

ALL STORIES
COMPLETE



JAN.

15¢ DIME
DETECTIVE
MAGAZINE
COMBINED WITH FLYNN'S DETECTIVE FICTION



**TWELVE
DEAD MICE**
A CASH WALE STORY
by **PETER PAIGE**
STINSON • COX • *AND OTHERS*



"That makes two of us who got what we wanted"

A MAN'S best friend this Christmas, we say, is likely to be the one who gives him a bottle of Calvert.

For this superb whiskey is *the real thing* ... so smooth and flavorful it simply can't be imitated! That probably explains why, year in and year out, Calvert is reported

"the whiskey most often asked for by name".

(P. S. While you're rounding up Calvert for your Christmas list, pick up some for your *own* holiday hospitality. But be sure you get Calvert ... if you want *the real thing*.)

CLEAR HEADS CHOOSE Calvert



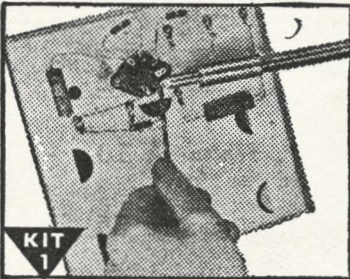
It's the Real Thing

Calvert Distillers Corp., N. Y. C. BLENDED WHISKEY 86.8 Proof.
 Calvert "Reserve"—65% Grain Neutral Spirits... Calvert "Special"—72½% Grain Neutral Spirits

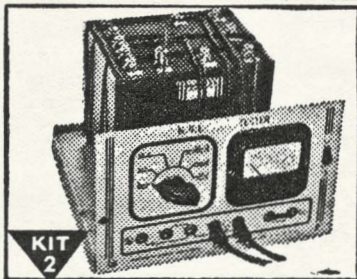


I Will Show You How to Learn RADIO by Practicing in Spare Time

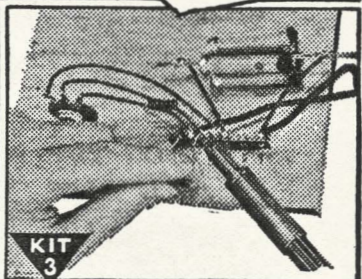
**I Send You
6 Big Kits
of Radio Parts**



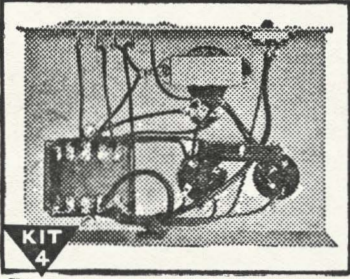
KIT 1
I send you Soldering Equipment and Radio Parts; show you how to do Radio soldering; how to mount and connect Radio parts; give you practical experience.



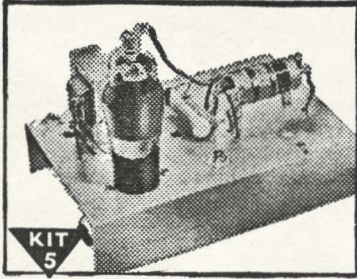
KIT 2
Early in my course I show you how to build this N.R.I. Tester with parts I send. It soon helps you fix neighborhood Radios and earn EXTRA money in spare time.



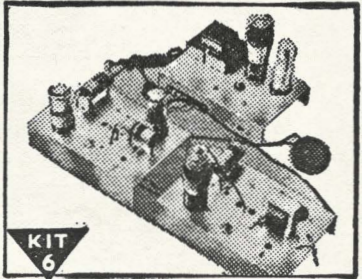
KIT 3
You get parts to build Radio Circuits; then test them; see how they work; learn how to design special circuits; how to locate and repair circuit defects.



KIT 4
You get parts to build this Vacuum Tube Power Pack; make changes which give you experience with packs of many kinds; learn to correct power pack troubles.



KIT 5
Building this A. M. Signal Generator gives you more valuable experience. It provides amplitude-modulated signals for many tests and experiments.



KIT 6
You build this Superheterodyne Receiver which brings in local and distant stations—and gives you more experience to help you win success in Radio.

KNOW RADIO - Win Success I Will Train You at Home - SAMPLE LESSON FREE

Send coupon for FREE Sample Lesson, "Getting Acquainted with Receiver Servicing," and FREE 64-page book, "Win Rich Rewards in Radio." See how N.R.I. trains you at home. Read how you practice building, testing, repairing Radios with SIX BIG KITS of Radio parts I send you.

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The day you enroll I start sending EXTRA MONEY JOB SHEETS to help you make EXTRA money fixing Radios in spare time while learning. MAIL COUPON for sample lesson and 64-page book FREE. It's packed

with facts about opportunities for you. Read about my Course. Read letters from men I trained, telling what they are doing, earning. MAIL COUPON in envelope or paste on penny postal. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 6AS9, National Radio Institute, Pioneer Home Study Radio School, Washington 9, D. C.

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MR. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 6AS9 National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C.

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(Please include Post Office Zone Number)



ALL STORIES
COMPLETE 

15¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

COMBINED WITH FLYNN'S DETECTIVE FICTION
EVERY STORY NEW—NO REPRINTS

Vol. 50 CONTENTS FOR JANUARY, 1946 No. 2

A THRILLING COMPLETE SERIES-CHARACTER NOVELETTE
Help Cash Wale uncover the riddle of the

Twelve Dead Mice.....Peter Paige 64
Which Joe Vaccari killed before he got out of prison—one for each member of the jury that had sent him up. Not a very pretty omen for the surviving jurors—but then twenty-seven years in stir can do things to a man, can turn a harmless eccentric into a mad killer with a revenge fixation.

AN EXCITING FULL-LENGTH MIDNIGHT MURDER MYSTERY
If you're at a loss what to do some winter evening, why not

Start With Murder.....H. H. Stinson 10
Except that in the case of Professor Franz Dichter, mürder was too good for the Nazis' most treasured physicist, inventor of a fiendish weapon of war which would make the atomic bomb look ineffectual by comparison.

2—ACTION PACKED SERIES-CHARACTER SHORT STORIES—2
Hop a train for Mildew and join in the search for

The Doctor's Trove.....Richard Dermody 46
A substantial little matter involving ten grand—and the Vanderbib diamonds.

Talk the boss into giving you a two weeks

Vacation—With Slay.....William R. Cox 53
And meet Malachi and his ex-college chums at Crab Cay, a snooty little colony off the Florida coast. A tight, clannish set this, and to be ostracized you had to do something really bad—like committing a murder, for instance.

A SMASHING SHORT DETECTIVE STORY

Grab a gun and start praying, for

They're Coming Through the Door!.....Robert C. Dennis 34
No mere steel and bolts could stop this baby. A smart operator, who pulled guns out of thin air and knifed women in the middle of a lagoon. I didn't want any of it. A fellow could get killed that way—and did!

AND—

We want to know if you're

Ready for the Rackets.....A Department 8
In this revealing series giving the lowdown on currently popular swindle schemes. Here's a chance to test your ability as a reporter and win \$5.00 at the same time.

The February Thrill Docket.....6
A preview of some of the sure-fire hits scheduled for production in next month's DIME DETECTIVE.

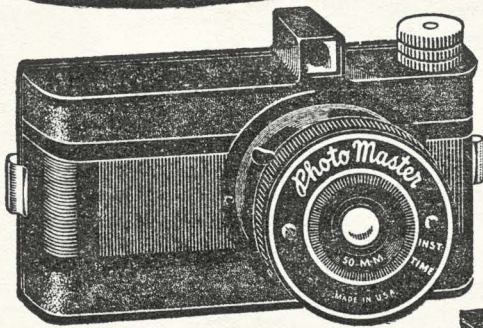
Cover: "It was Charlene, the strip dancer. She would never dance again!"
From: *They're Coming Through the Door!*

The February issue will be out January 2nd

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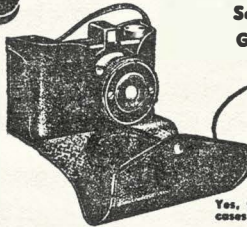
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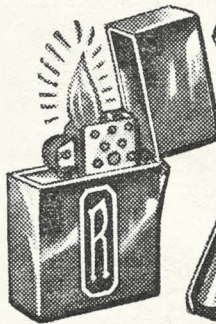
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... A TRIUMPH TOGETHER

Take the lighter, for instance! It's a genuine "Feather Lite," cased in gleaming heat resistant black plastic. Famed for the instant, positive action it's the favorite "dame" of smokers the nation over. Just a twirl of your thumb lights it—and its wind guard *keeps it lit*. And if you want the joy of a firm packed cigarette *all* the time, your answer is the matching featherweight cigarette case with its patented grooves that protect each and every cigarette until you're ready to smoke it. They're a peach of a pair, both yours to own for only \$2.98—a price you'd gladly pay for either one. Seeing is believing! and if you don't think you've bought a double value after seeing your thrilling roomie—we'll refund your money cheerfully! And that's a promise!



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CHECK ONE

- I am enclosing \$2.98. Send My Personalized Smoker Set Postpaid.
- Send my Personalized Smoker Set C.O.D. I will pay postman \$2.98 plus postage.

Name _____
Please Print Clearly.
Address _____
City _____ Zone _____ State _____

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Rush PhotoMaster at \$3.98 with Carrying Case for only 2c extra. Satisfaction guaranteed or money back if returned within 10 days.

CHECK ONE

- I am enclosing \$4 for payment in full. Send Camera and Case Postpaid.
- Send Camera and Case C.O.D. I will pay postman \$4 plus postage costs. If you want 3 rolls of No. 127 Film (enough for 48 pictures) for only \$16 plus 15c postage and handling costs CHECK BELOW.
- I am enclosing \$4.96 for payment in full. Include 3 rolls of Film postpaid.
- Include 3 rolls of Film C.O.D. I will pay postman \$4.96 plus postage.

Name _____
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Address _____
City _____ Zone _____ State _____

THE FEBRUARY THRILL DOCKET



FOUR of your favorite series characters clawing their way through the mazes of four assortments of homicide clues in as exciting a quartet of midnight murder mysteries as you're apt to encounter in a year's reading. And all in one short month!

It's quite a slay-party we're throwing in the FEBRUARY issue and all you have to do is *Bring Your Own Coffin*—we furnish the cadavers—in C. WILLIAM HARRISON'S new Hannibal Smith novelette. All that triple-chinned, triple-threat, ex-pug-cum-loan-shark had to do to earn his thousand-buck fee was to take his camera and snap a pic of Mrs. Jenner's prize Aberdeen-Angus cow and deliver the film to the invalid-owner. Seems simple, doesn't it? That's what Hannibal thought, too. Almost too simple! And the first kill that turned his Leica into a blood-clouded *camera-obscura* confirmed the impression. From then on it was a rat race through the dark-room with a death scream echoing every click of the shutter—and nothing positive to pin on the murderer till Smith thought of accentuating the negative.

D. L. CHAMPION takes a killer's *Imperfect Alibi* and turns it into a perfect out for a cop who'd put himself on a slay-spot in a brand-new Inspector Allhoff novelette that'll keep you guessing from the first paragraph to the final period. The legless scourge of Centre Street knew that plenty of people would have welcomed his quick demise but it rankled him, to say the least, to have his clay-pigeons-in-uniform, Battersly and Simmonds, interrupt his sleep to inquire, prematurely, about burial arrangements. They might at least have had the consideration to wait till he died!

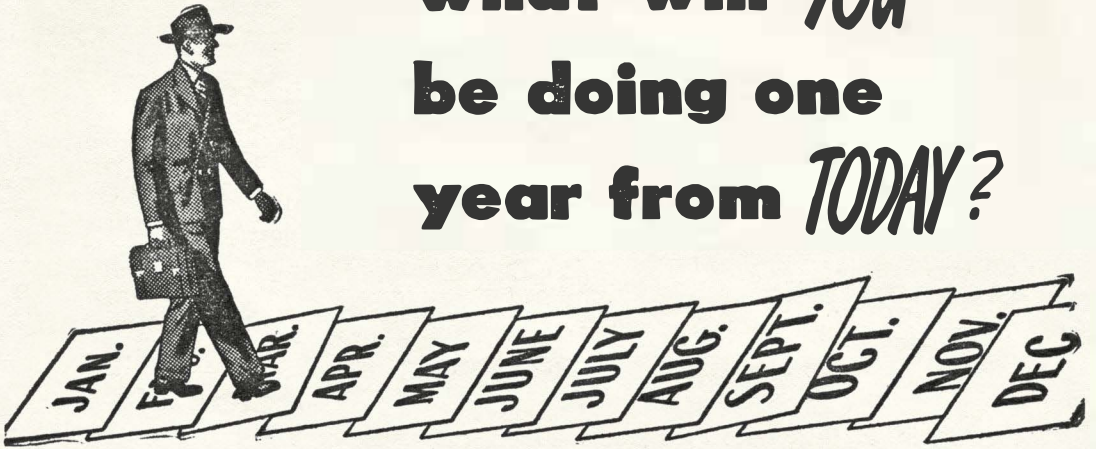
And H. H. STINSON, tossing a red-hot coin, watches it come up *Heads for Homicide* in another smashing Pete Rousseau story that has as eerie and fantastic a payoff as we've met in many a gibbous moon.

JULIUS LONG brings back Clarence Darrow Mort and Blackstone Jones to trample *Murder Under Foot* in another mystery with a legal twist.

Plus shorts by WILLIAM ROUGH and others.

This great FEBRUARY issue will be out on JANUARY 2nd.

what will YOU be doing one year from TODAY?



YOU'RE too smart to stay in the same old job rut! You know that you have one life — that's all. So you've thought about *doing* something that would advance you in your work, increase your income.

The time to get started is *now*. And you can take the first step toward **Personal Success** this very minute! Just look over the coupon below and mark the I. C. S. Course in your field of interest. Then mail it — *today!*

We'll send you complete information on the International Correspondence Schools, and how they can give you the training you need to get ahead faster. Cost is low, texts are easy to understand, and every student gets *personal* service. The time to "take steps" is **RIGHT NOW!**

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A Department

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SWINDLING people out of money by falsely promising them a cure for an embarrassing physical handicap is a favorite caper of some of the more unscrupulous mail order houses.

The Rackets Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Gentlemen:

When I was a young teacher in a rural community many years ago, I heard of a swindle which played on the fact that people are not apt to read carefully ads in papers and often see in them things which are not there or do not see the things which are there, a situation brought about by the clever arrangement or wording of the ads by shrewd advertisers. They are just within the law.

I never dreamed at that time that I, too, would someday read more into an advertisement than was really there, but I did many years later. I had gradually become deaf, and it worried me greatly lest I should be compelled to quit teaching. Like many deaf people, I had become open to the lure of fakirs who offered me help. One day, while reading the daily newspaper, I saw an ad with the headline: DO YOU WANT TO HEAR AGAIN?

That in itself was a sort of promise, to my way of thinking. To hear again! I read the whole advertisement, but my mind was still on the initial words: "Do you want to hear again?"

I had thought of buying one of the electric hearing aids with cords, but they seemed so complicated, quite visible to the naked eyes of scoffing pupils, and very expensive. This advertised one, with its luring caption, was said to be invisible to the eye and very simple. It cost but five dollars.

I did not even wait to consult a school physician. I sent for it. When the very small package came, somehow my confidence was lessened upon seeing the contents, but I carefully followed the directions nevertheless, thinking that I would try to get my five dollars' worth out of the package.

Two months passed by and the rubbing liquid was gone, while the other little adjuncts to the treatment were discarded by me as absolutely worthless. I took the outfit to a doctor finally, and he said I had been gypped, even as far as the value of the outfit was

concerned, which he said could have been bought for fifty cents retail. I might also add that the papers which came by mail with the actual treatment for deafness (price five dollars) did not contain such words of promise as: DO YOU WANT TO HEAR AGAIN?

In a few months, I saw the same ad in the ad columns of a city newspaper of high repute. I wrote to the publisher and told him of my experience. Whether my letter did the trick or not, I don't know, but the paper never carried the ad again, nor have I seen their ads in any other publications of late.

B. B.
Hamilton, Mo.

ALWAYS investigate your purchases from a door-to-door solicitor or you may wind up holding the bag—empty, of course.

The Rackets Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Gentlemen:

I am a member of a number of clubs. Quite often we work on what we call earning funds for some special purpose—sell homemade cookies, act as sitters, or sell chances on a piece of needlework, in order to donate a certain amount.

When I was asked if I would take in a package for my next-door neighbor, with whom I was quite friendly, I thought nothing about it. It was partly paid for but there was still an amount of 50c due, which I paid, my neighbor often having done this for me.

The elderly woman who delivered it started chatting about the present situation and other matters, and I asked her in. She told me she was working on an earning fund for her club, selling some articles she had secured wholesale, with which to provide comforts and gifts for some of the boys returning from overseas, who were related to the members of her group.

She unwrapped my friend's package and I saw it was a bottle of good toilet water. I intended to give a going-away present to a friend of mine who was leaving the city and when this person produced another package, nicely wrapped, from her large knitting bag, I took it, glad to be spared the trouble of shopping. When I presented this gift at a luncheon several days later and the guest of honor

(Continued on page 95)

ELECTRON WILL POINT
WAY TO OUR FUTURE

HUGE POST-WAR MARKET
FOR FM-SETS ENVISIONED

FAMILIES PLAN LARGE
POST-WAR OUTLAYS ON
RADIOS, APPLIANCES
ARE ACCUMULATING FUNDS

Let TODAY'S
HEADLINES
Guide You to
TOMORROW'S
OPPORTUNITIES

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RADIO, ELECTRONICS

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DeForest's Employment Service offers you the advantage of long and favorable contacts with some of America's foremost Radio-Electronics concerns. "VICTORY FOR YOU" tells you how this Service has helped many to their start in Radio-Electronics. You'll see how DeForest students and graduates are prepared to win and to hold good paying jobs—how DeForest students start businesses of their own with little, if any, capital.

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Tommy Dixon rarely drank but, as he put it: "Tonight, even my ulcers need Scotch." For Tommy had found a dead man sitting in his living room—a man who looked astonishingly like Professor Franz Dichter, the Nazis' most treasured physicist. If it were Dichter, the world was well rid of him—if not, it might yet see his brainchild, a weapon which would make the atomic bomb look ineffectual by comparison.

Fisk shoved Margie into the doorway. The sap smacked against his shoulder with an agonizing force.





START WITH MURDER

By **H. H. STINSON**

Author of "Crime on my Hands," etc,

CHAPTER ONE

Murder Date

IT WAS at a party that someone was giving for someone else at some grill or other just off Broadway that Sam Fisk met Margie. Fisk never did find out the name of the host, nor did he meet the guest of honor. As a matter of fact, he was not particularly interested in such extraneous details after being introduced to Margie.

She had brown hair with reddish lights in it, and brown eyes. She was tall enough and

nobody could complain about her figure. On top of everything else she had a nice smile and she looked as though she had never been bored.

Peter Vincent, who was the languid but golden-tongued announcer on the radio show that kept Fisk busy, did the introducing. He said: "Margie Shannon—Sam Fisk. She's a nice gal, Sam, even if she is nuts about murders. Have fun, kids, while I circulate and lap up some drinks before I gallop back to the midnight show."

Peter went away and Fisk smiled down at Margie. He said politely: "Is it just a hobby with you or a profession? Murder, I mean."

Margie smiled back. "My profession. Repulsive, isn't it?"

"No, I wouldn't say that. Maybe a trifle quaint. What's your favorite method?"

"I haven't any favorite—Hey, you don't think I commit murders, do you? I just cover them for the *Express*."

"Oh," said Fisk. "A journalist."

"My pay check says I'm a reporter."

"Anyway, we're kindred spirits," Fisk said. "You write about murders and I read about 'em. I never miss a good one. And we have some dillies out where I come from."

"Where's that?"

"The one and only Los Angeles."

Margie sniffed. "We have better ones in New York."

"The hell you do!" said Fisk. "How about our Jack the Stripper murders? Three blondes found dead in the nude in one week!"

"Our Park Avenue millionaire slaying had more class—it had better angles. Café society, opera singers, blackmail, bushels of money."

For ten minutes they went on arguing happily the merits of Los Angeles and New York murders. Finally Fisk said: "All right, you have good murders here but I think you ought to treat yourself to a change of pace. You ought to come to the Coast for a while. And that's not the only reason you ought to come out there."

"What's the other reason?"

"Because I have to go back there. And if you don't come out, how can I take you around to see Southern California's sights, things like orange groves and drive-in stands and a nice little church where we could get hitched up."

Margie gasped. "You don't work slowly."

Fisk looked surprised himself. He was a tall man, somewhat dish-faced, which made him look like a slightly dissipated and amiable horse. He said: "Margie, I never worked that fast before. I don't know what's come over me except I got to thinking that I have to go back to the Coast and you'd be here and never the twain would meet any more. But it still stands."

"I don't want to be nose-y, Sam, but just what do you do that brings you here and takes you there?"

Fisk grinned. "Some people call what I do a crime worse than murder. Since the army redeployed me back to civilian life three months ago, I've been writing corny gags for Duke Bisbee's radio show. Bisbee's moving the show to the Coast after the next broadcast and that takes me back to the place I called home before all the shootin' started. Why don't we have a date tonight so I can go into detail about how you'd love California?"

Margie considered it. "All right, why not? And now will you excuse me while I go powder my nose and catch my breath? I'll be right back."

She went toward the powder room and Fisk went downstairs to the bar, thinking about Margie. At the bar he picked a stool beside Tommy Dixon, engineer on the Bisbee show. Tommy was a small, pale man and he looked worried but Fisk thought nothing of that because Tommy always looked worried. It was stomach ulcers. Tommy discussed them on the slightest excuse. He had a double Scotch in front of him in place of the milk he usually drank.

Fisk lifted an eyebrow. "Tommy, what about your ulcers?"

"Tonight," said Tommy, "even my ulcers need Scotch. I went to my apartment a little while ago and found a dead man there."

"WELL," said Fisk, "I suppose that's as good an excuse for a drink as any—Hey, what did you say you found?"

"A dead man sitting in my favorite chair in the living room and looking at me. He'd been murdered, shot through the head. Or maybe it was suicide—but anyway he was all bloody. It upset me awfully, Sam."

"Holy Mike," Fisk gasped. "What did you do about it?"

"What could I do? The guy was already dead. So I came over here for a drink."

"You mean you didn't call the cops?"

"Gee, I never thought of the cops."

Fisk held his forehead in one hand. "You ought to think of the cops. They're interested in things like that."

Tommy said obediently: "All right, I'll call them." He started to get up.

Out of the corner of his eye, Fisk got a glimpse of Margie Shannon going up the stairs toward the room where the party was in progress. He suddenly had a better idea. He said: "Come on, Tommy."

Tommy followed him unquestionably up the stairs. Fisk led the way to the corner where Margie was sitting.

He said: "Margie, do you know Tommy Dixon?"

"Of course," said Margie. "Hello, Tommy. Why?"

"Well," said Fisk, "some guys bring their girls candy. Other guys say it with flowers and still others do it with mink coats. But to you I bring murder."

"Huh?" said Margie.

"Tell her, Tommy."

"Well," Tommy said, "I went home this evening and there was a guy in my favorite armchair, shot through the head."

Peter Vincent, tossing off another fast drink, whistled just behind Tommy. He said: "Good Lord, Tommy, what have you done about it? Didn't you call a doctor?"

"Oh, no. He was dead. Nobody could be alive with a hole like that in his head."

Margie had pencil and paper out. "Did you call the police?"

"I didn't think of that."

A heavy voice said: "Tommy wouldn't think of that. It was fat, bald and black-browed Willie Fischer, sound man on the Bisbee show. He was considerably amused above his rum-coke. He said: 'Tommy is a wizard with a watt and a demon with a dial but practical things like murder stymie him.'"

"Well, gee," Tommy said, "I never ran into murder before."

"Don't you worry," said Margie soothingly. "I'll take care of everything, Tommy. Because this is something a newspaper gal dreams about—getting to a murder before the cops." She glanced around at the dozen or more people of the party, who were knotting tighter and tighter about herself and Tommy. "Don't any of you breathe a word to anyone about this until I have this sewed up for the *Express*—or I'll haunt you."

Helen Fischer, Willie's wife, a stringy and vivacious blonde, gasped: "Breathe a word! I won't be able to breathe even a breath for a week. Imagine, murder!"

Margie poised her pencil. "Tommy, don't you know any more about it than that he was in your favorite easy chair? How did he get into your place? Who is he?"

Tommy reached for a Scotch that someone had forgotten and sipped it slowly. He wrinkled his forehead, puzzled. "I don't know how he got in the apartment. I thought I recognized him, but how could he be the fellow I thought he was?"

"Why couldn't he be?"

"Because the fellow I thought he was—but he couldn't be—was a Professor Franz Dichter, a German, who taught me physics at Tech. He was a whiz on electronics. But he went back to Germany just before the war started. So how could he be back here and dead in my apartment?"

Peter Vincent said: "Oh-oh, a Nazi! That sounds like hot stuff, kids. I'd say somebody

better get the cops or the FBI on it, but quick."

"Don't worry," said Margie. "I'll have all the cops in New York—and one reporter—on it, if you'll just give me five minutes." She was searching frantically in her purse. "And a nickel."

Fisk dug up the nickel and Margie went scurrying down toward the phone booths near the bar. When she emerged a few minutes later, Fisk was waiting. He beamed at her.

"O.K., baby," he said, "now that that's all set, let's go out and have our date."

Margie was astounded. "Our date? I can't keep it now."

"Why not?"

"I'm on a murder investigation."

Fisk scowled. He said: "A fine thing! I present you with an exclusive murder story and then you break our date. That's gratitude!"

"All right, all right," Margie said soothingly. "We'll have our date, but it's going to seem an awful lot like a murder investigation. Come on!"

AN *Express* news photog named Rafferty sat in the foyer of Tommy Dixon's East River apartment and looked at Margie Shannon and Fisk philosophically. He said: "It ain't any use having ants, Margie. You know the FBI always clams up on a case. So what the hell?"

Margie was mad. "We've been waiting out here forty-five minutes and you know what the city desk will say if they don't hear from me again soon. This *would* happen right after the night city editor told me I was the best damn woman reporter on the night staff."

Rafferty yawned. "You're the *only* gal on the night staff."

"I know, but coming from the night city editor it was still a compliment. And I'm getting pretty unhappy about this."

"You're unhappy?" said Fisk gloomily. "How about me? This is a swell date I'm having—chasing around after you, practically from corpse to corpse. I might as well have gone by myself to see Boris Karloff in something, except that you're prettier than Boris."

Margie patted his hand. "Poor fellow, but I warned you."

They sat in silence for a little, eyeing the door of Tommy Dixon's living room. The door had been open when they arrived and it had remained open just long enough to afford them a glimpse of the dead man in Tommy's favorite easy chair. He was a large man, bald save for thin gray hair above his ears. Quite a chunk of the top of his skull was gone and blood had congealed on his right cheek below a wound in the temple. There had been half a dozen men standing around the living room,

while another one daubed a coating of something on the dead man's right hand.

That was all they had seen when they entered with Tommy Dixon. A suave young man, who turned out to be a Mr. Shurtleff of the FBI, had hastened out to the foyer and intercepted them, closing the door with care. Mr. Shurtleff had explained that he was practically broken-hearted to bar them out but the boys couldn't work with an audience. There would, unfortunately, be no pictures allowed and, as for information, there wouldn't be any forthcoming for quite a while. Mr. Shurtleff made one concession—the *Express* was perfectly free to say that an unidentified dead man had been found in an East Side apartment and that the authorities were investigating. Then Mr. Shurtleff had retired, taking Tommy Dixon with him for questioning.

Presently Rafferty got up from the Renaissance bench on which he had been lounging. He yawned. "They'll be all night and they ain't gonna let me flash a bulb anyway. I'm going down for some Java."

He turned toward the hall door and Margie pointed at a battered gray Homburg and gray suede gloves on the bench. "Better take your hat and gloves, Raff. It's chilly outside."

"I lost my hat at that hotel fire last week," said Rafferty. "And I ain't owned gloves since my last pair of little red mittens."

He went out and Margie fidgeted, glaring at the closed living room door. Finally she shrugged and picked up the gray suede gloves from the bench. Fisk took them away from her and engulfed her small hand in his large one.

He said: "This hand-holding is nothing personal, you understand. It's just to calm you while we talk about serious things, such as you and me and California."

Margie rescued her hand. "I've already got serious things to talk to people about—or maybe you don't consider murder serious."

"Sure, it's serious. But a murder doesn't last. It's here today, gone tomorrow. Whereas you and I could go on forever."

Margie smiled at him. "Do you think we could, Sam?"

"Absolutely." Fisk got ready to go into the matter at length, but he was stopped by the opening of the living room door and the appearance of Mr. Shurtleff. Fisk muttered: "Is somebody or something always going to interrupt me?"

Mr. Shurtleff gave Fisk a nasty look and then shook his head at Margie.

"I'm sorry, Miss Shannon," he said, "but there's no point to your waiting around. I can't give you any information. Perhaps the agent-in-charge downtown will put out a statement tomorrow."

Margie was shocked. She wailed: "But

that means every paper in town will get it! And this is my story—I got it first!"

"Sorry," said Mr. Shurtleff, politely but with finality. He went back into the living room and shut the door.

Going down in the elevator, Fisk said: "Well, I've heard the FBI is a wonderful organization but I suppose there's bound to be a stuffed Shurtleff in any group."

"I hope your gags for the radio show are better," Margie said. "Now shut up, Sam. I'm thinking."

Fisk shut up, looking hurt. They went outside and saw Rafferty lumbering back from a lunch counter on First Avenue. They walked to meet him and Fisk handed over the scuffed bag containing Rafferty's picture gadgets. Rafferty took the situation equably.

"Well, another day, another story," he said and went his way.

"There's a smart guy," said Fisk. "Now let's get on with our date."

Margie was still mad. "Do you think I'm giving up just because one flatfoot said no to me? For the last hour I've been planning what to do if the FBI got difficult. After all, I didn't go to parochial school with Terence Grier's brother for nothing."

"So what did you go for?"

"For a moment like this, I guess. Terence is on police homicide and he's up in that apartment. I'll wait and corner him."

They waited down the block from the apartment building in the chill, fall night for an hour before two large men emerged to the sidewalk. Margie muttered, "Wait for me here, Sam," and bore down on the two large men. She deftly maneuvered one to a stop at the curb, while the other went on and climbed into a squad car.

Five minutes later Margie came hurrying back to Fisk. She squeezed his arm and said excitedly: "Oh, Sam, what a story!" She squeezed his arm again.

"If murder makes you so affectionate," Fisk said, "I'll have seven guys shot at our house every night."

"It wasn't murder—it was suicide. But it's still the story of the year. Let me phone the city desk and then I'll tell you about it."

CHAPTER TWO

Vanishing Lady

SOME time later Margie came out of a Second Avenue drugstore and fell into step beside Fisk. They headed west on Fiftieth, walking.

She was still excited. "The city desk is jumping up and down with frustration. First I gave them the story and then I told them I'd been given it off the record. Now they're

calling everybody from the Assistant President down to J. Edgar's office boy's girl-friend for permission to run it."

"What's so terrific about a suicide, particularly the suicide of a Nazi? We won't miss him."

"It's all terrific enough," Margie said soberly. "Professor Dichter was the Nazis' top scientist. He was mainly responsible for the buzzbombs and the V-2 rockets. He was in charge of Germany's atom-bomb experiments and everyone knows how close they came to perfecting it before we did."

"I get it," said Fisk, impressed now. "But what was he doing running around loose in this country?"

"It's a long story but not a dull one. When the Nazis folded, Army Intelligence and the OSS made a round-up of German scientists. But Dichter slipped through the net and vanished. However, we did get information that Dichter had been working on some kind of a lethal ray and was already close to the secret—"

"Now, baby," said Fisk, "don't pull a Buck Rogers on me. Everyone knows that a lethal ray is fantastic."

"Is it?" Margie said. "Six months ago the average person thought the atomic bomb was fantastic. But we've known for years that

X-rays and radium emanations can inflict fatal injuries, so what's to prevent the harnessing of some ray that will kill or even disintegrate things at a distance? Dichter was reported to be heading for Japan to finish his experiments. But Japan cracked. The next tip was that the Nazi underground planned a secret laboratory for Dichter and that he was heading for this country. The FBI started going quietly crazy. If they didn't nab Dichter and he had a year or two in which to carry on his work, this country and the world might be facing something even more horrible than World War II. They had to get Dichter."

Fisk frowned thoughtfully. "The Nazis must have all of Dichter's data. Even though he's dead, they can go ahead with his work."

"There's a lot of difference between data and the brain of a genius."

"But why should he commit suicide? And why do it in Tommy Dixons apartment?"

"It's definitely suicide, according to Terence. The gun was still in his hand, his right hand, and the tests showed he'd fired a gun with that hand. As for motive, they have to guess. Perhaps he figured he was about to be cornered by the FBI and he picked that way out in preference to being tried as a war criminal. Why did he pick Tommy's place? They're guessing again when they think he

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remembered Tommy as one of his students and thought maybe he could get help from Tommy. Tommy's such a dope in everything but radio engineering, he might have helped Dichter, never suspecting there was anything wrong about it. And then perhaps Dichter lost his nerve and didn't wait for Tommy."

"At least it was nice of the prof to eliminate himself."

Margie shivered. "Terence said the FBI told him the Nazis would have brought the world to its knees in thirty days after Dichter had perfected the ray."

"In that case we ought to celebrate his taking-off. Leave us have some drinks, baby."

"I'd rather have a corned-beef-on-rye."

"I'll even get you a dill pickle to go with it."

IN AN all-night restaurant on Sixth Avenue, around the corner from Radio City, they found a table for two near the window and gave their order.

Margie studied her face in the mirror of her compact. The face looked all right to Fisk but Margie wasn't satisfied with it. She said: "This make-up looks as though it had been run over by an amphibious jeep. Be seeing you."

Some time later she came back from the ladies' room and attacked her corned-beef-on-rye. Fisk wasn't eating although his order lay before him. He was examining a pair of worn, gray suede gloves and he looked worried.

Margie lifted an eyebrow. "Sam, aren't those the gloves—"

"Right, the gloves that were in Tommy's foyer. I must have stuck them in my pocket absent-mindedly while I was giving you that sales talk." He put the gloves on the table, palm up. "And they've handed me a hunch that maybe the case of the Nazi professor isn't as washed up as we thought."

Margie put her sandwich down. "Go ahead, Sam."

"I'm just a gag writer and no detective but there are things that even my lame brain can figure out. The dead man was shot in the right temple, wasn't he?"

"Yes, of course."

"If these are his gloves, he was left-handed—and a left-handed man isn't apt to shoot himself in the right temple."

Margie took the gloves and compared them. When she looked up again, her eyes were concerned. She nodded. "The left glove is much more worn than the right. But we're not sure they're his gloves."

"They bear a Czech trademark and we've had no Czech imports for years. They must have belonged to someone who has been living in Germany or one of the Nazi-occupied countries."

Margie thought and lathered her sandwich with mustard at the same time. She said: "Sam, if this isn't just a brainstorm, do you realize what it could mean?"

"Being an inventor of gags by trade, I've figured out a couple of good ones. If it was murder and Dichter was the victim—although I can't figure out who'd shoot him or why—we have a mystery, but our side is still all to the good. However, if the guy that Tommy Dixon found was only a reasonable facsimile of the professor, then he was bumped off as a red herring for the FBI. Incidentally, that might explain why Tommy's apartment was the scene. Tommy could be counted on to identify the man as Dichter, the chase would be called off and Dichter could be on his way unmolested. If it's the latter case, things are in a hell of a mess."

Marge gulped. "Sam, I love murders but this thing scares me. We'd better gallop right down to the FBI."

"Where do the G-guys hang out when they're hanging out in New York?"

"The Federal Court House down on Foley Square."

"Then leave us get going, baby." Fisk thrust the gloves into his pocket and shoved back his chair, turned to get up. He found himself looking up at Willie Fischer whose tall, bulky figure was just behind him.

"Hi, fellows and girls," said Willie. "How did it come out? Was Tommy seeing things or was there really a dead guy there?"

"He wasn't seeing things," Fisk said.

"What happened?"

"The usual thing," said Margie. "Nosey reporter snoops. Nosey reporter gets thrown out."

"Tough," Willie sympathized. "How about you kids coming over to our table and giving us the dirt, as much as you got?"

Fisk looked across the restaurant and saw Helen Fischer waving at them. He returned the wave but said: "Margie and I have a date, Willie."

Willie grinned. "Ah, love! Ah, romance!"

"Ah, scram, you cynic," said Fisk.

Fisk paused at the cashier's desk while Margie went through the revolving door to the sidewalk. When he joined her outside, Peter Vincent was ambling along toward them along Sixth Avenue from the Forty-ninth Street corner. Peter saw them, waved languidly and came to a stop beside Margie.

He yawned, managing to look sour through the yawn. "Hi, Shannon—Hi, Sam. What a day! Nine programs I've done and each commercial cornier than the one before. Say, you kids seem to be getting along all right. Maybe I shouldn't have introduced you. I've had an eye on this wench myself for sometime."

"Remind me to send you blinders for Christ—"

mas," Fisk said. "Not that I've been able to make much progress so far. A corpse is too much competition."

"I warned you the gal loves murders." Peter grinned. "What was there to the business at Tommy's place?"

"It was suicide," Margie told him. "If the cops know why or what, they're not telling."

A polite belch swung them around. Tommy Dixon belched again, covering his mouth apologetically with the back of his hand. He said: "Excuse me, I shouldn't have had that Scotch."

"Well, Tommy," Fisk said, "what are you doing running around loose? The way the FBI gathered you to its bosom I figured you'd be busy for days."

"The FBI?" said Tommy vaguely. "Oh, they were very pleasant. They just wanted to know when I'd last seen Professor Dichter, and I said back in 1938, and they said had I heard from him since, and I said no and it was all a mystery to me how he happened to be dead in my apartment. So they apologized for cluttering up my place, and I said my ulcers needed milk, so they said to get some milk." In the same breath, he added: "Hello, Margie. Hello, Peter. Will anyone have some milk with me?"

Fisk said he and Margie would take a rain check. Peter Vincent yawned again and said: "I'd have to take benzedrine to stay awake long enough to drink milk. 'Be seeing you, kids."

He swung on down Sixth Avenue.

Tommy turned toward the restaurant door and then remembered to be polite. Over his shoulder he said: "I'm awfully glad to have seen you two again. G'night." He went on into the restaurant.

Margie shook her head perplexedly. "It's beyond me. How can anybody be as consistently dazed about the facts of life as Tommy and still be one of the best engineers on the network?"

Fisk chuckled. "It takes genius to be as confused as Tommy." He flagged a passing cab with no results. He kept flagging for five minutes with the same luck.

"We could go down on the subway," Margie pointed out.

"I thought of that myself," Fisk admitted. "But I kept on hoping for a cab. What fun is a date in the subway?"

THEY rode downtown on the hard, narrow seat of a subway car, in company with seven sailors, five soldiers, twelve girls under military or naval convoy and two elderly drunks, one male, one female. Approaching the Chambers Street station, Fisk and Margie rose to get off. The elderly male drunk made up his mind that he wanted off there, too. He

stood behind them on the car platform and when the door opened, he raised his hat with exaggerated courtesy, barged between them, almost knocking Margie over, and tacked for the station steps.

"Should I sock him?" Fisk asked anxiously.

Margie righted her hat and said: "Of course not, he's just drunk."

Fisk said, relieved: "I'm glad you feel that way. When I get drunk I'm still a gentleman, but I always barge into people, just the way that guy did. It has something to do with faulty distance perception."

"Imagine," said Margie. "And all along I thought it was just alcohol."

From Chambers Street they walked a couple of blocks north and then east toward Foley Square and the Federal Court building. The cross street was old and very dingy in the saffron light of street lamps spaced far apart. There were smells there, smells of musty premises behind building fronts of scabrous brick and rusty iron, smells of a hundred different things that had been manufactured or sold or warehoused there over three-quarters of a century. Wind puffed jerkily along the pavement, raising swirls of dust that got into Fisk's eyes and nose.

He coughed. "California," he said, "is nothing like this. Out there you and I would have a moon. Nightingales would be singing. The scent of orange trees in blossom would pervade the night instead of something that smells like raw wool mixed with rabbit skins that weren't properly cured. By the way, have you given any thought to the suggestion that you come out to California?"

"Well, naturally."

"You mean I've sold you on the idea?"

"I mean you haven't. I've got a good job here. I like it."

"It's just the murders you like."

"Of course."

"I'll dig you up some dandies out there. After tonight you ought to be able to trust me."

There were faint footsteps just behind them and Fisk glancing over his shoulder, suddenly shoved Margie very hard. She staggered sideways into the dark yawning entrance of a store and Fisk had a lightning glimpse of her sitting down very hard. He hoped she didn't think he'd done that to her just because she wouldn't come to California.

After that he was too busy to worry about what she might be thinking. The sap he had seen swinging at him in that startled glimpse over his shoulder missed his head as he ducked, but it smacked with agonizing force against his shoulder, spun him around and smashed him to the sidewalk. The elderly male drunk of the subway was wielding the sap and

he didn't act at all drunk now. The sap rose and fell an missed again as Fisk squirmed aside at the last second.

His head bumped against the ankle of a second man and, without hesitation, Fisk sank his teeth into the ankle. He didn't like the flavor of the socks the man wore but it was a distinct pleasure to hear him yelp hoarsely. Fisk tried to climb up the leg he had bitten. Then the top of his head, the buildings on both sides of the street, the sky and the stars in the sky all caved in on him at once. There was a tremendous flare of light inside his skull, followed immediately by a complete and painless blackout.

A little later on, Fisk realized vaguely that he was inching along the sidewalk on hands and knees. He knew he had to go somewhere, although he couldn't recall just where, and since he apparently couldn't walk he had to crawl. He crawled until he ran into a picket fence of blue-clad legs.

A voice above him said in a weary brogue: "All the luck I have is bad. Another drunk! Now why do they pick my beat to get plastered on?"

Fisk wobbled around to a sitting position and the fence of blue legs resolved itself into a single pair. He looked up and found that the legs belonged to a very big cop, a cop who had a thick neck and a lot of jaw.

Fisk said thickly: "Wherzagirl?" His words ran all together.

"Oh, it's girls you're looking for, is it? Well, where you're going, my fine fellow, there'll be no girls."

Fisk didn't feel like arguing. He put one hand to an ache in his skull, an ache as big as the Chrysler Building, and brought it away slimy with congealing blood. The cop saw the smear.

He said: "So you fell down and bumped your noggin, did you? Serves you right for getting in that condition."

"Sapped," Fisk muttered. "Couple guys sapped me. Had girl with me. She fell down in store entrance. Gotta—find her."

The cop leaned over, smelled Fisk's breath. "By God, you ain't drunk," he admitted and immediately started back along the sidewalk, retracting Fisk's progress. He went to the corner, came back on the other side and crossed over to Fisk. He said: "Theres no sign of any lady, young fellow. Looks to me like she led you into something. Have you been robbed now?"

Fisk felt his pockets, learning as he did so that his right shoulder was now put together with red-hot rivets. His wallet was gone. The gray suede gloves were gone. But that was nothing at all, compared to the fact that Margie Shannon was gone.

The cop helped Fisk to his feet. He said:

"Come along, lad. I'll ring in for a prowler car to take you to the station where you can get your head fixed and tell your story to the detectives."

"No—FBI."

"FBI?" said the cop, impressed.

"We were on the way there—when it happened."

"Now why didn't you say so before this?" the cop demanded. "Come on, they're just down the street. I'll put you right in their hands in a couple of shakes. Easy does it."

FISK walked some of the rubber out of his legs but his head was still as big as a barrage balloon when the cop turned him over to a pair of husky, youngish men, one of them a square-jawed blond and the other a red-head.

"The lad's been knocked around a bit," said the cop, "but he claims he's got stuff to tell you before he gets fixed up."

The blond man eyed Fisk expertly. "Yes, sir. What's on your mind?"

Fisk's tongue was still thick. "Dichter—Franz Dichter."

"Dichter?" said the blond man. He shot a quick, level-browed glance at the red-head. "Jerry, get some black coffee—and lace it with a slug of that Five-Star Martel. Snappy."

The red-head went down the corridor in a hurry and the blond man ushered Fisk into a small and sparsely-furnished office. He got Fisk's coat off, produced a first-aid kit and did things to Fisk's scalp that hurt like hell. Fisk protested that the scalp could wait. All he was interested in was talking to somebody about Franz Dichter and a girl.

"Relax, pal," said the blond man. "You can talk to Mr. Hook as soon as we fix up your noggin a little."

"Hook?"

"Agent-in-charge. Get this down now."

Jerry had brought in a cup of steaming black coffee and then had melted out of sight again. The blond man shoved the coffee at Fisk and the fumes of good brandy stung Fisk's eyes. He got the coffee down and the blond man replenished the cup, this time with a slug of straight brandy. Fisk slid that down and began to feel almost as though he would live. He lit a cigarette, let himself be helped into his coat and then followed the blond man through another doorway.

He was in a slightly larger office, even more sparsely furnished than the first one. A wiry man with a weatherbeaten face and startlingly blue eyes was seated behind a desk. The blond man went out.

The wiry man got up, unfolding himself joint by joint. He put out a hand and said: "I'm George Hook, Mr. Fisk. You look as though you'd had a rough time."

Fisk shook the hand. He said: "I don't remember telling anyone here my name."

Hook smiled and tossed three letters and a hotel bill across the desk. "Our apologies," he said. "We took the liberty of looking through your coat while you had it off. We like to know who's calling on us in a case of this importance. You're the lad who was with Miss Shannon, the newspaper girl, earlier this evening, aren't you?" He smiled again at Fisk's startled look. "Mr. Dixon mentioned your name. Once we get on a case, we find out a good many things."

Fisk said: "Then maybe you can find out what's happened to Margie Shannon?"

It was the wiry man's turn to look startled. "What do you mean, Mr. Fisk?"

"I mean Miss Shannon has vanished, disappeared into thin air. We started down here to give the FBI an angle on the Dichter case and a block from here I was slugged by a couple of guys who came up behind us. When I came to, there wasn't any Miss Shannon around."

"Have you reported this to the police?"

"Not officially. I told the cop who found me crawling along the street. But I gathered tonight that the FBI knows more about the Dichter thing than the cops and could get quicker action."

"I see. Let me have her description."

Under ordinary circumstances Fisk would have done a very fancy job of describing Margie Shannon. Even now he threw in a few superlatives. He added: "I saw one of the two guys who sapped me. He came downtown on the same subway car with us—a fat, gray-haired guy with a flat nose and washed-out blue eyes. He acted drunk on the subway but it was just an act because he was plenty sober when the pair jumped me."

"Fine," said Hook. "Now what's this thing that brought you and Miss Shannon down to see us?"

Fisk said: "Huh? Listen, aren't you going to do anything about Miss Shannon? Don't you understand that she's missing, that she's in danger, that there isn't any time to waste?"

The wiry man permitted himself a faint smile. "The machinery is already started." He gestured with one finger at the walnut box of an inter-office communicating system on his desk. "Everything you've said has been taken down by one of our men, who knows just what to do about it. Now about the information you were bringing us."

The walnut box and the wiry man waited patiently for Fisk to begin. He said: "Well, it was about a pair of gloves that I stuck in my pocket absent-mindedly at Tommy Dixon's apartment." He told about the left-handed pair of gloves. "We figured that the man must have been murdered, since a left-handed man

wouldn't have shot himself in the right temple. So we took a running jump from that conclusion and landed with a theory that maybe the guy wasn't Dichter at all, that maybe they'd picked a guy who looked a lot like Dichter and knocked him off so you'd call off the hunt."

Hook nodded. "We haven't overlooked that, even though you walked off with the gloves before we got to them." He smiled dryly and Fisk flushed a bit. "Certain things indicated the man was left-handed—the development of his left arm as compared with his right, the location of certain articles in his pockets. All of which doesn't definitely prove that he didn't shoot himself or that he wasn't Dichter. We're checking various sources now to find out if Dichter was left-handed. We do know, however, that Dichter served in the German army years ago and in any army you're trained to use guns right-handed. So the gloves in themselves don't mean a great deal."

"They must have been of some importance. Otherwise those guys wouldn't have slugged me to get them."

"That's what I'm getting at," said Hook. "Were dealing with one of the smartest espionage rings in the world. If they planned the murder of a double to make it appear that Dichter had committed suicide, they thought of details such as gloves. They left the gloves there for us to find. Yet, later on, they regain the gloves in such a way that we're bound to become highly suspicious of the whole affair. It's very puzzling. And I must admit that the disappearance of Miss Shannon is also a rather disturbing element."

"Disturbing?" said Fisk. "That, Mr. Hook, is the year's fanciest understatement. I'm going nuts thinking about what may be happening to her—or perhaps already has—and all because I was dumb enough to stick those gloves in my pocket. I figure it's my fault. I've got to do something about it."

"I think," Hook said, "you'd better let us do anything that needs to be done. Was there anyone who knew that you two were coming down here?"

"No," Fisk said. "Nobody—no, wait a minute. There *was* a guy." He told the wiry man about turning around to find Willie Fischer just behind his chair in the Sixth Avenue restaurant. "He might have heard what I said, and he certainly saw the gloves. But I hate to think that of Willie—he's a nice guy."

"No one else could have known about this?"

"Nobody. Now isn't there some way I can help about Miss Shannon?"

The wiry man rapped his desk a little impatiently. "The best way you can help is to do absolutely nothing. Frankly, just the thought of an amateur detective gives us ~~the~~

shakes. In thirty minutes one amateur can wreck a case its taken us perhaps six months to nurse along. And get himself killed in the bargain. This case, Mr. Fisk, happens to be the most delicate and important the office has ever handled. So do us a favor and stay on the sidelines. The minute we get a line on Miss Shannon, we'll let you know."

CHAPTER THREE

Penthouse Party

THE night clerk at Fisk's hotel on Madison Avenue turned over the room key and, along with it, three memo slips from the switchboard.

Each slip said: "Miss Shannon phoned."

The time stamp on the first was 1:05. The stamp on the second said 1:10. The third call had been made at 1:15 which, according to the clock over the desk, had been only two minutes before. Fisk was on his way to the elevator, still reading the third slip.

Miss Shannon was all right, which was a relief. But it was also a kick in the teeth, since it meant she had walked out on him while he was being socked around in the cause of justice or something. He was sore as hell at Margie Shannon.

Nevertheless, he hurried down the corridor from the elevator to his room. If Margie was calling on schedule, the next call would come through at 1:20 and, for some reason, he wanted to be in his room to get it. He guessed that some guys never got tired of being suckered by a pretty face.

He was in his room at 1:19:30. At 1:21 the phone rang. He grabbed the instrument and said: "Hello!"

Margie said: "Hello, Sam."

"Hello, baby," said Fisk. "Hello, Judas Benedict Arnold Quisling Lord Haw-Haw. So you walked out on me!"

"Sam, I can explain everything."

"Go ahead."

"Not on the phone. Please come over here." She gave Fisk a West side number in the Fifties. "Be sure you're not followed. If you think anyone is following you, don't come here."

Fisk gulped a little. "Baby, are you in trouble?"

Margie talked around that one. "You remember my girl-friend, Jean Leslie, don't you? Well, I didn't want to go home where I'd have to be alone, so I'm staying with her tonight."

"How could I remember your girl-friends when I only met you four hours ago?"

There was a note of strain in Margie's voice now. She said: "Don't be silly, darling—of course I'm not in trouble. It's just that I don't

want to be. I certainly wouldn't lie to you, would I? Not after promising I'd go to California with you."

"But you didn't prom—" Fisk stopped and gulped again. He said softly: "Am I dumb, baby! Now I get you—and I'll come a-running."

"Be sure you're not followed." Margie hung up.

Fisk put the instrument back in the cradle slowly. He discovered that beads of sweat had popped out on his forehead and that more sweat was cutting a channel down his spine. He didn't kid himself. He was scared and he wished he were a smart guy. He wished he knew what to do, as the wiry man would have known what to do. All he knew was that, in some way, he had to get Margie Shannon out of a jam on account of he liked Margie Shannon very much.

He stared at the phone for a couple of minutes, finally made a decision and began to leaf through the phone book. He kept remembering what the wiry man had said: "An amateur can wreck a case and get himself killed in the bargain." He found the FBI number, put a hand on the phone. He didn't lift the instrument right away and then, after a little, he didn't lift the instrument at all.

It argued that the guys who had Margie also wanted a guy named Fisk. And if a guy named Fisk showed up with a flock of G-guys, it would mean curtains for her, judging by what she had said about not coming to the spot if he was followed. And if he showed up there alone, it might mean curtains for both of them. Somehow it didn't occur to him that a guy named Fisk didn't have to show up at all.

As for Hook, Fisk knew what the wiry man would do the instant he got that West side address: agents would descend on the place from every quarter of the compass. Hook would decide that the good of the country had a priority over the safety of one individual, even such an individual as Margie Shannon. He would be absolutely right, but Fisk couldn't be quite as impersonal about it as that.

He poured himself a slug of Scotch that would have put courage into a rag doll, gulped it and went downstairs, trying to figure out a method whereby he could do Miss Margie Shannon some good, without crossing up the wiry man. He couldn't think of any.

The lobby was vacant except for the drowsy clerk. Out on the Madison Avenue sidewalk there was no one in sight. A cruising cab came around the corner from a side street and Fisk stepped off the curb, waved it down. The driver was short, dark and sleepy. He listened wearily to the West side address, got started, finally remembered after a block to put down his flag and start the meter.

He cut over to Fifth, went north three blocks, turned across town toward Sixth. He was halfway through the long block when he said over his shoulder, in Brooklyn patois: "I t'ink some boid is tailin' you, pally. A green-and-white hack has been stickin' to our spare tire since we left the hotel."

Fisk looked through the rear window. A green-and-white cab was just making the turn from Fifth Avenue in their wake. Fisk swore. He said: "Hell, it must be her husband!"

The driver's chuckle had an obscene sound. He said: "Y'want me to give the bum the brush-off? I could do it for a small consideration—say, five tomatoes."

"Do it in the next five minutes," said Fisk, "and I'll make it ten bucks."

"A cinch, paly, a breeze—if you do like I say. I'll toin north on Sixth an' and you hop it an' dive down in to the Independent Subway just as soon as we're out of sight around the corner. I'll keep on goin', toin into Fifty-second an' stop in front of Babe Shore's Grill. By the time the guy gets around there I'll have my flag up an' be leavin'. Then I'll pick you up at the Forty-ninth Street stairs of the subway. You got it, kiddo?"

"All set."

They made a fast right turn into Sixth Avenue and the cabbie stood on the brakes the instant the buildings hid them from the pursuing hack. Fisk was out of the cab and down the subway stairs in a matter of seconds. He dropped a nickel in the turnstile and walked down the long echoing length of the platform to the Forty-ninth Street stairway. Back on the street again, he waited in the dim recesses of a store entrance.

Five minutes later, a cab slid to the curb and the dark, sleepy driver leaned out toward the sidewalk and looked around. Fisk came out of the shadows and got into the cab fast. The cabbie chuckled.

"It was easy—like shootin' fish in a beer keg," he said. "You know a young yellow-haired mugg with a lotta jaw?"

Fisk said he did, thinking of the young blond husky from Hook's office. He didn't elaborate.

"Well, the bum will prob'ly be watchin' Babe Shore's door until the jernt closes."

They went north on Sixth Avenue, were halted by a red light at Fifty-first. The light went green and the driver put the cab in gear, got rolling again. He was still chicking through the gears when he was seized by a gigantic sneeze. The cab jumped fifteen feet, almost running down two startled and forgivably-profane showgirls. The cabbie sneezed again and the cab headed for a light pole. He jerked it to safety at the last second and then sneezed again. The cab bucked and jumped down the street for a block, while the driver sneezed and Fisk hung onto the seat and prayed. It might have sounded like swearing but it was really praying.

At Fifty-third Street the driver got his sneezes and his cab under control. He swiveled his head, said: "You say something, pally?"

"Yes," said Fisk, "but I haven't got breath enough to repeat it."

The driver said apologetically: "Geez, I'm sorry, but I'm alloigic to something. The doc says maybe it's the night air, maybe I should drive daytime."

He turned west on Fifty-third, got green lights at Seventh and at Broadway. Across Broadway, Fisk halted him.

"This ain't the address you want, pally," the cabbie said.

"Hold your flag," Fisk told him. "I just want to get some food to take along."

He climbed out and went into a one-armed beanery where he ordered two hamburgers. The hamburgers came along in a hurry and Fisk sprinkled them liberally with salt, pepper and mustard, then wrapped them neatly in paper napkins and carried them back to the cab.

The cab went west to Eighth Avenue, north to the street Fisk had named, east again, then stopped in front of a tall, dingy brick building. He handed the driver another ten-dollar bill.

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"Geez, kiddo!" said the cabbie. "Thanks." Fisk said: "You're not finished yet. In ten minutes I want you to get on a phone and call a man named Hook at the FBI offices." He gave the phone number from memory. "Tell him you dropped a Mr. Fisk at this address and he'd better get some men over here fast—Miss Jean Leslie's apartment. Can I count on you?"

The cabbie's eyes were round with awe. He said: "Geez, the G-guys, huh? You bet I'll take care of that."

FISK got out, crossed to a doorway beyond which a dim lobby light shone. His conscience felt better—he had fixed it so he wasn't crossing Hook, but still he wasn't arriving with anyone tailing him. And he'd be—or hoped he'd be—with Margie Shannon when the fireworks started. Maybe he could do her some good then, maybe he couldn't—but at least he'd be around.

The interior of the lobby puzzled him. It was that of a commercial building—a bank of three elevators, shut down for the night, faced a bulletin board listing tenants ranging from publishers to wholesale jewelry concerns. Finally he found the solution to the puzzle. A small automatic elevator was open and lighted around a bend in the lobby. A name plate beside it said: *Penthouse—Jean Leslie*.

Fisk stepped in, pressed the "Up" button. The doors closed, the elevator rose silently, smoothly. It went up a long way and finally came to a stop without a jar. The doors slid open and Fisk walked out onto a small, blank-walled hallway from which stairs ascended to a steel door. He climbed, opened the door and found himself looking out at stars, a distant moon and the light-pricked silhouette of midtown Manhattan.

A double row of potted shrubs, some tall and thin, some short and bulbous, led across smooth tiles to the portico of a bungalow that looked as though it had been transplanted directly from Cape Cod. The steel door clicked shut behind him and he took half-a-dozen steps toward the lights of the bungalow. It didn't surprise him at all when a voice behind him said: "Please clasp your hands at the back of your neck, Mr. Fisk."

Fisk held the back of his neck with both hands, which was not too easy an operation, considering the fact that he was still hanging onto the hamburgers and also that his shoulder hurt like hell. But he managed and then twisted around a little so that he was looking at the man who had stepped out from behind one of the shrubs.

The glow from the windows of the bungalow showed him that the man was undersized, with a young pale face and sturdy, bowed legs. He looked worried and nervous, even though

he held a gun in his right hand. Fisk didn't like that because he had heard somewhere that a nervous man and a gun made a dangerous combination.

"Now walk to the house quietly," said the man, staying to one side and a little behind Fisk.

Fisk was half-a-dozen feet away from the portico, when the door swung open. A light went on above the doorway and its glare revealed the elderly man who had played a lush on the subway. Fisk had time now to absorb more details about him. He had a large, round belly and his face was phlegmatic, even a little stupid. He reminded Fisk of a German who had once run a butcher shop in the little town Fisk had come from. He had been a good butcher, but he had eventually been hung for killing his wife and daughter with a cleaver.

The elderly man chuckled in a very pleased way. "Welcome, Mr. Fisk," he said. "You came like a moth to the flame, as I thought you would. There is no bait quite so good as a pretty girl."

"Make up your mind," Fisk said sourly. "Am I a moth or a fish?"

"Both—also a fool, my friend," said the elderly man. "Come in, please."

He retreated into a large and comfortably-furnished living room and Fisk followed him, still clasping the back of his neck. The undersized man covered him with the gun, while the elderly man patted him here and there, looking for a gun. The elderly man didn't find any gun but he did notice the napkin-wrapped sandwiches. He took them away from Fisk.

Unwrapping them, he chuckled again. "Ah, hamburgers—thank you, Mr. Fisk. I love hamburgers."

The youngish man said: "Be careful, Henry, it could be a trick. They might be dangerous."

Fisk grunted: "They probably are. Who knows what goes into a hamburger?"

"One cannot be too careful, Henry," said the man with the gun. "It could be that they are poisoned."

The elderly man sighed. "You are quite right, Otto, although I am very fond of hamburgers." He tossed them into a wastebasket and said: "You may drop your hands now, Mr. Fisk."

Fisk lowered his hands and found that they were shaking badly. He jammed them into his coat pockets to hide that fact.

He said, trying to make his voice unworried: "O.K., now where's Miss Shannon? And what do you guys think you're pulling?"

Henry shook his head. "Mr. Fisk, it is unfortunate that you should have turned your head this evening just in time to recognize me. It is unfortunate, too, that Miss Shannon should have chased Otto and me to our car.

There was nothing to do but bring her along. We cannot afford to be recognized, not so much for ourselves as for the Fatherland. Too much is at stake. Now both you and Miss Shannon must be silenced. I am very sorry."

Fisk scowled thoughtfully. He said: "You guys don't make sense. If you were worried about being identified, what stopped you from giving us the works then?"

Otto said, in an apologetic way: "We had only been ordered to relieve you of a certain pair of gloves and also to take your wallet, so it would look like a holdup. We had not been instructed what to do if we were seen clearly enough to be identified later. So, you see, we had to think it over and decide what to do."

"You sound like amateurs," said Fisk scornfully.

"Pardon," Henry said. "We are not amateurs. I own a bar in Yorktown and Otto is my bartender. All through the war we have picked up much information across the bar and passed it on to our agents. But never before have we had to be so active as this. It is only reasonable that we would have to discuss what to do."

Otto raised the gun. "Shall it be now, Henry?"

Fisk laughed and his respect for himself as an actor jumped a dozen notches because he didn't feel like laughing. He said: "Don't be dopes. I've got some information that'll save you guys a lot of trouble."

"Yes?" said Henry. "What is it, Mr. Fisk?"

"I'll tell you when I see Miss Shannon and make sure she's unharmed."

Henry and Otto conferred in a whisper, Otto remembering, however, to keep the gun trained on Fisk. Finally Henry said: "There is no reason, Mr. Fisk, you shouldn't see Miss Shannon."

HE LED the way from the living room through a hall and opened a bedroom door. Beyond the door the room was decorated coolly in blue and silver. Margie Shannon lay on the blue-and-silver counterpane of the bed, her ankles lashed to the footboard, her wrists to the rungs at the head. She crinkled her eyes at Fisk above a gag that hid half her face.

"You see?" said Henry. "We have not harmed her."

"You lice!" said Fisk, his voice rough in his throat.

Otto said: "Please, Mr. Fisk, do not make me angry. Now what is this information you have for us?"

"Nuts to you!" said Fisk. He crossed to the bed and began to untie Margie Shannon.

Otto yelled: "Here now, stop that! You want to be shot?" He waved the gun.

"You're not going to shoot anybody," Fisk

told him. "Not after I tell you what I'm going to tell you." He kept on unknitting the lashings on Margie's wrists and Otto kept on waving the gun. But he only waved it.

Fisk unwound the gag from Margie's face. There was a bruise on her right cheek, but otherwise she looked unharmed. She worked the stiffness out of her jaw and grinned.

She said: "Well, where are the Marines? Or even the FBI would do at this point. Didn't you bring 'em with you?"

"You said not to let myself be followed here by anybody."

Margie sat up and hit her knees with clenched fists. "Sam, you stupe! You dummy! You should have known I didn't mean that."

Henry said complacently: "Miss Shannon, you would not have lived one minute if Mr. Fisk had arrived here followed by anyone. We knew he was not followed."

Fisk chuckled. "Henry, that's just what I wanted to tell you." He looked at his wrist watch. "The G-guys ought to be arriving here any minute now. I gave my cab driver ten bucks to call the FBI when he left here and—"

To Fisk's amazement, Otto's worried look changed to a grin, a chuckle, a laugh. He looked at Henry and Henry's belly began to shake with laughter. Henry said, between seizures: "Ho—you gave Max—ho—ten dollars to call the FBI?"

"Max?" said Fisk.

"Of course," said Otto. He wiped tears of laughter from his eyes with one hand, while the other hand held the gun steadily on Fisk. "Max is the fellow who drove you over here. He called from the delicatessen at the corner and said you had been followed from the hotel but that he had helped you shake the fellow off. He didn't say anything about the ten dollars, however—a sly one, that Max!" He laughed some more.

Margie said: "Well, Sam?"

Fisk felt as though he had been kicked in the pit of the stomach. He jammed his hands into his coat pockets again. He muttered: "It could be better, baby. But don't worry—these guys can't be as dumb as they act."

Otto raised the gun and said: "Henry, is it time now?"

Fisk coughed. He took his right hand out of his pocket and made a loose fist of it to cover his mouth. He coughed again, went into a paroxysm of coughing. He recovered and said: "What do you guys expect to gain by knocking us off? I've already described Henry to the FBI and they're on his trail. If they get you, it just means a few years in the clink for espionage, whereas, if you kill us, you'll both swing for it."

Henry, calmly stubborn, said: "We have decided it is the best way, Mr. Fisk."

Otto raised the gun again. Margie Shannon, still sitting on the edge of the bed, sneezed very loudly.

"Gesundheit," said Otto.

Henry sneezed.

Otto said, "Gesundheit," automatically.

Both Margie and Fisk sneezed again and Otto's pale face squeezed itself into a tremendous grimace. He sneezed and the effort bent him double. A chair that had been beside the dresser suddenly took possession of Fisk's hand, described a loop and came down on Otto's skull. Otto plunged backward, still doubled up, and the gun flew out of his hand and skidded under the bed.

Henry growled and sneezed and lunged toward Fisk. Margie, still on the edge of the bed, shot both feet out and caught Henry in the belly with her sharp heels. He groaned, sneezed again and staggered backward into the hall.

Fisk was on his knees, scrambling for the gun under the bed. He got his hand on it and swung around toward Otto. Otto was rolling on the floor. He rolled past the doorframe into the hall and Henry grabbed the door, pulled it shut.

Whooping and sneezing, Fisk swung the bed around, jammed the foot of it against the door.

Outside there was a sneeze and Henry shouted: "Otto—step out of the way, stupid!"

Fisk grabbed for Margie, and she was sliding off the edge of the bed toward him, when a gun thundered in the hall. A splintered hole appeared in a panel of the door and something ripped along the counterpane, slicing the pattern, lodging in the wall beyond.

The gun in Fisk's hand answered and then there was silence on both sides of the door.

THE silence was broken by Margie. She sneezed.

"Gesundheit," said Fisk and waited for more action from the hallway.

Margie blew her nose and said: "For heaven's sake, Sam, it was lucky we all got hay fever at the same moment—but how did it happen?"

"Just a little gag of mine," said Fisk. "The kind I charge money for on the radio show. On the way over here, the cab driver—Max, the guy I thought was going to be such a big help to me—got a sneezing fit. He weaved around light poles and almost climbed the sides of buildings. I thought if sneezing made a guy lose control of a big thing like a cab, it might work with guys holding guns. So I stopped in a place for a hamburger and came away with a pocket full of black pepper."

Margie sneezed, just a small sneeze this time, and laughed. "Sam," she said, "you're wonderful."

"O.K., I'm wonderful," said Fisk. "But I'm also scared. I figured all along I had the FBI on the way here and now I haven't. This is a fine mess."

"Didn't you go to the FBI with the gloves?"

"Sure," Fisk told her. He outlined his interview with the wiry man. "And he advised me to mind my own damn business. Instead of which I try to handle this thing and get us all messed up. I wish I knew what to do now."

"We'll sit tight," Margie said. "Just outlast them."

"You're optimistic," Fisk muttered. "Henry and Otto seem like the persistent kind. I'll bet they're planning something nasty right this minute."

Margie shook her head. "I'm not worried. You'll think up something first, Sam. You're a genius—I know that now."

Fisk started to disclaim any relationship to a genius but he was interrupted by the sound of breaking glass. The sound came from a window behind a heavy drapery and the shards bulged the cloth and tinkled to the floor. Fisk snapped two shots at the window with Otto's gun, in the hope that it would slow things up. He shoved Margie to the floor, so that the bed would shield her from the window, and crouched beside her.

Outside the window Henry said: "You two in there—you'll find we can play at the same game." He broke off suddenly, snapped: "Otto, careful how you handle that! We don't want to get a nose full."

A voice broke in on him. "It was not Otto's, but a smooth, unexcited and slightly mocking voice.

It said: "Hello, Henry—Otto. Just what do you think you're doing?"

Henry sounded startled. "Herr—"

"No names, please. Just tell me as quickly as possible what you two are up to."

Henry said a little sullenly: "We obtained the gloves from this man, Fisk, as we were ordered to. But both he and the girl saw us. Otto and I reasoned it would not be safe for us to leave them alive. So we brought the girl here and used her to trap Fisk. Fisk tricked us so that he and the girl managed to lock themselves in the bedroom. But a tear-gas bomb will bring them out quickly."

The voice sighed. "Ah, our poor Fatherland has fallen very low when it has to depend on stupid fools like you."

Otto sounded ugly. "Stupid, are we? Let me tell you it wasn't our stupidity that lost the war. It was you and your kind!"

"Quiet, you swine!" said the voice, snapping like a lash. "From beginning to end this thing has been botched. There should have been no attempt to recover the gloves. That merely focused attention on them. Such colos-

sal stupidity! I should have been told about the gloves before anything was done, not afterward."

"We obeyed orders," said Henry.

The voice didn't argue the point. "And to crown everything," it said, "you blockheads have to lead half the FBI agents in New York right to this spot."

"It can't be," Otto protested. "We were assured Fisk was not followed here."

"So you were assured," the voice mocked. "Well, you'll be surprised then to know there are men across the street, men at each end of the block, probably others covering the building elsewhere. I saw them when I arrived, but it was too late then for me to retreat. In a way that was fortunate—at least I found out the trap you two are in and can do something about it."

Otto sounded panicky. "We have to get out of here—"

"One of us might give them the slip," said the voice. "Not three of us. You two will stay."

Henry's words shook. "You leave us to be captured?"

"Not to be captured, Henry," the voice explained. "The FBI would have you both talking your heads off in no time. You'd ruin all our plans."

Otto cried suddenly: "Please, what are you doing—"

"Making sure you two won't talk," said the voice smoothly.

There was a flat, muffled report just outside the window, repeated almost instantly. Something heavy fell against the window, slid downward with the rasping sound of tearing cloth. Henry's voice began to say piteously and very faintly: "*Mein Gott—Ach, Mein Gott—Mein . . .*"

A third, dull-sounding report came from outside and Henry's voice stopped.

Fisk glanced at Margie Shannon. His face was greenish and he gripped Otto's gun very tightly. Under his breath he said: "When I have time, I think I'm going to be sick. Baby, that's what I call cold-blooded—bumping off your own side!"

Margie's voice was thin. "They—they sort of play for keeps. If he tries to come through that window—"

"We'll give him a slight argument, anyway," Fisk told her, wagging the gun, and not sure whether he was really wagging it or just shaking.

However, nobody tried to come through the window and there was no sound outside for a while. Then there was the sound of voices and the tread of feet elsewhere in the bungalow. Fisk raised the gun when heavy knuckles thudded against the panel of the bedroom door.

The wiry man's voice called: "Fisk—Miss Shannon!"

Fisk lowered the gun, shoved the bed aside and opened the door. The wiry man scowled. He was in a white rage, but he kept his voice level and icy.

"Mr. Fisk, I ought to throw you in jail and keep you there forever. I warned you to let us handle things."

"Sure," said Fisk, "but—"

Hook said bitterly: "But you didn't let us know about the phone call from Miss Shannon. You shook our man off so that we lost fifteen valuable minutes. As a result we catch two dead men and dead men don't talk. Either you don't realize the gravity of this situation or you're a fool. Now stay on the sidelines after this or I'll jail you as a material witness! Do you understand?"

"Yes," said Fisk. He thought he had better make it even more definite. He said: "Yes, sir!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Come Along Quietly

SHORTLY before noon, Margie Shannon pushed open the leather-padded swinging doors of a Radio City studio where Fisk was lounging at the rear of the auditorium, yawning at the attempts of Duke Bisbee to ruin a Fisk gag. Ordinarily he would have been cursing under his breath at the mayhem being committed on his brain child, but this morning he didn't care. He was too sleepy.

He yawned a greeting at Miss Shannon, said: "How do you do it? The G-guys question us until eight this morning and you show up at noon looking as fresh as though you'd slept for a week."

Margie sat down beside him. "I haven't slept at all." She waved at Tommy Dixon in the control room. "I haven't had time to sleep. I've been trying to find out things. Want to hear?"

"No, I just want to forget."

"It isn't really very much. The FBI is still mad at you. It seems that the man assigned to you had arranged with your hotel operator to listen in on your phone calls. That's how he found out the penthouse address, but you shook him off and he lost valuable time. They didn't find anything on Henry and Otto or anything in the house to help them. They didn't get the man with the voice and Jean Leslie was a dark-haired gal who was seen just once by the rental agency when she took the penthouse. So they haven't got any immediate lead to Dichter's whereabouts and they're going crazier by the minute. G-men are swarming around here like bees. I recognized one of them in a page's uniform."

Fisk yawned. "He's probably keeping an eye on Willie."

"Willie Fischer?" said Margie, startled. She looked up at the stage where Willie was lounging among his sound gadgets. Willie grinned and blew her a kiss. Margie tossed it back and said: "For heaven sake, how is Willie involved?"

"I thought I told you last night," said Fisk. "Maybe I was too busy to mention it. But Willie was the only one who could have overheard us say we were going to take the gloves to the FBI. Remember how he came up behind me at the restaurant? So I had to mention that to Hook."

Margie nodded. "That's right." She looked thoughtful for a while. "Sam, that gives me an idea."

Fisk said: "Go away, woman. I don't want to hear it. This thing is too big for small fry like me and that goes for you also, baby. If you've got ideas, take 'em to Hook. Don't try any solo stuff, please."

"Maybe it's not such a hot idea. But if Willie is in on this, then Helen, his wife, must know something. I've had her out a couple of times and each time she got plastered. Let's take her out and get her potted—"

"Let the FBI get her potted. They get paid for being slugged and shot at. We don't!"

The voice of the director boomed from the loud speaker in front of the glassed-in control booth. "Take a ten-minute break, kids, while we run through the commercial. Pete, hey, Peter Vincent, where are you?"

Peter Vincent called, "Coming, chum," from somewhere behind the velvet curtains at the back of the stage. The curtains parted and Peter ducked between them, saying: "Boys, wait until you hear this outpouring of blank verse on the subject of bellyaches and how to cure 'em."

In his golden voice, he read one minute and four seconds of advice on how to chase gas from the stomach with Stomach Balm.

Margie sighed. "What a voice that guy has! He even makes indigestion sound romantic."

Fisk yawned. "He's got a nice voice—if you like goo."

"Why, Sam," Margie said, grinning. "Ain't you got no loyalty to radio?"

"Not when I've lost this much sleep."

"All right, then—go to sleep." Margie stood up. "I'm going to talk to some guys who don't yawn in my face every thirty seconds."

She walked away and Fisk closed his eyes. He was asleep before she had gone a dozen steps. Presently a crick in the back of his neck woke him. He opened his eyes, yawned and said, "Hell's bells!" through the middle of the yawn.

THERE was nobody on stage. There was no one in the control booth. There was nobody in the entire studio but Samuel Fisk. He yawned again and wondered how he could have slept through an hour of a Bisbee rehearsal. It was no compliment to the kind of material he wrote for Duke Bisbee.

He lit a cigarette and went out through the swinging doors to the lobby between studios. Two page boys were in a corner talking in low tones. They looked shaken and nervous. The blond receptionist stared at her desk soberly. She didn't have her usual smile for Fisk.

An elevator door opened and Margie Shannon stepped out. She was so pale that the rouge on her cheeks stood out like patches.

Fisk said: "What's the matter around here? Did everyone's horse run out of the money?"

"I was looking for you, Sam," Margie said in a voice that sounded as though the breath had been knocked out of her and she was just getting it back. "Haven't you heard?"

"Heard what?"

"Willie Fisher fell out of his office window half an hour ago. He dropped thirty stories to an adjoining room and—well, you can imagine."

Fisk tried to say, "My God!" but it came out only as a sort of groan. He suddenly felt a little sick, remembering fat, bald, good-natured Willie. Even though he had given Willie's name to the wiry man the night before, he hadn't really been convinced that a guy he knew and liked could actually be involved in a Nazi plot. He said: "Does it mean that he was hooked up with this Dichter thing?"

"I think so," Margie said. She looked as unhappy as Fisk. "He left the studio when they called the rehearsal break and apparently went up to the small personal office he had on the fortieth floor. He didn't show up to begin rehearsal again so the director phoned the sound department. While he was on the wire, the sound department got word that a man identified as Willie Fischer had been killed in a fall from the building. I dashed right up to Willie's office but some cops had got there first so I didn't have a chance to look around. But I did get out of one of them that Willie had left a note addressed to the FBI. It looks as though you were right in suspecting Willie."

"I need a drink," Fisk said. "Maybe a lot of them."

They went down to the street-floor lobby. Peter Vincent was standing near the information booth. He looked shaken. He said gloomily: "Hello, kids. Did you hear what happened to Willie Fischer?"

"Yes," said Fisk. "And I need a drink."

"Maybe it'd help," Peter said. "Let's go get some."

They took the stairs to the lower level, passed along the corridor of shops with their gay windows and entered the oak-paneled and softly-lit English Grill. They found a table in a corner and ordered drinks. They didn't talk. When the drinks arrived, they drank.

Presently, Peter Vincent shook his head. "What a hell of a thing to happen to a nice guy like Willie. It—it sort of gets you."

"Yeah," said Fisk, "it gets you."

Peter finished his drink, said suddenly: "Sam, while I'm in this sour mood, I'm going to get something off my mind."

"Go ahead."

"I've never criticized your material on the show and it's been plenty corny at times. So just lay off about my contribution to the program."

"Huh?" said Fisk. "What are you talking about?"

"That crack you made about my voice being a lot of goo. That was a lousy thing to say."

"That?" said Fisk. "Oh, nuts, Pete, I didn't mean anything by it. I know it's only radio salesmanship and you're tops at that."

Peter Vincent grunted. He didn't seem entirely mollified and went back to staring at the table in front of him. Margie Shannon's knee pressed Fisk's. She glanced at him swiftly, her mouth a little open with shock. Fisk felt his heart turn over slowly inside his chest. What Peter Vincent had just said—it was impossible to miss its implications!

Peter suddenly hit the table with his fist and said in a taut, ugly voice: "For God's sake!"

"Now what's wrong?" said Fisk.

"I just thought of something."

Margie looked at her watch. "I've got to call the paper again. Coming along, Sam?"

Fisk got up and Peter Vincent got up, too. He tossed a bill on the table and said: "I might as well trot along with you guys. There's no fun drinking alone."

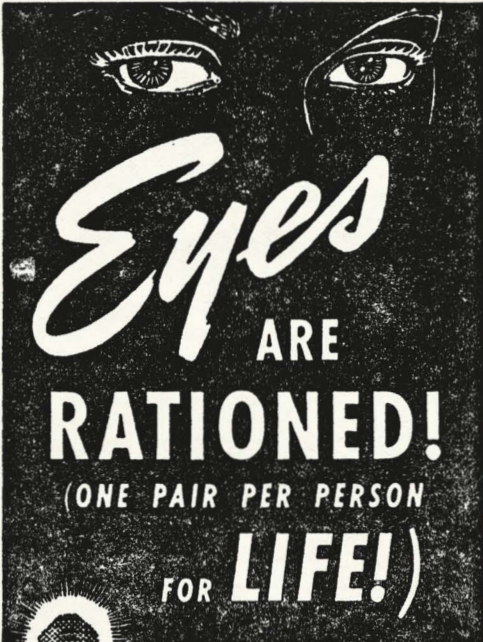
They went out to the corridor together and Peter moved close to Margie Shannon's side. He said: "Sam, I've got a gun in my pocket and I can put a bullet through Margie before you can lift a finger. Both of you take the stairs to the Plaza doorway and, so help me, I'll kill Margie if you make a false move."

Fisk said angrily: "Are you crazy, Pete?"

"I was crazy a minute ago to have made a slip like that."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Fisk, looking at Peter Vincent and making his eyes blank and puzzled.

Peter laughed without humor. "I saw both of you get the idea the moment I mentioned being sore because you'd said I had goo in my voice. I could see the thoughts as they hit you: 'Vincent wasn't close enough at the studio to hear that remark, but he saw us talk-



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ing. So if he knew about the remark, he must be a lip-reader. And if Vincent is a lip-reader, he could have watched us through the restaurant window last night and known we meant to take the gloves to the FBI. He could be the guy who had us socked around. We'd better run like hell and tell the FBI about Peter Vincent.' It's the most stupid mistake I've ever made, but fortunately it isn't irretrievable. Use the swinging door to the street—not the revolving door."

THEY emerged on the sidewalk and Margie said: "Peter, you don't expect to get away with this, do you? There are probably a dozen G-men watching us right now."

"I've got to get away with it," Peter said. A shiny black sedan, driven by a correct, gray-haired chauffeur, pulled out from a parking space down the block and slid to a halt in front of them. "Climb in, kids, and I swear I'll let you have it right here if you start anything."

Fisk and Margie climbed in. A pulse was beating very fast in Margie's throat but her chin was firm and her eyes were cold and filled with contempt for Peter Vincent. Fisk was feeling pretty sore, too, but he wasn't nearly as sore as he was scared.

Peter slid into one of the jump seats, half-facing Fisk and Margie. He said: "Take the Midtown Tunnel, Walter."

The sedan eased away, swung smoothly east on Fiftieth. Heavy glass in the windows cut off street noises and it was very quiet in the car.

The driver said: "What's up, Pete?"

"This pair accidentally learned about my connections but they haven't had a chance to tell anyone. I'm taking them out to Pinpoint to make sure they never tell anyone."

Walter clucked softly. "Do you think our people will like your bringing anyone out there?"

"I'll take the responsibility."

The sedan jogged across town, turned south to the tunnel entrance. It hummed through the long curves of the tunnel, slowed briefly for the toll collector and then maintained a brisk pace along the elevated highway to Queens Boulevard.

Fisk had been silent a long time. Now he looked at Peter Vincent, shook his head. "I'm still stunned, Pete. You're the last guy in the world I'd have suspected of being a Nazi, and a spy, in addition. For my money you were one of the swellest guys in my collection of friends."

Peter Vincent lost a little of his harsh, vicious look. He said: "I'm sorry about this, Sam. I'd give anything if you hadn't got yourself jammed with us. Now there's only one thing we can do."

Margie said thinly: "Pete, you're not really going to—"

"What choice have I got, Shannon? There's too much at stake to worry about individuals." He was silent for a moment before he went on heatedly: "Do you think we Germans have quit fighting just because we lost the battle of Europe? Give Professor Dichter a year, maybe two years, and we'll turn the tables. We'll be the rulers of the world—we Germans! Your armies and your navies and guns and airfleets and even your atomic bomb will be as obsolete as the clubs of the cavemen—"

The driver turned his head slightly, said: "We're being followed, a gray sedan."

Peter nodded. "Tell Midway to get set. And while you're talking, tell Pinpoint I'm bringing this pair out and it's O.K."

Walter leaned forward, flicked switches on the dash. He lifted a hand microphone and waited for tubes to warm up. He talked for a minute in an undertone, put the mike down, snapped off the switches. The sedan kept its steady, swift pace. Presently it turned into an east-west highway. They were getting into open country. A mile from the intersection the car dropped down a grade, rounded a sharp turn and slowed. A high stone wall edged the road and suddenly the gray-haired driver spun the wheel and the car swerved through a gateway in the wall, ground to a stop where it was hidden from the highway.

A black sedan of identical make and appearance got under way fast but smoothly, swung out through the gate to the road. Fisk could hear the diminishing whir of its tires as it sped east.

Seconds later, there was the squeal of tires making a fast turn at the curve and then the angry hum of a motor fighting for acceleration. The sound died away to the east.

PETER smiled. "The FBI men are clever but not clever enough. They'll follow that car to Montauk, thinking it's this one. Let's get going, Walter."

The sedan followed a driveway past a large, sprawling house of nut-brown shingles and to a gate at the rear of the property. A man in the sweat-stained overalls of a gardener opened the gate and they came out on a dirt road. The dirt road led to a highway and they turned north.

Fisk made a movement toward his pocket and Peter Vincent shoved the snout of his gun quickly into sight above the jump seat.

"Cigarette," said Fisk. "Don't get worried."

Peter watched him carefully until he produced a pack of cigarettes, a book of matches. Fisk got one out for Margie Shannon, one for himself, held the pack toward Peter Vincent.

"Thanks," said Peter, "but I'll wait until I

can relax. Incidentally, use the electric lighter in the arm of the seat. I know that stunt of accidentally lighting a whole book of matches and flipping it into a man's face."

Fisk grumbled: "You guys think of everything, Pete."

"We have to."

Fisk held the lighter for Margie, got his own cigarette glowing. Thereafter he smoked cigarettes chain-fashion. He was nervous and he didn't think he was doing a very good job of concealing it.

Eventually they sighted the Sound, its waters gray-green and cheerless beneath a spreading overcast. For another five minutes they skirted the grounds of huge North Shore estates and then the gray-haired man swung into a narrow, graveled road that wound and dipped for a mile before it was barred by high timbered gates, set in a long stretch of fieldstone wall. The sedan slowed, the gates were opened by a man in a leather jacket and they passed through into a vista of smooth lawns, manicured shrubs and trees that had been frost-nipped into a dozen shades of yellow and bronze and fire-red. Through the trees Fisk could see a comfortable, peaceful-looking house of fieldstone.

The sedan eased to a stop at the steps of a wide veranda and a sturdy-legged man with a high, bald dome opened the door of the house and came down the steps. Peter Vincent slid out of the sedan sideways, holding his gun alertly.

He said: "Come on, kids."

Fisk got out glumly and helped Margie Shannon to the steps. Her hand was cold and trembling a little, but her chin was still up. Fisk felt as though his own chin were somewhere around his insteps. The driver reached back, clicked the sedan door shut and headed for a three-car garage behind the house, without a backward glance at Fisk and Margie Shannon.

The bald-headed man had a gun out now, so Peter Vincent put his away. He gestured Fisk and Margie Shannon ahead of him and through the doorway into a wide, cheerfully-furnished hall. Two men were playing chess in a den off the hallway. A third man, tall and well-muscled, and clad in expensive tweeds, watched the game. He waited a full minute until one of the players moved. Then he came out to the hallway, one forefinger smoothing a clipped British-looking mustache, his gray eyes considering Peter Vincent coldly. He didn't look at Fisk and Margie Shannon.

"Peter," he said, "you've been making mistakes lately." His voice was the voice that had sounded in the night outside the penthouse. "Sending Henry and Otto after those gloves was bad enough, but bringing these two out here I don't like. I don't like it at all."

"I'm sorry about the gloves," Peter said. "It was bad judgment and the only excuse I have is that I've been under a lot of strain lately. But there wasn't anything else I could do with this pair except bring them here, as I had Walter explain to you from the car. Fisk and Miss Shannon have to be eliminated without trace for my protection. I thought of the cruiser and the Sound tonight. That's all right, isn't it, sir?"

The tweedy man considered, his gray eyes flicking Fisk and Margie Shannon impersonally. He nodded. "Get the first part of it over as quickly and quietly as possible. It's probable that everything will come to a head tonight and we won't want to be bothered with irrelevant details. Richard, lend Peter a hand."

"Yes, sir," said the bald-headed man and the tweedy man went back to watching the chess game.

CHAPTER FIVE

California Here We Come

PETER VINCENT looked at Fisk and Margie Shannon and shook his head. He sighed: "Kids, I hate to do this. But, damn it, you shouldn't have stuck your noses into things."

Fisk said: "O.K., Pete, we apologize and you can call the whole thing off."

"Shut up," grunted the bald-headed man. "Get going—both of you."

Peter Vincent went ahead of them and opened a door that gave onto a smooth, leaf-littered path. The path wound through thick shrubbery, then angled down a sharp slope toward the waters of the Sound and the bulk of a dock and boathouse. Fisk's throat was dry. His stomach was a cold stone. His feet had lead in them.

He said hoarsely: "Pete, you can't do this to a couple of people who've been your pals."

"Shut up, for God's sake!" Peter muttered. "Do you think it's easy for me?"

Margie said: "But, Peter, if you just kept us l-locked up—you don't have to do the—other thing . . ."

Peter said fiercely: "There's only one way to keep you two from talking eventually."

He hurried on and opened the narrow door of the boathouse. Through the doorway, Fisk could see the trim white and mahogany lines of a small cabin cruiser as it rose and fell on slapping waves. He threw a glance over his shoulder. The bald-headed man was a cautious three feet behind them, just too far away for a lunge to beat a shot. Fisk followed Margie into the semi-gloom of the boathouse and the bald-headed man came in behind them and shut the door.

He walked past Peter Vincent and Peter

rose silently on his toes, brought the dark, braided leather of a sap down on the hairless skull. The bald-headed man fell forward stiffly and his face made an unpleasant sound when it struck the boards of the catwalk around the cruiser. He lay without movement.

Fisk was too amazed to say anything but Margie gasped: "Peter, I knew you must be f-faking but you s-scared the life out of me—"

"Quiet," said Peter through his teeth. His face was white and strained in the dimness. He peered through the glass of the door toward the house for half a minute, then turned and grinned at them. He said: "I haven't much time for explanations, kids. I'm with the OSS and have been all through the war. Sorry if I frightened you, but I needed help out here and that was the only way to get it. I couldn't let you in on it because I was afraid you wouldn't be good enough actors to be convincing prisoners. But the important thing now isn't explanations—it's whether I can count on your help."

Fisk eyed Peter Vincent. "Pete, there are a hell of a lot of loose ends to this sudden transformation of yours. If I could believe you—"

"You've got to believe me, Sam!"

"I believe you, Peter," said Margie. "I don't know why I should, but I do."

"Thanks, Shannon," said Peter. He looked at Fisk, who finally nodded. Peter smiled. "Fine, Sam. Now here's the set-up. I'm going to try to flush a bird, a bird named Professor Franz Dichter. I'm pretty sure he's hidden out somewhere in that house and I'm also fairly certain that the plan is to speed him on his way tonight. If I seem a little vague, it's because nobody in the entire Nazi ring knows the complete picture except Colonel Halder. That's the guy in tweeds. He took over as head of the organization after Germany's surrender. Our job today is to stop Dichter and I'm going to do it the only way I know how—with a bullet. For me to do that, he has to be scared out of hiding and that's where you two come in."

"I'm listening," Fisk said intently.

Peter Vincent stooped and felt the bald-headed man's pulse. "This lad won't bother anyone again." He dug the gun out from beneath the body and handed it to Fisk. He gave his own gun to Margie Shannon and produced a third gun, a slim-barreled Luger, from a shoulder holster. "I'm going to post myself by the garage. I've noticed that when Halder arrives here he always comes to the house from the garage, although he never arrives by car, so I'm pretty certain the garage masks a secret entrance and exit and that if they try to get Dichter away in a hurry it'll be by that route. Give me three minutes to get set and then start

things. Each of you fire a couple of shots. You might as well fire them at the house to cause a little extra commotion. Then wait. One of them undoubtedly will start down here to investigate. Put a slug through him if you can or at least drive him back. Wait for me ten minutes after the fireworks begin and if I don't show up, start the cruiser and get the hell out of here. There won't be anything more you can do. Good luck, kids."

He put a hand on the knob of the door and Margie said: "Peter, I was never so happy about anything—I mean, welcoming you back as a member of the human race. Please be careful."

Peter grinned faintly. "Oh, sure." He opened the boathouse door, sauntered up the path a few feet and then crouched and angled to his left into the thick shrubbery. The shrubbery blotted him out.

Fisk held out his wrist so that both he and Margie could check the second hand of his strap watch. The hand made a complete revolution, another, started on the third. He glanced up at the house, the lower part of which was hidden by the slope. The second-floor windows stared down at them like blank eyes.

Under his breath he said: "I'll kneel in the doorway and fire at the center window. You fire over my head at the window at this end. This—is—it, baby!"

HE WENT to one knee, sighted on the center window a hundred and fifty feet away and squeezed butt and trigger gently. The gun bucked in his hand and the gutter above the window clanged. Margie's gun roared over his head and the lower pane of the corner window fell inward. Her gun banged again and this time the upper pane went into fragments.

"You win two cigars, baby," said Fisk, and let his second shot go. A pane of the center window splintered.

For a little while everything was quiet, except for the restless lapping of waves against the hull of the cruiser and the squalling of two startled and indignant seagulls frightened from their roost on the rail of the dock. Then one of the two men who had been playing chess appeared on the path at the top of the slope. He was moving slowly and cautiously, a gun ready in his hand.

Fisk lifted his gun, sighted and fired. The man whirled and sprang back to cover, apparently unharmed.

"Damn!" said Fisk. "Maybe Sharpshooter Shannon should take the next guy."

There wasn't any next one. Time spun around on the second hand of Fisk's watch. Two minutes. Three minutes. The hand had started another revolution when two shots,

close-spaced, crashed somewhere beyond the crest of the slope. A figure rose against the skyline, poised for an instant and then toppled, crashing down through the shrubbery to stop halfway down the hill.

It was Peter Vincent.

Fisk swore luridly. He lurched to his feet and took long, running strides up through the shrubbery. He could hear Margie at his heels and flung over his shoulder: "Get back, baby—get back!"

Margie stayed at his heels anyway. She was beside him when he went to one knee beside Peter Vincent. Peter's face was bloody on one side. Blood stained his coat just below the right shoulder and more blood leaked from his mouth. His breath sobbed through twisted lips.

He whispered: "Muffed it, Sam—they must have suspected me. Got behind me at garage—I muffed it . . ."

Fisk started to put an arm under Peter Vincent's shoulders. He muttered: "Hang on, Pete. This shooting is bound to attract attention and bring help."

"Too late," Peter whispered. "Up to you now, Sam—got to get Dichter." His voice steadied. "You'll know him. He looks a lot like the dead guy at Dixon's. Kill him if you can, before he gets to the garage. If he

reaches there, we're sunk. Future—this country, maybe whole damn world—may depend on you now, Sam."

Fisk said huskily: "I'm a hell of a crutch for the world to lean on, but here goes!"

He rolled over to his stomach and crawled toward the crest of the slope. He had made only half the distance when the silence exploded into uproar. Voices shouted. A garage door banged. Someone screamed an order in German and repeated it even more frantically.

Margie's voice whispered behind him: "Sam, what's happening?"

He looked over his shoulder to see Margie inching along in his wake, her face dirty but determined. He said: "I don't know what's happening. Go on back, pest, before you get hurt."

"I'm as bullet-proof as you," Margie told him. She didn't stop.

Fisk was within a few feet of the top of the slope when he began to get an inkling of what was going on just out of sight. A wisp of oily, black smoke drifted across his face. More came drifting down the slope. He inched ahead, finally lifted his eyes above the crest, behind the thin cover of a shrub, and saw that the black smoke, great whorls of it now, was pouring from the open doorway of the garage. Just inside the doorway, flames swirled and

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licked through the body of the black sedan.

The gray-haired chauffeur and the two chess players tugged frantically at the rear bumper of the sedan while the tweedy man stood just outside the doorway on the garage ramp. A submachine gun was balanced delicately in his hands and his head swiveled continually, alertly.

Beside him stood a large man, bald save for a fringe of gray hair above his ears. Fisk gulped a little. There couldn't be any mistake. He was looking at Professor Franz Dichter and also at a target that deserved a better marksman than Sam Fisk. Sweat leaked out on his forehead. A drop ran down his nose with a tickling sensation. He was more than a little surprised to find that, in spite of all this, his gun hand was steady and nerveless.

The blazing sedan began to move backward, inch by inch, out of the garage, in response to the furious efforts of the three men tugging at the rear bumper. Smoke momentarily obscured the figures of Dichter and the tweedy man. It cleared and Fisk brought his gun up with infinite care, began to line the sights on Dichter. Unwittingly, he must have made some sound. Perhaps he had caused some betraying movement of the thin shrub. He didn't have time to figure it out.

The tweedy man whirled like a cat and the submachine gun spat a stream of slugs that clipped the shrub an inch above Fisk's head. Fisk ducked, fell over Margie and landed half-a-dozen feet below the crest of the hill. He cursed, scrambled to hands and knees and started upward again.

Margie grabbed him. "Sam, they'll kill you."

"The hell!" Fisk muttered. "They're getting the burning car out of the garage. In another minute Dichter'll get away. I've got to do something."

"But they'll kill you!"

A dull, heavy explosion rocked the afternoon, bent the shrubs above them, seemed for a moment to rip the breath from their lungs. Silence pressed down and then, out of the silence, a man began to scream.

Margie breathed: "Sam, what was that?"

"If it's what I hope," said Fisk, "the gas tank of the damn car blew up in their faces. Let's take a look."

They crawled warily to the crest and peered through the shrubbery. The screams came from the gray-haired chauffeur who was running aimlessly in circles, his clothing aflame like a bright torch in the gray afternoon. He suddenly stumbled and fell. His shrill clamor stopped, but little flames kept licking up from his body. The tweedy man and the two erstwhile chess players lay motionless, blackened and contorted behind the ripped and torn rear deck of the sedan. There was only one moving

figure now visible. Professor Franz Dichter crept doggedly on knees and charred hands along the gravel of the drive, whimpering thinly. He covered a dozen feet and then stopped, wagged his large head and collapsed into a heap that looked like a bundle of discarded clothing.

"Dichter," muttered Fisk. "That's the wind-up of Dichter—and if you and the world want to heave a sigh of relief, baby, I'll help you heave it."

"I think I'm going to faint," Margie said. She didn't. Instead she said soberly: "Sam, luck like this is almost too good to be true. If that car hadn't caught on fire somehow and if the gas tank hadn't blown up, Dichter would have got away."

"Yeah," said Fisk modestly. "It turned out to be a pretty good gag."

"Gag?" said Margie. "What gag?"

"Just a little one I whipped up on the way out here in the sedan. Remember how many cigarettes I smoked? Well, there weren't any ash receivers handy in the back seat and the next best place to put the butts, it occurred to me, was down between the cushions. I wasn't sure they'd set the cushions and perhaps eventually the car on fire, but I thought if they did it might annoy the guys, might even attract some outside attention and help."

Margie looked at him, awed. She said: "Sam, you're wonderful! You're marvelous! You're a genius! Oh, heck, why don't I use a real superlative? Sam, my lamb, you're a gag-man!"

PPETER VINCENT grinned up at Fisk and Margie Shannon from the pillow of a hospital bed. It was a pretty good grin, considering that it had to fight through a mass of bandages around his head. The covers were piled high across his chest, indicating more bandages there.

He said: "After what I put you two kids through, you deserve explanations."

"You're not supposed to talk," Margie told him. "The nurse said so."

"When a radio announcer stops talking, he's dead," said Peter. "I'm a long way from that—a torn scalp and one lung tipped by a slug is all I got out of it. Anyway, kids, back in 1942 the OSS sent me in as a member of the Nazi espionage organization in this area. There's no need of going into just how it was maanged, but for the last three years the Nazis have been using my commercials—or thought they were—to transmit information to Germany. Everything I learned in that way filtered, of course, to OSS and then to the FBI if we needed the help of the G-men. Not long ago I found out that Dichter was headed for New York en route to a hide-out laboratory somewhere to the north—"

"That part was wrong," said Fisk. "The FBI has the whole ring and all of the story now and Margie just dug it out of the estimable Mr. Hook. Dichter's lab was to have been on a pseudo deep-sea fishing boat, presumably going out on a long cruise, that had been quietly fitted out at New Bedford."

"Clever," Peter said. "Dichter would have been absolutely safe from any prying eyes there and could have completed his work. I didn't get a hint of that angle. I think I mentioned to you that Colonel Halder was the only one who knew the entire set-up. Anyway, there was Dichter's apparent suicide at Tommy Dixon's place last night. It puzzled me. I had a substitute announcer do my last two shows while I tailed you kids. I figured I could count on Margie to dig up the details and I wasn't wrong. Lip-reading, incidentally, was part of the course the OSS gave me and I got pretty good at it, which isn't surprising when you consider that enunciation is an announcer's stock-in-trade. So I watched you talk at the restaurant and decided maybe you had something in the matter of the left-handed gloves. I was afraid the FBI might not realize their significance so I decided to underline them by having them snatched from you. My instructions to Henry and Otto were only to grab the gloves in a simulated stick-up and turn them over to me, but it seems they got a bit rougher than I'd intended. Apologies to both of you."

Margie said: "But, Peter, why didn't you just phone the FBI about them and let them handle it?"

Peter Vincent shook his head. "Look, my dear Shannon, the Nazi espionage organization has always been like a lot of fleas with other fleas to bite 'em. My instructions were never to communicate with OSS or the FBI by phone. I never knew when the Nazis were watching me just to make sure I was loyal to them, but I did know that they'd equipped several of their agents with those new electronic hearing devices that can pick up a conversation at a couple of hundred feet. If they'd had even a hint that I was contacting the other side—our side—my usefulness would have been ended. And so would I. So I always communicated through the mails. But last night I didn't have time for that. It was the same way yesterday afternoon."

"How do you mean?" said Fisk.

"I learned that the FBI was to be tipped off that Dichter was in hiding at a certain Nazi nest in southern New Jersey. I figured that the purpose of the tip-off was to draw as many FBI men as possible down that way and that Dichter, therefore, was probably at the Long Island hideout, waiting to be smuggled out last night. I had to work fast and I couldn't take a chance on phoning the FBI.

So I whipped up the stunt of having you suspect me and then taking the pair of you out there, ostensibly as prisoners." Peter remembered to a look a little hurt. "Incidentally, Sam, I'm still very wounded about that 'goosey voice' crack I saw you make."

"From now on," said Fisk, "what's good enough for you is good enough for me."

Margie gasped: "Sam, that's your worst gag to date." She had been watching Peter Vincent with a somewhat shocked expression in her brown eyes. She said: "Peter, I know you have to be pretty cold-blooded in espionage work but, well, did you have to let poor Willie Fischer be murdered? Couldn't you have prevented that?"

"I didn't know about Willie," Peter told her soberly. "As I said, I didn't know all the angles. In fact, I don't know yet what happened there. You're the first two the docs have let into see me."

"The tip-off to the FBI was in a forged note—what purported to be a conscience note—that was left on Willie's desk. Willie, who was absolutely innocent of any connection with the ring, was tricked into going to his office during the rehearsal break and then was shoved out his window. It was Tommy Dixon who did it."

"Tommy?" said Peter, amazed. "Good Lord, no!"

Margie nodded. "The FBI had been watching him. They got him right afterward and he confessed everything. He'd been a great admirer of Professor Dichter at college and Dichter had recruited him for Nazi espionage before going back to Germany. Tommy admitted it was his idea to find a pretty good double for Dichter, murder the man in such a way to make it seem a suicide, and in that way stop the hunt for the professor. It might very well have worked out except for one little flaw. The double they found, a Detroit man named William Hofflund, was left-handed whereas the professor was right-handed. Hofflund, who had been working for the ring in Detroit, was rushed to New York, not even knowing what they planned for him, and met Tommy at his apartment the night of the killing. Tommy confessed that he let Hofflund sit down, talked to him for only a couple of minutes and then shot him. He didn't even know about the left-handed business until you let it out by arranging to have the gloves snatched from us."

"So help me," said Peter, "I never even suspected Tommy. I always thought he was a dope."

"A very smart dope," said Fisk.

"What else don't I know?" Peter asked. "I had a two-line note from my chief telling me to relax because Dichter was washed up. But

(Continued on page 97)

THEY'RE COMING THROUGH THE DOOR!

By **ROBERT C. DENNIS**

Author of "Rear View of Hell," etc.



He was a magician all right. He pulled two guns as trickily as any sleight-of-hand I'd ever seen.

FOR the first time in my life I didn't mind not getting my story. It was worth it, just to see the expression on Lieutenant Carpenter's face when the doorman asked him for his membership card. Oh, brother! A cop needing a membership card to get into one of the hottest gambling joints in the city!

"This is a private club, gentlemen," the doorman said patiently, while he peered out at us through the grilled look-out. "Only mem-

bers *with* cards are supposed to be admitted."

He said it without batting an eyelash and it left Carpenter completely inarticulate. He was pretty sure he was being kidded because the gang who had knocked over the Stowaway Club the night before hadn't bothered with cards.

Just how they had gotten in was still a first-class mystery. There was even a suspicion that the owners of the club didn't know yet, though

they wouldn't even admit there had been a hold-up. It had been the suckers—who hadn't seemed to mind having their dough taken away from them across the tables—who had screamed like banshees for the cops when they had lost it all in one whack. So Lieutenant Carpenter, trailed by some assistants and a flock of us newsmen, had rolled up bright and early this morning to investigate.

And the doorman, still a little wild-eyed, wouldn't let us in! Finally Carpenter threw up his fat hands and stamped back to his car.

The newsmen just stood around telling each other that if a gang of crooks could crack the Stowaway Club, then geniuses like us ought to be able to do it. Being only a two-bit genius myself, I headed across the street to the drive-in to get myself some coffee.

There was a big black car parked in front of the drive-in, so sleek and shiny it gave me cramps in my bank balance just to look at it. It was empty. Inside the stand was a black-haired girl, every bit as sleek as the car, so I knew they had come together. Those two things—a car and a babe like that at a drive-in

She gave me a look, one quick, all-seeing glance from her odd greenish colored eyes, that made me glad I'd shaved and put on a clean shirt this morning. "Who are you?"

"Reporter."

That interested her. We were both looking expressionlessly across the street and talking so low that even the waiter didn't know about it. "Who did that job last night?" she asked.

I shrugged slightly. "I don't know yet."

"Do you mean you will know sometime?"

"Sure," I said.

"When?"

"Before the day's over," I said confidently.

"But I'm not going to print any names on the front page. That's for the cops to do."

She kicked that around mentally for a second. "Could you contact the—the men who did it?"

I turned and looked at her profile. She didn't change expression.

"Well," she said, "can you?"

"Maybe."

"For fifty dollars?"

She was letting me have it right where I

All the doorman at the Stowaway Club knew about the robbery was that "the mob just walked through the steel doors." Pretty clever stuff, but then we were dealing with a smart operator—a guy who knifed women in the middle of a lagoon and produced guns out of thin air. Even with a lush brunette giving me the green light, I didn't want to get mixed up in any of it. A fellow could get himself killed that way—and did!

—gave me food for thought. Also the fact that she wasn't sitting in the car, because then her back would have been turned on the activity across the street . . .

I had my coffee at the stool beside her. Up close she was even more so—in a shiny black pair of slacks, a white blouse, and over it all a light gray coat. Her shoes were the flat, heelless kind that usually make a woman's ankles look funny. But here was a pair of ankles that would have looked good wrapped in gunny-sacks. I said, out of the corner of my mouth: "You're not going to get in either."

She was as sharp as she looked. Without moving her lips, she asked: "How did you know I wanted to?"

"You're just a little too absorbed in what's happening over there," I told her.

"Mild curiosity," she returned.

"Uh uh," I said. "The car gives you away. Besides, you aren't the type to be out at eight A. M. seeing how the other half drinks its coffee."

lived. Tomorrow I started a four-day layoff and fifty bucks would do nicely. I didn't say anything though.

"A hundred. And a story," she offered.

"One-fifty," I said, wondering if she had any scruples against letting me show her a time on her own money. "What's the story?"

"We'll talk about it in the car," she said suddenly. "Come on."

FOR a dime I could be a gentleman. I paid for her coffee. We went out and got in the car.

"I was in there last night when it was held up," she said evenly.

An eye witness! I thought. *These things come to you when you live a clean life!*

"What happened?"

She pursed her dark purplish-red lips. "Nobody seems to know. All of a sudden a half dozen men with guns were all over the place. They cleaned off the tables, made everybody empty their pockets and purses, and collected

all the jewelry. Then they faded out. It took about five minutes."

"Six men?" I asked, already mentally writing my story.

"I think so." She fished the car out onto the street, while I ducked till we got by the newshounds who were still dreaming up impossible ways of getting into the Stowaway Club. "One man stood by the door and directed things. Either four or five others did the work."

"Were they masked?"

"No—maybe the man at the door was. Or at least he had his hat down and his collar up." She drove downtown. "But nobody knows how they got in."

"Not even the doorman?"

"He says they walked right through the door!"

I laughed. "A metal door?"

"He meant it," she insisted. "And he wasn't drunk."

I took a moment to think about it. None of the doors at the Stowaway could be opened from the outside. The only one ever used was the one with the grilled look-out where the doorman checked your membership card. If it was O. K. he stepped off to one side and pushed a button that released the electrically-controlled lock. The idea was that in order to reach the button, he had to step away from the grille. That way no bright boy with a rod could force him to open the door. When the doorman went to the button, he was out of range.

That was the way it had been described to me, at least. I didn't have a card, either.

"Somebody buy up the doorman?"

"I doubt it," she said. "He's been there since the club opened a year ago. No, he was in a daze, didn't know how it happened. He insisted they came right through the door."

I gave up on that one for the time being. "What would you estimate the take was?"

"Close to sixty thousand dollars!"

I whistled. "Big operators. How did you happen to be there? Are you a member?"

"No, I was with a friend." She didn't go into detail.

"O. K. Now how do I earn my one-fifty?"

"I lost a watch in that little party," she said. "I want it back. I'll pay any reasonable amount, and no questions asked, but I've got to get it before tomorrow. Can you do it?"

"Maybe," I said. "but not for a reasonable amount."

"How much?"

"What was the watch worth?"

"Twelve hundred dollars."

I didn't know they made watches for that much money, but if they did, I knew she would have one.

"But it isn't the value," she added. "There's another more important reason."

I believed that, too. She looked like the kind who could lose a twelve-hundred dollar watch and never blink. The kind of gal I liked. But it also meant another man in the background. What other reason was there for her to be so anxious about getting the watch back immediately?

"It's worth two or three thousand now," I told her. "If you weren't in such a hurry, the price might come down."

"Why?" she demanded. She'd been held up once, and didn't like the idea of having it done again.

"That sort of watch is hard to dispose of," I explained. "The gang would sooner sell it back to you than to a fence. But if they know you want it by tomorrow, they know you want it bad, so, up goes the price."

"All right," she said curtly. "I'll pay it. You get it for me, and I'll pay you *two* hundred. If I'm going to be squeezed dry, you might as well get some, too!"

I knew then that she liked me.

"How will I contact you?" I asked.

She gave me a phone number. "Ask for Mrs. McElreath."

"O. K. Do I call you Mac for short?"

She liked that, too. "Get my watch for me. It has my name engraved on the back."

"I once knew a girl who had hers tattooed on her hip," I said.

"I just bet you're a dog with the girls!" she snapped. "It also has, 'With Love, Arnold,' engraved on it. What's your name?"

"O'Neill," I said. "People who like me call me Hank."

We were downtown now. She pulled over to the curb near a bus stop and I opened the door and got out.

"Get the watch first, O'Neill," she said. "I won't like anybody till it's back on my wrist."

When she leaned over to pull the door shut I thought she could have worn a blouse that would have been more modest. But not nearly so interesting.

THIS bar was called Artie's and it wasn't a place where sightseers went to give themselves a cheap shudder from looking at underworld characters. The reason—a lot of the tough boys really hung out there, and they didn't like to be stared at. Pounding the crime beat for seven years, a guy naturally learned his way around such places as Artie's.

I started a second beer before I started any conversation. The barman's name was Artie but he didn't own the place. The owner's name was Homer Watkins. So help me! So it was called Artie's. "Hear somebody knocked over the Stowaway Club last night," I said.

That much having made the morning editions, Artie didn't mind admitting: "I did hear some talk about it."

"Did you hear who did it, Artie?"
He leaned close, confidentially. "Yeah, I hear it was Capone, personal."

Meaning, mind your own business, O'Neill!
"If you should happen to see Mr. Capone," I said, loudly enough for all the characters at the bar to hear, "a friend of mine wants to buy back her watch. For cash. But it's got to be tonight."

"Oh?" said Artie, without interest.
"Yeah. It has, 'With love, Arnold,' engraved on the back," I said. "And my friend's name, too, of course."

"Sure like to help you, Hank," Artie said. "But I don't know a thing. An eastern mob, I hear. I wouldn't have no connections, anyhow. Nobody like that ever comes in here."

"I know, Artie," I agreed solemnly. "You wouldn't want that kind of trade."

We were kidding each other, and we both knew it, so Artie set up a beer without cracking a smile. I knocked it off and then shagged back to the office and wrote up a story, mostly based on hearsay, rumor, and "it is alleged." It wasn't so hot but I thought I could duck the city editor for the rest of the day and by the time my four-day layoff was over he'd have forgotten about it.

I lit up a cigarette and then a kid came wandering in, asking for me. Katie Logan, whose position around the place was pretty vague but whose duties were anything you were too lazy to do yourself, put him on his course. He stood beside my desk, which was just about the same height.

"Look," he began ponderously, "I sell papers over on Seventh and Main. This one, and the *Evening*—"

"Don't befool the air by saying that name

here!" I commanded. "What's on your mind, son?"

"Well, a guy comes up to me and says if I will do him a favor he'll see I get paid for my time. But—"

I knew the kid was stringing it out to make it sound like a heavy task and worth a solid sum. I gave him half a buck, which I knew was twice as much as he'd expected, and he gave me a note. It read:

Mr. O'Neill, Can you meet me at the Penny Arcade immediately? Jerry Bradley.

Artie, apparently, hadn't wasted any time. The kid and I walked over to Seventh and Main and parted most amicably.

I found the note-writer watching a peep show. "If it's about the watch—" I began.

"The watch?" He looked blank. "I don't know about any watch."

"O. K., wrong number," I said hastily. "Are you Bradley?"

He nodded. "I wondered if you would do a little job for me, Mr. O'Neill. I can't pay a lot of money—perhaps fifty dollars . . ."

Why, I asked myself, are you bothering to work for a living, O'Neill? But I didn't try to beat up the price this time. "I'll listen to any honorable proposition."

"Here," he motioned to the peep show, "take a look." He put a coin in the machine and I glued my eyes to the slot.

It was a little different from the average peep show of that type. First of all, this one called for a dime instead of the usual nickel a play. The strip of moving picture film that ran off was also a little above average. It started with a shot of a flag waving in the



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breeze on a pole and over that came the title: *Western Productions*. A couple of brief credits, just like a real movie, then: *Charlene Dances!*

After that a fade-in to a blond girl doing a dance that was a modified strip tease. She had a nice figure and she got to show quite a bit of it, always just within the bounds of good taste. I guess.

"Take a good look at the girl's face," Bradley said in my ear.

I did, and liked what I saw. A very nice looking chick.

"I want you to find her for me, Mr. O'Neill."

I didn't get to see whether Charlene was going to lose her last wisp of silk. I turned to look at Bradley. He was thin, with dark hair and eyes, and rather handsome in a too well-groomed way. The kind that has to shave twice a day and looks like hell early in the morning.

"You want what?" I asked.

He gave a good picture of an embarrassed man. "I want to meet that girl and I don't know how to go about finding her. I thought of calling up one of the newspapers to see if the drama editor knew anything about her. Then I saw your by-line in the paper and thought you might understand." He made a self-conscious motion with his hand. "Can you help me?"

I could help him by telling him to ask the man who ran the Arcade for the name of the outfit that serviced these machines. "You could probably get a lead—"

"Please," he put in quickly. "I wouldn't want to let anyone else know about it. Do you understand? I thought you could get the information I need. Here!" He whipped out a billfold and slid a ten-spot into view. "Another forty when you find out what I want to know."

This was just a little too screwy even for me. Yet the guy seemed so flustered, maybe he really had gone overboard for the blond Charlene. I said suddenly, so he wouldn't have time to think about it: "What's your address?"

"2036 West De Carlo Street."

He said it straight enough, so I knew he wasn't handing me a phony, which might mean he was leveling with me.

He pushed the saw-buck into my hand and then hurried off down the street as if he were afraid I might run after him and return his money. The fool! I put the bill away, wondering if I was now a reporter or a private detective.

THEN I went back to the office and found there wasn't anything to do that couldn't wait. Katie Logan came by, so I flagged her down. "Do me a favor, Katie?"

"All right," she said. "How much?"

"Not money." Katie was that kind of gal.

Always good for a touch, always ready with a sympathetic ear. A cute kid and lots of fun, but no *oomph!* No shiny black slacks on Katie, no strip teases either. Nice and wholesome, the kind you used to take to high-school dances. "How would you go about finding Western Productions? It's an off-the-cuff film outfit, I think. Probably makes risqué home movies. And it isn't for me," I assured her.

"Well, I could locate it through—"

"Swell!" I said heartily. "Find it for me and I'll buy you a two-bit cigar."

"Don't think I won't smoke it," she said. She waited another second to see if I'd change it to dinner for two. But she just wasn't my type. She walked away, making a lot of noise with her heels, and I noticed for the first time that she had a pair of legs. But rather nice!

I decided to forget about Bradley and his yen for Charlene and settle down to wait for the gang who stole Mrs. McElreath's watch to contact me. I was pretty certain they would. Artie the barman would give me a good enough recommendation so they'd know it wasn't a police trap.

About four o'clock in the afternoon I received a special delivery letter. It was typed, all in caps, and read:

THE WATCH WILL COST FIVE THOUSAND. HAVE THE MONEY WITH YOU WHEN YOU RENT A MOTOR BOAT IN SILVER LAGOON AT EIGHT O'CLOCK. WE'LL DO THE REST.

A bright idea I decided. Silver Lagoon was in LeMoyne Park, only a mile from downtown. It wasn't large, maybe a couple of hundred yards long, half that wide. A place where kids in love rent tiny motor boats and turtle around the lake in the moonlight. With a dozen or two boats out there tonight, one of them could easily slide up alongside mine and make the swap in the dark, where I'd never get much of a look at the occupants.

Not that I wanted to. The watch would do.

I dialed the number Mrs. McElreath had given me. I said bluntly: "Mac, the watch will cost you five thousand."

She swore under her breath and I guessed she was wondering if I had upped the price for a little personal rake-off.

"I won't be able to bring back a receipt," I told her, "but it all goes to the one place."

"All right," she said curtly. "I'll send the money over within an hour. Call me as soon as you get the watch."

"Just as soon as I see what name is on the back," I said. "Besides Arnold's."

"I can't stop you from looking," she said.

"That you can't," I agreed, thinking about that white blouse.

She must have had the same thought because she swore at me and hung up.

Within an hour I had a visitor. He said his name was Hal Blane and he was doing an errand for Mrs. McElreath. He was pretty big for an errand boy. Also, he was pretty, period. He had a deep cleft in his chin and a lot of soft, wavy yellow hair, which he hadn't combed recently, probably because he knew it looked better that way. There would have been a faint suggestion of swish about him, except he had his sport coat off and through the thin silk shirt I could see some muscles that no swish ever had. A powerful boy, and in a foul mood.

He gave me an envelope, not sealed, full of bills. I counted them carefully right under his nose and his face got a lovely shade of pink. There was five thousand in the envelope.

"And how's Arnold?" I asked.

"He's out of town," he began, and then snapped it off. He gave me a look which meant that under different circumstances he would knock my head off. He had fifteen pounds on me but I wasn't convinced he could do it. I've gotten into gym rings with some light-heavies just for a gag and, while I never did them any harm, I always got out under my own power.

After Blane left, I gave a thought to what was eating him and I began to get the direction of the wind. Arnold, of course, was Arnold McElreath, and while he was out of town, pretty boy Hal Blane had taken the beautiful Mrs. Mac to the Stowaway Club. With Arnold due home tomorrow, she had to have her watch to avoid embarrassing explanations. Blane didn't appreciate having me doing the job for her.

Katie came in then and tossed a piece of paper on my desk. "There's the dope on Western Productions."

I gave her a pack of cigarettes in place of the cigar, but I was going to be too busy taking a boat ride to think of spending any time running down that blond lovely known as Charlene. Any other time and I'd be glad to run her down. Personally.

I GOT over to the Lagoon an hour early to make sure I could get a boat at eight o'clock. Before the war they had been equipped with radios, but all the tubes had long ago burned out and there were no more to be had. Electrically driven, with a canvas top that could be flipped back, I guess these boats were just the thing for a warm moonlit night. Personally, I liked something a little faster than one mile an hour.

My turn came at a quarter to eight and I probably looked pretty silly riding around all by myself. But it was dark on the Lagoon, with only the boathouse lights and the little red-and-green running lights on the other boats

reflecting in the black water. A crowd of people milled around on the boathouse dock, so there wasn't any hope of spotting the guy with the watch there. It didn't matter much. Getting the watch was all I was interested in.

I cruised around the Lagoon, hunting up all the darkest corners near the shore, just to be helpful. When that didn't produce anything, I floated slowly past the boathouse, letting the lights shine on my face. I didn't know how the gang intended to work this, whether they knew me by sight, or just what. But the instructions had been explicit. So I sailed around some more.

Along about eight-thirty I began to get worried. My time was up in fifteen minutes—due to the demand for boats, a customer could only rent one for an hour at a time. I hoped the boys in the other boat weren't rummaging around in the dark looking for me. I didn't really think that, in view of the efficient way they had "walked through" the metal door of the Stowaway Club last night. But the point was, they weren't finding me.

They never did find me, either. I stayed out an extra five minutes, hoping they'd show. Finally, there was nothing to do but cannonball my lame duck back into the dock. A perspiring young fellow and a girl in a tight pink sweater nearly fell into the Lagoon in their haste to take over. I stood on the dock feeling very sad about the whole situation.

Two hundred dollars and maybe some choice feminine attention—that's what I was losing. And me with a four-day layoff starting tomorrow!

Another boat came creeping in toward the dock, nearly running down the craft I'd just relinquished. The perspiring young fellow yelled something unpleasant, but the boat didn't stop. It didn't stop even when it rode into the waiting slip. For a moment I thought it was going to climb the dock and sail right into the boathouse.

Then somebody screamed. The dockman threw a boat hook onto the bow of the boat to prevent it from bouncing back out into the Lagoon. Somebody else flipped back the canvas roof and then the crowd surged in front of me and I couldn't see what was happening.

Somebody said, "She's all bloody!" and somebody else screamed. By that time I'd worked my way far enough through the mob to see into the boat. My angle of vision was such that the first thing I saw was her two hands, which had been lashed to the wheel with what might have been pieces of the belt of a woman's dress. Then I saw the dress of the same material and, finally, the woman.

It was Charlene, the peep show strip dancer. She would never dance again. She had been stabbed on the left side, high up, and the blood had already stained the dress around the knife.

I confessed I wasn't too quick-witted. I had to work it out step-by-step, like this: I come to meet a guy in a boat. The guy doesn't show. A gal turns up dead in a boat. Ergo, they were one and the same people. It was too coincidental to be otherwise. The letter had not been hand-written, so I'd naturally assumed some man would meet me. There was no reason it couldn't have been a woman.

When I'd wrapped that one up, I came up short. What was Charlene doing, getting mixed up in this deal? All at once my two cases became one. Just like that.

I knew there was no point in searching the body. The watch would be gone now. The important angle was, why had the killer tied down the wheel so the boat was certain to coast right into the dock? Why hadn't he just left it parked in the shadows on the far side of the Lagoon? It might have been hours before it was discovered. But instead of giving himself all that time for a get-away, he'd sailed his crime right into the spotlight.

I said I was slow tonight . . . The answer was, the murderer didn't feel he needed the time and wanted Charlene found right away. Why? Just on the off-chance that if I were found sitting there I might be tagged with the job?

But I wasn't having any of that. I got out of there, promptly!

When I was far enough away not to be annoyed by the sound of police sirens, I stopped to add up the column.

First, Charlene was dead, stabbed. There wouldn't be any fingerprints, naturally.

Second, somebody apparently wanted that watch very badly. Just whv I couldn't figure, because Mrs. McElreath would probably put a ceiling on what she would pay for it. I had an idea that the original asking price of five grand had been almost the top. After all, for that much dough she could buy another watch, or even a reasonably good explanation to satisfy Arnold.

While money was a plentiful commodity with Mrs. McElreath, I knew she didn't like being held up.

But the things I couldn't total up were these:

Where did Jerry Bradley come in? Maybe he, too, had lost something in the Stowaway hold-up, had bought it back from Charlene and then shivved her for good measure. That had a lot of lumps in it, though. Such as, why had the gang sent a girl to do the job? It didn't sound worthy of people who could "walk through doors."

Next, I called up Mrs. McElreath and gave her my tale of woe in detail. She didn't much like it, or me either. She called me things I usually take only from guys too big to resent. Finally I wearied of it and said: "Tell Arnold

it's in the jewelers getting a new crystal. He'll believe anything *you* say!"

That must have been a fairly accurate appraisal of the situation because she was struck dumb for a minute. During which I hung up.

If she could stall Arnold for a day or two, I might still fix it for her. I still had Mr. Jerry Bradley's address . . .

WEST De Carlo Street was away out, almost to the beach, a neat, respectable but by no means wealthy neighborhood. It was noon of my first day off and here I was spotting the numbers on houses! I found 2030 and followed on to 2032 to 2034 and then jumped to 2038. That would put Mr. Bradley's 2036 right between the last two, but there wasn't a number on the house. Hell, there wasn't any house! There was only a vacant, weed-grown lot with not even a *For Sale* sign on it.

This was an angle I hadn't expected because, first, what was the point of it? And, second, when I had asked Bradley for his address, he had given it without thinking. When you go to give a phony address you usually have to think a second or else you'll rattle off one that either patently a lie, or you'll unconsciously give one of your friend's addresses. But Bradley had dealt one right off the cuff and it had turned out to be a lovely vacant lot.

It gave me plenty to think about. I drove back downtown and called the office.

I had a little trouble with Katie. She wanted to talk about the murder of one Charlene, an actress of sorts for Western Productions. Hadn't I asked about Western Productions just yesterday?

"Just a coincidence, Katie," I assured her. "Now listen to me. How would you go about finding the owner of a piece of property, if it doesn't have a real estate sign on it?"

"Ought to be simple," Katie said. "Just call the—"

"That's swell, Katie!" I congratulated. "The address is 2036 West De Carlo. Find out who owns it, will you? I'll call you back in an hour."

"All right, Hank," Katie said, her voice just faintly weary.

I went out and had some lunch and read all the newspapers. They were making a nice thing out of both the hold-up and Charlene's murder, although not connecting the two in any way. It had been a very clever gang who had swarmed into the Stowaway Club without damaging the metal door in any way. The doorman was still dazedly insisting they'd just waded right through it. And it was also a clever murderer who had done in Charlene and then vanished. The police had checked the occupants of every other boat that had been out on the Lagoon and cleared them all.

It was rabbits out of the hat in both the crimes.

Only one man was not completely clear. He had come in several minutes earlier from an hour's ride, but the police admitted they were stumped as to how he could have fixed Charlene's craft so as to follow him in as it had done. But they were looking for him just the same. I hoped they wouldn't find him—him being me, of course.

The reports also gave Charlene's identity and profession, made no mention of finding an expensive watch on her.

Then I put the papers away, did a bit of thinking and came up with an idea of sorts. I phoned Mrs. McElreath.

She wasn't in a good mood. Arnold had arrived home, sick, and she had him in bed. He was feeling too low to bother noticing that her watch was missing, but she didn't know how long he'd stay that way. She wanted to know what I as doing in general, and, explicitly, when the hell I was going to get her watch!

"I'm working on something," I told her. "Can you come downtown now and see me?"

"If it's about the watch, I can," she said. "If it's purely social, no!"

"Why, Mrs. McElreath," I said, "I don't even know your first name!"

"It's still on the back of the watch," she retorted.

I told her the name of the place in which I'd wait for her and hung up. Then I called Katie. She had the dope for me. She read it off: "The property at 2036 West De Carlo Street is owned by a Jerry Bradley."

"Sure it is!" I exulted.

"Then why did you ask me to find out?" Katie demanded.

"I wasn't sure," I said hastily. But I had been pretty sure. Bradley had rattled off that address too glibly. When he'd had to pull one out quickly, he'd used the address of a vacant lot he owned, because ordinarily he had every right to expect it would dead-end me if I tried to find him again. But why give a lead on himself in the first place? That was one I didn't

get. I asked Katie: "Have you got his address?"

"Yes, it's the Yucca Towers. Apartment 350."

"Swell, Katie," I said. "You're worth a small fortune. You ought to get a salary increase."

"You'd better be careful, Hank," she said dryly. "You'll turn a girl's head with such flattery."

I could have done a lot better, I knew, but Katie just wasn't my style. No *oomph*. But a wonderful gal, all the same.

I went to the Arcade, where I was to meet Mrs. McElreath, and eavesdropped on a conversation of a couple of horse players. They were kicking around the Stowaway job and they had read too many Superman strips. To them there was nothing unbelievable about people walking through metal doors. They were more concerned about the future of such activities—there was no end to its possibilities.

They were a lot drunker than I was, but even in my more maudlin moments, I don't think I could ever swallow that stuff. It just goes to show you that some people will believe anything if you put it in the newspapers.

Or on the radio. Remember when we were invaded by men from Mars?

MRS. McELREATH took her time about meeting me, but I had a suspicion she'd spent it fixing herself up, which seemed to me a very good sign. She had on a black dress of the same material as the slacks. Glossy and snug-fitting so that the highlights of her very fine figure had a shine on them. Her legs were so good I had the feeling that she must have ordered them tailor-made. There were also a lot of shiny highlights in her black hair I noted, when I got around to noticing her hair. And she was carrying a handbag as big as a briefcase.

But even if she had done it all for my benefit, she was strictly business for the moment.

"I want you to look at a peep show," I said.

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Her eyes got narrow, calling attention to their odd greenish color and to a very short temper.

"All in the line of business," I hastened to add. "I want you to see if you can identify the girl who got killed before I could get the watch last night." I put a dime in the machine and took the first peek to make sure it was the right one. It was and I turned it over to Mrs. Mac.

She watched it through to the end.

"Well, what do you think?"

"I've seen better figures," she said.

"Yeah? Where?"

"In my mirror."

"I must take a look in your mirror sometime," I said.

"Get my watch," she said curtly, "or all you'll see will be the back of my neck. What about this Charlene woman?"

"Ever see her before?" I asked.

"Not that I know of. Where would it have been? That might help."

"In the Stowaway Club."

She shook her head. "It was pretty crowded and I didn't pay much attention to the women."

"How about the gang who held it up? Any women in that?"

"No. Just the five or six men. Why?"

"Charlene was connected with the gang some way. As middle man in our transaction, at least. And I have an idea there's more to it than that. Nobody has explained how they got into the joint. This walking through the door makes fine copy but damn poor sense. One of the patrons must have worked it from the inside. A woman would fit that very nicely."

She shook her head. "I don't think so. None of the players left their places at the tables. It's quite a distance from the nearest table to the entrance and everybody agreed no one could walk back from there in the second or so that elapsed between the time the gang trampled over the doorman until they took over the place. No, I'm sure no woman did that."

I scowled a little. "If they used some of the emergency exits, it'd be simple. But everybody insists they came in the front door."

"They did," Mrs. McElreath declared. "I didn't see this woman there, but that doesn't prove anything."

"O. K.," I said. "I've got another lead. I'll call you if it develops. You'd better get home to Arnold. By the way, is he very sick? What's he got?"

"Merely a bad cold. My husband is not a young man and traveling is a hardship for him." She handed me a level look that suggested a wisecrack on the subject would be out of order. "What is this other lead?"

"Bradley," I said. "He introduced me to Charlene's dance. Said he wanted to meet her,

but gave me a phony address. I know where he really lives. I'm going to call on him."

"I'll come with you," she said.

I started to object, then a possibility occurred to me. "This man who stood at the door directing the hold-up, what did he look like?"

She described him as best she could, but it was pretty vague. I described Bradley and we tried to match them up. We didn't get very far with it.

"Do you think he's the one?" she asked.

"Nope," I said.

"Why?" she asked.

"Here's why: The man at the door and Charlene's killer are the same person. Even without knowing Charlene was bringing me the watch he stole when she was killed, the two jobs were so neat and tricky it trademarks them. It shows the fellow to be a smart operator and it isn't consistent with Bradley's dumb play yesterday of having me look at the peep show. It was completely senseless—out of character."

"But the idea of sending the motorboat sailing right up to the dock with the dead body in it wasn't very bright either," she objected. "Since you had already docked, there was no way for you to control Charlene's boat out on the Lagoon. That clears you, so if his reason wasn't to implicate you, what was it?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "The whole thing is screwy. That's what balls me up so in this deal. The way the guy ran off the hold-up was so perfect even the people who watched it didn't know how it was done. Then he contradicts his intelligence by a bonehead move like that. Maybe it *was* Bradley, I dunno!"

"Maybe," she said, with considerable perception, "those things looked foolish only because we don't know what they were supposed to accomplish. If they had worked, they would have appeared like more magic."

"Maybe," I said. "But the business about the peep show definitely connects Bradley with the hold-up, which isn't consistent with the hold-up man's actions in keeping his face covered. No, I don't think it is Bradley, but I think Bradley knows a few things we don't. Let's go squeeze something out of him."

"My watch, I hope," she said. "What have the police been doing about all this?"

"I forgot about the cops," I admitted. "I've been so deep in this business, I forgot Lieutenant Carpenter was supposed to be investigating. Wait, I'll call him up."

Carpenter, it seemed, had been doing things. One arrest so far. "The Wiggler," he said, referring to a penny-ante racketeer about town who got his name from his ability to wiggle out of such situations. "Got drunk on his cut, and we grabbed him."

"What does he say?"

Carpenter grunted irritably in my ear. "Claims he doesn't know 'The Boss', as he calls him. Never got a good look at his face. Way I see it, some eastern wise-guy planned the job, then hired a half-dozen local bums to do the hard work. So even if we get all these bums we're no better off. They don't know how this guy is!"

"Have you found out how they got in yet?"

He swore at that. "Walked through the door," he yelled. "Somebody is going crazy! It might be me. I'm glad I don't have to worry about that Lagoon killing, too!"

You will, though, I thought. You just don't know it yet!

WHEN I got back to Mrs. Mac, she informed me that Hal Blane was in on the party, too. They were to have had dinner together anyway in a couple of hours, so they'd go to Bradley's first and dine later. I squawked but it didn't do the least bit of good. Blane was waiting for us on the corner, his yellow hair still wavy and uncombed. He had to sit in the back all by his lonesome and he could have knifed me, happily.

The Yucca Towers was a better apartment building than I could afford to live in. It was white stone—not stucco—and had eight stories, which is a goodly height for this earthquake town. The three of us marched in, took over an elevator to the third floor, and closed in on Apartment 350.

I rang the bell. For a minute it seemed nobody was home, then Bradley opened the door a crack. He got one glimpse of me and tried to slam the door shut again. I heaved against it. He wasn't a big guy but I couldn't force the door open. Finally Blane threw his two hundred pounds into it and that did the trick.

When we crashed into the room I saw why Bradley was so strong. He'd had help. This other fellow wasn't any bigger than Bradley but he arrested attention. Very pale, with a thin, triangular face and eyes that were dark and extremely bright. His hair was stiff and long, combed straight back from a hair line that might have been drawn with a ruler. All that doesn't sound unusual, but actually he was. He gave us a little bow, stepped into the back-ground.

I said to Bradley: "You've got a little talking to do. About Charlene."

Bradley was a scared man. I hadn't realized it till he tried to speak. "She's—dead."

"Yeah," I agreed. "Did you kill her?"

"Certainly not." His courage suddenly swooped back and he started talking fast. "I was nowhere near LeMoyne Park. I can prove it."

"Then what was the gag of hiring me to find her? What did you want her for?"

Bradley edged across the room before an-

swering. When he came closer to the only light in the room, an indirect floor lamp, I saw that he hadn't gotten his second shave of the day, and the black whiskers looked like hell against his ashen cheeks.

"I didn't want her," he said. "I knew where she was all the time."

We all sat around and chewed on that for a while. Blane sulked in a corner. Mrs. Mac was content to let me do the talking.

"I've had about all the mysteries I need for a while," I said. "Let's have it."

Bradley glanced across the room at his other visitor, then said: "I wanted her arrested. She doublecrossed me on a certain matter so I was trying to get even. I knew she was going to sell you a stolen watch and I wanted you to know enough about her in advance so you could help the police catch her."

"You wanted me to do your stooling for you, is that it?"

He turned red, but nodded. "I knew she wouldn't give you a chance to get a good look at her. But I thought if you saw her in the peep show you'd recognize her again, even with only a glimpse. You could identify her for the police and they could trace her through the film company. I didn't want to get mixed up in it."

That seemed logical enough. I believed it. "Then who killed her? And why?"

Bradley didn't answer. He sneaked a look at the pale-faced man sitting in the shadows across the room. I realized then that Bradley had been edging as far away from him as he could.

So I did a silly thing. I said, very brightly: "Are you the guy everybody calls 'The Boss'? The magician who pulls the tricky crimes?"

HE WAS a magician all right. He pulled two guns as trickily as any sleight of hand I'd ever seen. Not one, but two. I saw him do it and still I didn't believe it.

"That's right, Mr. O'Neill," he said. He stood up, herding Bradley back into our little group with a motion of one of the guns.

"You damn fool!" Bradley cried. "I was trying to tip you off . . . He came to kill me."

I'd already figured that. I knew Bradley was afraid of something, before we came in. He didn't need to get quite so pale for me.

"Why should he want to kill you?" Mrs. McElreath demanded, looking a lot cooler than I felt.

"Because I knew he pulled the hold-up." Bradley was nearly hysterical for a moment. "I knew he killed Charlene." Then he took a grip on himself and all at once he was steady again. It was the damndest thing the way he blew hot and cold.

"Why'd you kill the blonde?" I asked him, trying to be indifferent, like Mrs. Mac.

"She doublecrossed me, Mr. O'Neill," the magician said seriously. "She was selling the watch back without my authority. I'd have been glad to do it, of course, but she didn't give me the opportunity. When I realized how untrustworthy she was, I decided to break up the partnership. Since she knew too much about me, I was forced to kill her. You can understand that, can't you?"

"You killed her because she was leaving you for me," Bradley yelled.

He gave Bradley a cold glance. "You don't really believe that or you wouldn't have tried to put the police on her."

They bickered for a moment, and finally I got it straight. The Boss—his name seemed to be Nixie—had only recently gotten out of Alcatraz, where he'd done a stretch for armed robbery and other things. Right away he hunted up his girl of other years, Charlene, and planned the Stowaway job. The trick, which I didn't fully get yet, called for her to be on the inside at the time.

She got in through Bradley. "She found out I was a member," Bradley said bitterly, "and fixed it to get acquainted. We had a few dates and then I took her to the club. We went back several times, so she could get the lay of the land! We were there the night it was held up."

"How did you get suspicious?" I asked. Nixie seemed to be thinking deeply, without taking his eyes off us.

"She didn't act right," Bradley said. "Wasn't scared at the time or upset over what she'd had stolen. Then the next day I was at her place when she got a phone call—from one of the gang, I guess. She didn't know I was listening. I got enough to figure out I'd been played for a sucker and she was going to sell back a watch."

That was when Bradley, bitter as all hell, decided he'd get even by turning her in.

And now comes the payoff. Nixie had seen her swipe the watch from the rest of the loot and suspected she was playing *him* for a sucker. Thought she was going to run off with Bradley. So Nixie knifed her in the boat. Then, tonight, having finally located Bradley—just a few minutes ahead of us—he planned to finish the job.

"But that's all changed now," I told Nixie. "There's four instead of one. You can't kill all four of us."

"Can't I?" he asked. "Can't I, Mr. O'Neill? I think I might figure out a way to do that, too."

I'll never be any more scared than I was at that moment. Because I believed him! I hadn't even given the possibility any consideration till then. I'd thought he was too bright to try four murders. I thought he could never get away. And I thought, too, that with the three

of us, Blane, Bradley and I, one of us would get him. Now I remembered that this was the guy who walked through doors, knifed women in the middle of a Lagoon, and produced guns out of the air. He had me convinced he could kill us all and get away with it.

That's what the power of suggestion can do to you!

But I wasn't the only one who was scared. Bradley went into another of his fear-fits and didn't come out of this one. Blane turned green at the gills and forgot his sulks.

Only Mrs. McElreath retained her poise. "Is it all right for the condemned to have a last cigarette?"

Nixie bowed to her. She was a wealthy, prominent woman and he was actually a little impressed by her. She found a cigarette in her oversized bag and hung it in between her purplish-red lips. She had to rummage around in the bag for a match then, because the three of us were too paralyzed to light her cigarette for her.

"I've got a light, Mrs. McElreath," Nixie said.

He never said another word. She shot him in the stomach without even taking the gun out of the bag.

NIXIE flung both arms around his middle as if he had a terrific cramp, which he probably had. He lost his grip on one of the guns. The other he tried to line up on us but he couldn't seem to get his arm away from his stomach. He turned sideways, trying to get at us that way. Then I came to and slashed his wrist with the edge of my hand. I read once you could disable a man that way. Hell, I disabled two men! I think I broke every bone in my hand. Nixie dropped his gun, then fell on it.

He wasn't dead, but he was going to need more than magic to save him now. I used Bradley's phone and called for a doctor.

"We'll call the cops," I said, "when I get the rest of it all cleared up. Bradley, do you know how he engineered the Stowaway job?"

Bradley nodded, still keeping a fearful eye on Nixie's twitching form. "Charlene let him in one of the emergency doors. He just walked through the main room with his hat and coat on, as if he were leaving, and got to the entrance-way while the doorman was telling the gang only members were admitted. He reached around the corner and pushed the button."

Look, try to see this from the start. Charlene goes out to the powder room. That takes her past one of the fire-escape doors, the kind that has a handle clear across the middle. You push down on the bar and that releases the catch. There's no way to open it from outside. She lets Nixie in. He walks through the gaming room like a patron going home. A hundred

people could see him and it wouldn't register. They'd never remember him, never look close enough to see what he looked like.

Now try to see it from the doorman's point of view. He'd worked there every day for a year. Opened that door maybe a hundred times an evening, more on week-ends. Multiply that and you get a string of numbers that looks like the mileage to the moon. There's one thing in life that doorman was sure of—the door opened when he pushed that little white button. He believed that, it was his religion.

But then all at once this gang was swarming in—and he hadn't pushed the button! The answer, *the only answer*, was that the door hadn't been open!

It would be the same if I flipped a coin in the air—and it stayed up there! The law of gravity suddenly ceased right before my eyes. What would happen? I wouldn't believe it. That coin has to come down! Too many thousands of times I have flipped one up there, and *every time it has come down*. I'm sold on the law of gravity.

So when I look for an explanation, I'm ready to believe something fantastic. *Anything*, except what I really saw—that coin hanging up there in the air.

That was the doorman. His mind was so conditioned to seeing his door open only in response to the button—and he didn't see Nixie push it—that he could readily believe they had walked right through the door. It must have happened so fast the poor jerk never did catch on at all. Even if he saw Nixie behind him, near the button, as he was going down in the stampede, his befuddled mind tagged him as the first one of the gang in.

"He didn't plan it to be a mystery," Bradley declared. "It just worked out that way. It sort of went to his head. That's why he sent Charlene into the dock after he killed her. Just trying to make a big mystery of it all."

That explained the "bonehead play" I'd held against Nixie. What he must have done was follow Charlene to the boathouse, then climbed into the boat with her at the last second. They probably quarreled out there on the Lagoon and Nixie stabbed her. Then he decided to make a production out of it.

He simply sailed to the far end of the Lagoon directly opposite the boathouse. There he lashed her hands to the wheel so the boat was aimed at the dock, crawled up on the bank and scrambled while the boat with its grisly cargo was sailing right into the dock.

THERE really wasn't anything mystifying even about the way he'd produced those guns a few minutes ago. He knew there was going to be trouble the moment we walked into Bradley's place. So he sat down in the shadows, slipped the guns out ready, and whipped them

up at the right moment. His tricks were a combination of circumstances, luck, smart thinking—and a lot of newspaper ballyhoo.

And now, he was twitching here on the floor with his life running out of a hole in his stomach, and he didn't have one single secret to call his own. There was something just a little pathetic about him, I thought. I knelt down and gave him a couple of drags on a cigarette, then went through his pockets.

I pulled out everything I found—a huge wad of bills, the usual pocket articles, and Mrs. McElreath's watch. He must have been carrying it with him ever since he had taken it from Charlene. It was very small and compact and he probably wasn't even aware it was there. I took it over to Mrs. McElreath.

She gave me a warm smile. "My name is still on the back," she murmured.

"So is Arnold's," I said.

"Let's get that settled," she said. "Arnold takes very good care of me and I'm not losing it. That comes first."

That was the picture. Her husband's money and position came first. But that money would also buy love for her. She'd bought Blane, she'd buy me.

I glanced at Blane. He was over at the table quietly stealing the big half of Nixie's wad of bills. Sure, maybe Nixie stole it first from him at the Stowaway but it was Mrs. McElreath's money to begin with. And you could bet your last cigarette Blane wasn't cheating himself.

I even wondered a little about Charlene. Both men thought she was doublecrossing them. Which one was it? Or was it both? Another fine, honorable character!

All of a sudden I thought that I'd blow my top if I had to stay another minute with such people. Sure, Mrs. Mac had *oomph*. Charlene had *oomph*. A guy could very easily die from it! I handed Mrs. McElreath her watch, dial side up.

"I just remembered," I said quietly, "I never learned to read."

Down in the hall I found a telephone and called Carpenter and the paper.

Then, late as it was, I had to talk to somebody decent. To give my mind a chance to air out. Katie's voice sounded a little surprised. "What is it, Hank?"

"I want to come over," I said. "Right now."

"Not now!" she wailed. "I've just washed my hair. I've got my old sloppy clothes on. I look awful—"

"I can't think of anything prettier than you with a towel around your head," I said. I meant it. I wanted to see her just like that. "I'll be there in twenty minutes."

I was—with a decent proposition! She took me up on it.

I never did learn Mrs. McElreath's first name. I've never even been slightly curious.

THE DOCTOR'S TROVE

By RICHARD DERMODY

Author of "The Doctor's Gander," etc.



I notice that the door behind The Buster is opening slowly.

There are a couple of angles I do not like about the Kozy Knook Kottages—the owner, Mrs. Bonnie Throop, and her daughter, Idabelle, who has been taking dead aim at me ever since we arrived. Not that I wouldn't mind a little bout with Idabelle in the Florida moonlight, but the Doc and I got much more important matters at hand—a ten grand matter, involving the Vanderbib diamonds.

46

WE COME around a turn in the road and there before us is a pink wall with a gate in the middle. A sign over the gate says:

ALLIGATOR FARM
SEE THE MONSTER SAURIANS
Admission 50 cents
J. Pettigrew Prop.

Another sign over to one side says: FOR SALE. The Doc snaps his fingers and chuckles. "Let us examine this enterprise," he says. "I believe I have the solution to our little problem."

Personally, I am surprised to hear we have a problem. We are holding over eight thousand dollars between us and we have nothing

A Doc Pierce Story

to do but sit around while it cools off—although I must say Florida weather in July is not too cool. The main reason we are here is because Florida is several states distant from the locality where we accumulated this eight grand.

I slide the heap to a halt and follow the Doc through the gate. Inside the gate, there is a little house with the front part fixed up like a store. A long counter is loaded with pocket-books and handbags and other gadgets made out of alligator hide. A sad-looking Cracker in white overalls and a lion-tamer's hat is parked on a bench. He holds out a skinny mitt.

"Fo' bits to see the monster saureens, gents," he says. He stows the buck I slip him in his jeans and lets out a cackle. "Be keerful when yo' walk along the wall, gents. Them saureens ain't had no fresh meat for a week."

We go up a set of rickety steps to the top of this concrete wall that is built around the lake where the monster "saureens" are hanging out. The Doc is rubbing his hands and I can tell he smells money, although from what my own nose tells me, we are just off Coney Island when the tide is out.

This alligator farm is nothing but a small lake with this wall around it and some other walls running criss-cross to keep the different sized alligators from murdering each other. About a dozen big bulls are grabbing some shut-eye on the bank just below us.

The Doc opens his swayback coat, loosens the buttons on his white vest and pushes his wide-brimmed black skimmer back off his forehead. He leans against the railing and stares at the monster "saureens."

"They are formidable reptiles, pony boy," he tells me. "I judge they would make short work of anyone unfortunate enough to fall into their clutches."

Well, I can't give him much of an argument on this. I watch these bulls for a while and then I get restless. "How about a little action?" I ask the Doc. "You could slide down the wall and tussle with one of those reptiles. They would probably enjoy a good romp and you can easily spare a couple of bites out of that haybally you are packing around."

The Doc just grins, but I notice he sucks up his waistline about six inches. "You are gazing upon buried treasure, pony boy," he says. "Treasure trove in a checkered hide." He slips a quick look at me and his grin gets wider. "One of my boyhood dreams was to have an alligator farm of my very own," he says. "Let us have a few words with Mr. J. Pettigrew, Prop. We cannot afford to let this splendid opportunity go by."

If I didn't know the Doc, I'd figure this Florida sun has been putting in some work on

his brains. But I can tell he has a little plan in mind. I am always a sucker for the Doc's little plans. I don't ask any questions, as he never lets me in on the details of a caper until he is ready to put on the pitch. We go back down the steps and the Doc halts in front of J. Pettigrew.

"I am in the market for an establishment of this nature," he says. "What is your rock-bottom cash price?"

J. Pettigrew opens his mouth and nearly loses his cud of chewing tobacco. He sits there for a minute with his chin hanging, then he pats his chest and lets out a hollow cough.

"Got to git shut of this place," he says, like he is reciting something he learned in school. "Got a misery in my chest. The sawbones tells me I got to git on out west where it's dry." He looks the Doc over carefully, squinting his eyes. "Got a bunch of good prime hides in that lake. My price is twenty thousand."

The Doc opens his leather and riffles a handful of lettuce under J. Pettigrew's nose. "Here is five hundred dollars for a three-day option at a price of fifteen thousand," he says. "Take it or leave it."

J. Pettigrew goggles at the Doc. His fingers curl. He grabs at the money and gets to his feet. "You done bought yourself a herd of monster saureens, mister. I'll git my old woman to write you out a paper."

WE ARE five miles down the road before the Doc says a word. Finally he snaps his fingers. "Wall-Street Walter is our man," he tells me. "Walter is always ready to make a warm dollar in the cool of the evening. I shall send him a telegram."

When I hear this I begin to feel better. Wall-Street is a capable operator. If the Doc is bringing him all the way down from New York I know he figures on making a good score.

We stop in this town of Mildew and the Doc sends a wire to Wall-Street Walter. He also asks a couple of questions of the dame behind the counter. When he comes out in the street he is smiling.

"This town is the county seat," he tells me. "I have a good lead on a location for Wall-Street Walter. You can wait for me in the car."

I climb into the heap and watch him cross the street and go into a place with a sign that says: CORNPONE COUNTY TITLE GUARANTEE COMPANY.

When the Doc comes out he is rubbing his hands. "Fortune has smiled on us, pony boy," he says. "I have just rented desk space in that office for Walter. A key to the door goes along with the desk space."

Well, I am getting more mixed up every minute but I just put the heap in gear without saying a word.

It is just after sundown when we pull into Kosy Knook Kottages, which is an auto camp we have been hived up in for the last couple of weeks. I have been trying to get the Doc to move somewhere else as there are a couple of angles I do not like about the Kosy Knook Kottages.

One of these angles is standing around the dining room when we go in for dinner. Her name is Idabelle Throop and she is the only daughter of Mrs. Bonnie Throop who is the owner of The Kosy Knook Kottages. Mrs. Bonnie Throop is the other angle about this outfit that I do not like.

Idabelle is a few years younger than me, maybe twenty-two or three, but she is no bargain in my book. In fact she is the last dame in the world I will have any truck with, although she is not a bad looking filly with big brown eyes and curly yellow hair. She has been taking dead aim at me ever since we moved into The Kosy Knook Kottages.

Idabelle leans over my chair and gives me a big smile. "I made Otis save two nice steaks for you and Dr. Pierce," she tells me. She leans closer. "There will be a gorgeous moon later on, Mr. Allan. A golden moon shedding soft and silvery light through the pale branches of the magnolia trees."

Well, I can't hold still for this. "Look," I tell her, "your old lady will be ordering Otis to dust my steaks with arsenic if you don't quit trying to lure me out under the magnolias."

Idabelle gives me another smile. "Your harsh manner does not deceive me," she says. "I can discern the delicate and fragile soul that lurks beneath."

I can't give her anything on this one, so I just tell her to hustle the steaks along. I glance toward the kitchen and I notice the cook, Otis Smelch, standing in the doorway looking at me. Somehow I get the idea that Otis Smelch does not approve of me.

This Otis Smelch is a gangly party with ears the size of saddlebags and a face that looks like they used it for a door-mat in a lumber camp. He gives me one more look and then goes back to the stove. The Doc lets out a chuckle.

"From that cook's expression," he says, "I would judge he is also an entry in the Idabelle stakes."

"Otis can make the running all by himself," I tell him. "I was scratched before the entries went up. Furthermore," I say, "if you have the sense of a billygoat you will get out of this dump before you get your own feet crossed on the turns."

The Doc just grins, but he knows very well

what I am talking about. The reason he refuses to leave the Kosy Knook Kottages is because he is putting in plenty of work on Idabelle's old lady, Mrs. Bonnie Throop. He shakes his head at me.

"Mrs. Bonnie Throop may be a trifle eccentric," he says, "but she has many charming qualities, including a large amount of ready cash." He lowers his voice. "I have been thinking seriously about her ready cash."

The steaks come along right then and I don't have a chance to discuss this subject further. The Doc gets very impatient if you talk to him while he is packing steak into his haybally. After dinner we go out to the little gambling room in the rear Kottage. Mrs. Bonnie Throop is running the poker table, as usual, and her stick-man, a party called The Buster, is operating the dice game. The Doc pulls up a chair beside Mrs. Bonnie Throop and offers her a fresh cigar.

THIS Mrs. Bonnie Throop looks like a cross between a house detective and a burlesque queen. She is a rangy blonde with plenty of padding, a pair of hard blue eyes and a rough voice. She is done up in a tight black evening gown that shows her backbone all the way down to her quarters. She is also wearing a black derby hat and puffing on this big cigar the Doc slips her. Altogether this Mrs. Bonnie Throop is a hard case and the kind of a party I always give plenty of room.

The Doc buys a hundred dollars' worth of chips and settles down for the evening. I drift over to the dice table and stand beside The Buster. It is still early but the local gamblers are already lined up and paying their dues. They are standing three deep around the dice table and every chair at Mrs. Bonnie Throop's poker layout is filled.

The Buster gives me a sour look when I come up. He stops yelling, "Money, money, money" at the customers and speaks to me out of the side of his mouth. "I suppose that fat medicine-show phony you travel with is also infesting the joint."

I just grin at him. The Buster has been around a long time. I know that he knew the Doc when the Doc was peddling snake-oil around the carnival pitches. I also know that The Buster has been taking dead aim at Mrs. Bonnie Throop and her ready cash himself. The Buster is all sore up because the Doc is beating his time.

The Buster is a stocky party around forty years old with a bull neck and a pair of mean little eyes. He is called The Buster because he is a capable workman around a dice table. Especially when there is a hot run against the house. In a situation of this nature, The Buster is very handy at ringing in the busters,

or home-team dice, and cooling off this attack on his employer's bankroll. I have also heard that The Buster sometimes carries firearms on his person and shoots them off at people who irritate him. The Buster is strictly a wrong gee in anybody's book and I am all pleased to see him sore up.

I watch the game for a while and am just deciding to pick up the dice when I feel a tap on my shoulder. Idabelle is right behind me, and for a minute I figure she aims to haul me out under the magnolia tree by main force. Then I notice she has a yellow envelope in her hand.

It is a telegram from Wall-Street Walter and he says that he will meet us in the hotel in Mildew not later than two days hence. I go over to the poker table and slip this message to the Doc. He reads it and then leans over and whispers in Mrs. Bonnie Throop's left ear. She scowls and shakes her head. The Doc keeps on whispering and pretty soon she nods. The Doc writes a note on the back of the telegram and hands it to me.

I read the note carefully and then I take Idabelle by the arm. "Look," I tell her, "I will meet you under the magnolia tree in exactly one hour."

Idabelle opens her brown eyes so wide that I almost fall in. For a minute I think maybe this magnolia-tree routine is not such a bad idea, at that. Then I take another look at Mrs. Bonnie Throop and her derby hat and her big cigar and I come back to normal. I slip my arm around Idabelle and give her a quick squeeze. "Don't fail me, baby," I tell her.

Idabelle gives me another helping of the brown eyes and lets off a big sigh. "We will drink in the beauty of the night," she says. "In one hour."

Of course I know that in one hour I will be drinking bourbon whiskey with the Doc and Idabelle's old lady, but I give her another squeeze. "Sure," I tell her. "We will burn that magnolia tree plumb to the ground." I

shove her out the door and give her time to get to her room. Then I head for the kitchen.

Otis Smelch is sharpening a big knife when I come in and when he sees me he looks like he would enjoy testing the edge on my gullet. He listens carefully while I tell him how Idabelle is really nuts about him but is afraid her old lady will be upset if she finds out her only child loves a lowly cook, especially one with such big ears.

"Then Idabelle is only kidding when she makes those hot passes at you?" Otis asks me.

"Sure," I tell him. "Idabelle is only trying to make you jealous and throw her old lady off the track at the same time. She just confided in me a couple of minutes ago. She is in her room now getting shined up. She will be waiting for you under the magnolia tree in exactly one hour."

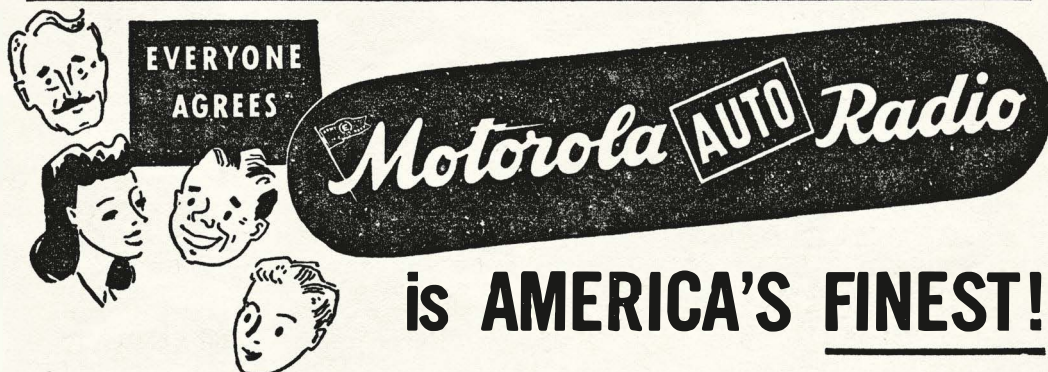
For a minute I figure Otis Smelch is going to kiss me, but finally he decides to save his affections for Idabelle. He lays down the knife and pulls off his apron. "I must wash my ears and put on my best white flannels," he says.

I HAVE a fresh jug of bourbon on the bureau when the Doc and Mrs. Bonnie Throop come into our cabin one hour later. I nod to the Doc to let him know I have got Idabelle out of the way for a while, just as he had suggested in his note.

Mrs. Bonnie Throop is a little suspicious. "Why did you insist that I close the poker table and sneak in here with you?" she asks the Doc. "I am losing money every minute."

The Doc nods at me and I fill up the glasses. He hands a dose of bourbon to Mrs. Bonnie Throop and hitches his chair closer. "We have a matter of the utmost importance to discuss with you," he says. "No word of this must go beyond the walls of this room. We are about to place our fate and the fate of a valuable property in your dainty hands."

Mrs. Bonnie Throop takes a big swallow of bourbon and leans back in her chair. "Shoot,"



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she says. "And it better be good, big boy."

The Doc goes right into the pitch. "First, I want you to read this." He takes a newspaper clipping out of his pocket and hands it to her. Mrs. Bonnie Throop looks at the clipping for a minute, moving her lips, then she lets out a whistle.

"The Vanderbib rocks," she says. "Two hundred thousand iron men in unset stones. All blue-whites." She whistles again.

The Doc shoots me a quick look. "As you will note from that clipping, Mrs. Throop," he says, "the police are baffled. Those unset diamonds are like money in the bank to the thief who stole them. The police must catch the burglar soon or they will never trace them."

I am beginning to get a faint glimmer of what this is all about, although I still do not see the pitch. I notice this look come into Mrs. Bonnie Throop's hard blue eyes—the same look I have seen in the eyes of a hundred suckers. She leans forward and her voice is low. "Do you know where those rocks are?"

The Doc shrugs. "Perhaps I could hazard a guess," he says. "I have a little story to tell you. I will begin by suggesting that there were two men involved in the robbery of the Vanderbib diamonds. One of these men was an experienced cracksman. He entered the Vanderbib residence and opened the safe. The second man, a person who might answer the general description of my friend, Mr. Allan, stayed outside the house and acted as lookout."

I open my mouth to let out a squawk. The Doc knows very well that I never have any truck with parties who open safes and steal things out of them. Then suddenly I realize what the Doc is driving at. I nearly let out a snicker. The Doc is watching me. He gives me a faint grin and goes on.

"These two men got away safely in a high-powered automobile. They stopped at a gasoline station not far from here. Two policemen happened to come along. The policemen came over to the car. These two desperate men leaped out of the car, knocked the policemen down and escaped into the woods." The Doc stops talking and takes another piece of paper out of his pocket.

I recognize this paper as the receipt the Doc got from J. Pettigrew when he handed him five hundred dollars for the option on the alligator farm. Mrs. Bonnie Throop looks at the receipt. I can see she is puzzled. Before she can say anything, the Doc goes on.

"These desperate men fled through the woods until they came to a wall. The man who had entered the Vanderbib house was carrying the diamonds in a leather bag. He scaled the wall and dropped down on the other side. The second man reached the top of the

wall and stopped, his blood chilling in his veins. The moon was bright."

Mrs. Bonnie Throop lets out a shudder. "Them alligators latched on to the guy with the rocks," she says.

The Doc nods slowly. His big red face is sad. "Yes," he says. "The victim uttered one despairing cry, threw the bag of jewels into the water and disappeared in a welter of thrashing reptilian bodies and snapping, crunching jaws." He takes out his bandana and wipes his face. I find I am sweating a little, too.

Mrs. Bonnie Throop is white, but her blue eyes are bright. "Then the rocks are in that lake with the alligators, huh?"

The Doc nods again. He tucks the receipt back in his wallet. "That is the story," he says. "Now you can see why I insisted on speaking with you privately tonight. There is no time to lose."

Mrs. Bonnie Throop narrows her blue eyes. "Where do I come in on this deal?"

The Doc hesitates for a minute and then sails in. "You probably noticed that the option on Pettigrew's alligator farm calls for purchase at a price of fifteen thousand within three days. Mr. Allan and I have five thousand dollars in a safety-deposit box in a Jacksonville bank." He stops talking and waits for the bite.

Mrs. Bonnie Throop takes another helping of the bourbon, thinks for a minute and then grabs the hook. "O.K.," she says. "So I put up the other ten grand. What's my cut, and how do I know you'll level with me?"

The Doc reaches for her mitt and pats it. "My dear lady," he says, "just think for a moment. We have placed ourselves in your hands." He hitches his chair a little closer. For a minute I think he is going to crawl up in her lap. "You will be the senior partner in the firm. Mr. Allan and I will go to Jacksonville tomorrow. On our return the following evening, we will meet you at the title company office in Mildew. You must bring your ten thousand in cash. We will place the entire sum in the hands of the title company, in escrow, and allow the company to handle the deal. In that way, everybody will be protected. We will become joint owners of the alligator farm and then we can take our time about disposing of the alligators and rescuing a certain leather bag from watery oblivion."

Mrs. Bonnie Throop takes her time about swallowing the rest of the bourbon in her glass. Finally she nods her head. "Sounds O.K. to me," she says. She gets to her feet.

Just then I hear a rustle outside the door. I look at the Doc. He is closer to the door than I am. "There is a tall weed in the grass," I tell him.

THE Doc is on his feet and at the door in half a second. I am right behind him. He yanks the door open, grabs the party who is standing outside and hauls him into the room. I catch this party on the chin with a hard right and then give him the boots as he hits the floor. The Doc turns this party over on his back.

It is The Buster and he is out cold.

Mrs. Bonnie Throop lets out a squeal and puts her hands over her eyes. "Please take him out back before you croak him," she says. "I always get nervous when somebody gets bumped off."

Well, I have to grin when she says this. I am the last party in the world to go around bumping people off and the Doc will not hurt a fly unless the fly happens to have a bankroll on him.

The Doc frowns. "There is nothing else to do," he says. "The Buster has heard the whole story. We cannot lay violent hands on him and we cannot hold him prisoner. We will have to cut him in for a small percentage."

Mrs. Bonnie Throop lets out a big squawk when she hears this. In fact she insists that we take The Buster over to the farm and feed him to the alligators right away. The Buster also lets out a squawk when he hears he is only cutting in for ten per cent. Finally the Doc gets them cooled off and we go to bed.

The next morning I insist that we leave before breakfast. I do not care to carry on a discussion with Otis Smelch and his big knife about the wrong steer I gave him on Idabelle. I tell the Doc about it and he gets a laugh. "It was a most lively evening around Kosy Knook Kottages," he says.

The next couple of days are not very lively. Of course this story the Doc tells Mrs. Bonnie Throop about the five thousand dollars we have in a Jacksonville bank is just malarkey. Neither of us will ever trust our bankroll anywhere except in our own pants pockets. We sit in the hotel in Mildew and wait for Wall-Street Walter. We have removed all our luggage from The Kosy Knook Kottages and we are ready to go when it is time to go.

Wall-Street Walter shows up on the second day. He goes down to this title company and sets himself up.

At five o'clock that evening, the Doc calls Mrs. Bonnie Throop on the telephone. She agrees to meet us at the title company office at six-thirty. The Doc tells her the president of the company, Mr. Murgatroyd, has agreed to handle the deal this evening as a special favor because we have only one day to go on this option on the alligator farm.

I am sitting in the office with the Doc and Wall-Street Walter at six-thirty. I am nervous. In fact, I am always nervous when we get to the payoff on a caper. When I see The Buster come in with Mrs. Bonnie Throop I feel no better. Especially when I notice a slight budge under The Buster's left armpit.

The Doc introduces Wall-Street Walter as Mr. Murgatroyd, the President of the Cornpone County Title Guarantee Company. Walter is a chubby party about the Doc's age, maybe fifty. He wears big glasses and he looks very well behind a desk—although I understand several district attorneys claim Walter would look even better behind a set of bars. Walter shakes Mrs. Bonnie Throop and The Buster by the mitt and sits down at the big desk.



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"Mrs. Murgatroyd is waiting dinner for me," he says. "Let us get down to business."

The Doc opens his leather and riffles forty-five yard notes on the desk. He lays the receipt for the option money on top of this stack of lettuce. "I am putting up a total of five thousand on this purchase," he tells Wall-Street Walter.

Walter has a big document on the desk. He writes on the document and then looks at The Buster. "I suppose you are the other partner?"

Mrs. Bonnie Throop lets out a sniff and opens her handbag. She shuffles ten thousand dollars on the desk like it is a hot poker hand. Wall-Street Walter counts the money, writes some more on this document and then tucks the whole roll in a big envelope. He seals up this envelope, writes out a couple of receipts and hands them to the Doc and Mrs. Bonnie Throop. Then he gets to his feet and holds out his hand. "I will place this money in the safe after you leave," he says. "Good night."

I TURN around and start for the door. Suddenly I stop and hold very still. The Buster is standing with his back to the door. He has a smokewagon in his hand and he looks mean. He is also looking right at me. "Don't start anything, pony boy," he says. "I will be only too happy to throw a slug at you."

Mrs. Bonnie Throop lets out a squeal. "What is the matter with you?" she asks The Buster. "Are you plumb nuts?"

The Buster smiles and jerks his head at Wall-Street Walter. "I figured there was something phony about this caper," he says. "When I laid eyes on that phony in the cheaters I knew I was right." He looks at Wall-Street Walter. "I was in the Big House the last time you came up to visit your brother. Your brother told me what a slick operator you are." He turns to Mrs. Bonnie Throop. "These three characters are in cahoots. They are just a bunch of con men."

The Buster is not pointing the gun in his hand at anyone in particular. Then I notice that the door behind him is opening slowly. All of a sudden there is a loud crack like somebody busted a watermelon. The Buster tips forward and falls flat on his face. The gun slides out of his hand. I stoop and pick it up. From what I have just seen I figure maybe I will need it.

Idabelle stands there looking down at The Buster and swinging this blackjack to and fro in her hand. She glances at her old lady. "Was that mugg going to shoot you, Mother?"

Mrs. Bonnie Throop shakes her head. I can see that she is not very clear about what is going on and I have to admit I am a little confused myself at this point. "I am beginning to think these guys are just a bunch of

crooks," Mrs. Bonnie Throop says. She scowls at Idabelle. "What are you doing here and where did you get that sappolo? That's a fine thing for a young lady to be carrying around!"

Idabelle looks down at the blackjack like she has just noticed it. "Why," she says, "I found it in the side pocket of the station-wagon. You put it there after you took it away from that deputy sheriff who was snooping around a couple of weeks ago."

Mrs. Bonnie Throop nods her head. "That's right. I forgot about it." She sits down in a chair and folds her arms. "Come on, honey," she says, "tell Mother all about it."

Idabelle gives me a hard look. "Mr. Allan played a prank on me," she says. "He sent Otis Smelch to meet me under the magnolia tree in his place. I was so mad that I was very nice to Otis Smelch. In fact, ever since, Otis has been pestering me to run away with him. Tonight, right after you left, Otis grabbed me and shoved me in the station-wagon. He told me he had a bag of diamonds and that he would sell some of them and buy me a chinchilla coat if I would go away with him."

Well, I am beginning to get more nervous than ever. I am holding the gun The Buster dropped in my hand, and I am just figuring which one I should bop on the head first, when I hear the Doc let out a big chuckle. He walks across the room to Idabelle.

"I take it you knocked Otis Smelch, the Vanderbib jewel thief, as cold as a mackerel with that blackjack. I also believe you have him safely trussed up in the station-wagon outside at this very moment."

Idabelle smiles. "That is correct, Dr. Pierce," she says. "Otis is still unconscious and he is also fastened to the railing behind the front seat with a pair of handcuffs Mother took from that deputy sheriff."

The Doc chuckles again. "I will go further. I believe that you read the newspaper story about the twenty thousand-dollar reward for the capture of the Vanderbib jewel thief and the return of the jewels." Idabelle nods. The Doc reaches in his pocket. "You are a true daughter of your distinguished mother," he says. "Have a cigar."

Mrs. Bonnie Throop snatches the cigar out of the Doc's hand. "Don't you make no cracks about me, you old crook," she says. She swings around to speak to Wall-Street Walter. Her mouth opens about a foot when she realizes Walter is not present. In fact, when Idabelle used the blackjack on The Buster, Wall-Street, Walter eased himself and the envelope with the fifteen thousand dollars out the door at the back of the office.

The Doc shakes his head at Mrs. Bonnie Throop. "We have been the victims of an

(Continued on page 96)

VACATION—WITH SLAY

The Crab Cay bunch had known Malachi since his salad days, they were all well-to-do and, despite their friendliness, there was a polite clan-nishness about them which excluded guys like me. A tight little unit, and to be ostracized by this snob-set you had to do something really bad—like committing a murder, for instance.

By **WILLIAM R. COX**

Author of "Slay-Belle," etc.

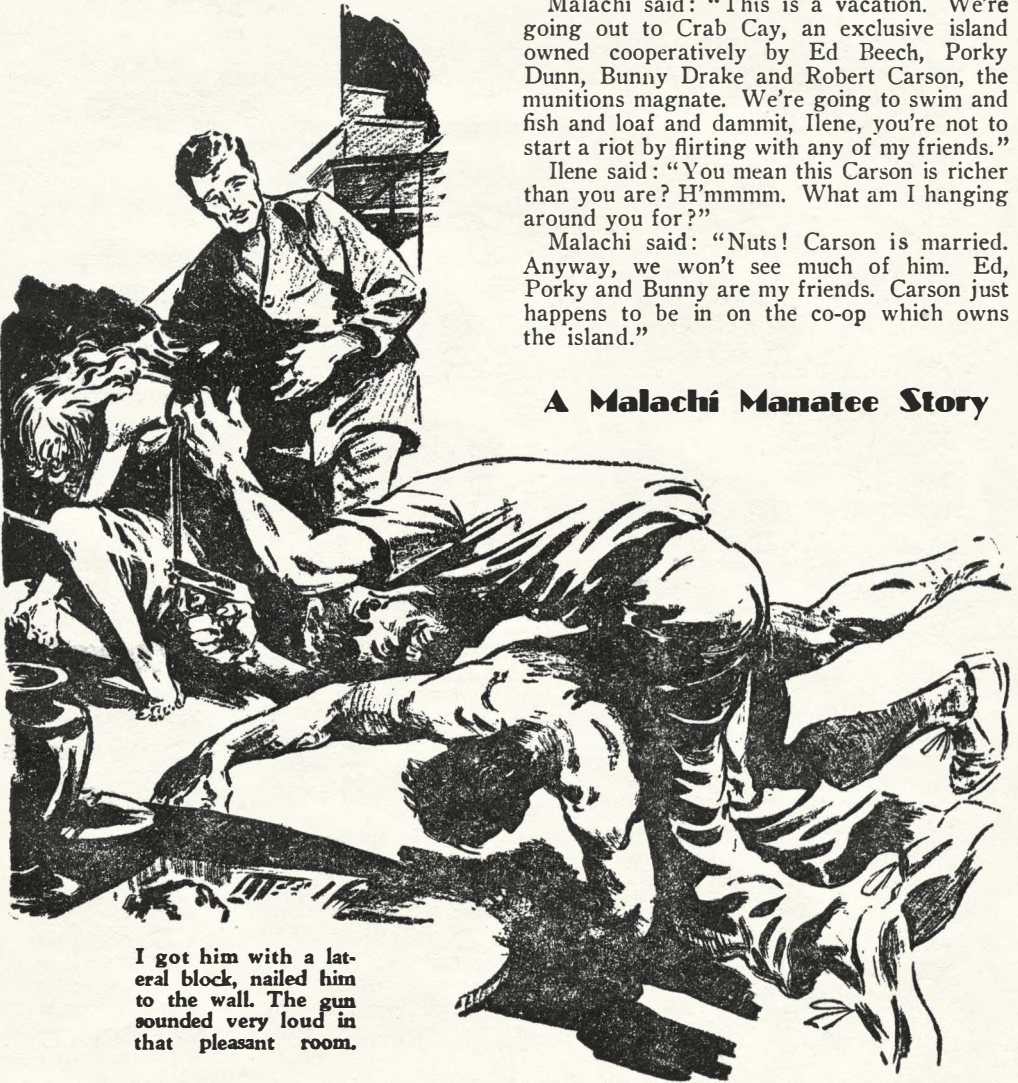
MALACHI MANATEE led us down to the wharf and cautioned us for the last time. He wasn't really talking to me. I'm pretty quiet and, if let alone, very reasonable. He was worrying about Ilene Carver, who is the most beautiful redhead in the world, but of an unpredictable temper and with no guards on her sharp tongue when aroused.

Malachi said: "This is a vacation. We're going out to Crab Cay, an exclusive island owned cooperatively by Ed Beech, Porky Dunn, Bunny Drake and Robert Carson, the munitions magnate. We're going to swim and fish and loaf and dammit, Ilene, you're not to start a riot by flirting with any of my friends."

Ilene said: "You mean this Carson is richer than you are? H'mmmm. What am I hanging around you for?"

Malachi said: "Nuts! Carson is married. Anyway, we won't see much of him. Ed, Porky and Bunny are my friends. Carson just happens to be in on the co-op which owns the island."

A Malachi Manatee Story



I got him with a lateral block, nailed him to the wall. The gun sounded very loud in that pleasant room.

"So he's married," mused Ilene. "All rich men are—except you. Well, if I can't get a single one, I'll take what I can get. I'm sick of stooging for a giant with a crooked brain . . ."

"Shut up!" said Malachi. He was really indignant and he looked like a tall, blond devil, with his inverted V eyebrows and his thin, ascetic features. We were almost at the boat, and I could see the three men lounging there spring to attention at sight of Ilene's curves and her shoulder-length bobbed locks.

Malachi said to them: "You know Miss Carver, I think . . . This is my guy, Tack Hinton. He was with me when I got my come-uppance. In fact, if he hadn't toted me away, I would have been rubbed out by those nasty little yellow fellows."

They shook hands with me, soft-spoken, tanned Florida men, all three recently discharged from the Service. Ed Beech was the leader, a powerful guy who had been a famed southern back, a clean-cut, ruggedly handsome fellow, with short black hair. Porky Dunn had been his block and he looked it—round skull, low brow, a big, good-natured grin for everyone. Bunny Drake was a little, sharp fellow with a nose like a fox and eyes half-concealed by heavy lids, which made him look older than the others. They had all known Malachi in his salad days, they were all well-to-do, and somehow I felt that, in spite of their friendliness, I was not going to enjoy this vacation Malachi had planned for Ilene and me.

There's something about these "scions of wealth," as the more sensational reporters limn them, something politely clannish which excludes guys like me, rough guys with no social background. As soon as we boarded the fifty-foot cruiser which Beech had loaned to the Coast Guard and had regained only that day, they gathered around the wheel where Beech stood and began reminiscing about old times.

I went aft, beneath a canvas shelter, and sulked with a Scotch bottle I found alongside a pail of ice and a pitcher of water. The boat picked up speed, and I could tell it was a hell of a good boat, even though I am a complete landlubber. Ilene came under the shelter and threw herself into a chair opposite me, her long legs stretched out alluringly. I mixed her a drink. She drained it, a bad sign, but I gave her another. Hell, I'd give her my right eye! I never will understand why Malachi doesn't marry that gorgeous woman.

I said: "Pull your skirts down, you're a big girl now."

She said moodily: "You're the only man on board who'll enjoy the view, so the hell with it! This is a damned clam bake for Malachi, but it's not going to be much fun or excitement for you and me, Tack."

She knew about the excitement and how, since the Pacific war days, Malachi and I, both somewhat crippled, needed stimulation to keep our minds from ourselves and our ills. Malachi limps in his left leg. I can't last very long at anything violent on account of my scar tissue. It irks us. Malachi was always a violent character. I was a professional football player and once something of a prize fighter.

I said: "Malachi pays the bills and he can call the turns for me any time."

"I know," she said. "Sergeant Hinton and Lieutenant Manatee."

"The hell with that!" I said. "We saw it through together."

She said: "Crab Cay. A hunk of sand covered with bungalows where the rich go native by wearing white pants for two days instead of one hour. Lousy with Scotch and soda—without ice. That's being rugged. I wish we were back hunting a nice, messy murder."

The little one, Bunny Drake, came up just then. His hooded eyes opened, then closed. He said: "Murder? Perish forbid! Wait until you meet Robert Carson, Ilene. You'll want to commit murder. His wife will be about your age—you'll like her. Only Carson won't let her play." He rattled on about Carson's great position in Washington, his political ambitions, his allegedly shady past. Bunny was a gossip little guy, it seemed. He was one of those snobbish fellows, rich enough himself, but envious of the richer people who sat in the seats of the mighty of the land. I left him to Ilene, who drank another Scotch and made no effort to listen, I was sure.

I FOUND a sandwich in a hamper and ate it. Malachi came over and we leaned on the rail. He said: "Maybe we ought to have a boat. Maybe we could have more fun."

"I don't like boats," I said.

Malachi said: "Look, Tack, I'm sorry. This was a bad idea. Now they tell me nobody can get along with Carson. Ed says he's a complete jerk. I think we made a mistake."

I said: "I've never punched a multi-millionaire on the nose."

"He has a tough chauffeur, who carries a gun," said Malachi. "Ed just told me. Ed's a very good guy, one of the few college friends I have, Tack."

"Sure," I said. "He seems O.K."

Malachi said: "Ed says Mrs. Della Carson is a good egg, but that Carson beats her down whenever she wants to have some fun. He's twenty years older than she . . ."

I said: "Ed likes this Mrs. Carson?"

"Oh, Ed wouldn't—I mean he's not that kind," said Malachi. "It looks as though we were going into an unpleasant situation, though. The island is small and Carson's

grounds adjoin his. If Ilene gets tight . . . ”

I didn't say anything to this. Ed Beech called Malachi just then and I sneaked back to find Ilene sitting with her eyes closed, and Bunny Drake telling her she was a knockout. He stopped when he saw me, and I knew right away this was no pal of Malachi's. Ed Beech might be all right, but this was a little gad-fly of a jerk. He lowered those eyelids when I came up, mumbled something and beat it.

Ilene opened one green eye and said: "Is it gone?"

"Like a wittie wabbit, he wunned away," I said.

"He's been trying to make the Carson woman," said Ilene. "He talks all around it—you can tell."

"So has the great Ed Beech," I told her. "Malachi gave it away. Malachi is worried."

Ilene sat up. She said: "Worried? In that case, I won't get too stiff. Maybe we won't be spending too much time on this damned island."

So we drank a little more slowly and only did away with the one bottle of Scotch. Then we sighted the island.

Crab Cay was small, but it had palm trees and bougainvillea and hibiscus and a bit of mangrove and it looked quite attractive. Ed Beech brought the boat in smartly, made it fast, and we all piled ashore.

The bungalows were in sight of the dock, and of course there were no roads and no automobiles and the air was clean and bright. It was October and the bugs were gone. Florida is a swell place and the Keys are wonderful without mosquitoes. We walked up a shell path and there were three bungalows about fifty yards apart, painted brightly, well-kept.

Malachi and I shared one of them, Beech's, and the three alumni took the biggest which belonged to Bunny, the littlest guy, which is life all over for you. Ilene had the middle one all to herself. She plunked down a bag, looked around at the comfortable cane chairs of a square, well-aired living room and said: "I've been in worse traps." It was a concession, from Ilene.

Malachi and I unpacked. The general rule was for everyone to be on his own, with no community activity. Each one got his own meals, whenever he wished, except dinner, which was at seven and cooked and served by Mama, a solid character in glistening ebony. That part was fine. Malachi and I started on a bottle of bonded bourbon and, as the afternoon waned, this seemed pretty good after all.

It was almost dinnertime when the ruckus started. Malachi and I were in the water, floating on our backs. We hadn't seen any of the others for two hours. Ilene, we imagined, was sleeping. The loud voices came from the

north, where Robert Carson's land began. There was a high hedge—a spite hedge—and you couldn't see anything of his place. But the voices coming from the other side of the hedge were easily distinguishable.

Thunderous bass accents rolled to us over the water. "I've warned you young wastrels to stay off my land time and again. None of you is worth a damn and killing you would be a pleasure and a virtue—"

Ed Beech drawled back: "Mighty harsh words, Carson. But neither you nor your tough friend is going to kill anyone."

A harsh voice said: "You hoid what d' boss said, joik!"

Malachi raised his head and eyed me. "Brooklyn?"

"Bronx, I think," I said.

Carson raved on: "Beech, you take your friends and get out. I've put up with you because Della knew you, but I won't be trespassed upon any longer. Now get out before I have you thrown out."

Malachi said: "This Bronx person must be very rugged."

"A gun," I said. "He shoots them off."

Ed Beech was saying coolly: "O.K., Carson. You're a terrible hog, aren't you? Sometimes I wonder why our national government tolerates a person like you."

They filed through a gate in the hedge, Bunny first, then Porky, and finally Ed Beech, who was grinning. Porky looked mad enough to hit somebody and Bunny's thin face was vicious with rage, but Ed Beech was shrugging it off. I had come in close to shore and was wading through the shallow water when I caught a glimpse through the hedge of the belligerent millionaire and his hired thug.

Carson looked spare and fit in a pair of wet trunks, with very little belly for a man of his years. He had iron gray hair and was not bad looking, although his eyes were mean. His bodyguard wore an ill-fitting sky-blue sports ensemble which did not match his bruised and very ugly face. His name was Katz and he was Bronx, all right—and poisonous. I knew what he was like in that brief second. A gunsel off the streets. It seemed funny that Carson should have a man like that around him, but then Carson was a very important character and a gun is a gun.

Beech came down to the water and said to Malachi: "Nice neighbor, huh?"

They all dove into the water. They swam out quite a way, saying nothing more about the incident. Malachi and I sat on the beach, where we could squint through the hedge, and Malachi said thoughtfully: "Now I wonder why our friends go over there when they're so obviously unwelcome?"

I said: "Look and you'll see."

A willowy blond woman was walking past

the gap in the hedge. She was undulating along sinuously and you could tell she was angry. She had an oval, piquant face and her hair was loose and she was built like a shapely eel, all fluid and lean, but with plenty of what it takes.

"Mrs. Carson, no doubt," Malachi murmured.

Another figure came along, hurrying after the blonde. It was an extremely dark young man, with sideburns, a neat black mustache and a marcel wave. He was pretty, too, in a Latin sort of way, and he looked very perturbed.

Malachi said: "Carson's secretary, Ricardo Perez."

"All that and your friends, too? Mrs. Carson must be quite a gal!" I said.

"She's got trouble in every line," replied Malachi. "For the small number of people it contains, this Crab Cay is loaded."

"And might go off any moment," I added.

Five minutes later, there were footsteps again on the Carson side of the hedge. The bass voice was purring, now. It said: "My dear, it was a pleasure to show you around. It is not often we are so honored. Now, please, I do hope you and Mr. Manatee and Mr. Hinton will come over for a drink around nine."

Ilene Carver stepped through the hedge and purred: "We wouldn't miss it for the world. Malachi's friends are so boring with their chitter-chatter. Thank you, Mr. Carson!"

I DON'T know which was the funniest—Ricardo Perez trying to conceal the fact that he was wildly in love with Mrs. Della Carson, the spectacle of Katz serving drinks like a waiter in a beer joint, or the way Mrs. Carson kept looking askance as Ilene poured Scotch down her gullet during the bridge game.

Malachi and Carson were in a corner of the long, high-ceilinged room in a heavy political discussion and the other four of us played hearts. Ricardo was so anxious not to give the queen of spades to his love that they were both duck soup for Ilene and me. We were playing for a nickel and a half buck, peanuts to them, and I won eighty dollars. Thus the poor triumph over the rich—once in a blue moon.

Ilene, who also doesn't have a dime, although she was born with dough, won sixty dollars. By this time it was twelve o'clock and Katz was beginning to look at Ilene with adoration as he poured her a drink from the second bottle of ancient whiskey.

Malachi dragged his six feet-six erect and said: "This island life makes me sleepy early. What say, kids?"

Carson came forward, rubbing his hands. He seemed pathetically pleased with the eve-

ning. He said: "Oh, have another drink!"

The blond woman, whose conversation was, I had found, confined to brief statements of her wishes, said: "I'm going to bed." She gave Malachi a look, glanced briefly at me, patted Ilene's arm, kissed her husband on the cheek, ignored Perez, who groveled, and waltzed her hips to the stairs.

The Carsons had a two-story, E-shaped hacienda which would have made a house and gardens magazine editor weep in his tea-with-lemon. There were six big bedrooms upstairs, each with a bath. They must have had the biggest cistern in the world.

Carson watched Perez bow out with many genuflections and rang the bell for Katz. The tray with ice came in and Katz said: "I gotta check d' power plant. See ya tomorrow, sir."

Carson said kindly: "Good night, Katz. Thank you."

Katz said: "I didn't do nuttin', boss. Them collechiate joiks—" He batted his slant eyes at us, stopped and went out.

Carson said: "Er—I know Beech is a friend of yours, and he's not a bad fellow. But that big footballer and the little snide chap are terrible lechers, Manatee. I've had plenty of trouble. I used to have white maids, but couldn't keep them here with those men chasing them all hours around the island."

Malachi said: "I understand, Carson. You're entitled to your privacy."

Carson smiled and let it go. He was a cool customer, and no nonsense about him. We chatted, and you got the feeling he was really powerful—I mean in the national picture—and that he was a bit of a fascist, too, philosophically speaking. Malachi, who walks the middle road rigidly, maybe a bit to the left in spite of his money, disagreed mildly with his host. I admired the whiskey and the furnishings and yawned, and suddenly we broke up. It was just one and the extra hour had been pleasant. I wondered if it was not because Della Carson and her Latin lover had left and I also wondered what the hell they had done with that hour.

We gathered Ilene and walked across the grounds, a couple of hundred yards to the hedge. Carson waved to us from his doorway and we went the rest of the way alone. Before we went through the gap in the hedge, the lights in the big house went out. There had been no lights upstairs, and Carson only had to throw a switch downstairs to turn off all the lights, leaving little phosphorescent buttons on the stairs to show him the way—a very cute arrangement.

We saw Ilene to her cabin and then Malachi and I went back to ours and got into bed.

We smoked a cigarette and Malachi said: "Carson's not bad at all. But why should he feud so with Beech? Ed is a very nice guy

who never went in for chasing the chippies.”

I said: “Porky doesn’t look the type, either. But Bunny—”

“Bunny is a talker, not a doer,” Malachi said positively. “There’s something screwy about all this.”

I said: “Something like Mrs. Della Carson . . .”

Then we heard the scream. The wind was our way and the scream was very loud anyhow. We both heard it plainly. It was a woman and it could only be the woman I had just so carelessly named. It gave me a bad feeling for a second, as though I had put the curse on her by mentioning her so contemptuously. In the next second we were pulling on shorts and canvas shoes and running down the path.

Ilene came out, fastening a halter around her neck, and she could run as fast as we could. Running is no longer my dish, nor Malachi’s, but we made pretty good time. We cut through the hedge and the moon stripped the sand with white and purple. Ed Beech was coming behind us, then passing us, calling: “That’s Della’s voice!”

Well, hell, everyone knew that! The Carsons had a Negro couple who cooked, but it wasn’t a colored woman who had screamed. You could tell, and somehow you could tell it was Della. As we ran toward the house, the lights suddenly came on. I saw Katz, sprinting from the direction of the powerhouse in the rear. He had a gun in his hand and was going faster than any of us. We were all terribly excited, of course. There is nothing in the world to raise the hackles on a man like a woman’s scream in the night unless it is a banzai charge by a company of drunken Japs.

We all sort of barged into the living room together, I guess. Ed Beech had slowed up, as though he needed company before entering

Carson’s house. But he needn’t have. Carson was past caring. He had gone to whatever heaven was reserved for munitions kings who walked with the great heads of states.

He was lying at the foot of the stairs. There was a scarf around his neck, a white, narrow silken scarf which his wife had been wearing earlier, and which I remembered seeing on the window seat behind her when we had been playing hearts. He was lying there, twisted and distorted and she was crouched on the steps, her blond hair disheveled, weeping as if her heart would break. Ricardo Perez was pawing her aimlessly, trying to quiet her and at the same time, keep from being sick to his stomach—a neat trick if he made it.

Malachi was leaning close to Carson when Ed Beech turned on his heel and abruptly walked past me toward the door. Katz, his gun pointed, snarled: “Stay right there, Beech! You an’ yer joik frien’s! Don’t none of you start fer that gondola of yours.”

Then I saw that Porky and Bunny also had arrived and were gaping from the veranda. Beech said shortly, “Don’t be a damned fool, Katz!” and made as if to go on.

I saw in Katz’s eyes that he was going to do it, and took off. I got him with a lateral block. The gun sounded very loud and sinister in that pleasant room. I nailed him to the wall and he tried to work me over with the gun muzzle. He was frantic with rage, and I think grief, too, as if Carson had been his friend as well as his employer. I slapped his wrist with a Marine Corps trick and he lost the gun. He tried to gouge and bite me and I had to clunk him one on the chin. He was still swinging when his lights went out.

ILENE had her handsome chin cupped in a calm hand. She said: “If he was strangled, why the blood?”

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Malachi said without looking up: "He was knifed, too. There's a hole in his chest. Must have been a sharp knife—it sure cut his shirt neatly."

I said: "Katz was right. Don't any of you fellows go away right now."

Ed Beech said: "He—he would have shot me."

"Just in the leg," I guessed. "As a lesson to you. Never defy a man with a gun. It's not brave, it's silly."

The three of them stood awkwardly, watching. Sudden and violent death in circumspect surroundings is so incongruous that people are always overwhelmed by it, which is why fewer murderers are caught. Little things are overlooked. Malachi and Ilene and I are not detectives, but we've had experience with murder. Ilene loves scenes like the one we were having. She's as cold as iced tea—just stands, looking everyone over.

She said: "Ricardo, leave Mrs. Carson alone!"

The pretty Latin sulked, but he was shaking too hard to talk. His jaws were clenched. But his eyes were not frightened, not one whit. It was his nerves, not his nerve.

Ed Beech said: "Someone'll have to go for the sheriff. It's a cinch who killed him—if it wasn't Katz."

Ricardo Perez stopped shaking. He was girding himself to get the business, of course. He withdrew from Mrs. Carson a few steps, leaned against the wall and managed to light a cigarette.

Malachi said: "Get our camera, Tack. We'll have to move him, but we can take pictures."

Ed Beech said: "Hadn't I better go for the sheriff, Malachi?"

Katz sat up, rubbing his jaw. He mumbled: "I'll take 'im inna next roun', so he'p me!"

Malachi shook his head at Ed Beech. He said: "If you will see to it that Mrs. Carson is made comfortable, we'll start worrying about the law later. After all, the murderer couldn't possibly get away, except on your boat or Carson's. And if he tried that, he would automatically be aspiring to the hot squat."

Ed Beech said: "But it had to be Ricardo—or Katz."

"Did it?" asked Malachi quietly. "Where were you when Mrs. Carson screamed?"

"Why, on the beach, walking in the moonlight. Are you kidding, Malachi?"

I wheeled on Porky, who stood open-mouthed, listening. I said: "Where were you?"

"Uh—in the bed, half asleep. She woke me up!"

Malachi was already on Bunny. "And you?"

"I was reading in our living room, so as not to disturb Porky," snapped Bunny.

"And you had all been doing just that for the previous hour, and can more or less alibi each other," added Malachi. "More or less! But any one of you could have slipped over here, waited for us to leave, then killed Carson. Any one of you could have!" He slammed it at them, and, coming from their old friend, it slayed them. They didn't even protest. They just wilted and took it.

I went out and over to our bungalow and got out the camera Malachi always carried, the good one with the gadgets I don't savvy. Then I drifted into the cabin shared by the three others just for the hell of it. There was no opened book in the living room. There was a shelf of books, but there was none lying around the room. I couldn't imagine Bunny pausing to replace a book in a shelf before racing to the scene of a crime.

I went into Porky's room, and the bed was mussed, but the cover hadn't been turned down. He may have been lying on the bed, but he was not in it for the night.

I went out on the beach and it was slick and smooth, the tide having just slid out: There were no footprints at all on it, and it was a narrow beach which would have showed footprints if Ed Beech had been walking on it. Then I went through the hedge and, on a hunch, I walked along the Carsons' beach. I did find prints there, and they could have been and probably were Beech's, but when I tried to trace them to the house I got lost in a maze of markings. Carson's beach was wider and the tide hadn't slicked it up that far, because his house was a hundred yards farther from the water than the bungalows. So I went back and handed the camera to Malachi and he took pictures.

That was when I first got a good look at Carson. His face was red, so he had been strangled before he had died. The knife wound had been fatal, but the murderer wanted no outcry and had used the scarf to make sure, I thought. It was a very thorough job of murder, one of the best I had ever seen. Carson had been caught at the bottom of the steps by someone above him, evidently. He was a sucker for it, that way.

It could have been anyone. It could, for instance, have been Della Carson. She wasn't weeping now. Her face was sullen and hard and she was over on a divan, her legs curled under her. She wore the sheerest of nighties and everyone pretended he wasn't looking at her because it wasn't decent with her husband lying there. But Malachi took a good look, all up and down her and into her face, and asked quietly, while Katz, the colored man, Beansy and Ed Beech carted the body upstairs to the front bedroom: "Do you want to tell me, or shall I call the law at once?"

She hesitated, then said: "It doesn't matter,

does it? He's dead. What difference does it make?"

"The killer has a better chance every hour," Malachi said. "The sheriff is a dope. I know him. Tell me, and I'll give you the killer."

"I don't want him," she shuddered.

Malachi said: "I do. It could have been Tack or Ilene, or me, you know. I don't like that. We have no motive, but this sheriff we are going to have to call sooner or later is a complete no-good. I've been rattling the skeletons in his closet and he would love dearly to throw me in the pokey. That would be a calamity, as I need this vacation."

Ilene said conversationally: "Nothing like a vacation with murder."

Della Carson made an effort. She was game, I thought, after all. She said: "I heard you three leave. I saw the lights go out and knew Robert had thrown the switch."

Malachi said: "Just a moment . . . did Katz throw the switch?"

Katz was rubbing his bruises, re-entering the room. He said: "I was inna powerhouse, see? Gotta keep d' t'ing erled and runnin' smooth. D' lights dey went out. Yeah, I guess he t'rew d' switch, huh?"

Malachi said: "If he did, he was in the dark, with the little phosphorescent buttons to guide him. He went to the foot of the stairs . . ."

Della Carson said steadily: "He did not mount the steps. It worried me, somehow. I got up and came into the hall. I thought I heard someone moving and called to Robert. A door—I think it was on the side, there—closed softly. I came down the stairs, groping a bit . . ."

The murderer went out on the Gulf side," Malachi supplied, "as you were coming down the steps . . . Perez!"

The pretty boy jumped inside his skin, but his eyes were still calm. "Yes, sir. I was in my room. I cannot prove that. I could have gone out that door, around to the back, and upstairs."

"Thank you," said Malachi. "Ilene, Tack and I were all together until we put Ilene to bed. At the sound of Mrs. Carson's scream, Ilene came rushing out of her bungalow slightly undressed. That's our story and we know it is true. You can believe us or not. Now, Mrs. Carson, everyone has placed himself—"

Ilene muttered to me: "Slightly undressed!" I like that! Malachi never misses a thing—but I was *absolutely* undressed when I first hit the dirt."

Della Carson said: "There's nothing else to tell. I stepped on him—in my bare feet. I screamed, I guess, loudly."

"Then Perez came from above," Malachi said. "Katz and the rest of us came in the front."

"I was dazed," she said. "I don't really know."

Malachi said: "Do you have a strong sedative?"

"Yes," she said, naming a sleeping tablet sold too readily in drugstores.

Malachi said: "Come upstairs with me." He took her hand and she went with him like a child.

ED BEECH came across the room, hunched a little, staring at Perez. He said in a low voice: "You dirty louse, you killed him."

Perez fooled me. He came off his chair and punched Ed Beech right on the jaw. Porky flew into it. Katz just stared, rather pleased.

Bunny squealed: "He hit Ed! He hit him!" As though it was a miracle or something.

I stopped Porky first, because he was the most dangerous. He bounced off the wall and then Katz came alive and covered him with the gat he always had handy. I got between Beech and Perez and caught a couple of harmless wild swings. I got a hand on each and shook some sense into them.

They had manners. They recovered quickly, glaring at each other, but not resisting me. Perez said: "I did not kill Señor Carson. He was my patron. I had nothing to gain by killing him."

"You're after—" Beech shut up. His face regained its normal color. He said quietly: "I lost my head, Hinton. I'm sorry."

I said: "I suggest you guys go out now and cover the island. Make sure no rowboat or canoe docked in here. Take flashes and examine every foot of the shoreline. Then Malachi can get this thing straight."

Beech said: "If Perez didn't do it, I'll apologize. But it had to be him or—or—"

I said: "Uh-huh. You're beginning to get it."

Beech said: "Come on, men." He stalked out and the others trailed him.

Katz slid the gun into a holster he wore under the flapping blue shirt, next to his skin. He said to me: "I gotcha now. You was full-back onna Gi'nnts."

"That was before Guadalcanal," I said. "Now be a good boy and give me that roscoe."

Katz backed away, shaking his head. "Somebody knocked off my boss. So maybe you're O.K., see? But I'm gettin' d' guy what done it. He's for me, huh? You can see how it is."

I said: "You want me to take it away from you, Katz, the hard way?"

"I do'wanna have you try it," he said. He backed up another step, which brought him to the stairs. Malachi, moving like a feather—bum leg, two hundred and thirty pounds and all—reached over and nailed him and lifted his gun.

Katz said disconsolately: "You joiks got too much onna ball. What if d' guy comes at me, now, huh?"

"What if you killed Carson?" Malachi asked him.

"Fer what?" asked Katz disgustedly. "I do'wanna mess with d' broad."

Ilene, who had found the Scotch during all this, said: "How impolite! Is she really a broad?"

Katz clammed up. He shook his head. He was the kind who could really go dumb on you and I gave Malachi the high-sign to lay off.

Malachi said: "I heard you send the boys off, Tack. That was good. Now we'll look around."

He turned on every light in the room. He found a magnifying glass and began going over the floor where the body had lain, down on his hands and knees, like Sherlock Holmes. Katz scratched his head idly, then muttered something about the power plant and went out.

Ileen said: "I see what you're at. It's undignified as hell, but nobody in shoes could walk on these polished floors and not leave a mark. Sand and shell from outdoors would be bound to come in with him."

I looked at the mat on the porch. It contained all kinds of traces. Malachi was drawing it a little fine. We'd all been rushing around the joint.

Malachi stopped, staring at a section of the floor where there was no sand at all. Then he got up, went into the kitchen and came back with some flour. He sprinkled it gently on the place, then blew it off, until only the faintest trace remained.

There was the outline of a bare foot, that is the outer part of a bare foot. It wasn't anything you could identify without those police measuring devices, but it was a bare footprint, all right.

I said: "All but one of us was wearing shoes when we came in here. Mrs. Carson had no slippers on when we found her. Nobody down here has got his feet toughened to the sharp shell yet, and everyone keeps rope-soled sandals or canvas sneakers handy all the time."

Malachi said: "I knew you'd be able to tell me. Now do you think Perez did it?"

"Why not?" I asked. "He comes down the back steps, out to the Gulf side door, walks in, barefooted and silent, stabs Carson, makes sure with the scarf, blows back—like he said."

Ilene said: "I got another idea. Carson turns out the lights, goes to the stairs. Mrs. Carson is waiting—with knife."

Malachi said: "I've looked for the knife. Let's look some more."

We looked. The three of us had got to be pretty good lookers for things. We looked very hard. Then Katz came in and his battered face was a bit ashen-hued. He had

something in his hand, wrapped in a soiled handkerchief. He said: "Inna power plant. Onna shelf behind an erl can. If he shoved it another inch, it woulda dropped down behind a cab'net and never been found, huh?"

The knife was long and keen as a razor. It was of Spanish design, a poniard sort of thing. Someone had honed it. It was one of the nastiest weapons I had ever seen.

Malachi said: "Could Perez have made it out to the power plant as Katz rushed in, then got back upstairs and down behind Mrs. C?"

We thought about that. Katz said numbly: "I ain't got d' skull fer it."

Malachi said: "Don't let it worry you. I know who killed Carson."

Ilene said: "You're full of—of malarkey."

"Language, dear," said Malachi. He looked more like a blond Mephistopheles than ever. "Pass me the Scotch. And relax, all of you. I'm ready to take you to the mainland on Beech's boat. Then I'll call Washington, get the FBI and deliver the killer."

It sounded like a nice, safe deal. We all took a drink, even Katz, who needed it worse than any of us.

THE three men reported to Malachi at our cottage. Ilene was already asleep, like a baby, in our bed. Ed Beech said: "Nobody came on the island. Nobody has left it."

Bunny Drake and Porky Dunn corroborated this with nods. They were still stunned and very wide awake, although it was now almost four o'clock. Ed Beech kept talking about all the angles of the killing that he knew. He was not naturally a voluble fellow, I imagined, but he was full of words now.

Malachi said very little. I got sleepy and nodded in the chair. I awoke one time to hear Malachi saying: "You all have to get some sleep whether you want to or not. Tomorrow will be a busy day. I'm bringing the FBI down here via plane. Carson was a national figure and they'll want to know everything about his death. You all want to be sharp with your answers."

"The FBI?" Bunny said. "Malachi, they're tough. Why not just the sheriff?"

The little guy was worried. It was so evident that I almost came wide awake. He gnawed a thumb, like a spoiled and petulant child, and I wondered why the others liked him so well. I decided, as I drifted off to sleep again, that he was just a hangover from college days. They were used to him, they had always known him and he did not break too many of their rules of conduct. He was one of them, and that was part of the business with these well-to-do folks. To be ostracized you have to do something really bad—like committing a murder.

The next time I awoke it was because Malachi was shaking me. His face was pinched and he was practically standing on one foot. I knew his shattered knee ached and he was bone-weary, but his face was very much alive. I got up and he said: "Over to Carson's. Make it quiet and easy."

It was just four-fifteen and almost light. Fantastic pinks were mingling with the dull gray and a cloud bank was the only thing that kept the sun from giving us a dappled gold Florida sunrise. Deep purples predominated. We went out and slid along the spite hedge and Malachi talked.

He said, whispering: "There are too many motives. Della looms as the first bone of contention. But Carson's start in life was in Latin-American trade, where he swindled some people, I guess. He quarreled with Ed and the others. Katz looks like a gunsel who could be hired. Della was always rowing with him . . . Rage, revenge, jealousy and possible gain from his death—they're all present."

I said: "It was planned."

"So is the next one planned," said Malachi.

I came really wide awake then. "Huh?"

"Too many people snooping around at the time of the murder," Malachi said. "Someone besides me has figured out the killer."

"Then whose number is up?" I demanded.

"The killer's, or the possible witness?"

Malachi said: "If I knew that, I'd act."

We entered the Carson grounds. Katz slept in a cottage to the rear of the big house. The servants were farther away and to the west. The long, low ranch-house lay humped and angled in stark isolation. I saw a figure moving. I said: "That's Drake!"

"Uh-huh," nodded Malachi.

"He's going in through the door the murderer used."

"Uh-huh. Run!" said Malachi.

That running was bad for us. But we got to the door Bunny had entered. It was dark inside the house. We stopped dead, listening. I wished Malachi hadn't left Katz's gun in our bungalow.

A moment later I wished it more devoutly. Because a gun went off. Again I heard Mrs. Della Carson scream, on a long note.

Malachi said: "Dammit! The fool!"

We went in and I snapped the master switch. Nothing happened. Malachi said: "Keep quiet and wait. Leave that switch on."

We crouched, waiting. Suddenly the lights flooded on.

Malachi said. "Ah! I thought so."

Bunny lay at the foot of the stairs. He was on his side and his canny little face was quite blank. There was a slight odor of cordite and it did not take an expert to see that Bunny was dead, shot through the brain.

I went upstairs as quickly as I could. Mrs. Carson was in the hall, wearing the same sheer nightgown and I had to look away, as the light was behind her and I am not *that* war-weary and murder-sick. I grabbed at the door of Perez' room and he was coming off the bed, pulling a robe on, seemingly drugged with sleep.

He said: "I heard her scream and thought I was dreaming."

I said: "The shot didn't wake you up?"

His pretty face fell into hard lines. He said: "Ah! I see. The murderer struck again!"

I said: "Come down and take a look."

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BLACK MASK



I led him downstairs. Mrs. Carson was alone in the room, staring at Bunny with eyes filled with loathing. "That nasty little man—what was he doing in my house?"

"Coming to consult you about your husband's death," I guessed. "He must have known who did it."

She looked at me and said stonily: "That got him killed?"

"Yeah," I said, wondering about Malachi. Then I put two and two together. It was about time.

I said: "Holy Cow! Perez, stay right here. Don't let this woman out of your sight!"

THAT running in the sand was awful. I was struggling for wind when I got to the hedge. I staggered through, my bad lung practically collapsed, and headed for the bungalow. It was touch and go whether I'd make it or not. I kept cursing myself without expending any energy, just cursing inside.

I had sense enough not to burst in the door. I walked up quietly and heard Malachi say: "If you've hurt her badly, I'll take you apart slowly, worse than any Jap."

Then Ilene's voice came groggily: "Just a slight tap on the noggin, darling. Ignore me and try to figure how to get the gun."

Malachi said: "He's not going to do anything. Tack's still alive, and Perez and Della Carson and the others."

I had to go in. I went around back, walking in the sand, my shoes discarded. I went in through the kitchenette. There was a little foyer and I tiptoed across it.

There was a swinging door leading into the living room where they were. I hesitated, gathering my strength, trying to regain my wind. Then a thought struck me.

I heard Malachi's voice, lighter and easier now that he was facing danger. He was always good under fire. He was just talking along, and it must have been tough on the man with the gun. He was telling a few things he had guessed and that the FBI could prove.

I had managed to get my fingers in the door. If I crashed it, I would be going in blind against a loaded gun. I wanted to pull it to me, let Malachi know I was there and get some cooperation.

The door hinge squeaked. I jerked it open then, knowing I had failed in surprising them.

Ilene was on the couch. Malachi was against the wall, his bum leg crossed over his good one, lounging. Porky Dunn was standing directly in front of me. I hit him so hard he bounced all the way across the room and out onto the porch, taking a screen door with him.

Malachi came away from the wall, arms extended, seeking a hand grip. I tripped and almost followed Porky through the door as my

feet skidded on the gleaming, polished floor.

Ilene came off the couch. She's a fiery-tempered young lady even in peaceful times. But now she had the empty Scotch bottle in her hand. I trimmed my sails, tried to carom off the wall and rebound into the middle of things, but I only succeeded in bumping Malachi.

There was one shot. Then there was a crunching, tinkling medley of sound. Ilene said: "All down. Set 'em up in the next alley. Damn you, Malachi, you were late in getting here!"

Malachi said: "Darling, I'm sorry."

"Well," she said. She looked at the neck of the bottle still in her hand. She said: "I shall keep this piece of glass forever as a memento of the time you apologized to me."

Malachi said: "I didn't think he'd go that far. He had all the motives for the first killing and one for the second, but none for attacking you—"

"The gun, you umpchay!" she said. "He'd got rid of the knife, and he needed something to kill Bunny with!"

Malachi said: "Bunny knew and you were wise to that?"

"Certainly," Ilene said. "Bunny was a nosey son. He was out walking, but he lied, trying to give Porky an alibi."

Porky crawled in, straightened up, stared at the man on the floor. He said abruptly: "I don't believe it. He couldn't have!"

Ed Beech was coming to. Malachi had the gun, wrapped in a cloth from the table top. Beech sat up, both hands in front of his face, his shoulders shaking. He was a handsome young man, slightly disheveled, but the kind of young man you can see in any high class bistro, sure of himself, drinking the best liquor, squiring the best gals.

He didn't look up at us. He kept his hands over his face and his jaw muscles worked. Porky said: "Ed! Tell them something—anything. Straighten us out, Ed. You can do it, old boy!"

There were footsteps on the porch. Della Carson came in. Perez was behind her, and then Katz. They looked at Ed Beech. They looked at Malachi.

I said: "Carson was partly right, partly wrong. He didn't like Bunny, he thought Porky was a dumb stooge, but he sort of thought Beech was O.K."

Malachi said: "That's right. Mrs. Carson, you can tell us something more. I assure you that Beech killed both your husband and Bunny Drake."

Beech never looked up, even then. Della Carson said: "He made love to me, if that's what you mean. Drake, Beech—but not Dunn. I don't know what's the matter with Dunn. Doesn't like girls, I imagine."

Porky said: "I'll be damned if—"

"Perfectly natural assumption," Malachi said. "Everyone else did—why not Porky? Well, I'll tell you—Porky is more like us. He has scruples. Small ones, but they're his. And he thought, in his own romantic way, that Della was unhappy and Ed Beech would eventually win her. He worshiped Ed Beech, always, even in school."

Della said: "I loved my husband. We quarreled often—but that was part of our life. We were both violently jealous. I was furious when he paid so much attention to Miss Carver."

Ilene murmured: "He never made one pass, darling. Just trying to get your goat."

MALACHI said: "Beech got us down here to cover him up. He had his scheme all planned. He knew how Carson turned out the lights himself, on that master switch. He went in as the lights went out, through the oceanside door, and did his killing. He went out the same way, doubled around the house, put the knife in the powerhouse while we were all running, ran along the hedge, followed us to the scene, then played his part in the aftermath."

"But Bunny was prowling. Bunny had a yen for Della also."

Della said: "He was—nasty."

Malachi nodded. "Just so. When I told him the FBI was coming, he became afraid and tried to tell you it was Ed. He knew it couldn't be anyone but Ed, because he'd snooped on everyone else. Porky was just wandering around at the north end of the beach. I found his footprints easily—there's a whole stretch of them. He was worried about Ed and Della—he's a very loyal and quite honest guy."

Porky blushed and actually shuffled his feet, like a schoolboy.

Ilene drawled: "So my friend here decides Ed will kill Bunny, but doesn't remember he needs to do it at long range. Beech comes in here and takes the gun. After he turns off the switch in the Carson house, to make sure nobody lights his second kill, he has to go back and throw the switch on again. He thinks Malachi and Tack are still asleep. He knows the scream will awaken them if the shot doesn't and doubles back to replace the gun after we all leave. But I wasn't quite out, so he slugs me from behind and by that time my big, dumb boy-friend realizes that I might be in danger—because the gun had to be purloined from here—and returns in time to get held up. Enter Hinton, the pride of the marines."

"And falls over his own feet," I said bitterly.

Ed Beech shuddered. He still hadn't un-

covered his face. His hands relaxed, slid down. His features were contorted, the lips drawn back from white, even teeth. He slumped sideways and curled up, kicking a little.

Malachi said quietly: "He won't die in the chair."

"He's been chewing poison," Ilene said calmly.

Porky Dunn lurched outside, hand over his mouth.

Katz said: "So d' joik's dead. He kilt my boss, didn't he?"

Perez put out a hand to Della, then withdrew it. He was a game sport and he had lost and he knew it. Carson's death had finished him more than if Carson had lived to quarrel daily with his beauteous young wife. Already her face was stiffening into harder lines, and grief was etching its indelible mark on her.

She had loved Carson, all right.

Malachi said, to break the tension: "I tried to stall Ed off by dusting that bare footprint, which was not his. It didn't mean a thing—in fact, it could have been anyone's from earlier that day. I knew it was Ed because he had the most guts. He always had the guts and he was always cool. Talking about Carson, he showed his hatred to me. Talking about Della, he showed his infatuation. He lied about his whereabouts, he lied about everything. But it was lying with a motive and it would have stood up unless the FBI could have dug up more than I could learn."

Della Carson said: "I once read that you can only catch a clever murderer if you know all about him and his victim. You learned the other side, our side, in very short order."

Malachi looked at her with respect. The dead body of Ed Beech, his old friend, lay on the floor like an empty sack which no one particularly wanted to notice. Dunn was being sick somewhere but the rest of us were, I think, relieved.

Malachi said: "When I saw you first, going after your husband, perturbed, with Perez following you, offering you sympathy and understanding you did not want, your side of the picture was clear enough."

Ilene moved forward until she stood alongside Della Carson. Her figure overshadowed the lean lines of the blond woman which seemed to have hardened with her husband's death.

Ilene said: "Darling, you must go and put on something and take a rest."

She put her arm around the thin shoulders and led Della away. I caught her eye and she tipped me a deliberate big wink.

Leave it to Ilene to remove any woman upon whom Malachi looks with approbation and respect!

TWELVE DEAD MICE

By **PETER PAIGE**

Author of "The Riddle of Papa Rio," etc.



CHAPTER ONE

The Man Who Murdered Mice

A VOICE from behind the hotel door invited: "It's open. Walk right in."

I walked in and the owner of the voice looked up as my entry caught him in the act of dealing four hands of draw poker. He said: "Hey, you ain't no bellhop!"

He was a squat man with sloping shoulders. His padded cheeks and jowls were the color of buttermilk. The fingers which flipped the pasteboards around the table were short and stubby and manicured.

I said: "That's right, Harry I ain't no bell-

hop. I have some questions to ask you for a friend. If I'd said my name was Cash Wale over the house phone you'd have said you were busy and for me to look you up later. But I can't wait. So I just knocked and said I was a bellhop. That's all right with you, isn't it, Harry?"

The girl propped by her elbows on the bed

Joe Vaccari had a kind heart and a lame brain and he loved his mice. He was afraid that when he got out of prison they'd starve, so he killed 'em—all twelve, one for each member of the jury that had sent him up to Sing Sing. Not a very pretty omen for the surviving members of the jury—but then twenty-seven years behind bars can do things to a man, can turn a harmless eccentric into a stir-mad killer with a revenge fixation.

giggled. I watched the three other men in the room. I wanted to see their faces. Then, when they turned to gape at me and I saw their faces, they didn't matter. A trio of solid citizens who had to look at the faces of their cards to read them, which distinguished them from Harry, the dealer.

I said: "Itchday the uckerssay, Harry. People are going to drop dead all over the country and it will take your answers to my questions to stop the slaughter. O.K.?"

It was not O.K. to the biggest of the citizens, the one with the tan and the chest. He rose and faced me with a great show of deliberation.

"Rog," the oldest of the citizens, a gray-

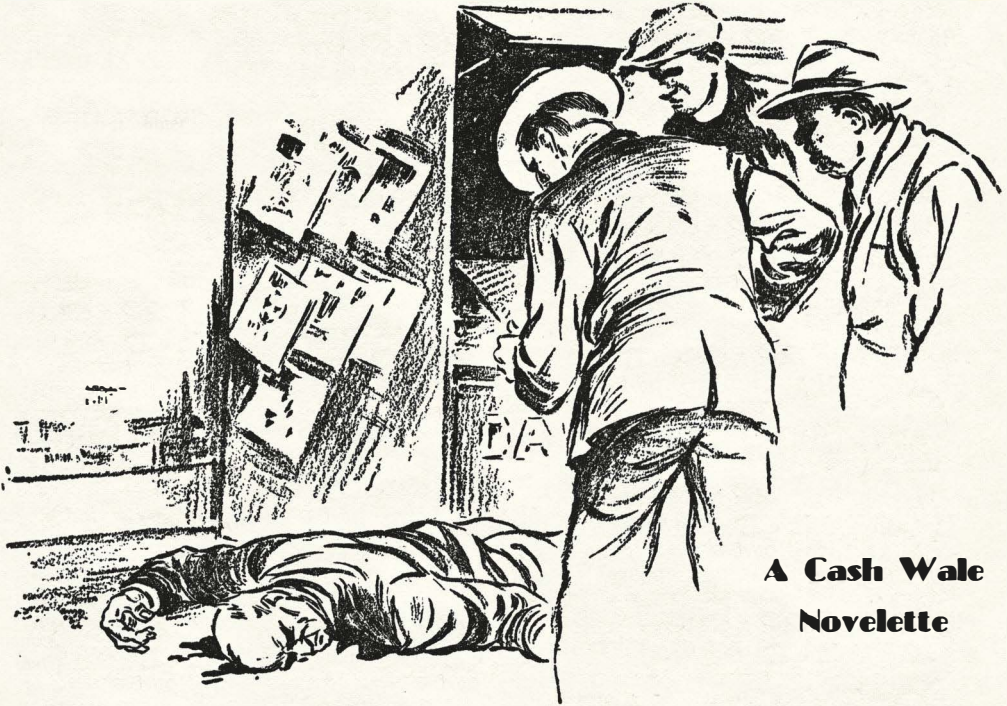
head with a mustache, told him, "phone the hotel detective."

Rog cast a quick glance at the blonde on the bed and drawled that he reckoned it was nothing he could not handle in person.

Under the blond waves was a pixie-like face supported by a structure including the necessary amount of bumps, dips and curves correctly distributed. The highlights were accented by a shimmery green dress that was a true confession.

"Don't fecl your oats, big boy," she told Rog, who was commencing to stalk me. "He says he's Cash Wale. He looks nasty enough."

Rog was not impressed. I showed him the difference between his six feet and my five-



A Cash Wale Novelette

On the sidewalk, just a few yards to the left of where I emerged, lay a gangling, crumpled, blood-spattered figure.

one. He became impressed. The difference was the .32-caliber revolver I had taken from my shoulder holster.

I walked around him to the table where the others sat frozen, their eyes trying to pry the gun from my fist. I fingered the backs of the big man's cards where they lay on the table.

"Two aces, a queen, a ten and a trey." I grinned at him, tossing him the pasteboards without examining their faces.

The queen landed face up on the carpet. He stopped for the others and pored over them, then shifted his attention to Harry, the dealer, who sat very still, his eyes riveted to mine.

I said: "The party's over. Why don't you boys blow?"

"Why, he's a crook!" the third citizen, a young towhead whose hands were better suited for pitchforks, ejaculated.

"Sure," I said, grinning at him. "Crooks have to eat, too. How much you in for?"

"Thirty bucks!"

Grayhead was out forty. Big Rog was only down twenty-five. The three of them glowered and muttered at the squat gambler who continued to stare expressionlessly at me.

I said: "Why don't you boys mark it down to experience and blow? You wouldn't want your friends to learn you'd been hooked by the same gag that put this man in Sing Sing thirty years ago, would you? Why don't you just pick up your marbles and blow?"

The squat gambler solemnly counted out three piles of bills from the stack before him and brushed them across the table.

The blonde giggled as the citizens reached for their losses. "When Cash Wale says blow, I'd blow. He's here because someone's paying him. As Winchell says, if someone paid Cash Wale enough he'd sell his mother to a Jap. Honestly, boys, I'd blow."

The citizens looked undecidedly at each other and at the blonde. They scowled at the gambler and my gun. But most citizens are allergic to being publicly exposed as suckers. And a drawn revolver has a calming effect. They talked it up a little. But they left.

I GRINNED down at Harry, whose second name was Campbell, and who continued to stare at me without expression.

"There's still a couple of hundred in front of you, Harry," I commented. "You came out of Ossining two days ago with a ticket to Manhattan and five bucks. Who staked you?"

Wordlessly, the squat gambler shoved the remaining pile of bills across the table toward me. I shoved them back.

"I don't want your pennies, Harry," I told him. "That was merely idle curiosity. What I'm after is the lowdown on Joe Vaccari and the mice. After twenty-seven years in the

same cell with the guy you should know some answers."

The blonde slid off the bed, thrust her feet in green pumps.

"Am I in the way?" she asked brightly.

"Yeah," Harry muttered. "Beat it, Mona."

"Stick around, Mona." I said, holstering my .32.

Harry Campbell deliberately tore the five cards in his hand into small pieces and piled the pieces on the table before him.

"What do you want to know about Joe?" he asked. "He's a good guy. He's a little off his rocker, but a good guy."

"That's progress," I encouraged. "How was Joe Vaccari off his rocker?"

The squat dealer brooded at the remains of his hand. He was a good brooder. He had had thirty years in which to practise while serving a rap at Sing Sing for stabbing to death a man who had noticed the pin pricks on the backs of another deck of cards.

Harry Campbell was only two days out of jail. He was on parole. And here he was, back at the old stand, trying to wangle an easy buck with a gag old enough to shave.

"In what way was Joe Vaccari off his rocker, Harry?" I prompted.

"He forgets."

"So does everybody."

"Not like Joe. He'll ask you the time and you'll tell him you ain't got it and half an hour later he'll ask you the time again. This went on for twenty-seven years. See what I mean?"

"It's a point." I nodded. "What else?"

"Sometimes Joe'd look up at me and say: 'Hey, what's my name?' It was like livin' with a four-year-old kid."

"That burned you up," I said.

Harry methodically began to tear the remaining cards on the table into small bits. "Nah. You can't get mad at Joe," he said, as he tore. "He's always pitchin' for you. Slip you his dessert at chow. Clean out the cell by hisself. He took care of me when I felt sick. He forgets—but he's aces."

"He sounds like a dope," the blond Mona said.

"Maybe too much of a dope, hey, Harry?" I prodded gently.

"Nah." The squat gambler shook his sleek head. "I know what you're drivin' at. For about ten years the dicks would drop in about once a week to ask him about it. But Joe couldn't remember nothin' about no dough. He couldn't even remember hitting the old guy over the head with a beer bottle to get it."

Mona edged her turned-up nose into the conversation.

"How much dough, Ace?"

"About two million, I think," the gambler said. "After a while I got sick of him telling

me he remembered nothin' about the dough. Always the same answer. So I stopped asking."

"So did the dicks," I said. "Maybe that's what Joe Vaccari wanted."

Mona pushed her streamlined self all the way into the conversation.

"Why don't you close your big mouth, Ace?" she drawled at the gambler. "You know what the peep's after. He's stepping all over you to reach two million bucks!"

"Shaddup, Mona," the squat gambler said patiently. "I know what I'm doin'. There ain't no two million bucks. After twenty-seven years in the same cell with the guy, I should know. If there was, Joe forgot where he hid it."

"How about the mice?" I put in, switching the subject.

Mona sprawled back on the bed again. "First two million dollars. Now mice! Anybody got a butt?"

Harry tossed her a pack of cigarettes and a book of matches.

"When Joe was released he was scared the mice wouldn't get fed. So he killed 'em. He had a very kind heart."

"All twelve?"

"Yeah."

"How?"

"I told you he was a nut. Three of 'em he chucked out the window," the gambler said tonelessly. "Six of 'em he strangled. And the last three he swung by their tails against the wall until they was dead."

"He had a very kind heart!" the blonde mimicked. "Omigod. Ace!"

The gambler turned toward her and spread his stubby hands. "They was his pets, baby. He caught the first one after he done a year. Then he got more. When one died, he'd get the cooks to let him have another to take its place. He'd give it the same name as the dead one. He kept 'em in a wooden cage he made himself in the carpenter shop."

"He was a creep!" The blonde shuddered.

"What names?" I asked, digging into my wallet for a folded slip of paper.

The gambler shrugged. "All I can remember is French and Watson and Lofuso and Arien and Cohen and—I guess that's all."

"How about these?" I asked, reading from the slip of paper. "Humphrey, Escourt, Reale, Flint, Charney, Benoit and Gault?"

"That's the lot!" the squat gambler assented. "He always kept an even dozen, always used the same names. I once asked Joe why he used those names. He said they was good names for mice."

I said: "Now tell me the names of the

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mice he strangled, the names of those he chucked out the window and so on."

Harry, the dealer, shook his head slowly. "I can't tell you that, mister. To me a mouse is a mouse. I was glad to see 'em go. It gave me the willies to hear Joe talkin' to 'em and callin' 'em by name."

I said: "It's funny he remembered their names when he kept forgetting his own, don't you think?"

"I never thought of that," Harry said slowly, broodingly.

I BROODED back at him and then he said: "Listen, mister, I talked. You have me over a barrel with these pin marks. I'm out on parole and can't stand a beef. So I talked, which way."

"I'll do that," I said easily. "But first I want to show you this picture."

I produced a snapshot from my wallet. He nodded vigorously.

Why don't you ask Joe these questions? Talk to Joe. He'll tell you which mice was killed "That's Joe!"

I said: "What happened to the mice?"

He shrugged his sloping shoulders. "I think they went out with the garbage. I was glad to see 'em go." His eyes widened. "You shouldn't have done that," he said.

He closed his eyes and slowly nodded his chin to his chest.

"Done what, Harry?" I asked.

The squat gambler remained motionless and the blonde touched his shoulder.

"Stop talking riddles, Ace. Done what?"

The squat gambler slid slowly off the chair until he lay on his side on the carpet.

The door was open wide. The corridor was empty.

I could hear the rickety elevator in motion. I pressed the up and down buttons. After about two minutes the door creaked open revealing the grizzled operator in his cage.

"Who'd you just take down off this floor?"

I asked him.

"Nobody," he grunted. "You goin' down?"

"Who was your last passenger in that squirrel cage?" I pressed.

"Mrs. Ellsworth from the next floor. You goin' down?"

I said: "There's a stairway down?"

The old man blew his top. "Dagnation, if you wanna walk down, why'd you ring me, willya tell me that?"

He slammed the door and I went back to the gambler's room. The blonde looked up from where the gambler lay on the carpet.

"He's dead, Peep."

She was not frightened. Her eyes, in fact, had grown particularly sharp.

The few hundred dollars were gone from the table.

I knelt by her side and found the tiny bullet wound inside his shirt that she had already discovered. It could have been done with a .25, a silenced .25 from the open doorway. Mona and I had been looking at Harry and the squat gambler had been looking at me. Hirohito could have stood in that doorway and fired a howitzer without being noticed.

"You don't look sorry," I told Mona.

"Why should I look sorry? I gave him a manicure yesterday. He propositioned me to talk up his game. He said he was hot with cards. I dropped in this afternoon to see if it was worth while. It wasn't."

"Who staked him? He came out of Sing Sing with a train ticket and a five-dollar bill."

"How should I know? He flashed a grand yesterday."

I said: "O.K. Mona, you have his dough. Why don't you beat it?"

We had been talking across the motionless body. Now I rose and deliberately prowled the room. The bureau drawers contained several decks of cards, two changes of socks and underwear, three shirts that had never been worn, some clean and dirty handkerchiefs, various odds and ends that go under the heading of "toilettries" and a rabbit's foot. The solitary suitcase was empty.

I walked back to look down at the body, but Mona slipped between us. She put both hands on my shoulders and drew herself close to me. "Don't brush me off like that, honey," she pouted. "We're in this together up to here. Let's ride it together all the way."

"All the way to the two million?" I grinned at her.

"Don't be like that," she murmured, closing the few inches between her lips and mine.

Three hours later she drew her lips back an inch and murmured: "I know girls in barber shops all over town, honey. Everybody gets haircuts. You let me have that picture you showed Ace and I'll find this Joe Vaccari a lot sooner than you will."

We parted on Lexington Avenue. The bright afternoon sunlight made her cheeks too white and her lips too red. We parted partners. She had the picture from my wallet and I had her promise to look me up the moment she found a trace of Joe Vaccari.

She may be looking yet. The picture was one of myself taken fifteen years earlier when I still had all my hair.

I never saw her again.

CHAPTER TWO

"Twenty-seven Years of Hell"

THERE was a crowd outside Mindy's famous eatery on the Stem. There is usually a crowd outside Mindy's and this one was for

the usual reason—celebrities were visible through the plate glass and the citizens were having themselves a free look.

It became personal when I elbowed through the mob and saw that these particular celebrities were Tony Escourt and Sailor Duffy. I fought my way through the door and to their window-side table where Sailor Duffy was telling Tony Escourt how he had once put Dempsey on the canvas for a six count.

He was telling it with gestures when I scowled into the exhibition and appropriated the third chair at the table. Sailor poised a left hook in midair and rumbled: "Aw, Cash, I'm tellin' Tony how I would'a been champ if I didn' forget t'duck."

"Skip it," I told him. "He probably saw the fight anyhow." I told Tony Escourt: "Listen, Hollywood, if you pay me for protection you don't make like a clay pigeon in a Broadway window. Either exercise your instinct of self preservation or let's call the whole deal off."

Mindy, in person, appeared at my elbow. Behind him lounged two of his muscles.

"Any trouble, Mr. Escourt?"

Tony Escourt smiled blandly. He nodded at Sailor and me and rose.

"None at all, Mindy," he said smoothly. "We were just looking for a less"—he looked out the window at his audience and favored it with one of those smiles that used to make your mama wonder what the hell she ever saw in papa—"less conspicuous location. If it is possible?"

It was possible. We were ushered to a booth in the rear where I could sit and face all comers.

His name was not Tony Escourt, but you know him. You have gazed into his wide, limpid eyes. Your attention has been held by his thin, aristocratic shnozle, his cleft chin, the dabs of silver at his temples.

If your age is right you have seen him throw custard pies into the face of Chaplin, you have seen him shoot it out with William S. Hart. You have probably seen him kiss Garbo, father Mickey Rooney and administer the last rites to Edward G. Robinson.

And, from the time you learned to read, you have been seeing his name at the beginning of pictures, after: *produced by—*

He's *that* Tony Escourt.

I told him: "Listen, Hollywood, when I took this job it was just an easy touch. I figured you had the jitters over some crank's gag and why shouldn't I make the best of it as long as your jitters lasted? But now I'm telling you your hunch about the mouse was legit. Joe Vaccari nursed a dozen mice in his cell and he gave them names. Your name for one."

Escourt's brows climbed. "A *dosen* mice?"

"The others were named after the eleven other guys on the jury," I said. "When he was turned loose he killed all twelve of the mice. You still have the note that came with the package?"

The actor-producer had it in his checked jacket pocket. It had been put together out of newspaper headlines and crudely pasted on a sheet of cheap notepaper.

It read: TWENTY-SEVEN YEARS OF HELL.

In the package along with the note, the actor-producer had found the corpse of a mouse.

Sailor Duffy said: "Why should a guy kill a mouse, Cash? Huh, Cash?"

Sailor had put Dempsey on the canvas for a six count, but now he ducked hooks that weren't there. He was my headache, my pal, and the other half of the Cash Wale Investigation Service. His current task was to guard Tony Escourt from possible mayhem.

I told him: "Listen, dope, let me be the mind on this job. All you're supposed to do is keep Hollywood from places like windows on Broadway. Where else you been today?"

"We been to the movies, Cash. Boy, Tony acts good! You oughta see him, Cash. He cleans up a gang o' Japs wit' one arm busted!"

"Wonderful," I said drily. "You just clean up anyone who tries to clean up Hollywood. Hollywood will pay all fines. Get me?"

"O.K., Cash!"

The actor-producer was brooding over the note.

"The painful thing about this," he said, raising those large eyes to mine, "is that the public may misconstrue any publicity resulting from this. Instead of a released prisoner harassing a juror responsible for his conviction, the public may regard it as persecution of an already beaten ex-con by a wealthy and influential man. I need not tell you how little I, or any one else in the cinema, can afford that."

"That's why you're paying me instead of the big agencies." I shrugged. "A big agency, or the cops, would find Joe Vaccari a lot faster than me. They'd get to the remaining jurors ahead of me. But you don't want the noise they'd make, so it's my job and I have to take one step at a time. You have no picture of Vaccari and that makes it tough.

"What makes it tougher," I said, "is that, according to the State Police, Joe Vaccari disappeared half an hour after they turned him loose last week. They had a man on him, still after the missing two million. A truck blocked their Trooper's car while Vaccari calmly stepped into a waiting sedan and got away clean."

Tony Escourt gaped. "Confederates?"

That's incredible, Wale. If you knew the man—"

"I know, I know," I said. "A dope. A moron. A lamebrain. But he managed to stash away two million bucks in spite of everybody's efforts to unstash the dough and that, for the time being, rates him one notch above Einstein in my book. Now, for a start, how about locating the rest of that jury for me?"

We spent the next hour muddling over that with the aid of a phone book and some long-distance phone conversations with citizens of the town of Northfield, a suburb fifty miles north of Manhattan.

We tore into some herrings, for which Mindy's is famous, and warded off autograph hounds. After an hour, I had one definite address and one potential one and the information that, of the six surviving jurors who had sent Joe Vaccari to Sing Sing, four had migrated to Manhattan and one had remained in Northfield. Tony Escourt was the sixth.

"Maybe Cohen or Charney could give you a line on Gault and Reale," the actor-producer suggested.

"Maybe they can," I told him, pushing aside my plate. "I'll try Cohen first."

I waited for Sailor to lead Escourt out the rear exit before I emerged on Broadway and pushed myself through the crowd which was now ogling a girl who looked like Lauren Bacall but wasn't.

THE third pawnshop on Mulberry Street belonging to an I. Cohen was it. I knew that when the wrinkled, graybearded man became alert as I told him: "You're the Cohen from Northfield, right?"

He nodded and emerged from the gloom of his shop—a mess of watches, saxophones, guns, rings, hardware, binoculars, etc.

"Yes?" he said, peering at me through watery eyes. "I am not remembering you."

I smiled at him and produced a notebook and pencil.

"Of course not, Mr. Cohen. You were there before my time. Smith, of the Northfield *Clarion*. It seems some practical joker is annoying former Northfield citizens and my editor sent me after the story. Something about dead mice—"

The old man's features came alive. "A joker, you saying? Sadie! Sadie—" An elderly woman emerged from the rear of the shop rubbing her red hands on an apron. "Sadie," the old man said to her, "this man from Northfield is saying the mouse is only a joke. To others the joker is sending it also."

The woman said: "What kind of a joke is it to send a poor little mouse in the mail, will you tell me that?"

I said: "The people who are getting the

mice seem to have served on the jury that tried Joe Vaccari twenty-seven—"

That hit the old man's memory bell.

"Ja, of course! I'm a *dumkopf!* Twenty-seven years of hell," the note said. Twenty-seven years ago Joe was sent to jail."

I said: "Do you remember being on that jury, Mr. Cohen?"

"Do I remember! You know who is the foreman from this jury? Tony Escourt! You know who else is on it? Edward J. Charney! You know who is Edward J. Charney?"

"I know Charney," I said. "Publishes the *Daily Press*. What I want to know, Mr. Cohen, is whether you can remember anything about the trial that might lead to these dead mice. Did Joe Vaccari threaten the jurors—anything like that?"

The old man dismissed the idea with gestures.

"Not Joe, Mr. Smith. Drunk or sober, except that one time, Joe would not so much as hurt a fly. Anyhow, Joe had a feeble brain. Our names alone he couldn't remember twenty-seven years. No, this is some joker."

"Isn't it a pretty queer kind of joke?"

The old man's shoulders lifted delicately. "Who is ever explaining jokers, Mr. Smith?"

I said: "O.K. One more thing—I'm trying to locate the rest of that jury. Three names stump me. Gault, Humphrey and Reale."

"Humphrey I don't know," the old man mumbled. "He was a reporter from your own paper. Gault, he comes in to pawn his sax now and then."

"How about Reale?"

The old man's face blackened. "A *gonniff*, Mr. Smith, strictly a no good. Better he should be dead!"

As I left the pawnshop with two addresses, the old man was still muttering about Charles Reale. I nearly bumped into a small, white-haired man who eyed me timidly from behind horn-rimmed glasses.

"Excuse me, please," he said.

"Skip it," I replied, and continued along the pushcart-lined street toward the subway.

I should have followed that little man into I. Cohen's pawnshop. It would have prevented several untimely deaths and removed the heat of the hot seat from my seat.

But how was I to know what Joe Vaccari looked like?

I SPOTTED Freddie Gault ten minutes after I was seated. It was a black and white joint in lower Harlem, and the color motif swept right through the dive which, appropriately enough, was named the Checker Club. The girl who took my hat was a red-headed toothpick. The headwaiter was coal black. Mixed couples swayed in tight clinches to a lazy sort of boogie. Even the band ranged

in color from deep ebony to creamy vanilla.

The blond stringbean hunched over the sax was my man. I waited for the number to hit the last bar, then I drifted over to him. Up close, he looked his fifty years. He chewed gum to the music and let his shoulders jerk mechanically to the rhythm. When I touched him, and his eyes turned toward me, I saw that their pupils were abnormally large.

When I spoke to him he smiled dreamily.

"Izzy Cohen? Yeah, I know Izzy. Listen to this next number. It wiggles in the groove."

He winked and I backed off while the band jazzed into its next drawling boogie. A white waiter touched my shoulder and asked if I was "Lookin' or drinkin'."

I followed him to a table and ordered a double rye. A girl who was the shade of well creamed coffee slid into the chair across from mine and told the waiter: "Make it two, Willie."

I said: "Two checks, Willie."

Her lips rolled back revealing large white teeth. Laughter bubbled easily from her.

"Goodness gracious, yes. Make it two checks, Willie. No, make it one check, Willie, and give *me* the check!" In almost the same breath her voice sank to a whisper and she said: "What do you want with my boy?"

I let my eyes slide to the blond sax drooler and she nodded solemnly. Her pupils, too, now that I examined them, were abnormally large.

"He's a pretty old boy," I said.

"You ain't answered my question," she said.

Willie arrived with the drinks. We drank them without releasing our hold on each other's eyes.

"Aw, hell!" I said. "I'm not after him. He can drag reefers until he goes up in smoke. I just want to find out if he sees mice. O.K.?"

"He sees *which*?"

"Mice."

"That's what I thought you said." She raised her eyes over my head and said, in the same tone of voice: "He was botherin' my Golden Boy, Angel. I thought you fixed all that."

Behind me stood the largest, blackest Negro I have ever seen. His tuxedo stretched taut as he stooped over to peer into my face.

"Ah don' make him, chile," he rumbled in a voice that emerged from the basement.

I said: "What's the difference? Let's bring Gault over. I want to ask him some questions that go back twenty-seven years. You can listen if you want."

The black Angel said: "Tha's reasonable,



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chile. Ah done paid off the locals, an' they'd tip me off if the Feds were crawlin' aroun'. Le's get th' Golden Boy."

Angel signaled Willie, the white waiter, who, in turn, walked over and tapped Gault's shoulder. And then there were four of us seated around the little table and nobody mentioned another thing about liquor. Gault slid his arm around the tan girl.

"My jive baby," he said, winking at me. "You're the fellow who mentioned Izzy Cohen. What's this about mice?"

I said: "If you don't know, that's your answer. That is, if you *are* the Freddie Gault from Northfield?"

The black Angel shuffled smoky eyes around the table.

"Ah don' get it."

"That makes two of us," the coffee girl murmured.

Gault was nodding his blond marcel.

"That's me. But I ain't lipped a toot in Northfield since Coolidge. Listen to that sad man chew the clarinet!" He closed his eyes and swayed dreamily to the clarinet wailing through the smoky atmosphere. The coffee girl nudged him.

"Git rid of the white man, Golden Boy. He sits too straight in his chair and I think he packs a boom-boom."

I ignored her and the black Angel's smoky eyes which had shifted to the slight bulge under my left lapel.

"Before Coolidge, Gault. All the way back to Joe Vaccari. Remember Joe?"

The black Angel reached over and laid his palm on the bulge under my lapel. I looked into his smoky eyes and he drew his palm away.

"Copper?" he rumbled.

"Private," I said.

Gault murmured: "Sure, I remember that nut. 'Way back in the dream. Tony Escourt was just a young snip then. Ed Charney had his nose in everything. He and Humphrey were reporters. Reale was the town boot-black and French, Lofuso and I jerked sodas. That was a long time back. Can you imagine me jerkin' sodas?"

The coffee girl giggled. "You can jerk my sodas from here on in, Golden Boy!"

I said: "Then there was Joe Vaccari. Remember?"

"The poor halfwit!" Gault murmured dreamily. "Sure I remember. The poor dead halfwit! If Charney hadn't sweet-talked me, I'd have voted to let him go."

"He isn't dead," I said. "He got forty years. And thirteen off for good behavior. He got out last week."

"What's the diff?" The sax drooler shrugged blankly.

I said: "Where does the two million fit in the dream, Golden Boy?"

IT WAS like touching a button. The man emerged almost completely from his reefer jag.

"Where is it?" he demanded, pounding his fist on the table hard enough to make the empty glasses jump. Coffee Girl put her arm around him, as several couples paused to look. He shrugged off her arm. "Listen, I can add. Even while the trial was going on, I was up Lookout Hill with a shovel. Joe had come only half a mile before Jordan arrested him. The dough had to be somewhere between there and old Scales' shack, d'ya see?"

I nodded that I saw.

"Three times after that I went back to Northfield," the blond sax crooner said earnestly. "It had to be between the shack and where they caught Joe! But it wasn't!"

"What wasn't, honey?" the coffee girl crooned tenderly.

"Two million dollars!" Gault breathed reverently.

The tan girl stiffened and the black Angel's eyes lifted from my jacket bulge to my eyes. A tiny red tongue wet his thick, black lips.

"That was twenty-seven years ago," I told him drily.

Gault had sagged back in his chair. He looked as if he had been dragged through a wringer. The girl lit a crumpled cigarette for him and he sucked on it hungrily. It gave off a stale, sweetish sort of smoke. The coffee girl offered me one but I shook my head.

The band was wriggling along an erotic groove. There were more couples on the floor now and practically no room to which to dance. It was a close-packed mass of black and white humanity that seemed to wriggle and sway in unison to the lazy, drawing boogie beat that oozed from the band.

I said to Gault: "Well, suppose someone beat you to it?"

"What, honey?" the coffee girl asked him. "What's he talkin' about now?"

"The two million," Gault mumbled.

"That's right," I said, nodding. "Did anyone in Northfield get rich all of a sudden after that?"

"Not me!" the Golden Boy snickered. He thought it was a terrific joke. He winked at the girl and smirked: "Not me, eh, baby?" I waited patiently and watched the black Angel's gaze shuttle back and forth between my jacket bulge and my eyes. Then Gault frowned.

"Well, Tony Escourt was always rich. Then he put his moola in Hollywood and got even richer. But now that I juggle it, Ed Charney did jump a hell of a long way from small-town reporter to New York publisher."

"And Charney talked you into voting Joe Vaccari guilty," I prompted.

Gault's attention was captured by the boogie beat. His eyes closed and his thin shoulders danced. The tan girl passed the reefer from his lips to hers and swayed with him. Angel sat like a statue carved from ebony.

I waited patiently and then Willie, the white waiter, pushed his head over Gault and said: "Someone sent you this, Golden Boy—"

I gaped at the familiar looking package Willie was planting on the table before the blond sax artist. Then I was on my feet and jerking Willie around to face me.

"Who sent it?" I demanded.

His eyes rolled. "Hey, who do you think you—" he began to snarl. I jerked his lapels hard. "I dunno—the checkroom!" he gasped.

I dropped his lapels and raced through the swaying couples to the checkroom. My elbows dug into a lot of flesh en route. Arguments sprouted behind me.

The redhead at the check counter wanted my hat check.

"Skip it, Red," I barked at her. "Who gave you that package for Gault?"

She waved at the exit and started to say something which I didn't hear. I was gone with her wave.

I should have known better, but you can't blame a guy for trying. The street, from there to Lenox Avenue, was pitch black, without any motion or sound. I prowled a few doorways, gave it up and returned to the club.

The red-headed hat check pirate said: "Just a little old grandpop with glasses. He watched the show from the door here for a few minutes, then he gimme the package for Freddie Gault. He gimme a buck for the favor."

I circled the dancers this time until I was looking down at the table where the black Angel had opened the package. The coffee girl did not scream, although I could see a scream struggling to emerge through her clenched lips.

"He said it was about a mouse!" she accused, pointing a tan finger at me.

There was a dead mouse wadded in cotton in the package. And the note. The same note.

TWENTY-SEVEN YEARS OF HELL.

Gault was mumbling: "I don't jive it."

The black Angel looked at me and said: "Yo're trouble, white boy. Yo' looked lak trouble f'um scratch. Ah think Ah wants ter ast yo' some questions!"

Two other large black men were approaching from behind to help Angel ask me questions. They lost interest when I showed them what rested under my left arm.

The music stopped in midair, slicing a trumpet wail in half. The dancers formed an eager path for me this time. The red-headed hat check girl was out of sight.

I skipped my hat.

The street was still dead quiet. I walked the ten long miles to Lenox Avenue in the middle of the road and heard nobody, saw nobody.

I dived down into the IRT and grabbed a subway for Union Square.

CHAPTER THREE

The Fifth International

IT WAS almost midnight, but that was not too late. The day only starts at midnight around Union Square. I sat in a cafeteria, wolfing ham sandwiches, and tried unsuccessfully to ring Tony Escourt at his hotel.

"There's no answer," the clerk at the hotel switchboard told me. "And his key's not in the rack. Should I try again?"

"You've already tried again," I told him. "Skip it."

I went back to my sandwiches and coffee and studied again the little item at the bottom of page two in the early edition of the *Daily Press*.

Just a squib. It was headlined: PAWN-BROKER SLAIN.

It went on to say that at five that afternoon Mrs. Sadie Cohen, wife of the victim, had found her husband dead on the floor of their pawnshop. A "blunt instrument" had been used on I. Cohen's head. Nothing had been taken from the shop, although there had been two hundred and twelve dollars in the cash register.

That was all. That was enough. It was the pattern of the perfect crime, and don't hand me that stuff about there being no perfect crimes. They happen every week. And I'm not talking about the gullible doctor who signs a "heart failure" death certificate for a victim of rat poison or the thick Homicide detective who looks at the electrocuted corpse in the bathtub into which a live electric razor has fallen and calls it an "accident."

I'm talking about the stranger who meets you half way up a dark alley and gets your wallet by socking you with a lead pipe—which incidentally kills you. He never saw you before and he grabs the first bus for the next town and nobody ever sees him again. The police blotters of America crawl with such perfect murders, and they will go down into eternity unsolved.

The death of J. Cohen almost fit that pattern. If I found Joe Vaccari and told about the mice and laid the whole business in the lap of Manhattan's Homicide Squad, what could they do about it?

Two dozen other citizens might have had good reason to bash in a pawnbroker's skull.

I brooded over this to the bottom of my coffee cup and then I went forth into the

night and looked up the second address the defunct pawnbroker had given me—the address at which I would find the man of whom the murdered ex-juror had said: “Better he should be dead!”

There was no admission charge, but there was a plate full of quarters and bills guarded by a woman who wore no makeup, low heels and a drab, brown tailored suit.

She said, in a husky whisper: “If you’re from the CP, don’t bother to enter. Another demonstration such as last night’s will compel us to resort to drastic action, even to the extent of employing the bourgeois police.”

I said: “Lady, what are you giving me? I saw the sign outside. I like to keep up with events. The sign said this guy’s gonna explain the future of America. Do I go in, or do I go next door where they’re explaining the future of the whole world?”

She said: “I made an error in judgment, Comrade. I thought you were an agent provocateur of the CP. You may enter.”

I said: “What’s the CP?”

“Communist Party!” she hissed. I clucked my tongue and started past.

She called: “Comrade!” I looked back. She was holding out the plate. I dropped a quarter in it and entered the small hall over which hung a large banner lettered in red: FOLLOW THE PERPETUAL REVOLUTIONARY PARTY TO A FIFTH INTERNATIONAL!

Another banner showed four pictures and four names under them: MARX, LENIN, TROTSKY, REALE.

The first three pictures were fairly familiar. The fourth resembled Mussolini, a Mussolini who had borrowed John L. Lewis’ shaggy black eyebrows.

The man himself was on the platform in the small hall and sounding off as I entered. I found a seat near a plump sweater girl whose main distinction was that she wore lipstick. There were about forty other citizens of assorted ages and sexes present, all of them eagerly drinking in the language pouring upon them in bull-like accents from the Mussolini on the platform.

As much as I gathered, the Communists had the Third International, the Trotskyists wanted a Fourth and this guy was all out for a rip-snorting Fifth. The Commies, he said, had “sold out” to the bourgeoisie. The Trotskyists were “confused.” But he, Charles Reale, was going to put the radical movement back on its feet with a program of perpetual revolution.

The way he figured it, Russia had proved its “betrayal of the working man” by not turning the Red Army against the other Allied armies after VE day.

Trotsky’s mistake, he said, had been in not killing Stalin when he had had a chance.

That left the mantle of world revolution on his, Charles Reale’s, shoulders and he was prepared to take up the burden.

THERE were cheers. Instead of pleasing him, they angered the man. He bawled them out for not “arousing more working people to their revolutionary destiny.” He wound up in a blaze of fist-waving oratory to violent applause.

They passed around the collection plate and the meeting dissolved. The comrades stood in clusters, shaking each other’s hands, and telling each other how wonderful it all was. I drifted toward the platform.

Charles Reale was on the platform, getting his hand pumped. He shook the hand free once to wave it at me.

“Comrade,” he thundered, “don’t go yet. I want to speak to you.”

I nodded and waited until only he, the girl with the collection plate and myself remained. She brought the plate to the platform.

“Thirty-five dollars and sixty cents, Comrade Charles,” she said in her throaty whisper.

“Pennies, pennies!” grumbled the revolutionist. “Do they expect to have a revolution on thirty-five dollars? Here, Sonia, take this and go home. I want to speak with the new comrade.”

She took the five dollars he proffered and left. He absently filled his pockets with the remainder of the collection. He frowned at the door through which the whispering Sonia had departed, then suddenly shifted the frown to me.

“Tell me, Comrade—it’s just between ourselves—did Foster send you?”

“Foster who?” I asked him.

“Oh, come now!” he said irritably. “Such political naiveté is impossible in this day and age. William Z. Foster.”

“Never heard of him.”

“He never heard of Foster!” the beetle-browed revolutionist told the ceiling. He brought his gaze down to me and said: “Tell me, then, how did you come to hear of Charles Reale?”

“I didn’t,” I said mildly. “I just happened to be passing outside and saw your picture. For a minute it reminded me of a guy I used to see around as a kid back in Northfield many years ago. But now that I see you in the flesh, I guess I was mistaken.”

I turned to go, but his fingers dug into my shoulder.

“Northfield?”

“Yeah. A shoeshine man. But, hell, that was almost thirty years ago. A guy can forget a face—”

Charles Reale was hooked solid.

“But you didn’t forget *my* face, Comrade!”

he cried, gripping my palm and pumping it. "I am not ashamed to admit that I started life shining shoes! Even Trotsky was a tailor in the Bronx! This calls for a celebration. Did I ever shine your shoes? What is your name, Comrade?"

"Vaccari," I said.

He dropped my hand as if it had grown fangs.

"Just a minute, Comrade! You're not—"

"Not Joe," I cut in. "Sam. Everybody makes the same mistake. Joe's my cousin. I don't think you ever shined my shoes, Mr. Reale. Ma used to shine 'em with tallow."

The new Trotsky could hardly get over it.

"Joe Vaccari's cousin!" he murmured.

"Yeah," I said. "Joe's out now. He's cracked. I guess he always was cracked. They say he's sending dead mice to people these days."

That drew a total blank.

"After all these years!" the super-revolutionist muttered.

"Joe's broke," I tried again. "I guess he forgot where he planted Old Scales' two million after all."

That drew another blank. Charles Reale came to a sudden decision.

"Sam, you're coming home with me. Now," he said. "It will do me good to get my mind off all this." His gesture included the hall with its empty chairs.

"O.K.," I said.

We rode the subway uptown.

IT PAID to be a friend of the downtrodden working man. Charles Reale lived in a duplex on Gracie Square. The place looked like a Modernage window display—a sunken living room decorated with hunks of modernistic sculpture, inch-thick broadloom, streamlined furniture and huge windows that looked down over the East River. We entered it via a private, self-service elevator. Charles Reale smiled at my expression.

"I have come a long way from shining Northfield's shoes," he said, waving me to make myself at home. "Do you drink, Sam?" I told him I drank. He raised his voice: "Sonia!"

She drifted into the living room, no expression on her solemn, unpainted face. She wore a powder blue wrap-around. With a different face, she might have stirred my ergs. As it was, she radiated as much sex as a slab of putty.

"Sonia, this is an old friend from my Northfield days," the thick-browed Musso-*lini* introduced. "Bring us some brandy, will you? Smoke, Sam?"

She nodded at me without meeting my eyes and disappeared. I lit a cigarette while Charles Reale unwrapped a fifty-cent cigar.

Sonia reappeared with a cutglass carafe full of mahogany colored liquor and two small glasses. She set it on a glass-topped cocktail table before the divan on which we sprawled. Then she vanished.

Reale filled the glasses and lifted his in a toast.

"To the revolution, Comrade Sam."

The stuff was a little sweet for my palate. But smooth. The ex-shoeshine boy brooded at me.

"Do you know, Sam, I came to regret my action at the trial of your cousin. He was a victim of capitalist cunning."

I said: "What do you mean by that, Mr. Reale?"

"Call me Comrade Charles, Sam. He was crucified for money."

"The two million dollars?"

He brushed that aside, filled and emptied his glass again. His words came a little thicker. That tagged him. He was a smell-the-bar-rag drunk. Some men are like that.

"No, I mean the temptation, Comrade," he murmured. "The temptation this society put in the way of that poor half-witted boy. There were rich men on that jury who were immune to such temptation because they had been born to wealth. It was easy for them to pronounce him guilty. Escourt. Charney. They were even able to confuse the poor shoeshine boy who felt honored to sit among them. I was ashamed because my father, that good working man, could speak no English. How I struggled to eat in those days, Comrade—"

He went through four more glasses of the amber brandy, reviewing his miserable past. He was developing a brooding jag.

I finally said: "I didn't know Charney was rich at that time."

Reale snapped out of his brood slowly and gaped at me without comprehension. A trickle of liquor was running down his chin. With an automatic gesture, he filled and absorbed another glass of brandy.

I said: "I thought Charney was just a poor reporter then."

He shook his bald head.

"If that was so, Comrade," he mumbled thickly, "how was Charney able to pay me three hundred dollars to vote *guilty*?"

The double sense of what he said suddenly penetrated his mind. He gestured vaguely.

"I mean he *tried* to bribe me, Comrade. But I—I—"

He was frowning those thick, black brows into a deep V now, struggling to regain the sense of what he was saying. He filled the glass once more, letting brandy slop over the table. He downed the glass as if to clear his mind.

"I voted guilty," he mumbled, "because—because in spite of—bribe . . . guilty . . ."

THAT was the end of the line. He crumpled to the divan, one arm flying out and upsetting the carafe. He began snoring. I straightened out the carafe and looked up to see Sonia standing in the doorway.

"The slob!" she said.

I gaped at her. She had found lipstick and had dabbed it across her mouth, much as a schoolgirl experimenting with allure might do. She wore a pink ribbon in her straight hair. Powder was distributed unevenly on her cheeks.

"Come in here," she said huskily. She led me into the next room. It was a stuffy, pink-and-powderpuff bedroom. She suddenly faced me and pulled my mouth to hers without changing expression. When she loosened her grip on my neck I took out my handkerchief and began swabbing my lips.

I said: "Don't you think we ought to put him to bed?"

She dropped her arms and stood reading my eyes for almost a full minute. Then her expressionless face cracked in a dozen places and deep sobs wracked her thin body.

"Take me out of here!" she cried. "For God's sake, take me away where I can be a normal girl and go to the movies and have babies and wear high heels—"

I loaned her my shoulder and handkerchief and patiently listened to her true confession. She had been jobless in the big city after studying journalism for years in the hinterland. And then she had drifted in to one of the lectures. The new Trotsky kept her fed and she became "intellectually mated" to him. In due time the rest of her fell in line.

Now she was fed up to her ears with perpetual revolution. She was sick of hearing the same lectures night after night, seeing the same faces, watching her "intellectual mate" booze himself unconscious nightly. It had reached the point where she kept praying for some other male to be around each night he passed out.

"I'm becoming a tramp!" she sobbed on my shoulder. "I want to wear bobby sox and listen to Sinatra and marry some nice, dull, middle-class man like you. . ."

This went on and on and suddenly there was no more. She simply turned off the faucet. She became stiff and expressionless and whispered huskily: "Please excuse my emotionalism. I forgot myself."

I said: "You'd better wash your face."

She said: "An excellent suggestion. I will show you to the door."

I said: "I think Comrade Charles went to sleep on my hat."

She followed me into the living room and said: "I'm not being hospitable. Would you care for another drink?"

"No, thanks. All I want is my hat."

I didn't pick up my hat though. She had walked over with me to where the revolutionist lay on the divan and now she began to laugh. With makeup and tears smeared liberally over her face, her laughter was like an ice cube rubbing up and down my spine.

Her laughter began jittering into screams.

I stood up and hit her jaw where I had seen Sailor Duffy hit men's jaws.

She crumpled to the broadloom.

I turned my attention to Charles Reale. Somebody had removed his necktie, looped it around his neck and held it the necessary three or four minutes. I felt for his pulse.

He had no pulse.

I could hear the automatic elevator in operation.

There were two phones in the alcove. I used the house phone. The elevator had stopped moving before a voice filled my receiver.

"Yes?"

"Someone just get off the elevator that goes through Reale's apartment?"

"You mean that little elderly gentleman?"

"That's him. Hold him!"

"I'm sorry, sir. But the old gentleman left in a cab just this minute. Is anything wrong?"

"Can you trace that cab?"

"No, sir. It's not one of our regulars. It happened to be cruising by and our doorman stopped it. Is anything the matter?"

"No," I said. "Skip it."

"Very good, sir."

I picked up the other phone and dialed the operator. I spoke gruffly into the mouthpiece.

"Get an ambulance with a pulmotor over here pronto. A man is choking to death." I gave her the address and pronged the phone.

I had to step over the inert Sonia to shift Charles Reale and retrieve my squashed hat. I used the hat to wipe the glasses I had handled, the top of the glass table and the carafe.

There was a stairway in back of the apartment that served as a fire exit. It brought me to an alley that opened onto the street. As I reached the street, an ambulance pulled up to the door and a white-jacketed interne jumped out and ran into the building.

I walked away from there and called myself fifty-seven kinds of a jackass. Inside of a single day two men had been killed, a third was probably beyond the aid of a pulmotor and all I had for my pains was the conclusion Tony Escourt had fearfully anticipated—that Joe Vaccari was following his mice.

But then, *Charles Reale had received no mouse!*

Had I thought of this and found an explanation for it at the time I would have been able to put my hands on Joe Vaccari and the two million dollars in an hour!

But I was too busy being thankful that this day, at least, was over and nothing more could happen until tomorrow.

I was so wrong it was pitiful!

THE desk clerk said: "Mr. Escourt does not answer, Mr. Wale."

I said: "He's probably at the Stork. I'll go up and wait." When the clerk raised his brows, I added: "It's O.K. I have a duplicate key. You can check with the manager."

I didn't use my key. The door swung open to my touch and that was when I learned how wrong I had been!

Someone had put Sailor Duffy's head inside a pillow slip and tied the end of the slip around his neck. They had tied his hands to his feet behind his back and dumped him into the foyer of Tony Escourt's suite.

The big guy thrashed around a little and grumbled when I sliced him free with my pocket knife. He sat there, rubbing his wrists and blinking at the light.

I left him and prowled the rest of the suite. The living room was empty. In the bedroom I found Tony Escourt.

Someone had taken less trouble with him than with the Sailor. Escourt lay on his back on the bed. Someone had clubbed the point where his hair formed a widow's peak. Blood had run all down his face and back into his hair.

I went back to the foyer and kicked Sailor as hard as I could.

"You dumb, clumsy, stupid imitation of an imbecilic halfwit!" I roared at him.

He spread his palms wide. "Aw, Cash, I couldn' help it."

"That's wonderful!" I grated, whipping the .32 out of my shoulder holster. "That's great! I leave you to guard a guy and you let the first monkey who wants to come in and cream him!"

The big guy ducked, but the muzzle of my .32 still managed to catch the side of his jaw and he reeled back into the wall. I teetered in after him, the gun poised.

"Cash," Sailor pleaded, crouching with his back against the wall, "I didn' see nuttin'. Don't hit me wit' the rod no more, Cash!"

"Marvelous!" I grated, feinting at his arms with the gun. "You're the guy who put down Dempsey, but a forty-five-year-old moron can wrap you up like a Christmas package."

I stepped in and swung the gun, but Sailor's arm jerked under my arm and the wall behind me slammed into my back. My jaw felt as if someone had dropped the Empire State Building on it.

Then Sailor was just standing there, shaking me as if I were a rag doll, and pleading: "Honest, Cash! Don't hit me no more, Cash! Please, Cash! I was just sittin' an' readin' the

funnies an' next t'ing I know I'm all tied up on the floor. Don't hit me no more, Cash! My head hoits—"

He stopped shaking me and I said gruffly: "O.K., O.K., leggo! I lost my head. I'm sorry, Sailor."

He released me then and showed me the new lump among the other lumps on his battered billiard ball of a head. I said I would get some stuff for his jaw and told him mine felt as if it was out of joint.

He said: "Naw, Cash. I jus' touched ya. What happened to Tony, huh, Cash?"

I said: "The same guy who got you got him. He's dead."

"The hell he is!" Tony Escourt said from the middle of the living room.

The actor-producer was trying to rub the blood off his face with the hem of his maroon dressing gown. He regarded us wryly, said: "If Joe Vaccari is a little, timid looking old man who wears horn-rimmed spectacles, then we have had a reunion."

He winced as the robe touched the bruise on his head.

Sailor walked over to him and gently lifted the corner of the robe off the bruise.

"'At ain't too bad, Tony," Sailor mumbled. "We go in the bat'room, I fix it quick. I guess I let yuh down, huh, Tony?"

"I guess you did at that." The actor grimaced wryly. "I think I'd better phone Billingsly and tell him we can't make it at the Stork tonight."

I said: "He can probably figure that out my himself. It's almost closing time now."

The actor's brows arched. "That long? Why, it was just about six when—" His eyes widened. "Wale, the man is incredible! I don't know how he managed to pass Sailor. The first thing I knew he was standing before me, mumbling my name over and over again in an undertone. A little old man. White hair. Horn rims. He was carrying some sort of package under his arm. I asked him what the deuce he wanted. The next thing I remember the package was flying up at me from his hands." The large eyes blanked. "And that's *all* I remember!"

I said: "That's probably more than Isadore Cohen or Charles Reale saw."

"Cohen and Reale, Wale?"

"And Gault got a mouse," I said. "But not even this killer is going to touch Gault. Gault has an angel guarding him."

Tony Escourt said: "Then do you think I should call in the police, Wale?"

"They'd probably find Vacarri and stop him for a while," I said.

"Why put it like that?" Escourt frowned.

I shrugged. "All you have is a possible assault charge against him, and that would be your word against his. Unless they find

the weapon he used or witnesses to place him in Cohen's pawnshop or Reale's apartment, they can't possibly hold him for suspicion of murder—even with the mice and the notes. What does it add up to, death threats? Not necessarily. It would all boil down to what you said you feared—your word against his, the impression that you're using your dough and drag to hound a man whom you, as foreman of the jury, already caused to spend half a lifetime in the big house. In fact, the public may even figure the guy was entitled to one poke at you."

Tony Escourt smiled crookedly.

"I think your main interest is to retain this lucrative job with me," he said.

"That, too." I shrugged. "Sailor won't let it happen twice. And you'll be more careful."

"Then what do you suggest, Wale?" Escourt demanded curtly.

"Go to Northfield," I said. "I'll look up Charney and tie a few ends together tomorrow and then join you. Northfield's smaller. A stranger won't be able to float around without being noticed there. If he's after you, he'll follow you and we'll have him. That's what you want—pin him down where he has no out, no alibi, where he's caught dead to rights and no questions asked. Isn't that what you want?"

"That's what I want," Tony Escourt agreed.

CHAPTER FOUR

Gun for Hire

SAILOR and I took turns guarding the actor for the rest of the night. His bruise, when we finally cleaned it, turned out to be small enough for half a dollar to cover. Sailor's lump didn't count—it was lost among the others he had accumulated during his two-fisted career.

We still had our job which, as the actor had mentioned, was "lucrative." Specifically, we drew two hundred a day. This was to be continued until the sum of five thousand dollars had been paid us. In the event we cleared up the situation before then, the difference between what we had earned and the five thousand would be given us in a lump.

I was after the lump.

I managed to get enough sleep and the following morning dawned auspiciously for me indeed.

The death of Harry Campbell, the antique card sharp, had finally hit the papers. The inevitable chambermaid had found his remains. The grizzled elevator operator had a "camera eye," he told reporters.

He described me as "a six-foot gorilla"

with bushy black hair. He described the blond Mona as: "A red-headed woman of middle age, I'd say."

During breakfast in Tony Escourt's suite, I suddenly recalled something and grabbed the phone. An unfamiliar voice answered.

"I want to speak with Comrade Reale," I told it.

"Comrade, have you not heard?" the voice queried. "Comrade Reale was attacked last night by seven Stalinist gangsters! But he fought them off and managed to phone for help before he fell unconscious! It will be a few days yet before the hospital will permit visitors."

I said: "Can I speak to Comrade Sonia?"

The voice froze. "The woman you speak of has deserted our Leader in his hour of greatest need. She had been expelled from the Party! Who is this speaking?"

"This is Comrade Stalin," I said, hanging up. I grinned at Tony Escourt's inquiring eyebrows. "That pulmotor revived Reale and his girl revolted," I told him. "Now she'll wear high heels and bobby sox. That means Cohen is the only corpse and, if we warn the others in time, he'll remain the only corpse. You handle Humphrey when you go to Northfield tonight. I'll see Charney."

Tony Escourt was not pleased.

"But Vaccari is running around New York, Wale," he argued. "If Reale is still alive, he may be able to identify Vaccari. In that case the publicity will not be at all unfavorable."

"Forget it," I said. "Charles Reale saw seven agents of the Soviet secret police. He'll call anybody who contradicts him a dirty Fascist, Capitalist, Stalinist, Imperialist, Middle Class liar!"

GETTING to see Edward J. Charney was a big operation. I call him Edward J. Charney and I call his paper the New York *Daily Press*, but you can draw your own conclusions without laying me wide open to half a dozen libel suits.

You know whom I mean—the man who entered the public eye as a booze-swilling skirt-chaser and wound up as a crusading reformer. And you've seen the *Daily Press* change with him—from a tabloid which featured bathtub blondes and penthouse shenanigans to a sober journal which features a series of editorial policies that at different times made Democrats, Republicans, union leaders, businessmen, church leaders, De Gaulle, Stalin, Truman, Franco and Chiang Kai-shek wake up screaming.

That Edward J. Charney.

His anteroom, at the time I made my bid, was aswarm with imposing looking citizens. There was a senator and a one-armed major

whose big chest was hardly large enough to hold all his ribbons. There was a nun and what appeared to be an entire citizen's committee. There was a deputy police commissioner whose name escapes me, and several other impressive looking citizens such as you would expect to find in the anteroom of a powerful independent publisher.

Normally, I would have waited there a week before getting a polite brush-off from some junior assistant office boy. The difference lay in the words I scribbled on the back of one of my cards:

Joe Vaccari spent twenty-seven years in Sing Sing dreaming about two million dollars and killing mice. Interested?

Edward J. Charney was interested.

Ten minutes later, I was ushered past the assembled citizens into a large office where a tall man stood with his back to me, looking out through giant windows at the panorama of New York harbor.

I merely glimpsed his back. My attention was diverted by the two characters who had grabbed my arms as I came through the door—a pair of overalled giants liberally smudged with printer's ink.

They swung me easily toward the desk in the center of the office.

This was no trick. I can reach five feet, two inches by stretching and my poundage is in proportion. Ordinarily, size doesn't bother me, but at the moment the difference lay beyond reach of my extended arms, in my shoulder holster.

One of the gorillas forced my palm down onto an open ink pad on the desk and then onto a blank sheet of paper alongside the pad.

A fourth man in the office, a young blond man in shirtsleeves, stepped forward and matched the paper with my fingerprints against the prints on another sheet of paper he already had. He used a magnifying glass.

Then he straightened up and said to the back at the window: "He didn't send the package, Mr. Charney."

The man at the window turned slowly. White tufts of hair over his temples gave him an owl's expression. He had a pink face and eyes the color of dirty water. His tall, lean figure was stooped so that he almost formed a human question mark.

He spoke in a dry, rasping voice.

"Too bad, Scott. It would have simplified matters." He turned that owl's stare on me. "You were a gunman for Capone," he stated. "The police still think you put Legs Diamond in the hospital. It's common knowledge that your gun was for hire to the highest bidder during Prohibition and it is even said you killed former employers when their rivals

lured you away with higher pay. What have you got to say to that?"

I said: "Get these monkeys off my arms."

The blond Scott said: "Mr. Charney, I think he's wearing a gun under his left arm."

The owl's publisher said: "Release him, boys."

The gorillas dropped my arms. I shrugged my jacket to a better fit, drew the .32 from its holster, walked over and laid it on the desk.

I said: "You've had your fun, Mr. Charney. Not let's get down to business. I have a few facts that should interest you. You may have some answers that would interest me. It shouldn't take more than five minutes. Then I'll pick up my marbles and go."

"Isn't he a fantastic little animal!" rasped the publisher with a dry chuckle. "I want you all to fix his face in your memories. Gus. Hank. Scott. Miss Herne."

The gorillas and the blond man nodded. A prim female in horn-rimmed glasses whom I had not previously noticed also nodded from her stool in the corner behind the door. She held a notepad in her lap and a pencil poised over it.

Edward J. Charney cleared his throat. "Very well, gentlemen, you may leave us."

They looked at each other. Scott put it into words.

"But Mr. Charney, you said he was dangerous—"

The publisher pointed a bony finger at my gun on his desk. "There lies his solitary fang, Scott. And the animal is sufficiently cunning to realize that your identification of him makes any overt act against me unfeasible. I think you may safely leave us now."

THEY left. I watched them step into a cage, the door of which opened when Scott punched a button on the side wall of the office. The door closed and left me alone with Charney, Miss Herne and the urge to pick up my .32 and cut that sardonic human question mark down to a mass of torn flesh and blood crawling on the carpet, screaming for pity.

But he had put the situation correctly. I could no more chest him around than I could the Mayor of New York. In fact, given the choice, I would probably draw a lighter rap for gunwhipping the Mayor.

No, Charney had me where he could shoot off his sardonic yap to his heart's content. He looked into my eyes and knew he had me and it came out of him in that dry, rasping chuckle.

"Now, get on with your so-called facts, Wale."

I said: "One. Joe Vaccari nursed twelve mice for twenty-seven years. He named them

after the jury that put him away. You know the names. Yours is included. Last week, when his time was up, he killed all twelve of the mice.

"Two," I said. "Of the six jurors who are still alive, four that I know of got dead mice in their mail along with a note. You have your sample. I don't know about Humphrey yet."

"Three," I said, throwing a quick glance over my shoulder to see if the prim secretary was taking it down. She was. "Yesterday Isadore Cohen was clubbed to death. Tony Escourt was clubbed less fatally. Charles Reale who, for some reason, failed to get a mouse in the mail, was almost strangled to death."

"Four," I said, as the buzzer on his inter-office communication box sounded. "Joe Vaccari killed those mice by strangling, clubbing and throwing them out the window. That's a pattern, Mr. Charney. My first question is—where do you think you fit into that pattern?"

The owlish publisher flipped a switch on the box and muttered: "Charney. What is it?"

"Sister Homus can't wait much longer, E. J.," a woman's voice droned out of the instrument. "What shall I tell her?"

"Tell her I'll see her in five minutes, Clara," the publisher rasped into the box. He flipped the switch and jerked his head back toward me.

"That was your first question," he said.

I said: "Charles Reale said it once and I can get him to say it again. Twenty-seven years ago he voted guilty along with the rest of you because—"

"Miss Herne!" Edward J. Charney called out, shutting me up with a gesture. The prim amanuensis looked up.

"Yes, Mr. Charney?"

"That will be all for now. Leave us, please."

Silently, she folded her notepad, rose and walked out the door I had entered. When the door closed behind her, the publisher turned his back to me and stood as I had first seen him, looking out over the New York harbor spread below.

"What did Reale say?" he asked without turning around.

"That it cost you three hundred bucks to send Joe Vaccari up the river," I said. I added: "Gault put it differently. Gault said you 'sweet-talked' him into voting Joe Vaccari guilty. Now Mr. Charney, my second question is—"

"Stop it! Damn you, *stop it!*" the publisher cried, whirling to face me. The pink was gone from his cheeks now, leaving them a pasty white.

He walked over to his desk and sat down. He sat there motionless a while, his colorless

eyes fixed vacantly on my face. He was becoming a deep brooder, this owlish newspaper crusader.

"What do you want?" he suddenly rasped. "Money? How much?" It came from him in staccato barks. "A hundred? A thousand? Damn it man! What do you want?"

"You're a little blunt, Mr. Charney," I said easily. "We can discuss finances later, when you cool off. If you decide to retain me," I added meaningfully. "Right now, all I'm trying to do is fill in a twenty-seven-year-old picture. You know . . ." I gesticulated vaguely. "Background."

"Why?"

"Why? Because the more I learn about Joe Vaccari, the quicker I'll find him. And the quicker I find him—" I shrugged. "Then the dead mice in the mail just become a silly gesture and everybody rests easier. You, for instance."

The pink was back in his cheeks now. His eyes were focused sharply on mine.

"Listen to me, Wale. I have better resources at my disposal than you can ever acquire. I have been looking for Joseph Vaccari since the day he was released." The publisher's voice dropped a notch. "Believe me, Wale, my only motive was to redress a great injustice that was perpetrated against that man."

"Reale said he was crucified for money," I said.

Charney dismissed Reale with a wry expression.

"Reale is a loud-mouthed hooligan who preys on susceptible crackpots!" he snorted. "Listen to me, Wale. I find it impossible to believe that Vaccari is responsible for these grisly fetish tokens in the mail or for the clubbings and strangling you mentioned. Vaccari was not only a moron, he was utterly incapable of conceiving and executing such a fantastic plan of revenge—although God knows the man is certainly entitled to turn on his tormentors!"

I said: "O.K. But you haven't found him. The State Police lost track of him through a very slick little maneuver. And what ever did become of that two million-dollar hoard? That is my next question, Mr. Charney."

His cheeks lost their pink and regained it again.

"For God's sake listen to me, Wale," he pleaded hoarsely. "I'm not a well man. I'm winding up my affairs—this you must believe. In my own way I intend to revive the entire matter so that Joseph Vaccari may at long last be recompensed for the injustice he has suffered. *But in my own time, Wale!*"

I said: "Your own time is not good enough, Mr. Charney. So far the man has made one hit and two errors. Each minute that passes, he's

liable to better his batting average. If you—"

"Wale," the owlish publisher suddenly demanded, "just where do *you* come into this?"

I pointed to my revolver on his desk.

"That's still for hire, Mr. Charney."

"Yes, yes. But *who*?"

I said: "The foreman of that jury, Mr. Charney. Tony Escourt."

The owlish publisher flicked the switch on the inter-office box. "Send Herne back in," he rasped into it. "Send Sister whatshername in in about two minutes." He flicked the switch and glowered up at me. "Wale," he thundered, "get out! Take your gun and get out!"

I gaped at him as the prim secretary slid back in through the door and appropriated her stool behind it. The pad instantly opened on her lap and the pencil hovered over it.

I said: "I have two more questions, Mr. Charney."

He rose to his question mark height and roared: "I told you to get out! Use the elevator. I don't want the people in my ante-room to gain an unfavorable impression of this newspaper. If you don't leave instantly, I will have you arrested for attempted blackmail! In your own gutter vernacular—*scram!*"

A BURNING coal was playing leapfrog with an ice cube in my stomach. I picked up my .32 and looked at Edward J. Charney. He winced. That made me feel better. I dropped it into its holster, pressed the elevator button on his office wall and grinned down at the prim secretary. "Get it all down, honey?"

Her thin mouth grew thinner. The door slid open and I had a quick glimpse of the nun of the waiting room entering the office as the elevator door closed behind me.

I rode the cage down.

It opened onto a basement corridor filled with bundles of papers, and Gus and Hank, the gorillas of the fingerprint episode. They had been shuffling the bundles. They straightened as I emerged.

"It's the little terror!" Gus chortled.

"Don't get him mad, Gus," Hank warned in mock terror. "He eats guys like us in his sleep."

I said: "Cut it, boys. This is one of my bad days. I'm in no mood to play—"

A bowlegged man ran, shouting, into the corridor from the street. He had a broken nose, a sun-battered face and a foggy voice—one of the human derelicts who peddle papers on the sidewalks of New York.

He was shouting: "Hey, de boss was just t'rown outta de winda! They're yellin' from upstairs t' hold a lil' guy on the elevator." His finger angled at me. "*Him!*"

The burning coal and ice cube developed sisters and brothers in my gut.

I felt sick.

Hank had quick reflexes, but I had the benefit of years of patient practice. The gorilla's mock terror turned to the real article when the hand he shot at me developed a crimson streak across its back.

Gus had slow reflexes. He reached two hands toward me, then yanked them back and stared, dumfounded, at holes the muzzle of my .32 had gouged in his palms.

Hank teetered backwards when the muzzle took a half inch bite out of his chin. Gus became intelligent as I swung toward him. He backed off without benefit of muzzle.

This had taken seconds. There now lay a broad path between them. The bowlegged derelict stood backed against the corridor wall, both arms elevated, his eyes watering from the intensity with which they were staring at my gun.

I raced down the corridor and out into the street.

The street was filled with running people. They formed a pattern that radiated in every possible direction. At the heart of the pattern, on the sidewalk, just a few yards to the left of where I emerged, lay a gangling, crumpled, blood-spattered figure. Ragged patches of glass lay around him.

I threw one glimpse upward as I spoiled the radial pattern by racing across the street.

Leaning out of the gaping hole that had been the window of Edward J. Charney's office was the blond Scott. He was shouting, but his words were lost in the cries from the assembling crowd.

I elbowed a man's chest and pushed a running girl off balance as I made the opposite sidewalk. Farther up the street, I glimpsed a uniformed patrolman. His eyes slid from Scott's extended arm down to me, then he started toward me, tugging clumsily at the gun on his hip.

Behind me, Hank and Gus had appeared at the entrance of the corridor. They had an armed private newspaper guard with them. Gus pointed as I dashed into a drugstore jammed with lunch gulpers.

I made the store's rear exit without incident.

Beyond lay the office building lobby with a bank of elevators and a stairway. I took the stairs. Half a flight up I slid through a window and dropped about ten feet to an alley cluttered with ashcans and a pile of coal.

The alley led to a grillwork gate and, beyond it, I saw a squad car screech to a halt and uniforms spill out of it.

It was one of those spots where fractions of a second counted. This was only a whoop and a holler from the financial district of

lower Manhattan, where the law is geared to split-second timing. In another two minutes that block would be sealed tight and then it would be merely a question of time.

I tucked my hat in my belt, turned my jacket inside out. I went to the coal pile and smeared my face and hands with coal dust. Then I rolled an ashcan to the grillwork gate, opened the latch and began rolling the can through as two uniforms converged on me.

One of them called: "Hey, bud, you see a little feller runnin' around in there?"

"Who, me?"

"Yeah. You! I ain't talkin' to your grandmother!" He raised his voice to the other uniform. "Larry, ain't some monkeys dumb?"

"I ain't seen nobody," I told him, rolling the ashcan around him and setting it against the wall.

"He ain't seen nobody," the uniform mimicked. "Larry, yuh know who we're after?"

"Cash Wale," the other uniform said. "The little punk who pushed Edward J. Charney out the window and clubbed his secretary to death and kidnaped a nun."

"Yeah?" The first uniform gaped. He caught sight of me walking down the sidewalk and roared: "Hey, where *you* goin'?"

"I'm gonna see Mr. Stafford," I told him over my shoulder.

"Who's Stafford?"

"He's the janitor. If he thinks I'm gonna wrestle all these cans by myself, he's nuts! I'll quit, that's what!"

"Let him go," Larry muttered. "We can catch Wale without botherin' the help."

"Wale's just another punk to me," the first uniform loud-mouthed. "All I want is one shot at him. One shot and I'm a sergeant!" He snapped his fingers. "Like dat!"

There was a subway kiosk at the corner and another uniform guarding it. He ignored me and I grabbed the first train to Times Square. The sisters and brothers of the hot coal and ice cube in my gut had acquired aunts and uncles.

I felt like hell.

CHAPTER FIVE

Strike Three

HALF an hour later, my hat back on my head, my jacket turned right side out, the coal dust off my face and hands, I stood in a phone booth and dropped twenty-three nickels into the slot before hitting the jackpot. Then Sailor Duffy's voice grumbled over the phone: "Whaddya want Tony fer? He's sleepin'."

"Wake him up, dope," I said.

"Cash? Whaddya t'ink? I'm in a Toikish bath!"

"I said wake him up, dope!"

"Tony?"

"That's right."

"O.K.!"

There was an interval of silence during which I had to drop my twenty-fourth nickel into the slot.

Then Tony Escourt's cultured accents purred from the receiver: "Mr. Thomas?"

"Wale," I said. "Listen, hotshot, last night I was all wet. Put the whole deal in the hands of the police. Tell 'em about my connection with it, but you don't know where I am now—get me? Stay away from high places and don't let Sailor out of your sight for a minute. Even take him to the bathroom with you."

"I agree with you entirely, Thomas," Tony Escourt's voice stated smoothly. "The weather certainly does not favor any outdoor montage shots at this time. According to the paper we will suffer a considerable delay. In the meantime your suggestion is excellent."

I developed television eyes. I said: "O.K., pal. I get it. Cops."

"Precisely, Thomas. I intend spending the next few days in Northfield. After that, shall we say?"

"Just be careful you don't join the mice."

"Good-by, Thomas."

He broke the connection, leaving me alone with the dead instrument and a deader taste on my palate and a feeling that the second I stepped out of that phone booth the world would become cold and cruel indeed.

I did and it did. Go buy a paper and see yourself described as a rat, a homicidal maniac, a paranoiac, a last vestige of prohibition gangsterism to be "stepped on and exterminated like a roach in your kitchen!" and you'll know how I felt.

It was all there in the paper I held between my face and the other faces in the Woodlawn Express racing to the Bronx. They had a front-page spread of the *Daily Press* building, the canvas-covered body on the sidewalk below it, and the police lines holding back the crowds.

There was an inset of the publisher with the white tufts over his temples. Another inset of Lucy Herne, his prim secretary. A third inset of myself.

There was the extract of Lucy Herne's final entry on her note pad:

. . . If you don't leave instantly, I will have you arrested for attempted blackmail! In your own gutter vernacular—*scram!*

There was the testimony of Hank and Gus. There was a note to the effect that the

nun, Sister Homus, had vanished. At first that, too, had been ascribed to me, but Gus and Hank testified I had emerged from the elevator alone. A quick survey of local Catholic agencies revealed no Sister Homus on their rosters. They were checking out-of-town convents. The theory was that she had been frightened by witnessing me kill the publisher and his secretary, that she had fled in wild hysteria and had not been noticed in the confusion.

Finally there was the testimony of Anthony J. Quinn, the shaggy Inspector of Manhattan's Homicide Squad.

Quinn declared that I was bottled up in a block of office buildings across the street from the *Daily Press* building. All legitimate occupants of those buildings had been escorted out and a painstaking office-to-office search was even then being made by the riot squad, armed with Tommy guns, tear gas, fragmentation grenades and revolvers.

Quinn stated, for the record: "This is one rap Wale will never evade. We have him cold. This time Wale will fry!"

That was the score as the subway jolted to its final stop at Woodlawn Avenue.

I crossed Van Cortlandt to the Saw Mill River Parkway and hitch-hiked to Northfield.

IT WAS dark when I found the storefront home of the Northfield *Clarion* on a side street of that sleepy, suburban hamlet. It was dark beyond the plate glass window, except for a small circle of light from a shaded bulb in a far corner. In the circle of light sat a dark, lean man hunched over a pile of papers on a desk.

The man wore a green eyeshade which he

brushed higher on his forehead with a quick, nervous gesture when I approached his desk.

"Thomas, of the New York *Daily Press*," I said, extending my palm.

"Humphrey," he said curtly. He gripped my palm, then gestured around the darkened newsshop. "All mine. What can I do for you, Thomas? Will you take the two million in hundreds or thousands?"

He chuckled at my expression. "Had it all over the teletype—that gunman and Charney chewing over the two million before the gunman pushed him out the window. And then one of your boys, Lawrence, was here earlier. Two million! Charney should have had better sense!"

Editor Humphrey snorted. He had black, snapping eyes under the green shade. "Folks have been coming up here ruining the countryside for more'n twenty-five years with their shovels and maps. . . Drink?"

He slid open a drawer at his elbow in which lay an automatic pistol, a half-filled pint of rye and several stained whiskey glasses.

I swallowed two fingers from the pint and asked: "How long have they been sending you dead mice?"

He shook a finger at me. "There you have me, m'boy! I've muddled that over for twenty-four hours now and it still fails to make sense."

"Would it make sense," I prodded, "if dead mice also went to Escourt, Cohen, Gault and Charney?"

"That wasn't on the teletype, son."

"I'm telling you."

"Keep telling me."

"Joe Vaccari," I said.

The dark man rolled this over on his

"Let Him Die Like A Rat!"

—they all said, from State's Attorney Beamer down to the man-in-the street. And it did look like curtains in blood-red for Tom Doyle, when that honest private-eye accepted hot cash from a hunted murderer-about-town to find the killer's wife. Doyle had neatly figured that she preferred her corpse-status to living on as a murderer's missus—but his itchy-fingered client rejected that theory fast—with an all-too-convincing hot lead argument in

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**DETECTIVE
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mind's tongue, then he spat it out with an emphatic headshake.

"Not Joe Vaccari, son. The lad was feeble up here." Humphrey indicated his eyeshade. "He wouldn't remember the names of the jury, let alone contrive a plan of revenge after twenty-seven years."

I said: "That makes it unanimous, yet you just finished telling me they're still looking for the two million he snatched."

"If there was two million." The dark man smiled. He had strong, white teeth when he smiled. "Two hundred thousand would be more like it."

"O.K. Two hundred thousand. I won't quibble about trifles. The answer I want is *what happened to it?*"

The editor spread out his hands helplessly. "Son, if I could answer that, would I be wasting my life here publishing the results of Mrs. Halloway's pie-baking contest?"

I said: "Charney went to New York and bought a newspaper. They say he spent a million bucks in hard cash. That was twenty-five years ago."

"I thought you worked for Charney, son."

"To hell with that. I'm after two million berries right now."

"Not Charney," the editor said. "Some other people have had the same idea. But the night the money vanished, Charney happened to be in New York covering the Armistice."

"O.K. Tony Escourt," I said. "Around that time Tony Escourt went to Hollywood and bought his way into pictures."

The dark man shook his head slowly.

"Wrong again. Tony *had* two million, rather his dad had it. You wouldn't remember it, but Escourt Ale was something in those days. Tony was a wild lad and his dad disinherited him every other Thursday, but that was a standing joke. We're a little proud of that boy, here in Northfield. Anyone else?"

"Joe Vaccari," I said.

"That's where you started!" The dark man chuckled. He rose to his full height and smiled down at me. "Listen, Thomas, I have some paper work to finish. Why don't you just go through our back files and see for yourself?"

"O.K."

He led me to the rear of the newsshop where he pulled the cord of another light and the dead, forgotten files of the Northfield *Clarion* became visible, rack upon rack of leather-bound volumes.

He used a rag to dust two of them, then dragged them off their rack and laid them on a high table under the light.

"The last of 1918 through 1919 when the trial was held," he said. "Make yourself to home. Another drink?"

I thanked him and told him I would table my thirst. He smiled politely and walked

back into the gloom of his shop. I heard his chair scrape beyond the racks and the sudden clicking of the teletype receiver. Then I opened the first volume and drifted back a quarter of a century. . .

IT SEEMS that once upon a time there was an inventor who was also a miser and a hermit. William R. Scales. He lived in a makeshift shack on the side of Lookout Hill and there he hoarded money that the local banker cashed from the checks which came to him from all parts of the world.

The money beat a path to his rusted iron door because, instead of a better mousetrap, the man had invented a better clothespin and a better egg beater. Your mother used his better potato peeler and you have gulped malteds stirred by his mixer that still whirs in soda fountains all over the United States.

This eccentric inventor had few visitors because his custom was to discourage unsolicited neighbors with a loaded shotgun.

But there was one visitor he not only tolerated, but encouraged. And that was the village halfwit and drunkard.

You guessed it, gentle reader. **Joseph Vaccari.**

Scales would let the derelict sleep in his shack on rainy nights and often he would feed him and—But that was as much as anyone ever knew about their relationship because all of Scales' other human contacts were of a business nature.

His landlord was the owner of Lookout Hill, Anthony Escourt, Sr. There was the banker who cashed his checks and futilely urged him to open an account. And there was the local attorney who frequently defended the wealthy hermit in court from overly curious strangers filled with buckshot.

But these gentry were not prone to linger at the shack and so nobody ever knew what conversations and badinage transpired between those curiously eccentric friends, William R. Scales and Joseph Vaccari.

There were pictures. Scales with his shotgun in front of his shack, a bearded, unkempt man in ragged clothes. And there were pictures of Joseph Vaccari, a short, dark-haired, youngish-old looking man wearing equally ragged clothes and a makeshift pair of spectacles held together with pieces of string.

And then there was the verbatim testimony of the trial:

DISTRICT ATTORNEY: Constable Jordan, in your own words I want you to tell the court exactly what happened on the night of November 12th, 1918.

CONSTABLE: Well, sir, I was making my rounds as usual that night. They were

still celebrating the Armistice and I was looking for the hoodlums who broke the store windows on Main Street. It came to my notice that a man was creating a disturbance on Lookout Road.

I went to see what it was and found this man, Vaccari, laughing and singing. He was holding three one hundred-dollar bills and a broken beer bottle in his hands and when I asked him to explain his actions he said a good friend had given him a lot of money to spend and a lot of beer to drink and have a good time.

DISTRICT ATTORNEY: Did the prisoner name this good friend?

CONSTABLE: No, sir.

DISTRICT ATTORNEY: Continue to tell the court in your own words what happened then.

CONSTABLE: Well, sir, the bottle and money in his hands were covered with blood. I made him go back up Lookout Road with me and when we came to old Scales' shack, I shined my torch inside, I saw Scales on the floor with his face all smashed in and bloody.

I asked the prisoner if he had done it and he told me he could not remember. I asked him who the friend was who was supposed to have given him the beer and money and he said: "What friend?" He could not remember telling me that.

I arrested him for murder.

DISTRICT ATTORNEY: Did you see any sign of this mythical friend in the vicinity of the shack?

CONSTABLE: No, sir.

So much for the case. It was simple, solid, air-tight. Except that they found no trace of the money the miserly inventor was supposed to have hoarded! They searched his shack and took it apart board by board. They dug six feet into the earth under it, and for a radius of several yards around it. In the days that followed, there were hundreds of citizens, attracted by the lure, digging into Lookout Hill as much as a mile on all sides of where the shack had been.

But no money.

The local banker, all the people in the bank, the local attorney and Anthony Escourt, Sr., all swore the ragged millionaire *had* had the money. The postmaster swore no package had been mailed by the miser. Dozens of other people's testimony, fitted together, proved that William R. Scales had not left the immediate vicinity of his shack for months.

But the money was gone!

They put Joseph Vaccari on the stand:

DISTRICT ATTORNEY: Joseph Vaccari, will you tell the court in your own words exactly what happened on the night of November 12th, 1918?

PRISONER: I don't remember. I don't remember things good. What time is it?

DISTRICT ATTORNEY: It is time you quit this pretense. It is time you realized you are on trial for your life for brutally murdering and robbing the man who befriended you.

DEFENSE ATTORNEY: Objection.

COURT: Sustained. The district attorney will confine his conclusions to his summation. Proceed.

DISTRICT ATTORNEY: Joseph Vaccari, did you meet a friend that night?

PRISONER: I got lot of friends. Everybody friend Joe Vaccari. I good fellow. Ask anybody.

DISTRICT ATTORNEY: Where did you get the three hundred dollars you had that night?

PRISONER: I want to go fishing. What time is it?

It was all like that. Joe Vaccari "couldn't remember."

The jury took six hours to bring in a verdict of *guilty*. The court took half a day to sentence Joseph Vaccari to forty years at "hard labor."

And that was the end of the story.

I STOOD there a while, scowling down at the brittle pages and brooding about the missing millions. Several odd notes piqued my curiosity. I had an intangible feeling that I might be able to put my hands on the fabulous hoard if only I could weave those odd notes together.

The thousand-dollar stake with which Harry Campbell, Joe Vaccari's defunct cellmate, had emerged from Sing Sing, for instance. And the reason for his murder. That worried me, along with why the reefer-smoking Gault had received his dead mouse while I was there. And why Charles Reale had been strangled while I was in the next room and *why Charles Reale had received no dead mouse*.

Then there was the other "co-incidence"—why had Charney been pushed to his death while I was riding the elevator down from his office? And, finally, what had become of that elusive, untraceable nun, Sister Homus?

I juggled these questions around in different combinations but they continued to elude me.

I put the musty volumes back on their racks. I pulled the light cord and made my way back to Editor Humphrey's desk, where he sat reading a long yellow sheet he had apparently just ripped off the teletype. The machine was clicking away madly, with a long sheet of news items reaching to the floor where it curled in eccentric loops.

I read the item on the desk over Editor Humphrey's shoulders:

NEW YORK AP FLASH POLICE CONFIRM SENSATIONAL NEW ANGLE OF EDWARD J. CHARNEY MURDER SUGGESTED BY ACTOR-PRODUCER TONY ESCOURT WITH IDENTIFICATION OF FINGERPRINTS ON QUOTE DEAD MOUSE UNQUOTE PACKAGE MAILED TO LATE PUBLISHER PERIOD THE PRINTS WERE IDENTIFIED BY THE FBI AS THOSE OF THE LEFT HAND OF JOSEPH VACCARI WHO . . .

It went on, but I knew the rest.

"That ties it," I told the editor. "Little Joe is elected. The next question, as the man said about the lost mule, is—where would you hide if you were Joe?" I put my hand on the editor's shoulder and said: "They always come home. Where in Northfield was home for Joe Vaccari, pal?" The man continued reading. I said: "Listen, pal, you steer me to Joe Vaccari and I'll give you a slant on the Charney kill that will rate you a front page by-line on every rag in the country. What do you say?"

He did not say. I took my hand from his shoulder, stooped over to look into his face and that family of hot coals and ice cubes began jitterbugging in my belly again.

I went to the front door and opened it and stood, one foot on the sidewalk, peering up and down the darkened street.

It was like that dead street in Harlem. Instead of Lenox Avenue, the main drag of Northfield teemed with life half a block away. But this street was dark and dead.

I pulled my foot back into the shop, closed the door again and returned to the saturnine editor. I peered into his face again.

He had no face.

You know the way a kid's face looks pressed against a windowpane, nose flattened, lips flattened, all the flesh pushed back. That was like Editor Humphrey's face. A single drop of blood had oozed from his mashed nose. Out of habit I felt for his pulse.

He had no pulse.

There it was again—the pattern of the perfect kill! Hit and run!

But the coincidence of my presence one more time was too much. Harry, the dealer, Charles Reale, Edward J. Charney and now Humphrey. Each time the killer struck when I was practically in the next room. Reale survived, but that was due to my call for the pulmotor, an item the killer had overlooked.

It was too pat, too neat. Too damned monotonous. Too damned personal.

I went to the rear of the newsshop and

found the two volumes of back numbers I had handled. I rubbed the covers and each page I had touched with my handkerchief. Back at the desk, where Humphrey still seemed to be reading the teletype sheet, I opened the drawer at his elbow. The automatic was still there. The bottle of rye and the two whiskey glasses were not.

I found them under the yellow sheet on the desk. The bottle was empty. I started to wipe the glasses, then changed my mind. I wrapped them in my handkerchief and stuffed them into my jacket pocket.

I used the skirt of my jacket on the front door knobs. Then I closed the door behind me, walked swiftly down that dark, dead street toward the lighted storefronts and people.

I had to question three separate citizens before I learned how to reach Tony Escourt's estate on Lookout Hill.

A bus took me to the gate, then I walked up the long, winding driveway toward the huge, rambling mansion silhouetted above me in the night.

Halfway up the driveway, a figure detached itself from the shadow of a tree and said: "Hold it, Wale. You're under arrest for the murder of Edward Charney."

"The hell I am!" I said, spinning the .32 from under my arm and slanting it up at the figure.

"The hell you ain't!" another voice contradicted from the darkness behind me.

I said, over my shoulder: "You monkeys sound Manhattan and this is 'way off your beat. You have papers. O.K. You don't, and I'll cream this halfwit in front of me before you can start squeezing your trigger."

I heard breath suck in behind me.

Then: "Listen, Wale, will you come into the house and see Inspector Quinn?"

I said: "O.K. But like this. I keep my heater. You can stay behind me, but I stay behind this stooge."

The voice behind me said: "Let's get movin'!"

The figure in front of me remained motionless.

"You ain't callin' me names an' gettin' away with it, Wale!" His voice raised. "Shoot the can off him, Deegan. I c'n take anythin' the rat can dish out."

I said: "You're a halfwit or you wouldn't have let him make you face me in the first place. In the second place, if Deegan shoots it's murder. A Manhattan flathead can't arrest anyone here without a warrant and if Deegan had a warrant he'd have shot me before I could poke my heater at you. That means you're still a halfwit. Why don't you turn around and walk to the house without wasting everybody's time?"

"Do like he says," Deegan's voice said wearily from behind me.

The figure in front of me lurched around and commenced striding up the driveway. Our little procession was launched.

CHAPTER SIX

Twelve Dead Mice and a Rat!

ANTHONY J. QUINN, Inspector of Manhattan's Homicide Squad, developed an expression, when we entered the library of Tony Escourt's mansion, of that proverbial cat half a second before it ate the canary.

He lost some of that expression when the empty hands of the man ahead of me registered. He lost the rest of it when the pair of ice chips he wore for eyes settled on the .32 in my right hand. He scowled at Deegan bringing up the rear. Quinn had a face made for scowls—ice chip eyes set in wrinkled leather. Most of his face was jaw.

"This better be good," he muttered.

"Wale got the drop on White," Deegan apologized. Deegan proved to be a somewhat fleshy character with very level eyes and no visible emotions. He said: "Wale was reasonable but, without a warrant, he wanted it like this."

Quinn's scowl shifted to the man in front of me.

"You wait three hours for the guy an' then he walks into your trap and gets the drop on you. This is something I want to hear."

"Deegan was behind him," the man called White argued. White was small and brittle and emotion oozed out of every pore of him. "I *told* Deegan to shoot him, but Deegan was all wrapped up in technicalities. Anyhow, we got Wale."

"Deegan has Wale." Quinn scowled. "Wale has you! After this Staten Island will get you!" Quinn's jaw angled at me. "Wale, I'm arresting you for—"

"Shaddup!" I said, angling my .32 at his middle. "I have *you*! Staten Island can have the stooge as of now. And don't go around arresting people off your beat. Anyhow, I didn't kill anybody. Hello, Sailor."

Sailor Duffy had been trying to get a word in edgewise ever since we entered.

"Hi, Cash!" he rumbled.

Tony Escourt said: "Cash, I'm sorry. But my hands were tied. When you phoned before—"

"I know," I told him. "They were listening."

"We'd been seen together lately," the actor-producer explained. "And then Sailor was with me. I never expected them to come out here. Then, when they did, I thought I could explain your connection with Ed Char-

ney and clear the entire atmosphere. But the inspector claimed—"

"I know," I cut in. "Quinn told you there was nobody else who could have pushed Charney out the window and bashed in the head of his secretary."

"Shrimp, can you name anyone else?" Quinn demanded.

"Sure," I told him. "Charney. How're you going to prove he didn't jump after attending to the detail of his secretary's noggin himself? Your only evidence is circumstantial. It could also fit—"

"That guy who sent the mice," Quinn interrupted.

"That's right," I said. "Joe Vaccari."

"Me?" a new voice asked from the door.

Six heads swiveled to the door and the whole case went berserk!

At first I thought I was looking at a nun. It took a millionth of a second to realize that was absurd, because who ever heard of a nun with a cigar in her mouth? That was the first impression, the one that held six pairs of eyes riveted to the door.

Someone wearing a nun's costume and smoking a cigar, a short someone with swollen eyes behind horn-rimmed glasses, shuffling in through the doorway and pointing something at Tony Escourt.

That was the second impression, the one that sparked sudden life into six statues and turned that library into a madhouse.

He was sidling through the door in his nun's costume, pointing the smooth bore of a shotgun at the actor-producer, and mumbling: "Tony Escourt, this for you. Me Joe Vaccari. What time is it?"

Nobody looked at a watch.

Tony Escourt was lurching to one side screaming: "Wale, it's Vaccari! Shoot him!" Sailor Duffy was plowing at the incongruous figure, chin on his chest, fists weaving. Inspector Quinn was hollering something I couldn't make out to Deegan. Quinn's other stooge, White, was diving behind the armchair in which Tony Escourt had been sitting.

Deegan looked at the shaggy Homicide inspector, flicked a quick glance at me, then shifted his revolver to Joe Vaccari and squeezed the trigger.

But my trigger squeezed first!

DEEGAN'S slug splintered the wood panel wall a good two yards to the left of Joe Vaccari. Then Deegan gaped dumbly at his hand which no longer held the revolver, at the drop of scarlet oozing from the back of his hand where my slug had struck!

About that time Sailor's left hand plucked the shotgun out of Joe Vaccari's grip. Sailor's right was poised ten inches from Joe Vaccari's jaw.

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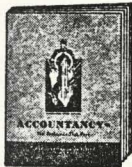
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Joe Vaccari mumbled: "What time is it?" Sailor drew back his right and pushed back the sleeve over his left wrist.

"Ten o'clock," he said.

"Let's go fishing," Joe Vaccari said.

"O.K.," said Sailor.

It had become a frozen tableau again. Even Deegan forgot his hand to gape at this conversation. I unfroze first. I said: "No, Sailor, don't go fishing now."

"O.K.," Sailor said.

It became a bedlam again—everybody talking at once. Deegan was hollering at me and Quinn was bellowing at Joe Vaccari that he was under arrest and Joe Vaccari was mumbling at Sailor who was mumbling back at him.

But I had the only drawn gun in the library. I walked over to where Tony Escourt stood, his large eyes seemingly hypnotized by the incongruous figure Joe Vaccari made. I had to tap his shoulder twice before he faced me.

I said: "O.K., pal. I'll take the lump now. There'll be no more dead mice and nobody else is going to take a poke at you. I'll take it in cash. All right with you?"

The actor-producer nodded as if he only half heard me.

I said: "Now, please."

This time it registered. He removed the collected works of Shakespeare from a shelf on the wall and began twirling the dial of the hidden safe there. Quinn went over and grabbed Joe Vaccari's arm. Vaccari asked him what time it was.

Quinn said to me: "Shrimp, this clears you of the Charney kill. But I'm gonna hold you for pinking Deegan. Aggravated assault."

I shook the gun in my fist a little and said: "Nobody is holding anybody, unless it's me holding you. This is still off your beat. If Deegan had shot the goof it would have been murder. I did him a favor."

Deegan's level eyes shuttled between the gun in my fist and his revolver on the floor. "Since when is self-defense murder?" he asked tonelessly.

"Self defense, hell!" I said. "Sailor, pull the trigger of that shotgun."

The big guy mumbled: "O.K., Cash." He pulled the trigger and four volumes of the Encyclopedia Britannica over Quinn's head disintegrated.

"Well, well," I remarked, when the roar subsided. "I didn't think it was loaded."

"Yeah, Cash. It wuz loaded," Sailor assured me.

Tony Escourt came over and peeled five one thousand-dollar bills into my free palm, while

(Continued on page 90)

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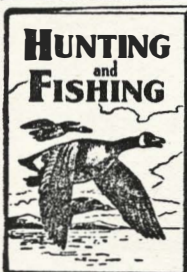
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Peter Paige

(Continued from page 88)

Quinn and White and Deegan all drooled.

Quinn growled at White: "If you can remember it, get to the phone and tell the D.A. of this county to change that homicide warrant to fit Joseph Vaccari. I want Wale's to be assault."

Tony Escourt said he was glad it was over. Large drops of sweat had oozed on his forehead. He went back to the safe to close it. White was picking up the phone. I wagged my .32.

"Hold it, halfwit! You people seem to forget the percentage is in my fist. Leave that phone alone and everybody stay put while I have a few words with the imitation Sister Homus here."

White turned red, then the color of his name. But he dropped the phone. I walked over to Joe Vaccari, took the cigar from his face, laid it in an ashtray and said: "Hello Joe, whaddya know?"

His swollen eyes crinkled at me behind their lenses.

"Hello. You got the time?"

"Sure. It's ten minutes after ten. But I don't want to go fishing. Let's you and me go hunt some mice, hey?"

His entire face wrinkled in distaste.

"I don't like mice." His brows furrowed as he wormed back into his memory. "In the stone room," he mumbled, "they'd throw dead mice an' I'd be afraid an' Harry'd throw 'em out." His wrinkles smoothed out. "What time is it?"

I said: "You like Tony Escourt, Joe?"

He looked at me blankly.

"Charney?" I tried.

Another blank.

Ditto for Cohen and Gault and Reale and Humphrey.

Quinn still gripped his arm, his leathery face in its perpetual scowl.

"So what?" Quinn grated. "It's an act. Escourt told us all about that first kill twenty-seven years ago. We'll straighten him out back in town."

"Sure." I scowled back at the shaggy Homicide inspector. "You'll work him over under a bright light for a few days, half a dozen of you taking turns. You'll try your stupid little psychological tricks and then, when they don't work, you'll try some rubber on his guts. And then you'll ask him if he'll sign and he'll sign, if he can write his name. Hell, he'd sign that he shot Lincoln or anything else you wanted!

"It was possible to figure him for that kill, twenty-seven years ago," I said, "because that was a simple hit-and-run job and he could have done it as well as the next guy.

Twelve Dead Mice

But all this stuff of the last few days—dead mice in the mail and masquerading as a nun—only a crew of Manhattan flatheads could figure this man for that!”

QUINN'S leathery features held worry. The shaggy inspector had seen one murder suspect slip out of his grip, now he was being argued out of another.

“Don't worry about our methods, Shrimp,” he barked. “Let White get to the phone. We'll put Vaccari in the hands of psychologists and find out soon enough if he's putting on an act.”

“You don't have to,” I argued. “If he is, why all this hokus pokus? If you were smart enough to put on that kind of act and you had two million stashed away, would you bother with the jury that sent you up? The hell you would!” I answered for him. “You'd be making tracks for places where you could spend the two million. And if you weren't putting on an act, that leaves you a halfwit without the brains to figure out this cockeyed deal.”

Tony Escourt had turned back from the safe. He was smiling at me crookedly.

“What are you suggesting, Wale?”

I said: “Several details have bothered me all along, but that was because I'd gone along believing Joe Vaccari was putting on a terrific act. But now that I see him I don't believe he's putting on an act and those details don't bother me any more.”

“What details, Shrimp?” Quinn growled. “Make it fast. We need a doctor for Deegan and we have to straighten out those warrants.”

I told Escourt: “When I asked you in Mindy's, you knew where I could contact Cohen and Charney. But you didn't know about Gault and Reale. You'd lost track of them. That's why Gault got his mouse while I was there. It was why Reale was strangled, with me in the next room. And it was why Reale got no mouse. You'd been following me around. You brought one mouse along in case I found one of them. But you didn't expect me to find both of them the same night.”

Tony Escourt threw back his head and laughed. He knew how to laugh, probably spent hours before a mirror practising.

I said: “Go ahead, have your little joke. There are more details. Harry Campbell, for instance.”

“What about Harry Campbell, Shrimp?” Inspector Quinn cut in, like a bird dog on a new scent. “Where does Campbell fit into this?”

“Joe Vaccari's cellmate.” I said. “He came out of Sing Sing with five bucks and flashed a grand two days later. He also flashed a long, fantastic story about Joe Vac-

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Peter Paige

cari and twelve pet mice named after the old jury. And when he'd said his piece he was eliminated with a small caliber slug."

"A twenty-five, Shrimp," the shaggy inspector supplied.

"O.K. A twenty-five. But after he'd given me the song and dance. That was why he was paid the grand, to give me the song and dance. Then when he'd done his bit he was erased."

Tony Escourt had moved behind the easy chair. His laughter had subsided into that famous crooked grin.

"Me again, Wale?"
"You," I said. "The mice and the rest of it was window-dressing to hide the main deal. There never were any twelve murdered mice. The main deal was to kill Charney."

Tony Escourt frowned.

"I've listened to enough of this gibberish, Wale. To explode your fantasy at the outset, how could I have followed you around to Gault and Reale while I lay unconscious in my suite along with your own Sailor Duffy as a result of his"—the actor pointed a dramatic finger at Joe Vaccari—"attack?"

"You again," I said dully. "All you had to do was slip behind Sailor and slug him, then tie him up with the pillow slip around his head. Why would Vaccari put a pillow slip on Sailor's head? That was so Sailor couldn't see you. After you tried to polish off Reale you returned to the suite, put the bruise on your own forehead and waited for me."

"A man wouldn't do that to himself," Quinn muttered.

"The hell he wouldn't!" I told him. "For two million bucks I'd take my penknife and cut out my right eye! You think I wouldn't?"

Quinn's ice chip eyes shifted uneasily from my face to the actor-producer. "Take it to Charney, Shrimp," he muttered.

"Hell, you could take it yourself!" I said wearily. "For an actor like him, it would be a cinch to become Sister Homus. That was the main play. The murders of Campbell, Cohen and Humphrey were so much window-dressing to develop the idea of Joe Vaccari dealing out revenge to the lads who sent him up.

"Escourt could do that and be sure that Joe Vaccari wouldn't show up to queer the play because he had Joe right here in this house all the time. He wriggled Vaccari loose from the surveillance of the State police the day he was turned out of Sing Sing."

I POINTED to the nun costume and the shotgun still clenched in Sailor's left.

"That was supposed to be the clincher," I said. "If Deegan's shot connected it would

Twelve Dead Mice

have been the clincher. All the killings would be considered the work of Joe Vaccari and who was there to prove Vaccari was not actually the simple-minded dope everybody said he was?"

"I'm Joe Vaccari," spoke up Joe Vaccari suddenly. "I'm tired of standin' here. Anybody wanna go fishin'?"

"Me," Sailor Duffy offered.

"Shaddup, Sailor!" I growled. "Before you drive us all nuts!

"Deegan wasn't supposed to cream Vaccari," I continued dully. The family of hot coals and ice cubes were gone from my insides now, leaving a dull, empty vacuum in their stead. All I wanted now was to collect Sailor and go some place peaceful where we could spend the five grand in my pocket.

"That's why Escourt hired me," I said. "Wale, the quick trigger kid. I was supposed to see Vaccari in the doorway with a shotgun and make like William S. Hart. Then, if the case against Vaccari didn't jell, it would land on my neck, or be divided between us. In any event, Escourt would be clear. But he was too elaborate and elaborate kills always miss. If he'd stuck to pushing Charney out the window he'd probably have got away with it."

"Humphrey, Shrimp?" Quinn put in. "I don't remember no Humphrey kill on the blotter."

"Local," I sighed. "Edits the local rag. It happened half an hour ago, and don't tell me Escourt was here!"

"He wasn't," Quinn worried. "He drove to town with White to go shopping."

White turned red and stayed red this time.

"He left me in a bar for about ten minutes," White said thickly. "Said he had to see a dame."

"You flatheads!" I scowled at Quinn whose ice chip eyes were tearing into his hapless assistant.

Tony Escourt cleared his throat. He looked serious. When he spoke, his voice was two notches below normal—the defense attorney pleading a case.

"Wale, at first I was prone to scoff at your accusation," he said earnestly. "But now I see how you could arrive at such conclusions. I concede the circumstantial evidence against me is strong. But regard it an instant from my side. What motive could I have in killing Ed Charney? The man was my closest friend. And why would I smash in Humphrey's face after, as you said, my object in killing Charney had been accomplished?"

"I didn't say you smashed in Humphrey's face," I said slowly. "I said Humphrey was killed. But it makes no difference. You're bound to have left your mark. You couldn't



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Peter Paige

break away clean from that many kills."

Inspector Quinn's scowl was on Tony Escourt now.

"What's the motive, Shrimp?"

I said: "Holy smoke, I'm just after telling you! Two million dollars, sap! Vaccari didn't kill Scales twenty-seven years ago. Tony Escourt did. And Tony Escourt got the two million. He bought into Hollywood with one million while the other million bought the *Daily Press* for Charney.

"Charney was the most intelligent man on that jury. He knew Joe Vaccari's simple mind. He knew Vaccari had a short memory. Your psychologists will have a name for it. Read the testimony of that trial. Joe Vaccari, when he was arrested, said he'd got the fatal beer bottle and the blood-stained money from a friend. By the time he came to trial he'd forgotten that. But Charney remembered. Charney figured Escourt for the 'friend' and confronted him with it. Escourt offered to split. Charney and Escourt were the two wildest bucks in Northfield in those days.

"So Charney sweet-talked Gault and bribed Reale and then he took nis million to Manhattan and made good. Gault and Reale will bear that much out.

"But running the *Daily Press* gradually changed Charney," I said. "Hell, all New York watched him change from a playboy to a reformer. It got to the point where he reformed himself. When Joe Vaccari got out he tried to reach him in order to make up for all the years Vaccari spent in the big house. But he probably told Escourt what he was going to do and that was his death warrant. Escourt took it from there."

Tony Escourt tried to smile at me from behind the big easy chair but he couldn't. What came out was a grayish twist to his taut features. His lips worked, but no sound came out. Suddenly he brought up his right hand from behind the easy chair.

Then he dropped. He was dead before he hit the floor.

I looked dully at the wisp of smoke from the .32 in my fist, then I walked over and gaped down at the two holes in his face.

The other hole came from the small-calibered pistol he had raised from behind the easy chair.

I looked up at Inspector Quinn and said: "That has to be the twenty-five he used on Campbell."

A State Trooper appeared in the doorway with a paper in his fist. He said: "I have a warrant here for the arrest of one Cash Wale for murder."

I told him what he could do with it.

THE END

Ready for the Rackets

(Continued from page 8)

unwrapped same I was humiliated and embarrassed to find it a cheap, inferior grade, worth about one-fourth of what I had paid.

Not only that, but when my neighbor came home the next week she knew nothing about the matter, and I was out another 50c.

I don't know how this racket is worked and how this woman knew to contact me. Perhaps she rang doorbells in our building and when someone did not answer, contacted the party living nearest—in this case, myself. I was ashamed and did not mention it to anyone but I imagine I was not the only one whom she tricked.

Mrs. M. H.
Chicago, Ill.

WHEN small business firms became counterfeit conscious, passers found it necessary to seek a safer field of operations. Now it appears that housewives, too, will have to be educated.

The Rackets Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Gentlemen:

Many housewives throughout the nation are victimized daily by crooks using an old racket with a new twist. It has countless variations, but the theme of the swindle is this:

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Within a matter of minutes the bell rings again. This time it's a man. He explains hurriedly that he is the borrower's husband. He has come to redeem the ring. It seems he has succeeded in raising a substantial sum elsewhere and, knowing how much his wife treasures the ring, wants to get it back at once. Much as she hates to part with it, the housewife has no alternative. She accepts the crinkly new ten-spot—counterfeit, of course—and returns the ring.

Oddly enough this racket is an indirect outgrowth of the Treasury Department's recent anti-counterfeit campaign. Due to the fact that most tradesmen are wise to their act, counterfeit passers have been forced to seek greener, more trusting fields.

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(Continued from page 52)

unscrupulous pair of rascals," he says. He gives me a scowl. "Young man, you have lied to me and deceived me. Your wicked accomplice has escaped, but he will not get far." The Doc starts for the door. "I dare you to shoot me, young man."

Of course I am right on the Doc's heels. Before Idabelle or Mrs. Bonnie Throop can make a move, we are out in the street. Wall-Street Walter is sitting at the wheel of our car.

As we go past the Kosy Knook Kottages' station-wagon, I notice Otis Smelch huddled up in a heap on the floor. I don't have time to stop and speak to him.

We are over the state line and a dozen miles inside Georgia before I quit feeling nervous and can relax.

The Doc tells Wall-Street Walter the whole story and for a minute I think Walter is going to bust himself laughing. I laugh, too. Now it is funny.

The Doc chuckles for a while and then he sobers up. "I shall always regard this as one of our most successful operations," he says. "We made a nice ten thousand-dollar score for ourselves. Mrs. Bonnie Throop and her intrepid daughter have the Vanderbilt diamonds or the twenty thousand-dollar reward, whichever they prefer. Even J. Pettigrew, the alligator farm impressario, wins out. He has the five hundred dollars I paid him for that option."

"Everybody wins but Otis Smelch and The Buster," I tell the Doc. "All The Buster gets out of this is a good belting around. Otis Smelch is also in bad shape."

The Doc grins. "Those two gentlemen will benefit when they think it over," he says. "Perhaps they will think twice before they attempt to associate with their superiors again."

THE END



Start With Murder

(Continued from page 33)

that's all I've heard. What went on after I passed out?"

Margie laughed. "Sam worked out a gag." She told Peter about the cigarette butts and the burning sedan and the exploding gas tank. "And when the FBI men showed up they went over the whole place, inch by inch. There was a tunnel leading from a pit in the garage floor—you know, the sort of pit they used to build so you could work under your car—and the tunnel ran to the garage on the next estate which was on an entirely different road. But the sedan had been parked over the pit, with the emergency brake on, and they couldn't get to it because of the fire. So the getaway was nicely blocked. The G-boys also got the fishing boat lab and I don't know how many members of the ring and the whole thing is over. So we can all rest up a bit."

A cute little sloe-eyed nurse had come in. She said: "That's what Mr. Vincent needs—some rest right now."

"O.K.," said Peter, grinning at the nurse. So long, kids."

"See you in Hollywood, Peter," said Margie. "That is, if you'll get well quickly and come on out there."

Peter raised an inquiring eyebrow. "You mean, Shannon, that Sam has finally sold you the idea? Congratulations, Sam."

"Thanks for nothing, Pete," said Fisk gloomily. "The lady is not going out to Hollywood to be with me. There's a brand-new beautiful murder mystery out there and her paper is sending her to cover it. The only way I'll get to see her is by chasing her while she's chasing police cars."

"Now, Sam," said Margie. "You know you'll get to see me."

"How?"

"Sam, my lamb," said Margie, patting his hand, "you'll think up a gag. You'll always think up a gag!"

THE END



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