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From the letters you send us each month we know that you want your Rackets column to keep going strong, just as long as there are slick schemers and racketeers of all kinds around to try and cheat you.

And that's why this month we're warning you to be especially careful of signing on the dotted line—*before* you read *all* the print, the large and the small print. Be especially cautious in dealing with salesmen who want you to make with the John Hancock before you show the contract to your lawyer. There may be some clauses printed in fine type which would bind you to the deal in ways you don't want.

There are other ways in which you can safeguard yourself from being bilked by blackguards and petty chisellers. Keep checking up on them by reading this column regularly for the latest news on swindles-about-town.

Also, don't forget to keep sending us your letters relating your own personal experiences with sharp characters. We'll print the letters you send us, paying you \$5.00 for every letter we can use. That way you'll help your neighbor keep his hard-earned cash—and we'll help you earn some more.

Naturally, we'll withhold your name from print if you ask us to. However, no letters can be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope. You'll understand that because of the press of mail in the office, we can't enter into correspondence concerning your letters.

Be sure to address all letters to The Rackets Editor, care of DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, New York.

Now, let's check up on the chisellers:

(Please continue on page 8)

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Ready for the Rackets

(Continued from page 6)

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Then he wrote a check for \$75.00 drawn on a bank some thirty miles away in payment for the watch.

The manager was reluctant to accept the check so the fellow left the check and the watch with the understanding that the manager would cash the check when he made his Saturday morning deposit at the bank, and the customer would pick up the watch later in the day.

The fellow came in and called for his watch that afternoon, but the manager told him the bank had refused payment whereupon he took the check back and left in an uproar.

But his anger lasted only until he got outside for he promptly went to another store down the street and, upon signing a name for which he had identification under the jewelry store manager's endorsement on the back of the check, he was \$75.00 richer.

R. D. Prentice, Ill.

Sitting Pretty

Dear Sir:

I wonder how many people have lost good money through failure to insure parcels in the mails. A few months ago, I received a beautiful folder offering auto seat covers for \$9.95 on a five day free trial. The offer was so attractive and there was no risk involved, so I sent for the covers.

On arrival, they turned out to be of very poor quality—so they went right back by return mail. Within two weeks I started to receive a steady stream of dunning letters threatening legal action.

Though I wrote explaining that I had returned the covers—until finally losing patience, I made a claim for a lost parcel with the post office.

Within two weeks I received a tracer showing that the seat covers were delivered and since the value was over five dollars, the receiver had to sign for them on delivery.

Needless to say, the dunning letters stopped fast. To any one doing business by mail, I can surely advise—pay the few cents parcel post insurance fee—in this case only ten cents—and protect yourself against the loss of many dollars by careless business methods or outright con artists.

F. S. Mynahan
E. Lynn, Mass.

That's the score-card on rackets for this month, detective fans. We'll be back again next month with the lowdown on new schemes.

—The Editor



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REST IN PIECES

*Each man kills the thing he loves—
but not prosaic Albert!*

SOMETHING was bothering her, some part of the night that had no name—or maybe some part of herself. She lay tossing and turning, trying to sleep, hearing Albert's breathing.

Outside the ocean surged strongly against the rock-bound shore. Strength against strength. Outside the moon shone voidly, expressionlessly, its light utterly without any meaning for Ivy Nettleton, limning the bedroom window with a pale insignificance. Where had she lost touch with its magic? How did she come to lie here, awake and angry, while Albert slept peacefully beside her and the solitude closed them in? Solitude for two—she had asked for it.

When had it become solitude for herself alone?

"Albert." Her voice was querulous.

He came out of it reluctantly, fighting returning consciousness every step of the way. "Ivy—uh—what is it?"

"Ivy—uh—what is it?"

"Albert!" Suddenly she knew she couldn't say it, not about his breathing. Inspiration came to her. "The waves, Albert—they're keeping me awake."

"Oh, for—" The bed springs protested in the darkness; even they seemed in league against her. She could feel his mounting anger in the silence, before he finally, said, "But you wanted us here. You said a cottage by the sea, just the two of us. . . ." His voice faded and she listened with a kind of terror.

Would he start *breathing* again?

He didn't, and she relaxed.

"Albert, do you remember those promises you made?"

"Yes—dear."

She had even written them down for him, and he had signed the document: *I give my word of honor and my promise that for the rest of my life . . .*

"Albert, make me a cup of tea."

"Yes, dear."

The mattress sighed as he got up, groped briefly in the darkness, found a match and scratched it to life. He held the light to a candlewick—the cottage had no electricity—and went into the kitchen.

I GIVE my . . . sacred promise that for the rest of my life . . . Never . . . go against any of my wife's wishes . . .

She had written them down and he had signed the paper. He filled a pan with water, put it on the stove.

The decisions of my wife in all matters shall be right and final.

He fumbled with the range. Not even in the army did you have to—

Never again will I wear a uniform.

That was another one of them. He scratched a match, got the fire lit. He watched it lick the metal pan bottom.

Hatreds of my wife shall also be mine.

Fire always hated and hungered, and seldom ate its fill. It even corroded metal. He felt slightly corroded remembering:

Never will I do anything for the benefit of man or country. Only will I act for the benefit of my wife and myself.

Never will I be a soldier, except in appearance. I will take and never give.

She had written it and he had signed

(Please continue on page 12)

• **By Lauri Wirta** •

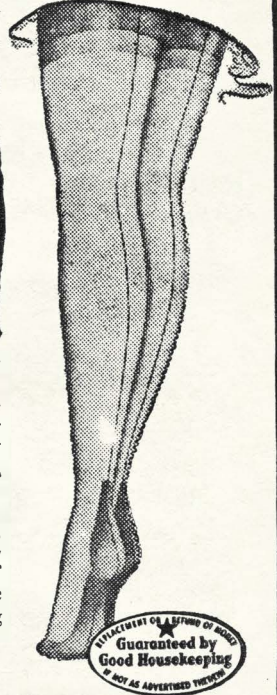
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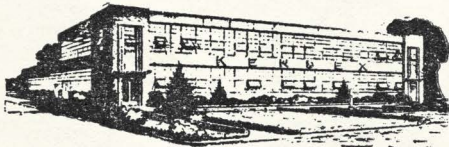
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(Continued from page 10)

it, for this was another kind of war—a war where peace was desperate.

I will live, work and play for one person alone, my wife Ivy.

The fire hummed, and the water in the pot grew restless.

Her wishes and plans shall also be mine.

Never will I speak to women, or have anything to do with them, unless to answer them when absolutely necessary.

Water simmered in the pot. The fire, as if it knew, whispered in early triumph.

Never will I speak of my adventures overseas in the presence of my wife.

The sound in the pot subsided, the water broke to a boil. The battle was won. Curiously calm, Albert killed the flames, went to look for a teacup.

May the Lord strike me dead if I ever lie to, or cheat my wife.

He found the cup and saucer.

Never will I make new friends or contact old ones without the consent of Ivy.

He knew her strength exactly, and the strength of the tea she liked. He watched the now-dead fire transmit its venomous power through the water to the tea leaves, wresting their final substance, staining the water brown.

Never will I write to anyone or have dealing with anyone without the permission of my Ivy.

He poured the rest of the water, the clear water, into the sink, and, for no reason at all, remembered the friend who had talked him into enlisting in the army.

Should I ever see Mr.—, I solemnly promise to spit in his eye.

He wiped the pot and put it away, and then went back to pick up the teacup and the candle. Scuffing sleepily among alertly dancing shadows, he rejoined Ivy.

He put the tea down by the bedstead.

Never will I look at, speak to or nod to any neighbors, except Mr.—and Mr.—

They were alone here—without any neighbors. The two of them. She had wanted it so. He watched her drinking the tea, thinking that she was still young, though a few years older than he. It shouldn't have been bad, but all he wanted was to go to sleep. Tired, memory intruded while he waited.

I will seek not, nor write, nor contact in any way, any of my relatives without the consent of my wife.

Not at this hour, anyway, he thought sourly and watched Ivy drain her cup, then lie back with a sigh.

"All right, dear?" he asked and banished the wide-awake shadows by blowing out the candle. He lay back in the darkness, hoping that sleep would come, but his mind kept remembering drowsily:

All money from wages or otherwise will be given to my wife, who will give me spending money.

I will do my best to atone for all the agony of mind and body my lies, deceit and foolishness have caused her.

That was all of them—twenty vows, ten more than the church required in commandments. He felt at peace now, though worn as stones by the sea.

"Albert!"

The sound wedged his eyes open, filled them with meaningless moonlight, hurt and seared his brain. He sat up.

"Albert, the candlewick is smouldering. Will you take it to the kitchen?"

He got up, picked up the dead candle, took it into the kitchen. There were no dancing shadows now, just a pale, vacuous diffusion of what-once-had-been, with all the meaning and substance drained from it—as from the dead tea leaves—guiding his steps. There was nothing to confuse him as he remembered the twenty-first vow she had never made him take, had never thought of.

In the kitchen he found a flatiron. . . .



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HOMICIDAL HOME-COMING

CHAPTER ONE

Two Weeks With Slay

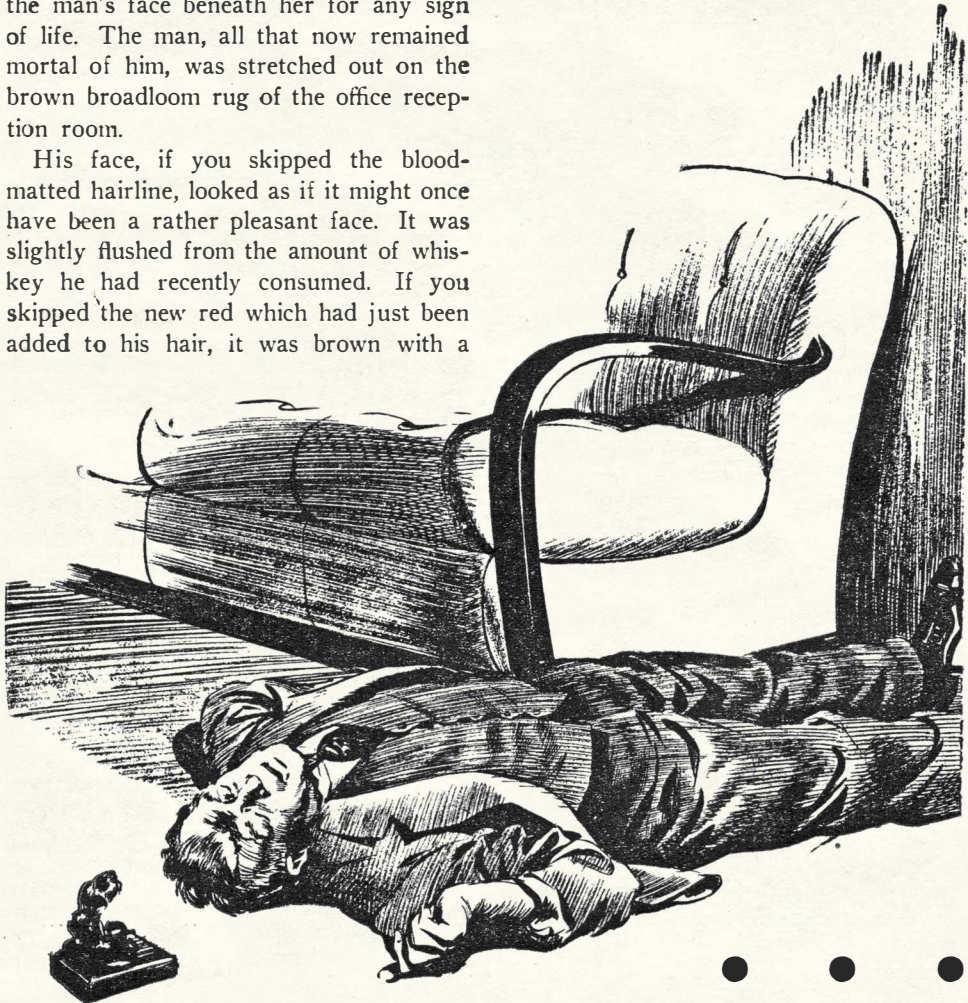
THE billiken-like paperweight rose in her gloved hand, poised for another crushing blow. In mid-air she held it, her eyes narrowly searching the man's face beneath her for any sign of life. The man, all that now remained mortal of him, was stretched out on the brown broadloom rug of the office reception room.

His face, if you skipped the blood-matted hairline, looked as if it might once have been a rather pleasant face. It was slightly flushed from the amount of whiskey he had recently consumed. If you skipped the new red which had just been added to his hair, it was brown with a

Sizzling

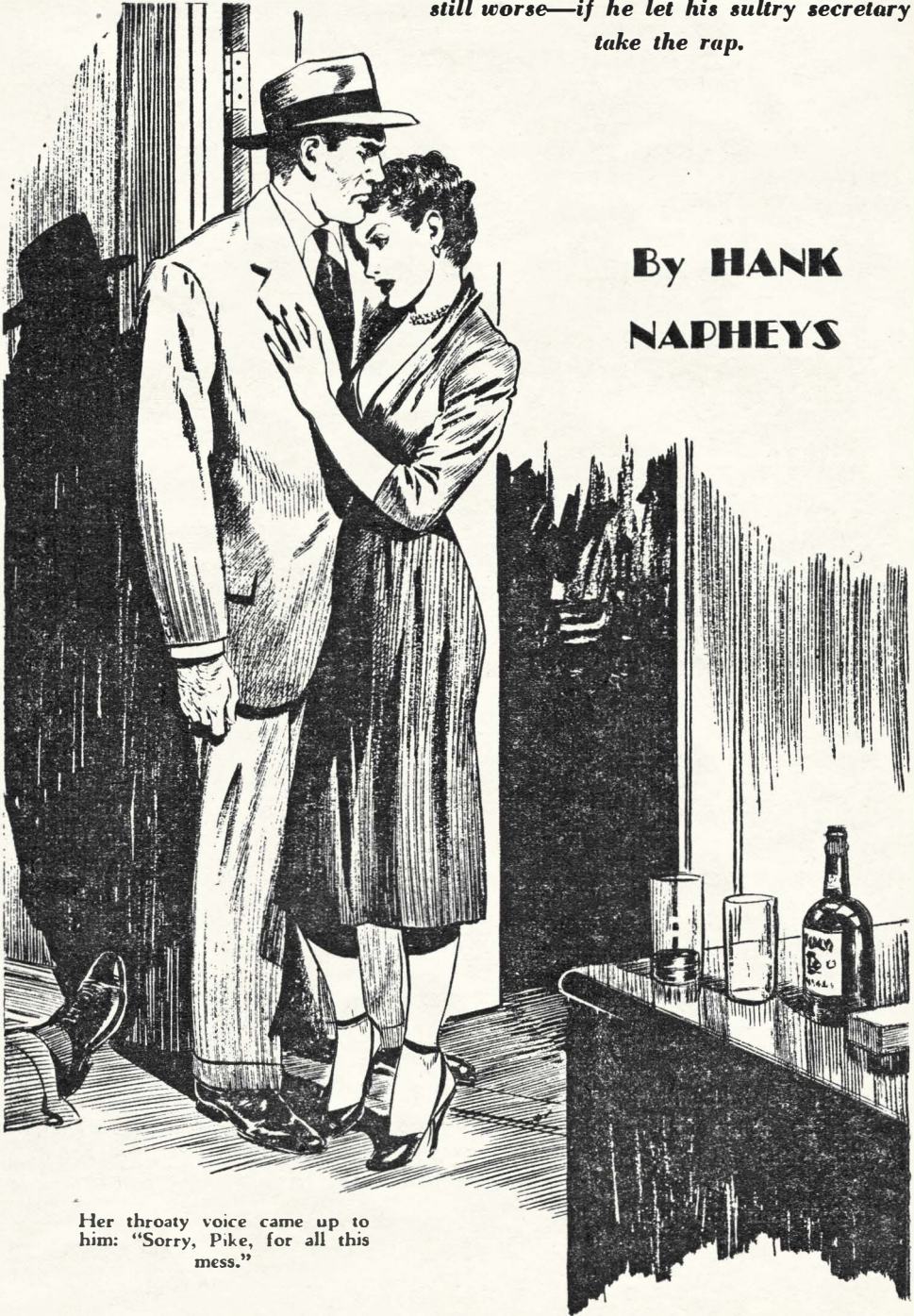
Suspense-Action

Novelette



*It sure was tough
to have a paying client knocked off...
but Private-Eye Pike figured things'd be
still worse—if he let his sultry secretary
take the rap.*

**By HANK
NAPHEYS**



Her throaty voice came up to him: "Sorry, Pike, for all this mess."

distinguished fringe of gray at the temples.

His white shirt had long Broadway points. The collar was fitted snugly to his neck with a nonchalantly precise Windsor knot. A second chin was now draped a bit loosely over the collar because he was neglecting to jut his chin to take up the flabby slack.

His necktie stuck out like a billiously pink tongue coated with wandering black scimitars. His dark-brown suit had faintly scented powder marks on the lapels.

The girl's eyes, hot with fury, were fastened on these powder marks. Too well had she known how they had gotten there on Harvey Varnett's coat. And she remembered Harvey's words:

We'll take a trip to this beach resort of yours, honey. We'll shove off now and drive down. We should reach the shore by about midnight. What say, honey?

You are drunk, Harvey. You couldn't drive a kiddie car... Quit it, Harvey... How many kisses do you want?

All you got, honey.

The infuriating memory of his words tensed the billiken paperweight in her hand. In her tigerish crouch, she scanned his features for the least flicker of life.

Waves of sound suddenly rose and beat against her ears. The crescendo of the music laced with gunshots told that the Grade-Z Western picture was blasting to its climax in the frowsy movie house beneath the offices. Above the accelerated tempo of the sound track music and gunfire, Harvey's words thundered in her ears:

Another round and we'll pull freight... This is Friday... No work tomorrow... Let's breeze—for the time of our lives.

I'm going to welch, Harvey... Guess I just talk big... Stop, Harvey... Stop!

The billiken paperweight started another plummeting drop. She checked it in time, let it roll to the rug. Harvey

Varnett was dead. Her angry blows would add nothing further to his punishment now.

She glanced at the two closed doors of the office. Shifting her weight, she moved to regain her feet. In moving, she exposed a tapering length of nylon. There was a metallic flash, showing the silver dollar she had twisted in her stocking top to hold it up. Easily, lithely she rose to her spike-heeled feet.

PIKE DOWD parked his convertible at the darkened street door of the balcony exit of the Odeon Theater. The dully painted metal exit door was closed as the feature was now showing. Over the door was an almost nonexistent ten-watt bulb. To the left of this was a three-sheet litho depicting a band of furiously riding outlaws under the red-emblazoned title: *Riders of Renegade Range*.

The modern sound-track music emanating through the closed exit door didn't go with a Western thriller. The second three-sheet announcing the second feature was too far from the dim light to be legible. Beside this second three-sheet was a dimly lighted doorway, sporting another extravagant ten-watt bulb. This door was the entrance to the offices on the second floor.

Pike pocketed the ignition key and moved purposely and angrily toward the office-door entrance. There wasn't a single pedestrian on the silent, dark street. Pike went into the paint-chipped lobby, nearly as dark as the street itself. As he climbed the stairs, the very walls seemed to shake and thump with the frantic abandon of the twelve-year-old tempo of the double shag.

The only office on the second floor was Pike's. The remainder of the floor space was taken up with cleaning equipment and cartons of supplies for maintaining a fifth-grade movie house. Pike saw the lighted square of florentine glass in his

office door, announcing: *Dowd Detective Agency*. Here in the worn and splintered wooden floor of the corridor the sound of the movie was still loud but not as blaring as on the staircase.

Pike flung open his office door, swept in and closed it. The first thing he saw was Harvey Varnett, his latest and best-paying client, stretched out laxly on the brown rug. Pike was about to kick him to his feet, best client or not, when his eyes lighted on the billiken paperweight balanced on its fat belly beside Harvey's caved-in forehead.

A soundless whistle escaped his lips. He looked toward the closed door of his private office.

A quiet bitterness narrowed his eyes as he saw the near-empty whiskey bottle and the two glasses on his secretary's desk. He felt like kicking Harvey Varnett, anyway. He paused a moment to feel Harvey's wrist and get a closer look at the battered forehead.

At the door to his private office he stopped and said: "Majel?"

Through the panel he heard the familiar squeak of the springs in his swivel chair; then a scared voice: "That you, Pike?" "Me."

There was the sound of a withdrawn bolt and the door swung open. Majel stood up to him, loose hipped like a man. She inclined her head, rested it on his shoulder. Her scented, raven-black hair touched his face. Pike kept his arms straight at his sides. From the vicinity of his coat lapel her throaty voice came up to him:

"Sorry, Pike, for all this mess. Harvey brought over a bottle. You know me—and liquor. It was fun until he blew his top." Majel shuddered against him. "The character went crazy." She turned her head, laid her cheek against his lapel and looked up at him through the smoky black fringe of her lashes. "Has he gone?" "He's still out there."

Her lashes raised as she regarded the hard lines of Pike's face. Her bright, dark-brown eyes were now wide upon Pike's. "Is he still out cold, Pike?"

"Very cold, Majel."

His tone as well as the word straightened the girl to her full height. She was tall, her eyes level with Pike's mouth. Her voice was a husky whisper: "Pike?"

"Look," said Pike evenly, "don't throw a fit of hysterics. We've got to face the fact that Harvey Varnett is dead—and that you killed him."

Majel backed away from Pike Dowd, her body taut. She looked for all the world like a baffled tigress at bay. "Don't pitch them so fast, Pike." Her voice had thinned to a cold edge. "I didn't hit Harvey hard enough to kill him."

"Take a look at him," said Pike.

HER heels twinkled across the rug as she moved sinuously into the outer office. Her sharp gasp of breath was clearly audible to Pike. She returned slowly to the inner office door. She leaned weakly against it. Her head slowly, stubbornly wagged back and forth.

Pike went over to her at the door. He slid his arm around her shoulders, murmured: "Knocking off my best-paying client." He drew her gently against him.

Majel averted her head. "Please don't try to kiss me—now."

"Relax," said Pike. "Believe me, it is the farthest thing from my mind. Corpses somehow cramp my style—seeing how that one out there got to be a corpse."

She raised her eyes briefly to Pike, then lowered them. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded. He—he said that he wanted all my kisses. Then he grabbed me." She shuddered.

Pike regarded her solemnly and thoughtfully, then he led her across the office over to his swivel chair. He eased her into it. He hooked a leg over the corner of his desk, loosened his tie. He

shook two cigarettes from a crumpled pack, lighted them both and put one in Majel's mouth. Her eyes thanked him.

Downstairs in the movie the music thumped into a louder tempo. He closed the door to the private office, then came back to his perch on the desk. The movie music now muted, Pike began to speak in a low voice.

"Harvey Varnett knew I was away from the office, working on that business investigation of his. He knew I wouldn't be here. So he came over here for a little after-hours office party. You weren't chained to the desk, so—"

"I drank his liquor—if that's what you mean."

"That's exactly what I'm getting to. Both of you killed nearly a quart of whiskey. You always carry it well. If I didn't know you real well—reasonably well—I wouldn't know that you've had a drink. But—if the cops gave you an alcohol test, you'd probably blow up their gadget. See, what I'm driving at, this—"

"Wait till I finish. Were you here alone with Harvey? Did any messengers come in and see you? Were there any phone calls? Did anyone at all see you here with him?"

She shook her head to all the questions, then said: "You certainly seem convinced that I killed him. I tell you I didn't hit him hard enough to crush his forehead."

Pike spread his hands in front of her. "Give me something else to work on, someone else to go after—and I'll buy it. You say you didn't hit him hard enough to kill him. Well, listen to this: The cops will find out that you're a top tennis player. Your service is a cannonball. Tie this in with a hard-drinking party." Pike shook his head. "Lord knows I'd like to believe that you didn't do this."

"What do you want me to do, Pike, put on a weeping willow act, and act as if I'm sorry that he's dead?" Her lip

curled. "It happens I'm glad he's dead."

Pike angrily ground out his cigarette. "What the hell did you expect with a setup like this? You asked for the treatment you got."

"Like hell I did! I expected he would be a gentleman like you, Pike."

"Gentleman!" snorted Pike. "I'm just a plain damned fool. I know it, and you know it. And now I'm going to prove it beyond any possible shadow of a doubt."

Majel leaned forward in the chair, placed an elbow on his knee, cupped her chin in her palm and looked up at him. "What do you want me to do, Pike?"

"First we clean up this place. You turn up Harvey's coat collar to cover his white shirt. I'm going to try to get him out of here as inconspicuously as possible. And you are going home to pack your bags. You are taking your two weeks' vacation...."

CHAPTER TWO

Wifie's Special Request

TWO hours later Pike restlessly paced his bachelor apartment living room. For a hep-to-the-jive private eye, he was acting like a flustered chicken. He knew now why surgeons never operated on their loved ones. He caught his reflection in a mirror. He stopped short and gave the worried reflection a short bark of a laugh.

A smart private eye would now be indulging in an utterly nonchalant bourbon on rocks. Deciding that that was an utterly good idea, he went into his kitchen and took down his favorite highball glass, a maroon-and-black striped affair. From the soap-powder compartment under the sink, he dug up a three-quarter full bottle of bonded bourbon. He poured a vigorous nip over the ice, and raised the glass to his mouth.

It was then that the doorbell rang

stridently. Pike came to an abrupt halt, the glass never touching his lips. He had a sudden, apprehensive conviction that the person outside his corridor door was no one but Detective-Lieutenant Karl Mauch of the Homicide Squad.

Pike made a frenzied, rapid-fire check of his actions of the past two hours and came inexorably to the conclusion he had made a colossal blunder somewhere. He had skirted the law many times, broken it a few times and had always neatly covered himself with the police. But now with Majel emotionally tied in with his law-breaking tonight—

With a fatalistic shrug which said, "Nuts! Let's face it," he strode into the living room and over to the corridor door. His hand on the knob was suddenly moist with sweat. As he twisted the knob, he wondered if law-hound Mauch would be able to smell the fear emanating from every pore of his body. Then the door was open.

If Detective-Lieutenant Mauch had been standing there, Pike doubtlessly would not even have seen him. For the blonde in the doorway filled Pike's eye to the brimful. Pike just stood there and stared at her. Opening that door had been like opening a dungeon vault on a sudden blast of brilliant sunshine.

Sunny was the word for the blonde. Her hair was the natural color of ripe wheat, and her eyes were the light blue of a summer sky. There was a questioning, troubled light in her eyes. Pike skipped the questioning eyes till he finished looking at the rest of her, beautifully filling a pale green dress, the sheerest of nylons and green high-heeled sandals. Then he came back to her eyes.

She asked: "Mr. Dowd—Pike Dowd?"

He nodded, gallantly gesturing her into the apartment, and noting that his palms were not hot and dry.

The blonde stepped into the room, glancing apologetically at him. "I phoned

your office several times, Mr. Dowd. . . ." She let the words trail off into her scented wake.

Pike followed her, politely sniffing. When she turned and faced him, he said: "Please be seated." Then he added in what he hoped was a casual tone: "I haven't been down to the office since early afternoon."

A frown drew her finely arched brows together. "That is strange, Mr. Dowd."

Pike stopped his drink a scant inch from his mouth. His words skittered across the brim of the glass: "How—uh—do you mean that?"

"My husband phoned me late this afternoon, saying he had an appointment with you."

"Your—husband?"

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Dowd. Of course, you don't know my name. I am Claire Varnett. Harvey said that he would probably have dinner with you tonight after your conference."

Pike had a trapped feeling. He groped for words.

The blonde took a hesitant step toward him. "Is anything wrong, Mr. Dowd? You look so—so strange."

"I'm just taken aback," he said truthfully. "I was startled to think that I might have forgotten an appointment. Harvey must have made a mistake. I had no appointment with him today. Definitely, not. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Varnett, I spent the day over in Meritville, checking a firm for Harvey. I didn't get back to town till well after the dinner hour."

"Oh!" The blonde nibbled her underlip. "What shall I do, Mr. Dowd?"

Pike didn't know. It was bewildering to have to accept the fact that a tasty dish like Claire Varnett had a two-timing husband. Pike's innards curdled at the thought of the tragic shock that was in store for her. He stared moodily at his rug and said gently: "I truthfully don't know what to say, Mrs. Varnett."

Claire Varnett still hadn't taken the chair Pike had offered. Now she came close to him. "Mr. Dowd, there is something you can do. Please take me—" She stopped, shook her blonde head. With a shrug of resignation, she walked toward the door.

Pike couldn't keep his eyes from the rippling liquid green of her dress. He put his nose into his highball glass, and took it out again to belatedly offer: "May I make you a drink, Mrs. Varnett?"

"Thank you so much, but not right now. I'm so worried. I've phoned all Harvey's regular drinking places. He hasn't shown at any of them tonight." She hesitated, then plunged on hurriedly: "Could you—would you, Mr. Dowd—take me to your office? Harvey may still be there waiting for you."

"All this time?" Pike hedged.

"Mr. Dowd, I will be perfectly frank with you. Harvey drinks much more than he should. He may have passed out in the corridor."

Pike knew he had no alternative. "Sure thing, Mrs. Varnett. I'll get the car out of the garage."

AS PIKE again climbed the stairway to his second-floor office, the *Riders of Renegade Range* must have been in full gallop, blasting their way through a cowtown posse. Shots ripped out from the sound track. Thundering hoofbeats sounded as if they were coming through the brick wall.

The riotous goings-on matched Pike's tumultuous thoughts. He wished he could climb on a horse and gallop the hell out of Claire Varnett's life, out of Majel's life and out of this town. He felt like one of the renegade riders.

Claire Varnett, going up the stairs with him, flashed him a sidelong glance. "Do you like this background music for your work, Mr. Dowd?"

"It's not always this loud," said Pike.

He was holding the blonde's arm, helping her up the stairs. He couldn't remember when he felt more like a heel and a Judas. The tension was stretching his mind like a taut rubber band.

The dim little light in the second-floor ceiling shed just enough of a glow to read the gold-leaf lettering on his office door: *Dowd Detective Agency*. The florentine glass panel in his door was a black square, showing no light from within the office.

Claire Varnett looked around the gloomy corridor. "Harvey certainly isn't here, Mr. Dowd. I'm sorry to have bothered you."

Pike had his office key in his hand. He had been about to put the key into the door lock but stopped at her words. He dropped the key back into his pocket and pointed his thumb toward the dark glass of his office door. "Sure doesn't seem as if anyone is in there."

A third voice, from the direction of the head of the stairs, said: "Let's go in, anyway."

Pike twisted his head toward the sound of the new voice. The rubber band that was his mind stretched another taut notch. He saw the hard-blunt face of Detective-Lieutenant Karl Mauch.

Pike wished that one of the soundtrack bullets would clip him so he could sink to the floor and dissolve. He felt Claire Varnett's questioning stare on his face, but he couldn't force himself to look at her. *This*, he told himself, *is it!*

Mauch's voice was as hard and incisive as his features: "Let's go into your office, Dowd. Must we stand out here while the West is won?"

Fumbling the key into the lock, Pike swung back the door and turned on the wall light switch. By the sheerest force of will power, he kept himself from looking at the spot where Harvey Varnett's corpse had sprawled on the rug. Without looking at his secretary's desk, he knew that the whiskey bottles and glasses and

all signs of the office party had disappeared. And he knew that the ugly billiken paperweight would never again see the light of day or the dark of night.

Claire Varnett's voice was sharp in his ears: "No one in here, either, Mr. Dowd."

Detective-Lieutenant Mauch followed them into the office. "Who were you expecting to see?" he asked. Then, when he got a good look at the blonde in the better light of the office, he took off his hat. "Dowd seems to have forgotten his manners. I'm Lieutenant Mauch of Homicide. And you—"

Claire said: "I am Mrs. Harvey Varnett."

Pike saw the lieutenant's eyes widen, then narrow. Before Mauch could speak, Pike said: "Mrs. Varnett is worried about her husband. We've been looking for him."

Mauch said carefully: "A man carrying the identification of Harvey Varnett was

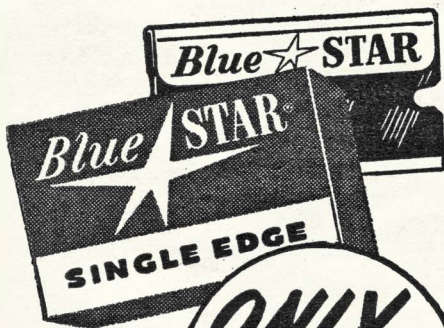
robbed, murdered and thrown from a car. Sorry to break the news this way, Mrs. Varnett."

Claire Varnett's mouth dropped open. She stared speechlessly at the lieutenant, then at Pike. Pike put his arm around her and gently eased her into one of his visitors' chairs.

Keeping his arm around her, Pike held her golden head against him. He could have told her exactly where the "robbed and murdered" body of her husband had been thrown from the car. He could have told her that the money taken from her husband's wallet was now floating somewhere in a sewer. And he could have told the blunt-faced homicide lieutenant that the well-used concrete highway would never yield the tire threads of the "murder car."

All planned and executed very neatly by a private peep who carried a torch for his secretary. But Pike wasn't pleased

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with his handiwork. He felt awful. And he held Claire Varnett's head against him so she couldn't see the miserable look in his eyes.

Mauch asked questions. Claire Varnett answered some; Pike answered others. And, as Pike knew Mauch would, the police detective got to the question which Pike knew was inevitable. Mauch said:

"One phase of this case could be cleared up instantly by talking to your secretary, Dowd—Majel Sherwood. When we found Harvey Varnett's body, we tried his home. No one was there. Then we tried his business address, finally reached his secretary at her home. She said that Mr. Varnett had left his office for an appointment here at this office, Dowd. And now, Mrs. Varnett tells us the same thing. Where can we find Majel Sherwood?"

Dowd kept his hands in his pants pockets, wiping his sweaty palms on his pocket linings. He hoped his voice sounded firm and natural: "Miss Sherwood had my permission to close up early today. She was starting her two-weeks' vacation."

"Where?" asked Mauch.

Pike felt Claire Varnett's blue eyes upon him as he replied: "It may sound unbusinesslike as hell—but I don't know where she went."

CLAIRE VARNETT'S private sitting room was a most welcome change to Pike Dowd, after two solid hours in Detective-Lieutenant Mauch's spartan-like office in the city hall building.

Both Claire and he had identified Harvey's body in the morgue. Claire alone had identified Harvey's personal belongings in the impersonal cardboard box. She had hardly glanced at the pitiful pile of memory-stirring belongings.

Blonde Claire, now curled up on her divan, was saying to Pike: "It is certainly no secret now that Harvey was a drunkard."

Pike spread his hands, said nothing.

"Also," Claire went on in her quiet voice, "now that the worry and uncertainty is over, I can tell you exactly how I feel."

Pike ventured a tentative: "Yes?"

"My husband was a heel." Claire's blue eyes never wavered from Pike's face. "Harvey was a drunkard and a chaser. What he got tonight—has been a long time coming."

Pike said: "Harvey and I went to high school together. I haven't seen much of him since—until several weeks ago when he hired me for this business investigation over in Meritville." Pike hesitated; then plunged on with all sincerity: "I honestly don't see how any man in his right mind who had a wife like you—"

Claire rested her hand briefly on Pike's wrist. "I like the way you said that." She shook her blonde head slowly. "But you are forgetting that a drunkard isn't in his right mind."

Pike liked sitting close to her on the divan and he liked her putting her hand on his, but he didn't like her thoughts on her husband's death. He spread his hands remonstratingly. "I really don't see how you can put such a construction on—on Harvey's death."

"It's very simple," said Claire quietly. "Because I saw something that Mister-Lieutenant Mauch didn't see."

Pike felt the sweat oozing from his palms. "Yes?"

"There was lipstick on Harvey's necktie."

Pike winced. There *was* something he had missed. And he knew that he had missed it because Harvey's coat collar had been turned up when he carried him out of the office to the car. Pike managed to mumble: "Why—uh—why didn't you point out this fact to Mauch?"

"He'll find out soon enough about it. I'm not going to put up signposts for Mauch." She clasped her slender fingers tightly, stared hard at them. "Besides, I

want to hold onto my pride as long as possible."

Pike asked very simply: "But why tell me?"

Claire rose from the divan by the simple expedient of straightening her lovely knees. She swayed across the room to a built-in bar on the far wall. Pike found himself entranced by the rhythmic fluidity of her sleek green dress. Her eyes slanted back toward his across her shoulder. "You are going to think me very silly when I ask you if you remember your last football game at Shoream."

A warm, nostalgic glow spread over Pike as he thought back to those lovely, beautiful, uncomplicated days. He nodded dreamily.

"You kicked the winning goal," said Claire, uncorking a bottle. "You could have had your pick of any girl in town that night. Do you remember the one you picked?"

"Lillian Varnett," said Pike promptly. "She is a cousin of Harvey's."

"Right. I was at the game with Lillian." Claire wagged her head and smiled wryly. "You didn't even see me. I'll tell you something else that happened that night. Lillian slapped your face."

Pike shrugged. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained."

"So very right," agreed Claire. She came back to the divan with two tinkling highballs, handed one to Pike. She took her place beside him. She didn't toast him, didn't look deeply into his eyes; she merely took a sip and placed the glass on the coffee table. Then she said: "Mister-Lieutenant Maueh didn't seem to believe you when you said that you didn't know where your secretary was vacationing."

Pike held his highball glass very steady. "I don't particularly give a damn what Mauch thinks. My secretary is entitled to a vacation. She's taken it. There's no law that says I have to know where she went or what she's doing."

"That's what you told the mister-lieutenant. I don't think that he believed you, Pike Dowd."

"Do you?" asked Pike.

A tiny smile tucked in the corners of Claire's mouth. "That is a tall question, especially when Mauch said that your secretary was a 'sultry-looking babe'."

Pike had the uncomfortable feeling that he was being maneuvered into something. He didn't want to think or talk about Majel Sherwood. Before he could come up with a rejoinder, Claire said:

"Yes, I do believe you, Pike. And you've been very thoughtful and kind to me tonight. I unwittingly dragged you into my sorry mess, and I hope I'm not the cause of any hard feelings between you and Mauch."

Pike impulsively laid his hand on hers. "Please don't feel sorry about anything on my account. You've been through pure hell tonight. All that Mauch wanted to do was to check with my secretary to learn if Harvey ever did reach my office tonight. I'm sorry I couldn't help him—and you."

Claire's fingers curled around Pike's. "You have helped me, Pike, in many ways. Being with me when I identified—Harvey. Coming back here with me." She leaned toward Pike, saying earnestly: "But I do want your opinion on one thing... Do you agree with Mauch's theory that Harvey was picked up by someone in a car, was killed, robbed, then thrown from the car?"

Pike definitely could feel himself being maneuvered into a corner. He said carefully: "Seems the only possible theory—from what facts the police now have."

"Exactly!" Claire's fingers tightened on Pike's hand. "But we have one fact that so far has escaped the police. We know there was lipstick on Harvey's necktie. Some woman is behind this whole mess." Claire's face was now a scant inch from Pike's. Her voice was low as she said: "Pike, I want that woman!"

"What?" Pike could feel the perspiration breaking out on his forehead. He was too numbed to get out more than that one word.

Claire went on: "Pike, I want to hire you to find that woman. I don't care what your fee is—but get her."

Pike's movements and words were mechanical. His mind was dazed. In a fog, he was conscious of gulping down his drink, promising he'd get right to work on the case, picking up his hat and moving through the house with Claire to the front door.

At the front door he was snapped back into focus by the strange way Claire was looking at him and the gentle warmth of her voice.

She stood two feet away from him, her hands pressed flat against her. Her blonde head was held high, her clear eyes staring straight into his. She said: "When that woman is in jail, come to me, Pike. I promise you...that you won't get slapped."

CHAPTER THREE

Law-Breaking Beauty

PIKE DOWD rolled his convertible around the traffic circle and onto Bay Avenue in Rural Beach. He drove slowly along the sun-glazed concrete avenue, looking at the names of the hotels on his right. All the hotels had wide, deep, inviting porches, shadowed by low-swung awnings. A sea breeze whipped the heavy fringes on the awnings.

On his left was an endless, glaring white beach and the brassy bay. The beach was alive with bathers who overflowed onto the avenue, treading the hot concrete with their bare feet. A man would have needed a swivel neck to see all the luscious dolls on parade. But Pike Dowd's eyes were filled with the picture of a dead man with his head bashed in.

A black plaque with a yellow device caught his eye: *The Golden Sea Horse*. Pike swung into the curb and parked in front of a huge no-parking sign. He stepped to the sidewalk and stretched his car-cramped body. He wore light tan slacks, a white T-shirt and loafers.

Steep wooden steps led up to a high, awninged porch. Pike took the long flight of steps in lithe, easy strides. At the top of the steep flight, a sweating, portly desk clerk greeted Pike with:

"You can't park there."

Pike planted himself solidly in front of the clerk, and asked: "Is Miss Majel Sherwood registered here?"

The clerk raised his eyebrows knowingly. "Oh, *her*. She's about to leave. Are you the boy-friend from the city?"

"Tell Miss Sherwood that Mr. Dowd is here." Pike had a strong feeling that some new disaster was about to pounce on him. He snapped irritably at the clerk: "Come on, Fatso, I haven't got all day."

The clerk entered the cool, dark lobby and started across to his desk. Two girls in sun suits were sitting on a wicker divan. They perked up and gave Pike a she-wolf once-over. The desk was on the left side of the lobby; a cocktail lounge on the right.

The clerk just couldn't keep his big rubbery lips still: "I can't blame you for being burned up, Mr. Dowd, but I sure got to hand it to you for having a stacked babe. In her birthday suit—" the rubbery lips whistled—"she's ter-rif."

Pike said softly: "Drag that across again."

The clerk's little eyes beamed sheer delight. "Of course—you haven't heard. That means that I'm actually the first to tell you." His mouth fairly watered. "I always did say that husbands and boy-friends are the last to hear the worst. Sure you won't mind my telling you?"

Pike managed an indifferent shrug. "I'll hear it sooner or later."

"Indeed," agreed the clerk. He hunched closer confidentially. "Majel Sherwood walked along the beach this morning—naked!" He cocked his head to see the effect of his juicy bombshell.

Pike stood open-mouthed, thinking: *This is just dandy.* He asked the clerk: "Were any reporters around?"

"Reporters," echoed the clerk. "There was a news photographer from Atlantic City right on the beach. The story and pictures will be in every big-city paper by night. Scandalous, isn't it?"

Pike thought that suicidal was a better word. He said: "Please tell Miss Sherwood that Mr. Dowd is here. Step on it."

The clerk went around the register desk to the switchboard. He spoke into the instrument, disconnected; then said to Pike:

"She's mighty anxious to have you come in. Room Fifteen." He sniggered. "But you won't be able to stay long. The police have ordered her to leave town immediately."

Pike walked swiftly down a corridor and knocked on Fifteen.

A muted voice invited: "Come in, Pike."

Pike found the door unlocked, and went in. The room was large and coolly darkened by an awinged window facing the bay. A draft created by the opening door whipped a silken flimsy from a partially packed suitcase, and spread it on the floor.

The bathroom door was open about an inch. From the crack came Majel's softly husky voice:

"So the knight again rescues the damsel in distress."

Pike closed the corridor door, walked over to the flimsy on the floor. "Lord knows why I'm doing this—but I'm getting you out of here, fast. Lieutenant Mauch is probably on his way down here now."

From the cracked door came Majel's question: "What does that stiff-necked baboon want?"

"The killer of Harvey Varnett," said Pike. "You murdered him—remember. It seems that Harvey told both his wife and secretary that he was going to my office. Mauch wants to talk to you about it."

There was a moment of silence from the bathroom; then: "What shall I tell him, Pike?"

The flimsy on the floor proved to be chartreuse nylon panties. Pike picked them up and dropped them back into the suitcase. He said: "And something new has been added. I've been retained by Mrs. Varnett to find the killer."

"That sorta confuses things," came Majel's voice. "Make yourself a drink. I'll be finished showering in a jiffy." There was no sound of running water. The voice went on: "I can explain about that beach episode, Pike."

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"That's just dandy, Majel. I'll visit you in the death house, and you can give me all the dazzling details. By the way, I don't hear any water in there."

"I'm toweling."

Pike ventured: "If I went in there, we wouldn't have to shout."

The bathroom door closed and the lock snicked.

Pike punched his right fist into his left palm. "Damned fool that I am!" He glared at the suitcase billowing with silken underthings. His mind slowly registered a foreign note in that soft medley of feminine apparel. A man's pink necktie lay on a lime-colored bra.

Slowly, Pike lifted out the tie. There were unmistakable lipstick smears on it just below the creases where a knot had been made.

FROM outside in the hotel corridor came a loud, blustering voice: "Right this way, Lieutenant. Damn that steep flight of stairs! Takes the breath right out of a man to climb 'em."

Footsteps thumped right up to the door. The knob turned, and, without so much as a knock, the door was flung open.

• Pike, partially turned away from the corridor door, swiftly stuffed the necktie into his pants' pocket.

Detective-Lieutenant Karl Mauch stepped into the room. A soft gabardine suit took none of the blunt harshness from his face. A snap-brim straw shadowed his narrowed eyes. His thin mouth was slanted in a cat-and-mouse smile. He put his eyes on the closed bathroom door and spoke in his careful, precise manner:

"I assume, Dowd, that you located your—ah—missing secretary."

Pike jerked his thumb toward the bathroom. Then Pike saw a very short and fat man bounce into the room. He wore a black-vizored white cap with a glittering shield on it, and a Sam Browne belt with a holstered revolver. On his light blue

shirt was a badge as big as a pie plate. Dark-blue trousers with a wide gold stripe filled out the picture of the local Chief of Police.

The chief was still wheezing from his climb up the steep front steps of the hotel. He demanded: "Where's that girl?"

Pike paid no attention to him; for the next person entering the room claimed all of Pike's attention.

Sunny-blond Claire Varnett slowly entered the room. Her sea-blue eyes widened in surprise when she saw Pike. She was trimly beautiful in a white suit and scarlet nylon blouse. Her ripe-wheat hair shone brightly in the dim coolness of the room. High-heeled scarlet sandals came together in an abrupt halt as she faced Pike. She remained motionless and silent as Detective-Lieutenant Mauch crossed to the bathroom door, knocking loudly on it and calling out:

"This is Lieutenant Mauch. Open up!"

Majel's husky voice came through the closed door: "Even the FBI couldn't get me to open up." There was a pause, then: "Tell Pike to mix you a drink."

Mauch glanced over his shoulder to the fat Chief of Police: "Can she get out the window?"

The chief shook his three chins. "No window in there. Only a ventilator. She's cooped up. Let's relax and take her suggestion." He then spoke brusquely to Pike. "Make mine with gingerale."

"Make your own," said Pike. He picked up the only two glasses in the room and a near-full bottle of fairly decent rye, and walked over to blonde Claire. He poured a healthy swig in each glass. Placing the bottle on the table beside Majel's open suitcase, he turned his back to both Mauch and the chief.

Claire took one of the glasses, letting her fingers brush gently across Pike's. She said in a low voice: "You're a fast man on the job, Pike. Was it my fee or my promise?"

Detective-Lieutenant Mauch walked over and just about thrust himself between them. There was hard suspicion in his eyes as he faced Pike. "I'd like to hear the answer to that, Dowd."

A deep gurgle behind Pike told him that the fat chief was taking Majel's suggestion.

"You mean," said Pike, "that you'd like to hear how I happened to come straight to this hotel. The answer is simple and can be checked. Miss Sherwood phoned me early this morning and said that she needed money. You see, she left on her vacation before I returned last night with her salary."

"I'll check that call," said Mauch. "But first tell me why you didn't report to me that you had located her. If I hadn't put her on the teletype and if A.C. hadn't gotten wind of this beach parade of hers, I'd still be looking for her. She's a material witness and—"

"That's not established, Mauch. She's not a fugitive—"

Blonde Claire cut in: "But I don't understand this at all, Pike. I was under the impression that you were working for me. And here you are trying to protect this—"

"Easy, Claire," cautioned Pike. "There's no evidence or knowledge that your husband went to my office. He told you that he was going there. He told his secretary he was going there. But that's still not proof that he ever arrived there."

Pike was talking loud enough for Majel to hear every word in the bathroom. "What I mean is—if you, yourself, saw him go into my office that would be eyewitness testimony for the law. Did you?"

"I did not," said Claire.

Pike shrugged. "There you are. That's what I mean."

The chief gurgled the bottle again.

Mauch thumbed toward the bathroom door. "Before I break down that door and drag her out here, Dowd, I want to point

out that your actions are not at all cooperative." Mauch strode swiftly to the bathroom door, raised his fist to strike the panel.

The door opened. Majel Sherwood stood in the doorway. She raised her eyes to Mauch's uplifted fist, asked in her softly husky voice: "Third degree, Lieutenant?"

Mauch slowly lowered his fist to his side. The hard grin seemed chiseled on his face. He breathed the words through thinned lips: "Miss Sherwood—at last."

CHAPTER FOUR

Cutie Turns Cartwheels

MAJEL was wearing a green-and-white striped dress which hugged her exactly where it should hug her. Her long, slender, suntanned legs were bare, and she wore no shoes. Her high cheekbones, sullen dark eyes and upswept black hair made her strikingly attractive. She swept past Mauch and padded over to Pike, saying:

"Hello, Boss. Sorry to keep you waiting."

Pike inhaled gently through locked teeth. He tried not to think of what her next few words would mean to both of them.

Claire Varnett's voice held an amused note: "So *this* is Majel Sherwood."

Majel turned slowly, stood loose hipped and critically surveyed Claire from head to toe. Then Majel turned back to Pike. "What's this all about, Boss?"

Pike nodded toward Mauch. "The lieutenant wants to question you."

"Right, Miss Sherwood," said Mauch. "When did you last see Harvey Varnett?"

"He phoned yesterday afternoon—"

Mauch cut in: "I asked you when you last *saw* him."

"Last week," said Majel, "when he came to see Mr. Dowd."

The detective-lieutenant studied her intently for some moments before saying: "Anyway, what about this phone call?"

"Varnett phoned to ask if Mr. Dowd had gotten back to town. I said that Mr. Dowd hadn't. Then Varnett tried to date me. He was drunk. I said there was nothing doing."

"What time was this, Miss Sherwood?"

"Around five."

"What else did he say?"

"That's all."

Claire Varnett banged down her glass on the table. "I don't believe her."

Majel thumbed in Claire's direction as she asked Mauch: "Is that the little woman?"

Pike kept his mouth out of it.

Mauch spoke gravely. "That is Mrs. Varnett—Harvey Varnett's... widow."

Pike couldn't have opened his mouth now. His heart was in it.

Majel never once took her eyes from Mauch's. She said quietly: "You mean that Varnett—is dead?"

"Murdered, robbed and thrown out of a car on the highway," Mauch hammered the words.

Majel's recoil was the natural, startled reaction to a shocking announcement.

The detective-lieutenant said pointedly: "So you see why we are trying to check Varnett's movements last night."

"I see," said Majel. "Say, Chief, save me a slug from my own bottle, will you." She padded, barefooted, over to the fat chief and took the badly punished bottle from his hand. Pointing the bottle's bottom toward the ceiling, she took a healthy swig. Then she gave the bottle to Pike. "Mind this for me, Boss."

The ruffled chief cleared his throat ominously.

Before he could speak, Claire Varnett asked Majel: "Does my husband's brutal death surprise you, Miss Sherwood?"

"No," said Majel. "He was so cockeyed drunk he was asking for whatever came

along. Don't tell me that surprises you, Mrs. Varnett."

Claire Varnett's eyes were blue fire. "That woman can't talk to me like that!"

Detective-Lieutenant Mauch stepped between them. "Quiet, both of you. I'm conducting this investigation. And your story, Miss Sherwood, will be checked."

Majel ignored him. She moved over to the chest of drawers, picked up a pair of sheer nylons and two silver dollars. She sat on a chair, and, oblivious to the stares of them all, casually drew one stocking on a lovely leg. When the stocking was on, she inserted one of the silver dollars under the top. She twisted it in the stocking, tourniquet-like, until the nylon top was tight against her. Then she tucked the coin under the stocking top to hold it firm.

Pike was fascinated by both the leg art and the novel method of holding up the stocking. He thought he had seen them all. And he watched admiringly while Majel repeated the procedure on her other leg.

Majel buckled on her ankle-strap white shoes with spike heels, dropped her green-and-white skirt over her knees, and stood up.

Claire Varnett clapped her hands in applause. "A splendid performance, my dear. And one so typical of you. I trust that Lieutenant Mauch was as observing as I." She turned to the police detective. "Lieutenant Mauch, I am sure you will find those silver dollars are dated Eighteen eighty-eight. My husband had a hobby of collecting that year. Cartwheels, he called them. And you might ask Miss Sherwood under what circumstances my husband gave her a coin garter."

Mauch tilted his snap-brim straw back off his forehead. "Now we seem to be getting somewhere."

PIKE raised the rye bottle for a fast drink. Some of the whiskey trickled down his chin. Brushing the back of his

hand across his mouth, he quickly closed the distance to Majel. He demanded: "Are those coins Eighteen eighty-eight?" Then, in the lowest of whispers, he said: "Get her mad. Steam her up." Aloud again, he hellowed: "Answer me!"

Majel put her face close to his and yelled back: "I haven't the faintest idea what date they are."

Pike swung around to Mauch. "I was totally unaware of this development and its implications, Lieutenant. From now on I'm keeping out of this, completely." He walked over to the far corner of the room and sat down on the arm of a chair, swinging the whiskey bottle idly in his hand.

Mauch regarded him narrowly. "That air of injured innocence doesn't sit well on you at all, Dowd. From now on, I'll be watching you, completely."

The fat chief was watching the swinging whiskey bottle.

Pike called out: "Chief—catch." He tossed the bottle. The chief caught it without spilling a drop.

Claire Varnett stepped into the center of the triangle formed by Majel, the chief and Mauch. Claire asked Mauch: "Do you need a search warrant to see those coins?"

Before Mauch could answer, Majel exposed both coins in her stocking tops. "Everybody can look."

Pike didn't move from his chair-arm in the corner. Claire disdained going closer to Majel. Mauch looked. The chief got down on one knee as if he was as near-sighted as a bat at high noon.

Majel's voice was soft and husky but it carried clearly to everyone in the room: "So they are Eighteen eighty-eight. Harvey gave them to me."

"When?" asked Mauch.

"Last week," Majel said. "When he wanted to demonstrate how they worked, I sent him off home. But I feel sorta sorry for him. His home life must have been pretty dull."

Claire started to boil. Her eyes shuttered to slits. Her lips were stiff when she said: "I rather imagine that a drunk—like Harvey—would find life very exciting with a bathing beauty—like you."

Pike was studiously trying to decipher the design in the threadbare rug. He felt Majel's eyes upon him. He didn't look up. Then he heard Majel's husky voice:

"I was speaking of Harvey's dull home life. He told me that he had to get blind drunk to go home to his Blonde Icicle."

When Pike saw the angry color flush Claire's cheeks, he figured she had been steamed up enough. He left the corner chair and wandered over to the chest of drawers behind Majel. He picked up her lipstick and unscrewed the cap.

Majel looked over her shoulder. "That's my lipstick."

"Shut up," said Pike. He walked over to Claire and held the lipstick case up in front of her. Several seconds ticked by before Claire's angry eyes focused on the lipstick. Then Pike deliberately twisted the bottom and brought the dark-red cosmetic stick into view.

Claire's eyes were puzzled as she stared at the lipstick. Then slowly a light glowed in the back of her eyes. The light grew brighter and brighter till her eyes were an exultant blaze.

Pike asked softly: "Is this the same color you told me about last night?"

"It is!"

"Then," said Pike, "tell the lieutenant about it."

Majel's eyes were fixed hypnotically on her suitcase.

Mauch strode over to the blonde. "Yes, tell the lieutenant." He glanced at Pike. "I thought you were keeping out of this, completely."

"I'm out," said Pike.

Claire snatched the lipstick from Pike and handed it triumphantly to the police detective.

"I told Pike that I noticed something

about Harvey's clothes that you missed, Lieutenant. All of his belongings were in that box, you remember. Well, if you had looked closely at Harvey's necktie, you would have noticed that there were lipstick stains on it." She pointed to the lipstick in Mauch's hand. "The same shade as that!"

Pike saw Majel's eyes drop to the rug. There was absolutely no expression on her face.

Mauch turned the lipstick over and over in his hand, but he wasn't looking at it. There was a frown deeply creasing his forehead. He took out a neat, black leather notebook and leafed through it till he found the page he wanted. His eyes swept over a list on that page. He closed the book with a snap and put it back into his pocket. His frown was deeper. He went over to the wall telephone, lifted the receiver—and waited.

Nothing happened.

Mauch dropped the receiver on its cord, swiftly crossed the room and jerked open the corridor door. The portly hotel clerk, ear first, almost fell into the room. Mauch glared at him, barking:

"Get on that phone. I'm Lieutenant Mauch. Get me a top priority call to Hartstown Police Headquarters. Get going!" He slammed the door and turned back into the room.

"Well, this is certainly a very interesting development. Now, Mrs. Varnett, will you be good enough to tell me why you feel so sure that this lipstick is the exact shade you say you saw on your husband's necktie."

"I'll never forget it," said Claire. "It's almost a blood color."

Mauch held the lipstick up to Majel. "This is yours, isn't it?"

Majel nodded.

THE lieutenant went over to the dangling telephone receiver. He leaned against the wall and placed the instrument

to his ear. With his free hand he shook a cigarette from a package and fired it. Then he spoke into the phone:

"This is Lieutenant Mauch, Sergeant. Give me Feeney in the morgue . . . Feeney? . . . Lieutenant Mauch. Check Harvey Varnett's belongings. Call out every item. . . ."

There wasn't a sound in the hotel room as Mauch stood there nodding to himself at brief intervals. He said: "Thanks." Hanging up he turned back to face the people in the room. His eyes singled out Claire Varnett as he said:

"Harvey Varnett was not wearing a necktie when we picked him out of the ditch."

The chief wasn't in on this deal at all. That simple statement of Mauch's didn't register with him. If it registered at all with Majel Sherwood, she gave no sign. Pike Dowd had calculated its effect, and his eyes were fastened on Claire Varnett. Claire's reaction was righteous indignation. She said, matter-of-factly:

"But I saw it!"

Pike kept his lip buttoned.

Mauch asked gently: "Where?"

"In the morgue!" said Claire.

Mauch shook his head slowly. "Not in the morgue, Mrs. Varnett . . . Where?"

Claire stepped back a pace, visibly flinched from the impact of Detective-Lieutenant Mauch's steady stare. Her eyes flashed with some inner knowledge. She put a hand to her mouth, too late to stop the damning words that had already been uttered. Her eyes, now frightened, turned hopefully to Pike.

Pike's words were inexorable: "You saw the lipsticked necktie when you hit your husband Harvey on the head—and killed him."

Claire recoiled from this unexpected attack. She backed up to the wall. Her eyes flicked from one to the other, lingering hatefully on Majel.

The Chief of Police, startled and puz-

zled by this sudden turn of events, jerked out his .38 revolver.

That suddenly bared gun metal touched off Claire Varnett. Her response was instinctive, self-preserving. She ran into the fat chief, pushed him with all her might. The chief went over backward, bounced on the floor with a resounding thud that seemed to rock the very foundation of the hotel. His .38 blasted straight up into the ceiling.

The blasting gunshot touched off another reaction in Claire. With a tearing cry in her throat, she jerked open the door and spun out into the corridor. Her heels tapped out an hysterical flight along the hotel corridor.

The chief, sitting on the floor near the door, fired a warning shot over the fleeing blonde's head. The bullet refueled Claire's panic. Her heel-taps increased to a mad tempo.

The chief yelled: "She's on the porch. She's getting away! She's—"

Claire's shriek knifed through his words. Her scream rose, then fell abruptly as if falling through space. Silence cut off the anguished wail.

All in the room were rooted to the floor. Footsteps clattered in the corridor. The portly desk clerk stuck a white face into the room. "She took a header—down the steps. She's—"

"Dead," said Detective-Lieutenant Mauch, two minutes later.

Majel and Pike stood on the porch and stared down the steep flight of steps to where the crumpled body of Claire lay on the sidewalk. Mauch, the chief and the clerk were bending over her.

Pike said woodenly to Majel: "While you phoned me from my private office, Claire must have come into the outer office and put the finishing touches on Harvey as he lay unconscious."

Majel winced. "She must have been out in the office corridor, listening to his

drunken play for me. No wonder she blew her top and killed him."

Pike pointed down to Claire's still, exposed thighs. "She's wearing cartwheel garters, too. Harvey gave 'em to all his girls."

Majel shuddered. "I'm no girl of his and never was. I've never worn those silver dollars before and never will again. Let's go back to my room. I want to get them off."



Back in Majel's room, Pike said, "What made you take off Harvey's necktie?"

"It had my lipstick on it," said Majel simply. "You didn't notice it was gone because I turned up his coat collar."

"Well," said Pike, "I'll have to get you out of town here—according to police orders."

Majel stood close to Pike. "Don't fret about that. My Bikini suit came off in the water. I lost it. And I damn well wasn't going to stay in the water till dark. I just ran up the beach to my robe. That's all."

"That's all," said Pike. "Mauch should be satisfied with his case now. So we'll just get back on the same old merry-go-round."

"Doesn't have to be," said Majel, taking the silver dollars from her stocking tops. "Just stop breathing hard at every female you see. Stop thinking you're still a college hero that has to make like a wolf. Just say plain and simple that you like me, if you do. That's all."

THE END

NONE BUT THE LETHAL HEART

I caught him with a heavy right hand flush on the mouth.



*She cried on Detective Calvano's broad shoulder
that she needed a friend—
because all of her pals were being bumped off.*

SHE was from Escradilo, Iowa, she said and she'd been lonely in this big, mad town and she'd joined this—well, this club, sort of.

She sat in my office, telling me this. She didn't look lonely as if she was from Iowa nor the kind who'd join a friendship

**By WILLIAM C.
GAULT**

club. She was around thirty, fine and firm and blonde. She was wearing a green faille suit which disguised nothing it shouldn't. I'd seen her convertible pull up at the curb below.

I said, "I'm surprised you considered a—an introduction club necessary, Miss Teague."

She smiled. "Shall I begin all over? I'm from Escradilo, Iowa, and—"

I smiled, too. "Okay. I'm sold. And now?"

"Well," she said, "there's a man." And she paused.

I waited.

"I mean, a man who—a man in whom I'm very greatly interested. I—"

Love comes to Lancaster Avenue, I thought. I said, "Was it a character reference or a credit reference you wanted, Miss Teague?"

Her chin came up and the blue eyes looked a little displeased. "I'm not interested in his credit."

"Which leaves his character." I fiddled with a pencil on my desk. "I'm a one-man agency, Miss Teague. There are large and very efficient organizations which are equipped to handle that kind of work much better than I can."

A silence, while she studied me. Then, "You're saying, in your oblique way, that the work's beneath you, Mr. Calvano?"

I took a breath. "N-no, it isn't that. I—"

"If it's money," she said, opened her purse. She put a pair of fifties on my desk.

I looked at them and at her. "How did you happen to come to me, Miss Teague?"

She met my gaze evenly, and there was a partial smile on her face. It could have been scorn. "I've been reading the papers."

I'd just had some ink. I'd helped send a shake-down artist to the clink, a very rough lad who'd been bothering one of our local starlets. But my name hadn't been

mentioned enough to make me believe Miss Teague.

The two fifties were crisp and clean, though, and obviously legal tender.

I asked, "What's the man's name—and where does he live, Miss Teague?"

"Edmund Swallow," she told me, and gave me an address on Charnock Road.

I stopped writing. "There's a gambler by that name."

She nodded, watching me. "He's a gambler."

She'd come a long way from Escradilo, Iowa. I said, "The police would undoubtedly be glad to give you a complete character and credit report."

The chin lift again. "He has no record, excepting in the newspapers. Do you believe everything you read in the papers, Mr. Calvano?"

"Some papers," I admitted, and looked at the fifties again. Bait. I continued writing, and picked up the bills. I said, "It might not cost you this much." I wrote out a receipt.

Her address was Bolinger Drive, which was in the Palisades, I knew. I handed her the receipt, and she studied it.

"Calvin Calvano," she said. "Italian, Mr. Calvano?"

"And Irish," I added. "I'm from Boston, and my father was a great admirer of Mr. Coolidge." I smiled. "Before he became president."

She rose, and picked up her purse. I couldn't read anything in her face. "You'll report to me?"

I nodded. "Of course. Oh, one thing more. What was the name of this—this introduction club?"

Her face was bland. "The Sunset Social Club. It's over on Olympic."

I wrote it down, and now she was standing near the door. "You're not—laughing at me, are you, Mr. Calvano?"

I shook my head. "Of course not, Miss Teague. It's a lonely town."

"And a crazy one," she said. She

smiled again, looked long at me, and left.

It wasn't a lonely town for well set-up blondes with '50 convertibles, though. No town is. Unless the blonde was inordinately shy. Or maybe particular.

The office was again as drab as it had been before she entered it. Three files, one empty, one half empty. My chair and two upholstered customers' chairs, a window to the north and one to the west, the drapes sun-faded.

I looked up the Sunset Social Club in the phone book and went down to the Coupe. The sun was trying to come through, but it was a dull day. . . .

It was a huge stucco building with a pillared porch, and a very small sign next to the door. Discreet, they were. I went through and into a long hall that seemed to run the length of the building.

There was a door to the right, at the head of the hall here and another modest sign. *Director*, this sign read.

I knocked and somebody said, "Come in." I went in.

CUTIE, he was. Small and blond and round, with a cherub's face and a blue and silver bow tie. With a powder-blue gabardine suit, a two-fleshy handclap.

"Welcome to our club, Mr.—?" He showed his teeth.

"Calvano," I said, "Mr.—?"

"Darcy," he said, "Rupert Darcy. I'm the director here, Mr. Calvano. It's a big town, isn't it? And seemingly a cold one."

"Not according to the Chamber of Commerce, it isn't cold," I said. "I'm not a prospect, Mr. Darcy."

"Oh?" His full lips made the *O* as he said it. His eyes moved around my face. "A salesman?"

I shook my head. "I work for a credit firm." Which I did, at times, when things were dull. "It's about a man named Edmund Swallow."

Silence, and some rigidity in the round, smooth face. A smile then and, "You've

come to the wrong place, Mr. Calvano."

"You don't know him?"

"I know him. We don't discuss our clients."

"You know a Miss Ellen Teague, too?"

He nodded. He pulled a cigarette case from his jacket pocket, opened it, and offered me one.

I shook my head. "They met here, eh?"

Nothing from him. He was tapping the cigarette.

"She told me they did," I said. "Phone her, if you want."

"There's still Mr. Swallow's privacy to be considered, Mr. Calvano." Then he frowned. "Calvano—you're the man who was in the papers. You're the detective who helped apprehend Solly Quirk."

"The same," I agreed.

He was frowning again. "Mr. Calvano, if there's something seriously wrong, if there's something—criminal—"

"Nothing," I said. "I can't always work on headline stuff, Mr. Darcy. Credit investigation pays the rent."

"Let's be frank with each other," he said. "If you'd wanted a credit report, you'd have gone to a credit bureau, to a retail establishment, to his bank. You wouldn't come here."

I'd already learned what I'd come to learn—they'd met here. She hadn't been lying about that. But some perversity in me made me toy with Rupert.

"I was thinking of—of collusion, as long as we're being frank, Mr. Darcy," I said quietly. "Some of these lovelorn ravens have pretty shoddy reputations and Miss Teague is obviously a lady of wealth. I—"

But I got no further. His little, round face was white and his light blue eyes were blazing. "Get out!" he almost screamed. "I won't stand for that kind of talk in here. You can check through the Chamber of Commerce, through the Better Business Bureau, through the Sepulveda National Bank, Mr. Calvano.

But don't even whisper an accustation like that in—"

I heard no more. I was out on the porch, and going down the steps to the street.

I went down to Central Headquarters from there and down the hall to the office of Captain Rodriguez. He was in—and amiable, for a change.

"What's on your mind, Cal?" he wanted to know. He waved toward a chair.

"A guy named Swallow." I said. "Edmund Swallow." I sat down, and pulled out a cigarette. "Solvent, is he?"

Rodriguez nodded. "Always. If the cards aren't running, a great ladies' man."

"No record, though."

"No convictions." Rodriguez yawned. "What's up?"

"Nothing of any importance. Quirk going to appeal?"

"He'd be wasting his time. He only got three years, and he'd go up in front of Judge Whittier next. He could do worse than three years." Another yawn. "What gives with Swallow?"

"Character reference for a client."

Rodriguez chuckled. "You kill me, Cal. What gives?"

"So help me, that's it."

"What's the client's name?"

"No," I said. "Be seeing you, Rod." I got up.

"Just when we were friends, again," he said. "And me with a dull day. I could help, maybe."

"You've got enough to do," I told him. "So long, Rod."

"So long," he said, and then his voice was a little stiffer. "Keep your nose clean, Cal."

I nodded, and went out.

I cut over to Olympic and took Olympic all the way to the beach. Up the Coast Highway to Sunset, and the turning climb of Sunset into the Palisades.

Her place on Bolinger Drive was nothing fancy, but it wasn't stucco for a change. This is a stucco town. Hers was redwood, low and with some taste, a view of the water to the front and the mountains behind.

She'd changed from the green suit into denim shorts and a striped T shirt under her denim jacket. She did all right by the T shirt. She stood in the doorway, a drink in her hand. Behind her I could hear music. I could see through the entry hall into the living room. Cigarette smoke was in there, but she wasn't smoking.

"Well," she said. "Reporting already?"

"He's solvent," I told her, "and a ladies' man. And you *did* meet at the Sunset Social Club."

A small frown. "I told you we did. Did you think I was lying?"

"I had to check," I said. "It didn't make sense. Are we going to do all our talking out here?"

She smiled and said, "I'm sorry. Come in. Come in and have a drink."

We went through the entry hall into a low living room with a beamed ceiling and

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full-length windows comprising the sea-side wall.

A MAN got up from a deep chair near the record player. He was as tall as I am, but thinner and a hell of a lot better looking. He was wearing a Harris tweed jacket and fawn slacks and a white silk sport shirt. He wasn't wearing a smile.

"Mr. Calvano," she said, "this is Peter Lunt. Mr. Lunt's an agent who still has hopes for me."

I thought there was a trace of lipstick on his neck, but I could have been wrong. His handclasp was thin and strong. His smile was professional.

"The detective," he said. "I've been warning Ellen about this Swallow person."

His hair was dark and curly, his eyes a soft brown and he was tanned like a saddle. If I'd have been a girl, I'd have put some lipstick on his neck myself.

"I guess Swallow's all right," I said, "A gambler, but Miss Teague probably knows that by now. He's never been convicted of anything."

"I was thinking of her reputation," Peter Lunt said. "I was thinking of her reputation in the light of my ten percent. I'm sure she can take care of herself."

I agreed to that.

He looked at the watch on his wrist. "Well, I've an appointment for three-thirty. I'll be running along. Glad to have met you, Mr. Calvano."

Ellen went with him to the door. She still had the drink in her hand. I was still waiting for mine.

She came back into the living room and went over to a liquor cabinet. Her back was to me as she said, "Isn't he handsome?"

"Very."

"Smart, too. Does very well."

I said nothing.

"Rye, bourbon, scotch, Mr. Calvano?"

"Rye and water. I didn't know you

were an actress. Childhood ambition?"

"I'm not. Peter doesn't know I'm not, or maybe he does, and it's part of his pitch. I think he likes me."

"But you prefer Mr. Swallow?"

Nothing from her for a moment. She finished pouring the drink and turned to face me. "I was lying about that." She came over to hand me the drink.

"Go on," I said.

"He's just another Solly Quirck, Edmund Swallow is. He—he knows some things about me, and he wants payment."

"Money?"

"Money or me."

"He put it that bluntly?"

"Of course not."

I sipped my drink. "And the Sunset Social Club. Did you throw that in for laughs?"

Silent, excepting for the Gershwin from the record player. She drained her drink. "You must think I'm an awful liar."

"You're a client," I said. "Level with me, huh, Miss Teague?"

"I belonged to the Sunset Social Club," she said. "I'm terribly interested in people, Mr. Calvano, especially male people. It's really amazing the variety of people I met there. Some of them are fun and *all* of them are real. Don't forget I'm from Iowa."

"All right," I said, "we'll get back to Edmund Swallow, one of the *real* people who belong to the Sunset Social Club. How much does he want?"

"Fifteen thousand dollars."

"And what can I do about that?"

"You can get something on him; that's what I'd hoped when I asked for the report." She took my empty glass and hers, and went back to the liquor cabinet. "You could watch him for a week or two, and I'll bet you'd get enough to *hang* him."

"Not for a hundred dollars and two drinks of rye," I said. "That kind of job costs money, Miss Teague."

"Don't worry about money," she said, and brought me a fresh drink. "The hundred was a retainer. I want you to stay with Mr. Swallow. A man who can handle Quirck shouldn't have any trouble with Edmund Swallow." She lifted her drink in a partial salute, and sipped it.

"Well." I said, "it's your money. You don't want to tell me just what it is he has on you, do you?"

"No."

I gulped the rest of my drink, and stood up. "Maybe I could reason with Swallow. Maybe, if I flexed my muscles—"

Her voice was sharp. "That's just exactly what I don't want, Mr. Calvano. I'd have gone to the police if I thought muscles would do it. They have those and guns, too."

"All right," I said. "*Adois.*"

I went back to the office from there, but there was no mail. I was about ready to leave when the phone rang. I couldn't miss that voice.

It was Rupert Darcy, and he sounded perturbed. "Mr. Calvano, I want to see you. I—it's very important, and I want to see you immediately."

"I'll be right over," I said. "You're at your office?"

"Yes. How soon—"

"As soon as I can make it."

"There's been a man parked across the street for the longest time," he went on, "and I—"

"What kind of a car?" I interrupted. "Can you see the license number?"

"Not the number, but it's a gray club coupe with white-wall tires." A pause. "A '49 or '50."

"I'll be right over," I said, and hung up.

It wasn't the man across the street that interested me. It was the fact that Rupert sounded scared enough to talk. People in cars don't bother the innocent; Rupert had some sins to confess.

I made fairly good time. When I pulled up in front of the stucco building there was no gray club across the street. I went up onto the porch and into the hall. His door was closed, but I didn't stop to knock. I pushed in.

The room was empty.

It seemed that way, at first. It was quiet, with only the hum of the passing cars, outside. I moved past the love seat near his desk, and over toward the windows which faced on the porch. When I got past the desk, I saw him.

He was spread-eagled on the floor, one hand gripping the bottom of the drape, his open, blank eyes staring at the distant ceiling. There was a knife-handle protruding from his throat, blood staining the powder-blue gabardine suit.

I CALLED Syd Mueller, first. Syd runs a personal loan service and I worked for him at times. And borrowed from him other times.

"I was checking a man Edmund Swallow, and I was checking him for you. Got that?" I told him.

"Trouble again," he said in a tired voice.

I gave him Swallow's address, and hung up.

Then I phoned the law.

I went through Darcy's desk while I waited for the sound of the siren. Only copies of his ads were there.

Like this:

Widowed darling of 68 with five hundred a month and you'll have to be on your toes, you gallant old-timers. Because she's the neatest, sweetest bundle of American beauty. . . .

After the prowler car, Dohoney came. He's a sergeant in Homicide and he'd come to the department after I'd left. He took me out into the rear of the long hall.

"This Darcy phoned me," I told him, "and said that he'd read about me in the

papers, and he needed a private investigator, but bad. He said there was a '49 or '50 gray coupe with white-wall tires parked across the street too long. I'd keep that part out of the papers, about the car, because they or he wouldn't know Darcy told me about it. I said I'd be right over, and I was."

"And found him like that?"

I nodded.

"You working on something right now?"

I shook my head.

"The captain says you were working on Edmund Swallow."

I shook my head again. "That was just a credit and character report. I'd finished it."

"For who?"

"Syd Mueller—you know, Pacific Personal Loan."

"The five-percent man," Doheney said, "five percent a month. You mean Swallow needs money that bad?"

"I've an agreement with Syd," I said. "He doesn't ask me my business and I don't nose into his."

Doheney gave me a long look. "Maybe you'd like to talk to the captain."

"If you think I should, I will." I took out a cigarette and lighted it, and gave him stare for stare. "I've known Rod a long time. We've worked together a lot. Why all the heat?"

"Maybe," Doheney said slowly, "I haven't just the proper regard for private operatives."

"That would be personal," I said. "A prospective client phones me. I come and find him dead. I phone the police. Nobody knows he phoned me. I could have walked out of here after I found him, and been clear."

"That's just it," he said. "Nobody knows but you if he phoned you, or if you came here without his phoning you. I never saw a private investigator yet who wouldn't have just breezed."

"You've been unlucky," I said, "until now. What do you want me to do, make up a story for you?"

"You already have, I figure. Stay here. I'll be back." He went down the hall to the director's office, again, and I figured he was going to phone Syd.

A couple reporters saw me, and came back, along with a photographer. "Cal," one of them said. "You again. You're doing all right, aren't you?"

I turned a smile on and off.

"What's the story, Cal?"

"We'd better wait for the sergeant," I said. "He'll have a statement for you."

A flash bulb popped, and then another photographer came hurrying down the hall. I gave him my profile.

"This part of the Solly Quirck business, Cal?"

I shook my head. "I'm an innocent bystander."

"You've been out of the papers for two days," he said. "What some guys won't do for publicity."

Now the sergeant was coming back along the hall, his face showing nothing. "Better get down and see the captain right away," he said. "I can have one of the men take you."

"My car's outside," I told him. "Thanks." I turned my back on him and went along the hall, wondering if he'd call me back. He didn't.

There was a crowd on the sidewalk outside. The police ambulance was there, and two department cars beside the squad car. I climbed into the coupe and swung out into the traffic. I was thinking of the widowed darling of '68 all the way down to the captain's office.

Rodriguez didn't look any meaner than usual. "You give Sergeant Doheney some trouble?"

I sat down across the desk from him, and faced him squarely. "No. He opened up by telling me he didn't like private investigators, and wound up by practically

calling me a liar. But I leveled with him."

Rodriguez had a sad, pock-marked face and my words didn't brighten it any. His voice was weary. "It could have been just a coincidence you were in to see me this afternoon and walked into a murder a couple hours later. I can't believe you're that busy."

"I got a lot of publicity lately," I said. "That always brings in business. This gent on Olympic told he he'd read my name in the paper."

Rodriguez clenched both hands on top of his desk. "You know, I think, Cal, that I've no loyalties outside of the department. If I thought somebody was playing me for a patsy, I'd get him, friend or not. I'd be awful rough on a man like that."

"I know those things," I said.

He nodded. "All right. Run along. We'll call you clear for now."

TRAFFIC was still curb to curb. It was nearly six. I walked over to a nearby restaurant for supper.

Coincidence, the captain had said. It's happened enough so they've got a word for it. I didn't think it was one, this time. I had a feeling the death of Rupert Darcy had something to do with Edmund Swallow. Not that Darcy probably didn't have enemies enough. Some of these outfits were on the up and up; some of them were lucrative rackets.

It was hard to figure a guy like Darcy. He looked soft, but some of the boys who'd gone to the chair looked softer. If he was tied up with con men, I wouldn't have been surprised. But con men don't go in for the heavy stuff, and murder's on the heavy side.

And Ellen Teague—there wasn't anything soft about her nor any reason to think she wasn't playing me for fish. But why?

After dinner, I phoned her from a drug-store near the restaurant.

I said, "Rupert Darcy's just been murdered. Do you still want me to follow Swallow?"

"More than ever," she said. "Do you think Swallow did it?"

"The law almost thinks I did it," I told her. "I found him dead and reported it."

"They're not holding you? You didn't give them my name?"

"They're not holding me. And I didn't give them your name, yet."

A silence. Then, "Yet?"

"That's right, not yet. Have you ever heard of Tehachapi?"

"N—no."

"You might, before this is through. It was a little too cute the way I walked in on Darcy."

A longer silence, and now her voice was just a whisper. "You've got to believe in me, Mr. Calvano. You'll have to go along with me. I desperately need your protection."

There was no use kidding myself. If she'd have been fifty and fat, I'd have told her to go to hell. I said, "You want to phone Swallow to see if he's home now? So I can pick him up if he's there."

"What shall I say to him?"

"Anything. Tell him you're having a hard job raising the money, but you're working on it." I gave her the number in the booth to call back.

I was watching through the glass sides of the booth as I waited, and I saw the man come in the door of the store. A very ordinary guy, thin, of medium height wearing a plain gray suit.

The only thing unusual about him was the gray club cope he'd left at the curb.

The town, I told myself, is full of gray club coupes. And killers don't use the same car on two jobs. They ditch them after a murder. Only this gent probably hadn't known his car had been spotted. Too many people park on Olympic.

The phone rang, and Ellen said,

"There's no answer. Maybe you'd better come up here. We'd better have a talk." Her voice was tired, defeated.

"Okay," I said. "Do you know anybody who drives a gray club coupe with white-wall tires? Skinny gent, average height?"

"No," she said. "You'd better come up here, Cal."

That was the first time she'd used my informal name. "I've a little business first," I said. "But I'll be there."

I looked up Swallow in the phone book and spent another nickel. A man's voice answered.

"Edmund Swallow?" I asked.

"Right," the voice said.

"How are you, Eddie," I said jovially. "Just got into town. Bet you don't know who it is?"

"I'm holding my breath," he said.

"I'll give you a hint," I said. "T.P., Eddie. From Eau Claire, Eddie."

"I have never in my life been in Eau Claire, wherever that is. chum," the voice said. "Would you mind identifying yourself?"

"Tommy Parsons. You gone high hat, Eddie?"

"You've got the wrong Eddie, T.P.," the voice said. The line went dead.

Of course, he could have come home in the two minutes between her call and mine. He might have been taking a shower and just got to the phone by the time I called. Of course . . .

I looked out at the thin guy, and he was moving my way now. I moved my .38 from its holster to my jacket pocket and stepped from the booth.

He kept coming at me, his hand in his pocket. I felt cold, but I kept moving his way, watchin that hand. He pulled it out. There was a nickel in it, I could see.

"It's about time," he muttered, and went past me into the booth.

His coupe had regulation black tires . . .

The sun was down, but there was moonlight on the water, as I drove out the Coast Highway. It was cold, and I turned on the car heater for a minute.

Traffic was thin. The bluffs to my right seemed to hang over the car threateningly. The coupe purred to herself, and I tried to make some sense out of the day.

Headlights came up from behind, moved alongside, and a gray club coupe, with white-wall tires went by, making time. The way his motor was chugging, he must have had an overdrive.

It had Nevada plates. I watched the twin tail lights disappear around a bend. When I rounded the bend, it was almost out of sight.

I went past the San Vicente intersection, working forward in my mind from the first lie which must certainly have been the Sunset Social Club, and looked for the way.

I ran them through my confused mind. Ellen and Rupert and Swallow and Peter Lunt and the man in the gray club coupe. Or *men*.

I thought there's only one way, that's to see Swallow. Then I was making the climb of Sunset, where it goes past the Santa Ynez Inn.

SHE was waiting in the doorway when my car stopped. She was wearing her third change of costume for the day, a strapless number of a pale green, misty material.

"She handed me a drink as I came up onto the porch. "Time to let my hair down, Cal."

"I'll bet," I said.

We went into the living room. The record player was silent. She sat down on a love seat and I took an armless chair nearby. She said, "I remembered what Tehachapi is. It's the state women's prison, isn't it?"

I nodded.

"You're not an easy man to fool."

"Easy enough. I've been in a fog all day. That Sunset Social Club was a little thick, but the rest hangs together. Who killed Darcy?"

She stared at me. "You don't think I know about that? How corrupt do you think I—"

I lifted a hand. "You said you were going to let your hair down."

"All right." Her hand which held the drink was trembling. "I used to work with Edmund Swallow." She chewed her lip. "Promotional work, I suppose you'd call it."

"Confidence work might be better."

She looked at me and smiled. "Guilty. In any event, nothing I'd be proud to admit now. We were careful; at least I was. I invested mine. I'm pretty well fixed. Now Peter's come along and there's a very good chance he could wrangle me a fair contract. I'm no world beater, but I've been on the stage and done radio work. Edmund's put out about that."

"Why?"

"I suppose because Peter's so handsome. And because I've grown weary of dear Edmund. Anyway, he threatened to reveal enough of my—background to kill any deals." She looked at me. "He doesn't want money. He wants me to stick with him. I thought if he saw you around, following him, he might—well, think you're a—"

"A gun? A mug? A torpedo?"

She nodded. "I thought it would scare him. But now I don't want you to go near him. I realize now that Edmund could be dangerous."

"Tell me about the Sunset Social Club." I was being patient.

"It's surprising the people you meet there," she said tonelessly. "Lonely people and stupid people and gullible people. Quite a few of them very well off, willing to buy gold mine stock and oil stock. Even uranium stock." She looked at me quietly, stood up. "Another drink?"

"In a second. You say you don't want me to go near Swallow, because he might be dangerous. Why should you worry about that? Why should you worry about me?"

"I've grown quite attached to you, Calvin. You're not as smooth as Edmund nor as handsome as Peter, but you're more man than both of them. I'll get your drink."

I was tired enough to believe what I wanted to believe, and I didn't believe more than a fraction of that. But it had been a busy day.

Two hours later I had acquired some lipstick too much rye, and we were listening to *Porgy and Bess*. I was bushed and half-drunk and all the events of the day kept running through my mind, and I remembered what the reporter had said in the hall.

Ellen's eyes were closed and her head was back. I looked at the clean line of her throat and said suddenly, "I'm going to see Swallow."

She came alive. Her eyes flashed open and her head turned swiftly toward me. "Don't. He's a moody man. He's never killed, to my knowledge, but I think he could."

"I've never met him," I said, "but I've seen him around and he doesn't frighten me a bit. Don't fret about him; I'll go easy."

She was gripping my arm. "Cal, leave him alone."

"All right," I said, and stood up. "It's been a full day."

"I'll . . . see you again?"

"I think you will. There's a little matter of Rupert Darcy's murder the police are going to investigate, and they'd like to involve me. They might even go to Swallow."

"Why should they?"

"Because," I said evenly, "when I first started to check Swallow, I checked him at Headquarters. So they know I was

working on him. Then, *I find Darcy.*"

"You went to the police?"

"Naturally. It's bad business to work without them. I didn't give them your name, and I probably won't. But I won't be railroaded. Not for *anybody.*"

She was staring at me as though trying to read my mind.

"You told me Swallow wasn't home when you phoned. He was home when I phoned—two minutes later."

"I didn't call him. I lied about that. I'd decided by then to forget him."

"I wish I could. I must have a one-track mind." The room seemed unsteady and my vision of her was blurring. "What does a man have to do to earn his hundred bucks?"

"Cal!" Her face blurred, grew clear, and I saw her eyes were blazing in a white face. Then she started to swear.

"You never learned those words in Escradilo, Iowa," I said softly. "I'll be seeing you."

I WENT out, and the night air was cold, which helped. I got into the coupe and drove very carefully back to the ocean road. I took Olympic again to Sepulveda, and that to Charnock Road. I had the windows open, and my head was beginning to clear.

There was a light at the residence of Edmund Swallow. I parked a couple hundred feet past the house and walked back. Two houses down a party was going on. The driveway was crowded with cars and there were some at the curb.

I walked up onto the porch of the Swallow domain and pressed the button. Chimes, but no other response. I walked along the porch to the wide living room window, and looked in. Nobody in sight. A single table lamp was lighted. My eyes moved around the room and paused at the shadows near the end of the davenport. There were shoes there, the toes pointing

upward, shoes that must contain feet, considering their position.

I went back to the front door. It was unlocked. I pushed in. The door opened directly into the living room.

A knife, again. The dead eyes of Edmund Swallow caught a bit of the lamp's gleam, shining at me without seeing.

She'd had a change of heart. She'd tried to keep me up there, give me an alibi, keep me out of it. Maybe. And if she had, she knew this was going to happen.

I could call the police and wait. Rodriguez would believe me—like hell. A man would need to believe in a double coincidence on the same day. I didn't think there were any men like that and I *knew* there weren't any on the police force.

I didn't believe it myself.

I called headquarters. "This is Helmuth Frontenac," I said, "and I've discovered the body of Edmund Swallow at Charnock Road. He's been stabbed to death." I wiped the phone and the doorknob; I hadn't touched anything else.

They were still raising hell at the party as I walked back to the coupe.

Round and round we go. And where now? Not home for Calvin Calvano. It's a small apartment, and there wouldn't be room for me with all the cops that would soon be there.

Somebody had set up a pattern and put me in the middle of it as the patsy:—I didn't like being one of those any more than Rodriguez did.

This Darcy business had been incidental. He'd seen he was getting out of his depth. He'd learned something and phoned me as he couldn't afford to go to the law because of the publicity.

I was bone weary, but my mind was alive and I thought back to the reporter in the hall and knew he'd called it right. For anybody else I'd have played it differently, but she had all she needed.

I headed back that way—and then de-

cided against it. There were some things I had to know first. I'd been working blind too long. I heard the siren as I turned back onto Sepulveda.

Hans Ehler's house was old and Spanish and huge. A tile roof and floor length windows and a mammoth lawn, complete with built-in sprinklers.

I went up the drive and parked in front of the four-car garage. There was a light on in the rear, and I knew it was Hans' study.

A very solid citizen. With a finger here and a finger there, an old resident who hobnobbed with senators and shot craps with sharpers. What went on in this town Hans Ehler knew, and we were friends.

At the side door I pressed the button. After a while I could see him coming along the hallway from the study. He had his pajamas on and an old bathrobe. His thin, gray hair was wet as though he'd just washed it and his moon face was freshly shaven. He was a lot of man, about two-seventy, and not all of it fat.

"Cal," he said. "Come in, come in. What is it?"

"I want a bed for the night, Hans," I told him.

He closed the door quietly behind me. His voice was as quiet. "Hot, Cal?"

"Warm. I've been playing stooge."

He chuckled. "Not you. I know you, Cal."

"There's a blonde," I began.

"That makes it different. For blondes, it's sometimes fun to be a stooge. Nice build?"

"Very fine." We went into his study, I sat in the big chair near the bookcases and told him all about it.

When I'd finished, he said, "Solly Quirck owes Edmund Swallow thirty thousand dollars."

I wasn't surprised. This was a hangover from the Solly Quirck deal, just as the reporter had suggested. Somebody

had wanted Swallow out of the way, and why not get rid of me at the same time? Solly was in the clink, but his allies weren't, and Solly was a man who lived by vengeance.

"How about Rupert Darcy?" I asked.

"Swallow worked with him from time to time. They didn't get along very well though." Hans smiled. "Rupert could be a hard man to get along with."

"But Swallow was no killer."

Hans shook his head. "You want me to put some men on it, Cal? You want me to call off Rodriguez for a while?"

"No," I said. "Some puppet master is pulling the strings and I'd like his name, but it's got to be a personal thing with me."

Hans nodded slowly. "This blonde would know. It's probably someone very close to Solly, and someone who's otherwise clean. She should know."

"I didn't think Solly had any friends," I said. "He usually worked alone."

"And with people of prominence, people whose reputations mattered, who were building a reputation, or trying to."

That didn't click, then. I was tired. I yawned, and tried to stretch the ache out of my muscles.

"A hot bath," Hans said, "and a bed. We'll talk about it in the morning. . . ."

We had breakfast in the patio at ten o'clock. Hans said, "I've made some phone calls this morning. Nothing. Solly didn't have any friends who are admitting it."

"I'll go back to the blonde," I said. "They'll be watching for my car, Hans. You got one I can use?"

He nodded. "Take the sedan. And if they pick you up, phone me. I think you're all right, Cal."

"Thanks," I said. "I guess everybody thinks you're all right, Hans."

He chuckled. "And how wrong they are, eh?"

I didn't think so.

I was getting to know this Coast High-

way. The water was calm, today, the air clear enough to see Palos Verdes, behind me.

THE convertible was on the drive, in front of the double garage. I looked toward the doorway, expecting to see her there with a drink in her hand. But the doorway was closed.

After I'd pressed the button four times, she opened the door. She had a blue flannel robe over whatever was underneath.

"Late sleeper," I said, "I suppose I'll have to wait for breakfast."

"Cal, darling," she said, and put a hand on my arm. "Welcome home."

I came into the entry hall. "Edmund Swallow's dead," I told her.

Her face sagged. Her eyes met mine. "You didn't do it. You were here with me. I'll swear to that in court."

"Is it me you need or my gun?" I asked her.

Her face stiffened, and her eyes began to flame again.

"I'll bet you never even knew Edmund Swallow," I said. "I'll bet you're just a finger for one of Solly's boys."

"I knew Edmund Swallow. I worked with him."

"And tired of him. You'd just as soon see him dead, and so would Solly Quirck. If they could make it look like Calvano was the gun, so much the better. Two birds with one knife."

"But you were with me," she said hoarsely. "You're clear."

"Why was Darcy killed?"

"I—I don't know."

I gripped her shoulder hard enough to bring tears to her eyes. "Why was Darcy killed?"

"Cal—I—" She started to cry quietly.

"I've got all kinds of friends in this town," I told her. "I'm an awful hard man to frame. You'd better string with me."

Her mouth opened, and she said, "He

was afraid of—of murder. He went along with it up to the time he heard we—up to the time he heard Swallow was going to die."

"And who's the killer?"

"I—I only know part of it. Honestly, Cal, I—"

The door chimes sounded, and she twisted in my grasp, looking frighteningly toward the doorway.

"Wait," I said. "Don't open it yet." I went to her bedroom window, the one that faced the street. There was a gray club coupe with white-wall tires parked in front. A '50. Peter Lunt stood on the front porch.

I hadn't see that car in front yesterday, or hadn't noticed it, if it was in front. But I hadn't been club coupe conscious, then.

"It's Lunt," I called to Ellen. "Better let him in."

I thought of Hans saying, "—people who were building a reputation, or trying to . . ." Lunt would know about those kind of people. Those were the kind he got his ten per cent from. He wasn't well enough established to get the big shots, but he was smart enough to spot the comers.

As I came out of the bedroom, he came into the entry hall. His eyebrows lifted.

"The police are looking for a car like yours," I said. "I hope you're clear."

"Police? I don't quite understand."

"A car like yours was parked in front of the Sunset Social Club yesterday before Darcy was killed. I don't know if the police have the license number, but they've got a description, and they've probably got the number."

He smiled. "I imagine, if it was my number, they'd have bothered me by now. Try again."

He looked at Ellen and his smile was reassuring. As though to tell her there was no cause to worry; guys like Calvano could be handled with a minimum of effort. In carload lots.

"One of Solly's boys, aren't you?" I asked him.

Now, he turned to face me, and there was no smile on his face. Ellen gasped, but I didn't need that to know I'd hit the bull's-eye. His brown eyes were glittering and there was menace written all over his suddenly tight face.

Ellen's eyes went from me to him and back. She was about due to topple.

"You big, dumb—" he started to say.

He didn't finish. I caught him with a heavy right hand flush on the mouth, and he went stumbling back. He started to get to his feet, but I had him by the throat, dragged him into the living room.

Lunt was choking and sputtering when I propped him on the love seat. I slapped him, forward and back, and then put a stiff right hand under the heart.

I heard a thump behind me and knew Ellen had passed out. She didn't have the stomach for this. She liked her murder by remote control.

I worked on him for a while. When I got busy on his face, he started to scream, and then to babble. Soon some of his words made sense, and I went to the phone.

* * *

Rodriguez came in and sat down behind his desk. "He's admitted he's Solly's

brother, but not much more." He paused. "Not yet. What the hell did you hit him with, Calvano?"

"My good right hand. I suppose by not calling me 'Cal', you're telling me a long ways from the clear."

"You didn't play it very straight."

"I came in here twice yesterday, once by my own volition. I phoned twice, yesterday, and once today. If I'd see you any more than that, people would say we're in love. What do you want me to do, pull the call box every hour?"

"Don't get lippy."

"I apologize. You are the law. I'm just a crummy private dick scrambling for nickels. Unlike the others, I believe in working *with* the department."

"You ought to run for Congress."

"Maybe I will. If Peter Lunt, alias Peter Quirck doesn't squeal, the girl will. She's not as hard as she looks."

Something like a smile came to Rodriguez' face. "She says you'll clear her. She says you know she's innocent. How about that?"

"She's a good kid," I said, "but she'll be better after a spell in Tehachapi. She knew all about it."

Now he smiled. "All right, Cal. Friends again, for the moment. I thought you might go to bat for her."

"She's just another blonde," I said.

But I knew she wasn't.

BLOOD WILL TELL

Here's one all the mystery writers we've ever read have missed out on—murder, born in the dark, also betrays itself in the dark. This has special reference to bloodstains.

A room where murder may have been committed is carefully sprayed with an atomizer. Every inch of every surface is covered, then the room is sealed tight, all apertures closed against light.

Faded old bloodstains will then glow with a blue luminescence—the older and more faded they are, the brighter the glow. Bright new bloodstains, easily seen in daylight, show hardly at all in the dark.

The method was originated by the German criminologist, Dr. W. Specht.

E. Jakobsson

THE DEADLY COINCIDENCE

*His boss' runaway wife didn't mean a thing
to Roper—except his epitaph.*



All four of the bullets
lay in a corner, surround-
ed by a big guy with
straight, dead eyes. . . .

By **CHARLES LARSON**

SPANGLER said: "I think you're making a mistake. You know that." Roper snubbed out his cigarette. "You're all the same, you young squirts," Spangler said. "You get a case or two under your belts, and you decide you know this business backwards and forwards. You get cocky."

He was a short man, solid, with the

bland, anonymous face of a retired accountant. He'd started with the Roth agency in the days when the Roths were as big in the trade as the Pinkertons.

Ten years later he'd opened his own office. He'd never made a fortune, but neither had he starved. They said, in Hollywood: "If you want a good investigator, neat but not gaudy, see Clyde

Spangler." He left the dirty stuff alone, he cooperated with the police, and he gave his clients their money's worth.

Rising, Roper walked to the window.

"If it's a question of salary," Spangler began.

"It's a question of forming my own agency," Roper said. "Nothing else."

Spangler's chair creaked as he sat back. In the stillness of the office, the sounds of the street outside were muted, cotton-covered.

Silently Roper watched the fabulous golden people of Hollywood come and go on their fabulous brassy Boulevard. A girl in shorts and a mink jacket. A willowy woman wearing sandals and leading a duck on a leash. All the bright young things with brown legs and slender waists and dark glasses.

He turned and found Spangler gazing at him through half-closed eyes. Impatiently he said: "Well? What are we waiting for? Do I get my severance pay now, or—"

"You're in an awful damn hurry to leave, aren't you, Jack?" Spangler said.

"What's the matter with you? I told you two weeks ago that I planned to get out."

"So you did," Spangler murmured. "So you most certainly did." He smiled, but his eyes were faraway, remote. He glanced down at his desk. A piece of pink note-paper, folded once, lay on his blotter, and he touched it absently. "I remember distinctly," he said.

"Now, listen—" Roper began.

"Jack . . ." Spangler looked up. "I want you to handle one more job for me."

Puzzled, Roper said. "Let somebody else take it. Peterson. Marker . . ."

"It's right down your alley. A missing person. I want you."

"Since when I have become so damned indispensable?"

"Will you do it?"

"No."

Still smiling, Spangler picked up the pink note, tossed it across the desk.

After a moment Roper opened the note. It was typewritten, and it said:

I simply can't go on any longer this way. I'm leaving, and don't try to find me. You must know that I love someone else. Try to understand. Gloria.

"Is this supposed to intrigue me?" Roper asked.

"Maybe. Maybe not. What do you make of it?"

"A cheap trick by a cheap dame. Happens every day. The guy's well rid of her."

"The guy," Spangler said, "doesn't agree. He loves her. He'd do anything to get her back." Spangler swung his chair around to face the window. "Anything."

"The guy's nuts," Roper said. He reached into his pocket for another cigarette, and then he noticed the picture on Spangler's desk—or, rather, the signature on the picture—and he stopped with the cigarette half way to his mouth.

IT WAS a good picture, straightforward and simply posed, of a woman in her late twenties. One of the bright young things. One of the brown-legged golden girls. The written signature said: *To my darling husband Clyde, from his Gloria.*

He lit his cigarette, blew the match out slowly.

"Clyde . . ." he said.

Spangler said: "Yeah. It's a great racket, isn't it?"

"I didn't realize. There're a million Glorias." He paused.

"Sure," Spangler said harshly.

Again Roper looked at the picture. He'd met her. He remembered her as lithe and young and predatory. And cheap. The word fit her like a glove. But she'd been the boss' wife, and Roper

had been polite to her, and admired her, and forgotten her.

"I found the note this morning," Spangler said. "She hadn't come home last night. The note was in the mailbox. That's why I asked you to come in before you left."

"Why me?"

"I told you," Spangler said. "I want her back."

Roper picked a piece of tobacco off his tongue. He felt the tug in Spangler's voice, the unsaid words, the tight intonation, and he said: "I don't get you, Clyde."

"How crude do I have to make it?" Spangler asked. He folded his hands on the blotter, and stared steadily at his interlaced fingers. "It's worth five hundred to me. Cash. No questions asked."

Roper knew that his own face had gone white.

"I've got a provision or two," Spangler continued. "You'll have to get out of the state, and stay out. Two fifty when you send Gloria home where she belongs, and the rest when I see your new address."

Roper sat down slowly in the leather chair opposite the desk. "Well, for the love of—"

"Five hundred too low?" Spangler said. "How about seven fifty?"

Roper started to laugh, and then cut it off at the look in Spangler's eyes.

"A thousand?" Spangler whispered.

There was a rattle at the door suddenly, and the mail slot was pushed open. Two letters drifted to the floor. The regular ten o'clock delivery. Spangler tried not to hurry as he got up from the desk and retrieved the letters. He stared at both of them for a long moment before tossing them aside. Roper saw that they were advertisements.

The interruption, however, had at least given him time to think. Or to make an attempt at thinking. His mind felt dull.

There was, of course, no basis whatsoever to Spangler's accusation. On one or two occasions he had spoken to Gloria—at a New Year's Eve party, once when he'd run into her drinking alone in a bar called Cappy's on the Sunset Strip, now and again when she'd visited the office—but it had never gone beyond speaking. It might have, because Gloria was that kind of woman, but Roper had made sure it hadn't.

He said: "Clyde, you're way off the track."

"Am I?" Spangler said. He started to pace. "Let me get really crude then. Two weeks ago Gloria started staying out late. Two weeks ago you began growing restless. This morning I found a note. This morning you want—"

"Coincidence."

"Yeah," Spangler said. "Fifteen hundred."

"Why, damn you," Roper said softly. "I ought to—"

"You ought to what?" Spangler snapped. He spun around, and his eyes were black, and his face was twisted. "Don't push me too far, Jack. I told you the guy loved her. I'm making you an offer. Fifteen hundred dollars if she's home again by tomorrow morning. I've had a check on all bus, train and air terminals."

"I know that she's still in L. A. Tell her whatever you want. Tell her you've tired of her. But if she *doesn't* come home—I'm going to kill you. I mean it. Take your choice. Fifteen hundred bucks, or a couple of slugs in your belly. Wherever you are, I'll find you. If it takes me ten years."

Slowly Roper got to his feet. "All right. I'll find her." He watched Spangler, unblinking. "And when I do, I'm going to come back and beat the living hell out of you. Is that clear?"

"Yeah," Spangler said. He grinned humorlessly. "A date, Jack."

He was still grinning when Roper left the room.

ROPER went back to his own office, and for the first fifteen minutes he could do nothing more than sit and stare at the wall and let the anger boil helplessly inside him. Then, gradually, he began remembering. He remembered the soft, silken way Gloria Spangler had curled against him during the New Year's Eve party dances. He recalled the huskiness in her voice whenever she had spoken to him.

Spangler was a jealous man, and a man in love, and consequently a blind man. He'd been unable to see that his wife acted the same way toward everything in pants. He'd seen only that she had acted as she did toward Roper, and he'd put two and two together, and he'd been satisfied that the answer was undoubtedly five.

A nice spot, Roper thought. A very sweet spot. And just exactly how do I go about getting out of it?

On an impulse, he rose and opened the connecting door between his cubbyhole and the tiny office next to it. Ray Peterson was sitting behind his desk, tapping out a report on his portable. He was a tall, laconic, loose-limbed man, one of the best in the business on shadow jobs. He glanced up when Roper entered.

"Pete," Roper said, "you know anything about Gloria Spangler?"

Peterson pushed his hat back on his head. "The king's consort? Sure. Why?"

"I want to get in touch with her, and I can't find her."

"Ask the boss where she is"

"It's—a private affair."

Peterson watched him silently for a time, and then pursed his lips. "Private," he repeated. "You're playing in a rough league." He smiled to himself. "Not that you don't have company."

"Yeah?" Roper murmured. "Who?"

"If you figure that half the people in L. A. are male, I'd say your competition adds up to about a million head. Give or take a hundred."

"Anybody in particular seem to have the inside track?"

"What the devil is all this?"

Roper said: "Curiosity. Just plain old curiosity."

"Well—" Peterson sat back thoughtfully, and pulled at his lower lip. "I can't tell you if there's anything in it, but I've seen her with this big jerk—what's his name? Oh, hell. *Big* guy. All mixed up in the fight on daylight saving. Lawyer. Represents the Grange or some damn thing."

"Perry Collins?"

"Collins. I think he owns a piece of a bar on the Strip called Cappy's. You—"

"Cappy's," Roper repeated. "Cappy's. Yeah. Thanks, Pete."

He left while Peterson was still talking.

When he got on the street, the sun hit him like a knife. He made his way into the first drugstore he came across, bought a paper, and took his change in nickels. Then he squeezed into a phone booth.

Collins, Perry S. was listed under Lawyers in the yellow book. The girl who answered sounded as though she'd had a hard day. No, Mr. Collins wasn't in. No, he hadn't been in all morning. No, she didn't know where he could be reached. No, she didn't expect him. At last, she said wearily: "For heaven's sake, Mister, don't you read the papers?" and cut the connection.

Roper hung up slowly, and then glanced at the paper he'd bought. There was nothing on the front page, but back in the local items he ran across it. A column on the daylight saving issue, headed by a stern picture of Perry S. Collins, champion of the opposition.

It seemed that Mr. Collins' vigorous work on behalf of the farming interests,

and others who objected to daylight saving, had ended in failure, but Mr. Collins was undaunted, and he would most certainly continue the fight in Sacramento at the earliest opportunity. Meanwhile, beginning at midnight, daylight saving time would go into effect and would prevail throughout the summer months. And so forth.

Roper studied the photo of Perry Collins. A big head. Hair going back at the temples. Smart, straight eyes. Good-looking in the way a fighter is good-looking.

He folded the paper, found Collins' home phone number, and dialed. No answer. He got his nickel back, and tried Cappy's Club.

"Mr. Collins ain't here now," the voice on the other end of the line said. "Maybe later on. Any message?"

"No message," Roper said . . .

The phone book had given a Westwood address for Collins, Perry S. The house was new and shaded and discreet. Roper parked in the drive, strolled up to the porch, and rang the bell. Melodious chimes echoed inside. In a moment, he rang again.

The curtains on either side of the door were drawn. Presently Roper backed away from the porch, hesitated, and then started down the driveway toward the rear. A chest-high hedge surrounded the yard. He was looking for a way in when a rasping female voice stopped him.

"What you doing there, Sport?"

Roper turned. The kitchen window in the house next door was open. A woman, fiftyish, dressed in a maid's uniform, glared at him.

"Speak up, Sport. Speak up."

"Well, I'll tell you, Grandma," Roper said. "I'm a masked killer, see? I'm making a systematic robbery of all the joints on this street. After I strip the place, I usually put the inhabitants to the knife. I'm a real beast."

"You stay right where you are," the woman said. "I'm calling the police."

"Make it quick," Roper said. "As soon as I'm through here, you're next."

The woman disappeared from the window, and Roper wandered slowly around Collins' house, which appeared empty, and then made his way back to his car.

The woman in the maid's costume was standing on the porch when he drove away. Roper leaned out, drew his finger meaningfully across his throat, tipped his hat, and went on.

THE sign over the doorway said *Cappy's Club* in red neon. The front was shaped like the prow of a ship, and the attendants were dressed the way Hollywood thought pirates ought to look. By nine-thirty, when Roper arrived, the place was just beginning to fill up.

He gave his hat to a tricky little blonde pirate with a cardboard cutlass hanging against her bare legs, and headed through the smoke toward the bar. On the darkened dance floor, a five-piece band dragged its way through one of those numbers with a good deal of drum, and the blue spot caught a slim brunette who was doing some very interesting things with her hips.

Roper edged onto a stool, and ordered a double scotch. He'd spent the afternoon in a routine check through the hospitals and the morgue, and, of course, had gotten nowhere. He felt tired and irritable.

When the bartender brought his drink, Roper said: "I'm looking for Mr. Collins. He come in yet?"

"Mr. Collins? I don't think so, sir. Haven't seen him."

Wearily Roper turned back to watch the slim brunette. While he was in the act of turning, the front door opened and Perry Collins entered. Roper put his drink down quietly.

Collins was alone. He paused in the

entranceway, got out a cigarette, lit it, and then began walking slowly past the bar. When he'd come abreast of Roper, Roper said:

"Pardon me, Mac. You got a match?"

Collins stopped, annoyed. He was still holding the lighter in his hand, and he raised it finally for Roper.

Roper said: "The lady's husband's mad, Mac. He says if the lady don't come home, he's going to slap your wrist."

Collins stiffened. Roper steadied his hand and applied the end of his cigarette to the lighter's flame. "Where is she, Mac?" he whispered.

"Who are you? What are you talking about?"

"Just call me Sherlock Holmes. And I'm talking about Gloria Spangler."

Collins' eyes flickered. "Never heard of either of you," he snapped. "Now beat it, Buster."

He started away.

Roper put out his arm. Collins made a half turn and got his fist into Roper's stomach with his shoulder behind it. Roper saw it coming, rode with it, and jerked the arm around and up behind Collins' back in the same motion.

"Shame on you," he grated into Collins' ear. "You ought to show better than—"

He saw the big bouncer at his elbow just soon enough to twist his head away from the blackjack, and just late enough to take it on his ear. The drums of the orchestra seemed to have surged into his temples. He sank, fell forward into the bouncer's arms. Then he was being dragged out, and far away he could hear the bouncer saying: "It's all right, folks. Just a drunk. Sorry to bother you. . . ."

He felt the coolness of the night air on his face, and the hardness of the sidewalk and finally the uncertain footing of the graveled parking lot. The bouncer let him drop. Soon there was the gurgle

of liquid, and the splash of bad bourbon on his face. The bouncer tossed an empty pint bottle alongside of him, and walked away.

Roper waited until his head was steady on its axis. Then he pushed himself to an upright position. He leaned against the fender of a nearby coupe for a moment. When he was sure of his feet, he walked with great dignity to his own car, got in, and drove off. . . .

It was ten minutes to eleven when he got back to Westwood. He parked a block away from Collins' house. The lights in the place next door were blazing and a radio was blaring. He could have sounded a siren on his way to the back yard without being heard.

The hedge, he found, had a break big enough for him to squeeze through. He crossed to a pair of French doors, studied them for a time, and then moved on to an adjoining window. He might have played with it for a while, but he thought, oh what the hell, and wrapped his handkerchief around the butt of his gun. The glass tinkled demurely after the third tap.

He crawled inside, found himself in a bedroom, and stood patiently until his eyes adjusted to the deeper darkness. The first thing he saw was the mess the room was in, and the next was the dresser, and the third was the pile of envelopes.

He took a small bed-lamp off the dresser, put it on the floor. Squatting down, he flicked on the lamp, and studied the envelopes. They were full of letters signed "Gloria" and "Googie" and "Buttercup," and they were all in Mrs. Spangler's handwriting. He read the first few, and whistled soundlessly. "Why, Mister Collins," he murmured.

He couldn't have said when he first felt the draft on his shoulders, but he caught it at last, and glanced toward the bedroom door. It was open, and the window beyond it was open, and he cursed

himself for not looking around a little more carefully before cracking a locked one. He put the letters back. Rising, he started into the next room.

The first blow slashed across his cheek and jaw. He dropped, knowing the instrument for something blunt and metallic, clawing for support in the blackness. The second blow cracked against his skull like the stroke of doom. His last thought was: *Why, you stupid fathead, where else would she be but here? Where else . . . ?*

THERE was a swirling in his head, the sound of a siren, and the sweet smell of blood. He clung to the shred of returning consciousness, nursed it along like the precious thing it was, and finally forced his eyes open. The rooms were gray with dawn. He must have been unconscious for hours.

The siren was louder now. And the smell of blood persisted, sickening and fresh. He saw that he was holding his gun, and he looked automatically to see if it had been fired.

It had. Four times.

All four of the bullets lay in a corner, surrounded by a big guy with straight, dead eyes and hair going back at the temples. Perry S. Collins.

As his brain cleared, Roper could hear an excited chattering outside the house. He recognized the rasp of the maid from next door.

“. . . threatened to kill Mr. Collins this afternoon. He admitted it. I'd know him anywhere. About six feet tall. Light complected. I even remember the suit he was wearing . . .”

Fine, Roper thought. And there would be a bouncer at Cappy's Club who could testify that Collins had been attacked by this same tall, blond maniac. To say nothing of the evidence of the bullets from a gun registered to him.

The sirens were meowing like records running down, which meant that they

were close and ready to stop. All the chatter seemed to be coming from one side of the house. He stumbled across the room. No one was in sight there, and he thanked the gods for giving humans the habit of banding together in time of excitement. If the neighbors had spread out to surround the place, he'd have been through.

He slipped out the open window, grateful for the coolness of the early morning breeze on his battered head. He paused, took a deep breath, and started for the next yard.

“Hey!” somebody yelled. “You there! Stop!”

He crouched, plowed through the hedge, stumbled to his knees, and came up running. He could hear them behind him, worried about damaging the hedge. He turned at right angles, crossed two more yards, and found himself on the street where he'd parked his car.

His lungs ached, and his mouth felt as though it had been stuffed with wool. He flicked the starter button, let the clutch in at the same moment. He was a block away from them, and he had a good start on top of it. But it was many streets later before he allowed himself to relax.

The city was still empty and somnolent when he got to the downtown area. He drove slowly along Main, parked his car, and entered an all-night movie. The ticket-taker, used to the vagaries of skid-row customers, hardly gave his beaten face a second glance.

Roper went to the men's room, where he washed his face as well as he could, and then chose a seat in the back row of the theater, under the hum of the projector.

On the screen, a private eye with the pretty look of a chorus boy about him was accusing the butler of murder. Now why the hell, Roper thought, couldn't there have been a nice convenient butler

in this case? Or at least a nice smart private eye like pretty-boy up there?

Had Gloria killed Collins, in the dark? Tired of her boy friend maybe, and quick to see a way out? No. A woman wouldn't have been so crude. Besides which, the open window he'd noticed pointed to an outsider, a third party. Somebody who wanted Collins out of the way, and had seen a chance to make him, Roper, the fall guy. Somebody who knew he was going to Collins' house; somebody who had picked his time, who may even have shadowed Roper all day, waiting, waiting. But a good *shadow*—so good that Roper had never suspected his existence . . . The best shadow in the business. . . .

Roper sat up slowly. He swore softly under his breath. Peterson. Peterson had led him to Collins as surely as though he'd taken him by the hand. Suppose Peterson had been the man mentioned in Gloria's note. Suppose he'd gotten Gloria out of the state before Spangler had clamped his check on the bus and train terminals. Suppose Gloria had been worried about the letters she'd once written to Perry Collins, and suppose Peterson had wanted the letters or Collins, or both, out of the way before he joined his lady.

The luminous clock on the wall said five forty-five. Roper got to his feet, and then sat down again. Nothing doing yet. Peterson wouldn't leave until he was certain that Collins was really dead, and that Roper was caught. Maybe it was high time Roper stopped trying to play solo. . . .

ETERNITIES later, Roper's elbow slipped off the arm rest, and he jerked his head upright. The same private eye was beating hell out of the same butler, but the clock on the wall now said ten minutes after ten. Roper had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. He rose, hurried into the shabby lobby and to a pay phone sign across the foyer. Roper

hurried to it, pushed a nickel into the slot, and dialed the Spangler agency.

Spangler himself answered. "Jack?" he said. "Where have you been? I've—"

"Never mind," Roper said. "Has Peterson come in yet?"

"No. But I got news for you."

"Well?"

"You've been on a wild goose chase. I just now got a letter from Gloria. Post-marked Flagstaff. Come on back and—"

"I know," Roper said.

"You *know!*"

"Listen, I'll explain when I get there. Don't go away. See you. . . ."

It was ten forty-five when Roper walked into the agency.

"Now what the devil is all this?" Spangler asked.

Roper nodded toward Peterson's office, and raised his eyebrows.

"Not yet," Spangler said.

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"All right," Roper said. "I'll give it to you straight. All of it. First, your wife has been playing around with a character named Collins."

"The lawyer."

"The late lawyer."

Spangler's chin dropped.

"He was shot last night, and the murderer tried to build the frame on me."

"On *you*!"

"I think your wife's dead too."

Spangler jumped to his feet. "Jack—"

"Take it easy," Roper said. He motioned toward the door. "Any minute now the whole answer's going to come walking up that hall."

Spangler stared toward the door, and then looked at Roper, and in the silence they could hear the footsteps. Roper got his gun, checked it, and found two bullets left. The footsteps paused.

"Now!" Roper said.

Spangler jerked the door open.

In the hallway, the mailman, who was bending over to insert a letter in the mail slot, looked up in surprise.

"Close the door, Clyde," Roper said.

For a long moment Spangler remained motionless. Then, very slowly, he shoved the door shut. There was a snort from the mailman, and the sound of him continuing down the hall.

Roper's gun was steady on Spangler's stomach when he turned.

"So," Roper murmured, "you didn't get a letter from Gloria this morning, did you? The mail is still delivered at ten, Clyde. But there's an hour's difference now with daylight saving. Ten to the mailman, eleven to us. A small thing, but so important. . . ."

Spangler started toward him.

"Right where you are, Clyde," Roper said, and Spangler stopped.

"I had it all figured out," Roper said, "except that I had the wrong guy. But you cleared that up for me with that let-

ter nonsense. You had to get me back here after I got out of your little trap at Collins', didn't you?"

"You're out of your mind," Spangler whispered.

"Sure. So we'll just have the police check your house. Maybe the basement. Did you hide her body there, Clyde?"

"I think the first note was real. The one you showed me. But I think you found her, maybe while she was writing it. I think you killed her then. Such a jealous man. Still, you couldn't be sure of whom she was referring to in the note. It could have been me. And you probably knew she was seeing Collins. Everybody else knew it. So you decided to get rid of both of us.

"You knew I'd hit on Collins if I investigated Gloria's activities well enough. And you followed me, and waited. And when I went back to Collins' house, you came after me, and rigged your frame. If the police know there was a third man in the house with Collins and me, they can always get fingerprints."

"Damn you," Spangler whispered.

"And still there was a way you could have thrown me off," Roper said. "Two words. But you were too stupid to think of 'em."

He saw Spangler's hand jump to his shoulder holster, and he dropped, his own finger gripping his gun's trigger. The sound of the shot thundered in the room. Spangler whirled under the impact of the slug in his forearm. He sank to his knees, holding his shattered arm.

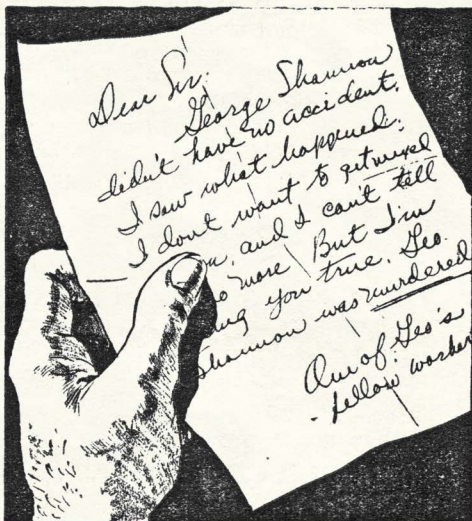
"You're getting old, Clyde," Roper snapped. "You're slowing down." He went to the phone, dialed the police.

"Two words," Roper said over the mouthpiece. He grinned tightly. "Did you ever think of telling me the letter from Gloria had come—special delivery?"

"Gimme Parker," Roper said. "Homicide. . . ."



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NAME YOUR

*All the evidence proved
Buck McCord had choked the town's big boss—
until Newshound Bradford uncovered
a cyanide skirt . . . and a disappearing poison.*



POISON

CHAPTER ONE

By **FREDERICK C.**

The Civic Spirits

DAVIS

A MOTOR began humming and a pair of headlamps lighted up just as Bradford was passing the parking lot behind Police Headquarters. When a car veered through the gate, he planted one foot on the runningboard, swung on, opened the door and lowered himself into the seat. Brakes squealed.



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Baffling

Mystery

Novelette

"Come, come, James," Bradford sighed. "Proceed."

Detective Sergeant Jimmy McCord kept his foot on the brake. "You get out of here, Brad," he ordered urgently. "I like your company, but I don't want any reporter along this trip."

Bradford looked mildly affronted. "I am not any reporter," he said. "I am the reporter. I'm the best damn reporter in the whole world, at least. My only fault is that I drink a little."

"If the amount you drink can be called a little," McCord answered impatiently, "Niagara Falls is a mere trickle. Go on, get out of this car!"

Bradford displayed a marked reluctance to move, now that he was so comfortably settled. "Relax," he said. "I don't want news, I want sympathy. I've been fired. Not more than an hour ago I was heaved out of the *Bulletin* city room on my tail. I'd have been here sooner, only there are six bars along the way."

"That's tough, but it's a wonder to me you weren't canned years back," McCord observed. With abrupt decision, he released the clutch and the car leaped forward. "I can't waste time arguing with you now," he added, bending to the wheel. "I'll roll you out, the first red light I hit."

Bradford held onto his hat. "If you'll go a little slower," he suggested, "I'll point out my favorite gutter."

McCord never drove slowly; he raced. He never walked anywhere; he ran. He was a tenacious, hard-muscled little bull who hustled about dynamically day and night.

"It happened this way," Bradford explained. "I made a slight mistake. I discovered that an unusually large number of dead citizens voted in the last city election. All of these corpses cast their ballots for the same candidate, who happens to be the private property of Lew Wolff."

"Well, it was the best story I ever wrote, so Fisk handed it to the managing editor, and the managing editor passed it on to the publisher, and the publisher decided it was much too good to print, so he presented me with a little blue slip instructing the cashier to pay me up to date, less advances."

McCord gave him a queer look. "Listen," he said quietly. "Did you just come from six saloons, or did you just leave Lew Wolff's apartment?"

"I think it was six," Bradford said. "Maybe it was seven. Why?"

"I'm heading for Wolff's place now." Bradford's weary lids lifted. "Has Wolff been murdered?" he inquired eagerly. "Or is that too much to hope for?" He hastily added, "In case he has, I want to mention ahead of time that I never done it, but I'd like to shake the hands of the public benefactor who did."

McCord didn't smile. "I don't know what this adds up to," he said uneasily, "but I'm answering a confidential hurry-up call."

"Who from?"

"A Mrs. Anna Wilson," McCord answered. "She lives in the same building as Wolff does. She says she can look out of her window and across the court into Wolff's apartment. She told us a couple of men were there, fighting. The scrap was still going on when she hung up. One of them was choking the other, and the one getting choked was Lew Wolff."

"Then don't drive so fast," Bradford urged. "Give the other guy a chance. This is your opportunity to render a great service to the people. What this country needs is fewer grafting big-shot politicians of Wolff's ilk."

Earnestly, McCord put on more speed. "I'm answering this because it's probably something that'll have to be hushed up."

"Like my story about the civically dutiful corpses. I do not like Mr. Wolff,"

Bradford announced. "I don't like to see him ruling like a predatory dictator over our fair and progressive little city. He stuffs too many ballot boxes. He's a silent partner in too many contracting firms which are awarded too many juicy municipal contracts.

"He has broken too many good men like me, and he had handed out too many soft jobs to too many incompetent bums—not like you, Jimmy. Right-minded citizens, like us, simply do not approve of such a powerful political crook. I can say without exaggeration that I do not like Mr. Wolff at all. I'm hoping for the worst."

SWERVING the car to the curb, McCord stopped it violently in front of a massive building of white stone. Bradford was unfolding his lean length when he noticed a man hurrying out of its entrance. The man was impressively big and, as he strode away, Bradford saw that his handsome face was screwed up as if he was about to burst into childish tears.

He passed from the shine of the marquee into the darkness beyond. Bradford gazed after him curiously, and touched Jimmy McCord's arm as McCord hustled to the entrance.

"Wasn't that Buck?"

McCord looked hard at the disappearing figure, then hard at Bradford, and made no answer. He hastened into the lobby with Bradford swinging along at his side.

"I said, wasn't that your big dumb greaseball brother?" Bradford insisted.

"What would Buck be doing around here?" McCord countered uneasily.

"That's what I'm wondering."

They wondered in silence while they rode up to the seventh floor. McCord was the first to reach the door lettered *D*. It was standing ajar. He pushed it open slowly. Bradford stood behind him,

looking over his head into the disordered room.

"D stands for death," Bradford murmured.

Lew Wolff was lying huddled on the rug in front of the sofa, staring darkly with eyes that seemed to be all glazed pupils. His face was swollen and flushed. His tie was pulled loose, his collar was torn open and there were dark bruises on both side of his neck where thumbs had pressed.

"I couldn't have done a better job myself," Bradford said.

McCord lowered himself to his knees in front of the dead man. His gaze was narrow and sharp, his examination swift and skilled. He didn't say anything and neither did Bradford. They didn't move for a half a minute. Bradford looked around the too-sumptuous apartment with grim satisfaction, but McCord's lips drew tight and his cheeks took on the color of wax.

"Dynamite," Bradford observed.

He was attracted by a bottle of scotch on the table. With a fine disregard for the importance of fingerprints, he poured whiskey into two glasses and offered one to McCord.

McCord didn't take it. He didn't even see it. Now he was looking out the window, at another window that was visible across the corner of the court. From it a woman was staring into the death room. She was a silhouette making nervous motions with its hands.

"That would be Mrs. Wilson," Bradford surmised.

As McCord got up stiffly, his tension mounting with his anxiety, Bradford turned to the telephone. He dialed the number of the *Bulletin* and asked for Fisk.

"Good evening, sir," he greeted the city editor. "I called to say that I'm willing to overlook the tactless blunder you made tonight by firing me. I have on

hand one first-class murder, suitable for an extra."

Fisk growled at him: "Haven't you learned the *Bulletin* doesn't put out extras? There's no competition in this town. If you've actually got a murder, we'll take it as it comes. I wouldn't take it from a no-good rum-pot like you under any circumstances. Haines is covering police in your place. Go soak your head and don't bother me."

A loud sound of finality came over the wire, and Bradford shrugged. Jimmy McCord pulled the phone out of his hands. Bradford wandered around the room looking pleased with the corpse, while McCord talked rapidly to headquarters. Sipping his drink, he studied McCord. When the detective turned from the instrument, the paleness of his face had bleached his tight mouth.

"Did you tell 'em about Buck?" Bradford inquired quietly.

McCord winced as if he had been flicked by a whip-lash. Without answering, he bent down. He looked all around the body, under the sofa and under the table. His movements were quick and urgent.

Finding nothing, he straightened, stepped back into a corner and stared into Lew Wolff's dark dead eyes.

"If there are any clues lying around that you'd like to eliminate from the picture," Bradford said, even more quietly, "don't hesitate on my account."

McCord breathed a little faster, but he didn't stir. He stood there, tightening by the minute, until a knock sounded at the door; then he opened it quickly. A uniformed patrolman, beefy and florid, was standing in the hall.

"Keep an eye on this, Halligan," McCord directed him tersely. "Beckett's on his way with the Homicide Squad."

BRADFORD had to exert himself in order to stay in McCord's wake on the way out. McCord's heels hit hard

as he hastened to the car. He swerved it off with feverish haste while Bradford was clambering aboard. Still he didn't say anything, but he drove wildly.

Bradford held his hat-brim in both hands while they skidded around corners and whizzed past red lights with the horn squawking. McCord slammed the car to a stop in front of a two-story brick building that was all dark.

There was a sign above its broad door that read, *Supreme Service Garage, Buckley McCord, Prop.* Jimmy McCord hurried to a smaller door near the corner. He ran up a flight of stairs, began pounding on still another door and kept doing it until Bradford laboriously pulled himself up to the landing.

"He hasn't come back yet," McCord said.

"Where could we look for him?" Bradford wheezed. "The dumb guy doesn't even drink. I wouldn't know where to start hunting."

"I'd better wait here," McCord said.

He paced back and forth on the landing, three steps one way, three the other, the rhythm of his heels quickening. Watching him sympathetically, Bradford noticed the way he kept glancing at his watch and gnawing on his thumbnail. Though he wasn't a smoker, he accepted a cigarette; but he crushed it out after two quick puffs. Suddenly, hearing the sounds of a car stopping, he ran down the stairs and rushed out into the dark street.

Buck McCord came in first. He was big enough to make two of his younger brother. He didn't look like a mechanic, in his flashy suit and his jaunty Homberg. In appearance he was handsome, but in his baby blue eyes there was a vacuum. As he climbed the stairs, with Jimmy McCord at his heels, he seemed full of a dull, hurt bewilderment.

He unlocked the door, went first into the neat little room where he lived above

the garage, sat heavily in a chair and stared at the floor. Bradford entered quietly after Jimmy McCord.

"Where've you been since you left Wolff's place, Buck?"

"Just walking."

"What happened there?"

As Buck McCord looked up, he seemed like a dim-witted kid who was grieving.

"For heaven's sake, talk!" Bradford urged him. "Jimmy will do his damndest for you, you know that, don't you? He always has. As a cop he's aces, but he's more than that—he's your brother. He's ready to go through hell and high water for you right now, if you'll only open up, you big lug. Tell him why you went to Lew Wolff's place tonight and why you choked the rat to death."

Buck McCord jerked himself to his feet. Now he was more than bewildered; he was stunned and frightened. He fumbled with a few startled words, words that didn't make sense, and then he broke off. At the same time a moan broke from Jimmy McCord's throat, and Bradford made a gesture of weary resignation. There were footfalls on the stairs.

The sullen-looking man who came in was Captain Beckett. The two men who paused behind him were Brady and Schultz, members of the Homicide Squad which Beckett headed. Jimmy McCord turned to confront him, looking defiant and heartsick, and Beckett smiled wryly. Then the captain lowered his head, as if he were about to butt it into something, opened his fist under Buck's eyes.

A silver cuff-link lay on his hard palm. In alarm Buck McCord pulled up his left sleeve and looked at his shirt-cuff. The link in it was the mate to the one Beckett had. Then he slipped up his right coat sleeve and stared at the other cuff. It was gaping, without any link.

"Sorry, Jimmy," Beckett said in a tone that was more gratified than regretful. "I found this under the body.

The doorman of the building told me Buck McCord was there a while ago. This brother of yours is under arrest for murdering Lew Wolff."

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CHAPTER TWO

In Buck's Wake

NOW Bradford was slumped in a chair in the locker room of headquarters, where he could see the entrance. It was morning, and he was mulling over the *Bulletin's* front page story of the murder. He scowled because he had a hangover and because Fisk and Haines were doing an excellent job of covering the break without him.

Haines, a studious-looking chap who took his crime seriously, was visible from moment to moment, wasting a great deal of energy hurrying from one office to another. Things were happening all over the place, but Bradford was waiting until something definite developed, as it would soon, and for Jimmy McCord to show up.

Presently a door opened. Bradford watched Buck McCord, led across the corridor by Brady and Schultz. His eyes were still full of that hurt, bewildered look. He scarcely showed the effects of an all-night grilling; he wasn't tired, but two dicks seemed worn out. He went along with bovine obedience as they led him into the line-up room.

At the same moment Jimmy McCord came hustling in from the street. Though he needed a shave and his eyes were rimmed with red, the mainspring of his energy was still wound up to the tightest notch. As soon as he came in the door, a detective named Cummings tagged him on the shoulder.

"The chief wants to see you, Jimmy."

Jimmy McCord looked inquiringly at Bradford.

"Find anything?" Bradford asked.

McCord shook his head. "I've been all over that apartment," he said huskily. "There isn't any more evidence to find. Just that cuff-link—but that's plenty, added to everything else. I don't know how I can prove Buck's innocence."

They pushed through a door into the auditorium of the line-up room. The stage was still empty, except for Captain Beckett, who was standing in the rostrum at one side looking over some papers. Brilliant lights were focussed upon the platform. Half the seats in the shadow were occupied by detectives and patrolmen. There was an expectant tension in the air, for the show was about to begin.

Bradford and Jimmy McCord took seats in the rear. McCord's face was wan, but his chin was thrust out square and his eyes were intense. He kept swallowing and the veins in his neck throbbled hotly.

"This gets me," Bradford said softly. "I guess it always has, the way you've looked after that big dumb ox. I know how hard it's hitting you."

"I'm afraid they'll take me off the case," McCord said. "I can't let that happen, Brad. I've got to get Buck out of this somehow."

"That's the point," Bradford said. "You'll do your almighty damndest to get him out of it, if they let you. You'll kill yourself trying. You're too good a man to sacrifice to a lost cause."

"I've got to get him out of it."

Bradford slumped lower in his chair. "I've never seen anything like the pair of you. You're Buck's kid brother. He's seven years older than you are, but you've raised him from a pup better than your mother and your old man could have done it.

"You've wiped his nose for him and done his homework for him and set him up in business and checked his books at the garage every week and led him around by the hand all his life. Heaven knows it's not your fault he stayed so dumb he'd do a fool thing like throttling the biggest politician in the state in the presence of a witness."

"Listen," McCord said earnestly.

A line of men was being led onto the

stage. Three of them were part of the night's crop of vagrants, one was a greasy-looking mug who'd been nabbed sticking up a cigar store, two were detectives—and the one in the middle was Buck.

The prisoners stood squinting in the glare that prevented their seeing farther than Beckett. Jimmy McCord strained up in his seat, tense to catch every single word.

"Beckett's not going to be easy on Buck," Bradford said. "You're going to wish you hadn't won all those marksmanship medals away from him."

A detective named Evers came down the aisle accompanied by a woman. Her spectacles glittered and her hands fluttered nervously. Evers brought her to a position beside the rostrum.

"Your name is Mrs. Anna Wilson, madam?" Captain Beckett inquired.

Mrs. Wilson made a squeaking sound of assent.

"Last night," Beckett continued, "you saw a man in the act of strangling Lewis Wolff?"

Again Mrs. Wilson squeaked.

"Can you identify that man? Is he among those men on the platform?"

The woman not only pointed straight at Buck McCord, but took a few venturing steps forward in order to make her aim more accurate.

"That's the man, that's the man," she piped.

"Thank you, Mrs. Wilson."

SHE was led back up the aisle by Evers, her hands still fluttering. Jimmy McCord stared at his brother standing there in the blinding glare. Buck was looking around as if all this was happening to somebody else instead of to him. When Beckett pronounced his name through the loudspeaker system he didn't move, but just looked more confused.

"Buckley McCord," Beckett growled again, "step forward."

Buck stepped forward and Jimmy swallowed.

"This man is charged with the murder of Lewis Wolff," Beckett informed the assembled detectives and patrolmen. "He has no previous record. McCord, did you visit the apartment of Lewis Wolff last night?"

Buck nodded.

"Use your voice!" Beckett snapped, lowering his head as if to butt. "Did you go to the apartment of Lewis Wolff last night?"

"I guess so."

Beckett roared, "Did you go or didn't you go?"

"I went," Buck said.

"For what reason?"

After hesitating, Buck mumbled, "I told you all this before. I told it a hundred times."

"Tell it again."

"I—I went on account of a girl."

"What's the girl's name?"

"She told me that her name was Evelyn Baker."

"How long have you known this girl?"

"Couple of months."

"Where did you meet her?"

"Her car broke down, so I towed it into my garage and fixed it," Buck said with some degree of pride.

"How often did you see her after that?"

"Well . . ."

"When you saw her after the first time it wasn't about fixing her car, was it?"

"We got to be sort of friends."

"Good friends? *Very* good friends?"

Buck nodded.

"Use your voice!"

"Very good friends," Buck admitted.

"Did you like her?"

Buck smiled a little, and then his face became sad. "She liked me, too. She said she did."

"Where did you usually see each other?"

"Well . . . sometimes we drove out into the country, and sometimes she came to my place above the garage," Buck explained.

"How long did this go on?"

"Till yesterday."

"Then what happened?"

"I saw a picture in the paper."

"What kind of a picture?"

"It was a picture of some people eating dinner at a banquet."

"Who was in the picture?"

"A man name of Lewis Wolff and this girl I was going around with. Underneath it said it was a picture of Mr. and Mrs. Lewis Wolff at the—"

"What did you do about it?"

"I couldn't believe it," Buck said in an injured tone. "She seemed like a sort of a nice girl."

"What did you do?"

"I thought I better find out about her for sure."

Buck was hesitantly reciting this now, like a lesson he hadn't learned too well. He kept trying to see through the lights, as if hunting hopefully for Jimmy. Jimmy was sitting upright, his gaze fixed upon Buck's screwed-up face.

"How did you find out about her?"

"I looked in the telephone book where Lewis Wolff lived, and I went there last night."

"You gave your name to the doorman, didn't you?"

Buck nodded.

"Use your voice!"

"That's right," Buck said quickly.

"Mrs. Wolff told the doorman to let you come up to the apartment, and you did. Is that also right?"

"That's ri—also right."

"When you got up there, you saw that Evelyn Baker and Evelyn Wolff were the same woman, didn't you?"

"That's right."

"You realized that the girl you'd been running around with was the wife of

Lewis Wolff, didn't you?" Beckett said.

"I didn't know what to think."

"Then what happened?"

"I told her she shouldn't have done such a thing like that, and I said I never meant to start dating with some man's wife, so I started to leave."

"But you didn't leave."

Buck's face screwed up again. "She wouldn't let me."

"How could she stop you?"

"She told me it didn't make no difference, and she liked me just the same, and she put her arms around me and wouldn't let me go."

"Tell the truth!"

"That—that's the truth," Buck said. He wagged his handsome head. "I felt bad because she fooled me. I didn't want to get into no trouble over her, but she put her arms around me and wouldn't let me go."

"You're strong enough to get yourself out of a woman's arms, aren't you?"

Buck shuffled his feet.

"Aren't you?"

"She wouldn't let me go," Buck insisted.

"Then what happened?"

"All of a sudden the door opened, and Mr. Wolff came in."

"Go ahead, tell the rest."

JIMMY McCORD was leaning forward, scarcely breathing. Bradford sat doubled up, looking disgustedly at Buck under the brim of his hat.

"Well, Mr. Wolff was—he acted sort of crazy. He started hollering and cursing, and he told Evelyn to get out. She was afraid of him. She said, 'I never saw you like this before.' She got her hat and coat and ran out, she was so afraid. Then Mr. Wolff started to fight with me. I didn't want to fight with him, but he was wild drunk. I didn't want to hurt him none, but the way he jumped on me—"

"You threw him down to the floor and choked him!" Beckett's accusing voice thundered out of the horns. "You choked him, you choked him until he was dead! Tell the truth!"

Buck seemed to shrink a little. "I'm telling the truth," he said in a cowed tone. "I started to choke him, but I just wanted a chance to get away, that's all. He wasn't dead when I got up. I went out, and he kept making crazy noises in his throat. I didn't kill him. He was alive when I left."

"Tell the truth!"

"He was alive when I left."

With a contemptuous snarl, Beckett roared, "That's all. Step back."

One of the detectives on the platform had to push Buck back into the line.

Jimmy McCord rubbed his hand across his haggard face, and got up abruptly. Bradford ambled after him into the corridor. Just as they stepped out of the auditorium, a detective named Rogers touched Jimmy McCord's arm.

"Chief wants to see you, Jimmy."

McCord looked up at Bradford. His eyes were full of despair, yet they were glinting with determination. "I've got to find some way of proving what Buck says is true," he said.

"Buck's telling the truth, all right," Bradford answered. "He's too dumb to be able to lie well. It just isn't in him to think up a sound story and stick to it as he has. Maybe there'll be something in the autopsy. As for Evelyn Wolff, she's in Hanley's office now."

At once Jimmy McCord turned to the stairs. Bradford followed him quietly into the outer office of Inspector Hanley. The door connecting with the inner office was open. Hanley, a mild-mannered man who looked like a business executive, was at his desk. Seated opposite him was Evelyn Wolff.

She was a one-time night club soprano made too plump and too soft by ten years

of pampered luxury. She was small but voluptuously curved. Her mouth, very large and very red, was pursed petulantly.

"It's ridiculous and insulting," she was saying in short breaths of cigarette smoke. "I never went out with him. I never saw him alone. He kept annoying me, following me around, thrusting himself on me. I let him in the apartment last night, hoping my husband would come in while he was there and teach him a lesson and get rid of him once and for all. I never dreamed the stupid fool— Oh!" She became speechless with indignation.

Hanley nodded and saw Jimmy McCord looking in.

"The chief wants to see you immediately, McCord," he said in a tone of dismissal.

McCord turned quickly and strode out. Following him across the corridor, Bradford uttered a dour chuckle.

"Maybe so, maybe so," he said. "But the lady is not the type who is attracted to a man by his intelligence."

MORE questioning was going on in one of the outer offices of the chief's suite. A detective named Glover was making inquiries of Jean Whitney, who had been Lew Wolff's private secretary.

Jean Whitney was nearing her thirties, but her adroit use of make-up made her seem nearer twenty. Her eyes were bold and her thin mouth determined. She was sitting straight, perfectly poised. She had a cold, hard, diamond-like attraction about her. She fell silent as Jimmy McCord and Bradford went through to the chief's office.

"There is a gal I like to keep both eyes on," Bradford said. "Not only because she's easy to look at, but I wouldn't dare turn my back unless I was wearing a dagger-proof vest."

He caught a glimpse of the chief as McCord went in. Chief Sweet was anything but. His face might have been

chiseled out of granite and his eyes were like burnished steel. Slouching in a chair outside the door, Bradford eavesdropped.

"I'm sorry, McCord," the chief said in his brisk, curt manner. "Very sorry."

"Thanks, Chief," McCord said.

"It's a clear case."

"But I know Buck. He's telling the truth."

"You understand," Chief Sweet said dubiously, "this case must be handled without prejudice."

"Certainly."

Bradford heard a rustle of papers. "Pete Garzani is being held for us in Chicago. Arrangements of extradition have been completed. Here's everything you'll need, including a round trip train ticket."

McCord's voice lifted. "You mean you're sending me to Chicago to bring Garzani back?"

"Your train leaves in an hour."

"But couldn't you send one of the other men, Chief?" McCord pleaded. "If I can keep working on the Wolff case—"

"You're not on the Wolff case," Chief Sweet answered bluntly. "I understand how you feel, McCord, but your orders are to get Garzani and bring him back. You'll show up with him on Friday at about five o'clock."

"I don't want to throw any monkey-wrenches into the works, Chief," McCord protested. "But I've got to have a chance—"

"Orders," the chief growled.

"Yes, sir."

"That's all."

McCord came out of the office, stuffing an envelope into his inner pocket, looking white and shaky. He strode across the corridor with his fists clenched. Grabbing up the telephone, he spun the dial. After a few minutes of fast talk, during which he made notes, he jumped up. His eyes were full of recklessness when Bradford paused at his side.

"A damned tough man, Sweet," Bradford observed. "You'll have Garzani back here at five o'clock on Friday, Jimmy, or you'll get the book of regulations thrown at you. You'll get demoted to the gashouse beat—if you don't get busted off the force entirely."

"They'll slap an indictment on Buck before I can get back," McCord said, his words dry and hard. "They'll keep me busy all along the line with things like this—shut me out of the case."

"I'll be doing a bit of free-lance work on this while you're gone, Jimmy," Bradford promised.

McCord tightly shook his head. "I can get Garzani back here in time without catching that train in an hour. I can wait and take the ten o'clock plane instead—buy the ticket myself—and make the same connection back."

Bradford nodded thoughtfully. "You could," he agreed. "And you'll still get the works for insubordination. Also, it wouldn't give you much extra time to help Buck."

"Less than twelve hours," Jimmy McCord said.

CHAPTER THREE

Tough Medicine

THE morgue was a trim brick building that sat behind the City Hospital. Inside were a row of offices, a cement dissection room, another large room that contained the ice-boxes in which the corpses were kept, the chemical laboratory of the toxicologist and an ever-present reek of disinfectant. In spite of its newness it was not a cheery place, but Bradford uttered an ironic chuckle as he went in with Jimmy McCord.

"One of Lew Wolff's firms was awarded the contract for this building," he said, "and of course Wolff got his cut. Today he's here getting another

cut—only, it's of a very different kind."

They went into the office of Medical Examiner Copeland. It was walled with books and file cabinets. Copeland was a huge man with a neat, gray beard, who constantly smoked a crusty pipe.

"Hello, Brad," he said with gruff cordiality through a fragrant cloud. "I'm sorry about this, Jimmy, my boy, damned sorry. I guess this is what you want."

He handed them a copy of his report on the death of Lewis Wolff. They bent over it intently, skipping the preliminaries, studying the findings of the autopsy.

Jimmy McCord drew a hoarse breath.

"Tucker is making his tests now, but I don't expect he'll find anything significant," Dr. Copeland said jovially. "I think this report will stand. You can hang around until Tucker's finished if you want to."

"Thanks, Doc," McCord said gravely.

They crossed the hall to the chemical lab. It was a long room brightly lighted and full of glittering glass. Bluestone benches were arranged around the walls. These bore a clutter of apparatus and queer-shaped glass crucibles. At one of them, a man with his sleeves rolled up was working with test tubes and a Bunsen burner. As Bradford and McCord came to his side, he continued his task with careful deliberation.

"How's it coming, Tucker?" Bradford asked.

The toxicologist was a thin man with high cheekbones and a lofty, forceful forehead. His brilliant blue eyes shone with the fire of a zealot and reflected his penetrating intelligence. He handled the test tubes deftly and tenderly in his long, tapering fingers.

"Nothing at all so far," he answered without looking up. "I've eliminated the volatiles and the minerals and now I'm going through the organics. I don't expect to uncover anything."

"We'll stick around."

Tucker looked at Jimmy McCord, put the test tube in a rack and turned to a cabinet. Unlocking its door, he revealed an array of bottles quite different from the hundreds of others on the shelves that contained chemical reagents. Bradford said, "Ah-h!" and admiringly appraised the supply of scotch, bourbon, rye and brandy.

"Name your poison," Tucker invited.

"I'll have a little cyanide of scotch," Bradford decided at once.

Tucker again looked sympathetically and inquiringly at Jimmy McCord. After a moment of doubt McCord said, "Anything." Tucker took ice cubes out of a big electric refrigerator, made two scotch-and-waters. Bradford sampled his liberally, with deep satisfaction. McCord stared at his highball, then tentatively sipped it.

"It's the first drink I ever had in my life," McCord said.

"Then you've got a hell of a lot of catching up to do," Bradford observed. "Besides, you need it."

McCord took another sip, sank stiffly into a chair and watched as Tucker resumed work. Bradford hoisted himself to one of the bluestone tables. For several moments he soberly contemplated an array of jars. Then he remarked: "Mr. Wolff is a bit difficult to recognize in his present condition. Don't you get the squirmy-wormies, Tucker, when you think how often this mess of offal used to come in here and slap you on the back and tell you what a fine job you're doing?"

"You get used to it," Tucker said. "I've seen more than one of my friends come into this lab in jars, but they all look pretty much alike."

"Are you ever tempted, in the case of somebody you know, to tone down your reports?" Bradford inquired.

Tucker gave him a brief, sharp look

and said, "I'm a scientist serving the law. Whatever I find goes into my reports. The results are determined by the reactions in these test tubes, not by my personal sentiments. Otherwise we'd be as had as the old coroner system. Doc and I fought for years to get rid of that rotten disgrace."

"But don't you run up against a pretty ticklish question sometimes?"

"Not often. I never report until I'm absolutely certain."

AS TUCKER went on working, Bradford idly pulled one of the technical books from a shelf above the table, took a pair of horn glasses from his vest pocket, hooked them on and began flipping the pages. Jimmy McCord kept watching Tucker, his drink forgotten.

"I was thinking of the Mason case," Bradford said, "That happened a couple years ago. Young Marty Mason was killed in an auto crash. The guy who was driving the other car—Purello, his name was, and his old man was a bricklayer—he pulled through. It was hard to tell who was to blame for the crash, but the point was important. Marty Mason's father was president of the Chamber of Commerce at that time. Remember the case?"

Tucker opened one of the jars and reached in with a long, sharp surgical knife. "I remember it very well."

"Marty Mason was a wild young boozier. If he'd been driving while drunk it would have made a lot of difference. You tested Marty Mason's brain and reported he hadn't been drinking at all. Purello denied he'd been boozing, but he had a bottle of rye in his car, so he was blamed and he got the work's. But couldn't that test for alcohol in the brain go wrong somehow?"

Now studying the specimen, Tucker said, "Not that one. That's always definite. We use the refractometer. Lew Wolff's brain, for instance—" he gestured

to another of the jars—"is full of alcohol. Four tenths of one percent. He was very drunk when he was killed."

Jimmy McCord was listening intently.

"You should know," Bradford said, drinking and turning the pages of the book. "You and Doc Copeland have certainly done yourselves proud here. The medical examiner system in this city is as fine as New York's. More power to you. Listen. That's pretty queer, isn't it—about Lew Wolff having so much alcohol in him? He was known as a very moderate drinker."

Preparing little heaps for separate tests, Tucker declared, "There was nothing moderate about the way he'd been drinking last night."

"Another queer thing," Bradford went on thoughtfully, turning the pages as he spoke. "Wolff prided himself on his poise and his self-control, yet he went absolutely haywire. According to Buck McCord, he acted like a wild man."

Tucker put some specimen into a clean tube with a narrow spatula. "The liquor must have done that to him," he suggested.

"I suppose so," Bradford said. "But I wonder why he blotted up all that booze. It couldn't have been over Evelyn. He didn't know she'd been two-timing him until after he'd had a beltful. There are some queer things about this case, ordinary as it seems on the surface. For instance, when we found Lew Wolff dead, I noticed his eyes."

"Dilation of the pupils is one of the symptoms of strangulation," Tucker reminded him, still working intently.

"When I got these new glasses of mind, the doctor put drops in my eyes. The stuff made the pupils open up, so he could examine the back of the eye. I looked like a madman, just like Wolff did, until the effect wore off. What was it the doc used?"

"Belladonna."

Jimmy McCord was still motionless, still watching Tucker's careful handling of the tubes and the reagents. Bradford turned more pages and drained his glass.

"What I'm getting at is this," he said earnestly. "I believe what Buck McCord says. He says Lew Wolff was still alive when he left the apartment. Suppose Wolff had been doped up, somehow, by somebody else, a little earlier in the evening. Is there any poison that would have the effect of making him take to drink and run hog-wild before it finally killed him?"

Tucker was stirring into the tube a small quantity of ether. "If there is, I've never heard of it."

Bradford and Jimmy McCord watched keenly while the toxicologist let a few drops of a clear solution fall into the tube from a pipette. Nothing happened. With a gesture, Tucker put the tube aside and made a note on a pad.

"That's that," he said.

"No traces of poison?" McCord asked quickly.

"Not the slightest."

McCord peered haggardly at Bradford. Bradford took the highball out of his hand and consumed it in one draught.

"That's tough, Jimmy. It means Doc Copeland's report stands—that Lew Wolff died of asphyxiation by strangulation."

McCord looked wretched. He said hoarsely, "Let's get out of here," and turned away.

CHAPTER FOUR

Strictly Dead Business

BRADFORD and Jimmy McCord stepped out of the elevator on the eleventh floor. They walked down the corridor to a door bearing the name of Lewis Wolff. It was evening, and the other offices were dark, but there was a light shining from Wolff's.

"You go in first, Brad," McCord said in an exhausted tone. "If any of the boys from headquarters are in there, I'll have to fade. It wouldn't be so good if they saw me, with the chief thinking I'm on my way to Chicago to get Garzani."

Bradford stepped in. McCord waited restlessly. After a moment the door opened again and Bradford wagged to him.

"The coast is clear."

McCord hurried into the elaborate paneled office. A girl, seated at a desk in the corner, had been sorting papers. Her long nose and her buck teeth made her look like a rabbit, but her bearing declared that she was full of spunk and nobody's fool. After an annoyed glance at McCord, she resumed shuffling the papers.

"If I have to take any more time out to answer any more questions, I'll never get this file straightened out," she said with a snap.

Bradford sat on the corner of her desk. "Your name's Mildred Potter, isn't it?" he inquired. "Lew Wolff thought a lot of you—as an office worker, I mean, of course."

"He should have," Mildred Potter retorted. "I earned my money. I did all the work he asked me to do and half of Jean Whitney's besides."

"You know, frankly," Bradford said in a confidential tone, "I wouldn't quite trust Jean Whitney."

Miss Potter uttered a dry laugh. "I'll say one thing for her, she knows how to look out for herself."

"What's she going to do now that her employer has passed into the great beyond?"

"She's not worrying," Mildred Potter said. "She'll get along."

"Meaning what?"

The girl stopped work and gave Bradford an irritated look. "Meaning it's none of your business."

"You're wrong there," Bradford answered. "It's my pal's business because

he's a detective working on the case, and it's mine because I'm making it so. We don't think Buck McCord deserves the credit for ridding the world of the big bad Wolff. We've got a sneaking suspicion somebody else had a hand in his demise. We thought you might help us find out for sure."

She sat still. "How?"

"You're a smart little trick," Bradford said. "You're honest and conscientious, or you wouldn't be working here this late, straightening things up for a man who can't even thank you for it. Maybe the real reason you dislike Jean Whitney is that you have reason to believe she wasn't on the up and up, as you are."

"I haven't said so."

"I'm not intimating that Jean Whitney gains anything by Lew Wolff's death. I believe it was all pure business between Jean and Wolff. In fact, that's the point—strictly business. A girl who kept her ears open might have heard plenty of things said in this office that she might very well use to her advantage."

"I'm not saying anything."

"But you know something."

"I'm not saying anything, I said."

"That in itself says plenty."

Mildred Potter became a bit frightened. She glanced anxiously at Jimmy McCord. The ashen drawnness of his face discomfited her still more. She turned again to her papers, but immediately she paused, staring at the wall in thought.

"I don't for a minute believe Jean Whitney had anything to do with Mr. Wolff's death," she said suddenly, "but she did something strange this morning."

Instantly Jimmy McCord stepped forward. "What did she do?"

Mildred Potter hesitated. "I came into the office earlier than usual today. I saw that Mr. Wolff had been working last night, and that Jean had been with him. A few minutes after I arrived, Jean came in. Then, just before the detectives came,

I noticed something was missing from Mr. Wolff's desk."

"What was it?" Jimmy McCord demanded.

Mildred Potter got up quickly. She went past the ornate desk in the center of the office and opened a door behind the big padded chair. McCord looked curiously into the closet. Bradford, seeing several handsome bottles of liquor, made a thirsty noise in his throat. The girl pointed to a small black and chromium tray on one of the shelves. On the tray was a clean tumbler.

"Mr. Wolff usually kept this on his desk, with one of those fancy water jugs on it. Jean filled the jug with water for him every morning. It was always there, ready to use. But this morning Jean took it off the desk and hid it in this closet. I don't know why."

"Where's the jug?" McCord asked urgently.

Mildred Potter gazed at him knowingly. "After the detectives got through questioning us down at headquarters today, about Mr. Wolff's actions last night, Jean and I came back here together. Pretty soon she left for home.

"She was carrying a bundle done up in newspaper when she went out. It might have been some of her personal things, but it was just the size and shape of the jug. And she tried to keep me from seeing that she had it."

Jimmy McCord's hand closed on Mildred Potter's arm. "You mean Jean Whitney took that jug home with her—tried to get away with it without your knowing it?"

"I've said enough."

"But why would she do that? What would she want with it?"

"I don't know."

Bradford and McCord stared hard at each other. At the same moment they turned to the table where a telephone directory lay. Bradford opened it to the

W section, and McCord's finger stabbed down on Jean Whitney's address. They faced about suddenly and, leaving Mildred Potter gazing after them uneasily, hurried out of the office. . . .

Jimmy McCord dashed for the wheel of his car. Bradford spilled in and held onto his hat. Wind slapped at him as McCord zigzagged ten blocks into a residential district that flanked the business section of the city. They skidded into a street lined on both sides with old brown-stone-front houses. As soon as the car stopped, McCord scrambled out.

By the time Bradford caught up with him, he was in the vestibule of one of the houses, learning from the names on the mailboxes that Jean Whitney's apartment was 2A.

McCord sped up the stairs. Bringing up the rear, Bradford found him pounding on a door. Light was shining under the door, but no response came. McCord gripped the knob. He pushed in and stopped so suddenly that Bradford almost toppled over him. Bradford regained his equilibrium, pulled his hat-brim down and stared.

JEAN WHITNEY was lying in the far corner, her arms flung out. Her negligee was twisted around her. She was gaping and her glassy eyes were fixed upon the ceiling. Her hair was matted, the top of her head crushed. The heavy base of the chromium ash-stand that was lying beside her was stained crimson.

McCord quickly shut the door. He hurried to the dead woman and stooped over her. Bradford peered around, then stepped into the kitchen, found a bottle of brandy in one of the cabinets and poured himself a powerful shot. He came back as Jimmy McCord got up and turned to the telephone.

"Wait a minute!" Bradford blurted. "You can't report this. You're supposed to be on your way to Chicago."

McCord halted, his eyes grimly elated yet deeply puzzled.

"This is a hell of a thing!" Bradford said. "There's not going to be much to work on. The killer could come in here, beat the girl's skull in and scam without being seen. But it certainly throws an entirely different light on the Wolff murder."

"A break for Buck!" McCord exclaimed.

Bradford carried his drink to the telephone. He dialed a number while McCord watched him alertly. A tired voice answered.

"Toxicological laboratory."

"Hello, Tucker," Bradford said. "Working late?"

"I always do," Tucker said.

"I think I'll have a new job for you. Rush job, important. It can't wait until morning—there are reasons. Will you do it right away, as a special favor?"

"What's the job?"

"I can't tell you definitely now, but stay there, will you?"

"I'll be here for a while."

"Thanks. Listen. I understand that you toxicologists can detect every poison there is, but maybe I'm wrong. Are there any that don't leave any traces, any that your tests wouldn't show up?"

"You don't want that information for your own practical use, do you?" Tucker countered. "I remember you asked me that question once before."

"Certainly not. Come on, give me the straight inside dope. I've got to have it."

"Well," Tucker answered, "the symptoms of a poison might be disguised or confused by mixing it with another poison that counteracts its physical effects, but that trick would hardly fool us at this stage of the game. Also, some poisons are eliminated or transformed by the body before death occurs."

"On the other hand, there are several poisons that can't be detected by any test."

Certain glucosides, for instance. Also, certain glandular extracts, if given in a minimum lethal dose. It's possible that a murder might be committed with these poisons without the chemist's being able to establish the fact."

"That's what I wanted to know," Bradford said. "Hold down the fort until I get there, and I'll make it snappy as possible."

He hung up, his eyes burning.

"That jug—that water-bottle," he said quickly. "Maybe the killer took it away with him, but maybe it's still here. If it is, we've got to find it."

McCord started hunting for it at once. Bradford gulped down the rest of the brandy and charged into the kitchen. He opened one cabinet after another, then the closet. He even peered into the ice-box before he went back into the living room.

The thermos jug wasn't anywhere in the kitchen. McCord had pulled the console radio away from the wall and was looking into its hollow back. A sharp shake as his head announced a negative result.

"One of those bottles isn't such an easy thing to hide," Bradford said urgently.

They hurried together into the bedroom. McCord began opening the drawers of a dresser. Bradford punched the pillows on the bed, then turned to the wardrobe closet. He swung dresses aside to look behind them, then pulled two hatboxes off the shelf. In them he found hats. Next he unlatched the lids of two suitcases. They were empty. He stood back, disconcerted, and McCord came nervously to his side, baffled.

BRADFORD swung around into the bathroom. It seemed to offer no possibilities as a hiding place until he found the laundry hamper. It was in the corner. The door, when swung wide, hid it completely. He opened it and pulled out a pile of soiled linen. Suddenly he said "Ah!"

and straightened with the jug in his hands.

McCord took it from him and shook it. Something sloshed inside. Removing the stopper, McCord smelled of the contents. His face registered no discovery. Turning, he picked up a glass, poured some water into it from the jug and held it to the light. It appeared to be innocent. He lifted the glass to take a sip.

"Hell, don't do that!" Bradford blurted.

McCord stared at him, then poured the water from the glass into the jug and twisted the stopper in firmly.

"A break for Buck!" he blurted again.

"The guy that killed Jean must have hunted for it, but he didn't find it," Bradford said. "He couldn't take too much time about it. It would have been too risky—somebody might have happened in. Maybe he thought it wasn't so important anyway, because nobody but us suspects that Lew Wolff was poisoned."

"There must be poison in this water," McCord said vehemently. "Some sort of stuff that Tucker's routine tests missed this morning. But he ought to be able to find it now. I'm taking this bottle over to him damned quick."

"Wait a minute." Bradford blocked the doorway. "Let's figure this out before we get into that juggernaut of yours. You drove so fast I couldn't think on the way."

"Somebody came into Wolff's office last night, and dropped something into his water jug when he wasn't looking," McCord said rapidly. "Jean Whitney was there with Wolff, and she knew who the caller was. She might even have seen him doing something to the bottle. Or she may have seen the symptoms developing in Wolff afterwards."

Bradford pulled McCord into the living room. "Look at this place. Such finery costs money. I'm sure Wolff wasn't paying Jean Whitney so much she could afford all this luxury on her salary alone. Wolff got a kick-back on his patronage jobs.

"Apparently Jean also came in for her share of gifts. Lots of men in this town went out of their way to be nice to her. She probably dropped hints—invited a little ladylike bribery. I know that girl's kind. With all due respect to the dead, she was a mercenary, scheming little so-and-so."

McCord began pacing back and forth, holding the water bottle. "She reasoned that Wolff had been poisoned. She knew who poisoned him, and how and probably why. Nobody else even suspected it at the time. She had something there. The first chance she got, she grabbed this water bottle. Added to what she would tell, it was worth plenty to the man who killed Wolff."

"So she contacted this guy tonight," Bradford went on. "She told him, 'Mr. Murderer, I have a very rare water jug which I am willing to sell to you for a very fancy price.' But she overplayed her hand. The murderer was less interested in getting that half-pint of water back than he was in shutting her up permanently. That's it, Jimmy!"

"All except—"

"Yeah. All except," Bradford said quietly. "Who do you think?"

"It depends on how much Evelyn Wolff liked Buck," McCord said tersely.

"She certainly isn't very fond of him at the moment, but that's because the boys at headquarters made him talk. If he hadn't been picked up for murdering her husband, she'd probably be nuts about him still, and she'd be free to snag him for herself. She's getting all of Wolff's money—she's sitting pretty. Jimmy, we're doing all right!"

"Everything depends on Tucker's analysis," McCord said. "He'll be able to tell us what kind of poison it is. That stuff had to come from somewhere. It can be traced. That'll uncover the murderer, but it'll take time—more time than I've got. I'm not waiting any longer."

He charged toward the door. Bradford impeded him a moment, put both hands on the bottle and took it away gently. His eyes thoughtful, he looked down at the dead woman and murmured, "We'll attend to you a little later, madam." He hurried after McCord. Suddenly his eyes lighted.

"I just got a bright idea," he said quietly as he closed the door upon the corpse.

CHAPTER FIVE

All Cut Up

THE morgue was dark. The cadavers were sleeping in their ice-boxes and the offices were empty and hushed. The chemical lab, however, was still brilliantly lighted. Bradford and McCord stood alertly at Tucker's side and watched him.

Holding the jug carefully in his lean hands, Tucker poured some of the water into a test tube. He portioned it into seven tubes, emptying the bottle. The faint trickling sound mingled with McCord's and Bradford's quick breathing. Tucker carefully placed the jug aside and lighted the Bunsen burner.

"Have you got enough of it?" McCord asked quickly.

"Oh, yes," Tucker answered. "This may take an hour, maybe longer. Depends on what shows up."

McCord looked anxiously at his watch and Bradford looked anxiously at McCord.

"How soon does your plane leave, Jimmy?"

"A little over an hour."

"I hope Tucker's finished in time for you to make it. You stay here with him. I'll be back."

Bradford left McCord standing tensely at Tucker's elbow while Tucker held the first of the seven tubes in the flame.

He swung out of the morgue and walked six blocks to a building that was bursting with light and filled with a mechanical bustle. The *Bulletin's* linotype machines were clattering. Typewriters were clicking in the city room. Bradford lazily signaled a greeting to several reporters, and gave the studious Haines a broad grin. The city editor looked up from his littered desk in the corner and scowled at him.

Bradford scanned several galley proofs hanging from Fisk's spike. The topmost was headed *Bulletin Uncovers Election Fraud*.

"Well, well," Bradford remarked with cheerful disgust. "Now that Wolff's dead, you're not afraid to print the stuff I got fired for writing."

"That's only half of why you got sacked," Fisk retorted. "The other half is that you socked me on the jaw when I told you we couldn't print it. You were so tight you probably don't remember."

Bradford looked amazed and delighted. "My sainted uncle! And I'd been wanting to do it for years! That'll certainly be a lesson to me. Seriously, I thought you'd like to know you're putting me back on the payroll tonight."

Fisk uttered a mocking laugh.

Bradford shrugged. "If you'd rather, I'll file my story with the AP. Since you haven't any AP franchise, you won't be able to use it even after it comes through from New York. You won't like that."

Fisk's scowl darkened. "What story?" he countered.

"A little item naming the real murderer of Lew Wolff."

"The entire United States already knows who murdered Lew Wolff," Fisk snapped. "I'm busy. Go away."

Bradford wagged his head. "Fact is, only two persons in the whole wide world knows who really murdered Wolff—the murderer and me."

"Get out of here."

"The murderer's name is not Buck McCord," Bradford went on.

"Nuts," Fisk said.

"Okay," Bradford said.

He sauntered back to the swinging doors. Just as he was pushing out, Fisk bawled, "Hey, Brad! Come back here!" He shrugged disdainfully, but ambled again to Fisk's desk and sat on a corner of it. Fisk looked nettled.

"Is this on the level?" he demanded.

"Well," Bradford answered, "I may turn up late for work pretty often, or I may not show up at all some days, and I might miss the deadline now and then, and occasionally I have a little difficulty seeing the keys of my typewriter—but did you ever know me to give you a bum steer?"

"No."

"If things break the way I expect, I'll have the case cracked before you have to put the paper to bed. I'll write you the best story you ever printed—provided I'm working for you at the time."

Fisk looked at him hard.

"Am I back on the payroll?"

"I'll tell you after I've seen your story."

"In that case you don't see any story."

"In that case you're back on the payroll now."

"With a raise of ten a week."

"No!"

"Five!"

"No!"

Bradford got up. "I don't catch murderers for peanuts," he said.

He ambled back to the swinging doors. Just as he reached them, Fisk's voice bawled again.

"Five!"

"Okay," Bradford said.

HE WENT out with a grin. On the way to the morgue he stepped into a bar. After bending his elbow in self-congratulation, he continued happily on his way. When he reached the lab in the

morgue, he found Tucker and McCord both intent upon analysis.

McCord's face was white and he was biting the parched skin off his lips; he seemed on the point of nervous explosion. A test tube was twinkling in Tucker's slender fingers as held it near one of the bright bulbs. Bradford counted the empty tubes in the rack—four. The one Tucker was inspecting was the fifth sample.

McCord looked around and said huskily, "Nothing so far, Brad."

Tucker poured the contents of the fifth tube into the sink. Bradford hoisted himself to the next table to watch. McCord mopped his clammy face as Tucker took up the sixth tube.

The toxicologist used a pipette to drop a bit of a greenish solution into the specimen. No notable change occurred. Tucker emptied the tube.

"Looks like you boys are wasting my time," he said.

"That last one may tell the story, mightn't it?" Bradford inquired.

"Yes, but it looks doubtful."

Tucker was taking up the last tube when the telephone rang. He turned to the instrument, said "Toxicological laboratory," listened, then turned to Bradford. "For you."

Bradford said, "Bradford talking." Then he was silent a moment, with McCord's eyes fixed on him. "Thanks," Bradford said. He left the telephone and returned to the table, pulled a book off the shelf, hooked his eyeglasses onto his nose and flipped the pages. Tucker dropped a small quantity of clear acid into the clear water in the seventh test tube, and the mixture remained clear.

"That's that," he said.

"You mean the stuff in that jug was just plain water?" McCord asked tightly.

"Ordinary tap water, apparently," Tucker answered.

Bradford lifted the book.

"I have here a volume about legal

medicine and toxicology. Here's a paragraph headed, *Symptoms of Poisoning by Belladonna*—a precise description of what happened to Lew Wolff," Bradford said quietly. "I was reading that paragraph this morning, Tucker, when I asked you if there is any poison that might account for Wolff's behavior last night. You said that if there was—you'd never heard of it. But there's the straight dope, in a book you know by heart.

"YOU see, it's this way," Bradford went on quietly. "After I found the water jug in Jean Whitney's place, I didn't bring it straight to this lab. Instead, I took it to the lab around the corner in the City Hospital. I poured all the water out and left it there to be analyzed. That was the phone call I just got. They told me the water contains a lethal amount of belladonna."

Tucker looked up, his eyes fierce.

"While I was in the hospital lab," Bradford continued, "I put some ordinary water back into the jug. To this water I added a strong shot of belladonna. That's the solution you've just pretended to analyze. You thought it was the original stuff that killed Wolff, so, naturally, you took care not to find any traces of the poison you'd put into the jug when you were in Wolff's office last night."

Tucker stood motionless, glaring.

"I never thought of it before this morning," Bradford observed, "but it certainly is true that the city toxicologist is in the best possible spot to get away with a poison murder. It's very simple. All he has to do is deliberately fail to detect the poison he gave the guy. Mind telling us why you did it?"

Tucker's hollow voice came from a dry throat. "Lew Wolff forced me to falsify my reports. He would have kicked me out of my lab if I hadn't followed his dirty orders. I covered up people he wanted

(Please continue on page 130)

By PAUL



THE first scream fooled Jallop. He heard it over the motor rumble of his speedboat, *Love Dove*, and thought it was just a heron's cry. Those big, spindle-legged birds were a pest anyway, he thought; always squawking at a fellow and mincing along the edge of the lagoon like prissy old maids.

The six-lunged engine of his thirty-two-footer was idling nicely, shoving the nifty scow along at an even six knots. Its bow barely rippled the glass-still water and there was a silvery mist in its wake. Jallop leaned back against a Kapok cushion, contentedly sucking his pipe.

It wasn't until the scream came a second time that he cut the motor and recognized it for what it was. A dame calling for help! Some woman he didn't know from Adam making a racket that would have brought goose pimples to another man's neck.

But Jallop just sat there and listened with a frown on his slablike face. He ran annoyed fingers through his graying hair, felt of his chin with the fretfulness of a person weighing the pros and cons of an unpleasant deal. Should he go see what the heck the matter was, or shouldn't he? Was it any skin off his nose if a strange dame was in trouble? No, he decided, it wasn't.

Whoever she was and whatever mess

*Jallop was a man with murder on his conscience—
and he never should have trusted the . . .*

MERMAID

CHADWICK

she had got herself into, he didn't *have* to help her. Let some other sap do that. He hadn't come to the shore to play Santa Claus. He'd come to live quietly under cover. The idea of rescuing somebody was distasteful to him. He didn't want to get involved right now in any way.

"Let her yell," he thought. "Let her drown if she wants to. I should worry!"

But the scream came several times more, louder and shriller with each repetition. It made Jallop uneasy. Not that it stirred his sympathy. Other folks, problems didn't affect him much. He'd schooled himself long ago to the notion that the only way to get along was to look out for Number One. Pity, charity, compassion—all that sort of stuff was the bunk, he thought. But there was a selfish consideration in the situation that *did* bother him.

There might be other people around the lagoon who would hear her and who might see his speedboat near by. It wouldn't look right if he just stayed on the sidelines doing nothing. It might start ugly rumors.

Reluctantly he pressed the starter, gunned the engine into life again and lifted his foot off the clutch. The boat shot away and Jallop tooted the wheel expertly, heeling the craft over, making a long, white-foamed turn as he headed west across the lagoon like an arrow.

Even with a human life in the balance his thoughts centered on his speedboat. He gloried in the sense of power that this four-thousand-dollar plaything gave him.



"I'm going to take you right along back with me, Mr. Jallop."

IN DISTRESS

It was painted red and white for his college colors—Old Colvin College.

The speedboat was the only real luxury he had indulged in since murder and robbery had changed his life from uneasy poverty to stable wealth. He felt that a man living alone in an island cottage was justified in owning a good boat. And it soothed a secret fear that was always haunting him—the fear of being cornered some day by someone and of needing to make a quick getaway.

He saw movement ahead in the water presently. A tangle of dark, wet hair, the flash of a white arm and a widening circle of frantic ripples.

He swore under his breath. What sort of double-dyed fool, he wondered, would swim out this far alone? There was no other boat near by, no other swimmer in sight. There was only himself and this one person almost a mile from shore—this brainless, screeching, human Calliope of a woman.

He changed his opinion the next instant, and his interest quickened as he idled the motor again and coasted up alongside of her. For she was young and pretty and girlish. Her face had a flowerlike quality as she turned it toward him. Even with the pallor of fright on her cheeks, there was disquieting loveliness there. Gasping with fatigue, trying desperately to keep afloat till he got to her, she turned over on her back. She made feeble kicking motions with her long white legs.

He drew in close beside her, throwing the gear into reverse, backing water at the last moment to hold the boat steady and still.

For a second he stared down at her, conscious only of her beauty, her sweetness, her helplessness, as though she were a living statue created for his especial benefit. Her dark eyes looked up at him and her soft lips were open a little. Time seemed to hang suspended.

Then he remembered what he was there

for and reached down and caught her wrists. She was too weak to help herself much. She just let him lift her up and over the smooth, polished gunwale of the boat. Then she sank down on the cushioned side seat, arms and legs asprawl, hair falling across her bare shoulders, her face turned toward him silently as gasps shook her.

Jallop leaned back smiling. He exchanged his pipe for a cigarette and drew deeply, letting the smoke trickle through his wide nostrils. He stared at the girl with a momentary feeling of accomplishment much as an angler has when he lands an especially fine fish.

She looked almost like a fish, too. Her trunks and halter were gray, skin tight and silvery in their wetness. The rest of her was glowingly white. The long, slim lines of her body seemed made for darting through water with the least possible effort.

A wonderful catch, thought Jallop. A beautiful, beautiful babe! But what'll I do with her?

WOMEN had no place in his life right now. He'd always found them disturbing and dangerous, and at present, with his new position in the world to clarify and crystalize, he was sure they'd be doubly so. Afterwards, of course, when even the faintest hint of danger had vanished, when he felt absolutely sure of himself and had grown used to the idea of being comfortably well off and respectable, a girl like this one would fit in very nicely with his plans. But now. . . .

"I don't know—how I can—thank you," she said. Her voice was quavering with chill and fright, but it had a husky richness and sweetness that somehow went with her good looks.

"Don't try," said Jallop good-humoredly. "Just tell me why you wanted to drown yourself."

"I didn't. I'm a strong swimmer usual-

ly and I can keep going for hours. But I got tired for some reason. The cold water, I guess. If you hadn't heard me and come—"

"Somebody else would have," said Jallop.

She sat up a little, swung her legs to the floor of the boat and shook her head.

"Maybe not. The wind's off-shore—away from the town. I doubt if anyone else heard me."

Jallop shrugged. He offered her a cigarette, but she refused. Then her teeth began to chatter and he saw gooseflesh rise on her lovely arms. It annoyed him. It didn't seem right that anything should mar her perfection.

"I could use a drink if you happen to have one," she said.

He shook his head.

"A blanket then."

"I haven't that either. This boat's a new one—not very well equipped, I'm sorry to say."

He looked over his shoulder. His island cottage was on the nearest bit of land. The girl was really cold and needed a drink and some warm clothing. A sudden recklessness took possession of him. *What can I lose*, he thought?

"If you don't mind," he said, "that's my place over there. We can zip to it. I'll get you a drink and something dry to wear."

"Why should I mind? You saved my life. I guess I can trust you."

She smiled at him between chattering teeth and Jallop grinned back wolfishly. Nobody could trust him—least of all a pretty, defenseless girl whose very fragility was a challenge to his predatory instincts. If she were safe in his hands it wasn't because she could trust him. No. It was only because of a complex structure of external events. The murder he had committed. His desire to remain incognito. His sensitivity over his newly acquired wealth and the urge that went

with it to be conservative in all things.

For the first time in his life he felt that those four years he had idled away in college, making himself popular and having fun while his mother scrimped and sacrificed, were really a good thing. He wanted to live up to them. They had at last helped him on the road to wealth by making it possible for him to meet and influence and finally blackmail an old college pal.

Good old Bob Sharp! Charming and weak. A fraternity leader. Afterwards a customer's man in a brokerage office with too expensive tastes and habits that Jallop had been able to play upon. When Sharp had finally grown tired of being bled and blackmailed, Jallop had cleverly made his murder look like suicide. Sharp's large thefts from his firm had been discovered and the police had been convinced. Jallop was in the clear, the money in his pocket, his association with Bob Sharp not even suspected, his whereabouts under an assumed name of no concern to anyone.

He leaned forward toward the shivering girl and raised his voice above the thunder of the motor.

"Might as well introduce ourselves. My name's Steve Brown. What's yours?"

"Vicky Carse," she said. There was a blueish look around her mouth from the chill water and her voice was so weak he could barely hear it. He didn't try to talk to her again till the boat slid smoothly in alongside the landing in front of his cottage.

Then he helped her out and up the ramp into the big, main room with its fireplace and bookshelves. It wasn't ostentatious or luxurious; just a comfortable cottage that the local real estate agency had had for rent and which he had taken by the season. There was nothing in it that could give him away, no clue of any kind to his real name or to his past.

He got a driftwood fire going. The girl

stood in front of it, holding out her hands to the blaze, a mermaid so lovely and youthful and appealing that Jallop could hardly take his eyes off her. The orange glow of the flames high-lighted her body. She was, thought Jallop, the most beautiful thing he had ever looked at. He got her clothes to wear with some reluctance, a checkered shirt and a pair of riding britches. He would have preferred to have her remain as she was. But she retired to the bathroom to change.

Jallop smiled wryly at the discovery that his heart was beating abnormally fast. The girl's presence made him feel younger, more adventurous. It brought home to him, too, how lonely he had been all these weeks.

"I could fall for her like a chump," he thought. "I've got to watch out or I'll be doing something nutty, something I'll be sorry for. Better find out more about her!"

He had two brandies poured when she returned. The britches and shirt hid the curves that he had so admired and she was no longer mermaid like. Returning warmth had brought color to her cheeks. She seemed excited, too, and a little tense. He wondered why. Could it be that she was falling for him, attracted by him because he had played Sir Galahad? He began to wonder if he shouldn't revise his plans for the immediate future to include a woman after all. This one had dropped right into his lap.

Then Vicky Carse reached forward for her brandy glass and a cold tremor shot through him. She had a ring on her finger that he had hardly noticed when he had pulled her out of the water. It had been turned inwards with only the gold band showing on the outside. Now it was turned out, facing him. It was a ring bearing a fraternity emblem on it that was common around Colvin College—the same sort of ring that old Bob Sharp had worn!

HIS gaze grew frozen in that first startled instant and the girl noticed where he was looking.

"You've seen rings like it before, haven't you?" she asked softly.

Jallop switched the direction of his eyes, but the damage had been done. He'd given himself away. No use trying to deny it!

"Sure," he said. "It's a big fraternity. You see 'em lots of places."

"At Colvin College, for instance."

She gave a silvery laugh at the look that crossed his face. He wondered, thunder-struck, how she could be so cool-headed, so utterly poised and even bantering in the face of the crime she was investigating. For he had her spotted now. A woman detective, of course—clever as they came.

Her call for aid had been a trick, he realized. In rescuing her and bringing her back here he had been like a fish snapping at bait. She was the fly. He was the trout. He was on the hook right now but he didn't intend to stay there. Her knowledge of his past would be her death warrant if she didn't look out.

"Don't deny, Mr. Jallop," she said, "that you went to Colvin." She spoke gaily. "Class of '29."

"How—how did you know?" he faltered. "And how did you learn my name?"

"Because I made it my business," she said. She tipped her face sidewise at him, a mischievous look in her blue eyes as though an inquiry into murder were a mere trifle. "Haven't you got your speedboat painted red and white—Colvin's colors? And didn't I bring a class photo with me to make identification sure?"

Jallop could feel a coldness filling him, a sense of a trap closing in. He cursed himself bitterly for buying the speedboat. It was a luxury he should have denied himself. And as for painting it with Colvin colors—that had been mere foolish sentiment or vanity or both. The police

hadn't been lulled after all. They were watching him, waiting to trip him.

"So what?" he asked thickly.

"So I'm going to take you right along back with me, Mr. Jallop. You can't get out of it. I'm here to see that you don't."

The confidence, the sheer audacity in her voice, sent a wave of fear and hate through him. A slip of a girl, with mockery in her eyes, telling him that he was to be brought back, questioned, put on the mat for a crime he had thought he had covered perfectly.

Emotion choked him, convulsed him. She wasn't even armed. She had worn only a bathing suit when she arrived. All that covered her fragile body now were the clothes he had lent her.

He stood baffled, indecisive, raging till a sound from the lagoon outside came through an open window. It was the sharp, staccato *put-put* of an outboard motor.

At the noise he nodded grimly and comprehendingly. That was it, of course—the reason for her bravado! She was only the advance spy, the Trojan horse. Other detectives were close at her heels, coming to give her aid and support. No wonder she could talk so lightly!

He made a sound in his throat that was like a snarl. Reaching forward, he grabbed her slender wrists in a furious grip. His face was distorted and she shrank away from him in sudden fear. She tried to wrench herself from his grasp next, and he was surprised at her strength. It was her swimming, he guessed. Those rippling muscles in her arms and legs had been developed by her water hobby. Or maybe they taught you Judo and stuff in those schools for police women.

He subdued her despite her fierce resistance, half dragged her, half carried her across the room to the door. There he paused only long enough to flip open the drawer of a small desk and take out a

metal strongbox and an automatic. She screamed when she saw the gun, louder and more real sounding than the screams she had given in the water. He had to menace her with it, shoving it against her to keep her silent.

Going down the ramp toward the water, as he rushed her headlong toward the speedboat, she raised her voice again.

"Help! Please help me!"

There was quavering terror in the words that carried across the lagoon toward the approaching boat.

Jallop could see two men in it. He struck Vicky Carse a blow across the mouth that frightened her into whimpering silence again for the moment. He lifted her bodily at the last, threw her into the speedboat's bottom where she lay shaking against the cushions.

There was a hard grin on Jallop's face now. The approaching detectives wouldn't dare shoot because of her presence. And their boat with its puffing outboard motor was no match surely for the thundering power his own craft possessed.

He got behind the wheel, pressed the starter. In a moment the engine was throbbing, the whole red and white craft vibrating with life. It shot away when he threw the automobile-like clutch. White water foamed from its bows. He saw distance leap between himself and the rowboat while the two men in it gesticulated and shouted.

Jallop stared back grimly. They had fishing poles in their hands, but that was only another trick, of course. They had been hanging around somewhere in one of the many hidden coves, waiting for the girl to put the finger on him.

They faded astern as he swung the speedboat up the lagoon toward the break in the shoreline that marked the pathway to the sea.

This was the getaway he had always held in reserve, his hidden ace in case of trouble, and his real reason for buying

the boat. There was plenty of gas in the tank always, more in the side lockers. He'd keep the girl with him as long as her presence might be of any use to him as a hostage, and then—

SHE lay wilted against the cushions, making no attempt to speak to him again. From time to time, though, he saw her glance his way with terror-bright eyes. It gave him a savage pleasure to see the almost hysterical quality of the fear she felt for him. He'd keep her in suspense as long as he dared, as long as it served his purpose.

The seaway opened at last, and for the next half hour it took all his attention to negotiate the narrow channel. He sent the boat reeling around bends, made white-crested waves lap in against the reed stems, scaring up squawking water birds by the drove.

The passage widened finally. There was a coolness in the air, a keener smell of open water. The blue sea suddenly revealed itself.

Jallop steered through the middle of the inlet, the boat taking breakers that rolled in, lifting it like a surfboard. It leaped high, came down with sickening smacks. He gloried again in its speed and power.

With the open sea all around him, Jallop cut south a thousand feet beyond the breakers. The surface was quiet here, except for long, rolling swells. Plans began to form in his head. He would land somewhere along toward nightfall, do away with this sneaking police spy, change his identity again—and this time he'd even use a clever disguise. He knew where he stood now at least. The police suspected him and perhaps even had proof. But a murderer with money to burn could get away.

He turned his gray eyes coldly on the girl again. It would be a pleasure to snuff out her life, he thought. Holding the

wheel with one hand, he fingered the black automatic in his pocket. Now was as good a time as any perhaps. There were sharks in the sea around him and her body would never be found. She liked the water so much—well, let her stay in it forever!

He didn't see the shadow of the Coast Guard patrol plane till it was almost overhead. The roar of its motor was drowned by the roar of his own boat's engine.

Then Jallop stiffened and sweat broke out on his face. For a moment he was speechless, stunned. Like a madman, then, he came to life, jerking the automatic from his pocket, firing desperately at the wide-winged plane that was obviously about to land.

It lifted its pontoons like a great bird lifting its feet, circled twice, landed smoothly on the water far in front of him and came taxiing around to face him.

Jallop shot again and again till his gun was empty. He had the desperate feeling then that his bullets had been useless, that the plane was an air-borne monster no man could hope to subdue.

He swung his wheel to the left—tried to scoot off at right angles. But there was a flicker of flame at the plane's big nose, a whine of bullets in the air overhead that brought him to his senses. He throttled his own motor down and drifted irresolutely till a voice through a megaphone boomed at him from the seaplane's cockpit.

"Heave to there—you in the speed-boat."

The plane came taxiing slowly up and Jallop's courage left him. He collapsed inwardly, knowing he was beaten, outwitted, beyond escape. He stared and the girl stared, too, dark hair blowing across her cheek. Looking at her, he wished almost that he had saved the last bullet in the gun to kill her. The electric chair could only get you once anyway.

The plane came alongside and two uniformed Coast Guardsmen, their pistols

drawn, swung down a short ladder and came aboard the speedboat. Jallop glared at them and could say nothing. His blood seemed turned to ice.

The girl rose stumblingly and moved closer to them for protection, a vast relief on her face. One of the guardsmen, a hashmark on his sleeve, stared from her to Jallop.

"What's it about, lady? We got a radio from some fishermen that this bum was trying to kidnap you—that you were calling for help."

"I was," said Vicky Carse. "I'm sure he'd have killed me if you hadn't come in time."

"What's he got against you, lady?"

"Nothing that I know of. But—well—" Her voice faltered, while Jallop listened, his nerves tingling, then seeming to congeal. "He's a homicidal maniac, I guess. He must be. You'll have to be very careful with him and get him into the hands of a psychiatrist as soon as you can."

"You know him, do you, miss?" The guardsman asked.

"Only by name. I'm just a secretary at Colvin College, acting for the Class of '29. They're holding their reunion next

week. They wanted Mr. Jallop to be there for certain because he was once class president and they're putting on a big jamboree to raise funds. I was commissioned to find him and bring him back. It took a lot of work, too. I learned that he was living under an assumed name for some reason.

"I used a harmless trick to make contact with him. Then Mr. Jallop went crazy, threatened me with a gun and kidnapped me."

"U-u-um!" said the Coast Guardman judiciously. "He could be nutty an' it could be something else. You never know."

You never *did* know, thought Jallop bitterly.

He'd really barked up the wrong tree. He'd made a fool of himself. And now it was too late to untangle himself from his folly.

A state psychiatrist would probably start the investigation of him, as Vicky Carse suggested. But he had a hunch, a chill foreboding, in fact, that it would be ended by a person or persons quite different—cops and gimlet-eyed gumshoes from the D.A.'s office. . . .

Detective Tales

25c

February

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POLLY WANTS A

He gestured with the gun. "Don't give me no trouble, punchy."



*Just back from a two-year workout in the snake pit,
heavyweight Barney found his snazzy wife missing . . .
a brassy blonde in his room—
and the sizzle-seat beckoning.*

KILLER

By **DAY**
KEENE



CHAPTER ONE

Blonde Bomb

THE day, for early Fall, was cold. At four o'clock it began to drizzle. Night came quickly after that. Outside the misted windows of the bar, the street lights and the neon signs winked

**COMPLETE
BOOK-LENGTH
NOVEL**

on. Now and then a freshly enameled damsel planted herself on one of the bar stools and bought her own first drink. I considered a trim brunette.

If I bought her a drink, she'd let me take her to dinner. She'd let me buy her a lot of drinks. She'd laugh with me and act the fool. As long as my money held out, she wouldn't bother looking at my heels. She wouldn't give a damn if I was fresh out of a snake pit.

The brunette liked what she saw and smiled. I tried to smile back, and couldn't. I didn't want to see *any* woman. I wanted Gale. I ordered another rye and considered running a personal in the papers, reading:

*Hey, honey. Hey, Gale. I need you.
Please come home.*

But where was home? Where was Gale for that matter? Where did society go when it was too cold for Pinehurst and too early for Palm Beach?

The brunette lost interest and looked away. I ordered another rye and Charlie shook his head. "Not in here, Barney. You got plenty. Why don't you take a walk, fellow?"

I started to argue and changed my mind. It could be he was right. "Okay," I agreed. "Why not?" I paid my tab from the few bucks I had left and lifted my three-hundred-dollar, three-year-old top-coat from a hook.

"Who's the good-looking wolf with the broken nose?" the brunette asked the barman.

Charlie was shocked. "Where you been all your life, sister? That's Barney Mandell. You know. The guy who should have won the heavyweight title. Only he couldn't fight on account of he's been in the fish bowl. They just let him out this morning."

"Oh," the brunette ohed. "I make him now."

Randolph Street hadn't changed. A group of chattering high-school girls, bound for the Palace, charged by. A cop tooted his whistle at a cab. There were tall men, short men, good girls, bad girls, rich men, poor men, gamblers, brokers, preachers. It felt good to be back.

The room clerk gave me a phone call with my key. I hoped it was Gale. It wasn't. A Mr. Curtis had called and would call again. I was still trying to place the name as I unlocked my door.

The big man on my bed smiled thinly. "Come in. By all means, come in, Barney."

"Why not?" I asked. "It's my room." I closed the door and leaned against it, looking at the gun in his hand. "What's the big idea?"

He was as original as I had been. "That's for me to know and you to find out, wise guy." He stood up and gestured with the gun. "Come on. Let's empty our pockets on the bed."

I played it coy. "Nah. I don't wanna. But if you want to empty *your* pockets, it's all right with me."

He repeated, "Wise guy," and took an uncertain step forward. "Come on now. Don't give me no trouble, punchy."

He took another step and I swung. The rye and two years of wondering if I was walking on my heels played hell with my timing. He was big, but fast and sober. I missed him by a mile. Then, before I could block the blow, he laid the barrel of his gun on my head. . . .

WHEN I came to, the lad with the gun was gone. So was my wallet. I got to my feet and looked at my reflection in the dresser mirror. My eyes were red-rimmed and blood-shot. The duck egg over my left ear didn't add to my manly appearance.

"*I've got to stop this horsing around,*" I thought, "*or they'll put me back in the fish bowl and throw away the key. So*

Gale had walked out on me. So what?

I knew the answer to that one. So plenty. If Gale had walked out on me, then nothing mattered.

I fumbled the top drawer of the dresser open and drained what the maid had left of a partly filled pint of whiskey, while I debated calling the desk and reporting the stick-up—and decided to hell with it. Police would mean more reporters and more questions I couldn't answer.

"How does it feel to be out of the fish bowl, Barney?" "When is Mrs. Mandell going to join you? Are you going to try to get back in condition, or is Mrs. Mandell's father going to set you up in a business of some kind?"

I fluffed a pillow against the head of the bed and stretched out. If my set-to with the hood was any criterion, I was out of the fight game. But how.

I lay listening to the quickening night noises, wishing I'd been bright enough to lay in a good stock of whiskey before the few bucks I had were stolen. I wished I had fifteen or twenty of the grands I'd thrown away when I'd been up there, with the white lights beating down on me and the shouting of the fight mob's music in my ears.

"Kill him, Barney. . . . Knock him for a loop. . . . That's it. . . . Oh, you Barney."

I closed my eyes and wanted to see Gale so badly I could smell her perfume. But that was over, too. She had only been acting. She'd always had everything she'd wanted. She'd wanted to marry me—and I'd been had.

That I'd been born back of the Yards hadn't mattered. Not while the sport pages had been whooping it up for me. Not while I'd had an unbroken string of sixty-two knock-outs, in as many fights. I'd been a hero in boxing trunks and a pair of six-ounce gloves. Sir Resin of the squared ring. A punk from the wrong side of the tracks made husband-presentable by limelight.

"You've been sick, Barney," the mind doctors had told me. "You've been a very sick man. Well men don't see or hear the things you've seen and heard. You've lived too fast, too intensely. You've burned too many candles. You've taken too many punches. Now we're dismissing you as cured. But no more fights. No more excitement. No more late hours. The next time you come back, you'll stay here."

The room phone tinkled, as softly as phones in eight-buck-a-day hotel rooms are supposed to tinkle. "And to hell with you, too," I told it.

Then I saw the blood on the floor and felt my stomach turn over. The hood who had clipped and robbed me had hit me plenty hard. The wound had bled a little. But it had bled on the carpet in front of the hall door and the blood I was looking at had oozed out from behind the bathroom door.

The scent of familiar perfume grew stronger. There was someone in my bathroom. Someone who used the same perfume Gale did. And that someone was badly hurt. I'd lost enough blood to know.

I got up and opened the door of the bathroom. Maybe Gale was wise in not meeting me as she'd promised. The sickey-ackey doctors were wrong in assuming I was cured. The hallucinations were beginning again.

Either that—or there was a girl on the tile floor. I could tell she had been a blonde, but not if she had been pretty. There wasn't enough left of her face. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

The Beckoning Bars

INSPECTOR Carlton's voice rasped like the wheels of an L train rounding a too-tight curve. "So the dame put up a fight and you beat in her face

with a towel rod. That right, Barney?"

"No," I said, "it isn't. I never saw her before."

"She just flew in the window, huh?"

"I don't know where she came from."

Mercer of the *Standard* studied the dead girl's curves. "You still can pick 'em, Barney. I'll give you credit for that. But you're also in bad jam. Why not give the *Standard* an exclusive on the story? What's her name?"

I told him the truth. "I don't know. I never saw her before."

"Oh. A bar pick-up, eh?"

Carlton told Mercer to shut up. "You're a married man, aren't you, Barney?"

I said I was, suddenly sore at Gale. If Gale had kept her word to meet me at the hotel, none of this would have happened. I didn't know the girl. I'd never seen her before. I hadn't picked her out of a bar. But my story sounded phony as hell. I didn't blame Carlton for not believing it.

Carlton looked at my bloodshot eyes. "Been on a bit of a bat, eh, Barney?"

I admitted, "I've been drinking."

"Since they relaxed you from the asylum."

"Let's say since ten o'clock this morning."

"Why?"

I told him that was none of his business.

A ferret-faced, gray-haired man, Carlton pushed his hat on the back of his head and scratched his scalp. "You punks that make a little dough." He walked to the door of the bathroom. "How long has she been dead, Tom?"

The M. E. told him, "Not long. Maybe twenty minutes. Maybe half an hour."

"Did she do any screaming?"

The M. E. shook his head. "That I can't tell you. But I'd say it was unlikely."

Carlton singled the desk clerk from the crowd. "You say Mandell came in alone?"

"Yes, sir," the clerk said. He gave me

a dirty look. "But that doesn't mean a thing. We're all the time having trouble with wisenheimers sneaking girls into their rooms."

I said, "I never snuck anyone in. But someone got in just the same. Like I told you before, when I came upstairs there was a guy sitting on my bed with an automatic in his hand."

"Ah, yes," Carlton said. "So you told us. Your door was locked. But when you opened it there was a man inside."

"That's right."

"A man who told you to empty your pockets on the bed."

"That's the way it happened."

"And you had how much in your wallet?"

I shrugged. "Not much. Maybe six hundred bucks."

"Oh," Carlton said. "I see. And just when are you fighting again, Barney?"

I said I didn't know as I would ever fight again. "Why?"

Carlton shrugged. "I just wondered. There aren't many working stiffs who can get clipped for six hundred dollars and not even bother to report it. I know that I'd raise hell."

I said six hundred bucks wasn't much.

Mercer grinned nastily. "Not when you're married to the Ebbling money, eh, Barney?"

I looked around the circle of faces. None of them were unfriendly. They just didn't believe me. They thought I'd picked up the dame in some bar, we'd had a drunken misunderstanding, and, after letting my temper get the best of me, I'd invented a mythical hoodlum on which to pin the blame.

I walked into the bathroom and looked at the dead girl. I had a right to. From where I stood, it looked like I was picking up the check. If her face had been anything like her figure, she had been very pretty.

Carlton leaned against the jamb and

lighted a cigarette. "About Mrs. Mandell, Barney?"

"What about her?"

"You say she promised to meet you here this morning?"

"That's right."

"But she didn't."

"No."

He said, "Oh," and sucked hard at his cigarette.

I didn't like the way he said it. I knew what he was implying. He thought I'd been sore because Gale hadn't met me, and to get even with her I'd picked up the doll in some bar.

I fought down a wave of panic. Maybe I had picked her up. Maybe I had sent her on up to my room. Maybe there'd never been any guy with a gun. Maybe he had been a hallucination. Maybe I had quarreled with the doll because she wasn't Gale.

Maybe in my drunken craziness I had beaten in her face with the towel rod with which Carlton claimed she had been killed. After all, I was fresh out of a fish bowl. Maybe I was walking on my heels. Maybe I didn't know what I was doing.

MY PANIC subsided slowly. I hadn't been that drunk. I could trace every step I'd taken. I'd planted myself on a stool in the Royal Bar at ten o'clock that morning with the intention of getting drunk. I had. But Charlie, the barman, could swear I hadn't as much as talked to a girl.

"And nuts to you," I told Carlton. "I didn't kill her."

A detective had been going through the dead girl's purse. He said, "Her name would seem to be Cherry Marvin. And she lived at the Tansfield Arms Hotel."

Mercer whistled. "Class stuff, eh? Nothing but the best for Barney."

Carlton examined the dress and coat one of his boys had found hanging in my

clothes closet. Then he checked them against the froth of lingeree that had been piled neatly on a chair. All of it was expensive and reeked of the same perfume Gale used.

I pointed out, "She used the same perfume that Mrs. Mandell uses." The remark sounded idiotic. I was sorry as soon as I'd made it.

Carlton lifted an eyebrow. "That's what attracted you to her, eh, Barney?"

I gave with the story I was stuck with. "I didn't kill her. I never saw her before I opened the bathroom door."

"Yeah. Sure," Mercer needled. "And, boy, were you surprised."

The tinkle of the room phone cut through the smoke. A plainclothes man answered it. "Long distance. Eagle River calling for Barney. That's where the Ebling summer lodge is, ain't it?"

Standing close so he could hear the conversation, Carlton nudged me with his elbow. "Take it."

"Barney, my boy." Old man Ebling sounded as pleased as if his stocks had gone up forty points. "I've been trying to get you for hours and I can't tell you how nice it is to hear your voice."

I said it was good to hear his.

The old man continued, "As you know by now, the good news you were being released found Gale in Sun Valley, but she got there as soon as she could. Let me talk to Gale, will you, Barney?"

I said I couldn't as I hadn't seen her as yet.

He sounded puzzled. "Oh. I say now. That's odd. Her train should have gotten in at the LaSalle Street Station at four o'clock this afternoon."

One of Carlton's eyebrows lifted again. I swallowed hard, not liking what I was thinking. Like most rich brats who've always had everything they want, Gale had a nasty temper. The thought was far-fetched but possible. In common with a lot of athletes, I've had a lot of trouble

with dames who thought a leading heavy-weight contender must have something special.

What if Gale had come to my room while I'd been drinking myself into a stupor and found the girl? Gale could well have clubbed her with a towel bar.

Ebbling said something I didn't catch. Then, more sharply, "What's the matter, Barney? Why don't you speak up? Is something wrong?"

"Yeah. Plenty," I told him, and hung up.

Inspector Carlton looked at his watch, then snuffed his cigarette. "Well, let's tie it up, Barney. You reached your room at approximately six-fifteen and found a hood sitting on your bed. A hood who robbed you of a wallet containing six hundred dollars. Is that right?"

I said it was.

"You put up a fight and he clipped you. When you came to, you didn't bother to report the stick-up until you looked into your bathroom and found a dead girl on the floor. Am I still right?"

I said he was, glad he had decided to be sensible and believe me.

"So you yelled 'copper', and here we are."

I nodded. If Gale was mixed up in the affair I could take care of that angle later. The thing now was to clear myself and locate her. The dead girl failed to make sense, no matter who had killed her. But there was no use of jumping to conclusions. "That's the story," I agreed with Carlton. "And it's true."

Carlton shook his head. "No. It's not even a good lie, Barney. And you'd better drag out that booby-hatch record of yours and begin to make even less sense than you do or you're headed straight for a first-degree murder conviction."

The buzz of conversation died away. Two wagon men paused in the act of

lifting the dead blonde onto a stretcher.

"What are you talking about?" I asked Carlton.

He said, "Your wallet for one thing. You should have thrown it out the window, at least have hidden it better, if you expected your story to stand up." He took my wallet from his pocket and riffled the bills in it with his thumb. "Six hundred even, Barney. I played along to get your story. But I found your wallet under your bed two minutes after I got here."

I looked at the leather in his hands. I couldn't deny it was mine. It had my name stamped on it in gold. "You found it under my bed?" I gasped.

Carlton nodded. "Right where you found your story of a mythical hood who *might* have killed the doll." He took a pair of handcuffs from his pocket. "Well, let's get going, Barney."

I backed away from him until two husky plainclothes men stopped me. Unless I was completely crazy, the story I'd told was true. Carlton had to believe me. He couldn't arrest me now.

Gale was in town. She'd kept her promise to meet me. And she wasn't mixed up in this thing. There was some logical explanation. Her train had probably been late. I had to wait in the room until she arrived.

"No," I protested. "You can't."

"Oh, but I can," he said quietly.

And he did.

CHAPTER THREE

Good-by, Mr. Curtis

THE cell was small, even smaller than the one I'd had at the asylum before they decided I was harmless and gave me the run of the place. It was late night or early morning. I couldn't tell which. The screw that had frisked me had taken my watch, along with my

belt and my shoelaces. He wasn't taking any chance I might try to hang myself or cut my throat with the crystal.

I might have—if it hadn't been for Gale. I had to see her and explain. The headline on the paper the screw had poked in between the bars was a lulu.

*BOXER MURDERS MODEL IN
DRUNKEN HOTEL SPREE*

A tasty mess of carp to set before one's wife. The story that followed wasn't any better. Mercer hadn't had time to check on either the doll or myself before his paper had gone to press. But he hadn't let that stop him. What he didn't know, he imagined. And his imagination should have been soaked in acid.

According to his version of what had happened in my room, I was a loud-mouthed, know-it-all, wise-guy from back of the yards who had allowed the sporting public's recognition of my ring ability, and a fortunate marriage to a wealthy girl, to go to my head and not my heart. I was a dirty ingrate with a swollen ego. I was a dirty dog who thought I was above the law.

If there was any justice left in the world, he hoped I wouldn't be allowed to base an insanity defense on my recent two-years incarceration in an asylum. I might have absorbed too many punches. I might be walking on my heels. But I knew right from wrong. I had been legally sane when I had lured Cherry Marvin up to my hotel room and beaten in her face. There was only one sure cure for maniacs like me. That was the electric chair.

I asked the screw what he thought of the story.

A middle-aged lug, he said, "To tell you the truth, Barney, I think Mercer laid it on a little thick. I know how it is with dames. I've had it happen to me. You spend a wad showing 'em a good time. Then they say a fast good-by."

I sat back on my bunk and held my head in my hands. The screw's reaction was typical. Given a blown-up picture of the dead blonde, any twelve-man jury, if they didn't decide I was crazy, would reason just as he had.

I wished I had less muscle and more brains. The more I thought about it, the less sense the whole thing made. I didn't know who had killed the doll, or why. But I'd been foolish to worry about Gale. She couldn't be involved in this mess, I realized.

Even if her train had been on time, she hadn't known what room I was in. She would have had to ask the clerk. And he would have mentioned it to Inspector Carlton.

The hood who had slugged me made even less sense. There'd been nothing in my wallet but money. Why bother to slug me for it, then toss it under the bed? And what was his relation to the blonde?

The screw ran his sap along the bars. "A dame to see you, Barney."

I hoped it was Gale. It wasn't. It was Rosemary.

She'd just come off-duty and she was wearing her red-lined blue dress cape over her white uniform. Along with her red cheeks, big blue eyes, and black hair, it made her look like a million-dollar gate.

She gave the suitcase she was carrying to the screw and squeezed both of her hands through the bars.

"Hello, Barney. Nice to see you, fellow."

That was Rosemary. No beef. No gripe. Just glad to see a guy. She'd been the kid next door since we'd both been knee high on the big pitchers of suds we used to carry for her and my old man. As pretty and smart as she was, I'd often wondered why she had gone in for nursing instead of getting married.

I said, "It's nice to see you, Rosemary." I meant it. "How's mom?"

SHE told me mom was fine but that I should have gone to see her as soon as I had gotten out of the hospital.

That kicked me off again. I let go her hands and squeezed the bars until my knuckles showed white. "That's a ten-dollar word for where they had me, kid. You and I both know what the joint really was. I was as balmy as old man Giovanni used to get when he was looped. And now I've really torn it."

Rosemary shook her head. "I don't believe it, Barney. I don't believe you killed that girl. And I don't believe you're walking on your heels. That's why I'm here. Why did you ever let them commit you?"

I said, "Because I took one punch too many and it did something to my head. Because I was acting crazy and seeing and hearing things that didn't exist except in my mind."

She asked, "How acting crazy?"

I told her. "Hearing bells and voices in the middle of the night. Imagining hot water was running out of cold water taps. Thinking my razor was an ice cube and putting it in a tray in the refrigerator instead of the medicine cabinet. Then there was the parrot."

Her eyes narrowed slightly. "What about the parrot, Barney?"

I explained, "That's when I knew I was turning dangerous. When I wrung the parrot's neck because I was sore at Gale."

"And why were you sore at Gale?"

I didn't like to think about it. I used my hands to hold my head again. "Because, me being crazy like I was, I imagined she was two-timing me. I imagined I walked in on her and another guy and I slapped hell out of 'em both. But it was all in my mind, see? There wasn't another guy. Gale swore it even while I

was still slapping her around that night.

"Then, when I woke up the next morning and found the parrot dead, I knew that it was time to do something about me. So I talked it over with Gale and her father and a high-priced mind doctor. The four of us decided that I needed treatment."

"At a state institution."

"The doc claimed they were best."

"They are," Rosemary agreed. "What was this psychiatrist's name, Barney?"

I told her, "Orin Harris. He's the big sickie-ackey guy." I took my hands away from my face and hung on to the bars again. "They let me out yesterday morning as cured. But I guess they made a mistake. I guess I'm still punchy as hell." I squeezed my fingers through the bars to touch her hands. I wanted someone to believe me.

"But I didn't kill that dame they say I killed. I never laid a hand on her, Rosemary. I never even saw her until I opened that bathroom door."

She squeezed my fingers and smiled. "I believe you, Barney." Her chin jutted a trifle. "What were the names of your doctors out at the asylum, Barney?"

I gave her the three I remembered and she wrote them down. Then I asked her what time it was. She said it was four in the morning and I asked how she'd gotten in to see me.

She continued to squeeze my fingers. "With a last name like Doyle, an inspector for an uncle, and three cousins and two brothers on the force"—she snapped her fingers—"that for the brass. The Doyles do as they please."

I cracked, "Then get me out of here."

"I wish I could," she said. She let go of my fingers and touched my face. "You're still nice and you're sweet and you're good, even if you are the dumbest man in Chicago, Barney. You're still the boy next door."

Then she was gone. When the screw

came back from letting her out he opened the door of the cell and passed in the opened suitcase. There was a clean shirt and a change of underwear and socks and one of the freshly-pressed suits of clothes I'd left hanging in the closet of my old room in mom's cottage.

"Now there," the screw admired, "is a dame. That little babe could—"

I let him smell my fist. "You be careful about Rosemary."

"Oh. Pardon me," he made wise. "How many dames do you keep on the fire, fellow?" When I'd changed my clothes, he added, "Now straight down the corridor, Romeo, with me right behind you." He swung his sap like he hoped he'd get a chance to use it. "The big brass would converse with thee."

INSPECTOR Carlton looked tired and even older than before. His mouth was as puckered as if he'd been sucking a lemon. I didn't know any of the other guys in the office with the exception of the State Attorney, but all of them looked like big shots.

A slim, well-dressed, red-haired guy, with no fat on his frame, said, "Sit down, Barney," friendly-like.

I sat in the chair he indicated and all of them looked me over like I was something in a zoo. Then a tired-looking old buck with a beak like the eagle on a two-bit piece asked, "How do you intend to plead, Mandell? Guilty or not guilty?"

"This is a court?" I asked. "I'm being tried at four o'clock in the morning?"

The red-haired guy grinned at me. "Let's call it an informal hearing, Barney. And don't worry about your rights. They're being well protected. Among other things, I'm a lawyer."

I asked him who he was. He said his name was Curtis but before I could ask if he was the same Curtis who'd phoned me at the hotel, the tired-looking old buck got into the act again.

"Let's put it this way, Mandell. If this was a criminal court and I was the presiding judge, how would you plead? Did you kill that girl?"

I played along with him like he was a judge. "No, Your Honor. I did not. Every word I told Inspector Carlton is the truth. On account of I was feeling bad because I thought my wife had stood me up, I went to the Royal Bar at ten o'clock yesterday morning. And I didn't leave until six o'clock. Charlie the barman will back me.

"There was a hood in my room when I opened the door. He slugged me and took my wallet. Until I spotted her bleeding all over my bathroom, I never saw the dead blonde before."

"You know," the old guy said, "I'm inclined to buy that. How about you, Joe?"

The State Attorney wasn't enthusiastic. "It could be." He scowled at Curtis. "But what the hell. With all the weight that's being thrown around, we don't seem to have much choice. You checked with the barman at the Royal, Bill?"

Inspector Carlton shrugged. "For what it's worth. I wouldn't believe one of those guys if he told me the right time." He was fair about it. "But he checks with what Barney told us. More, he said Barney sat there all day lapping up the stuff and looking the field over but he didn't crack wise once."

One of the other guys said, "There's only one angle to this thing that bothers me. The newspapers are going to eat us up for admitting a looney to bail."

"Looney yourself," I said. "If I had the stuff the desk sergeant took from me, I could show you something no other lad in this office has."

"And that is?"

"Proof I am sane," I told him. "The sickey ackeys gave me a paper saying so before they released me from the asylum."

Curtis grinned and said, "*Touché.*"

I asked him what that meant and he said it meant a hit.

"Could be," the other guy admitted.

The tired old guy with a beak got up from the edge of the desk on which he was sitting. "Okay. I'll go along. Book him for manslaughter and bind him over in ten thousand dollars bail. We can always pick him up and re-book him."

He and the state attorney left the office. Curtis made with a lot of papers. Carlton had to sign one of them. The guy who'd cracked about my marbles had to sign another. Then Curtis pushed a paper at me and handed me his pen. "Fill it out and sign it, Barney, while I get your stuff from the desk."

It all was Greek to me except the bail bond. I was still working on it when Curtis came back with my wallet and watch and belt and necktie, the paper saying I had been discharged as cured, and the small pair of golden gloves I always carry for luck. I signed the property receipt and the bail bond. Then I asked Curtis, "Now what?"

"Now you and I have a talk," he told me.

I worked on the knot of my tie all the way down in the elevator. I was glad Rosemary had brought me the suit and the clean linen. I wanted to look my best for Gale. I hoped our talk wouldn't take too long.

In front of the Bureau, I asked Curtis, "Who hired you to spring me? Mr. Ebbling?"

He shook his head. "Not exactly."

The Loop was gray with dawn. There were few cars and trucks on the street, most of them Sanitary Board trucks loading the stuff that building superintendents had plied on the curbs and emptying the green Help Keep The City Clean boxes.

I made conversation. "My father-in-law is an attorney, too. He's a patent lawyer."

"So I understand," Curtis said as he parked in front of a building on Wells.

A BANK of elevators was there, but no night operator. It was hot inside after the cold morning air. The building smelled like an old man. It was so still our footsteps echoed on the tile of the fire stairs. Curtis led the way to the third floor, pushed the fire door open, and unlocked an office with no legend on the glass except the name: *Mr. Curtis.*

The office was small and none too clean. The only furnishings were a cigarette-scarred desk, a few chairs, and a big filing cabinet. After closing the door, Curtis took off his topcoat, opened the file marked W and set a bottle of good whiskey and two glasses on the desk.

"If it's all the same to you, Mr. Curtis," I apologized, "I'll take a raincheck. I had mine yesterday."

He sipped his like it tasted good. "You know, I ought to get more money," he said finally. "Believe me. I had a hell of a time springing you." He had a nice grin. I liked it. "Kinda wondering what it's all about, eh, Barney?"

"That's for sure," I admitted. I was hopeful. "Who laid the dough on the barrel head—Gale?"

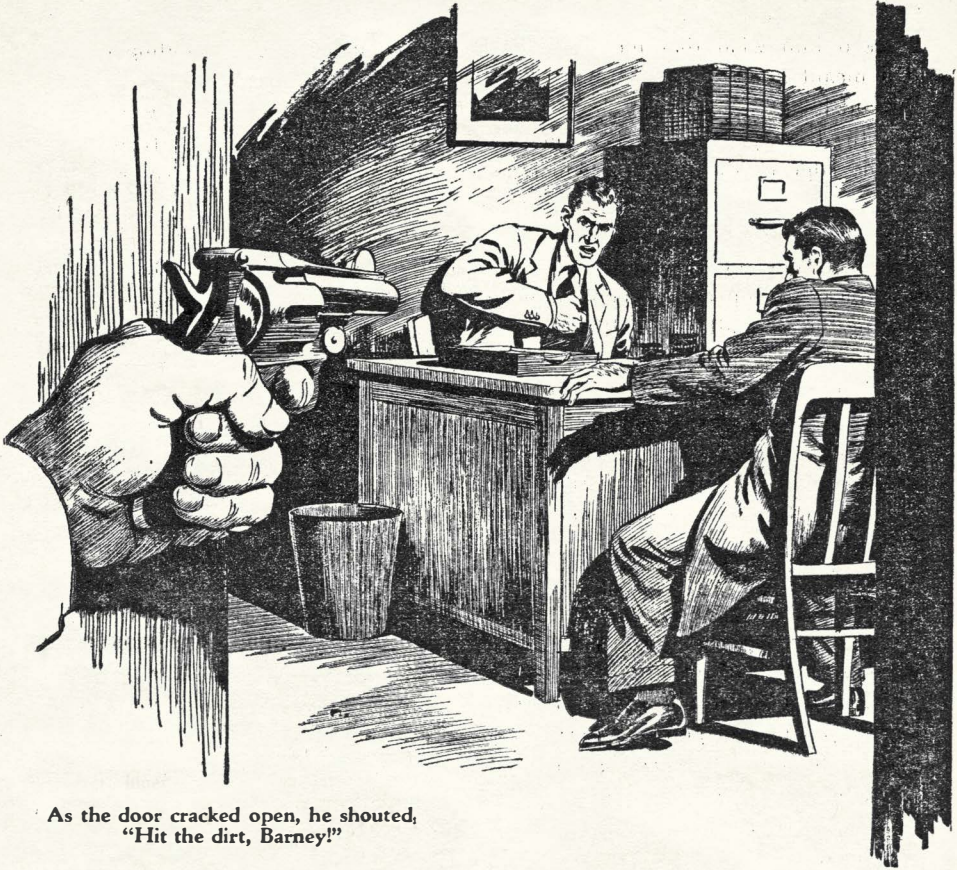
He rolled the question from one side of his mind to the other. "N-no."

I tried again. "Some smart fight promoter?"

He finished his drink and put the bottle and the glasses back in the file drawer. "You aren't even warm, Barney. Let's just say it was someone who is very much interested in you. A guy with a lot of weight who was willing to pry you out of a bad jam for his own convenience."

I felt goose pimples forming on my spine. "Not the guy who killed the blonde?"

He shook his head. "No. That's still Inspector Carlton's baby and open to much speculation." He walked to a neutral



As the door cracked open, he shouted,
"Hit the dirt, Barney!"

corner and came out swinging a wild one. "What was your name before your father Anglicized it, Barney?"

I rolled with the punch. "That was before I was born. But I've seen the name Mancowitz on letters from his brother."

I wasn't telling him a thing. "A brother named Yascha."

"That's right," I admitted.

He consulted a mental file. "Born in Bucuresti, Romania, in 1897 and married to one Sofie Bjela in 1922. One time professor of Advanced Physics at the University Of Vienna. Later a *Docteur és Sciences* at the Sorbonne. A rabid anti-Nazi who emigrated to Sao Paulo, Brazil in 1943 where he opened his own consulting laboratory, Deceased as of Sep-

tember 14, 1947, a widower without issue."

Curtis backed off long enough to light a cigarette, then swung an even wilder one. "How do you feel about this country, Barney?"

The more he talked, the less sense he made. I couldn't see what my Uncle Yascha, whom I'd never met, had to do with the blonde in my bathroom. From where I sat, it looked to me like they'd had the wrong guy in an asylum. I asked him:

"How do you mean how do I feel about this country? It's my country. I like it."

Curtis nodded. "Yes. I think that can be assumed, Barney."

There was something vaguely familiar about his voice. Then I realized what it

was. A weight. I'd felt the same weight before, a lot of times. Mostly nights, lying sleepless long after taps had sounded, staring into the dark, knowing that just what happened to Barney Mandell was up to the eagle perched on my chest.

Curtis consulted his mental file again. "You were a good soldier. You never made better than PFC but you earned an infantryman's combat badge, a bronze and a silver star, a citation, three battle stars, and a purple heart. On your separation from the service, you resumed your ring career and climbed rapidly. And on the night of November 23, 1947, after a whirlwind courtship, you married Gale Ebbing in New York."

The guy was uncanny. I wisecracked, "A possible. Now tell me where I spent my honeymoon and make it a perfect target."

He grinned at me. "That's easy. At Miami Beach. The room waiter's name was Francois. Remember?"

I threw in the towel. "That does it. But how come you know so much about me? And what's this all about?"

The smile fading from his lips he snuffed his cigarette. "Several million dollars, Barney. And more important, a very valuable—"

He stopped short as the door cracked open. Then he drove for the floor back of the desk, tugging a gun from a shoulder holster and shouting, "Down. Hit the dirt, Barney. Down!"

My back was to the door, I sprawled forward on my face just as two shots rocked the office. I heard the smack of a slug into flesh. Three more shots followed in quick succession and slugs bracketed my head, digging into the floor and showering my cheeks with splinters.

I rolled on up to my feet, grabbed the leg of a chair, and threw the chair at the door. The frosted-glass shattered, but before I could tug it open there was a pound of running feet in the hall and the

heavy door to the fire-well slammed shut.

The guy had a gun. I didn't. I looked to see how it was with Curtis. His face was a dirty gray. He was sitting with his back against the filing case, both hands pressed to his chest. His lips were moving as if he was trying to shout something to me, but no words were coming out. Then his hands dropped away from the wound and he fell on his side and lay still.

What was more important than several million dollars? Brother, the answer to that one was simple.

Still being able to breathe.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Bird in the Hand

THERE was the same sour smell of caged men. The same blue haze of cigar smoke. It was like sitting through a movie that I'd seen before. All of the faces, with the exception of Mr. Ebbing's, were the same.

I was glad he'd flown down from Eagle River to find out what was wrong when I'd hung up on him. For a patent lawyer, the guy was good. He was as hep to the old mouthpiece formula as he was to the branch of the law that had made him a millionaire.

Tall, white-haired, distinguished-looking, his well-modulated voice showing his Harvard background, he had the S. A. and Inspector Carlton running around in circles like dogs chasing their tails. Now they had me back in the pokey, they wanted to keep me so badly they could taste me. But they were stuck with Ebbing's:

"I don't need to point out the law to you gentlemen. You know the law as well as I do. And don't bring up the dead blonde. You've made a charge of manslaughter on that and bail has been set and furnished. This is something else

entirely. According to the criminal code, you are obligated to do one of three things. Charge Barney with something and book him. Establish him as a material witness and set bail. Or, release him."

Inspector Carlton sucked on his lemon. Mercer wasn't so impressed. He'd gone to town on his story about me and it wasn't panning out the way he'd written it. For one thing, the charge had been reduced.

For another, one of Inspector Carlton's boys, checking with the Tansfield Arms, had learned most of the dead girl's bills were paid by a mysterious older man known only as Mr. Smith, and with whom she had quarreled violently on the afternoon she had been murdered. He was at least as good a suspect as myself and the hood I had seen in my room.

Mercer missed the spittoon by six inches. "How do you know," he demanded of Carlton, "that Barney didn't kill Curtis? How do you know there was a third man in the office?"

My father-in-law chuckled. "You reporters. So help me. While I'm a staunch advocate of a free press, there ought to be a law against you."

The reporter stood his ground. "That still doesn't answer my question."

Ebbling explained it to him like he was still in short pants. "There was blood in the hall for one thing, showing that Mr. Curtis wounded the man at whom he fired. More, I believe the police found some five ejected cartridge cases where the man had stood." He looked at Carlton. "Is that correct, Inspector?"

"That's right," Carlton said sourly.

He walked on out of the S. A.'s office, leaving the whole thing in his lap. The S. A. wanted no part of it or any part of Ebbling. At least, not until he'd received instructions from the 'weight' Curtis had mentioned to me.

"All right," he dismissed me. "We'll probably want to talk to you some more,

Barney. But that's all for this morning." He played a little politics by shaking hands with Ebbling. "Nice to have seen you again, Roland."

You don't get to own a lodge in Eagle River and a big house in Lake Forest by snooting guys who may be able to do you a favor. Ebbling shook hands like he meant it. "Nice to have seen you, Joe. Give me a ring at the club and we'll have lunch together some time in the near future."

"I'll do that," the S. A. said.

Mercer rode down in the elevator with us, shaking hands with himself. "Nice to have seen you again, Mercer, old boy. How's for dropping over to Slimy Pete's and having a little snort? Thanks. I don't mind if I do."

Ebbling ignored him. I grinned. "Kinda called the round wrong, eh, Mercer? What's the matter? The City Desk stepping on your tail?"

He said, "Nuts to you, Punchy," and went off to lubricate his disappointment.

Ebbling's car, complete with a uniformed chauffeur, was waiting in front of the Bureau in a no-parking zone. Ebbling let down when he hit the air foam. "You'll be the death of me yet, Barney," he reproved me. He added as the car purred away from the curve, "Now, just between the two of us. You're telling me the truth? You aren't mixed up in either business, are you? And I'm speaking as your lawyer, not as your father-in-law."

I told him the truth. "No, sir."

"You had nothing to do with the girl."

"No, sir."

"She was dead when you found her."

"Yes, sir."

"You didn't see the gunman who shot this—er—Curtis?"

"No, sir."

"And during the short time you were alone, Curtis didn't tell you anything that might cause someone to shoot him or give you any information the police might be

able to use to apprehend the man who killed him?"

I held out a little on that one. So it was screwball. It was the way I felt at the time. Gale's folks, on both sides, had been in the U. S. A. since the first Plymouth Rock laid an egg and I was a little ashamed of having her know my name had originally been Mancowitz and I had a foreigner named Yascha for an uncle.

Besides, if my hunch was right about the identity of the guy with a lot of weight who was killing to pry me out of a jam for his own convenience, another 'Curtis' would be along. After what had happened, it seemed only square-shooting to me to keep my big yap shut until I knew the whole story.

"Well?" Ebbing asked.

I said, "I'm sorry, sir. I was thinking of Gale. The answer to your question is no, sir."

HE LEANED back, satisfied. I rode thinking of what Curtis had been saying when he had been killed. He'd said several million dollars and something even more valuable involved. I shadow-boxed it from every angle, but it beat me.

To a guy who's shined shoes and peddled papers and fought five-buck prelim fights to eat, a million bucks is all the dough in the world. There isn't anything more valuable. I still had to pinch myself to realize I was on married terms with anyone related to that much.

I asked Ebbing where we were headed.

Now that he had let down, some of his dapperness had wilted. He didn't look so distinguished. He looked white and old and tired. Mouthing an unlighted cigar, he said:

"Why, I'll drop you at your hotel, Barney. Then I'll go to the Club and see if I can't get a few hours' rest before we hold a family conference. What with rough weather between here and Eagle River

and then finding you in a double mess, I don't feel quite up to driving all the way to Lake Forest."

I said, "Oh," disappointed.

He chuckled. "But I think you'll be content at the hotel, at least for the time being. And I doubt if you'll miss my company. You see, Gale is waiting for you. She checked in last night just after Carlton took you away."

Wanting to see her tied knots in me. I grinned all over my face, then sobered as Ebbing laid a well-cared for hand on my arm.

"Just one more thing though, Barney. That—er—mental business is all cleared away?"

I showed him the psychiatric discharge the three doctors had signed.

"Fine," he said softly. "Fine. But no more fights now, Barney."

"No more fights," I promised.

"Not even if some smart promoter tries to match you with the champ. I want you and Gale to be happy. And I want my son-in-law to have, what is it they say?"

"All his marbles?" I suggested.

"That's it, Barney." He laughed. "I've plenty of money for us all until you find yourself in some other line of endeavor. And you will find yourself. You're young and you're smart. And Gale loves you."

I walked into the hotel on air. I was young. I was smart. Gale loved me. There was a stack of morning papers on the cigar counter. I stopped to look at the top one. Tempus had fugited. I was out of the headlines already. The only thing I could find about the blonde who'd been found in my room was a squib in a box on the bottom of Page I, sub-headed:

*FIGHTER RELEASED IN
\$10,000 BAIL*

The story was a condensed rehash of Mercer's yarn but without any of its vitriol. It also mentioned the police were

looking for the guy named Smith, known to be the dead girl's protector. The paper had hit the street too early for there to be even a stick about Curtis. I tossed a quarter on the stack and tucked a paper under my arm.

The day desk clerk had just come on duty. He insisted on shaking hands. "I'm glad it's clearing up, Barney," he lied. "I know you didn't kill the blonde. I knew it all the time."

I asked if Mrs. Mandell was in my room.

"She's in Suite 5A," he informed me. "And I've already had your luggage transferred, Barney."

That first-name gag is quite a business. It's Barney this and Barney that when a guy is on top of the heap or it looks like he's going to be. But just let him get in a jam or drop a fight to some palooka, then it's that no-account jerk Mandell.

"Then you didn't kill that dead girl, eh, Barney?" the boy on the elevator cage asked.

I said there seemed to be some doubt about it.

He was truthful. "There're lots of women that need killin'." He grinned slyly at me.

I slipped him half a buck for the ride. 5A was in front, at the far end of the hall.

But I lifted my knuckles to run them across the door, squeezed a fist full of air instead, as a voice on the other side chuckled:

"Forget him. You're beautiful, beautiful, beautiful. And you're mine, all mine. How's about a kiss?"

The voice was male with a deep whiskey husk. The old sickness came back in my head.

A thick lump of ice formed in my stomach. I could feel the veins in my temple pounding. *Why I'll kill him, I thought. I'll kill them both.*

CHAPTER FIVE

Quick Send-Off

I WAITED for Gale to answer him. When she didn't, I tried the knob to see if the door was locked. It wasn't. I pushed it open and went in. It was a hotel sitting room. There was no one in it but a green-and-yellow parrot in a cage, a duplicate of the bird whose neck I'd wrung.

I leaned against the door, still breathing hard. The parrot cocked his green head at me and squawked:

"Awk. Don't give your right name, boys. Awk. Here come the law."

The ice in my stomach melted. The veins in my temples stopped pounding. I wanted to laugh, and couldn't. I was too weak. I compromised by wiping the sweat from my forehead and cursing myself for a fool. I was glad Gale wasn't in the sitting room. She loved me. She was waiting. She'd come all the way from Sun Valley to be with me. And here my mind was back in the same old rut.

The door to the darkened bedroom opened and a cute little trick backed out. I'd forgotten about Marie. Gale never went anywhere without her. The maid saw me and said:

"*Monsieur.*" Water glistened in the corners of her eyes. "*Mon Dieu* has heard madame's prayers."

I was pleased but embarrassed by the reception. I never knew quite how to treat Marie. I wasn't used to maids. Down where I had been born, the women had always dressed themselves and done up their own hair.

I threw my hat on the sofa and said, "Gale—"

Marie placed a finger to her lips, dramatically. "Madame Mandell sleeps, *Monsieur*. The sleep of the exhausted. All night she has cried and walked the floor." Her face wreathed in a triumphant

phant smile as she reached for the knob of the door.

I swallowed hard. "No. Wait. If Gale's asleep—"

"You're mine, all mine," the parrot squawked. "Awk. How's about a kiss?"

Marie opened the door. "But of course, *Monsieur*." She stood aside to allow me to pass her. "Madame Mandell would never forgive me if I detained you from her for a moment."

"That bum," the parrot squawked. "Forget him. You're beautiful, beautiful, beautiful."

Marie shook her finger at him. "You bad bad bird."

He awked a couple of times, then cocked his head at her.

I laughed and walked on inside. The window shades were drawn, but even in the half light I could see Gale's cheeks were tear-stained. Her long brown hair was braided and wrapped in twin crowns around her head. She slept with one arm shielding her eyes, the single sheet covering her.

Two years had been a long time. "Hi, honey," I greeted her soundlessly.

She was more than a woman. She was Gale. She was the end of the rainbow. She was the something sweet and clean and good that a ragged back-of-the-Yards kid had always known existed if he only knew where to look.

The subtle scent of her perfume blotted out the sour smell and rancid sweat of all the second-rate fight club dressing rooms I'd known. One of her little fingers was worth all of the shoes I'd shined, all of the papers I'd peddled, all of the leather I'd swallowed.

I took off my coat and had trouble loosening the knot in my tie. Then I eased down on the edge of the bed, content to just sit and look at her.

She stirred like a sleepy kitten. Her arm dug deeper into her eyes, then lowered to her side. She opened her

eyes and saw me, suddenly came awake.

"Barney."

Then her arms were around my neck and she was laughing and crying at the same time and trying to explain, between kisses, how sorry she was that her train had been late and that she hadn't wired me when to expect her and how awful she had felt when she had reached the hotel and learned I had been accused of murder.

All I could say was, "Honey." It didn't matter. Nothing mattered as long as I was with her again and I knew that Gale loved me.

She pushed me away from her and lit the lamp so she could see my face. Then she asked, woman-like, "You didn't kill that awful woman, did you, Barney?"

"No, honey," I told her. "I did not."

"You never had anything to do with her."

I raised my right palm. "I swear."

Gale studied my eyes. "I believe you." Her own eyes clouded slightly. "And—that other trouble? It's all gone, Barney? It won't ever come back again?"

"The sickey ackeys say not," I assured her. "Not if I stop fighting."

"Then you're going to stop fighting."

"I promised your father I would. He insisted on it. And he said he was willing to stake us until I could get going in some other line."

"I'm glad," Gale said simply. "So glad." She caressed the scar tissue over my eyes with the tips of her fingers, then ran one of her pinkies down my broken nose. "I want you to stay pretty, Barney. For me."

I laughed and kissed her, hard. Her lips were just as sweet as I remembered them. Everything was just as I had hoped it would be.

WITH the exception of her perfume. Close up, it almost gagged me. It made me think of the dead little blonde. It

made me think of Curtis leaning against the filing cabinet, holding his life in his chest, dying without saying a word, and thinking he was shouting.

I buried my face in the natural fragrance of Gale's hair. Her fingers dug into my back. "I've missed you. Oh, how I've missed you, Barney. And I won't ever let them take you away from me again."

Her breath sweet in my face, she glued her lips to mine— and the phone on the bed table tinkled.

Gale sat up, sweetly disheveled, brushing the hair from her eyes. "If that's father, I'll kill him."

She wanted to know what I was laughing at. I told her, "You. You know, you're awfully cute when you're mad."

She laughed with me. "Don't think I'm not mad." She picked the phone from its cradle. "Yes? Mrs. Barney Mandell speaking." The laughter went out of her eyes. The corners of her pretty mouth turned down. "Yes, Just a minute. He's here." She handed me the phone. "For you. Some girl who knows you well enough to call you Barney."

It was Rosemary.

"I thought you were coming to see your mother as soon as you could, Barney," she opened the conversation.

I said I had every intention of so doing.

Rosemary was so mad she was spitting tacks. "Then why aren't you here? Your mother may not be quite such high society as your wife, Mr. Mandell, but she can read. She's read the morning paper. She knows you've been released on bail." Rosemary sounded like she was bawling along with being mad.

"And the poor old soul insisted on cooking a big breakfast for you. And she runs to the front window every time an ice truck stops, certain it's her Barney." Rosemary sniffed audibly. "She waited for you all day yesterday and cried herself to sleep last night. Don't you dare let

her down again. You hear me, Barney? I don't care what I interrupted. I hope I did. You grab a cab and get here as fast as you can."

So saying, she hung up. I cradled the receiver, feeling like a heel. With pop dead since we were kids and Sam and Milton killed on Iwo, I was all the old lady had left. And she didn't have too many years to go. Gale lifted one of her arched eyebrows.

"That was Rosemary, the neighbor girl next to mom's," I told her. "It seems the old lady expected me to drop in this morning and, well, she's kinda disappointed."

"You went to see your mother yesterday?"

"No," I admitted. "I didn't."

Gale slipped into a white silk negligee. "Then you do what the neighbor girl told you. You get a cab and go right down there now, Barney. Shame on you to treat your mother that way. I only wish my mother was alive."

I felt even more of a heel.

Gale brushed my cheek with her lips. "And don't look like you've lost your last friend. We've a whole life time ahead of us." She sniffed. "I don't think much of this second-rate hotel anyway. While you're gone, Marie and I will repack and I'll have daddy's new chauffeur drive us out to Lake Forest.

"Then, when you finish your visit with your mother, you come directly to the house." She kissed me. "And we'll start our married life all over in the sort of surroundings anything so beautiful deserves. That all right with you, Barney?"

I said I thought it was swell and so was she and followed Gale out into the sitting room. Marie looked mildly surprised. The parrot *awked* and cocked his head at me.

"Until then, sweetheart," Gale said.

"Until then." I kissed her good-by.

So much, and nothing, had happened so fast, that after I closed the door I had

to stand in the hall a moment trying to get my balance. On the other side of the door, the damn green-and-yellow parrot, the duplicate of the one I'd killed, went through his whole routine:

"Awk. That bum. Forget him. You're beautiful, beautiful, beautiful. And you're mine, all mine. Awk. How's about a kiss?"

Both Gale and Marie laughed heartily. I thought, at the time, at the parrot.

CHAPTER SIX

Federal Fracas

A COLD wind with the feeling of rain or sleet in it followed the cab up Wentworth and turned the corner with us. Nothing had changed. The old two-story frame houses leaned a little more, but that was all. Ginty's Bar was still on the corner. Old man Gold's tailor shop looked just as shabby. A bunch of sharp-looking punks without any visible means of support still held down the walk in front of Angelo's pool room, cracking wise to every babe who passed. Hepplemeyer's grocery was still across the street from mom's. You could still smell the Yards without having to strain your lungs.

After my first big fight, with thirty grand burning a hole in my pants, I'd wanted mom to move into a fancy hotel apartment up on Sheridan Road but she'd vetoed the suggestion.

"All my life I've lived here, Barney," she'd told me. "You and Sammy and Milton were born here. Papa passed away in the front room. For why should I move away from where I've been so happy? Who would I talk to? What about? Here I know Clara Ginty and Rose Gold and Mary Doyle and Rosemary and Mrs. Hepplemeyer. Good times we've had together. Bad times we've shared what we had. Up on Sheridan Road, how should I even know who has a baby?"

All she would let me do was have the old house painted and stuff the parlor with a television set and a radio-phonograph combination. More so she could boast how well her Barney had done than because she wanted them.

"A fight boxer my Barney is," she told everyone who would listen. "So strong he doesn't know his own strength. Champion of the world, yet, is my Barney going to be."

Well, that was one dream that was over.

As the cab parked in front of the house, a bunch of brats with runny noses, too young to go to school, left off playing shinny with a tin can in the vacant lot next to the Doyle's and swarmed around the cab, shouting, "It's Barney. Hey guys. Barney's home."

It was almost like old times. Grinning, I tossed them the change left from the fin with which I paid the tab on the meter. Then, getting a better hold on the long-stemmed roses and big box of candy I'd brought, I climbed the stairs. Mom was waiting in the doorway with Rosemary, out of uniform, just behind her.

Mom hugged and kissed me like I was something special, then gave Rosemary a dirty look.

"See?" she crowed. "You told me I shouldn't feel so bad if Barney couldn't come this morning." She had to stand on the tips of her toes to pat my shoulder. "But I knew my Barney would come to see his mama." She was so pleased it was pathetic. "And he brought me roses and candy."

Rosemary didn't say anything. I felt more than ever like a heel.

Mom dabbed at her eyes with a corner of her clean white apron. "But here I'm making like an old fool. And you must be hungry, Barney." Clutching the roses and the box of candy to her, she bustled down the hall toward the kitchen. "Come. By the table sit and I will make break-

fast just like it was old times.”

Rosemary offered me her hand. “Nice to see you, Barney. Welcome home.”

I could see her a whole lot better than I had been able to with a lot of rolled steel between us. The years had been good to the kid. She’d filled out where she should fill out and stayed flat where it looked best. Most of her freckles were gone. The few that were left looked good on her.

Seeing nothing but her pins, you would have thought she was a movie star. Even in the simple dress she was wearing she looked a lot more like a model than she did like a supervisor of nurses at Cook County.

I squeezed the hand she was offering. “Thanks a lot, Rosemary.”

What followed was instinctive. I was grateful to her on two counts. We had been friends for years. I was holding her hand. Pulling her to me, I kissed her.

She surprised me by kissing back, even more feverishly than Gale had. Her finger nails dug into my back as she strained against me. Then, breathing hard, she wriggled out of my arms and slapped me. “Thanks a lot, Mr. Mandell.” The back-of-the-Yards in her came out. “But perhaps you’d better save your kisses for that dame you’re playing house with.”

I said, “All right, now, Irish. I didn’t mean a thing by kissing you.”

“Yes. That’s what I mean,” she said.

Women. They’re hard to understand some times.

THE front of the house was cold but the kitchen was warm and smelled good. Mom had her best cloth on the table and enough food for four men. I ate enough for three, to please mom and because it tasted good. But neither she nor Rosemary did much more than push the stuff around their plates.

Rosemary was over her mad and filled with information about the guys and dolls we’d grown up with. Marty Quirk was a

lawyer with an in at the City Hall. Jennie Hepplemeyer was working with her at Cook County. Mort Fagin was playing with a name band. Joe Mercer had quit the *Star* and moved over to the *Standard*.

Pete Bowman was a big shot with an oil company and the Bowmans were living in Evergreen Park. Most of the old crowd, however, was still around, the lads working in the Yards and the girls keeping house and having babies.

From time to time mom chimed in, but mostly just sat looking at me, beaming. Neither she nor Rosemary mentioned the past two years until I brought them up. Then mom was indignant.

“No Mandell was ever crazy. Out of their minds they were who ever put you in such a place.” She reached across the table and patted my hand. “What you should do is sue somebody, Barney. Maybe Marty would take the case.”

I pointed out I’d committed myself. Rosemary asked, dryly, “At whose suggestion?”

I repeated what I’d told her in the cell block. “We held a family conference with Doctor Orin Harris.”

One side of her mouth turned down. “That egocentric quack. Look, Barney. I’m a nurse. What did the staff out at the —” she avoided using the word asylum — “well, where you were, say?”

I admitted, “They were puzzled.”

“Puzzled?”

“Yeah. They went over me with everything they had and couldn’t find a sign of a brain injury. But my record was against me.”

“You mean the hallucinations you told me about this morning? Finding your razor in the ice cube tray, hearing bells and voices that didn’t exist, ringing a parrot’s neck, and imagining you’d caught your wife with another man?”

It wasn’t nice to think about. I said, “That’s right.”

“With whom?”

"I never saw the guy before or since. I couldn't. He didn't exist. See? It was all in my mind on account of me having taken too many punches."

"Gale, that is, Mrs. Mandell explained it to you."

"That's right."

"But why stay two years at the asylum?"

"Because Doctor Harris thought it was best. He said the punishment I had absorbed in the ring had given me pronounced manic-depressive tendencies. After checking the case history he compiled, the sickey ackeys out at the asylum agreed with him."

Rosemary got up from the table. "Stuff." She scraped the food on her plate into the garbage can and put the plate on the sink.

"Look, Barney. If you were a flat-footed puncher who took three to land one, it would be a different matter. But you never have been. You've always been a boxer. Ever since you won your first golden glove tournament, you haven't taken enough punishment to break an egg. You're no crazier than I am. And you never have been."

I asked, "Then why did I hear and see and imagine the things I did? Why did they go away almost as soon as I stopped fighting?"

"That," she admitted, "beats me."

I got a little hot. "I suppose you think I should have gone on scrambling for a fast buck until I blew my top completely and maybe murdered Gale, imagining things that weren't so."

Rosemary laid her hand on my shoulder. "No, Barney. Believe me. All I want is what is best for you."

I patted her hand. "I'm sorry, kid. I didn't mean to yell at you. But I'm beginning to wonder if the docs were wise in letting me out of the fish bowl. So much has happened since yesterday afternoon. You heard, didn't you, about what hap-

pened after I was admitted to bail?"

Rosemary looked at mom and shook her head. "Of course." There was a scrape of feet on the walk between the houses. "But there's Pat now," she covered up as she reached her coat from the hook on the kitchen door. "And he's probably starved, as usual. Before you start back up town, Barney, drop next door for a minute, will you? I know Pat would like to see you. He told me so over the phone."

I said I would do that.

The whole neighborhood belonged to mom. She boasted, "A detective now, Pat is. Instead of wearing a uniform, he goes to work in his best plain clothes."

Rosemary laughed. "Pat's been working out of Central Bureau but right now he's been loaned to the State Attorney's office." She kissed mom's cheek. "Thanks for the breakfast, sweetheart. I'll drop in again before I go on duty."

MOM watched her out the back door. "A fine girl, Rosemary. Always so sweet, with a smile." She confided, "And ninety-eight dollars and fifty cents regular every week she makes, besides cooking and keeping house for her two brothers. A fine wife she would make for some man."

I told mom I agreed with her and asked her if she knew why Rosemary had never married.

Mom opened her mouth to say something, then merely shrugged and began to clear the table.

I sat a moment, smoking, digesting the heavy meal. Then, thinking of Curtis, I asked mom if she had ever met papa's brother, Yascha.

"No. Yascha I never knew," she told me. "He stayed in the old country when papa came over here steerage. But papa was always very proud of Yascha. A smart man, a professor in a college, he was."

I asked if he'd had any money.

Mom shrugged again. "Since when do professors have money?"

I admitted the few I'd met didn't seem to have very much and asked her if she had saved any of his letters to papa. She said she'd seen one a few days before. Sorting through a box of family photographs and birthday cards and letters she had saved for one reason or another, she came up with it and put it on the table.

The name Yascha Mancowitz was on the return as I'd remembered it. It was postmarked Vienna and dated 1933, the year I had been twelve and pop had died. Along with his brother, pop had been born in Bucuresti, but the family had moved to Stuttgart when they both had been little boys and the letter was written in German.

I asked mom to read it to me. It was just a letter. There wasn't a thing in it that gave me even a clue to what Curtis might have been talking about. It mostly concerned his work at the university, his regret his own marriage had proved childless, and his pleasure in knowing pop had three fine boys.

Mom choked up over that but managed to finish the letter. "Every night I say a little prayer of gratitude for the knowledge that you and Marta and your boys are living in the last stronghold of democracy. Affectionately, Yascha."

He sounded like quite a guy. Mom wiped her eyes on her apron. I asked if the letter was the last one Uncle Yascha had written. She said it was not.

"I wrote him when papa died. Yascha wrote back saying he wished he could send money regularly to help raise Berny's boys, but the bad times were worldwide. However he hoped the small check he was sending would help." Mom remembered, "It was for three hundred dollars. With what you boys brought in, we lived on it for almost a year. But why should you all of a sudden want to know about your Uncle Yascha?"

I said I'd just got to wondering and let it go at that. Then I helped her to dry the dishes and we sat in the parlor talking about old times until I got so jumpy thinking about this and that, I had to get on my horse.

I hugged mom hard at the door. "It won't be so long next time. I'll get down once a week regular."

She patted my cheek. "Please, Barney. That I would like very much." Then she mentioned the mess in the paper for the first time. "It isn't so, is it, Barney? Tell mama. A good boy like you couldn't do such a thing."

I told her the truth. "I never saw the girl alive, mom."

She patted my cheek again. "Just like I told Mrs. Ginty. Come again. Soon. Please, Barney."

I said I would and the next time I'd bring my wife with me. I was lying. I knew it. So did mom. I'd never bring Gale down back of the Yards. She and mom had nothing in common. Both would only be embarrassed.

"That's a good boy," mom said. "Thank you for the flowers and the candy. And don't forget to stop by and see Pat."

It was colder outside than it had been. The kids had quit playing shinny. I walked down the area-way and rapped on the Doyles' back door. Rosemary opened it, wearing a big apron over her dress and drying her hands on a dish towel. Pat was sitting at the table in his pants and heavy undershirt, finishing the last of a big T-bone. There was a bottle on the table and he'd been drinking with his meal.

"Breakfast or supper?" I asked him.

He told me, "Supper. I've been pulling a four until midnight but they've got me on a special." He wasn't overly cordial. "Sit down, Barney. That is if you're not too ritsy to sit at a table with a guy in his undershirt."

I pulled out a chair and sat down.

"Don't be that way, Pat. Folks won't like you."

He sucked at a piece of steak that had gotten stuck in one of his teeth. "Can be I'm mistaken. But before you had yourself put away, kid, it seems to me you were flying pretty high. Not much time for old friends, eh?"

I admitted, "So maybe I got a little big-headed. I wonder why. Maybe because until I started cutting in on those big purses, the most I ever saw in my life was the dough I got once a month for saying, 'Pfc. Barney Mandell, Company A, 2nd platoon.'"

He thawed a little. Enough to pour himself a shot and push the bottle over to me. "Looking at you."

I said I was off the stuff but could go for a cup of coffee, and Rosemary poured me a cup. "You wanted to see me. Why, Pat?"

DOYLE found another piece of steak along the bone and tried to pry it free. "Well, like maybe Rosemary's told you, I'm on loan to the S.A.'s office. We've been working on the blonde business and the Curtis affair all night. Not that we've gotten very far. But I just wanted to tip you not to feel too bad, kid, if your bail is revoked any minute and you're yanked back to the Bureau and booked for First Degree."

I protested, "But I didn't kill the dame, Pat."

He got the piece of steak loose and put it in his mouth. "Sure. I know. I read your statement."

"Curtis believed it."

He chewed on the piece of steak. "Yeah. And now Curtis is dead and the old man with the whiskers is raising hell with us."

"Then Curtis was Federal?"

"I ain't saying yes, I ain't saying no. But this thing is big, Barney, believe me. And because we used to be neighbors, I want to give you a break."

"In what way?"

"If your nose isn't clean, if your statement as of record isn't so, if you've been lying to Inspector Carlton and the State Attorney, the best thing you can do, kid, is grab a handful of transportation and beat it down to the Bureau and tell the boys the truth."

I was tired of having my word doubted. I pushed my chair back from the table and stood up. "To hell with you, too. What's the matter with you, Pat? Jealous? Sore because a guy from the neighborhood gets a few good breaks and marries a little honey whose old man happens to have dough?"

He got a little red but didn't say anything.

I really blew my top. "To hell with all of you, excepting mom. You all make me sick to my stomach, including Joe Mercer. A loud-mouth, am I? A wise guy. A know-it-all from back of the Yards who let a little ring ability and a fortunate marriage go to my head and not my heart.

"Why shouldn't I have a good opinion of myself? I'm next to the top guy in my line. And I've made a lot of dough with my fists. This top coat cost three hundred bucks. This suit cost me a hundred and fifty. I pay thirty bucks for my shoes."

Pat cut me down to size. "That's right. Also, once upon a time, a long, long time ago, you gave your mom an eight hundred dollar television set and a four hundred buck radio-phonograph combination. But for the last two years your old lady has been living on home relief and what us neighbors have chipped in because you're yellow, Barney.

"When the first real big problem in your life came along, you turned chicken. You didn't have the guts to admit to yourself that you'd married a little tramp. So you pretended to swallow her story. You pretended you were crazy and had yourself tucked away in a cushy asylum until

she was ready to let you crawl back.”

He'd gotten to his feet while he was speaking. I said, “That’s a dirty lie,” and started one from the floor.

I was two years out of training and more sick than mad about what he'd just said. Pat handled tough guys three hundred days a year. He let the punch slide over his shoulder, picked up the whiskey bottle and tapped me just hard enough to drop me back into my chair and start the claret flowing from the goose egg formed by the hood slugging me.

Then he reversed the bottle and poured himself a drink. “Now get out of here, Barney. And don't ever come back.” Pat looked at Rosemary. “And if I catch you bawling about Barney again, I'll smack you, too.”

Her face got even whiter than it was but she didn't answer him and, at the time, Pat's remark didn't register on my mind. I was too busy thinking about his first crack. No wonder Joe Mercer thought I was a loudmouth. No wonder Pat despised me. Down back of the Yards there's only one yardstick of conduct. A guy takes care of his own.

He can make the pokey every Saturday night for getting drunk. He can raise hell and get his face beat in. But he shows up for work Monday morning if he has to show up on crutches. He can earn it or beg it or steal it. But he sees to it there's food on his table. And he doesn't blow his pay check until the rent and the grocery bill are paid.

And, if what Pat had just told me was so, something was awfully wrong some where. To the best of my recollection, on the day before I'd committed myself, I'd drawn all my dough from the bank, kept a grand for cigarette money and given Gale ten grand to bank for mom with instructions to mail her fifty dollars a week until I was well again and cou'd transact my own business.

Getting to my feet I pulled my roll from

my pocket, peeled two twenties from it for immediate expenses and tossed what was left, some five hundred odd, on the table.

“Please,” I asked Rosemary. “For old time's sake. Pass that along to mom will you, Rosemary, and tell her I forgot to drop it off.”

Pat looked at me, puzzled. Rosemary caught my arm as I started for the door. “No, Barney. Wait.”

I shrugged off her hand, turned up the collar of my topcoat and walked out into the cold.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Tricky Cigarettes

IT WASN'T a cheerful meal. It reminded me of meals mom and Sam and Milton and myself had eaten out on the grass of the cemetery the first year pop had died and we hadn't got used to it yet and still wanted to be kind of near him. The grass had been long that year. So was the grass under me.

Only this grass was wool and oriental. I could feel it around my ankles, tickling them through the black silk socks I'd put on to match my dinner jacket.

The room was long and wide and high and filled with slinking shadows trying to escape the red and yellow fingers of flame reaching out from the log-burning fireplace on one wall. The only other light was the yellow glow of the candles.

Outside the drawn drapes on the tall windows, I could hear the wind whistling in from the lake and feeling its way through the blue spruce and arborvitae and bare-limbed oak and maple on the expensively landscaped grounds.

The sweep hand of my watch feinted at nine o'clock; then knocked it out of the ring and into time. While Gale had been in Sun Valley, my father-in-law, it seemed, had been dividing his time be-

tween his club and Eagle River. He was sore at Gale for insisting on opening the big house without giving him sufficient time to recall all of the staff.

The only one he'd been able to contact was the cook and Marie had to do the serving. He got even by droning on in a flat-footed twenty round draw about a flaw he had discovered in the basic patent of some snap fastener that had enabled him to save a client some hundreds of thousands of dollars and, incidently, make a nice fee for himself.

Wearing a backless, strapless, evening gown with a plunging neckline, her bare shoulders warm and creamy in the candle light, Gale patted my hand from time to time and gave me her best, "just wait until I get you alone" smile.

I wasn't so certain I wanted to be alone with her. I'd made a point not to be all afternoon. Either there was something in what Pat had said, or I was crazy. You don't just mislay ten thousand dollars. Not even if you're an heiress to millions.

I nibbled at my *Points d'Asperges* and *Filet de bouef Champagnons Frais*, wishing I had a Coney Island hot dog, thinking there probably had been plenty of times when mom had gone hungry—and wondering how a guy went about asking his wife if he had actually given her ten grand in trust for his mother or if the entire transaction had been in his addled mind.

Ebbling came out slow for his last three minutes with the snap fastener, slow-waltzed through the round, then suggested we have our coffee and our liqueur served in the drawing room.

"Oui, Monsieur," Marie beamed. She was a cute little trick, almost as cute as Gale, and about the same age.

"Just coffee for me," I told her.

"Oui, Monsieur."

"Marie likes you," Gale said.

"I like Marie," I assured her.

Gale sat beside me on a love seat. Ebbling chose an easy chair not far away

and offered me one of his dollar cigars. I said I thought I would stay with my dessert transportation and offered a cigarette to Gale.

She snuggled close to me. "No thanks, sweetheart."

I thought one of them might ask how I'd found mom and give me a chance to bring up the ten thousand dollars. Neither of them did. I decided it was just as well. I wanted that out with Gale, alone.

Marie served coffee for the three of us and an anisette for Gale and her father. Ebbling sipped his thoughtfully. The old man didn't look well. The lines in his face were deeper than I remembered them. From time to time he compressed his lips as if he was in pain. Then he brought up the subject I was afraid he would.

"About your trouble, Barney—"

"Yes, sir."

It was one of the few times I'd ever heard him swear. "Damn and double damn, if that isn't a mess," he said. "Are you certain you didn't kill that girl, Barney?"

Gale said, "Father," sharply.

I reached for the cigarette I'd been smoking and, suddenly, the whole black mental morass was back again and I wasn't certain of anything.

GALE'S father had offered me a cigar. I remembered distinctly, or thought I remembered, refusing it, saying I would smoke a cigarette. Yet the cigarette I'd thought I was smoking had turned into a cigar. And it wasn't Ebbling's. He was rolling his between his fingers. I picked the smoking cigar up gingerly and looked at it.

Ebblings' dry voice droned on. "I don't mean to doubt Barney, Gale. I only mean there is something much bigger behind this than just a dead girl. This man who was killed, this Curtis who furnished Barney's bail, turns out to be a Federal employee. And late this afternoon his

superior arrived in Chicago and demanded that Barney's bail be cancelled and he be taken into custody immediately.

"Your bail was quadrupled, Barney. And I not only had to scratch to raise it, I had to pull every wire I could to be permitted to post it. In fact if it wasn't for my rather prominent position in the city, you would be back of bars right now."

My mouth dry, I said, "Thank you, sir."

Gale put her arm around my waist. "I won't let them take him. I won't. Barney hasn't harmed anyone. Why should they want him back in jail?"

Ebbling sighed. "I wish I knew." He got back on the horse he'd ridden that morning. "Are you certain, Barney, this Curtis didn't give you some clue that would enable us to find out just what is in back of this?"

He had been good to me. A minute before I'd have told him that Curtis had mentioned my Uncle Yascha, several millions of dollars, and something even more important.

Now, still looking at the cigarette that had turned into a cigar, I shook my head. I wasn't in any condition to tell anyone anything. For all I knew I'd killed both the blonde and Curtis. I certainly wasn't sane. The best thing I could do was keep my big mouth shut.

He saw me looking at the cigar and asked, "Something wrong with it, Barney? Not quite up to snuff?"

"No," I lied, "it's fine," and put the cigar in my mouth.

Gale looked at me with approval. "I like you in a cigar, Barney. You look so masculine."

Ebbling waved his cigar in the air. "Oh, it will work out, I suppose. These things always do. But it's a puzzler."

He leaned back and blew smoke at the beamed ceiling. I finished my coffee. Either in my mind, or in some other part of the house, a bell rang faintly but per-

sistently, drowning out all other thoughts.

Gale said, "It must be too hot in here. You're perspiring, Barney."

I said, "Do I hear a bell?"

She smiled. "Of course. That's the front door bell."

Even so I was relieved when it stopped. Then Marie tripped in and stirred up everything again. "*Monsieur*," she addressed Ebbling. "Is an Inspector Carlton to see you." She described a big man with her hands. "And two other men who have much the look of, how you say—" She puzzled a moment, then beamed, "I know. The plainclothes *gendarmes*. I have asked them to wait in your study."

Ebbling got heavily to his feet. "You wait here, Barney. Don't leave the room." He looked back at Marie. "Did you tell Inspector Carlton that Mr. Mandell was here?"

The French girl apologized, "But no, *Monsieur*. They did not inquire and I did not offer the information. Should I have done so, *Monsieur*?"

Ebbling shook his head. "No. You haven't seen Mr. Mandell tonight. Is that clear, Marie?"

She bobbed her head. "*Oui, Monsieur*."

Ebbling left the room with her. Gale laid her head on my shoulder. "I love you, Barney, so much. Why did this have to happen to us when we could have been so happy?"

I said I didn't know and sat just holding her, wondering how to broach the subject of the money. Her perfume still bothered me a little. It was identical with the perfume the dead blonde had used. And it wasn't a common scent. I asked her the name of it.

She smiled. "It hasn't any name, Barney. Just a number. I have it made up special for me by a little shop over on Michigan Boulevard." She tweaked my ear. "And do they charge plenty to keep it my personal scent."

I started to tell her the shop was cheating on her and backed away from the subject. I didn't even want to talk about the blonde. I hadn't slept for so long I could feel the kettle drums of fatigue tuning up in my addled gray matter. The scene with mom and, later, Pat, had drained me emotionally. I was both jumpy and dead for sleep at the same time.

There was still the matter of the ten grand to thrash out with Gale. And now I had Inspector Carlton to worry about. I wondered what he wanted. If my quadrupled bail had been cancelled, I didn't like to think about it. I'd dreamed of Gale for two years.

As if she'd read my mind, Gale cupped her hands in back of my head and kissed me. "I love you, Barney."

We broke as Ebbling cleared his throat. His face was as white as his shirt front. "I've just done something," he said, "that I've never done in my life." He sat in his chair and held his forehead in his hands.

"I've filthied my standing as an officer of the court. Carlton was looking for you, Barney. Your bail has been revoked. You're now charged with first degree murder, which is inadmissible to bail. And I told Carlton that you weren't here but that I would try to contact you and surrender you in the morning."

"He believed you?" Gale asked.

"I—think so," Ebbling said.

I asked why he had lied to Carlton. He lifted his head from his hands. "Because I don't think you killed that girl. Because I sincerely like you, Barney. Because, despite your recent mental trouble, an act of such violence isn't consistent with your past record."

Gale wagged my chin with the palm of her hand. "Tough, but oh so gentle."

Ebbling continued, "Remember, I checked on you thoroughly, Barney, before I allowed Gale to marry you. And in your whole past life, including your

army and ring record, there isn't one instance of meanness."

I said sourly, "Except the time I wrung the parrot's neck."

"Yes. There was the parrot," he said thoughtfully. "I'd forgotten about that." He rang the bell for Marie and told her to bring him his coat and hat and inform the chauffeur he wanted to be driven into Chicago immediately.

Gale asked what he intended to do.

He said, "Two things. One, engage a firm of detectives with whom I have done some business to look into the background of the girl Barney is charged with killing. Two, phone our senator in Washington and have him find out the federal interest in this thing."

I got up, saying I'd go with him.

"No. You stay here," he told me. "I don't dare be seen with you, Barney. For the sake of my own reputation and future dealings with the law I can't be confirmed as a liar. You stay here. In the house. And out of sight."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Hot and Cold Chills

WE WALKED with him to the hall. The cold had let up and it had begun to snow, big, white flakes you seldom see except on Christmas cards.

As he buttoned his coat, Ebbling said. "Perhaps I'm being foolish. Perhaps I should have let them take you, Barney. But if we have to go through a trial, I want *something* on which to base a defense. And I think while I'm in town I'll contact Fogle and Dunham. They're both bright young men and much more versed in criminal law than I am."

I said I appreciated everything he had done and was trying to do and hoped some day I could make it up to him.

"Maybe you can," he told me.

Then his big car showed in the plate glass and Marie opened the door for him and he was gone in a flurry of snow flakes.

Marie curtsied to Gale. "Will Madame need me anymore tonight?"

Gale said she would not and walked slowly up the wide front stairs leading to the second floor. I followed, still smoking the cigar I'd thought was a cigarette, wondering if a man's mind could slip a cog, like a broken gear, once in a while, without the entire machine being ruined.

Our suite of rooms hadn't changed. There was a big dressing room and bath. With the silk hangings and the green and yellow parrot in his cage, it looked like a movie set.

The parrot started right in on me.

"Hello, you," he squawked. "Awk. Oh, you kid. Hot stuff. Hot stuff. Hot stuff."

I started to crack wise about being able to do without the bird but before I could, Gale picked up a black cloth cover and shook her finger at him.

"Pretty polly," she reproved him. "Don't be a bad girl now. Time for beddy-bye, sweetheart."

"Awk," he cocked his head. "Oh, you kid. Hot stuff. Time for beddy-bye."

Gale laughed as she covered the cage. I sucked hard at my cigar. If the bird was a female, I was a chorine. More he had a larger vocabulary than any other parrot I had ever heard before. With the cover over his cage he subsided as if his neck had been wrung. The thought made sweat bead on my forehead. I'd wrung one parrot's neck.

Gale patted my cheek. "He doesn't bother you, does he, sweetheart?"

"No. Of course not," I lied.

She slipped out of her evening dress and let it lay where it fell for Maria to pick up in the morning. I hung my dinner jacket in the closet, then, opening the chest of 'Mr.' drawers found the purple silk pajamas I'd paid fifty dollars for.

When I turned again, Gale was brushing her hair, preparatory to braiding it for the night. She was matter of fact about it as she lifted her lips to be kissed. "Seeing this is your first night home, you can have the first shower, darling. But don't be long about it."

I hadn't figured on taking a shower but it was a good idea. I could still smell the pokey on me. Old man fatigue was leading for my jaw, my eyelids were beginning to sag, and I wanted a long talk with Gale. I *had* to know about the ten grand. A quick cold shower would keep me on my feet.

I stripped to my shorts and walked on into the bathroom. The shower was in a separate stall with a frosted glass door. I turned on the faucet marked *Cold* and started to step in just as Gale said something I couldn't hear because of the rush of the water. I walked back to the door and admitted:

"I didn't catch that, honey."

She wrinkled her nose at me. "Go take your shower. I merely said I love you."

"I love you, too," I told her and stepped into the shower—and almost scalded myself. The tap I'd turned on read *Cold*, but the water coming out was steaming.

I turned it off and considered calling Gale. Then the old, familiar, lump of ice began to form in my stomach. Thinking cold water was hot and hot water was cold had been one of my former hallucinations. This was as good a way as any of proving if the sickeyackes had been wrong in discharging me as cured.

I DRIED what little water I'd gotten on me, put on my pajamas, and was pretending to wash my teeth when Gale walked into the bathroom and turned on the water in the shower.

I stood by ready to warn her, but it wasn't necessary. The *Cold* tap, seemingly, poured out cold water for her. Glancing up, Gale saw me looking at her and

splashed a handful of water at me. It was cold.

I walked on into the bedroom and sat down, trying to keep my teeth from chattering. I had to face the fact. Rosemary was wrong. My brains were scrambled. *I'd taken one punch too many. I didn't have enough marbles to distinguish hot from cold.*

It opened a new field of thought. Could be I had killed the blonde. Could be I had killed Curtis. Could be I'd never given Gale ten grand to take care of mom. I sat, my teeth chattering. Then the damn parrot let loose on me.

"Awk. That bum. Forget him. You're beautiful, beautiful, beautiful. And you're mine, all mine. Awk. How's about a kiss?"

The cover was off his cage and I'd seen Gale cover him. It was more than I could take. Getting up, I batted the cage with a hard right that sent it spinning out of the stand.

The parrot awking and squawking, it camed off the wall and banked into Gale's dressing table, scattering her perfume bottles and cosmetics.

She ran in, wearing a prim white cotton nightgown that made her look fourteen instead of twenty-four. "Barney!" she screamed at me. "What's wrong?"

I shouted back at her. "Did you cover that bird?"

She was eager to please me. "No. But I will right away. Please don't get so excited, Barney." She ran around like mad, picking up the cage, hanging it back on the stand, and finding a dark green cover. She was crying now. "I knew I shouldn't have had that bird in here. It made you think of that other awful time. I'm sorry, Barney."

The bird *awked* a couple of times and was still.

I sat down. Gale sat beside me, looking small and frightened. "You're all right now, Barney?"

"I don't think so," I told her. "I'm afraid I'm plenty sick, kid." I wanted to cinch it once and for all. "Remember when I went away before. Gale?"

She said, "Yes?" with a catch in her voice.

"How much did I give you to dole out to my mother once a week?"

Her eyes filled with tears and spilled over. "You didn't give me anything, Barney. I asked you at the time if you wanted me to send her a weekly cheek, but you said it wasn't necessary as you had provided for her."

"I told you that?"

"You did."

"I didn't give you ten grand, and ask you to send mom fifty dollars a week while I was tucked away?"

"No."

"Okay. That tears it."

"Tears what?"

"Everything. The sickey ackeys were wrong in discharging me. I belong in a padded cell. And you'd better grab a train and get back to Sun Valley, kid."

"Why?"

"Because both you and your father have been swell to me. And I don't want you to get in any deeper."

"Deeper in what, Barney?"

"This mess I'm in. Your father shouldn't have put up the additional bail. He shouldn't have told Inspector Carlton that I wasn't here. He should have let them take me back to quod."

Gale began to cry. "Barney. You didn't kill that girl, did you? Tell me, Barney."

I looked around for a cigarette. She took one from the box on the side table and put it between my lips. I lighted it and told her, "I'm beginning to wonder. In the light of what's happened this evening, it's very possible I did." I got up and, taking off my pajama tops, put on my undershirt.

Gale caught at my arm. "Where do you

think you're going? What are you doing?"

I told her. "Down to give myself up."

"No, Barney. Please," she pleaded. "You must be mistaken. You have to be. Please wait until morning. At least until daddy comes home."

I scowled at the cigarette. Everything I put into my mouth tasted like a cigar.

"Lie down and compose yourself, Barney. You look so fierce you frighten me."

I was over-fatigued and disgusted with myself. I let myself be persuaded, thinking perhaps it would be just as well to let Mr. Ebbling surrender me as he had promised Inspector Carlton he would.

I sucked smoke into my lungs, starting at the ceiling. It had been a nice dream while it lasted. Back-of-the-Yards boy makes good. Barney Mandell, son of Berny and Marta Mandell, nephew of Yascha Mancowitz, fights his way to the top of the heap and marries society heiress. And they lived happily ever after.

Hah. Was that a laugh. It was a dilly. A wow. If the law didn't give me a legal hot-foot, it would tuck me away for life. And I had it coming.

I'd let Gale and her father down. I'd let down mom. I'd let down Rosemary and Pat and John. I'd let down Joe Mercer and Mr. Curtis. I'd acted like a heel to everyone who had ever been decent to me.

All I wanted to do was die.

CHAPTER NINE

No Squawking, Sucker

AS DREAMS go, it was screwball. Despite the fact there were six inches of snow in the ring and more snow sizzling as it pelted down on the white lights over the ring, I was fighting for the title in an open air bout at Cub's Park.

The guy was good. He belted me at will, me being somewhat hampered in my

foot-work by the snow shoes I was wearing. Fed up eating leather, I clinched and looked at the crowd. Mom, Rosemary, Pat, John, Mr. Ginty, old man Hepplemeyer, Angelo, Mr. and Mrs. Gold, all the old neighborhood, even Joe Mercer, were there, all of them yelling:

"Take him, Barney. You're our boy. Knock him out of the ring. Oh, you Barney Mandell."

Joe was yelling loudest of all. Him having written such nasty things about me, it made me feel plenty good and I waded into my opponent throwing leather, only to have the referee step between us and sob, "*Foul.*"

The referee was the faceless blonde. I turned away, gagging. Then the snow turned to rain and I tripped on one of my snow shoes and fell flat on my face and almost knocked myself out just as the round bell rang.

I rolled over on my back and lay, panting hard, thinking I'd better take a five count. It was difficult to breathe. My mouthpiece was choking me. I tried to fumble it out of my mouth with my glove and metal slapped against my cheek and the bell kept on ringing and ringing and from down in one of the ringside seats the parrot began to awk:

"Oh, you kid. Hello you. Hot stuff. Hot stuff. Hot stuff."

My eyes felt like they'd been sealed with glue. I pried them open with the hand without any metal in it. I was lying, fully dressed, on the floor of Gale's room. The parrot stand was tipped over. The thing I'd slapped myself with was a gun. The bell I heard ringing was the phone. And Gale wasn't in the room.

I got to my feet groggily and picked up the extension.

"Sergeant Breen calling back, Mrs. Mandell," a man's voice said crisply. "We've notified the Lake Forest police and one of their cars and four of our own are on the way. Just keep him locked

in the room until the first police car gets there."

"Thank you," Gale said, low-voiced, and hung up.

I dropped the receiver back into the cradle and sat on the edge of the bed, wondering why Gale was crying, wondering when I'd gotten dressed, and why; looking at the gun in my hand, wondering where I'd gotten it.

It felt awkward. I transferred it to my left hand and rubbed my right palm over my mouth. My tongue felt twice its usual size, like I'd been on a canned-heat jag. Then I saw Mr. Ebbling.

He was lying on the floor a few feet from the door, one hand outstretched as if he had been reaching for the knob when he'd fallen. I knelt beside him and turned him over. He was dead. The front of his dress shirt was sodden with blood already beginning to clot.

I walked on into the bathroom and was sick. I'd wanted to die and Mr. Ebbling was dead. I broke the gun and looked at the cylinder. All of the chambers but two had been fired.

What had happened seemed fairly obvious. My homicidal tendency caused by the one punch too many had boiled over again. For some reason I had killed a man who had been trying to help me. But why? In the name of the Illinois Boxing Commission, why? I liked the guy. He had been good to me.

I sat on the stool and forced myself to think. The last I remembered was smoking a cigarette, with Gale sobbing she didn't want them to lock me up in any nasty asylum, that she would rather see me dead.

There was no argument there. I'd had all I wanted of snake pits.

In sudden decision I closed the gun, spun the cylinder so the hammer would fall on one of the two live shells and put the barrel of the gun in my mouth.

Here goes nothing, I thought.

BUT pulling the trigger was another matter. My brain gave the message but my finger refused to contract. I wasn't afraid to die.

It was the way I intended to go, the easy way. So I'd been in a brawl with life and gotten my teeth kicked in. I still was running out without picking up the tab. I wasn't showing up for work. I was spending the last of the big pay check without settling the grocery bill. As few brains as I had, and those few scrambled, I could write the lead on Joe Mercer's story:

Early this morning, in the palatial Ebbling home, showing the broad yellow stripe down his back, loud-mouthed Barney Mandell, alleged heavyweight contender, climaxed his two-day blood bath by shooting the man who had attempted to befriend him, then, putting the barrel of the murder gun in his mouth—

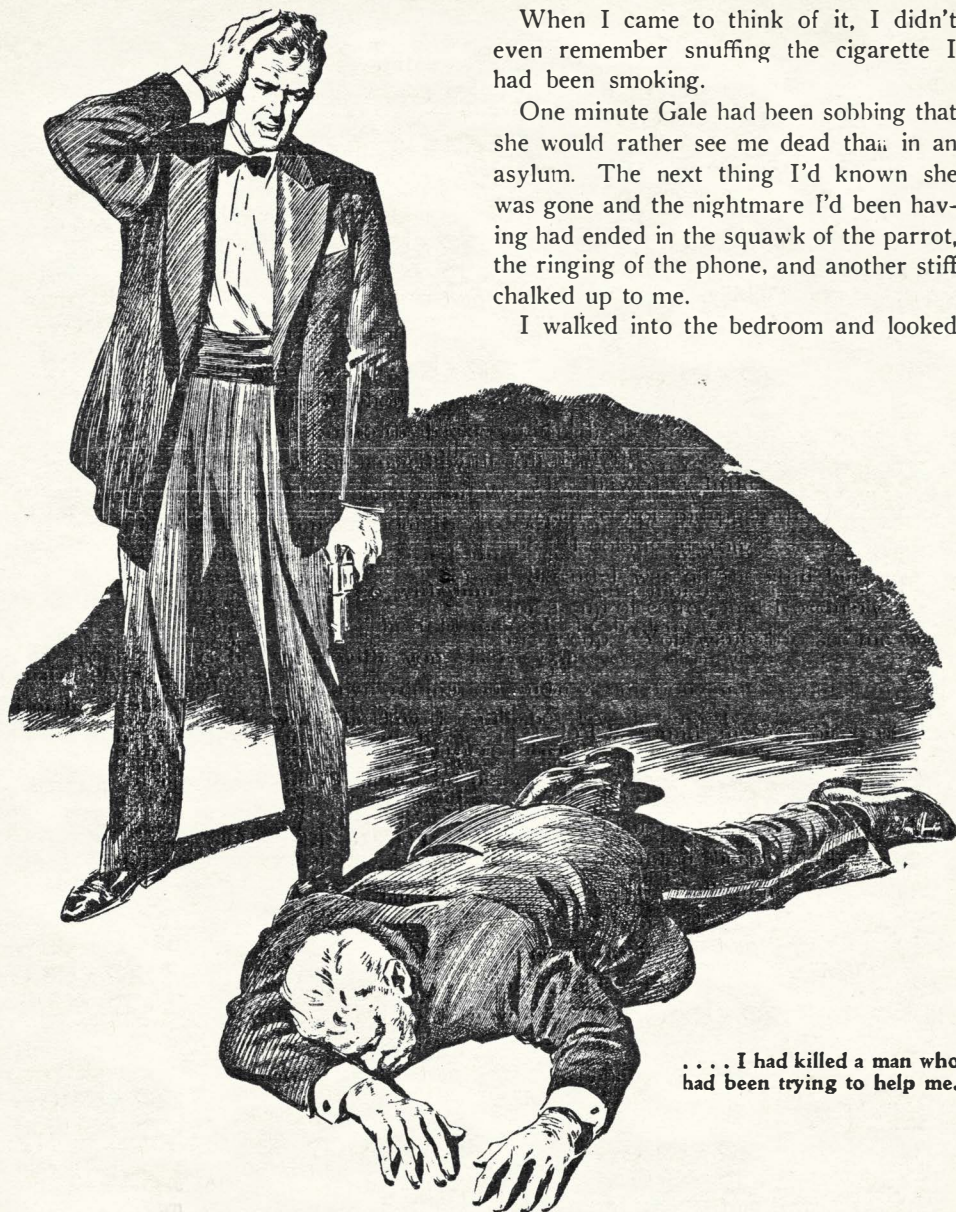
I took the barrel out of my mouth and dropped the gun in my pocket. I was damned if I'd kill myself. I'd been called a lot of things but no one, with the exception of Rosemary's brother Pat, had ever called me yellow. I'd taken them as they came. I could take this, too. If the law wanted a pound of flesh, it could have it. If it wanted to lock me up in a snake pit, that was all right, too.

I felt a lot better after that. I started to get up, thought of something screwy. I'd come to with the gun in my right hand and I was naturally left handed. Where had I gotten the gun in the first place? If it was Ebbling's, he certainly hadn't handed it to me, saying:

"Here. Shoot me, Barney."

I doubted I could have with my left hand. And where had Gale been when it happened? *Why didn't I remember her screams? Why was it I could remember all the silly little things that happened?* Hot water coming out of a cold water tap. A cigarette that turned into a cigar. A parrot that was covered, then wasn't.

But when it came to the big stuff—the



When I came to think of it, I didn't even remember snuffing the cigarette I had been smoking.

One minute Gale had been sobbing that she would rather see me dead than in an asylum. The next thing I'd known she was gone and the nightmare I'd been having had ended in the squawk of the parrot, the ringing of the phone, and another stiff chalked up to me.

I walked into the bedroom and looked

... I had killed a man who had been trying to help me.

only thing I could remember was thinking I had seen Gale in another man's arms. I didn't remember killing the blonde. I certainly hadn't killed Curtis. I suddenly doubted I had killed Ebbing. If I had, insane or not, certainly some vague memory of it would have stayed in my mind.

at the ash tray on the table. It had been emptied and washed. Then, stooping, I pulled Ebbing's shirt out and looked for the source of the blood. There were two bullet holes in his abdomen, one of them red and angry looking, the other one white and puckered.

I looked from Ebbing to the parrot.

The stand was lying on its side but the cage was upright on the floor. The wire was no longer bent where I had punched it, nor was any of the gilt scratched off from its two-cushion bank into Gale's dressing table.

Seeing me looking at it, the parrot awked:

"Hello there. Hot stuff. Oh, you kid."

Squatting down in front of the cage, I tried to awk like a parrot. "That bum. Forget him. You're beautiful, beautiful, beautiful. And you're mine, all mine. How's about a kiss?"

He or she played it coy and tucked his or her head under his or her wing. Then, deciding I was friendly, if a hell of a looking parrot, pecked at my finger and repeated:

"Hello. Oh, you kid. Hot stuff. Hot stuff. Hot stuff."

I got up and tried the door. Gale was following Sergeant Breen's instructions. It was locked. It was also too strong to break down. And the first of the cars Breen had mentioned was due to show any minute. I opened a window and looked down. The snow made the ground look soft. I knew it wasn't. But all I had left to break was my neck.

I started to crawl over the sill, but there was one more thing I had to know. Walking back into the bathroom I turned on the tap in the shower marked *Cold* and felt the water gingerly. It was cold.

There was a dress topcoat and a black homburg hat in the closet. I put them on. Then, lowering myself from the window until I was hanging by my finger tips, I dropped.

The ground under the snow was frozen. I landed with a jolt that reminded me of some of the therapeutic shock treatments I had taken, but by throwing myself sideways and rolling as I landed, I came up in one piece.

Back on my feet again I dodged back of a blue spruce and brushed the snow

from my coat and hat, watching the house to see if anyone on the first floor had heard me. Seemingly no one had.

The first-floor drawing room drapes were drawn, but I could see the light where the drapes didn't quite come together. I walked up to the window and looked in.

FACING the window in which I was looking, one pretty leg up on the arm in a very un-maid-like position, Marie was sprawled in an easy chair, a cigarette in one hand and a highball glass in the other, nodding sagely in answer to something someone I couldn't see was saying.

It was like watching an old silent picture. I could see but I couldn't hear. I could hear a siren, faintly. That would be the Lake Forest car. No matter how fast they drove, the other cars Breen had mentioned couldn't reach the lake shore community in much less than half an hour.

I turned away from the window, turned back as Gale entered the room. She'd changed into white hostess pajamas that made her look her age. Lighting a cigarette and sucking the smoke deep in her lungs, she said something to the party whom I couldn't see.

Marie laughed nastily at whatever it was Gale had said, and raised her other leg to the arm of the chair.

Then a man moved into the picture. All I could see was his back. The visored cap and the well-cut gray twill uniform he was wearing decided me he must be 'daddy's new chauffeur'.

He poured Gale a drink, a big one, and insisted that she drink it. Then he laid down the law to both girls. They both nodded when he'd finished. The three of them seemed cagy but confident. Then the lad in the chauffeur's uniform looked at the ceiling and Gale's lips formed two words that could only be:

"Any time."

There was an amused smile on her lips as she said it. Gale expected me to shoot myself. Feeling as I did about her, I wondered why it didn't make me feel bad. Then I realized I didn't feel any way about her. She didn't affect me one way or another. Viewed from a distance, with no smoke in my eyes, she was just a dame I had known. And not a very nice dame. Not according to the standards by which mom and Rosemary lived.

Gale had said, "*I love you, love you, love you.*"

The hell she did. She loved something I had or could give her. And that something wasn't Barney Mandell. Every time she had been in my arms, mouthing sweet-nothings, she'd been mentally picking my wallet.

She'd also said, "*I'd rather see you dead than locked up in some nasty asylum.*" That I was willing to buy. She'd planted the thought in my mind and left me both a means and a reason. Just why she wanted me dead, I didn't know. I meant to find out, if I could, before Inspector Carlton and his boys caught up with me.

I felt a little sick. Pat, Joe Mercer, all the guys in the old neighborhood had known Gale for what she was. Everyone but me. I'd been blinded by a dream, a dream about finding the blue bird me and Rosemary had read about in our high school English class.

In Gale's eyes, I was just a big palooka she'd deliberately bewitched for some reason. And, seeing the trouble both she and her father had gone to, the reason had to be good. It had to be a long shot that would pay off with me either dead or alive, and preferably dead.

As I watched, Gale said something to the lad in uniform. I knew who he was even before he turned. I hadn't gotten a look at anything but the back of his head when old man Ebbling had driven me from Central Bureau to my hotel. But I'd seen his good-looking, smirking face

a lot during the two years I'd spent in a snake pit.

It was small wonder Gale hadn't minded me leaving her to go see mom. It was small wonder she and Marie had laughed when the door had closed behind me. And they hadn't been laughing at the awking parrot.

'Daddy's new chauffeur' was the lad I had caught her with just before she and Mr. Ebbling had convinced me I was crazy and had persuaded me to commit myself for treatment. Before I got violent.

Brother, was that a laugh.

The night was overcast with storm clouds. There was no moon. Being careful to keep a tree or shrub between me and the house, I waded the snow to the highway and stood in back of a clump of arborvitae. The police car whose siren I'd heard roared up the road and turned in the expensively landscaped Ebbling drive on two wheels.

Then I walked on down the highway openly and turned to thumb the next car bound south. It was early morning. No one but a fool would stop to pick up a hitch hiker at that hour.

But the driver's headlights showed him a seemingly clean-cut lad in dark evening dress.

An Evanston business man homeward bound from Lake Bluff, he assumed my car had broken down and was glad to give me a lift.

I fed him a line of bull to fatten his conjecture. Then I just sat back, feeling good. I hadn't realized I was making with the lips until just the other side of Winnetka, he laughed.

"Not that I mind it, friend. It's pretty. But why? What are you feeling so happy about?"

"Well, I'll tell you, chum," I told him. "I lost my whistle two years ago. And I just found it again tonight."

He laughed like *he* was crazy.

CHAPTER TEN

Fancy Frame

IT HAD snowed in Chicago, too. The snow plows were busy on the car tracks and the boulevards, but the snow on the street was unbroken. My cab left the first track.

As he pulled his flag in front of mom's the driver looked at my boiled white shirt and asked, "You a waiter in some hot spot, chum? Or you been to an all-night wedding?"

"A wake, pal," I told him as I paid him off. "I just buried a dream."

He was noncommittal. "Could be," he agreed. "But you'd better sober up before you go to work, chum. Jobs are getting scarce."

He made a tight U turn and headed back toward Wentworth. I stood a moment, just feeling good. There were lights in a few of the windows. More lights winked on as I watched. The crisp, morning air was spiced with the smell of frying onions and steak and liver. I wasn't hungry but it smelled swell.

Flipping my butts at a dirty snow man the kids had scraped up the night before, I walked down the area-way between the two houses and looked at my watch, as I rapped on the Doyle back door.

It was a few minutes of six. The small white cottage was still heavy with sleep. I tapped on the door again, then tried the knob. The back door was unlocked. Rosemary seldom bothered to lock it except when she was alone.

What with two big cops living in the cottage, both of them handy with a gun, and a gun handy, no prowler in his right mind would try to snitch as much as a milk bottle from the porch.

The kitchen was warm and quiet. I tiptoed in, closing the door behind me. Then I took off my topcoat and my hat, trying to remember if Pat and John slept in the

front or the back room. I wanted to talk to Pat if he was home, but John would do if he wasn't.

Both big guys were honest as eight hours work for eight hours pay. And before I turned myself in at the Bureau, I wanted to go on record. I wanted a friend in court. I wanted someone to know my side of the story. It could be I'd burn. It could be I'd be sent back to an asylum. But I wanted mom and Rosemary and all the old neighborhood to know I wasn't completely a heel. I wanted them to know my side of the story.

Both bedroom doors were closed. No sound was coming from either. I cracked the back bedroom door and peeked in. As I did, the alarm clock on the dresser rang. Rosemary slipped out of bed, put on a cotton wrapper, switched on the overhead light, and padded across the floor to shut off the alarm before I could close the door.

"Oh," she said, "it's you. I heard someone in the kitchen. But I thought it was one of the boys. What are you doing here, Barney?"

I had to tell her. "I'm not crazy. And I'm married to a tramp."

She brushed the hair out of her eyes. "Now you come crying. At five-thirty in the morning." She looked worried. "You'd better get out of here, Barney. If Pat or John wake up and find you here—"

She looked over my shoulder and her eyes went wide. The snout of a gun rammed into the small of my back. "John is awake," John said. "You're asking for it, Barney. And you're going to get it, fellow. What are you doing here?"

Rosemary said, "Surprise. It seems Barney dropped in to tell me he's just realized his wife's no good."

Pat spun me away from the door and into a kitchen chair. "It could be I'm wrong. Maybe you are crazy, Barney." In the gray of morning feeling through the

window they both looked seven feet tall. Pat looked at me, puzzled. "The whole Force beating the city for you and you show up here fresh as a daisy, wearing a head waiter's suit."

"I'm not crazy, Pat," I told him. "I never was crazy. See? And I came here to go on record before they lock me up and throw away the key. I want to talk to you."

"FOR one thing, Mr. Ebbling's dead. He was shot early this morning. And they're going to pin that on me, too. Although that didn't go quite as planned. I came to with a gun in my hand and the idea firmly planted in what passes with me for brains that I would be better off dead. The theory being I would do a Dutch."

John asked, "Why didn't you?"

I said, "You've known me since we were kids, John."

"So what?"

"So I'm a loud mouth. So I got big-headed. But did you ever know me to take a dive or walk out on a tab I'd run up?"

He thought a moment, said, "No."

Pat sneered, "What would you call letting your mother live on relief?"

"That's what tipped me," I said. "I didn't know she was living on relief. The day before I had myself committed I gave Gale ten thousand dollars and instructions to send mom fifty every week until I came out cured."

"I knew it," Rosemary said.

"What's more," I continued, "there was another guy, see? I didn't *think* I caught Gale two-timing me. I did." I was so filled with it, it gushed out. "And the cold and hot water gag was merely a matter of getting some plumber to cut in a diverter and a shut-off on the regular pipes. Marie switched my cigarette for a cigar when she served my coffee.

"There were two parrots. I mean besides the one whose neck they said I

wrung. A male who squawked, *'That bum. Forget him. You're beautiful, beautiful, beautiful. And you're mine, all mine. How's about a kiss?'* And a female who awked, *'Hello, you. Oh, you kid. Hot stuff. Hot stuff. Hot stuff!'*

"And the French maid isn't a maid. She's one of the gang. And the chauffeur's not only Gale's boy friend, he's the king pin and probably the guy who killed Ebbling. On account of the old man was shot twice. Once some hours ago. And once just before I came to."

Pat passed his hand over his face and looked at John. "Was there a drink left in that bottle we brought home from Ginty's last night?"

"One apiece, I think," John said. He got the bottle from the pantry and the two of them killed it between them.

Pat smacked his lips and looked at me. "Now would you mind starting all over, Barney? And take it slower this time."

Rosemary switched on the kitchen light. "Not until we eat." She filled the coffee pot and ladled coffee into it. Rosemary turned on another burner and knifed lard into a spider. "When the boys turn you in, mom and I are going along." She reached for the egg bowl. "How many eggs can you eat, Barney?"

"Six," I told her, sober faced.

Then, for some reason, we both grinned. . . .

We were still kicking it around at eight o'clock. John had called his station and reported sick. Mom had sat in on the conference for an hour. Neither John nor Pat were completely convinced of the truth of my story. I didn't blame them. They stood to lose their badges if they tried to give me a hand and I was lying to them.

Things went better after I thought of calling Eagle River. The local operator had no record of any long distance call put through on the afternoon before from the Ebbling Lodge to me.

Rosemary pursed her lips. "Ebbling just *said* he was calling from Eagle River." Then she insisted that Pat call Sun Valley long distance.

The room clerk checked the records, then came back on the wire. "No, officer," he told Pat. "I'm sorry not to be able to help you, but we've had no guest by the name of Mrs. Barney Mandell recently. At least not within the last month."

Whistling softly, Pat asked me if I thought it would be worth while to check the dude ranches and motels in the vicinity. I said I did not as Gale had told me she had stayed at the big hotel.

Rosemary nibbled at her lower lip. "That would seem to sew it up. Both father and daughter were lying. Ebbling wasn't in Eagle River. She wasn't in Sun Valley. They were both probably here in Chicago hatching the pay-off to this thing. But then, what is the pay-off?"

Mom said emphatically, "Has something to do with Uncle Yascha. A smart man he was, papa said. A professor in a college."

John discounted that. "But teachers don't make any dough. They're in the same class as cops. You're sure now, Barney. The federal man who was killed mentioned a million dollars?"

"And something even more important."

Rosemary picked up the phone and Pat asked who she was going to call. She said, "Uncle Dennis."

Inspector Doyle was just leaving for his office. "No. I don't know a thing about it, honey," he told Rosemary. "That is, except there is more pressure being put on the department to find young Mandell than I've seen for a long time."

"Local or Federal?" she asked the inspector.

Uncle or not, he was cagey. "Well pressure. What's your interest in this, Rosemary?"

She said, "Barney used to live next

door to us. And his mother still does."

"Say," Doyle enthused, "that's right. I'd forgotten about that. Thanks for calling, dear. I'll order a stake-out put on Mrs. Mandell's house immediately."

Pat gave his sister a dirty look. "Now you've done it."

I said that was okay with me, that I wasn't trying to keep from being pinched. I just wanted my side of the story on record.

JOHN reached for his hat and overcoat from the kitchen hooks. "Then let's get down to the Bureau. If Barney gets in the car in the garage, none of the neighbors will see him."

We plowed down the snow-filled alley to Wentworth, Pat sitting up front with John. I sat in the back seat between Rosemary and mom, keeping the collar of my topcoat closed so my boiled white shirt wouldn't show. Heading north on Wentworth we passed a couple of radio cars, but the boys riding them knew Pat and John and all they did was wave.

Once Pat growled, "For all we know, there may be a shoot-to-kill out on you, Barney. I hope you realize we're sticking out our necks trying to give you a break."

I told him, "Nuts. You guys aren't doing this for friendship. You're just after a boost up the ladder." But neither of us said it sore-like. It was just like we used to talk back and forth before I got in the money and married Gale and got big-headed.

There'd been a time when if you licked Pat or John, you had to lick me, too. And the same thing had gone for them. Once the three of us, along with Joe Mercer, had stood off the whole neighborhood for a week.

I asked John if he knew where Joe Mercer lived. He named a hotel on South Michigan. I said, "Then cut over and stop by for him. I want Joe in on this."

He shrugged but cut east to the hotel. Pat got out and went inside. While he was gone, Rosemary asked me, "Just how did you meet Gale, Barney?"

I said, "At a milk fund fight. She was one of the Junior Leaguers in charge of something or other. And, looking back, I can see she practically threw herself at me."

John grinned sourly. "Of course you ducked."

"No," I admitted. "I didn't."

Mom stood up for me. "Why should he? How should he know she was bad. Barney is a box-fighter, a champion. About women, he knows absolutely from nothing."

"That," Rosemary said, "I'll buy."

She and mom both laughed. I couldn't see anything funny. I was still whistling. But it was out of the corner of my mouth. The closer I got to Central Bureau, the less I liked the set-up. I couldn't *prove* I hadn't killed Ebbling, or Curtis, or the blonde.

For all our kicking it around and our phone calls, it would probably boil down to my word against Gale's. She had both money and looks. I was down on the books as a punch-drunk fighter who'd just spent two years in a snake pit. All she had to do was show a jury her legs. If I showed them mine, I'd get ninety-nine years in addition to whatever else they decided to plaster me with.

Pat came out of the hotel followed by Joe Mercer. Joe looked at me like I was dirt. "Running true to form, eh, Barney? When the going got really rugged, you came back yipping 'mama'."

Mom leaned out of the car. "Was all a big mistake, Joe. Before Barney went to the hospital, he is giving that girl money and instructions she should send me so much every week."

Joe pushed his hat on the back of his head. "You can prove that, Barney?"

I said, "I can't prove I gave the money

to Gale. But the bank records will show I drew eleven grand the day before I had myself committed. And the records out at the fish bowl should show I turned up there with one."

He thought that over, then asked, "How about that mess out at Ebbling's last night? You shoot the old man?"

"I can't prove that either," I said. "But the answer I'm stuck with is no."

Joe nudged Pat over and got in beside him. "Let's roll. I've either got a hell of a story here or Barney should be back in a snake pit."

John had his car radio tuned in to the police band. As we rolled south again, the P.D.C. announcer came in with:

Calling all cars . . . Calling all cars . . . Remember . . . The code on Barney Mandell is one-oh-one. . . .

Joe Mercer whistled softly.

I asked Pat, "What's one-oh-one? Is that the new code on shoot first and ask questions later?"

He turned in the seat and looked at me thoughtfully. "Hell, no. That's code for 'Fragile. Handle carefully. Bring the guy in wrapped in cotton.' Maybe I should ought to get in back and hold you in my lap."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Siren's Smoke-screen

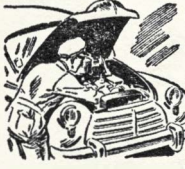
A HALF-DOZEN uniformed cops and plainclothes men nodded to Pat and John and Joe as we crossed the foyer of Central Bureau to the elevators, but none of them paid any attention to me. They were all too busy rushing out to look for Barney Mandell.

Pat asked the cage operator if he'd seen Inspector Carlton lately. "That I have, Pat," he informed him. "The inspector is in his office. Him and the State Attorney, and half of the brass in town."

"We'll take the same," Mercer said.



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Day Keene

The office was much the same as the foyer. Two guys headed out almost knocked me down as we walked in. The lad on the up-and-down hadn't been whoofing about the brass. The office was packed with it. Every chair was taken and guys were standing against the wall. In addition to the brass, the hood who had stuck me up in my hotel room, Doctor Orin Harris, two of the sickey ackeys from the snake pit, the chauffeur whose name I didn't know, and Marie were standing in front of Carlton's desk.

Wearing a platinum mink coat over her two-piece, bare-midriff, hostess pajamas, Gale was also among those present. But she wasn't feeling hospitable. She wasn't even pretty. Her face screwed up in a knot, she was pounding on Carlton's desk, screaming:

"This is an outrage. You had no right to bring me down here. You have no right to hold me now I'm here. I demand to be permitted to phone my lawyer."

Standing beside Inspector Carlton, a slim, poker-faced man who looked something like Curtis had looked waved her hysterics aside. "In due time, Mrs. Mandell."

It wasn't what he said. It was the manner in which he said it. He didn't raise his voice but the old bald eagle was flapping his wings on every word. "That is—if you are legally Mrs. Mandell. Which I doubt very much. We have you listed on our records as *Senhora Goyandira*, nee Gale Ebbing, married to *Capitão Goyandira* of the Brazilian Army in São Paulo, Brazil on July 2nd, 1947."

I made a mental calculation. That had been about five months before Gale and I had been married.

I expected Gale to call him a liar. Instead she looked at the lad in the chauffeur's uniform and began to cry.

Harper, as I later learned the bald eagle's name was, continued, "Said *Capi-*

Polly Wants a Killer

tão Goyandria cashiered from the Brazilian Army a few weeks later for personal activities inimicable to the best interests of Brazil. That right, *Capitão?*"

Goyandira spat on the floor.

Harper shrugged and looked at Doctor Harris. "Now, just for the record, Doctor, how much did Mr. Ebling pay you for your part in convincing Mandell he was punch-drunk? Or are you working for the same organization?"

The big-shot stickey ackey polished his rimless eyeglasses and said thinly, "I refuse to answer that question on the grounds it would violate my constitutional rights."

"I see," Harper said. He nodded to one of Inspector Carlton's boys. "Take Doctor Harris upstairs to a detention cell, will you, Mack, and let him look at his constitutional rights through bars for a few hours. It may make him more cooperative."

Mack hustled the doctor past us out of the office. No one laughed. Harper looked at the two doctors from the asylum. "How about you, fellows? Are you willing to go to court with your story?"

"Absolutely," one of them said. "Mandell wasn't any more punch-drunk than I am. We accepted him on Doctor Harris' prognosis and the proper commitment papers, of course. But when we ran our own tests, we couldn't find a thing to back either the prognosis or commitment. Being as crowded as we are out there with patients who really need treatment, we tried to have the commitment revoked but ran into a political stone wall."

"Set up by the patient's alleged father-in-law and Doctor Harris?"

"So we were given to understand."

"But when they wanted him out, they wanted him out in a hurry."

"Right."

"Thanks. Thanks a lot." Harper

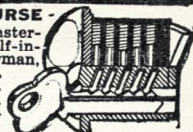
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smiled. "We'll need you again later on. But that will be all for you fellows right now."

They shook hands with Harper and left the office. The hood who had stuck me up didn't wait for the federal man to pick on him. He came forward and got it over with.

"LOOK—" he laid his cards on the desk. "I don't want a lawyer. I'm not beefing. I know when I'm in something up to my neck. But I didn't know that dead girl was in the bathroom. And I don't know why Mr. Ebbing wanted to pin her on to Barney. All I did was stick up Mandell, like Mr. Ebbing paid me to."

"But why toss Barney's wallet under the bed?"

"Mr. Ebbing told me to."

"And he paid you to do this, when?"

"That afternoon. A few hours after we saw Barney drinking in the Royal. He is going to teach him a lesson, Mr. Ebbing said, but he doesn't want it should cost him any money."

Inspector Carlton said wryly, "No. Just cause us to doubt his word."

Gale pounded on the desk again. "Stuff. He's lying. My father was in Eagle River."

Harper agreed with her. "Um hmm." He'd been doing some long distance telephoning, too. "Just like you were in Sun Valley, *Senhora*."

Gale straightened as if he had slapped her.

The next time I say the law is dumb I hope I have to fight with both hands tied behind my back. The boys might have gotten off on the wrong foot, but they had been plenty busy since. Inspector Carlton took up the story.

"Of course," he said quietly, "it was your father, perhaps with *Capitão* Goyandira's assistance, who killed Cherry Marvin. We have established both men in the

Polly Wants a Killer

vicinity of the hotel on the afternoon in question. We've also identified Mr. Ebbling as the mysterious Mr. Smith who visited Miss Marvin. His giving her a vial of perfume made especially for you helped us there. Why he chose her as Barney's supposed victim will have to come out at the trial. But men who have sunken as low as Ebbling had don't need reasons. They act on impulse to cover up the last dirty mess they made. We also know, of course, that it was Ebbling who followed Curtis and Barney and who shot Curtis and tried to kill Barney before Curtis could explain just why he had bailed him out." His face got red. "Just how dumb do you folks think we are?"

Harper laughed. "Be grateful they do." Sobering, he pointed a finger at Marie. "And it was you, of course, Marie, who shot Mr. Ebbling tonight with the same gun with which he shot Curtis in the hope of making one murder charge against Barney Mandell stick and still get what you were after."

"Is a lie!" the French girl exploded. Goyandira tried to shut her up and couldn't. "I am just what you call, the little fly. I am only work for money." She pointed a finger at Goyandira. "It was he who shot Mr. Ebbling. The *Capitaine* called him a bungler and a fool and shot him in Gale's boudoir and pressed the gun in which he did it into Monsieur Mandell's hand, hoping he would kill himself when he came to." She shrugged her shoulders. "Not that Mr. Ebbling had long to live. He was already dying from the exchange of shots with, how you call, the federal man."

Gale put her hands in her face.

Harper sighed. "Well, that would seem to tie it up. With the exception of locating Barney Mandell and winding up the Mancowitz angle."

"See?" Mom said loudly. "Who told you? Has to do with Uncle Yascha, papa

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always said. A professor in a college. Carlton stood up. "Who said that?"

Pat didn't need a house to fall on him to recognize a sergeancy when he saw one. He and John pushed me through the crowd and Pat saluted Carlton. "Detective Doyle and Officer Doyle reporting with Mandell, sir. In good condition."

I thought Carlton was going to kiss him. He compromised by shaking hands. Then he shook hands with me. "You're all right, Barney?"

"Yeah. Sure. I'm fine," I said. "But still a little puzzled."

Harper introduced himself. "I don't blame you, Mandell. But am I glad to see you."

Rosemary was practical. "But why? What is this all about, Mr. Harper?"

Inspector Carlton introduced her as the sister of the two officers who had found me and the niece of Inspector Doyle. That made her royalty. But Harper still wasn't talking. Rather, he talked in circles, like Curtis had.

SEVERAL millions of dollars and something even more important were involved. Important enough to interest even the General Council of the United Nations. Mom had been right in assuming it had to do with her husband's brother. The late Yascha Mancowitz, as we might or might not know, had been one of the world's leading physicists.

Mom hadn't the least idea what the word meant. Neither had I for that matter. But she said, "See?" and I nodded.

Mr. Harper continued. "His last experiment is still top-drawer secret. But his basic processes and formulae are thoroughly patented and protected. That's where Ebbling got in on the deal. Knowing him only as a reputable patent lawyer, Mancowitz paid his expenses to São Paulo to ask him to do two things.

"One, to handle his patents. Two, to act

Polly Wants a Killer

as his executor and, in the event he died, to make certain his patents and processes would be turned over to his designated heirs, the sons of one Bernard Mancowitz, born in Bucaresti in 1894, currently believed to be living in Chicago but whose address he had lost during his escape from the Nazis." Harper lighted a cigarette. "What Mancowitz didn't know was that Ebbling was no longer either reputable or wealthy. Ebbling had been playing with fire. He was broke."

I gasped at that one. "Broke."

"He hasn't had a dime for years," Harper said. "His money went on a long series of girls like Cherry Marvin. Lately he and his daughter have been living on borrowed money."

And on mom's ten grand, I thought.

Harper sucked hard at his cigarette. "Naturally, in view of their importance, this country has been interested in Mancowitz's experiments for some time." He looked at Goyandira. "So have certain other nations. One nation in particular. And as soon as they learned that Ebbling had become Mancowitz's lawyer and executor, they attempted to chisel in by having one of their local stooges marry Ebbling's daughter and promise him several millions if he could find a way to legally turn over to them the aforementioned patents and processes.

"Back in the States, Ebbling promptly laid the ground work for his steal by locating you and identifying you as the sole heir of your uncle. It took us a little longer. We had our eyes on Ebbling, of course. But we had no way of knowing you were Bernard Mancowitz's son as your father Americanized his name without bothering to go to court about it.

"We assumed that Gale's marriage to you was just one of those things. We realize now why she kept her marriage to the *Capitão* secret. As your widow, she would become your legal heir and Eb-

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bling could, legally, dispose of the patents and processes that should have come to you in any manner he saw fit. As we see it, they didn't intend to allow you to live very long."

He snuffed out his cigarette. "But we can't figure out this insanity gag. We can see why they killed Cherry Marvin in such a way as to pin the blame on Barney. They hoped the law would execute him for them. We can even see why they shot Ebbling in a last desperate attempt to make their first murder stick. The man was dying on his feet anyway, had been dying since Curtis plugged him. But why delay this thing two years? Why sell Barney on the idea he was punchy in the first place?"

Looking at Gale, Rosemary said, "I think I can answer that. You see, I happen to be a nurse." Her eyes rested on Gale's bare mid-riff.

Rosemary continued, "I think a doctor's examination will bear out what I say. They convinced Barney he was crazy and had him tucked away so they wouldn't lose their golden goose—while Gale went into seclusion and bore Goyandiras child. If those aren't stria on her abdomen, I'll turn in my cap."

"Stria?" Harper puzzled.

"Minute grooves or channels, especially when one of a series of parallel lines, quite frequently caused by child bearing."

Inspector Carlton said, "Leave it to a woman." Then he and his boys herded Gale and Goyandira upstairs to a cell block along with Marie and the hood, both of them telling anyone who would listen how pleased they would be to turn state's evidence.

When they were gone, looking very serious, Mr. Harper shoed everyone out of the office but me.

Our talk took maybe fifteen minutes. Mr. Harper said what he had to say and made the offer he was empowered to make

Polly Wants a Killer

for all the legal rights to Uncle Yascha's patents and processes. The same offer, he said, that Mr. Curtis had been empowered to make.

He also told me how Uncle Yascha's experiments could be developed by our own scientists and what benefit they would be to the country if some other nation should push another mess on us. What I mean, he laid it on the line.

I listened with both ears, then said back the way I felt. . . .

Pat and John and Joe and Rosemary were waiting in the hall. Pat wanted to touch me for luck, saying he had never touched a millionaire before. I said if I ever got to be a millionaire it would have to be by fighting.

Rosemary got it right away. Her eyes bright and shiny, she said, "It was important, Barney?"

"Is," I corrected her. "Top drawer."

"And you signed away all your rights for a dollar."

I bummed a cigarette from John. "No. Not exactly. I still have plenty of rights. All I did was transfer something very important from one uncle to another."

"Why?"

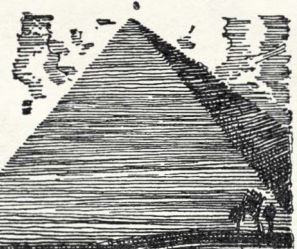
"Well," I said finally. "I guess I sort of got to thinking about Milt and Sam and all the other lads who walked ashore at Iwo and Normandy and all the way-points in between."

Pat's fingers shook a little as he offered me a light. Mom patted my hand. "Such a good boy, Barney. Papa would be proud."

With Pat and John and Joe and mom bringing up the rear, laughing and wise-cracking, and Rosemary walking tall and proud beside me, I had all the dough I needed. I felt like a million dollars. And the best part of the whole thing was, the little bird I'd been looking for had lived right next door all the time.

THE END

*Knowledge
That Has
Endured
With the
Pyramids*



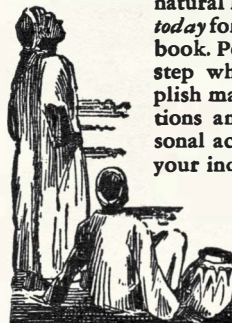
A SECRET METHOD FOR THE MASTERY OF LIFE

WHENCE came the knowledge that built the Pyramids? Where did the first builders in the Nile Valley acquire their astounding wisdom that started man on his upward climb? Did their knowledge come from a race now submerged beneath the sea? From what concealed source came the wisdom that produced such characters as Amenhotep IV, Leonardo da Vinci, Isaac Newton, and a host of others?

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Frederick C. Davis

(Continued from page 75)

covered up for dirty political reasons.

"The Mason case was one. The auto crash was all Marty Mason's fault. Purello's suffering for it now, but Marty Mason's brain was full of alcohol. There were other cases, like people who'd been taking dope. Lew Wolff was making a horrible farce out of my life's work."

"I'll be damned," Bradford said very quietly. "You broke the law by murdering Wolff—in order to be able to do faithful service to the law. You falsified your report on Wolff in order to put an end to falsifying your reports on others— Stop him, Jimmy!"

Tucker was whirling to the door. Moving with electrical swiftness, McCord reached the sill first. He flung himself into a flying tackle. Tucker fell back and spun about again, one hand reaching out to the bench. He ran past Bradford wildly, with something glittering in his hand—a long surgical knife.

Bradford and McCord chased him. He flung himself into the corner, his back turned, and made a single jerking motion. He clawed the wall as he fell on his face, stabbing himself in the heart.

Bradford and Jimmy McCord stiffened. "Scram, Jimmy!" Bradford said hoarsely. "You've just got time to make the plane. By the time you get back, Buck will be out fixing ladies' cars again."

McCord gripped Bradford's trembling hand, then ran out the door.

Bradford turned wearily to the liquor cabinet, filled a glass to the brim with scotch, drank half of it, then tramped to the telephone. He spun off the number of the *Bulletin*.

"Things like this are the reason I drink," he mumbled aloud. He eyed the dead man as he waited for an answer. "Convenient place to bump yourself off—the morgue."

THE END

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