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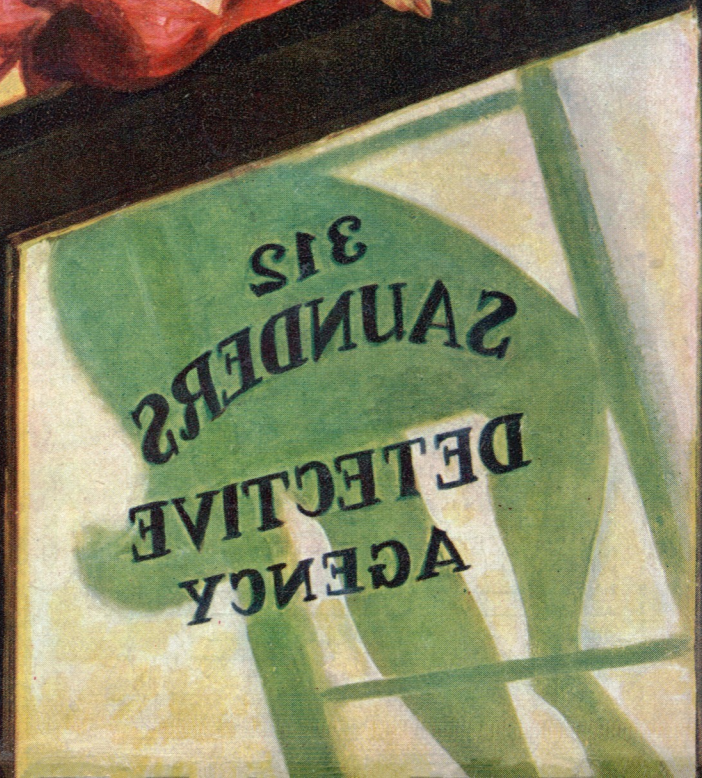
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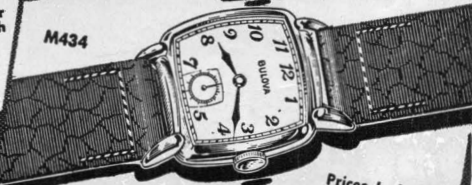
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Vol. 60

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Ready for the Rackets A Department

Dear Detective Fans,

Most rackets leave the victim with nothing but his temper—not very much use *after* he has been rooked. Yet we all know that especially in hard times, eager cheats are planning to rob or swindle you. Because dishonest characters and racketeers are lying in wait for unsuspecting citizens, many people have wanted to know how they can be prepared to thwart their slick schemes.

Well, there is a way to safeguard yourselves from getting caught by these brazen breakers of the laws. That's where the old and tried Boy Scout motto, "Be Prepared," comes in. For the best way of all to protect yourself against being stuck by a dishonest dealer—is to know beforehand all about the possible tricks he might pull.

In other words, keep up with the rackets. And the easiest way to do that is by reading these pages every month. Here we print the news of the latest chicanery and modes of *operandi* the petty chisellers and sharp operator have pulled.

That's one way this column can help you. And the other way—is by you helping us. Write in and let us know of your own personal experience with racketeers and con men of all kinds. We'll publicize the information you pass on to us that will benefit others—and at the same time, pay you \$5.00 for every letter we use. Naturally, we'll withhold your name if you wish. However, no letters will 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 regarding your letters.

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

Now, let's see what tips are in the offering:

Danger In The Dark

Dear Sir:

One of the slickest rackets that I have ever seen was worked upon me the other day. I have

(Please continue on page 98)

You know the value of training.
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Good Movie-Going For Fiction Fans

Palmer Picks:

For Murder Drama: "Too Late for Tears" with Lizabeth Scott, Dan Duryea and Don de Fore (United Artists).



Mysteriously, Jane Palmer (Lizabeth Scott) and her husband acquire a leather bag containing a fortune in cash.

Although she is determined to keep it, her husband thinks differently and checks it at Union Station. With the help of a black-mailing crook (Dan Duryea), Jane drowns her husband, but they fail to find the claim check for the money. The husband's sister and a stranger (Don de Fore), who arrive on the scene, locate the check. Jane takes it at gun's point, sheds herself of the blackmailer with a well-administered dose of poison and flees to Mexico.

The sister and stranger follow her, unravel the plot and bring Jane to a just end.

Suspensefully played, the picture makes for some spine-tingling moments.

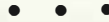
For Adventure: "Canadian Pacific" with Randolph Scott and Jane Wyatt. (20th Century-Fox). Cinecolor.



Building this famous Canadian railroad was more than just ties and trestles—at least according to this version where it takes six-guns and two-fisted action by Tom Andrews (Randolph Scott) to overcome bad whites and renegade Indians.

Although Andrews has a temporary love affair with a female doctor (Jane Wyatt) in the railroad camp, it is his own true love, a French-Indian girl, who warns him of the Indians' plan to attack the camp. Andrews goes on a private sortie to prevent the signal for the attack from being given and gets the ringleaders—but too late. Returning to camp he joins the fight which the Indians abandon after they hear the whistle from a relief train.

The railroad background gives a different flavor to this outdoor action picture. Plenty of bang-bang and dust-biting keep it fast paced.

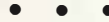


For A Western: "The Red Pony" with Myrna Loy, Robert Mitchum, Louis Calhern, Sheppard Strudwick, Peter Miles (Republic). Technicolor.



Not in a sense a true Western, but a picture laid against a ranch and a boy's dream about a pony come true, which even the most calloused Western picture-goer will find moving. As the story unfolds you can see the boy (Peter Miles) growing apart from his father (Sheppard Strudwick) through his love for his pony and the hero-worship of a ranch hand (Robert Mitchum) who helps him raise the animal. Myrna Loy, as the mother, understands the boy and helps him out.

A simple story, well-told and rich in human values and colorful backgrounds.



For Sports: "Take Me Out To The Ball Game" with Frank Sinatra, Esther Williams, Gene Kelly (MGM). Technicolor.



Imagine Frank Sinatra and Gene Kelly, as vaudevillians turned baseball players, fielding "hot ones" for a baseball team owned by Esther Williams. Silly, but nonetheless fun. When a gambler (Edward Arnold), who is betting against the team, inveigles Kelly to direct the chorus at a night club, Kelly begins to slip from the loss of sleep and is benched. Eventually, wised up by a little gal who is sweet on Sinatra, he gets back in the line-up.

The picture—and the baseball—are played for the laughs.

by Ted Palmer

"I WAS ASHAMED OF MY FACE

until Viderm helped make my skin clearer in one short week"

(FROM A LETTER BY E. S. JORDAN, DETROIT, MICH.)

If your face is broken-out, if bad skin is making you miserable, here is how to stop worrying about pimples, blackheads and other externally-caused skin troubles.

JUST FOLLOW SKIN DOCTOR'S SIMPLE DIRECTIONS



IT DOESN'T PAY to put up with a broken-out face. Your very success in business, love and social life may depend upon your looks. Nobody likes to look at a face that is blemished by blackheads or pimples. **WOMEN ARE ATTRACTED TO MEN WHO HAVE SMOOTH, CLEAR, HEALTHY-LOOKING SKIN.** Business executives don't choose men whose complexions are against them. And it's just plain foolish to take chances with your happiness and success in life when the Viderm formula can do so much to give you the clearer, blemish-free face you want.

Good-looking Skin Is Not for Women Only

You—yes, you—can have the same handsome complexion, free from externally caused skin troubles, simply by giving your face the special care that screen stars give theirs. *Because, remember!—a good-looking, handsome appearance usually begins with the condition of your skin.* There's almost nothing to it—it is just about as easy as washing your face. *The whole secret consists of washing your face in a way that thoroughly purges the pores of every last speck of dirt and grime—something that ordinary cleansing seldom does.* In fact, examination after examination shows that, usually, it is not a case of "bad skin" so much as faulty cleansing that leaves oily grime clogging up your pores. What you should use is a highly concentrated soap like Viderm Skin Cleanser. This penetrates the pores and acts as an antiseptic. Specks of irritating dirt and grime are quickly loosened. They dissolve and disap-

pear, leaving your skin entirely free of the dirt particles that otherwise remain as pimples, blackheads and other externally-caused skin troubles.

Squeezing pimples or blackheads to get rid of them is a nasty, messy business—but that isn't the worst of it. Doing so may also be injurious and leave your face with unsightly, embarrassing blemishes. There is, now, a much easier, safer, cleaner way to help you rid your face of ugly, offensive, externally-caused skin troubles. *You merely follow a doctor's simple directions.*

Don't murder your skin! Here's all you have to do to get it smoother and clearer and to keep it that way. Use Viderm Skin Cleanser when you wash your face. Rub the rich lather of this highly-concentrated medicated soap on your face for just a few seconds and then rinse it off. Then apply a little Viderm Medicated Skin Cream and that's all there is to it. Viderm Medicated Skin Cream quickly disappears,

leaving your skin nice and smooth. This simple treatment, used after shaving, helps heal tiny nicks and cuts, relieves razor-burn and smarting, besides conditioning your skin.

Give Your Face This Treat for 7 Days

Stop worrying and being embarrassed over what may happen

to your skin. Just send for your Viderm Double Treatment this minute, and be confident of a smoother and clearer complexion. Follow the simple directions, written by a doctor, that you will get with your Viderm Double Treatment. Then look in your mirror and listen to your friends admire your smoother, clearer skin—the kind that women go for.

Just mail your name and address to The New York Skin Laboratory, 206 Division Street, Dept. G-1, New York City 2, N. Y. By return mail you will receive both of the Viderm formulas, complete with full directions, and mailed in a plain wrapper. On delivery, pay two dollars plus postage. If you wish, you can save the postage fee by mailing the two dollars with your letter. Then, if you aren't thrilled with results, your money will be cheerfully refunded. Remember that both of the formulas you use have been fully tested and proven, and are reliable for you. *If they don't help you, your treatments cost you nothing.* After you have received your Viderm, if you have any questions to ask concerning abused skin, just send them in.



DON'T DO THIS!

Don't murder your skin by squeezing it. Skin is delicate. When you break it, you leave yourself open to miseries. It's far easier, far safer, to let the Double Viderm Treatment help you enjoy a handsome, clearer, blemish-free complexion.



A SHROUD In Her TROUSSEAU

*Jim Bennett prevented the beauty's stealing
a wedding march—
until a deadly bullet stole her thunder.*

*Leveling my gun on
the hedge, I fired
once.*





Jim Bennett

Detective Novel

By

ROBERT MARTIN

CHAPTER ONE

Unexpected Guest

I OPENED my eyes slowly and stared up at the ceiling in the gray pre-dawn light. The wind had died down, and from below my room I could hear the sullen slapping of the water on the beach. Something had awakened me—I didn't know what. I lay very still, my eyes wide open, and my ears straining. But the big house was silent. There was only the sleepy remembrance of a sound. A sharp, quick sound. Like what? Like a gun?

I slid off the bed and looked out of the window. In the gray light I could see the oily expanse of the lake and a narrow strip of beach. I tilted my wrist-watch toward the slowly brightening sky and squinted at the pale dial. Twenty minutes after five in the morning. The soft bed behind me beckoned, but the echo of the sound remained in my ears. I unhooked the screen in the window and

pushed it outward. I leaned out and gazed up and down the beach.

There was a little fog rising off the lake, and it hovered mistily over the slowly breaking waves. I saw the stone railing of the terrace, and the white outline of the big ornate sun dial on the beach beyond. Something white huddled on the sand at the base of the sun dial. I closed the screen, hooked it, and dressed quickly. The steel of my .38 felt chilly to my fingers as I dropped it into my pocket. I opened my bedroom door slowly and silently.

A dim light burned at the end of the long hall. Thick carpet silenced my footsteps as I moved swiftly past gilt-framed mirrors and brocaded divans. It was almost black at the foot of the massive stairway, but I could see the gray sky beyond the French doors opening onto the terrace. I tip-toed over the stone terrace and descended the steps to the beach.

From somewhere, a bird began to chirp a drowsy welcome to the summer morning. When I felt the sand beneath my feet, I began to run. But I slowed to a walk as I neared the sun dial.

I saw the pale shimmer of white silk, and the slender fingers of an outflung hand. I saw a slim naked leg, and the faint silver of sandals, and a spreading dark stain in the pale sand. A shockingly large stain, which seemed to grow as I watched, like ink on a blotter. I moved close and knelt down. I pushed tousled hair away from a still face.

A pair of eyes glittered dully at me. Eyes that couldn't see—that would never see again. Red lips were parted over white teeth; it was almost as if she were laughing. I shivered a little, and gently pulled the robe over her. There was much blood on the white silk, welling thickly from a dark hole high up on the front of the robe.

I stood up, and I thought grimly of the events which had led me to this spot, in the gray stillness of a summer dawn. . . .

* * *

Jason Maxwell Gerard rattled the ice in his glass and gazed gloomily down at the waves breaking on the beach below us. We were sitting on the windy north terrace of his house on the Erie shore

outside of Cleveland. It was late summer, and the air took on a faint chill as the red sun sank low. I finished my scotch in a long swallow and placed the glass on a low table between our chairs.

"Is that all?" I said.

Gerard nodded silently, and finished his drink before he said: "That's about it, Jim. I don't care how you get rid of her, but I want her out of this house by tomorrow noon. I'll stay in town until you call me. I'll be at the Royal Plaza. You have the two thousand dollars. Use any part of it—or all of it, if you must. But I want her out of here. Understand?"

"If the money doesn't work, do you want me to get tough? Or what?"

"Do anything," he said harshly. "That's up to you."

I sighed, and stared out over the lake. A dead-panned youth in a white jacket appeared and silently re-filled our glasses. I smiled my thanks. He nodded gravely and retreated. Jason Gerard merely lifted his glass and started to drink again.

Glancing at his sharp, brooding profile, I said carefully: "You said you didn't want any publicity. What if she squawks to the papers?"

He turned his head toward me, and in the fading light I saw the neat part in his thick brown hair and the sharp angle of a cheekbone. "I'm counting on you to handle that end, too, Jim," he said quietly.

"It's a little out of my line," I said.

Gerard stood up suddenly and began to pace the terrace. Abruptly he turned to face me. "Dammit, Jim, she's just a— a tramp."

"Is she?"

He looked down at his glass. "It's obvious, isn't it? No decent girl would come here to my home and insist upon remaining, the way she has done."

"But you said you invited her," I reminded him.

He made an impatient gesture. "Of course," he snapped. "But I thought she understood—" He swung away from me and stared out over the lake with angry eyes.

I stretched out in my chair. "Jay," I began, "let's see if I've got this straight: Janie Crockett is the girl's name. You met her three weeks ago in Chicago at

a cocktail party you threw at your hotel in honor of Julius Stockmaster, the novelist, a pal of yours. Julius was autographing copies of his new book, *Red Is the Sun*, and you standing by to act as interpreter—because Stockmaster is a deaf-mute. He became bored, and ducked out.

"You were a little tight, and put on an act for the amusement of the guests and pretended to be Stockmaster. Then Janie Crockett came in, assumed you were the famous writer. She was little and cute, so you played it straight and autographed her book. Do I have it right?"

"Don't remind me," Gerard said bitterly.

"I like detailed backgrounds," I told him, and went on: "Eventually, you took Janie Crockett home. By that time she was wise to your impersonation of Julius Stockmaster, and you both got a big laugh out of it. For a week you gave her a big play, and she seemed to like you. But she wouldn't unbend—you couldn't even hold her hand in a taxi, or kiss her good night. You figured she was just playing hard-to-get, and so you tried a few maneuvers—like maybe asking her up to your suite to see your mezzotints, or your Australian goldfish. But she stopped you cold. It was then that you made your big mistake." I paused, and took a swallow of my drink.

"Go on," Gerard said stonily. "Get it over with."

"She had told you that she worked in a library, and that she was soon taking her vacation. So you threw caution to the winds, asked her to meet your mother and invited her to visit you here at your home during her vacation. She accepted—but still she wouldn't play the way you wanted her to play. You gave up then, handed her a gentle brush-off, and came home. That was a week ago.

"This morning she showed up here, bag and baggage, tennis racket and bathing suit, all set to spend her vacation with you—and your mother. But you had neglected to tell her that your mother was in Argentina, where she has lived since she divorced your father ten years ago to marry a South American wheat grower.

"You also neglected to tell her that your fiance, Miss Gail Brand, of Boston,

New York and Miami, is arriving here tomorrow noon to make plans for your wedding next month, and to attend a big announcement party you're throwing here tomorrow night. Very obviously you can't have Miss Janie Crockett hanging around here." I took another drink and cocked an eye at Jason Gerard.

IT WAS almost dark, and his tall body was etched against the deep red of the setting sun. The wind stirred his hair as he stared out over the glittering water. He didn't move, or make any sign that he was listening to me.

I said softly: "And then, Jason, my boy, the worm turned. Janie Crockett became very angry. She told you that she was an invited guest here—and that she was staying for a week. She wouldn't listen to your pleading, and she scorned your offer of money to leave. Then she locked herself in a guest room. In desperation, you called James Tobias Bennett, district manager of the American Detective Agency, and asked him personally to get you out of a spot—a spot you very neatly got yourself into."

He turned slowly to face me. "Don't lecture, Jim. You'll get your money for the job."

I said: "I haven't met Miss Crockett, but I think she has a point."

Gerard hesitated, said quietly: "All right, Jim. Let's just forget it. I'll work it out somehow. What do I owe you for your time?"

From my wallet I took the four five-hundred-dollar bills he had given me to help persuade Janie Crockett to fade out. I laid the bills on the table, said: "I don't charge by the hour. If I did, your scotch has more than repaid me. Good luck." I stood up and moved across the terrace.

"Jim."

I turned.

"Jim, I—I can't have her here when Gail arrives tomorrow."

"Of course not," I said. Then I added gently: "Look, Jay. I do a lot of big jobs I don't like—but I don't have to act as if I like them."

"The bitter with the sweet, Jim," he said, and laughed softly.

I went back to my chair and sat down. The poker-faced youth appeared again,

and in the dusk I heard the tinkle of ice in our glasses, the gurgle of a decanter, and the fizz of a siphon. I leaned my head against the back of the chair. All that remained of the sun was a narrow red rim, and the lake was like rippled red glass.

"Remember, Jim," Gerard said. "Tomorrow noon—at the latest."

"All right."

He moved over the terrace until his body was a tall shadow in the dusk. "Ask Cecil for anything you want," he said, and then he was gone. I heard the muted throb of a motor presently, beyond the terrace, I saw the red tail lights of his car winking down the long drive to the highway. It was suddenly very quiet. I slumped in the chair and nursed my drink.

After a while I heard a soft footstep, and I glanced upward. The white jacket of the poker-faced youth was a gray blur in the gloom. "When would you like dinner, sir?" he asked.

"Is your name Cecil, sonny?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm ready to eat anytime, Cecil. Just bang a spoon on a frying pan."

"Yes, sir. Would you care for a cock-tail?"

"When we have scotch? Cecil, you should know better. Just bring me the bottle."

"Yes, sir." He moved away.

"Cecil."

He paused, and waited silently.

"Isn't there a young lady guest in the house?"

"I believe so, sir."

"Please tell her that we expect her for dinner."

He nodded, and disappeared through the French doors. In a couple of minutes he was back with a bottle, a soda siphon, and a small silver bucket of ice cubes. "The young lady will be pleased to join you at dinner, sir," he said gravely.

"Delightful, Cecil. Charming. I hope you asked her if she'd like a little snort before we eat?"

"Of course, sir. But she declined."

"Very well, Cecil. You're a good boy."

His teeth gleamed in the dusk. He moved away and went through the French doors.

There was enough breeze to keep the

mosquitoes away, and I was very comfortable as I reclined in the chrome and leather chair. The sun was long gone and the pale moon, brighter now, hung low in the sky off to my right. I poured some scotch into my glass, added two ice cubes and a brief squirt of soda. Then I lit a cigarette, leaned back, and thought about Jason Maxwell Gerard.

I knew him fairly well, but I could hardly be called a pal of his. I made enough money to satisfy my simple needs, but I wasn't near solvent enough to maintain the pace of the crowd which ran with Jay Gerard, whose father, a toothpaste tycoon, had died two years before, leaving him two million dollars. I had met Jay at a poker session in the home of a mutual acquaintance, and we had met several times since. At thirty-five he still looked like the college halfback he had once been. He had remained a bachelor, in spite of numerous assaults on the Gerard fortune by a variety of females, from Hollywood starlets to hatcheck girls.

Two hours before he asked me to come out to discuss a very important matter. Miss Janie Crockett's unexpected and unwanted visit was the very important matter.

A voice at my elbow said: "Dinner, sir."

I got up and followed Cecil into the house. We crossed a living room a little smaller than a basketball floor and entered a long dining room filled with flickering candlelight. Cecil disappeared through a door at the side, and I stood staring at the slim little back of a small girl standing before a vast expanse of plate glass covering half of one wall.

She was staring out at the darkness of the sky and the lake. A black evening gown ended in a V just over her neat little hips, and her black hair was arranged in thick braids coiled around her small, well-shaped head. She stood very still, with one little hand resting against the glass.

I said: "Good evening, Miss Crockett."

She turned quickly. She had a small round face, a short little nose, and a soft red mouth which was almost—but not quite—too large for her face. Her eyes were like blue mirrors. There was a narrow black ribbon around her throat,

and nothing between it and the top of her low-cut black gown. Her small round shoulders gleamed smoothly in the candle-light. She looked beyond me, quickly around the room, and then at me with a startled expression.

"Where is Mr. Gerard?" Her voice was small and soft, like a little girl's.

"He was called into town," I told her. "I'm a friend of his. My name is Bennett."

There was bewilderment in her eyes, and something else. Maybe fear. And then her small chin came up a trifle. "How nice," she said, and the false gayety in her voice was enough to break your heart. "Are we dining together, Mr. Bennett?"

I smiled at her, pulled out a chair, and stood behind it. She hesitated for only a split second before she moved forward and sat down. As I leaned over her I got a clean odor of scented soap. It reminded me of clover and green grass and sunshine.

MOVING around the table, I sat down opposite her. There was iced shrimp cocktail on our plates. As I lifted my fork, I smiled again at Janie Crockett in what I hoped was a fatherly manner. She returned my smile, a little uncertainly, and began to eat. The shrimp was excellent, with just the right amount of tobasco and horse-radish in the sauce.

I said brilliantly: "That's a lovely dress you're wearing."

Her cheeks went pink. "Thank you. I—I bought it just before I left Chicago." She paused, and lowered her eyes. "Will Jay—Mr. Gerard—be back soon?"

At close range I saw that there was a faint dusting of freckles over her small nose, and that her eyes were clear and devoid of all deceit.

"No doubt," I said.

We didn't talk much during dinner. Afterwards we had coffee beside an oval glass table in the living room. I offered her a cigarette, and she held it in her fingers while I struck a match. I held the match until it burned my fingers, and then I said: "Put it in your mouth, honey. You don't light a cigarette like a fire-cracker."

She gave me a quick shy smile. "Of course. I—I guess I wasn't paying attention." She placed the cigarette between her lips. As I applied flame she inhaled

deeply. Immediately she went into a strangled fit of coughing. I took the cigarette from her and crushed it out.

"Relax," I told her. "You don't have to smoke if you don't want to. I'm just people."

"I—I never did learn," she choked.

"Nasty habit," I said as I applied flame to my own cigarette.

Cecil appeared. "Would you like some brandy, sir?"

I grinned at him, and nodded. He glanced enquiringly at Janie Crockett, and she quickly shook her head. He went away and came back with a decanter and a bell-shaped glass and placed them on the table beside me.

"Thank you, Cecil," I said. "All the comforts of home."

He nodded gravely, and poured two inches of brandy into the glass.

From somewhere I heard a muffled sound, like a car door slamming. Cecil carefully replaced the glass stopper in the decanter, but I knew from the alert expression in his eyes that he had heard the sound too. Then the soft chiming of bells drifted in to us.

Cecil silently left the room, and I looked at Janie Crockett. Her lips were parted, and her face seemed suddenly pale. "Would—would that be Jay—Mr. Gerard?"

I shook my head slowly. "I'm afraid not, honey."

She lifted her cup to her lips with a trembling hand, and a drop of coffee splattered to the top of the glass table. She looked about fourteen years old, and she was scared blue. I reached out and touched her shoulder.

I said gently: "Nobody's going to bite you. What are you scared of?"

Janie Crockett glanced quickly around the room. "Of this house . . . of Jay . . . of myself."

"Why?"

Her big blue eyes stared at me wonderingly. "Didn't he tell you . . . about me?"

I shook my head. I wanted to hear her tell it.

She lowered her eyes to her folded hands. "You said you were a friend of Jay's," she said quietly, "and so I'll tell you. He invited me here for my vaca-

tion. I met him in Chicago a few weeks ago, and I—I liked him. I thought he liked me, too. He asked me to come here to visit him—and to meet his mother. But when I arrived today he acted very strangely. He said he didn't really mean for me to come here, and that I must leave right away, because the girl he is going to—to marry is coming tomorrow. . . ." She paused.

"And then what?" I prompted, keeping one ear cocked for sounds from the front door.

Her little chin came up, and she looked at me defiantly with tear-filled eyes. "At first, when he told me, I wanted to leave, to get away from him. And then I got mad. I—I told him that I wasn't going to leave. He had invited me here, and I thought he was sincere. I told him that I was going to stay. He—he can't do things like that."

I suppressed a smile. "How old are you?"

"Nineteen."

"How long have you lived in Chicago?"

"About six months. I work in a library. Mr. Preeble, the principal of the high school back home, arranged for my job there."

I felt a hundred years old, and I said wearily: "And where is back home?"

"Sycamore Creek. It's a little town."

I decided abruptly that I may as well get it over with. I took a deep breath, and began, "Look honey," but I never had a chance to finish.

A man appeared in the archway opening into the big living room. A big, solid man, with a broad pleasant face and bushy shock of black hair. He was wearing a green corduroy coat, gray flannel slacks, and white buckskin shoes with thick crepe soles. He smiled and nodded pleasantly at Janie Crockett and me.

"Hello," I said, and I tried to remember his face.

He took a small leather-bound notebook from a pocket of his coat and wrote swiftly with a gold fountain pen. Then he tore a page from the book, advanced across the room, smiled, and handed the page to me.

I read his back-handed scrawl:

Howdy, people. My name is Stockmaster. How are chances for a drink?

CHAPTER TWO

Deaf-Mute's Surprise

C ECIL suddenly appeared in the archway. "Mr. Stockmaster is a deaf-mute," he explained to us quietly. "He is a very good friend of Mr. Gerard's."

I stood up, shook hands with Stockmaster, and said, "Bennett," with an exaggerated motion of my lips.

He watched me closely, his lips moving. Then he wrote in his book and held it up for me to see. He had written:

Bean-ett!

I smiled, nodded, and pointed at Janie Crockett. He handed me his book, and I wrote:

Miss Crockett.

He smiled, clicked his heels, and bowed low. Janie Crockett looked bewildered.

I pointed at the decanter, and at my glass. The big man shook his head vigorously and held his right palm about eight inches above his left.

I said to Cecil: "A highball for Mr. Stockmaster."

Stockmaster wrote hastily in his book and held it up for me to see.

Bourbon, please—with water.

"Bourbon," I said to Cecil. "With water."

He nodded, and left the room.

Stockmaster sat down in a big chair and beamed at Janie Crockett and me. I was on the point of saying, "Nice evening," when I remembered that he couldn't hear me, so I just grinned back at him. There was a short silence, during which Cecil delivered to the big man a king-sized glass tinkling with ice. From the dark amber color of the contents I guessed that it contained three-fourths bourbon and one-fourth water.

Stockmaster took a long swallow of his drink. Then he wrote in his book and held it up. I read:

Don't bother about me. Entertain the lovely Miss Crockett. I'll just work on the bourbon until Jay returns.

The door chimes let loose again, and almost immediately I heard murmured voices at the end of the hall. Janie Crockett stiffened beside me, and I reached out and patted her hand.

A girl strode into the room. She was a natural for technicolor. Hair the color of polished copper, deep blue eyes, and a red, red mouth. A smooth tanned skin, a thin straight nose, and a tall rangy body made for a bathing suit. She was wearing a loosely tailored black suit over a red silk blouse and incredibly high-heeled shoes of vari-colored snakeskin. Her eyes flicked over Janie Crockett and me, and then she flung herself at Julius Stockmaster.

"Julius!" she cried. "How perfectly, perfectly lovely!" Her arms went around his neck, and she kissed him warmly. Stockmaster didn't pull away. Presently she let him go, and she ran a hand through his thick hair. "Julius, you dog. Where have you been hiding?"

Stockmaster grinned and handed her his book and pen. She sighed, wrote in the book, and handed it back to him. Then it was his turn to write, and when he had returned the book to her, she held it high and read aloud: "*I've been at the mercy of the autograph hounds in the local book stalls—and pining away for you, darling.*" She laughed gayly, and said to me: "Isn't that sweet?"

"Very," I said. Janie Crockett didn't say anything.

The tall girl gave me a quick glance, and flung off the jacket of her suit. The red silk blouse sported an extreme off-the-shoulder neckline. "I'm Gail Brand," she said carelessly. "Cecil told me that Jay is in town. Will he be back soon?"

"I'm afraid not," I told her. "He wasn't expecting you until tomorrow." I nodded at Janie. "This is Miss Crockett. My name is Bennett."

"How do you do?" Janie Crockett said primly.

Gail Brand gave her a cool, appraising glance, nodded briefly, and said to me: "I suppose you are here for the party tomorrow night?"

I gave her the easiest answer, "Yes," I said.

Janie Crockett looked down at her clasped hands. Julius Stockmaster stared

silently, a faint frown on his broad, rugged features. Cecil appeared, bearing a tray containing a cocktail glass, a tall bar glass, a spoon, gin, olives, vermouth and bitters. He placed the tray on a table and deftly mixed an amber-clear martini.

Gail Brand lifted the glass, said, "Thank you, Cecil. Start another." She turned to me. "Better have one, Mr. Bennett. Cecil makes the best martinis in the world."

I shook my head, smiling. "I'll stick to brandy."

She gazed at me thoughtfully over the rim of her glass, and then she turned to Cecil. "I haven't had dinner. Will you please ask the cook to fix me a plate in the kitchen?"

"Yes, miss," Cecil said. He refilled the glass in her hand.

She smiled at him. "Thank you. You run along now. If I want another drink, I'm sure Mr. Bennett will make it for me."

"Sure," I said.

Cecil nodded silently, his features carefully composed, and left the room.

Julius Stockmaster had moved over beside Janie Crockett on the divan, and was showing her a sleight-of-hand trick with a coin. He sat very close to her and held one of her small hands in his as he tried to explain the secret of the trick. He watched her with his bright eyes, and his big body shook with silent laughter at her awkward attempts to follow his demonstrations.

I made Gail Brand two more martinis, and we talked about the racing season at various tracks.

Presently she said, "Well, I suppose I'd really better eat," and she moved over to Stockmaster and patted his cheek. He looked up, grinning, and she jerked her thumb in an exaggerated gesture toward the kitchen. He stood up, bowed low to Janie Crockett, nodded pleasantly at me, put his arm around Gail Brand's waist. They left the room. She swung her hips gracefully, tilted her head up at him. I heard her throaty laughter in the hall.

Janie Crockett said: "He's nice."

"Have you read his new book, *Red Is the Sun?*"

"I've read all of his books," she said solemnly. "He's a wonderful writer. But

I didn't know he was a—a deaf mute."

"Lack of speech and hearing doesn't seem to bother him," I said.

"I—I think he's marvelous," she breathed. "He talks with his eyes."

"Yeah," I said, and I finished the brandy in my glass. I remembered that I hadn't locked my car, and I also wanted to get a spare toothbrush and a razor I carried for emergencies. I had decided that I wasn't going to put the pressure on Janie Crockett until morning. I was enjoying myself too much.

"Excuse me," I said to her, and I walked across the big room, down the hall, and turned off at the doors opening on the terrace.

IN A little alcove lined with book shelves I spotted Cecil and a thin dark man sitting at a table playing chess. I paused, and Cecil stood up.

"Can I get you anything, sir?"

I shook my head. The thin man watched me silently with bright black eyes. A narrow black mustache accentuated the dark lean lines of his face.

Cecil said: "This is Mr. William Darmody, Mr. Stockmaster's secretary. He is also a deaf-mute."

I stepped forward and held out my hand. Darmody half rose from his chair, shook my hand firmly, smiled briefly, and sat down again.

"Where do I sleep?" I asked Cecil.

"Second room on your right, sir. At the top of the stairs."

I nodded at the two of them, opened the French doors, crossed the wind-swept terrace, and descended the steps to the driveway where my car was parked. On my way back to the living room I saw that Cecil and William Darmody were bent intently over the chess board. On the table beside Darmody was a small pad of blue note paper and a pencil, apparently his means of communication with Cecil. Neither of them looked up as I passed.

When I entered the big living room, I saw that Janie Crockett had gone.

I stood still and jingled some silver in my pant's pocket. Then I poured myself a modest inch of brandy and slowly drank it. Janie Crockett didn't appear, and so I began a slow tour of the house. I wandered through the rooms, one by one, turn-

ing on lights and peering into dark recesses. For a single man, Jay Gerard certainly maintained a lot of house.

As I re-entered the big hall, I heard a muffled voice. I followed the sound until I came to a door in the dining room. There was a light leaking from around the door, I pushed it open a half inch.

I had a clear view of a gleaming kitchen, and of Gail Brand and Julius Stockmaster sitting at a white enameled table. There were several empty plates in front of Gail Brand, and both she and Stockmaster were drinking coffee. Stockmaster was hunched forward intently, and his bright eyes were on the girl's face. She was looking down at her cup, and her mouth was hard and sullen.

Behind them, a fat gray-haired woman was listlessly banging pots and pans around in a sink the size of Cleopatra's bath tub. A big white clock on the wall told me that it was eight minutes until ten o'clock.

I closed the door silently, retreated through the dining room, crossed the hall, and climbed the wide carpeted stairway. There were seven rooms on the second floor, complete with baths, and I peeked into all of them. All were empty of humans.

In the room which Cecil had designated as mine there was a reading light burning at the head of the bed, and the silk cover had been laid back. I deposited my toothbrush and razor on the top of a knotty pine dresser, and went back into the hall. It was then that I remembered that there was one room I hadn't entered—the one next to mine, at the head of the stairs. I knocked briefly, got no response, and went on in.

As soon as I stepped inside I smelled the clean fragrance of Janie Crockett. Her clothes were there, and an open bag on the bed. I stepped over to the screened window, and I could hear the sound of the wind and the pounding of the waves on the beach below. From out on the lake I heard a freighter hoot dismally, and I saw the winking red light of a channel buoy in the darkness.

I went back down to the living room. It was still empty. The brandy bottle winked at me invitingly, and I had another drink. Then I headed for the terrace. As I passed the alcove I saw that Cecil and

William Darmody were still bent over the chess board. I moved quickly past them. The wind was blowing hard on the terrace, and the sound of the waves had grown to a steady roar. I went down the stone steps to the beach and stood still until my eyes became accustomed to the darkness. I moved over the sand, and presently I made out the outline of the big sun dial. A small dark figure stood beside it.

Here, in a curve of the beach, light from the house above cast a pale glow. I saw that the small erect figure beside the sun dial was Janie Crockett. She was staring out over the turbulent lake, and the wind lacquered her dress against her curved small body. She didn't see me as I approached over the sand.

I touched her arm, and she whirled with a little startled gasp. In the half-darkness I saw that her cheeks were wet with tears. I smiled at her, and the fear went out of her eyes, and she turned to stare at the lake again. Her small profile was like a cameo in the pale gloom. I lit a cigarette, cupping the match in my hands. Smoke and tobacco sparks whipped away on the wind. I leaned against the sun dial.

"What's the matter?" I said.

"I—I hate him."

"Who?"

"J—Jay."

"Forget him, honey," I said. "Get your things, and I'll drive you into town. You can get a bus for Sycamore Creek."

She shook her head quickly. "I—I can't go home now. Besides, dad promised to call me here tomorrow morning. About Angus."

"Who's Angus?"

She looked at me with wide eyes. "Angus Lochandeen. He's a bull. Dad raised him from a calf, and tonight he's entered in the bull breeder's show at the county fair. We think he'll get first prize."

I sighed, snapped my cigarette into the wind. I placed my hands on her bare shoulders. "Get some sleep. We'll leave early in the morning. I'll drive you all the way home—and you can see the blue ribbon that Angus won. Would you like that?" I felt like a father bribing a four-year-old to eat her spinach.

Her small body was trembling beneath my hands, and I took off my coat and folded it around her. For an instant she hud-

dled close to me. Then her body stiffened, and her small chin tilted upward at a defiant angle. "You're very kind, Mr. Bennett, but I'm staying. I—I'm just as good as that—that girl."

"Now listen," I said gently, "you're bucking the big time. Miss Brand is going to marry Jay. There'll be an announcement party here tomorrow night. The smart thing for you to do is to fade out. There are a million other guys."

"No," she said stubbornly.

"Why?" I said wearily. "Just tell me why. What have you got to gain?" I answered my own question by thinking: *Nothing but two million bucks, you dope.*

She pressed her face against my chest, and I could feel the sobs raking her small body. "He—he can't do that to me. Not after what he told me. I—I believed him, and I—I love him."

I held her in my arms and looked helplessly up at the stars.

Suddenly she broke away from me and ran swiftly over the sand, my coat flapping like a tent over her shoulders.

"Hey," I yelled, but she was gone.

I lit another cigarette and smoked it down to a finger-burning stub before I went back into the house. The chess game between Cecil and William Darmody was still in progress. There were a number of crumpled little balls of blue paper on the table and on the floor by Darmody's chair. I guessed that he had been carrying on a lengthy written conversation with Cecil. They both looked up at me, smiled and nodded. I waved a hand, and went on.

As I neared the living room, I thought I heard a man's voice. But as soon as I stepped through the archway I decided I had been mistaken. The only man there was Julius Stockmaster, and at the moment he wasn't in a position to talk—even if he had been able to. He was too busy. His hands were cupped behind Gail Brand's head, and he was fiercely kissing her.

CHAPTER THREE

Murder Talks Loud

THEY stood by a fireplace, very close together. Stockmaster's face was averted, but I could see that Gail Brand's eyes were closed. The low

neckline of her blouse had slipped downward, liberally exposing her tanned bare shoulders, and her fingers dug into the back of Stockmaster's neck.

I figured they would have to take a breath sometime, and so I waited. They held the clinch for a full minute before she slowly removed her lips from his.

"Darling, darling," she breathed. "Please try to understand. *Please.*"

Stockmaster pushed her roughly away from him, his big hands gripping her shoulders. His bushy hair seemed to be standing straight up, and his square jaw jutted outward.

"You can't marry Jay," a deep voice said. "You love me."

I jumped, glanced quickly around the room. I didn't see anyone else. Then I realized that Stockmaster, the deaf-mute, had spoken.

"I must," Gail Brand said. "You know I must."

"For what?" Stockmaster said bitterly. "For two million dollars?"

She nodded her head slowly. "Yes, Julius. For a long time now I've been living on loans and the kindness of friends. My money is all gone. Don't ask me where it went—but I can't live without money. Lots of it. More than you have, Julius. More than you'll ever have. Much, much more."

Stockmaster dropped his arms to his sides, and his big shoulders hunched forward. "But the house in Boston your father left you, and all his money. What about them?"

She looked at the ceiling and laughed a little shrilly. "Oh, darling, you sound like Mr. Unterbrink, my fat little banker. I haven't a dollar left—all gone." She spread her hands in a wide gesture and looked at him with bright eyes.

"But where?"

She lifted one bare shoulder. "Where does money always go, darling? Clothes, jewelry, the races, parties. Did you ever spend a season in Miami? And there were several young men with muscles and the correct clothes. Young men like that are expensive, Julius. I'm not exactly a debutante any more, and you have been burying yourself in the desert in New Mexico writing those novels which never seem to earn you enough money."

"If you love money," Stockmaster shouted at her, "why didn't you stay married to Ted Hammond. He was filthy with money."

"But, darling," she pouted, "Ted was an old man, and he insisted upon calling me 'Sugar.' It used to make me shudder. Besides he found out about the expensive young men. That's when he divorced me—and all I got out of it were a few trinkets and a beat-up convertible. Now Jay is different. He's young, fairly handsome, and it'll take me quite a while to spend two million dollars.

"I met him the night the sheriff came out with the foreclosure papers on the Boston place. I was having a big party—I still owe for the food and liquor. Jay came with one of my young men, and when I learned about Jay's money I decided to marry him. I turned on my fatal charm, and pretty soon we were engaged. We're having the announcement party tomorrow night. Are you coming to our party, darling?"

"No," Stockmaster said heavily. "Jay called me and asked me to come—after I got your letter. I came down to ask you to marry me. You don't love him."

"It won't do any good to plead, Julius," she said coldly. "You shouldn't have come." Suddenly she put her arms around him and laid her cheek on his chest. "Oh, darling, can't you see? We can still see each other, after Jay and I are married. I'll slip away once in a while—if you promise to be good. You're really very nice, Julius. If only you had two million—"

There was a sharp cracking sound, and I jumped again. Then I knew that the sound was made by Stockmaster's hand striking Gail Brand's face. She stumbled backward and fell to the divan, moaning a little. Stockmaster stood glaring at her, his big body trembling. I ducked back and started down the hall. Cecil was standing silently by the dining room door. He gave me a slow smile.

I pointed toward the living room and whispered: "He talks."

Cecil nodded slowly.

I grabbed his arm, pulled him into the dining room and closed the door. I said: "You knew he was faking that deaf-mute act?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why?"

He lifted his white-coated shoulders. "Mr. Stockmaster is rather eccentric. He dislikes to meet the public, and so he pretends to be a deaf-mute. The pose amuses him, and he adopts it with all strangers. He is a frequent visitor here, and Mr. Gerard has instructed me not to expose his little pretense." He made a deprecating motion with his hand. "I hope you understand, sir, why I lied to you."

"Sure," I said, "but it's screwy. What about his secretary—this William Darmody? Is he faking too?"

"Oh, no, sir. Mr. Darmody is really a deaf-mute. That is why Mr. Stockmaster engaged him—it helps to maintain his deception. Mr. Darmody is really quite efficient. He types the final drafts of Mr. Stockmaster's novels, and handles all his correspondence."

"Where is this Darmody now?"

"He has retired, sir."

"Stop calling me 'sir'," I told him. "It makes me nervous."

"Okay," Cecil said, grinning.

I grinned back at him, and went back

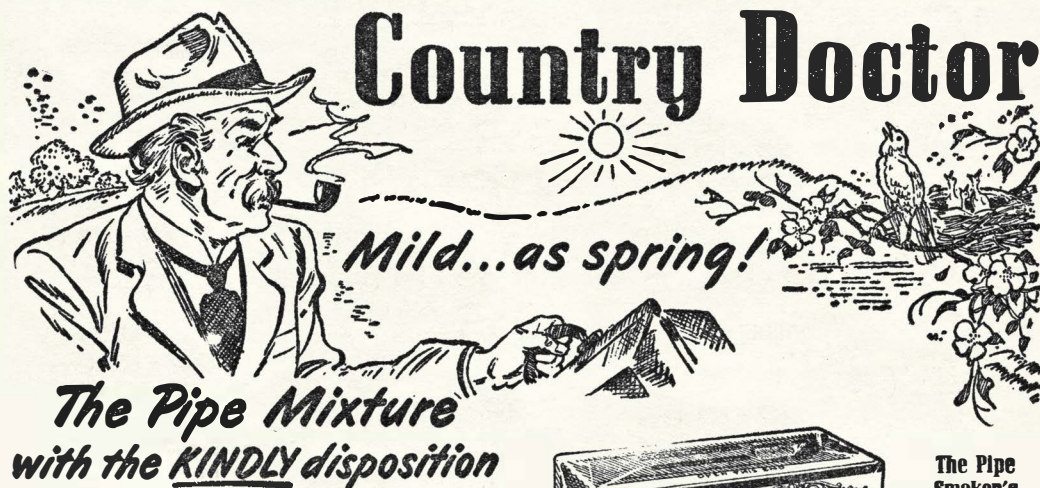
into the hall. I moved cautiously to the archway and peeked into the living room. Gail Brand was gone. Julius Stockmaster was bending over the low glass table and I heard the clink of a bottle against a glass. I tip-toed upstairs to my room.

There was a dim streak of light leaking from beneath Janie Crockett's door, and I paused a moment and listened. I heard a low sobbing sound from inside. I hesitated, decided against knocking, and entered my own room. I got a bottle of bourbon from my bag and sat down before the open window to listen to the wind and the sound of the waves on the beach below.

Somebody knocked softly on my door. When I opened it, I stared straight into the big blue eyes of Janie Crockett.

SHE said tremulously: "May—may I come in?" She wore a long robe, and her black hair hung down over her shoulders. Her small round face held a scrubbed look, and her eyes were big and dark against her white skin. She carried my coat neatly folded over one arm.

I opened my door wider, and stood



The illustration depicts a man in a suit and hat, smoking a pipe, with a sun and a bird in the background. The text reads: "Country Doctor", "Mild...as spring!", "The Pipe Mixture with the KINDLY disposition".

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aside. As I did so, Julius Stockmaster lurched into view. He was carrying a bottle in one hand, and a glass in the other. His head was hanging down, and he didn't look up as he plodded past us.

I called to him: "Hello, you big dumb ox."

He didn't check his pace, or look around. When he came to a door at the end of the hall, he opened it and went inside. The door slammed behind him.

Janie Crockett said in a puzzled voice: "That wasn't very nice—just because you know that he can't hear. Why did you call him that?"

I patted her shoulder. "Never mind, honey. It's just a pet name I have for Julius. Come on in."

She moved past me, and once more I smelled the green grass, and the clover, and the sunshine. I closed the door, took my coat from her, and nodded at a chair.

Janie shook her head quickly. "I—I just wanted to tell you that I've changed my mind. I—I'm going home."

"Fine," I said, and I put on my coat. "Get dressed, and we'll be on our way."

She shook her head again, and her braids did a dance. "Oh, no, not tonight. I couldn't ask you to do that. Morning will be soon enough. If you'll just take me in to town so that I can get a bus."

I moved over and stood close to her. Her head was about on a level with the knot of my tie. She looked up at me, and her eyes were as trusting and as innocent as a week-old kitten's. I said gently:

"It won't do any good to wait. Jay won't be back."

She looked at my necktie, and tears beaded the edges of her long lashes. She didn't say anything.

I said: "Shall we leave now?"

She moved her head slowly from side to side. "I—I want to go in the morning."

I sighed. "All right. I'll see you then."

She tilted her small face up to mine. "I like you, Mr. Bennett," she said gravely. "You drink too much, and your eyes almost never smile, but—but you're nice."

"Sure. I'm a swell guy."

She smiled slowly, and suddenly her eyes weren't so innocent anymore—or maybe it was just my imagination. To make sure, I nodded at my bottle of bourbon. "How about a nightcap?"

"No, thank you," she said quickly. "I—I'd better go back to my room." She backed away from me, and eyes were innocent again—and maybe a little scared.

I grinned at her. "Good night, honey. Sleep tight."

She turned and moved slowly to the door. With her hand on the knob, she paused, her face averted. She said in a low voice: "Is Jay really going to marry that—that girl?"

"I'm afraid so."

She glanced quickly around at me, and there were tears in her eyes. "Why?"

I shrugged. "People get married for a lot of reasons. One of them is love."

"He don't love her," she said quietly. "She just roped him."

"Whatever she did," I said, "it worked. You just hustle back to Sycamore Creek and forget about Jay Gerard."

"I—I can't forget him," she said in a choked voice. She jerked open the door and ran out. In a second I heard her door slam.

I stepped out into the hall. As I did so, Gail Brand rounded a corner and walked unsteadily toward me. She was carrying her jacket over her arm, and her red silk blouse was low on her shoulders. Her bright hair was tousled and hung in a glittering fold over one eye. Like Stockmaster, she, too, carried a bottle—scotch, half full. Her red mouth was moist and slack, and her eyes held a hot bright glitter. When she spotted me, she stopped abruptly and stared sullenly.

"Good evening, Miss Brand," I said.

She swayed a little. "'Evening," she said. "I didn't catch the name."

"Bennett," I said. "We met downstairs."

"Course. Bennett. Friend of Jay's." She tossed the hair from her eyes. She was a handsome woman, if you didn't object to the faint beginning of the lines around her eyes and mouth, and the slight puffiness beneath her well-shaped chin. But her figure was still something special, and her skin was clear and white. "I'm looking for Julius, the rat," she said.

I jerked a thumb toward the far end of the hall. "He went that-a-way."

A glitter of interest entered her eyes, and she smiled slowly. "Thanks, pardner," she said. "What are you drinking?"

"Bourbon."

She lifted her bottle. "Care to switch to scotch?"

"I thought you were looking for Julius."

"Hell with Julius." She leaned into my room and peered about. "Where's Cutie-Pie?" she asked.

"Who?" I said, playing dumb.

"Little Big-Eyes," she said impatiently. "The itty-bitty number in the twelve-ninety-eight dress."

A door across the hall opened, and the slight figure of William Darmody stepped out. He stopped abruptly when he saw us, and looked embarrassed. His hands fluttered nervously over the buttons of his neat double-breasted blue suit. I nodded and smiled at him, and he smiled back. Then he looked at Gail Brand with troubled eyes.

"Go away," she said to him.

He looked at me helplessly. From his pocket he took the little pad of blue note paper, scribbled on it hastily, tore off the page and held it up for me to see. I read:

Where is Mr. Stockmaster?

I pointed at the door of the room the novelist had entered.

He smiled, crumpled the paper into a small ball, and flicked it to the floor with a snapping motion of his thumb and forefinger—like some persons flick away a cigarette stub.

Gail Brand moved abruptly away. She stopped before Stockmaster's door and twisted the knob. Apparently it was locked, and she began to pound on the door with the base of the scotch bottle. It made a fearful racket. In a second the door opened, and Gail Brand entered. The door slammed shut, and the hall was quiet.

I LOOKED silently at Darmody, and he shook his head sadly. I made a drinking motion with my hand and pointed inside my room. He smiled, nodded his head vigorously, and followed me inside. I closed the door, poured some bourbon into a glass and handed it to him. I drank from the bottle. He sat on the edge of the bed and sipped slowly at the whisky. He seemed nervous, and his eyes kept darting to the door.

The light glistened on his smooth black

hair, and picked up blue sparks from a fair-sized diamond on the little finger of his right hand. I looked closer at the ring. Two small hearts were engraved on the gold band. In one heart was the letter S, and in the other, T.

I took an envelope from my pocket and wrote:

As a friend of Mr. Gerard's, I don't like Miss Brand's conduct. Do you know her well?

I held it out for him to read.

He read quickly. Then he shrugged faintly, placed his glass on the floor, and began to write on his blue pad.

I looked down at his bent head and shouted loudly: "Hey! Look out!"

He jerked his head up and stared at me with startled eyes.

"You're not a deaf-mute," I told him. "You're faking—like Stockmaster."

He looked puzzled, his lips moving slowly.

"Stop it," I said. "The act's over."

He continued to look puzzled, and he held his pad out to me. I jerked it from his hand and scribbled: "If you can't hear, why did you look up when I shouted?"

He read. Then he frowned, and compressed his thin lips. He began to write, and I waited. Presently he stood up, tore a page from his pad and handed it to me. Then he moved to the door. I stepped quickly forward, grabbed his arm, and pointed down at his unfinished drink on the floor.

He looked at me coldly, jerked his arm free, and went out. The door closed softly behind him.

I read what he had written:

I knew you shouted, because I sensed the vibrations. If you were deaf, you would understand. Mr. Stockmaster pretends to be a deaf-mute because it amuses him, and because it is sometimes convenient for him. I have never known what it is like to speak like other men, or to hear. What is music like? If I could hear and speak I would certainly not pretend to be a person condemned to a world of silence. Thanks for the drink. Good night.

I wadded the paper into a ball and snapped it away, the way I had seen Darmody do. I felt like the grandfather of all the heels in the world.

I decided it was time to inform my employer of developments. There was a telephone in a small sitting room at the far end of the hall. I called the Royal Plaza and asked to be connected with Gerard's room.

Presently a female voice said: "I'm sorry, sir. Mr. Gerard is not registered."

"You mean he has checked out?"

"No, sir. We have no record of a Mr. Gerard registering within the last twenty-four hours."

"Thanks," I said, and hung up.

I went back to my room, turned off the lights, and sat by the window. Moonlight glinted dully on the rolling surface of the lake, and the wind moaned through the trees. From the other side of the house I heard the faint hum of night traffic on the highway. From somewhere a door slammed loudly, and after that there was silence.

After a while I undressed, stretched out on the bed and pulled the sheet up over me. I suddenly realized how tired I was, but I was glad that I had accomplished the job for which Jay Gerard had hired me. In the morning I would see Janie Crockett safely aboard a bus bound for Sycamore Creek—out of Jay's house, and out of his life, and he could proceed with his plans to marry Gail Brand without the embarrassing presence of a little blue-eyed girl who was foolish enough to believe that all men meant the words they whispered on a summer night.

I felt a little sorry for Janie Crockett, and I hoped that she would acquire some protective armor before she met too many Jay Gerards. I went to sleep thinking how cute Janie Crockett looked with her face scrubbed and her hair braided. . . .

Four hours later the sound from the beach had awakened me, and I was kneeling in the sand over the dead body of Gail Brand.

CHAPTER FOUR

Back for the Kill

A BIRD flew over my head, singing a shrill morning song. From down the beach another bird answered. The red rim of the sun cast lanes of blood over the surface of the lake. A sudden cool

breeze fanned my face and gently lifted a corner of Gail Brand's white silk robe. The breeze rustled the leaves in a row of trees at the crest of a steep rocky rise sloping upward from the beach, and it whispered along a thick hedge linking the row of trees to the steps leading upward to the terrace.

It was the instant between dawn and full sunrise. The breeze died away with a last whisper, and the birds were suddenly quiet. Even the gentle lapping sound of the water behind me seemed to be stilled. I stood up, and I looked up and down the beach in the yellowish light. The only moving object was a little brown dog sniffing along the sand.

He lifted his head at me, his short ears cocked. Suddenly his nose pointed upward, toward the hedge, and he began to bark. It was a sharp, shrill sound in the morning quiet. I swung my head toward the hedge. There was a faint rustling, and a stone the size of a golf ball bounced down the rocky slope and rolled almost to one of Gail Brand's silver-sandaled feet. There was a subtle stirring in the hedge above me, and I dropped to a crouch, my hand reaching for my gun.

In that instant pale flame burst from behind the hedge, and spurting sand stung my cheeks as three bullets thudded into the beach with trip-hammer swiftness. I flattened myself on the sand, leveling my gun on the hedge, and I fired once. There was a ringing metallic sound, and the glancing whine of my bullet. Along the hedge, toward the house, I caught a quick glimpse of movement. I began to run, my feet heavy in the sand. I was panting when I reached the terrace.

The big house loomed silently above me, the sun glittering red on the windows. I turned, and looked back down the beach. From here the body of Gail Brand was hidden by the curving rocky slope. I entered the house, and from somewhere I heard the muffled sound of a radio, apparently broadcasting the early morning news. I followed the sound to the kitchen, and I stepped inside.

Yellow sunlight glittered on the dazzling enamel of stove, refrigerator, tables, chairs, and danced on the dial of small radio on a window sill. An electric coffee-maker bubbled on a table. The back door was

open, and through the screen I saw Cecil standing on the steps of a small porch. He had a coffee cup in his hand, and he was staring out over the landscaped lawn to the highway beyond. He was freshly shaved, his black hair smoothly combed, his jacket crisp and white.

I stepped over to the screen door. "Good morning."

He turned his head, his teeth glinting in a smile. "Good morning, Mr. Bennett. You're up early."

"Not early enough," I said. "How about you? Do you always get up with the birds?"

He smiled. "Not always. But I have a lot of work to do today for the party tonight. I had just made myself some coffee, when I heard what sounded like a series of explosions." He nodded toward the highway. "I thought maybe it was a car or a truck back-firing."

"It wasn't," I said. "It was gunfire. And there won't be any party. The bride-to-be is dead."

He turned slowly to face me through the screen. Then he said quietly: "You're joking, sir."

"Murder isn't a joke," I said, and I told him about Gail Brand.

When I had finished, he took a deep breath. "That's—bad, sir." He opened the screen door and moved past me into the kitchen.

"Whoever killed her," I said, "was still hanging around when I showed up. They took a couple of shots at me from behind

the hedge, and then scooted for the house. There's a killer in this house right now—unless he ran away, and *that* would be admitting guilt. I'm going to call the police, but first I've got to count noses."

I hesitated, asked: "Will you see that nobody leaves?"

He nodded gravely, and moved across the kitchen. He opened a drawer and took out a .32 revolver. It was blue steel, with a black rubber grip. "I use it to shoot crows," he explained, "and rabbits, when they get in the garden." He handled the gun like he knew how, the way I like to see a man handle a gun—with the muzzle averted and pointed downward.

I said: "You like guns?"

He nodded. "I was the best pistol shot in my outfit during the war."

I held out my hand. "May I see it?"

He handed it over, butt first.

I checked the cylinder, saw that it was full of live slugs, and I smelled the muzzle. Cecil watched me silently, a faint smile on his lips.

I said: "Shoot it lately?"

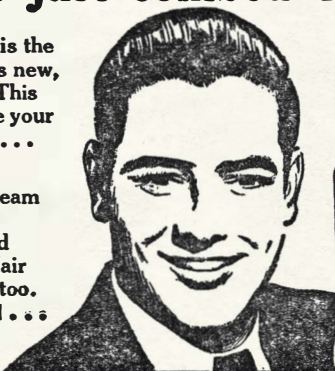
"Yesterday afternoon, at some crows," he said.

I snapped the cylinder shut and handed the gun back to him. I didn't like it, but there wasn't much else I could do. He stuffed the gun beneath his belt, under his white jacket, and went out the kitchen door to the driveway. I saw him walk rapidly to a spot on the lawn where he could see both the highway and the lake side of the house.

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I WENT upstairs and knocked on Julius Stockmaster's door first. I didn't get any action, so I twisted the knob. It wasn't locked, and I went on in.

Stockmaster was sitting on the bed, his big shoulders slumped forward. Yellow sunlight slanted over the stubble on his heavy cheeks, and his eyes were like red spider webs. His white shirt looked soiled and wrinkled, and his tie was knotted loosely beneath the unbuttoned collar. A bottle was on the floor at his feet, and there was a half-filled glass in his hand. Cigarette stubs spilled from an ash tray beside the bottle. His mouth hung open stupidly, and he gave me a dull up-from-under look.

"Good morning," I said cheerily.

"Go to hell," he said thickly.

"Well, well," I said. "The great novelist can hear—and talk."

He pushed himself clumsily to his feet, and his big fist swung for me. I side-stepped easily, spread my fingers on his face, and pushed. He sprawled back on the bed, grunting. The liquor spilled from his glass and soaked a pillow. He heaved himself slowly to a sitting position, looked at his empty glass in a surprised manner, and flung it against the wall.

It shattered, and tinkled to the polished floor. He reached a brawny arm downward, his fingers groping blindly for the bottle on the floor. I kicked the bottle under the bed, and I heard the remaining whiskey gurgle out of it. He looked up at me, his face contorted, like a kid about to cry because someone had snatched away his stick of candy.

"You been here all night?" I snapped at him. "In this room?"

He pulled a hand down over his face and looked at me in bewilderment. Then he hunched forward, lowered his face slowly into his hands, and began to sob like a baby. His beefy shoulders shook with his sobbing, and tears dripped from beneath his fingers.

He began to mumble brokenly: "She's mine. . . . She can't marry Jay. She doesn't love him. . . . She loves me. . . . It's just his damn money."

"Forget her," I said. "Somebody shot her dead last night."

He stopped his mumbling and slowly pulled his fingers down over his cheeks.

He raised his head. The downward pressure of his fingers on his cheeks made red half moons of his lower eyelids. He looked like a mournful hound dog.

"Dead?" he muttered.

"Sober up," I told him, "and come down to the terrace. The police will be here shortly."

I left him sitting there, staring at me dumbly. I slammed his door behind me and went down the hall to William Darmody's room. I didn't bother to knock, but went right in. He was sleeping soundly. I shook him gently, and he opened his eyes and looked at me calmly.

First I pointed at his clothes folded neatly on a chair, then at the door. He sat up in bed and looked puzzled. His blue pad and a pencil was on a stand by the bed and I picked them up and wrote:

There's been some trouble. When did you last see Miss Brand?

I held the pad up for him to see.

He read slowly, frowning slightly. Then he took the pad from me and began to write swiftly. When he had finished, he tore off the page and handed it to me. He had written:

Miss Brand came to my room last night. She was drunk. She wrote on my pad, asking me if I knew where Mr. Gerard was. I wrote that I didn't know, and she became angry, and began to shout at me, too fast for me to read her lips. Then I wrote that she had better go to bed, and that Mr. Gerard would no doubt return in the morning. She shouted something at me again, and then she left. What is wrong?

It was my turn to write.

Miss Brand has been murdered. I'm calling the police. Get dressed and come down to the terrace.

As his eyes flicked over my scribbling, I thought his narrow face paled a little. He nodded, his lips compressed, and he got out of bed. He was wearing white silk pajamas. He crossed the room, entered the bathroom, and closed the door. I went out.

Janie Crockett's door was standing open, and I poked my head inside. The silk cover of the bed was wrinkled a little, but it appeared to me that the bed hadn't

been slept in, and Janie Crockett wasn't there. I made a quick search. No bags, no clothes, nothing. Not even a hair pin. I left, closing the door behind me.

I didn't have any trouble locating Gail Brand's room. It was incredibly cluttered. The top of the dresser was loaded with jars and bottles of beauty lotions. In a dresser drawer I found a black leather purse.

It contained the usual woman's junk, forty-nine dollars in bills, a check book—and three little brass cartridges, .25 caliber. The balance on the check stubs was \$106.25. The last check had been made out to a famous New York dress shop in the amount of \$850.00. I replaced the purse, took a last look around, and opened the door.

As I stepped into the hall, I saw William Darmody turn the corner at the head of the stairs. He disappeared. I crossed swiftly to his room, entered, and closed the door. I looked in his bag first. It contained nothing but clean clothes—shirts, socks, underwear, a spare necktie. The cabinet in the bathroom revealed only toilet articles and a safety razor. All the dresser drawers were empty. In the wastepaper basket I found two canceled train tickets from Chicago, a crumpled receipt from a Chicago hotel, an empty match folder bearing the name of a State Street restaurant, three cigarette stubs and some ashes.

I got down on my knees and peered under the bed, but all I saw was a pair of men's lounging slippers. I stood up and moved around the bed. Darmody's pad and pencil were gone, but the three notes we had exchanged were there, wrinkled into little balls. I unfolded them, and read them, one by one. Then I left.

There was a telephone in a small sitting room at the end of the hall. I lifted the receiver to my ear. I didn't get any response. Dead silence. I rattled the bar a few times before I gave up. I opened a window of the sitting room and looked out. The telephone wires ran in from the highway, and I could see where they had been connected to the house at a spot just outside the window of Gail Brand's room. They dangled limply in the grass beside the house.

I thought dismally: *That's just ducky.*

Stuck with a beautiful corpse, four people to keep an eye on, and no way to summon the law. I went down to the terrace.

The first person I saw was Janie Crockett. She was sitting stiffly in a canvas chair, a small bag beside her. She was wearing a simple black dress, a wide-brimmed black straw hat, and stubby little black high-heeled shoes. Her eyes looked too big for her pale little face. William Darmody sat in the far corner of the terrace and was staring out over the lake in a preoccupied manner. Cecil was leaning carelessly against the wall at the top of the stairs leading down to the beach. I didn't see his .32, and I figured he still had it tucked away beneath his jacket.

Cecil said quietly: "Miss Crockett was leaving by the back door. I asked her to stay a while."

Julius Stockmaster came slowly through the French doors and stood glaring at me with bloodshot eyes. Darmody aroused himself and went over to Stockmaster. He began to make rapid motions with his hands in front of the novelist. Stockmaster pushed him roughly aside and lurched over to me. "Where is she?" he blurted.

I saw Cecil shift his position slightly, and a bright alert look entered his eyes.

"Sit down," I said to Stockmaster.

"Damn you. What kind of a cheap, dirty trick is this?" He moved closer to me, his eyes dangerous, his big fists clenched.

Cecil stepped quickly forward and touched Stockmaster's arm. "Sit down, sir. I'll get you some coffee."

"Don't want coffee," Stockmaster said. "Want a drink. Want to see my darling, my true love. Cheap trick."

Cecil said, "Of course, sir," as if he were talking to a child, and he guided the big man firmly to a chair and gently pushed him into it. Stockmaster didn't protest. He leaned his big shaggy head back and closed his eyes. Cecil winked at me and left.

Janie Crockett was staring at Stockmaster like a bird watching a snake. I went over to her and said: "He's drunk, honey. And he's not a deaf-mute. Why did you try to leave alone?"

Her small shoulders shivered as she jerked her gaze away from Stockmaster. She looked up at me. "What? Why did I leave? I—I decided not to bother you, and

I was afraid Jay might come back. I—I don't want to see him again—ever. I thought maybe I could catch a bus on the highway.

A car roared up the driveway and stopped. There were rapid footsteps on the walk. Jay Gerard appeared on the terrace. He stopped abruptly, a puzzled frown on his tanned face.

"You're just in time, Jay," I said.

"In time for what?" he said coldly. "What is this, Jim? Where's Gail?"

"Sit down, and I'll tell you." I looked at him, hard.

He hesitated, his eyes stubborn and angry.

Cecil appeared with a tray bearing cups and a steaming silver coffee pot. "Good morning, sir," he said to Gerard as he placed the tray on a table.

But Gerard's gaze had swung to Janie Crockett. The anger faded from his eyes, and he walked slowly toward her. She turned to face him, and her lips began to tremble. With the rising sun beyond them, it was like the reunited lover's fade-out in an old-time movie. He sat down beside her, and he took her hand in his. She turned her face away, but she didn't remove her hand. He smiled, and said something to her in a low voice.

I took a deep breath, and said loudly: "People, the police will be here any moment. Miss Gail Brand has been murdered—shot. Her body is lying on the beach by the sun dial." I flung that at them, and I stopped.

CHAPTER FIVE

Pattern of Death

JAY GERARD started to rise, and then sat down again. His face was suddenly pale beneath his tan. Janie Crockett turned quickly, her eyes looking bigger than ever. Stockmaster apparently hadn't heard me. He was still sitting quietly with his eyes closed. I couldn't tell if he was asleep, passed out, or dead. Cecil quietly poured coffee.

Somebody plucked at my sleeve, and I turned to look at William Darmody. His eyes were puzzled, and he held out his little blue pad to me. I took the pad and wrote:

Sorry. I forgot that you can't hear. I told them about the death of Miss Brand.

He read what I had written, nodded, and resumed his seat in the corner. Cecil handed me a cup of coffee. His face was composed and expressionless. The coffee tasted good, hot and strong. He carried the tray around to the rest, but Darmody was the only other person to accept a cup. Stockmaster continued his attitude of a sleeping sphinx.

I said to Cecil in a low voice: "Maybe you'd better stay with the body until the police arrive." I was aware that there was at least one person who knew that I hadn't been able to call the police, but I didn't see any point in broadcasting the fact that the telephone wires were cut.

Cecil nodded silently, put down his tray, and descended the steps.

Jay Gerard got slowly to his feet. "Jim, this is terrible. When did Gail arrive? I—I didn't expect her until today."

"She came last night," I said. "Right after your pal, Stockmaster."

William Darmody stood up abruptly, crossed the terrace, tore a page from his pad and handed it to me. He had written:

Why do you assume that someone here shot Miss Brand?

I took the pad and wrote:

I assume nothing. The police will want to question everyone here. That is routine procedure.

He read what I had written. Then he nodded grimly, tore off the page, crumpled it into a ball, and flicked it away. He went over to Stockmaster and shook him gently by a shoulder. Stockmaster opened his eyes and stared dully. Darmody made a few rapid motions with his fingers. Stockmaster wearily waved him away.

"Stop it, Willie," he said heavily. "You know I can't savvy that sign lingo."

Darmody went back to his chair, his face expressionless.

Stockmaster looked stupidly around at the rest of us. "What is this?" he said plaintively. "What's going on?"

I ignored him and swung my gaze to the beach. Cecil was leaning against an out-cropping of stone. The body of Gail

Brand lay just beyond him, out of sight from the terrace. I glanced at Jay Gerard. He, too, was watching Cecil. Janie Crockett's hands were clasped tightly together, and her small face looked pinched.

Gerard turned to face me. "Jim, what kind of hell went on here last night? I trusted you to keep an eye on things. I—"

"I tried to call you," I broke in. "They said you weren't registered."

He flushed, and for an instant his eyes wavered. Then he said: "I didn't go to the hotel, after all. I wanted to think, and I just drove around for miles. A little while ago I made up my mind . . . about Gail." He paused, and looked at Janie Crockett.

Some color was in her cheeks now, and her eyes were veiled by her dark lashes. Gerard stepped close and placed a hand on her shoulder. His face was red, but his eyes were steady as he spoke.

"I made a mistake, Jim. It was all arranged, between Gail and me, before I met Janie. Afterwards, I felt that I had to go through with the marriage for Gail's sake. But I love Janie. I knew it all the time—and so did she—" he gave her a rueful smile— "and I hurried back here this morning, hoping that you hadn't persuaded her to leave. Oh, hell." He made a helpless gesture. "I know this isn't the time for me to talk like this, but it's the truth."

I said: "Jay, you should have decided that last night, when Gail Brand was still alive."

"Dammit, Jim," he burst out. "How was I to know? I thought I was doing the right thing. Where are the police? Let's get this over with."

I turned away, a cold feeling creeping along my spine. A word had just filtered into my brain. One word. The wrong word. And a couple of other things. All together, they fitted into a pattern of death.

Suddenly Julius Stockmaster stood up. He moved toward the steps leading down to the beach. "I'm going down there to see her," he mumbled. "I've got a right to see her."

"Stay here," I said sharply.

He kept moving. His eyes were glazed. I stepped in front of him and placed a hand on his broad chest. He didn't speak, and he didn't slow down. He flung his fist at me from down around his knee. I sidestepped and jabbed a quick left at his jaw. But he was fast, in spite of his bulk. He jerked his head, and my knuckles barely grazed the stubble on his chin. He kept moving.

I slammed my right fist into his side as he reeled past. He roared like a wounded lion, wheeled around, and charged for me. I had my hands full. His brawny arms whipped around me, and his eyes held the look of madness. I struggled in his embrace, and I kept pounding him in the ribs. But he was wild with whiskey and love, and his fingers clawed for my throat.

I heard Jay Gerard yell, "Julius!" and I saw him leap toward us. Then another face loomed suddenly beyond the novelist's shoulders—Darmody. The thin secretary leaped upon Stockmaster like a terrier upon a bear. He hooked an arm beneath the big man's chin, and tried to pull him off me. Darmody's face was contorted with strain, and his mouth was working convulsively—but no sound came out.

But Stockmaster's fingers tightened on

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my throat. I slipped, and fell backward. Stockmaster's body engulfed me, blotting out the sun. We hit the stone floor of the terrace together, and I kicked and tried to get at my gun, but the heavy body pinned me down, and his fingers dug deeper.

Stockmaster's face was close to mine, and I smelled the whiskey on his breath. "You can't stop me!" he shouted. "I've got a right to see her. She—"

A fist shot into my view. There was a sharp cracking sound. Stockmaster's head jerked violently sideways, and I saw the sudden rolling white of his eyes. Then he slumped over me, a dead weight, his thick shock of hair against my mouth.

I wiggled out from under him and stood up. Jay Gerard stood by, rubbing the knuckles of his right fist.

"Thanks," I said to him. My throat hurt when I spoke.

He nodded grimly. "I hated to hit him," he said, "but when he gets drunk he's like a wild man. I didn't know that he—he cared about Gail. She never—"

"Never mind," I said wearily. I felt my throat tenderly. "He damn near strangled me."

"Willie helped, too," Gerard said. "I think he understands Julius better than any of us."

William Darmody had rolled Stockmaster over on his back, and now he knelt beside him. Stockmaster's eyes were closed, and he was smiling a little, like a man enjoying a pleasant dream. Darmody looked mutely up at me, and sadly shook his head. I gave him a short salute, trying to make him understand that I was thanking him for trying to pull Stockmaster off me. He smiled faintly, and nodded.

I glanced over at Janie Crockett. She sat rigidly, like a wax image of terror. Beyond her, down on the beach, I saw Cecil strolling slowly back to his post, and I decided that he, too, must have ran to my aid when Stockmaster jumped me.

STOCKMASTER stirred, and opened his eyes. He stared blankly up at the sky for a moment, and then he pushed himself ponderously to his feet. He stood swaying a little, his bloodshot eyes staring at each of us in turn. When his gaze swung on me, he said quietly:

"Did you hit me?"

Jay Gerard said quickly: "I did, Julius. I had to."

Stockmaster nodded slowly, and ran a hand through his thick hair. Then he said to me: "Is she really dead?"

"Yes."

A glint of the madness returned to his eyes, and he spoke from between clenched teeth. "Who . . . killed . . . her?"

I shrugged.

He took a slow step toward me. "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

Gerard stepped forward quickly and grasped Stockmaster's arm. "Dammit, Julius, Mr. Bennett is a friend of mine. I asked him here."

Stockmaster's eyes went dull again, and he allowed Gerard to lead him to a chair. William Darmody trailed anxiously behind them. Stockmaster sat down heavily and said in a plaintive voice: "Won't somebody get me a drink?"

"Later, Julius," Gerard said.

I felt mean, and tired, and beat-up. My head ached, and my throat hurt, I hadn't had any breakfast, and I was sick of the whole mess. I had been on the verge of fulfilling my part of my bargain with Jay Gerard, and it wasn't my fault that Janie Crockett was not now on her way to Sycamore Creek. Or was it? I took a deep breath, looked into the face of the four persons on the terrace, and I glanced at the figure of Cecil standing guard at the curve of the beach a few feet from where Gail Brand lay dead in the morning sun.

I backed up a little, and I spoke to William Darmody. My voice sounded harsh in my ears. "Why did you kill her?"

He knew I was speaking to him, but he looked at me blankly.

I took a step toward him. He backed away from me, a bewildered expression on his face. I stalked him slowly, and he kept backing away. He shot a worried, helpless glance at Stockmaster, who sat erect, alert now, like a wild animal aroused. The stone parapet stopped Darmody's slow retreat. He shot a frantic glance around him.

"Talk," I said to him.

"Jim," Gerard said quietly, "Willie can't hear you."

"He can hear," I snapped, "and he can talk." I pointed a finger at Darmody. "I

know you can hear, in spite of the touching drama you put on in my room last night. A little while ago you wrote me a note referring to the fact that Gail Brand had been *shot*. No one told you *how* she had died. When I told the rest, my back was toward you—you couldn't even see my lips moving. You not only heard me say it—you already knew she had been shot. Because you shot her."

He shook his head violently in frantic incomprehension, and with his hands he went through the motions of writing. He whipped out his pad and offered it to me.

"Stop the act," I told him. "You can talk. You talked to Gail Brand in your room last night. You have admitted that you had a conversation with her. It was a *vocal* conversation, and not conducted by writing notes to each other. It's your habit to crumple your damned little notes and throw them away. The only notes in your room are the ones you wrote to me, and I to you. There weren't any others."

I paused, thinking: *Bennett, this is silly. Why don't you just keep an eye on this fake dummy, this killer, and send someone out to call the cops?*

Jay Gerard said raggedly: "Jim, Willie wouldn't—"

"The hell he wouldn't," I snapped. "Blackmailers never know when to stop. Gail Brand was paying him to keep him from telling you about her relationship with Stockmaster. Darmody knew that the affair was continuing, even after she became engaged to you, and he was smart enough to realize that she didn't want anything to happen which would interfere with her plans to marry you—and your money. Would you marry her if you knew that?"

Gerard's face was gray. "Jim, I can't believe that."

"Get smart," I said. "Gail Brand was broke and money-hungry. She felt that she *had* to marry you and the Gerard millions. But Darmody stood by, in her way. She was reduced to paying him off with jewelry. That diamond ring he's wearing on his little finger. It was hers. Her wealthy ex-husband, Ted Hammond, gave it to her. I heard her tell Stockmaster about him. The initials *S* and *T* on the band stand for 'Sugar,' Hammond's pet name for her, and for 'Ted,' his first name."

Darmody stood very still. His eyes held little dancing lights. I moved slowly toward him and said:

"She refused to pay off any more," I told him, "and she threatened to expose you regardless of the consequences to herself. You had to kill her, to keep her quiet. Is that it?"

Still he didn't speak.

From behind me there came a kind of a strangled roar. I turned my head. Julius Stockmaster was on his feet, his long arms hanging, his legs bent a little. He was watching Darmody, like a gorilla closing in for the kill. Darmody passed the tip of his tongue over his lips, and his gaze darted around the terrace like a cornered animal.

Stockmaster advanced slowly. He said in a dead voice: "You killed her." He leaped for Darmody with shocking suddenness.

For an instant Darmody stood frozen with terror. Then he turned and scurried across the terrace to the steps leading down to the beach. Stockmaster leaped after him, and they both disappeared. Jay Gerard yelled something and followed at a run. I jumped to the parapet overlooking the beach, my .38 in my hand.

Darmody was running like a rabbit flushed from a woodpile. Stockmaster was twenty feet behind him. Directly beneath me Jay Gerard was sprinting over the sand at an angle designed to cut off Darmody's flight close to a steep bank at the water's edge.

I raised my gun and steadied it. Darmody made a good target against the yellow sand. He gained the protruding bank, skirted it, and splashed into the water. My finger tightened on the trigger. Then Stockmaster's big body loomed between my gun-sight and Darmody. I swore, and held my fire.

A FAINT *crack* sounded from behind me. I shot a glance over my shoulder. Down the beach the white-coated figure of Cecil stood in the classic posture of the pistol marksman—feet spread slightly apart, left arm hanging limp, right arm straight out. His gun was a black dot in his hand, and I saw the tiny wisp of smoke slowly drifting away in the morning sunlight.

I swung my head, like a spectator at a tennis match, and I saw the figure of William Darmody rolling over and over in the shallow water. Stockmaster splashed after him, his arms reaching out.

I turned and started for the steps. Janie Crockett was standing by the parapet looking down at the scene on the beach. Her small face was pale, and her hands were gripping the stone railing.

"Relax, honey," I said to her. "Your mother probably never told you there'd be days like this."

She glanced at me quickly, her eyes big. I grinned at her, and went down to the beach. When I saw what was happening at the water's edge, I began to run.

Stockmaster was crouched in the water over the half-submerged body of Darmody. His big hands were on the secretary's throat, and he was shaking him like a cat with a mouse. Jay Gerard was shouting and trying to pull Stockmaster away from Darmody. But Stockmaster hung on grimly, and the water foamed and churned around the three of them.

Then I was ankle-deep in the water. I raised my gun and smacked it down on Stockmaster's head, just above his right ear. Jay Gerard looked around, startled. I caught the sagging body of the novelist, and dragged him to the sand. Gerard lifted Darmody by the shoulders, hauled him out and laid him a short distance from Stockmaster.

Darmody was coughing up lake water, and there was fear and pain in his eyes. The water had washed away the blood, but I could see where Cecil's bullet had drilled him neatly in the back of the right leg, just above the knee. The slug had gone straight through, leaving a ragged hole in his trousers. Already the fresh blood was seeping out and mixing with the water-soaked cloth.

Stockmaster groaned and opened his eyes. As he struggled to get up, Jay Gerard pushed him back down. Stockmaster mumbled incoherently and started to get up again. Gerard stood over him and cocked one fist.

"Dammit, Julius," he snapped, "behave yourself." Stockmaster sighed and laid back on the sand, his eyes staring dully up at the blue sky.

Cecil sauntered up and stood beside me.

"Nice shooting," I said to him. "You weren't kidding about being a crack shot."

He smiled, and blew into the muzzle of his gun.

I said: "The telephone wires into the house have been cut. Find a phone somewhere and call the police—and a doctor."

He nodded in his grave manner, and hurried away over the sand.

I looked down at Darmody. "Do you want to talk now?"

He stared silently, his eyes filled with a cold hatred. I shivered a little. Then I said: "Maybe you'd rather talk to Mr. Stockmaster. Want us to turn him loose?"

His eyes shifted a little, but still he didn't speak.

I turned to Jay Gerard. He caught my glance, and I winked at him. Then I said: "Let Mr. Stockmaster get up."

Gerard grinned, and said loudly: O.K."

There was a short silence. Then Darmody said: "No, no." His voice was shrill and thin with fear. But he had a voice.

I said: "Where's the gun you used on her?"

He kept rolling his eyes in Stockmaster's direction, and the words came from between his teeth. "Damn you, it's in the hedge, by the sun dial. It's hers. She came to my room last night to tell me she couldn't pay me any more. We argued. I followed her down to the beach. She said she didn't even have any more jewelry to give me—until after she married Gerard. I thought she was lying. I told her I was going to tell Gerard about Stockmaster. Then she pulled the gun. I tried to grab it, and it went off. I didn't mean to kill her. When I saw she was dead, I started to leave—just as you came up the beach. I ran and hid behind the hedge. I was scared and rattled. I thought you spotted me, and I shot at you. Your bullet knocked the gun from my hand, and I ran into the house. I cut the telephone wires from an upstairs window before I went to my room and got into bed. Is that enough, Jack?"

"No," I said, "but you're doing fine. Why did you fake the deaf-mute act?"

His lips lifted over his teeth in a sneer. "Ever hear of Alvin DeWitt?"

I had heard of Alvin DeWitt. He was wanted in three states for larceny, embezzlement and blackmail. I had seen his name and picture on police bulletins, and

I vaguely remembered that he had been a blond-haired man. He had been a secretary to an investment house executive, and forsaken his bookkeeping and his typewriters for the easy money trail. And I realized that DeWitt, alias Darmody, had dyed his hair black. I nodded slowly.

He said: "Get it now, Jack? I was hiding in Chicago when I read Stockmaster's ad for a deaf-mute secretary. I learned that he was not a deaf-mute himself, and I did some reading up on sign language and stuff like that—enough to fool Stockmaster—and I got the job. I figured it would be good cover for me until the heat was off. It was a good job. All I did mostly was front for Stockmaster's deaf-mute act."

I said: "How long have you been bleeding Gail Brand?"

"Go to hell," he sneered. "I've talked enough."

I glanced significantly in Stockmaster's direction. Fear came into Darmody's eyes, and he said quickly:

"About a month. I read a letter she wrote to Stockmaster saying she was going to marry Gerard, and that in the future she would have to be careful about seeing Stockmaster. It was a made to order set-up, and I called her that night. She was after Gerard's dough, and she started paying off right away."

"And Stockmaster never tumbled that you were a fake deaf-mute?"

He shook his head. "Hell, no. He had the babe on his mind. The day he got the letter he drank a quart of bourbon and broke up the furniture." He glanced apprehensively toward Stockmaster. . . .

An hour later I sat on the terrace. Cecil was pouring more coffee. Jay Gerard and Janie Crockett were holding hands and whispering to each other. The police ambulance had taken Darmody away, and we all had answered the usual questions. Darmody hadn't lied about the gun. We found it in the hedge—a little silver-plated .25 automatic with four bullets fired. It was also engraved with the initials S and T, and there was a dent in the barrel where my bullet had struck it.

Stockmaster had behaved like a man drugged all during the time the police had been there. I missed him now, and I looked around. He was not in sight. I went down to the beach, and I found him kneeling by the sun dial. There was a pale brown stain in the sand where Gail Brand had lain. I touched Stockmaster's shoulder, and he looked up at me dumbly.

I said gently: "Come on."

He stood up and followed me like a dog.

As we stepped to the terrace, Cecil came through the French doors and told Janie Crockett that she was wanted on the telephone. She looked surprised, but she got up and went inside. In a couple of minutes she came running out. Her eyes were shining.

"Angus won!" she cried.

Jay Gerard looked blank.

"Get smart, boy," I muttered to him. "Angus is her dad's prize bull."

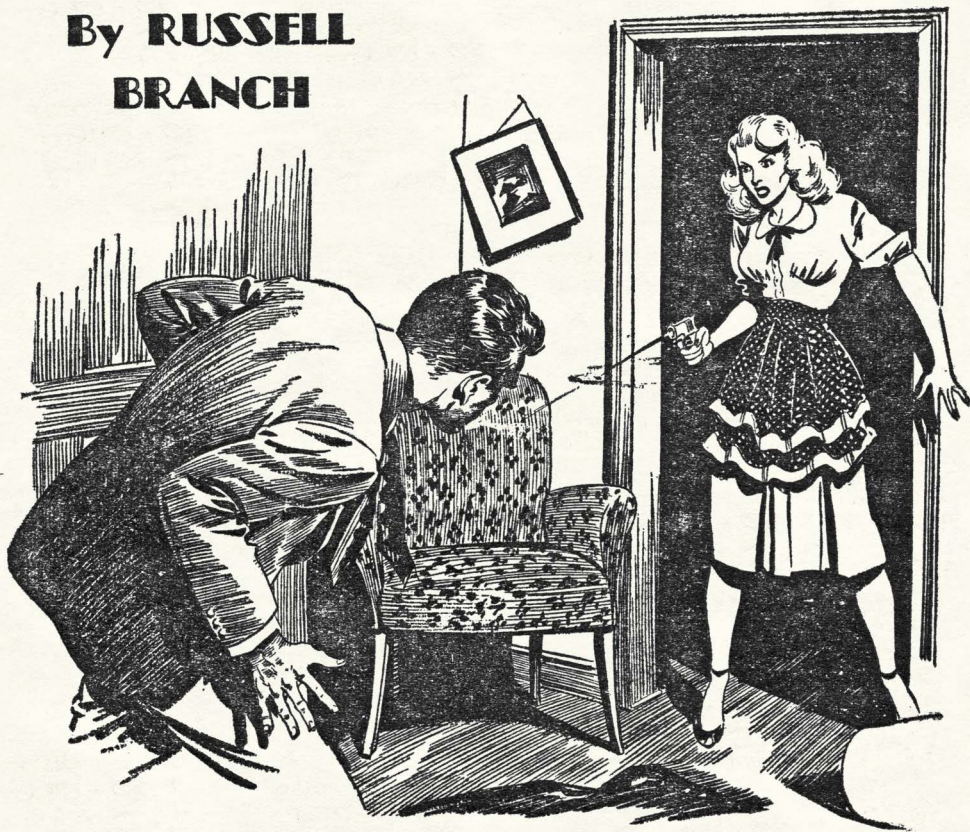
He grinned happily. "I'll have to learn about things like that." He walked over to the girl and took her hands. "Good for Angus," he said, and the two of them went into the house.

THE END

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MAYHEM IN HER MADNESS

By **RUSSELL
BRANCH**



He crumpled forward in
slow agony.

*He laughs best, who laughs last—
but Jim Haynes' wife laughed
while she screamed.*

WHEN Dora started screaming that night, I just dropped my paper and stared, like an open-mouthed stupe. I was used to her sullenness, her biting tongue, and even the cold silences which filled our evenings. But this was something new. This was loud, shrill hysteria and for no good reason. It went on and on.

"Dora!"

She didn't hear me. She couldn't have heard me if she'd wanted to. Her head was back, her eyes closed and her mouth open in that senseless, blood-curdling shriek.

I got up and shook her. "Dora . . .

DORA!" Then I slapped her twice, as you would a child having a tantrum.

She stopped abruptly, her eyes flaring resentment at me.

"For heaven's sake, Dora! The neighbors."

She opened her mouth again, mechanically, as if moved by some insane compulsion to exercise her lungs. I raised my hand again, warningly, and that was how the neighbors saw us when the door burst open.

Dora's scream died in her throat. She buried her face in her hands, her long blonde hair shimmering as she sobbed heartbreakingly. I glanced uncertainly at the open door, put my hands gently on her shoulders.

"Dora . . . Dora, honey. What is it?"

She shrank back as if my hands were clutching at her throat instead, stared up at me with tearful, fearful eyes.

A hand grabbed my own arm, spun me around. "Leave her alone, you big scum. I oughta—"

That was Graham, Lloyd Graham from the next apartment. All ham and a yard wide. An actor-producer, he called himself.

I shook myself loose. I'd always wanted a good excuse for sinking a fist in his fat face, but this was hardly the right time for it.

"Look, you don't understand. It's not . . . not anything I did. Dora just suddenly—"

Dora burst into fresh sobs. I looked at her helplessly, then back at them. Jenkins, the manager. Mrs. Levy from across the hall. The redhead who lived two doors down and her bald-headed mate. And Graham, of course . . . all standing there glaring at me in hostile accusation.

I got it, then. *Jim Haynes, that "nice" Mister Haynes, beating his poor lovely wife.*

Mrs. Levy moved past to hold Dora to her ample, motherly bosom. Graham got between us with his arms folded belligerently across his chest, and scrawny Jenkins started spluttering indignantly.

"Listen, folks, you've got this all wrong."

They didn't want to listen. They ignored me—except for that big lard from next door. Mrs. Levy got Dora calmed

down, bathed her face with a cold washcloth. Jenkins prowled around suspiciously, seeing if any of his lousy furniture had suffered. The redhead and her husband stood smirking in the doorway, enjoying someone else's domestic troubles for a change. And Graham scowled at me, daring me to make a move.

We finally got rid of them. Dora refused to explain, refused to say anything beyond a somewhat shaky: "I'm all right, now. Please go."

Mrs. Levy stomped out, her usually friendly face like frozen granite. Redhead and Baldhead went back to their bottle and their own battle. Mr. Jenkins lingered to mutter some warning about, "No more trouble, Haynes, or else."

Lloyd Graham was ostentatiously the last and most reluctant to depart, still scowling like a Grade B musclemán, and it was a pleasure to slam the door in his face.

Then I turned to Dora, my arms spread in a big gesture of bewilderment, dismay, and—I thought—tender concern.

But she wasn't having any. She turned away, her face cold and inscrutable.

The bedroom door slammed behind her, the lock clicked. I prepared to bed down on the couch for the night. It was all I could do. The walls were listening . . . just waiting for me to "start something" again.

IN THE morning, Dora told me she "simply didn't want to discuss it." She could "not discuss" something in louder silence than any female I'd ever known, and our breakfast was even more cheerless than usual.

I set off to work, feeling like something despicable dragged up from the bottom of the East River. Mrs. Levy, climbing the stairs with her morning milk, sniffed and looked the other way instead of giving me her usual chirpy, "Guten morgen."

The boss gave me hell for being late, and it seemed to me that I had more than my share of nasty customers that day. But five-thirty finally came, as it always does, and Merritts, the department store of merit, shut its doors. I froze out a last tentative customer who had already swung every golf club in the racks, turned in my cash and sales slips, and turned

my weary feet toward the subway and home.

"Home" was empty. Dora had left a note saying that she'd gone out for supper and an early movie with Irma, and I'd find cold cuts and an open can of peas in the icebox.

About ten-thirty she blew in, looking flushed and eager and vivacious as she always did after spending a couple of hours in Hollywood's never-never land. But the look faded quickly. Back to reality, back to a drab little sixty-dollar walkup and the husband that went with it.

I waited until she had her hat off, had fluffed her blonde tresses loose and had kicked out of the pumps that were too tight for her. They were *always* too tight for her, too tight in the toes and too high in the heels.

"Look here, Dora." Then I lowered my voice, aware that Graham next door had just come in. "Look, honey, I don't—"

She spun on me. "I suppose you're going to tell me that we can't afford a cocktail or a movie once in a while! That when a man comes home after a hard day's work, he expects—"

"That's not it at all," I interrupted quietly. "You know I've urged you to get out more, do more. I don't happen to think too much of your friend, Irma, but that's—"

"Oh, so now you don't like Irma!" she snapped bitterly. "I suppose you want to pick my friends, too. Besides telling me what I should wear, how I should keep house, where I should—"

"Damn it, be quiet," I shouted, forgetting the thin walls and their eager ears. "Listen to me."

"I don't want to listen to you," she screamed back. "I'm sick of listening to you!"

There was a nasty silence, broken only by our own heavy breathing and the creak of a footstep out in the hall.

"Dora, I didn't want to start an argument with you. Really. I don't want anything—except some sort of an explanation for what happened last night."

"And what about last night?"

"Nothing," I said wryly, "Nothing at all . . . except that now all the neighbors are convinced that I beat you, in addition to all my other faults. You know very

well I've never touched you, that I hadn't even *said* anything to you last night when you started screaming like you'd suddenly gone mad."

"Oh, so now I'm going crazy, am I?" she shrilled. "Well, let me tell you, Mister James Haynes, you'd go crazy too if you had to live in this dump all day, with a husband who begrudges you even the price of a movie, and tries to pick your friends, and—"

And we were right back where we had started.

"It's not enough that I gave up my career and try to be a good wife," Dora was finishing with fine, bitter logic. "I'm supposed to sit quietly by while you read your eternal newspaper every evening. And if I even say *boo*, I'm going crazy!"

I didn't point out that her *boo* had been loud enough to bring the whole apartment house down on our heads. Or that the "career" she had given up to marry me had consisted of contributing one pair of legs out of many, in a musical which had folded after two weeks. Or that sixty-five dollars a week and a man to go with it had once looked mighty good to a leggy blonde from Keokuk who had already found out how many leggy blondes were already in the Big City, working as waitresses or worse.

No, I didn't mention any of these points, because I was beginning to suspect a method behind her madness. I suspected that there was nothing wrong with her that five thousand dollars wouldn't cure, and I didn't want to give her an opening.

Specifically, five thousand dollars, more or less, in U. S. savings bonds which I had laid away, methodically and at times painfully, out of my paycheck and commissions over the past seven years. And even more specifically: five thousand dollars which Graham next door had assured Dora would buy her the leading role in the "mutual-stock" revue he was supposed to be promoting.

But I had held out all along. I told Dora her friend Graham was nothing but a phony, a cheap chiseler, and not the kind of man I liked my wife to encourage. And furthermore, that those bonds represented the down payment on a dream of my own, conceived long before I'd met her. A country place up in New Hampshire,

which would be a ski lodge by winter and a snug little farm by summer.

Dora had told me in no uncertain terms what she thought of *that* idea—but there the matter had rested. And still rested, much to my surprise. Dora subsided now, apparently satisfied with having the last word, and I knew when to leave well enough alone.

Also I still loved her, heaven help me.

THAT was the week when spring suddenly changed to summer, as if to make up for our cold winter. Dora and I made up too, Mrs. Levy spoke to me again, and even Jenkins went about whistling happily, now that the radiator season seemed safely over.

The weather had brought customers flocking into the sports goods department; I had earned a healthy bonus over my sales quota, and the case of beer in our pantry had been my splurge. Dora's present had been a new negligee of sheer black nylon, and she was wearing it now, curled up on the sofa with a copy of *Variety*.

The evening was warm, the beer was cold, life was good—and my only worry at the moment was choosing between bed and another bottle of beer, or both.

Dora felt my eyes on her and looked up. Then she got up, moving deliberately. I looked back down at my paper, pretending a coy interest in the stock section. I thought she was going to get us another bottle, or perhaps slip down into my lap.

She didn't. She calmly picked up one of the three empty bottles at my elbow and hurled it through the window. Then, just as it shattered below in the air shaft,

she began to scream, long and loudly.

For a moment I just stared, too dumfounded to move. Thinking stupidly: *The window's open, she might at least have put it through the opening, instead of knocking out both panes at the top.*

Then I was on my feet, shaking her violently. Her eyes had that glassy, blank look again; the tempting red mouth I had been contemplating a second ago was distended now in raw, nerve-fraying sound.

I clamped my hand across it, trying to shake sense back into her, with my other hand biting into her shoulder.

Her teeth sank into a finger, her foot kicked my shin. She fought her way loose, managing to rip her negligee half off and kick over the end table at the same time.

It was a fine scene for the neighbors to come in on. And come they did, with eager-beaver Graham in the lead. I moved to greet him, ignoring Dora for the moment. Jenkins and Baldhead finally pulled us apart. Redhead slapped me again for good measure, apparently because I'd pasted Baldy by mistake in the shuffle. The last I saw of Dora was as she disappeared through Mrs. Levy's door, wailing hysterically on that good woman's massive shoulder.

Then Jenkins took the floor. I would please get out in the morning, if not sooner—and any rent I had coming would no more than cover the broken lamp and window.

I protested, I pleaded, I argued. I tried to convince him that my wife was sick, well on her way to a nervous breakdown. That I was completely innocent of any mistreatment, that something had snapped,

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emotionally, in her and that the worse thing in the world would be to kick her out on the crowded streets of an overcrowded city.

Jenkins only looked noble, like a dime-store Galahad. "The little lady can stay, as long as she wants. But *you* go. First thing in the morning—or else I call the cops."

He didn't get a chance; somebody already had. Maybe Mrs. Levy—although my bet was Graham, who had disappeared to nurse his cut lip.

And the cops gave me the same scornful treatment—particularly after they'd gotten an eyeful of Dora in her torn negligee and an earful from the other tenants. Graham was back on the scene by then, too, adding his dramatic description of our previous quarrels and his opinion of me, personally, as a lush who needed a going-over with a rubber hose.

The two cops shook their heads with obvious regret. Mrs. Haynes had refused to sign a complaint, and that was her privilege. But . . . well, if there was any more trouble, just let 'em know. *And how in the world, their eyes asked, did a gorgeous gal like that ever get hitched up to a drunken bum like this?*

Later that evening, after things had settled down again, I tried once more. I tiptoed quietly across the hallway, knocked ever so gently on Mrs. Levy's door. She screeched at me to go away. Dora raised her own voice in tearful accusation, and the doors along the hall began opening up again.

I slunk back into my own apartment, tail between my legs. Fifteen minutes later, while I was searching Dora's drawers for a liquor bottle, or dope, or some sort of a clue—I found the gun.

It was a nasty little blue-steel .25 automatic, and the carbon slip with it showed that it had been sold and registered to Mrs. James Haynes for purposes of "self protection."

I stood staring at it a long time, remembering that phrase "nervous breakdown" which I had used on Jenkins. Actually, until now, I'd had my sneaking suspicion all along that these tantrums of hers were deliberate and malicious; that sooner or later she'd name her price for being good—and that the price would be

the five thousand dollars which she thought would buy her a stage career and all the glamour she longed for.

But not one word about that in these past two weeks. Not even a sly hint; just these senseless and violent attacks of hysteria, as if something unseen were threatening her.

And now a gun . . . a gun for "protection". Protection against what?

I finally put it in my own drawer under a pile of shirts, and went to bed. But not to sleep. It's hard to admit that your wife—in plain everyday language—is going bats before your eyes.

I DIDN'T see Dora the next morning; I left early before the other tenants were about and got my breakfast at the corner drugstore. Somehow I got through the morning without my mind. That was going endlessly over and over my problem, while the rest of me waited automatically on customers who were contemplating more cheerful things, such as vacation trips and fishing equipment.

By noontime I had decided what I must do. Dora would need medical care, the most expensive sort of medical care, and there was only one way I could provide it.

During my lunch hour I went to the bank, took out of my safe deposit box that thick sheaf of bonds. Not just bonds, they were, but my whole ambition and future. And I felt guilty even in my moment of reluctance. When a man's wife is sick, mentally or otherwise, he has to do everything he can.

Grimly I carried them across the bank floor to the proper counter, opened one up to read the instructions on the back. I had forgotten one thing. They were made out to James Haynes and Dora Haynes as co-owners, or the survivor, and that meant in order to cash them—

Then I stopped thinking. Those last typewritten words leaped out at me, drummed into my mind monotonously until they lost all meaning.

Or the survivor . . . or the survivor . . . the survivor . . . the . . .

The man behind the counter was fidgeting impatiently. "You wish to cash these bonds, sir?"

"No . . . no, I've changed my mind. Thanks."

He watched me, puzzled, as I gathered them up again and hurried back toward the safe deposit vault. . . .

Jenkins, our charming landlord, caught me as I passed his door that night and tried to stop me.

But I didn't wait to discuss the matter. I just growled over my shoulder that I had come only to get my things, and went on up the stairs.

When I first opened the door I thought Dora was still missing, since the place was just as neat as I had left it that morning. Then I heard her cheerful call:

"Jim?"

She was in the kitchen, of all places, and tonight she looked like the tired husband's dream. Neat and pretty in an apron, her cheeks flushed and excited as if she had prepared some special surprise, and busily preoccupied. Just as if our last exchange had been a tender kiss.

I set my lips, determined to have it out. "Dora, I just came back long enough to get my things. And to tell you—"

She interrupted me with a gay little laugh which sounded only a bit strained. "Darling, it's all settled. I talked to Mr. Jenkins today, practically on my knees. You just have to know how to handle him, that's all."

"That's *not* all," I said. "That's not even the point. I just want to tell you that—"

She shut me off with a quick kiss. "We'll talk about it during dinner. I haven't got the table set yet, and the roast's practically done. Here." She opened a drawer, handed me the big carving knife and pointed toward the knife sharpener. "Make yourself useful, handsome. And while you're about it, all my knives need sharpening. This is a surprise, so don't peek."

Her lips brushed mine again and she whirled out of the kitchen, closing the door behind her. Automatically I began stroking the long blade back and forth, thinking that it was a surprise indeed.

She hadn't cooked a real meal for months. And her lips had been cold, although she was obviously all keyed up. I could hear her now, hurriedly shoving chairs about in the next room.

Then I thought of the gun, the gun in the bedroom, and looked down at the long,

slender carving knife I had in my hand.

Carefully I eased the door open a crack. The dining table had been set, yes—but the room which had been so neat a few moments ago had undergone a startling change.

The end table by my chair had been tipped over on its side, magazines and books scattered across the floor just as they had been last night. The bridge lamp was also lying sprawled on its side, the shade crumpled as if it had been stepped on. Two of the dining chairs were shoved together in a heap in the corner, the cigarette box by the sofa had fallen to the floor and spilled, one curtain dangled from a broken rod.

Amidst this wreckage Dora flitted nervously, busily. Even as I watched she kicked a scatter rug into a heap, then paused to survey her work like a nervous stage manager looking over a set just before the curtain.

Apparently satisfied, she crossed to the bedroom door, then paused again, her eyes narrowed toward the door which hid me.

"Jim, dear, when you get the knife sharpened put it on the table, please. I'll be right out."

I grunted indistinctly. She took one last, calculating survey of the scene she had laid—and I'll never forget that look in her face. Then the bedroom door closed, the lock clicked shut.

AND I stood there stupidly, still holding the knife. For years it seemed I stood there, knowing what to expect in some remote part of my brain even while I tried to make sense out of it consciously.

I must have moved to the range, because I found myself bending down and peering into an empty, stone-cold oven. I felt a moment of surprise—but I think I would have been more surprised if it had actually held a sizzling roast.

And I must have been listening, too; I must have been aware of the muffled sound of drawers being opened and shut in the bedroom.

And then I waited no longer. I grabbed up the long carving knife and all the knives that Dora had laid out for me, and dashed out of there. She obviously didn't hear me cross the living room. She was too frantically searching for what she

couldn't find, and I didn't bother to close the door behind me.

Down the stairs, pounding on Jenkins' door desperately. Trying to beat the scream which I knew now would come as soon as she found her gun.

The door finally opened. Jenkins stared out at me, napkin tucked in his collar-band, jaws still chewing. He gulped and scuttled backward like a startled crab when he saw the knives in my hand. At the table behind him his stout wife turned pale.

I thrust them at him. "Here, quick. Take 'em! Afraid my wife—another one of those spells. Afraid she'll hurt herself."

The first scream came then, even as Jenkins hesitated in bewilderment. It was shrill and hysterical. Muffled, but ringing through the hallway and down the stairwell like the voice of terror.

We both stood there rooted as it died away and then picked up again. Jenkins let the knives clatter to the floor as he pushed past, his short skinny legs pumping up the stairs ahead of me.

Doors began opening, men shouted in confusion, a woman down the hall began screaming hysterically herself. "Somebody do something! Do something!"

And still the wild cries went on, the shrieks of gurgling insane terror, the tortured pleading. "Jim! Jim! Don't, Jim! Oh—not the knife, Jim! No!"

Jenkins had reached the top of the stairs now, hurrying as if a life depended on him. He had forgotten that I had already warned him, that I myself was not in that room, but right behind him. *Carefully* behind him, as he ran down the hall with horror in his face.

He didn't quite make it. Graham got there first. He burst out of his own room just ahead of Jenkins, disappeared through the door I had left ajar.

By the time I had reached it, Graham was already lunging against the inside door. If he saw me then, coming in behind Jenkins, he was like the rest of them: too distracted to register, too convinced by the urgency in those terror-driven cries still coming from behind the locked door.

I shouted at him, but already Graham's heavy shoulder had carried him through—

through the doorway and to his death.

For inside the bedroom, a little automatic was sounding out its vicious tattoo. It went on pounding convulsively, even after he had crumpled forward.

I left her to Jenkins and went to phone the police.

* * *

Dora's getting at least part of what she counted on: the headlines she always dreamed of. The papers call her a glamorous blonde, a beautiful show-girl, and that seems to be enough for her.

I don't think she cared much for Graham after all. Whether he was actually in on the scheme or not, I think she just considered him a means to an end. A handy witness, let us say, who would testify that Jim Haynes had attacked his wife with the carving knife found near his body.

For, of course, I was supposed to have gotten those bullets instead of Graham. I was supposed to have broken in that door to get to her when she went into her act.

Dora realizes now, naturally, the mistake she made in her blind, self-induced hysteria. She doesn't know that that nice, sympathetic man she talked to today was the police psychiatrist—and that she'll probably talk to more like him before the trial is over. She doesn't seem to understand either that the state's prosecution will be based on the testimony of Jenkins and the other tenants: that they will prove that neither I nor anyone else was anywhere near the apartment when she first began screaming for her life.

Yes, I'm going to do what I can for her. When a man's wife is in trouble he does what he can for her, even if it means sacrificing his life's savings.

But there's one thing that bothers me. If I tell the whole story, if I give those psychiatrists the *reasoning*, the cold-blooded calculation, behind her actions—I'm not sure where she will end up.

If I don't, if I just hold my peace and let the evidence speak for itself, then I know very well what will happen to her.

Maybe I should ask Dora herself when I see her today:

"What will it be, my dear? The state penitentiary . . . or the state asylum?"

◆ ◆ ◆
The man at the door said:
"You killed your wife in a
jealous rage."



*Pete couldn't be paid back
in the same coin—
No, she had to short-change him
into a hot-squat.*

**By FRANCIS
HAMILTON**

PETE sat on his favorite rear stool in the Blue Lamp and sipped the Gibson cocktail his favorite bartender brought him. He was thinking of Eloise, a million years gone now, a million years, seven or eight favorite bars and a baker's-dozen favorite bartenders.

CHEEZ-IT, THE COPS!

This one said: "I'm gonna leave you now, Mr. Lockner. Split shift tonight." He stripped off his apron.

"Unfinished business, Jerry? Blonde or brunette?"

Jerry grinned, watching Mr. Garrigan at the other end of the bar. Then he disappeared.

Pete played with the change from a five, his mind, annoyingly, still on Eloise. The divorce had been final a week ago. Today his bank told him she'd cashed the draft for twenty-five thousand. That ended it, completed the divorce settlement, and left Pete with the nickels and dimes he'd started with. Well, there'd been at least a year they loved each other.

He looked up, surprised to find that Garrigan had moved his drink down the bar to join him. Garrigan had an office on Pete's floor, they'd drunk together before, but there was something jarring about Garrigan. Nothing Pete was sure of—just that Garrigan was too smooth, and fat.

"I got a bid to this cocktail party, Lockner. Come on with me. It's always easier to break away if there's two of you."

"Why go at all?" Pete said snappishly. He felt like he needed a tonic.

"She's a client of mine." He grinned sleekly, reminding Pete of a performing seal. "Got to keep 'em happy."

Pete watched the new bartender holding down Jerry's station. He was the surly one, who made weak Gibsons.

Pete was suddenly impatient with unsociable bartenders. "Let's go then," he decided out loud . . .

They knocked again, louder, at the fourth floor apartment. Pete laughed easily. "Quiet, for a party," he said to Garrigan. "Sure it's the right night?"

Garrigan examined his watch. "Early, maybe." He pulled out a key and looked at Pete inquiringly. "We could go in and wait."

Pete eyed the key dubiously. He was ready to drop the whole thing, go home and read, but Garrigan was already using the key. They entered a room that was lighted, but cold.

"Listen, I don't know about this," Pete objected. Garrigan hushed him.

"Maybe she left a note. I'll take a

quick look and see what the deal is."

Pete waited unhappily. The apartment disturbed him, like an old scene revisited, like something out of boyhood coming back to memory. He saw the piano, and realized with a wrench, he hadn't played since— He heard Garrigan cursing in back, and hurried to him.

Garrigan was shaking. "Let's get out of here. I can't get mixed up in this. I'm on thin ice with the wife already."

Pete seized him by the shoulders. "What the hell's the matter?" he shouted. The guy wore on his nerves.

Garrigan pointed dumbly. "She's in there. Dead." He twisted his hands. "Look. I was lying, this dame was no client of mine. She's well, you know." He fumbled for a handkerchief. "I got kids," he muttered.

"Yeah, I know," Pete said. He pushed through into the bedroom. Something in black negligee lay across the quilted bed. Nyloned legs stuck out. Pete stepped closer, his mouth burning dry as he saw the little familiar curve of her leg at the back of the knee, the dark curling hair, inky black before something had beaten the skull until it was a sickening mass of white scalp and clotting blood.

HE TURNED her over, feeling gingerly the still faintly warm flesh through the chiffon. He needn't look at the little girl's face that had never grown up; he knew now why the room was familiar. He'd lived with that furniture, some of the best months of his life.

More than the pain of death in her face was the surprise, the amazement that anyone could be so cruel to her.

Pete said quietly, "She used to be my wife."

Garrigan stuttered.

"Hold it," Pete said curtly. "We'll talk about it later, with the cops."

Garrigan shook his head vigorously. "No. We'll get out of here," he argued. "My kids—"

"Shut up!" Pete tried to think. He'd figured Garrigan for tougher than this. The setup bothered him. She'd cashed that draft today. If he knew Eloise, she'd still have the money around, carelessly. The dresser probably. Or her handbag.

Garrigan started to grin, slickly.

"You're not in so good shape yourself, chum."

"How's that again?"

"You came here this afternoon, killed your ex-wife in a jealous rage. Then you get me to come with you later, to discover her. What if the police thought that?"

Pete studied him. "You could explain it, for me."

"Sure. If I was in the right mood."

"Wait a minute, Garrigan. You trying to threaten me?"

"Oh, no," Garrigan said smoothly. "Just showing you how our interests, uh . . . coincide. We both leave now, quietly, chum?"

Pete cursed him mentally. But maybe Garrigan was right. Pete had made a call nearby that afternoon. They could place him in the neighborhood.

"Straighten up the place, then. Wipe out your prints, you know where you left them."

Garrigan moved out. Quickly, Pete shuffled through the dresser, and the handbag on top, full of women's goo. No dough. She would not have banked it. Carried it a few days, worried about it, then called him to ask what to do. Money was something Eloise never understood.

Pete stiffened; the doorbell was buzzing. He peered from the bedroom. Garrigan had heard too, was standing near the door, hand in topcoat pocket. Pete hoped it wasn't a gun.

The rattle of keys sounded. Pete groaned. Eloise had handed out keys to the whole army. One man at a time in her life was Eloise's idea of complete banality.

A man came through the door. Pete saw only a band of woolly reddish hair below his hat before Garrigan struck. The man dropped and Garrigan leaped astride him, bludgeon ready. This was more Pete's picture of Garrigan—he could conquer his nerves and act, when he had to.

Pete came from the bedroom, knelt at the man's side. "Know him?" he asked.

Garrigan, breathing heavily, shook his head. Pete saw his weapon was the carved wooden Balinese figure Eloise kept on her night stand. He remembered, dully, the night he got it for her in Chinatown. Pete flipped the man over, looked at a pasty face, upslanting blond eyebrows. He searched him.

"Goes by the name of James Hurtgens. Out of town." The man breathed, un-rhythmically. "I guess you had to hit him."

Garrigan absently handed him the figurine. "Let's go, then. No argument, huh?" Garrigan said.

"And no cops?" Pete took the figurine, wiped it off carefully with his handkerchief. He noted the little smear of blood on it.

"And no cops. I don't like this."

"You don't like it, I don't like it. Who does like it?" Pete snarled. "I hope we're doing the right thing. Let's go to your house, we need to build up our alibi a little. Your wife is home?"

They got out of the building unseen, walked five blocks and picked up the next cruising cab for Garrigan's house.

"What about that cocktail party?" Pete asked.

"Something that came up the last minute." Garrigan shook his head sadly. "I

women prefer men who prefer



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had a telephone message at the office, that's all. Could have been a frame."

"And then you pick me out, of all guys, to take along."

Garrigan said he was damned sorry, he'd never known. "You must have left her some time ago. And she called herself Murman."

"A year," Pete said. "She left me." He thought of the men she must have taken up with. Lightweights like Garrigan. "It was her maiden name," he added. Suddenly, he was sorry for his stubbornness that had led him to let her drop completely out of sight. If he'd kept an eye on her, this never would have happened.

GARRIGAN had a home in Forest Hills, not imposing, but still not bad. They were taking off topcoats in the hallway when a girl called.

Garrigan choked a greeting and Mrs. Garrigan came down the stairs. She was pert-nosed and violet-eyed, pretty and Irish, with the damndest head of lemon-yellow hair Pete had ever seen. She rocked him back on his wheels; a beautiful piece of goods like that hooked up with a jerk like Garrigan.

"Surprise! You said you'd be working late." Her voice rang bells in Pete's heart.

Garrigan mumbled about meeting Pete. "Old pal, you know. Let everything go for tonight."

"Fatzo just couldn't wait to get me here and show you off," Pete said.

Lois Garrigan looked puzzled. "Fatzo?" She turned to her husband. "That's a name you never told me about," she said innocently, her smile warm on Pete.

"Should have seen him in prep school," Pete said quickly. "You'd never recognize this svelte creature."

Lois laughed. "Tell him about the diet, Latham."

Garrigan looked embarrassed. Pete jabbed the needle again. "Diet? You should have seen him put away that double porterhouse tonight. It'll take him seven weeks of cottage cheese entrees to make up for it."

Garrigan started to protest, then changed his mind. When Lois went to get them drinks he glared at Pete. "Want

to laugh yourself into the gas chamber, joker?"

"Shut up," Pete said. "With that stuff at home, why play around with every tramp downtown? You're a louse, Garrigan."

Garrigan was puffing and stuttering when she came back. Pete knew he should stay longer to make it look better, but every time he glanced at Lois pain sank a little deeper into his heart. He pleaded an early morning engagement and broke away, going straight to his down town apartment. . . .

His key was just an inch from the lock when he checked it. The sound of someone shuffling about inside came through the cheap door. Pete warily backed away, considering. There was nothing in there to attract burglars. He went downstairs to the basement, then up the back way through the delivery alley.

Grimly, he saw shadows on the shade of his bedroom window. He climbed the steps softly, let himself in through the kitchen door off the service porch. He listened at the door between living room and kitchen, wishing sharply that he had a gun. Fists would have to do. He waited, fighting to breathe evenly.

The small table lamp was on in the living room, he saw through the crack in the door. Someone came from the bedroom. Pete's throat tightened in anger. It was Hurtgens, carrying a stack of old letters and photos from his dresser drawers. Hurtgens placed them on the table, starting expertly going through them.

There were things there Pete would just as soon keep secret, old things between him and Eloise. His hand closed on the knob tentatively, and then a barrage of knocks hit the front door.

Hurtgens started, and the knocks came again, harder. Hurtgens stuffed his loot into a drawer and paused, uncertain. Pete got ready to move if he came kitchenward.

"Open up, Lockner. We saw you coming in." The voice at the door was detached, official. Pete could almost see the glint of a policeman's badge in its cold tones.

Hurtgens muttered, "Coming." He looked about, snatched up hornrim reading spectacles Pete had left on the table.

He hurried to the bedroom and came back wearing Pete's plaid dressing gown. He opened the door casually. Two young cops, a prowler team, shouldered in.

"Headquarters has been trying to get in touch with you," a cop said.

Hurtgens looked at them with disinterest. "Wait a minute. It must be Lockner you want. I'm just a friend of his from out of town."

"Yeah? Where is Lockner?"

Hurtgens thought a minute, snapped his fingers. "He told me this afternoon he had to go see his ex-wife. That's right. But don't ask me where she lives."

The cops exchanged glances. "Let me check your identification. So you're a friend of his?"

While one cop checked Hurtgens' papers, the other used the phone. Pete couldn't hear his low tones, but apparently he talked with headquarters. Then the cops warned Hurtgens to have Lockner come in to headquarters.

"Nothing serious, I hope?" Hurtgens said. The cop, closing the door, sneered.

"We just figure he killed his wife, that's all."

The suddenness with which Hurtgens moved when the door closed startled Pete. Glasses and robe were whipped off and Hurtgens ploughed toward the kitchen. They collided and Hurtgens grunted as Pete folded arms about his middle. They crashed to the kitchen floor and exquisite torture split through Pete's nerve centers as he felt the full force of Hurtgens' knee.

Skull-popping blows rained against his face and jaws, rights and lefts intermixed. Then the back of his head struck hard metal and he went out.

PETE came to and disentangled himself from the kitchen range. Hurtgens was gone, out the back way. When Pete's head cleared he followed him. He'd better get together with Garrigan and revise their story in the light of what Hurtgens had told the cops.

He marveled at Hurtgens' Barrymore-like exhibition. Calmly putting Pete in a jackpot with a little ad libbing. They had found Eloise already. Pete's only defense, the truth, would stink if they picked him up now.

Pete went back down the steps, climbed

a fence, walked a couple of blocks and picked up a cab for Forest Hills, hoping he could sweat it out of Garrigan without running into cop trouble.

Lights still flared in the house, but it wasn't Fazio who answered. Lois Garrigan wore cream and jade green, a dressing gown chosen with great care to set off the lights in her hair. Her eyes were anxious, but she couldn't keep the stars from winking when she smiled at Pete.

He learned that Garrigan had received a series of phone calls and had gone out to see an urgent client. She insisted that he come in for another drink. She didn't have to insist very hard to make him stay, especially after he sensed the weariness in her spirit. She was fearful and worried about something.

Over a bourbon Pete asked politely about the health of the children. Round-eyed, she looked at him and laughed. "Don't rush me," she said. Pete learned that there weren't any children—yet. Garrigan's pleading of them was nothing but a bid for sympathy.

He took her by the shoulders, wondering how much he should tell her. He kept his face a blank and said:

"Listen. He may be in a jam. How serious, I don't know." His voice still casual, he added, "I don't think you should sit here all evening worrying. He—it just isn't worth it."

She gave way to a soft, sweet-smelling bundle that lay lightly in his arms, crying. Pete held her a precious moment until she pulled away, gently. "I knew something was wrong. He's never brought anyone here before, and he acted so . . . nervous."

Pete made a small advantage of it. "You love your husband, don't you?" She looked away from him.

"I don't want to see him suffer. Just what has he done?"

"Maybe nothing. But I'll find out . . ."

He decided it was time for some quick research at the Blue Lamp. Jerry, he found with approval, had returned behind the bar. He splashed a little water into a double shot of bourbon for Pete and stood back to watch him drink, his eyes a delicate shading of non-committal blue.

"Things have been happening," the

bartender said. Pete gave him a quick look.

"Some men were here asking about you. I think they were detectives."

Pete nodded, easily. "They think I killed my wife. Ex-wife," he amended. "What did they want?"

Jerry kept his dead pan. "Little things. When you were in last, who you left with, how much you'd been drinking, what sort of humor you were in. Just little things."

Pete smiled. "How did you describe my humor, for instance?"

"That it probably wasn't your fault, just ulcers."

"Good."

Jerry went down the bar and was busy making a pair of buttered rums. Then he came back. "Another thing. A big man with a slant-eyed fat face came in."

Pete's brain ticked off automatically: "Hurtgens!"

"He asked me the name of the man who left here earlier with Mr. Garrigan. He wasn't a detective," Jerry said. "He paid me."

So saying, Jerry took a folded bill out of his pants pocket and slipped it in the cannister for the Police and Firemen's Widows Fund on the backbar.

Pete looked at him questioningly.

"He gave me a tenner not to say he was asking for you," Jerry said. "I didn't earn it, did I?" Jerry moved away.

What was Hurtgens building? He must have known Garrigan before, judging by the question he'd put to Jerry. Pete meant to ask Jerry about that, but the bartender came hurrying back, a warning in his face.

"Strangers, Mr. Lockner. Just checking their hats."

Pete grabbed a look. The two men, husky, rounded, graying, smelled and looked squad room, right down to the bulging capped toes of their department-issue shoes.

Jerry flicked a bar towel. "Might go back to the kitchen," he suggested. "See what chef's serving for lunch tomorrow."

Pete gulped his drink and moved through the back of the bar. From the cover of the kitchen door he watched the cops range the room. When he left, one of them was in deep conversation with

Jerry. The others were prowling about.

Pete took a couple of turns around the block, arguing with himself. *Figure it out, Lockner. You always got A for effort in school. Gonna let a fat geezer like Garrigan get away with it? What could he get away with? What did he have on the fire, and where were Eloise's 25,000 clackers, anyway?*

HE FOUND himself standing in front of his own office building, and thought of going up to his office to phone Jerry at the Blue Lamp.

He went up to his suite on the eighth floor, snapped on the big lights, thought better of it, snapped them off, and groped for the small green-shaded lamp at his desk. No use advertising.

His hand closed on the lamp shade and he snatched it back in surprise. The shade was warm. He turned it on and studied it, then sat down at his desk and lit a cigaret.

The desk drawer was loose. He ran a finger along the upper surface and found where the lock had been pried open. He examined the other desks and the small file section. Someone had gone over the office carefully, leaving few signs of his work other than the broken locks.

A great night for breaking and entering. Eloise's apartment, Pete's apartment and office, and now—Pete jumped up, remembering Garrigan's office was on the same floor, on the opposite side of the building.

Light was coming through the ground glass door but it snapped cut as he approached. He flattened against the wall until the door opened slowly, cautiously, then he leveled off and hit, bursting the door open into the bulk of a man.

There came a gasp from him as Pete belted him hard, two fists to his middle. He came back clawing, thumbs probing for Pete's eyes and Pete backed away, thinking about the kneeling he'd gotten before.

The bulky man rushed him and Pete exchanged two more hooks into the enemy's middle for a bruising blow on his forehead, high. They traded positions, until the man was backed against the desk. Pete heard him searching behind him, and sensed the snap throw coming. He

dropped and an inkwell splattered the wall behind him.

A siren growled in the street below. Both men tuned an ear to it. His opponent was breathing in short rasping intakes, suffering from the effort. He spoke, croakingly: "Break it off, kid. Coppers on the way up here now."

"What do you want?" Pete growled.

"Look," the guy said, reasonably. Pete relaxed his hands, and something exploded on his chin. He didn't go down, but he was too dazed to argue any more. The man was gone.

Pete pulled himself together, washed his eyes and face in the closet washbowl. He looked around the office; it had gotten the same treatment as his. Not Garrigan, then. Casually, Pete flipped open a desk drawer, saw Garrigan's company check book. He opened it to the last entry and noted the balance.

Seven hundred thirteen dollars and six cents. Enough to buy three squares a day and cigarets beside, but only peanuts in the operation of a business like this. Expenses could eat it up in a week. Which might explain Mrs. Garrigan's worries. She knew they were short and she was pinning a lot of hopes on the client Fatzo had supposedly gone to interview.

Pete tarried no longer, but hustled down the hall and ducked into the stairway when he heard the elevator coming up. The two plainclothesmen he'd seen in the Blue Lamp got out.

They aimed for Pete's office.

He remembered what he was going to do, call Jerry. He got to a pay phone and tried the Blue Lamp, but the bartender

had gone out again. He'd have to take a chance on getting to his apartment. He could pick up a few clothes there and lay up in a hotel somewhere until the odds shifted in his favor. He was sure if he could get Latham Garrigan alone for ten minutes he'd know the name of Eloise's killer and the score in the ball game.

Garrigan hadn't spoken two words of truth yet, but Pete was set to sweat it out of him, if the cops didn't grab either himself or Garrigan first.

He approached his apartment cautiously, stopping in the allnight drug store across the street for coffee and watching the entrance opposite him. A familiar figure came through the door, waited in the foyer to light a cigaret, then advanced into the street, pulling his hat low over his face, perhaps to shield it from the wind.

It was Jerry. Pete paid up and hurried across the street but the bartender was gone. He wondered what was on Jerry's mind, to look him up this time of night. He found the answer in his rooms—a man sitting in his big reading chair with a gun in his lap.

IT WAS Garrigan. His eyes were glazed, crazy-looking. Pinpoints of moisture beaded his forehead. Pete walked closer and Garrigan raised the gun in his left hand.

"Sit down," the fat man said. "Cops'll be right over." A faint grin twisted his smooth chops and he spoke breathlessly, as if he'd run a great distance.

"I turned you in," Garrigan said. "You killed your wife." He held his right hand tight inside his coat.

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"The hell," Pete growled quietly. "You beat her head in with that wooden figurine for a chunk of stinking money. You're broke, Garrigan."

The man in the chair made a sour face. "I needed dough," he muttered, vacantly. "She laughed at me when I asked for it." He spat, dryly. "Laughed."

Pete winced. He remembered her accusing, bedeviling laughter. It had started just before she left him.

Garrigan grinned again. "Stay in front. Where I can watch you. I phoned the cops you went there with me, killed her in a jealous rage."

"You can't prove it."

"Death-bed statement. I'm done for."

He spat away a fleck of foam. "I said you blackmailed me to alibi you. I pretended to go along, until I could get to the cops."

"You're dying, Garrigan."

"I'll last. Long enough."

"Who got you? Hurtgens?"

"That cheap con? He was just after her money. Saw news story about divorce settlement."

"Jerry, then?"

"Leave him out of it. Jerry's okay." Garrigan grinned again. "You got me, Lockner." His voice faded off. Pete walked up to him, cautiously.

Garrigan laid the gun down in his lap. Now he wasn't seeing any more. "Lois," he whispered. "She'll be okay."

Now he wasn't living any more.

Pete slipped his hands inside Garrigan's coat. They came away sticky. He was soaked in blood. Probable knife wound. Garrigan had an appointment with the cops, but he hadn't lasted long enough.

If they pinned Garrigan's death on him—Pete saw the scorn in Lois' eyes. No, if he took the rap, it had to be for anything else but Garrigan.

Why had Garrigan gotten it? Pete searched him for the money. Nothing. Nothing, but in the topcoat pocket a smear. Dried blood?

Every place on the circuit had been searched tonight. Except Garrigan's house. If Garrigan had done the searching, all right. But Hurtgens? Or Jerry? He thought of how Garrigan had died, and Eloise. He thought of Lois Garrigan, all alone, waiting.

Suddenly, he had to get to Lois. He could explain all this later. He put hat and coat back on.

Two men were waiting for the elevator in the lobby. He'd seen them before, the plainclothesmen at the Blue Lamp. He hurried past. One clutched his arm.

"Mr. Lockner, I presume?" the cop said with a surly leer.

"You'll find a body in my living room," Pete said. "They got Garrigan."

"Yeah. We had his call. It's not unexpected."

Pete frowned. "Whoever got Garrigan is probably on his way to Garrigan's house now. His wife ought to have protection."

The cops exchanged winks. "Another load off your mind, mister. She'll get protection. Especially after you're locked up."

They went in where what was left of Garrigan sat. The cops whistled. "Busy day, Lockner. First your wife. Then him."

"What makes you think I—"

"Shut up!" The cop who did the talking sniffed delicately at Garrigan's gun, but didn't touch it. "He was playing around with your wife."

"He killed her," Pete said wearily, "because she laughed at him. Because she had money. Somebody else is after that dough. It's not on him, but maybe he left it at his house."

Pete was very tired of talk. He walked casually to Garrigan's body. "Don't touch," the cops cried, but Pete had the gun by then, Garrigan's gun, and he held it on them.

"All right, move, you guys. In the closet."

The two cops were pale. "Don't blow your top, Lockner. We'll see you get a break. You're making it worse."

He got their guns, tossed them on the floor, and savagely prodded the two of them into the bedroom closet and locked the door. It wouldn't hold long, but he didn't need much of a start.

HE GOT to Forest Hills fast, and walked the last four blocks to Garrigan's. There were no suspicious cars in sight.

Lights were still on in the house. Pete

kept a big spreading fig tree between himself and the light, and made the base of the tree. He skinned up it.

Pete shivered in the tree. Maybe he'd miscalculated. He perked up when he heard a car roll gently to a stop down the street. He heard the faint voices of man, and the soft scrape of feet.

His hopes sagged. The cops had gotten onto his idea, but they were blocking off the house, ruining it as bait.

Busy with his worries, he heard the new sound for a while without sensing what it was, until finally he got it, a faint squeaking noise that alternated with a light tapping. It came from the rear door of the house, screened off from him by ornamental shrubbery. Someone was working with a glasscutter.

Pete slid to the ground, took three deep breaths and rushed. When he hit the first step of a porch a dark figure turned from the door and grunted a curse.

He pulled his head in and drove in and under against the man's body. Faint night light told him it was Hurtgens.

Pete screamed. Outside the fence the sentry came to life. He heard whistles and running men. He belted Hurtgens back against the door, and the man's hand groped behind him on the steps.

Pete glimpsed it as he sprang—a six-inch slim commando knife. In mid air Pete wrenched his body around so that he came down on Hurtgens' feet first. He heard the shriek of a pinned animal as his heel crunched the knife hand at the wrist.

One of the gray-haired cops he'd left locked in his apartment puffed up. He gave Pete a dirty look. "Tough, huh," he said to nobody. "Better put the cuffs on him." Then his eye fell on Hurtgens.

"Oh, ho. An old friend," he said, brightening. "Sioux City Jimmy, the widows' favorite, I do declare. Quite a haul, the two of them."

"Wait a minute," Pete growled.

The cop turned on him, snarling. "Don't tell me you got another explanation."

"That big hole in Garrigan's chest. Try the knife for size." Pete was feeling faint. "I'm betting it fits." Now he knew why Garrigan had shielded Hurtgens—so that there wouldn't be any chance for the police to hear about the stolen money.

The cop stared. "All right," he ordered. "The coroner's man has got Garrigan now. Take the knife out there and see who's right. If it fits, I'll buy this guy a cigar."

It did. And the trace of blood in Garrigan's pocket was from Eloise. He'd stuck the Balinese figure there after using it on her.

Hurtgens talked. He was conning Eloise for an investment and she asked her boy friend, Garrigan, what he thought. Garrigan tried to cut himself in. When Eloise called him on it, he slugged her.

Hurtgens, kill-crazy at the loss of his mark, knifed Garrigan trying to make him talk about the suddenly missing cash—which was still missing.

* * *

Smoking the gray cop's two-bit cigar, Pete got to the Blue Lamp just before closing time.

"So the cat scratched you," Jerry said, inspecting Pete's face.

"Some cat," Pete said. "I'll have a Gibson."

Jerry brought it, brimful and strong. "And," Pete added, "I'll take what Garrigan left for his wife."

"There must be a mistake, chum." Jerry shook his head blandly.

Pete put an edge to his voice. "Don't be stupid. They could get you yet, as an accessory. For helping hide Garrigan in my rooms.

"I didn't," Pete said, "mention your name to the cops. But I might drop back by headquarters tonight."

Shrugging, the bartender went to the register on the backbar, pulled a manila envelope from behind it.

"And a stamp," Pete said.

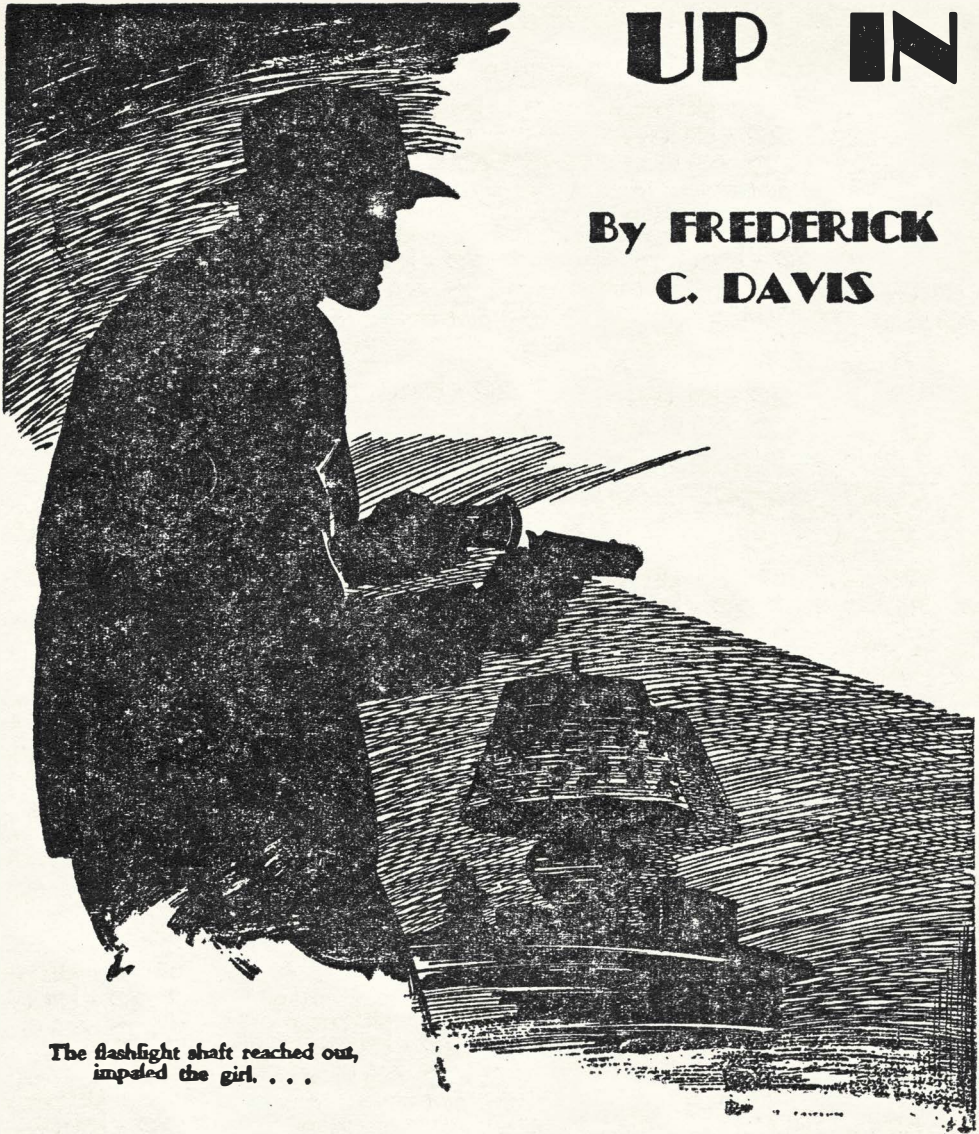
He put Garrigan's name and office address in the upper left corner and addressed the envelope to Mrs. Garrigan at the Forest Hills number. Garrigan wouldn't have left her enough to pay for his funeral.

Jerry took off his apron and walked out. Pete sighed. He hoped the money would all be back in the family, some day. But he'd have to look for a new bar now, and a new bartender. He savored the Gibson.

Hell of a note. Jerry made the only good ones in town.

UP IN

By **FREDERICK
C. DAVIS**



The flashlight shaft reached out,
impaled the girl. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Change Her Stripes

HE FADED back into the dark corner with the gun in his fist and his eyes fixed on the door, waiting for the girl to show. She was due any second. When she came to that door and opened it he would first flick her with his flashlight, to make sure it was really the girl in the zebra coat, and then he would hit her with a couple of fast bullets.

He was going to kill her right there in

front of my eyes and I wouldn't be able to lift a finger to help her. I was too sick, too weak to stir.

My scalp was still bleeding. My wrists were locked together behind me with a dick's handcuffs. He had used my belt to strap my ankles together. Something was stuffed hard into my mouth, something as big and tasty as a four-year-old pair of galoshes. He wanted me to keep out of his way, to lie there nice and quiet while he got his murdering done. Any slight noise from my direction would invite him to

MURDER'S ROOM



*That's where Paul caught up
with the Zebra girl—
almost in time to escort her
to the grave.*



Fascinating Suspense-Mystery Novelette

come back and chop a few more gashes in my skull.

I lay there wondering whether he meant to kill me as soon as he'd finished with the girl. Why not? What did he have to lose? He had already murdered three others. The girl he was waiting for now would be his fourth. Adding me to his list of non-talking corpses might help him to keep on getting away with it.

The room was blinding black and silent, with only a few faint street noises trickling in. In my aching eyes he was a blurred shape eight or ten feet away. He was standing tight-bodied there in the opposite corner, the flashlight in one hand, the gun in the other, listening patiently for the girl.

She didn't know, of course, that he was waiting here for her. Her date was with another guy, a nicer one, one who would much rather kiss her than kill her. That one, however, had been violently side-tracked a few minutes ago by this murderer who had now taken his place with a gun in the dark.

Then the first sound of her came, quick footsteps on the stoop downstairs. The killer in the corner leaned toward the window, slanted a downward look at her as she paused on the stoop to fish up her key. A grunted sound of gratification came up from his throat. He had recognized her. It was the girl in the zebra coat.

She would open the street door, run up one flight of stairs, then turn and hurry along the upper hallway to this deadly door. She would open it also and as she stepped into this dark room she would instantly get shot dead. From the outer door, where she was momentarily pausing, to the door of this room, where she would suddenly die, the trip would probably take no longer than twenty seconds by anybody's clock.

We heard the snap of the lock downstairs—the killer and I—as she opened the street entrance and pushed in. . . .

THE Grotto bar was not where it began. Like other merry-go-rounds, it didn't begin in any one place. The bar in Getto's Grotto just happened to be the spot where I finally began edging up on that elusive lass in the zebra coat. Or so I thought.

At about four in the afternoon, a few afternoons ago, I came once more to the door of "that ever-popular rendezvous," as the Grotto's newspaper ads called it. Before going in I paused, as I always did, to admire the big colored lithograph being displayed as bait to the passing suckers.

It depicted, almost life size, a dream doll emerging part way from a pair of filmy black curtains. Her perfect features were perfectly located and she was clad mostly in shadows. She had lifted a small fan to her face as a sort of mask and she was gazing at me temptingly through the black lace web of it, exposing her coaxing smile. Her name, the notice said, was Zora Raye. I would have gladly gone inside to view Zora Raye in person, at close range, expense no object, except that the sign added, *Opening Next Week*.

I had been trying for days to track this cupcake down, but my luck had been consistently bad. This poster in front of Getto's Grotto seemed to be a fair statement of my prospects. Maybe I might connect with Zora Raye next week, if ever.

I pushed inside anyway. It was still too early for cocktails, if it's ever too early for cocktails. The hat-check girl wasn't there yet. No customers sat at any of the tables. The piped-in music wasn't turned on. The joint was as dead as a mausoleum except for one barman in a fresh white monkey jacket who was wearily squeezing a night's supply of lemon juice. It wouldn't stay this way long, but right now was a good time for asking more questions.

I had come in without any real hope of hearing any answers, but one came wafting to me on the air before I had halfway reached the bar. It was a drifting cloud of perfume, flowery but potent. It wasn't exactly heliotrope or narcissus or jasmine, but a whole hothouse full of fragrant blooms giving out their all like a symphony orchestra in full cry. It stopped me short and boosted my drooping spirits a little because it meant that the girl in the zebra coat had momentarily passed this way.

Once before, days ago—it seemed weeks—at another dive called the Beachcomber, they'd told me, "You just missed her, she left just half a minute ago," which was the closest I'd come so far. There, at

that time, I'd picked up her scent literally. She had left behind her there that same heady fragrance hovering in the air, one reminding me of a wedding or a funeral. I hadn't caught another whiff of it anywhere since, until now, here inside Getto's Grotto, where there wasn't anybody except the barkeep and me.

I went on to the bar and said, "She's here now! I know she is. I've got to see her."

The barman went on squeezing lemons.

"She must be in seeing Tony Getto," I insisted. "In the boss's office, isn't she? Buzz him. Tell 'em it's about money."

He was so busy squeezing lemons he didn't hear me.

"Strictly business, you understand. The name's Daniels, Paul Daniels, from the Hartley Agency. That's class, see? When a Hartley Agency man is interested it means a strictly blue chip play."

Another lemon. They were beginning to turn me a little sour.

"Tell Tony Getto I'm coming in to see Zora Raye right now," I said. "Otherwise I'll walk right in there unannounced and it might be embarrassing."

The barman turned from the squeezer and reached under the bar. First he pressed a buzzer button. Then he brought up an empty bottle. Instead of slugging me with the bottle, he began funnelling lemon juice into it.

"Don't you ever get tired?" he said.

"I'm tired all the time," I told him. "I'm tired as hell of dogging Zora Raye all over town. Why doesn't she ever stay still? I've been chasing after that cream-puff day and night and never once connecting and all I want is to talk five min-

utes worth of business with her and I'm getting damn tired of it."

"Take yourself a rest," the barman recommended.

"So what makes her so elusive?" I went on. "What's there about her that makes guys like you clam up the minute I ask where I can find her? Why don't you ever know where she is? When I go there how-come she's always somewhere else? Why must she always be the little girl who was here just a minute ago but she just stepped out?"

Lemon.

"Why am I getting nowhere just trying to find out where she lives?"

If the barman knew where she lived he was one more who wasn't saying. Like the rest, though, he probably didn't know.

"Could be you think it's safer not to be too curious about her," I went on, feeling sore. "So you're afraid of her. Everybody's afraid of her. But why? How-come you and everybody else along the main stem are so skittish about this zingie in the zebra coat?"

THE street door had opened and another customer was moving in to the bar. He was quiet-mannered, with an intensely serious face, pitch-black eyes and beautiful wavy black hair. I'd never seen him before but the barman had. The barman lifted his eyes to the phony crags of the ceiling and muttered. It sounded like: "My Lord, him too! Both of 'em at once!"

If I'd heard right, this could mean that this earnest-looking lad was also dogging Zora around, maybe with no more luck than I'd had. It was a possibility which I



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had no time to inquire into because just then another character moved up from the opposite direction.

This one was wearing a two-hundred-dollar suit in gray checks, a hand-made ten buck cravat, hand-customed shoes and a face that belonged out in the back alley. From the neck down he was as smooth as any movie star on exhibition but from the neck up he was still living in the jungle. The barkeep's buzzer had brought him out of a cave somewhere, so he might have been the bouncer, only he wasn't.

"Good afternoon, sir," he said. "I'm Tony Getto. You wish to see me?"

"No," I said. "It's Zora Raye I wish to see. She's prettier."

He nodded agreeably, gestured and led me away. For a moment I was stunned. I couldn't believe my good fortune. I'd been chasing around after Zora Raye day after day, always just missing her, getting one runaround after another, but now, finally, Tony Getto, a truly wonderful guy, was about to lead me to her. At least I believed this for fully ten seconds. I then found that what he had led me to was a table at which his gesture invited me to sit.

"No," I said. "Zora Raye, remember? In your office. Who do I have to be to get in to see her?"

Tony Getto wouldn't commit himself on that point. Smiling, he asked, "You are—"

"Daniels, Paul Daniels, from the Hartley Booking Agency. Here's my card. You know Steve Hartley?"

I expected Getto to shake his head, no, and he did. The Hartley Agency was definitely the highest class. If the Hartley Agency ever stooped to book talent into a shabby den like the Grotto, the deal would be handled with rubber gloves by a second assistant, -like me.

"You have come here many times wanting to see Miss Raye," Getto told me, as if I didn't know. "You have asked my employees many questions about her. To you she seems to be very, very important in some way."

"At first she wasn't," I said. "If I'd seen her the first time I tried, it would have been strictly routine. All over in a few minutes. Just another night club entertainer scouted out and signed up.

Turned over to the booking department and forgotten. But as it is I haven't yet managed to get into the same room with her. I can't get her on the phone. Everybody keeps giving me the fishy eye and brushing me off when I ask for her. Seeing Zora Raye wasn't one damned bit important to begin with, but now it's turned into one of those things where you swear to yourself you're gonna do it if it kills you."

There was a polite suggestion of skepticism in Getto's smile. "There was a murder," he reminded me. "Miss Raye's sister. The singer named Patty Raye. Murdered just a few weeks ago."

I nodded. "That murder added up to plenty of fine publicity. Worth millions to a girl like Zora. It's a shame she hasn't made more of it."

"The police," Getto went on smoothly, "have stopped coming around the way they did at first. They're still working on it, but not in a regulation gumshoe way. I don't want any undercover men sniffing around the Grotto and making Zora nervous."

"If appearing in public doesn't make her nervous, nothing else is likely to. Look, I don't know how the cops may be nosing out the murderer of Zora's sister," I insisted. "When they find him it will be another million bucks' worth of free publicity for Zora, so I hope they'll hold off until I've got her signature on a Hartley contract. Now, if I can see her for a few min—"

"You just missed her," Tony Getto said. "She stepped out just half a minute before you came in."

"One of these fine days somebody's going to say that to me once too often," I warned him. "In fact, this is the day. Always before, I've taken it, but this time I damn well don't believe it."

I brushed past him, heading for a door back in the region of the kitchen, one marked *Private*. A shoulderwise glance showed me the barkeep frowning and reaching for another empty bottle, although the first one was only half full. A signal from Getto froze him. The lad with wavy black hair at the bar also made not a move, but quietly watched me wading chin-deep into more trouble, with Tony Getto's forty-dollar bluchers flash-

ing close behind my run-down heels.

I pushed into the door of Getto's private office just in time to see something flicking out of sight through another door in the rear, something that looked a lot like a zebra coat.

THE air here in Getto's sanctum was reeling with Zora Raye's funeral-like fragrance. That perfume was as definitely part of Zora Raye as that unique zebra coat she wore everywhere she went. It was a damned peculiar thing how her coat made her so conspicuous that you could see her coming blocks away, and how her perfume made her presence hang around long after she had moved on, and yet she was never anywhere. This was the closest yet.

Tony Getto's eyes behind me were dark with a murderous smoulder. He couldn't stop me from connecting with Zora Raye now, not without slugging me down. And I was already across the office and sidling out the door into a short, narrow service alley, all set to buttonhole the elusive Zora.

Zora's flowery perfume floated along its length to the street, but the girl herself was already out of sight again.

Still moving fast, I reached the street just in time to see her vanishing around the nearest corner.

Moving even faster, I made the corner and swung into view of her. There she actually was, straight ahead. People all along the line had assured me that I would easily recognize Zora Raye anywhere because of that theatrical one-of-a-kind zebra coat of hers, but this was the first time I had actually seen it. I felt like Columbus finally sighting the new world. Zebra ho!

All I had to do now was catch up with her. Her spike heels were ticking along at double time. People stared at her as she breezed past, keeping close to the buildings for a clear course, but she gave none of them a glance. Maybe she thought she'd made a clean getaway and wasn't being tailed. At any rate she didn't look back until she had almost reached the next corner. Then she took a quick peek over one striped shoulder, veered suddenly into a doorway and disappeared again.

When I reached the same doorway only seconds later she was not in the vestibule.

She had hurried in deeper, up the stairs. This building combined a drugstore on the street level with apartments on the second and third floors. The four mail-boxes in the vestibule wall bore the names of the tenants, but the name of Zora Raye was not among them, so evidently this wasn't where she lived. None of the names meant anything to me, but one of them, Rex Asher, somehow seemed faintly familiar.

I went quietly up the stairs, following Zora's hothouse scent. The door nearest the first landing was standing ajar. The calling card thumbtacked to it bore that same vaguely familiar name of Rex Asher.

There were no sounds inside, no talking going on. Squinting in, I saw a man's hand lying on the carpet, laxly curled, palm up. Slowly pushing the door wider, I could follow the arm up to a shoulder, then a head, including a sleeping face. It seemed to have two bullet-holes in the forehead, each neatly placed above an eyebrow.

I eased the door wider, all the way. Now I could see the whole room, but there was no girl in it. There was just this dead-looking guy on the floor, seemingly all alone.

I stepped in and knew that the girl in the zebra coat had been here, all right. Her perfume was haunting the place, making it feel like a funeral parlor. A funeral, though, would have been a little premature. Before poking around for the missing girl I took half a minute for a closer look at the guy on the rug and found that those two spots on his forehead were not quite what they seemed. They were bullet-holes, but the bullet, instead of drilling into his skull, had furrowed a crease under the skin. That up-turned palm of his seemed to be beseeching, *Brother, could you spare a life?* and the chances were that he'd get a break.

Zora Raye's perfume wafted over him. She had heard me coming, of course, and had backed under cover. There were four inside doors in the apartment, all of them closed. Bedroom, bath, two closets. I had three chances in four of guessing wrong.

I chose the farthest one on the left. It was the bedroom. In the bedroom were two more closets, also closed. I was mov-

ing in on them quietly when the bathroom door burst open behind me and a zebra came tooling out in high gear, heading for the hallway.

She moved with wild speed, slamming the hallway door shut behind her as she raced out. She slammed it so hard that the night latch sprang into its socket and jammed. I discovered this, wrenched it out again and went jumping down the stairs. There was no sign of the girl in the zebra coat until I reached the sidewalk.

She was ducking into a taxi. At the same instant, of course, the light turned conveniently green for her.

This was where I got my first break, one that led me to hope I might soon actually catch up with this capering cupcake. Directly behind her taxi there was another one, unengaged. This fact will serve to refute those skeptics who believe that miracles don't happen any more. This one happened to me. When the girl's taxi rolled on, mine rolled directly behind it, with my driver instructed to stick close at all costs.

He stuck practically bumper to bumper. The girl's taxi jumped red lights, cut into illegal left turns and dodged the other way down a this-way street, but he stuck as close as a trailer all the way. He hung on so tightly that the girl, seemingly driven to more frantic tactics, suddenly popped out of the taxi door and fled on afoot.

Remembering to leave a banknote with my driver, I hustled right after her. She cut straight across the sidewalk and up the steps of a brownstone stoop. She had a key ready and stabbed it into the lock. She spun about and tried to slam the door shut in my face. My left foot stopped it, painfully.

She whirled away again and this cock-eyed chase went on. By this time she was simply scrambling in the only direction left to her, getting herself more deeply cornered with every move. I kept at her pretty heels all the way up the stairs, then down the hall to another door. She used another key and I just pressed in after her.

Inside, she stumbled to a dressing table, then backed up to the wall gripping a pair of long scissors in her up-raised fist, with every intention of poking both my eyes

out as soon as I came within stabbing distance.

"Easy does it, honey," I panted.

Watching her, I shifted to the phone. After a few seconds I was saying over the line, "Police headquarters? Listen fast. A man has been shot in Apartment 2-A at 672 East Fifty-Third Street. He needs help in a hurry." Then I cut the connection, grinning jubilantly at the girl in the zebra coat.

"Relax, honey," I said expansively. "I wouldn't harm a single stripe of your lovely hide. Let me introduce myself. Paul Daniels, of the Hartley Agency, at your service. And you, of course, are Zora Raye."

Her answer hit me between the eyes like a wild-flying eight ball.

"N-no, I'm not," she said. "I'm not Zora Raye. M-my name is Maxine Nixon."

CHAPTER TWO

Stairway to the Morgue

THE killer and I heard the snap of the lock downstairs as she opened the street door and pushed in. This time it was no ringer. It was really Zora Raye this time, really the girl who belonged inside that zebra coat. The way I had seen this murder-to-be building up, I could be as sure as the killer was that this was the right girl walking in to keep a date with a bullet in the heart.

The man in the corner began to tighten for the kill. He stood motionless, a vague shape, breathing very slowly, one hand pointing the flashlight, the other aiming the gun. He was gambling plenty on the bullet he would fire at that door when it opened. He wanted to kill her fast, at the first blast, and then clear out even faster, over her dead body.

From the street door downstairs to the door up here, twenty seconds at the most.

Downstairs in the vestibule the latch clicked again as the street door automatically closed behind her. Then we heard her start up the stairs. We listened to her coming up in a hurry, one quick step topping another, each bringing her closer to the death waiting for her on this side of the dark door. . . .

Where it really began, for me at least, was in Steve Hartley's apartment, over cocktails. The push-off came when Steve began to frown over a routine newspaper ad promoting Getto's Grotto. If he hadn't decided to make something of that ad, this murderous merry-go-round would never have started on its deadly whirl.

Steve had invited me to come home from the office with him that afternoon. He'd said Felice had mentioned that it was a long time since she'd seen me, and so it was. As an old friend of Steve's and Felice's I used to drop in on them quite often and very pleasantly, until Steve gave me a badly needed job in his booking agency as a second assistant talent scout and errand-runner.

As one of his hired men I felt a change in Steve's attitude. It seemed he couldn't remain a cordial friend after office hours and still be an exacting boss too. Anyway I was glad to see Felice again in that luxuriously comfortable, impeccably appointed apartment after a much longer absence than usual.

Felice was a tall, dark, patrician heart-stopper. She graciously served the martinis while Steve, his mind still on business, glanced over the theatrical sections of the afternoon papers. Suddenly he handed me a folded paper and said, "See there, Paul—something for us."

It was a coarse-screened reproduction of that same photo of Zora Raye which I was destined to look at so often in front of the Grotto in the next few days. The ad was one of Tony Getto's routine insertions, promising the usual *Superior Cuisine, Finest Liquors, Exciting Star-Studded Floor Show, No Cover Charge,*

No Minimum, except that this ad was bigger than usual in order to feature Zora's shadow-draped attractions the more alluringly. The ad might have filled the Grotto to capacity that very night except for that same added teaser, *Opening Next Week*.

"Raye," Steve said. "Didn't a girl named Raye get murdered a couple of weeks ago?"

"Couldn't have been *this* Raye," I observed. "This one looks alive all over."

"Patty Raye, that was her name," Steve said. "Patty. A singer. We never handled her, of course." She was too small-time, far below the level of our classy clientele, he meant. "But I remember seeing her billed at the Grotto over quite a long period. This girl in today's ad, Zora, is probably her sister."

"So?"

"Zora is muffing the opportunity of a lifetime," Steve explained to me. "She's gotten more publicity in the headlines—gotten it once removed, anyway—than money can buy. Millions of people have heard her name and plenty of them will pay to see her out of simple curiosity. Yet here she is, wasting herself in an obscure side-street gin-mill when she could be built up into the top money."

Felice had lifted her fine eyebrows at him. In her clothes, her home, her husband, Felice showed flawless taste. She had a strong sense of pride, not merely a personal pride, but also a pride in fine possessions. The cocktail glass she held was delicately beautiful in itself but she saw an added quality in its beauty because she owned it. Her husband would have been a remarkably handsome and charming guy



Will You Try a 25c Box of NoDoz Awakeners at My Expense?

If you have trouble keeping awake when you have to, try a NoDoz Awakener*—America's famous wake-up tablet since 1933. 25c at all drug stores.

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Hugh Harrison

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under any circumstances, but he acquired an extra touch of distinction because he was hers. That fine sense of pride in the high quality of her life was precious to Felice and something she would never lose.

"But Steve, dearest," she said, "wouldn't it cheapen the agency to make capital of the fact that this girl is a murder victim's sister?"

"We've gotten to be a little too high class for our own good," Steve said. "It costs us some good clients. Besides, I hate to see such a magnificent opportunity go to waste. Of course we would never be blatant about it. It might be really stimulating to try, if only as a novelty. I'll have a contract drawn up first thing in the morning, Paul. Let's get her signature on it right away and have some fun creating a chi-chi career for her."

That was all there was to the start of it. Just an idea of the boss's tossed off in passing. One of those might-be-a-good-idea things. Just get her signature on a contract, Paul. Nothing to it.

Brother!

TWO days later, at the office, Steve buzzed me. I dragged my rounded heels into his office to be greeted by a frown.

"The Raye contract," he reminded me. "Where is it? Haven't you talked to her yet?"

I explained how at the Grotto they seemed to want to keep Zora Raye under wraps until the opening show next Monday night, when she would take the wraps off herself for the paying customers.

"We can't waste time over a minor deal like this one, Paul," Steve said. "Are you sure you've really tried?"

I stared at him with my tired, baggy eyes. "There's something damn strange about that girl, Steve. Everybody's on the defensive about her, in peculiar, subtle ways. I can't quite describe it, but it's as if she were a two-legged bundle of dynamite moving among them and they're afraid to say anything about her because if they happened to speak the wrong word she'd suddenly go boom and blow 'em all to hell and gone."

"How could she?" Steve asked.

"Must be tied in with her sister's mur-

der somehow. The cops haven't gotten to first base with that murder. They have a fairly good notion that Patty's boy-friend killed her in a fit of pique because he found her twoing him with the next in line, but they haven't connected with him yet, although of course they're still looking. I hear there are at least a dozen guys living in a constant state of the jitters for fear the cops might nail one of 'em for it any minute now—although it's anybody's guess which one."

"I still don't understand why this makes everybody so offish to strangers about Zora," Steve complained.

"It's mostly because of a remark that Zora has dropped around in various places, I think. When eavesdropping on the customers' conversations at bars here and there, I've heard it mentioned three or four times in a hush-hush way. Zora makes a point of saying that Patty was close to her, Patty wrote to her regularly once a week and told her just everything, and the letters were so interesting that Zora saved every one."

"So?" Steve asked, frowning.

"Writing things down on paper makes some people nervous," I said. "Especially when they can't know exactly what's been written. Then the safest play is to be just as nice as pie about the whole thing, at least until you find out."

Steve made an impatient noise. "I'll be damned if I have the foggiest idea what you're talking about, Paul. Nor can I see how this makes the slightest difference to us. All we want is Zora's signature on a contract. I wish you'd quite dawdling around. Go out there and get it."

So, despairing of making him understand how a babe could be so elusive as all that—I couldn't quite understand it myself—I went out and pulled myself back onto the merry-go-round.

Finally, when I had what I thought was victory within my grasp, it had eluded me once more. I had knocked the wind out of myself chasing this fugitive doll across town. I had congratulated myself upon tracking her down to her closely guarded apartment and at long last cornering her here. Yes, sir, I had this babe now.

And what did she say?

She said, "But I'm not Zora Raye! My name's Maxine Nixon!"

I stared dazed at her as she stood backed against the wall with fear in her eyes and those sharp-pointed scissors in one upraised fist.

"Don't give me that," I said. "You're Zora Raye, all right. You couldn't be anybody else, wearing that coat and smelling as you do."

She shook her head, which was blonde and easy to look at. "The coat and the smell go together. I borrowed 'em for this afternoon, to wear just for the hell of it."

Then she seemed to realize that in some way it had been a risky play, letting herself be seen inside that zebra skin. She quickly put the scissors down, slid the coat off, whisked it inside a closet, then backed away from it in relief.

"You need a drink, sister," I suggested. "Your nerves are shot. Otherwise you wouldn't be scared of a coat with nobody inside it."

MAXINE NIXON swallowed as if she had had a narrow escape. "I won't do *that* again. Zora just doesn't realize the chances she's taking. Brother, the way she's asking for it, she'd be smarter not to make herself such an easy target."

With a shudder Maxine opened up the kitchenette and began doing the right things with two glasses and a half-full bottle. Pausing, she observed, "Y' know, it's a funny thing the way Zora wears that cockeyed coat everywhere except one place. I don't know what that place is, either, but whenever she goes there she puts on her other coat, the gray tweed, and leaves the zebra here. She stays there quite a while too, usually overnight. Then when she comes back and starts circulating along the main stem again she gets back into the zebra with the load of stink-um on it. I have to keep my clothes in the other closet so I won't smell like that damn zebra second hand."

"It's mother would certainly never recognize it now," I agreed. "Where did Zora get it?"

"It used to be Patty's. Patty happened to find it in a hock shop over near the waterfront. She wore it once in a while just as a lark. Zora, though, went for it strong. *Too* strong. It's tough on the nerves of Patty's friends. We know she's

dead and buried now but that damn zebra makes it look like she's still walking around. The perfume was Patty's too, but she never doused it on, the way Zora does."

All this, while very interesting, had nothing to do with my own problem. "When can I find Zora in?" I asked.

Maxine handed me a drink to help me get over my disappointment and began soothing her nerves with the other. "She's in and she's out, but I never know when. Y' know, this is where her sister got killed. Right in this room, murdered."

"Here?" I jerked it out, looking around with eyebrows lifted.

"I'm the one who found her, there on the floor against the couch. Almost where you're standing now. She had the phone clenched in her hands. J'ever see the picture the dicks took of her, the way I found her?"

Maxine—friendly girl, babbling on like this to let off nervous steam—rummaged briefly in a desk and came up with a glossy eight-by-ten print, evidently one which an obliging homicide man had thought Maxine might want to keep.

It depicted the corpse of Patty Raye lying on the floor beside the couch, her face smeared with blood and the phone clutched in both rigid fists. I recalled vaguely the way the police had accounted for this, as given out to the papers. They believed that after Patty's jealous boyfriend had shot her up and left her for dead, she had still enough life left in her to try to make a phone call—one which might have put the finger on her murderer if only she had held on long enough to finish it.

"She was trying to say something over the phone when I came in," Maxine told me, as she must have told the cops, and scores of others by now in an attempt to get it off her mind. "This was her apartment then, see, and I was just dropping in. She was spluttering and coughing blood horrible, and trying to make words. Sounded something like 'Get the rat for this.' But then she suddenly went all limp—died right there before my eyes." Maxine took a quick gulp of her drink. "They never did find out what number it was she called, either."

A rash of speculations had broken out about that phone call. Who had the dead girl tried to reach, and why? Had she wanted to tell one of her friends who it was that had shot her up? Whoever it was that Patty had phoned in her dying moment, however, that person had not come forward to the police and had not been identified.

"Do you think it really was Patty's boyfriend who gunned her because he thought she was shelving him for somebody else?" I said. "As a close friend of Patty's, you probably know the right answer."

Maxine's face paled and stiffened. Her guard had gone up. No doubt the cops had grilled her on that very same point. She wasn't giving out that answer in the wrong places if she could help it. After all, a girl's got to get along, hasn't she? That little bit of information could be worth big money to Maxine when she found the right buyer, and she knew it.

"I saw him only a couple times," she said evasively. "Never heard his real name, though. The only name I ever heard Patty call him was Sweetie, and when she talked to me about him she called him My Honey."

I put on a wise smile. "But Zora must know better than that what to call him. She knows from those intimate letters Patty used to write to her, hmmm?"

Maxine put her drink down suddenly and began moving around the room like she had ants. That was the way people reacted to the mere mention of Patty's letters to Zora. Nobody knew just how much Patty had written to Zora but everybody had the meemies for fear it was too much.

I COULD understand now what Maxine had meant about Zora's running risks and making herself too conspicuous a target in those zebra stripes. Among those who might be jittery about those letters, one was Patty's murderer.

"It's a funny thing," Maxine said in a shaky voice. "Patty never used to talk about Zora. I never even knew Patty had a sister until Zora turned up right after the funeral. She had to come from the West Coast, she said, and couldn't get here sooner. I'd already moved into Patty's apartment, here, because good apartments are so hard to find, and then

Zora asked could she share it with me. Well, after all, this was where her sister lived and died. She had a better claim on it than I did.

"So since then Zora and I have been living here, if you can call it that. The way she comes and goes, hardly ever spending a night here—the way she wants everything hush-hush except when she breezes out in that coat you can see a mile away—the way she clams up sometimes but talks too damn much the rest of the time, especially about those damn letters—I can't figure her. I just can't figure her. Let's have another drink."

"Another drink is just what I need, honey, but I've got to stick to my job and find Zora." I asked it again, "Got any idea at all where I might find her?"

Maxine shook her yellow head again, looking anxiously puzzled. "She was here a little earlier, but she went off wearing her gray tweed again. Where she goes when she leaves her zebra behind, I just wouldn't know."

I said good-by to Maxine, telling myself that at least I had found out Zora's address. That was a big step toward my objective of finding the babe herself. All I had to do now was to keep the joint cased and sooner or later she would turn up.

Luck was with me again. On the corner, almost directly across the street, was a bar and grill. Going in, I found that I could stand at the bar and watch Zora's door through one of the windows. I ordered a rye and soda and began watching.

Time passed while I went on watching for Zora. After a while the little radio behind the bar began chattering out the latest news, in the course of which it mentioned the name of Rex Asher.

". . . Found unconscious as the result of a gunshot wound in his apartment on East Fifty-Third Street late this afternoon. Asher was removed to Surgeons' Hospital, where he is remaining under observation. He told police he did not see the person who shot him and can give no explanation for the attack. Police believe it was an attempt at homicide and that it may be connected in some way with the recent murder of Patty Raye."

That was it—that was where I'd heard of Rex Asher before. In the papers. He'd

been Patty Raye's "latest heart interest." It was her palpitations over Asher, in fact, that had led to fatal consequences for her. I recalled now how the cops had grilled Asher at length, but they had had to let him go because his alibi checked. As to who may have slaughtered his sugar, he had avowed the profoundest ignorance.

Yeah. Maybe. If Asher knew who had knocked Patty off, that information was as valuable to him as it might be to Maxine, or to anyone else who might feel inclined to suck a little blood.

"Asher will probably be released from the hospital tomorrow afternoon," the radio added.

Okay, okay. The hell with Asher. I had a babe named Zora in mind. I had to hook a hinge on Zora.

Four hours later I had watched for Zora so hard that I was scarcely able to stand and too blind to spot a Ringling Brothers parade if one should come along. When I finally staggered off duty, Zora simply hadn't shown.

CHAPTER THREE

Death is Where You Find It

WE LISTENED to her—the killer in the corner and I—as she came hustling up the stairs, each quick step bringing her closer to the death waiting for her on this side of the dark door.

He was all set. The flashlight in his left hand and the gun in his right were both pointed straight and steady at the door. He would flick her with the light first, just to make sure there would be

no mistake, then he would knock her over with a bullet. The distance was only ten or twelve feet. He couldn't miss. She would be the second girl he had murdered in this same room.

His tight-nerved waiting was almost ended now. She would be on the mark in another ten seconds.

She came to the top of the stairs and the sound of her footfalls changed a little when she reached the carpet on the landing. They quickened a little too. She turned and came hurrying up the hallway almost eagerly, straight toward the door where she would die. . . .

As early as I could navigate, next morning, I set a course past Getto's Grotto, carrying a full cargo of black coffee and aspirin.

The young guy with the intense black eyes and the beautiful black wavy hair was already there. I mean the strong-looking, silent, dark character who had appeared at the bar inside the Grotto yesterday afternoon while I was dogging Maxine Nixon under the impression that she was Zora Raye. He was standing admiring that oil-colored picture of Zora and obviously longing for next week.

I paused at his side and said, "Yummy, hmm?"

It broke the spell. His answer was a dark, resentful frown, as if I'd made a coarse remark that had cheapened Zora's loveliness. Not wishing to discuss Zora's merits with a stranger, he turned his broad back on me and moved on down the street. I decided he probably knew less about Zora than the little I knew, so I let him go.

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It looked like the dawn of another bad day for me. I had started it by digging up the phone number of the apartment shared by Maxine and Zora. Maxine had finally answered my ring with a yawn. I had asked her—guess what?—if Zora had come in.

“Cer’nly not. Told you she went out in her gray tweed, din’t I?” Maxine added in a drowsy drawl, “She phoned, though. Said she’d be in later and wasn’t it too bad about Rex. Said she’d be dropping in at the hospital to see how Rex is making out.”

Standing in lonely admiration before Zora’s almost-life-size lithograph, I wondered where it was that she went in her gray tweed, leaving her zebra behind her. That was one of the things about her that nobody else had mentioned and not even her roommate seemed to know.

I could make either one of two tries. I might go back to that corner bar and start watching Zora’s apartment all over again; but that would be tough on my liver. My other possible move was to case Rex Asher’s room in Surgeons’ Hospital on the chance that, as she had mentioned to Maxine, she might drop in to hold his hand.

Going into Surgeons’ Hospital I began getting the breaks again—the kind of breaks that liked to boomerang on me. First the schedule posted on the wall told me I had arrived during regular visitors’ hours. Then, when I inquired for Rex Asher’s room, the redhead at the information desk answered without hesitation, “Second floor, Two-forty-two.”

I went upstairs, turned down the right corridor and found myself following a white-coated intern carrying a tray on which lay something covered by a towel. He pushed into the door numbered 242 and closed it behind him just before I reached it. My fingers were on the knob when a hand caught my arm from behind with authoritative force. I looked around into the stony poker-face of a stocky, grizzled guy who couldn’t be anybody other than a headquarters dick with an assignment to keep an eye on Rex Asher’s room.

“Friend of Rex’s?” the dick asked. “Want to see him about something?”

Before I could answer, two loud bangs

sounded behind Rex Asher’s closed door.

TO ME, the bangs sounded like the noise made by a gun when it goes off. The dick blinked blankly at the door, suspecting the same thing but unable to believe it. Then a thin cry of terror rose inside the room. The booming noise came a third time and the wail stopped as abruptly as a switched-off radio.

The dick bumped past me, grabbing the knob of 242 in one hand, pulling a police positive off his hip with the other. The door had no lock but he had trouble pushing it open. He jammed his shoulder against it hard. Then something gave and he squeezed in, past the chair that had been braced against it.

The room was deserted except for the patient, who lay still in his bed. He looked scared to death, and was, although the gun had helped to make him that way.

The bandage on his forehead, covering the old bullet crease, had a fresh hole through it. Blood had trickled down across his face and into his gaping mouth. There were two more brand-new holes in his chest, high up, also leaking a little blood. The gun that had shot him not quite dead enough yesterday and polished off the job today.

This killing had been done in a way that would cause the detective to do plenty of explaining to his chief. He stared at the floor near the foot of the bed. There lay the tray which the intern had carried in a moment ago, the towel that had covered something lying on it, and the white jacket he had worn. The man himself was here no longer. There was a wide open window at the side of the bed. It was a drop of only eight or nine feet to the sidewalk.

Having seen all this without entering the room, I backed off into a quiet retreat. In another instant the dick would begin scrambling for a phone, but so far, while I faded along the corridor, the murder in 242 appeared to have caused no disturbance.

Once out the entrance, I walked faster, chilled by the realization that without knowing it, I had been following at a killer’s heels. His play had been blood-freezingly daring and amazingly easy. He had probably entered the hospital without

topcoat or hat, unnoticed, it being a balmy day. Acting like a doctor, he could have gone unquestioned into some department of supply, perhaps in the basement, where he might easily pick up the tray, towel and a fresh jacket. Hiding the gun under the towel on the tray, he had then walked unchallenged past the detective on sentry duty. Clearly enough, this was a killer who had plenty on the ball. I did not want him getting sore at me.

I kept walking fast, trying to figure the right angle on all this. Presently I squeezed myself into a phone booth and phoned the Hartley apartment. Felice answered in her charming way. After a friendly bit of chit-chat she told me Steve had just dropped back from the office. When Steve came on the wire, I got down to grim business.

"I haven't got Zora Raye's signature on the contract yet, Steve, but maybe it's better that way. I think we'd be wiser to skip her. The longer I trail her around the more she seems to shape up as a luscious bundle of trouble."

"In what way?" Steve asked.

"Please listen carefully, Steve, because it's hard to explain. It all ties in with the murder of Patty Raye. So far the cops haven't found the killer, but a number of people, all of them formerly associated with Patty, seem to know who he is, or at least they have strong suspicions. One of them is a girl-friend of Patty's named Maxine Nixon. Another is Tony Getto, who runs the night club where Patty worked.

"Still another, a hooper named Rex Asher. They've all been jockeying around, feeling one another out and trying to outfox each other so as to grab off the big sugar. At the same time Patty's killer seems to know he's due for the bite and he has shown himself to be not too willing to pay off. The way this thing is going, in other words, somebody could get hurt."

"You mean Zora too?" Steve asked.

"Zora even more than the others. Zora seems to have documentary evidence. She's riding the top of this lush blackmail setup in such a way that she'll probably get laced with bullet holes one fine night soon. You don't want the Hartley Agency getting mixed up *that* deep in murder, do you, Steve?"

"Certainly not," Steve said, "but all this sounds pretty wild to me. Aren't you exaggerating?"

"How can you exaggerate a corpse?" I said. "Rex Asher became one of those only a few minutes ago. Zora may be next. So why should I run myself ragged trying to get a babe's name on a contract when maybe it will soon be going on a tombstone instead?"

"Maybe you're right; maybe we'd better steer clear of it," Steve said. "On the other hand, I'd be sorry to lose the advantage of all that priceless publicity. Let's check a little deeper on Zora before dropping her, Paul. Okay?"

"Okay," I said wearily, remembering that Steve hadn't too much use for me around the office anyway. "My heels are ground off up to my ankles already, but you're the boss. I'll give it one last whirl."

It was that one last whirl that almost made me Number Four on the corpse parade.

NUMBER Four? Let's see now. Patty Raye was Number One, right? Rex Asher was Number Two. So if I almost fell into line as Number Four, who, then, got in there as Number Three?

Number Three came along fast, right after dark, at a spot where it might not be too unexpected—in Getto's Grotto.

I had spent that entire day vainly prowling around in search of the little girl who was never there. I kept phoning Zora's apartment and Maxine kept telling me no, Zora hadn't come in yet, until finally the phone didn't answer at all.

In and out of the Grotto and similar dives all day, I'd found that asking for Zora made people even more jittery today than it had yesterday. The reason for this was the sudden violent demise of Rex Asher.

The impression was getting around that our unknown murderer was no guy to trifle with. Having started with Patty Raye, he was quite willing to go on blasting holes through people who made themselves dangerous to him. It seemed likely to me that unless all these would-be blackmailers got together and organized themselves into a club in self-defense, the killer might go right on picking them off one by one.

Wondering who might be the next, I came wearily back to the Grotto early that evening. Hour after hour I had inquired for Zora in more places than I cared to remember. By this time I was so heartily tired of the whole dizzy business that I was eagerly looking forward to getting fired out of the Hartley Agency as a rank incompetent. I had come back to the Grotto this one last time to seek not Zora alone, but solace also.

The Grotto this evening was full of babble and smoke. As I neared the bar, a female voice lifted shrilly above the others. It was Maxine Nixon's. She was wearing her Sunday eyelashes, a black turban on her straw-yellow head and a mangy fur coat over black slacks. She was squeaking at Tony Getto in an unsteady voice while he politely tried to shut her up.

"Quit pullin' at me that way, Tony," Maxine objected, swaying a little. She had evidently dosed herself liberally with nerve-soother. "Y' wanta know what I thinka her? Y' really wanta know?"

She paid no attention to Tony's murmured admonitions to pipe down. Evidently she was referring to Zora Raye, a subject too fascinating to drop.

"I think she's a phony," Maxine asserted, wisely lowering one blue-shadowed eyelid. "About her bein' so close to Patty, I mean. Patty never mentioned to me about having a sisser. There're some things about Patty that Zora don' seema know any better'n a stranger would. But what I can't figger is *if* she's a phony, wha's it for? Jus' tell me that, Tony, wha's she affer?"

Tony Getto had suavely succeeded in tugging Maxine into motion. While she remained unaware of it, he deftly jockeyed her toward his office. She was still bearing down on her suspicions of Zora when he steered her inside and closed the door behind them.

I hoisted myself onto a stool at the bar. The barman gave me a look of long-suffering and a whisky sour, saying nothing. I took a sip, began to feel slightly convalescent, then discovered that Zora's dark admirer was here again.

The young guy with the beautiful black wavy hair was perched at the end of the bar, looking lonely while nursing a beer.

Now and then he turned his dark intense eyes to the street door as if Zora might show at any minute. Some guys, I thought with a twinge, never stop hoping. If Zora ever turned up at all, I thought, it would be as a handmaiden to Santa Claus.

The door of Tony Getto's office opened again and Tony came out alone. He had left Maxine cuddling up to a fresh highball, in an easy chair near his desk, where she wouldn't disturb his soberer clients. Looking relieved to be rid of her, Getto came back to the bar.

"Was Rex Asher a friend of yours?" I asked, hitting him with it abruptly.

He winced. His eyes narrowed a little. He said in a sort of fed-up droning tone, jaws clenched, "At the time Rex Asher got shot I was downtown talking to a banker about borrowing dough to make this place bigger. You should already know that."

"How should I already know it?"

"I already told it to the boys from headquarters this afternoon when they checked on me."

"How should I know what you told the boys from headquarters?"

Getto's eyes grew narrower. "I think you're one of them. You're a dick working under cover. You come around making like you're a booking agent, but as a matter of fact you're a cop trying to get people to blab about their friends behind their backs."

"I'll let you in on a little secret, Tony," I said. "Strictly on the level, I'm a booking agent."

His face stayed coldly set and his answers kept coming through his teeth. "Please accept that drink on the house. Thank you so much for your patronage in the past. I am so sorry we will not be seeing you here in the Grotto any more. Good ni—"

That was when it happened again—the shots coming almost like an echo of those fired hours ago in Room 242 at Surgeons' Hospital.

The orchestra in a cave beyond was tinkling out a tune and the reports might have been two emphatic drum beats—but they weren't. The customers all around seemed not to notice, being too enchanted with the sound of their own voices. But

Getto heard them and frowned. I also heard them and put down my free drink. The lad with the wavy black hair, down at the end of the bar, also heard them and quickly slid off his stool.

Getto steered himself past waiters with practised ease and reached his office door first. As he opened it, I crowded at his shoulder. We stared in at Maxine sitting there in the easy chair. Her glass had spilled whiskey and ice-cubes into her lap. She looked as if she had simply passed out—which she had, permanently. There was one bullet hole high in her chest and another in the center of her forehead.

The other door at the far side of the office—the one giving into the passageway leading straight out to the street—was standing ajar. Neither Getto nor I moved toward it. We both felt it was hardly any use. By this time the killer must be well on his bloody way again.

I felt myself firmly pushed aside. Getto was nudged also, away from his own office door. The lad with the beautiful black wavy hair stepped past us into the murder room and took a clear, hard look at the latest corpse in the case. Then he turned and said with grim crispness:

"I'm Sergeant Brace, special homicide detail, in charge here," and shut the door in our faces.

CHAPTER FOUR

Last Stop for Murder

SHE HAD come to the top of the stairs and turned, and now she was hurrying up the hallway, every quick step bringing her closer toward the door where she would die.

She came along the hallway rapidly, almost eagerly, until she reached the apartment door, and there she paused.

It was very close now, so close that she had only a second or two of life left—so close that her next move would be her last.

She was pausing at the door just long enough to fish her key out of her hand-bag. I could faintly hear the fumbling sounds of her hand poking around inside the bag. A light was burning out there in the hall to help her find it, although here in the room where the killer was waiting for her it was dark.

His target was in range now. He'd drawn a bead on it, dead center. When the door opened, the girl would step squarely into his line of fire. He would have to make no other move to kill her, not a single move except a slight pressure of one finger on the flashlight button and a slight pressure of another finger on the trigger.

He had stopped breathing in order to listen more intently to her sounds through the door, to the little noises made by her hand fumbling in her purse. That sound stopped. Then came the noise of the key as she sank it into the lock. Next, finally, the door-knob, the brief rattle of the knob as her hand grasped and turned it. . . .

The lad with the beautiful black waves had informed us, "Sergeant Brace, special homicide detail, in charge here." A new murder having just occurred on the premises, he had dropped all pretense of being a time-killing customer. His cards were down. He was playing for keeps.

Staring at each other, Tony Getto and I heard him spinning the phone and calling for action from headquarters.

"I told you I was only a booking agent," I reminded Getto. "You went skittish over the wrong guy."

Getto tried one tentative push into his office and was stopped by the latch. Adopting a policy of discretion, he went back to his post near the cash register, trying to act as if nobody had been killed in the place. So far as the customers seemed to be aware, nobody had been.

But for me it was turning into a nightmare. Getting a woman's name on a contract had developed into a rat race that led me through one burst of deadly violence to another—and I still hadn't come within collaring distance of Zora Raye.

I headed out into the fresh air, stood in a dark doorway across the street and watched the cops move in. They came in an official limousine that veered smoothly to a stop just short of the Grotto's marquee. Detectives carrying cases full of crime-detecting apparatus trudged down the passageway flanking the Grotto. They went in through Tony Getto's private door. After that things got even quieter.

Just as I was about to move to a pay phone, to report this dubious development to Steve Hartley, my nerves took on a startled shiver.

A zebra coat with a woman inside it came around the far corner from the avenue and headed down the opposite sidewalk toward Getto's Grotto.

For a moment I stood motionless, unable to believe that I had finally sighted Zora Raye. At least I could be sure that this time the girl in the coat was not Maxine Nixon, who was dead. No, this time it had to be the genuine article, Zora Raye herself. Apparently she had come back to her apartment from parts unknown, had swapped her gray tweed for her main-drag zebra and now she was out to make the rounds again. Finally, at long, long last, I had come almost within hailing distance of Zora.

My gaze followed the stripes of her coat, the twinkle of her ankles below it and the glitter of a hat ornament above, as she breezed along through the shadows on the opposite side of the dark street. My reaction to this moment of long-awaited discovery was peculiar. Now having spotted Zora, I didn't make a dash for her. Instead, thinking I finally knew just where to put my finger on her, I felt like taking my own sweet time about it. My plan was to stroll into the Grotto after her without straining any ligaments.

However, she didn't go as far as the Grotto's main gate, where that appetizing lithograph of hers stood. She turned into the passageway leading to Tony Getto's private entrance.

She was halfway down the little alleyway when Getto's private door opened. Sergeant Brace stepped out. Leaving the routine work to the other boys on the squad—special detail, he had said of himself—he seemed to be setting out on an angle of his own. If it was to hunt up Zora, he hadn't far to go. Getto's door was still open behind him when he spotted the girl heading toward him in the zebra coat.

He froze, the light from inside the office slanting across his astonished face. Zora saw him and her steps slowed uncertainly. Sensing danger ahead, she turned quickly and started hurrying back. Brace gave her no chance to scam out

of reach. He went after her fast, grabbed one of her striped arms and stopped her cold.

Lucky boy. He'd connected with her ahead of me after all.

For a moment they stood close together there on the opposite side of the police car, the top of Zora's hat just visible, Brace's face intensely earnest as he spoke to her. Then, steering her into an unexpected move, he opened the rear door of the homicide squad's limousine, followed her in and closed it behind them.

What was this?

I EASED into the street, keeping myself on the limousine's blind spot. Hunched down near the left rear fender, I picked up their voices through an open window. After half a minute's listening, I knew this was no routine exchange between a cop and a suspect under arrest.

"Sorry, very sorry you've become involved in this, Miss Raye," Brace was saying. "Don't want to make trouble for you unnecessarily, believe me."

Zora answered in a shaky whisper, "Please, I swear I've done nothing really wrong, nothing!"

"I sincerely hope not, Miss Raye. In fact, I'd like a chance to help you to keep clear of all this."

Well, I would be damned. Brace's admiration when he gazed at Zora's picture had not been part of his act. The eagerness with which he had looked for her was sincere. That glow in his dark eyes was the real thing, not there on orders from a superior officer. He had fallen for her—for her picture; it amounted to the same thing. And having met her at last, he didn't sound disappointed. On the contrary, the gentleness of his voice said he would go miles out of his way to give her a break.

"But please try to understand my position, Miss Raye," he went on. "I'm the newest man on the squad, appointed from a desk job. The chief chose me for this special assignment because nobody knew me along this scotch-and-soda belt. He's counting on me for results and I can't let him down."

"I—I understand," she said softly.

"The spot I'm in now is a little warm," he went on. "I was sent into this case

to solve it, and while I was sitting tight, sizing it up, two people got murdered. The chief won't like its shaping up this way. The pressure's on me to deliver, as soon as possible. Now, tonight."

She asked in a whisper, "Do you know who?"

"No. Do you?"

"No."

Sounding a little surprised, he insisted, "You don't?"

"I mean I—I can't be sure."

"But at least you have evidence, Miss Raye. Material evidence—those letters you've mentioned rather freely. That's what I had to talk to you about, those letters from Patty. I need them and you'll have to give them to me."

"The letters from Patty?"

"Ordinarily I wouldn't be talking like this. I should simply jail you as a material witness and use a warrant to get those letters. I should hit you at least for concealing evidence if not for attempted blackmail also. But it wouldn't be pleasant for either of us, Miss Raye. I don't want to foul you up that way—not if I can possibly avoid it."

She whispered, "Please don't."

"I can get around all that if you'll just turn those letters over to me now. I'll tell the chief you voluntarily came to me with them. I'll say you were working on your own to find out who killed your sister. You shouldn't have tried it, I'll say, but anyway you deserve a lot of credit for trying, at the risk of getting yourself shot as dead as the others. When I put it up to him that way, I'm pretty sure the chief will want to go easy on you. But I'll need those letters."

"But—I haven't them!"

"Not with you, naturally. Where are they, in your apartment?" He was bustling with confidence.

"N-no."

"In safe-keeping somewhere else? Okay, Miss Raye, get them for me right now. I'll wait for you over in your apartment. I have Maxine's key and I'll have to look in there anyway. While I'm checking over the place you'll come in, see, having just heard about Maxine, and you'll put those letters right in my hands. I'll give you one hour."

She said quickly, "You're being wonderfully fair and generous, but—but I'm so mixed up I can't think—"

"One hour at the outside, Miss Raye." He said it firmly and meant exactly what he said. "If I don't hear from you by then, I'll have to do it the rough way. Please don't force me to that. All right now, hustle on."

He ducked from the car on the curb side and helped Zora Raye out. I hunched lower out of sight. In a tone of voice that made it clear he wasn't fooling, he urged her again to get going, and she went. In that conspicuous zebra coat of hers, she hurried back the way she had come. I was totally unable at this time to approach her on the subject of the contract because Sergeant Brace stood there beside the police car watching her with his intense black eyes until she turned from sight at the corner.

I stayed folded down, there at the rear of the car, until Brace moved away. His heels clicked on the sidewalk, slowly and thoughtfully, fading. When I straightened, he too was gone.

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THEN I swung off and didn't stop until I was closed inside the nearest phone booth. I dialed the number of the Hartley apartment. Steve answered.

"It's all off, boss," I reported to him, feeling relieved but oddly disappointed too. "Our prospective client has become too hot to handle. The cops closed in on her ahead of us."

"Ah?" Steve said. "What's behind this?"

"Murder," I reminded him. "One, two, three murders now. And those letters I told you about. Those letters are supposed to name names, including the killer's. Zora is due to turn them over to an undercover dick named Brace in her apartment within an hour. Zora's part will be soft-pedaled and given a favorable angle, such as she was trying all along to sniff out her sister's murderer. But anyhow this case is about to bust wide open with a loud, raucous noise, probably as early as tomorrow."

I had thought that the classy Hartley Agency would wish to rise above such cheap front-page sensationalism as this, so Steve's reaction surprised me. "Why, that's wonderful, Paul! That's perfect. Think of it—a beautiful girl courageously risking her life in order to hunt down the man who killed her sister! It makes Zora a real-life heroine. Why, that angle's worth a million to us!"

"It is?"

"Of course it is! We can't possibly pass this up. Go after her, Paul, harder than ever, get her signature. Don't fail to close with her before the other agencies come swarming at her."

I said weakly, "Okay, Steve, you're still the boss," and hung up. I dragged the contract out of my inside pocket and stared at it. It was wrinkled and dog-eared now, and figuratively stained with blood. All I had to do now was to begin trying all over again to get Zora to write her name on it.

"Your apartment," Sergeant Brace had stipulated. "An hour at the outside."

Okay. I knew now just where to find her. When she turned up there, it would be in character as a heroine. On the other hand, if she didn't show, Brace would crack down on her hard; she'd get smeared and then we wouldn't want to

touch her anyhow. Either way, I was all set. All I had left to do was the same thing I'd started out to do in the beginning—get Zora Raye to sign her name on that piece of paper.

Since there was no particular hurry, I made several restful stops along the way. My stomach still felt queasy from too many murders, so I confined myself to a bland liquid diet. My condition improved as I went along. By the time I reached the stoop outside Zora's apartment I was buoyed up by the anticipation of meeting the original of the tasty lithograph that I had admired so often at the door of Getto's Grotto.

Light was shining behind the venetian blind of the window of the second floor front apartment. This could mean that Sergeant Brace was waiting there for Zora. Brace would not welcome any interference from a booking agent, but I felt he would listen to reason when he found out I was hep to the deal he'd made with Zora.

The way I felt about Zora, I'd been dogging her around too long and too hard to let any dick stop me now, just short of victory. So I pushed into the vestibule, climbed the one flight of stairs, turned at the landing and walked up the hallway to the door of the apartment where Zora Raye now lived alone.

I rang the bell.

Nobody answered.

I rang the bell again.

Again nothing happened, so I tried the knob. It turned freely. I opened the door a crack and looked in. The living room was deserted. I opened it wider and inquired, "Anybody home?" The room stayed empty.

I went in. It looked cozy. The table lamps gave out a warm glow. The chairs were invitingly soft. It smelled of Zora's flowery perfume in here, not too much, just nice. Comfortable and homey.

I wondered how-come the door had been left unlocked and why Sergeant Brace hadn't turned up yet.

A sound came from my right, a low moaning sound from the bedroom. I stepped curiously to the door. No lights were on in the bedroom, but the shine from the lamps behind me showed something dark lying on the bearskin rug.

After fumbling for a wall switch and finding none, I went in anyway. The dark thing on the rug was a man. It was Sergeant Brace.

BRACE lay curled up on his side, very still. Lacerations on the back of his black head indicated the attack might have hit him first from behind.

The light in the room grew dimmer as I stooped over Brace. The fan of light from the living room was growing narrower. A quick shoulderwise look showed me the door swinging shut. Nobody was in the doorway. Nobody was in sight anywhere, but the door was swinging shut. It was being quietly pushed by the hand of a man standing in black shadow behind it.

Watching that moving door, I quickly patted both hands over Brace's inert body. No gun. If he had had one, it had been taken from him. Handcuffs, though. A pair in his hip pocket. I dragged them out, straightening. They were the only weapon within reach. The slowly swinging door was almost entirely closed when I curled one hand through one of the steel rings. Then I jumped.

My first blow cracked hard against his shoulder. His answer came with merciless swiftness and persistence. I couldn't see him at all but his every blow seemed to land with murderous accuracy. He crashed his gun across my head, across my eyes, across my mouth. I tried crazily to tear away from him, to pull loose into the living room. The lamps there became blinding smears of light. He came after me, chopping with his gun, chopping until I fell apart in little black pieces. . . .

When consciousness came back to me like a dream, the room was all dark. I found myself lying beside the couch.

Apparently I hadn't been out long. My hands were locked behind me—the killer had used Brace's handcuffs for that. I figured that the hard band strapping my ankles together was my belt. Something was stuffed into my mouth and tied in place.

I lay still, careful to make no sound at all, while my banged-up brain cleared a little. I heard movements near me. The killer was still here in this same dark room with me.

He was going to kill Zora Raye to shut

her up, then take those incriminating letters off her corpse and destroy them.

Numb as my mind was, it was being buzzed by a question. How did he know? How had he found out that Zora was due here about now with those letters?

The puzzle didn't last long. The answer came whirling up through my dizziness. I had told him myself. Over the phone I had informed him just when and where to get those letters and Zora both.

I moved my aching eyes—just my eyes, nothing else—until I could see him. He was unrecognizable in the darkness, a vague shape fading back into the corner opposite the hallway door, but I knew it was Steve Hartley.

Stephen Hartley, head of the Hartley booking office, tops in its field. The highest class, but—"I think we've been a little too classy for our own good," Steve had said. Possibly he had done a little *sub rosa* scouting on his own.

In that case, it wasn't too surprising that something feverish had developed between the handsome agent and a singer named Patty Raye, as ambitious as she was attractive. Steve had probably started it as a pleasant little divertimento. Then, oddly enough, he must have gone overboard for Patty deep enough so that when she began getting the flutters over the next one, an even handsomer hooper named Rex Asher—

Murder.

He had faded back into the dark corner, with the gun in one fist and his eyes fixed on the door, to wait for Zora to show. I understood now why he had sent me out to connect with her. It wasn't because he wanted to sell her talent, not at all. What he'd really wanted was to find out how much she knew about Patty's fatal affair, how much she knew, if anything, about Steve Hartley. The contract was just a convenient excuse. He'd used me as a tool, and unwittingly I had tipped him to just what he had wanted to know.

Then the first sounds of her came. It was a series of quick footsteps on the stoop downstairs.

She came to the top of the stairs and her footfalls quickened a little when she turned on the landing and came hurrying up the hallway straight toward the door where she would die.

Outside the apartment door she paused. I could faintly hear the fumbling sounds as she fished her key out of her handbag—and I could sense Steve's finger tightening on the trigger. Next came the noise of the key sinking into the lock, then the brief rattle of the knob as she turned it.

At this point, when in another half moment she would step into point-blank range of the killer's gun, the realization struck me that this was the closest I had ever come to Zora Raye—this, her moment of dying, would be the first time I had really seen her.

She twisted the knob, pushed open the door and stepped into this dark room.

The light behind her in the hallway revealed the stripes of her zebra coat as she moved. She paused just inside, in the dark, reaching for the nearest lamp, with the door closed to a line behind her and the flowery scent of her waiting through the air.

THE flashlight shaft reached out, impaled the girl and held her. She stood still in its brilliant spot, lips parted, eyes wide.

Felice.

Felice Hartley!

The light blinked out again. The girl stood motionless in the darkness at the door. The killer in the corner was still. Time itself had stopped.

Within my mind, little pieces began falling together to form a sequence of pictures. First, I knew now who it was that had received Patty Raye's dying, inarticulate, vindictive phone call. Felice. It was clear now why Maxine had never heard Patty mention a sister Zora. Patty actually had no sister. Zora Raye seemed strangely uninformed about much of her "sister's" life—because she had never actually known Patty.

Why this on the part of the patrician Felice, this brazenness, this daring tempting of fate? Because of a dying girl's phone call, because Felice the proud must learn whether it was Steve who had killed Patty.

When she disappeared in her gray tweed, of course, she was simply back home as Felice.

And those letters, Patty's intimate re-

velations, which a killer had come here tonight to get and destroy. Having no sister Zora, Patty had never actually written any letters to her. They simply did not exist. Zora's frequent pointed mentions of them had simply been bait tossed out.

Sergeant Brace had put her in a spot tonight. Unknown to him, he had forced on her the alternative of suddenly disappearing as Zora or of coming clean with him. She must have had a hellish hour of it, deciding which choice to make. She had decided to come back here and confess the whole play, to explain that she could never have rested without knowing whether her husband was a murderer. Now the gun in the corner was still pointing at her in her husband's deadly hand.

Time began to spin again. A faint sound of motion stirred the darkness. Then a report—a deafening blast—just one.

After a moment, a switch clicked. Light sprang away from a lamp near the hallway door. Felice's delicate hand lingered on it. Her widened eyes gazed across the room where Steve lay with the smoking gun in his hand and a black-ringed hole in the center of his forehead. . . .

Later, when the loud and ugly part of it was all over, Felice began again occasionally inviting me to drop in for cocktails. Every damn time, though, there were other people there, all sympathetic friends, including Johnny Brace.

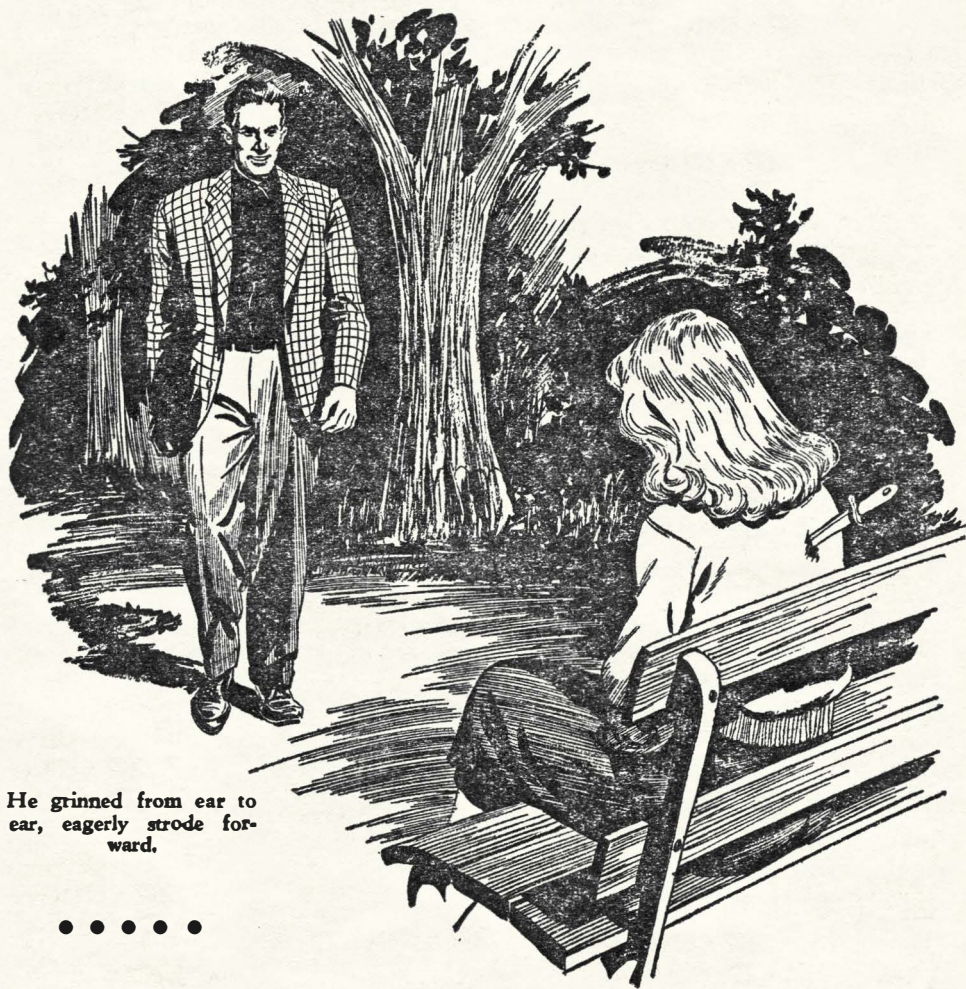
I tried to ignore him and concentrate on Felice—so proud in her own special way, so fine. She had taught me something about women: That you never can tell how much dynamite is packed away in any given one, or what shape it may take.

There was one question that kept on tantalizing me long after the case was closed. That luscious lithograph propped in front of Getto's Grotto, was it an old one that Felice had bought from some theatrical warehouse, or had Felice posed for it herself? If things had not developed as they had, what about that next Monday night at the Grotto? Would Zora Raye's engagement there have been cancelled, or would she have played the game right through?

A fascinating question. But somehow I never got to the point of asking it.

THE END

A SAP TAKES THE RAP



He grinned from ear to ear, eagerly strode forward.

• • • • •

*Georgie was walking on air—
until he found his glamour-babe
had chilled on him.*

• • • • •

By
DON CAMPBELL

THE night was air-conditioned with a lazy breeze from the lake. It smelled fresh and clean. George Sylvester thought it was a night made for love on a park bench. And so he hated the night. Hated it with all the fierceness his strong young body could muster.

He was kicking a battered popcorn box along the dusty path near the edge of the

park, taking his bitter disappointment out on the forlorn pasteboard. He hated the night in general and women in particular. He hated Alice Barrett in most particular!

His long legs carried him reluctantly into the little glade where he and Alice were to have had their date—if she hadn't broken it. It would have been their first date, too. He swore, and the sound of the muttered oath was strange to his ears. Then through the screen of bushes he saw the bench—and Alice.

He grinned from ear to ear, eagerly strode forward. Alice was leaning slightly forward, her elbows resting on her handbag in her lap. Then George suddenly stopped short in rigid horror. He saw that the hilt of a butcher knife had pushed its way into the back of her white, knit sweater. A red rosette flowed in spreading circles around the shining blade. A vagrant wisp of bright gold hair waved gently to and fro across her forehead.

George Sylvester met death then for the first time in his eighteen years. His lean face white, his mouth partly open, he edged closer on anvil feet. He reached out to touch the still, bent body that had been beauty and life to him for so many hopeless, suffering weeks. Then he drew back his hand and turning quickly began to run wildly, without direction or purpose to his flight.

Racking sobs tore from his dry throat as he streaked along the lake, keeping to the shadows of the shrubbed border path. At first his thoughts were frantic, darting, in step with the frenzied pattern of his flight. Alice was dead . . . dead. They would say he killed her. He had told everyone at the B & B he had a date with her tonight.

Then he was at the 14th Street breakwater. He swerved up over the wall and onto School Street. The low-hanging tree branches formed grotesque shadows under the street lights. He slowed down, keeping under the shelter of the shadows. He tried to walk calmly.

A radio was spilling a familiar voice out onto the night air. George recognized the high excited sounds made by Doc Cashaway, the local telephone quiz announcer. For a moment that old brief excitement came over him.

For months, ever since Cashaway start-

ed to broadcast last spring, George had jammed his ear to his little radio each night up in his room over the restaurant. Hoping, always hoping, he might be called. One night when the prize money was up to \$210 his phone had rung—but it was just Pete Glenn pulling a gag.

For no reason he suddenly wondered if Cashaway still poured vinegar on his French fries. He remembered how he had picked up Cashaway's dirty dishes one day when he was a bus boy and the tall, smiling announcer had come in to eat at the B & B. The cashier had told him who Cashaway was—like she was referring to a movie idol. She had poured vinegar on her own French fries ever since.

Now the radio voice was saying “. . . for tonight. Sorry, but we'll have to continue this same question again tomorrow. Who wrote the popular best-seller, 'The Eagle is A-Wing'? Sorry you all missed it tonight. It will be \$170 tomorrow at this. . . .”

It might as well be \$170,000,000, George thought. He'd never have a chance once the policeman walked by the park bench and saw the beautiful girl who didn't turn her head or answer his greeting.

Then George stopped short. He was almost to the corner where a street-light would penetrate his frail refuge. An old man and his big-as-a-minute dog came out of a house on the corner and preceded him toward the gray school building that loomed across the street.

He wanted to shout to the old man; to tell him he didn't do it. He wouldn't kill Alice. He just wanted to walk with her. He just wanted to read poetry with her under the street light in the park.

Then he was at the corner. He hid in the shadow of the last tree and waited for a car to pass up School Street.

The old man had started across the schoolyard with his little terrier dancing along in front like a drop of water on a hot griddle.

GEORGE looked quickly back down the street. Another car was coming. It was slowing down. Soon its headlights would pick him out; standing there like a scarecrow in a cornfield. Without thinking he jumped over the low hedge that encircled the school yard and dropped flat

on his stomach, scarcely daring to breathe.

Through the leaves of the hedge he saw the car pull up to the corner. A short, fat policeman got out of the car. He waved good-bye at the driver and started over to the telephone pole as the car pulled away.

George flattened his body even closer to the hedge. A dull ache tugged at his legs. He began to tremble. He fought back an insane desire to get up and run.

He could hear a muttered oath from the cop as he stood on tip-toe to speak into the police call box on the pole. The side of his upturned face was toward George. He could see any movement behind that hedge. George thought of the many times he had hidden in that same spot before, when he was a school kid, playing hide and seek.

He remembered the anguish of his school life. Georgie Porgie, the kids used to scream at him. Even then, he was Georgie Porgie. And because he was always taller and stronger than his tormentors, he had taken it. So it was inevitable that "Pudding and Pie" was tacked on when he started slinging hash at the B & B.

And then ever since Decoration Day, when Alice had moved to town and had started eating lunch at the B & B, she had joined the others in laughter when he told them the choice for dessert was "Pudding or Pie."

But Susan, her younger sister, was cruel in her laughter. George hadn't minded when Alice laughed. The voices were alike but Alice was different. Her eyes were kind when she laughed.

That was why he was confused and hurt when he had called her back about eight tonight to suggest they take a drive around the lake instead of a walk in the park. He had been so happy. He had promised to work three nights running on the late shift so Pete Glenn would lend him his battered convertible. Pete had said maybe his help wasn't good enough for a gal with a rich aunt, but George had just laughed. Pete didn't know Alice.

And then when he had called, Alice had laughed at him. "Are you plain crazy, Georgie? I don't know what you're talking about. We never had a date in the

first place. I can't imagine whatever gave you that idea." Then she had hung up before he could remind her it was she who had called him just after dinner to suggest the walk.

"Wow. A murder in this burg!" The cop's shout jolted George from his reverie. He held his breath. Now the officer might stroll over near the hedge, look down and—

The old man who had been exercising his dog walked by on the other side of the hedge. The cop tipped his cap.

"Evening Mr. Wilkins. Heard the news? The murder I mean."

George strained his ears, but the policeman and the old man walked slowly down the street. He could not make out the words, although the excitement in the fat cop's voice carried back to him.

He didn't notice the dog until he heard him start to bark. The shrillness of the yaps was like a knife cutting into his brain. He reached out to grab the darting little animal but that only made the dog bark more. Then he lay quietly, not moving, hoping the dog would come within his grasp. The incessant yapping grew louder.

"What's got into you Trixie? Corner a cat?" The old man's faltering voice was amused.

George saw the man's baggy cotton pants directly on the other side of the hedge, not ten inches from his face. He turned slowly and looked up. A toothless grin and staring wide eyes were framed above his head. The wavering voice said, "So, Trixie, what have we here?"

"I guess I kinda fell asleep. I was just—that is, I was hiking through town and—" George rose slowly to his feet.

"Well, now that's a shame. Might catch cold there. Where ya' bound, young feller?"

George clutched at the straw in disbelief. "Around the lake. I was—"

But the old man motioned him closer. George stepped hesitantly across the hedge. The cop was half a block away now. He felt the trembling hand reach up and clutch his shoulder.

"Then you ain't heard the news. Biggest thing to hit this town in ten years. Murder!" His watery eyes blinked gleefully. "Yessir, a young kid, 'bout your

age I should guess, stabbed his girl friend to death. Right up there in the Lake Park." He shook George's shoulder feebly. "Got all the inside information from the police on this beat. Seems the girl's sister found the body 'bout quarter after nine and the cops are combing the city. They got this kid red-handed. Her sister says the girl had a date with him all right and she was scared something might happen. This lad was sort of teched, I guess. This sister was going after the two of 'em to be sure nothing happened but she got called—now get this—by this here Doc Cashaway radio quiz show at nine o'clock and she was talking on the telephone right at the time her poor sister was being stuck with the knife. It's a terrible thing."

AS GEORGE listened to the quavery voice, a strange excitement crept into his mind—something was out of place! It was like an odd-shaped piece that didn't fit in a jig-saw puzzle. It ought to fit, he knew. Yet he couldn't force it into the pattern.

Suddenly his eyes focused on the old man's face again. The watery eyes were looking over George's shoulder now. The old man smacked his lips. "Tony, Tony, did you hear about. . . ." George turned his head. A big black-haired hulk of a man had walked up behind George. The old man turned away from George and spoke again to the big man. "I say Tony, did you hear—"

Tony was looking George square in the eye. There was recognition in his face. Suddenly George knew him. He drove the relief bakery route and was in the B & B just a few days ago.

His voice was high and thin. "Sure, Gramps, I heard. You don't know it but you are standing right here talking to the killer himself."

He started a big paw out toward George. Instead of pulling back, George slipped to the left and threw a punch at the black jowls with all his might. Tony shook his head and hate leapt into his dark eyes. He tried to grab George again with both big hands, like a bear with a one-track mind.

He caught the sleeve of his sport shirt and George wrenched away, leaving the

sleeve in his hand. Then George threw another punch, right in the belly and followed up with another left just as Tony connected a roundhouse swing on the side of his head.

Flashes of fireworks burst through his brain but he felt happy in his strength. He swung one more right with wild desperation. It caught the big man alongside his left ear. His knees folded and he slipped to the sidewalk. George started to run then, just as the old man found his voice and shouted feebly:

"Police, Police. Here's the killer. . . ."

George raced through the alley across the street and down Sycamore past Batterly's house. As he ran he thought of the book of Ellen Gillespie's poems he had bought at Batterly's Book Store the previous week and sent to Alice for her birthday. It had cost five dollars but the poems were wonderful. Susan had told him Alice loved Gillespie's work; so he just had to get this fine edition for her. But Alice had never mentioned it. Never thanked him.

As he ran swiftly on down to the bottom of Sycamore hill the lines of Gillespie's that thrilled him most kept pace with his pounding feet:

*"If thou won't have me for thine
And taste not this love so sublime;
As certain as e'er thou drew breath
I will make thee my captive in death."*

Those lines expressed the hopeless state of his progress with Alice. George moaned at the sodden, crushing pain that had lodged in his chest but he didn't slow down. He wondered if Alice ever saw those lines in the book and thought of his love for her.

Susan had laughed at him one day when he had enough nerve to quote them to her. She seemed surprised that he read Gillespie. Said he ought to read he-man stuff like—like—"The Eagle is A-Wing," the book she had been reading while eating her lunch.

He shivered slightly. That elusive bit of jig-sawed remnant plagued him again. He shut his eyes in a futile effort to force his mind to twist and turn this little fact into the big puzzle that lay all about him. Why had Susan just happened to be the one called on the Quiz Show when her sister was being murdered?

The puzzle looked like a giant grinning face now. It was taunting him, defying him to fit in the last missing gap. He had to see Susan quickly. It was too neat—of all the people who might have been called . . . but why would Susan want to—

The shrill wail of a siren jerked his mind back to the alley and the shadows and the danger of the unknown. He was in the middle of Little Poland now. The siren wailed again.

He couldn't tell where the sound came from. It seemed to close down on him from every side. He crouched against the door of the Polish Hall, his thick chest heaving and his legs trembling. Then he heard voices around the corner, shouting excitedly. It might not be anything but a bunch of kids playing—but it might be the police searching for the tall, brawny killer with red hair and freckles. He pushed in the door.

THE music was fast and bouncy. George looked warily over the heads of the squirming mass of laughing, singing revellers. It was a Polish wedding. Everyone was full of beer and good humor. In all the gayety of the crowd he felt a momentary escape from the terror that had chased him the length of his town. No one paid any attention to him or his torn shirt.

He walked slowly along the edge of the dance floor. Then he looked at the door where he had come in. Cold fear rushed down on him once more as he saw a tall grim-faced cop looking over the crowd. He wanted to stop running then. He wanted to sink down on the floor and lay there waiting peacefully while the dancers made a laughing pathway for the big cop to come and lead him off in a new kind of grand march.

Then the hopelessness of surrender, while everything pointed the finger of guilt at him, made him take one last chance. He turned his head away from the door. His eyes were desperately searching for a partner, when he heard a happy voice behind him:

"And this tall one has not danced with the bride yet, have you?"

George hesitated, then took her slender waist in his arm. She laughed and talked snatches of ecstasy that made no sense

to him. He grunted what seemed appropriate replies, but his eyes were searching. Panic seized him. He couldn't find the cop!

Then a heavy hand fell on his shoulder. He started to whirl, ready to strike out or run away once more, but the girl in his arms said:

"Barney, you old dear. I thought you couldn't get off duty tonight. I have been saving this dance for you all evening."

The cop and the bride danced away. They never looked back. George was only a few feet from the edge of the floor. He walked slowly, casually along the wall and out the side door into the passageway between the hall and the old Grand Hotel. To his right was a dead-end formed by the ell of the Polish Hall. To his left the street offered another brief taste of liberty and a treadmill for his pounding feet. Quickly he ran toward the open end of the passage way.

He didn't see the lurching little drunk till it was too late to stop. They tangled and George toppled over him out onto the sidewalk. He started to get up but the drunk was sitting on his legs.

"Get off. Quick. I'm in a hurry. Get up." He wanted to smash the unshaven, foul-smelling face that grinned foolishly at him. But he knew violence might attract attention.

"Whassa matter, sonny? Wheres a fire? Relax, pal. Just goin' up to the corner and get me an extree. Gotta read all about the big murder t'night ya' know. Just heard 'em telling 'bout it on the radio an—"

George stopped shoving the drunk off his legs. "What did the radio say?" He shook the little man by the shoulders, roughly. "Did they catch the killer, yet?"

"Not yet, m'boy. Gotta give 'em time. But I heard about the threatin' death message he sent her."

George struggled to his feet and propped the little man against the building wall. "What message. Quick, tell me!"

"This here love-sick kid sent the girl-friend a book and he marked some poem with red ink, all 'bout he was going to kill her if she wouldn't— Say, sonny, maybe we could have a lil' drink, jus' us two buddies."

Terror and reason fought for control of

George's brain. He couldn't just keep running away. Susan was framing him for sure. He knew it now. He had never marked that poetic death passage with red ink. Susan was trying to make him the killer. He had to find Susan and force her to admit he hadn't dated Alice tonight or threatened her.

George turned away from the drunk. He started to jerk off the grimy hand that still clutched at his arm for support when the furry words broke into his consciousness. "Shay, I know you sonny. You work up there at that greasy spoon. Hey you—you're this Georgie Porgie the radio was talking about. Georgie Porgie Pudding and Pie, killed his girl and made her die. Shay that's pretty good."

He began to shout, "Help, help, call the poleesh somebody, I got the Georgie Porgie killer right here. . . help—"

His last words were cut off as George's long fingers dug into his throat. For an instant George fought back at the whole world through the wild strength in his hands. The soft, shaggy throat of the drunk gave little resistance.

Suddenly George let go. He couldn't kill this derelict any more than he could have plunged the butcher knife into Alice.

Two men started across the street toward them. George ran quickly down the street and headed toward the wooded strip that faced the Jackson Heights incline. The hoarse cries of the drunk grew fainter as his tired legs gathered speed.

How long would it be before the two men sobered him up and listened to his wild tale about the killer that almost claimed a second victim this night? How long could he keep free, stay alive? He started for the incline station. Susan and Alice's house was at the top of the hill.

A BABBLE of voices came from inside the station. Then one voice, louder than the rest came through the window as he crouched in shadow. ". . . careful on the way home. This killer is dangerous. We think he's down at this end of town now. Don't let any of these girls walk across the ridge alone." George recognized the voice of the policeman, Barney, who must have been called back on duty in the emergency!

He knew now there was only one way to get up the hill. He couldn't ride up in the little incline car with a cop standing there checking the passengers. He would have to hitch a ride on the rods under the battered old dummy car that pulled the passenger car up the hill.

He could slide under the car in the few moments it took for the passenger car to load up at the top of the hill and he would ride up the hill as counterweight to the descending passenger car. He would have to be careful but he might make it, if his luck held out.

This was the last lap.

At last the slowly descending dummy car grunted to a halt. The slimy black cable fastened to its nose slackened. He rushed from the shelter of the waiting room shadows. In an instant he was under the car and scrambling into place on the narrow greasy rods. The car lurched forward just as he wormed his left leg onto a precarious foothold.

The shining steel wheels turned slowly, ominously. He clung desperately to the rods; the car lurched back and forth. His nerves tightened like the straining cable that stretched out a few feet beyond his head. If the cable should break! And what if he was too late? What if Susan wasn't home?

Finally the car leveled off and nudged gently into the battered bumper at the end of the incline. But that voice. There shouldn't be any passengers there now. They should have gone home. His heart pounded up into his throat. It was the same cop he had heard down at the bottom of the incline. He had ridden up in the passenger car to stand guard. To keep the killer from slipping through the net!

"Last trip Billy. Yeah, lock up down there and bring her up empty for the night." The cop hung up the phone that connected to the terminal at the bottom of the hill.

Tears of frustration and anger rushed to George's eyes. He felt himself swaying. He mustn't fall off now. He must force his aching muscles to cling just a little longer. The cop was right above him on the landing platform. He had to hang on.

A groan escaped his lips as the car suddenly lurched backward. He started

to reach out and clutch the ties as they began running past his eyes faster and faster as the car began the descent. Back to the bottom of the hill. Back to the scene of the crime. Back to more police and further and further away from Susan.

With every foot of squeaking descent George felt his courage oozing away. What was the use?

Then out of his tortured mind came one last hope. The car was almost half-way down the hill. If he could just roll out onto the ties and dodge the steel cable slowly paying out its length, then he could lie between the rails until the passenger car had passed him. He could grab a ride up the hill on the back of the car where the motorman couldn't see him.

With a muttered prayer on his lips George twisted his long body and dropped flat to the face of the cliff. He slipped over one, then another tie and then his fingers finally caught on the edge of the ties and held him there trembling.

He heard the squeaking progress of the other car creeping up the hill. Its grinding wheels were passing by within a few inches of his left arm. This was it! Without looking back down the steep rails below, he raised himself onto his knees and began scrambling on all fours up the slippery ties.

He stumbled and fell flat on his face. Cursing aloud, he climbed again, faster and faster. The car was just beyond his reach now. With agonizing effort he stretched his long right arm as far as he could reach. The handle rail at the back of the car caught in his straining clasp. Slowly he dragged his body up until he could swing onto the narrow ledge below the back windshield of the car.

As the car climbed higher he felt like a hitchhiker on the back of a giant bird slowly winging its way high above the earth. Then, in a flash, the jig-saw puzzle fell into place. The maverick came into the corral and waited to be counted. At last a kind of desperate peace came over George.

He had to find Susan now! He just had to make her talk. Make her tell him why she hadn't answered the quiz question tonight. Because she knew the answer! She had to know Bryan O'Neill had

written "The Eagle is A-Wing." That was the book she had been reading at lunch the other day. The "he-man" book . . . and yet Cashaway had said the question went unanswered.

Just then he felt the track level off and the car came to rest inside the terminal once more.

George crept along the track back to the cliff side of the terminal, and onto the street that skirted the top of the ridge. Once more George ran through the night.

GEORGE rested against the side of the doorway as he pushed the bell. He was shivering. Sweat stained his oil-smudged shirt. Lights went out in the front room. The door opened slowly.

He could see a form standing there in the half light. It was a woman. He opened his mouth to speak when the back of his head exploded in an agony of pain. A million lights flashed past his eyes and then just as quickly blacked out. A solid black velvet curtain whirled down around him and snuffed out the pain.

Voices came back with the pulsing pain in his head. At first they overlapped and the words were standing on end. Then they fell apart and sprang back together like carpet tacks rushing toward a magnet.

He wanted to hear that voice in the middle. He knew that voice. It was the trouble voice. It was the voice that hurt, that frightened him.

It was saying, ". . . lose our heads now. The stupid cops in this hick town believed the whole story. They know you called me on your radio show purely by chance. The phone numbers are picked at random. What an alibi! How could I have stuck the butcher knife in my poor little sister—just to get my hands on our aunty's lousy \$20,000 legacy that should have been mine in the first place.

"No, not me. I was talking to my darling sweetheart on his corny quiz program, wasn't I, dear?" The voice grew harsh. "So now, this jerk has to slip through the cop's clumsy fingers and beat it right to my door."

George was afraid to open his eyes. That was his Alice's voice. But it couldn't be. Alice was dead. Stabbed with a butcher knife from the B & B. He forced his eyes open. He stared in wild disbelief

across the dimly lit room at Susan Barrett. She wasn't looking at him. She was talking to someone across the room—behind where George lay on the floor.

Then it made sense.

His ears had deceived him now and they had deceived him once before! Just a few age-long hours ago when Alice had called him for that first date in the park—it hadn't been Alice at all! It was Susan. That was why the real Alice had been so surprised when he had called back an hour later. No wonder she hadn't known what he was talking about.

Slowly his mind focused on the other voice. He didn't need to turn his head.

He remembered that voice with its excitement; its golden promise. Only now the voice was different. Now it was cold and lazy. It was Doc Cashaway. The man who told the police he was talking to a Miss Susan Barrett at nine o'clock last night. A certain Miss Barrett whose number he just happened to select from the phone book! Phone book.

Maybe George was through running now. Maybe— He raised himself on his elbow, slowly, painfully.

"Well, dreamboy has come up for air," Susan said.

"Why don't I row him out in the lake and hold his head under?" Cashaway said casually.

George was shocked at the casual way his death was discussed. Then he was surprised at his own voice. "I'm not your problem, Cashaway. Getting rid of me is just child's play. How are you going to explain to the cops about the phone book? They may be stupid—but when they get the little note I dropped in the mail tonight it will explain everything."

Cashaway was down on the floor: a big black automatic in his fist. The bored smile vanished. "What are you saying, punk? What did you write to the cops? Quick, answer me!"

George choked down a rising wave of nausea. "The phone number in the book. Alice and Susan moved to town last May and the new phone books came out the last of April. So there isn't any listing for this phone in the book. The cops will—"

Susan's high shriek cut him off. "He's

lying. You looked up the number, didn't you? Didn't you?"

Cashaway moved fast. He ran into the little hallway off the living room and grabbed the phone book. He still held the gun in his left hand and began frantically turning the pages with his other hand. The book fell to the floor.

Susan and he both were down on their knees grabbing for it, when George let go with his long arm. He smashed the book up into Cashaway's face. He scrambled to his knees and swung another powerful blow that caught the startled Cashaway on his right cheek.

Susan threw herself on George's head. She was scratching at his eyes. He couldn't see but he rammed his body straight ahead, throwing Susan into Cashaway and pushing him off balance. The gun was lying only a few feet behind Cashaway. As the latter tried to get untangled from Susan's flailing legs, George dove head first over them and fell on the gun.

But before he could turn over and get the gun in his hand, Cashaway had rolled out from under Susan and had thrown an armlock around George's neck. Slowly he pulled George's head back from the gun. George's breath was coming in choking gasps now.

Then he felt long fingers reaching around his face to gouge into his eyes. Desperately he fished for the gun with his foot. The pain in his throat and back seemed unbearable. His foot struck the gun. He twisted his hips and angled the gun toward him. Susan sprang.

He kicked out hard and caught her on the shoulder. She screamed in pain. The gun was close enough now. He grabbed it with his free right hand and twisting about pressed it into Cashaway's side.

"The gun," he gasped. "I'll shoot . . . let go . . . I'll shoot." Then the terrible pain fell away and he breathed in great gulps of air. He rolled over on his back and slowly got to his feet while Cashaway cringed on the floor and Susan moaned softly across the room.

George was still breathing heavily as he picked up the phone. "Get me the police," he panted. Then he sat down to wait with the gun in his hand.

THRILL

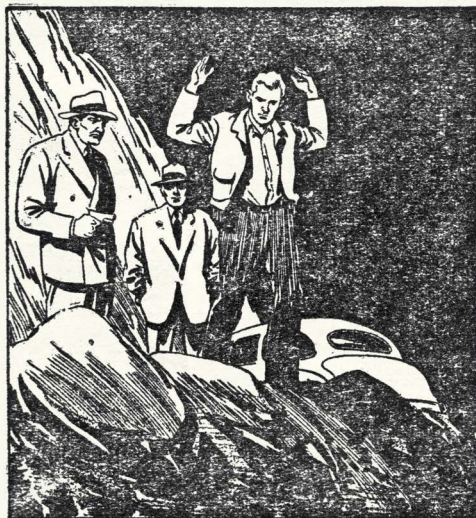
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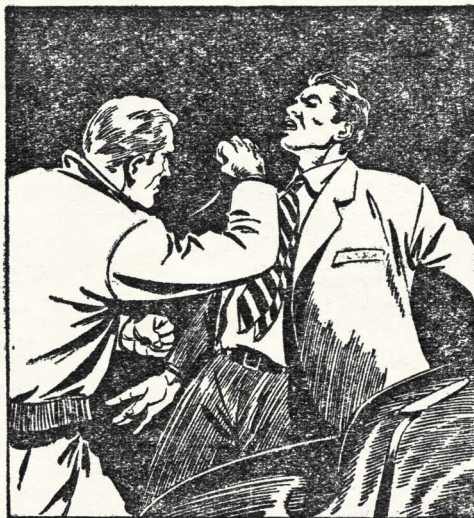


Into the auto-court shack came the bent-for-hell redhead—with a gun as passport, to ride with the car pirates who were hijacking their bullet-plowed way to San Francisco.

Sam Dane knew Johnny Blood hated dames, but he razed his partner into saying okay. Later, Johnny went to Club Peril. The redhead canary showed—and so did a blackjack.



Johnny was in the hands of Shultz, owner of Club Peril. The redhead was gone, and Schultz gun-prodded him to tell where the hot-car caravan hid its secret cargo.



Shultz had the surprise of his life waiting for Johnny. . . . Read the novel by Bruce Cassidy —“Hellcat of Homicide Highway”— in the July issue . . . published June 3rd.

TIN-LIZZY HOUDINI

By JHAN
ROBBINS



Mechanic Garson was a wizard at the auto racket—until he fixed his own wagon . . . but good.



Georgia asked: "What went wrong?"

ROD GARSON'S racket was old but good. It was while he was working in a Glendale, California, auto repair shop in the spring of 1935 that the idea struck him. One day the tow truck went out to the scene of a highway wreck and brought back a sedan, which had turned over and skidded across the cement road until the paint on one side had been scraped off as clean as a whistle.

Rod pounded out the dents and repainted the entire body. It was an excellent job. The owner was impressed. "Say, you're a real artist! It looks like new!" he exclaimed admiringly. "Why, I don't even know my own car!"

Rod's eyebrows shot up. "Is that so?" he mused. "I didn't know I was that good. Wouldn't recognize it, huh?"

And the next week Rod went into business for himself—the stolen car business. Of course, he had a partner, and an able one. Her name was Georgia Aikens. She was red-haired, slender and easy to look at. Any man, however, who owned a car worth stealing and who was himself the least bit susceptible, should have looked

the other way. All Georgia needed was a brief acquaintance and five minutes' time to take a wax impression of the car keys. After that, it was up to Rod.

What the owner of the wrecked car had said was true. Garson was an artist. By the time he got through face-lifting the automobiles that Georgia brought in, the fondest owner couldn't have told which car was his. And just across the state line was a second-hand dealer who wasn't too fussy about ownership papers.

Soon, the talented grease monkey and his shapely girl friend began to look prosperous. Rod wore a pin-striped suit with a diamond stickpin in his hand-painted ties. Georgia bought a flock of clothes and started to climb the social tree.

Accordingly, she threw one big party after another. A ball at a Los Angeles

hotel was attended by three hundred guests. Twenty for dinner at an exclusive shore restaurant. A cocktail party on the terrace of her \$400 a month apartment.

Rod had no similar ambitions, but he went right along with her because the social contacts they made were good for business. Many a rising young bank vice-president who swept up to Georgia's door driving twelve cylinders worth of glittering horsepower discovered, a few nights later, that his car had unaccountably disappeared.

"Right under my nose!" they invariably complained. "Someone must have just climbed in and driven right off!" And sure enough, someone had. By July, the police of greater Los Angeles were beside themselves. Along three hundred miles of winding California border, state troopers were also alerted, each armed with a daily bulletin giving a complete description of each stolen vehicle, stopping every car that corresponded with that description. Yet none had been recovered. The bereaved owners, most of them wealthy with friends in high places, began to make life miserable for the law. But even the federal agents, called in to investigate the inter-state angle, could find no fingerprints in the case but their own.

It is quite possible that Garson would be shuttling ritzy automobiles across the border to this very day if Georgia had not accepted an invitation to weekend at Malibu Beach. It was an important invitation, involving a handsome and eligible bachelor, his socially prominent mother and his two snooty sisters, both of whom gave Georgia a hopeless inferiority complex.

A whirlwind shopping trip through Los Angeles' higher-priced shops took nearly a thousand dollars and came as close as anything could to satisfying Georgia. She had, now, just one more problem: which car should she take?

The current catch was hidden out in a grove of palm trees along an isolated part of the coast. She looked scornfully over gleaming, half-hooded town cars, snappy open convertibles, long-nosed sedans and low, wide speedsters. They failed to please.

Once more Rod raised a questioning

eyebrow. He could not help but think how Georgia's standards had changed since they came West in a 1925 coupe. But he said only, "Well, what would you want?"

"There!" said Georgia, pointing. "That's what I call a car!"

Garson followed her gaze and gasped. The car was custom-built, graceful as a swallow, with a motor that throbbed low like a five-thousand-a-week blues singer. Rod shook his head. "Can't do," he told her. "No one could ever disguise that car!"

But no one had ever successfully said "can't" to Georgia, either. She pouted and pleaded, sobbed and stormed until her partner, in a towering fury, gave in.

The next day Georgia Aikens started out for Malibu Beach in the stolen chariot. Although all the morning newspapers carried a story about this latest auto-thief outrage, she drove serenely, for she knew that Rod had done the best job of his career. New paint, a remodeled hood, every serial number on the outside and inside either filed away or changed. Together, they had gone over every inch of the car, removing or remodeling every identifying detail.

"I couldn't be safer on a streetcar," she chuckled. The next moment, she wished heartily that she had taken that streetcar, for the policeman at the crossing of Hollywood and Vine shrilled his whistle and two motorcycle cops closed in from either side. Minutes later, Georgia was in jail, booked for driving a stolen car and on suspicion of stealing a great many more. Garson joined her within the hour and the two confessed. Rod apparently was giving no thought to his prospective prison sentence. He was too humiliated to think about anything but his failure.

"I don't get it," he muttered, shaking his head. "It was the finest job I ever did."

Georgia asked: "What went wrong?"

"Nothing," grinned the policeman who hauled her in. "The owner himself wouldn't have recognized that car if he was run over by it. There was just one thing that got you tagged."

"What was that?" Garson demanded.

"You forgot to change the license plate!"

TOO MANY

*After she shoved him into hell,
Johnny came back—at gunpoint—
to swear that Carlotta was an angel.*

By **JOHN D.
MacDONALD**



Compelling Crime-Adventure Novelette

SINNERS



"Shut your eyes and die,
Johnny Rogan."

CHAPTER ONE

No Trespassing

JOHNNY ROGAN was troubled. His campaign to become the star collector in the Hunt City area for the Careful Credit Association was bearing no fruit at

all. In the morning, before he had left the office he had been forced to listen to another of those, "Rogan, you're too soft-hearted" speeches.

There were other familiar parts to the speech, as delivered by Carl Spinter, agency manager. "And stop calling yourself a collector, Rogan. You're an adjuster. Get that? Adjuster."

Of course the manual, as put out by the company, contained the Fifty Rules for Adjusters. But fifty were too many. Johnny Rogan wondered hopelessly why they hadn't made it Ten Rules for Adjusters. Or five.

He was parked in his black coupe in front of the unassuming frame house where he had just met defeat. *Rule 21, Adjusters will drive inconspicuous automobiles.*

He looked at his list of calls and made

a small check mark beside the name Mrs. W. W. Green. There was a space for the adjuster to write in what disposition he had made of the account.

When Mrs. Green had bought the refrigerator, she had no way of knowing that her daughter was going to become ill. Without the daughter's pay coming in, she couldn't handle the payments on the refrigerator. Spinter would have automatically called for repossession. And yet the daughter's medicine had to be kept in the refrigerator.

Johnny Rogan was a tall, hardy-looking young man with a firm jaw, friendly blue eyes and a shock of yellow hair, almost too yellow to be true. He grimaced and thought of the shoes he needed. He took eighteen dollars and eleven cents from his wallet, put it in the collection envelope, carefully made out a receipt in the name of Mrs. Green, put the original of the receipt in his billfold, wrote "paid back installment" opposite Mrs. Green's name.

He hoped fervently that Mrs. Green would be able to scrape up the next installment. *Rule 39, Adjusters, on pain of dismissal, are forbidden to, under any circumstances, make a payment in the name of one of the debtors.*

And the next one on the list was Mrs. Gunderson, janitor at the school. Mr. Gunderson had fallen asleep in his car. He had no insurance. It was a total loss. Mr. Gunderson lived six miles beyond the end of the bus line. His new car was financed through the Careful Credit Association. And Mr. Gunderson, lonely for someone to talk to, had learned that if he didn't pay on the right day, friendly Johnny Rogan would be around.

He started the motor, glanced idly at the out-of-state license on the new maroon convertible which had just passed him. Then he checked the license against the list pasted to the front of the door of his glove compartment. It was the list put out by the home office. Skip list, they called it.

Johnny woke up with a great start. The car was a skip. And here was his chance to regain lost ground with Spinter, his employer. Besides, for every skip that was six months in arrears, there was a fifty dollar bonus to the company employeé

who managed to find and claim the automobile.

The tires of the company car whined against the asphalt, so quick was his start. *Rule 11, Adjusters will obey all traffic laws at all times.*

The maroon convertible was ahead, glimmering in the sun. Two blocks ahead,



Johnny Rogan began to close in. He was a half block behind when they crossed the city line. Immediately the maroon job began to gain speed.

Johnny lost ground. He put the gas pedal down to the floor. For a time he gained and then he began to lose again. Too many adjusters had used the little black coupe, and too few of them had remembered Rule 11.

A progressive shimmy in the front end caused Johnny Rogan to slow down, in spite of his fervent words. The wide road was straight for miles. The maroon job passed two trucks, became a small wine dot in the glimmering distance.

Just as Johnny was about to give up in disgust, he saw it turn off onto a side road. When he at last came to the road, a haze of dust still hung over it. A small metal sign, firm and implacable, said in green letters on a gold background:

Private Road.

Johnny idled the motor, shrugged, put it in gear and followed the dusty road. It wound up a slope densely covered by pine woods, came at last to a wrought iron gate. The black coupe seemed to tremble with exhaustion as Johnny stopped once more.

He got out and walked to the gate. The catch was on the inside. He reached through the bars and was fiddling with it, when a deceptively mild voice said, "Something you want?"

Johnny turned. The man who spoke wore whipcord breeches, shiny black riding boots and a pistol belt. Johnny judged that the pistol was in back.

The man had a smooth hard face, sun-browned and inscrutable. His black hair

was combed straight back. He walked up until his face was four inches from Johnny's.

"Something you want?" he said again. Johnny noted that the man's breath was bad. He backed up a step.

"Because if you want anything, you got to phone from town. Mr. Esperance has made that clear to everybody. And then we'll be expecting you, friend, and maybe we'll open the gate, hey?"

"Isn't this the Gordon estate?" Johnny asked meekly.

With a speed that was truly surprising, the man with the hard face slammed the heel of his hand against Johnny's chin. The seat of Johnny's pants slapped against the dust.

Johnny came up fast, a large, knobby fist cocked, and stared into the pistol from the pistol belt.

"Into your teakettle, laddy boy, and back down the hill."

Johnny silently dusted the seat of his pants and got into the black coupe. He glared at the gate guard, turned the coupe around and rolled down the hill. *Rule 2, An adjuster is resourceful. He does not admit defeat.*

He went down to the highway and turned back toward Hunt City. A mile along the road he found another dirt road turning off to the right. He parked the car under a willow, took the tow rope from the back end, looped it around his shoulder and struck off across country. After ten minutes during which his long legs covered a goodly hunk of country, he came to a tall new fence, made of tough steel wire mesh, ten feet high with projecting arms at the top, well strung with barbed wire.

Johnny whistled softly. He thought of the mean glint in Carl Spinter's eye. He judiciously considered the pistol down which he had looked. He thought of Mrs. Green and her refrigerator.

At the end of his cogitations, he tossed the tow rope up, looping it over one of the bars which held the barbed wire. He took off his coat, held it in his teeth and went up the rope, hand over hand. He tossed his coat across the barbed wire, laid on his belly across the coat, inched his feet around, pulled his rope over so that it hung down on the inside of the fence, and

dropped over the fence, fell onto his feet.

He decided against following the fence line. Inside the fence the property was like a city park gone to seed. A squirrel champed its teeth at him. When the trees began to thin, Johnny got his first glimpse of the house. It was frame, in classic colonial style, badly needing paint.

He stood beside a tree looking at the silence and the air of decay, and then, as he heard a sound beside him, he turned rapidly, trying to lift his arms.

The thing he thought of as he floated down toward the sod was that the feeling was like a huge red tomato exploding between his eyes. . . .

He woke up at dusk in the front seat of the black coupe. His head was against the steering wheel. It was stuck there. With fumbling fingers he found that it was his dried blood which kept him stuck to the wheel. He pulled free and fingered his face. It felt as though it belonged to somebody else.

The rear-vision mirror showed him that it did belong to somebody else. His coat was beside him, neatly folded. The tow rope was coiled on top of it. It took a long time to get out of the car. He was sick, staggered down to the brook and cleaned himself off. Then he pulled on his coat and went back to his one-room apartment.

The bright bathroom light hurt the one eye that was open. He judged he didn't need stitches and he guessed that the damage had been done by a pistol barrel laid diagonally between his eyes.

IN THE morning, after he dressed, he put on dark glasses. Both eyes were open, but both were puffed with interesting shades of purple, green and blue.

The girl behind the counter at the grill room where he had breakfast every morning said, "Don't tell me. A door fell on you."

"Ha, ha," Johnny said wearily.

Carl Spinter sat behind his dark desk, neat and ominously quiet. He did not invite Johnny to sit down.

When Johnny Rogan had finished, Spinter said, "In the first place, Rogan, I read about Mr. Esperance taking over the Gordon place. He is not the man to be a skip. Nor are his guests. Thus, you

misread the license. In the second place, you should have phoned this office. In the third place, you made two calls yesterday out of the fourteen assigned you. I made a routine check.

"In the fourth place, you turned in this morning a payment purported to come from a Mrs. Green. Over the phone she claims to have made no payment and she babbles something about you promising her that nobody would take her refrigerator. In the fifth place, you were guilty of trespass. I have made up my mind, Rogan. You'll be happier in some other line of business. Ethel is making out your check. Turn over your files to Smith. Good day, Rogan, and good luck to you."

Spinter picked a letter out of his basket and began to read. Johnny shifted from one foot to the other, coughed twice and left. . . .

Johnny stood at the end of the bar and said, "So I got the wrong license, did I? So I'll be happier in some other line of work, will I? Well, you listen to me, Mr. Musty Spinter, I can go and grab that car and I can go over your head, see! I can go right over your head to the home office, see! And then, palsy, let's see you squirm out of that one, see!"

The bartender nudged his elbow. "Go away, pal. I like your business, understand, but today I got a headache and guys talking to themselves make it worse. No hard feelings, pal."

Johnny lurched out into the early afternoon sunlight. He glared up and down the street to get his bearings, headed toward the central bus terminal. The bus let him out a quarter mile beyond the Esperance place. Rogan, to the beat of unheard drums, the blare of invisible bugles, marched back to the dusty road.

He went up through the pine woods, got as close as he dared on foot, dropped onto his stomach and began to use the tactics which had kept him alive in an infantry platoon. He listened, moved, listened again. He froze against the ground. He had long since tucked his glasses away, afraid of the glimmer of light on the lenses.

The man in the whipcord breeches was leaning against the fence, yawning from time to time, picking his teeth with a twig.

Johnny watched him. On the distant highway a truck roared by. Johnny waited

for more trucks. He risked moving only when the noise of the truck was loudest. When he was in position, crouched in a hollow with a pine tree between him and the gate guard, a mere fifteen feet away, Johnny waited.

At last the man grew bored with standing in one place and began to walk down the fence line. As soon as his back was turned, Johnny made a wild bound. He flung a big fist into the man's face as he turned. The fist made a satisfying, splatting sound. Johnny dived onto the man, found the gun arm, found the pistol, pulled it free and threw it aside.

Then he stood up, pulling the man up with him. He slammed the man's sleek head against the fence until the fence rang like a big bell. The satisfaction faded and, feeling slightly ill, Johnny let the man drop.

CHAPTER TWO

The Living Dread

AN ELDERLY, cherubic little man with high color in his face, a sparkling white toothbrush mustache and blue eyes surrounded by smile wrinkles stood inside the fence and said, "My goodness! Bless my soul!"

He wore blue jeans and a tattered cardigan. Johnny glared at him and said, "Who are you?"

"That is the question I should be asking you, young man. I'm Timothy Esperance. That man you just—ah—worked over, he used to be my gate guard."

"He isn't dead."

"I didn't think he was. His name is Blue. Joseph Blue. I watched the whole thing. Very pretty. Very pretty indeed."

"Look, Mr. Esperance, I don't want any trouble. I just . . ."

Esperance gave him a keen look. "Would you be the young man who came over my fence yesterday? By the look of your face, I'd say you were. Blue told me after it was all over. By the time I got around to driving down to see what you had wanted, you'd come to and driven away."

"Well, this was sort of a business matter, Mr. Esperance."

The elderly man smiled, a warm, youth-

ful smile. "Then we can't discuss it through a fence, can we?"

Esperance walked up to the gate and swung it wide. Johnny glanced back at Joe Blue. "Oh, never mind him, my boy. Let him have his sleep. Apparently he needed it."

"My name is John Rogan," Johnny said.

"And how do you do, Mr. Rogan. We'll go around the house and have a drink by the pool, shall we?"

The back of the house had received the attention the front so badly needed. The water was green in the pool and the sun was bright and warm. There were deck chairs and small tables beside the pool.

The elderly man walked briskly to one, gestured to the one next to him. But Johnny stood and his jaw sagged open as he stared at the girl walking toward them. Johnny's dream life was as good as anybody's. He'd built a mental image of the sort of girl he most badly wanted to be cast away on a deserted hotel suite with. And so it was a bit of a blow to see her walking toward him, completely casual, wearing sandals and two strips of material that could have been used for the tail of a kite. She was the color of what you would get if you mixed peanut butter and honey. And she was soaking wet.

"Ah, my dear," Esperance said. "Meet Johnny Rogan. He just wrote his name all over our Mr. Blue. Johnny, this is Carlotta. And ring for Larry, my dear."

Larry turned out to be Filipino, and he came out at a full gallop, came out again ten seconds later with glasses that tinkled tall and cool.

Johnny sagged in the chair and watched Carlotta climb up the tower to the diving board. She knifed down into the green water, and incidentally into Johnny's heart. For her he would have gone after a dragon with a paper pen knife.

He awoke to hear Esperance saying, "About that matter of business, Mr. Rogan."

Johnny's voice was dreamy. "Business? Oh, sure. It was just that I used to work for Careful Credit. That is, up until this morning. I tracked a maroon convertible to your gate. It was listed as a skip."

"A skip?"

"Yeah. Somebody bought it on time

and then lit out with it without finishing the payments. We usually get 'em sooner or later."

The old man's voice was silky. "A maroon convertible, you say?"

"Uh huh. New one."

The old man's voice was surprisingly sharp. "Carlotta, dearest. Swim over here, please."

She clung to the edge of the pool, and, to Johnny's surprise, the old man unleashed a torrent of purest Italian. Johnny, after two miserable years slogging up Italy, followed perfectly.

The old man said, "Girl, the money was sent to you for the car. Enough money. How could you have the stupidity to attempt to deceive me? What did you do with the money?"

Carlotta sneered and answered him in Italian. "Can no one evade the law but yourself, old one?"

In response Esperance hitched himself forward and, with precision, kicked Carlotta full in the face. She fell back into the water.

Johnny roared, "Cut that out!" He towered over Esperance, both fists clenched.

Carlotta swam to the far end of the pool, pulled herself out and walked, shoulders slumped, toward the house, her hands covering her face.

"Oh, come now," Esperance said. "You wouldn't hit an old man." He smiled up at Johnny.

Johnny said, "What went on there? All that lingo."

Esperance sighed. "A foolish child. She ran out because she was afraid when she could no longer make the payments that they would take her beautiful car. She is so hard to manage. That sort need rough handling."

"Not that rough, gramp. You kick her again and old man or no old man, I lay you out there beside Blue."

"My, such rough talk! My charity, Mr. Rogan, is to help girls who have gotten off the straight and narrow trail." His voice was sanctimonious. "I give them a home and, of course, my land here is well guarded, as I want no slips while I am putting them on the road of righteousness."

"Carlotta?"

"Exactly. She is one of the worst. I have three other girls here right now. Not as many as usual. You can meet them in a little while."

Johnny, confused, sat down and took a deep gulp of his drink.

"That's better, my boy. Now, about that car. Here is more than enough to cover it."

Johnny looked stupidly at the bills the old man forced into his hand.

"Look, I don't work there any more."

"Nonsense, my boy. Keep any overage there may be as partial payment for your trouble yesterday."

The Filipino brought more drinks. Johnny finally borrowed trunks and went swimming. Surprisingly, there were other people in the pool. Girls. Three of them. He looked for Carlotta. She wasn't there. A redhead ducked him and tried to hold him under. A brunette was helping her. Johnny began to lose track.

Then the Filipino was driving a car and it was dark. Johnny pointed out the cheap apartment house, got out and wavered to the stairs. He fell into bed.

In the morning he couldn't remember if it was a dream or not. It wasn't until he found the wad of bills in the bottom of his pocket that he was certain it had actually happened. He untangled them, counted them twice. It added up to three hundred dollars more than the list price of the maroon convertible.

SPINTER said, "Now let me get this straight. You want to make all back payments on one of the cars on the skip list, including penalties?"

"That's what I said."

"Don't you use that tone of voice with me, Rogan."

"Mr. Rogan, please. I'm not an employee. I'm just a guy paying a bill."

"You'll pay for the long distance call to the branch office reporting the skip?"

"You heard me say all penalties and charges, didn't you? Or are those fancy brains of yours pushing too hard on your ears."

Spinter swallowed hard, checked the list and placed the call. He wrote down the figures on the desk pad. He hung up. "Eleven hundred and twenty dollars, plus the phone call."

Johnny peeled off eleven hundred and fifty. "Keep the change, Spinter," he said. "Lay it away for your old age."

Spinter cleared his throat. "Johnny, if you collected that much on the skip, maybe it's an indication that I was hasty yesterday. Maybe we could talk this thing over."

"How's the crow? Tough?" Johnny asked. He pulled the office door shut behind him. As he went out the swinging gate he looked back. Carl Spinter was standing in his office door. Johnny grinned, went over to the cashier and paid off in full on Mrs. Green's refrigerator, waiting while the girl stamped the cancelled contract.

And he still had twenty-two hundred dollars surplus out of the thirty-five hundred he had found in his pocket.

He walked aimlessly for a time, stopped dead as he saw the maroon convertible. The top was down. It was empty. He opened the door and sat in the car to wait.

In twenty minutes Carlotta came out of a beauty shop up the street. Among the humdrum pedestrian traffic of Hunt City she looked like an orchid on a gingham apron.

Johnny fumbled his way out of the car, held the door for her. Her lips were still puffed, her nose swollen.

She said, "Go away, Rogan. Just light out running."

"Look, Carlotta, I wanted to slap that little old man."

"After the first slap, junior, you'd have been picking up teeth."

She got behind the wheel. He got in beside her.

She turned and her eyes were serious. "Rogan, you're a nice clean-cut type. Once upon a time I might have had the flutters. Go away before I corrode your girlish illusions."

Johnny grinned uncertainly. "Hey, it can't be that bad!"

"I could see by your face that you understood what he was talking about yesterday, Rogan. I could see you followed him."

"Me? Speak Italian?"

"How did you know it was Italian, sugar?" She laughed and said, "Look, don't try to be a hero. Just go away. Don't meddle. It's for your own good."

When Johnny refused to get out of the car, she switched to Italian. Ten seconds later Johnny stood on the sidewalk, his big ears flaming, watching the tail of the convertible flirt around a corner a block away.

He shook his head like a stunned ox. Carlotta made no sense. In fact, according to what Esperance had said, Carlotta shouldn't have been permitted away from the place by herself. He bought a paper, thinking vaguely of the help wanted ads, went into a bean wagon and sat at the counter, ordered coffee.

The item in the bottom right corner of page one drove all thoughts of employment out of his mind.

MAN FATALLY BURNED

Joseph Blue, employed by Mr. T. A. Esperance who recently bought the Gordon Estate, was fatally burned last night in the garages of the estate. He died in the ambulance on the way to Central Hospital. Police report that Blue was attempting to clean tar from the back of Mr. Esperance's car with gasoline, and that Blue was smoking at the time. Another employee managed to extinguish the blaze before appreciable damage was done. A cousin in Des Moines has been notified. Burial from the Johnson Funeral Home tomorrow.

Johnny read the notice three times, drank his coffee, walked five blocks to the police station, waved at Sergeant Hempstack behind the desk, found Lieutenant Bus Maiser in his office eating a cheese sandwich.

Bus, his voice muffled by half a sandwich, said, "What the hell, Johnny? The stove is all paid off."

Johnny Rogan sat down. "I got fired," he said humbly. "Too softhearted."

Bus swallowed. "I didn't notice any softness. Maybe you just got hard with cops, eh?"

"Got any ideas where there's a job?"

"There's always the force. If you can pass the exam. With your veteran's preference, maybe you can take my job. You're welcome to it."

"Maybe I'd be too softhearted for the cops. Say, what about this guy named Blue?"

Bus shuddered. "Was he a customer too? Johnny, deliver me from that sort of a deal. That guy was highly inflammable.

He went off just like a celluloid comb."

"Should he have got burned that bad?"

"He did. Twice last night I woke up screaming. Dolly moved into the guest room."

"This maybe sounds silly, Bus, but could he have been murdered?"

Bus took a long, reflective look out the window. He said, "Sure he could, Johnny. If you got a good reason, I'll take a hack at it. Mostly because I'm bored."

"Well, I killed him because he wouldn't pay off on his contract."

Bus laughed. "You had me going for a minute, boy. Always the kidder, hey?"

"Well, I'm going out and see if I can land his job."

"I never thought of you as a hired hand around the house, Johnny. But go ahead. . . ."

"**A**H, MR. ROGAN," said Timothy Esperance. He smiled through the bars of the gate. A lanky, moody-looking man stood off to one side, scowling at Johnny.

"Mr. Esperance, I read about Joe Blue and I wondered if I could have his job. Like I told you yesterday, I got myself fired."

Esperance smiled. "Sorry, Johnny. The job has been filled."

"Gosh, that was quick."

"Not particularly. Anything else I can do for you?"

Johnny shifted uneasily, trying to think of an excuse to prolong the conversation. He glanced at Esperance's hands. They were plump little pink hands. The left one had curly white hair on the back. The right one had no hair at all. Esperance's smile lost some of its heartiness and he put his right hand behind him, a gesture almost too quick.

"If there's nothing else, Rogan . . ."

A horn blared and the maroon convertible nosed up over the crest of the hill. Carlotta was driving. Her bruised lips tightened as she saw Johnny. The lanky man hurried to the gate.

Johnny gasped as he saw the girl beside Carlotta.

"Hey, June!" he said.

She opened dazed blue eyes and said loosely, "Hiya, Johnny, old pal, old pal."

The gates were open. The convertible

roared in and as Johnny started forward, the gate slammed in his face.

He said, "Hey, that was June Garringer! I've known her for years."

Esperance looked irate. He said, "Some poor girl that Carlotta is helping."

"Poor nothing!" Johnny said indignantly. "June is okay. How'd she get loaded? She's darn near the prettiest girl in town. She's a buyer at Log's Department Store."

"Young man, suppose you mind your own business," Esperance said. "I find I'm getting a bit weary of you and your big nose."

The lanky citizen shuffled over, thumbs in his pistol belt. "You heard the man," he said.

Johnny spat into the dust at the man's feet, turned and walked rapidly down the dirt road to the main highway. He found that he didn't like Carlotta at all. Something had changed when he had seen the expression on her face, June slumped beside her on the leather seat. Carlotta had reminded him vaguely of a black widow spider.

He went directly to Log's. The floor manager wrung his hands. "I haven't the vaguest idea what happened to Miss Garringer. She went out for lunch as usual at noon. And she just didn't come back."

Johnny loped down to Bus Maiser's office. Bus listened to the first five sentences and then held up his hand.

"Take it easy! Take it easy! It's still a free country, isn't it. A guy can lose a weekend. And a girl can lose a Thursday afternoon. Maybe she needed a change. I'd look sick dashing out there on a fake kidnapping charge."

"So maybe I'll go."

"And so maybe you become an honored guest of the establishment here also."

Johnny turned and stormed out. He had no coherent plan, and no weapon save anger. But he had sufficient discretion to wait until dark.

At eight o'clock he walked along the western fence line of the Gordon estate, a shovel in his hand. When he felt that it was soft ground underfoot, he began to dig. Within fifteen minutes he had a neat tunnel, slightly muddy, but sufficiently large so that he could almost dive through at a full run.

He drifted like a gaunt ghost through the sparse woods, emerging at last to face the shaded windows of the big house. A bulky man, a stranger, paced back and forth, his footsteps loud on the gravel drive in front of the house. Johnny crouched in the darkness, wrapped his handkerchief around the knuckles of his right hand.

The man paced near the border of grass. Johnny kicked off his shoes, went noiselessly along the grass, a pace behind the man. He had previously noted where the stranger turned.

Johnny clamped his stocking toes against the grass, braced his legs, drove a straight right hand at the man's jaw. The man turned nicely to meet the punch. Johnny caught him, eased him down onto the grass, felt the hard cool bulk of a revolver, transferred it to his own pocket.

At that moment the front door opened, a harsh oblong of light falling out across the gravel. Johnny scuttled into the shadows and waited. He heard Esperance's voice saying:

"The guard will let you out the gate, my dear. I'm sure you can find your way."

June Garringer came walking out across the drive. She held her body rigid and her face seemed very white when the light struck it.

When the door closed, Johnny raced over, jammed his big feet back into his shoes, hurried after June. He caught her when she was halfway to the gate. He said, "Hey, Junie," and grabbed her arm. She stood very still, did not turn to face him.

"Gosh," he said, "I thought you were kidnapped or something."

"Get your hand off my arm," June Garringer said in a dangerous voice.

"Look, Junie! Why act like that? What have I done to you to make you—"

"Just enough, John Rogan. I hope you and your friends will be very happy."

"I'm no friend of this outfit. I came under the fence."

She turned and looked at him for the first time. Her face, in the starlight, was like death. She came into his arms, the sob tearing her throat.

He patted her shoulder ineffectually, saying, "What happened, June?"

There were hoarse shouts from the direction of the house, the pound of feet in their direction.

"Come on!" Johnny said, pulling on her arm.

"Hurry, Johnny," she said. "I'm all right."

He cut along the fence line as the clear white beam of a flashlight swept toward him. He touched him for a moment.

"Get him!" Esperance shouted.

A bloom of orange split the night and something rang off the fence, whined up into the darkness.

The flashlight caught him again. The second shot hit the heel of his right shoe. It hit the heel just as he had that particular foot in the air, planning to plant it a good eight feet ahead of him. The force of the blow slammed his right foot sideways, tangling it against his left leg. He went down hard. The stub of a dead tree protruding a few inches above the ground slammed into him. He was gasping when the two men fell on him.

He caught his breath, yelled, "Get help, Junie!"

A sweaty hand was clamped over his mouth. He bit it with relish. A man yelled. He was hauled to his feet, spread-eagled against the fence and a misty figure slammed him in the mouth a sufficient number of times so that Johnny lost all feeling of pain and it seemed like getting hit with a pillow.

The blows stopped. Johnny sagged and blinked into the flashlight. He looked beyond it, saw June's still face.

Esperance said, "Sorry to disillusion you, Johnny, but Miss Garringer has a rather serious hangover and she has no intention of summoning any assistance for you. Do you, my dear?"

"No," said June flatly.

"Because she knows what might happen if she did, don't you, darling?"

"Yes," said June.

"You may go now," Esperance said. June walked quickly away into the darkness.

"He killed Joe Blue," Johnny yelled after her.

Esperance smiled, took one step forward and kicked Johnny in the stomach. Johnny felt the scream tear past his lips. The other men held him upright. Tim-

othy Esperance, still smiling, kicked him again. Johnny melted down into merciful unconsciousness.

CHAPTER THREE

Nobody Knows

JOHNNY ROGAN came back to pain-filled consciousness as he was being dragged down a rocky slope. He heard the sound of water. The starlight seemed brighter. He began to struggle. The world exploded, very close above his right ear. He came to again and he was in the front seat of an automobile. However, it was an automobile canted at a very strange angle. A bit of ripped metal was silhouetted against the sky. The long hood seemed to be aimed at the new moon.

His wrists were tied tightly to the wheel. His ankles were tied to the clutch and brake pedals. A rough hand tried to jam something into his mouth. He grunted and kept his mouth firmly shut. A jarring blow in the pit of the stomach made his mouth sag open. Immediately it was jammed full of cloth.

The voice of Timothy Esperance was soft and friendly, and close to his ear.

"Johnny, I think people should get a thorough briefing, don't you? This little gully is a quarter mile from the house. Two hundred feet further along, the dirt road comes out onto the main highway. Miss Garringer saw us capture you trespassing on my property. Miss Garringer left. A short time after she left you broke loose, managed to steal Carlotta's automobile. In your haste you ran it into this gully, totally wrecking it. We were about to call the police to come and get you."

Johnny made a comment. The gag turned it into a muffled grunt.

"Of course, Johnny, we had to push the car off the edge of the road by itself. We couldn't risk your not being killed. You have come very close to upsetting a spk n-did applecart indeed. I would have contented myself with a severe beating, had it not been for your unfortunate remark about Joseph Blue. That, my poor boy, was your ticket to extermination. Joseph did not wish to take his dismissal in good grace. He wanted a rather absurd amount of money. Poor Joseph."

Johnny surreptitiously tested the soft bonds on his wrists.

"Oh, you'll find that material quite sturdy, my boy. And it has one remarkable quality. It burns without leaving the slightest trace of ash." Esperance coughed and said, "I've sent the others back up to the house. They find this . . . too unpleasant. Now forgive me, my boy, for causing you discomfort. Shut your eyes for a moment."

There was a gurgling sound and Johnny glanced up, saw a small gas can outlined against the stars before the choking stream of gasoline descended on him. He nearly strangled as he inhaled the fumes. They made him groggy and the night turned to wet mist as the tears ran down his cheeks.

"You see, Johnny," Esperance said in a fatherly tone, "we couldn't very well permit you to upset a most profitable operation, could we? Be fair."

Esperance turned away from the car and lit a cigarette. Johnny tensed every muscle in an agony of fear, in anticipation of the lick of the flames.

But Esperance took the cigarette, wedged it lengthwise in a cardboard packet of matches, carefully balanced the matches on the seat cushion beside Johnny, the glowing tip of the cigarette upward.

"You see the beauty of it, my boy. It is precisely the same problem poor Joseph faced. That seat is wet with gasoline. If you jiggle about, attempting to get free, you will knock it over and the cigarette tip will ignite the gasoline. If you wait peacefully, the cigarette will burn down until it touches off the matches which in turn will light the gasoline. In either case, it won't be long. We'll be watching from the house. The instant we see a big orange flower over the trees, we'll place our call to the police."

There was the sound of shifting rocks, of the pattering of gravel. Johnny saw Esperance reach the top of the slope. The little elderly man with the smile wrinkles around his blue eyes waved down and said, "Courage, my boy. It shan't take long, you know."

He was whistling softly as he walked away into the night.

Johnny sat very still. The glowing end of the cigarette was a ghastly companion.

He heard the rush of cars on the main highway, heard the sleepy twitter of some birds, awakened by Esperance as he walked up toward the house.

Cautiously Johnny began to exert pressure on his bound wrists. The little cardboard match case, on its side, rocked dangerously. He stopped. He wanted to scream. He wanted to feel Esperance's throat between his lean fingers. He wanted to see sunshine again. He heard the muted thump of his heart and wondered what it was like when the heart stopped.

The gag in his mouth was soaked with gasoline. It burned the tissues of his mouth and he gagged constantly. Wet, the gag took up less room. He tried vainly to push it out of his mouth with his tongue, but it was too tight. Suddenly he had an idea. The little red glow was creeping dangerously close to the match heads.

Working his jaw, he settled the gag further back into his mouth. His mouth tissues were too seared to permit him to create saliva. When the gag was far enough back, he sucked in his lower lip, bit down on it with all his strength.

The hot salty taste of blood filled his mouth. He leaned as far over to one side as he could, holding his mouth above the cigarette. A heavy drop of blood extinguished the cigarette with a small hissing sound. Johnny Rogan sobbed deep in his throat and lay back against the seat.

At that moment there was a slithering of rocks and he turned his head, knowing that he had won once, but would lose the second time.

THEN a hand was warm against his face and Carlotta's voice, thick with hysteria, said, "Not too late, oh, not too late, Johnny! And I thought I would be." She untied the gag, pulled it out of his mouth.

For a moment she put her cheek against his. "I heard them, Johnny, and they locked me in my room. We might not have much time."

The knots on his wrists were stubborn. Finally she got one free and he undid the other, stooped, and released his ankles.

When he put his arm around her to help her up the slope he felt that she was crying silently.

"Almost anything else, Johnny," she

Too Many Sinners

said hoarsely, "but not that. Not that for anybody."

He found matches in his pocket. They were dry. He did not dare light one with his clothes as soaked as they were.

"Burn the car," he said.

"But I . . ."

"Light the match and throw it down there and move out of the way."

He went to the far side of the road. As she ran toward him, she was silhouetted against the roaring orange-yellow column of flame that reached hot fingers toward the distant stars.

Johnny thought of himself in those flames and his fingernails bruised the palms of his hands. He held Carlotta tightly for a moment, whispered, "Thanks, honey. Thanks."

"Now go," she said. "Get out of here. Go fast."

He said slowly, "I'm just an ordinary guy. I don't know what this is all about. But I've been pushed around enough. I'm going up to the house."

"You can't!" she said. "This time he will kill you."

"I'm going up there and you can either try to stop me or you can help me."

She was silent. "So I help you, Johnny. I guess I have to. I guess I'd always help you, Johnny."

"First, what's the game?"

There was no mirth in her laugh. "Don't you even know that? Esperance is one of the biggest operators in the field. He's got film and good cameras."

"For what?"

"And then all he needs is a few girls that have stopped giving much of a damn. He sent me a bonus to report here. I didn't like it at first. I paid the down payment on the car with the bonus. Now I'm—well I'm getting used to it, I guess."

"But what about June?"

"The boss gave me two hundred for mickeying the cocktail I bought her when I met her at lunch, and bringing her here. He took a few shots. She pays him twenty percent of her income from now on or Mr. Log, who owns the store where she works, gets a print in the mail."

Johnny had moved a little away from Carlotta. She said, in a hard voice, "Now that you have the pitch, junior, I suppose

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you don't even want me helping you." "Honey," he said, "I'm not bright enough to be a snob. Let's go. It's up to you to make a long pass at the guy at the gate. . . ."

Johnny moved close. Carlotta was in the arms of the gate guard. He was saying, "Honey, what makes you smell like gasoline?"

"I was cleaning my dress," she said. She snuggled closer to him.

Johnny lifted the revolver out of the man's holster, and, with a continuation of the same movement, laid the barrel briskly against the man's mastoid bone. As the man spun and tottered, Johnny caressed him across the bridge of the nose.

"Neat and gaudy," Carlotta said.

Johnny opened the gate. Carlotta walked briskly up the drive, right up to the front door. Johnny sat down in the shadows, put his left forearm across his knees, rested the barrel of the gun on his left forearm.

Carlotta knocked briskly at the door. In

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Too Many Sinners

a moment the door swung wide. The heavy man in the door said, "What the hell! You're supposed to be—"

Carlotta darted to one side. Johnny smashed the man's knee with the first shot. The man fell out the doorway, his right hand reaching inside his coat.

Johnny ran for the door. The man had the gun out, was trying to swing it into action when Johnny's right foot made abrupt contact with a mouth full of porcelain teeth. The man lost all interest in his environment.

Carlotta was half-way up the stairs. Johnny bounded after her. The shot came from below and from one side. The slug hit Johnny in the left shoulder, spun him against the wall. Out of long instinct, he snap-shot at the faint afterglow of the orange flame in the darkness. There was a groan of pain, the thudding clatter of someone falling headlong on a parquet floor.

"And that will be about all," a mild voice said.

Johnny glanced up the stairs. Carlotta cowered by the railing. Esperance, a lean automatic in his little pink hand, stood at the top of the stairs. Johnny opened his right hand. The revolver thumped onto the stair rug, rolled down four stairs and was still, the barrel pointing toward the front door, gleaming blue-gray in the hall lights.

Without taking his eyes off Johnny, Esperance said, "I'm disappointed in you, Carlotta. I didn't know your impulses were so—so quixotic. Alas, this is breaking and entering. Armed robbery. That makes it even simpler. Shut your eyes and die, Johnny Rogan."

Johnny tensed to bound up the stairs. With luck he might make it all the way to the top. With luck there might be enough life left in him to break the back of the evil little man with the face of a pocket Santa.

The pink finger on the trigger slowly whitened.

Carlotta thrust herself away from the railing, ran up the last two stairs, her left arm circling the old man's neck. She pressed herself against the muzzle of the automatic as her right hand pulled up the red skirt, flashed up glinting silver.

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The gun thudded again and again, muffled by her body which jerked as in some eccentric dance at the impact of the slugs. But the silver glint was silver no more, a blade of shining red.

She left the hilt of the knife protruding from his side and her arm swung limp. They stood there motionless for a fraction of a second, two figures dressed for macabre masquerade. And then, inextricably linked, they tumbled down toward Johnny.

He flattened against the wall and they brushed him as they passed. The jar of the fall shook them apart. Esperance was on his face on the hall floor. Carlotta, her dress matted against her, lay kitten-curved near his feet.

Johnny, his hand grasping his left shoulder, went unsteadily down to her.

Her eyes opened. Then she winked. Gamin wink. Moppet grimace. "Better so, Johnny," she whispered. "Carlotta was going to be a pest. Your shadow, Johnny. But you rate something better." She tried to smile.

Then he was shaking her and he was saying, "There isn't anyone any better," but Carlotta was looking at something far beyond him and the smile was frozen on dead lips and there was no need to shake her any more.

He took the gun in his right hand and he walked up the stairs. He found the samples of Esperance's art in an upstairs library, locked in steel file cabinets. There was a big fireplace. He shot the locks off the cabinets. The film burned with thousands of tiny explosions, black snakes writhing, flames the color of hell itself.

There were files, careful files, with names and addresses and amounts. He burned those. He found the darkroom and found the prints, still wet, of June Garringer. They hissed when he threw them on the flame, when he burned June's lax face, uncomprehending eyes.

Bus found him staring at the flames. Bus's voice was thin and high. "What goes on, Johnny? For Pete's sake, tell me what goes on? Bodies all over the place. Johnny! Snap out of it, kid!"

* * *

June Garringer said, as she stirred her

Too Many Sinners

coffee, her cheeks carmine, "I—I don't know how to thank you."

Johnny shrugged. "There would have been a way for you to help me if that guy in the doorway had died of a busted neck when I kicked him in the mouth. You would have had to testify for me. I could only be noble up to a point."

She sighed. "That girl, that Carlotta, she was so convincing the day she talked me into a drink."

"Yeah," Johnny said flatly.

June took her fork and began to draw aimless lines on the tablecloth. She flushed again. "Johnny," she said softly, "remember the last time you asked me for a date?"

"About two years ago, wasn't it?"

"Two years and three months." She didn't look up at him. "Johnny, you've changed a lot. You're older, sort of. More—well, less of a kid."

"So?"

This time her flush was anger. She said, "Can't you see what you're making me do? Can't you meet me half-way at least? Or do you just have to humble me first?"

Johnny smiled distantly and stood up. He said, "I won't be around for a while, June. I collected a little reward money, and then I'm going away from here for a while."

"And what are you going to do when you come back?" she asked primly.

He tilted his head on one side. "Junie, you weren't going to make much of a sacrifice, were you? You weren't even going to tell the cops that they were beating the hell out of me."

Her eyes widened. "But remember! They had those horrible pictures."

Something like nausea gave him a metallic taste in his mouth. In a tight, bitter voice he said:

"You aren't fit to live on the same earth where Carlotta is buried." He heard her gasp as he turned away.

He walked with long strides down the cluttered noontime streets of Hunt City. He walked with a sense of loss that was as sharp as a tiny knife that had once glinted silver in a hallway where the air smelt of death.

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Ready for the Rackets

(Continued from page 6)

since heard that other cities are menaced by the same scheme.

I went to the movies one afternoon. The theater was not very crowded. I was enjoying the picture when a young girl slipped into the seat next to me. There was no one near us. She whispered in my ear: "Gimme five bucks or I'll scream." She meant that if I didn't pay up she'd scream and claim that I had been annoying her.

Rather than create a scene and have the embarrassment of going down to the police station to clear myself of suspicion, I paid her. She promptly disappeared.

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When I arrived home from work the next day my wife was in tears. The furniture had arrived all right, but it was not the nice assortment we had bought and paid for in hard-earned cash.

We streaked over to the flat only to find it empty and deserted. We were struck with the cold realization that the sellers had used the flat as a "front" to display and palm off cheap imitations of the furniture they set up in their temporary "show room." After selling it to us they had skipped.

We were sadly stuck with the stuff—and learned that it pays to deal only with reliable sources such as well-known stores, and not to look for bargains when there is no assurance of getting delivery on the actual goods purchased.

Yours truly,
 J. M. Hawes
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That winds up the scoop on swindlers this month, detective fan. Remember, write in and tell us of the rackets you've come up against. That way, we'll all be prepared for the sharp operators.

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