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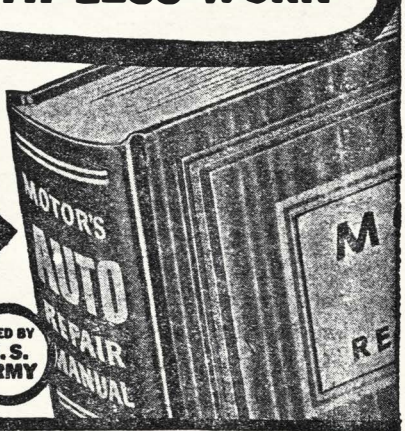

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CORNELL WOOLRICH, who's been absent from these pages too many months, returns to tell you *What the Well-Dressed Corpse Will Wear*. It's as neatly put together a piece of murder puzzlement as we've encountered in many moons and by the time each razor-edged segment falls into its proper niche in the last paragraph of the novelette you'll know you've read something extra special in the way of crime fiction.

And D. L. CHAMPION adds still another episode to Inspector Allhoff's dossier.

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A Department

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The Racket Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

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D. R.

(Continued on page 95)

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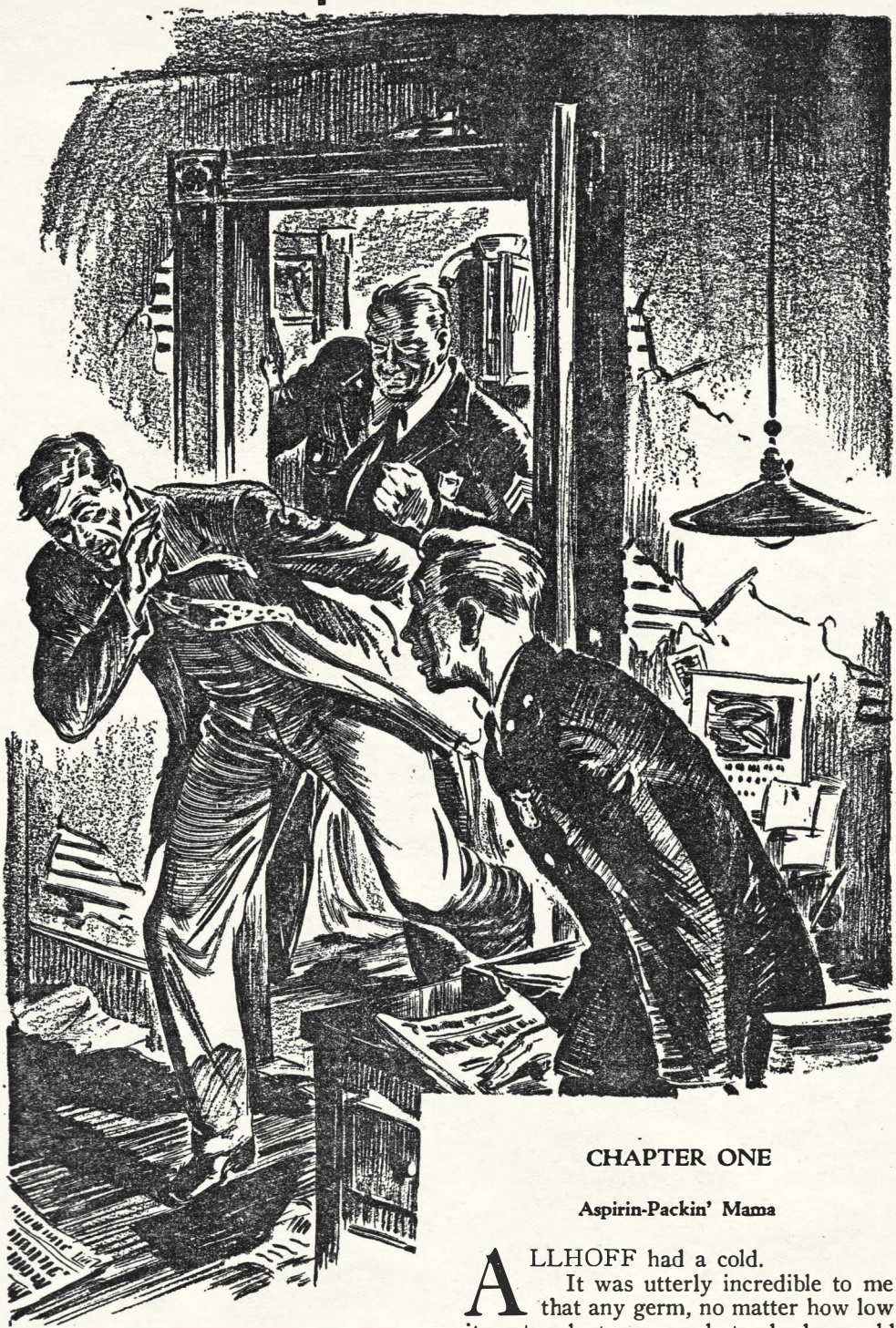
THE DAY NOBODY DIED

By D. L. CHAMPION

Author of "Aaron Had a Rod," etc.

Harriet Mansfield dumped the whole mess in our laps—the midget lying dead in a locked room—and then she died right in Allhoff's office. Then comes Doctor Warburton and his quest for priceless Washingtonia, and the old coffee-swiller himself is forced to do the medico a good turn, despite Allhoff's unprintable opinions of the bill-and-pill boys.

An Inspector Allhoff Novelette



Suddenly a yell of pain rang out. Then the door flew open and Strouse ran into the room.

CHAPTER ONE

Aspirin-Packin' Mama

ALLHOFF had a cold.

It was utterly incredible to me that any germ, no matter how low its antecedents or moral standards, would voluntarily take up abode in Allhoff's

snarling sinuses. Yet, apparently, several hundred thousand had.

His prominent corvine nose was the color of a lobster which has boiled for three hours. His lips were dry and cracked and his eyes were rheumy. Thus far I had had no external evidences of the condition of his temper. But I certainly knew the way to bet. Allhoff in the pink of condition was no beaming lover of mankind. With a running nose and a slight temperature he was going to be something more than a trial to Battersly and myself.

It was a little after nine o'clock in the morning. Allhoff was inhaling his fourth cup of coffee and cursing that it had no taste. From without, the cold gray light of a winter day oozed reluctantly through the grimy window pane.

Allhoff's tenement flat was in its customary chaotic disarray. The floor was unswept. The sink was piled with dishes. A platoon of cockroaches had established a beachhead upon the edge of the uncovered garbage can and reinforcements were arriving on the double.

A pile of dirty laundry wearily climbed the north wall and through the open door of the bedroom, the unmade bed could be seen, in all its flop-house glory.

Allhoff refilled his cup. He sneezed and expelled a thousand germs. He cursed and drained his cup with the delicate sound of a jeep passing through a swamp. Then Battersly came in.

HE WAS tall and rather handsome in his patrolman's uniform. He eyed Allhoff, with what I took for apprehension, as he passed on the way to his desk, took off his cap and sat down. Allhoff paid him no attention whatever. He alternated between slugs of coffee and sneezes. He cursed again and picked up a handkerchief. He buried his nose in it and the room was filled with the sound of a block-buster crashing down on the Wilhelmstrasse.

Battersly cleared his throat and said, deferentially: "You really ought to see a doctor, sir."

Allhoff swung his body around in his swivel chair and set his cup down with a bang. He said, "Doctors!" as if it were an obscene word. Then he drew a deep breath and let go.

"Out of every ten patients they get, five would recover anyway. Three are beyond help. The others may be remotely aided. But do they ever tell you that? Do they ever tell you they can't diagnose a case? The hell they do! I admit they can do surgery. They can set a broken leg and remove a perfectly good appendix without killing the patient. But they can't cure a cold. They don't even know its cause. But, by God, they prescribe for it. And they'll send you a bill. Right or wrong, they'll send you a bill. It's one racket where you get paid for your mistakes, too. If you're dead, they'll send your estate a bill. If you haven't an estate, they'll attach your tombstone. The bill and pill boys! By God, I'd sooner call in a Haitian voodoo man to burn a chicken wing in the full moon. His fee will be more reasonable and the result will be precisely the same. Doctors! God, they're worse than lawyers. And you know what I think of lawyers!"

I assured him hastily that we knew exactly what he thought of lawyers. He grunted furiously and turned again to his coffee cup. He thrust his nose in it and sucked in coffee.

Battersly blinked. From his expression I gathered that he had something to ask Allhoff and the query regarding the doctor had been intended as ingratiating.

Now Battersly stood up and approached Allhoff's desk with all the aplomb of a junior office boy about to put the question of a raise to the irascible senior partner.

"Inspector," he said nervously, "how would you like to handle a murder case Homicide knows nothing about? They don't even know the man is dead yet."

Allhoff put his cup down and looked up at Battersly, mixed emotions in his face. He disliked Homicide just a fraction of an inch less than he liked Battersly. He delighted in showing up the squad across the street. He delighted even more in crushing Battersly. He hesitated for a moment, then the copper in him came to the fore.

"Who's been killed?"

Battersly shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know, sir."

Allhoff lifted his eyebrows. "Well, where's the body?"

"Well—I don't exactly know that either, sir.

"Then," said Allhoff, "who's the killer?"

Battersly shuffled uneasily and hesitated.

"So you don't know that, either," roared Allhoff. "Then how the devil do you know anyone's been murdered?"

Battersly licked his dry lips. "Well, sir, it's like this. I met a girl last night in a bar. And she told me she knew that someone had been killed and that the police didn't know of it yet."

"And what did you do about it?"

"Why, nothing, sir."

Allhoff flung his arms to heaven as if asking the Deity to bear witness to Battersly's idiocy.

"My God," he said. "He's a copper and he meets a tramp in a barroom. She tells him she knows where a corpse is. So he buys her a drink and goes home. Are you so much in the habit of meeting dames who have corpses hidden somewhere?"

Battersly's face was red now. He cleared his throat nervously, and said: "If you'll let me explain, sir. . . ."

"*Let* you?" roared Allhoff. "I demand that you explain."

"This girl's name is Harriet Mansfield," said Battersly. "As I told you, I met her in a bar last night. She's good looking and tough. I guess her morals aren't all they should be and she's been in one or two jams with policemen. She doesn't like them."

"Neither do I," said Allhoff, superfluously.

"She's scared of coppers. And she doesn't trust them. But right now she's even more scared of this murderer."

"Damn it," yelled Allhoff, "what murderer?"

"I don't know exactly. She knows this murderer. She knows he's killed someone. Now she's afraid he'll kill her because she knows too much. She wants to tell about this killing to some policeman she can trust. Someone who'll investigate the killing, have the killer put away and protect her until he's in jail—protect her later from any pals of his."

"Did she know you were a copper?" asked Allhoff.

Battersly shook his head. "I was wearing civvies. But I told her I knew you. I told her to come up here this morning. I told her you'd keep her name entirely out of it, that you'd give her a fair break."

The idea of Allhoff giving anyone a fair break was something which caused my imagination to totter. Allhoff, however, beamed proudly as if he had never dreamed of doublecrossing anyone in all his career.

"When's she coming?" asked Allhoff. And the entrance of Harriet Mansfield answered the question for him.

SHE was a tall girl, and blond. She was under thirty, but a pair of dark circles beneath her blues eyes made her look older, and there was a shadow in their depths which indicated she knew more of life's seamy side than any woman should ever know. All in all, however, she was damned attractive, even if she wasn't the type usually associated with ivy-covered cottages and the patter of little feet about the kitchen floor.

She looked first at Battersly in his uniform. She said in a dull, expressionless tone: "So you were a copper, eh?" She turned to Allhoff. "And you're the Inspector. You don't look like no Galahad to me, but, hell, I just got to trust someone."

She sat down, sighed and opened a cavernous handbag. She withdrew a bottle of aspirin. She said to Battersly: "Son, get me a glass of water, will you?"

Battersly handed her a glass of water. She crammed half a dozen aspirin tablets in her mouth and washed them down. Allhoff emptied his coffee cup and regarded her oddly. It was obvious he disapproved of her, but if she was going to give him something which would enable him to sneer at Homicide, he was willing to listen.

She put the half-emptied glass on Allhoff's desk. In her monotonous voice, she mentioned a Greenwich Village address. She said: "Down there, in a studio on the third floor, you'll find a dead man. The studio is a big barn-like room with one window facing a blank wall. That window is locked on the inside. There's a wooden bar on the inside of the door. It's in place. It's all locked from the in-

side and the little guy is there with a bullet in his head."

Now, Allhoff was registering intense interest. For that matter, so was I.

"Do you know who killed him?" asked Allhoff.

Harriet Mansfield nodded. "I know who, how and why. That's what I'm here to tell you, but first I want to make a deal."

Allhoff nodded impatiently. "I understand. I'll guarantee that nothing happens to you. I'll keep you out of it altogether, if possible. Anyway, I'll see that this killer doesn't harm you. Is that enough?"

The girl nodded. "That's good enough for me. Now, this is what happened—"

She broke off for a moment and reached in her vast handbag again for the aspirin bottle. Quite obviously, she ate them. She was an aspirin addict. As she withdrew the bottle, she also took a small tin box from her purse.

"Oh, sonny," she said to Battersly, here's that stuff I promised you. Try it. It works wonders."

Battersly stood up. His face was a fiery red. He moved toward the girl and took the tin box from her slim hand. Allhoff watched him with his shrewd little eyes.

"And what's that?" he asked.

"Nothing," said Battersly, hastily, "nothing at all."

"Oh, that," said Harriet Mansfield, dumping aspirins out into the palm of her hand. "It's corn cure. The kid was complaining to me that his corns kill him—drive him crazy with pain. Said he could hardly stand it. I got this stuff for him. It's wonderful."

BATTERSLY sat down and closed his eyes. I drew a deep breath. Allhoff inhaled sharply. His eyes narrowed cruelly. He looked very much like a cat about to spring upon a particularly succulent mouse.

"So," he said, "his little corns hurt him? Now isn't that a damned shame? His tiny pink tootsies ache! Well, well."

Harriet Mansfield, the aspirins still in her hand stared at him in amazement. I said sharply: "Allhoff!"

He ignored me. He pushed his chair away from the desk, revealing a pair of leather stumps where his thighs should have been. His eyes, hot and frenzied, fixed themselves upon Battersly. He opened his mouth and his words filled the room like smoke from an exploding shell.

"You miserable rat! You whining, yellow dog! You dare complain about corns! What about me? Do I complain? You, who amputated my legs, have the cast-iron gall to squawk. Why, you——"

At this point Allhoff's vocabulary slid off into the sewer. He hurled slime and filth upon Battersly and all his ancestry back to Adam. Harriet Mansfield blinked at him in amazement. She stood up and said: "Hey, lay off him. What's the idea of talking like that to—"

"Shut up, you tramp," roared Allhoff, and without any punctuation at all turned his attention back to Battersly.

Harriet Mansfield, apparently, had undergone many such rebuffs as this. She shrugged her stooped shoulders, sat down again and crammed the aspirin into her mouth. She emptied the water glass, crossed her legs, and sat silent.

Allhoff went on like a man who is never going to run out of breath. From long experience I knew he would continue until he was short of lung power. I turned my head away and closed my ears as best I could.

The reason for Allhoff's insane diatribe went back several years. In those days he was an up-and-coming police officer with two good legs and first-rate brain cells. Battersly was a raw recruit.

We were tipped off one day that a pair of murderers whom we had been seeking, were holed up in a West End Avenue rooming house. We had been tipped, further, that they were in possession of a tommy gun which commanded the front door from the inner stairway.

Battersly's assignment had been to effect a rear entrance and close with the machine-gun operator at precisely the same moment Allhoff burst through the front door at the head of the raiding squad.

Battersly got in the house, all right. Then he underwent a quite understandable case of buck fever. Instead of carrying out his task, he fled precipitately up the stairs to the roof. Allhoff came charg-

ing through the door at zero hour into a hail of machine-gun bullets.

A dozen of them lodged in his legs. Gangrene set in and after that, amputation was necessary to save his life.

Naturally, civil service rules did not permit an inspector of police minus his legs. But the commissioner, a stubborn man, was of no mind to lose his best man. By devious bookkeeping devices, he arranged it so that Allhoff was paid his old salary and continued to work under the department's sponsorship—unofficially, of course. Allhoff moved into this slum apartment across from headquarters.

He insisted that Battersly be assigned as his assistant. The commissioner, with a strong sense of poetic justice, had agreed. I had been sent along as an old hand who had come up with Allhoff, to pour oil upon the waters when they became too troubled.

I had no doubt that when Allhoff lost his legs he also lost something of his mind. He hated Battersly, unreasonably and relentlessly. He lost no opportunity to persecute the younger man.

Too often had I heard this same crazed diatribe which was pouring into my ears at this moment. Yet I had never become used to it. Were it not for a family and an impending pension I would have quit years ago.

At last Allhoff, completely out of breath, came to a stop. Breathing heavily, he turned to his coffee cup, filled it and lifted it to his lips.

I looked around again, glanced over at the girl to see how she had reacted to Allhoff's mania. I blinked, then looked at her more closely.

She sat slumped down in her chair. Her face seemed unnaturally bright and there was the tiniest speck of froth at the edge of her mouth. Her arms hung loosely down at the side of the chair and it seemed to me that her crossed, shapely legs were limp.

I sprang out of my chair and crossed the room. I found her pulse with my finger and there was no beat in it. I stepped back in utter amazement and said: "For God's sake, Allhoff!"

He put down his cup and said: "What's the matter?"

"She's dead."

CHAPTER TWO

Midget-Murder

ALLHOFF'S brow clouded. He glared at me as if I, personally, had killed her.

"Dead?" he roared. "She can't be dead. Not here in my office. Besides, she was going to tell me about this murder."

His attitude was the epitome of all the arrogance in the world. No one could die in *his* office. No one could die if they were about to tell him about a murder case.

"Have it your own way," I said ironically, "but if you're going to get any information from her you'll need a priest or a spiritualist. Or you might try cutting your own throat. Then you can join her in Heaven and get the whole story. After that, you can come back to earth and haunt the murderer. You—"

"Shut up!" yelled Allhoff. "Revive her."

"Are you crazy?" I shouted, losing my temper. "I tell you she's dead! She must have had a stroke or something."

Allhoff pushed his chair out and slid to the floor. He clumped over to the girl. He felt her pulse and listened to her heart. Across the room, Battersly toyed with the box of corn cure and watched interestedly.

Allhoff picked up the aspirin bottle from his desk and peered into it. He went back to the girl, put his face close to hers and sniffed.

"Stroke, hell," he said. "Cyanide."

"You mean among the aspirin tablets?"

Allhoff nodded. "That's right. Someone must have planted one poisoned tablet. It was just a question of time until she ate it. Of course, it had to happen here just when she was going to tell me about this killing!"

"Good old Allhoff," I murmured. "Sympathy drips from his heart like water from a spring. The fact that the girl is dead doesn't seem to bother you."

"Of course, it bothers me," he snapped. "I wanted to hear about this killing. It sounded fascinating, if it's true. Door barred, window locked and a corpse inside."

He clumped back to his chair and climbed into it. A thoughtful frown wrinkled his brow. He snatched up the as-

pirin bottle and put it in a desk drawer.

"Battersly," he said, "call the morgue. Have this body put on ice and tell them to keep it under cover for a couple of days. Don't let the newspaper stringers know anything about it."

"You can't do that," I began. "Maybe she's got relatives. Maybe—"

"Maybe," said Allhoff, "you're sucking around for a fine. Do as I say. Then you guys get down to that Greenwich Village address and see if there really is a little guy who's been murdered."

I shrugged my shoulders. Battersly called the morgue. As I saw it, Allhoff was merely trying to cover up the fact that the girl had been killed in his office. That, he knew, would be the cause of raucous laughter across the street at headquarters. Harriet Mansfield had come to him for protection because she didn't trust ordinary policemen and she had died in Allhoff's chair. Well, I had been in Allhoff's company long enough to have learned that minding one's own business was a most profitable pastime.

IT was a little before noon when Battersly and I went down the rickety staircase, hailed a bus and journeyed uptown to Greenwich Village.

The address the girl had given us was that of a little crooked alley off MacDougal Street. The sidewalks were unswept and garbage cans lined the pavement. The street itself was cold and deserted.

We entered the building and climbed to the third floor. At the head of the stairway was a door. Battersly rapped on it hard with his knuckles. There was no answer. He tried the knob. It turned but the door did not open.

We exchanged a glance. Under the circumstances it was quite possible that a wooden bar *did* block the doorway. I nodded at Battersly. He moved a few feet away from the door and smashed into it with his shoulder. The door trembled but did not open.

"I think there *is* a bar there," said Battersly. "And I think it's a thick one. I nearly broke my shoulder."

"Wait here," I said. "There's a fire house down the block. I'll borrow an axe from them."

I went down to the fire house, returned a few months later with the axe. Battersly swung it against the door panels three times. The door broke down—it did not open.

The bar across its center was a solid two inches thick. We crawled under it into the room. My nostrils told me of the dead man's presence before my eyes. The stench of death permeated the studio. The room was stuffy and it seemed to me almost devoid of oxygen.

At one end a huge stone fireplace had been built into the wall. It was piled up with ashes attesting to the fact that a tremendous fire had been burning there some time ago.

Lying before the fireplace on a mangy scatter rug was the corpse.

"My God," said Battersly, "it's a kid. Who the hell would want to kill a kid?"

I moved closer and knelt at the side of the decomposing body. It wasn't a kid. It was a midget. He was, or had been, something well under four feet in height. He had been dead, I judged, for some time.

The method of murder would have been obvious to a ten-year-old. The midget had an ugly bullet hole in his head. Dried blood clung to the skin of his temple, stained the scatter rug and formed a winding streak upon the floor.

Battersly spoke from the window. "Say, sergeant, the window *is* locked. And the door certainly was barred. How do you figure it?"

I stood up. I examined the window. The catch was in place and beyond the pane, as Harriet Mansfield had said, there was a blank windowless wall. I shrugged my shoulders and looked around the room.

I found nothing much save candle grease. There was no electric light in the studio. There were, however, a hundred candles. Candle grease was everywhere. Smeared on the table and mantel-piece, all over the floor and spattered on the walls. Even the panels of the door were covered with it.

Battersly sat at a battered desk going through the papers in the drawers. "Find anything?" I asked.

"Routine stuff. It seems this dead guy's name is Robert Daintley. He's a partner in an antique shop on Greenwich Avenue. There's nothing beside that."

I sighed. I looked from the bar across

the door to the locked window. "This," I announced, "is a beauty. We'll dump it in Allhoff's lap with pleasure. You wait here while I go out and call him for instructions."

I went down the stairs to the corner drugstore. From there I phoned Allhoff. I gave him what meager details we had picked up. Then, following his orders, I reported the murder to Homicide. After that, I went back to the studio.

"Homicide's coming down here," I said. "We'll send the beat copper up to stand by. In the meantime, Allhoff wants us to visit this antique shop, have a little chat with this Daintley's partner."

Battersly nodded. He did exactly what I had done a few minutes before. He looked from the bar across the doorway to the latch on the window.

"For Heaven's sake, sergeant, how in the name of—"

"Don't worry about it," I told him. "It's Allhoff's baby. For years I've been waiting to see him outwitted. I think this is it."

WE pounded down the stairs over to Greenwich Avenue. Within ten minutes we entered a gloomy antique shop which bore the legend on its window: *Daintley and Grimes.*

The first thing I noticed was the portly special copper sitting in a chair which may or may have not been an antique. It certainly was old. He stood up as we came in, peered through the crepuscular light of the shop, and looked relieved when he saw the uniforms.

"Oh, Mr. Grimes," he called. "Someone here to see you."

Mr. Grimes emerged from the darkness at the rear of the shop. He reminded me very much of a mole. Weak blue eyes blinked from behind a pair of thick-lensed glasses. He was almost bald. His manner was fussy, his teeth obviously false. Mr. Grimes, I figured, was no man to stand up in the face of adversity. I found myself hoping he wouldn't be too upset about the death of his partner.

"Yes?" he said in a high pitched voice. "What can I do for you? I assure you we have no building violations here. We—"

"Where," I said, "is Mr. Daintley?"

Grimes blinked and looked rather like a helpless, fluttering hen.

"That's what I'd like to know," he said. "I haven't seen him for days. I simply can't understand it. I—"

"He's dead," I said, watching him closely for the effect of my words. "Murdered."

Grimes uttered a little cry and wrung his hands. "No," he said. "Why, I've been to his studio time and again knocking on the door, and receiving no answer."

"The reason was that he's dead," I told him. "Have you any idea who could have killed him?"

Grimes shook his head. "None at all. He had no enemies. God knows he had no money."

"What about this place?" I asked. "Does it yield a profit?"

Grimes shrugged. "We split perhaps eighty to a hundred dollars a week. You can check the books if you like. Certainly Daintley had no money. There's no sense in his murder."

We snooped around for a little while. The special copper buried his nose in the *Racing Form* while Grimes, apparently overcome by the news of Daintley's fate, sat down in a Windsor chair and mopped his brow with an effeminate lace handkerchief.

A few minutes later we took our leave and returned to Allhoff's office. He was blowing his nose furiously as we entered. He removed the handkerchief from his face and lifted his coffee cup.

"Well?" he demanded.

"Nothing," I said. "Everything the girl told us is true. The door was barred. The window was locked. There was absolutely no way for the killer to leave the room. Grimes, Daintley's partner, is a fussy old woman. I'm sure he knows nothing about it."

"I don't want your opinion," snapped Allhoff. "Give me the facts. Give me each detail your hazy brain can recall. Battersly, you listen and check him on it. Now, get going."

He picked up a pencil and held it poised above a pad as I began my recital. He made an occasional note as I unfolded my story. When I concluded, he grunted and refilled his cup.

Battersly got up from his desk and approached Allhoff with shining eyes. "Inspector," he said, "I have a theory."

Allhoff looked at him as if he'd announced he had leprosy.

"Look," said Battersly, "anything can happen in an antique shop. Suppose they got hold of something really valuable, worth a lot of dough? Suppose Grimes knocked his partner off so he'd own this thing all by himself?"

"This is positively brilliant," said Allhoff. "Army Intelligence needs men like you."

"Wait a minute," I said, "maybe it's more brilliant than you think. What about that special copper? Is it likely they'd employ a guy like that unless there was something valuable in the joint?"

"I was considering that," said Allhoff, "but from an entirely different angle. Did you notice which agency that cop was from?"

I nodded and mentioned the name of the agency.

"Call 'em. Find out how long he's been on the job. I'd guess it hasn't been more than a few days."

I checked that on the telephone and rather to my surprise discovered that Allhoff was right. The special copper had been on duty at the antique shop for precisely three days.

Allhoff nodded with such smug satisfaction when I told him this that I became nettled.

"So," I said, "I suppose you now know who killed the midget, why, and how the murder was committed."

He beamed at me. "You over-rate me," he said with false modesty. "I don't know who did it. I don't know the motive. All I know is how it was done."

I stared at him. "You mean you can explain that barred door, that locked window?"

"Sure," said Allhoff blandly, picking up his coffee cup. "That's easy."

I wracked my brains for a moment, then came up with the only answer I could get. "You mean the killer escaped through the chimney?"

Allhoff revealed his discolored teeth in an unpleasant grin.

"Simmonds," he said, "aren't you thinking of Santa Claus?"

BATTERSLY and I arrived together the following morning. We halted upon the threshold, stared transfixed at Allhoff. Here it was, nine by the clock. Certainly, he had not yet imbibed over a pint of coffee. Yet he was grinning.

Battersly and I looked at each other. We came warily into the office, each of us suspecting a trap. Allhoff said heartily: "Good morning."

"Do you feel well?" I asked solicitously. "Or has some dear friend just died?"

"Neither," said Allhoff equably. "I'm amused by the fact that Homicide is up to its neck in the midget murder. They've combined your theory with Battersly's."

"And come to what conclusion?"

"They figure, in line with your Santa Claus theory, that the guy went out through the chimney, and that it was Grimes who killed him to gain possession of some invaluable antique. They've got an expert casing the shop now to find the priceless article."

He went off into a paroxysm of laughter which was shattered abruptly by a sneeze.

Well, I *still* thought there was something to that theory, though I had no intention of saying so and ruining Allhoff's astounding merry mood.

"Have they found anything else?" I asked him.

"Yeah. The M. E. says the guy was dead about four days. And after combing the neighborhood they found a saloon where this Daintley and another guy had a drink on what appears to be the day of the murder."

"Do they know who the guy was?"

"Yes. The bartender knew him. Didn't know Daintley, though. But he remembers this other guy was in there with a midget. This guy's name is Strouse. He's on the way up here now."

Allhoff returned to the matter of brewing fresh coffee. I gave my attention to the onionskin reports which were sent over from headquarters each day, while Battersly sighed with pleasure and scanned the adventures of Dick Tracy, a vice I could never understand in a professional copper.

About eleven o'clock footsteps sounded on the creaking stairs outside. There was a rap at the door and two men entered.

CHAPTER THREE

Watch-Hunt

THE first was slim, clean-shaven, clad in a double-breasted suit. His eyes were dark, his face intelligent. He approached Alhoff's desk and said: "I'm Dan Strouse. You sent for me?"

Allhoff nodded and waved him to a chair. Strouse half turned and indicated his companion. "This is a friend of mine, Dr. Warburton."

Warburton bowed. He was portly, gray, and exuded success. I had heard of Warburton. He was an M. D. who had made a fortune in the past few years. Moreover, he was a famous collector of Washingtonia. His private museum was said to contain more relics of the Washington estate than any other collection. He owned more letters written by George and his half-brother, Lawrence, than once were believed extant.

He seated himself beside Strouse and looked at Allhoff. Allhoff sniffled with the sound of a weary vacuum cleaner.

"Ought to do something about that cold, Inspector," the doctor said.

Allhoff regarded him hostilely. "Why?"

"Might get worse. I'll examine you if you like."

Allhoff laughed unpleasantly. "What the devil do you know about colds?"

Warburton bristled. "Something more than a layman," he said coldly.

"I don't believe it," said Allhoff. "I will, however, concede you know more about corpses. I may have seen as many of them as you, but I never made any, save in the line of duty."

The doctor opened his mouth to reply. Strouse came pacifically into the breach.

"Now, then, Inspector," he said, "suppose you question me."

"I shall," said Allhoff. "Why did you bring him along?"

"Well," said Strouse, "at the moment the doctor and I are engaged in a business deal. Besides, he's my alibi, just in case you might accuse me in that midget matter."

"Your alibi?" said Allhoff. "What do you mean?"

"Last Tuesday I went to a barroom with Daintley. We sat around for about an hour. Daintley went away, leaving me there. The bartender, a friend of mine, gave me a lift to Doctor Warburton's. I remained at the doctor's house all night playing cards."

Allhoff nodded slowly. "So if Daintley was killed on Tuesday, you couldn't possibly have done it. Is that it?"

Strouse nodded confidently. "That's it."

"You knew him well?"

"Fairly well."

"Any idea who killed him?"

Strouse shook his head. Allhoff took a long time to think it over. Then he jerked his head contemptuously in Warburton's direction.

"What's this business deal you're in? Is he trying to talk you out of a perfectly good appendix?"

Warburton flushed. "Damn it, sir," he said, "I decline to be insulted! I am about to buy from Mr. Strouse a most valuable document written by George Washington regarding the death of his half-brother, Lawrence, some six weeks after the latter died."

Unimpressed, Allhoff gulped more coffee. Warburton, carried away by his subject, went on.

"Yes," he said, "there are no other known letters written by Washington upon that subject. Lawrence died in the Barbados in 1752 where George—"

"He would have died sooner if he'd had a modern physician," snapped Allhoff. "All right, Strouse, that's all. Leave the sergeant there your address in case I want you."

Strouse gave me his address. A moment later he and the doctor walked to the door. As they gained the threshold, Allhoff said sharply: "Do either of you guys know a woman named Harriet Mansfield?"

I watched their faces carefully. They both registered a perfect blank.

"Never heard of her," said Warburton. "Who is she?"

Allhoff shrugged. "I don't know. She phoned me from New Jersey about an hour ago. Made a date with me for tomorrow morning. Said she knew something about Daintley."

Strouse shook his head. "I don't know anyone of that name," he said.

THE door closed and our two visitors went down the creaking stairway. I looked over at Allhoff with interest.

"What's up your ragged sleeve?" I asked him. "What was the idea of that story about Mansfield?"

"You'll find out," said Allhoff, "tonight. Battersly, you go down to that antique shop at once. Chat with Grimes and that special copper. Let drop, casually, that same lie I just told about Harriet Mansfield. Do you think you can do that?"

"Yes, sir," said Battersly. "Of course, sir."

"Then get going," said Allhoff, "if it isn't too hard on your delicate little corns. If the pedal anguish isn't too much for you to—"

Battersly left the room like a gust of wind before Allhoff could get started. He put down his coffee cup and turned to me.

"You," he said, "are not going home tonight."

"Now, listen—" I began.

"You listen. They've got that Mansfield broad's address over at the morgue. Get it. She lived with another girl. When you leave here tonight, go up there. Introduce yourself and stay there."

"For how long?"

"All night."

"All night? Are you crazy? I'm a married man. What's my wife going to say if I stay at the apartment of some dame all night?"

Allhoff grinned oilily. "She'll probably praise you for your devotion to duty."

That was a beautiful thought, indeed.

"What am I supposed to do there?"

"Wait," said Allhoff.

"For what?"

"For whatever happens. I'm leaving the method of coping with things up to your own judgment."

"Why the devil can't Battersly do it? He's single."

"That's just why. He's a sucker for a girl. I want a man who'll stick to business. I figure you're too damned old to be concerned with sex."

That complimentary remark ended the conversation.

At six o'clock I called my wife and told a wild and blatant lie about some special duty to which the commissioner had assigned me. From her tone I judged I hadn't quite got away with it. I sighed, hung up, and took the subway to Broadway and 96th Street.

BETTY Wasmuth was a suspicious brunette with a magnificent figure and skin as soft as her eyes were hard. She admitted me when I showed my badge and sat nervously on the edge of a sofa while I explained my mission.

Which wasn't easy since I hadn't the slightest idea what it was.

But the instant I mentioned Harriet Mansfield she was on me like a cat.

"Where is she?" she shrilled. "You lousy coppers got her? And for what? You ain't got no right—"

I decided that if she was scared she would be more inclined to have me hanging around.

"She's dead."

The shrew oozed out of her. Her face became deathly pale beneath her rouge. She sat down again and her hard eyes were suddenly softened with tears.

"Oh, my God, the poor kid. I knew she was scared of something. But I never thought—"

She was a pathetic figure in that moment. Clumsily, I leaned over and patted her shoulder. I uttered a half dozen idiotic consoling words and heartily cursed Allhoff for putting me in this unreasonable position.

After a while she calmed down and went into the bedroom. She came out shortly before midnight and offered me a cup of coffee which I gratefully accepted. We chatted hesitantly. She wondered why I was here, why I was going to stay. I did not enlighten her, for the simple reason that I did not know myself.

About one o'clock the girl went to bed. I lolled on the living room sofa, smoking, killing time and wondering what the devil my vigil had to do with a midget who had been murdered down in Greenwich Village.

At three o'clock my eyes grew heavy. The room was filled with smoke and the neighborhood seemed as quiet as a sleeping child. I stretched out on the couch, put out the light and lay there in the dark resting my eyes.

Heaven only knows just when I dropped off to sleep. I came back to consciousness at the same moment the creaking of a floor board sounded in my ears. For a moment I lay absolutely still. I heard furtive, creeping footfalls in the dark. I heard the sound of tense, labored breathing.

I swung my feet down to the floor and sat up. My hand reached out for the chain on the floor lamp. I missed badly and the lamp went crashing to the floor. Something flashed in the darkness. The room was filled with the sound of a shot and a bullet whizzed past my ear.

I knelt down and reached for my Police Special. Footfalls raced toward me. A flashlight shone full in my face. I thought, for an instant, that this was my last moment on earth. I ducked my head down and charged into the flashlight.

How that second bullet missed me, I shall never know. I swung a wild fist into the darkness and it found its mark on a human jaw. The flashlight clattered to the floor. I clawed out at my adversary's right wrist, found it, and held on grimly in order to render his gun useless.

It suddenly became an out-and-out test of strength. Somehow I had hold of both his wrists—right and left. We grunted and strained against each other. Then suddenly he wrenched his right hand free. He brought the barrel of his gun down upon my skull. I was aware of nothing else, except the abrupt buckling of my knees.

I REGAINED consciousness to find Betty Wasmuth wiping blood from my brow with a wet towel. Her face was pale and there was terror in her eyes.

"I heard the brawl," she said, "but I was scared to come out of the bedroom. I remembered what happened to Harriet. Who was it? What did he want?"

Of that I had no idea. I got up, took my throbbing head to the bathroom, pulled myself together and left the house. I figured that what Allhoff had sent me up here to cope with had already happened. I took a cab downtown to his place.

Allhoff slept like a cat. He was awake before I had even turned the knob of his

bedroom door. He pulled himself up in the bed, looked at the bump on my head, and said: "You fool. Did you let him get away?"

I sat down and unfolded my story. His little eyes grew hotter and hotter as I went on. When I had finished, he banged his fists on the muddy counterpane and cursed me bitterly.

"You idiot," he snarled. "You and Battersly have the intelligence of a pair of rather bright lice. You just let the killer get through your clumsy hands."

"What killer?"

"Daintley's killer. I planted the fact that the Mansfield girl was calling on me tomorrow to spill what she knew. No one knew she was dead. The murderer went uptown to kill her tonight. He figured that somehow his poisoned aspirin didn't work. He went to her flat to attend to it personally. I figured you'd bring him back with you."

"Well," I said defensively, "why the devil don't you tell me what's going on in your head when you send us out on an assignment like that? How the devil did I know what was going to happen?"

Allhoff shook his head. He clumped out of the bed into the other room, climbed into his desk chair and flicked on the switch beneath the coffee pot.

"All right," he said at last, "call Battersly. Get him here right away. Then I want you two guys to go out and pay early morning calls upon Strouse, Grimes and Warburton."

"For what?"

"Collect their wrist watches. Bring them back to me."

"Their *what?*"

"Watches. Their wrist watches."

"Are you nuts?" I demanded. "Do you think they'll hand over their watches without question?"

"I don't care if they do it with question or without," said Allhoff. "Moreover, I don't care how you fools get the watches. Just get them. That's all."

It was an idiotic assignment and, I anticipated, a damned difficult one. We had no trouble with Grimes. He wrung his hands a little and fluttered around the shop. But he handed over his watch after we promised it would be returned to him in its original condition.

WHILE we were still in the antique shop the phone jangled. It was Allhoff asking for me. His harsh voice drilled over the wire: "Simmonds, ask that Grimes if his partner drank much."

He clicked the receiver back on the hook without waiting for my answer. Dutifully, I put the question.

Grimes nodded his head dubiously. "Well," he said, weighing the question, "he wasn't a drunkard, if that's what you mean. But he did drink more than I thought was good for him. I told him often enough."

Taking Grimes' information and his wrist watch along with us, Battersly and I set out for Strouse's place. We got him out of bed and he raised hell. I argued with him for half an hour. Then by delicately pointing out that Allhoff was a bad man to have as an enemy, that refusal to let us borrow his watch might be construed as a tacit admission of guilt, we got it.

A taxi took us uptown to Doctor Warburton's. He was easier than I expected. I gathered that he regarded Allhoff as a somewhat amusing charlatan, which, incidentally, was just about Allhoff's opinion of him. He gave us his watch with a sort of amused tolerance.

Battersly and I returned to Allhoff's bearing the loot. Allhoff downed a cup of coffee, took the watches from us and made a telephone call. A moment later, a messenger came over from across the street and took the watches which Allhoff had carefully packed in an envelope. He handed the runner a second envelope in which he had enclosed a note.

For the next twenty minutes he drank coffee earnestly and noisily. Then he swung around in his chair and said: "Hey, I called that bar where Strouse and Daintley were on the day of the killing."

"So?" I said.

"So," said Allhoff, "he tells me that Daintley was drinking root beer and kept an unlighted cigarette in his mouth."

"Well, well," I said. "And did he tell you what kind of a hat Daintley was wearing?"

"Sure," said Allhoff, "a derby."

"And that, of course, clears up some important points about the killing," I said sarcastically.

"Of course," said Allhoff. "I'm surprised you noticed it, though."

Naturally, I had noticed nothing at all. I said so, but Allhoff had relapsed again to mysterious silence.

A little before noon, he looked up and said: "You fellows go down to Noonan's now and get your lunch. By the time you come back I'll have the principals in the case here and we can get to work."

"To work on what?"

"The murder solution, of course. Now get out and leave me alone."

CHAPTER FOUR

Choose Your Poison

WHEN I followed Battersly back from lunch, the guests had gathered. Doctor Warburton, pompous and obviously annoyed, had difficulty arranging his bulk comfortably on one of our narrow-bottomed chairs. He fidgeted and glared at Allhoff through his glasses.

Even so, however, he seemed more at home than Grimes. Grimes appeared as nervous as an aspen leaf with financial troubles. He perched on the edge of his chair like a bird. He never took his watery eyes off Allhoff.

Allhoff drank coffee, ignoring the company. On the far side of his desk, Strouse smoked a cigarette blandly. Of the three of them he was most at ease. Battersly was at his desk, regarding the entire scene expectantly. He nodded to me as I came in and cast a significant glance across the room.

I followed his gaze and found that my own swivel chair was occupied by Sergeant Sligo. That fact occasioned some surprise in my breast. Sligo was a tough copper. He was built like a brick wall and his hands were like a pair of red boxing gloves. His nose had been broken in two places and there was a scar on his cheek from a knife cut.

Sligo had broken a number of tough cases in this town—all by the same method. With a baseball bat, a rubber hose and a soundproof room, Sligo was almost as effective as Allhoff himself. Sligo was strictly strong-arm. There was a sadistic streak in him and he would knock a citizen's teeth out with as little compunction as I would step on one of the cockroaches beneath the Allhoff sink.

I got myself a chair from the bedroom and sat down, puzzled. Allhoff decried the strong-arm boys. He invariably boasted that his brain was more valuable than every rubber hose in any precinct house basement. Why he had called Sligo in baffled me.

However, my being baffled by Allhoff no longer came under the heading of spot news.

Allhoff set his cup down with a bang. There was a frown upon his brow and a glare in his eyes. These, I well knew, were symptoms that he was angry. I watched him closely to see upon whom his wrath would fall.

It fell on me.

He swung about in his swivel chair and glared at me. "I regret," he said, in tones which indicated that he regretted nothing at all, "that I have been compelled to drag all of you down here to my office. It is only because I am saddled with moronic assistants."

Everyone, including Battersly, looked at me. Allhoff took a deep breath and called me a name that you shouldn't call your sergeant.

"Imbecile!" he roared. "I sent you uptown to catch the killer. I knew he'd go to Harriet Mansfield's apartment after I planted the fact that she was going to call on me the following day. But you go to sleep! Moreover, you didn't even hold the killer's wrist steadily when you fought with him."

That one dazed me. "I didn't what?"

"Hold his wrist steadily. You told me that at one period during the brawl you had hold of each of his wrists. If that were true, I figured there'd be a good chance of your fingerprints being on his wrist watch. That's why I collected them. There are prints there, but they're all too damned blurred to tell us anything."

"Oh," I said weakly.

"So," said Allhoff, "I had to figure out something else."

"You mean," I said incredulously, "that you now have the answer to the why's, how's, and who's of the murder?"

"I have the why's and the how's. I will have the who's before anyone leaves here today."

I GLANCED over at Sligo. "You mean you're resorting to Sligo's methods of detection?"

Warburton blew his nose into a silk handkerchief with a blast that sounded like Allhoff roaring at Battersly. He said: "I didn't come here to listen to you quarrel with a subordinate, Inspector. In fact, I don't know why I'm here at all. I don't—"

"Look," said Allhoff, "I'm very much afraid you'll thank me before this is all over. I was going to let you take your beating. However, my moronic subordinate has forced me to help you out."

"Help me out?" said Warburton. "Why—"

"Look," said Allhoff again, "this gadget you're buying. This letter from George Washington regarding the death of his half-brother—you say it was written some six weeks after Lawrence Washington died?"

"That's right."

"And Lawrence died on July 26th, 1752?"

"That, too, is correct."

"And what is the exact date on that letter?"

"September 8th, 1752. But what in the name of God all this has to do with—"

"Suppose," said Allhoff, "you shut up and let me do the talking. We are all gathered here to discuss the murder of Daintley. First, let me tell you how he was killed."

I screwed up my brow. To my certain knowledge, Allhoff had not left his apartment for weeks. If, while seated at his desk, he had figured out how the murderer had killed Daintley, barred a door and locked a window after the deed was done, I was prepared to admit that he was about fifty per cent as good as he actually believed he was.

He spilled coffee into his cup and drained it with the sound of a Saint Bernard lapping up a bowl of water.

"All right," he said, "this is what happened. Daintley knew his life was in danger. He knew from what direction, too. That is why Harriet Mansfield shilled him into opening the door."

"How can you know that?" I asked. "How can you know the Mansfield girl was ever in that studio?"

"How the devil did she know a murder had been committed?" yelled Allhoff. "The killer was obviously no fool. Do you think he went around confiding to everyone that he'd killed a guy? It was impossible for the girl to have looked through the window and seen the corpse. There was nowhere to look from. Obviously, she was there."

He was still sore at me. He glared at me like a headlight. I decided to let him tell it in his own circuitous way.

"She got the door open," he went on. "Then the killer came in and blasted Daintley through the head. Simple, isn't it?"

Grimes wrung his hands and looked bewildered. "But anyone could have figured that out," he said. "The point is, how did the killer get away?"

"Through the door," said Allhoff, picking up the percolator.

DESPITE my resolve to keep my mouth shut, I came in again. "How?" I said ironically. "Metempsychosis? Or did he float through the panels?"

Allhoff set the percolator down with a crash. "He went out on his feet," he roared. "He walked out—on two legs." He turned his head an inch and stared at Battersly.

This time I came in quick to cut him off. "But how?" I asked. "How could he bar the door after him?"

To my relief, Allhoff did not pursue the matter of people who walked out of rooms on their own two legs.

"The grease," he said. "The candle grease."

Warburton blew his nose again and blinked. "Candle grease?"

"Of course," said Allhoff. "He melted some candle grease. He smeared the entire length of the wooden bar with it. He stuck the bar to the door with the grease, held it there until the grease hardened."

I thought that over for a moment and felt like all the morons Allhoff had ever called me when Battersly, who was no Einstein, got it before me.

"Click," he said, "the fireplace."

"Right," said Allhoff. "Before he left the room he piled up the fireplace with kindling-wood and coal and lighted it. Then he closed the door and left. The fire

lifted the temperature of the room high enough to soften the candle grease. The weight of the bar pulled it down and it dropped into its sockets."

Warburton nodded in Allhoff's direction with reluctant admiration. Allhoff sniffled, reached for a handkerchief and blew his nose. Warburton leaned forward professionally. But if he had been about to offer medical advice he thought better of it.

Allhoff replaced his handkerchief. He regarded Warburton maliciously. "God," he said, "I'd like to take you. It's a damned shame—" He broke off and shook his head sadly.

There was a long silence while he gulped more coffee. Strouse lit another cigarette. He said, politely: "You say you figured all this, Inspector? I thought you said you were about to obtain the information from Harriet Mansfield?"

"She's in the hospital," said Ahlhoff. "Nervous breakdown. The doctors say she's evidently scared to death of something. She's unable to talk. May remain in that condition for a couple of weeks."

I stared at him. Not because he had lied. But Allhoff was no character to pass up an opportunity for bluff. And if the killer was in the room, why hadn't Allhoff pretended that Mansfield *had* talked —that she had told him everything?

"Then," said Grimes, "you really don't know who killed my partner?"

"I have a damned good idea," said Allhoff. "However, I'm a soft-hearted fool. I like to be sure in capital cases. Sligo!"

Sligo pulled his vast girth out of my chair. He grinned happily. He pounded his huge right fist into the open palm of his huge left hand.

"Are you ready?" asked Allhoff.

Sligo nodded. He looked as happy as a Gestapo lad about to stroll through a concentration camp with a bull whip.

"All ready, Inspector."

"You understand thoroughly what you are to do?"

"Thoroughly."

Allhoff nodded. He jerked his thumb in Warburton's direction. "All right, doctor, you first. Go into the bedroom with the sergeant."

Warburton looked mildly astonished. "What for?"

Allhoff did not find it necessary to reply. He signaled Sligo with his eyes. Sligo laid his heavy hand upon the doctor's collar, dragged him to his feet. He pulled the vigorously protesting Warburton into the bedroom. The closing door shut off the doctor's enraged sputtering.

BATTERSLY and I looked at each other. Was Allhoff directing Sligo to beat a confession out of Warburton? Grimes glanced around the room and wrung his hands again. He knew as little about what was going on as I, but he was a damned sight more worried. You didn't have to know Sligo's reputation to realize he was a bruiser. It was written all over his face.

Strouse sighed and lit another cigarette. Allhoff busied himself refilling the top of the percolator with fresh coffee.

In less than three minutes, Sligo and the doctor reappeared. The doctor wore an expression of utter amazement. Sligo seemed somewhat disappointed. I examined Warburton carefully. His face bore no mark. Apparently, Sligo had not hit him.

Allhoff caught Sligo's eye and the latter nodded. "O.K.," said Allhoff. "Grimes, you're next."

Grimes fluttered his eyes. "Inspector," he said, "I am an innocent man. Besides, I'm not quite sure that all this is legal. I—"

Sligo smiled without mirth. He put his fist under Grimes' nose and said: "Will you come quietly?"

Grimes swallowed something in his throat. He went quietly.

We sat around in complete silence, all save Allhoff utterly baffled. Then the sound of Sligo uttering a hearty curse emanated from the bedroom. A moment later he came out with Grimes behind him.

Again it occurred to me that Sligo wore that same expression of disappointment. Grimes, like Warburton, looked unharmed but a little stunned. He sat down again on the edge of the chair. I observed that Warburton was watching Allhoff much in the manner of a psychiatrist staring at a patient who may well become violent.

"All right," said Allhoff, after noting Sligo's nod. "You, Strouse."

Strouse shrugged his shoulders calmly, got out of the chair and followed Sligo into Allhoff's bedroom. The door slammed shut behind him.

A minute ticked by. Suddenly, we heard a thudding sound, followed by a louder thudding sound. A yell of pain burst through the panels of the door. A minute later, the door flew open and Strouse ran into the room.

One of his front teeth was missing. There was a darkening mouse beneath his right eye. Blood dripped from his split lip down on to his tie. Sligo strode along behind him, his little eyes glinting and an expression of vast satisfaction upon his face.

Strouse pointed his right index finger at Allhoff, his left at Sligo.

"This is illegal," he shouted. "It's third degree. Besides, it's insane. You've invaded the rights of a private citizen. I'll have you all broken. I'll have you—"

"Sit down," said Allhoff.

Strouse opened his mouth as if to toss around a few more threats. Sligo advanced happily upon him. Strouse shut up and sat down.

Warburton now registered intense interest. Grimes looked none too happy.

"Do I understand," asked Warburton of Allhoff, "that Mr. Strouse was given the same proposition in the bedroom as were Grimes and myself?"

"Exactly," said Allhoff. "But he refused to take one."

"Why?" said Warburton. "The entire procedure was ridiculous. Any man would prefer to take a harmless aspirin tablet than a beating."

"An aspirin tablet?" said Battersly and myself simultaneously.

"Of course," said Allhoff benignly. "You wrecked my plan to have you take Strouse red-handed uptown. So I had to resort to chicanery."

"I'm listening," I said.

"Well," said Allhoff, "since he didn't know that Harriet Mansfield was dead, he figured the poisoned aspirin would still be in the bottle where he planted it. Sligo simply took each one of them into the bedroom. He offered them a choice of taking one aspirin tablet, which was taken from a bottle found in Harriet Mansfield's bag, or a beating. Naturally, Grimes and the doctor were outraged. But to any sane or innocent man, there is only one choice. They took the pill."

"But," I said, "Strouse didn't. He knew one of them meant sudden death. He'd rather take a beating than risk dropping dead."

"Too, too apparent," said Allhoff, affecting jaded boredom. "And equally apparent that Strouse murdered Daintley and Harriet Mansfield."

CHAPTER FIVE

Not a Leg to Stand On

STROUSE stared at him. He patted his handkerchief to his bleeding mouth. He didn't get panicky. There was shrewd calculation in his eyes. He said: "You're as dumb as that palooka who slugged me, Allhoff. You're stuck with a few lovely textbook theories. You haven't got a thing on me that the D. A. would bother to keep in his files."

It seemed to me that this was true talk indeed. Allhoff's experiment with the aspirins and Sligo's heavy fist may have been conclusive as hell to us, but it wouldn't get into a court record even if Strouse had the dumbest lawyer in the country as his counsel. And that was a fact Allhoff must well know.

"You see," said Allhoff blandly, as if the case was tied up and in the bag, "Mansfield was probably Strouse's girl, or ex-girl. He prevailed on her to get Daintley to open his door. After that she got panicky. She knew Strouse was a tough, ruthless character. She knew her life wasn't safe as long as she knew what she knew. That's why she tried to get me to help her. But Strouse's lethal aspirin beat her to it."

"It all sounds wonderful," said Strouse, "but what are you going to do with it? You can't pin a murder on me with that aspirin gag. And I got an alibi for Daintley."

I recalled that Strouse had been in the saloon with the midget and was completely covered until after the killing. I nodded my head sagely.

"My God," said Allhoff, "do you think, Strouse, I haven't seen through that one?"

"I don't know what you're talking

about," said Strouse. It was quite obvious he did.

"If I was right about the killer having to get the Mansfield girl to induce Daintley to open the studio door because he feared Strouse, it was obvious the midget wouldn't casually visit saloons with Strouse. No, that, like the ingenious device of locking the studio door, was put in to make it harder."

"I don't see it," I said. "Daintley *was* in the saloon with Strouse, wasn't he?"

"No," said Allhoff. "The instant the bartender said Strouse was accompanied by a midget we leaped to the conclusion that it was Daintley. Midgets aren't too common. However, it wasn't a midget, at all. It was a child."

"A child?" I said.

"A child," said Allhoff firmly. "Probably hired from a theatrical agency, dressed in long pants and a derby hat. You will note the midget drank root beer, although Grimes stated his partner drank pretty heavily. You'll note also that he held an unlighted cigarette in his mouth. Cigar smokers do that often. Cigarette smokers don't. After baffling us with his locked room murder, Strouse figured on baffling us further with a perfect alibi."

ALLHOFF reached for the percolator. There was a long silence in the room. I turned everything he had said over in my brain. It sounded good. It sounded perfect. But it still didn't sound legal. Strouse's point was as well taken as Allhoff's. There was plenty of good theory and damned little good evidence.

Across the room Strouse smiled confidently and I knew thoughts similar to mine were passing through his head.

"Inspector," he said, "I don't think you can convict me of disorderly conduct. Especially since I shall be able to hire an expensive attorney. You can't lay conjecture before a jury, you know."

"And there's another thing," said Warburton. "I don't know much about law—"

"Or medicine," Allhoff interrupted blandly.

Warburton glared at him and went on: "I don't know much about law but it seems to me the prosecution must establish a motive for a crime. You've completely overlooked that, Inspector."

I realized that I'd overlooked it myself. "That's right, Allhoff, you've given Strouse no motive for killing Daintley."

Allhoff banged the percolator down upon its electric base. "Idiots," he snarled. "The motive is so damned obvious, I didn't bother mentioning it. It's that damned letter. The George Washington letter."

"You mean the letter belonged to Daintley and Strouse killed him and stole it?"

"Obviously."

"My God, is the letter worth that much?"

"Ask Warburton what he intends to pay for it."

I looked inquiringly at the doctor.

"The price agreed upon," he said, "is one hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

Battersly whistled. I was impressed. Allhoff turned to the doctor.

"And despite the fact that I tell you murder was committed to gain possession of this letter, you'll still pay that price. You will, in short, finance Strouse's trial. You may well enable him to go free."

Warburton shrugged. "That's your business, Inspector, not mine. I want that letter. I'm willing to pay a good price for it. I don't care how Strouse got it. All I care about is its authenticity."

"And are you sure it's authentic?"

"Quite. Two experts have assured me so. One, a man who knows paper and ink—the other, a handwriting expert."

Allhoff inhaled deeply. "I wish I had a better case," he said slowly. "I just hate to do you a favor, doctor, but I guess my hand is forced."

He heaved a regretful sigh and turned to Grimes. "You," he said. "You knew your partner had this letter, didn't you?"

Grimes swallowed something in his throat and shook his head wildly.

"I had no idea," he said. "I knew nothing about it. I—"

"You're a liar," said Allhoff amiably. "But you wouldn't be a liar for nothing, would you?"

Grimes was utterly bewildered. "I wouldn't be a liar for nothing?" he repeated dazedly.

"Look," said Allhoff, "you engaged a private copper as soon as you knew Daintley was killed. Why? There was nothing of any value in that store. At least,

nothing any of Homicide's antiquarian experts could find. You hired that special to keep Strouse from killing you, too. He made a financial agreement with you to keep your mouth shut. You're getting a piece of Warburton's dough, aren't you?"

Grimes shook his head again. Not very convincingly, I thought.

"So that's what I mean," said Allhoff. "You wouldn't be a liar for nothing, would you? But you would be a liar for a slice of a hundred and fifty grand."

HE looked significantly over at Sligo, who returned his glance hopefully.

"I even believe you'd take a bad beating for that kind of dough. You're no hero, Grimes, but for a pile of money a man can steel himself to keep his mouth shut even under the pressure of Sligo's fists."

Allhoff leaned forward in his chair and fixed Grimes with a reptilian gaze.

"But would you do it for nothing?"

Grimes did not look happy. He bit his lip and wriggled in his chair. "I still don't understand what you mean, Inspector."

"I'll clear it up," said Allhoff. "I concede Sligo couldn't make you talk if you knew you make a fortune by suffering in silence. But would you still keep your mouth shut if you weren't getting a cent? Would you keep quiet merely out of your great love for Strouse here?"

Grimes patted a handkerchief against the cold sweat on his forehead.

"What I'm asking," continued Allhoff, "is what would you do if Warburton welshed on the deal—if he refused to buy the letter?"

Grimes didn't answer.

"I'll tell you," said Allhoff. "Without the incentive of money you'd talk like a back fence gossip the instant Sligo lifted his bullying hand. So, as you all see quite plainly now, in order to obtain a key witness, all I must do is prevent Doctor Warburton from buying that letter."

Warburton took a cigar from his vest pocket and lit it. He seemed to be enjoying himself immensely.

"Inspector," he said, "you appear to be as bad a detective as you claim I am a doctor. Your job has nothing to do with me. I am buying that letter. You do what you will."

Allhoff shook his head sadly. "This is like cutting off my right arm," he said. "I just hate to do you a favor, doc, but justice demands it."

Warburton exhaled smoke happily. He was putting one over on Allhoff. He was getting even for the insults he had suffered. Better than even, I decided. For if he bought that letter, Allhoff's case wasn't worth the paper the indictment was written on.

"Very well, doctor," said Allhoff. "Suppose I told you that letter was a fake?"

"A fake?"

"A forgery. A damned skillful forgery."

Warburton took the cigar from his mouth and laughed. "Rot. What about my experts? My parchment man? My handwriting expert?"

"Your parchment man is a fool. Your handwriting expert is an ignoramus. You, doctor, are a sucker."

"Very well," said Warburton calmly. "Since you possess so much knowledge of these matters, suppose you prove it's a forgery."

"All right," said Allhoff. "Now what is the date on that letter?"

"September 8th, 1752."

"That's what I thought," said Allhoff. "Now, do any of you bright boys know what happened on September 8th, 1752?"

"Sure," said Warburton. "George Washington wrote a letter to Governor Dinwiddie of Virginia, concerning the death of his half-brother, Lawrence."

"He did not!" yelled Allhoff.

"Well," I put in, "what did happen on September 8th, 1752?"

"Nothing," said Allhoff. "Nothing at all!"

"That's a rather ridiculous statement," said Strouse. "How could nothing happen on any date?"

"Nothing happened," said Allhoff, "because there wasn't any September 8th in 1752. There were not dates at all from September 3rd until September 14th."

WE all looked at him as if his mind had gone. He grinned back at us, evilly and triumphantly.

"You fools!" he yelled. "You ignorant fools! On September 3rd, 1752 in all the British possessions, of which we were one

at the time, the calendar was changed from the Julian of the Caesars to the Gregorian calendar of Pope Gregory. In order to make up for the lost days of the inaccurate Julian calendar, the dates September 3rd to the 14th were omitted. So, George Washington never dated a letter September 8th. There wasn't any! So nothing happened on that day. No one was born and no one died."

Warburton took the cigar from his mouth. His face was white as its ash. He said: "Is this true?"

"There's an encyclopedia in my bedroom," said Allhoff. "Look it up."

I went into the bedroom and did so. I brought the volume out to Warburton.

"Show it to Grimes," said Allhoff.

I showed it to Grimes. He read it blinking and trembling. Allhoff said: "O.K., Sligo. See if he'll lie for nothing."

Sligo took one step toward Grimes when he cracked.

"No," he yelled. "No, I'll talk. The Inspector is right—"

Strouse sprang out of his chair and headed with great speed toward the door. Sligo's speed was even greater. His hamlike fist hit Strouse on the side of the face. Strouse spun around like a top, then Sligo had him by the throat.

"Don't butcher him here," said Allhoff. "Take him across the street. Book him for murder. Take Grimes, too."

Sligo took the pair of them and dragged them out the door. Warburton stood up.

"I don't know what to say—" he began.

"That's fine," said Allhoff. "We won't have to listen. Boy, I sure would have enjoyed seeing you clipped for all that dough. You know what I think of doctors? They—"

Warburton got out at top speed to avoid hearing again what Allhoff thought of doctors. Deprived of that victim, Allhoff thought for a moment, then grinned. He opened his desk drawer and took out a small container.

"Oh, Battersly," he said, "I asked the morgue to send me over the contents of Harriet Mansfield's pocketbook. There was another tin of corn plasters in it. Doubtless, she intended it for you. Her dying wish, you might say. Here."

He held it out. His eyes met those of Battersly. Battersly averted his head.

"Don't want it, eh?" said Allhoff. "Well, I'll keep it myself. You never can tell. With wet weather coming, I might need it myself. Never know when my old corns are going to bother me. Never can tell when—"

"Allhoff," I said, "for God's sake, shut up. Lay off the kid for once. This constant harping is unjustified. It's—"

"Ah," said Allhoff, who always got the last word, "are you telling me I haven't got a leg to stand on?"

MAN'S BEST FRIEND IS HIS MURDER

By

ALAN FARLEY

Author of "The Whole Worm," etc.

"The tall grass has been considerably shortened. No coal-oil lamps, no johns in the back lot. Just find a pair of binoculars and make it look as difficult as possible," Suggs told me. That's all—except that the discovery of a very dead Pete Brooks kind of shoved the other matter into the background—and the dame who hired us didn't live long enough to appreciate my work.

SHE WAS in the office talking to the boss when I came back from lunch. Suggs wiggled his shaggy eyebrows at me and smiled at the woman.

He said to her: "This is Dave Landrum," and to me he smirked: "Mrs. Maude Addison, Dave. One of my childhood sweethearts."

Mrs. Addison said something polite while we looked each other over. To have known Suggs that long would have made her around forty-five. She didn't look it.

She was small, with the sleekness of a well-kept cat. Her nose was short and had a tendency to puggishness. Her eyes, the same shade as her dark brown flannel suit, were wary and alert. She had a wide mouth that missed generosity by being tucked in at the corners. Her blue-tinted gray hair was topped by a

piece of brown felt twisted into a grotesque shape.

Suggs ended my mental inventory of Mrs. Addison's charms by saying pontifically: "Mrs. Addison wants you to go to Buttonhook with her and investigate the disappearance of a pair of glasses."

Through the light haze of a fading hangover, I said: "Buttonhook? Haven't seen a buttonhook in—let's see, must be twenty-five years. I was sixteen at the time. She was the leading lady in a traveling tent show. The things she taught—"

"Dave!" Suggs' voice cut like a hot knife through cream pie.

"Buttonhook is a town, Mr. Landrum," Mrs. Addison said sweetly. "It is the county seat of Hook County."

SHE looked at her watch, pursed her well-painted lips and stood up. Suggs and I stood up. From the back of her chair, she picked up what looked like a mink coat. Or it may have been skillfully done rabbit to match her face. Suggs helped with the coat.

She gave him a lingering handclasp and said: "It's been really wonderful seeing you, Homer. I do appreciate your taking this interest in my little problem. I'm really upset." She looked about as annoyed as a General Grant tank. "Steve probably did it merely to embarrass my son but—well, I couldn't be sure. That's why I drove up instead of telephoning—to keep it all quiet, if possible."

Her shoulders drooped a little but not enough to spoil the lines of her figure. Suggs patted her shoulder with a practiced hand.

"Everything's going to be all right," he soothed. "Dave will do whatever is necessary. If you'll wait in the other room while I give Dave the details?"

They smiled mistily into each other's eyes. When the door had closed behind her, I turned angrily to Suggs.

"What's the idea in picking me? I'm no good at this tall grass routine."

"The tall grass has been considerably shortened since you left a small town, Dave. No coal-oil lamps, no johnnies at the back of the garden." He dug a thumb in my ribs. "Does Maude look like the product of the sticks as you and I knew them?"

"Maybe not, but she's wacky. Hiring a private eye to look for a pair of glasses she probably dropped in the chicken-yard."

"Not eye glasses," Suggs said in a pained way. "Binoculars. Carl Zeiss binoculars. Maude has an invalid son who likes to watch the birds and bees with them. She's eager to have them returned."

"It's still wacky. Who'd take 'em?"

"Only two people had a chance. Some local lad named Steve Kennedy and a neighbor lass, Barbara Webb. The two of them called on Joe—that's the invalid son—last Sunday. After they left, Joe couldn't find his binoculars. Maude is sure this Kennedy took them. She came up to retain our expert help."

"Why?"

He stuck out his chest. "Because we're the best in—"

"Nuts," I said. "Why would Kennedy steal binoculars from an invalid?"

"As I get it, although Maude doesn't say so in so many words, she has decided to marry her son to this Webb lassie. Kennedy has other ideas. Maude figures he took the glasses to heckle Joe." Suggs' voice came down to a conniving level. "She's got plenty of that stuff that's stuck away in banks, so make the job look as hard as possible."

"Buttonhook!" I snorted.

"Oh, you'll like the place. Just one big happy family. Everybody your friend." He let me get to the door before he gave me the clincher. "By the way, the voters of Buttonhook rejected liquor. Yessir, Dave, this trip is gonna do you a *lot* of good."

IT WAS three o'clock before we were on our way. The day was sunny and cool, a fine day for driving. But not in Maude Addison's car and not at her speed.

She had a LaSalle convertible a few shades bluer than her hair and several years old, but still rakish looking. The windshield and door windows were up but the top was buttoned down. After a glance at the speedometer and a mental prayer that no OPA checker would catch

up with us, I stared morosely at the question on the back of the "C" sticker: IS THIS TRIP *REALLY* NECESSARY? I made appropriate replies to myself.

Nothing of importance was said during the drive. We shot through Buttonhook as the clock in the courthouse bonged six. At the southwest corner of the square we turned south and were soon out of the city limits and on a macadamized road narrower than the town's streets.

Mrs. Addison said: "Joe prefers having his dinner at six. I'm so late I'll take you home with me and bring you back to a hotel later."

I said that was all right.

It was not dark enough to have the headlights on and not light enough to have them off. The countryside was hilly and the road was a succession of slight grades. In the hollows made by the dips, fog hid the roadway. It didn't make any difference in our speed.

A couple of miles out, after we'd done ups-and-downs a half-dozen times, we topped a rise and I saw the first houses since leaving Buttonhook. There were two hills, one on each side of the road. Atop each hill a house stood stark against the darkening sky.

Mrs. Addison took a hand off the wheel, flexed her fingers and said: "We're almost home."

The road in front of the two houses was wider than the macadam and showed hard-packed reddish dirt where it had been freshly graded. We turned right and went west on it. We dipped into a fog-filled hollow.

I saw the obstruction ahead. I don't know whether Mrs. Addison did or not. She didn't live long enough to tell me.

It loomed out of the fog like a battleship half-seen through a smoke screen, a gargantuan machine looking larger than it really was. There wasn't anything we could do about the speed of the LaSalle. We hit the thing full on. I was unconscious before I heard much of the noise.

I LAY like a thrown shoe and listened to a welter of confused sounds. An agonized, ragged voice kept saying: "Why couldn't it have been me? I'm no good to anyone." A soft, baritone voice, that reminded me of Suggs, cursed someone named Pete with efficiency and vigor. A nice girlish voice kept asking if Joe couldn't go back to the house. Other voices said things that didn't make sense. I opened my eyes.

A couple of feet from my nose was the biggest 8-ball I have ever seen. After blinking a few times, the ball broke into several smaller ones, set in a precise row along the shoulder of the road. They were road flares, round in shape with a short wick tube at the top and white lettering making an oval on the dull blackness of their sides. The lettering read: HOOK COUNTY HIGHWAY DEPT. They were not lighted.

At the thought that I had been run over by the entire Hook County Highway Department, I giggled.

The nice girlish voice said: "He's conscious."

The baritone said: "Let me talk to him."

A new voice said: "Keep your shirt on a minute."

A man came to me and folded himself until he was squatting on his heels. He probed me with knowing fingers. I yelped when he touched my right arm.

He said cheerily: "Fine, fine. Nothing here but a broken arm."

I sat up. He tried to push me back.

I said: "I'm O. K. Mrs. Addison—"

He shook his head. "Pinned in the car. You were thrown clear."

I looked. The blue car was not impressive, pleated as it was against the rear of a road-grader. The steering shaft held Mrs. Addison to the back of the seat like a giant nail. I leaned crazily and vomited on the dry, brittle grass beside the flares.

A black hearse slid to a stop beside the crumpled metal and the doctor said briskly: "You folks better go back to the house. I'll be up later."

Hands helped me up and I staggered along the road shaking my head and not helping it much. We went farther west several yards, crossed the road and went into an upward-curving drive. One of the houses I had seen from the macadam road stood beside the driveway, a long,

low building with a porch the full length across the front.

During the tortuous trip a half-sensed odor kept reminding me of my school-days, of books and nights of homework. The scent was a little stronger in the house, but by then I was too busy looking at the girl to wonder about it.

She was what the nice girlish voice belonged to. She wore a wool dress the color of fog over a figure good enough to make her anybody's pin-up girl. She was not beautiful but she had the right number of eyes, ears, nose and mouth pleasingly arranged. Her hair had the color and sheen of a fresh carrot that had been scrubbed, brushed, waxed and polished, and it was combed severely so the color could be appreciated without bothering about details.

The rest of the occupants of the room were male and, beside the red-head, didn't mean much. The one who came in for the most attention was a delicate-looking dark lad who used a cane and seated himself at the end of the divan as though he might break if not handled with care. I could see that no hooks had ever been used on him.

Two vaulting poles ambled into view. Neither was as tall nor as thin as a vaulting pole but the resemblance was strong. The younger one, in his fifties, held out my billfold to me.

He said apologetically: "We wanted to know who you were, Mr. Landrum."

I nodded, which made my head buzz worse than a hangover from a fifth of Scotch. I wished I had a fifth of Scotch.

He continued in his soft baritone: "I'm Sheriff Wymer. The young lady is Miss Webb."

He twitched his leather jacket with an embarrassed gesture. Miss Webb smiled at me. My head buzzed louder.

The older man watched me with keen eyes and when Sheriff Wymer said: "This is my father," he stepped toward me with a pleased grin and stuck out his right hand. He looked a little foolish and put his hand down.

He said gently: "Doc's gonna fix your arm soon's he can, son."

The official voice of Hook County resumed introductions with a tinge of impatience.

"Mr. Addison." He indicated the lad on the divan who gave me a dazed, white look. "And Captain Steve Kennedy," he identified the big, broad, tanned-faced man who leaned against the mantel of a dead fireplace.

I LOOKED closely at the captain. He looked young to be wearing captain's bars, but he also wore a couple of foreign-campaign ribbons so I wouldn't argue about that. He had bright blue eyes and a square jaw and an air of complete assurance.

Sheriff Wymer said: "It's plain that Pete went off and left that road-grader without putting out flares but—"

The elder Wymer snorted derisively and went over in a corner and sat down in a chair where he diddled his fingers up and down on the chair arm from time to time.

The sheriff gave him a firm look and went on. "But we're wondering if he did it deliberately. If what Mrs. Addison hired you for is tied up with Pete in any way, it'd help us to know it."

I said cautiously: "I can't answer that until I know who this Pete is and what he did."

The lad on the divan moved his cane back and forth. He looked like Maude Addison. The same dark eyes, the short nose, the same repressed mouth. His face was young but his dark hair was already liberally threaded with white. He had a cool, insolent voice.

"Perhaps I can explain to Mr. Landrum. I—I was here alone. Mother had gone into town, to hire you, I suppose, although I can't imagine why. But she frequently does—did things I didn't understand. Anyway, a little after five, someone knocked at the door. It had been one of my bad days"—he motioned with the cane— "and walking was difficult. Ordinarily I don't answer the telephone or the door but the noise persisted. We don't have servants."

He invested this lack with pathos.

"Finally I went to the door. It was Pete Brooks, the driver of the road-grader. Something had gone wrong with it and he wanted to report. I let him use the telephone."

Barbara Webb patted his shoulder.

She said: "Steve was in the office and he answered Pete's call. He told me Pete told him that—" She stopped confusedly.

"It was time for Barbara to go home so I answered for her." The captain's voice was solid and confident. "I relayed Pete's message to her. She said to have him put out the flares and report it to the garage when he got back to town. It was nearer five-thirty than five then."

Sheriff Wymer said suddenly: "Reminds me, I got to set folks to looking for Pete."

He went into the hall where I heard him mumbling in a one-sided conversation.

Barbara Webb perched on the arm of the divan close to Joe Addison. He looked at her with a mixture of adoration and dependence.

She said earnestly: "You must be the detective Maude said she was going to hire to find Joe's glasses."

I asked innocently: "Glasses?"

She waved a shapely hand. "Binoculars. Maude came by the office this morning and told me all about it." Her voice grew teary. "I—I took the binoculars. She was always talking about sending them to the Navy. I was going to do that for her."

I smiled. "That story might do, Miss Webb. It sounds good the first time over."

The captain stood away from the fireplace and said something bitter to her about defending him needlessly and making a fool of herself. At the same time Joe Addison grabbed his cane and waved it at me.

"If—if I was as healthy as you, Landrum," he said thickly, "I'd beat you to a pulp. You can't talk to Barbara like that."

I grinned inwardly and waited for the blow-off. Before anything could pop, the doctor bustled into the room, followed by Sheriff Wymer. My arm was put in a temporary splint and the doctor draped my jacket and topcoat over my shoulders.

He said happily: "Best I can do right now. Can't set the bone until the swelling goes out of that arm." He turned to Joe Addison. "Now I want to get this young man—"

What he wanted to do to Addison was drowned in a squeal of brakes, a dull crumpling sound and a heavy silence into which Sheriff Wymer groaned: "Somebody else ran into the damned thing."

We broke for the door in a bunch.

TOW-TRUCKS had their spotlights turned on the wreckage. In their light I could see a neat black coupe with its nose buried in the hillside like a hungry horse going for its feedbag. A short, heavy man dressed in dusty business clothes walked back and forth beside the car, peering at the damage. Some of the workmen followed him, talking in carefully lowered voices. He heard the pound of our feet and turned to face us.

Sheriff Wymer, well to the back of the group, said meekly: "Hello, Mr. Webb. You hurt?"

Webb said sourly: "It's not your fault if I'm not. I don't need to remind you there's a curve down the road and I'd have hit this damned thing sure as shootin' if I hadn't seen the wrecker lights when I did." His eyes sorted us over, saw Joe Addison.

He said in a gruff, unconvincing voice: "Sorry to hear about your mother, Joe." Then, harshly to Barbara Webb: "What're you doing here?"

Without waiting for an answer, Webb looked at me and said: "Who's this?"

"A private detective, Daddy," Barbara said brightly. "He's come to find Joe's glasses."

"Uh-huh," he nodded absently. "Where's Pete Brooks?"

The sheriff spat stolidly onto the hard clay road.

"We're looking for him now. Pap, you better take Mr. Landrum back to the hotel and bed him down. Like as not he's tuckered out."

The older man protested: "I was going to help the boys look for Pete."

"Nothing for you to do," the sheriff insisted. "Anyways, it's too late for you to be out. Maw'll give me fits as it is."

The fact that it was not quite eight-thirty, coupled with the indulgent tone of Sheriff Wymer's voice, produced the effect of a patient father trying to talk sense into a not-too-bright child. The older man got the inference.

He said: "Come on, Mr. Landrum. Car's down the road a piece."

He hadn't looked his years until he walked. He bent slightly at neck, waist and knee so that his heavy overcoat dipped in front and flapped his thin legs at each step. His shoes were high top, brightly polished, showing the outline of bunions. His slow pace gave me time to see things I had missed before.

The sheriff's car was parked in front of the road-grader. The hearse was gone and with it the body of Maude Addison.

We passed a sedan and the old man stopped at a Model-T phaeton, held the door open for me, then climbed in slowly over the door on the driver's side. He grunted and grinned at me, showing where a tooth had been broken, marring the even perfection that only false teeth seem to attain.

"Got a little rheumatiz," he explained. "Comes from early piety and sitting in damp churches."

I laughed with him at his joke and did some heavy thinking.

Before he could start the car, I said: "Where's Captain Kennedy live?"

"He's home on leave right now. Stays with his folks in Buttonhook."

I shook my head, said: "Where's this Webb live?"

Wymer jerked a large thumb over his shoulder. "Cross the highway. On this same road on the other hill. We call 'em Twin Hills."

I nodded at that. "What kind of weather did you have here last Sunday—day before yesterday?"

He turned his head and looked at me anxiously. "You feel all right, son?"

"I feel swell," I lied. "What kind of weather—"

"All right, all right. We had rain."

"Not so good. All day?"

"Well, long about two, three o'clock it come on to rain. Don't have much snow down here—too far south. Winter is mostly rain."

"That might be it," I said. "Let's go see Webb's house."

WE STARTED the car and turned it expertly in the road.

"You ought to be in bed, son. That was a bad fall you took."

"Look, Mr. Wymer," I said, "I just want to walk around Webb's house. That won't kill me. If it does, my insurance is paid."

We bucked across the macadam and continued east.

Wymer said thoughtfully: "Must be an awfully exciting business, being a private detective."

"Hell, we're just glorified door shakers."

"Door shakers?"

I explained: "You take a few blocks of fine homes or a little out-of-the-way business district. The owners get together and hire a guy to walk a beat all night and test doors every once in a while to be sure everything's O.K. That's what we do mostly. Suggs, the boss, gets a real case only about once in six weeks."

He sucked a tooth. "This binoculars thing a real case?"

"Just bait," I said scornfully. "I'll know as soon as I see Webb's house."

He turned into a long curving drive similar to that leading to Addison's house. The car bucked to a stop and we got out.

I didn't pay much attention to the house itself. A lot of money had been spent on it and it was reminiscent of the Deep South. I went around to the west side. Straight across on the other hill was the long, low silhouette of the Addison home. Behind it was a smaller, lower building. I pointed at it.

"What's that behind the house?"

Jake squinted. "Eyes ain't what they used to be," he said. "Must be the milk house."

"Milk house? In this day of—"

"Maude don't use it as such. Fixed it up for Joe, him being kind of touchy about being crippled. Maude was a great one for parties and Joe uses that for a sort of hide-away. Studio, he calls it." He sighed enviously. "He's got one of them old leather couches in there I'd like to have. All rigged up fancy in red leather."

"Has this studio any windows?"

He looked at me again with his anxious look.

"Your mind's wandering, sort of. Got one window. On this side."

I shook his hand solemnly.

"Thanks. We can go home now."

HE GOT in the car shaking his head. I waited until he was headed for Buttonhook before I opened up again.

"Mr. Wymer, I'm a little hazy about some things. Like, for instance, how'd the law get out here so fast? If you don't mind my asking questions."

"That's all right. I don't have to answer 'em if I don't want to. You can call me Jake." I moved irritably and he said: "Well, it's like the Addison boy said. He heard the smash and remembered Pete. So he figured the sheriff would be needed and he phoned in before he went out to see."

"Good figuring," I grunted.

"Don't let him get your dander up, son. Maude raised the boy to think he was the salt of creation. He was sure a wild-haired kid. And him being crippled don't help. Mighty hard on a man now, not being able to do any more for his country than Joe can."

I asked idly: "How'd he get hurt?"

"Run into a bridge once. 'Bout five years ago. He was around twenty years old then. Maude spent a sight of money on him since. All she had and all she could borrow. She used to take him over to Zanesville for treatment. That's why she had a 'C' card."

"Did it do any good?"

He drew his lips down. "Hard to tell. Like he says, he has his good days and his bad days. Some days he can get around pretty good, other days not. Didn't help his disposition any. Sits and broods too much, likely. Look the way him and Steve are. They used to be chums. Now they ain't hardly civil."

He sighed gustily.

"Sure too bad about Maude. I don't know what Joe'll do without her."

I said: "Yeah. Especially when she died through Pete Brook's carelessness."

As though he hadn't heard me, he continued: "Now Luther Webb's the one I'd expect to smash into something. He goes over to Zanesville twice a week to tend to business. I been telling Junior he's got to do something about Luther's driving. Other folks slowed down to save gas and tires but not Luther . . . There's Buttonhook."

He pointed to lights ahead. I ignored the change in subjects.

"Any reason why Pete would leave the road-grader without flares?"

We crawled past small houses set back on carefully raked lawns. Children played under sputtering arc lights in the street. Jake maneuvered the car around them before he answered.

"Don't seem like Pete, somehow. He's

a good boy. Fought in the last war. Always been tidy about flares and such as that. But nobody's seen him since. Junior called Mrs. Kennedy and Pete hadn't come home to supper."

I asked: "Pete roomed at Mrs. Kennedy's, did he?"

"Yep. She took in boarders after Steve went to the army. Said the house was lonesome." Jake sounded tired of me.

He turned onto the square and at the other corner was the neon sign of the Buttonhook Hotel.

I said hurriedly: "You'd like to help Pete, wouldn't you? I mean, so he won't be charged with criminal negligence or something like that." I rushed along without waiting for an answer. "I'll have to have your help. I don't know my way around Buttonhook."

The car was eased over to the curb.

Jake said shyly: "Been a long time since anybody asked for any help from old Jake. Sure I want to help. But I don't know's there is much we can do."

"I'd like to look at Pete's room," I said. "And I'd like to know if Maude Addison told any one beside Barbara Webb that she was going into the city to hire a private eye."

Jake started the motor. He drove the rest of the block and turned the corner away from the hotel.

"Mrs. Kennedy's place is down here a few blocks. You can get in easy enough. I'll scout around and ask about the other thing."

He let me out in front of a two-storied, frame house with lights showing in most of the windows.

With ill-concealed eagerness he said: "Meet you back at the hotel as soon as I can," and drove away.

MRS. KENNEDY was a small, neat woman with work-roughened hands and bright blue eyes that twinkled. She let me into a clean hall furnished with the conventional chair-table-telephone combination, a stairway going up at the right and open double doors at the left showing an empty sitting room.

I said: "Is Pete Brooks home?"

"He hasn't come in yet. Would you—"

I let disappointment show in my face.

"He was going to loan me a book." I hoped he had a book. "I'm trying out for a job with the Highway Department tomorrow and he thought the book might help me. I'm in a sort of hurry. If it's all right, I'll just run up and get it."

She looked at the stairs and back at me.

"Well, I never let—you could wait in here." She motioned toward the double doors. "Pete ought to be home real soon."

A young colored woman came to a door at the other end of the hall.

She said worriedly: "Miz Kennedy, that sauce is sure gonna curdle and I never made any afore. You got to show me what to do with the aigs."

Mrs. Kennedy said: "In a minute, Flotilla." She frowned at me. "You wait in the parlor. I'll run up in a minute and get the book."

She went toward the other door trailing the last words over her shoulder. I said, "Thanks," and was three steps up the stairway by the time she was out of sight. At the landing where the stairs turned, another flight of narrower stairs went down into the kitchen. Mrs. Kennedy was explaining about eggs.

The upper hall had four closed doors with sounds behind them, an open door showing a spotless bathroom, and another open door at the front of the house. It was the right one. I went in and left the door open.

The room had the austerity of an army cot. The bed was neatly made. The dresser top was almost bare. There were two chairs, one pulled up at a straight table which held a spread-out newspaper. On the newspaper was the greasy litter of a disassembled ignition distributor.

I sniffed the faint, sharp odor in the room, looked at the table and said, "Homework."

Under one of two windows a low book shelf held books and magazines about things mechanical.

There were no binoculars. No Pete Brooks, dead or alive, stuffed in the clothes closet.

In the hall downstairs Mrs. Kennedy said shrilly: "Flotilla! Flotilla, did you hear that fellow go out? He isn't here.

You know, I thought he had a sharp look."

Pete Brooks' room had told me the kind of guy Pete Brooks was. I went to the stairs and tiptoed down to the flight that led to the kitchen. Standing there I looked through the banisters into the hall. Mrs. Kennedy had stopped with one foot on the steps and one hand on the newel post while she argued with herself about my "sharp" look. She settled the argument and started up the steps. I edged around and went down the back stairs into the kitchen.

The Negro girl looked up from the stove and raised a spoon dripping lumpy-looking yellow liquid. Her mouth opened and her eyes bulged.

I snarled: "One yelp and I'll curdle your sauce."

I was through the back door, around the house and on the sidewalk before her yell sounded.

THE Buttonhook Hotel was an old building with a high ceiling, dark red rugs and leather divans and chairs. It was warm, well lighted and threadbare. Jake Wymer waited for me near the desk. Behind the desk stood a motherly, gray-haired woman as tall and broad as Jake was tall and thin.

Jake said proudly: "This is my wife, son. Junior called and said I was bringing you in, so Maw's got a nice hot dinner ready."

I sighed in relief. Mrs. Wymer smiled.

"You just go on upstairs," she beamed. "I told Pap you'd be hungry and he's going to bring you a tray. You'll need help cutting up your food with that bad arm and all."

In ten minutes I was seated in a room that matched the lobby, eating some of the best food ever put down a willing throat. Jake squirmed around and got his pipe going.

"Find out anything about Pete?" he asked eagerly.

Around a bite of roast chicken I said: "Not much."

"I didn't get much either. I talked to Gladys—that's the girl on the phone during the day. I figured she'd know what was going on, the phone office being upstairs right here on the square. She saw Maude go into the courthouse this morning. Must have been when she went to see Barby."

I swallowed coffee and asked: "What is this office Miss Webb works in?"

"County Highway Department. She keeps books and such as that. Pete really should have called the garage. Gladys said one of Maude's cronies called her around five-thirty but she didn't get any answer." He slapped his thigh. "Almost forgot. I talked to Junior. They brought the road-grader in to the garage under its own power. All it needed was gas."

My left hand jerked a little and I got gravy on my face. When I had licked it off, I said: "Is that what those machines run on?"

"That's what I call it. It's really diesel fuel."

"Would the Addisons have had any to loan Pete?"

"Uh, reckon not. See, they don't farm any of their land. Rent it all out. Maude needed money for Joe. And she was always ready to spend some on herself."

I digested this along with some candied yams.

"What are those flares fueled with?"

"Coal-oil."

He squinted through the fog of his pipe and his voice grew diffident. "I'm a man to let people tell their stories in their own way, son. But I'm hankering to know what you found out about Pete."

"He didn't leave that road-grader like that."

"How you figure that just from looking at his room?" He added hastily: "Not that I'm arguing with you. I'd as leave not think he did."

"One look was enough. He was painfully clean, neat and orderly. The grader stalled in a dip in the road where there was fog. A methodical guy like Pete would light the flares before he ever went up to Addison's house. Unless something made him forget."

Jake licked his broken tooth in thought.

"Can't think what that would be, unless it was Luther Webb. He comes helling it along that road about five- thirty every Tuesday and Friday night. You can almost set your watch by him. Only tonight, of course, he had that flat."

I lost my appetite. I said: "Does Pete have anything against Webb?"

Jake crossed his knees and swung his foot a few times.

"Uh, well, no. Luther got Pete his job. You think maybe Luther was the one supposed to hit the grader instead of Maude?"

"I was just trying that for size. How'd Pete feel about Mrs. Addison?"

"Well—he didn't like her. Nobody did much. Too bossy. I reckon Luther come as near hating her as anybody. With him it was Barby. He never tried to hide it. He thought Maude was making Barby into somebody to fetch and carry for Joe the rest of her life and Luther didn't like that."

I pushed my chair back and got up.

I said: "Help me with my coat."

He hauled himself out of the chair, his knees creaking.

"I wouldn't go off half-cocked, son. Luther wouldn't have to kill Maude. He holds her paper on everything she owned. All Luther would have to do would be foreclose. Maude liked money. Not having any would be worse to her than dying."

I regarded him with fondness. There was more to his head than his too-big ears and his too-long hair.

I said: "Let's go out and look at Joe's studio."

WE LEFT the Model-T on the road below the house. A few cars were parked around the front porch.

I said: "Quite a gathering."

"Friends. Neighbors. Womenfolks bring food. Menfolks come to help with the chores which there ain't any of in this case. When do we start looking for Pete?"

"This won't take a minute," I said. "Got your flashlight?"

He waved it at me. We went up the driveway and around the house silently, not using the flash. Behind the house, about ten or fifteen feet from the back door, was the long mound of earth I had seen from Webb's house.

I said: "I'd sure like to see the inside of that place."

"Well, go on and look. Door's never locked."

The door was locked. Jake grumbled. I knew how he felt. These people were all his friends—the younger ones he'd known all their lives. He didn't like prying.

I repeated: "I want to see inside."

Jake got out a bunch of keys tied on a shoe-lace and separated a long slender one.

"You're an obstinate cuss," he said. "This is a skeleton key we use at the hotel. Doubt if it will work."

It worked.

The room was about eight by ten feet, made of rock with a small rock fireplace set in the back wall. Burned-out embers looked like coal in the beam of the flash.

My back was cold and clammy when I went down the two broad rock steps into the room. The odor I'd noticed in the Addison living room was stronger here.

Jake's flash showed the retreat of a shy, studious man. Two chairs were pulled up at the fireplace, the red leather couch Jake coveted was pushed toward one wall, and against the opposite wall, next to the window, was a small desk.

I had dredged the answer out of my memory but I asked the question anyway.

"What's that smell?"

Jake sniffed audibly. "Coal-oil. Probably Joe uses it to start his fireplace, but it's a bad habit."

I mimicked Suggs' voice: "The tall grass has been considerably shortened. No coal-oil lamps, no johns at the back of the lot. Just find a pair of binoculars and make the job look difficult."

"Huh?"

I growled: "Don't pay any attention to me. My arm hurts."

I walked over and looked out the window. Webb's house was straight across on the other hill, dark and dead in the glittering moonlight. Behind me, Jake prowled the room, using the flash sparingly.

His yelped, "Dave," spun me around. He was down on his bony knees at the end of the red leather couch. I went to the other end.

The light showed the length of a man, jammed down between the wall and the couch. He was short and husky and very still. He had a pair of wool pants tucked into clean, heavy work boots. A plaid flannel shirt showed a little under his

jacket. A plaid cap, with the ear flaps turned down over his ears, was aslant on his head. The top of the cap was a crushed and crusted brownish blob. His hands smelled of kerosene.

Jake rose slowly and held the flash straight down at his side where it made a pool of light on the rock floor.

His voice was broken and sad. "I always liked Pete. He was a good boy. Born the same day as Junior. He—the wind hurt his ears so he always wore his cap that way."

I went to him and put a hand on his thin arm.

"Take it easy. He's still a good boy."

Jake didn't hear me. "No call for anybody to do that to Pete. He never hurt anybody. He was a good—"

THE DOOR popped open and Jake turned. He brought the flashlight up like a gun. Captain Steve Kennedy blinked in its glare. The light picked up the red of Barbara Webb's hair in the crowd behind him.

He said: "Someone heard a noise out here. We came out to see about it." He reached around the door jamb and pushed a light switch. He grinned crookedly at me.

"The public detective. Still snooping for glasses. Well, you can have them. I guess you knew I took the things."

Joe Addison shoved Kennedy aside.

He sneered: "My mother died this evening, Mr. Landrum. To you that may not be as important as earning your fee. But it is to me. Get off this property or I'll have you put off."

"Hold up, Joe," Jake said. "We got a little more than glasses now." He singled out a kindly-looking woman in the crowd. "Mrs. Webb, you call the sheriff. Tell him we want him right away. Joe, you and Steve and Luther come in here. The rest of you get back to the house and stay put."

Barbara insisted on being allowed to stay and Jake waved the four of them away from the couch. He held himself straight and stiff, his shoulders back and his chin up.

"We just found Pete Brooks. Down behind the couch with his head bashed in."

Steve Kennedy was silent. Barbara cried out once, sharply. Addison took a quick step and leaned on his cane, his face the grayness of home-made paste. Luther Webb was the only one who looked unaffected by Jake's announcement.

Addison said hoarsely: "You mean he's —in here?"

I put my arm across his shoulder.

I said: "Addison, we need your help. We know you were out of the house around five-thirty—an unanswered telephone call shows that. If you saw anything or heard anything that would help us, don't be afraid to tell us."

His small, rabbity chin trembled.

"I—I don't know anything about it. I—you mean he took the binoculars and —and was killed because of it?"

I shook my head. "Kennedy took them. Pete is an entirely different matter. Your mother knew who had the binoculars, although I don't think she knew why Kennedy took them or she'd never have tried to use the incident the way she did."

Luther Webb said sharply: "I'd like to know about those binoculars, Landrum, since my daughter seems to be involved in some way."

"Sure. Kennedy and your daughter were here Sunday to see Joe. Kennedy took the binoculars. Mrs. Addison decided to throw a scare into Kennedy by coming up and hiring a private dick to recover the glasses."

"That's crazy," Webb said.

"Yeah, that's what I thought. But look at it this way. She liked money. She didn't have any. What better way to get more than to marry her son to your daughter? And what better way to drive Barbara into her son's arms than by accusing Kennedy of a petty, snide trick like that?"

Barbara clenched her hands. She looked like she would have enjoyed having them around my neck—with a knife in one of them.

"I don't have any money," she said triumphantly.

I shrugged. "You will have some day. Your father has plenty."

The girl's face was a fanatic's face.

"Joe's loved me for years," she said with pride. "The night he was hurt—he had just asked me to—to marry him.

I said we were too young. He—he tried to commit suicide by driving into the bridge. I wouldn't have done that to him for anything. And I won't make that mistake again."

LOOKING at her proud face it was hard to put acid in my voice but I did.

"Loyalty is a wonderful thing, Miss Webb. But you will have to realize that some people just aren't worth as much as you give."

Steve Kennedy laughed bitterly. "I've been telling her that but it does no good. All she can see is a young pup who whines about his hard luck. Hell, if she'd seen the boys I have who have had lots worse breaks than Joe here and the way they take them—"

She pounded at him with her fists.

"You can't say things like that," she sobbed. "Just because you can walk."

I yelled: "Cut it out, for God's sake. Grow up. A murder trap was set for your father tonight and all you can do is drool over Addison."

She whirled at me.

"My father? But—but Maude . . ."

I nodded wearily. "Yeah. It's too bad she didn't take her son into her confidence about her crazy scheme with the binoculars. Then maybe Addison wouldn't have had the idea of working at it from another angle."

Addison's eyes glittered.

He said evenly: "If you are through with this disgusting display, get out."

"I'm almost through, in more ways than one. When Pete Brooks told you about the grader, didn't you have the bright idea of eliminating the person you thought stood between you and Barbara Webb? Not your mother but her father. Didn't you know he always came along this road about five-thirty every Tuesday and Friday evening and drove so fast that he'd never be able to miss that grader without warning flares around it? Didn't you know that you had to kill Pete Brooks because he had a reputation your word wouldn't have had a chance against? What kind of dodge did you use to get him in here where you could kill him?"

Addison smiled cruelly. "You forget, Mr. Landrum, that I am crippled and hardly in shape to tear around murdering and setting murder traps."

I smiled as nastily. "You're a better man than I am right now, Addison." I didn't know how right I was. "When we heard Luther Webb's car crack up outside, we all ran down the drive and you got there right in the front row. You forgot your crippled pose in your eager-

ness to see the results of your scheme."

I plead carelessness. I had let him get too far away from me. His cane caught me full across nose and mouth. A second blow landed on my broken arm. The room swayed but I lunged for him. Steve Kennedy's out-thrust foot tripped me. Kennedy's face was thoughtful, almost sad as he looked at Addison.

He stood in the opened door and smiled at us, his face a twisted, dark, evil mask.

"You must help me, Barbara," he coaxed. "They are all against me. The world is against me."

Two long arms clad in leather reached around him and pinned his arms to his body. He twisted and writhed and tried to use his knee. Sheriff Wymer shook his head dolefully, turned Addison around and planted a big fist on his rabbity chin. Addison folded limply into the sheriff's arms.

THE LIVING room reminded me of Maude Addison. It had a great deal of her shades of blue and brown. It was nicer with a fire in the fireplace.

Barbara Webb sat stiffly on the divan between her father and Steve Kennedy. The sheriff leaned against the door. They watched Jake Wymer hand me a glass of pale liquid. He showed his broken tooth in a wide grin.

"Junior don't approve of this because I made it. But it's better'n what you can buy around here."

It was hot, stinging stuff that brought tears to my eyes, a glow to my stomach and eased the ache in my head and arm.

Barbara moved restlessly. She said: "I—I don't like to talk about it but I have to know. What was Joe using the glasses for?"

I liked her for that. She had been given a stiff jolt and she was taking it the way I was taking mine—straight.

I said: "Kennedy can tell you." I looked at his red, uncomfortable face and added. "But I'll save him the trouble. Joe was spying on you from the window of his studio."

Barbara turned to Kennedy for proof. He moved his big feet on the rug. He looked miserable and very young.

"That's right, honey," he muttered. "The few times I've been out to your house in the mornings, I kept noticing a flash from over here as if the sun was reflecting against a mirror or something. I—when we came over to see Joe last Sunday I saw the binoculars lying on the window ledge." If possible, his face got redder. "He—he could see right into your bedroom. I couldn't punch him in the face, not the way he was—or seemed to be. So I just took the binoculars."

"Cheer up," I said. "I think you've got a chance there. She must have known you took them but she said she'd done it. They tell me that's a good sign."

Barbara's red hair all but shot sparks.

Jake said hastily: "Joe talked some, before they took him off. He—he meant to kill Luther. He followed Pete back to the road and Pete discovered all the grader needed was gas. He offered to give some to Pete but he told him the gas was in the studio. Pete had been tinkering with the motor so Joe let him get ahead of him and helped himself to one of the wrenches."

"Maude and her son were thoroughly disagreeable persons," Webb stated firmly.

I gulped the last of my drink.

I said: "Then he went back and put out—extinguished—the flares and lined them up nice and straight in the precise way Pete would have done it. He got coil-oil on his hands. I smelled it every time I got near him."

I leaned back and looked at Barbara Webb. Even without her father's money, she was a luscious dish. Not bad for the tall grass, I thought.

I said: "After the war, I'm gonna cash my bonds in and come back here and grow fat drinking Jake's corn and eating his wife's baked chicken. I'm sleepy."

I don't think now I'll be able to live that long. Suggs almost gnawed a rug when I told him all about it. His check from Maude Addison was tied up because of her death. I hadn't tried to get a fee from Luther Webb for saving his darling from the villain's clutches. Suggs even suggested I could have squeezed a little money out of Jake because he made corn from time to time.

In short, he put me to shaking doors.

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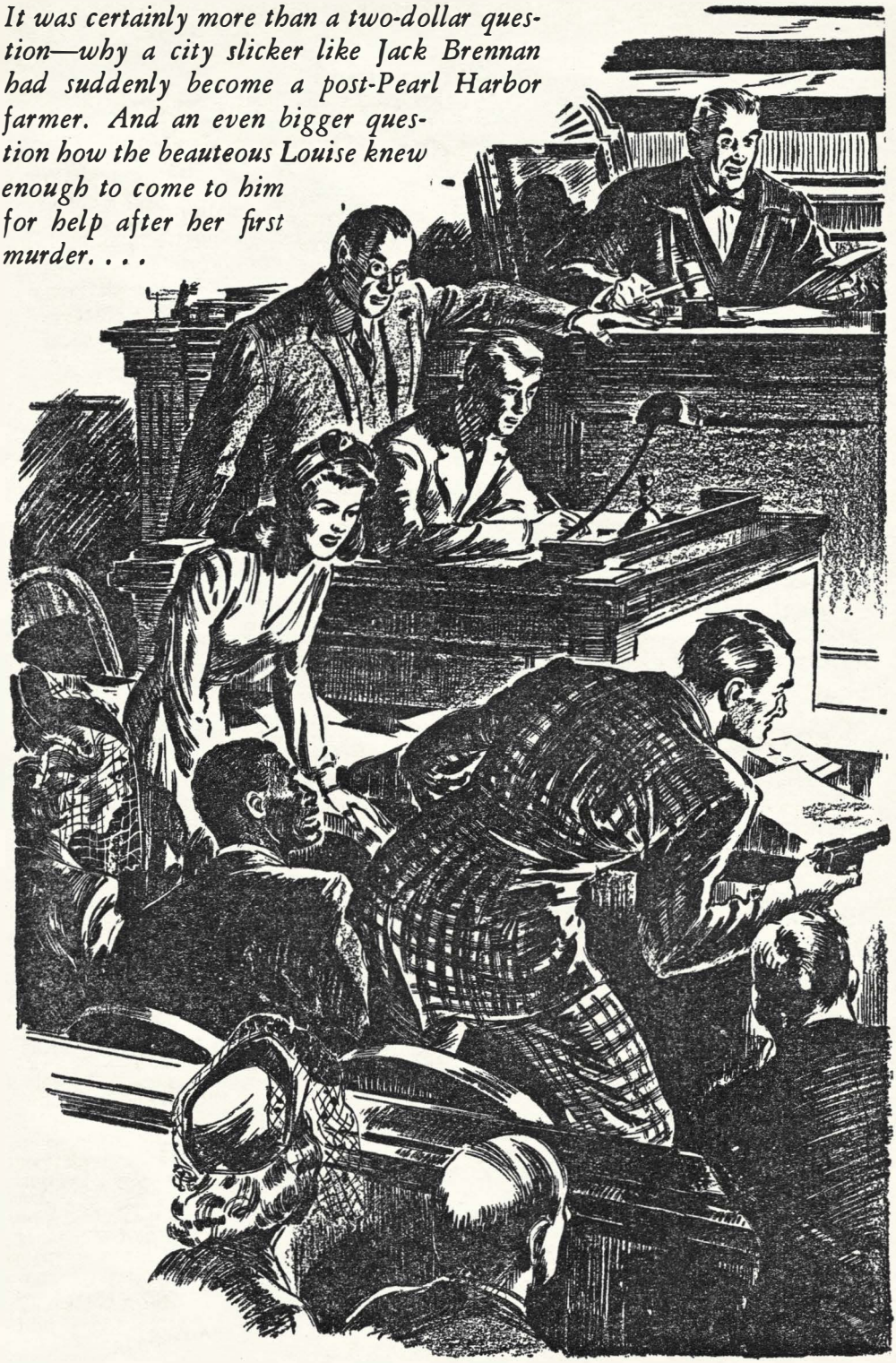


THE CORPSE BELONGS TO DADDY

By JULIUS LONG

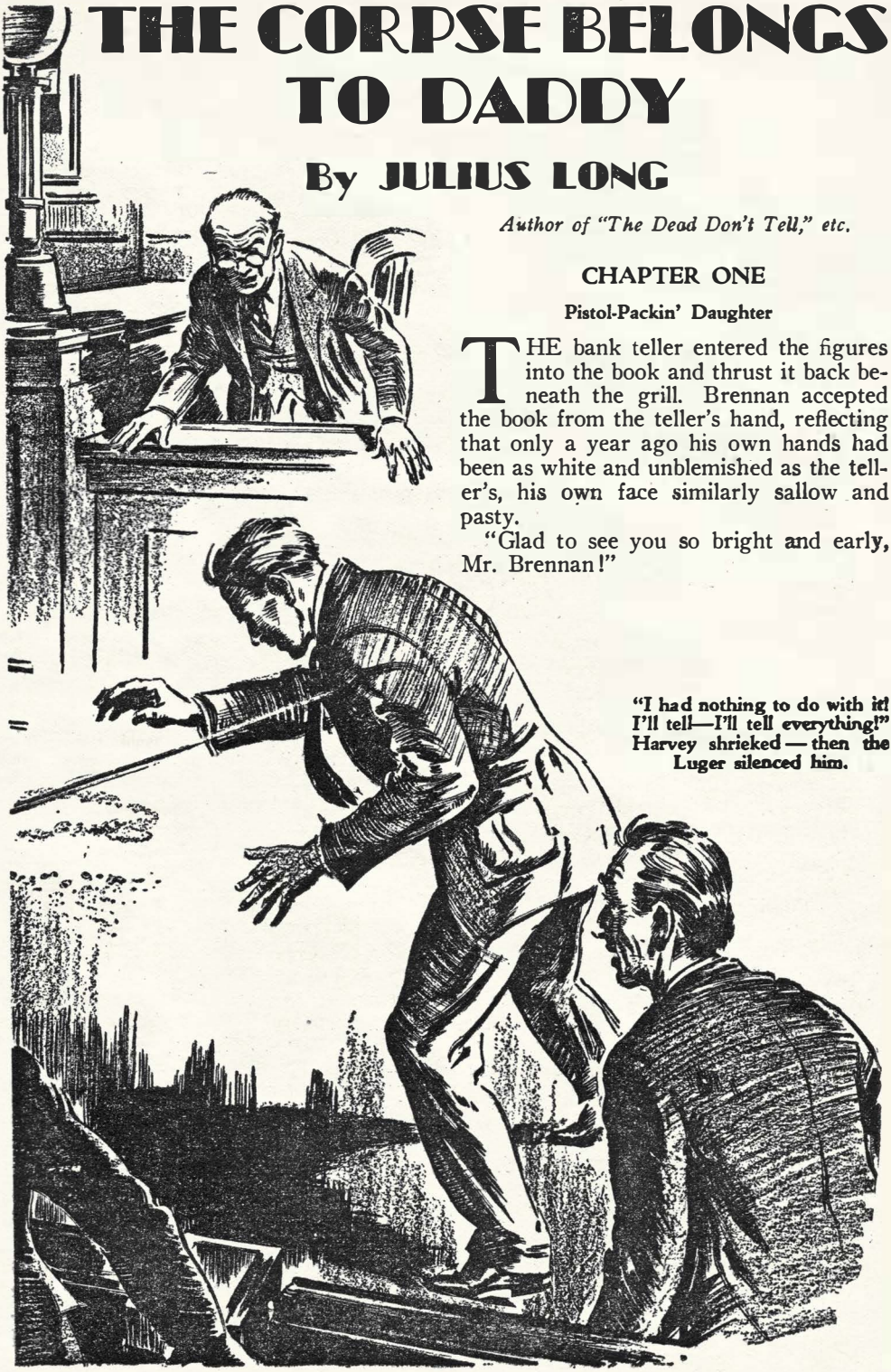
Author of "The Dead Don't Tell," etc.

CHAPTER ONE

Pistol-Packin' Daughter

THE bank teller entered the figures into the book and thrust it back beneath the grill. Brennan accepted the book from the teller's hand, reflecting that only a year ago his own hands had been as white and unblemished as the teller's, his own face similarly sallow and pasty.

"Glad to see you so bright and early, Mr. Brennan!"



"I had nothing to do with it! I'll tell—I'll tell everything!" Harvey shrieked — then the Luger silenced him.

Brennan turned to find Curtis Harvey beside him with outstretched hand. Harvey was president of the bank. It was the only bank in Woodstock, the First National, and that made Harvey the biggest man in town. Brennan shook hands. The banker winced.

"Did my son, Dannie, take care of you all right?" he questioned. He nodded with fatherly pride to the pasty-faced teller.

"Yes," said Brennan. He would have continued on, but the banker blocked his path.

"I'd like to have a word with you in my private office," Harvey invited. His tone implied that refusal would be unthinkable.

"Of course, Mr. Harvey," said Brennan. He followed Harvey into a glass-partitioned office. Harvey closed the door with excessive caution, rounded a desk to his swivel chair. Brennan subsided uncomfortably into a "borrowing" chair, a straight-backed relic calculated to imbue a borrower with appropriate humility.

"Mr. Brennan," began the banker, "you are a young man and a newcomer to our community. A year ago when you arrived in Woodstock County and purchased the old Peterson place, I must confess that, in common with many others, I was inclined to believe that you would make a miserable failure of it. You were obviously a city man, and it seemed hardly likely that you could handle six hundred and forty acres of land. I confess that we didn't wait to give you a chance. We laughed at the idea.

"But we, none of us, Mr. Brennan, are laughing now. We have seen you develop the Peterson place into one of the finest producing units in the county. You have joined the ranks of our most successful farmers. So, despite your comparative newness in the community, we have come to accept you as a man among us."

HARVEY paused, and Brennan, feeling that comment was expected, said respectfully: "I am much flattered, Mr. Harvey."

The banker waved a deprecatory hand.

"What I say is only your just due. We need men like you in Woostock County, Mr. Brennan, now more than ever before. For now, as never before, the welfare of our county is at stake. Its future depends on the outcome of the next election. Only by winning that election can the decent people of this county exterminate the vicious circle which is corrupting its lifeblood."

Curtis Harvey paused self-consciously.

"Perhaps, Mr. Brennan, I sound like an old fogy to a young man like you. I try not to be one. I realize that our county is unusual in that it contains Mirror Lake, the state's largest summer resort. I don't object to its night clubs, dance halls and boardwalk amusements. The thousands of visitors it attracts expect that kind of entertainment.

"Unfortunately the lake attracts other kinds of people, an entirely vicious and unnecessary element. In prohibition days it was infested with bootleggers—it was the appalling corruption there that made me vote for Repeal. For a while we had a breathing spell from racketeers in Woodstock County. Then Brocky Paxton and his gang moved in.

"You've certainly heard about him and his Casino Club. Even more sinister are his numbers and slot-machine rackets. Of course he couldn't operate a day without the connivance of Tal Handley, our sheriff, and Sam Benoy, our prosecuting attorney.

"It is the removal of these men from office that is our first step in cleaning up the county. I speak for a group of public-spirited men who have formed a citizen's committee dedicated to cleaning up the politics in the county. I have the honor to be the president, and Franklin Smith—you've seen his lumber yard—is secretary. Franklin's out of town now, buying lumber, but he's even more active than I am. In his absence I'd like you to serve as sec—"

"I'm honored," Brennan interrupted gently, "but I'm afraid I'll have to decline your gracious invitation. I appreciate your aims, but I've absolutely no time to participate in politics. It's really all I can do, Mr. Harvey, to run my farm. I've no time for anything else."

"But I, too, am a busy man! All of us behind this movement lead active private lives. We are contributing our time because we feel that it is our duty as good citizens."

Brennan smiled firmly.

"I repeat, Mr. Harvey, I'm sorry. But you'll have to excuse me this time. After all, I'm just a farmer—I know nothing of politics."

It was the wrong thing to say, Brennan knew at once. The banker's face stiffened. Reading faces was his profession. For Brennan to protest his rustic simplicity was to insult his intelligence. He knew that he was confronted by a man of background. He couldn't mistake the shrewdness, the marks of worldly sophistication manifest through the disarming good humor of Brennan's face.

"Very well, Mr. Brennan, I'm sorry I've wasted your time."

"On the contrary," Brennan said hastily, "it's been a pleasure."

But he knew as he left the bank that he had mortally offended the banker. The thought made him uncomfortable. He had tried hard to get along with his fellow citizens of his adopted community. But, he consoled himself, enough is enough. After all, he couldn't get mixed up in local politics merely to please Curtis Harvey.

His eyes searched for his station wagon and failed to find it. He had left it with Jerry Geboe to accumulate the week's groceries, and evidently Jerry had taken advantage of his delay at the bank. That meant Jerry would be at the Hornberger Bar around the corner. Brennan spied the station wagon as he turned the corner, and he walked on to the saloon. After his session with the reforming banker, he could stand a quick one himself.

Jerry's beefy figure was draped over the bar. Adjoining him was a creature whom Brennan never beheld without an inward shudder. The man was Felix Rensart, a besotted lawyer who was the abomination and disgrace of the local bar.

YEARS ago, Rensart had been the finest lawyer in that section of the state. Tales of his courtroom triumphs were still told with awe. It was said that no lawyer before or after him had ever enjoyed his local reputation. But booze had been his undoing. His once cunning brain groped in an alcoholic fog, his body was a shaking hulk within its filthy rags. His face was a fiery red now, for, as Brennan saw at a glance, Jerry Geboe had been setting them up.

"Having fun?" Brennan asked acridly. Geboe started and turned sheepishly.

"Oh, hello, boss. Meet Mr. Rensart, the lawyer. He was just telling me about one of his big cases. Happened a long time ago."

Rensart extended a grimy hand. His rheumy eyes were fixed upon Brennan with a fascination the intensity of which puzzled him.

"This is a very great honor, Mr. Brennan. I have long waited to enjoy it."

The words were blurred but spoken with a certain emphasis. Brennan hurriedly clasped the extended hand, eyeing the disgraced lawyer sharply. He felt uncomfortably that the wretched man was wholly sincere and not merely fawning for the price of a drink. He ordered a round of drinks.

Felix Rensart smiled happily into the glass of whiskey set before him, and his rheumy eyes were effusively grateful. Brennan emptied his own glass quickly, and Geboe followed his lead.

"We must be going now, Mr. Rensart," Brennan said. "It's been a pleasure."

The old lawyer laughed sardonically. His eyes fixed themselves upon Brennan as if he certainly must understand the joke. Uncomfortable, Brennan turned away.

Then he froze in his tracks as the voice behind said thickly: "I've just sent you a client, Mr. Brennan. You'll find her out at your house, I think."

Brennan dared not turn. He walked out of the saloon. Jerry Geboe followed close behind. As Brennan climbed under the station wagon's wheel, Geboe protested almost frantically: "Don't get me wrong, boss! I never said a word! I never even hinted you were a lawyer, much less told him who you are! You gotta believe me!"

Brennan drove from the curb and tramped on the gas. The station wagon raced through Woodstock's narrow streets. Geboe cringed in the seat.

"Take it easy! Think of your rubber if not of me!" Brennan slowed. Geboe relaxed. "Listen, boss, did you hear what that old codger said? He said he'd *already* sent you a client. That means someone tipped him off about you before I saw him this morning!"

"Correct. You've told him over some

other bottle. And after all my warnings!"

Geboe earnestly shook his head, then slumped in abject silence as he saw that Brennan remained unconvinced. He looked so pathetic that finally Brennan laughed.

"All right, Jerry, forget it! I suppose it had to get out sooner or later. Since you tell all, maybe you know all. For example, what do you know about Brocky Paxton?"

Geboe was at once relieved and interested.

"Why, he's the county racket king. Slots and numbers, also a joint at Mirror Lake called the Casino Club. It's a slick layout for this part of the country. Nothing on the level but the floor. But it doesn't have to be—Paxton's got the local law in the satchel."

"So I just heard. Curtis Harvey back at the bank was telling me there's to be an indignation meeting tonight for the purpose of rallying the voters into giving the boot to the prosecutor and sheriff. The old boy seems wrought up about it."

"He should be. One of Paxton's best customers is Dannie Harvey, the old man's son. It's very embarrassing to him, since Dannie's a teller at the bank. Dannie always loses, and old Curtis must worry constantly that someday he'll have bond trouble. It doesn't help a bank to have a gambling teller, even if he is the son of the president."

BRENNAN whistled softly. Recalling the pasty, weak face behind the teller's cage, he wondered that surety bond trouble hadn't developed already.

"Paxton must be short on brains himself," he commented. "Clipping the town banker's son is asking for trouble."

Geboe nodded. "Paxton's not too bright. The real brains of the establishment belong to Lew Lowery, his No. 1 boy."

"Lew Lowery? The name sounds familiar. Haven't I heard it before?"

"You have. He's the Detroit torpedo that was around Broadway for a while. About the time Nicky Greenstein took seven Luger slugs in the guts. They say Lowery always used a Luger."

"Yes, I remember now. But why would a boy like that play second fiddle to a dummy like Paxton? It doesn't add up."

"That's because you don't have all the figures. I mean Norma Paxton's. She's Brocky's daughter and built like a little brick firehouse. She's got all the boys jumping, including Lowery. So he stays in line."

Brennan laughed quietly.

"No wonder old Harvey's up in the air! I can see that I've been too busy farming to learn what's going on in our fair community. I can't say that I blame Harvey for trying to clean house."

Geboe nodded.

"Me either. I'm no tin saint, but the setup at Mirror Lake ain't pretty. Only a couple of nights ago Paxton's crap game took one of the farm hands for his month's pay check. Wilbur Shawver, the little guy with the big wife. She asked me to do something about it, but I told her no soap. Trying to put the bite on Paxton for Wilbur's check would only rate a horselaugh."

Brennan frowned.

"Send Wilbur to me. He's probably pretty short by now."

He had forgotten Felix Rensart by the time he turned off the wide national highway that passed his own farm. A bright red convertible was parked in the lane beside the sprawling frame house.

"There's your client!" Geboe said. "There's only one crate like that in the county. It belongs to Louise Smith, whose pappy owns the Woodstock Lumber Company. I don't get it. Why would a gal like that talk to Felix Rensart even in the dark?"

Brennan didn't answer. He parked the station wagon.

"Take in the groceries. I'll handle this."

He walked the flagstone steps to the wide, old-fashioned verandah. His caller sat nervously on the edge of a comfortable wicker chair. Brennan had noticed her several times at Woodstock. She could hardly escape notice, for her flaming hair almost matched the crimson of her car. She had the looks to go with the hair, and the combination was unbeatable in Woodstock. A girl like that in a town like that, Brennan had decided, would be impossibly spoiled.

His opinion was confirmed as the girl said: "I've got to talk to you Mr. Brennan. I want to hire you as my lawyer."

Her tone indicated that Brennan was as good as hired. Her failure to mention her own name indicated that she felt certain she had been pointed out to him.

"I'm afraid there's some mistake, Miss Smith. I'm John Brennan, farmer, not lawyer."

The girl tossed her red hair in impatient denial.

"Please don't try to keep up such a pretense, Mr. Brennan. I know who you are. You aren't John Brennan, farmer—you're Jack Brennan, the famous New York criminal lawyer. A year ago you disappeared from New York, came out here and bought this farm. The man carrying groceries to your back door is Jerry Geboe, the detective who's worked for you for years. You see, I know all about you."

Brennan stared.

"It seems you do. But you've made one mistake—I'm not a lawyer, not in this state. I've never been admitted to practice. So let's not waste any more time—I can't take your case."

The girl waved a slim white hand at the technicality.

"But you can. There's a reciprocity agreement between this state and New York. You could get a license quick enough."

"I can see you've had coaching. Better get the lawyer who coached you to try your case. I'm not."

"But it's your kind—murder."

Brennan leaned back on the verandah rail and stared at the girl. She calmly produced an enormous revolver from a handbag.

"I've just killed a man with this."

BRENNAN stared at the revolver and accepted it when she handed it over, gripping it by the barrel. It was a long barrel, nearly six inches. It had been Brennan's business to know guns. This one was a man's gun, a .45-caliber Smith & Wesson, 1917 model. Brennan examined the cylinder.

"Two cartridges have been fired."

"Yes. My first one missed. But it was my first murder."

Brennan saw that the flippancy was a thin cover for near hysteria. But the girl met his eyes steadily.

"It happened nearly an hour and a half ago—almost eight o'clock. At Mirror Lake. The Casino Club. Brocky Paxton, the proprietor, is the man I killed. Maybe you've heard of him."

Brennan did not nod. He continued to stare into the girl's eyes. Her affectation of flippant carelessness persisted as she went on.

"They must have found him by now, though there was nobody there when it happened. I knew he always stuck around in his office till about nine o'clock counting the night's loot and so forth, so I went there early. About a check. I'd dropped three hundred dollars there one night last week and only fifty of it was cash. I gave a check for the balance. It bounced.

"Paxton was very unhappy about it, of course. He knew what a mess I'd be in if he went to my father. Dad's been dead set against Paxton and his gang ever since they came to the county, working with Curtis Harvey to have them run out. Paxton knew I'd be terribly mortified to have him go to Dad about the check, so he put the squeeze on me. I scraped up a hundred dollars and thought that would stall him.

"It didn't. He took my hundred all right but said he'd go to Dad if I didn't have the rest of it by noon. Of course Dad's out of town and won't be back for a week, but the way Paxton acted made me lose my temper. I'd taken Dad's revolver from his desk at the office, and before I really knew what I was doing, I'd whipped it out of my bag and shot Paxton. Then I grabbed up my check. Here it is."

Brennan accepted the check, which the girl proffered. Stapled to it was a slip with a mark at "Insufficient funds." It bore the single endorsement, "Brocky Paxton." He returned the check. "You say this happened at about eight o'clock?"

"Yes. I ran out of the place, got in my car and drove into Woodstock. The only person I could think of going to for advice was Uncle Felix. He—"

"So that's it! He's your uncle?"

"On my mother's side. She's dead. We pretend Felix is, too. But Dad was gone, and I had to go to someone. Felix was all there was. I knew he wasn't any good any more, but it was someone to talk to, someone who was at least in the family.

"Felix was drunk, but not as much as usual because it was still early in the morning. He told me what I already knew, that he couldn't help me. But he said there was a man who could, a great criminal lawyer right here in the county. When he told me you were the famous Jack Brennan, I thought he was crazy. But he insisted that he was right, and that you'd be my salvation if I could get you to take my case."

Brennan firmly shook his head.

"Sorry, but the answer's still no. I don't know why I've let you tell me your story, except that I was overcome by curiosity."

The girl eyed him with what she thought was shrewdness.

"I know what's troubling you. You think that if I couldn't raise a few dollars to pay Paxton, I'll never be able to pay you. But you're mistaken. In a few weeks I'll come into the estate my mother left me—I'll be twenty-one then. I can pay you as much as you made in your New York cases."

BRENNAN handed back the revolver. "I assure you that it's not a matter of money. Try to understand that I'm through—through as Felix Rensart, though for a different reason. I'm just a farmer now, and that's all I'll ever be."

"But you could make this one exception. I really need you so desperately!"

The palms of her hands were uplifted in supplication. They were delicate, beautiful hands, unblemished and unmarked by toil. Brennan regarded them interestedly, then answered firmly.

"You don't really need me. Any good lawyer can take your case and win it. No local jury will ever convict a local girl of your good looks and family for killing a tin-horn racketeer like Brocky Paxton. You'll be acquitted with a fanfare."

Earnestly Louise Smith shook her head.

"You're very, very wrong! You don't understand local politics. Sam Benoy and the sheriff will use my case to strike at Dad. Uncle Felix says they may get a change of venue and have the case tried in some city court where things won't be the same. He says they may not even have to do that. Benoy and the sheriff have packed juries and railroaded men before this."

Brennan had no answer for this. But he remained firm.

"The answer's still no. My advice to you is to get yourself a lawyer and give yourself up as quickly as possible."

The girl's eyes flashed. Brennan saw red-headed temper rise to fever heat. Then Louise Smith controlled herself, rose quickly and walked from the verandah. He watched her turn her red convertible around and drive from the lane. As she reached the highway, a voice said accusingly: "Kind of hard-boiled, aren't you?"

Brennan turned. Jerry Geboe had been eavesdropping from a partially opened front doorway. He walked out onto the verandah.

"Looks kind of tough for that gal, Jack. She may get a long stretch or even fry for bumpin' that punk."

Brennan shook his head.

"She didn't do it, Jerry."

Geboe stared.

"Then who did?"

Brennan smiled. "That's what we're going to find out, Jerry."

For an instant Geboe's face lighted, then it clouded with alarm. "But, Jack, do you think you should? Remember what the—"

"This time won't count," Brennan interrupted. "But I am counting on you. Let's see if a year's rusticating has softened you up. I want you to take the station wagon, go into Woodstock and see if you can get the lowdown on that girl's father, Franklin Smith. He's out of town buying lumber, she says. Find out about that. Don't spare the horses. If you have to hire all the agencies in the country, hire them.

"And when you come back, bring Felix Rensart with you. Try to sober him up—if that's possible."

Geboe needed no urging. A few moments later the station wagon was careening into the highway. Smiling with satisfaction, Brennan went to the garage and backed out a sleek streamliner that had been unused for weeks. The car leaped eagerly to his touch as he tooled into the highway. The direction he chose was opposite to that taken by the detective.

His destination was the Casino Club. The gambling house was situated a half-mile from Mirror Lake. As Brennan

neared the resort, the frequency of the signs giving full directions to the Casino Club increased. If the signs had carried the additional legend, "This gambling house is operated with the full and enthusiastic cooperation of the local authorities," they couldn't have put over the front more clearly.

CHAPTER TWO

Torpedo Junction

THE club was a converted farmhouse situated a half-mile from the lakefront. Brennan saw with satisfaction that its parking lot was deserted. He parked, walked to the front door, which was open. No one stopped him as he entered a corridor. It contained a stairway and a door in each wall. A door at the left was ajar, and Brennan pushed it inward. He halted and stared.

Jerry Geboe had not exaggerated. The room beyond, despite its limitations in size, rivaled the most elaborate gambling room Brennan had ever seen. If Brocky Paxton had overlooked any known device for separating his customers from their cash, Brennan couldn't think of what it was.

"Yes, boss?"

A Negro stood in a far corner. He held a floor mop.

"I want to see Mr. Paxton."

The Negro shook his head.

"He's most likely gone to bed by now, boss."

"But you don't know? You didn't see him leave?"

"I wouldn't, boss. He got his office upstairs, and his rooms too—where he and Miss Norma live."

"Supposing you find out for me if he's still in his office."

It was a command that Brennan enforced with the production of a bill. The Negro put aside his brush and advanced cautiously, but his pace quickened as he saw the denomination of the bill.

"Yes, sir! I'll sure see, though I think he's gone to bed by this time."

The Negro moved past him, entered the corridor and started up the stairs. At the third step, he halted and looked back.

"I didn't get your name."

"John Brennan. Paxton won't know me, but my business is urgent."

The Negro continued up the stairs. Brennan removed his watch from his pocket, watched the second hand make two revolutions. Then he put the watch back into his pocket and ascended the stairs.

The hallway above was deserted. It had been partitioned off a few feet beyond the head of the stairs, and the door in the partition was locked. A second door in the wall to the left was wide open. Brennan walked to the doorway and peered inside.

The room was Paxton's office. Brennan knew this not only because of the office furniture there, but because of the body outstretched upon its back between an executive desk and a heavy safe. Brennan walked to the body.

It was the body of a man of perhaps forty-five, perhaps fifty-five. The man had a poker face. Even in death he seemed to be exercising control over its muscles, as if deception were still necessary. Brennan knew that the man was dead—the position of the bullet-hole was conclusive.

The bullet had crashed into the heart. That death had come at once was evident from the small amount of blood which stained the white shirt which he had worn. The blood, however, had clotted over the wound. It was impossible to guess the caliber of the fatal bullet, but the odds were that it had been one of heavy caliber. It could easily have been a .45 Smith & Wesson.

Louise Smith had said Paxton had been behind the desk when she had shot him. It was possible that the body had been moved. It was also possible that blind fury had carried him to the edge of the desk after he had been shot. He might have fallen there precisely as he now lay.

Brennan rose and regarded the wall behind Paxton. There was a window, but the shade was drawn to the sill. A fluorescent desk lamp burned on the desk. It was evident that the gambler, accustomed to working at night, worked by artificial light even in daylight hours. The was no bullet hole in the shade, nor did any appear in the wall at either side. Louise Smith had told of two shots, the first one missing Paxton. Brennan turned then, for someone approached in the hallway.

A GIRL entered the room. The Negro from downstairs trailed behind her. He tensed at the sight of Brennan and stepped forward protectively.

"You was to stay downstairs."

Brennan nodded.

"I gave you two minutes. You didn't come back. I thought maybe you were taking a powder with the five-spot I gave you."

"You belong downstairs."

Brennan had been watching the girl. She had walked directly to the dead body. She regarded it without expression. She turned, frowned suspiciously at Brennan and demanded: "Who are you?"

"He's the man wanted to see Mr. Brocky," answered the Negro. "He said—"

The girl stilled him with a motion, and her eyes, never leaving Brennan, were demanding.

"I'm John Brennan," he told her. "When this man didn't come back downstairs I got suspicious and came up here to see what was delaying him. I saw the body in here and naturally came in."

"Naturally." The girl mocked him. "I've never heard of you. Why did you want to see Brocky?"

"Because he'd won a month's salary from one of my hired hands. I thought Mr. Paxton might give the money back if I told him the man's wife was going to have another baby."

The girl looked him over slowly and carefully. Her rougeless lips curled. "So you're a farmer?"

"Yes. I have a farm across the county."

The girl didn't believe him. She turned to the Negro.

"Doug, call the sheriff."

The Negro moved toward the door. He halted. The man who had appeared in the doorway stood nearly six feet. He was slender, and it was apparent that he wore a white polo shirt and slacks because he was conscious that he made a good appearance in them. His black hair was sleekly oiled. His face was heavily tanned, but it was as if an unhealthy pallor still showed through.

The man's black eyes surveyed the body several seconds before he crossed the room. He knelt beside the body. The girl had viewed it without expression, and now the man also betrayed no expression. But his struggle to accomplish this showed through. He rose and regarded the girl.

"Doug just told me," she said. "He found Brocky here and came straight to me. By the time we got here, this guy had butted in. He says he's a farmer named Brennan and that he's got a beef about one of the help losing a pay check. It sounds phony to me."

The man in the polo shirt shook his head. "You're wrong, Norma. This guy's right." He turned to Brennan. "Think nothing of it, Mr. Brennan. Miss Paxton's upset. The dead man is her father. I'm Lew Lowery. I've seen you in Woodstock."

Brennan faced the girl. "I'm sorry about your father. I never met him. I regret butting in. I'd like to go now, but I suppose I'd better wait for the authorities."

Suspicion flared in Norma Paxton's eyes.

"I'll say you'd better!" She turned with annoyance to the Negro. "Doug, what are you waiting for? Phone the sheriff!"

The Negro answered her question with a look of inquiry to Lowery. Only when Lowery nodded did he move from the room. Lowery regarded Norma Paxton.

"You'd better get something on."

Brennan had been attempting not to notice that the girl was virtually naked in a transparent black negligee. Only its sleeves appeared to have been designed to conceal—they hung low over her hands. Her only reaction to Lowery's suggestion was a flash of resentment.

"I'm giving the orders around here now!" she snapped. Lowery shrugged. Having made her point, the girl walked in queenly strides from the room. Watching Lowery, Brennan saw that Jerry Geboe had accurately reported the former torpedo's motive in staying here as second fiddle to Paxton.

WHEN the girl was gone, Lowery said: "You said you had a beef about a hired hand losing some dough. What was his name?"

"Wilbur Shawver."

"How much did he drop?"

"One hundred and twenty-five dollars."

Lowery reached into a pocket, produced a sheaf of bills and peeled off three. Their denominations totaled Shawver's losses. Brennan accepted the bills from Lowery's smooth, well-manicured hands. They were hands that had never done manual labor. They were without blemish.

"Thanks," Brennan said.

"Think nothing of it, *Jack* Brennan!"

Brennan knew there was no point in attempting to conceal his astonishment or to deny his identity. Lowery's insolent, knowing eyes told him this. He smiled wryly. "This is the second time today I've found my little secret to be an open one."

Lowery seemed concerned.

"If somebody else knows it, it wasn't me that squealed. I pegged you the first time I spotted you, about six months ago. I've seen you many a time in the Fifty-second Street spots and twice I went downtown to see you work. In my book, you were the class of the mouthpieces. I always said if ever I needed a mouthpiece, it'd be you and nobody else."

Brennan regarded him thoughtfully.

"You're sure you didn't tell another soul?"

Lowery emphatically shook his head.

"Not another soul. I had my reasons. I figured you're being in Woodstock County was a break for me. I wanted to keep you under cover in case I needed you for myself. I was right. I need you now. I want to hire you."

"What makes you think you need me?"

Lowery nodded at the dead body. He looked back at Brennan with a wry smile.

"I'm the logical candidate to fry for this job. And that little girl in there is just the one to put my name in the hat. She knows what the score was between me and Brocky. In my book he was never anything but a tenth-rate punk. It was me that put the class into this joint and got it the play it has. Brocky cut the big slice —I got paid off in buttons. All because of Norma. I've carried the torch for years, and I never got to first base. She not only don't like my style, she hates my guts. Maybe that's why I can't help myself. That is, up to a couple of weeks ago. It was then I served notice on Brocky I was leaving if he didn't cut me in fifty-fifty.

"It was a bluff. I couldn't have cut loose from this place so long as Norma was here—ever. Brocky knew it. He laughed in my face. My deadline on checkin' out was this morning. Now Brocky's dead. What does it look like? There's only one answer. I'm it. And it'll be Norma that'll tag me by giving the local law the inside dope, you can bank on that."

Brennan shrugged.

"Why worry about the local authorities? They won't bother you, will they? This place must be a gold mine to them. They'll want someone to carry on the mining."

Lowery shook his head.

"They're both ready to rat to save their own skins. They're scared stiff by the citizen's committee that Smith and Harvey have stirred up. They've been looking for a way to square themselves with the voters, and this is it. They'll railroad me to the hot-seat just in time for the election!"

Brennan shrugged.

"You may be right. But I can't take your case."

COLOR showed through Lowery's thick tan. "You let me talk! If you weren't going to take my case, why did you let me talk?"

"I didn't ask you to talk. That was your own idea."

Lowery's color deepened. He controlled his temper with visible difficulty.

"Is it dough that's bothering you? If it is, let your mind rest easy. I can pay my way."

Brennan shook his head.

"Try to understand, Lowery, I'm out of the law profession. For good."

Lowery smirked sardonically.

"For the duration, you mean! Don't think I'm too dumb to tumble to why you walked out on Broadway for the sticks. Buyin' a farm was your slick way of beatin' the draft!"

Brennan had spent many idle minutes wondering just how he should react if this remark was ever made to him. The only smart thing he could do, he had decided would be nothing. He had resolved to do the smart thing. But he didn't remember this good resolution until Lew Lowery lay sprawled on the floor at his feet. But that time, the knuckles on his right hand were skinned. There was also a slight abrasion on the gambler's face.

"What's coming off in here?"

Brennan turned. The man in the doorway completely blocked it. He stood well over six feet. Though he was paunchy, his huge bulk had an appearance of solidity. He was Tal Handley, the sheriff of Woodstock County.

"Forget it!" It was Lowery who snapped the answer from the floor. He had lifted himself upon an elbow and was now rubbing his jaw with his free hand. His eyes flashed a promise of revenge to Brennan, then he told the sheriff: "I slipped and fell, that's all."

Handley smiled broadly. He advanced into the room, and his smile became one of cordial greeting as he extended a paw-like hand to Brennan.

"Never met you, Mr. Brennan, but I know who you are. You're the man that bought the old Peterson place. A sweet job you've done with it, I'll say! Handley's my name."

Brennan had made Curtis Harvey wince under his handclasp that morning, and now his own turn came as he accepted the outstretched hand. His fingers were numb as Handley mercifully released the pressure and turned casually to view the dead body of Brocky Paxton. He shook his head.

"That's just too bad. Just too bad."

Lowery was viewing him with narrowed eyes.

"How'd you get out here so fast? Doug just called you a few minutes ago."

The sheriff turned with mild astonishment.

"Doug called? Guess I must have missed it. Sam and me was already on the way out here I expect."

Lowery frowned.

"Then someone else tipped you?"

Handley's gaze shifted back to the body.

"I got more than a tip, Lew. I got a confession, signed, sealed and delivered! And I got the murderer, too! Murderess, I guess I should say. First time in more'n a year I had to open up the women's cellblock. And it's the first time since the jail was built that it ever had a prisoner as highclass as Louise Smith!"

"Louise Smith!"

Lowery barked the name. Handley turned and slowly nodded.

"She did it, Lew. Blew her top when Brocky put the squeeze on her for some dough she'd dropped downstairs. Sure is a shame. I don't know what could have got into her—or Brocky, either, making a fuss over a few lousy dollars!"

Lowery's eyes searched Brennan's. Brennan maintained an air of calm indifference that belied his inner thoughts. Louise Smith had acted swiftly. Brennan wondered if she had acted wisely. No doubt the attorney whom she had retained had prompted her to make the confession. If an admission of guilt were to be made, of course the sooner it was made, the better. But, Brennan could not avoid reflecting, if he had been handling the case . . .

"DID you find the body, Mr. Brennan?" Handley was regarding Brennan with a curiosity the mildness of which was misleading. Brennan sensed the sheriff's keen alertness.

"The man they call Doug found it first, I believe. He went to notify Miss Paxton and was gone so long I came upstairs to find Mr. Paxton myself. I found him like this."

"I see. You had business with him?"

"Yes. Mr. Lowery can give you the details."

The sheriff exchanged a glance with Lowery, and Lowery nodded. This seemed enough for Handley.

"Do you think I should wait for the coroner?" Brennan asked casually. "If not, I'll be on my way back to the farm."

Handley sneered at the mention of the coroner's name.

"Don't you worry about the coroner. Just be sure you show up at the preliminary hearing. That's at one o'clock. I'll expect you there."

"I wouldn't miss it," said Brennan. He left the room. Lew Lowery's eyes followed him with a cold threat that he did not miss. He realized that the threat was no bluff. Descending the stairs, he reflected that his haymaker to the former torpedo's jaw had been far from bright. But he also realized that if the thing happened again, it would happen the same way.

"Just a minute! Where do you think you're going?"

Brennan had reached the foot of the stairs and started across the room. He turned. An over-dressed man sat at a table in a far corner. Brennan recognized the man as Sam Benoy, the prosecuting attorney. The Negro, Doug, stood obsequiously before him. There was a pad of legalcap on the table, and the prosecuting attorney held a pencil.

"Who the hell are you?" Benoy demanded, obviously ruffled by Brennan's silent appraisal.

"John Brennan. I've already told everything I know about this to the sheriff. He advised me that I might leave."

The prosecuting attorney frowned. That the sheriff had been guilty of insubordination seemed his obvious thought.

"I don't care what Handley told you!" he snapped. "Come over here! I'll ask the questions!"

Brennan regarded the man thoughtfully, then crossed the room to the table.

"You claim you had some business with Paxton," Benoy announced, with a downward glance at the pad of legalcap.

Brennan seemed awed by the prosecutor's importance as he let his eyes fall. They swept across Benoy's soft, well-manicured hands, then lingered momentarily on the pad.

"Well?"

Brennan lifted his eyes until they met Benoy's squarely.

"My business with Paxton is none of yours. If you have any questions to ask me, you can ask them at the preliminary hearing."

He turned on his heel and walked outside. He could almost feel the heat from Benoy's crimson face. This seemed to be his day to lose his temper, and the realization wasn't pleasing. But he was well satisfied with the information he had gleaned from his momentary perusal of the prosecutor's notes. He now shared Benoy's interview with Doug.

Doug had given no information about the murder. He had arrived for work at a little after nine. Brennan had been the only visitor after his arrival. All the information he could supply was a faithful account of Brennan's visit and his subsequent discovery of his employer's body.

According to Louise Smith's story, Paxton had been shot at eight o'clock. That meant that Doug would not have seen her. Brennan wasn't surprised. He drove slowly toward his farm. It was amazing, he marveled, running into something like this amid these peaceful fields. Never in the grand canyons of New York had he encountered a mind so coldly calculating as the brain he sensed that he was now up against.

"I kidded Jerry about rusticating," he mused. "I wonder if I'm the one that's gone to seed!"

CHAPTER THREE

The Two-Dollar Question

JERRY had returned ahead of him, he knew as he entered his lane. The station wagon was parked near the kitchen door. Brennan entered the kitchen. Felix Rensart slouched at a bottle-filled table.

"Gawdamighty!" Geboe half-cried. "Am I glad you showed! This guy's about got me nuts! I thought I knew how to wake the dead, but I never seen any guy as tough to work on as this one! Holy cats! I'll bet six institutes could treat this stew for the rest of his life and never even take the smell off'n his breath!"

Brennan surveyed Felix Rensart. The ruined lawyer turned his head slowly, peered back through bleary eyes. Then, slowly, deliberately and with studied effort, he let go a belch that seemed visible as it traveled from his heels, up his baggy pants, suffusing his torso and finally emanating in a volcanic eruption from his practically toothless mouth.

"See?" queried Geboe. "I warn you, count ten before you light a match—you might blow up the place!"

Rensart seemed to feel shame as he turned his face back to the table. Brennan pulled up a chair, turned its back toward the lawyer and straddled it as he sat down, facing him.

"Try to snap out of it, Rensart. I want to ask you some questions, and I want some straight answers."

The broken lawyer's bleary eyes lifted to his own.

"Then get me a drink—quick. This goddam fool's got me sober'n I been for years. I can't think for sour apples!"

Brennan unhesitatingly signaled to Geboe. The detective threw up his hands. He walked to a cupboard door, opened it and withdrew a bottle of whiskey. He poured a double slug and placed it on the table before Rensart. The lawyer stared at the liquor suspiciously, slowly assured himself of its reality, then lifted it in trembling hands to his lips. The liquor vanished from the glass.

"O.K., Jack Brennan. What do you want to know?"

"First we'll ask you the two-dollar question. How did you know who I am—who I was, I really mean?"

Rensart lifted his eyes. The liquor seemed to have cleared them.

"Thought I kinda took your cork under! Shoulda seen your face! Never saw anyone needed a drink more'n you did back in 'at saloon!"

"You haven't answered my question."

"Sure I haven't. Well, I don't see why I shouldn't. It's like this, Jack Brennan. A man's got to have something to keep him going. Even me. When I got down, I mean down and out like I am now, I had to have something to go on. Don't think I mean liquor. Liquor never kept me goin' a minute!

"It was dreamin' that made livin' possible! Dreamin' I was somebody, somebody great. A great lawyer. A great lawyer like Darrow. Like Arthur Garfield Hayes. Like Samuel Leibowitz. Like Jack Brennan. Yes, I mean you, Jack Brennan. For five years, up until a year ago when you quit, I was your double, Jack Brennan! Only you didn't know it!

"Every time you won a case, which means every time you tried one, I was right in that courtroom with you! I *was* you—everything you said came out of my mouth, every gesture you made was made with my hands, my arms! I lived your life, Jack Brennan! Sure, the newspapers didn't give every detail, but I filled 'em in myself. I could read between the lines. Oh, I plotted and schemed from day to day and in the end I won your cases, just as if I'd been there myself. Lord, how I used to get drunk celebrating each victory!

"When you quit a year ago, it really broke me down. I'd got so wrapped up in your career I couldn't switch to anyone else. I just didn't have anything to live for. Then one day I spotted you right on the streets of Woodstock! Of course I knew you right away—haven't I got a hundred pictures cut out of the newspapers?

"It didn't seem real, your being in Woodstock. At times when I was drunk I got to thinkin' there was something in mental telepathy, that you'd picked this county out to come to because I'd lived so much of your life. But of course when I got fairly sober—that is, when I waked up every morning—I knew it couldn't be that.

"Lord, how I wanted to talk to you, just say a word! 'Course I didn't dare. I just kept my eyes on you for a while whenever you came to town, bein' careful you didn't see much of me. Finally I got acquainted with Geboe, here. He kidded me along, buyin' me drinks, never tumblin' to the fact I wasn't playin' him just for drinks. It was his bein' your own private detective that attracted me—talkin' to him was the next best thing to talkin' to you."

Brennan hadn't been looking Rensart in the eyes for many seconds. He forced himself to lift his gaze. The once successful lawyer smiled.

"Well, you wanted an answer. Do I win the two dollars?"

BRENNAN noted that Geboe had become intensely interested in something outside the kitchen window. He said gently: "I have some more questions, Mr. Rensart. That client you sent me, Louise Smith—I want to know how it was that she happened to come to you this morning."

"Well, she's my niece."

"Yes, she told me that."

Rensart smiled sadly as his eyes met Brennan's.

"Yes, I know you think it's not enough that I'm her uncle. You still wonder why she came to me. Well, she didn't."

"Would you mind telling me, then, how you happened to send her to me?"

"I saw she was in trouble. I saw her parking her car at the curb in front of Judge Morrow's office. It wasn't where she was parking, though, it was the way she was parking. She can drive that car of hers slick as a whistle. But this time

she was backin' all over the street tryin' to get into a parking space that had plenty of room. I saw she was in trouble, real trouble.

"So I went over to her and climbed into the car beside her and made her tell me what it was. She didn't want to, but I made her. Then I knew she needed a real lawyer instead of Morrow. That's why I told her about you, Jack Brennan. I wouldn't have done it if I hadn't known she needed a real lawyer."

"Apparently you don't think Judge Morrow qualifies."

Rensart grimaced wryly.

"Who am I to criticize the most respected member of the local bar? Morrow and I were admitted to practice the same year—we both hung out our shingles in Woodstock the same day. Look at him. Look at me. But all the same, in the old days before booze got me, I never lost a decision to Morrow. Matter of fact, he never even warmed me up!"

Brennan regarded Rensart thoughtfully.

"I wonder if you've heard that Morrow turned the girl over to the sheriff together with a signed confession."

The broken old lawyer seemed to rise in sections from his chair. He stood shaking in his shoes, supporting himself with both hands on the table. He swore softly but roundly.

Brennan said: "Louise Smith didn't kill Brocky Paxton. I'm trying to find out who did, though I refused to take her case. Perhaps you can help me. That's why I had Jerry bring you here. My theory is, she's shielding someone. You know her well—whom could she be shielding?"

Rensart subsided into his chair. Thought seemed to come painfully to him. His flabby face writhed with the effort.

"Outside of her father, I just can't think of anyone. But Franklin Smith couldn't have killed Paxton. He's in Georgia, buying lumber. No, I can't think of anyone."

Brennan frowned.

"But there has to be someone! Maybe it's someone she's in love with. Who's her boy friend?"

Rensart quickly shook his head.

"She hasn't any! She gives the local talent the snoot. They've all stopped tryin'—all, that is, except Dannie Harvey. He hasn't given up yet, but she gives him the brush-off every time he tries to date her up."

Brennan exchanged a glance with Geboe, who said: "It's true, Jack. It's the talk of the town, the way young Harvey chases the girl. She can't see him at all. As for her fronting for him to the tune of taking a murder rap, that's out."

Brennan frowned back at Rensart.

"Think, man! There must be someone!"

Rensart looked cagily at the whiskey bottle.

"Maybe I could remember if I had one more drink!"

Brennan poured two fingers. Rensart downed the drink in a single gulp. He smacked his lips.

"Boy, that did it!"

Rensart then slid quietly from his chair to take a perfectly horizontal position on the kitchen linoleum. Geboe regarded his sleeping form in disgust.

"Well, that did it. I'm afraid I've let you down, too. I did my best to locate Smith, but it's nothing doing. The agencies can't seem to do any good either. Over at his yard they gave me a brush-off. By the way, I can't figure why he'd be buying lumber—the place is stacked with it!"

Brennan regarded the detective thoughtfully.

"Maybe you've got something there, Jerry. As for finding Smith, call off the agencies."

Geboe watched Brennan shrewdly.

'O.K., Jack. And what am I to do with this?"

He indicated Rensart's inert form.

Brennan stooped and seized the lawyer's shoulders.

"Help me carry him into a bedroom, Jerry. We've got to revive this stiff before one o'clock."

"Revive him?" Geboe's eyes widened in incredulity. "What are you talking about? Before one o'clock! Hell, this lug's knocked himself out for days!"

"No, Jerry. Black as Felix's future may seem, it's about to take a turn for the better. Felix doesn't know it, but he's going to return to the practice of law. He's wasted years imagining that he was Jack Brennan, criminal lawyer. Well, at one

o'clock he's going to be Jack Brennan—by proxy, of course, but he's going to represent Louise Smith at that preliminary hearing. So let's get to work, Jerry. We've got to revive the dead!"

IT LACKED a minute of one o'clock when Brennan entered the county courtroom via the door reserved for officials, lawyers and law-breakers. The room beyond the rail was packed. Within the rail sat officials, some dozen lawyers impelled by curiosity, the principals and witnesses attendant at the hearing.

Louise Smith sat at the defense table accompanied only by her lawyer. Brennan regarded the man with interest. He had noticed Judge Morrow during his occasional visits to the county seat, but had hardly given a thought to the lofty-browed, venerable gentleman who commanded so much respect as the dean of the Woodstock County bar.

Outwardly the man looked shrewd, intelligent. But Brennan couldn't forgive him Louise Smith's confession. A confession may always be repudiated, but when it is made on advice of counsel—

Louise Smith flashed an interested glance as she caught sight of Brennan. Her eyes questioned him—evidently she had been unaware of his connection with the case. Brennan gave no sign of recognition, ignored her look of wonder and concern.

He studied the other witnesses called to testify. There was a little man who looked extremely uncomfortable. He held a little black satchel on his knees. That would be Dr. Burchard, the county coroner. Brennan would have given much for a word with him, but he contented himself with an interested scrutiny of Lew Lowery, who sat at the coroner's left. Lowery interested him because he now wore a coat which bulged slightly beneath his left armpit.

The bulge meant Lowery was again carrying his Luger. Brennan made due mental note of this and let his gaze pass on to the Negro, Doug, who sat at Lowery's left. Doug bore himself with dignity. It was impossible to find emotion on his well contained features. But Brennan had seen the same expression on the faces of guards in asylums for lunatics.

At Doug's left sat Norma Paxton in full mourning, even to her arm-length gloves. If she had meant to achieve a reverent effect, she failed. She managed only to look theatrical. Brennan recalled her absolutely expressionless features as she had viewed her dead father. She was expressionless now. Brennan knew that she would be a worthy opponent across a poker table—or in any other game.

Standing near the judge's bench were Handley and Benoy. The situation was obviously enjoyable to both men. Brennan recalled Lowery's prophecy. The gambler had been fifty per cent right, at least. Though the sheriff and prosecutor hadn't tried to pin the crime upon him, they had used it as a face-saving incident for themselves. With any kind of luck, the murder trial would make the voters forget their past peccadillos.

Brennan's attention came to rest upon the magistrate presiding at the bench. The man was J. H. Wisecup, a justice of the peace. Thanks to an archaic law, the preliminary hearing was necessarily before a justice. The importance of the case, the first murder trial in Woodstock County since prohibition, was responsible for the transfer of the hearing from Wisecup's own backstreet headquarters to the more dignified chambers of the county courthouse.

That the justice was self-conscious of his momentary importance was obvious, but Brennan saw that he was determined to rise to the occasion. As he watched, the justice gaveled for order.

Brennan's eyes turned to the door. Where was Jerry? Where was Felix Rensart? Had Jerry let him down, failed to produce the proxy who was to appear for him in the defense of Louise Smith?

"The court will now come to order," the justice intoned. "The case before the court is the State versus Louise Smith, charged with murder in the first degree. Is the accused represented by counsel?"

Judge Morrow replied for the accused.

"The defendant, Louise Smith, will arise. How do you plead to the charge, guilty or not guilty?"

"Not guilty, your honor."

A murmur ran around the room. Brennan's inner agony grew. Again he looked hopefully at the door. But there was no

sign either of Felix Rensart or of his escort, Jerry Geboe.

THE prosecuting attorney made his opening statement. At the conclusion the justice nodded expectantly to Judge Morrow. Morrow shook his head. He rose with an air of deep portent.

"The defense waives preliminary examination and asks that the defendant be bound over to the grand jury."

Absolute stillness prevailed as Morrow seated himself. The justice seemed to be wondering if his ears had deceived him. Brennan didn't wonder—he now knew that his worst fears were being realized. The waiving of the preliminary hearing, coupled with the confession already signed and delivered, meant that if Louise Smith were not already doomed before a jury, her guilt would not be questioned in the entire community.

"In that case," said the justice, "I have nothing else to do but to bind over the defendant to the grand jury. Accordingly this hearing is now cl—"

The justice never finished his sentence, for there was a hubbub at the door. It burst open and Felix Rensart was precipitated into the room. The propelling force was Jerry Geboe. His coat had been all but torn from his back, his face was red and wet with perspiration. The door closed to hide him from view as persons unknown pulled him away.

But Felix Rensart remained.

He stood not too steadily. He gazed dazedly about him, mouth open, eyes rheumy and semi-glazed. In three strides Tal Handley reached him and started to ease him not too gently from the room.

"You can't do this!" Rensart protested. "I'm an officer of this court, a member of the bar, and I have a right to be here!"

The sheriff didn't stop, and no one, including Rensart's mortified colleagues of the bar, attempted to end this humiliation of their brother lawyer. Only when Handley reached the door did Rensart's resistance grow desperate. He wriggled from the sheriff's grasp and shouted: "You can't put me out, I tell you! I'm here representing the defendant, Louise Smith!"

The justice had looked on in dumb wonder until now.

"Let him go, sheriff," he ordered. He demanded doubtfully of Rensart: "Is this true?"

Rensart straightened himself up in a pitiable show of dignity.

"Yes, Your Honor. I am the senior counsel in this case. Louise Smith consulted me before she ever talked to Judge Morrow!"

The justice turned a quizzical eye on Morrow. Morrow's face reddened as he rose.

"This is preposterous! I am the only counsel representing Miss Smith. The man is either mad or drunk!"

The justice now regarded Louise Smith. Slowly she turned in her chair until her eyes met Brennan's. He nodded. The girl turned back to the justice.

"Yes, Your Honor. It's true. I did talk to Felix."

"But certainly—I mean, you didn't retain him to be your counsel?"

"Well, I guess maybe I did. Anyway, it's all right for him to be here now and represent me if he wants to."

Brennan hoped Morrow wouldn't keel over. He had never seen anyone closer to a stroke. Finally the outraged lawyer turned to his client and sputtered: "Dammit, Louise, I won't stand for this! I won't have that drunken bum in this case, least of all as senior counsel! I'm serving notice on you right now—either he goes or I go!"

Again the girl turned toward Brennan. Again he nodded. This time she hesitated, but something in Brennan's eyes must have decided her. She faced Morrow.

"Felix will have to stay."

Morrow turned white. He stalked from the room as if he didn't know what had hit him.

Felix Rensart regarded him with mild interest. Then he walked slowly to the defense table and seated himself in the chair which Morrow had occupied.

"The accused has already waived examination," the justice told him. "So there's—"

"The waiver is withdrawn," Rensart interrupted. "The defendant is ready to proceed with the hearing. We wish to call only one witness. I have here a precipe for subpoena."

Rensart rose, approached the bench and

handed the justice a folded slip of paper. The justice read it incredulously. Then without comment, he passed it on to the sheriff.

"Subpoena the witness," he ordered. The sheriff, too, seemed unable to believe his eyes as he read the precipe. But his duty was clear. He left the room, and the hearing was resumed.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hold That Luger!

THE State's Exhibits Nos. 1 and 2, the confession and the gun respectively, were duly admitted for identification. The first witness called was Dr. Burchard, the coroner, who testified that one Brocky Paxton was dead, that the cause of his death had been the infliction of a bullet wound by a .45 caliber bullet, that the wound had not been self-inflicted.

"Take the witness," said the prosecuting attorney. He made no attempt to hide his broad grin as Felix Rensart pulled himself to his feet.

"Dr. Burchard," Rensart began, "I believe that you have testified that Paxton was killed by a .45 slug. You're sure there weren't two bullets in Paxton's body?"

The coroner lifted his brows.

"Oh, I'm quite sure of that. The one was enough. It—"

"That's fine, Dr. Burchard. Now, I want you to tell me if, when you made your investigation of Paxton's homicide, you found a second bullet anywhere else?"

The coroner said quickly: "No, I did not. The bullet in Paxton was the only one I saw."

"And you didn't see any bullet hole any place else?"

"No, I didn't see any bullet hole, either."

"But you do know that two of the cartridges in the gun, State's Exhibit No. 2, have been fired?"

"Yes, I noticed two of them had been fired all right."

"Knowing this, did you look carefully on the premises for a second bullet?"

"Yes, I was sure there would be a second bullet somewhere, not only because of the two cartridges in the gun but because Miss Smith in her confession said the first shot missed."

"But still you found no trace of a second bullet?"

"No."

"Do you think it could have gone through a window?"

"No, the windows were all down, and the blinds were drawn."

"That being the case, tell me honestly, Dr. Burchard, weren't you inclined to doubt Miss Smith's confession?"

Benoy was on his feet with an objection, but the coroner nodded before he could intervene. The justice ignored the prosecutor's protests, for he had his hands full maintaining order. The coroner's admission had brought a roar from the room.

"So much for the second bullet," said Rensart loftily. "And now, Dr. Burchard, let me ask you if the bullet wound was the only wound you found on the body of Brocky Paxton."

"It was the only wound."

"Are you sure, doctor? Are you sure there wasn't a scratch between the thumb and index finger of Paxton's right hand?"

"Oh, that! Oh, yes, there was a little scratch there, but I didn't think it important enough to mention. It had nothing to do with Paxton's death."

"Ah, but you're wrong, Dr. Burchard! It had everything! Now tell me, have you ever in your professional career seen a similar scratch?"

Burchard hesitated, then said cautiously: "No, I don't think I have."

"Would you be able to recognize such a scratch if you saw one again?"

"I'm sure I would."

"Is there any such scratch on my own right hand?" Rensart questioned, extending hand. The coroner shook his head. "No."

Rensart turned quickly, strode to the table on which lay the State's Exhibit No. 2. He picked up the revolver, squeezed the trigger and fired point-blank into the wall.

The audience jumped collectively. There were feminine screams, some of which emanated from masculine throats. The section of the wall which Rensart had chosen as his target had been about three feet from the justice's head and the justice was now invisible.

SLOWLY His Honor arose from behind the bench. He stared at the lawyer as if at a lunatic, but before he could regain his speech, Rensart said quietly: It's all right, Judge. The wall's stone and two feet thick." Rensart then laid down the revolver and approached the witness stand. "Is this," he asked, "the kind of scratch you saw on Brocky Paxton's hand?"

Dumbly the coroner nodded.

"Why—why, yes! That's exactly like the scratch on the dead man's hand!"

Felix Rensart triumphantly faced his client.

"Stand up, Louise! Lift your hands. Show everybody there's no scratch on them!"

Mechanically the girl complied, then, recovering control of herself, she lowered her hands and held them together as if in an attempt to conceal them in shame.

"You see? said Rensart, pressing his advantage. "She's trying to hide the proof of her innocence of this crime! Too late she realizes that her lovely, flawless hands are without a mark of any kind! Too late she sees that she has unwittingly proved that she could not have committed the murder of Brocky Paxton!"

"I object! I object!" shouted Benoy. "I demand that Rensart be made to stop arguing with the witness! And I object to his shooting off guns in this courtroom. It's highly irregular!"

From the bench Justice Wisecup growled: "This whole thing's highly irregular! Felix, I wish you'd tell me what this is all about!"

"Gladly, Your Honor." Rensart bowed low. "I apologize to this court for my irregular methods, but I point out in extenuation that this is an extraordinary case which requires extraordinary methods. My client, Louise Smith, is not guilty of the murder of Brocky Paxton. She foolishly confessed to the crime, thinking to shield someone she dearly loves. It is because of—"

The roar of the audience drowned out Rensart's words. The door had opened, and Tal Handley ushered Dannie Harvey into the room. The teller's face was white. Louise Smith started at the sight of him, and when his eyes fixed themselves upon her, she shook her head.

"Your Honor," said Rensart gravely, "I ask that the defendant's witness, Dannie Harvey, be excluded during the submission of the testimony. He—"

"Come over here, young man!" snapped the justice. "Come over here and lift up your hands!"

The white-faced youth complied. The justice stared closely, and his face showed his disappointment.

"There's no mark on his hands either," he exclaimed to Rensart. "If she isn't shielding Harvey, who is she shielding?"

The lawyer looked away from the justice and sadly upon his client.

"The girl is shielding her father," he said sadly. "The pity of it is that her sacrifice is so unnecessary. She thinks that her father killed Brocky Paxton. But he didn't. It was the other way around. It was Brocky Paxton who killed Franklin Smith!"

A hush lay like a silencing hand. The justice stared at the little lawyer, his eyes not so incredulous this time, wondrous respect betraying itself against his will.

"How do you know this? What is your proof? If Franklin Smith has been murdered, where is his body?"

Rensart regarded Dannie Harvey. He lifted a thin finger.

"Ask him!"

Dannie Harvey winced. His pallor deepened. A momentary resolve to brazen out the situation caused his weak chin to clamp firmly, then hysteria seized him. "I'll tell!" he shrieked. "I'll tell! I had nothing to do with it! I'll tell everything!"

The gun report was deafening. A puzzled look spread over Harvey's face. Then his knees sagged, and he collapsed in a heap. Before he fell, Brennan was out of his chair. His hands gripped the Luger pistol that had materialized in Lew Lowery's hand. He wrested the weapon from the gambler before Lowery knew he was upon him. Disarmed, Lowery shrugged.

"All right, so I killed Paxton! I'll plead guilty—let's get it over with!"

"Not so fast," said Felix Rensart. "Making phony confessions seems to be the order of the day." He faced the justice. "Lowery didn't kill Paxton—take a look at his hands, and you'll see there's no mark. And he wouldn't have killed

Dannie Harvey to save his own skin—he killed the boy to save someone else."

"HE DIDN'T kill him!" Dr. Burchard announced tersely from his kneeling position beside the fallen youth. He had leaped from the witness stand almost at the crack of the gun. "The bullet's got him in the shoulder. When he come's to he'll be able to talk."

"Why wait?" asked Felix Rensart. He faced Norma Paxton. "Ask the lady to remove her black mourning gloves. You'll find the tell-tale mark between the thumb and index finger of her right hand!"

All eyes turned upon the daughter of the murdered gambler. Her expressionless face did not quiver. She returned Rensart's gaze calmly. Then, with an almost imperceptible shrug, she slowly removed her black gloves. Smiling sardonically, she held up her hands, and spread the thumb and index finger of each wide apart.

They were beautiful hands, snow-white, slender. There was no mark between the thumb and index finger of either.

"Well!" said the justice from the bench. "If she didn't kill Paxton, who did?" The justice wore a look of frank puzzlement, but his dumb wonder seemed mild to that of the little lawyer. Felix Rensart stared at Norma Paxton's flawless hands as if seeing a ghost. Slowly his gaze shifted from them. His eyes implored Brennan in silent despair.

Others followed the direction of Rensart's gaze. Until now Brennan had been almost completely ignored. In a matter of seconds he was the focal point of all eyes. Dead silence reigned within the room. Then Brennan said quietly: "All right, Rensart, you win. I killed Paxton."

Calmly he lifted his right hand. There was a long, narrow scratch between the thumb and index finger. From across the room sounded an agonized voice.

"No, Jack, no!"

It was Jerry Geboe. He had managed to work his way into the room, and his features were twisted in horror. Brennan smiled sadly.

"Yes, Jerry. I killed Brocky Paxton. Long before you came to work for me, when I was just a struggling, almost starving lawyer, I tried a case for Paxton. He was just a small-time chiseler then, as he was when he died. He was guilty. I knew he couldn't be acquitted without an air-tight alibi.

"So did Paxton. He supplied the money—I supplied the alibi. It was the first and last time I ever suborned a witness. I wouldn't have done it if I hadn't been desperate. Paxton knew that. He always seemed to appreciate what I had done for him. I lost track of him through the years, but when I had to retire from practice he somehow found out about it and wrote me about the Peterson farm.

"I came out here and bought it. Paxton knew I wanted to keep my identity a secret, that I wanted no notoriety, so he never even nodded on the street. A year passed, and we didn't exchange a word. Then Paxton called me this morning, Jerry, before you were out of bed.

"He said he was in trouble and wanted to see me. I drove to his place and found him in his office. He wasn't alone. There was a dead man on the floor. The dead man was Franklin Smith.

"Paxton had killed him. It had come about accidentally—I believed Paxton when he insisted on that. When Curtis Harvey and Franklin Smith had started their citizen's committee, Paxton had retaliated in the only way he knew. He had tried to get something on both men, and had succeeded in Smith's case. Smith's yard was full of lumber, and that gave him a lead.

"Smith was buying bootleg lumber. When Paxton got proof of this he called Smith and told him to lay off or he would sing to the OPA. Smith faked a lumber-buying trip for an alibi, and came to see Paxton this morning. He knew that Paxton had a habit of staying up in his office, alone over his books. He walked in on him with his revolver and tried to kill him.

"Paxton grappled with him, got his hand on the revolver and would have merely disarmed him, but the gun accidentally went off. It made the mark on Paxton's hand, as you saw. That early model, as originally built, had that little habit. The gun lay on Paxton's desk when I got there.

"He was desperate. He feared the sheriff and the prosecutor would nail him to

the cross because of the local pressure being put on them. He wanted me to defend him. I refused. Paxton then threatened to expose my guilt of years ago. Subornation of perjury is a felony—there is no statute of limitations, as you know upon it.

"Paxton appreciated the power of his threat. He knew that I had retired from practice because the draft board had discovered that I have a trick heart. He knew I hadn't long to live and that if he squealed on me I would assuredly die in the penitentiary. I think you can understand, Jerry, how I came to lose my temper. Before I knew what I was doing, I'd picked up that revolver and blasted Paxton.

"I WIPED my prints from the gun. I didn't think Paxton's daughter, asleep in the back part of the house, had heard the shot. Doug hadn't shown up for work, so I was sure no one saw me leave. I raced back to the farm, got there before you came downstairs, Jerry, and then drove you into Woodstock to pick up the groceries.

"I was trying to establish an alibi, just in case. You can imagine my surprise when I got home and found Louise Smith waiting for me. When she told me she had killed Paxton, I was at a complete loss. I drove back to the Casino Club to find out what it was all about. Gradually, by slow degrees, I was able to piece it together.

"Norma Paxton had heard the shot that had killed her father. I'm sure she wasn't able to see me leave—otherwise, she wouldn't have bothered to go to such extreme lengths to cover up the truth. The only thing she was interested in was whitewashing the whole affair. Brocky left her no inheritance except the Casino Club, and his other rackets and she wanted to salvage them.

"She quickly decided to conceal Franklin Smith's body, then use his revolver to convince Louise that her father had committed Paxton's murder. She must also have held the threat of exposal to the OPA over the girl, for Brocky had no doubt shared that confidence. She sold Louise the idea that her own fate in the hands of a jury would be far better than any her father could meet. She would think her father's continued absence due to his headlong flight from the scene of his crime.

"She had to supply a motive, so she faked the business about the rubber check. She needed corroboration of that yarn, so she got a friend of hers to fake a check and forge Brocky's endorsement upon it, along with an attached slip indicating that the check had been returned for insufficient funds. The same friend was also to testify that the check had been presented at the bank. That friend, of course, was Dannie Harvey.

"Dannie was also sucker enough to help her to dispose of Smith's body—I'm guessing there, but I'm sure he'll confess to that. I think he'll also admit that the consideration for his assistance was to be the return of a sheaf of his I.O.U.'s. It was worth far more than that to Norma Paxton. By getting Louise Smith to take the rap for her father's murder, she cleared up a nasty mess, gave the local authorities something to save their faces with, and as a result, took all the heat off the Casino Club and her other valuable gambling interests.

"Her little scheme would have saved my own skin too, but unfortunately for us both, Louise Smith enjoyed the representation of the keenest legal mind I have ever beheld. Felix Rensart knew all along that the scratch on my hand would give me away—he set the stage cleverly, as you saw. Well, I bow humbly to a superior brain."

Brennan had held the Luger from the time he had taken it from Lowery. As he lifted it, Jerry Geboe cried out in alarm, but Brennan meant merely to return the weapon to Lowery.

"I hope you get off light for popping Harvey in the shoulder," he told the former torpedo. "I doubt that he'll press the charges. But even if it costs you a rap, you should consider it worth the lesson I hope you've learned. Never try to do anything *for* women—they appreciate only what you do *to* them."

Brennan smiled then and moved unsteadily toward a chair. He never reached it.

He pitched headlong and lay still. Dr.

(Continued on page 98)

The little antique dealer was sitting quietly in his chair, his eyes closed and his lap stained with blood.

DEATH'S OLD SWEET SONG

An Edward Asa Scott Novelette

By LAWRENCE TREAT

Author of "Portrait of a Corpse," etc.

CHAPTER ONE

Labeled For Murder

THE WINDOW of Gregor Berendt's Third Avenue antique shop had a curious placard. It read, MURDER EXHIBIT. The dates and the names of the victims were written on tags attached to the knives and daggers and guns, to the rope and the wire, to the glass tumblers and the varied assortment of used bludgeons.

Edward Asa Scott, the artist, took in the collection at a glance. Just trash, he told himself. The morbid mementoes of human rot.

Suddenly, his eyes caught the one item that didn't belong. He grunted in amazement and blinked once. Then he wheeled and his tall, gangling figure strode through the doorway. A bell jangled

somewhere in back and little Gregor Berendt looked up.

At sight of Scott, he glowed with the happiness of an angel alighting on a newly formed cloud. His pink face wrinkled up in ribbons of pleasure and his little, misshapen body practically purred.

"Ned!" he exclaimed. "You haven't been here in two weeks! Did the exhibit bring you?"

Ned Scott stuck his hands in the pockets of his loose tweed jacket. "That?" he snorted. "It's cheap. It's tawdry. It's not even gruesome."

Gregor cocked his canny little head on one side. "You were out there, staring."

"At the musical snuffbox. The one with the monogrammed *R* on it, heh? Let me see it, Gregor."

"It's cheap. It's tawdry. It's not even gruesome," sneered Artist Edward Asa Scott about Gregor Berendt's Murder Exhibit. The whole thing was phony—but that was before he saw that curious item in it with the scribbled tag, and met the Droopy Bear and the luscious number with the thyroid eyes. Of course you can't kill a grown man with a snuffbox—and yet he remembered Gregor's story that morning of approaching death.

"You, too?" murmured Gregor, and went to the window to fetch it.

Scott hooked a stool with his foot and slid it towards him. He looked pretty much the way people imagined one of America's leading painters would look. Tall, turbulent, explosive. Carelessly dressed. A small, sandy mustache. Nondescript features that somehow showed kindness and bitter humor and a touch of his quick, avid interest in all things.

But the thing that held people was his eyes. Clear and blue and magnetic, they seemed to bore through you and hit bone with a thud.

He sat down on the stool, crossed and recrossed his long, restless legs and waited for Gregor to hobble back and place the musical snuffbox on the counter.

The box was of blue porcelain, with the outline of a medieval castle in the center. It had a small yellow key in the lower lefthand corner, a red *R* in the upper right, and an intricate design of olive trees worked from the border inwards. The edges were bound in gold filigree. Wedged underneath the lid was a blank tag.

Scott fingered it. "You forgot to fill this one out," he remarked blandly.

Gregor smiled. "Oh, no. I merely put that on so the box wouldn't look out of place in the window. The snuffbox doesn't belong there."

Scott lifted the cover and the tag slid to the counter. The musical mechanism, set in motion by the opening of the lid, ground out a squeaky little tune. The quaint, old-fashioned music tinkled with a suggestion of sadness and a hint of gypsy.

The bell clanged with the opening of the shop door. Gregor said: "Excuse me, Ned," and went over to wait on his customer.

Ned closed the box and the tune ceased playing. Idly, he lifted the tag and turned it over. The other side was not blank. Scribbled in pencil was a name and a date: *Gregor Berendt, October 29, 1943.*

That was today.

Scott stared at the small, rubicund antique dealer. He was chattering away with a kind of devilish innocence and selling an undistinguished hunting print for about five times its value. That was because the buyer looked prosperous. Gregor charged what the traffic would bear, and when it would bear nothing, he gave his merchandise away.

Scott felt a wave of affection for the little eccentric, and then a wave of queer,

helpless anxiety. It bubbled Scott's stomach with hiccups. He took a deep breath and held it.

The inscription was not in Gregor's handwriting. Apparently he hadn't even noticed it, and there was no point in bringing it to his attention. The whole thing was probably a joke, anyhow. No murderer was going to warn his victim, and you can't kill a grown man with a snuffbox. The whole business was phony. And yet—

Scott dropped the tag in his pocket and watched Gregor take ten dollars for the print. As soon as the customer had left, Scott tapped on the snuffbox.

"Where did you get it?" he asked.

"A soldier went to war and he sold his possessions. I paid a dollar for it and I can sell it for a hundred. I believe the soldier stole it, or else bought it from a thief."

"Why put it in your murder exhibit?"

"Intuition," said Gregor slyly.

SCOTT didn't pursue the subject. "The box is seventeenth century Spanish," he said. "Do you know the music?"

Gregor nodded. "Yes. It's a gypsy song about a girl who fell in love with a Spanish peasant and left her tribe to live with him in the mountains. On their first night together, she hears the men of her tribe padding up the mountain to kill her and her lover. Her lover doesn't hear, but she does, and she sings this song to him so that he won't know the murderers are approaching. She accepts the doom and only wants him to die happily, believing in her."

"You're making it up," said Scott suavely, "to fit in with your murder theme, heh? You have a story for everything in your shop, which makes you a poet and a business man at the same time. The combination should be incorporated. How much is the box, to me?"

"A most unusual box, Ned. Do you know what the *R* stands for?"

"Rendosa. Don Pablo Rendosa was a nut on snuffboxes and owned some of the finest there are. All the others have his initial stuck plumb in the center, heh? I have one at home, but two of the teeth in the musical mechanism are busted and when I open the box it sounds like Harry James playing Bach from memory, with an accompaniment of Bill Robinson dancing a little Palestrina. How much, Gregor?"

"It has no price. It is not for sale. I play it at breakfast and mourn the moment I must part with it. A customer of mine has asked me to reserve all the Rendosa boxes for her. Her name is Rendosa and she is a descendant of the famous Don Pablo. She is very beautiful, Ned. She'll be here tonight. She'll take this and two drops of my heart's blood. If I introduce her to you, she'll fall in love with you."

"Maybe she's in love with you, instead."

Gregor nodded. "Possibly. She pays the prices I ask and she never haggles. Greater love than that hath no customer." He chuckled to himself. "Ned, would you kill me for the box?"

"I wouldn't kill anybody except a fascist, and you know it. Why?"

"There are at least two people who would."

"Who are they?"

"Russell Chandler, the singer, is the first. He wanted to buy, and there was death in his eyes when I turned him down."

Ned Scott yawned. "Your stories are interesting, Gregor, but this one lacks conviction. Russ is a musician. His voice is as true as the finest instrument there is, and the only thing that could make him murderous is an offense against the laws of harmonics."

"I think he sent the Droopy Bear," remarked Gregor serenely. "Turn around, Ned. See the man in the doorway, on the other side of the street?"

"The swarthy man? Yes. Something Latin about him."

"He's a murderer, and he's watching. He has a dark mustache and a gray hat, but I can't see his face. He's been there ever since the Droopy Bear left."

"Who is the Droopy Bear?"

"He dresses in black and he makes me feel as if I were running a cut-rate cigar store. The man has greatness about him. It droops, as if he had come upon evil times, but through his bumbling, you can smell the greatness in him. He saw the box and wanted to buy it. When I

refused, for the same reasons that I refused you, he offered me any price I'd name and he threatened to put the law on me. He claimed that, by placing it in the window, I had made an offer to sell, which he had accepted. He was full of logic and subterfuge and strength, and he would gladly kill me for that box. When he was convinced I wouldn't sell, he tried to smash it. By luck, a cop interrupted. I could have had him arrested."

"Why didn't you, Gregor? Tender heart?"

Gregor shook his head. "I tell you, there was greatness in him. I didn't want to see it smudged by a police court."

"You're making up stories again, Gregor, in order to prepare me for the price you're asking. You've done it before. You'll do it again. I tell you, I have money and I want the damn box."

Gregor fondled the box with his soft, womanly hands. "I'll take it upstairs and keep it in my room, for safety. You had a birthday last year, Ned. I'll give you a present."

From the showcase Gregor picked a delicately designed cloisonné box, about the size of the Rendosa music box, and wrapped it up.

"It cost me ten cents," he said, "so don't overvalue it. I'll see you tonight, at your studio."

Ned got up. The man watching from the opposite side of the street had seen Gregor remove the music box and would assume Ned had bought it and was taking it home with him. If Gregor were telling the truth, he was making a sucker out of Ned Scott.

So much the better. It meant that the threat to Gregor's life—provided there was one—was gone. If it were transferred to Scott, at least he could take care of himself.

He smiled. "Thanks," he said. "Don't forget to bring the Rendosa girl with you this evening. And the music box, heh?"

He marched out of the shop and heard the bell clang with the opening of the door. He had the package under his arm. Across the street, a swarthy man in a gray hat picked up interest and followed.

That afternoon, Scott's studio was ransacked and the only thing missing was a musical snuffbox.

BY EIGHT O'CLOCK, Becky, his gargoylish housekeeper, had cleaned up the vast, barn-like studio and set out food and tobacco. It was Friday night, when Scott always held open house and served hard cider and stale rye bread and took the phone off the hook.

People streamed in. There were Ned Scott's cronies and their friends, and a few outsiders who came to sightsee the big, balconied room with its howling canvases and its delicate canvases and its grim, precise portraits which laid bare the soul of a man as mercilessly as a surgeon rips open a belly with a scalpel.

People streamed in, but Gregor Berendt and a beautiful girl were not among them. Around ten o'clock, Ned walked over to his friend, Inspector Donnigan.

"Bill," said Scott, "I've been expecting Gregor Berendt tonight and he didn't show up. Let's go see why."

"Gregor's entitled to change his mind," said Donnigan. He took a final swig of cider and set the cup down carefully. "Why the worry, Ned?"

"Because he has a fabulous music box which he's holding for a beautiful girl, and because he had the mark of death on him the last time I saw him."

"Quit being a mystic, Ned. Just because you solved a murder or two—"

"All right. I was only trying to make a simple thing complicated. This box—Gregor was practically assaulted for it. It was part of a murder exhibit and he took it out of the window while I was there and didn't put it back. I left with a package the size of the box, and a man in a gray hat followed me."

"Lots of people follow you. You look like a nut, and they get interested."

"This afternoon, while Becky was out marketing, somebody walked into my studio and turned it upside down."

"Why didn't you tell the police?"

"They never helped me yet. I suppose I should have locked my door when I went out, but I'd only have lost the key."

"Are you kidding, about this search business?"

"No, but I can handle my own crimes. You ought to know that."

"Come on," said Bill. "If you had the brains of a harness bull, we'd have started for Gregor's long ago."

Together, they made their way towards the open doorway that led to the stairs and thence to the street. As they approached, a man entered.

He was tall and blond and smartly dressed. Every movement he made was quick and precise and energetic. His jaw was sharp and his smile showed white, glistening teeth. He caught sight of Scott and called out in a rich, singing voice: "Hello, Ned."

Ned Scott halted. For a brief, intense moment, his blue eyes sliced into Russell Chandler with the sharp, fixed thrust that made most people tremble. Then Scott said affably: "Hello, Russ. Bill and I are on our way over to Gregor Berendt's. He claims you're liable to kill him."

Chandler's face darkened and he spoke with savage heat. "What do you mean by that?"

"I'm just quoting Gregor and watching the effect. You're worried, Russ. Why?"

"I have a concert tomorrow night, and recitals always make me jittery."

"Well, jitter away, but wait for us to come back. I'll promise you either a beautiful girl or a story."

"Make it both, and the wait will be worth while."

"I hope so," said Scott.

On the way to the antique shop, Donnigan spoke only once. "You go off half-cocked, Ned."

"Why not? I hit and I miss, but by and by I get a bull's-eye. And meanwhile, you're still shoveling reports at the rest of the Centre Street ballet corps."

Inspector Bill Donnigan snorted.

CHAPTER TWO

The Thyroid Beauty

GREGOR BERENDT'S store was still open, as were several others on the block. The lights glowed feebly in the dimout and the window display showed just one more second-hand shop forcing itself to stay awake because of the competition. The sign, MURDER EXHIBIT, was barely legible unless you were standing right in front of it.

Ned grabbed the door knob and pushed. The bell at the rear of the shop jangled metallicly. The girl standing near the counter swung around.

She was beautiful. She had brown, thyroid eyes that gleamed from their lustrous whites. Her skin was glossy and of the texture of dogwood petals. Her features were as soft as a Raphael madonna's and she was dark and vital and graceful as a colt.

Scott glanced past her to the little cubbyhole where Gregor usually sat and spied on his customers. The nook was empty. The girl followed his glance and then, casually and silently, she headed for the street.

Without a word, Scott grabbed her arm and held her fast. She faced him and spat out her words furiously. "Let me go!"

He released his grip immediately and she started to sweep past, but Bill Donnigan's calm, matter-of-fact voice stopped her in the middle of her first step.

"Where's Gregor?" he asked.

She bit her lips and uttered an embarrassed, impatient sound. "I don't know," she said. "I don't work here."

"I know it. That's why I'm asking."

"Really," she said. "I just came in to buy some candlesticks. I didn't see any."

"Where's Gregor?" demanded Scott this time.

She shrank back. "Please—I told you—I have no idea. What do you want?"

Neither Scott nor Donnigan answered. It struck Scott that they were behaving queerly. They walk into a store, find a strange girl and prevent her from leaving. They give no explanation. No wonder the girl was terror-stricken.

She said abruptly, in a shrill, nervous voice: "If you don't let me go, I'll call the police."

"I'm the police," said Bill Donnigan. He took out his badge and showed it to her.

She seemed not to believe, and she spoke in a scared, tense, wheedling voice. "Suppose you are?" she said. "What of it? I still have the right to go shopping and then return to my hotel."

Scott called out sharply: "Gregor!" There was no answer.

"Please," murmured the girl. "I want to leave."

"As soon as we find Gregor," remarked Scott, "you'll be as free as any other law-abiding American. Stay with her, Bill. I'm going upstairs."

Ned Scott marched to the back of the shop, past the swords and paintings and guns and vases and chairs and daggers and candlesticks, past the little desk piled high with account books that Gregor could never add correctly, and up the narrow wooden stairs to the apartment where Gregor lived.

Scott didn't knock on the door. He opened it and saw first the portrait he'd painted of Gregor and then Gregor's back. The little antique dealer was sitting quietly in his chair. He didn't turn around. Scott marched over and touched his shoulder. Gregor didn't stir.

Scott shivered and then he circled the chair and bent down to see what the trouble was. Gregor's lap was stained with blood and his eyes were closed. His forehead felt warm, but there was no pulse.

Slowly, Ned Scott stood up. The tag. The girl downstairs. The Droopy Bear. Russ Chandler. The man in the gray hat and the unknown who had searched Scott's studio this afternoon. And Gregor's story this morning of approaching death.

Well, it had come. And every person and every incident had one thing in common. A musical snuffbox with the initial *R.*

Scott heard something drop and he spun around. A squeaky, tinny little tune began playing. It unfolded itself slowly, as if the music box needed winding. But the gypsy air, so quaint and appealing this morning, was out of place now. He recalled what Gregor had told him it meant. The approach of death.

SCOTT licked his lips and felt his heart thump against his ribs. How could the damn box start playing when there was nobody else here?

He didn't turn toward the doorway. He called out: "Bill!" A thick, hoarse whisper was all that came from his throat. He could barely hear it himself, above the slow, tinny sound of the music box.

He kept staring at the portrait on the wall. He wondered whether anyone was behind him, but he didn't turn. Presently, from downstairs, he heard Bill Donnigan's voice calling his name. Simultaneously the cat meeowed and strode majestically from the pile of books and papers over in the corner.

Ned Scott began laughing. A cat had knocked over the snuffbox and the cover had fallen open, and when the cover was open the thing naturally played. That was all there was to it.

He marched forward, picked up the little porcelain box and shut the lid. The music stopped instantly. He put the box in his pocket. Bill's voice called again.

This time Ned Scott answered. "Come on up, Bill. And bring the girl."

Scott was standing there, near the body, when they came in. He said: "Dead. Murdered." And he watched the girl.

Her brown eyes grew big and she uttered a shocked cry. Scott said to her: "Who are you? What were you doing here?"

"I'm Mira Rendosa," she answered in a faint voice. "I came here tonight in answer to a telegram. Here—I have it in my pocketbook somewhere." She began to search. Her fingers were unsteady and she couldn't control them.

"What was the wire about?" asked Scott. "A snuffbox?"

"Yes," she whispered, so low that he could hardly hear. "How did you know?"

Donnigan, kneeling next to the body and making his examination, glanced at her and then returned to his work.

"Gregor told me," said Scott. "Go ahead with your story."

"A particular box," she said breathlessly. "An ancestor of mine, Don Pablo Rendosa, had had it made and I collect the things that belonged to him. Mr. Berendt lets me know when he comes across anything. Please—can't we go downstairs?"

Donnigan stood up and reached for the phone. "Sure," he said. "Take her down, Ned. I'll call headquarters and be right with you. Gregor was stabbed in the side. He just sat here and bled to death." Donnigan had headquarters on the phone and he spoke into the mouthpiece. "I want Murphy, Homicide."

Ned Scott and the girl went downstairs.

She was trembling violently. "I didn't know," she kept repeating. "I didn't

know. What will happen to me? Can I go soon?"

"That's up to the police," said Scott. He was still watching her and trying to make up his mind whether she was really just a kid in a jam. If she was, she wouldn't have any trouble. She'd identify herself and explain why she was here and show the telegram, and then they'd let her go back to her hotel and she could get some sleep. Maybe.

"What was there about the box?" asked Scott. "I've seen a lot of those Rendosa boxes. They all have a big *R* and a design in the upper right hand corner, but this one was different. The *R* was small and there was a key in one corner." He frowned and wondered why he said it. "The key to what?"

Mira had found the telegram and she was showing it to him. He read it briefly, and it checked with everything that she and Gregor had said.

AM HOLDING RENDOSA BOX WITH KEY. YOU CAN SEE IT FRIDAY NIGHT BUT PRICE IS HIGH.
GREGOR BERENDT

"The key to what?" repeated Scott.

She folded the telegram and put it back in her pocketbook. "It sounds silly," she said. "I've always been sort of romantic, I guess, and the story about Don Pablo—I was brought up on it. It was a sort of family legend—how he sailed for this country and left an enormous treasure at home in his castle, and said the key to it was a snuffbox—that whoever had the snuffbox could have the treasure. He was killed in America and the Rendosa family stayed here and they always knew the family legend but nobody ever did anything about it. Besides, the box had been lost. I wanted it."

"Whoever killed him must have taken it," said Scott. "He had it upstairs with him, and now it's gone."

"I wanted it," said Mira. "Is it terrible for me to still want it, after he was killed on account of it?"

Donnigan came downstairs. "Why did you want it?" he asked.

Ned Scott said: "Tell him, Mira. Tell him what you just told me."

She repeated the short account and ended up: "It's childish of me to think there's really a treasure. How could it still be there, after all these centuries? And yet—I half believe it."

Then the first patrol car arrived.

ABOUT two hours later, they returned to the party. Inspector Bill Donnigan led the way up the stairs to the studio, and Ned Scott followed, with Mira holding tight to his arm. From the floor above, the noise and chatter of the party floated down in a confused babel.

At the doorway, Mira tugged at Scott's arm and then turned suddenly and buried her face against his shoulder.

"I can't!" she sobbed. "It's too much—I can't! All these people and their talk, right after seeing Mr. Berendt dead! I can't! Please take me away!"

And, still sobbing, she tore herself loose and dashed down the stairs. Scott followed her and took her as far as the corner, where he put her in a cab. When he turned around, Bill Donnigan was coming up the street.

"Just wanted to see what you were up to now," remarked Donnigan.

"The kid was upset," explained Scott. "You shouldn't have given her such a grilling before."

"Ned, why the hell can't you play straight with me?"

Scott frowned in surprise. "What's the trouble, Bill?"

"The box. I thought I heard it playing while you were up there alone with the body, and it's been sticking out of your pocket all evening long. Why did you hook it, Ned?"

Ned held it up to the light. "There it is. Three hundred years old, and that key business in the corner. Mira believes it's a key to a buried treasure. I don't believe in buried treasure or castles in Spain. Not after three centuries. So why is this thing so important? And why didn't the murderer even take it? He'd have found it if he'd half looked."

"You tell me. And then tell me why you kept it."

Scott grunted. "I'm in the middle of this, whether I like it or not. I thought I might as well have the thing, as a sort of ace up my sleeve."

"Don't kid yourself. It isn't an ace up your sleeve. It's just a bulge in your

pocket, and any fool can see that." Donnigan opened the box. It gave a squeaky groan or two and a feeble click. "Needs winding," he remarked. "Why did you hook it and what was this business about Chandler?"

"Bill, you saw Gregor's window display, heh?"

"Sure. Pure theatrics, though. Secondhand murder weapons. Gregor should have been spanked for it."

"He was killed instead. This morning he had the music box in his window, and the tag on it had his name and today's date."

"Let's see the tag," said Donnigan crisply.

"I threw it away. I thought it was a joke and I didn't want to scare Gregor, so—"

"Why lie to me, Ned?"

Scott put his arm around Donnigan's shoulder. "Sorry, but I always lie to the police. It's instinctive and I just can't help it, even to you."

Bill handed the music box to Scott. "Here's your little keepsake, Ned. You may get killed for it, but that's what you seem to want."

"I'm usually lucky," said Scott. "Let's go back and see Chandler."

Chandler's chief concern seemed to be that Mira hadn't been anxious to see him. Scott got the impression that he was fond of her, that they'd had some sort of quarrel and that Chandler had been waiting for her to make the next move.

Scott left the questioning to Donnigan, but there was nothing to be gotten. Just an alibi for the day, and two complimentary tickets for Chandler's concert the following evening.

Scott commandeered them. "I need them, Bill. I want to hear that concert, and I want to take Mira."

Donnigan submitted. "That's the advantage of being an amateur. You can date up every good-looking witness who comes along."

TO CALL Mira Rendosa good-looking the next evening was a classic of understatement. It was not merely her features or the way she dressed. Not just the low-cut gown and the black silk shawl with the flaming orange design. It was a fire that her whole being seemed to exude. She was challenging and reckless and eager. With all her fear, she was mixed up in a murder case and was getting a supreme kick out of it.

Sitting in the orchestra, listening to Chandler's deep, rich voice sing the old Spanish folk music that he'd picked up on a trip there, a few years ago—listening to Chandler and stealing an occasional look at the girl, Ned Scott felt it was all true. There *was* a hidden treasure and the key to it *was* a musical snuffbox which he'd disguised with a bit of leather and which was lying on a table in plain sight in his studio. The door was open and, except for Becky, the place was deserted. The box was safe enough, however, unless somebody came in and wanted a cigarette and accidentally discovered the cigarette box was camouflaged.

Suddenly, Ned Scott went taut. Chandler was standing on the concert stage and his accompanist was playing the first bars of the tune Scott had heard yesterday, from a mechanical snuffbox. Then Chandler took up the air and sang the first few words, carefully, cleanly, as if they meant far more than was apparent.

Ned Scott turned to the girl. "Quaint, isn't it?" he said.

She nodded quietly and smiled. He kept looking at her until her brown, liquid eyes met his. She seemed to be asking him something. He kept staring. She frowned, and then she seemed to understand why he was staring and she reached over and touched his hand. The contact was electric. He closed his fingers over hers.

Ten years ago, Scott's wife had died and he could never again fall in love. But Mira took the years out of him and made him heady and reckless. He could have put his arm around her and kissed her, and that was what she wanted him to do. But if he did, he'd shock all the ushers and bust up a perfectly good concert.

Chandler's voice seemed to come from a great distance. Scott concentrated on the words and caught a phrase here and there, in Spanish.

Murder. For that innocent little tune, Gregor had been killed. And yet, the killer hadn't even bothered to look through a pile of junk in the corner of the room

and take the thing for which he'd just committed the crime.

When the concert was over, Scott said: "Come on back stage, Mira. He'll fall at your feet, and so will everybody else."

She seemed to go bloodless. "I have a headache," she said. "You'll excuse me, won't you? I guess I've just been too excited. So much happened yesterday. Just put me in a taxi and I'll go back to my hotel."

"Sure," said Scott. "But I didn't think you were the type to generate a headache just when the fun is starting."

"You forget that I'm only a little country girl."

"Sometimes you forget it yourself," he said.

Chandler's dressing room was crowded, but Ned Scott towered above the jabbering group of people. Chandler spotted him and called across the room. Scott waved a long arm and elbowed his way through.

"Congratulations, Russ. You were in good voice tonight."

"Thanks, Ned."

"That song—the first one in the group after the intermission—tell me about it. What does it really mean?"

Chandler frowned. "I thought so," he said somberly. He took a slip of paper from his pocket and scribbled something. "Meet me at this address in an hour, Ned. We can talk there."

Then a dowager who was built like a fullback bucked the line and Scott was carried past Chandler. But Scott heard her bright, chirping voice.

"It was so wonderful, Mr. Chandler! But that song right after the intermission —why did you sing it instead of the one that was printed on the program?"

Scott blinked in surprise, but he could have answered the question. Chandler hadn't intended to sing it. He'd decided on it only at the last minute, after Gregor Berendt had been murdered.

Outside in the light of a dimmed-out street lamp, Scott looked at the address Chandler had written. Then Scott rummaged through his pockets and found the tag with Gregor's name and the date of his death.

Scott compared them carefully, checking the few letters and the fewer numerals. They'd both been scrawled hurriedly and carelessly, but they were in the same handwriting.

CHAPTER THREE

The Droopy Bear

AROUND midnight, Scott reached the house. It was a gray, sandstone structure in the East Seventies. No lights showed through the curtained windows, but that meant merely that the occupants took the dimout seriously. Scott rang the bell.

The butler was swarthy and he had a small mustache and he spoke with a Spanish accent. He wasn't wearing a gray hat, but Scott recognized him immediately.

"Señor Scott?" he said. "They are waiting you. *Arriba.*" Scott marched up the stairs.

Of the group who were sitting in the big, high-ceilinged living room, two men stood out. Chandler, and the man in black. The Droopy Bear.

His face was large and his thick, puffy lips were large. His dark eyes were sad and his head was sunk upon vast, hulking shoulders. He gave the effect of slow, awkward, terrible power. Ned Scott realized what Gregor had meant when he'd said there was greatness in the man.

Chandler didn't introduce him by name. He merely said: "Friends of mine, Ned." And then, turning to the Droopy Bear, he said: "This is Mr. Scott. Edward Asa Scott."

"I'm glad to meet your friends, Russ," said Scott, "but I like to know their names. Hell, I'll meet anybody half way, so long as he's willing to introduce himself."

The great man bowed slightly. "You may call me Don Luis," he rumbled. "I have seen your work, Mr. Scott, and I admire it greatly."

Ned Scott blinked once, as recognition dawned. There were not many pictures of the man, but his name had been in headlines in every newspaper in the world. He had held a high cabinet position in the Spanish Republic and he had fought to the end.

Scott said: "It is an honor, Señor.

Pardon me for not recognizing you at once."

The great man's lips flapped in a characteristic mannerism. "We will waive the compliments," he said. "When you asked my friend, Señor Chandler, about that gypsy song, you all but admitted possession of a certain music box."

"That's hardly logical," snapped Scott.

"No, but it is truth. I will buy the box from you at your own price."

"You're generous," said Scott.

He stuck his hands in his pockets and sauntered across the room. Chandler frowned impatiently. Don Luis, apparently lost in thought, rubbed his fingers across his lips. The rest of the group watched him, feeling the tension but withholding themselves until their leader issued orders.

On a small, round, marble-topped table, Scott noticed a snuffbox. It had a red *R* in the center. It was the box that had been stolen from his studio yesterday.

He swung around. "Why do you want the thing?" he asked abruptly.

"I cannot tell you," said Don Luis. "Your trust in me must take the place of knowledge."

"Sorry," said Scott. "Not enough."

"The secret is one which the agents of the Falange would give much to know. To reveal it would betray the honor of Spain."

"Let's not be children," said Scott. "The honor of Spain isn't bound up in a tune played by a seventeenth century music box. Besides, if it were, Russell Chandler wouldn't sing it in a public concert hall. I'm getting tired of the whole farce."

"And I," said Don Luis, "am full of patience. I ask it again, señor: What is your price?"

"The story, and a straight answer to a straight question. Who killed Gregor Berendt?"

Don Luis looked up with a heavy, pained expression. "I do not know. I do not kill people."

Scott turned to Chandler. "And you, Russ? Don't you kill people, either?"

Chandler started to answer, but Ned Scott cut him off with a gesture. "I'm not asking for the fun of it. Gregor Berendt was a friend of mine, and of yours, too. He usually overcharged me in a spirit of sweet, angelic fun, and he hung up a portrait I'd done and priced it at five thousand bucks, just to show what he thought of my work. He slipped into my studio every Friday night and listened with a respect that neither I nor anybody else deserved. His back wasn't quite straight, but his soul was as pure and as rare as butter."

"A very nice elegy," remarked Don Luis, "but irrelevant."

"Quite," admitted Scott. "But this isn't. Yesterday Chandler came into Berendt's shop, tried to buy the box and couldn't. Before Chandler left, he scribbled Gregor's name and the date of his death on a tag that was part of a murder exhibit, heh? Well, Gregor was killed on that day. What am I supposed to deduce? That Chandler is a great prophet?"

Don Luis looked at Chandler. "Tell him, señor."

CHANDLER'S sharp jaws clicked and he spoke with an aggressive vehemence. "I wanted to scare Gregor. I wanted to put the fear of death in him and pry him loose from his infernal little music box. I wanted him to smash it to bits so that it would never play that cursed tune again."

"You hated that tune," remarked Scott. "You hated it so much that you sang it in front of a thousand people tonight. Why?"

"In the hope of attracting the owner of the box," rumbled Don Luis.

Scott spun around and spoke to the great man. "Chandler saw the thing and told you, and *you* rushed to the shop and it took a cop to get rid of you. Then you sent one of your agents. He waited across the street and watched the shop. He saw Gregor take the box from the window, and the box wasn't put back. He saw me leave with a package about the size of the snuffbox and he followed me. Then he searched my studio and stole a Rendosa box. It happened to be the wrong one."

"I had no agent watching," observed Don Luis. "I give you my word."

Scott straightened his shoulders and he poured out his words like liquid fire. "Don Luis, I once believed that you and your cause were welded into a mighty

saga that had the deathless ring of destiny. When I shook hands with you, I felt gratitude and humility, which are emotions I haven't experienced since my old man took off my breeches to spank me and couldn't go through with it. Don Luis, you fired my soul up to an hour ago. Now I think you're a cheap liar. You don't know a thing about my stolen Rendosa box, and there it is. On that table!"

He pointed to it and Chandler marched over and snatched it up. He opened it, listened to the first few notes and then slammed down the lid.

Dun Luis raised his dark, troubled eyes and his voice rumbled ponderously. "In your literature, there is a man named Iago, and he had the power to destroy a great faith. Between you and me, there might have been trust but a Iago destroyed it. Men do not often call me a liar. Tell me about this girl in the case. This Señorita Rendosa. It seems to me that she may bear the guilt."

"I told you," exclaimed Chandler, "she didn't—she couldn't!" And then he stood there blushing.

"Mira Rendosa," said Scott quietly, "was in the shop an hour or two after Gregor was killed, but I don't think she was quite stupid enough to stab him and then wait downstairs for the police. Furthermore, she was the one for whom Gregor was saving the thing. All she had to do was pay his price. And she had plenty of money, too. The police checked."

"The police can make mistakes," said Don Luis.

Scott shrugged. "We're getting off the point," he said. "You want the box and you asked my price. I told it to you. The name of the person who killed Gregor Berendt."

"I do not know."

"In that case," said Scott, "I'm wasting my time. Good night, Don Luis."

The great man didn't answer. Scott wheeled and headed for the door. Two of the group in the room leaped to their feet and drew revolvers from their pockets. Dark, baleful eyes stared above the muzzles.

Ned Scott turned around and sat down. "Perhaps it isn't good night. But it certainly looks like an impasse."

Don Luis looked up slowly. His dark, tragic eyes, his hunched shoulders, the great weariness about him made Scott blink and feel profoundly sorry for this exile. Chased from country to country, harassed by fanatics who called themselves the Falange and who worked incessantly against the cause of America as well as that of Don Luis—

Scott repeated his own phrase. *Chased from country to country.* He'd thought Don Luis was in Mexico. He remembered vaguely that Don Luis had been refused a visa to the United States. How, then—

DOWNSTAIRS, the doorbell rang in a long, shrill burst. One of the pair of men who had blocked Scott's exit walked to the window and pulled back the curtain.

"Police," he said slowly. "They are here."

Don Luis looked at Ned Scott. "You?" he said. "You sent them?"

Scott shook his head. "Hardly. I told you, up to an hour ago, you fired my soul and I'd rather have died than tell the police you were in this country illegally."

Don Luis rose and approached Scott. "I believe you, Señor Scott. And it grieves me that our meeting did not bring understanding, for I have admired your work deeply. Nevertheless—good night, my friend."

He held out his hand, but Ned Scott didn't take it. He stood there, taken aback by the gesture. He'd insulted the man, called him a criminal and a liar and practically accused him of murder. Then, when the police came and Ned Scott denied sending for them, Don Luis took him at his word.

Don Luis had to be either sublime or stupid. And he wasn't stupid.

Ned Scott laughed suddenly and grasped the great man's hand. "If you're fighting the Falange, I'm on your side. I'll hold off the police, Don Luis. Say for ten minutes. That will give you time to get away."

Ned Scott turned and headed for the door. This time, no one stopped him.

The man with the mustache was in the

downstairs foyer when Ned Scott came plunging down the stairs. Scott snapped out: "Stay away from there. I'm handling this."

He opened the front door, slipped out and slammed it behind him. One of the cops tried to grab the knob, but Scott pushed him aside.

"Stand clear!" barked Scott. "What do you want, anyhow?"

A police sergeant stepped forward. "Take it easy, mister," he said. "There's somebody in there that we want."

"Got a warrant?" demanded Scott.

The sergeant handed him a paper. "I got a warrant. Now let us in."

"As soon as I read it," said Scott. He moved slowly. He held the paper up to the light, squinted and then lowered the paper. "Need my glasses," he said.

He had never worn glasses in his life. He looked through his pockets, one by one, and then returned the warrant to the sergeant.

"I must have left them upstairs, Sergeant. Read it to me."

The sergeant read it. It was a warrant for the arrest of Don Luis, suspected of having entered the country illegally. It was signed by one Juan Lopez.

At the name Lopez, Ned Scott exploded. "Sergeant," he said, "somebody put one over on the police department and you don't even know it because you can't speak Spanish."

"There's no Spanish in this."

"There's nothing but Spanish," retorted Scott, "in the signature. Juan Lopez is the Spanish equivalent of John Doe, so you've got a warrant that's signed by John Doe and it's worthless. There's fraud on the face of it and the owner of the house can sue you for illegal entry. Cross that threshold and you can throw your sergeant's stripes in the waste basket and get ready for your salary cut, because you'll be the goat. Maybe you think I'm bluffing. If so, call headquarters and get Inspector Donnigan and repeat what I've just told you. My name is Scott. Edward Asa Scott. And if Bill Donnigan doesn't corroborate every word I've said, I'll get down on my knees and humbly beg your pardon."

The sergeant was only a sergeant, but he was wise enough not to do the right thing at the wrong time. He turned to one of his men.

"Charlie," he said. "Beat it back to the radio car and get headquarters and check on what this Scott guy says."

Scott folded his arms and grinned. The analogy between Juan Lopez and John Doe was an improvisation, but it had worked. Bill Donnigan would back him up, of course.

PRESENTLY the patrolman named Charlie came back. "I got the inspector at headquarters," he reported. "He said he knows Scott all right, and if Scott tells us to keep out of the house, that means we ought to get in quick, before it's too late."

The sergeant glared at Scott. "Wise guy, huh?"

Scott glanced at his watch. The ten minutes he'd promised Don Luis were up.

He stooped to his knees and bowed low. "I said I'd do it and I'm a man of my word. My apologies. Sergeant, excuse me. And now get the hell inside and see what happens."

The cop rang the bell and the swarthy man opened the door at once. Scott watched the police stream upstairs, but he stayed in the hallway.

"What's your name?" he asked the man with the mustache.

"Sebastian."

"Did Don Luis get away?"

Sebastian nodded. "I think yes." He twisted his lips nervously. "If we know yesterday that you are the great friend of Spain," he said, "we avoid the big trouble."

"Meaning Gregor would still have been alive?"

"I don't know Gregor."

"You followed me from his shop. Why did you?"

"It eez not me. I am opposite the shop. I stay there."

"Sebastian," said Scott, "you know how important that box is to Don Luis. Well, I've finally decided to give it to him."

Sebastian smiled. "You weesh me to find Don Luis? Give me the box and I will do. I will put in his hands."

"Fine, except that I haven't got the box.

Which is where you come in. I want you to get it."

"Where ees?"

"I hid it in Gregor's place, behind that portrait of him. The one with the green background. Remember?"

Sebastian frowned. Scott said: "They'd catch me if I tried to break into Berendt's. You can manage where I'd never have a chance."

Sebastian nodded and Scott said: "Now shut up. The police are back."

They were coming down the stairs, muttering and swearing at Scott for the trick he'd pulled. He scarcely noticed them. The connection had just dawned on him. The link in the chain that had been overlooked. The reason the killer hadn't taken the box, up in Gregor's room.

The sergeant was lashing out at Scott, but Scott was hardly listening. He turned suddenly and his blue eyes needled through the sergeant.

"Forget it," said Scott. "I tricked you—stalled you off so Don Luis could escape. But that was because I didn't know what every cop in New York would give his right eye to find out—the name of the man who killed Gregor Berendt."

The sergeant couldn't make up his mind whether Scott was still trying to put something over on him, and while the cop was deciding, Scott swung around suddenly and pointed at Sebastian.

"Him—he killed Berendt!"

The sergeant finally made up his mind. He put his hands on his hips and burst out laughing.

For a moment, Sebastian did nothing. Then, with a quick, dancing motion, he pirouetted and burst for the door. Scott dived at him and missed. The sergeant whipped out his gun and shouted, but he was too late. The door slammed in his face, and by the time he had it open, there was nothing to be seen on the street.

Scott was undisturbed. "Maybe you'll believe me now. Donnigan was ribbing me before, but now it's a matter of the Berendt case and nobody's going to kid around. Least of all me. If you want the man who just slipped away, I can tell you exactly where you'll find him—Gregor Berendt's antique shop, second floor!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Dungeon Serenade

AROUND two in the morning, Scott got home. He switched on the studio light and crossed the room quietly. The fake cigarette box was in its place. He ripped off the leather and breathed a sigh of relief. The Rendosa box with the key in the corner was still in his possession.

He worked on it for about an hour. Then he put it inside a blue volume which, by cutting out the inside pages, had been fashioned into a receptacle. He switched out the lights and entered his bedroom, but there in the doorway, he halted. Mira Rendosa was asleep on his bed.

As the light hit her eyes, she moaned and turned to her other side. Then she rubbed her face and sat up drowsily. "Ned," she said. "Ned!"

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Please," she said timidly. "Don't be angry. I went back to my hotel and I couldn't sleep. I kept thinking of you, and after a while my headache went away and I had to come here. You don't mind, do you?"

"Did you look for the box?" he asked.

Wide-eyed, she nodded. "Yes. It's mine. I'll pay for it. Mr. Berendt wanted me to have it and it's mine. I thought maybe you'd taken it and it was here."

"It is," he said calmly. And then, before she could speak again, he added: "They got Berendt's murderer."

"Who?"

"A Spaniard by the name of Sebastian. The police are working on him now. They'll have the confession by morning. But there's still one thing I want to know about the box before I give it up. What's so valuable about it? Why is it so important? Just a snuffbox that tinkles out a little old-fashioned tune, heh?"

"I told you all I knew. Don Pablo said it was a key to his treasure. I don't know whether the treasure was ever found. I only half believe the legend." She was standing up and fixing her hair. "I've never even seen the box," she said. "Please, may I look at it now?"

"No."

She seemed to float across the room,

but she didn't melt into his arms because he kept them rigid at his side. Her kiss burned into him, but he pushed her away.

"You'd better go home," he said drily.

She smiled and put her arms around him again. He called out, "Becky!" in a sharp, crackling voice. Mira pulled back at once.

"Who's Becky?"

"My housekeeper. She cooks like a witch and guards me like a brood hen. She hates every woman who's younger or less attractive than she, and that takes in the whole world. If she sees you kissing me, she'll scratch out your eyes, which would be a damn shame. Here she is now." He turned and said: "Hello, Becky."

Becky at her best, with her big colorful features, her flashing eyes and her coils of black hair, looked like some medieval gargoyle miraculously come to life. But now, in her huge, white nightgown, with her hair in braids and her face heavy with sleep, she resembled a caricature drawn by a drunken artist and colored by a shaky-handed friend who had never applied paint before in his life.

She said: "Ned—what do you want?"

"Take Miss Rendosa to the door. I seem to have lost my powers of persuasion, and I'm tired."

Becky's hate was so deep that it cooed. "I'll be glad to, Ned. Did the hussy annoy you?"

"Greatly," he said.

Mira swept across the room. "Ned Scott!" she flamed. "I never!" Then she took two quick strides forward and faced Becky. "Ugly old witch!" she jeered.

Becky's slap was so hard that she almost lost her balance. Mira stumbled back against the wall. She let out a quick gasp and then she rushed out.

SCOTT waited until the front door had slammed shut. His eyes, blue and deep and usually so incisive, were thoughtful and almost tender as they gazed at Becky.

"I do the damnedest things," he remarked serenely.

Becky howled with laughter.

Bill Donnigan came in at nine the next morning. Scott, sitting in a corner of the studio and wearing a wine-colored dressing gown, said: "Hello, Bill. You forgot to shave."

Donnigan's stern, austere face didn't smile. He called out: "Becky? Got some coffee for me?"

Ned Scott frowned. "What's the trouble, Bill?"

"You. You act as if you'd hired the police department to run your errands and provide you with personal entertainment. They raid a house, and you hold them off and try to make me back you up. Then you admit you stalled them off, and you think you can get back in their good graces by letting them arrest someone for murder. Do you think you're Sherlock Holmes, or did you just dream up this business about Sebastian?"

"What's the matter? Didn't Sebastian confess?"

"No. And he didn't kill Berendt."

"What makes you so sure?"

"I've been in police work a lot of years. I can recognize a phony alibi when I hear it, and the same goes for an honest one. I've been questioning Sebastian most of the night, and he wasn't anywhere near Berendt's house at the time of the murder."

"He's taking you for a ride, Bill."

Becky came in with the coffee. She put her hand on Scott's shoulder and said: "Don't be a genius all the time, Ned. You do the painting, and leave the police work to Bill."

Scott shook his head. "I know I'm right."

Donnigan snorted. "Holy hell! The guy knows he's right!"

"Look," said Scott. "I saw Sebastian follow me from the shop. He'd just seen the box taken out of the window, and he saw me carrying a package about the size of that box. That's why he followed me. A couple of hours later my place was searched and a music box was taken. By him. He thought he had the right one."

"You think you've proved he searched the place, huh? Geez!"

"He, or an accomplice of his. Last night I told him I'd hidden the box behind Gregor's portrait and I asked him to get it for me. He said he would. But the portrait was in Gregor's room, up-

stairs, so how the hell had Sebastian seen it unless he'd murdered Gregor?"

Donnigan's voice dripped with sarcasm. "He came in the shop and it was empty, and he heard a noise on the second floor and so he went up. He tried to buy something that Gregor kept upstairs. He might have been there last year. I can give you a thousand explanations why Sebastian was in Gregor's apartment, and not a single one of them proves murder."

"Bill, there's only one possible reason why the killer didn't take the box. He thought he had it, heh? He'd taken it from my room and he thought he had it!"

"So?"

"Don't you see it yet?" asked Scott.

"Sebastian didn't kill him. I told you that five minutes ago. You have theories and I have a fact. My fact is that Sebastian didn't commit a murder because he was nowhere near the place where the murder happened. Understand?"

Ned Scott nodded meekly.

"Furthermore," continued Donnigan, "I didn't come here to argue the case. I came to get the box and turn it over to Homicide, where it belongs as material evidence. Legally you stole it, and if you don't give it to me, and do it quick, I'm going to arrest you for larceny."

Ned Scott shrugged. "I don't see what good it will do you. You'll hand it in and have to explain where you got it. Either you'll lie to protect me, which I won't permit, or you'll tell the truth and I'll be just as badly off as if I refused now. Bill, I don't think I can give it to you."

"Holy jumping Jezebel!" said Donnigan slowly.

Ned Scott sat down and finished his breakfast.

A COUPLE of hours later he was concentrating on a new war poster and he didn't hear the footsteps thump up the stairs. He didn't hear anything until the door slammed and he looked up at Russ Chandler.

He was no longer the strong, confident singer of faultless appearance. His hair was unkempt, his tie was pulled away from his collar and his eyes were worried and haggard.

"Ned!" he said. "They got him!"

Scott put down his crayon, wiped his hands on his smock and called out: "Becky, Better put on some more coffee. And something nourishing with it." Then he walked over to the closet, took out a bottle of Spanish brandy and a couple of small glasses and poured out two drinks.

"Take this, Russ, and then tell me. Who got whom?"

"Don Luis!" exclaimed Chandler. He gulped the liquor and made a face. "They got Don Luis, and Mira, too. In the cellar of a house on upper Madison Avenue. And they'll kill the pair of them if I don't come through with the story."

"Call the police, since you know where they are."

"I can't. That's the whole point, Ned. If I call the police, they'll arrest Don Luis for illegal entry. And if I don't do anything, they'll hurt Mira!"

"Who's holding Don Luis?"

"The Falange, of course. He came here to organize a group to counteract the Falange. I arranged his visit. The government let him in, but unofficially and at his own risk. Once his trip becomes known, they'll have to arrest him. That's the trump card the Falange have, and they know it. The government won't act of their own accord. But once he's booked, they'll have to act."

"How much time have you?"

"Till tonight. Then they'll turn him in and they'll kill Mira. Kill or torture her."

"Why?"

"On account of me. To get my story."

Ned Scott crossed his long legs and leaned back in his chair. "You'd better tell me the whole business, Russ. You got yourself tangled up in conspiracy and plots, and you're out of your depth. You've been behaving like a romantic. Arranging a secret visit for a man of Don Luis' stature. Trying to steal a snuff-box and making a mystery out of your reasons. Writing death notices on tags and singing your theme song from a concert stage. The trouble with you, Russ, is that you're an artist and you live in the clouds. So drink your coffee and give. From the beginning."

Chandler's hand shook as he lifted his cup. "It goes way back. To my trip to Spain, in 1936. I went to collect folk songs. I stayed away from the big cities

and spent my time in remote little villages. That's how I happened to be in Loja. An ancient settlement up in the mountains, with a castle."

"Don Pablo Rendosa's, heh?"

Chandler nodded. "Don Pablo Rendosa's. Not his main estate. That's why the music box is so important. It has a picture of the Loja castle. Once you identify the castle and hear that tune, the chances are you can catch onto the rest."

"Not so fast, Russ. You reached the point where you were in Loja, collecting songs. Then what?"

"Then I heard this legend of Don Pablo's treasure and the musical key. There was an old woman who claimed she knew where the treasure was. For the fun of it, I asked her to show me, and she took me to a dungeon deep down in the bowels of the castle."

Becky came in with a trayload of sandwiches and Chandler picked up one and swallowed it.

"I found a vault, with a great stone doorway so heavy that probably you couldn't even dynamite it open—not without destroying everything inside, anyhow. It had a curious kind of combination lock, consisting of a bank of tuning forks. Ten rows of ten each, covering the entire door. Certain ones operated as levers with which to release the lock mechanism and the rest were dummies, but neither the old woman nor anyone else knew which were which.

"One hundred levers. To get the right combination of three meant one possibility out of millions. I'm no mathematician, so I didn't even try to figure it out."

"THE musical key," murmured Scott. "So that's it! The right melody would vibrate certain ones of the tuning forks, and no others. Then you'd pull the ones that vibrated and you could open the lock. Is that it?"

"Yes. The idea hit me in the face while I was there. The legend of the musical key, which I already knew from Mira, and those tuning forks which were obviously levers. My voice is pretty true, so I tried singing some of the seventeenth century airs. The one the music box plays—the one I sang last night—that was it, of course."

"What did you find inside?" asked Scott.

"Nothing," said Chandler. "The vault was completely empty. It had been rifled long ago."

"Then what's so valuable about the music box?"

"That's the second part of the story," answered Chandler. "I made it valuable. I said I was there in 1936, when the Spanish war began. My sympathies, of course, were with the Loyalists. It so happened that I was in Loja when two trucks loaded with Loyalist gold rolled through the town. Back in the hills somewhere, a tank was chasing them. They were heading for the coast, but in Loja they discovered the road to the coast was cut off. It was capture, either way—to go back or to go forward meant losing a couple of million dollars worth of gold."

"So you hid the stuff in Don Pablo's vault," remarked Scott.

"Yes. And the next day Loja was taken and the castle blown up and the vault buried under tons of earth. So the stuff is safe enough, until somebody learns the whole story and digs up the ruins. I told Don Luis what I had done, but some of the facts leaked out and that's how the Falange knows of the importance of the music box, without being sure just why it was so important. You can imagine how I felt when I saw the thing in Gregor's window, in plain view."

"You tried to buy it and couldn't," said Scott. "Then Don Luis tried to buy it and couldn't. And meantime, you learned it was being held for Mira, whom you knew. So you decided to wait and try to get it from her, heh? And while you were waiting, the Falange killed Gregor because they believed he knew the whole story and was keeping the box for you people. Now where does Sebastian fit it?"

"Sebastian," declared Chandler, "is a traitor, secretly in the pay of the Falange. It was he who sent for the police last night."

"I thought so, but Bill Donnigan says he didn't, and that's proof in my eyes. I presume you didn't kill him, and I know Don Luis didn't kill him. And that leaves Mira."

"You know damn well she didn't do

it. A girl like her! She had no reason, either. Besides, I spoke to her on the phone for a moment. The real murderer is holding her and threatens to kill her."

"But who is the real murderer?" asked Scott. And then he jumped to his feet and exclaimed: "Well, I'll be damned! All I have to do is sit here and call the police and tell them whom to arrest. And when they make the arrest, they get half their evidence on the hoof!"

"Before anybody is arrested," said Chandler grimly, "they've got to release Don Luis. Maybe the police can save Mira, but if they find Don Luis, they'll ruin everything."

Scott stood up. "A painter and a singer, heh? Don Luis is a good deal more important than the pair of us. How about it, Russ?"

"How about what?"

"Trading ourselves for Don Luis."

"They won't do it, unless they get the box."

"They'll do it, and without the box," said Scott. "We may be the fall guys, because between us we have everything they want. It'll take guts, Russ—"

Chandler stood up and his long, powerful jaws clicked shut. "Stop making speeches and let's go."

CHAPTER FIVE

Don Quixote and Don Luis

THE house was set back from the street and was the only remaining brownstone in a block of tenements. Several of the upper-floor windows were broken, but on the parlor floor they were protected with boards. The front door, too, was boarded up.

Chandler and Scott marched up the high stoop and found a bellpull in the molding of the doorway. Scott gave it a tug. Inside, as if from a great distance, they heard a flat, unmusical clang.

They waited a long time. They heard no footsteps. A couple of children playing on the street stared curiously and one of them called up: "There's nobody lives there, mister." A few seconds later, the boarded door swung open.

It was dark inside, and within the darkness, vague, half-formed shapes materialized and then fused into the background. Ned Scott heard the shuffle of feet and had the impression of many men surrounding him as he walked in. Then Sebastian's voice said: "Señor Scott! I did not think to find you."

"Lots of things you didn't foresee," retorted Scott. "Where's Don Luis?"

"He eez down, where I show you."

He snapped on a flashlight and Scott saw that there were three other men here. He couldn't see their features, nor did it matter. They were dark and anonymous and all three men were armed. Their revolvers looked immense in the dim light and they marched forward as a unit and frisked Scott and then Chandler with a silent, methodical thoroughness.

When they had finished, Sebastian spoke. "We go down."

He led the procession and shone his light on the stairs in front of him. Scott, further back, groped for his footing. Once, on the narrow, rickety steps, he stumbled and lurched against the man in front of him. The cold steel of a revolver bumped against Scott's cheek and he felt the muzzle pressed against the side of his head. Then he recovered his balance and pulled away.

He'd made a mistake. He knew that now. He should never have come on this quixotic errand. He'd had deluded ideas about his ability to save Don Luis. And because Scott was sore at Donnigan, he'd tried to pull this off by himself. He'd gone knight-errant in a big way, but his attempt was doomed to dismal, impotent failure.

There was only one thought in his mind now: Bring the police. No matter what the cost, no matter how humiliating it might turn out, bring the police. If there was any chance of communicating with the outside world, use it to bring the police.

He'd underrated the Falange, considered them a crackpot organization when in truth they were deadly. They thought they were on a holy crusade, and they'd kill with or without reason. Chandler, Mira, Don Luis, himself—each of them was doomed.

The mad, bitter irony of it struck Scott and he almost laughed aloud. A couple of harebrained artists, a concert singer and a portrait painter with visions of

grandeur, trying to outsmart the Falange into releasing Don Luis. It was hopeless.

Scott felt his way down the last decaying tread and stepped through the doorway into the cellar. It was low and vaulted with brick. Thick, squat columns rose from the damp concrete and fanned out sharply to support the low ceiling. A couple of kerosene lanterns cast their yellow light and lit up the dark, ugly iron furnace with its tangle of pipes spreading upwards like some ancient and cumbersome machine. For all the world, the scene resembled a medieval torture chamber.

The victims were there, too, seated on a broken-down horsehair sofa. Don Luis and a scared, sensitive girl. At sight of Chandler she leapt up and cried, "Russ!" Then she was knocked back to the couch where she crumpled up, a fragile, frightened thing to whom no one paid any attention.

Don Luis didn't move. He sat there brooding, and his helpless, terrible strength seemed to insulate him and to radiate outward as if in waves. Until it struck the woman.

She was sitting on a table and her long, slender legs swung free. She was still beautiful, but not with the scared, timed beauty of the moment Scott had first seen her in Gregor's shop, nor yet with the reckless, impulsive beauty of the night of Chandler's concert. She had changed subtly and the evil in her glowed sharp and triumphant. There was no mercy in her, no pity, no warmth, no joy. Just the hard, burnished sheen of her beauty, and the ugliness underneath.

SCOTT spoke to her. "You'd be nice to paint," he said. "I'm sorry I didn't bring my sketchbook along."

"You miss so many chances, don't you?" she said coldly.

"Like last night, when you kissed me? Mira—or whatever your name is—I was too damned scared."

Chandler leaned forward and whispered to Scott: "Who's she?"

"The girl who impersonated Mira Rendosa," answered Scott. "Nobody knew the real Mira, except you. You were the only person she had to avoid, and she did it twice—at my studio, and again at your concert." He turned back to her and said: "What is your real name?"

"Fata Morgana," she replied slowly. "That will do as well as any other."

"All right, Fata. I have the music box, and I came to give myself up in place of Don Luis."

"I know you have it," she said, "but you made a mistake. I won't let Don Luis go. I don't have to."

"Aren't you forgetting something? I have the box, but I haven't told you where it is."

"I think you will," she murmured softly. "I think you'll be very, very glad to. Because you need your hands."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Ned dear, without your hands you can't paint. And it is so easy to mutilate them."

She spoke calmly and then she smiled. But her very calmness warned him that she'd do precisely as she said.

It was hard to believe. Here in a cellar, in the heart of New York. Torture. The time-honored method of all Gestapos, through all the ages.

He raised his hands and gazed at them. Ten years ago he'd lost his wife. He'd thought he'd go mad, but he'd poured all the fierce, bitter rage of his soul onto canvas. That had saved him.

He thought of his daughter, Marilyn, who was away at boarding school. He thought of himself, a crippled wreck of a father, mouthing the ugliness of his resentment and having no release—no art, no expression. He couldn't stand that, either for Marilyn or for himself.

The woman sitting there on the table seemed to read his thoughts. "You won't die," she said. "You'll just never be able to paint again."

Chandler roared out: "You can't give it to her, Ned! You promised—there's too much at stake! Tell her to—"

One of the dark, thin gunmen struck savagely and knocked Chandler back. He hit the brick column and dropped to his knees. Blood trickled from a cut on his jaw. He wiped it and glared at Scott.

"Well?" asked Fata.

Scott bit his lips. He thought of Bill Donnigan and of Becky. Then he looked at the couch. Mira—the real Mira—had started forward and then stuffed a hand-

kerchief in her mouth. She was biting on it spasmodically. Don Luis seemed almost unaware of what was going on around him.

He raised his head and smiled at Scott. It was a kind of message.

Don Luis would have suffered anything rather than tell. He had the will and the strength to undergo all torture. He would never break. But he could understand those who did.

Scott turned to Fata Morgana. "What happens to me if I give you the thing?" he asked.

"You will be released. Once I have it, I'll leave the country and I won't have to worry about your police." She stroked her wrist. "There are ways of getting out," she added.

Chandler spluttered: "Ned, don't! She'll kill you anyhow!" Then he lowered his head and let out a sobbing, muffled gasp.

Scott shrugged. "I'm no martyr," he said. "I'll let you have it."

Fata Morgana's brown eyes lit up triumphantly. "Where is it?" she demanded brusquely.

"In my studio. The bookcase near the window. Third shelf. Stuck inside a box that looks like a volume of Sandberg's Lincoln."

Fata smiled. "Sebastian," she said. "You will get it."

"Just a minute," said Scott. "Becky's there, and she certainly won't let anyone take it. Nor will she leave anyone alone in the room."

"She will be taken care of," said Fata coldly.

"That's just it," said Scott sharply. "I don't want her taken care of. I know you hate her and want nothing better than the excuse to harm her. But you have sense enough not to take unnecessary risks just for the sake of a bit of feminine revenge."

"What do you suggest?" she asked, a humorless smile on her lips.

"I'll send her a note. I'll ask her to give Sebastian something or other that's in another room. While she's getting it, Sebastian will have plenty of time to take the box."

"Write your note," she said, "and then I'll decide."

SHE handed him a sheet of paper and a pencil and he sat down at the table and scrawled rapidly. He spoke as he wrote.

"Please give the bearer—" He glanced up and frowned. "Better give him a name. Makes it sound more natural."

"Smith," said Sebastian. "I make the good Smith, no?"

"Every phony errand is done by a Smith or a Jones," declared Scott. "Make it something else. Like"—he thought for a moment—"like Haskins. That's a good butler's name. Morton Haskins." He scribbled the rest of the note and read it aloud. "Please give the bearer, Morton Haskins, my sketch pad. And tell Bill I can't get back for lunch. Ned." He handed the note to Sebastian.

Fata grabbed the paper and crumpled it up.

"Think I'm a fool?" she demanded furiously. "The part about Bill Donnigan and not being back in time for lunch—you're trying to send a message to the police!"

Scott shrugged dejectedly. Fata said coldly: "Write it again. Just the one sentence about the sketch pad."

Scott obeyed. She read the note carefully and handed it to Sebastian. *"Vaya,"* she said. "Go." He went.

Scott avoided looking at Chandler. Chandler's anger and contempt were too apparent. Scott wished he could have done otherwise. He wished he had Chandler's defiance and flamboyant courage. But he didn't.

He turned to the woman. "You killed Gregor. I knew that before I came here, because there was no one else eligible. As soon as I thought of the possibility of your being an impostor, I realized you were responsible for everything. The tip-off was the way you avoided Chandler. A headache at the concert, hysteria at my studio. That, and the manner in which you kissed me last night. Too much Fata Morgana in it. And what bothers me is that your whole scheme might have worked, if you'd gotten the box at the beginning."

"Aren't you forgetting something?" she asked. "That I'm getting it now, and so my scheme *has* worked?"

Scott disregarded her. "How did you

know about the box in the first place, and about Mira?"

"I saw it in the window," she replied. "I knew Mira, I knew she wanted that snuffbox, and when Berendt refused to sell, I didn't insist. I was afraid of making him suspicious. So I phoned Mira and learned she was coming to the city to see Berendt. I said I'd meet her at the train, and I did. But I brought her here instead of to Berendt's. I didn't make a stupid fuss, like these two." She pointed deprecatingly to Chandler and to Don Luis.

"I get it," said Scott. "Sebastian told you he had the box. Actually, he had the wrong one. Then you killed Gregor, thinking that, once he was dead, there'd be no trace of the music box and no clue to any crime save through Mira, who would be too scared to do anything but rush back to the country immediately and hide in the trees.

"With Gregor dead, you saw what Sebastian had stolen. It was the wrong box. So you told him to plant it at Don Luis' temporary quarters, and you rushed to Gregor's to look for the box with the musical key. We arrived before you had time to search, so you pretended you were Mira Rendosa. Last night when you came to my studio, it was purely to look for the box. What do you expect to find, once you have it?"

"The tune," she said, "is the key to something important. After I leave, these others will try to get the whole story from Chandler. If they fail, it will not matter too much. There are those in Spain who will know what to do, once they see the box and listen to the melody."

"You don't even know," said Scott. "And yet you kill and torture for it." He raised his hands and gazed thoughtfully at them.

At the end of a half hour, the door opened and Sebastian marched in. He was grinning.

He said, pleased: "It ees here," and then he took something from under his jacket. He walked over and placed it on the table.

There was no mistaking the music box. The outlines of the castle of Loja, the yellow key in the corner, the small red *R* which distinguished this box from all other Rendosa boxes.

Fata Morgana grabbed it and studied it searchingly. A momentary look of doubt and suspicion crossed her face before she opened the lid.

But with the first notes of the tune, she relaxed. The mechanism was in perfect order.

THAT evening, Ned Scott gave a dinner to Chandler, Don Luis, Mira Rendosa and Bill Donnigan.

Becky brought in the big, steaming soup tureen and set it on the table before them with a flourish.

Don Luis turned to Bill Donnigan. "I have not had the opportunity to thank you, Inspector. For a time, I feared the police would not let me go. Señor Scott says that it is you whom I have to thank for arranging my release."

"I did it through the commissioner," said Donnigan, "and at first I didn't think I'd be able to swing it. But he finally called Washington and they changed his mind."

The phone rang and Scott got up and answered it. "For you, Bill," he said after a moment. "Sounds like something official."

While Donnigan was answering the call, Chandler said: "Have you told him, Ned?"

Scott shook his head. "He'd only get mad. He'd say I tricked him again, so let's let him think she really got away with the Rendosa box and that it has to be found."

Mira looked at Chandler. "What?" she asked, puzzled. "I don't understand."

Chandler smiled. "It doesn't make a bit of difference whether she gets away or not—as far as the secret is concerned. She has the real music box, of course, but the wrong tune. Ned switched the mechanism from another box in his collection, and the famous Rendosa box can only play a bit of Brahms—which was written two hundred years after Don Pablo died. It's a good thing she didn't know music."

"It's a good thing I had a music box of the same size, so that the mechanism fitted," said Scott. "Brahms was the least

(Continued on page 97)

THE REMEMBERING SKULL

By CLYDE MOREHEAD

The whole Hatry clan was nuts—Harry, who suffered from a persecution complex; Robert, who kept a skull in his living room; and Old Man Hatry, who held the secret of a gold mine in his head—even after death!

With a bitter curse he lifted the skull and hurled it into the placid waters of the river.

THE advertisement called for a bum without family ties who desired a fresh start along a road that wasn't too rocky. Of course, it wasn't that forthright. However, stripped of its fancy, stilted verbiage, that was what it came to.

I first read it with a skeptical eye. There was no doubt that I filled the requirements, yet there was something about it which gave off an odor of old, uncooked sole.

Sitting in the flop house in Skid Road, I thought it over, came to the conclusion that I had nothing to lose save my next-to-last nickel in all the world, and edged myself into the phone booth in the lobby.

I called the number listed in the advertisement and listened to a clipped New England accent ask me my business.

"You ran a blind classified ad," I said. "I'm an applicant. What do you want to know about my character?"

There was a short silence. The clipped voice said: "How tall are you?"

I told him.

"Age and weight?"

I told him that too. There was a longer wait. Then: "O.K. My name's Weldon. Office at 164 Summit Street. Come over right away."

The receiver clicked in my ear. I came out of the phone booth, fingered my last nickel and thought it over carefully. It didn't make much sense. If some huge-hearted philanthropist was offering an anonymous bum another chance, it seemed to me he would be more interested in spiritual qualities than age, height and weight.

I decided at last that no matter where this all led, I might well be able to pick up a free meal along the way. I invested my final nickel in a bus ride and traveled downtown to Summit Street.

The gilded sign on the door informed me that William Weldon was an attorney-at-law. The furnishings of the waiting room informed me further that he was quite a successful one.

An efficient-looking brunette secretary eyed my ragged coat and my unshaved jowls suspiciously, and rather reluctantly took my name into Weldon. A moment later I was ushered into an office which would have been no come-down to Cecil B. DeMille.

The walls were lined with leather-bound legal tomes. The rug beneath my feet was soft as a mattress. The chairs were upholstered and inviting. At the far end of the room stood a desk which would have made an excellent pingpong table. Behind it sat William Weldon.

HE was about fifty years old. His hair was sparse and gray, his features as sharp and clipped as his accent. His eyes were hard and slatey and there was something indefinable about him which I didn't like.

I sat down in one of the huge chairs. I ran a hand over my bearded chin and said: Well, what's your proposition?"

He didn't answer me. He looked me over as if I were a fat steer and he a stockyard buyer. He grunted to himself, took a typewritten sheet of paper from a desk drawer and studied it. From time to time he'd raise his eyes from the paper and stare at me.

After some three minutes of this I decided I didn't like him and I didn't like the treatment. I stood up. There is one thing a guy without a nickel and a millionaire have in common. They can tell anyone to go to hell without losing anything. I said as much to Weldon.

He flushed and put the paper away. For an instant he seemed angry. Then he forced a wintry smile to his thin lips.

"Now, now," he said, "you mustn't mind me. "You're just the fellow we're looking for. You've heard of the Hatry family?"

"Hatry?" I said, digging into my memory. "Yeah. A bunch of nuts, aren't they? The old guy killed himself, I believe. One son is in the nut house. And there was a gold mine involved somewhere."

"That's right," said Weldon hastily. "But none of that concerns you. Here's the situation: Robert Hatry is a sane, decent lad. His dearest friend was killed recently in the South Pacific. He had intended to go into business with him after the war. He's a sentimental fellow. He resolved to pick an absolute stranger, a fellow who was down and out and give him the same opportunity he intended to offer his friend. Get it?"

"No," I said.

He looked annoyed. "What don't you get?"

"The whole damned layout. I've been around a little, Mr. Weldon. If you must know, I've even served time. That's why I'm on the bum when business is booming. I can't get in a war plant with my record. There was a little matter of forgery. Now to a guy who's bummed about a bit, your proposition sounds off key. I want no part of the Hatrys. They're a bunch of nuts. I want no part of you, either. That tale you just told me wouldn't even be convincing to a radio audience. If you're looking for a fall guy, just keep on looking."

I put my battered hat on my head and

turned toward the door. There was anger in Weldon's face. His mouth was set hard. However, he controlled himself. When he spoke, his voice dripped with unadulterated molasses.

"Now, look," he said, "I know it sounds a little screwy, but it's true. You can check it yourself. Anyway, what've you got to lose? You're a man of spirit. I like that. Look into the deal. Satisfy yourself. Then, if you don't like it, get out."

I hesitated near the wide doorway. There still might be a square meal in it, even though he was lying like hell. After I'd eaten, I could go back to the flophouse. My room was paid for until tomorrow morning.

All right," I said. "What do I do?"

"Here's a key," he said. It's the key to Robert Hatry's apartment. You'll go there. Get cleaned up. There's plenty of food and liquor in the house. Stay there overnight. Hatry is out of town. He'll be back first thing in the morning. Then you can listen to what he has to say."

I took the key and departed somewhat cheered. Not only was I on the verge of achieving the free meal, but according to Weldon I was going to have something to wash it down with.

I still didn't believe him. But with the prospect of a bath, food and drink, I was quite content. For the past three years I hadn't been too fussy.

ROBERT HATRY'S apartment was comfortable if not luxurious. There were two bedrooms, a master and a smaller guest room, a living room and a kitchen. I investigated the kitchen first. I attacked a bottle of Scotch and a cold chicken with the verve of the Eighth Army, and after liquidating the enemy, visited the bathroom.

I showered, shaved and climbed into a pair of Robert Hatry's pajamas, wrapped Robert Hatry's bathrobe around me, and thrust my feet into a pair of Robert Hatry's slippers. Through the warm glow the whiskey had imparted, I still knew that William Weldon had been lying to me. However, at this moment, I didn't care a damn.

I shuffled into the living room, turned on the reading lamp and took my ease in the best chair. I took a fat cigar from a hammered silver box, lighted it and looked around expansively.

It was then I saw the skull.

I blinked, shuddered and stared at it through the rich cigar smoke. It stood upon the mantel-piece over the wide fireplace and its empty eyes gazed eerily at me. I stood up, walked across the room and picked it up.

I said: " 'Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio'," and examined it closely.

I am no connoisseur of skulls and for a moment I believed that this was like all the other skulls in the world. Then I observed the hole in the head. It was a small hole on the right side of the head, some distance above the temple. I reflected that it could have been caused by a bullet.

That thought impelled me to replace hastily the death's-head on the mantelpiece and sit down abruptly. Old Man Hatry, I recalled darkly, had killed himself. He had shot himself in the head. I stared again at the thing on the mantelpiece. Then I got up, went to the kitchen and poured myself a stiff slug of Scotch.

Once again I wondered what was up Weldon's tricky sleeve. Apparently, everything I had heard about the Hatrys was on the level. The old man had blown his scrambled brains out and the son kept the paternal skull on the mantel-piece as a souvenir.

Sitting in this house alone with the mortal remains of Old Man Hatry was slowly giving me the horrors. I decided I needed company.

I went to the telephone in the foyer and called the flophouse. I asked for Sam Gerson.

Sam was a good guy. A genuine bona fide bum who had once been an engineer. Liquor had put him on the skids and liquor was keeping him there.

"Sam," I said, when I got him on the wire. "Come up here. I'm in a house filled with grub, liquor and all the comforts of home. Remember home, Sam?"

"You're drunk," said Gerson.

"I'm drunk," I admitted. "Come up and get the same way."

There was an instant's silence. "I'm on my way. For God's sake, hold a slug till I get there."

Gerson arrived within a half hour. I poured a pint of whiskey into him, cooked some bacon and eggs and ushered him into the bathroom. He cleaned himself up and donned a pair of the Hatry pajamas. I uncorked another bottle. We gave a serious imitation of two camels who had just hit the first oasis this side of Damascus.

The evening became a little blurred. Once, I recall, the phone rang. I answered it and someone left a message for Robert Hatry. I was to inform him that Harry was out, whatever that meant.

I remembered vaguely ushering Gerson with grave ceremony into the master bedroom and tucking him in. I retired into the smaller guestroom and promptly fell upon my closely shaved face.

THE insistent ringing of the house bell awakened me. Gene Krupa was banging drums in my head and my mouth tasted like coffee in the Third Reich. As I sat up in bed some invisible gremlin bashed me on the head with an invisible mace.

I groaned and groped with my toes for Robert Hatry's slippers. Feeling like a taster for a Mickey Finn manufacturer, I made my way to the door.

A girl stood on the threshold. I blinked the cobwebs out of my eyes and saw a tall, striking blonde, well-dressed and possessed of a pair of almost transparent blue eyes.

"Robert," she said, "Harry's out."

I pulled the bathrobe closer about me and myself together. "I'm not Robert," I said. "And I know Harry's out."

She looked at me closer in the dimly-lighted hall.

"Oh," she said, "I'm sorry. Is Robert here?"

"Not yet," I said. "Come in. He's due here this morning."

I led her into the living room. A bottle with a good drink remaining in it was on the table. I drank it down and felt steadier.

"I'm Jane Reeves," she said. "Robert's cousin. I suppose you're a friend of his."

"In a way," I said. "Anyway, I'm waiting for him, too."

She nodded and sat down. She crossed her shapely legs and lighted a cigarette. I noted that her cheeks were pale underneath her rouge and her manner was apprehensive.

"You stayed here all night?" she asked me.

I nodded.

"There was no—I mean, no one called? No one came here?"

"Not until you did," I told her.

She puffed furiously at her cigarette. Her gaze lifted and traveled toward the mantel-piece. Her blue eyes opened wide. Her jaw dropped. "My God," she said, "he *was* here. It's gone!"

"Who was here?" I said. "And what's gone?"

My own eyes answered the second question. Old Man Hatry's skull was gone. The mantel-piece was empty. The blonde stood up. Her gaze was wild and her register was one of transparent terror.

"Maybe—maybe, he's here," she said in a leaden whisper. "Maybe, right now. Are you sure there's no one on the house?"

"There's a pal of mine," I said. "Stayed with me all night. We were pretty high. Maybe he took the skull to bed with him as a drunken gag. I'll see."

I left the frightened blonde in the living room and went down the hall. It was time I aroused Gerson anyway. Robert Hatry was due shortly and Gerson should be on his way by then.

I put my hand on the door knob of the master bedroom, flung open the door. Then I stood framed in the doorway, frozen to immobility.

The body of Sam Gerson was in the bed. His head wasn't.

Blood stained the pillow. His bright pajamas were a dull crimson. And he had been neatly decapitated.

I WIPED cold sweat from my forehead with the back of my hand. William Weldon had needed a fall guy after all. And I, apparently, was it. I heard a footfall behind me. The blonde elevated herself on tiptoe and peered over my shoulder into the bedroom.

I braced myself for her shriek, her accusation of me as a fiendish murderer. I was half right. She shrieked. Then burst into sobs. She did not, however, point the finger at me.

"I knew it," she cried. "Harry *was* here. Harry's killed Robert."

I took her by the arm and dragged her out of the doorway. I closed the bedroom door. Through her thin blouse I could feel the trembling of her flesh.

"Look," I said, "I don't think Harry's killed anyone. I'm certain he hasn't killed Robert."

I led her into the kitchen. I opened a fresh bottle. I poured a moderate drink for her and a stiff slug for myself. When she had emptied her glass I took her into the living room, sat her down and gave her a cigarette.

"Now," I said, "what's it all about?"

"Harry's escaped and killed Robert. Just as he said he would."

"That's not Robert in there," I told her. "It's a friend of mine named Gerson. And it was damned nearly me. Do you know William Weldon?"

"Of course. He's the family lawyer."

"He's more than that. He's a murderer. He tried to kill me."

She looked at me utterly bewildered. I took another drink and told her of my interview with Weldon. She stared at me, incredulous, as I finished.

"There it is," I said. "There's something lousy and bloody going on here. Can you throw any light on the subject? Or shall I just forget about it and return to my flophouse?"

She stood up, crossed the room and put a slim hand on my shoulder. "I don't know you," she said. "But I want to get to the bottom of this for several reasons. I've got to trust someone. Will you help me?"

I nodded. "I have my own incentive. I don't like to be almost killed."

"I don't know what happened in there," she said, indicating the bedroom and shuddering. "I only hope to God it wasn't Harry."

"Who's Harry?"

"Robert's brother. He was in an insane asylum. He escaped last night. He'd sworn to kill Robert. And in just that way."

I blinked at that. "You mean, to decapitate him?"

She nodded. "That's right. It was Harry who insisted on retaining old Mr. Hatry's skull after the cremation. But let me begin at the beginning of the story."

"Just a minute," I said. I poured myself another drink and swallowed it. "All right. Go ahead."

"Well, the Hatrys are all a little peculiar. Except, maybe, Robert. Ralph Hatry—that was the father—was a sort of Death Valley Scotty. You remember him?"

"Sure. That was the guy who had the mysterious gold mine in Death Valley. He'd roll out there whenever he wanted dough. No one ever found out where the mine was."

"Exactly. Ralph Hatry did the same thing. He owned a gold mine in Mexico, just below the border. No one knew where it was. He always swore he had no maps, no charts. He kept the location in his head."

"And he died without revealing it?"

"Yes. He often said that when he died the wealth of the mine was to be divided up among all the relatives. There are about a dozen of us. He said he'd give us the location before he went. But he didn't."

"He killed himself, didn't he?"

She nodded. "The doctors say he was definitely paranoiac. Like Harry. He shot himself one night. Harry was furious that he died without telling the location of the mine. Harry went a little crazy then. He kept the skull after the cremation. He talked to it bitterly, sneering that the knowledge of the mine was in that head, that there must be some way to get it out. Finally, he became so bad they had to put him away."

"But what's all this got to do with Robert?"

"Well, when the papers for Harry's commitment were signed he became violent. He claimed Robert was putting him away deliberately. He claimed his father had actually confided the story of the mine to Robert before he died, that Robert was driving Harry away in order to take the entire mine."

"I get it," I said. "He believed that the secret was now locked in Robert's head. He vowed he get that skull, too, in order to pry its secret loose."

"That's right," she said. "And last night they telephoned me to say Harry escaped."

I STOOD up, helped myself to one of Robert's cigars and wacked my brains. Gerson was dead and old man Hatry's skull was missing and any opinion I had had regarding the screwball proclivities of the Hatry clan was thoroughly reinforced.

I said: "Where does Weldon live?"

"On this street. On the river. Why?"

"I think I'll pay him a visit."

"But he's probably down at his office."

"This morning I'm inclined to think he's at home. Anyway, I'll see."

"What about your—your friend? Shall I call the police?"

"No," I said. "Not yet. Where do you live?"

She gave me her address.

"Go home, then. Stay there until you hear from me. I'll call you as soon as I've seen Weldon."

We left the house together. She took a taxi downtown. I walked slowly east toward the house where Weldon lived.

First, I carefully cased the joint. It was a three-story private house hard by the river. The east wall rose sheer from the waterfront. A few yards away a dock thrust itself out into the water. Facing the river was a balcony, the adit to which was a large French window which apparently opened onto it from the living room.

I went down to the waterfront, smoked two of the cigars I had foresightedly brought with me and gave over every brain cell to the mystery at hand. Dusk was coming down when I thought I finally had it.

I went back to the river bank where the wall of Weldon's house rose up. There was a waterspout on the corner. I spat on my hands and shinnied up until I came to the balcony. I climbed over the rail and cautiously approached the open French window. I heard voices, one of which I recognized as the lawyer's.

I put my eye to the crack made by the hinge of the door and peered into the living room. Weldon was standing at the far side of a wide chamber. Seated opposite him was a gray-faced man of about forty. His clothes were disheveled, his face was smeared with dirt. He spoke in a whining, plaintive voice.

"Don't tell Robert I'm here," he said. "He'll only send me back. Weldon, you've got to help me. You've got to."

"There, there, Harry," said the lawyer, soothingly. "Just take it easy. I'll look after you, son. You did right to come here. I'll see you're taken care of. Just wait here a minute. I'll get you something to eat and drink."

He left the room, carefully closing the door after him. Harry Hatry stood up. He paced the room like a caged animal and there was a hot, feral glint in his eyes. Suddenly he came to a stop.

"Curse you!" he said. "Damn you to hell. It's your fault. All yours. You miserable miser. Even in death you kept your secret."

I squinted more closely through the aperture. Harry Hatry was talking to his father's skull.

Suddenly he snatched it up. "Get out of my sight," he cried. "Get off the earth into the hell where you belong!"

He charged across the room toward the balcony. I moved back and squeezed myself against the wall. Harry halted at the balcony rail. He lifted the skull high above his head and hurled it with a bitter curse into the placid waters of the river. Then he turned on his heel and went back into the living room.

I RESUMED my observation post. A little later the outer door opened and Weldon returned. There was someone with him. Someone bigger, younger and healthier than Harry Hatry but cast from the same mold. It was obviously Robert.

Harry looked up at his brother and cringed. He lifted his arms as if to ward off a blow. He retreated to the wall and

cowered there. He cried out in a whimpering voice to Weldon: "You've betrayed me. You're going to turn me over to Robert. Oh, my God, oh, my God!"

He burst into wailing tears and buried his face in his hands.

Robert Hatry regarded him callously. "You've called the asylum?"

Weldon nodded.

"They mustn't find me here. Harry's having one of his spells now. He'll be absolutely incoherent. If he ever says he saw me here, they'll never believe him."

He glanced about the room and a frown crossed his brow. "Where's that skull?"

Weldon shrugged. "It was here a moment ago. Harry must have hidden it."

Robert Hatry swore. He jumped across the room and seized his brother's collar. "Where's that skull, you fool? What did you do with it?"

Harry's only answer was a fresh paroxysm of wailing.

"My God," said Robert Hatry, "take him upstairs and try to quiet him. We'll never get anything out of him while he's like this."

Weldon looked at him wonderingly. "What's it matter?" he asked. "You only took the skull along to make it look like Harry's work—as if he collected the old man's head along with yours."

"You idiot," snapped Robert witheringly. "Do as I tell you. Take him upstairs."

The pair of them helped the howling Harry to his feet, dragged him from the room.

I clambered over the balcony rail, skidded down the drain pipe to the dock. A moment later I was racing up the street to a telephone booth to call Jane Reeves.

"Listen," I said, when she answered, "call the police now. Tell them there's a headless body in Robert Hatry's apartment. Just tell them that. Nothing more. Then call the doctor at the asylum. Tell him to get down to Weldon's house as soon as he can to pick up Harry. Then meet me at the dock down by Weldon's house."

She came through like a trouper, as if she'd been obeying instructions like these all her life.

"I've got it," she said. "Do you know who killed your friend?"

"I have a damned good idea," I told her and the receiver clicked in my ear.

I WAITED for twenty minutes. Long enough to give the coppers time to get to Robert's apartment. I went back to the phone booth and called the flat. A gruff voice answered the phone.

"Copper," I said, "if you're interested in finding out who's responsible for that headless corpse you are now taking pictures of, come to this address right away."

I gave him the number of Weldon's house and hung up. I returned to the dock. I arrived there simultaneously with Jane Reeves. She extended a cool, steady hand and I shook it.

"You know," she said, "I don't even know your name."

"Gordon," I said. "Hugh Gordon."

"Very well," she said, "and what do we do now?"

A sudden warmth swept over me. I regarded her with a mixture of admiration and gratitude. It had been a long time since anyone had trusted me. Even longer since it had been a good-looking girl. For the first time since they had sent me to the pen I felt like going to work and once more becoming a solid citizen.

"Come with me," I said abruptly.

We walked out on the dock. The river rippled beneath us. Lying beside a piling was a rusted grappling hook with a length of rope attached.

"That'll come in handy," I said. "Hold on to that rope. Lower the hook when I tell you. I'm going for a swim."

I took off my coat and shoes. Jane Reeves regarded me curiously. "What are you going to do?"

"Dive," I said. "Dive for Old Man Hatry's skull. When I get it, lower that hook and pull it up."

She appeared more bewildered than ever. But she asked no questions.

I took a deep breath and went over the side of the dock into the oily water. I groped along the bottom of the river until my lungs were almost bursting. Then I came up.

On the third try I got it. My fingers touched the smooth brow of Old Man Hatry's head. I grabbed it like a bowling ball, my finger in the bullet hole, and came up to the surface. I whistled and

the grappling hook was lowered to me.

I hung Old Man Hatry's skull on it and she hauled away. I swam to the piling and clambered up. I was half way to the dock when I heard Jane Reeves' startled cry and saw the beam of the flashlight thrust into the darkness.

I completed my climb in nothing flat. Dripping, I reached the top of the dock to see Jane haloed by the light and a black-hatted figure advancing upon her. A hand stretched forth in front of the flash. It held an automatic.

"Give me that skull," said the voice of Robert Hatry, "and put your hands up. Both of you."

She handed him the head of Old Man Hatry. He looked from her to me and there was puzzlement in his eyes.

"I don't quite get it," he said. "I don't figure what you're doing here, Jane. And I don't figure your boy-friend. But I will before very long. Come along, you two."

He got behind us and prodded us forward with the automatic. We were upon William Weldon's doorstep when the police car turned the corner and its headlights silhouetted us in neat tableau. Brakes screamed and an instant later there were three coppers in the street with drawn guns. Robert Hatry was relieved of his automatic.

A distinguished man in plain clothes said: "I'm Inspector Dane. What's going on here?"

"Let's go inside the house, Inspector," I said. "I think I can explain this for you."

He looked at me suspiciously. "That voice," he said. "Didn't I speak to you on the phone a little while ago?"

"You did," I said. "I—"

I broke off as a second car came down the street. A tall man got out and advanced to the Weldon house. He saw the two uniformed coppers and said relievedly: "Have you got him?"

"Who?" said Dane.

"Harry Hatry. I'm Doctor Willis."

"Gentlemen," I said, "let us go inside. Harry Hatry is there and so is the answer to your headless corpse, Inspector."

WE WERE gathered in Weldon's living room. Harry, who had been brought down from upstairs, sat cringing in a corner, staring at his brother and mortally afraid. Robert appeared bewildered and desperate. Weldon, since he had set eyes on me, looked like a man who wished he was somewhere else. Jane stood at my side and the inspector leaned against the mantel-piece facing us all. His register was one of dominance and interrogation.

Old Man Hatry's skull was on the table staring at us all with its hollow eyes.

"Well," said Dane, looking at me, "you seem to be the bright boy with all the answers. Who killed this man?"

"Robert Hatry," I said. "But it was a mistake. Wasn't it, Weldon?"

"A mistake?" said Dane.

"A mistake," I repeated. "He meant to kill me."

"Keep talking," said Dane.

"Weldon advertised for a bum. He got me. He wanted a guy whose height, weight and age corresponded with those of Robert Hatry. That was in order that the decapitated corpse be identified as Robert."

"Why?" said Dane.

"So," I said, "that Robert, supposedly dead, could, in partnership with Weldon, help himself to the proceeds of the Hatry gold mine. Had he done it simply, everyone would have wondered about his sudden affluence. If they thought him dead, he would collect the dough and disappear."

There was a long silence. Weldon was white-faced and Robert shifted uneasily in his chair. Jane Reeves spoke.

"You mean that Robert actually knew the mine's location? That he intended to swindle the rest of us out of our share?"

"I mean that and more. I also mean that he and Weldon contrived Harry's escape. Probably an investigation will reveal they bribed some guards."

Jane Reeves closed her eyes for a moment and shuddered. "They tried to make it look as if Harry had done it. That's why they actually decapitated Gerson. That's why they took the other skull away as well. It would look like the work of a maniac. A maniac who'd sworn to kill Robert in just that way."

I explained the Hatry mine set-up to the inspector. When I had finished, Robert Hatry stood up.

"Wait a minute," he said, "this is ridiculous. I never knew where that mine was. I don't now. Harry obviously entered my apartment. I don't know who this Gerson is, but Harry mistook him for me and killed him. It's as simple as that."

"It isn't," I said. I turned to the doctor. "Is Harry Hatry a homicidal maniac?"

The doctor shook his head. "No. Not in a general sense. He's paranoiac, possessing strong delusions of persecution. It's likely he'd try to kill his brother whom he believes persecutes him. But not a stranger."

"What's the difference?" asked Robert. "Harry thought that guy in my bed was me. That's all."

"That won't work," I said. "That decapitation was a neat job. Probably done with an axe. It certainly wasn't done in the dark. And with the lights on, Harry would have known Gerson was not his brother. But Robert wouldn't know that Gerson wasn't the bum which his confederate, Weldon, had hired."

Dane nodded gravely. "I think that's enough for an indictment."

"It's not," cried Robert Hatry. "There's no motive. Unless you can prove I really did know the location of the mine, the whole case falls down."

Dane glanced at me inquiringly.

"He knows it," I said. "He has a map."

"A map?" said Jane. "I thought Mr. Hatry never had a map. I thought he kept it in his head."

"He didn't," I said. "He had a map. He gave it to Robert before he died. No, in life Hatry did not keep the mine's location in his head. He only did that after he was dead."

Robert Hatry glared at me. Everyone else looked bewildered.

"What do you mean?" said Dane.

"When that skull was missing," I said, "Robert went wild. He simply had to recover it. I began wondering why. Harry threw it in the river in a fury. Robert couldn't get Harry to tell him what he had done with it. In desperation, tonight, Robert figured, since it wasn't in the house, perhaps it had been thrown into the river. He went out to look for it and found Miss Reeves and myself engaged in a salvage job."

"But the map?" asked Jane.

I crossed the room and picked up the skull. "It's in Old Man Hatry's head," I said, "as he always claimed it was."

I thrust my hand into the skull. Attached to its top was a tiny oilskin pouch. I withdrew it.

"That's where Robert, with a nice sense of irony and secrecy, hid it."

"That'll be plenty," said Dane. "Come on, Hatry. You, too, Weldon."

"No," shrieked Weldon, gray-faced. "I had nothing to do with it. I only hired this bum. I didn't know why. I—"

Dane smiled bleakly. "You'll be an easy man to break down, Weldon," he said. "Come on, both of you."

The coppers removed Weldon and Robert Hatry. The Doctor led Harry away. Jane Reeves looked up at me and smiled.

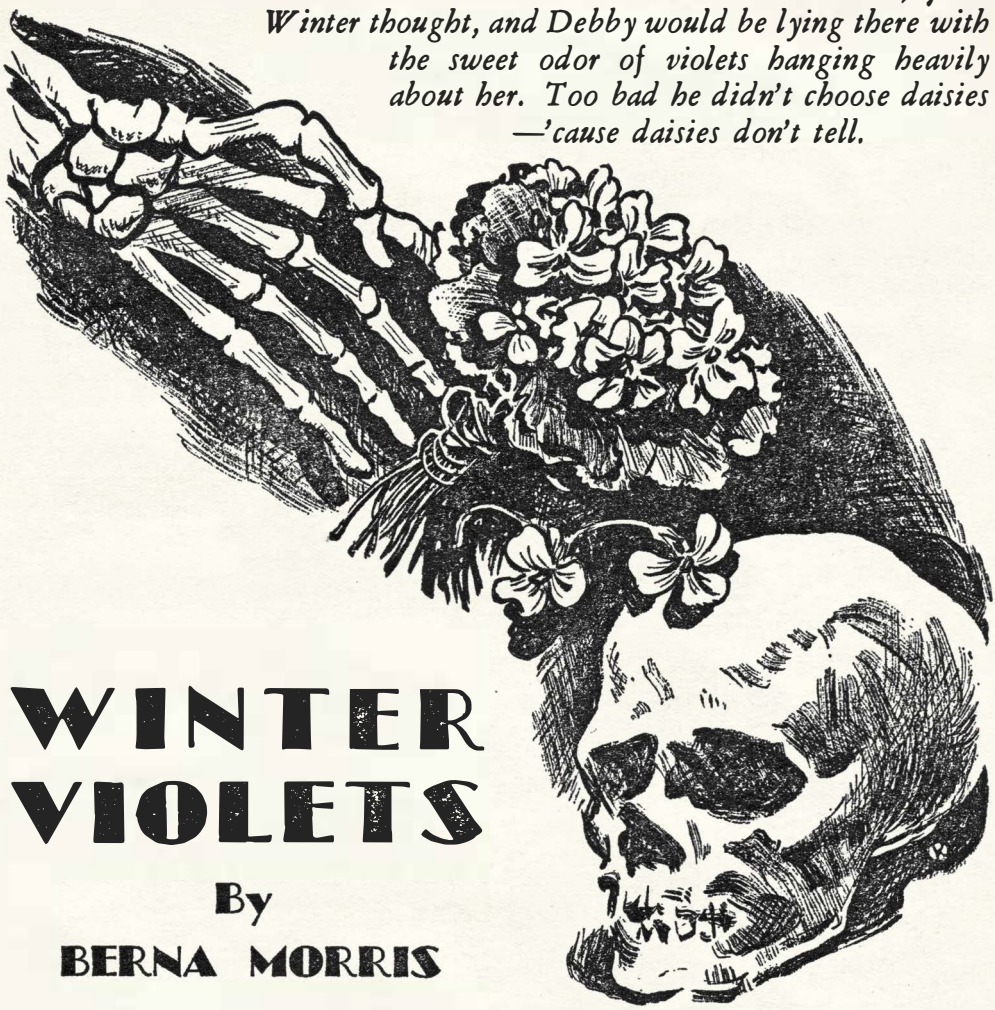
"You know," she said, "I don't believe you're a bum."

I smiled back at her, aware of an unreasonable happiness. "I'm not," I said. "From here on in. At last there's a little incentive in my life."

We went out to breakfast together and for the first time in four years I found myself thinking of a job.

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of Dime Detective Magazine, published monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1943. State of New York, county of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Harold S. Goldsmith, who having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of Dime Detective Magazine, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. Managing Editor, none. Business Manager, Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y., Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y., Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: none. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner, and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest, direct or indirect, in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. Harold S. Goldsmith, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 29th day of September 1943. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, New York County Clerk's No. 18, Register's No. 4W359. (My commission expires March 30, 1944.) [Seal]—Form 3526—Ed. 1933.

A little while now and it would be all over, John Winter thought, and Debby would be lying there with the sweet odor of violets hanging heavily about her. Too bad he didn't choose daisies —'cause daisies don't tell.



WINTER VIOLETS

By

BERNA MORRIS

JOHN WINTER looked down at the body of his wife and let the heavy poker fall from his gloved hand. He shook his head slightly.

Poor Debby. If she had just kept quiet about having that insurance. And when he needed it so desperately!

He looked about carefully. Must be sure he hadn't forgotten anything. The florist's box was on the floor. Debby always saved boxes. The violets that he had purchased at a small, out-of-the-way shop yesterday were crushed against the floor under her body. Their odor hung heavy in the air. Purse and contents scattered about. Fire escape window fixed with signs of forced entry.

The little man looked at the clock. Almost time now.

The doorbell squealed.

Mr. Winter peeled off his gloves, picked up his hat and stick and went into the hall to answer the door. He opened it.

A florist's boy was outside.

"Flowers for Mrs. Winter."

"Oh, yes," Mr. Winter smiled at the boy. "I'll sign." He placed the flowers on the hall table and signed the book. He put on his hat.

"Oh, Debby—package for you," he called over his shoulder as he slammed the door.

He and the little red-headed boy smiled at each other like fellow-conspirators. The

boy followed him down the stairs of the three-story walk-up.

"Looks like I'm all the time coming here, Mr. Winter. You give Mrs. Winter a lot of flowers."

John Winter stopped, then straightened his tie and continued on down the steps.

"Bet your wife thinks a lot of you," little gabble-mouth went on, trotting by his side. They were on the street now. "Oh, thank you, Mr. Winter." The boy pocketed the tip and touched his cap.

Mr. Winter ran across the street and barely made his bus. Must not be late at the office. Not today. Saturday. A half day. He would be back by one. And by tonight it would all be over. In a short time he would have the insurance money and then maybe he could shut Torrey's mouth. Maybe that would keep him quiet.

SHORTLY after one that afternoon, he was going up the apartment steps. Somehow the morning had passed. Somehow he had done his work. He must have appeared normal. No one had looked at him queerly, no one had asked him if he felt all right. A little while now and it would all be over. He was getting away with it. Five minutes in the apartment and he was safe.

He was just getting out his key, when a door on the opposite side of the hall flew open. He stiffened.

"Oh, Mr. Winter. I'm so glad to see you." Mrs. Nelson was solicitious. "You know, I've been worried. Mrs. Winter was supposed to go to the Red Cross with me this morning, but she didn't come over and when I rang no one came to the door. Is she sick?"

John Winter smiled mechanically. "I hope not, Mrs. Nelson." He edged away, unlocked the door. "I'll let you know." He slid inside.

He closed the door softly. Then stood for half a breath. The violet odor closed about him. He shook himself.

Damn the old windbag! Now he had no time at all. No time! But one thing he had to do.

He grabbed the florist box on the hall table, went swiftly to the kitchen and dropped it down the incinerator chute.

Then he went running back to the

front door, flung it open and shouted, "Mrs. Nelson! Mrs. Nelson!"

Mrs. Nelson popped out into the hall as though she had been waiting behind the door.

"Mrs. Nelson—" he gasped, and pointed. "My wife—" He leaned against the wall and Mrs. Nelson's scream seemed to come from a distance. Those violets, the smell almost choked him. "Call the police!" he managed. "Call the police. We must not touch anything. That's what they always say—don't touch anything."

JOHN WINTER sat in a chair with his head in his hands. Every now and then he ran one hand through his hair. Why didn't they say something? The routine questions were over. Now everything was quiet. What was the matter? Swift fear closed his throat.

The body had been removed and the inspector—Mr. Winter wondered why all police officers were inspectors—the inspector was standing in the middle of the small living room, looking at a bunch of faded, crushed violets that he was turning slowly in his big hands.

Inspector Hanchett coughed.

"I know that this is very painful for you, Mr. Winter, but there are a few points that must be cleared up. For instance, when you ordered these—" he waggled the faded flowers—"why did you want them delivered so early in the morning?"

John Winter had worried over that little item, but he was ready.

"Today is our wedding anniversary. I —well, I wanted to see her when she got the flowers. And then I didn't, they—they were late and I almost missed my bus." He settled back in the chair with an air of exhaustion.

"Yes, yes, we know all that." The inspector nodded, then turned to one of his assistants. "We're trying to get the delivery boy now. You say that you left as the boy was bringing the flowers. Did he see Mrs. Winter, do you think?"

"I don't know." John Winter put his hand to his head again. "She was in the dining alcove. I don't know whether she came into the hall when I called to her or not. I was hurrying. I was afraid I was going to miss my bus."

There was a disturbance out in the hall and a tall sergeant came in bringing the red-headed gabble-mouth. The boy's freckles stood out on his white face.

Inspector Hanchett coughed again.

"You're Tim McLemore?"

"Yessir."

"You work for Sprice, the florist?"

"Yessir." The boy was turning his cap in his hands. "On afternoons and Saturdays, that is."

"When you delivered these flowers this morning, did you see Mrs. Winter?"

The boy thought for a moment, then shook his head. "No, sir. Mr. Winter signed and put the box on the table. I guess she come and got them, 'cause he hollered to her."

The inspector seemed to be thinking. "O.K., sonny. That's all."

"YESSIR." The red-head turned to go, hesitated, then twisting his cap, went over to John Winter's chair.

"Mr. Winter," he gulped. "Mr. Winter, I don't guess it makes no difference now, but Mr. Sprice specially told me to tell you. And I—I guess I sorta forgot."

John Winter's heart stopped. The violet smell clutched at his throat.

The inspector's head jerked up. He came over to them, put a hand on the boy's shoulder.

"What did Mr. Sprice tell you?"

The boy raised worried eyes.

"He just told me to be sure and tell Mr. Winter that he hoped the white ones would be all right. He said to tell him that we sold out all of the purple ones and only had white ones left this morning. He hoped they would be O.K."

"Wait a minute." The inspector was harsh. "You mean, you delivered white violets this morning?"

The boy nodded. "Yessir. Mr. Sprice said they were supposed to cost more, but like it was, he would make them for the same price."

The inspector looked over the boy's head at Mr. Winter.

John Winter half rose from the chair, then sank back, his eyes glued with stark fascination on the bunch of crushed purple violets in the inspector's hands.

THE END

Ready for the Rackets

(Continued from page 6)

HERE'S one that's particularly vicious, playing as it does on the sympathies of honest, hard-working people.

The Racket Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

Dear Sir:

This is a racket which has been used times in the past and will probably be used again in the future. It is a nice way for the swindler to net forty to fifty dollars, and may be worked on many service stations in quick succession.

A well dressed man pulls up to the service station in an expensive automobile and purchases several gallons of gasoline. While paying for the gasoline with a large bill he discovers that he has lost his ring. After searching several minutes he says that he will leave his address with the station and they can mail him the ring when they find it. He explains that though the ring is worth little it has great sentimental value and that he is willing to pay several hundred dollars for its return. Speaking of his hurry and leaving his address, he drives away.

A short while later another person drives up for gas and discovers the ring. The station owner, thinking of the several hundred dollars reward, readily pays the finder fifty for it. The address, of course, proves false and the station manager is out his fifty dollars. Two men working together can easily clear five hundred dollars a day on the deal.

Norris A. Wimberley, Jr.
Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

A NEW wrinkle has just been uncovered in the short-change racket—the grifters' sole investment being a pair of scissors and a roll of scotch tape.

The Racket Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

Dear Sir:

This scheme is worked in or near shipyards or ports of embarkation. It consists of tearing ten- and one-dollar bills in half and then using scotch tape to paste the halves together—thereby getting phony ten-spots. The bills are passed in this manner:

During the early morning or late evening when it is somewhat dark and business is at its peak, the operator hails a cab and asks to be taken to a depot, where he knows the driver will pick up another fare immediately. He pays the cabbie with the phony bill—the $10 half showing. The driver who is usually in a hurry to pick up a waiting fare (who may or may not be an accom-

plice), shoves the bill into his pocket and gives change for $10. He's in for a rude awakening when he counts his cash at the end of his shift.

Stan Lee Loftus
San Francisco, Calif.

WITH the housing shortage becoming more acute in war production centers, a new swindle has made its appearance on the West Coast—fleecing war workers and servicemen for a well-earned night's sleep.

The Racket Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

Dear Sir:

A particularly vicious racket has sprung up recently. Workers from all over the country are crowding into the already congested San Diego and Los Angeles areas, where shipyards and aircraft factories are using a tremendous number of men and women. The situation is becoming so bad that advertisements appear in the daily papers, offering rewards for houses and apartments *to* rent.

Speculators and racketeers are taking advantage of the shortage of living accommodations by tying up all available houses. Their scouts, unlike the workers who are in a factory all day, have an opportunity to seize upon any vacancies. They immediately rent or lease the place, using various names, and make a down payment. Then these living quarters are peddled again, at a much higher price, to desperate families. Thus, the speculators, having the advantage of inside tips and plenty of time, are able to sublet for fantastic prices.

A similar practice is worked on hotel rooms. Since any type of hotel accommodation is at a premium, the racketeers make reservations for a great number of rooms, in many different hotels over the city, using of course, fake names. The reservations are made for weeks, or even months, in advance.

Then, on week-ends when both San Diego and Los Angeles are congested, it is an easy matter to inform a sleepy service man or civilian that since he (the speculator) is a close friend of the manager, he can secure rooms for the night. Of course, there will be "a slight additional charge."

It is crooks like these who, by taking unfair advantage of a situation that cannot be helped, are cheating honest workers who are giving their whole-hearted energy to building ships and planes. These racketeers are, in my mind, as guilty of treason and sabotage as any Axis agent.

Corporal D. R.
Camp Santa Anita
Arcadia, California

Death's Old Sweet Song

(Continued from page 81)

of my worries. Somehow, I felt I could trust him."

Donnigan returned to the table. "That was the Army Air Force, Interceptor Command," he said. "A strange plane took off this afternoon and headed out to sea. A patrol plane intercepted and had to shoot it down. They've just fished up the wreckage and it contained the bodies of two men and a woman. Probably Sebastian and the pilot and the dame who impersonated Mira. There was a music box strapped around her waist, but the mechanism didn't work. Salt water must have ruined it."

Chandler muttered, "There goes Brahms," and hummed a tune under his breath. Then he looked up. "The only thing you haven't explained, Ned, is how Becky knew there was something fishy about your note. The part about not being able to meet Bill for lunch—that was a warning. But how did the simple request to send your sketch pad induce Becky to follow the messenger and then call the police?"

"His name," said Scott, "was Morton Haskins."

"What of it?"

Becky roared with laughter. "The note told me that the bearer had committed murder. Ned worked on two murder cases, and the names of the guilty ones were Morton and Haskins. So I knew."

"Clever," murmured Chandler.

But Bill Donnigan snapped: "Ned, of all the boners you ever pulled, this was the worst. You claim you knew ahead of time, and yet you walked into the trap. Why the hell didn't you call me as soon as Russ Chandler got here?"

"That," said Scott, "is something I'd like to know myself."

THE END

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(Continued from page 61)

Burchard reached him quickly, slowly shook his head.

"And he came out here to escape excitement!" he mused aloud.

Jerry Geboe and Felix Rensart sat at a corner table in Hornberger's saloon. Jerry was staring at his sixth drink, but the lawyer was still contemplating his first.

"I don't get it!" Geboe said. "I don't get it! Why did Jack go to all that trouble to set the stage for his own conviction? He could have kept his mouth shut and lived maybe another year in comparative safety."

"The cost would have been too great," Felix Rensart told him. He seemed quite sober. "He knew he couldn't let Louise stand trial for the murder of the man he killed. And he decided that while he was cleaning the slate, he'd do a favor for me. He wanted me to have my day, to come back into my own if only for a brief moment."

Jerry shook his head.

"But, I still don't get it. He told us both that Norma Paxton had killed her father and that the mark on her hand would prove it! Why did he put you out on a limb like that? You must have felt as if the courtroom floor were giving away beneath you when she held up her hands!"

Felix Rensart nodded.

"I did. That was exactly the way Brennan planned it. He knew I would turn in bewilderment to him, that then he could pretend that my stare was one of accusation. It was magnificent—he gave me my day at the cost of his life!"

Jerry Geboe regarded the lawyer across the table.

"A day? You can make a career out of it if you like. From now on, the people around here will think you're some kind of a wizard!"

Geboe lifted his glass and swallowed his drink. He started to signal for another. Felix Rensart slid his own glass across the table. He returned Geboe's startled look in silence. Geboe lifted the glass, made a little gesture toward a third chair which was unoccupied. He downed the drink with a gulp.

THE END

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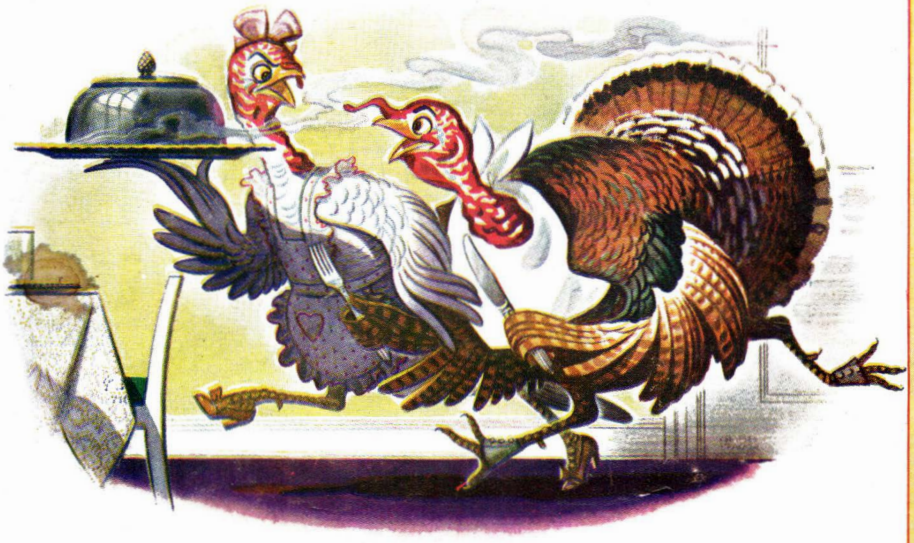

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