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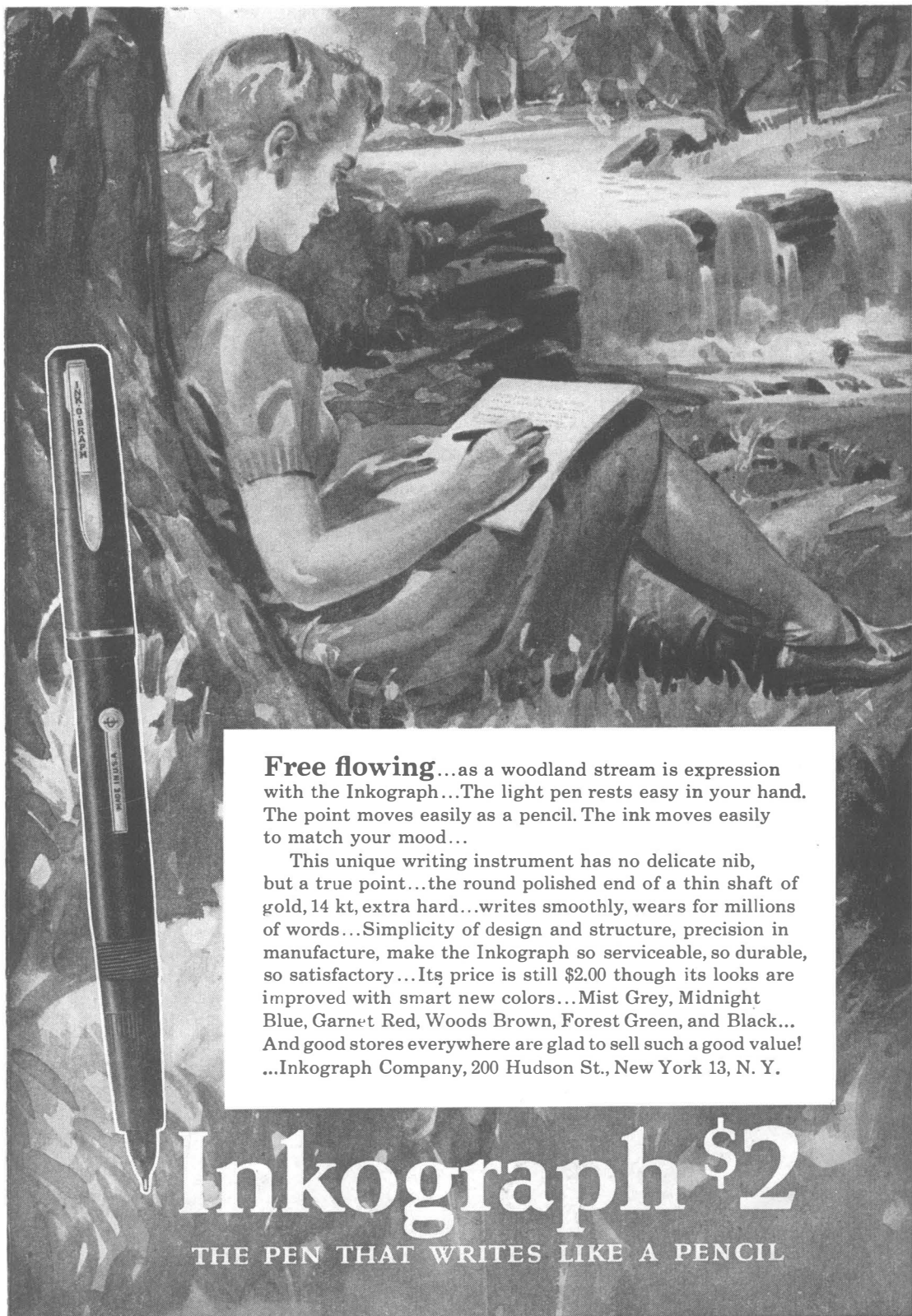
WITH FLYNN'S DETECTIVE FICTION



ARTHUR
LEO
ZAGAT
•
THORNE
LEE

**DEATH
UNDER PAR**
by **ROBERT MARTIN**

ALSO A MERCADO NOVELETTE
by **D.L. CHAMPION**



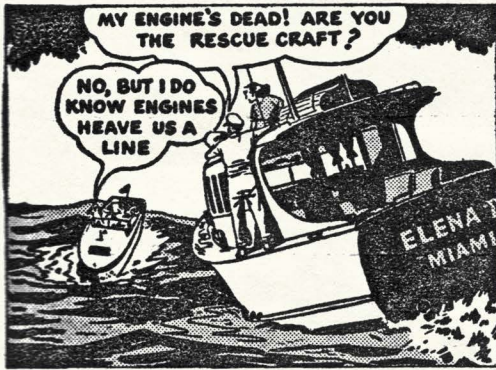
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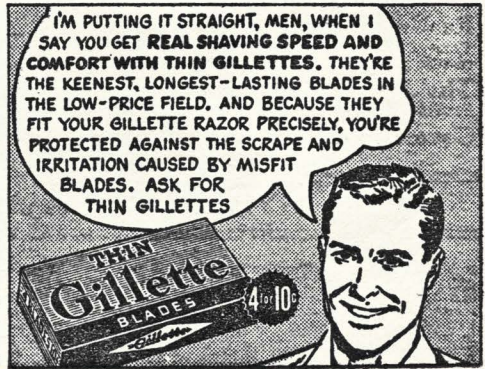
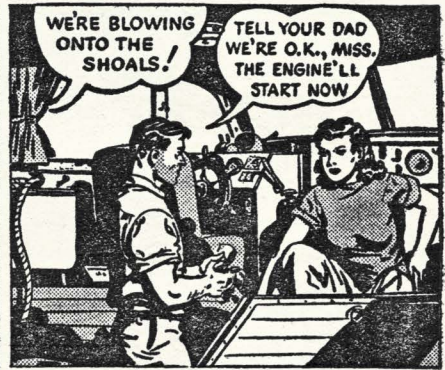
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THE PEN THAT WRITES LIKE A PENCIL

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20 MINUTES LATER



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Vol. 54

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Cover: From a scene in "Grim Reaper's Model."

The June issue will be out May 2nd

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DOCKET



June Kobak said: "Mr. Monahan, I know how you feel about girls who did things while their men were overseas. . . ." Private Detective Kerry Monahan had both personal feelings and a financial interest in the subject; for his buddy, Jack Marshall, had killed the husband of his ex-fiancee, then committed suicide.

On the road to Cape City to investigate Jack's double crime, Kerry Monahan's car was shotgun-blasted into a ditch, killing the unknown hitch-hiker whom Kerry had picked up. . . . Kerry swiftly traded identification with the corpse to let the murderers think that Private Detective Kerry Monahan was dead.



In Cape City, Kerry, playing his stolen identity to the hilt, stirred up a nest of killers—and ran into double trouble when two vice-squad cops burst into his room. One of the cops flashed a buzzer and said: "You're not kidding anybody. . . . Let's go down to Headquarters."



The murder-suicide manhunt led to the secluded Mission Gateway in the hills where Kerry Monahan was greeted by a welcoming salvo. . . . The complete story will be told by H. H. Stinson in his detective novel—"A Window In My Coffin"—in the next issue. Jane DIME DETECTIVE—published May 2nd.



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How to Get Your Wings Clipped

Dear Sir:

I was just out of school, the son of a north-western Michigan farmer, and I had a burning desire to learn to fly. The news paper had been running an ad: *Aviation, Earn While You Learn*. After considerable argument I convinced my parents it was for me.

One week later I walked up the steps of the aviation school. I was made welcome and treated like a rich relation. The school had two divisions: aviation and radio. I did not learn much about the radio part of it, but the aviation school looked good—a nice classroom and a large work shop in which a plane was being built.

After a few days in the shop I was convinced that opportunity had knocked. We were to build up the plane in the shop to pass a government inspection, and were told we would patch wings and make repairs at a nearby airport under the supervision of the instructor, who seemed to be very capable.

After two weeks had passed we were told that we would be off for the next week; they wanted to make some repairs on the shop. The first morning school reopened I was the first man there. I didn't go into the shop, as I wanted to do a little early studying. I opened the classroom door, and my eyes and mouth opened, too. The room was full of dancing girls!

When I regained my senses, I backed out and closed the door. Still in a somewhat dazed condition, I walked down and had a look in the shop window. It was as clean as a hound's tooth. I had a talk with everyone I thought might offer an explanation, but they too were surprised. When I went back about noon to have one more look, I found several of the boys there looking like amnesia victims.

I arrived home a few days later, and after a heated discussion with my father I learned that a fellow had plucked him for a tidy little sum, on the grounds that I was an unusual student etc., and that I had decided to go on to a better school that they also operated. Well, I learned all right, and worked like hell to pay back the debt.

GWA
Hartford City, Ind.

Funny Business

Dear Sir:

Recently, a friend of mine married and found herself faced with the problem of buying furniture at a time when it was very expensive.

Reading through some ads in the local paper, she found an item about a couple that were breaking up their home and moving west. They wanted to sell their furniture. She went there and bought several of the pieces. They weren't too cheap.

Some time later she was telling a friend about this, and the friend said that she had bought some things in the same way. They checked up and discovered that this young couple did this as a regular thing. They bought second-hand furniture at warehouses and fixed it up. Then they put it into their home and placed the ad in the paper. When someone bought a coffee table, they replaced it. They were running a regular furniture business!

Geraldyn Delaney
New York, N. Y.

Horse Laugh

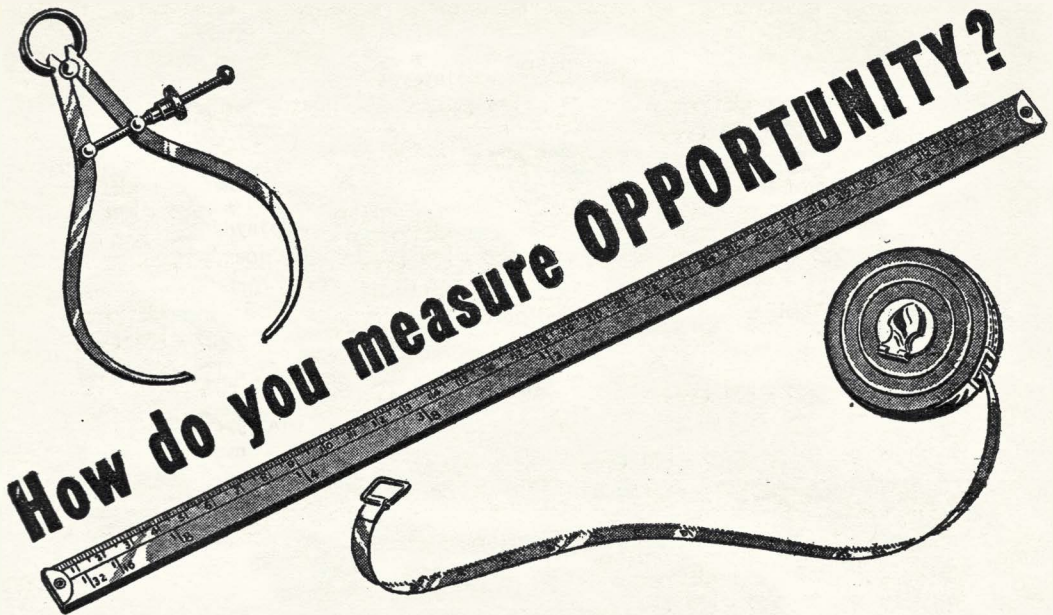
Dear Sir:

Here's a neat little racket with a touch of Mr. Maddox's favorite sport mixed in with it. Mr. Sucker is busy minding his own business in some hotel lobby, when Mr. Con Man disturbs him by asking if he has just lost his wallet. "No," says Mr. Sucker and then the other fellow picks up a wallet that is lying at Mr. S's feet. Mr. Con Man opens it and reveals what looks like a neat sheaf of bills. There is an identification in the wallet, too, with the address of a room in the hotel on it. At Mr. Con Man's insistence, Mr. S. goes up to the room with him, no doubt hoping for a cut of the reward money. Well, Mr. Smith, the owner of the wallet, is overjoyed to get it back and as a reward, says that he will put some bets down on a horse that he owns and that happens to be running that day at the track. He tells the two men to see him the next day.

Back come Mr. Sucker and Mr. Con Man the next day, and Mr. Smith gratefully hands the two of them anywhere from a hundred to four or five hundred dollars—their winnings on his horse. The lure of such easy money generally goes to Mr. Sucker's head and after a confab with his new found friend, he decides to get a good lump of money out of his life savings and put down some more bets, if Mr. Smith will do so. And Mr. Smith will do so—but only after persuasion.

Anyhow, Mr. Smith promises to take the money from both of the pals and put it on a good horse. Literally speaking, both Mr. Smith and Mr. Con Man get on the horse with the money and ride away, because Mr. Sucker never sees them again.

George E. Messner
Detroit, Michigan



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DEATH UNDER PAR

*Jim Bennett
Novel*

By
**ROBERT
MARTIN**

CHAPTER ONE

"Hi, Brother!"

SAM ALLGOOD'S law office was above the Wheatville National Bank. I nosed the right front wheel of my Ford against a parking meter along the curb, and stepped out to the sidewalk and put a nickel in the slot. I figured that sixty minutes was long enough for my business with Sam Allgood.

I climbed a wooden stairway and walked down a hallway. A door lettered, *Allgood and Winters, Attorneys at Law*, was standing open. I walked in. There were a few

A bullet hazard and playful wives didn't faze Private Detective Jim Bennett—but he just couldn't take a corpse before breakfast!



"Put that gun away," I said.

wooden chairs and a long table. On the wall was a big, faded map of Wheatville and two framed diplomas from a mid-western law school.

A pocket-sized girl was sitting behind a tiny typist's desk. There was a sheet of paper in her typewriter, but she was reading a book with a photo on the jacket of a man blasting a golf ball out of a sand trap.

The girl looked up at me, closed the book on a stubby forefinger and smiled brightly. She was a pretty little girl, in a tanned boyish way, with long brown hair falling over her shoulders, a short nose and a little round chin. Her eyes were big and brown and clear looking. She was wearing a bright print dress, not too much lipstick, and a blue and gold enameled high-school graduation ring on her right hand.

I took off my hat. "Which club do you prefer for traps?" I asked.

"A putter," she said seriously. "I really do. That is, if the sand is hard, and the overhang not too steep."

"A true student of the Bobby Jones school," I said. "Is Mr. Allgood in?"

"No, Sir," she said. She reluctantly withdrew her finger from the pages of the book. "He's at the lodge hall. He hasn't come back from lunch there yet."

"What lodge?" I asked.

"The Beavers," she said. "Mr. Allgood is Supreme Celestial Commander this year."

"Ah," I said. "A brother." I took out my billfold, flipped it open and showed her my paid-up dues card from the Cleveland Chapter of Beavers. "Where's the lodge?"

"Around the corner," she said. "A big red brick building with white pillars."

"Thanks," I said. "Keep your head down."

She gave me a friendly grin. As I went out the door she was again engrossed in her book.

I found the headquarters of the Wheatville Chapter of Beavers without any trouble. From the looks of the building and grounds I guessed that the Wheatville brothers paid their dues promptly. I pressed a button beside an ornate doorway and in a couple of minutes a big man in a white bar apron opened the door.

"I'd like to see Sam Allgood," I told him, and I flashed my membership card on him.

The big man leaned forward and looked

closely at my card, his lips moving silently. Then he snapped to attention, crossed the palms of both hands over his forehead, his elbows protruding, and focused his eyes on my necktie. "Give the password," he barked.

I took off my hat and placed my right hand over my heart. "True blue," I said.

He relaxed and held out a big red hand. "Welcome, Brother."

I followed him down a cool dusky corridor. We emerged into a long room with a bar along one wall and a row of slot machines along the other. Through an alcove I saw a larger room filled with round tables. Most of the tables were empty, but at several of them men were playing poker. I looked at my wrist watch. It was a quarter of two in the afternoon.

The big man poked his head into the card room and shouted: "Sam! A brother here to see you."

I heard a voice say: "Count me out, boys," and a man walked into the bar. He was about six-foot-one with a puffy white face which had once been handsome. He had a straight nose, thick black brows, rather small blue eyes, heavy black hair which he wore long and parted on the side. He was beginning to get fat, and his big frame was draped in a tailored pale-gray gabardine suit. He wore a white shirt, a red-speckled necktie and tan-and-white shoes. I guessed him to be about thirty-five.

"Hello, there," he said to me, and we shook hands. "Been looking for you."

"Your office girl told me I'd find you here," I said.

He nodded, and turned to the bar. "What'll you drink?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Ginger ale, plain," I said.

"Oh, come now," Allgood said.

"It's a little early in the day for me."

He shrugged his big shoulders and said to the bartender: "The same, John—and a plain ginger ale."

When the drinks were ready, Allgood picked them up and jerked his head at me. I followed him through a door and into a big room filled with deep leather chairs. There was a thick, dark-red rug on the floor, a long table covered with magazines, and a combination radio and phonograph a little smaller than a grand piano. A man

was snoring in a chair in a corner. Allgood led me to two chairs by the windows and handed me my drink. We sat down and I looked out at the sweep of green lawn.

Allgood said: "Your name's Bennett, isn't it?"

I nodded.

"When I called your office yesterday, I asked them to send you. We met at a party in Lakewood a year ago. Remember?"

I nodded again. "It was after the Midwest Open golf tournament—at The Erie Isles Country Club. Red Rourk died that night. Wasn't he your professional here?"

"Yes," he said. "For many years. Red was too old to enter that tournament—and he had a bad heart. He collapsed in the clubhouse afterwards and died in a hospital in Cleveland a couple of hours later."

I LOOKED out of the window, remembering that day in Cleveland a year ago. The Midwest Open, with the big money on a lanky kid from Alabama. And then Red Rourk, an unknown small-time professional, and come up from behind and went into the final play-off. He led the Alabama Kid right up to the seventeenth hole, and then he missed an easy two-foot putt. He lost the match by one stroke. Somehow the word got around that Rourk had taken a pile of dough to throw the match to the Kid. They never proved it, but it didn't make any difference to Rourk. He died that night.

"Tough," I said. "Red was deadly with the irons."

"His daughter works for us," Allgood said. "After Red died, we hired her. She was just out of high school, and there was just she and her mother." He took a swallow of his drink. "But I didn't call you down here to talk about Red Rourk. I've got a job for you."

"Shoot," I said.

He shifted his big body in the chair. "In the first place, you're to pose as a friend of mine from Cleveland. It's important that your real identity be concealed. Do you understand?"

"Sure," I said. "What's my name?"

"Simpson—George Simpson. I've got it all figured out."

"Fine," I said.

He looked at me over his glass and

frowned slightly. "We've got to play this thing carefully. It's got me a little worried. I remembered that you were a private detective, and I think your agency is reliable. This is my first experience of this sort. I know what your fee is, and how I pay it. But how do you work—what do you have to know?"

"Everything," I said. The build-up irritated me. "What is it—a woman?"

His handsome face flushed. He took a swallow of his drink and looked out the window. "Why do you say that?" he asked in a tight voice.

I shrugged and sipped some ginger ale. I wished now I had some whiskey in it. "That's what a long-winded buildup usually ends up with. Why don't you tell me what you want?"

"All right," he said. "Somebody's been shooting at me on the golf course. I want to find out who it is, and I want it stopped."

I thought about that for a couple of minutes. Then I said: "All right. What else?"

He looked at me steadily. "Nothing else, Bennett. That's enough. It's a hell of a thing to be teeing off—and have a bullet sing past your ears."

"I can imagine," I said. "When did it happen?"

"This week—twice. Late in the afternoon on Tuesday and Wednesday."

"Why didn't you tell the police?"

He made an impatient gesture with his hand. "You don't understand. Get this, Bennett. The police are not to be dragged into this. That's what I'm paying you for. I don't want any publicity. The police wouldn't do anything about it, anyway—and they'd jump at the chance to get something on us."

"Us?"

"The Wheatville Country Club. The town doesn't like us. You know how small towns are."

"Exclusive?" I said.

"Our membership is restricted—naturally," he said coldly.

"I see," I said. "You bury your own dead. What goes on at the club is none of the town's business?"

"If you want to put it that way."

"Do you have the slugs?" I asked.

He took two flattened bullets from his coat pocket and handed them to me. "They

were imbedded in the shelter house behind the tee."

I examined the bullets. They were small. I guessed them to be .22 long rifles. "Mind if I keep them?"

He shook his head, and I dropped the little chunks of lead into my coat pocket. "Anybody playing with you when it happened?" I asked.

"No. Both times I was playing alone, practicing. There weren't many people on the course."

"Any ideas?"

He shook his head.

"Any enemies?"

His shoulders moved beneath the gray gabardine. "No more than any attorney has."

"Anybody else know about it?"

"No. I didn't tell anyone."

"You got shot at twice—and you didn't tell anyone about it?"

"Why should I?" he said. He hesitated and looked down at the glass in his hand. "Maybe I'd be telling the person who did the shooting."

"You think maybe it's a fellow club member?"

He shrugged again, his face expressionless. "It could be. I don't know." He finished his drink in one swallow and the ice clinked in the bottom of his glass.

I got to my feet. "All right. Let's go out to the club. I want to see where it happened."

He looked at a gold, diamond-studded wrist watch. "I can't. I have an appointment at three-thirty. But you go ahead. It happened on number six tee—both times. I'll call the club and fix it for you. You'll stay at my house while you're here. It'll look better that way. Do you need anything?"

"Well," I said, "I ought to at least have a golf club in my hand."

He took a ring of keys from his pocket and detached a small flat key and handed it to me. "Help yourself to anything in my locker."

"Where is the club, and where will I see you?" I asked.

"Turn left at the courthouse," he said. "It's a mile and a half. I'll meet you there around five-thirty for dinner. And remember, you're a guest of mine—and your name

is George Simpson." For the first time he grinned at me.

We left the Wheatville lodge of Beavers and Sam Allgood walked with me to my car. He went up the steps to his office. I drove to the courthouse and turned left.

CHAPTER TWO

Bullets for Two

THE Wheatville Country Club was built around a small lake, and as I turned into the drive leading up to a rambling white-painted building I figured it was a nine-hole layout. I parked my Ford beside a sign which said *Members Only* and walked along flat stones laid in a smooth lawn to a wide screened porch.

The porch was deserted, but from inside the club house I heard the shrill babble of many female voices. Through an open pair of French windows I saw about fifty women, all dressed to the teeth, jabbering away at card tables. I opened a screen door on my left and followed a sign which read, *Locker Rooms*.

A man in a white jacket stepped out of a swinging door and looked at me. He gave me a quick cold smile and stood still. He was a young man, pudgy, with fat cheeks and thick yellow hair cut long like a radio crooner's. He looked at my ready-made blue suit and at my dusty brown shoes which I can never remember to get shined. I felt that maybe I should have gone around back to the service entrance.

"Whom did you wish to see, Sir?" he asked politely.

"Nobody, Sonny," I said. "My name's Simpson. Sam Allgood called about me."

He stepped away from in front of the door. "Yes, Sir," he said. "If you need anything, call me. My name's Rogan."

A man came through the door from the locker room. His spiked shoes made a clattering sound on the pitted hardwood floor. He was a tall thin man with a long sun-burned face and a narrow yellow mustache. He had a thin hooked nose and a thin wide mouth. His eyes were blue and set far apart. He was wearing a white terry-cloth pull-over, gray flannel slacks, and was carrying about fifteen glittering golf clubs in a seventy-five-dollar bag slung over his shoulder. He stopped and hooked his thumb beneath

the strap of the golf bag, looking at me. "Did I hear you mention Sam Allgood," he asked. His blue eyes were friendly.

The white-coated Rogan said quickly: "This is Mr. Simpson, Mr. Winters. Mr. Allgood telephoned about him."

The tall man held out a hand to me. "I'm Bert Winters, Sam's partner."

I shook hands with him. Rogan disappeared into the locker room.

Winters said: "Like to play with us, Mr. Simpson? I've got a foursome, but we'll break the rules and make it a five-some."

"Thanks," I said. "I'm just going to dub around a little—and I'm meeting Sam after a while."

He nodded, said, "I'll see you later," and clattered out the screen door. I located Sam Allgood's locker, and took three irons out of his golf bag—a number five, a number seven and a putter. I unzipped the ball pouch and pocketed three balls, and hung up my coat and necktie. There was a bright red baseball player's cap with a long bill hanging on a hook in the locker. I tried it on. It fit, and I decided to wear it, instead of my felt hat. Allgood's spiked shoes were a little small, but they would do. There were also three bottles of whiskey in the locker, one of them Scotch, but I resisted the temptation and closed and locked the metal door. Then I went out.

A tall girl with a flat black hat the size of a bicycle wheel came out of the babble of the card playing room and headed for the porch door. She was carrying a highball glass, and she was walking fast. Her hair was black and it curled around her shoulders. She had a thin, hollow-cheeked face, a thin straight nose, a red-painted full-lipped mouth and wide gray eyes beneath arched razor-edged black brows. Her plain black dress and stubby-toed, three inch heeled black shoes had cost some man a lot of money. She looked straight ahead and walked for the door with a free, long-legged stride.

I kept moving. Unless one of us slowed down, we were bound to collide. At the last second, I slowed down, but it was too late. We came together, hip to hip. Her highball splattered to the floor, and we both jumped away from each other. The surprise in her eyes was as faked as my apology.

"Sorry," I mumbled.

She dazzled me with a flash of white. "My fault," she said. "I wasn't looking. I just couldn't stand it in there anymore." She tossed her head at the sound of female chattering.

I didn't say anything.

"All right," she said. "I met Bert on the porch. He told me. I'm Katherine Allgood—Sam's wife. I'm glad to meet a friend of Sam's. Of course, I could have gotten Bert to introduce us, but this way is more interesting."

"Definitely," I said. "But I'm sorry about your drink."

"You can buy me another," she said.

I looked at my watch. Three-thirty. Plenty of time.

"Of course," she said, "if I'm detaining you—"

"Not at all. Where's the bar?"

SHE laughed and moved through an archway. I followed her out to a screened porch overlooking the little lake. There were tables, chairs and wicker porch furniture. We sat down at one of the tables. Rogan came out of a door and stood quietly attentive.

"Scotch and soda," Katherine Allgood said to him.

I nodded. "The same."

"So you're a friend of Sam's," she said. "It's strange that he never mentioned you to me."

I squirmed a little in my chair. "Lawyers know a lot of funny people."

Rogan came in with the drinks, and she waited until he had put them on the table and left.

"I don't think you're funny," she said. "I think you're nice."

I held up my glass and grinned at her. I couldn't think of an answer to that.

"Going to be in town long?" she asked.

"A couple of days maybe."

"You'll have dinner with us tonight?"

"I'm staying at your house," I said.

"Really? How nice."

A stout gray-haired woman in a purple dress and an imitation orchid for a hat came out onto the porch. "Katherine, dear," she said, looking at me intently. "We need you."

Katherine Allgood said: "In a minute, Myrtle."

"But, dear, we're waiting."

Katherine Allgood sighed and finished her drink in two long swallows. "See you later," she said to me, and she followed the woman back into the club house.

I drained my glass, left some money on the table, and walked out to the first tee. There was nobody on number one fairway, but I could see a sprinkling of players scattered over the rolling course. I saw by the white-painted arrows sticking in the turf at the edges of the tee that it was a three-hundred-and-twenty yard, par-four hole. I like golf, but I don't have much time to play.

I teed up a ball and smacked it out with a number five iron. I got about a hundred and fifty yards and landed in a bunker. I walked down the fairway to the bunker and lifted the ball with a seven iron and landed thirty yards short of the green. I used the seven again and pitched up to within three feet of the cup. I holed the putt for a par and walked to number two tee feeling pleased with myself.

There was a foursome ahead of me, and I figured it was Bert Winters and his crowd. I stayed behind them. When I approached number six tee I began to look over the lay of the land. There were lots of trees, and number six was bounded on one side by a row of poplars, and on the other by a corn field protected by a wire fence. Nailed to the fence posts at intervals were big black and white signs which read, *Out Of Bounds. Do Not Enter.*

Number six hole was a hundred and seventy yards, par three. The corn field ended just beyond number six green, and opposite number seven tee. Just beyond the field was a group of farm buildings and a green-painted house. When I stepped up to the tee I saw that Winters and his party had holed out and disappeared beyond the poplars. Behind me in a clump of fir trees was a small three-sided shelter house, with a ball washer anchored in the ground beside it.

I turned back to my ball, dug in and started my back-swing. Something zinged past my nose and smacked into the shelter house behind me. The wind carried a faint clear *crack* to my ears. I jumped back to the shelter house and stooped low, holding my breath.

I waited maybe a minute, but I couldn't hear anything but the birds and the bees

and the distant mooing of a cow. I looked around the walls of the shelter house. Just above my head a bullet was imbedded in the wood, and I pried it out with my pocket knife. It was a small caliber, probably a .22. A foot to the left were two shallow depressions, with the wood splintered a little around them. I took the slugs which Allgood had given me and laid them in the depressions. They fitted.

I heard the metallic rattle of steel golf clubs in a bag, and I stepped outside. Sam Allgood's little secretary was walking up from number five green, her head down. Her clubs were slung over her shoulder in a small canvas bag, and the sun glinted on her hair.

"Hello," I said.

She looked up suddenly and stopped. Then she recognized me and smiled. "Hello, there. Did you find Mr. Allgood?"

"Yep. He had an appointment, and so I came out here to do a little dubbing around."

SHE stepped up to the tee beside me and laid her golf bag on the grass. She stooped down and withdrew a junior size, steel-shafted brassie. "Mr. Winters gave me the rest of the day off," she said. "I was glad, because I need the practice. I'm playing in a tournament tomorrow."

"Go ahead and shoot," I said.

She nodded at my ball on the little wooden tee in the ground. "You're teed up. Put it on the green."

I sliced the ball into the poplars on the right of the fairway. "Just a duffer," I said.

She laughed and teed up her ball. She had a slow, easy swing and the click of her club against the ball was a sweet satisfying sound. The ball arched into the air and landed on the edge of the green a hundred and seventy yards away.

We picked up our clubs and started down the fairway. "Nice shot," I said. "Is the competition stiff tomorrow?"

"Pretty stiff," she said, trudging along beside me, a small trim figure in a white linen dress. "I've got to beat Mrs. Allgood."

"The boss' wife?"

She nodded seriously. "She's plenty good."

"Who's the favorite?" I asked.

"Mrs. Allgood, of course," she said. I

looked down at her. There was a faint bitter twist to her small mouth. "She's the club's woman champion—has been for three years. But now the tournament's narrowed down to just we two. She said I was getting too big for my pants."

"Now, now," I said, "Little girls shouldn't talk like that."

"Well, panties, then. Anyhow, that's what she said about me when I defeated Mrs. Nusbaum last Saturday. She was the leading contender for the championship."

"And now you are?"

"Yes. You see, Mr.—"

"Simpson," I said.

She looked up at me thoughtfully. "Oh," she said.

"Oh, what?"

"Oh, nothing."

"We were talking about pa-ties," I said.

"Well, Mrs. Allgood was pretty peeved about my beating Mrs. Nusbaum. She knows she can beat Mrs. Nusbaum, but she isn't sure about me. She's the champion, you see, and she wants to keep on being the champion. Mrs. Allgood's a leader in everything. She's always giving luncheons, and bridge teas, and parties, and I'm just a working girl—her husband's hired help. I only belong to the club for one reason, and that's to play golf. You see, m, father used to be the pro here. I guess golf comes naturally to me."

"I saw your father play once," I said.

"A few years ago, in Cleveland. In the Midwest Open."

She looked quickly up at me. "How did you know that Red Rourk was my father?"

"Mr. Allgood told me."

"Then—then you know what they said about him?"

I nodded. "Yes—but I don't believe it."

She smiled up at me. "Thanks. You look like the kind of a man who wouldn't believe a story like that." She lifted her little chin proudly. "Red didn't throw that match. He was sick. He—he died—right after it, you know."

"Yes, I know," I said. "What's your first name?"

"Margaret. But everyone calls me Peggy."

We were approaching the green, and I moved over to the line of poplars. My ball was lying in high grass close to the trunk of one of the trees. But I had a clear swing,

and I blasted it out with the seven iron and it plopped on the green.

Peggy Rourk said: "You don't look like a duffer to me."

"Lucky," I said. I was looking over at the green-painted house and the group of farm buildings. Anyone with a gun would have a clear shot for the sixth tee. . . .

As we climbed a gentle hill to the seventh tee, I saw a man leaning on the wire fence looking at us. He was wearing overalls and a sweat-stained felt hat. His face was red from the sun, and he needed a shave. His eyes were the palest of gray, set close beside a long nose, and they stood out sharply against his dark face. He was a young man, around thirty, with heavy shoulders and thick, work-toughened hands.

"Howdy," I said, as we came abreast of him. "Your corn looks good."

He spat out a piece of straw he was chewing. "That's right," he said. "And I aim to keep it that way."

"We could use some rain," I said.

"It ain't the rain that worries me."

"Corn borers, brother?" I asked.

"Corn trampers," he said. "They ruined half my crop last year looking for lost balls. I aim to keep them out this year. You're a stranger here-a-bouts, ain't you?" His eyes were on my red cap.

"That's right."

He grunted. "Thought so. I know 'em all by sight. Silly game, ain't it?"

"Kind of," I said.

"Grown men—" he sneered, and I saw that his two front teeth were missing—"chasing a little white ball around a pasture." He spat contemptuously.

I grinned at him. Peggy laughed, and we moved on up to the seventh tee. While she was driving, I looked over the buildings of the farm across the fence. I spotted the shutters of a tiny window high up in the peak of a big white barn. The shutters were hanging open. I looked back at the farmer. He was still watching us.

CHAPTER THREE

Delaying Action

WE WALKED down the green fairly, and Peggy Rourk was suddenly quiet. I watched her for several seconds before I asked: "Did you

hear a shot a while ago, by any chance?"

"No," she said, "but it was probably kids over on the lake. Shooting turtles. I used to do it myself—with a little .22 single shot rifle. I was practically raised out here, you know."

"How long was your dad pro here?" I asked.

"About fifteen years—until he died last year."

"Why did they say he threw that match?" I asked.

She tilted her small face up at me, and there was an angry glint in her brown eyes, and a hint of tears. "Why do you ask that?"

"Just wondered," I said.

She bit at her lower lip and dropped her head. "They lied about him—and he didn't have a chance to fight back. It—it killed him."

"Who do you mean by 'they'?" I asked after a moment.

She shook her head quickly and didn't look at me. "I don't want to talk about it," she said in a choked voice.

We reached her ball. "Sorry, Peggy," I said. "Lay it on the green."

She swung her club, but the stroke was ragged and too fast. She topped the ball and it bounded along the grass and into a bunker fifty yards away. She didn't say anything. She dubbed her bunker shot, and three-putted the green. I kept quiet after that, and by the time we started number nine she was laughing and gay again. But she was six over par when we holed out on the ninth green in front of the club house.

"Don't worry," I told her. "You've got the bad shots out of your system. Tomorrow you'll burn up the fairways."

She gave me a quick smile. "Sure," she said.

I headed for the club house.

"So long, Mr. Simpson," she said.

I turned. "Aren't you coming over to the club?"

She shook her head. "I—I don't belong up there. And Mom will be waiting supper."

"All right," I said. "Good luck tomorrow."

"Thanks." She walked across the gravel drive and tossed her clubs into a faded blue 1937 Ford convertible.

I crossed to the clubhouse and went up

the steps to the screened porch. There were four people sitting there, all with drinks in their hands. Sam Allgood was there, and his partner, Bert Winters, and Katherine Allgood. Sitting beside Winters was a tall slender girl with long tawny hair, dark blue eyes and a wide red mouth. She was wearing a tight, pale-green T-shirt, dark green gabardine slacks and white rubber-soled sneakers.

Sam Allgood got to his feet. "Hello, George. We've been waiting for you." He sounded a little self-conscious. "I hear you've met my wife, and Bert." He nodded at the tall blonde. "This is Bert's wife. . . . Lily, meet my friend, George Simpson, from Cleveland."

The blonde held up her glass to me and smiled. "Howdy, George," she said.

I nodded and bowed in my best company manner. Allgood handed me a tall glass which tinkled. There was the roar of a car motor, and the crunch of gravel. A blue Ford convertible went along the drive and white stone dust drifted over the porch.

Katherine Allgood said: "I see you've met our little golfer. We watched you come up number nine."

"She tells me that she is playing you for the championship tomorrow," I said.

"Kate's got a job on her hands," Bert Winters said. "Peggy's good."

"The little Rourk girl trains for her matches," the blonde said. "Why don't you train, Kate?"

"I'm in training right now," Katherine Allgood said. "How about another drink, Sam?"

Everybody laughed.

Allgood took a bottle from a table and poured whiskey in all our glasses. The sun was going down, and the porch was in shadow. I was tired. I planted myself in a wicker chair and tried to look attentive and bright.

The blonde said: "I'm glad I'm not playing in that silly tournament. Let's eat. I'm hungry."

Allgood said to me: "Lily's always hungry—or thirsty."

"Golf is a silly game," the blonde said. "But if you people want to make a little bet on the clay pigeons, or how many bull's eyes in fifty shots. . . ."

"We call her A nie Oakley Winters," Bert Winters said to me. "I had a hell of a

time keeping her in ammunition during the war."

I felt that I should rouse myself and say something. "Which do you prefer, Mrs. Winters," I said. "A notch or a peep sight?"

"That depends upon what I'm shooting at," the blonde said. "Call me Lily."

Bert Winters moved his lanky form to the club house door and shouted: "Rogan."

The lights had been turned on inside, and through the French windows I could see people eating in the room which had housed the afternoon bridge party. The white-coated attendant appeared in the doorway. "It'll be about five minutes, Mr. Winters," he said. "Shall I serve it out here?"

"No," said Winters. "We'll eat on the rear porch."

"Yes, sir," Rogan said, and disappeared.

Winters turned to the rest of us. "Come on. We can have another drink inside."

He turned and entered the club house. Katherine Allgood took my arm and led me after him. As I entered the door, I saw that Sam Allgood and Lily Winters were talking in low tones, and the blonde laughed softly.

The three of us had a drink on the rear porch overlooking the lake. The porch was lighted now, and a table was set for five. I lit Katherine Allgood's cigarette, and she looked up at me.

"Mr.-Simpson-from-Cleveland," she said. "What do you do? Sam wouldn't tell us."

"Why?" I asked, smiling down at her. She was still dressed as I had seen her in in the afternoon, except that she had discarded the bicycle-wheel hat. Her black hair was smooth and shining and parted in the middle. She moved closer to me, and I could tell by her eyes that the liquor was getting to her.

"Why, Mr.-Simpson-from-Cleveland?" she said. "Because I want to know. You don't look like the men around here. You look like someone out of a book. You don't talk much, and yet you say the right things at the right times. And there is a kind of watchfulness about you, and a cold alert light behind your eyes. You're big, but you move about like an Indian—how did you get that lovely scar on your chin?"

"Shaving," I said.

She laughed a little too shrilly. "It looks

like a rapier cut to me, or a nick from a bolo knife. You're a knight in glossy black armor. . . ."

Over her head I saw Bert Winters watching us. He winked at me. I was beginning to feel uncomfortable, and I suddenly realized that I was still wearing Allgood's spiked golf shoes.

"Pardon me," I said to the girl. "The knight forgot to take off his spurs." I started for the locker room.

"Tell Sam and Lily to come in here," Bert Winters called after me.

I got my shoes out of Allgood's locker, and put them on. Then I went into the shower room, washed my hands and face, combed my hair, put on my necktie and coat. Then I moved towards the front porch.

In my college days it was a point of pride with me to always wear leather heels with a small steel wedge in the outer corners. The more noise they made, the better. But when I got older and began to work for the American Detective Agency I changed to rubber heels. They don't make much noise on a wooden floor, and I was standing on the porch in the early evening dusk before Lily Winters and Sam Allgood knew I was there.

It was just as well, because he had her in his arms and he was kissing her like it was his death hunger.

I BACKED up, and I didn't make any more noise than a cat tip-toeing on the White House rug. When I was well inside the clubhouse I began to whistle *Jingle Bells* and started for the porch again. When I got there, they were standing a respectable distance apart, and Lily Winters was lighting a cigarette. The glow of the match threw dark shadows beneath her cheek bones. She flicked away her match and looked at me and laughed.

"That tune," she said. "Christmas in July."

Sam Allgood asked: "Dinner ready, George?"

"I guess so. Bert said I should call you two."

Allgood didn't say anything. His face was in shadow.

Lily Winters moved to the door. "Come on, Sam. Whatever Bert says—we must do." She entered the clubhouse.

Sam Allgood moved out of the shadows and into the light from the doorway. There was a smear of lipstick on his upper lip.

"Have you found out anything, Bennett?" he said to me in a low voice.

"A little," I said. "I want to talk to you later."

He nodded, and moved through the doorway. I grasped his arm. "You better wipe that lipstick off your face," I said.

He paused, his back to me, and took a handkerchief from his breast pocket. He wiped his lips. "Thanks," he said, without turning around. I followed him out to the rear porch.

The dinner wasn't very good, and everybody drank too much, including myself, and I was glad when it was over. Katherine Allgood announced that she was riding into town with Mr. Simpson-from-Cleveland, and Bert Winters said he would lead the way in his car. I went out to get my Ford and bring it up to the front porch steps.

It was a dark night, but as I approached my car I saw a sudden quick movement beside it. I stepped to the grass beside the gravel drive and moved quickly forward. As I came abreast of the car I saw the dark form of a man leaning in the open door.

There was the faint glow of a tiny flashlight. The light was shining on my open bag lying on the seat, and the man was pawing hastily through my stuff. I stepped up behind him and grabbed him by the shoulder. The light went out and he swung violently around and smacked me across the face with the lense end of the flashlight. I cocked my arm and jabbed fast against the unseen face. I heard him grunt, and I swung my fist again.

He ducked low, twisted loose from my grasp, and sprawled in the gravel. I made a dive for him, but I wasn't fast enough.

He scrambled to his feet and scooted through a hedge along the drive, and I heard the thud of running feet on the turf. I let him go.

I turned back to my car, switched on the dash light, and looked through my bag. My socks, underwear, handkerchiefs and extra shirts were all there, but my Smith and Wesson .38 in its shoulder clip was gone. I was sorry for that, because I had carried that particular gun for a long time. I closed the bag, tossed it on the deck behind the seat, and drove up to the club house.

Bert Winters and Lily were just getting into a black coupe. Katherine Allgood was standing on the steps, and I leaned over and opened the door for her. She got in beside me. I didn't see anything of Sam Allgood. I waited for the Buick ahead of me to get going.

Katherine Allgood said: "I need a drink."

I had a bottle in the glove compartment, but I didn't mention it. I didn't have to. She found the bottle, unscrewed the cap and took a long swallow. She handed it to me, and I took a short nip. I put it back into the glove compartment, but she got it out again. "What are we waiting for?" she said.

"Sam, I guess," I said.

The coupe's horn did a shave-and-a-hair-cut routine, and then Sam Allgood came down the steps. I heard Lily Winters yell, "Where you been, Honey?" and Allgood got in beside her. The coupe moved down the drive and I followed. When we hit the main highway, Winters drove too fast, and had to hold the Ford to sixty-five to stay on his tail.

Katherine Allgood said: "You didn't answer my question."

"What question?"

"About what you do."

"I'm in the earthworm business," I said. "I raise worms. Did you know that it takes nature five hundred years to make one square inch of top soil, and that one earthworm will produce the same amount in one year?"

"All right," she said. "Don't tell me, then." She moved on the seat until she was close beside me. She turned her face up to me. "But I still think you're nice."

I was trying to keep Bert Winters' tail lights in view, "Sure," I said. "I'm nice."

Suddenly she reached out and flicked off the ignition switch. The motor died, and I moved the gear lever to neutral. I put on the brakes and pulled over to the side of the road. The instant the car stopped rolling she had her arms around my neck and was pulling me down to her. It was suddenly very quiet, and I could hear the crickets singing in the fields around me.

The motor ticked a little, like motors do when they are cooling, and Katherine Allgood's lips were on my face. She twisted her body towards me and I could see an

expanse of nylons. I kissed her, but I was thinking all the while about Sam Allgood.

She clung to me, and her fingernails dug into the back of my neck. I reached my free hand for the ignition switch.

"No," she said. "No." Her voice was desperate, pleading.

I felt like a fool, but there was nothing else I could do. Sam Allgood was my client, and I was being paid to do a job for him. Not this kind of a job. And Allgood and the rest of them were waiting for us. I pushed the girl away from me as gently as possible, turned on the ignition.

As the Ford moved out onto the highway, Katherine Allgood sat up straight and slapped me hard across the face. It made me blink, and she slapped me again. I didn't blame her, and I didn't say anything—but I didn't want to make a fool of myself just because she was jealous of her husband.

SHE huddled in the far corner of the seat and began to sob. I let her go. When we reached the outskirts of Wheatville, she sat up and began to do things to her face with the aid of a handkerchief and a silver compact.

"Left at the next street," she said quietly. "Third house on the left."

The black coupe was parked in a drive, and I pulled up behind it. The white house was long and low and rambling. There were soft lights in a long living room and through the windows I got a glimpse of an oil painting and the top of a white porcelain fireplace.

When Katherine Allgood and I entered, Bert Winters and his wife were sitting side by side on a white English lounge drinking

highballs. Sam Allgood was leafing through a record album beside a mahogany record player at the far end of the long room. The muted strains of a Strauss waltz floated through the house.

Bert Winters held up his glass to us and smiled. Sam Allgood turned and looked at his wife. She walked straight across the room and disappeared through an alcove beyond the fireplace.

"Goodnight, dear," Allgood called after her, and he winked at me.

"Kate's tight," Lily Winters said. She had a cigarette in her mouth and was trying to hit the end of it with the flame from a silver lighter.

Bert Winters steadied the lighter for her. "So are you, my pet," he said, smiling at her.

She laughed and swayed towards him, her long yellow hair falling over her face. She flung the hair back from her eyes, reached out a red-tipped thumb and forefinger and undid Winters' neat polka dot bow tie. Winters grinned at Allgood and me and stood up. He reached down and pulled his wife to her feet. He put an arm around her and led her to the door.

"We better go home," he said, "before she falls on her face." He nodded at me. "Glad to have met you, Simpson. Be seeing you."

They went out.

Sam Allgood poured whiskey from a bottle on a cocktail table and handed me a glass. "Swell people," he said. "Bert and I went to school together."

I nodded agreement. "Is Mrs Winters really good with a rifle?"

He gave me a quick sidelong glance. Then he carried his glass to a chair and



TOPS FOR QUALITY

BIGGER AND BETTER
★

sat down. "She's good with anything—rifle, pistol or shotgun. She's won a lot of marksmanship medals. Why?" His eyes were a little foggy, but he seemed sober enough.

I shrugged. "Just wondered."

Suddenly he threw back his handsome head and laughed. "Good Lord, Bennett, you don't think that Lily's the one who has been taking pot shots at me?"

"I don't know," I said. "You're paying me to find out. There's a farmer across the fence from the sixth hole with a mean look in his eye on account of his corn. Have you been trampling around in his field?"

"You mean Len Fassler," he said. "He's a crackpot. He won't sell his land to the club, and he won't let us on his property to look for lost balls. We put up out-of-bound signs, but some of the boys still climb the fence."

"Do you?"

He laughed again. "Bennett, I've got a terrible hook. When I drive a golf ball it usually takes a terrific curve to the left. I can't seem to correct it. Red Rourk had me cured once, but he's dead now. Sure, I've been in Fassler's field—but he wouldn't shoot me for it."

"He might try to scare you," I said. "A guy like that. Somebody took a shot at me this afternoon."

He looked at me. "No kidding?"

"I was wearing that red cap of yours. Maybe he thought it was you."

"Well, dammit," Allgood said, "if you're so sure it's Fassler—"

"It seems to me," I said, watching him, "that you could have figured that out for yourself."

He looked down at his glass. "I thought of Fassler right away, of course," he said. "I even asked him about it. I don't think he'd do a damn fool thing like that."

"He had a reason," I said. "You've been trespassing on his land."

"Not when I got shot at," he said stubbornly. "I was on the golf course."

"All right," I sighed. "You better tell me the rest of it."

He got up and poured more whiskey in his glass. "That's all, dammit," he said.

"What about Mrs. Winters?" I asked.

He turned on me so sharply that some of his drink spilled to the rug. "That's none of your damn business," he said.

"We've been close friends for years—Bert and Lily and Kate and me. Bert's my partner. What if I did kiss Lily? You're a grown man. You ought to understand about those things."

"Maybe I'm old fashioned," I said, "but does Bert understand—and your wife?"

He made an impatient gesture. "Don't be naive, Bennett."

I held up a palm. "I'm just a private dick trying to do you a job. I met your little secretary, Peggy Rourk, on the course today. Do you think that her dad really threw that match to the Alabama Kid a year ago?"

He nodded grimly. "It looked like it. I saw the match, and it was pretty obvious. Red Rourk never missed a two-foot putt in his life, and that's what he did on the seventeenth in Cleveland. What's that got to do with it?"

"Nothing, I guess," I said. "Except that his daughter is working for you and Bert Winters."

"I told you about that. After Red died, we felt sorry for her. She needed a job, and we gave her one."

"I understand she's playing against your wife in a tournament play-off tomorrow."

"That's right," Allgood said. "And I'm afraid that she'll beat the pants off Kate, too—the hangerover Kate's going to have won't help her any." He laughed. "Kate won't like it, either. She can't bear to lose at anything."

I yawned, and Allgood told me where I was to sleep. I went out to the car and got my bag. When I came back in, I saw that Allgood had poured himself a fresh drink. He had taken off his coat and tie and was thumbing through the record albums. I declined his offer of another drink, and moved towards the alcove.

"See you in the morning," he said.

I walked down a thick-carpeted hall with mirrors on the walls with gilt tables and brocaded chairs beneath them. My room was the third one on the left. The door to the second room was standing open, and there was a light inside. As I passed, I looked in. Katherine Allgood, fully dressed, was lying very still, her face down, on the silken cover of the bed.

I entered the room beyond, undressed and got into bed. I lay awake for a long time. From the living room I could hear

faintly the strains of *Tales from the Vienna Woods*, over and over. After a while the music stopped, and a door slammed. I waited. Then, through the walls, I heard a woman's voice, and Allgood's laugh. Then I relaxed. In a little while I went to sleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Winnah!

IN THE morning I shaved and showered in an adjoining bathroom, put on fresh clothes and went down the hall to the living room. I didn't see anyone, but I smelled coffee and I followed the smell to a big bright kitchen.

Katherine Allgood was sitting in the morning sunlight by a window in a cheery breakfast nook. She was smoking a cigarette and reading the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. From somewhere in the house I heard the whine of a vacuum cleaner.

She looked up and smiled. She was wearing a sand-colored open-necked blouse, a tan gabardine skirt, white ankle socks and brown moccasins. Her eyes were about the color of Lake Erie on a sunny day, but there dark smudges beneath them, and her thin, handsome face had a faintly drawn look to it.

"Good morning," she said.

"Good morning," I said, trying to act cheerful at nine o'clock in the morning. "All ready for the big game today?"

She smiled ruefully, and shoved a tall glass of orange juice towards me. "As ready as possible—after last night." She poured coffee and flicked the switch on a toaster. "Look," she said, and she hesitated, her eyes on the toaster. "I'm sorry about—about last night. I'm not really that—cheap." She looked up at me, and there was faint color in her cheeks.

Even with a hangover, she was still a good-looking woman, and I felt like a yokel. "Forget it." I mumbled. I sipped at the orange juice.

She looked out the window. "I've—I've been rather upset lately, and. . ."

I changed the subject. "What time is the match today?"

She looked at me and smiled faintly. "One o'clock."

Two pieces of toast popped up out of the toaster, and I began to butter one of them.

I began to eat the toast, and I didn't say anything.

She lit a fresh cigarette from the stub of her first one. "How good a friend are you of Sam's? He never mentioned you to me before, but then he knows lots of people I never heard of."

"I met Sam in Cleveland," I said. "At the Midwest Open a year ago. I'm in town partly on business."

She shrugged her slim shoulders. "Oh, business. That's all Sam thinks about—almost." She laughed shortly.

I squirmed a little in my chair. Katherine Allgood was being eaten alive by jealousy. She didn't like it, and she didn't know what to do about it. I figured she had experimented on me the night before, and I hadn't been much help to her—damn it. She was used to having what she wanted, the way she wanted it, and when she wanted it, and I didn't doubt that she would win the golf match from little Peggy Rourk. She was that kind of a woman.

I drank my coffee and lit a cigarette. "How long have Sam and Bert Winters been partners?" I asked.

"Ever since they got out of school," she said. "They graduated together. They make a good team. Bert figures the angles, and Sam puts on a good show in court. Between them, they make a lot of money." Her lips twisted a little.

"What's wrong with money?" I asked. "Nothing," she said. "It's swell—if money's all you need to make you happy."

"It helps," I said.

She laughed shortly and dropped her cigarette into her coffee cup. She spread her fingers in a gesture of finality. I got to my feet.

She looked up at me and smiled brightly. "Are you coming out to the match?"

"I wouldn't miss it."

"I'll win," she said.

I didn't doubt it. I went out to my Ford and drove down to the business section of Wheatville. I parked close to the office of Allgood and Winters, put a nickel in the meter, and entered a drug store across the street.

There were a couple of pay phones in back. One of them was on a wall, and the other was a booth job. I waited for a woman to leave the booth, and then I went inside, closed the door, and called Pete

Gordon, a sports-writing pal of mine on one of the Cleveland papers. I was lucky. He was in the office.

"Pete." I said, "this is Jim Bennett. Remember me?"

"Sure," he said.

I asked: "What do you know about that Red Rourk deal in the Midwest Open last year?"

"Red Rourk's dead," he said.

"Yeah. I know that. Did he throw that match to the Alabama Kid, or didn't he?"

"Well, Jim," Pete said, "the wise guys say he did. But it was never proven. I was one of the few guys who stuck up for Red."

"I remember," I said. "Why?"

"Because I don't think Red would have done a thing like that. I know that he was a small-time pro all his life, and he probably needed the money, but Red was a square shooter. He missed that putt on the seventeenth because he was rattled—maybe sick. Somebody got him that way on purpose."

"Tell me more," I said.

"Hell, I was right beside Red when it happened. He played like Byron Nelson right up to the seventeenth. But just before he stepped out on the green a guy leans over to him and said, 'You're through, Red. Don't forget that.' And right after that Red blew up. But not on purpose. He couldn't help it. And two hours later he was dead."

"Why didn't you print that?" I asked.

"Print it? Hell, it was just me against about five thousand people, and I didn't know who the guy was who needled him. He disappeared in the crowd. I tried to find him, but I couldn't."

"Would you know him if you saw him again?" I asked.

"Sure."

"All right," I said. "Now listen, Pete. Climb into your car and come down here. I'm in Wheatville—"

"Wheatville? That's eighty miles from here!"

"Sure. But I think there is a story in it for you. Peggy Rourk, Red's daughter, is playing off a local club championship today. The agency will pay your expenses, including liquor."

"That last got me, Jim." Pete laughed. "I'm on my way. Where'll I see you?"

"At the Wheatville Country Club. The match is at one o'clock."

I HUNG up. I had a coke at the counter, and then I drove out the country club road. I turned down a dirt road which ran beside the golf course and parked in a grove of trees below Len Fassler's farm. I walked through an acre of second-growth pine, climbed the fence bordering the corn field, and approached the farm from the rear.

As I came to the sixth tee of the golf course, I climbed the fence again and walked along the row of poplars bordering the fairway until I came to the elevated position of the seventh tee. I looked around. There were some players holing out on the eighth green, and a twosome was moving up number five fairway. From where I stood I had a clear view of the sixth tee and the shelter house behind it.

I turned and faced the farm across the fence. The shutters on the little window in the peak of the barn were still standing open. I stepped down from the tee, skirted the sixth green, climbed the fence and scooted around back of the barn. I didn't see anyone, and I ducked into a side doorway. The place smelled like barns usually smell. There were a couple of worn-out horses munching in a stall. They looked at me with dazed impersonal eyes and kept on chewing.

Above the level of the stalls was a hayloft, with an open space in the middle clear to the roof. There was some flooring under the eaves beneath the tiny window in the peak. Birds were shooting in and out of the window and the shaft of sunlight glinted on their wings.

A straight ladder was nailed to the flooring beneath the window and extended down to the stalls. I figured the ladder was used to rig the tackle for pulling hay up into the loft.

I took a last quick look around me and then I climbed the ladder to the little platform beneath the window and looked out. I had a panoramic view of the golf course, and of the entire sixth hole in particular.

A voice from below me said: "What in hell do you think you're doing?"

I turned slowly and looked down. Fassler, the farmer, was standing on the barn floor beneath me. He had a .22 bolt-action rifle in his hands.

I climbed down the ladder and stood in front of him. He backed up a little and

raised his gun. I jerked a thumb towards the window. "No use going up now," I said. "There's nobody playing the sixth hole right this minute."

He looked puzzled, and his mouth hung open. There was no more expression in his little pale eyes than in a couple of ping-pong balls.

"But don't worry," I said. "There's a guy coming up number five."

He shut his mouth then, and leaned forward. "Has he got on a red hat?"

I shook my head.

"Shucks," he said. "That's the one I'm a-laying for."

"Some sport, hey?" I said. "Making them jump?"

He doubled over and slapped his hip. I kept my eye on the gun in his hand and began to wish that I had brought a straight jacket along. The farmer straightened up and grinned at me. I saw the gap in his yellow front teeth.

"I made that sucker jump—twict. You oughta seen him run. I'll teach 'em to trespass on my property. Yesterday a fella fooled me. He had on a red hat, but he wasn't Red Hat hisself, and I zinged one past him anyhow—before I saw it wasn't Red Hat. He run like a scared 'coon from the shanty." He doubled up again in silent laughter, and his hand beat on his pant's leg.

I stepped in and jerked the rifle from his loose grasp. He straightened up suddenly and his loose mouth flopped shut. His little pale eyes got cloudy and he took a step towards me.

"Gimme that gun," he said, and I got a strong whiff of whiskey.

"I'm the guy you shot at yesterday," I told him.

He stood still, and his mouth opened up again. Then he shuffled his feet and looked down at the floor. "I thought it was Red Hat," he whined. "He was the worst. I chased him out of my corn a dozen times, and I got sick of it. He was in the field early this week, a-trampling it down, and I told him for the last time. I didn't aim to *hit* him—just wanted to scare him a little." He gave me an up-from-under look. "Who be you Mister?"

"The law" I said. "I'll have to take your gun."

He got cagey. "Lemme see your badge?"
I didn't even have a bottle cap to show

him. I moved toward the door. "Don't leave the county," I told him. "The sheriff will want to talk to you."

He jumped to the barn doorway and stood in front of me. I didn't think he could move that fast. His big hand closed over the handle of a rusty spade leaning against the stalls. There was murder in his eyes now, and a little saliva showed at the corners of his mouth. "Gimme that gun," he said in a low voice. His face took on a sly look. "It ain't loaded, Mister."

"Get out of the way," I said.

He shouted something, and swung the spade. I side-stepped and let him have the rifle butt in his mouth. He slammed up against the stalls and rolled to the barn floor. I waited a couple of seconds, but he didn't move. I bent over him. His mouth was open, and he was breathing heavily. Blood was running down his chin. I figured that a couple more missing teeth wouldn't bother him any, and I left.

When I got back to my Ford I clicked open the bolt on the rifle and slid it back. He had been right. The chamber was empty.

IT WAS going on to eleven o'clock in the morning when I entered the office of Allgood and Winters. Peggy Rourk was not at her desk in the outer office, and I opened a door labeled *Private*. Sam Allgood was sitting behind a big desk talking into a dictating machine. When he saw me, he hung up the mouthpiece and swung around in his chair.

"Where's Peggy?" I asked.

"We gave her the day off—on account of the golf match."

I nodded. "You going out?"

"I expect to. After all, I've got to cheer for my wife." He laughed. His fleshy white face had a pasty look, and there were tiny red spider webs in his eyes. "How are you making out?"

"It was the farmer," I said.

He frowned. "Are you sure?"

"He just admitted it," I said. "I've got his gun. I can check the slugs against the rifling—if you want me to."

He moved a hand impatiently. "No, no. It was his idea of a joke, I suppose. I just wanted to be sure. Kind of a crackpot, isn't he?"

"He's nuts," I said.

He hesitated, said, "Well—" and took a

thick wallet from his inside coat pocket—"how much do I owe you?"

"Put your money away," I said. "You'll get a bill from Cleveland. You'll have to pay for today anyhow, and I think I'll stick around."

"Why?" he asked.

"Well, for one thing, I want to see that golf match. And for another thing, somebody got into my car at the club last night, went through my bag, and stole a gun."

He thought about that for a second. Then he said: "Just some petty thief."

"At the Wheatville Country Club?" I asked, raising my eyebrows.

He flushed. "We can't put up a steel fence and station armed guards around it, you know."

"If it was just a common thief," I said, "why didn't he just take my bag and done with it? By the way, the price of the gun—it was a Smith and Wesson .38—will be on your bill."

"All right," he said coldly. "If you want to hang around town, I can't stop you. But I want it understood that you are no longer in my employ."

I moved to the door and lit a cigarette. "Feel like telling me what you really hired me for?" I asked.

There was a bleak look in his eyes. "I've learned what I wanted to know, Bennett. Good-by."

I went to the Beaver's Lodge for lunch. The doorkeeper didn't remember me, and I had to go through the whole routine again. But I had a good lunch and met a brother from Cleveland who insisted on buying me more Manhattans than I wanted. Afterwards, I drove out to Sam Allgood's house and rang the bell.

A fat girl with thick glasses came to the door and told me that neither Mr. nor Mrs. Allgood was at home. I told her about my bag, and she let me get it, and then I went back down town and snagged a room at the local hotel. It was a quarter of one in the afternoon by that time, and I drove out to the Wheatville Country Club.

The first person I saw was Peggy Rourk. She was getting out of her battered blue convertible.

"Hello, Mr. Simpson," she said. Her small round face had a tense look about it, and she seemed nervous. "Golly, but I'm scared."

I patted her cheek. "Just keep your head down and swing easy."

She looked up at me, and there was a soft look in her eyes. "Thanks—that's what Red always used to say." She shouldered her clubs and moved away.

I shook my hands above my head at her, and then I went over to the club house. I found Bert Winters and Sam Allgood in the locker room. They were sitting around a table with a couple of other men and they were working on a bottle of bourbon. Winters introduced me to the rest, and I had a drink. The sleek-haired Rogan came in with more ice. I noticed that his lower lip was swollen and bruised looking. Bert Winters kidded him about it. "What's the matter, Al? Walk into a door?"

Rogan smiled stiffly. "Yes, Sir," he said, and hurried out.

In a few minutes we went out to the first tee. There was quite a crowd gathering for the play-off, and a couple of guys were stringing ropes from the tee and out along the fairway. Katherine Allgood came up to us. She was cheerful and gay, and was waving and speaking to everyone. Peggy Rourk stood off by herself and took slow practice swings with a driver.

A two-door sedan wheeled up the drive and stopped in front of the club house. I recognized the Cleveland license and walked over. Pete Gordon got out, and we shook hands. He was a little, sandy-haired guy with freckles, a short nose and thick dark-rimmed glasses. He was dressed in a gray tweed sport coat and pale blue slacks.

"Just in time, Pete," I said. "The battle of the century is about to begin."

"Where's the drink you promised me?" Like a lot of little men, Pete had a perpetual belligerent look about him.

"Later," I said. "They're teeing off. Come on."

The little reporter trotted at my heels. "Damn you, Jim," he complained. "You double-crossed me. I drive like a demon to get here, and you ain't even got a drink for me."

"Shush," I said.

The crowd was banked tight around the first tee, and Pete and I had to go down to the end of the line along the fairway. I didn't see anything of Sam Allgood or Bert Winters and his wife.

Peggy Rourk drove first, a neat little two-

hundred push straight down the middle. Katherine Allgood was right beside her, and they both holed out in par. Then it was neck-and-neck until the seventh, when Peggy holed a thirty-foot putt. After that, Katherine Allgood began to waver. Peggy was three strokes up at the end of the first nine.

On the thirteenth, Peggy holed an approach shot, and she was five up. The crowd began to murmur.

Pete Gordon muttered: "It's in the bag. That little gal's got championship stuff in her."

It stayed that way until the seventeenth hole. I was standing close to the tee when it happened. I saw Katherine Allgood lean towards Peggy Rourk and say in a low voice:

"I'm not worried, dear. This is about where Red cracked in the Open."

I saw Peggy Rourk go pale. She bit her lower lip, and her eyes filled with tears. Katherine Allgood laughed gayly and stepped up to her ball. She smacked out a sizzling two-hundred-and-twenty yarder. Peggy sliced her drive into the woods, and she had to play out from high grass. Her approach was short of the green, and Katherine Allgood picked up a stroke. The crowd began to murmur louder.

Pete Gordon said softly: "It's a damn shame."

I shot him a quick look. "Did you hear it too?"

He nodded. "Yeah. That was dirty. Who is that black-haired—?"

"Katherine Allgood. Peggy works for her husband."

"I see," Pete said. "She can't let the hired help beat her."

It was brutal after that. Peggy Rourk fought for control, but she couldn't quite make it. And twice more I saw Katherine Allgood lean down and speak to the little, brown-haired girl. I was glad when it was over. Katherine Allgood holed out on the eighteenth two up on Peggy Rourk.

For the first time since before the match I spotted Sam Allgood. He was kissing his wife. I grabbed Pete's arm and pointed. "Do you know that guy?"

Pete squinted through his thick glasses. "Hell, yes," he said. "He's the guy I was telling you about—the one who fouled up Red Rourk in the Open."

"The husband of the winnah," I said. Pete spat on the ground and looked disgusted. "I might have known," he said. "A family custom."

CHAPTER FIVE

Rough Stuff's No Good

THERE was a dance at the Wheatville Country Club that night, and Bert Winters invited Pete and me. I thanked him, and told him that I would probably be heading back for Cleveland. In the early evening I drove Pete Gordon out to Peggy Rourk's house. It was a little place on the edge of town with a chicken coop in back, a small garden, a neat lawn and a garage. Peggy was in the back yard feeding the chickens. I introduced her to Pete, and she smiled.

"You played a great game today, Miss Rourk," Pete said, very politely. He was trying to conceal the fact that he had consumed seven Scotch-and-sodas since the match. "You should have won."

"The best golfer won," Peggy said, still trying to smile.

"Like hell," Pete said. "Pardon me. Like heck."

"Mr. Gordon would like to talk to you a little," I said to Peggy.

"What about?"

"About Red," I said gently. "And about the Midwest Open."

She looked at me uncertainly. "But, Mr. Simpson—"

"Simpson?" Pete said.

"Shut up," I said, and I turned back to Peggy. "Mr. Gordon is a Cleveland sports writer, and he knows why your father lost the match to the Alabama Kid. He knows the truth, and he wants to tell the world about it. But he needs your help."

Her little chin came up. "Come in," she said quietly.

We followed her to the house and into a small parlor. It was very neat and clean and attractively furnished. On a stand in a silver frame was an enlarged snapshot of a laughing slender man with a golf club in his hand.

"Mother isn't here right now," Peggy Rourk said. She hesitated. "I'm—I'm glad she isn't. Excuse me a minute." She left the room.

"Act sober," I said to Pete.

He looked at me and screwed his freckled face up into one big wink.

Peggy Rourk reappeared with an envelope in her hand. She handed the envelope to me. Across its face was written in wavering penciled words: *For Mary and Peggy.*

"Read it," Peggy said. She stood in the middle of the room. Her little boy's face was pale, and her small hands were clenched into fists at her sides.

I took out a single sheet of paper. Black engraving across the top read: *Erie Isles Country Club, Cleveland, Ohio.* There was a penciled date—"7-8-46"—followed by the same wavering scrawl. I read, and Pete looked over my shoulder.

Dearest Wife & Daughter,

I feel pretty bad—you know. Already they are saying that I threw the match—you two know better. S. Allgood offered me \$5,000 to throw it to the Kid. I said, "No." He said I would lose my job at the Club, if I didn't. I was worried, but I kept my head down and swung easy. On the 17th, Allgood said, "You're through, Red, don't forget that," and I told him to go to H. But right then I got that pain—you know—and I began to shake and I missed that putt. . . . I just wanted you two to know why. Peggy, take care of Mary—chins up.

Red

Pete Gordon blew his nose. "The dirty—" he said in a low voice.

Peggy looked at him.

"He means Allgood," I said to her. "How long have you known this?"

"Since Monday," she said. "Mother found it in the bottom of the ball pouch of his golf bag. We—we hadn't looked at his clubs since he died. He wrote it in the clubhouse right after the match—shortly before he died. It—it was his heart. We didn't want him to enter the Open, but he kidded us and said he was going to win it for Mother and me. . . ." She turned away and looked out the window.

Pete Gordon said: "I'll plaster it all over the sport page."

She turned, and there were tears streaming down her face. "I—I couldn't help it today. When—when she mentioned Red, I couldn't think of anything else. . . ."

Pete Gordon said, "Yeah. I know. Can I print it? About your dad, I mean?"

"Yes," she said.

"Peggy," I said, "are you going to the dance tonight?"

She laughed. It wasn't pleasant to hear so little and so young a girl laugh like that. "And have Mrs. Allgood pat me on the head and call me 'dear?' No, thanks. Besides, the boys I know don't belong to the club."

"I'll take you," Pete said quickly.

She smiled at him. "That's nice of you. But I'd rather not."

I thought of something. "If this story is printed, how will it affect you—and your job? After all, you're working for Sam Allgood."

Pete said: "I won't use names—except Red's—but, by dam', I ought to."

But I was watching Peggy. Her small round face went white, and there was a sudden flame in her eyes. "*Allgood*," she whispered, as if to herself. "*He—killed—Red.*" She turned away from us.

"Now, now, Peggy," I said lamely. "Don't feel that way about it."

She covered her face with her hands. "I'll—I'll get another job," she said in a choked voice. "Mr.—Mr. Winters is kind—and nice. But Mr. Allgood—he laughs, in a certain way. And when Mr. Winters is gone, he—he touches me. . . . *I hate him. . . .*"

I looked at Pete. The reporter's lips formed unmistakable words. I nodded agreement, and jerked my head towards the door. Pete stood up and placed a hand on the girl's shoulder. "How about going to that dance with me?" he asked softly.

She shook her head violently without looking at us.

Pete and I left. As I backed the Ford out of the driveway, Pete said: "Let's get a drink."

"Right," I said.

WE DROVE back down to the center of town, had a couple of Manhattans followed by dinner in the Wheatville Hotel's dining room. Afterwards, Pete climbed into his car and headed for Cleveland. He said he had a midnight deadline to make, and that the Rourk story would break in Monday's paper. I bought some magazines and sat around the lobby for a while. But I was restless. All of a sudden I decided to go out to the Wheatville Country Club and see what was going on.

The place was lit up like a Hollywood

premiere, and I had to wheel my Ford the hell-and-gone down the drive before I found a parking place. I walked back to the clubhouse and climbed the porch steps. The place was swarming with people, and I shouldered my way to an improvised bar set up in the ball room facing the lake. Nobody stopped me to ask for an engraved invitation, and I grinned to myself as I contrasted my old blue suit with the draped white dinner jackets and the filmy summer dresses with a dime's worth of lace above the waist.

I had struggled halfway across the dance floor when a woman's voice shrieked in my ear: "Mr. Simpson!"

I had to think twice before I turned. Lily Winters was close beside me. She was wearing a black dress with a narrow V-neck cut to her stomach with a couple of black threads for shoulder straps. Her tawny hair hung in long folds over her shoulders with a straight-cut bob over her forehead. She was dancing with Sam Allgood, and he was slightly boiled. Allgood smirked at me, and tried to lead her away. But she wouldn't be led. She jerked free from Allgood's clutch and grasped my arm with both hands.

"You look awfully sober," she shouted at me. "How about a drink?"

"Sure," I shouted back at her.

She threw back her head and laughed. Then she pulled me towards the bar. Allgood trailed along behind with murder in his eyes.

"I thought you had left town, Bennett," he muttered in my ear.

"You're being charged for today," I said.

"I thought I'd give you your money's worth."

We reached the bar and Lily elbowed a

space clear for us. Three bartenders were working like madmen. I finally got a bourbon and soda. At least it was something liquid and amber-colored in a small glass with an ice cube. I cuddled it in both hands and tried to gulp it down before it was splattered on the ceiling.

"To hell with this," Lily Winters shouted in my ear. "Come on!"

She grabbed my arm with both hands and pulled me away from the makeshift bar barricaded by a screaming horde of people and led me back across the dance floor. Sam Allgood sullenly followed us. We emerged into a cleared space in the foyer beyond the dance floor and entered the locker rooms.

Lily went straight to a locker with a brass-bound card bearing her typewritten name. She took a small ring of keys from a tiny sequin bag and unlocked the door.


"I'm supposed to keep golf clubs in here," she said over her naked shoulder, "but I use it mostly for guns—and Scotch." She stooped down and took out a square bottle half full of whiskey.

I peered over her shoulder into the locker. There was a junior-size leather golf bag complete with assorted chromium-plated clubs leaning in a corner. Beside it stood a fancy .22 bolt action rifle with a tooled stock and fitted with a telescope sight. On the floor of the locker were three boxes of .22 long rifle cartridges.

Sam Allgood, standing behind me, said: "Ugly things—guns."

Lily Winters laughed and held the bottle over her head. She swayed her neat hips in the tight fitting black gown and hummed a few bars of a rhumba. Allgood leaned against a locker and watched her. He was almost drooling.

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"Rogan!" Lily shouted.

The locker room attendant appeared from somewhere. His lip was still swollen.

"Set-ups, handsome," Lily said to him.

Rogan nodded and retreated. He was back almost instantly with a tray of ice, glasses and soda. He was carrying an extra quart bottle of soda in his hand. As he leaned forward to place the tray on the table, the heavy bottle fell from his hand. It landed squarely on my right foot, across the toes. It hurt.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Sir," he said instantly. He stooped to pick up the bottle.

I looked down at the top of his sleek blond head and I wanted to kick him in the teeth. Looking down at him, I said: "How did you hurt your lip, Rogan?"

He straightened slowly and put the bottle on the table. His face was red, but carefully composed. He didn't say anything.

Sam Allgood laughed. "Did her husband come home too early, Rogan?"

Rogan managed a tight grin. He didn't look at me. "Yes, Sir," he said. "That must be it." He went out.

"My foot hurts," I said.

Lily handed me a glass. It was about two-thirds whiskey and one-third soda. "That'll fix you up," she said.

The locker room door swung open. Katherine Allgood and Bert Winters came in together.

"What a cozy little party," Katherine Allgood said. She was looking at Lily and Sam Allgood.

"And with my liquor, too," Bert Winters said.

"It was in my locker," Lily Winters said.

Bert Winters took the bottle from her hand. "Well," he said, "it's Saturday night, and I've gotta get drunk. Lord, how I dread it."

Sam Allgood took Lily Winters' arm and pulled her towards the door. "Come on, Lil," he said. "The party's lost it's class." The two of them went out into the din of the dance floor. Lily was swaying her hips and snapping her fingers.

Katherine Allgood seemed to notice me for the first time. "I thought you had left town."

"I couldn't miss this party," I said.

"Did you see the match this afternoon?" she asked.

"Yes. I saw it."

"I won, you know."

"Congratulations," I said.

She looked at me coolly. "You're not very convincing."

"I'm sorry."

She turned abruptly away from me and poured whiskey into a glass. With her face averted, she said in an unsteady voice: "All right, Mr.-Simpson-from-Cleveland. It was a dirty thing to do. But I won."

"That's all that counts," I said.

Bert Winters had been leaning his long frame against a locker and slowly drinking a highball. He winked at me, and said to the girl: "You played beautifully this afternoon, Kate."

She moved close beside him and took his arm. "Thanks, Bert. Shall we go find Lily and Sam?"

He grinned down at her. "Let 'em go. They're old enough." He raised his eyes to me. "How about some golf in the morning, Simpson?"

The invitation surprised me, but I had nothing better to—except sleep. I didn't intend to return to Cleveland until after lunch. "Thanks," I said. "Can you furnish me some shoes and clubs?"

"Sure," he said. "About seven-thirty?"

I smiled. "You really meant 'early,' didn't you?"

"That's the best time on Sundays—before the course gets cluttered. I'll pick you up."

"At the hotel," I said. "I moved."

He smiled. "So I understand."

Katherine Allgood pulled him away then, and I was left to drink alone. I was taking a last swallow when Rogan poked his head around the corner of a locker.

"Boo," I said to him.

He pulled his head back quickly.

"Hey," I said. "Come here." I jumped forward and grabbed him by the back of his white jacket. He struggled briefly, and then stood still. He turned to face me and there was hate in his eyes.

"Sonny," I said, "why didn't you just take my bag and be done with it?"

"What do you mean, Sir?"

I sighed and gathered the front of his jacket in my fist. He stood very still and kept his gaze on the points of my collar. "Tell me about it," I told him.

He didn't say anything. Only the corners of his mouth twitched.

I slapped him across the cheek.

He began to tremble a little, but he didn't raise his eyes above my chin. I slapped him again, and he turned his head sideways, kept it that way. I waited.

"May I go, Sir?" he said.

My toes still ached, but I pushed him away from me. He turned silently and walked down the corridor. I had a bad taste in my mouth. That hard-boiled stuff never did get me any place.

I shouldered my way through the crowd on the porch and went down the drive to the Ford. I didn't see anything of the Allgood or Winters families.

Before I went to sleep that night, a soft summer rain began to fall.

CHAPTER SIX

No Deal, Killer!

AT SEVEN-THIRTY-TWO in the morning Bert Winters' black coupe stopped in front of the hotel. I was sitting in the windows of the lobby reading the Sunday comics. As I got in beside him, I said, "I didn't think you'd make it—after that party last night."

He smiled. "I didn't stay so late. I like to drink, but not all night. Besides, I wanted to talk to you. I didn't have a chance last night."

"All right," I said. "Go ahead."

Winter swung the Buick left at the courthouse. He was freshly shaven, and his blond mustache glistened red in the morning sunlight. He was wearing a gray flannel suit, a crisp white shirt and blue polka-dot tie.

He asked: "What kind of trouble is Sam in?"

"Why do you think he's in trouble?" I asked.

He looked sideways at me and showed his even white teeth in a grin. "Because I know that you are a private detective, and that your name is not George Simpson—as Sam told us. Your name is James T. Bennett."

"I knew I should have brought along my false whiskers and putty nose," I said.

He laughed. "That wouldn't have helped. Peggy Rourk told me. She said that the Beaver Lodge card you showed her yesterday morning was made out to James T. Bennett."

"We'll hire her," I said. "How much you paying her?"

"Peggy's a good girl," he said seriously. "After Sam introduced you as George Simpson, I got a little curious and I checked with a man I know in Cleveland. I found out all about you. I hope you don't mind?"

"I'm mortified," I said.

He laughed again. "Don't be. Lawyers do things like that. Sam apparently hired you for some reason, and it worries me. After all, he's my partner. And he hasn't been acting right lately—as if he had something on his mind. Feel like telling me about it?"

"It's kind of silly," I said, and I told him about the farmer, Fassler, and the shooting on number six hole.

When I had finished, he nodded slowly. "Yes, a thing like that would worry Sam. As a matter of fact, he told me about it and asked me not to mention it. But there must be something else."

"That's what I thought," I said, "but he wouldn't tell me. I cornered the farmer, and he admitted shooting at Allgood—to scare him. When I told Allgood, he seemed satisfied and fired me."

"Fassler's kind of a nut," Winters said. "Is Sam going to prefer charges against him?"

"He didn't say anything about it," I said.

Winters braked and turned into the drive of the Wheatville Country Club. We parked in the drive in front of the clubhouse. The place was deserted. Winters took a key from his pocket and unlocked the club house door. "Want to come in?" he asked me over his shoulder.

I shook my head. I sat in the car and smoked a cigarette. The sun was coming up over a distant woods and it glistened on the wet grass of the green fairways. I thought about a lot of things. I felt a little sorry for Bert Winters—he seemed like too nice a guy to have a fast-stepping babe like Lily for a wife, and a cheating partner like Sam Allgood.

And I felt sorry for little Peggy Rourk, and I hoped that Pete Gordon would do a good job on his story about her father, and I wondered if she would continue to work for the firm of Allgood and Winters, feeling as she did about Sam Allgood. I didn't feel sorry for Katherine Allgood. She was the kind of a woman who would never be happy

unless she was holding four aces with the lid off the limit. I sighed and wished that I had refused Winters' invitation and stayed in bed.

Winters came out of the clubhouse carrying two golf bags and a pair of spiked shoes. He had changed his clothes and was again wearing the white terry-cloth pull-over. He handed me the shoes, and I tried them on. They were a little tight, but they would do.

"They belong to Lily's brother," Winters said. "He's about your size. Do you mind playing without a caddy? It's a little early for them."

I said I didn't mind. I left my hat and coat and tie in the car and shouldered the bag of clubs Winters had brought me. We went out to the first tee. As I drove my first ball the sun lifted clear of the woods and I decided that I was going to enjoy myself.

We were the only persons on the course. The ground was a little soggy from the rain the night before. It cut down on the roll of our drives, but it made our approaches stop dead on the greens. By the time we had finished the fourth hole, Bert Winters and I were talking together like a couple of old pals and we decided that we ought to bet a quarter a hole, with a dollar on each nine. He had a quiet easy manner about him, and he played about the same brand of Sunday golf as I did.

We holed out on the fifth green and climbed a little hill to the sixth tee. We were walking side by side, and we both saw it at the same time. A man was lying face down on the green grass of the tee. The sun glinted on the shiny steel spikes of his golf shoes. He was wearing tan gabardine slacks, and a dark green sport shirt. On the back of his head was a bright red baseball player's cap. One hand was doubled beneath him. His other arm was stretched out at his side.

Winters and I exchanged glances.

"Allgood?" I said.

He nodded. "I'd know that cap anywhere."

"Drunk?" I asked, but suddenly I knew that I was just making conversation.

"He was hitting it pretty heavy last night," Winters said. "He must have had a crazy notion to play golf." He stepped forward.

I followed him.

"Sam," Winters called.

I put a hand on Winters' arm. I had known it was coming. The feeling had started the night before. "Drunks don't flop like that," I said. "He's dead."

BERT WINTERS shook my hand away and stepped quickly forward. He knelt beside the still form of Sam Allgood. I stooped down beside him and gently turned the body over. He hadn't been dead very long—maybe an hour or two. I laid the back of my hand against his forehead, and I could still feel a little warmth.

There were two bullet holes in Sam Allgood—one under his left eye, and one just over the left breast pocket of his shirt. The holes were small, and there wasn't much blood. A number five iron lay beneath the body, and a little to the right a small red wooden tee protruded from the ground with a golf ball lying beside it. A leather golf bag was propped against the shelter house. I stood up and looked around. On the edge of the tee was a white-painted arrow, upon which was printed in black letters: *No. 6, 170 yds., Par 3.*

"Well," I said aloud, "he's one under."

Winters looked up at me. "What?"

"Only two shots in him," I said. "It's a par three hole."

Winters stood up. "That's not funny, Bennett."

"Sorry," I said.

He lit a cigarette with an unsteady hand. "All right," he said harshly. "You're the big town dick—what do we do now?"

I looked across the fence at the buildings of the Fassler farm. I saw a telephone wire leading from the highway into the house. "You stay here," I said to Winters. "I'm going to see a man."

His eyes followed my gaze, and he nodded grimly. I walked away from him.

It was eight thirty of a Sunday morning. As I climbed the fence I heard cows mooring in the barn, and a collie barked at me from his place in the sun on the back porch. I walked around to the front of the house and pounded on the front door. I pounded long and hard, and I was still pounding when the door was jerked open.

A woman in a long flannel nightgown peered out at me. She was maybe thirty, but she looked forty, and her long tangled hair was beginning to gray. She had proba-

bly been a rather pretty girl once, but the wind and the sun and the lack of dental care had changed all of that. "Well, she said, "bring him in."

"I haven't got him," I said. "I'm looking for him."

She squinted up at me. "And who are you?"

"Mrs. Fassler," I said, "I'm afraid your husband is in trouble. Where is he?"

"Is it about that shooting of his? I told him, and I told him—" She stopped abruptly and folded her arms. The heavy nightgown very effectively concealed the lines of her body, but the bones of her face were good, and I wondered what circumstances had prompted her to marry a lout like Len Fassler.

"He isn't home—you don't know where he is, then?" I said.

She shook her head. "He went to town right after supper last night, and I ain't seen him since."

"All right," I said. "May I use your phone?"

"We ain't—" she began, and then she saw me glance at the wires slanting in over the porch. She stepped aside and pushed a lock of hair from her eyes. "It's on the radio," she said wearily.

I stepped inside. There was a big coal stove in the middle of the room, and a large old-fashioned cabinet radio in a corner with the telephone on top of it. I called the Wheatville Police Department. A sleepy voice answered, and I told the voice who I was, where I was, and what had happened.

"Pick up a farmer named Len Fassler," I said. "Lives out here by the golf club. He went to town last night, and hasn't come home yet. Check your liquor joints." I hung up before the cop on the phone had a chance to argue with me.

I heard a shrill sound behind me. The woman in the nightgown was sitting by the cold stove with her face in her hands. She was sobbing like a child sobs—spasmodically, holding her breath. The heels of her bare feet were resting on the lower rung of the chair. Her toe-nails had chipped red lacquer on them.

"Good-bye, Mrs. Fassler," I said. She didn't answer me, and I left. As I closed the door, I could still hear the sound of her sobbing.

I found Bert Williams leaning against

the sunny side of the shelter house behind the tee. A few flies were buzzing around Sam Allgood's head, and I shooed them away with my hand as I walked past. Winters looked a question at me.

"He's on a drunk," I said. "I put the cops on his tail. They ought to be out here pretty quick."

He nodded silently. I lit a cigarette and moved over to Allgood's body. His eyes were half open, and the pupil of his left eye was turned slightly in towards his nose. I looked at the little red wooden tee with the golf ball lying beside it, and at the steel shafted club with the pigskin grip. The polished head glittered in the morning sun.

"He was just getting ready to drive," a voice said behind me.

Bert Winters was standing at my elbow. I heard a distant squeal of brakes. A car had stopped on the highway in front of Fassler's farm, and men were walking across the road.

"Here they come," I said to Winters. "Get your answers ready."

IT WAS almost nine-thirty before Bert Winters and I were finished with the local law and were heading towards town in his Buick coupe. He hadn't changed his clothes, and was still wearing his golf shoes. I changed my shoes as we rode along.

"We've got to tell Katherine," Winters said.

"How about getting Lily—Mrs. Winters—to tell her?" I said.

"I can't," he said dismally. "She went to a skeet shoot in Toledo this morning."

"Doesn't Mrs. Allgood have any relatives in Wheatville?"

He shook his head grimly. "None that I know of. She came from up around Detroit."

"I guess you're elected," I said.

He nodded silently.

When we got into town, I told him to drop me at the hotel. He swung his head towards me. "Hell, aren't you coming?"

I shook my head. "Sorry. I've got a chore to do."

"About—Sam?"

I nodded.

He swung the car into the curb in front of the hotel and slammed on his brakes savagely. "Tell me about it sometime," he said bitterly.

I got out to the sidewalk. "Look," I said gently. "You've got quite a chore to do yourself. . . . I'll see you later."

He gave me a stiff smile. "Sorry, Bennett—I wish Lily was home." He jerked the Buick into gear and pulled away.

I went around the block, unlocked my Ford, and drove out to Peggy Rourk's house. A pleasant-faced, middle-aged woman answered my knock. She told me that Peggy had gone to Sunday school, was staying for church, and that she would be home around twelve o'clock. I asked her what church, and she said: "St. Paul's, on Sandusky Avenue."

I thanked her, and started to leave. She stopped me. "Aren't you Mr. Simpson?"

"Yes."

"Peggy told me about you—and Mr. Gordon. I want to thank you . . . it means a lot to Peggy and me. . . ."

"Thank Mr. Gordon," I said "It should be in the paper tomorrow."

Her eyes began to wet, and I left. I felt like the champion heel of the world. But that didn't stop me from driving down Sandusky Avenue past St. Paul's Church.

A blue 1937 Ford convertible was parked out in front. I looked at my wrist watch. Ten o'clock. I had two hours to wait—unless I wanted to crash a church service. I decided I'd better get a cup of coffee.

I wasted maybe twenty minutes at a lunch counter drinking coffee and reading the Sunday papers. Then I began to get jittery. I went back to the hotel and sat in the window of the lobby and looked up and down the quiet Sunday streets. After a while, the desk clerk came up to me, "You're wanted on the telephone, Mr. Bennett."

It was Bert Winters. He sounded tired. "Come on over, Bennett," he said. "I've got Katherine here—she's in pretty bad shape. Lily isn't back yet, and I've got to talk to somebody."

I looked at my watch. It was still forty-five minutes before twelve o'clock noon. "All right," I said.

He met me at the door. He was still wearing his golfing clothes, but he had changed his spiked shoes for soft leather house slippers. He had a half-finished highball in his hand. The morning sun lighted up the deep maroon of the rugs and the

blonde maple furnishings of his house. I thought: *his wife designed this room to match her hair.*

"Katherine's upstairs," he said in a low voice. "She's taking it pretty hard. Sam may have had his faults, but I guess she loved him, all right. Katharine's a funny girl—it's all or nothing with her. I've phoned her folks in Detroit. Sam's folks are all dead, except a married sister in East Liverpool. I wired her." He sighed heavily.

"What kind of faults?" I asked. "Sam, I mean?"

He shrugged his lean shoulders. "Sam was human."

From up the stairway I heard a low sobbing wail. Then silence.

"You got in touch with your wife?" I asked.

"Yes, finally. She's on her way home." He moved across the room to a mahogany cabinet. "What will you have to drink?"

"Anything," I said, and I meant it. I looked at my watch. Church would be out in thirty minutes. I sat down.

Winters opened the doors of the cabinet and said over his shoulder: "Scotch all right?"

"Fine," I said absently, watching him. His lean flat back was towards me. There was a dried smear of mud on the left elbow of his white pull-over. I leaned back in my chair and sighed wearily. This was the way it always is. I had just begun to like this tall, quiet-spoken lawyer.

I said: "Was Sam dead before you shot him?"

For maybe three seconds there was absolute quiet in the room. Bert Winters stood very quietly at the liquor cabinet, his tall body very still. And then, with his face averted, he said quietly: "Yes."

I knew he would say it. I knew that he would not protest and scream his innocence. In a way, it was a hell of a rotten deal for Bert Winters.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I really am. Up until a minute ago I had other ideas about Sam's murder. But I just saw that mud on your elbow. Let's see—you were lying flat on number seven tee, a hundred and seventy yards away, when you shot him. It rained last night, and you got mud on the left elbow of your sweater because you supported the gun with your left arm.

"You used that .22 telescope job of your wife's which she kept in her locker. You carried Sam to number six tee and propped him up against the shelter house. Then you went down the fairway to number seven tee, opposite Farmer Fassler's house, and pumped two slugs into Sam. After that, you laid him out on the tee and planted the golf club, the ball and the little wooden tee. You wore your golfing clothes, in case anyone should be around and see you on the course.

"You went back to the clubhouse, changed your clothes, went home, cleaned up, and then picked me up. You figured that if someone was with you, especially a private detective, it would help to throw suspicion off of you. Isn't that about right, Winters?"

His back was still towards me. He poured whiskey into a tall glass and reached for a soda syphon. "Yes," he said quietly. "That's about right—but how did you know that I carried Sam out to the tee?"

"Because you're the only one big enough to handle him, for one thing," I said. "Sam was dead before you shot him. You got his golfing clothes and clubs from the locker room, changed his clothes, put his spiked shoes on him, probably took him in your car to the road which runs past the Fassler place, and carried Sam to number six tee, where you knew the farmer had shot at Sam before.

"I know that somebody had carried him there, because the spikes on the soles of his golf shoes were clean and shiny—if he had walked under his own power there would have been mud, or at least wet grass, clinging to the spikes. It rained last night, you know."

"All right," Winters said. He was still facing the liquor cabinet. "You're doing pretty good. But there is just a minor matter you seemed to have overlooked. Why did I kill him?"

"Because of your wife, Lily," I said, watching him. His face was turned slightly, and I got a quarter view of his lean profile. "You knew about her and Allgood—you probably knew it for a long time, and you couldn't stand it any longer. How did you kill him?"

BERT WINTERS turned all the way around then, and he faced me. He had a blue steel Smith and Wesson .38 revolver in his hand. I recognized it as my gun—the one which had been taken from my bag. He must have had it hidden in the liquor cabinet.

"Don't move, Bennett," he said in a flat voice. "I'm a lawyer, and I know what I'm up against. In Ohio it's the chair, and they can only burn me once. I was beginning to like you—"

"Put that gun away," I said. "We ought to be able to figure something out."



"TOO MEAN TO DIE"



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He laughed harshly. "Stick to snooping, Bennett. I know what they'll do to me. I killed Sam because I hated him. I've hated him for a long time. It wasn't only because of Lily—she was only one of them. I don't blame Lily too much—she isn't very bright. But I love her. Last night she left the party with Sam. I followed them here—to my house. They came in, and they were in here a long time, with the lights out. I waited. I was ninety years old before the door opened and Sam came out. I was standing beside the door, and I had a lug wrench in my hand.

"I spoke to Sam, and he began to shake, and I saw the look on his face. I hit him. He flopped to the sidewalk. I knew he was dead. I carried him to my car. That was just before dawn. I took him out to the club, changed his clothes, carried him out to number six tee and propped him up against the wall of the shelter house. Then I went over to number seven tee and waited for daylight. Then I shot him with Lily's gun, and—well, I guess you know the rest by now."

"You wanted it to appear that it was Fassler, the half-wit farmer?"

He nodded grimly. "If I could get away with it."

"Did you hire Rogan to search my car?" I asked.

He nodded again. "After I found out who you were, I was curious to know why Sam had hired you. I thought maybe I could find out something from your belongings—a letter, maybe. But all Rogan brought me was your gun. This gun." He moved the barrel in a half circle and brought it back toward me.

"You should have asked me," I said. "Sam Allgood hired me because he had a guilty conscience. He suspected that it was the farmer who was shooting at him, but he wasn't sure. He was afraid that it might be you. Guys who are chasing other men's wives get funny ideas. He was worried, and he hired me—if only to find out for sure that it was the farmer."

Winters said: "Any use in talking a deal? I can pin it on the farmer—if you'll help."

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

"Would, say, twenty thousand help?"

"Don't make it tough for me, Winters," I said.

"All right," he said wearily. With his left hand he reached behind him to the liquor cabinet, picked up one of the two highballs there, and placed it on a table between us. "Drink that, Bennett. I'm walking out the front door and I'm going to get in my car and I'm going to drive away."

"No," I said.

"Yes," he said, and I saw his teeth gleam with sudden desperation beneath his neat yellow mustache.

I got slowly out of my chair and moved across the room to a small desk along the wall. There was a telephone on the desk, and a spindly-legged chair with a needle-point seat beside it. I put one hand on the phone, and the other on the back of the chair. I lifted the phone from its cradle, and Winters steadied the gun.

"Put that gun away," I said.

"Dammit, Bennett," he said in a ragged voice.

I flung the chair at him. It struck his knees, and in the same instant the gun exploded and the bullet zinged past my head. I ducked low and jumped for him. He was tangled in the chair, and I jerked the gun from his grasp. He stumbled, and fell over the chair. He rolled over and lay on the rug, his face resting on an outflung arm, like a man going to sleep. He didn't try to get up.

I backed towards the telephone. I heard a slight sound, and I looked up. Katherine Allgood stood in the doorway. Her face was the color of dirty snow, and her gray eyes looked almost black. I heard a car door slam, and through the French windows I saw Lily Winters hurrying up the drive.

The house was very still, and from half a mile away I heard the courthouse clock striking twelve times. Church would be out, and Peggy Rourk was probably climbing into her blue Ford convertible, heading for home.

"I've got to call the police," I said to Bert Winters.

He spoke with his mouth against the rug. The words were muffled. "Go ahead," he said.

Katherine Allgood leaned on the stair railing and began to sob.

A REDHEADED CLUE

By **KEN GREENE**



He ordered: "Get moving.
We're going places. . . ."

I WAS walking along Penn Square when this girl spoke to me. I'd just come out of the Golden Tavern and it was maybe eleven twenty of a nice Tuesday night early in May. I remember the air was full of those disturbing spring perfumes that made a young man's fancy turn, to quote the old gag, to what the girls had been thinking about all winter. I remem-

When the luscious redhead picked me up, I never figured on a one-way ride to the sizzle-seat!

ber, too, that I was thinking about something much more serious. I'd been bending the elbow with Joe Matuszak and Larry Harding and envying them to pieces.

Joe had three thousand, and Larry had a grand. They were going to open up a little men's clothing shop next week and they wished I could come in with them on the deal. I needed at least a grand—and there was only \$320 in my bank account. So that was out of the question. I was walking along feeling sorry for myself when I saw this car at the curb.

It was a long shiny dark-green convertible with the top down, a dream buggy. While I was eating my heart out staring at this sleek auto, a redhead stuck her head out of the car.

"Got a match, Mister?" she called. Between two slim red-nailed fingers she held a cigarette.

Aware that she was something special, I strode over to her and struck a light. When I held the flame to her cigarette I got a whiff of her perfume. It was heady, exciting stuff and quite beyond my wallet.

"Got it?" I asked. My heart was beating rather fast.

From her full red mouth came a cloud of smoke which formed into a smoke ring. While I watched it in fascination the car door swung open.

"Get in," she said.

I did a double take and wondered if she was kidding. Then I saw the automatic in her hand. It was a pearl-handled weapon, a .25 calibre pistol, small but deadly. It was pointed at my stomach and she wasn't smiling. I got in.

"You drive," she said in a voice as crisp as fresh potato chips. "Crawl over me and no tricks. I'd hate to put any holes in you."

I just stared at her, unable to believe my ears. She had burning dark eyes and a small pointed nose, upturned just enough to give her that snooty appearance. She seemed to be about 25, with a sophisticated upsweep, and the outfit she was wearing hadn't been picked up in any bargain basement. It was a smooth two-tone affair, orange and green, with half-sleeves and square at the neck. It looked good on her, but then she wouldn't have looked so bad even in a burlap bag.

She jabbed the gun into my back. "Move!"

I moved.

She motioned down Penn St. and I tooled the machine in that direction. It was smooth riding only I wasn't enjoying myself. "Look, Red," I said, "I don't like to seem nosy but would you mind telling me what the hell this is all about, and where I come in?"

"Shut up," she said.

So we rode out of the city and into the suburbs. In the open country I tried to engage her in conversation, but it didn't take. Finally she had me turn left off the macadam onto a dirt road containing a wooden sign at the turning: *Hampden Road*. There was nothing but fields on both sides of this dusty road and about a quarter-mile back it dead-ended in an unworked stone quarry, which our headlights picked up fifty yards yonder.

"Stop here," she said, while we were still a good piece from the quarry.

While I braked the car she reached behind herself and brought forth a bulging brown paper bag.

"See that boulder?"

I saw it, about thirty yards right oblique, off the road, down in a hollow surrounded by tall weeds. It was a big round rock about my height. I nodded.

She said: "Go down there and stand on this side of it. Then do what you're told." She handed me the bag.

I looked inside. It was stuffed with greenbacks in packets of tens and twenties.

"Holy smoke," I gasped. It was a lot of dough in my league. Thousands of bucks. "Suppose I don't go," I said.

She looked at the pistol significantly. "You better go," she said quietly.

"What's this favor worth to you?" I asked.

She reached in her shiny green pocket-book and got out a bill. Holding the bill and the pistol in her left hand, her right hand crudely ripped the greenback in half. She handed me a half.

"You'll get the other when you return to the car, after the job is done."

I drew in my breath sharply when I saw the torn bill I was holding was a century note.

"Okay," I said, "Miss—?"

She didn't volunteer her name.

I got out, holding the bag, and walked down the dirt road. There wasn't much

moon. Scrambling down a three-foot embankment, I approached the boulder. The place was as creepy as a cemetery.

As soon as I reached the boulder a guy poked his head up from the other side. He had a round, weather-beaten face and his brown hair was sparse. He could have been anywhere between thirty and forty.

He growled: "Hand it over!" There was a blue-black gun in his hand.

I handed over the bag. He opened it and dropped it to the ground. Still keeping the heat on me, he fished a flash from his pocket and took a quick gander at the contents of the bag. He grunted and tossed me a package, wrapped in newspaper. It was small enough for me to have put in my trouser pocket.

"Turn around," he said.

"What for?"

He swore and I did what he asked. I heard him coming around the big rock but there was nothing I could do about it. Something hard crashed into the back of my head over the right ear. Vaguely, I could sense the earth coming up to meet me. Then everything went blank. . . .

WHEN I came to, I was alone. My head ached like the devil. I sat up and held my head in my hands and groaned. Then I got unsteadily to my feet. I looked up the road for the redhead's car. It wasn't there. I scanned the ground for a package the man had given me. That was missing too. So I started cautiously around the big rock, still wondering what this was all about. Then I stumbled over something in the rock's shadow. It was a body.

I lit a match and bent over the still figure. The face was familiar to me. It was the man who had taken the dough from me. By the light of a second match I saw that he was dead. There were two red-stained holes in his blue shirt.

He still had his gun in his right hand. A half dozen more matches convinced me that the dough wasn't there anymore. A hasty search of his pockets revealed his wallet inside his coat and I learned from his driver's license that his name was Charles S. Buck. It didn't mean anything to me. I found a newspaper clipping in his wallet. It was part of the society column, "Doings Around Town," that Daisy Pfleeger runs in the *Evening Standard*. There was no

date indicated but turning the clipping over I got that straightened out by a small filler, (Phoenix, Ariz. Apr. 19.) That was two weeks ago. It couldn't have been a year ago because the clipping bore no signs of age. An underlined sentence in the society column interested me, which had been marked with pencil and read:

Miss Janice Fairmount wore her diamond bracelet, which, rumor has it, cost her late father a cool sixteen thousand.

I folded the clipping, tucked it back into the wallet, used my handkerchief to wipe the wallet and stuck it back in his coat. Then I started the quarter-mile hike back to the main highway. There were lightning flashes in the sky and the rumble of thunder. The air had turned cooler and it was real windy. A shower seemed to be approaching.

On the highway I tried my luck thumbing a ride. Hitch-hiking is an uncertain way of getting anywhere, and it's ten times harder in the middle of the night in open country. Several dozen cars passed me in twenty minutes and I'd just about decided to trudge away from this dirt road and down the macadam when this coupe pulled up on my waving thumb.

The driver was alone, a thin guy with specs, around forty. He looked me over pretty closely and asked where I was going. I must have looked okay to him.

"Into the city," I said.

He nodded. "Hop in, son."

I got in beside him and he seemed glad for the company. I said I'd been visiting some farmer girl I knew and that I'd missed the last Wernersville to town bus. He said I was taking an awful chance of getting struck eight miles from town.

"Yeah," I said, "but it was worth it." I sighed and put what I hoped was a satisfied smirk on my pan. He chuckled and dug me in the ribs. He told me he'd been visiting his parents in Robesonia.

At Fourth and Penn I told him I'd get out, and I thanked him.

As I turned away he called to me. "Hey!"

I wheeled. "Huh?"

He said, deadpan, "Your head. It seems to be bleeding."

I felt my head. My fingers came away sticky. He was looking at me, waiting. The

light had changed to green but he was waiting to hear my explanation. I swore and grinned wryly at this thin guy. "Her old man don't like me," I said. "He lined a shoe at me."

"Oh." He drove off but I could see by his face that he wasn't entirely satisfied. It did sound fishy but it was the best thing I could think of at the time.

There was an all-night diner in the middle of the block. After I had mopped my head with my handkerchief I went in there, consulted the phone book, deposited a nickle, and dialed police headquarters.

A curt male voice answered.

Cupping my right hand to the mouth-piece so that the two young couples in the nearest booth wouldn't hear me, I said: "Get this. Hampden Road—by big rock—man murdered." And I hung up.

All the cabs were busy so I started walking. The thunder shower caught me with four blocks to go. I was drenched by the time I got home. When I went to bed, ten minutes later, the rain had stopped.

In the morning I woke up with a headache and took two aspirins. Then I called up the glove mill and told the timekeeper that I was sick as a dog and wouldn't be in today. In a way I hated to take off because I needed the money. But this half of a century note in my pocket had me interested—and if I could get the other half I'd still make a neat profit without the wear and tear of the factory.

SO AFTER breakfast I hauled my carcass down to the public library and had a glimpse at the City Directory. Miss Janice Fairmount was listed, all right. Her address was 1701 Lincoln Avenue, Vine-land Park. I had a mental picture of the neighborhood. Rambling, expensive homes, lots of lawn, ditto on shrubbery, fat checking account, servants, and a snooty attitude toward anyone who made less than \$4,000 per annum. Maybe I'd get thrown out on my ear. I didn't know but I was sure going to find out.

I took a bus out Penn Avenue and got off at the beginning of the seventeen hundreds. A two-block walk brought me up to this Fairmount shack. It was on the southwest corner, with the lawn spreading a stone's throw both ways. There was a hedge around the whole business, and the

house was set back thirty yards from the street. The ornamental iron gate was unlocked and I had no trouble getting in. As I started up the gravel driveway I noticed, in the opened garage, the sleek job I had ridden in last night. Beside it was a station wagon.

I was making tracks for the front door of this big, impressive house when a huge animal started barking belligerently, rounded a flowering dogwood tree, and came tearing toward me. It was a German shepard, a big fellow. I heisted myself into a handy cherry tree. The dog sat under the tree, growling up at me in a most menacing manner.

A dark-haired man sauntered across the lawn until he stood under the tree. He didn't say anything to the dog—and the dog kept on making ominous noises deep in its throat.

The man grinned up at me. "Rather early for cherries." He was tall and slender and dressed in an expensive blue shirt and slacks affair and wore sneakers.

"I'd like to see Janice," I said.

His grin widened. "Go right to the house." He began walking away. The huge beast started barking at me again. Ten yards away the fellow turned and yelled to make himself heard above the dog's noise, "If you wait a couple months, those sour cherries will be ripe."

"Very funny," I called.

At that moment my pal of last night's fun and frolic appeared.

"Stop, Prince!" she ordered, and slapped the animal twice on the rump. The barking gave way to growling and he kept on eyeing me hungrily. I was glad that she was there to handle him.

"Go away!" she cried, hitting him again and motioning him off. This time he went, and when I dropped to the lawn he was not in sight.

"Nice morning, Janice," I said, trying to regain a semblance of dignity.

The redhead's big green eyes looked me over coolly. "Isn't it," she said with reserve. She twirled the tennis racket in her hand, dug her left sneaker into the grass and waited for me to say something. She was wearing lemon-green shorts and a fuzzy white sweater. She looked very attractive. With considerable difficulty I managed to keep my eyes on her face.

"Could I see you alone a moment?" I asked.

She turned to the grinning lad and said, "I'll be with you in a minute, Reggie."

He flipped his hand in a salute and headed for the tennis court to the rear of the house.

"Who's the grin-and-chin boy?" I asked.

"Reggie Winslow."

The name rang a bell. I'd heard of him. He was a local playboy who went in for polo.

"Boy friend?"

Her full mouth parted in a faint smile. "You're psychic." Her intense eyes darted over my face, taking in my curly, blond hair, my slightly crooked nose I'd busted in the Marines on Iwo Jima, and my rugged chin. Her nostrils quivered a little and I had the impression that she approved of me, although I could have been mistaken. Her eyes burned into mine. "How'd you find me?"

"I'll tell you that, if you'll tell me what it's all about," I bargained.

She shook her head decisively.

I said, "Why'd you run off last night and leave me lying there?"

She swallowed. "I didn't mean to," she said, coloring. "When I got to you, I heard the shots. I got scared and grabbed the— the package and ran."

"I wonder. Maybe you killed the guy yourself."

"You know that's not true," she said heatedly. "My pistol's a twenty-five."

"So what?"

"He was killed by a .38 automatic. Besides the slugs in him, the cops found two empty .38 cartridge shells nearby. Didn't you know?"

I shook my head. "It's in the morning paper."

Admitting I hadn't seen the paper, I remembered about the clipping and said, "Then the police must have been here."

"That's right. Unfortunately I couldn't help them out," she said, looking at her racket. "I couldn't imagine why this character should be carrying a clipping with an item about me underlined."

"And the bracelet?"

"Oh, yes," she said brightly. "They wanted to see that."

"So?"

She smiled gently. "I showed it to them, of course. Now I'm afraid I'll have to go. Reggie must be getting impatient."

"One more thing. The reason I came." I dug out the torn bill. "You promised me the other half of this century note."

"And you shall have it," she said. She strode swiftly toward the house. She had a lot of hip action. In a moment she returned with the torn bill. I fitted them together and they matched. I had made myself a hundred bucks.

She stood there, watching me with that faintly amused smile on her face, and I was very conscious of her nearness, her perfume, her animal magnetism.

"Satisfied?" she asked.


It was a helluva question. Glaring at her, I wheeled, and strode away fast, down the gravel driveway. I didn't look back but I felt that her eyes were upon me, that she was watching me.

ABOUT five o'clock the paper boy tossed the *Evening Standard* on the front porch and I took it into the parlor to read. The murder case was right there on the










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front page. The thunder shower must have washed away footprints and tire tracks; for there was no mention of them. Charles Buck, the guy who had been bumped off, was a two-bit bookie.

Another fact, more interesting to me, was that a Howard Ford had reported picking up a man at Hampden Road and giving him a lift to town. The police attached special significance to Ford's statement that the pickup was made about twelve fifteen, because the coroner had declared that Buck had been killed between eleven thirty and midnight.

The police were searching for this man, the report said. I was described fairly accurately by Ford. Too damn accurately, for my own peace of mind. Immediately I began worrying that someone would associate the description with me and tip off the cops.

Just about the time I got the idea that I'd better make myself scarce until I could find some way to clear myself of being Buck's murderer—the doorbell rang. The shade was up and a guy was peering at me through the glass in the door. I felt sick in the stomach as I answered the door.

"I'm Anderson of Homicide," he said in a deep voice. He was a big blond fellow about 40, muscular and hefty. "Mind if I come in?"

I let him in, pretending that I hadn't the least idea what he was here about. He remained standing and so did I. "What do you want, Mr. Anderson?"

"Maybe you read about that murder on Hampden Road?" he asked.

"No," I lied. "I must have missed it."

"Well, a guy picked up a hitch-hiker in that vicinity," he said, "and someone had a thought that you fitted the description."

"Me, Mr. Anderson." I laughed in what I hoped was a casual manner. "There must be some mistake. I don't even have a car."

"Not the driver," he said. "The hitch-hiker."

"Oh."

"I want you to come along to headquarters," Anderson said. "The guy who made the pick-up is there. As soon as he says you're not the man—why, you can go. It's simply routine."

"Sure," I said, smiling, while a chill ran down my spine. "I have the utmost re-

spect for the police and I'll be glad to do everything I can to cooperate with you. Mind if I get my coat?"

Without waiting for his reply, I started nonchalantly up the stairs. He didn't say anything. I guess he figured there was no harm in it. Then I tiptoed down the hallway, through the back room and to the upstairs porch. I went quietly down the back stairway, through the back yard, and strode up the alley, fast.

I didn't run, feeling that that would attract undue attention to me. Once inside the burial grounds I slowed my pace. It was a big cemetery, almost like a park and I would be seen here by a minimum number of people. Also I doubted that the police would look for me here.

I realized that I'd be drawing a lot of attention to myself by running away, but what else could I do? I didn't want to be tagged for the Charlie Buck kill on circumstantial evidence and I wanted to find out more of the answers before I had any more police interviews. After all, I was in a bad spot. The Fairmount filly had played Lady Innocence for the cops' benefit so how could I tell them the truth? If I did, she would probably say she hadn't seen me before and that would blow my story to pieces.

I did a lot of thinking up there among the graves. Buck had been a two-bit bookie. There was no other lead connecting with Janice Fairmount—except Reggie Winslow, the big-grin boy. I decided to call my pals, Joe Matuszak and Larry Harding, to learn what they knew about Reggie Winslow. Leaving the cemetery, I went to a cigar-store telephone.

Larry could only offer that Reggie Winslow was polo and upper crust. But Joe had seen Reggie at the races and in the back room of the Ace of Spades, a fast-crowd club on the northern outskirts of town. I thanked Joe, and took a bus.

THE Ace of Spades barroom was blue with smoke. I ordered a drink. There was the chatter of many voices. Over in the corner a blonde in a tight blue sweater and a skinny guy in a red polka-dot bow tie and peg pants were jitterbugging to juke music. I swallowed my drink without seeing the big-grin lad.

Crowding up to the bar again, I said to

the guy dunking glasses, "Reggie Winslow around?"

"Huh?" he said. I knew he was putting it on, because no one could actually be as stupid as he looked. I'd already exchanged my century note for a pocketful of fives and tens. Pulling a ten out of my pocket, I creased it through the middle and held it loosely before me.

"I'd like to see Reggie," I said.

He jerked his head toward another room, the door of which was closed. He picked up the bill that dropped to the bar. Taking a deep breath, I strode over to the door and pushed it open.

There were three people sitting around a table. There were mixed drinks before each of them. Two of the guys I didn't know. The third tossed away his cards and said disgustedly, "No luck tonight." The speaker was Reggie Winslow. And yet there was a wad of bills on the table before him.

One of the other players, a fat guy with a scar across his cheek, looked up at me in annoyance. He took a chewed cigar out of his mouth and said, "Whaddaya want, Bud?"

I closed the door behind me. "I want to see Winslow."

"Well," said Winslow, grinning, "It's you."

"I'd like to see you alone," I said.

"These are friends of mine," he said pleasantly. "Speak your piece, my fine tree climber."

I said, "You knew Charlie Buck, the bookie, didn't you?"

"I know a lot of bookies."

"The police are trying to tie me in to the killing. It's important for me to see that the case is solved correctly."

"Or else it's your neck, eh?" His laugh was as merry as when the dog treed me.

"That's about it," I admitted, trying to hold my temper.

"So?"

"I figured that if you knew Charlie Buck you might be able to give me a lead on who could have done it. Say an enemy he had."

Reggie Winslow spread his hands. "I just wouldn't know, fella."

He turned his back on me, speaking to the fat guy. "How about a little black-jack?"

The temptation to go over and slug him was a powerful one but I fought it down. It wouldn't be wise. Three against one. I'd probably wake up in a hospital ward with a cop outside the door.

"Okay," I said. "Thanks a helluva lot. I'll do you a favor some day."

Reggie Winslow gave me a big grin. "Nice of you."

I went out, closing the door.

Back in town I stopped in at a corner cigar store and used the pay phone to give redhead Janice a buzz. A woman's voice answered and when I asked for Janice she said, "I'll see if she's home," and in a minute I was talking to Miss Fairmount.

"Who is this?" her cool, rich voice asked.

"Your chauffeur of last night."

"Well, this is a surprise."

"Look," I said, "I gotta see you. I'll be looking for you up at the Lily Pond in City Park in a half-hour. Okay?"

Silence, then faintly: "Okay."

I hung up.

* * *

It was so quiet in the dark park that I had no trouble at all hearing Janice's approaching footsteps on the macadam walk. She recognized me and gave me a little smile.

"You sounded worried," she said.

"Not a bit," I said acidly. "I love to have the cops on my trail." I told her about Lieutenant Anderson's visit. The redhead looked extremely attractive in a two-piece silk outfit of lemon-green. The quarter-sleeved top was high-necked and the flat midriff was bare. Not many girls can wear such an affair but she could and effectively.

"What am I supposed to do?" Janice asked.

"I want some answers," I said. "Good clean fun is all right but when I feel the hot breath of the law on my neck that's something else."

"Well, I don't want you to get in any trouble."

I could have shaken her. "I'm already in trouble. The thing now is to get out. Make with the answers or I'll paddle them out of you."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Oh no?" My hands roughly grabbed her waist. Her skin was smooth and warm.

She wriggled, frowning, out of my grasp.

"I—I believe you would," she gasped. "All right, I'll tell you. You've probably guessed part of it."

"The diamond bracelet."

She nodded. "It was taken from me a week ago." She paused for breath and then went on rapidly. "Reggie was taking me home from a dance at the Blue Valley Country Club. A car blocked the road and when we were forced to stop, a man took the bracelet at the point of a gun."

"Why didn't you tell the police?"

"The man warned me not to. He said if I did I'd never see the bracelet again."

"It meant that much to you?"

"Yes—sentimental value. You see, I was very fond of Dad and it was the last gift he gave me before he died. It meant a lot more to me than the eighteen thousand he had paid for it."

"I see. Did the thief say he'd get in touch with you?"

Janice nodded. "And he sent me a note telling me to bring ten thousand in tens and twenties to the big rock on Hampden Road at eleven forty Tuesday night."

"What did your mother say about that?"

"She didn't know about it. I didn't have to tell her. When Dad died I came into a good deal of money . . . Well, I asked Reggie to act as go-between but he said he had to go to Philly. I could have hired a private eye only I didn't want anyone nosing into my affairs. I preferred a stranger, whom I wouldn't ever see again. That's why I picked you up."

"Sounds logical. You say Reggie Winslow was with you when you were robbed?"

"That's right."

"And he'd taken you to the dance?"

"Sure. What are you driving at?"

"Has Reggie been holdin' heavy lately?" She frowned and I added, "I mean has he been in the chips?"

"No, he's been broke for the past several weeks. Told me he had a streak of bad luck at the tracks. Why?"

I thought of the pile of dough I'd seen in front of Winslow at the card table. And his conversation indicated he hadn't won it in that game either. Things were beginning to add up. I saw what I had to do to clear myself. And then the profit angle slipped into my mind.

"Look," I said. "I might be able to re-

cover some of your money—for a ten-percent fee. Are you interested?"

"Fair enough," she said. "But how? What are you going to do?"

"You go home. You might get hurt."

"Nothing doing. You can't shake me."

I tried to argue with her but she insisted on coming in on the deal. In a way that was good. It simplified things for me. It would be easier to get to Winslow through Janice.

"Okay," I said. "Your Reggie's at the Ace of Clubs. Call him up and tell him you've got to see him. Tell him to meet you at your place near the tennis court, at once. By the way, how are things between Reggie and you?"

"I've known him for years and years," she said, as we walked out of the park.

"Are you in love with him?"

Janice stopped and looked me straight in the eye. She came closer, a green-wrapped bundle of femininity. Her hands went behind my neck. Her kiss was laced with uranium.

"What do you think?" she asked.

A SLIGHT May breeze rustled through the maple trees flanking the south side of the tennis court. The hands on my wrist watch said ten to eleven as I heard the ornamental iron gate clank shut. I tensed. The moon was pale and there were only a scattered handful of stars.

It seemed a long time before I heard Reggie Winslow whisper hoarsely, "Janice! Where are you, kid?"

I straightened and stepped from behind a snowball bush. "Hello, Reggie."

Winslow tried to grin. "Where's Janice?"

"She isn't here," I said softly.

"What do you mean?"

"I came to see her," I said, "but when she said she was expecting you, I decided it was more important to see you—and alone. So I told her you'd sent me to ask her to come to the Ace of Clubs. She left five minutes ago."

He said something under his breath and turned to go.

I blocked his path. "Wait! I want to see you—"

"Out of my way, Mister!" he said tightly.

"—about ten thousand bucks," I said quietly, not moving, "and murder."

He took a deep breath. "Step aside—"

"No, Winslow," I said, "it's no use bluffing. I'm wise to you. You needed dough, so you arranged with Charlie Buck to heist the gal's diamond bracelet. She had told you how much it meant to her. You knew she'd pay plenty to get it back. She did, and when Charlie had the dough—you fed him lead. Beautiful, wasn't it? That way there was no split, and you silenced the only one who could finger you for the job."

I could see in the pale moonlight that he was still trying to grin. He said, "Try to get anyone to believe—that."

"I intend to," I said. "I'm going to try to get the police to believe it and you're going along."

"Think again!" He hung a healthy left hook on my cheek. It jarred my head back. Then I brought up a right from my knees. It had power and it landed solidly on his jaw. Winslow staggered back and fell.

Swearing, his hand dived under his coat. Something hard and metallic gleamed in his hand. It was an automatic pistol and it was pointed at me. He got slowly to his feet. There was no grin on his face now.

"You've stuck your nose in my business just once too often," he said softly.

I said, "So I get—what the bookie got." My knees felt wobbly and the short hairs at the back of my neck were standing on end. I was afraid. A drop of perspiration trickled down the bridge of my nose.

"Yes—" he said, gently—"and with the same gun. This time it will be down by the river."

"Not here?" I asked. "That's thoughtful of you to save Miss Fairmount disagreeable publicity."

He was grinning again, now. "The police know I'm an old friend acquaintance of the Fairmounts' chick," he said. "I might possibly be dragged into it."

"Just thinking of yourself, huh?"

"That's right, tree-climber. Janice and I are about washed up. She's a gorgeous hunk of woman but I haven't the time or the patience." He shrugged his shoulders, then ordered: "Get moving. We're going places."

I took one step—and then Janice's curt voice cut through the night:

"Drop it, Reggie!" She was behind him

and her gun was in the small of his back. Rage replaced astonishment on his face as he let his .38 fall to the ground.

"A nice pal you turned out to be," he said bitterly.

"You should talk," said she, "playing me for a sucker."

"Nice goin', Janice," I said softly. "This is curtains for Winslow—now that we've got his gun. The ballistics boys will prove that it's the same one that killed Charlie."

"Good," she said. "Start walkin'."

Instead, Reggie's elbow knocked the gun out of her hand. It took her by surprise and she only gave a little yelp as Reggie wheeled. Then he upper-cutted her to dreamland, and she crumpled to the ground and was still.

His sudden move took me by surprise, too, but by this time I was on him. We fell to the ground together. He groped for his gun and got his hand on it despite the bash in the eye I gave him. Winslow lashed the gun at my head. I ducked. It clipped me on the ear and set my head to ringing. The pain was blinding.

It stunned me for a moment, and gave him time to shift his grip and get his finger on the trigger. I had to stop him or I was a corpse. Before he could point it at me, I grasped his wrist and twisted. It was a life-and-death struggle. He was breathing heavily in my face and I could see the veins standing out on his neck, as, red-faced, he tried to get the gun free for a shot.

I pasted him one on the nose and two more in the mouth, and I took two that rattled my teeth. My next blow found his chin. It only traveled inches but it was a hard wallop. Winslow's eyes went glassy. He sagged backwards, almost out. I had no trouble taking possession of the gun.

After I revived Janice, she called the cops. I kept a gun on Winslow. Then we searched him. There was only a couple hundred on him.

"Where's the rest of it?" I demanded, threatening to give him another workout.

Winslow said it was under the front seat of his sedan parked out front and there's where I found it. We recovered ninety-one hundred altogether. He claimed he'd spent what was missing. Janice was glad to get that much back. Smiling, she handed me my \$910—just as the cops arrived.

(Please continue on page 59)

MARRIED TO MURDER

*Kermit Winfield dashed to the rescue of his glamorous ex-wife—
and learned that some women will hang onto a man . . . through
hell and the gas chamber!*

By
**THORNE
LEE**



CHAPTER ONE

Crusader's Good-by

**Gripping
Crime-Adventure
Novelette**

THE way she said good-by, he might have been going to war. Her small, lithe body clung to him fiercely, coils of black hair clouding his eyes, lips murmuring against his ear.

"Take it easy, Lucy," he whispered. "It's only a hundred miles or so."

"A hundred miles north and five years backward," she reminded, hoarsely.

His quick laugh ran like wind through

"No!" she whispered shrilly. "Darling—turn around . . . we'll be shot in the back!"



her hair. "The five best years of my life!" he said solemnly. "Listen, this is strictly an impersonal matter for me. That gal, Maxine, had a full year to work her charms on me five years ago, and they didn't take. They never will."

"This is—murder, Kermit. I wish you wouldn't touch it. Only hateful things lead to murder and your—" She dropped her arms, stepped away. "—your hands are so clean!"

He laughed, threw a closed fist lightly across the delicate curve of her jaw. "I'll be sure to wear gloves."

He trotted out to the sleek station wagon

—a big-shouldered, solid-waisted blond who looked more like a football player than a writer of screen and radio dramas.

The car rolled away. Kermit waved at the trim, silk-clad figure in the doorway of the little white cottage. He thought, warmly, that nothing—not even anxiety and pain—marred his wife's dark, natural beauty. Time itself wrote its passage gently across the small, oval contours of her face.

"Time, be good to her," he whispered with unusual fervor, and a queer shudder leaped across his shoulders.

There was nothing fatalistic about Kermit Winfield. But that last look of his wife's

was—what would you call it—frightened?

Foolish notion! . . . But grant a woman her notions. Maybe it was equally foolish of a man to be racing like a crusader to the rescue of his former wife. Lucy had a right to be jealous of such a campaign.

The thing was that Kermit had never in five years thought of Maxine Poole as an ex-wife, only as an old friend. That was how he felt when he remarked abruptly this morning at the breakfast table: "I am sure that Maxine, whatever her other faults, would never be capable of murder."

Thinking back on that simple statement, it seemed that Lucy was unduly alarmed, even then. The coffee cup shook in her hands, spilling the brown liquid recklessly, until she set it back without drinking and seized upon a slice of toast, daubing at the crust desperately with a butter knife while Kermit read two paragraphs aloud from his morning newspaper. They were from the story of Rodney Poole's murder.

At 8:10 p.m., Saturday, Maxine Poole phoned the local sheriff's office. Mrs. Poole's words, recorded by a deputy, were: "Please tell Sheriff Daly to come over at once. My husband and I are having a terrible quarrel. I'm frightened. He has his gun. Somebody might get killed!"

The alarm was relayed to the home of Sheriff Evan Daly, who immediately embarked for the Poole home three miles away. At 8:40 Daly, observing lights in the bedroom wing of the home, but getting no answer at the front door, walked into the unlocked house. He found Rodney Poole in his bedroom, dead from a bullet in the chest. Mrs. Poole lay in a faint beside her husband's body. . . .

KERMIT had tossed the paper aside, consulted his grapefruit. "That dramatic speech of Maxine's over the telephone was very true to character. She was always living imaginary dramas."

"And you don't think she could ever live a real one?" Lucy had finally forced a response through the icy stiffness of her lips.

Kermit's reply was given with an air of superior knowledge: "Maxine—God bless her—never reached an honest-to-goodness climax in her life!"

He might have added that Maxine never faced any issue squarely, that she dreamed and idled and plotted great things, but her plots were thin as spider webs. She had no drive. She never got anywhere. If there

was one thing Kermit Winfield despised it was aimlessness; and so it was not Maxine, golden and lazy, but Lucy, dark and intense, who now shared his breakfast table.

Kermit had attacked the grapefruit vigorously, then slammed down the spoon in a gesture of abrupt decision. "Lucy, I'm not going to let them get away with it! They'll ride Maxine to prison just because they don't know her. That softness and delicacy, that feminine charm is not as effective with juries as people think. The prosecutor will wade into poor Maxie like a punching bag. . . . Lucy, I'm the only person alive who knows that woman, who knows that she hasn't the substance of a murderess. I'm the only friend she has. I've got to go down there and help her out!"

Lucy had suddenly strangled over her toast. She washed it down with a deep swallow of coffee, then pushed her food away, uneaten. She lit a cigarette with shaking fingers and managed to force out a note of sarcasm: "Are you sure, Darling, that it's an old friendship or a fresh murder plot which inspires these gallant notions?"

Kermit grinned. The tan wrinkled pleasantly around the mild laughter of his blue eyes. "I'll admit," he said, "that I've always had an itch to dabble in real human affairs, instead of those fancy melodramas my typewriter turns out!"

Lucy's brown eyes tried to look amused. "If Maxine is not capable of murder, Darling, just what kind of woman—in your brilliant opinion—would make a murderess?"

Kermit thoughtfully buttered his toast, and then, suddenly, the knife in his hand thrust out like a spear at his wife's bare white throat. "You, for one, Kiddo! . . . Not that I think you would ever get around to killing anyone. Your price would be too high, Lucy. But if you ever sold out, you would carry the bargain through. . . . Maxine would make an easy bargain, but she would never close the deal. She hasn't the stuff to finish anything!"

That was all there was to it, just a sympathetic interest in an old acquaintance. But once Kermit Winfield had made up his mind to save his former wife from a murder charge, his campaign was planned in a single hour.

And so it was— "Call the studio, Lucy,

and tell them I am bloodhounding a new plot. . . . Good-by, m' dear! Back tonight or tomorrow!" And Kermit Winfield was off to the rescue of a memory.

IT TOOK most of the morning for the drive from Hollywood to the deceased Rodney Poole's home town, a thriving foothill community surrounded by wealthy ranches.

Kermit paid his first visit, not to his ex-wife, but to the daily paper. One of his writing friends had mentioned the local editor as a man to be trusted. Editor Strickland proved to be a big, florid individual with a mouth that drooped open to relieve some deep, whistling nasal constriction.

Strickland's estimate of the Poole case coincided neatly with Kermit's. It seemed that the town of Alta Vista and the surrounding country was divided into two political camps over the matter. One group, led by Strickland himself, believed that Maxine Poole was being railroaded into a murder indictment.

Strickland handed Kermit over to a young reporter named Jack McGuire, who had his own ideas about the murder.

Kermit liked the quick brusque manner of McGuire, a tall, athletic chap with a gaunt face and a dry humor.

McGuire proceeded to introduce Kermit to the late Rodney Poole by means of a set of newspaper clippings. It was Kermit's first glimpse of the man who had followed himself in Maxine's affections. There were some photographs featuring Poole as a leader of civic affairs. He was a small, suave individual whose postures seemed to be carefully staged.

Kermit noted several personal items about trips to the California racetracks. "Horse fancier?" he inquired.

"Not exactly," McGuire informed. "Poole was a big shot banker, you know, and he liked to move in the money crowd. We have a lot of ranchers around here who breed racehorses. They represent the *society* of our fair village."

"Was Poole a type who would have brought a gun into a family argument—the way Maxine claims he did?"

McGuire rolled a sodden cigarette along his thin lips. "Well, he might do it for dramatic effect, but he would not be likely to use it. Not right out in the open. Poole

would only commit a crime that he was pretty sure of getting away with. Passion would never get control of his brain."

"A little cold, you mean?"

"No, not cold, exactly—but self-interested. He was deeply jealous of his wife, but more as a valuable possession than as a desirable woman."

"That *desirable* fits Maxine very neatly as I recall her," Kermit said.

"How long were you married to her?"

Kermit shrugged. "Only a year. To me Maxine was like a pet cat—lazy, affectionate— We staled along for a while, but it never worked out. If you want the other side of it, you'll have to ask Maxine."

"I already have," McGuire drawled.

Kermit's blue eyes flickered. "Yes," he said, "I suppose you have."

Kermit paid his second visit, accompanied by McGuire, directly to Sheriff Evan Daly.

Daly was tall, dressed a little too neatly in a cord-trimmed brown uniform—the California version of a cowboy outfit. There was a long red spot under each eye where his sharp, freckled cheeks curved up to meet the sun. His eyebrows and hair were thick tangles of red.

The sheriff stuck stubbornly to his case against Maxine Poole. It might be only a second degree murder charge, he admitted, since the woman had warned his office in advance; but the strongest point against her was the fact that she refused to confess she had shot her husband in a family argument.

"I think I'd refuse to confess, myself," drawled Jack McGuire, "if I knew I was innocent!"

At that remark the sheriff withdrew into a surly shell, and Kermit quickly gave up any hope for Maxine in that direction.

CHAPTER TWO

Reunion with a Memory

ON THE drive out to see the lady herself, Jack McGuire explained his own angle on the case. "I arrived at the Poole home about an hour after the sheriff that night. I noticed a couple of items which the law chooses to ignore. For one thing, it was a rainy night and there was one set of automobile tracks in front of the house that did not belong to any machine connected with the case."

McGuire produced a pencil and pad and sketched a zig-zag pattern, flashing it before Kermit's eyes. There was something oddly familiar about it. "What's that?"

"That," McGuire informed, "is the tread design of those unidentified tires . . . The other thing that bothered me was a cigarette stub that I found on a tray in Rodney Poole's den. It had a trace of lipstick, but the color did not match with any lipstick of Maxine Poole's."

"You mean to tell me the sheriff has facts like that and is doing nothing about them?" Kermit exploded.

McGuire laughed. "The law out here in the sticks is pretty crude. Only other big crime we ever had was a bank robbery. Daly muffed on that. He'll probably do the same with a murder.

"Bank robbery?" Kermit queried.

"Yeah. Rodney Poole's bank. The thief never was found. . . . That Sheriff Daly, as a detective, is strictly Grade B. He takes the course of least resistance. When he has a nice easy murder case, why horse around making out a tougher one? Let me tell you, Brother, when Maxine Poole made that hysterical phone call for help it was like turning the key on her own jail cell! . . . She's out on bail now, you know. Suspicion of murder is the charge."

Kermit swore softly, felt the blood rising angrily to his face. "Any reason why the sheriff should have a grudge against Maxine?"

McGuire shrugged. "Not that I know of. Rodney Poole was the sheriff's strongest political backer, but that's not exactly a reason to take it out on the wife. No, Daly is just playing out his best hand."

The Poole home proved to be about three miles from town, entirely isolated on a thinly graveled road running from the paved highway deep into the hills. The house was modern style—a rambling single story, shed-roofed building, faced in redwood.

Their rap at the front door went unanswered. "No servants these days," McGuire commented.

They strolled around the house through a young jungle of green shrubs and spring flowers.

In the rear, overlooking a paved patio, the house was walled almost entirely with glass. A single sweep of the eye gave a complete

interior view, room by room. From right to left were two bedrooms, a long living room, the kitchen and dining room, and at the far extreme a combination office and den.

McGuire chuckled a thumb at the right bedroom. "The body was in there. Rodney's room. The house is pretty far away from neighbors, and you can see that this glass wall is rather feeble protection; so Poole kept a gun in his dresser drawer. Maxine says he had the gun out that night, threatening her. After she phoned the sheriff's office, she didn't go back into her husband's room at all. She just left him in there, raving to himself, and locked herself in her own room. About fifteen minutes later the gunshot scared her out of her wits. When she finally worked up her nerve to go in, she found poor hubby dead and proceeded to faint on the spot."

"I see that every room has a door opening on the patio," Kermit remarked.

"Yeah," the reporter grunted. "Modern style. Free and easy. . . . The murderer had three possible entries to Poole's bedroom. He could have used this glass door from the patio, or the door from Maxine's bedroom, or a door which connects with a hallway running along the front of the house."

Kermit studied the reporter's shrewd, bony face. "Which door do you say was used, McGuire?"

McGuire pushed back the crumpled gray hat from his forehead. "Well, the patio door here was unlocked, but my theory is that the murderer was already in the house when Maxine made that phone call for help. Maxine says she called from the living room. I claim that some person, identity unknown, was sitting in the den at the time, heard Maxine on the phone, and seized the opportunity to murder Poole and throw the blame on his wife. Whoever it was could easily have slipped down the hall, surprised Poole, shot him, and then escaped into the patio."

"McGuire," Kermit said admiringly, "it occurs to me that you're a detective, Grade A!"

Both men stiffened at the sound of a hoarse shriek from the outer garden. They turned to face a woman running through an apricot grove, a spaniel panting at her heels. "Kermit!" she cried joyously. "Kermit Winfield!"

KERMIT'S heart vaulted into his throat. His knees felt a brief, sagging weakness. It was like the weird torment of a dream—that husky, soprano voice, the streaming blonde hair, the tall, full figure, graceful in bright green slacks . . . the delicate face, more tan than he remembered, the lazy gold lashes, green eyes dancing. . .

“Hello, Maxine.”

She didn't stop to investigate the tone of his greeting. She closed on him, flung her arms tightly around his neck, swayed against him. “You came!” There was triumph in her throaty voice: “Kermit, Darling, I knew you'd come!”

Kermit peered ruefully over her shoulder at the dry grin of Jack McGuire. He managed to turn his cheek, tactfully, to the moist kiss she lifted to his lips. He wriggled slowly out of her embrace, his collar and tie swiveled halfway around the neck. “You knew I'd come?” he repeated doubtfully. “Well, Maxine, that's more than I knew until this morning.”

She stepped back, eyes gloating over the substantial breadth of his shoulders. “It was great of you, Kermit. You were always

great! . . . I need you desperately. You don't know what they're trying to do to me, Kermit! They're—”

“I know all about it, Maxie.” He worked a normal tone back into his voice. “You've got yourself in a spot. I read it in the paper, but I didn't believe it. So I came down to get the straight of the matter.”

She was suddenly back on him again with a flood of welcome. Kermit managed to work her over to a cushioned bench and get her seated between himself and McGuire.

“I'm married, you know,” Kermit said stiffly.

“Yes, I know. I hope— I mean, she isn't with you, is she, Kermit?”

“Hardly,” he said. “She doesn't know you from Adam, Maxine—or rather, from Eve!”

They all laughed at that, and Kermit relaxed a little. Maxine studied him dreamily through her lashes. “I always wondered about her, Kermit. I wondered if your marriage were—well, if it were like my own. I mean—” She looked down at her fluttering hands. “Well, to put it brutally, Kermit, I bounced! Right into the arms of—”

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She hesitated, seemed for the first time to be aware of Jack McGuire. "Oh, hello Jack," she greeted. "I shouldn't be talking like this, should I, Jack? You'll have it all in the papers that I didn't love my husband and that will make it go badly for me at the trial—"

"You're kidding!" McGuire said wryly. "You know I'm on your side, Mrs. Poole. . . . But we're working against a deadline, and I'd suggest right now that we get down to business. To put it brutally, as you say—what's your full story of the night your husband died?"

Kermit breathed thanks to the reporter for switching the subject.

"Really, I—I'm terribly vague about that night," Maxine admitted. "That goes against me, I know, but when I get too excited, I—I just go into a blank—an absolute stupor!"

McGuire examined the burning lump of cigarette in his long fingers. "Do you recall if your husband had any visitor that night, Mrs. Poole?"

"Visitor?" Her mind seemed to flutter over the thought like a bird. "I remember somebody called on the phone and asked for Rodney, right after dinner, but he said nothing about a visitor. I went off to bed early."

"Was the phone call from a man or woman?"

"A woman."

McGuire's dark eyebrows met sharply above his thin nose.

"The paper said you had a quarrel with your husband," Kermit put in. "What was that about?"

SHE twisted a sly green glance at Kermit, examined his hard, serious profile. "It was about those foolish letters I wrote. Somehow Rodney found out about them; he must have spoken to the mailman or something. He got me out of bed that night and made the most horrible accusations. Why, Kermit, he said he'd shoot me dead before he'd release me to another man!"

"Letters?" McGuire said, sharply. "This is a new one on me. What letters do you mean, Mrs. Poole?"

"Oh, it was ridiculous of me I know, but I'd had so much trouble with Rodney, and no place to turn. I had written several letters to Kermit about it."

"Letters to me?" Kermit stiffened as if a knife blade had pierced into his back. He didn't actually speak the words. They just hung there on the edge of his lips; but he must have gone stark white, because McGuire was staring at him curiously.

Kermit swallowed, spoke. "Oh," he said thinly, "the letters you wrote to me?" He wanted suddenly, desperately to get out of there, to run for home. What was he doing in this mess? Why had he come down here? What letters was she talking about? The woman must be crazy!

Kermit wandered through the rest of that interview in a total daze. The whole bottom had dropped out of the thing. He was not in this as a friend anymore; he was in it right up to his stupid neck!

Somehow he managed to maneuver Maxine away from the reporter long enough to shoot a question at her: "What's this business about letters, Maxine? Are you trying to drag me into this murder?"

"Drag you in, Kermit? Oh, that's mean of you! You always had a little streak of mean—" She seemed to recall the gulf of five years between them. Her voice melted: "Kermit, I had no idea when I wrote those letters it would come to this!"

He stared at her, jaw hanging. "You mean you actually did write letters to me, Maxie?"

"Why Kermit, of course I did! You can't deny that. I had to tell about that. I had to explain what I was quarreling with Rodney about!" Her hand fluttered out and touched the taut, writhing muscle of his jaw. "It was silly of me to write, Kermit, but I needed you! You know I've always needed—"

He got away from her finally. He staggered out of it, drunkenly, not trusting his mind to search deeper. A sickness churned inside of him, a terrible alarm he could not bring himself to analyze.

There was only one other scene that Kermit's glazed eyes fully recorded that afternoon. It happened in the brief farewell moment, as they prepared to drive away. . . . Maxine on the lawn, waving, lonely, wistful-eyed, a little frightened. . . . Jack McGuire walking up behind the station wagon, stiffening, staring down at something in the coagulated mud and gravel of the road. . . .

When they were back in the car, racing toward town, McGuire seemed more quiet.

His eyes kept a stiff distance between them in the seat. He lit a cigarette, pulled out the ash tray from the dashboard, and peered into it before tapping his ashes on the murky pile of old stubs.

Kermit could crowd only one action at a time through his dazed senses. First thing was to get rid of this inquisitive animal at his side, to pull out and run, find his way home. . . .

He dropped McGuire at the newspaper office. "Anything more you want to know, Mr. Winfield?" the man drawled.

"No—no!" Kermit stammered. "I mean I—I've seen what the situation is. . . . Got to think. Got to think it over."

He got away at last, nosed the long station wagon back toward Hollywood. A few miles out of Alta Vista he slammed the brakes, slid out on the dirt shoulder of the highway, leaped to the ground. He crept around the machine like some soldier advancing on the enemy.

On hands and knees he examined the rear tires, his own tires. He stared at the zig-zag pattern of the tread, like jagged teeth, the teeth of a monstrous fear gnawing at the muscles of his throat. He crawled up to the front. Same tread. Same design. McGuire had pencilled that identical pattern for him on a scrap of paper. *Four tires exactly like his own had paused in front of the Poole home the night Rodney Poole was murdered!*

CHAPTER THREE

To What Lengths . . .

FOR the rest of the hundred miles Kermit drove in a double blanket of fog—outside the moist twilight breath of the ocean, inside a deeper fog clouding up from the dank terror of his chest. Night came down, drawing the dark curtain more tightly around him.

A few miles from home, on the inland highway, he slipped into a roadside tavern, warmed up his courage over a half-dozen cups of coffee, and finally ducked into a phone booth. Every spin of the dial was a torture screw applied to the finger, sending a shrill pain along the currents of his body.

"Hello," he barked hoarsely at the distant female voice. "Mrs. Lindsay? . . . Ethel, this is Kermit Winfield. . . . Fine,

fine. Say, Ethel, my wife—a—Lucy seems to have lost the gloves she was wearing last Saturday night. Wondered if she could have left them at your house? . . . Oh! . . . You say she hasn't been at your house in two months? . . . Oh, I see! My mistake then. I thought she was going to drop by your place after the theatre. . . . She didn't? Well, sorry then. I was out this way, and just had a hunch she might. . . . Yeah. Yeah. Thanks just the same, Ethel. . . . 'Bye. See you."

He was out again in the night, and the fog was closing in thickly, palpable as a shroud. Lucy did not go to the theatre Saturday evening. Not with the Lindsays.

I didn't see Lucy from Saturday morning to Saturday midnight. . . . Lucy lied to me. . . . Lucy lied! . . . Lied!

The station wagon was rolling again. The windshield wiper took up the whining monotone of his thoughts. . . . *Your wife lied, Kermit Winfield. . . . Your wife lied. . . . Wife lied. . . . Lied! . . . Lied! . . . Lied!*

The man went into a state of suspended horror. He drove for hours, a random, cobwebby pattern of streets, tracing the confusion of his mind.

He came to no definite decision, but the car at last seemed to steer itself for home, like a horse heading for the stable. Certainly there was no will to guide it in his stiffened arms.

He was only half aware that it finally nosed into his own street. The houses and street lamps drifted dimly through the mental and physical mist surrounding him. A single car was parked along the street, two glowing cigarettes inside, spaced like a pair of eyes. In the rear seat a third cigarette winked at him. Fifty feet farther his own car was swerving, looping into the double garage beside the little white colonial cottage.

The lights went off and he sat stiffly in the dark. He discovered the unlit cigarette, sodden and bitter in his mouth. His hand flipped on the overhead light and groped out to the ashtray. On the point of tossing the cigarette into it, he hesitated, leaned forward, peered into the bowl of ashes. His finger stirred up three white stubs from the mess. Fingertips formed a tweezers and plucked out the stubs, dropped them on the palm of his left hand. Two of them were

crushed balls of white paper, burnt-edged. The third showed a semi-circle of red lipstick near the unburned tip. He dropped it back, shuddered.

He forced himself to get out of the car, lock the garage, and stalk up the long sidewalk to the house. No lights. It was a warm night. Lucy would be in the garden, most likely.

The shadow of her burst out at him suddenly from the rear gate, leaped up, dragged on his neck. "Kermit!"

Greeted like a soldier back from the war. He might have been gone for years.

The embraces were all hers. Kermit was stiff. He couldn't move his arms. She must have sensed his feeling finally, because she moved off to arms length, silently, one hand still trembling on his sleeve.

He walked her back into the garden, let her sit down.

HER voice was the first one to split the grim silence. "Well, Kermit," she said tautly. "What happened? What did you find out?"

He didn't know where to begin. She was his wife. . . . To love, honor, and cherish. . . . "Honor!" He actually spoke the word aloud. The hollow sound of it groped through the veil of darkness between them. "Lucy, is it honorable to read and destroy someone else's mail?"

Her words came out in a long, shrill sigh. "So, she told you, Kermit? So Maxine got to you at last?"

"She said there were letters, Lucy. I have seen no letters."

The answer was a quick, desperate rush of words: "Yes, there were letters. Four of them. I read the first one. There was no return address on the envelop. I have never heard of any law that a wife should not read her husband's mail! . . . Kermit, I—I couldn't show it to you! It was ridiculous. The things she said! Why, you might have been her own husband, the words she used. She had no right. No right at all! . . . Kermit, I wasn't going to let her get at you like that! You're too—too sympathetic. You owed her nothing. The divorce was hers, not yours. I burned up the letter as she should have burned it herself. . . . I recognized the other letters as they came, Kermit. I burned them, unopened!"

"What was she after?" Kermit de-

manded. "Why did she write to me?"

"She said her husband was abusing her, that she had no one to turn to. Kermit, that was only an excuse! She was after you!"

"After me? Nonsense! How did you know—"

"How did I know?" Her voice trailed off in a low whimper. "Kermit, the things she said in that letter. I would not say to you myself. Not out loud. I might whisper them in your ear if you held me tightly enough—"

He felt a tremendous impulse to hold her then, but the hands that reached out for her slowly stiffened, bit like steel into her shoulders. "Lucy, you were there! *You were there at that house the night Rodney Poole was murdered!*"

He felt her muscles go limp, her body boil down into a little pool of shadow. Her silence was a kind of confession.

He shook her, tugged her. "Lucy!" he hissed. "Listen to me! They found tire tracks in the mud. They found a cigarette in Poole's den stained with lipstick! Lucy, they'll only have to put two and two together—"

"Oh, Kermit," she sobbed, "why did you have to go back there? Why couldn't you have left her alone? I tried to warn you—"

"Warn me?" he roared. "Why didn't you tell me, Lucy? Why didn't you tell the truth? That was murder down there, damn it! A man shot in the heart! And you were there! Lucy, what were you trying to hide?"

"Hide?" A low whistle sighed in and out of her lungs. "Kermit, sometimes a woman would not—" she whispered; then groaned and began again—"a woman would not want her husband to know to what lengths she might go—how low she might stoop to keep him!"

His grip broke, the arms fell loosely at his sides. He reared, stumbled back, as if she had struck at his face. "Well," he said hoarsely, "how far would you go, Lucy?"

No answer.

"You were there, Lucy."

"I went to take the letter back, Kermit. I meant to give it to Maxine, fight it out with her, to tell her not to be such a miserable fool! . . . Instead—oh, I don't know what came over me, Kermit. Cunning, I guess. I phoned out to the Poole

house from town. When I heard a woman's voice on the telephone, I couldn't talk to her. I knew I'd never be able to talk to her. . . . I—I asked for her husband, arranged to see him privately. . . ."

IT WAS becoming mechanical now, like a confession. "I didn't see Maxine at all. Rodney Poole met me at the door of the house, took me into his private den. I just handed him the sealed letter. The fourth letter, Kermit; it had come that same day. I told him I wished he would stop his wife from writing the silly things. I don't know what I expected him to do, but he ripped it open right in front of me and read it. . . . Kermit, I never saw a man so terribly angry. He went purple. I believe he even frothed at the mouth. He forgot I was there. He dropped the letter on the floor and left me without a word. I put the letter back in my bag, and then—"

The last of it didn't come. It stuck in her throat, and Kermit himself had to wring the words out of his own despair. "You heard them quarreling at the other end of the house, Lucy. You heard Maxine call the sheriff's office on the phone, heard her speak of the gun. You heard her say somebody might get killed!"

Kermit slumped down to his knees. Panic drained the muscle out of him, like water from a sieve. He was face to face, shoulder to shoulder with her now. "I'll have to know, Lucy, if I'm going to help you," he managed to gasp. "What did you do then? What did you do after you heard Maxine—"

She recoiled away from him. "*Kermit!*" she shrieked. "*What are you asking me?*"

A broad spot of light suddenly engulfed them like some cataclysmic bursting of the stars. They were dazed, petrified in mutual surprise.

A voice spoke from beyond the light, a bodiless, dazzling emanation of justice: "That's enough! Thanks for putting the questions, Winfield."

A lean, elongated shape squirmed into an edge of the light from the direction of the garden gate.

"Jack McGuire!" Kermit groaned, staggering to his feet.

Behind McGuire emerged a short, stocky man in uniform, a single star gleaming on his lapel.

It was neither of these men speaking. It was the phantom behind the flashlight. Kermit recognized it now, the voice of Sheriff Evan Daly: "Lucille Winfield, let me warn you that anything you say from now on may be used against you. . . ."

The processes of the law could be very swift. Before the night was over Lucy was transferred to the custody of Sheriff Daly.

When the first shock had worn off, Kermit managed to put through a call to his lawyer and arrange to be met in Alta Vista the next morning.

Jack McGuire, who had recognized the muddy track of Kermit's car and had led the sheriff in this pursuit, was an excited spectator. In the middle of the night the reporter raced off in his own car to file his big "scoop" on the murder story. Up to now Kermit had almost liked the guy.

Kermit drove Lucy and the sheriff back to Alta Vista in his own station wagon. Lucy sat beside him in the front seat, stiffly. She had not spoken a word in her own defense.

In the rear-view mirror Kermit caught glimpses of the long, freckled face of Evan Daly, a flat-crowned sombrero balanced steeply on his head, thin lips sucking meditatively at a big pipe.

The sheriff had a right to be satisfied. He had a beautiful case against Lucy. Kermit ran it through his mind, trying to puncture the fabric of this monstrous web around his wife, but he couldn't find a solitary gap. In the first place, Lucy had been there, on the spot, within the time limits of the murder. That was a damning fact by itself. She had opportunity. Sitting alone in Rodney Poole's den, she must have heard Maxine's frantic phone call to the sheriff's office and that wild statement, 'S somebody might get killed!' No one could ask for a better chance than that to murder Rodney Poole and throw the blame on his wife. And Lucy had plenty of motive. There was Maxine Poole trying to worm back into the affections of her former husband. Lucy, in a frenzy of jealousy, might have grasped any possible method to block Maxine's insidious campaign, even if it meant shooting an innocent man in order to put his wife in jail. To top it all off, Lucy had the potential character for the job. She was not a frothy cream puff of a woman like Maxine. She was deep. In

five years of marriage she had never revealed the full limits of herself. Even now, thrown together in this supreme misfortune, Kermit could find no way to get at her, no word, not even a touch of the hand that would bridge the gulf between them.

She certainly had no word for Kermit. She was taking the sheriff's warning at its face value: "Lucille Winfield, let me warn you that anything you say from now on may be used against you. . . ."

CHAPTER FOUR

Don't Look Back!

KERMIT'S heel shot down in reflex, hammered hard against the brake pedal. The station wagon, on a long curving slope, went into a weaving, dangerous skid. In the moment of that single braking action a murder case shaped itself in his mind. Fragments assorted themselves, dropped into the proper slots. His eye raced over the tight interior of the car, down the black trunk of the steering wheel, across the license placard, up to the ashtray, to Lucy's taut, unreadable profile, to the little mirror and the sheriff's stern, dark-eyed surveillance. The murder case was all there in a tight little box.

"Hey!" the sheriff yelped through slitted teeth.

Lucy gasped.

The machine was almost out of control. Kermit eased up the stiffness of his leg, the brake came back, they rolled gently off the pavement to a curving grassy shoulder.

"Flat tire?" queried the sheriff sharply.

Kermit's head came around stiffly on his neck. "Blowout!" he said, and a strange thrill twanged the muscles of his throat. "Not a tire, but a murder. Sheriff, I've just blasted a hole in your case against Lucy, and this one you'll never get patched together!"

Daly leaned forward. Dawn was seeping through the car windows, plastering the drawn faces with a deep inhuman gray. The sheriff's freckles looked like pencil dots. "Well, what's new, Winfield? I'm open to ideas."

"You're getting one, right now!" Kermit snapped. "Sheriff, the basic charge against my wife will be that she overheard Maxine

Poole calling your office with that warning about, 'My husband has his gun. Somebody might get killed!' That gave Lucy an opportunity to kill Rodney Poole so that the blame would logically fall on Maxine. . . . Sheriff, my point is this: That phone call gave a murder opportunity not only to Lucy but to anybody else who knew the call had been made!"

"Meaning who?" the sheriff muttered.

"Meaning anybody at the other end of the wire! For instance, let's suppose an outsider—someone who knew Maxine had made that call for help—drives up to the house while Lucy is still there, while Rodney Poole is still quarreling with his wife. That house is glassed all along the rear so that anyone standing in the patio can see everything that goes on inside, just as if it was acted on a stage—unless, of course, the curtains are drawn. A man lurking back there in the dark can see Lucy in the den, Maxine in her bedroom, and Rodney Poole in his own bedroom brooding over his gun. After sizing up the situation, the watcher slips around to the front to find out who the lady in the den might be. With his flashlight he reads her name on this registration slip strapped to the steering wheel of her station wagon. He has an inspiration right then to lay a trap against her as a murder suspect. He opens this dashboard ashtray here and takes out one of Lucy's old cigarette stubs with lipstick on it. If he can plant that stub in the house, there will be a little extra evidence against some mysterious woman visitor, in case Maxine Poole squeezes out of a murder charge!"

Kermit was looking at Lucy now, gloating, ignoring the prickle of danger that ran along his neck. He leaned down, kissed her on a cool cheek, swung back to the sheriff. "After that," Kermit went on, "the man waits there in the patio until Lucy, getting impatient and frightened and maybe a little disgusted with the whole thing, slips out of the house and drives away. By that time the watcher in the dark has worked out his own little murder plot. He enters Rodney's unlocked room directly through the glass door from the patio. He picks up the gun which Rodney by this time has laid aside. Rodney, aroused by the sound of the door, rises to face the intruder. Recognizing the man, he feels no fear, does not cry out. The invader calmly shoots

Rodney in the chest, tosses the gun aside, and ducks out to the patio again before Maxine can respond to the gunshot. . . .”

KERMIT'S eyes met the sheriff's in full collision. "Daly, if you have wits, prepare to use them now. The thing I want to know is this. When you broke into our garden with Jack McGuire tonight, you called my wife by her full name, *Lucille Winfield*. I never call her Lucille. Neither does anyone else. Where did you get that name, *Lucille*?"

Daly's eyes worked at the answer silently, and then he forced it down to his tongue, a thin, sandpaper sound: "You call her Lucy. Ain't that short for Lucille?"

"No!" Kermit snorted. "Lucy is a name by itself. It could be a nickname, but that was no reason for you to pull *Lucille* out of your hat. . . . I'll tell you where you got that name, Sheriff. You read it here on the registration tag of this station wagon, and the only time you could possibly have done that was the time that it was parked in front of Rodney Poole's home, the night Poole was murdered!"

Daly blurted, "Jack McGuire told me the name!"

"You're a little late with that one, Sheriff," Kermit drawled. "We can easily find out from Jack if he knew my wife's name was Lucille. Also, Jack will make an excellent witness to the fact that you used the name in the first place! Another thing, Daly—I recall reading in the paper that it was a half-hour after Maxine telephoned for help before you broke into the Poole house and found Rodney's body. You had to drive only three miles that night. It doesn't take any half-hour to go three

miles! I figure you spent most of the time spying on that little melodrama in the Poole household and planting your own version of the murder."

Kermit felt a strange thrill of relief, crowding out the cold shudder of fear that kept trying to dominate his shoulders. He had made the accusation. He couldn't call it back. He had thrown the grenade.

"Sheriff, if those two items are not enough, there is the little matter of those letters that Maxine wrote to me. Maxine claims she told you about the letters, because they were the cause of her quarrel with Rodney. If you knew about the letters, why didn't you look me up immediately, Sheriff? Why did you wait for me to come to you?"

No answer.

Kermit answered himself: "You didn't check into those letters, because that would bring my wife into the matter too soon for your plans. Lucy was your final trump in case the rest of your plot fell through!"

A shudder quaked the sheriff's shoulders, ran in a thin convulsion down his arms. Tracing the motion, Kermit found himself confronting not a pair of eyes but the solitary, eyeless snout of a pistol.

"I don't answer questions. I ask 'em!" Daly said stiffly. "I'll remind you I'm the law in this county; but since you seem to have taken over, would you give me one good reason why I, of all people, would want to kill Rodney Poole?"

"Politics!" Kermit snapped. "Poole's influence put you in office and kept you there. That made him the lord of your life, Daly. Look deep enough in a setup like that and you'll find stuff for murder. Also, there was the matter of that unsolved



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robbery of Poole's bank. More than likely that was a frame-up—"

That last spark of inspiration struck fire. "Get out!" the sheriff whistled thinly. "Get out of the car!"

Kermit slid through the door. The road was just a lonely ribbon of cement climbing steeply to meet the gray horizon. It was a bad spot for facing down a murderer, but back in town, flanked by the full dignity of the law, the sheriff might have stood up to Kermit's bluff.

"Get your arms up!"

That was addressed to Lucy, still in the car. Kermit saw the sheriff handcuffing her wrists together.

Then they were all three in the road, Lucy huddled against the bulk of her husband's shoulder, Daly about thirty feet from them with the pistol gripped low and tight against his waist.

KERMIT found his breath again. "Gunplay will do you no good, Daly. One murder compounded to two or three only seals your case!"

The sheriff rocked on his bowed legs. His long hairy hand came down, pointed a finger down the road. "Walk!" he ordered. "That way!"

They backed away from him, stumbling. "Turn around and walk!" His voice was a flat, dead sound. "Run, if you like. Get away from here!"

Kermit looped an arm around Lucy's shoulders. The stifled fear was breaking out on him now, like a rash. He had to swallow to get the words up the tight swelling of his throat. "And be shot in the back!"

"No!" The sheriff's lips argued hoarsely against the fever in his eyes. "I just want time. Time is all I want. . . . Walk, damn you! Just walk and don't look back!"

Kermit's arm twisted Lucy's body, tried to press her around ahead of him. Turning, he took a long hungry look at the haggard white of her face, hooded by the streaming black hair. Her brown eyes were deep, haunted. Too deep; at another time he might have reached her thoughts. What was the picture of himself reflected there? Bungler? Meddler? Doubter?

No time to make it up to Lucy. He spoke through stiff, dry lips. "Lucy! I got you into this. It was all my doing. My doing.

. . . Lucy, if he shoots, you run. Get over there in the trees!"

Her face came up with a twisted red ribbon of a smile. "No!" she whispered. "That's what he wants us to do, Kermit. Darling—turn around—we'll be shot in the back! *'Shot running away, resisting arrest! Shot in the back!'* Darling, can't you see, that's his only way out!"

"One of us can make it, Lucy! If he shoots, you run! You'll get there! You'll get out of it!"

Kermit had his own plan of attack, but he had to be sure Lucy would leave him, would try to escape. Lucy did not respond to the twist of Kermit's arm. She whipped away from his grip, lithely, ran in quick cat steps back along the road, straight at the sheriff.

Kermit saw her leap, fling out the noose of her handcuffed arms straight for the sheriff's head. The tall, red man staggered back. The gun went off in a muffled spurt.

Kermit found his feet, charged down on the pair. His big body left the ground, roaring, piling the tangled couple in the road. The gun came out under Lucy's arm, dangling in the sheriff's hairy hand. Kermit sliced the side of his own hand down against the wrist like the butt of an axe.

The fingers convulsed, flipped the gun out into the road, but Kermit ignored it. He was fighting with the blind elements of fury. He gripped two deep handfuls of matted red hair and pounded, swore, and pounded until the sheriff lay inert against the concrete road.

When Lucy was recovered enough from her gun wound to sit up in bed, Jack McGuire dropped around to the Alta Vista hospital to sum up the case. Maxine Poole came along, clinging languidly to the reporter's arm.

Kermit greeted them with a happy grin, explained, "The bullet broke one of Lucy's ribs, glanced off, and went politely on its way. She's going to be all right."

"Yeah. She sure is all right," McGuire said, admiringly.

Maxine's green eyes fluttered with amusement. "Too bad," she said in a tone that could be taken either way.

MCGUIRE winked at Kermit. "You had Sheriff Daly tabbed just about right, Winfield," he informed. "The motive was

tied up with that bank robbery. That was an inside job, framed between Poole, the president of the bank, and Daly, the investigator. It was Poole's only chance to replace a lot of the bank's money he had lost betting on the horses. The trouble was that the first robbery went off so well that Poole wanted to try it again later, to get himself out of another gambling hole. The sheriff was smart enough to know that the same robbery trick would never work twice, but Poole was overconfident. And he had poor Daly all sewed up. . . . Then, all of a sudden, Mrs. Poole made that phone call for help and the sheriff saw a chance to let himself neatly out of Poole's shady affairs by letting the life out of Poole!"

McGuire backed off and studied Maxine Poole with a kind of cynical approval. "Of course, I don't think Daly really wanted Maxine to land in the jug. He thought a smart lawyer could get Maxine off, either on a self-defense plea or a suicide build-up against Rodney Poole. That murder scene could have been interpreted as suicide, you know. But just in case the whole thing got out of Daly's grip, he kept those two aces up his sleeve—the cigarette with the strange lipstick, and the unidentified tire tracks, which placed your wife in the house

at the time of the murder. That turned out to be Daly's biggest blunder; because you can't drag in extra elements without throwing a case wide open. My discovery of your wife's connection with the case forced the sheriff to play his hand against her. He would rather have stuck to Maxine and trusted the courts to get her off."

A little mirthless smile disturbed Maxine's perfect tan. The long gold lashes trembled. "One thing I had to see," she said to Lucy. "I had to see a woman who would go to all this trouble just for one man!"

Lucy colored briefly, darted a fierce, possessive glance at her husband. "Some women will go to any lengths—almost!"

Kermit squeezed her bare arm. "Even to throwing their lives away," he said.

"It was the only thing to do!" Lucy's lips trembled in protest. "He could only shoot one of us at a time. The other one could fight back—and live!"

Kermit was no longer aware of Maxine Poole, or of Jack McGuire tugging at her arm, dragging her quietly out of the room. Kermit was leaning forward, searching deeply into Lucy's brown eyes. He was seeing things in his wife that he had never seen before.

THE END

(Continued from page 45)

Then we were all in for a session at the police station. Janice drove me down, with the law and Winslow following us in the squad car. Winslow was held. We left the station an hour later.

"Well," said Janice, when we were in her convertible, "what are you going to do with your money?"

"I'm going to call up the glove mill in the morning and tell that crabby super what he can do with my job." And then I told her how I'd be going into business with Joe and Larry in a little men's wear shop.

"That's fine," she said, pulling away from headquarters. "But what about us?"

"I've been thinking about that on the way to the station," I said. "It's no go. If I'd keep on seein' you I'd fall hard."

"Would that be bad?" she asked.

I knew I'd never live on Janice's money, and that she wouldn't be happy if she had

to lower her standard of living to get along on mine." I said: "It wouldn't work."

Silence. Then, "I fear you're right." After a longer pause she turned her flushed face toward me. There was just a trace of shakiness in her voice. "Do you suppose your pride would allow you to drop in at my place—for a toast to our parting?"

I caught a whiff of her heady perfume when I glanced at her. My heart skipped a beat. She was quite the gal behind the wheel with the breeze rippling through her lovely red hair and her full lips slightly parted in a tantalizing smile.

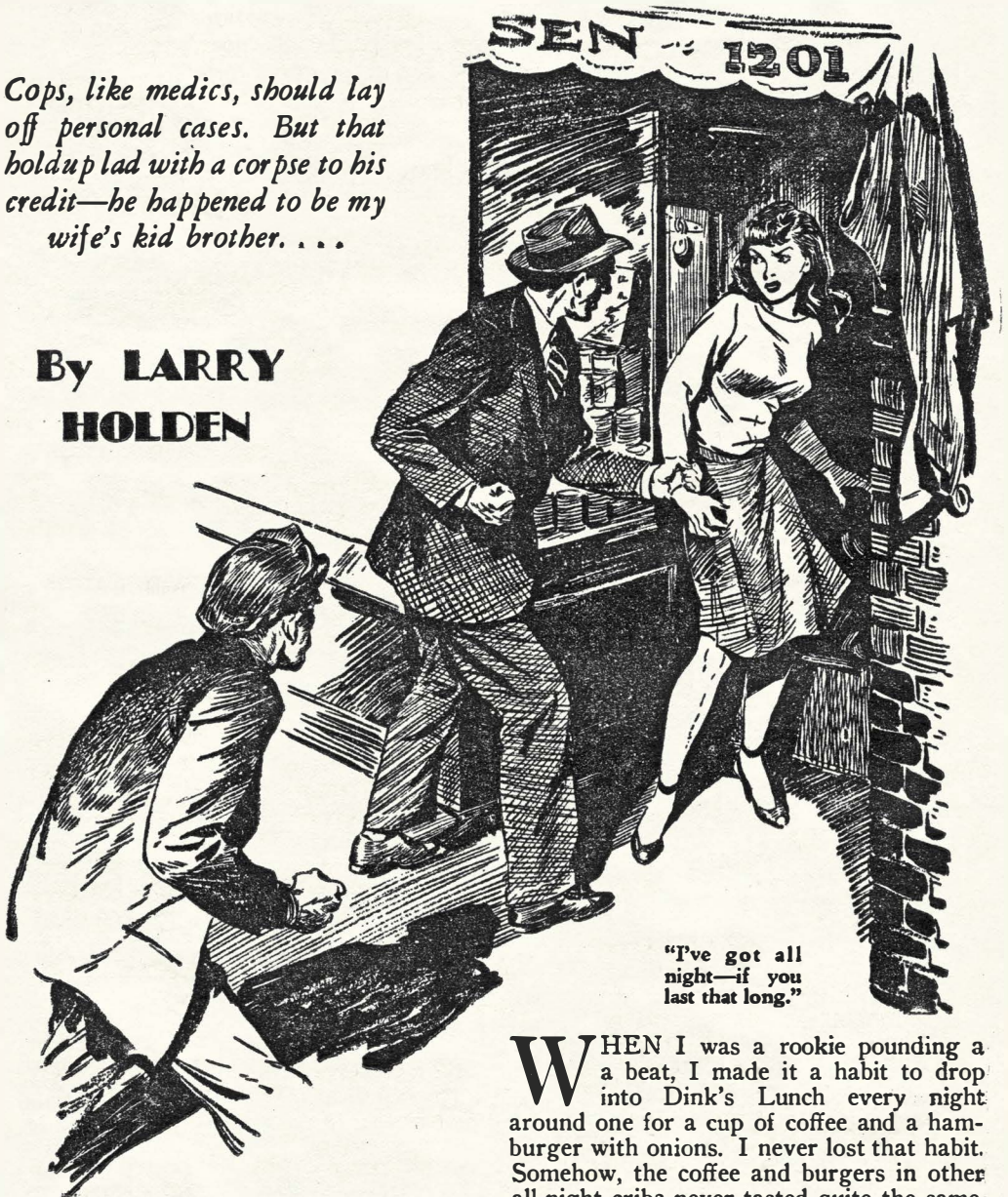
I swallowed the knot in my throat and said, "Seems like the best way to part."

Janice gave me a big devastating smile. Then she stepped on the gas and the powerful car shot forward, eating up the road. But it seemed to me as if it were only crawling. Was I that thirsty?

A CORPSE TO HIS CREDIT

Cops, like medics, should lay off personal cases. But that holdup lad with a corpse to his credit—he happened to be my wife's kid brother. . . .

By **LARRY
HOLDEN**



"I've got all night—if you last that long."

WHEN I was a rookie pounding a beat, I made it a habit to drop into Dink's Lunch every night around one for a cup of coffee and a hamburger with onions. I never lost that habit. Somehow, the coffee and burgers in other all-night cribs never tasted quite the same. Then, after a while I got to be detective, third grade, and after a longer while, sec-

ond grade. It wasn't possible, of course, to get to Dink's every night, but I made it whenever I could. Dink, a skinny little guy who prayed over his racing sheets as if they were a breviary, called me Old Faithful, which I think is a dog there's a song about.

This was the fourth night hand-running I was able to make it this week. I slid the door open, grinned at Dink, who was scraping his griddle with a shiny spatula, said, "Hi, Dink. Java and a burger with," and headed for the washroom at the far end. A tired-looking customer in a blue suit was reading the *Daily News* between timid sips at the steaming coffee. I was behind the door when out of the blue came Dink's yell. It didn't sound like one of those yells he lets out every once in a while to relieve the monotony. It was a yell with real urgency in it.

Out I charged from the washroom, grabbing my gun with one hand. I stopped dead at the end of the counter. I swear I couldn't have pulled that gun if there'd been a million bucks tied to the end of it.

A kid in a brown suede jacket was skittering for the door, and in his hand he had a big, dull-black automatic. At the door he turned his head for one wild, backward glance; then leaped out into the night. But that one quick hinge at his face had been enough to turn me soft and sick inside. It was Eddie, the wife's kid brother. I rushed to the door, but by that time there was nothing for me but a belch of exhaust smoke and a brief glimpse of a '32 Packard sedan, black, as it lurched heavily around the corner. I sprang for my car at the curb, but as I opened the door I saw a tangle of wires hanging down limply from under the dash, where someone had reached up and ripped them out.

I went slowly back into the diner. I don't think I could have felt worse if the holdup had been pulled by Jessie herself. The customer in blue was telling Dink excitedly just what had happened, and Dink said yeah and walked away from him. He looked sympathetically at me.

"He was likkered to the ears," he said in a low voice. "His breath was that long. He was tanked silly."

I said dully, "It's no excuse, Dink. You know that."

"He had friends out there in the car, Al. Maybe they. . . ."

"Forget it, Dink. I have to go after him, not find excuses."

I went back to the pay phone beside the juke box, dropped in a nickel and called headquarters. When I got the desk sergeant, I said, "This is Al Reilly, Sarg. Check and see if there's been any holdups reported tonight."

I heard him riffing over the sheets, and in those minutes I prayed—not just the formula they give you, but real prayers, the kind without words. But I might just as well have been hooting up a rain pipe.

"Here they are, Al," he said. "12:03, Esso Station, River Road, armed robbery, \$49.62 taken from cash register. Description—kid in a brown suede windbreaker, seventeen or eighteen years old, five feet eight, hunnert forty pounds. Got away in a '31 or '32 black Packard sedan. Here's another. Same guy only worse. 12:42, Amoco Station, nothing taken—because the attendant made a squawk and got a bullet in the neck. Hospital report says dead on arrival. The other attendant saw the job from the john and gave us the description. Same kid, same car. He couldn't see the driver of the car. What's up, Al? That ain't your detail."

"Just ran into another one." I gave him the caper at Dink's—omitting the kid's name.

I was heartsick when I turned away from the phone. Dink had the coffee and burger hot and ready. He gave the cup a small, apologetic push and said, "Siddown, Al."

"I'm not hungry, Dink."

"Drink the coffee anyway. Do you good."

He had recognized the kid. Dink had the memory of a dictaphone. Then there was the way he was acting. I had to get him straight on this.

I took a breath. "Listen, Dink," I said heavily, "I'm going after him, and I'm going to bring him in. After that I'm going to turn in my badge and do everything I can to get him off."

Dink avoided my eyes and turned and scraped at the griddle again.

"Twelve hours," I said. I sat on the stool and hunched over the cup of coffee. "After twelve hours you can name him." I sucked at the coffee. It tasted as if it had been brewed from dried liver.

Dink growled, "Don't be a dope."

I stared down at my clenched hands. My

thoughts kept swirling off on wild tangents like Roman candles and I couldn't get them together. I just couldn't. "I haven't the first idea where to start, Dink," I groaned. "I can't pull it together. Lord, I can't even believe it!"

"Why doncha call your wife? And get that idea about turning him in outta your head. What would *she* say?"

"Yeah," I mumbled, "yeah." I turned away and went back to the phone. I got Jessie and said as casually as I could, "Hope I didn't get you out of bed, Honey. Any calls for me?"

She said, "no," wonderingly, then asked: "Why?"

I TRIED to keep it commonplace. I said carelessly, "You know I've been detailed to those warehouse robberies. Well, I got word somebody wanted to sing and I thought maybe there was a pigeon in Flight One." That was our private joke—any telephone call at home for me was a pigeon in Flight One. Then, "Eddie get in yet?" I have all the Irish vices—except the talent for subtle fiction.

She flared up in an instant. "Al," she said anxiously. "Al, tell me. Is something wrong about Eddie?"

"Hell no," I mumbled. "I just asked, that's all. Just asked."

"Al, there *is* something. I can tell. What is it?"

"Not a thing, Jessie. Honest. I just happened to think. . . . Nothing, nothing. I just asked."

Relief flooded her voice, "He's a good kid, Al. You know that. He's just at that age. . . ." She loved her kid brother. But the relief she was feeling was relief she *wanted* to feel—not something she really believed. "But I do wish," she said severely, "you'd talk to him about hanging around those bowling alleys until all hours. Here it's after one and he's not in yet."

"What alleys?" I asked sharply.

"Oh, Al, if I told you once, I told you a dozen times. Those Salgo Alleys on Ridge Road. You will talk to him tomorrow, won't you?"

"Yeah. Tomorrow. I'll talk to him tomorrow." I hung up.

Sure she had talked to me about it, and all I had said was: *Aw, he's only a kid. Stop nagging him. He's okay.* There were

other things on my mind. I was busy. He was just a kid. Who worries about kids? But he wasn't just a kid. Anyone old enough and strong enough to point a gun at a man and shoot him down wasn't just a kid. And it was just as much my fault as anybody's. He used to brag to the other kids that his brother was a cop, a real detective. I guess that made him some kind of a big shot in his world, and he loved it and was always after me to take him around with me. But I don't know, I got busy or something and with one thing and another. . . . But that didn't make it any easier now.

I looked up. Both Dink and the customer were watching me, the customer looking a little puzzled. I must have been making faces. I usually do when I'm rassing with myself. I tipped Dink a brief nod and strode for the door. I had work to do.

As I stepped outside, Dink called behind me, "Al. Hey, Al. Wait a minute, Al."

I knew what he was going to say, but I couldn't afford to listen to it. It would just turn me soft again. I plunged down the street with long, reaching strides. A cruising cab picked me up at the corner, and I had it drive me to Salgo's Alleys on Ridge Road. The driver was as gabby as the radio. He got on my nerves so much that I had to snarl at him, "Shut up, will you? Shut up!"

He said, "Okay, Captain," and sounded hurt.

Salgo's place was pretty new, and the alleys still had a nice yellow shine under the overhead lights. There were sixteen of them, but only four were in use. A boisterous party of older men in shirt sleeves and suspenders were laughing, wisecracking, drinking. The thunder of tumbled pins hollowly filled the hall.

Salgo's young daughter, Teena, sat boredly behind the counter at the door, chewing gum and listlessly watching the abrupt, violent motions of the bowlers as they swooped to the line, skidded and hurled their balls. She was twenty-four and looked sixteen—not too badly put together, black-haired and blue-eyed. To me she was an unhealthy-looking runt, but maybe the kids saw her differently. I'm forty and I like an armful of woman, not a fingerful of splinters.

I leaned on the glass counter, over the

opened boxes of White Owls and Phillies, and said, "Hello, Teena."

She looked at me, didn't see anything for her, and said offhand, "Hello."

"Eddie been in tonight?" I asked.

"Eddie?" She popped her gum. "Who's Eddie?" She yawned and glanced beyond the alleys where a couple kids in zoot pants up under their chins were shooting pool. Sharp kids with hair like melted licorice.

She was lying, and not very well either. If Eddie hung around the alleys, she knew him. Hell, if he wore pants, she knew him. The cop on the beat used to tell me, "Gosh, Al, I never saw anything like it. She tries to get a date outta me every time I drop in. Her old man ought to take the end of a belt to her." That's the way she was with men. That's why I knew she was lying. Eddie was a good-looking kid.

"Sure you didn't see him, Teena?" I pressed her.

"Toldja I didn't see no Eddie," she said irritably. "Who's Eddie anyway?" She gestured impatiently at the bowlers and pool players. "See'm over there? That's all there is. If any of them's Eddie, you can have'm."

I pushed myself back from the counter. "Guess he isn't here, Teena. See you around." I tipped my hand from my hat-brim and went out.

THE hack was waiting for me, and I told the driver to go around the corner and park. He started to get out when I did. I waved him back. "You stay there and wait."

"I oney wanted to stretch, Cap," he protested.

"You can stretch later."

He scowled, but slouched down in the seat and pushed his cap forward over his eyes. I didn't want him prowling around and showing himself.

I went to the angle of the building on the corner and took off my hat and watched down the street. The yellow light from Salgo's entrance spilled over the sidewalk—the only light in the block—and for a long time, twenty minutes or more, the street was as empty as a desk sergeant's mind. My legs developed pains and prickles and wanted to move around of their own accord, but that was just plain impatience. I wanted to go down there and move things around

and get them going, but all I could do was wait and try to keep my legs still. It was like standing knee-deep in an ant hill.

Then the break came. A shadow stretched into the egg-yolk oblong of light, and a moment later Teena came out. She looked quickly up and down the street, then turned right and walked rapidly away from us, holding her coat tight.

I strode back to the hack. "We're picking up a girl." I showed him my badge in the cupped palm of my hand. "Down that street. Now hop to it."

He said, "Okay, Captain," but he didn't look happy. Maybe he was thinking of the hours he might have to spend in court as a witness.

He wasted a little time making a slow U-turn, then crawled back into Ridge Road. Two blocks ahead I could see Teena's head bobbing against the street light.

"Come on, come on," I snapped. "I want to pick her up before she turns gray. Step on it!"

We picked her up in the middle of the third block. I jumped from the hack and walked ominously toward her. She looked wildly around, then turned and ran back up the street. I caught her inside of five strides. I shoved her roughly into the darkened doorway of a delicatessen and backed her against the door.

"I'll scream!" she cried hysterically, "I'll scream!"

"For the cops?" I jeered. "Who the hell do you think I am, Teena? Who got you for shop-lifting last year? You don't recognize me, Teena?"

She said sullenly, "Well, what's it now? I ain't done nothing."

"Where were you going, Teena?"

"No place. Home."

"Don't lie, Teena. Where were you going?"

"I toldja—home." She pulled her coat closer to her throat. "It's late."

The back of my hand licked across her face, and she raised her hand to her mouth and whimpered. I never raised my hand to a woman before, but she wasn't a woman to me. She was just something that was in the way, that I had to break down or I couldn't go on.

"I can get it out of you, Teena," I said. "I can take you in and have the matrons work on you."

She leaned forward and sneered. "Go ahead," she said thinly. "Go ahead."

I slapped her again. "Maybe we'll work it out here. I've got all night—if you last that long. Now come on."

I raised my hand and she cringed back against the glass of the door, holding both hands up in front of her face.

"Where were you going?"

"Joe's," she whined. "Joe's diner."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Honest I don't know, Mister. I was just told to go there and say: 'He's loose.' That's all I know. Honest. Please don't hit me again. Please!" She grabbed both of my hands.

I started to pull them away but she held them tighter, and someone got me a terrific clip alongside the ear.

I floundered against the glass window. The girl ducked her head and scurried out of the corner. The guy came at me again with his fists cocked, and I flopped down on the sidewalk, drew up my knees and let both feet fly into his stomach. He clasped his belly, took two dragging steps backward and sat down. I shoved myself to my feet, lunged and cracked him in the point of the jaw. It felt like a sackful of marbles as his jawbone went. I bent over him. It was the gabby cabbie. I snapped my fingers and swore. I should have watched that monkey. But in the meantime, the girl was gone. From somewhere I could hear the diminishing echo of her heels pounding the sidewalk.

IRAN to the corner. The deserted street and the empty, eyeless storefronts stood in silence. The sentinal street lights shed dreary radiance and revealed nothing. There wasn't a glimmer anywhere to show me a diner open for business, and the girl was gone. I had lost her for fair now. There was no point in returning to Salgo's, because that was the last place she'd go. I began to know what it was like to feel really desperate. It's a black room with no doors.

But, Lord, I *had* to get to the kid before anyone else on the Force did. He was armed; he had killed a man. The Homicide boys were okay when you worked with them, played pinochle with them, but in a case like this they wouldn't be taking any chances. They'd do their thinking with

bullets. Sweat broke out in a rash on my forehead, ran into my eyes, pebbled my upper lip. It wasn't just the kid, though he was important enough. It was Jessie, too. If I let anything worse happen to Eddie, there would always be a closed, studded door between us for the rest of our lives, and I'd never be able to break it down.

I strode grimly back up the street. The cabbie had propped himself against the side of the building and was sitting there groaning and holding his jaw with both hands.

I demanded savagely, "Where was she going, punk?" I had forgotten he couldn't talk.

His eyes licked up derisively at me and said go to hell more plainly than words could have. He didn't even shrink back when I shoved my fist under his nose. I couldn't do any more to him, and he knew it. I had to get him in shape to talk, and he knew that, too. He stared back at me with jeering, hate-filled eyes, pushed my fist aside and briefly thumbed his nose.

I muttered, "Okay, punk, but your turn's coming." I pulled up his jacket behind and jerked out his wallet, but all it had in it was the usual stuff—seven bucks in ones; driver's license; a dim, cracked snapshot of a plump girl with her head turned away from the camera and her dress pulled up, shyly showing her legs; one of Dink's cards; a page torn from a loose-leaf notebook and on it *Muriel* and her phone number scribbled in pencil; a card from a flophouse called the Hotel Belvedere over on State Street; and another card from Salgo's Alleys.

He watched me warily as I sorted the junk on the sidewalk. I held up Salgo's card, snapped it with my forefinger and gave him a wolfish grin, and his wariness deepened. Maybe he'd been thinking of getting away with the plea that he had jumped me because he saw me picking on the girl and cop or no cop. . . . You know, that bunk.

But not now.

If I hadn't been so buried in my anxiety over Eddie; if I had taken only one minute to think, I would have thought how funny it was that he had been on hand so quick to pick me up after I left Dink's. It wasn't a neighborhood where cabs cruised, and especially not at this time of night. It was be-

ginning to pull together now—a little. The ripping out of my ignition wire was supposed to strand me so this monkey could turn up in his cab and pick me up. That was no accident. Somebody knew about my habit of dropping in at Dink's, had known I'd play this on my own, had set this crumb to keep an eye on me and maybe lend a helping hand. Only his hand had slipped.

I went quickly through his other pockets, but turned up nothing more than handkerchief, keys and change. He didn't even have a blackjack. That was flattering, that was. They had some opinion of me, setting this punk *bare-handed* to keep me out of the way.

But maybe they were smart at that.

They knew damned well from my record that I'd never go along like Mary's little lamb. Killing is bad enough, but cop killing is worse. Cop killers didn't stay happy long in this town.

I whistled up the beat cop and turned the cabbie over to him. "Have his hinge wired," I said, "and throw him in the cage. Book him for A and B. And nobody talks to him. Nobody! I'll take care of his cab. Where's Joe's diner around here?"

He shook his head. "There ain't no diner around here at all, Al. Not on my beat."

"What's the nearest one in that direction?" I pointed up the street.

He thought for a minute. "Let's see. That'd be down by the Erie station, but that ain't Joe's diner. It's the Erie Lunch, run by a guy named Ike Coxe. It's a good mile or more."

"Thanks. Take care of this monkey. I'll show later."

I went over to the cab and sat trying to muscle my thoughts together like a subway guard jamming a train full. Only your mind doesn't work that way. It's not a subway train. It has to work smoothly without pushing, or it shoots off in all directions, leading you heaven knows where. It led me to the Erie Lunch. You can see I wasn't functioning.

It was right across the street from the railroad station, lit up like Coney Island and jammed to the baseboards. It was all wrong. It was too conspicuous and too busy. There were four counter men, probably a cook behind, and a girl cashier at the register next to the door.

I stopped in front of her, pointed at the counter men and asked curtly, "Which one of them's Joe?"

She glanced at them, looked back at me and said humorously, "They're all Joe. Good Joes, everyone of them."

I showed my badge. "It isn't funny! Which is Joe?"

HER grin snapped in like an elastic band and her mouth got small and cautious. "None of them's Joe. That's Frank, that's Spinny, that's Sven, that's Tommy, the cook is Rex and I'm Frances. Anything else?" Why should she be so resentful?

"What's Spinny's real name?"

"Ask him. And now do you mind getting out the way so them people behind can pay their checks and catch their trains? The trains run on schedule here."

I got sore. I opened my mouth, closed it abruptly and strode over to the counter. What good would it have done to yell at her? It was only half her fault anyway. It's the loud-mouths on Traffic detail that make people that way.

Spinny wasn't Joe. He was Bruno Bamberger. His Social Security card said so, his draft card said so, and his driver's license said so. That made it official. "What's it all about, Chief?" he asked, pushing the cards back into his wallet.

"Nothing," I said sourly, "Nothing. Forget it."

I went outside and sat in the cab and held my head in my hands. What a swell dick I was turning out to be. Detectives, like medics, should keep the hell away from personal cases. They get all mixed up and their hands fumble and they make a mess—like I was doing. What had I found out? That a guy called Spinny was really named Bruno. That took real detection. Go to the head of the class, Al. Go home and tell Jessie what a bum you turned out to be. Tell her you're letting her kid brother down because you're too dumb to—

I stopped. Something started to click right along, began to add up a little more. Sure. Maybe this trip down to the Erie Lunch wasn't wasted after all. If a guy called Spinny could be named Bruno, another guy called one thing could actually be named another. Like Joe, for instance. Sure, sure! It had been too pat in the first place, timed to the minute almost.

That soft futile feeling was gone now, and all I wanted was to go full speed ahead. I almost begrudged the time I had to spend at the corner cigar store, calling Dink. I whispered, "Joe?"

He said, "Yeah?"

I said, "He's loose," and hung up. That was all I needed.

I hid the cab in the shadows of a loading platform at one of the warehouses a block from Dink's and went the rest of the way on foot. Dink was alone inside behind the counter, sitting on his high stool, poring over one of his racing forms. I had never thought of it before, but now it struck me that of late Dink never had enough nocturnal trade to warrant his staying open all night. A drifter now and then, the beat cop, me—not enough to pay for the electric. I watched him from outside for about five minutes, but he just sat there moving his lips over the entries. Below, the cellar windows were dark. I prowled around the side. A cellar door sloped out there and I tried it cautiously, but it was locked. Around back were two narrow windows almost flush to the ground, thick with mud splashed by years of spattering rain. I crouched down beside the one in the deepest shadow, moistened my finger and rubbed myself a peep hole—but underneath the glass was painted black.

I swore and lay flat to the ground and laboriously cleaned off the whole window, working a quarter of an inch at a time, or my scratching on the glass would have sounded like someone cutting tin with a hacksaw. At last, down in the corner where the brush couldn't reach, I found a chink of light. I had to lay my cheek right against the rough, cindery ground to see at all.

Behind a small rickety table, facing me, a man in a blue suit sat playing solitaire—the customer who had been at the counter! So that was how it was—all carefully rigged, witness and all. Then my breath staggered, caught its beat and rushed on. With his back to me, still wearing his brown suede jacket, sat Eddie. He was cleaning his gun with professional care. With a thin metal rod he pushed an oil rag through the barrel, held the gun to the light, squinted through it. He handled that gun as if he had teethed on it. I really felt sick.

Then he turned his head to say something to the card player, and I caught my

breath again. It wasn't Eddie. He was about the same age, had the same build, the same untidy black hair, but his face was thinner and he had a loose slash of mouth. This was the killer—not Eddie. I didn't have the bare threads of proof, but I knew. It was in his face, in the accustomed way he handled the gun. I knew it, but would the garage attendant know it—the one who had watched the killing from the doorway of the john? Or would he identify Eddie? Eddie was enough like this other kid so that a mistake could happen. . . . But I had no time to torment myself with things like that.

I HEARD approaching footsteps and I shrank back tighter into the shadows, watching the street. Two men were walking straight for Dink's, one in front of the other. As they came within the collar of light that ringed the lunchroom, I saw their faces. The one in front was Salgo—you couldn't miss that pulpy nose and those pock marks—and the other was Eddie. In his hand he still had that black gun.

They came around to the cellar door. Salgo turned his head to say something, but the kid prodded him roughly with the gun and said, "Keep going!" His voice didn't sound very sure of itself. I slid my gun from under my coat. With his foot, Salgo tapped three times on the door, then twice, then once. I ducked down to the window again. The card player looked swiftly at the door, then jerked his head at the gunner, who slipped noiselessly behind a stack of boxes and stood with his back to a pile of paper-wrapped cylinders held against the wall by two strips of one-by-twos. Then the card player went over and slid back a catch on the door. I saw his hands go up as Salgo came in with Eddie behind him. Their voices were faint, but I could hear them.

Salgo said, "The punk blew his top."

"You're damn right I blew my top!" Eddie stood with his feet apart, crouched over his gun. "I'm not letting you do that to Al. I'm not letting you. He's been a good guy to me, and you're not dragging him in. I'm settling it now. Call Dink."

The card player winked at Salgo and obeyed. I looked quickly at the gunman. He had shoved the clip into his gun and was edging around the boxes, the tip of his

tongue showing between his teeth. He raised his gun. Eddie still hadn't seen him.

I smashed the window with my elbow, yelled and took a snap shot—and missed! I know I missed because I saw the strip of one-by-two split behind him. But it was almost as good as hitting him.

The board broke and the stack of what looked like rolled-up rugs toppled forward against his legs and knocked him down. He squirmed sideways and came to his knees with the gun roaring in his hand. But he was shooting at Eddie. My next shot caught him in the chest and flung him against the table. Eddie was leaning against the door frame, his gun wilting in his hand and a patch of red blossoming on his right shoulder. The other cellar door opened and Dink slid in.

I shouted, "Drop it, Dink. And you too, Salgo. And you, fella."

All they could see was my gun at the window. They dropped their guns and slowly raised their hands.

Eddie cried, "Al!"

"Can you hold them till I come around, Kid?"

"Sure." He shifted his gun to his left hand and braced himself against the wall. I raced for the cellar door.

But it wasn't the three men with upraised hands, nor the body on the floor that caught my eye. It was the spill of shimmering color—red, green and yellow cloth—where the heavy cylinders had broken open after they fell.

I said, "Ah!" and looked at Eddie. That cloth was a shipment of the new plastic dress goods that had been stolen from a warehouse a week ago. "Is that why they rigged you, Eddie?" I asked.

"They wanted to get at you." His eyes were bitter, but he looked me straight in the face.

"Tell it, Kid. Get it off your chest."

"Well—I had kind of fallen for Teena Salgo and—well, tonight, I got a little drunk down there. Salgo was kidding me and Teena joined in. It was something about me hiding behind your badge and not being as tough as I made out. I—I guess I was trying to be a big shot," he said humbly. "I don't quite know how it happened, Al, but there I was with a gun in my hand and Salgo said just for a joke we'd go and make out we were holding up a friend of his—just to show I had the guts. Then he'd come in and we'd all have a laugh. It— isn't very funny, is it? Well, I had just got inside the lunchroom upstairs when I heard him step on the starter of the car, and I knew he was going to go off and leave me, and then Dink yelled and I jumped for the car. He tried to knock me off the running board but I poked the gun at him and got in. Then he laughed at me and said now they had *you* where they wanted you. They had all that stuff from the warehouses, but they couldn't get rid of it very easy because you were always around. He said unless you went and buried your head someplace while they unloaded it, they were going to turn me in. He said something about a killing, but I didn't get that."

Salgo laughed harshly. I said, "In this state we burn *everybody* who has to do with a killing, wise guy." The grin withered on his mouth.

* * *

Eddie and I sat on the hard bench outside Judge Sundstrom's chambers. I hadn't said a word of reproach to him. It wasn't necessary. You had only to look at his face to see the torment inside. No kid should have to go through that. Maybe the judge knew that, and that's why he wanted to speak to Eddie in private.

DEATH-ON THE HOUSE

Exciting, Sparkling Mystery Novelette

By Peter Paige



in the next issue



GRIM REAPER'S MODEL

By
**ARTHUR
LEO
ZAGAT**

He swiftly grabbed
her wrist. . . .



JO-ANN MARLIN was tired and cold and—yes, a little frightened. She was tired because she'd just finished the midnight show and who wouldn't be tired at past one in the morning after doing three shows? She was cold because all she had on, in this draughty, dim corridor down which she ran, was a white nylon bathing suit that just barely covered what the law says must be covered. Of course, she also wore on her lovely pale red hair a gold—well, gilded—tiara glittering with real-looking jewels, and slanting across luscious curves the wide blue ribbon whose red let-

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Not every milkman has the most beautiful girl in the country rush into his arms—especially a frightened Miss America who's just posed for Death. . . .

ters proved those curves were the most beautiful in the country. But tonight the crown was just something heavy on her head, and the *Miss America* on the ribbon didn't make her any warmer.

Jo-Ann was beginning to be scared because it was so dark in this hall, with only one grimy light, way behind, throwing her shadow ahead of her as she ran past shadowy doors. Dark and dusty and awful empty.

It was Fred Avery's fault she was here. He'd gotten her awful sore at him this morning. Through the thin door of her room in their hotel suite she'd heard him tell the fellow who'd come all the way from Gale County to take her picture that if the *Weekly Gazette* wanted one they could buy it from Atlas Fotopix. Before she could make herself decent and get out there, the fellow was gone. Well, she certainly had given Fred what-for. Just because he was her manager, that didn't mean he owned her. Suppose he had signed a contract giving Atlas the exclusive of her pictures? He'd signed a lot of contracts, but she hadn't had a letter from Dad or anyone else home since she'd won the state contest and they'd left for Atlantic City. The least Fred could do when someone from home showed up was to let her talk with him. He hadn't even found out the fellow's name. Why, he could be one of the boys who graduated with her from high school last year.

"That's what I was afraid of," Fred had grinned. "You're through with those local yokels, my pet. I've got big things in mind for you—and me—and they don't include going back to the farm after you've seen Patee."

Gee, it sure was scary in here. This was the old part of the Thalia Theatre. The part, Mr. Grimsby said, they used only to store things in since they built the new dressing rooms on the Rand Avenue side twenty years ago. New! That was before Jo-Ann was born. How old was this part then? How long had these lonely shadows whispered to one another in their voices of dust?

Jo-Ann stopped short, hand at her pulsing throat. *How could anyone from far-off Gale County know about this forgotten corridor?*

She hadn't thought of that when he'd told her to meet him here. When Fred and

Mom—not Jo-Ann's real mother, who was dead, but Mary Taylor, whom Fred hired to make believe she was her mother and travel round with them so people wouldn't get wrong ideas—when Fred and Mom had gone downstairs for lunch, Jo-Ann had still been too sore at Fred to go along. Then the 'phone had rung and it was the man from Gale County. Jo-Ann had been too excited to think of anything except that this was a voice from home.

She'd wanted to ask him if Dad was doing any better with the farm now she'd sent him the money to pay off the mortgage, and if Prue Hobson's baby had turned out to be a boy or girl and—oh, lots of things. But he'd cut her short.

"We've got to talk fast before your manager comes back. You're not going to let him get away with chasing me off without a special picture of you for the home folks, are you, Jo-Ann?"

"I should say not," she'd said, getting sore all over again.

"All right, then. Listen. . . ." He'd told her what to do and hung up, and only then did Jo-Ann remember he hadn't told her who he was.

That had made her all the more anxious to meet him. So when the curtain lowered on the finale of the midnight show, she'd danced off-stage through the left wing instead of by the right where Mom was waiting with her warm robe. Before anyone could notice, she'd run up the rusty iron steps the reporter had told her about and into this musty passage with its rows of closed doors in shadow-filled niches.

One of those doors, there just ahead of Jo-Ann, was opening inward. It was where he'd said he'd be. Jo-Ann could make out the faded star on it and under the star a faded name—Edwin Wills Rooth. The door opened slowly and soundlessly, although the hinges were rusted. Yellow light showed between its edge and the scabby jamb, and a voice inside said, "Come in, Jo-Ann."

It was silly to be afraid of someone from home. Jo-Ann stepped into the dusty-smelling room, noticing that the light came from an unshaded bulb screwed into the top of the frame of a specked mirror on the right-hand wall. It was a queer-shaped bulb with a glass point on top, and not frosted, so she could see the dull-glowing curlicue inside it. "Stand before the mirror," the

voice ordered, "turn around and face me."

Jo-Ann had got so used to obeying cameramen without thinking that she stepped in front of the mirror before she turned to look at the man from the Gale County *Weekly Gazette*.

Across the room, he bent over his camera. The flash reflector stuck up over the camera, gleaming with the light from behind her, but all Jo-Ann could see of the man was the top of his wide-brimmed slouch hat and the dark topcoat that hung from his hunched shoulders.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Later." It was the voice on the phone. "We'll get the picture first. Don't look at me," he ordered. "Look at the flash reflector."

Jo-Ann knew what that was, the round thing like a big cup silvered inside that stuck up from the side of the camera. It cupped the light of the bulb behind her, but shone much brighter than the bulb itself.

"That's right," the cameraman murmured. "Look at it. Lo-o-ok at it," he kept saying, very softly. "Keep looking, Jo-Ann." The brightness hurt her eyes but she couldn't pull them away from it. "I know you've very tired, very sleepy," the voice murmured, soft and slow. "You're sleepy, so-o-o very sleepy." She was. The sleepiness was welling up inside her, a gray mist inside her head. "No-o-ow," the voice droned. "No-o-ow, Jo-Ann, no-o-ow look at me. Look," it dropped to a husky whisper, "at *Death!*"

Jo-Ann looked—and screamed. White light exploded, searing her terrified eyes, her horror-stricken brain. She whirled down into the white and devastating light. His chuckle followed her down, down into nothingness. . . .

AT six in the morning Rand Avenue was as unglamorous as a champagne hang-over. The night's flaming neons were mere twisted glass tubes, their carnival glow replaced by a hard, bright light that made cruelly vivid every crack in the deserted pavement, every asphalted patch in the desolate gutter. Garbage cans were stacked under the limp canopies of the Gray Cat, the Club Manana, Dolan's Tavern. The Thalia Theatre's marble lobby yawned cavernously behind its grating of diamond-meshed iron slats.

The only living being in all this stale vacuity was the young man in a crisp white suit who peered through the Thalia's grating at a color-washed photo cut-out, enlarged to life size, that was propped just within.

Tom Grant's freckled left hand rumbled his thatch of black hair. His right clutched the handle of a wire basket heavy with a dozen bottles of milk. Behind him, at the curb, a hundred more bottles flattened the over-sized under-inflated tires of the electric truck in which their boxes were piled. He ought by now to be around the far corner on Sixth Street, delivering to the boarding houses there, but he couldn't tear himself away from the picture, not just yet.

Standing here, Tom could imagine the girl in the bathing suit was real. That she was smiling for him alone and not for the guys who could afford to buy orchestra seats from the speculators. He could, if he dared, reach in and touch her shining golden-red hair. He could talk to her.

He said her name. "Jo-Ann. Jo-Ann Marlin." It was a pretty name, almost as pretty as she was, with her green eyes and wide red mouth, a dimple denting one corner of it. "Jo-Ann Grant." He liked that better. "Mrs. Tom Grant. . . ."

Hell, what was the use of mooning over her? She was for some guy with money and brains, not for a dud only smart enough to cart milk around and collect for it. Who was Tom Grant to dare dream he might ever so much as get near to the real Jo-Ann?

Thin sound twisted him around to the Seventh Street corner. He heard it again—the ghost of a scream, prickling his spine. A cat, he told himself. An alley cat—Something flashed around the corner, red, white and blue, and ran toward Tom.

The wire basket dropped. Its contents smashed, and—so fast that the explosion of glass and milk missed him—Tom leaped to meet her. *Her!* It was Jo-Ann Marlin who flew toward Tom as if all the devils of hell were after her. Her white bathing suit was dirt-smeared, her ashen face black-smudged, the crown askew on her streaming hair. A soundless scream hovered on her pretty mouth and her green eyes stared ahead sightlessly.

She didn't see Tom, would have plunged on past him if he hadn't caught and held

her. Her breath rasped in her throat and her small fists flailed at him.

"Hold it," he gasped. "Hold everything, Jo-Ann! I'm not going to hurt you. Look. I'm just a milkman."

The homely, familiar word did the trick. Her hands dropped. Her eyes cleared, saw Tom's white coat, his freckled, broadly moulded face. "Milkman?" her quivering lips repeated.

"Only a milkman," he smiled, his voice low, soothing. "I'm Tom Grant, Jo-Ann."

"Tom? Tom Grant. I don't— You know me?"

"Sure I know you. I was just looking at your picture—"

"Picture!" The terror flared again into her face. Her body stiffened in his arms—*Jo-Ann's gorgeous body in Tom Grant's arms!*—and she twisted to stare back over her shoulder. Then she turned to Tom. Her lips trembled violently as she whispered: "He—he took my picture!"

"Who?"

"Death!"

Her eyes were midnight pools holding remembered horror. "I saw him. I saw his fingers with the camera in them. Just bone. Skeleton fingers." Her voice was a toneless scream again, a scream Tom hardly could hear. "His face!" Her own face was a twisting mask of terror. "Bone and black holes and grinning teeth without lips. His face—a skull grinning at me. And then the light, the white Death-light. . . ."

"Easy, Jo-Ann." Poor kid. Poor scared kid. "Take it easy." She was very young, Tom saw now, and the fuss, the late hours since she was named Miss America must have driven her nuts. "You just imagine you saw Death."

"I did, Tom. I did see him!" Her hands snatched at his white coat, clung frantically. "And he's after me. He's back there around the corner, waiting to take my picture again!"

"No one's going to take your picture, Jo-Ann. No one's after you."

"Yes he is, Tom. Death's after me. He's around the corner, watching, waiting for a chance to get at me again!"

"Okay." Humor her, that was the thing to do. "If he is around the corner, I'll go chase him away." Play along with her. Calm her down and then get her to a hospital. "I'll tell you what." He gently urged

her toward his truck. "You sit down in here and rest, and I'll go chase Death away." She went docilely, sank into the padded-leather driver's seat. "And then I'll take you home."

"Home." Her pupils widened again. "He didn't come from home, Tom. He lied."

"Yeah. Sure he lied. Now you just sit here and I'll go chase him away." Maybe her babbling had something real behind it. He'd better take a bottle along for a club, just in case. He pulled one out of a box, gripped it by the neck. "Be a good girl, Jo-Ann, and I'll come right back."

"Be careful, Tom. Please be careful."

He was, Tom Grant had to admit, maybe a little nervous as he went past the Second Balcony entrance, past a cigar store window with whitewash letters sprawled across the glass: *Miss America—Choice Seats—All Performances*; past the shuttered Orange Drink stand on the corner.

He stopped there, looked down Seventh Street, along the Thalia's red brick wall up which iron fire escape stairs crawled, to the Stage Door and beyond it, where the wall became the almost-black, stone facade of the old part of the theatre.

Nobody, nothing, moved on the empty pavement. The gutter was empty and so was the sidewalk across. A flicker of movement at the corner of Tom's eye jerked his head back to this side. The iron stairs? They were as empty as before, but he saw now what he'd missed, that the Stage Door jutted out a little, open.

Or had it opened in the instant he'd looked away? Was whoever, whatever had so scared Jo-Ann crouched behind it, peering out at him, watching for him to turn his back?

TOM was really frightened now. Then, remembering how the girl had looked running toward him, he was suddenly blind-mad. He ran toward the door, swinging the milk bottle like a club. He pulled the door wider with his free hand, plunged in—and stopped short, windpipe locked on breath.

The bottle slipped from his numbed hand, smashed on concrete. Milk washed over Tom's shoes, washed against the body that lay face down along the foot of the drab wall. Milk whitened gray trousers and a tattered gray sweater clasping an emaci-

ated torso, did not quite reach the sweated arms flung out as if still trying to reach the shelf on which stood the phone from which old Grimsby might have called for help.

Tom stood frozen, staring down at the grisly dent that misshaped the gray-haired back of the old man's skull. Of old Grimsby's skull, the Thalia's stagedoor guardian and night watchman, to whom only yesterday Tom Grant had delivered his every-other-day quart of milk.

He'd always thought Grimsby was kidding when, rheumy eyes glittering, he'd husk a yarn of some eerie midnight visitor he'd met in the dusty corridor where the old dressing rooms rotted. "I'd be scared hairless to be in here alone all night with those spooks," Tom would kid back. Grimsby'd show his gums in a toothless grin. "Why should I be frightened of Edwin Rooth, to whose Hamlet I played Horatio before your father was born? It is the coryphees should fear him, who flaunt their naked limbs on the very boards he strode as the greatest interpreter of the immortal Bard the world has known."

Their naked limbs. Jo-Ann had shown from that stage her wonderful arms, her gorgeous legs. An icy chill crawling his skin, Tom stared into the dark depths beyond the armchair Grimsby had salvaged from some long-forgotten set. Did he make out, back there, a crouching shadow blacker than the black shadows? Was the—? Bony fingers clamped his shoulder from behind.

A soundless scream rasped Tom's throat. The grisly hand twisted him around and he gaped into a broad, red face topped by a dark blue uniform cap, saw over the cop's shoulder another pounding across the sidewalk toward them, and behind that one the green top of a police prowler. He went limp with relief.

The second cop reached them, grunted, "Whach yuh got, Hen? A sneak thief?"

"Sneak thief, rats! Killer's more like it. He's sloughed in the watchman's skull—"

"With that milk bottle, huh?" A beef-like hand jabbed down at the smashed glass beside the corpse. "Good thing we noticed the door wuz open—"

"No!" Tom squealed, suddenly aware of what they were saying. "I didn't. I didn't kill Grimsby. I just found him like that."

"Yeah." Hen grinned humorlessly. "He

didn't do it, Bill. He just come along innocent-like an' found him like that. An' he smashed the bottle just on account he likes to see nice wet milk splashin' over stiff's."

"Look." Tom pawed blue cloth. "You're wasting time. The murderer may still be in the theater somewhere. I was around the corner almost right after Jo-Ann ran up to me screaming he was after me, and—"

"Hold it," Hen broke in. "Who's this Jo-Ann an' where is she?"

"Jo-Ann Marlin. Miss America. She'll tell you. She's in my truck around there in front of the Thalia lobby."

"Uh-huh." The cop's fingers tightened on Tom's shoulder, digging in. "So Miss America's in your truck around on Rand Avenue, is she."

"That's right. I know it sounds funny but she is. You can go look."

"No, mister. We don't have to go an' look. On account of we just come through Rand Avenue, past the Thalia lobby, an' we looked for a milk truck partickler on account we saw milk an' glass all over the sidewalk in front of the Thalia. But we didn't see no truck, an' we didn't see no Miss America neither."

He turned to his partner. "Okay, Bill, call Homicide. You better tell 'em to bring along the wagon from the nut house."

What happened after that was never very clear to Tom Grant. He had a confused recollection of wailing sirens, of bright lights and rock-jawed men in uniform and in cits hammering him with questions whose answers they refused to believe. Of sunlight slanting in through an open door and the mutter of a crowd gathering outside it and, towards the end, of a tall, gray-eyed man in a black felt hat and a black topcoat saying to him, "Look here, Grant. We've finally found out Miss Marlin is registered at the Grand Union Hotel and I've just talked to her mother on the 'phone. The three of them, Miss Marlin, her mother and her manager, returned there right after the show last night. The girl has been in her own room ever since, sound asleep."

"No," Tom croaked, his hands flat against the wall behind him. "She couldn't be."

"Something more, Grant. We've found your truck. It's around on Sixth Street, at the other end of the alley that runs behind

the theatre through to Seventh Street here." The man's face was grim but his low voice was almost friendly. "So you see, Son, if there ever were a chance of your wild story's being believed it's gone now. You're tied tighter to this murder than a Siamese twin to his brother. Why did you kill the old man?"

"I didn't. I tell you I didn't. Edwin Rooth did."

"Good boy. Now you're beginning to show some sense. So you had an accomplice. Where do we pick up this Rooth?"

"I—I don't know. I don't know where he's buried."

"Buried! So now you're bringing in a ghost." The friendliness went out of the man's voice, his eyes. "Okay, Grant." Both were chilled steel. "If you're playing for an insanity plea, you'll find out you can't get away with it." His tight look moved to the cop holding on to Tom's arm. "All right, Sergeant. We've got enough to hang him without a confession. Take him in."

"Yes, Sir. Come along, you." The sergeant dragged at Tom's arm, but another man, short, with a pointed little chinbeard and gold-rimmed specs, got in the way. He plucked at the gray-eyed man's sleeve. "Captain Storm."

The other made an irritated sound in his throat. "Well, Doc. What have you got on your chest?"

"SOME information that should be of interest to you. Your bright young men haven't yet learned to recognize the difference between a cadaver which rigor mortis is just beginning to stiffen and one from which it has almost passed away again."

"What the devil are you driving at?"

"Oh, just a trifle, Captain Storm." The medical examiner smiled tauntingly. "Just that the corpse in which we are at the moment interested has been a corpse for approximately five hours. It is a little after eight now, so the murder occurred at about three this morning."

The sound in Captain Storm's throat was not irritation this time.

"You see," the physician went on didactically. "It was very cold last night so that rigor set in quickly, but towards morning the automatic heating system—"

"Okay." Storm swung back to Tom.

"Where were you at three a.m., Grant?"

"At the plant, waiting to load up. I—"

The captain swung to another detective. "Get on the 'phone, Parks, and check that."

"Yes, Sir." The detective hurried away and Captain Storm was lost in the shifting knots of men. After awhile Parks was back, a smile on his square-jawed face. "Okay, Grant. You've got an alibi." He put a hand on Tom's shoulder. "You shouldn't have got rattled and told us all those ghost stories."

"But they weren't—"

"Yeah, I know. Go on. Get out of here before the skipper decides to hold you for interfering with the police in the performance of their duty."

Tom Grant stumbled out through the door into sunlight. A man with a press card stuck in his hatband asked him something but Tom pushed past him. Another one pushed a camera at him and snapped it. A camera! Jo-Ann had said something about a camera—No, a cameraman. A skeleton cameraman. It had happened. No matter what the cops said, she'd come running toward him, so scared she couldn't even scream. *Something* must have scared her. Tom had put Jo-Ann in his truck, and then the truck and Jo-Ann both had disappeared.

Her mother had told the police Jo-Ann was in bed all the time. Jo-Ann's mother wouldn't lie, but maybe she only thought Jo-Ann was in her bed. Or maybe somebody had made Jo-Ann's mother lie, maybe holding a gun on her while she talked on the phone.

Then—the thought stopped Tom stock-still on the Rand Avenue corner—then Jo-Ann might still be in danger. *Was* still in danger. He started to go back to tell the cops, then stopped. They wouldn't believe him. It was up to Tom Grant.

The Grand Union Hotel. It was the ritziest place in town, and he was in his milkman's white suit, with milk splashed all over his shoes. Well, he could do something about that. He pulled out a handkerchief, stepped over to the man who was opening up the Orange Drink stand and asked him to wet it. The fellow looked at him kind of funny but did. Tom washed off his shoes, threw the handkerchief away and went across the sidewalk toward a taxi that stood at the curb while its driver

gawked at the crowd. "The Grand Union," Tom yelled, snatching the door open and climbing in.

The hackie turned to look in at him, flat nose screwing up like he smelled something bad. "Ain't yeh fergot yer luggage, me lud? Or are yeh travellin' incog—incognito?"

"I got the fare." Tom dug a bill out of his pocket. "See." And then he got mad. "Get going before I ram your teeth down your gullet."

"You an' who else, bud?" But the cab started off, so fast it knocked Tom back into the seat.

He decided to have the cabbie let him off around in back, where the delivery entrance was. And he got a break. Some porters in white suits like his own were unloading baggage from a truck. He walked up to it and hoisted a trunk to his shoulder like they were doing and went on in after them, into a big, stone-floored room with brick walls painted gray-blue.

He was inside. But he still didn't know how to get to Jo-Ann's room, not even where it was. He saw one of the porters go up to a sort of desk on high legs, look at a tag hanging from the trunk on his shoulder and say to the man standing behind the desk, "Jenkins."

The man didn't look up. He just thumbed some cards in a box on the desk, pulled one out a little and said, "Fourteen-oh-two." Tom Grant stepped up to the desk and said, "Marlin," muffling his voice.

"Six-twenty-three," the man read from a card. Tom went around the same corner into a narrower blue-walled space where some trunks were piled along the wall. The porter was just going into a big elevator, ahead, and alongside the elevator was a door through which Tom saw stone steps going up. He put his own trunk down on top of the others. As soon as he saw him do that, the elevator man rattled the cage-door closed, which made it simple for Tom to dive to the opening beside it and start running, two steps at a time, up the walled-in stairs.

He met no one on the stairs, but when he shoved out through the sixth-floor fire-door, a woman wrapped in a white Mother Hubbard apron looked at him sort of funny over the pile of folded sheets she was carrying. He swallowed, but walked right past her as if he knew where he was going.

A right-angle turn took him out of her sight before the numbers on the doors lining the red-carpeted hall got to 623.

Some of the doors along here were open, the bedrooms inside all messed, the mattresses stripped. Counting ahead on his left, where the odd numbers were, Tom saw that the door of what must be Room 623 was closed, as were the ones either side of it. A queer, babbling noise came from behind the door of 621 as Tom passed it. He reached 623 and turned its knob.

It was locked. He had to knock. A murmur of voices inside cut off, but nothing else happened. Tom knocked again.

THE KNOB turned and the door was pulled half-open by a stocky man, about thirty, with slicked-down black hair and a roundish, pleasant-looking face.

"Good morning," he said, looking mildly surprised. He had on a maroon silk robe, and his white shirt was tieless and open at the neck. Otherwise he was fully dressed. "You must have the wrong room. I didn't call for a porter."

"I'm not a porter." Tom shouldered the door aside and pushed in through it before the man could shut it again. "I'm a milkman." He looked for Jo-Ann but this wasn't a bedroom. It was a swell parlor with a sofa upholstered in pale green silk, a radio between two wide, drape-swathed windows, a desk littered with papers in the far corner and two or three deep, comfortable-looking chairs out of one of which a very thin man in a navy blue suit pushed up, eyes widening.

The other one closed the door and said quietly: "So you're a milkman, are you? The milkman, I suppose, we've been hearing about on the radio. The one who sees ghosts."

Tom turned around to him. "Where's Jo-Ann?"

The fellow's smile deepened and he put his hands in the pockets of his robe before answering. "Jo-Ann is in the room she shares with her mother." He pointed with his chin at a closed door in the wall to Tom's right. "Asleep, as the police were informed when they phoned."

Tom swallowed, asked: "Who're you?" "Fred Avery. Miss Marlin's manager. And legal guardian." The other man made a peculiar, choking noise and Avery said,

not taking his eyes from Tom's, "You'd better get out through my room, Roberts. I'll contact you later."

Roberts went, without a word, to another door in the wall to Tom's left, opened it, went through and pulled it shut behind him. When Tom looked back to Avery, his eyes were waiting. "Now, Mr. Milkman," he murmured. "Would you mind telling me why you're here? What are you after?"

Those eyes were pale, queer-looking. They made Tom uncomfortable. To get away from them, his own dropped to the floor, stared at Avery's shoes as he answered, "I wanted to make sure Jo-Ann—Miss Marlin is all right."

"What makes you think she might not be all right?"

"Her being so scared of someone who was after her, and then—" Tom gulped and all of a sudden was shaking inside of him. "And then her disappearing after I put her in my truck in front of the Thalia."

The freshly polished shoes at which he stared shifted a little on the green carpet. "So you really believe that story, milkman. Well, you'd better forget it because she wasn't anywhere near the Thalia at six this morning. She left there with her mother and me immediately after the last show. She came right back here with us and has been here ever since."

Tom's hands fisted at his sides and his head came up. "You lie," he said hoarsely. "You lie in your teeth. She was there at six and so were you. You were the one who drove her 'round the corner in my truck. Now I know you're lying about her being in there!" He whirled away, plunged toward the door on the right—stopped short at Avery's snapped command. "Freeze, milkman. Freeze right there if you don't want lead in your guts."

Tom twisted back, gaped at the flat blue automatic that had come out of the robe's pocket and snouted at him from Avery's fist. Just then the door toward which he'd been plunging rattled open. The babbling he'd heard in the hall was suddenly behind him and a woman's voice, saying: "She's coming to, Fred. Should I—" She broke off with gasping breath. "Oh, oh. More trouble."

"No, Mary," Avery smiled past Tom. "The end of our troubles. I was worried about this milkman and his story, afraid

someone might believe him, but he was good enough to come to me with it." Tom stole a glance over his shoulder at the brunette in the doorway behind him, mouth a thin red slit in her overly rouged face, eyes drowned in blue shadow, hand clutching a feather-edged pink dressing gown about her. "The story will be," Avery's soft voice continued, "that he forced himself in here, stark, raving mad. He tried to get to Jo-Ann and I had to shoot him down. But first you'd better put my dear ward back to sleep. I'm afraid we're going to have to wait a while before letting the world know Miss America's gone insane. Understand?"

"Yes, but I don't like it. One killing was one too many."

"My dear, there are people who'd murder a half-dozen for a lot less than the quarter-million or so we're in for if we don't lose our nerve. And there are others who'd sing to the police to keep their own necks out of the noose. Our friend Roberts, for instance. I'm afraid it's too late to get squeamish, my pet."

"I guess it is," the brunette sighed. The door thudded shut.

"Okay, milkman," Fred Avery murmured, "we'll even skip your prayers." The automatic lifted a little. Staring at the tiny black hole in its tip, Tom Grant knew he looked at death. "We'll give my wife thirty seconds to shoot Jo-Ann another dose of morphine, and then—"

"Right now, Avery," a new voice said from the door behind him, "you'll drop that gun or get it shot out of your hand!" Detective Parks came stiff-legged into the room, fisting a Police Positive.

Tom didn't wait to ask how he'd got here but whirled, slashed open the door behind him and flung himself through. He shot past an open bathroom door, into a bedroom where the malignant Mary bent over one twin bed. He swiftly grabbed her wrist. Then he slapped at a hypo that glinted metallicly in her fingers. The hypo syringe flew across the room and the brunette screamed. Tom swept her aside with an impatient arm and bent over shining red-gold curls spread on a pillow no whiter than the face that stared sightlessly up at him.

"Jo-Ann," he groaned. "It's all right, Jo-Ann. I've fixed everything and there's

nothing to be afraid of no more. Not no more."

Long lashes quivered. Sight came into green eyes, and recognition. "Tom," he heard. "You saved me, Tom! I knew you would." Jo-Ann smiled up at him, tremulously, and her wonderful arms lifted to him.

"WHEN I discovered Parks had let you go," Captain Storm explained, later, "I hit the ceiling. I knew you'd really believed the mad story you'd told us. He might have let a dangerous lunatic loose on the town. I ordered him to get after you, fast.

"You were gone by the time he'd pushed through the crowd to the corner but the Orange Drink man had seen you take a cab and heard you give your destination. Parks grabbed another, caught your hackie just as he was driving away from the Grand Union. What he said he'd seen you do sent my man up to the Marlin suite on the double, to grab you before you did any damage.

"Just as he turned the corridor corner on the sixth floor, this Roberts popped out of 625 and Parks recognized him as someone we've been looking for a long time, for manslaughter."

"Manslaughter!" Tom exclaimed.

"That's right. He used to have a hypnosis act till one night, there at the Thalia, he killed one of his stooges by jumping on him when he was stretched stiff between two chairs. Roberts ducked and we had nothing on his manager, so we had to let Avery go. Yes," The Homicide Squad captain smiled grimly, "the same Fred Avery who was now Miss America's manager."

"Parks knew all this. He grabbed Roberts, and was a smart enough detective to figure there was something wrong if that crook were around, so he listened at the door of 623 before barging in. Parks heard you charge Avery with having kidnapped Jo-Ann on Rand Avenue, and then he heard Avery threaten to shoot you. The house-dick, who'd come up by then, let him into 625 and—Well, you know the rest."

"No, I don't," Tom objected. "What about the skeleton cameraman, for instance?"

"That was Roberts—or rather what he

successfully made Jo-Ann see him like."

"Made her see him?"

"He was a hypnotist, remember. One of the established ways of mesmerising is to focus the subject's attention on a bright light."

"The reflector!" That was Jo-Ann, seated very close to Tom on the sofa in Room 623. "He told me to keep looking at it."

"Precisely. He could make you see him as a skeleton death, and remember it after you reawakened, but since you'd never been hypnotised before he couldn't keep you under long enough to suit their purpose.

"Roberts," the captain went on, "knew the Thalia inside out. And Avery knew you, Jo-Ann, well enough to get you to that abandoned dressing room without seeming to have any part in it. The plan was for Roberts to give you a shot of morphine after he'd put you under and then sneak you out a window and through the alley where he had a car waiting. The hotel people are so used to drunks being lugged in all hours of the night that it would have been easy to get you up to your suite and to bed, where you'd wake up in the morning with a wild story that would convince even yourself you'd gone insane.

"Where their plan went wrong was that Grimsby, who'd taken a liking to Jo-Ann, noticed she didn't leave with the others. When everyone else was gone and she still hadn't appeared, he went looking for her and spied Roberts lugging her down that disused corridor. Not realizing he'd been seen, the old man stole back to phone for help, but Roberts dropped the girl, followed him and just as he was reaching for the instrument, let him have it with the flat of his camera. Then Roberts got panicky, ran out into the street and through the alley to his car.

"It took him about three hours of aimless driving to get up courage enough to go to the hotel and tell Avery what had happened. The latter had more guts, enough to return to the Thalia, park his car on Sixth Street and scout around. He spied Jo-Ann in your truck, Tom, and drove off with her, back to the Grand Union hotel. That clear now?"

"Yeah. I guess it is. But why, Captain? Why'd they want to make out Jo-Ann was

mad? What's he mean about a quarter-million dollars?"

"That, more or less, is what her home farm is worth. You see, it has just been learned that the soil of the territory just around there is, of all places in the country, best adapted to produce an especially fine yield of *guayule*, the plant from which a fine natural rubber is extracted. Two big syndicates are fighting to get hold of all that land, bidding its price up to way above its real value, and Avery wanted to line his own pockets with the money.

"Quite by accident, or rather because he was a far-seeing crook, he was in a position to do so. You see, when he took over the management of Jo-Ann's career as a beauty contestant, he'd had himself appointed her legal guardian, which was easy enough because the local judge knew her father's reputation for shiftlessness. The court order specified that the appointment was to be effective 'as long as the said Jo-Ann Marlin shall be a minor or otherwise incompetent.' If she were adjudged insane, it would remain in effect indefinitely, and Avery could do as he pleased with the money for the farm."

"But it's my father's," Jo-Ann protested. "Not mine."

The captain turned to her. "No, my dear. When you insisted on Avery's paying off the mortgage, he had your father make

over the deed to you. He wasn't missing any chance of making a profit out of you, even a small one. Your father didn't object. You were his only child and knowing his own failings, it seemed to make sense. And now, young fellow." He swung back to Tom. "Suppose you tell me something. How did you know, when Avery said he'd brought Jo-Ann home right after the midnight show at the Thalia, that he was lying?"

"Shucks," Tom Grant shrugged. "That wasn't anything. Looking down at his shoes, I wondered why they were shined so early in the morning. And then I saw there was some milk in the crease between the sole and the upper, just like there was on my shoes in spite of the fact I'd tried to clean 'em up. That told me he must have walked through the milk puddle in front of the Thalia where I'd smashed those bottles at six a.m. when Jo-Ann came running toward me."

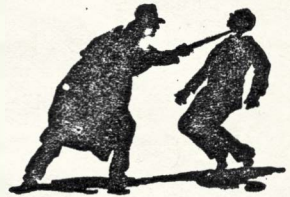
"Oh, Tom," Jo-Ann Marlin exclaimed. "You're wonderful! Now I know you're going to take care of me and my money just divinely."

"Hey! Hey, wait up, Jo-Ann. I ain't going to be your guardian."

"Who said anything about your being my guardian?" she came back, and then covered with both hands the blush that reddened her cheeks.

KILLER, COME BACK TO ME!

I was hot after a stone-cold corpse, but unless I could improve my cadaver-catching technique, either an innocent kid would take the gas-chamber route to hell, or I, myself, would have to act as stand-in for the body-that-wasn't-there. Don't miss Peter Paige's smashing new novel: *Meet Me in Death Alley!*



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SUITABLE



I bent over, looked—
and took a deep breath.

CHAPTER ONE

Germless Genius

IT WAS almost dawn. There was a chill in the rarified Mexican air. A light tropical rain had been falling since eight o'clock in the evening. At four in the morning it had stopped. The streets gleamed wetly in the yellow light of the street lamps.

I sat, chain smoking, in the sterile apartment of Mariano Mercado. I was not comfortable. Mercado's chairs were not over-stuffed. As a matter of fact they were not stuffed at all.

It seemed that germs, bacteria and bacilli lived more contentedly in padded fabrics than on inhospitable wood and iron. Therefore Mercado's furniture was made of the

latter materials. I was seated on a maple chair with a straight back and a bottom far more unyielding than mine. I had been sitting there for three and a half hours.

There was no urgency in my visit when I arrived but now I was beginning to become concerned. I had spent a plutocrat's evening, dining in *Ciro's*, dancing at *El Patio* and slumming in various unsavory *cantinas* in the company of a wide-eyed feminine *tourista* whom I had picked up in the American Express office.

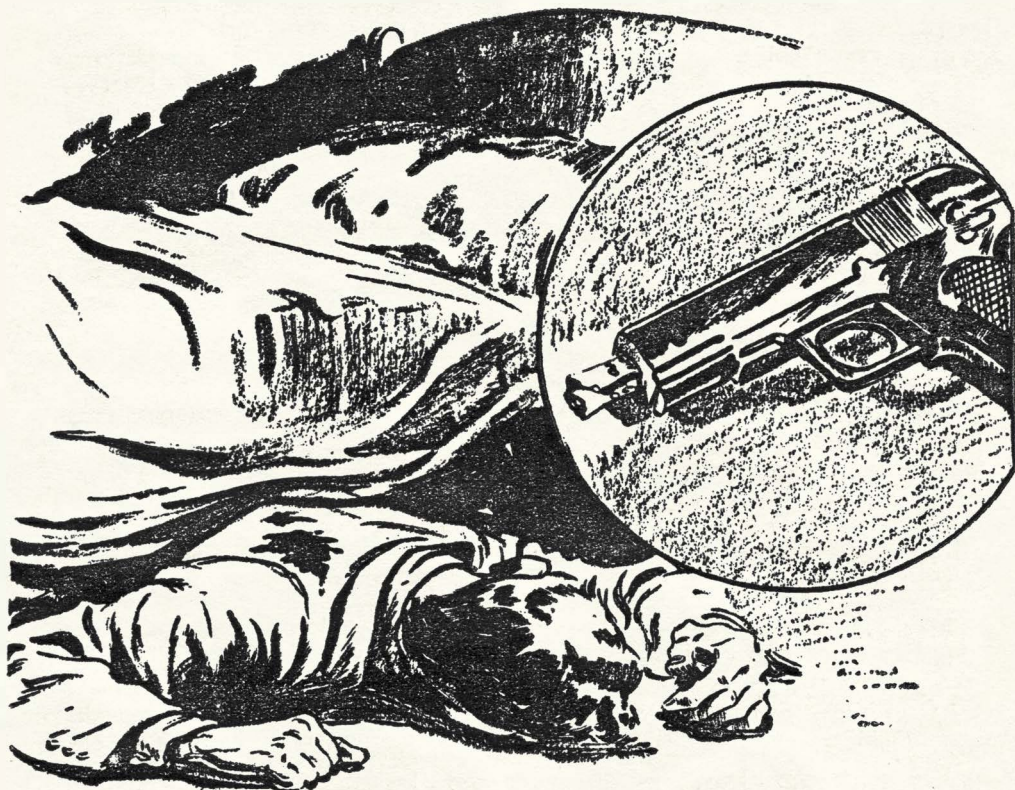
At about one o'clock she thought I had insulted her and I was positive that she had bored me so we parted not too amicably.

Down Mexico way, Mariano Mercado slyly evaded a Galahad call—and sent his assistant to save a lady's honor!

FOR FRAMING ●

Mariano Mercado Novelette

By **D. L. CHAMPION**



Not feeling sleepy and finding myself in the neighborhood of Mercado's sanitary lodgings, I had dropped in for a chat and a *habanero* before going to my hotel.

He had not answered my ring. However, in the role of employee, confidant and general confessor I was possessed of a duplicate key. I let myself in, sat down uncomfortably and awaited his return.

At three o'clock I began to wonder. Mercado was a man of temperate habits. While averse to neither a spot of alcoholic refreshment nor a touch of romance, he always managed to clean up both before midnight. It appeared that germ life flourished more potently in the darkness,

that a man who retired early was a healthier one and that late hours weakened one's resistance thus making the body a pushover for whatever parasite cared to attack it.

By now the sun had already climbed up from Vera Cruz and appeared over the rim of the plateau where Mexico City is situated. The bright light slanted through the Venetian blinds, making golden bars on the scrubbed wooden floor. And Mariano Mercado was still abroad. It was so unlike him that I resolved to give him until six o'clock, then telephone the accident wards of various hospitals.

Three minutes after I had made that decision, I heard light racing footfalls on

the stairs. A key turned in the lock and Mariano Mercado burst into the room.

He was an ineffable sight. He had started out wearing a sword-creased green suit which had been cut by a daring and imaginative tailor. Now it hung like a robe of drenched burlap. His shirt, a natty two-tone job combining the worst features of puce and grey, was a sodden ruin. The colors of his tie—and I will swear there were thirteen of them—had chummily run into each other. His shoes made a squishing sound as he walked and his hat was a wet blob of verdant felt.

This, in itself, was enough for the human eye to absorb before breakfast but there was more. The face of Mariano Mercado was a study in fear and horror. His eyes were rimmed with dark circles. His coffee-colored complexion had turned gray. Sheer panic was etched on his face.

I stood up and put out my cigarette. I said: "What on earth's the matter?"

Mariano Mercado did not answer me. He turned his face toward the ceiling and addressed a personage of greater influence. "*Valgame Dios,*" he murmured. That, in Spanish, is usually an oath. It was not this time—it was a prayer.

Then he turned his wild-eyed gaze on me and went into action. "The bath, Latham. And *pronto*. As hot as you can get it."

Even as he spoke he began to rip off his clothes like a strip tease artist who wants to get home early. I went into the bathroom, turned on the hot water and returned. By this time Mercado stood stark naked before his desk.

His trembling brown hand was poised over an array of bottles on the blotter. Hastily he selected three of them. He filled a glass with triple-distilled water and gulped down one pill from each bottle.

"Calomel, aspirin and quinine," he said. "They may save me."

He dashed past me like a marathon runner, raced into the bathroom and plunged into the tub like a man whose clothes were on fire. I followed him in, sat on the edge of the basin and said for the second time: "What's the matter?"

"*Nada,*" he said with the brave tremulous smile of a Christian martyr, "nothing at all, except that I shall probably die."

This did not alarm me. Mariano Mer-

cado died several times a week. If he saw a fly approaching at a hundred yards he was certain it was either tsetse or malarial. Every dish from which he ate was the host for a googol of germs.

I said quite calmly: "And what shall you die of this time?"

He soaped his brown chest. "Pneumonia, tuberculosis, bronchitis or pleurisy. Evilio Torga has murdered me."

NOW Evilio Torga was the proprietor of a *cantina* often frequented by Mercado and myself. He was a huge fat man, jovial and fond of a joke. He was free handed and pleasant. It was impossible to conceive of Evilio Torga murdering anyone at all and I said as much.

"He is a villain of the deepest dye," said Mercado. "He has sent me to my grave. He—"

At this point he sneezed. An expression of terror spread over his face. He said sepulchrally: "Mercado is not long for this world."

"Mercado," I said, "will outlive the sphinx. You're as healthy as a bottle of tonic. But tell me what horrible thing Torga did."

"Listen," said Mariano Mercado gravely. "Listen to the tale of an assassin."

It appeared that, about ten o'clock, Mercado had been drinking *habanero* in Torga's saloon. It had begun to rain. Torga's telephone was out of commission and Mercado had been unable to call a taxi.

Now, Mercado would no more have thought of going out in a storm sans raincoat, rubbers, bumbershoot and muffler, than he would have considered tossing a bomb into the chambers of *el President Aleman*. So, quite naturally, he remained where he was.

It kept on raining and Mercado kept on leaning against the bar sipping drinks. At three-thirty he was the only customer and Evilio Torga manifested an understandable desire to go home.

In Mexico City there is no closing law. The custom of the country is for the saloon keeper to keep his doors ajar until the clients have departed, then run down his iron shutters.

Torga politely invited Mercado to leave. Mercado peered outside at the rain and flatly refused. An argument ensued, where-

upon Torga stood on his proprietary rights and ordered poor Mercado out onto the street.

Mercado had eventually gone, with all the enthusiasm of a man walking to the electric chair. At this hour the taxis were gone from the streets and Mercado had walked home in the wet, covering a distance of almost two miles.

On several occasions he had taken refuge in friendly doorways and the journey had taken him some time. Drenched to the skin, he was thoroughly convinced that he was a dead man. And he was unshakable in his conviction that Evilio Torga had murdered him.

He concluded his tale and looked at me reproachfully when he found me unsympathetic. He got out of the tub, rubbed himself vigorously and searched the medicine closet for more remedies. In that well-stocked chest he found several.

He was pouring a sticky dark mixture down his gullet when the telephone rang. I wandered out of the steaming bathroom and answered it.

A voice, obviously mid-west United States, said in execrable Spanish: "*Esta abierto la oficina?*"

I said, in English: "Are you asking if the office is open?"

"Yeah. That's right. Are you open for business yet? If not, what time do you open?"

Even in English it was a difficult question. Mercado had no office hours. It was strictly forbidden to disturb him during the siesta hours, but beyond that the office was open whenever either of us was in it.

I wasn't sleepy and I knew Mercado was far too concerned over his imminent demise to rest. I said: "If it's important, you can come over now."

The voice thanked me fervently and without giving me a name cut off.

I found Mercado in the bedroom. He had a red woolen muffler about his neck and his little body was wrapped in a heavy bathrobe. Some of the panic had gone from his expression, had been replaced by a look of mild incredulity, as if he were surprised to find that he was still alive.

"Was that Torga on the phone? Overcome by remorse, perhaps?"

"It was not Torga. It was a client, I gather."

"Send him away. I am in no condition for work."

"You'd better be," I told him. "Our combined bank balances total something under five hundred pesos. You'd better do whatever this *gringo* wants and for whatever you can get."

"What does he want?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. He sounded like a countryman of mine in some trouble."

"I didn't know your countrymen got up so early."

It was useless to tell him that the American *tourista* is not typical of the average citizen. Mercado considered that all Americans were fat, well heeled, arrogant and lazy. Judging from the caliber of the *touristas* who infested Mexico, I cannot say that I found it in my heart to blame him.

It was a little before seven o'clock when the doorbell pealed. By this time Mercado was sitting at his desk dosing himself periodically with the contents of various bottles and vials. I got up from my uncomfortable chair and went to answer the door.

THE man upon the threshold was a perfect example of Mercado's conception of an American. He was of middle age. He was fat. He apparently had money and his manner was brusque and condescending. He said: "I'm Thomas Lapley. Where's Mercado?"

I nodded and led him into the office. As we came into the Mercadian presence, I said: "The *Senor* Mercado is somewhat indisposed. Perhaps he will not be able to help you today."

Lapley laughed a Chamber of Commerce laugh. He said with profound conviction: "He'll help me, all right. I'm quite willing to be overcharged."

He extracted a thick wallet from his pocket, plunged two pudgy fingers into it and withdrew an enormous mass of Mexican bills. He flung them on the desk and said: "There's three thousand pesos. What do you say to that, Mr. Mercado?"

Mr. Mercado said nothing to that. As a matter of fact, he shrank back in his chair, registered anguish and said in a weak voice: "Latham, take that away."

Thomas Lapley, who doubtless had never seen a man flinch in the face of three thou-

sand pesos in his life, looked astonished. But this was a familiar situation to me.

I scooped the bills up from the desk and put them in my pocket. Mercado grabbed a large bottle of disinfectant, spilled some on the desk where the money had lain and scrubbed vigorously with his handkerchief.

"For the love of Pete," said Mr. Lapley, "what's wrong?"

Mariano Mercado paused in his labors. He fixed Lapley with a reproachful eye. He said: "Do you have any idea of how many germs there are on a single peso note?"

Mr. Lapley blinked. It was obvious that he had not the slightest idea of how many germs there were on a single peso note. But I knew to the last decimal point. I had heard it often enough. Moreover, I had no desire at all to hear it again.

I said hastily: "Since Mr. Lapley has seen fit to call on us so early in the morning, his business is undoubtedly important. Suppose we listen to what he has to say."

I drew up a chair and Lapley deposited his bulk in it. He said very seriously: "It is important. Also pretty incredible. That is why I am prepared to pay such a high price for some help."

Mariano Mercado opened his mouth, thrust the nozzle of an atomizer in it and sprayed away. He set the bottle down on the desk again and said: "All right, what is it?"

"Well," said Lapley, "it is a matter of honor."

Mercado blinked. He did not associate American businessmen with honor.

"A lady's honor," said Lapley solemnly and Mercado blinked again.

"I had a letter in my possession," went on Lapley. "An indiscreet letter written by a lady. If the contents of this missive were to come to light the results would be disastrous for this woman."

Mercado nodded. "And you have lost the letter?"

"In a sense. Only in a sense. A few hours ago I was alone in my hotel room. I had the letter in my possession. I also had an automatic pistol I had just bought."

"Why did you buy the pistol?" asked Mercado.

"For protection. I was afraid that some unscrupulous people would want to take

the letter from me by force. And I was right. I was just about to load the gun when I heard the outer door of my suite open. Instinct told me that it was the man who wanted that letter. My gun was still unloaded. What could I do?"

The question was rhetorical and required no answer. Thomas Lapley continued.

"The letter was in my pocket. Hastily I rolled it up and jammed it in the magazine of my gun. No sooner had I done that than this other person entered the room with a thirty-eight in his hand."

Mercado's expression was frankly sceptical. Lapley, however, did not seem to notice it.

"He disarmed me at gun point, tied me up and searched the premises. Naturally, he did not think of looking in the magazine of my automatic. He found nothing of interest.

"Then my telephone rang. I told him that the front desk knew I was in and if I didn't answer the phone they'd come up to investigate. That scared him and he left. I left the hotel shortly afterwards. In my excitement I forgot my gun which is still lying on the table in the bedroom."

"This," said Mariano Mercado, "is a most interesting story. What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to go to my hotel—suite 398, La Paloma—and retrieve that gun and the letter it contains."

"Why can't you go yourself, thus saving a great number of pesos?"

Lapley shook his head. "Because I am afraid my adversary may be waiting for me outside the hotel. He might kidnap and torture me to reveal the hiding place of the letter."

Mercado swallowed a pill thoughtfully. "And to what address shall I return the automatic?"

Lapley took a card from his pocket and scribbled something on it. "There," he said, "I shall wait for you there. Will you go for the gun immediately?"

There was a long pause. I turned Lapley's story over in my mind and decided it sounded as phony as the clink of a lead half dollar. Mercado nodded suddenly and said: "*Senor*, we accept your commission." Lapley wrung his hand fervently, then shook mine and headed for the door uttering profuse thank-yous.

WHEN he had gone, I found Mariano Mercado regarding me calculatingly. "Latham," he said, "can you be objective?"

"To a degree."

"Very well. I want you to consider a hypothetical question."

I lit a cigarette and sat down. "Shoot."

"From a purely objective point of view, which, in your opinion would be the better all-around situation: For me to languish in jail while you used your brains and influence to get me out, or for you to be in jail while I exercised mine?"

I thought it over with some apprehension. "Personally," I said, "I would far prefer to see you in jail. However, honesty and objectivity compel me to admit that you possess quicker wits and more influence than I do. I am sure you'd get me out quicker than I could get you. But why?"

"I am salving my conscience," said Mercado.

"Has this anything to do with Lapley?"

"It has everything to do with Lapley. One more question: You have no qualms about sharing Lapley's fee with me?"

"Of course not. Haven't we an agreement that I'm to collect forty percent of all fees?"

"We have. My conscience is almost clear. Another thing: you have no fear of bacteria?"

"Well," I said, "I wouldn't drink from a typhus infested well, but beyond that I can face bacterial peril without panic."

"My conscience is lulled to sleep," said Mercado. "Get your hat on."

"For what?"

"You are going to the La Paloma hotel. Suite three ninety-eight. To retrieve Lapley's gun."

"You really believe his story? You believe the gun is there?"

"I believe the gun is there. Go and get it."

I stood up, shrugged and reached for my hat. I didn't know what Lapley's angle was but I was certain that there was no truth whatever in his tale. Mercado reached for his atomizer and I went down the hall to the door.

It was after eight o'clock when I got into the street. The careening buses were jammed with people going to work. The street cars jangled perilously around cor-

ners with humanity hanging on by teeth and fingernails.

I saw a *libre* coming down the street and hailed it. Twenty minutes later I paid the taxicab at the entrance to the La Paloma and entered the lobby.

It occurred to me as I mounted the stairs that I had no key to the room. I decided to try the door on the off-chance that it might be open and, if that failed, to tell some wild tale to the clerk in order to obtain access.

However, luck was with me. Or so I thought at the time.

The door was unlocked. The knob turned easily in my hand and I entered the overfurnished living room of the hotel suite. The chamber, vast and musty, was empty. I strode through it toward a door which apparently gave on to the bedroom. I threw this open and went in.

Since I had hardly believed a word of Lapley's weird tale. I was mildly surprised to observe that one major item of it checked. There *was* an automatic on the table near the bed.

I picked it up and dropped it in my pocket, reflecting that this was the easiest batch of pesos that either Mariano Mercado or I had earned in many a long *dia*.

I was about to leave the room with a sense of task easily and well done when I saw the shoes under the bed. I stared at them and my stomach slowly turned over.

The shoes were not empty, neither were they laid flat on the floor. The toes were pointed toward the carpet on which they rested, and the heels were aimed at the ceiling. It needed no quick wit to realize that there was a man under the bed lying on his face.

I bent over and looked. I saw a short, rather paunchy figure, lying very still. I took a deep breath, straightened up again and pulled the bed to one side.

A second examination showed me the two red holes in the back of the man's coat. He had been shot in the back and in the heart. As a matter of routine I reached for his pulse. I found out only what I already knew. He was dead.

I reached in my pocket for a cigarette, lighted it and sat on the edge of the bed. Half a dozen theories sprang to my mind, none of them full blown.

Mercado was infinitely better at this

sort of thing than I was. I decided to leave the corpse where it was, phone Mercado from a booth in the lobby and acquaint him with the facts. He could make up his mind whether he wanted to pocket the fee and lay the corpse in the lap of the *policia* or handle it himself.

It occurred to me that, perhaps knowledge of the corpse's identity would be useful. I put my cigarette out and bent over the dead man. I rolled him over on his face and proceeded to go through his pockets.

My macabre task was interrupted by a guttural and too familiar voice saying: "*Madre de Dios!* I have you red-handed. And where is that other murderer, Mercado?"

There was a sudden vacuum at the pit of my stomach and half a dozen ice cubes seemed to touch the end of my spine. I removed my hand from the dead man's breast pocket and turned my head around to see *el coronel* Gomez of the *Departamento de Policia*.

CHAPTER TWO

The Tumbrels Roll

GOMEZ was a stout, swarthy man with a pair of elegant mustachios of which he was inordinately proud. He was possessed of infinite conceit, unlimited arrogance and an intense dislike of Mariano Mercado which was broad enough to include me.

I said, rather foolishly: "I can explain this."

Gomez took a huge piece of ordnance from his pocket, covered me and ran his free hand through my coat. He removed Lapley's automatic, holding it carefully by the muzzle.

He said: "A dead man and a gun in your pocket. Probably with fingerprints on it. If the ballistics department confirms what I believe to be true, I do not think any explanation you make will be satisfactory, *Senor* Latham."

Now, I am no genius. I am not the most quick-witted man in all the world. But I knew, beyond all doubt, that I had been framed. What exactly had been Thomas Lapley's object I did not know. But at the moment I was the fall guy.

I knew it was idiotic to tell Lapley's tale to Gomez. If Lapley's story was so wild that I hadn't accepted it, it was a cinch that Gomez wasn't going to believe me.

I said: "*Coronel*, I want to see Mercado."

He grinned. "We have that desire in common. I was hoping to find him here. But I see he sends his assistant to perform his bloody work."

I blinked at that. "You mean you think Mercado and I killed this *hombre?*"

Gomez bowed courteously. "I merely make the arrests," he said. "The prosecutor will discuss the matter with you."

"You mean I'm pinched? You're going to take me to the police station?"

El coronel Gomez nudged me in the back with his oversized revolver. "I am not taking you to the bullfight," he said. "Let us proceed. *Vamos!*"

Less than an hour later I was developing Mercado's attitude toward germ life. A Mexican prison is no white-tiled sanctuary. It is neither modern, sanitary, nor beneficent.

My cell was dark and windowless. On the floor lay a pallette which had been used at least once before. Fleas danced gayly in the straw. There was no lavatory, and the food which had been brought me consisted of a dirty tin plate covered with greasy beans, a cup of brackish water and a tortilla at least four days old.

When Gomez had locked me in he had politely promised to get in immediate touch with Mariano Mercado. However, lunchtime was far behind me and no one had yet appeared.

At four o'clock I was hungry, angry and, to be candid about it, afraid. After all, Gomez had nailed me in a hotel suite with a corpse and a gun—a gun which doubtless bore my fingerprints. All I had on my side was an utterly incredible story about Lapley and a woman's honor. By this time I was certain that there was no incriminating letter in the automatic's magazine. I was painfully certain that there were bullets there instead, eight of them anyway. The other two were in the dead man's back.

At four-thirty I heard heavy footfalls on the concrete of the passageway outside my cell, and a few seconds later the bulk of *el coronel* Gomez hove into view. He fitted

a key into my cell door. I noted that he was scowling.

"That *cabrone*, Mercado," he said. And added three unprintable Spanish oaths. "He knows the *politicos*. He has used his influence to have you released upon his recognizance. But remember you are not free. As soon as I have the report from the ballistics people I will have enough evidence to take you despite Mercado and his petty officials. You are to go to Mercado immediately and remain in his sight all the time."

I didn't pause for conversation. I flicked some fleas from my lapel and headed out for the street on the double. I hailed the first taxi I saw and rode through the streets to Mercado's apartment.

HE HAD recovered somewhat from his morning's alarm. He had discarded his bathrobe and donned a suit of bright brown which looked rather like an inferior brand of milk chocolate. His shirt was Erin's flag, and his tie motley.

He was cautiously squeezing yellow beads from a medicine dropper into a glass of water as I entered. He looked up, saw me, and said gravely: "*Dios*, it was worse than I expected."

"It was a damned sight worse than I expected," I said. "What the devil—"

I broke off as he looked at me in horror.

"*Dios*, Latham," he said. "Get away from my desk. Get away. Stand over in the far corner of the room."

His voice had risen and the final syllable was a falsetto scream.

"For Heaven's sake," I said, shaken by this reception, "what's the matter with you? You don't think I'm a murderer, too, do you?"

"Murderer?" he said. "No. But you're infested. You've been in a cell. You're alive with fleas, with bacteria. You could kill a regiment as you stand. Keep away from me."

He had snatched up a Flit gun which always laid on the top of his desk and furiously assaulted the invisible hosts in the air.

I retreated to a far corner of the room. Mercado put down the Flit gun and reached for an atomizer. As he sprayed his throat I recalled something he had said early that morning.

"Listen," I said, "You were talking about salving your conscience this morning. Did you know I was going to jail?"

"I suspected it."

"And you let me go anyway?"

"I wanted to see what *Senor* Lapley was up to."

"Well, you certainly found out," I said bitterly. "Do you realize I'm facing a murder rap? Do you realize that they have one hell of a lovely case against me?"

He nodded and sighed. "It was very well thought out, wasn't it?"

"Damn it. Do you have to be so impersonal about it? Do you want me to hang?"

"There is no capital punishment in Mexico," he said reassuringly. "You forget we are a civilized country."

That was comforting as hell and I said so. I added: "Did you really have any idea what Lapley was up to?"

"Of course. His story, as even you noticed, was idiotic. No one would have believed it. No one was intended to but us. Lapley thought that all those pesos he threw on the desk would blind our judgment."

"But it didn't?" I said with a withering sarcasm which was utterly wasted on Mercado.

"It did not," he said. "I knew what he was up to. He wanted to stick us with such a weird story that when we told it to the police they would not believe it."

"But you didn't know there was a murder involved?"

"I suspected it."

"How?"

"That yarn about the letter in the automatic. And the fact that he wanted me to go and get the gun. It was apparent that he wanted me to pick the weapon up. That would plant my fingerprints on it and help tighten the case against me."

"Against *you*?" I said indignantly. "You mean against me."

"That is of no moment. Lapley expected me to go to the hotel. I sent you instead."

"My Lord," I said. "I have half a mind to buy myself some leprosy germs and drop them in your coffee. You had a good idea what was going on and *you sent me instead*. Why the devil didn't you go yourself? It was you he was hiring."

"I was afraid," said Mariano Mercado with devastating simplicity.

I stared at him. I had seen Mercado tackle a thug armed with a knife and overpower him with his bare brown hands. I had seen him gaze blandly into the muzzle of a gun and spit Spanish insult.

I said: "Afraid? Of what?"

"Of exactly what happened. I was afraid that someone would get arrested. If arrested he would be thrown in a cell. I would rather face a battalion of wild elephants than spend an hour in a Mexican prison."

I got it then. Mercado had sent me, anticipating the frame and realizing it was quite likely that whoever entered the hotel room would eventually be pinched. And Mariano Mercado certainly did not possess the courage to cope with the fleas, lice and invisible parasites which infested the jail.

But the fact of my understanding his actions did in no wise mitigate my own circumstances. Unless something speedy and drastic was done I would face a trial for murder with no better than a fifty percent chance of beating the rap.

I mentioned this none too calmly and added: "So what do we do first?"

"Find Lapley."

I laughed without mirth. "There are twenty million people in Mexico, the area is seven hundred and sixty thousand odd square miles. How are we going to do it? *Cantina* by *cantina* or *pueblo* by *pueblo*?"

"It is simpler than that," said Mercado. "First, there is little doubt that this Lapley, as he calls himself, is an American."

"So what?"

"If he is an American he possesses either a passport or a tourist card."

That, of course, made it easier. Then a depressing thought occurred to me. "But how do we find him? Thomas Lapley certainly is a phony name."

Mercado nodded. "The name is phony. But the initials aren't. He wore a signet ring marked with the letters *T. L.* He was intelligent enough to use a false name which began with those initials."

Now I felt better than I had since early morning. "So I go to the passport office and look for an American whose initials are *T. L.* If that fails I check the tourists cards. And if I find Lapley do you think you can pin that killing on him?"

Mercado shook his head. His bland air of unconcern nettled me.

"Well, why not?" I demanded.

"Because," said Mercado, "I don't think this Lapley committed any murder."

"Then who did?"

Mercado sighed, spread his palms upward and achieved a magnificent shrug of his thin shoulders.

"You go and check up on Lapley," he said. "In the meantime, I'll find out what I can about the murdered man. And you'd better hurry."

I threw him a savage glance. After all, I was the guy who was in trouble. I needed no gratuitous advice as to speed.

AT THE passport office I had no luck at all. There were no foreign characters who bore the initials *T. L.* However, in the office which keeps an official eye on *touristas*, I had a little more luck than I expected.

Not only did I find an American whose description answered that of Thomas Lapley but his name, it seemed, was Theodore Lamb. In addition to this break, the recorded dates showed that his tourist card expired in three more days.

Now a Mexican tourist card which is granted to Americans in lieu of a passport is good for six months. After that period has expired it must be renewed for a second six months. Moreover it must be renewed on the precise day it becomes invalid. Otherwise the luckless tourist will find himself spending the night on a straw pallette similar to the one that I had just deserted.

I telephoned Mercado and reported all this. He acknowledged the news and said: "Well, then, hang around. When this Lapley or Lamb shows up, follow him and find out where he lives. We're going to need him."

I said: "All right. And what about you? Have you masterminded anything?"

His voice, as he replied, did not exactly surge with hope. "I am pursuing certain lines of investigation," he said primly. "Be patient and do not worry. Rest assured that if there should be a miscarriage of justice here, I shall avenge you."

That, of course, was just jolly. I could spend ten odd years sleeping on straw, dining on frijoles and goat meat, all the while solacing myself that Mercado would see to it that I was avenged.

Espying a *cantina* across the street from the tourist bureau, I went over there and ordered a stiff and straight shot of tequila. I drank it quickly, then took an encore. I took several encores, after which I slowed down a bit. After all, I had two days to kill.

The tourist office was open from ten in the morning until four in the afternoon. I made those my hours, too. It was an arduous job. After all, one cannot sit in a *cantina* staring blankly at the transparent glass which encloses the men's room. It looks odd. One must drink.

I had consumed, at a rough estimate, four and a half litres of tequila when I caught sight of Lapley's pompous figure entering the tourist office. Aware of the fact that Mexican officialdom does not function at breakneck speed, I decided I had time for a large cup of *cafe negro* to sober me up a little.

I ordered it and drank it before Lapley emerged from the office. He blinked in the brilliant sunlight, waddled to the corner and hailed a *libre*. I went along after him and hailed the next one.

It was a full hour before lunch time and the traffic was not dense. Both our cabs went along leisurely toward the west side of town. The closely built houses of the city finally became sparser as we gained the suburbs. The cab in front of me turned off into a dirt road. I instructed my driver to follow, promised him extra pesos, and counseled him that discretion was of the essence.

We moved along a winding dirt road, climbing a mountain in the process. We crossed a rickety wooden bridge flung across the turbulent stream which poured hissing over the rocks. Then in the distance I descried a pair of stone columns which indicated the presence of an elaborate house. I was a good half mile behind when I saw my quarry stop.

I halted my own cab.

"Wait here," I said. "Drive back to that last turnoff and wait for me there. I don't know how long I'll be but I'll see you have a profit."

My driver flashed a set of glamorous teeth at me and did as I bade him. I set off on foot toward the distant stone columns.

As I approached I saw that the columns were part of a magnificent *hacienda*. It stood proudly against a blue sky, and in the midst

of a luxurious tropical garden. About a hundred yards on this side of it stood a fenced-in modest bungalow. As I neared it I saw two children playing on the verandah.

The bungalow was neat and trim, the garden well cared for, and the children clean and charming. Yet, somehow, with the background of the chateau-like building next door, I received a strong impression that the occupants of the smaller structure were not well-to-do.

I waited around for some time. At the end of an hour Lamb emerged from the big house and climbed back into his taxi. I concealed myself behind a huge Indian Laurel tree and when he had passed made a wild dash on foot for my own *libre*.

I made it in time to pick up his trail and follow him back to town.

There, Lamb's taxi drew up before the Ritz hotel where he paid off and dismissed his driver. I followed suit, waiting a few moments, then went into the lobby.

I approached the desk, pressed ten pesos on the clerk, and possessed myself of the information that *el senor* Lamb was a resident of the hotel and had been for some six months.

I had one more tequila in the Ritz bar and took myself off to Mercado's. I had done my job. I was hoping to high heaven that he had done something, too.

WHEN I arrived he was immersed in a medical journal. He said: "Latham, how far can a mosquito fly?"

"I made Phi Beta without knowing that," I said. "I guess I can get along without the knowledge. Why?"

"I am reading of the Virgin Islands. It seems elephantiasis is prevalent there. It is caused by the bite of a mosquito which prowls at night. Do you think a mosquito could fly fifteen hundred odd miles?"

I stared at him, a slow anger arising within me. I said: "*Hijo de perra*, I am walking about with a ten year sentence for murder hanging over my head. Instead of concerning yourself with me you are worrying that some damned supermosquito is going to fly from the Virgin Islands and bite you. *Dios!* What have you done regarding *me?*"

He waved a brown and deprecatory hand. "Do not excite yourself," he said.

"It raises blood pressure and hardens arteries. I have made my investigations. But what about you?"

I gave him a full report of my activities, and asked again of his.

He said again: "I have investigated."

"With what result?"

"The murdered man was Luis Ortega. He has had something of a checkered career. He was of good family and sowed a bumper crop of wild oats in his youth. He once spent some time in prison. He dissipated his patrimony and—"

"Will you get to the point? I am not at all interested in the drunken amours of *Senor Ortega*."

"Very well. A few years ago he entered the export business and made a lot of money. However speculation in silver lost most of it for him and his business was in danger. He needed capital and needed it quickly. When he was murdered he was on the verge of ruin."

Mercado stopped with an air of finality and helped himself liberally to cod liver oil.

I said: "Well, go on."

"Go on? That is all."

"Well," I said bitterly, "I am glad I am going to jail with full knowledge of the affairs of Mr. Ortega. It would have been quite unbearable to spend my life in a cell unaware of the Ortega business affairs." I dropped my forced calm and shouted angrily: "What good does all this irrelevant information do me?"

Mercado lifted his eyebrows. "Perhaps it did none a few minutes ago. But in the light of the information you obtained it might conceivably help you a great deal."

"What valuable information did I bring in? Save, perhaps, Lamb's address?"

"You discovered that Lamb knows Grannick. There may be a connection there."

"Why? Who's Grannick?"

Mercado sighed and his face assumed the doleful expression common to it when he spoke of physical infirmities.

"He is an old man," he said. "An old man with a heart weak as American coffee. However, he is a tough old man, though hardly as tough as his uncle. That was his house you saw today."

I settled back in my chair and resigned myself to hearing some more family history. Mercado knew everyone in Mexico City. Moreover, he knew their genealogy.

"His uncle, dead some twenty-five years, was an American who became a naturalized Mexican citizen. He was appalled at the lawlessness of this country some forty years back and set out to do what he could to rectify it. He entered politics and eventually became a Federal judge."

"Must you gossip," I said, "while I hear the tumbrils roll?"

Mercado ignored me. "Old man Grannick, the uncle, had a phobia against crime and criminals. He considered all law breakers equal—the pickpocket was no less guilty than the murderer."

"I get it," I said sarcastically. "I'm supposed to be grateful that I can't come before him for sentence."

Mercado picked up the cod liver pills, put them down and had halibut liver instead.

"He left a son," he went on blandly. "And a nephew and one hell of a lot of money. He cut the son out of his will because as a youth he served six months for assault—some sort of a tavern brawl. The son is now dead although I believe he had issue. Grannick, the nephew, has not."

"Goody," I said without enthusiasm. "And will you write me long letters about the rest of it while I'm serving my time? I understand prisoners just love to get mail."

Again he ignored me. He stood up and took from the clothes tree a hat whose green would have caused a leaf to tremble. He put it upon his head, adjusted a tie which would have penetrated to the iris of a blind man, and said: "*Esta lista?*"

"Sure, I'm ready. Where are we going?"

"Out to Grannick's. I'd rather like a look around. This afternoon I must do some work which may save you from this prison you're always harping about."

I checked the angry answer which rose to my lips. If a guy isn't entitled to harp about ten years of penal servitude I'd like to know what he is allowed to gripe about.

I reached for my own hat and followed Mercado into the sunshine of the street. There we hailed a taxi and set out for the Grannick place.

WE RODE through the suburbs retracing the route I had followed earlier. We crossed the rickety bridge from which we could see the stone columns of Gran-

nick's place. We were at least a half mile away when Mercado cried, "*Pare!*" and got out of the cab.

He told the man to wait, and set off on foot. I followed him, puzzled.

"Why the walk?" I asked.

"I desire to think," said Mariano Mercado. "I find I do so more effectively without the stink of gasoline fumes in my nostrils."

I let it go at that and plodded along behind him.

In a few minutes we reached the flower-covered cottage which stood just to the west of the Grannick place. The front gate was open and the two children I had seen before were playing in the yard. As we approached the boy was staring at a small pool of water in the ground before him.

He said in his high voice: "Let us make mud pies."

His sister frowned. "No," she said emphatically. "It's dirty. You get germs all over you."

"What's germs?" said the boy.

Mercado stopped dead and shamelessly eavesdropped this conversation.

"Germs," said the girl, and her solemn mien while discussing this subject reminded me of a juvenile Mercado, "are nasty things. They give you diseases. You can't see them but they're there and they're more dangerous than lions, even than elephants."

"*Olé,*" cried Mercado. "A precocious child."

The children turned grave faces toward him. He fumbled in his pocket and produced two *tostones*.

He proffered them to the children. The boy glanced uncertainly at his sister who shook her head emphatically.

"*Gracias, no,*" she said.

Mercado lifted his eyebrows. "And why not?"

"We must not take money from strangers. Besides money is dirty. It has germs all over it."

Mercado stood entranced. He beamed happily like a missionary who has just saved a soul.

"What a wonderful *niños,*" he exclaimed. "And what are your names?"

"I'm Juanita Grannick," said the girl. "My brother is Juan."

Mercado looked at me significantly. "Old man Grannick's grandchildren," he mur-

mured. More loudly, he said: "And that is the house of your uncle over there?"

He pointed to the *hacienda*. The girl nodded. "But," she said gravely, "we never see him. He is rich. We are poor. Our *madre* has to work."

Mercado patted her on the head. He seemed suddenly abstracted. He said, "*Adios, little ones,*" and walked away. I followed him.

As we got back to the car, I said: "Well, where are we now?"

Mercado scratched his head thoughtfully. "I'm not quite sure. But it occurs to me that if old man Grannick cut off his son because of a minor peccadillo, he certainly would do the same thing to his nephew."

"And what does that mean?"

"You'll recall I told you this Ortega who was killed had a prison record."

I said again: "What does *that* mean?"

"I'm not quite sure but I'll go to work tomorrow morning. I'll probably have a definite answer for you then."

CHAPTER THREE

Free Man or Felon?

I SLEPT on that but not restfully. I was up at dawn. I ate breakfast and went to Mercado's apartment, but he had already gone. I put in a long nervous day. Mercado came home a little after six o'clock.

He refused to talk to me until he had performed his disinfecting rites and swallowed his vitamins and other mysterious nostrums. Then he carefully dusted off the seat of his chair and put himself into it.

He said: "I have spent the day in the Probate Court studying the Grannick will. It is much as I thought it would be."

"Does it keep me out of jail?"

"Perhaps," he said and I failed to note a lot of conviction in his tone. "We shall see in a little while. I have communicated with Gomez instructing him to pick up this Lamb and conduct him out to Grannick's mansion. We, too, are due there right away. *Vamos!*"

After that he shut up like a taciturn clam and my questions elicited no answer at all.

It was about seven o'clock in the evening when we set out for Grannick's mansion. A mantle of dark, menacing clouds hung

in the sky. The air held a sultriness not often felt at this altitude.

We had taken Mercado's ancient coupe out of the garage where it was pasturing, to make the trip. We rattled across the rickety bridge in the last light of day.

I was driving, and frowning at the road. Mercado had been most secretive about his researches and I considered myself an interested party. I slowed down, lighted a *Delicado*, and said: "Well, how do I stand now? Am I a felon or a free man?"

Mariano Mercado pulled a sigh up from his boot straps and let it go like a melancholy wind. He said: "With luck, you're a free man. What is your opinion of this Lamb?"

"I'm glad you asked me," I said bitterly. "I am the one man in Mexico qualified to give an expert opinion. Senor Lamb is a—"

I ran out of unprintable epithets in three minutes. Then Mercado said mildly: "I did not mean that. Do you think he is a man of stamina or will he crack under pressure?"

"He's fat and soft. He'll probably crack. Why?"

Mercado sighed again. "As I have things worked out, your fate probably depends on him. I can explain everything but I'm going to need some tangible evidence. I am hoping to get it from Lamb."

My stomach was filled with an apprehensive emptiness. I glared at him. "Do I understand that my fate depends on your obtaining a confession of murder from Lamb?"

"Not exactly a confession of murder, but a confession, si."

I said: "Will you bring me cigarettes on visitors' day?" Then I laughed wildly and without mirth. Mercado regarded me gravely but he did not speak. We made the rest of the journey in silence.

As we passed the modest home of the Grannick grandchildren I noted a uniformed man on the verandah engaged in tacking up a poster on the wall. I wondered for a moment if the working widow had defaulted on the mortgage and was about to be dispossessed in the best tradition, then I dismissed it from my mind. My personal problems were too pressing.

A moment later we disembarked at the rambling stone mansion of Ricardo Gran-

nick. We were the last arrivals. A servant admitted us, led us into a vast living room with a stone fireplace and luxurious leather chairs. *El coronel* Gomez leaned against the mantelpiece smoking a cigar and twirling his mustachios.

Across the room Grannick, a blanket around his shoulders, sat slumped in a chair which was far too big for him. He looked like an old man. His eyes were sunken deeply in his head, his face was wrinkled and the color of old leather.

Half enconced behind the curtain on the window seat was Lamb. It seemed to me that some of his pomposity was gone. His round face was grave and there was an expression of anxiety in his eyes.

The introductions were performed and a servant produced a bottle of *aguadiente* and some glasses. Grannick abstained but the rest of us drank and I thought with relish.

Gomez set his glass down with a clinking sound and said abruptly: "Well, little man, and why have you called this meeting?"

"You already have the corpse," said Mercado. "I have come to give you the killer."

THESSE were brave words. But considering what he had said to me in the car I took little heart from them. I still had a picture of myself wallowing in a vermin-infested cell for the rest of my life.

Everyone glanced toward Mercado. He seemed assured and if he didn't know what he was doing he certainly gave the impression that he did.

Gomez opened his mouth to speak again but before he could do so the storm broke. A sheet of rain belted down on the roof and the wind raced over the plain, bending the trees before it. Lightning flashed in the sky and thunder crashed like artillery off to the left.

Gomez lifted his voice. He said: "I have the killer. I have Latham."

Mercado shook his head and I lit another cigarette with fingers which in no wise resembled the Rock of Gibraltar.

"Latham is not your man," said Mercado.

Gomez shrugged and spread his palms. "I am not a court. Let them decide. I have a good case. And, as you say, I have a corpse. It becomes my duty to give the courts a man to punish. Latham is good

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enough. He will keep my record clean."

"And would you jail an innocent man for the sake of your record?"

That was an unnecessary question and Mercado knew it. Gomez was a loyal man—to Gomez. Gomez would jail twenty-seven innocent men to protect his record. At least he had the grace not to deny it. He smiled enigmatically and spread his palms.

"I have spent the day with lawyers," announced Mercado. "I have read old Judge Grannick's will."

"So," said Gomez.

Mercado said: "It seemed his son was cut off because of some criminal record. And his nephew would lose what had been left him if he ever was convicted of a greater crime than the son."

"Common knowledge," said Grannick.

"Moreover," said Mercado, "Ortega, the corpse, was once in jail. And when he died he was broke. Can you put those two facts together, *mi coronel*?"

Gomez wasted no mental effort. He said succinctly: "No."

"Suppose," said Mercado, "that Grannick in his youth served a prison term, unknown to his uncle. Suppose Ortega was in the same prison. Suppose Ortega, knowing the terms of the will, came suddenly upon evil days and needed cash—is it not logical he should try to blackmail Grannick?"

"You have some evidence of this?" said Grannick sharply.

"The evidence of my own intelligence," said Mercado. "According to my researches there was a period of two years in your youth when you were supposed to have run away and shipped out on a freight boat. Those two years coincide with the period that Ortega spent in prison. I do not suppose that you would care to tell me the name of your ship. That would ruin my theory."

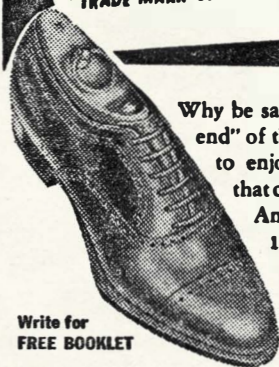
There was a long silence. Apparently, Grannick did not care to mention the name of his ship.

"Therefore, I believe," said Mercado, "that you were in the same prison as Ortega and later invented the sea story to prevent your uncle from knowing where you were."

Lamb said, with obvious anxiety: "And you only have the evidence of your own intelligence?"



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"Unfortunately," said Mercado. "The records are destroyed. The fingerprints of one Jesus Pinto, which I believe to be an assumed name, are missing. So are most of the other records. His term was served along with Ortega. How much did that cost you, Señor?"

Grannick smiled and relief spread itself over the features of Lamb. Gomez voiced their thoughts when he said: "Is that all you have?"

"At the moment," said Mariano Mercado. "Just think it over and you'll see how logical it all is."

Gomez and I thought it over. It may have been logical as hell but the evidence of Mercado's own intelligence wasn't going to work in a courtroom. The more I thought about it the more I was certain Lamb was going to get away with whatever he was doing and I was going to pick oakum or whatever they do to while away the time in a Mexican dungeon.

Gomez took the cigar from his mouth, gave his left mustachio a savage twirl and said: "Let us recapitulate. You are arguing that once, in his youth, Grannick committed a crime. That he kept this fact from his uncle, accounting for his absence by announcing he had been a deckhand.

"In later years, Ortega, who needed cash and served time with Grannick, blackmailed him. Ortega, aware of the terms of the will, insisted Grannick pay him off or he would expose him, thus causing him to lose the fortune."

Mercado nodded. "The will states that if Grannick was ever convicted of a crime greater than that of the deceased's son he shall lose the money; it shall revert to the son's heirs. It's as easy as that."

"Easy?" repeated Gomez dubiously. "I think not, amigo. But where does the Señor Lamb come into this?"

"He is Grannick's heir. The complicated will takes care of every contingency. Lamb's father, an American who is dead, was a friend of old man Grannick's. The will provides that if Alex Grannick here has no issue the money goes to Lamb's issue who is Theodore Lamb over there."

"I still want to know where he comes into it. I believe you charge that Lamb killed Ortega."

Mercado shook his head. I glared at him.

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I was under the impression that it was the conviction of Lamb which would absolve me. Now Mercado was denying that Lamb had killed Ortega.

"Well, who killed Ortega?" I said.

"Grannick, of course. Then he forced Lamb to try to pin it on someone. Lamb did it willingly enough, knowing he would lose his inheritance if Grannick was sent away for murder. Lamb is no killer. He's a business man. He cheats with his mind, not with a gun."

Grannick cleared his throat from the other end of the room. "It is theory," he said. "Theory pure and simple. You have not made a single statement that would stand up in the most rural court in Mexico."

Lamb nodded in nervous agreement. "Absolutely," he contributed.

I ignored them and watched Gomez. It was his reaction in which I was interested.

Gomez spread two fat palms and shrugged his shoulders. "You've presented a good case," he admitted. "As for me, I'm neutral. I've got to have someone to lock up. All things being equal, I'd prefer Grannick to Latham. Grannick's a Mexican citizen and when we arrest Americans the Embassy always steps in and causes trouble. Now what we need is a confession."

He looked invitingly around the room. He was not at all particular whom he got the confession from. Mercado cleared his throat and said: "You can't get a confession from Latham because he's innocent. You won't get one from Grannick because he's tough."

Both their gazes settled on Lamb who shifted uneasily in his chair.

"A gringo," said Gomez speculatively. "Gorde cansado."

"It's worth trying," said Mercado.

Gomez nodded. He crooked a brown finger at Lamb and beckoned. "Come," he said, "we will question you in another room."

LAMB'S face was suddenly green. Fury flashed in Grannick's eyes. "You can't do this," he yelled. "It's illegal. Besides Lamb's my guest. I insist—"

"Shut up," said Gomez. He turned to me. "You will remain here and keep an eye on Grannick. Keep him away from

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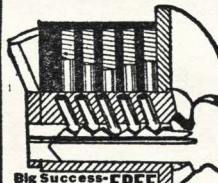
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telephones. Keep him right in that chair. Come, Señor Lamb."

Señor Lamb, sputtering incoherently, was dragged from his chair into the next room. Mercado followed along after him and Gomez. The door closed behind them, leaving me along with Grannick.

Grannick's eyes were narrowed and his lips set in a thin line. He looked like a professional gambler watching his last grand as the wheel spun. The analogy was not too inaccurate. If Lamb talked he was done. If Lamb held out he retained both freedom and property.

And it was no mere coincidence that I felt exactly the same way. My fate lay with the result of the 'questioning' in the other room no less than did that of Grannick.

Neither of us spoke. The ticking of an ancient grandfather clock was the only sound save that of the storm.

Three quarters of an hour passed by, then the door of the other room opened. Grannick and I glanced up expectantly. Lamb's face was still a dull green. There was a cut over his left eye and a bruise on his cheek. That I knew was Gomez' work. But in Lamb's eye there was a glint of triumph.

Mercado appeared with dejection stamped on his brown face. I didn't need to ask any questions. I knew that Theodore Lamb was not as soft as we had thought.

The hall door burst open suddenly and a servant appeared.

"Don Alex," he said to Grannick, "the bridge is down. The storm has carried it away. These señores will have to remain here until morning."

Grannick exchanged a glance with Lamb. Lamb nodded almost imperceptibly. Grannick smiled faintly. He said to the criado: "Prepare the guest rooms."

The servant left the room. Grannick stood up. "I shall see to the rooms myself," he said. "These servants are not too efficient."

He stalked out, quite assured. Gomez regarded me impersonally. "Well, Latham," he said, "I guess I'll have to take you in again in the morning."

I shot a desperate glance at Mercado. He shook his head sadly. "It is too bad," he said. "We know who committed the crime and why but we cannot prove it. Señor Lamb's cupidity gave him courage. I am

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now prepared to admit that he has far more courage than I thought only a minute ago."

Lamb said: "Why? What do you mean?"

"You are a brave man," said Mercado, "to sleep in this house tonight."

"Why?"

"Because, though it is true you refused to talk tonight, Grannick has no guarantee that you won't talk tomorrow or the next day or next month. And he is a ruthless man who stops at nothing."

Lamb's face turned slightly green again. "You mean—"

"Only that he may cut your throat while you sleep. Come, Latham, let's find our chamber. I'm sleepy."

I certainly wasn't. However, I went along with him. We met Grannick in the hall and he escorted us into a bedroom that looked like an observatory.

The ceiling was twelve feet high, the walls sixteen feet apart and two huge four poster beds stood in the middle of the room.

Mariano Mercado removed his coat with a preoccupied air. There was an anxious frown on his brow.

I said: "So Lamb didn't crack?"

Mercado shook his head.

"And where does that put me?"

He shrugged. "Not in an enviable position."

"That's just dandy. What do we do now?"

"We'll have another try at Lamb in the morning. In the meantime we'd better pray."

That remark from the lips of such an agnostic as Mariano Mercado caused my heart to sink. If he was relying on Heaven rather than his own wits it didn't seem to me that I had much chance.

I undressed slowly and crawled into bed. Wearing his look of preoccupation and a pair of heliotrope shorts, Mercado did the same.

Long after the light was out I lay on my back staring up at a ceiling I couldn't see. Outside the storm still raged but no more furiously than my own nerves. I heard Mercado snoring gently and it annoyed me unreasonably. The hours marched by on heavy, leaden feet. At last I slept fitfully.

There was a time when I thought I heard stealthy footfalls in the hall. I listened in-



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D. L. Champion

tently but the noise of the wind and rain drowned out all other sound. Then a few moments later I heard the cry.

It was unmistakably a cry from a human throat and it was pregnant with terror. I sprang out of bed reaching for the light switch with one hand and my pants with the other. As I struggled into the latter, I said: "Mercado, didn't you hear—" Then I stopped because his bed was empty.

A MOMENT later I was out in the hall. Gomez, half-dressed, passed me. I followed him to an open door at the end of the passageway. In the room stood Mercado standing over Lamb whose face, this time, was positively verdant.

In the wall over his head was stuck a knife blade with a trembling protruding hilt. In Mercado's hand was the cord of a bathrobe.

"I warned you," said Mercado gravely. "As a matter of fact you owe me your life."

Gomez said: "Que pasada?"

"I rather thought Grannick wouldn't take any chances," said Mercado. "I rather thought he might attempt to put Lamb out of the way. So I got out of bed and did sentry go in the dark outside Lamb's door."

"I must have dozed off. When I awakened, Lamb's door was open and a dark figure stood there. I jumped him just as he threw that knife. He squirmed away from me, leaving the cord of his bathrobe in my hand. It's a cinch you'll find there isn't any cord on Grannick's bathrobe right now."

"My Lord," said Lamb and covered his face with his hands. "My Lord, I'll never be safe until he's dead."

"Or in prison," said Mercado. "Why don't you—"

Footfalls sounded in the hall and Grannick's voice cried: "What's the matter? What's going on?"

Lamb seemed to shrink back into the bed. "Keep him away from me," he said. "Don't let him in here. He's a killer. I'll tell you all about him."

Mercado lifted his eyebrows and glanced at Gomez. "You listen to the confession," he said, "I'll keep Grannick away."

He closed the door leaving Lamb and Gomez inside and himself and me in the hallway. Grannick came up to us panting. He was wearing a dressing gown and I ob-

Suitable for Framing

served that he held it together with his hands.

"We will wait in the living room," said Mercado. "Señor Lamb is talking privately to the coronel."

"No," shouted Grannick. "You've framed something. I'm going in. I—"

Mercado had a huge revolver in his hand. He thrust its barrel into Grannick's stomach and repeated: "We will wait in the living room."

We marched in there and waited.

Twenty minutes later Gomez appeared with Lamb and three sheets of paper in his hand. He said: "Grannick, as soon as we can cross the stream I'm taking you to jail."

Grannick glared at Lamb and began a string of epithets in two languages. I said: "Mercado, come out to the patio, I want to talk to you a moment."

We stood in the clear dawn on a patio covered with bougainvillea.

"Mercado," I said, "I don't believe Grannick threw that knife. He wouldn't be such a fool. First, suspicion would immediately point to him, second, he wouldn't have hurled it. He would have made sure and stabbed Lamb to death."

"Interesting," murmured Mariano Mercado.

"What I do believe," I went on, "is that you sneaked into Grannick's bedroom, pinched the cord of his robe, went to the kitchen, got a knife and threw it yourself, making sure it hit the wall a foot above Lamb's head. Then you howled and raised the household. When Lamb woke up he helped you howl, only he wasn't kidding."

Mercado regarded me with a faint smile on his lips. "It's an ingenious theory," he

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D. L. Champion

said, grinning. "Perhaps it's even true."

Then he suddenly snapped his fingers. "Do you know what I am going to do? Now. *Pronto!*"

I didn't know and I said so.

"Those lovely little *niños* next door. They now inherit the Grannick fortune. I am going over to tell them myself. To tell them what Mariano Mercado has done for them."

He raced out into the dawn. I followed along some twenty feet behind.

In the distance I saw him gain the porch of the cottage. The uniformed guard I had seen the previous evening was still there. As Mercado approached the guard stretched forth a restraining hand. Mercado, triumphant and excited, thrust it away and crashed through the front door.

The sun had touched the edge of the horizon as I came up to the porch. The guard was exploding Spanish and pointing an indignant finger to an official cardboard poster attached to the side of the house. I read it hastily.

It announced in seventy-two point type that one of the children was afflicted with diphtheria, that the house was under strict quarantine, that no one could leave or enter.

I walked up to the porch and waited. A little later Mercado put a sickly face against the window screen. "*Dios, Latham,*" he said. "The child is ill. The house is quarantined."

I nodded. "The guard tried to tell you that."

"But I?" screamed Mercado. "What will become of me? They won't let me out!"

I grinned. "You stay there until the child is well. There isn't anything to worry about."

"Nothing to worry about!" His voice was a shrill and terrified soprano. "The house is alive with lethal bacteria."

"Don't worry," I said. "I'll go back to town and send out a doctor. He'll give you some shots. I'll get him out right away."

"A doctor!" Mercado's tone was anguished. "Don't waste time sending me a doctor. God knows there is someone I need far more than that. For the love of *Dios*, send me a priest."

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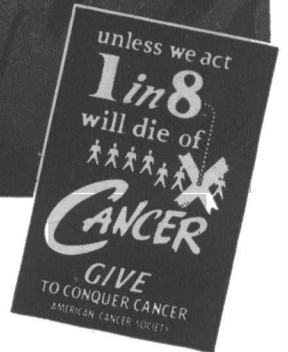
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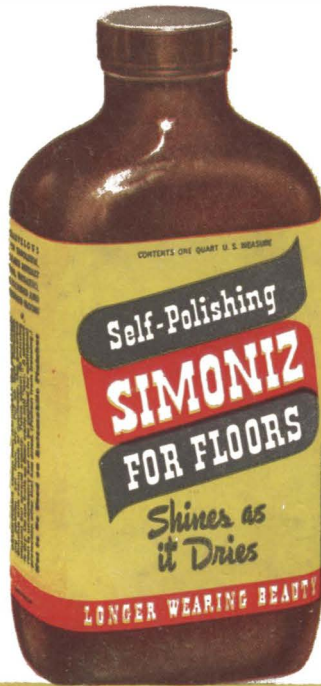
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