

15¢ DIME  SEPT.

# DETECTIVE

## MAGAZINE

COMBINED WITH FLYNN'S DETECTIVE FICTION



### SINNER TAKE ALL

by **FREDERICK  
C. DAVIS**

— ALSO —

**JIM BENNETT**  
THRILLER BY

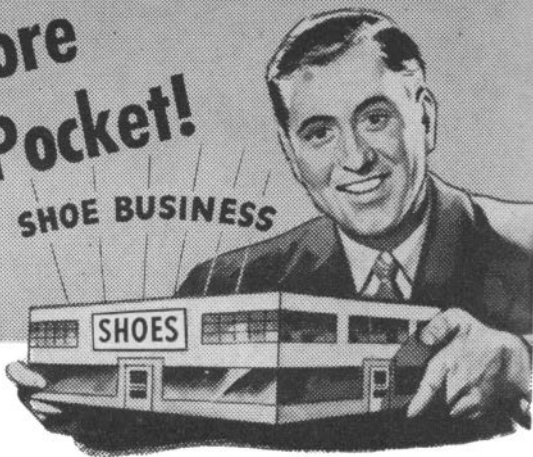
**ROBERT MARTIN**

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**HERE'S PLENTY!**

**I'll Put a "Shoe Store Business" in Your Pocket!**



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I Furnish Everything — FREE**

It's better in many ways than a retail shoe store of your own! I plan to give it to you for absolutely nothing—FREE. You don't invest a penny, now or ever! Rush the coupon Today—be in this splendidly profitable business next week.

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**EXCLUSIVE FEATURES**



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Remember, Mason Shoes are backed by the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval—neither you nor your customers can lose a dime—and you have everything to gain.



**RUSH THE COUPON NOW!**

**MASON SHOE MFG. CO.**  
Dept. M-222, Chippewa Falls, Wis.

Put me in a "shoe store business"! Rush me great FREE Sample Outfit featuring Zipper shoes, Air Cushion shoes, Leather jackets—other fast-selling specialties. Show me how your National Advertising makes more customers and profits for me. Send everything free and prepaid. (My own shoe size is.....).

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# JACK PLAYED IN LUCK. WHEN...



MOTOR CRUISER "ELENA" REPORTED IN DISTRESS OFF CATFISH SHOALS. RESCUE CRAFT...  
JACK LEVEL AND LOU McKIE, EX-SEABEES, ARE ON THE SECOND DAY OF A ROUGH RUN DOWN THE COAST IN THEIR NEWLY-PURCHASED SECONDHAND BOAT, WHEN..



TAKE IT FROM ME, MEN, YOU GET SWELL-LOOKING, COMFORTABLE SHAVES WITH THIN GILLETTE. THEY'RE THE KEENEST BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICE FIELD. ALSO THEY FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR ACCURATELY AND PROTECT YOU FROM THE IRRITATION CAUSED BY MISFIT BLADES. ASK FOR THEM IN THE CONVENIENT NEW TEN-BLADE PACKAGE.

NEW TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED-BLADES

# 15¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

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



Vol. 61      CONTENTS FOR SEPTEMBER, 1949      No. 1

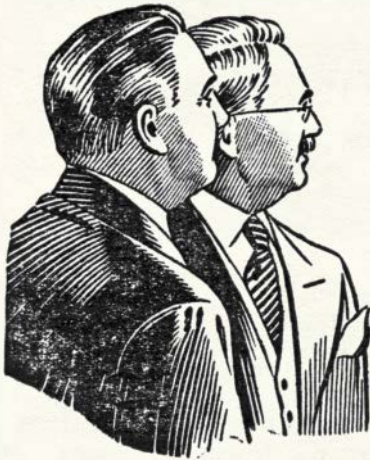
<b>1—HEADLINER FILES MYSTERY NOVEL—1</b>		
<i>Heads she loses, tails he wins . . . and the—</i>		
<b>Summer Take All</b> .....	<b>Frederick C. Davis</b>	<b>8</b>
<i>Ex-shamus Hackett cut loose . . . when Pres chased some honeys into a homicidal harem.</i>		
<b>2—SHOCK-A-MINUTE DETECTIVE NOVELETTES—2</b>		
<i>This lass sharpened her teeth on a—</i>		
<b>Murder Run-Around</b> .....	<b>John D. MacDonald</b>	<b>44</b>
<i>Bren Harris stormed the killers' hangout, betting that the Judas doll would cry "I didn't know the gun was loaded."</i>		
<i>He lost his life over the—</i>		
<b>Deadliest Dame in Town</b> .....	<b>Robert Martin</b>	<b>78</b>
<i>When joy-riding Sally got a hitch in Jim Bennett's car, she brought along a grave-load of corpses.</i>		
<b>5—STARTLING CRIME-ADVENTURE STORIES—5</b>		
<i>Extra! Newshound pass the—</i>		
<b>Spotlight on Slaughter</b> .....	<b>Paul W. Fairman</b>	<b>33</b>
<i>Rafferty aimed to crash the cops' cordon—to get a scoop on a rat in his trap. The killing was a pleasure . . . so—</i>		
<b>I'll Laugh at Your Funeral</b> .....	<b>E. A. Morris</b>	<b>37</b>
<i>'Cause Bill was crabbing her time, Msude tried spicing his palate—with poison. Tough operator, beware—</i>		
<b>The Spider's Web</b> .....	<b>Larry J. Marcus</b>	<b>58</b>
<i>He was smart, Duke was—smart enough to show Spider a new switch on zip-guns. Pardon my shroud . . . I've a—</i>		
<b>Rendezvous With Blood</b> .....	<b>Harvey Weinstein</b>	<b>65</b>
<i>A holiday from prison, Joe Grand swore, would net him a kill-apre—on the jailhouse. Some people like football; others are—</i>		
<b>Mad About Murder</b> .....	<b>Scott O'Hara</b>	<b>72</b>
<i>This fluff was Jack Forrester's weakness, but he wasn't going to let it be fatal. AND—</i>		
<i>We want to know if you're</i>		
<b>Ready for the Rackets</b> .....	<b>A Department</b>	<b>7</b>
<i>The lowdown on currently popular swindle schemes. Here's a chance to test your ability as a reporter and win \$5.00 at the same time.</i>		
<b>Popular Films</b> .....	<b>Ted Palmer</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>The October Thrill Docket (Illustrated)</b> .....		<b>71</b>
<i>Gander at Carroll John Daly's novel, "Race Williams Cooks a Goose."</i>		

The October issue will be out September 2nd

Any resemblance between any character appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

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“  
He’s going places,  
that boy!”



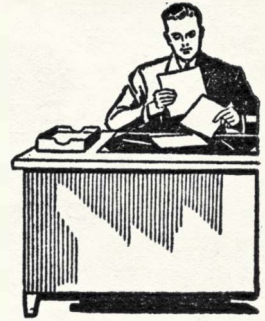
“Fred came here as a machinist three years ago. Not too much experience, but with a yen to learn and plenty of ambition. He caught on quickly — so quickly, in fact, that I got a little curious.

“Sure enough, it wasn’t long before I got a report on him from the International Correspondence Schools. He had enrolled in an I. C. S. Shop Practice course and was making better-than-average grades. On the job, he applied what he learned. In fact, he ‘showed up’ many of our more experienced machinists. It paid off.

“When we needed someone to study and recommend the shop equipment for our new plant, Fred got the job. He’s on ‘salary’ now, working here in the front office. When we move, he’ll be put in charge of maintenance and repairs. It’s a big step up, but he’s trained for it — and in this business, it’s the trained men who get ahead!”

Thousands of successful “Fred’s” have acquired their all-important Shop Practice training from the world-famous International Correspondence Schools. If advancement appeals to you, lose no time in following their lead. You can study an I. C. S. Shop Practice course in your spare time — at low cost.

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# POPULAR FILMS

## Good Movie-Going For Fiction Fans

### Ted Palmer Picks:

#### For A Western—"Roughshod" with Robert



Sterling, Gloria Grahame and Claude Jarman, Jr. (RKO).

As if they didn't have trouble enough, a quartet of women from the dance hall at Aspen,

Nevada, join up with Clay and Steve Phillips (Robert Sterling and Claude Jarman, Jr.) who are headed for California with a herd of blooded horses. To make matters worse, an ex-convict is gunning for Clay. The brothers manage to get rid of all the women except Mary (Gloria Grahame) who has taken a shine to Clay—but Clay isn't taking. That is, until after a rip-roaring gunfight during which the outlaw bites the dust. *A "western" proving that men are still men.*

• • •

#### For Suspense—"House of Strangers" with Edward G. Robinson, Susan Hayward and Richard Conte (20th Century-Fox).



The strangers in this house are the four Monetti brothers. The

story is of Max Monetti's (Richard Conte) personal vendetta against the others for allowing him to go to prison while trying to save their father (Edward G. Robinson) from jail. It's the love of a woman (Susan Hayward) and the final realization of how futile his motives are that saves Max. In between, *this film develops plenty of chair-gripping tension.*

• • •

#### For Romantic Adventure—"The Great Sinners" with Gregory Peck, Ava Gardner, Melvyn Douglas, Walter Huston and Ethel Barrymore (MGM).



Peck's a writer, Ava's his girl, Huston's her father, Melvyn's the churl. Mix them all up in a European gambling casino around 1860 and you have a story. Pauline Ostrovsky and her father (Ava Gardner and Walter Huston) have gambling in their blood—not so writer Peck. But when the Ostrovsky chips go down—and down, Peck risks his own money to prevent Pauline from marrying the

cad, Armand De Glasse (Melvyn Douglas), for his money. Peck loses at the wheel—and loses spiritually. He finally regains mastery of both—and the girl. *A well-played tale.*

• • •

#### For Comedy—"Sorrowful Jones" with Bob Hope and Lucille Ball (Paramount).



Damon Runyon's wonderful story of bookmakers, mobsters and "little Miss Marker" is re-

told here with Bob Hope in the title role. Filled with typical Hope clowning, Runyonesque characters like "Regret," "Big Steve," "Once Over Sam" and the beautiful Lucille Ball, this picture makes the best of a good story. Briefly, Sorrowful, as a miserly bookmaker, accepts a five year old girl as a marker for a bet on a fixed horse race. When the child's father is liquidated by the mob for trying to "unfix" the race, Hope takes it upon himself to protect her from the gang. In the end, the thugs are outwitted and everyone lives happily ever after. *This is an hilarious Hope vehicle for all.*

• • •

#### For Music—"Look for the Silver Lining" with June Haver, Ray Bolger and Gordon MacRae (Warner Brothers) Technicolor.



Perhaps all won't remember Marilyn Miller—one of the

greatest musical comedy stars ever—but everybody will recognize the many tuneful and nostalgic melodies that stud this screen portrayal of her life. With June Haver as the star; Ray Bolger as Jack Donahue, one of the inspirations in her life, and Gordon MacRae playing Frank Carter, her first husband, this picture tells Marilyn's story of devotion to the stage. From her very first appearance as a child with the "Four Columbians" to her final performance in "Sally", she and all about her were a part of the theatre. Musical memories include "Who", "Sunny", "A Kiss in the Dark", "Time on My Hands", and, of course, the title piece. *A skillful blend of fact and music, solidly entertaining.*

• • •

#### For Sports—"The Great Dan Patch" with Dennis O'Keefe, Gail Russell and Ruth Warrick (United Artists).



The greatest pacing horse of them all was Dan Patch, and this is his story—more or less. He gets born, trained, raced on the Grand Circuit and made a champion. There's also some kind of plot involving people, but you'll be most interested in the harness racing on which this film is based.

# READY FOR THE RACKETS

## A Department

Dear Detective Fans:

These pages are especially for you, to warn you beforehand if possible about the eager cheaters who are cooking up slick schemes to pull on you. We print the letters on prevalent rackets you readers send us—and for every letter we publish, we pay \$5.00. Of course, we'll withhold your name if you wish.

Why not help us all to keep ahead of the swindles by sending us letters telling of your own personal experience with con men of all kinds? That way you'll be helping yourself—and safeguarding the detective fans who read these pages.

You'll understand that we can't enter into correspondence regarding your letters because of the press of mail in the office. Neither can we return any letters unless they are accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes.

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

And now, let's issue a warning to automobile owners in particular.

Motorists, beware! Sure, you're a good-hearted driver, eager to talk to that clean-cut kid trying to thumb a ride on the road ahead. Moreover, there's plenty of room in your car, and not much traffic whizzing by. So you start to pull over—but stop right there!

Don't pick up thumbers.

The hitch-hiker waving to you may look like an honest Joe, but too often the man you think is a migrant worker or a penniless student turns out, instead, to be a criminal who's out to stick you up and take you for what he can get. And if he gets excited, or you try to resist, the armed pick-up may very well turn out to be a murderer.

Crimes by hitch-hikers—murder, assault and robbery—are becoming much too common. In fact, the "thumber" has become such a problem that 23 states and the District of Columbia now have laws against soliciting rides, orally or by thumbing, and also making the driver

liable for injuries to his strange passenger.

Besides the possible criminal, many professional spongers have taken over the hitch-hiking idea and made it a racket. These nervy moochers will feed you well-prepared hard-luck stories—and even try to wrangle free meals out of you.

Of course, it's still true that plenty of honest-to-goodness hitchhikers want only a lift. But look out. Chances are that even the pretty young woman you pick up will turn out to have a special scheme to hook you but good. Remember, the odds these days are rising against your picking up a legitimate rider—so guard against being taken for a sucker's spill.

### Video Vanishes

Dear Sir:

Last year while living in a Southern city, a nicely dressed man came to my door and told me he was representing a large television corp. He said if they succeeded in getting a large number of home owners to buy television sets, they would be able to get their TV stations in that section. As I was anxious to get television, I asked him to come in.

He said his plan was to offer sets at \$350, with \$50 down and the balance at \$20 per month. I thought that reasonable enough, but hesitated as I did not know him. So he spoke up and told me he was a home man, and that he had lived at a certain hotel in town for five years, and in order for me to feel sure of him, for me to call the hotel and ask to speak to Mr. Smith, who was the manager—he said. I called and asked for Mr. Smith and was told the salesman had lived at the hotel for years, and was entirely reliable.

I felt sure the deal was on the level, paid my \$50 and signed the papers for the balance. He assured me my set would be delivered in two weeks, as stated in the contract. But in two weeks the morning papers told the story of how several hundred people there had been swindled just like I had been. They had planted Mr. Smith in the hotel lobby to pose as manager when prospects called, while the rest of the gang did the selling. With several hundred fifties in their jeans, they skipped town.

S. Evans  
Nashville, Tenn.

That's the racket wind-up for this month, detective fans. Be sure to write in and keep us posted on the rackets you've come up against.

The Editor

# SINNER

*Thackeray Hackett's deadly cane started slashing . . .  
when a minked beauty gave Preston a tumble—  
into a homicidal harem.*

**By FREDERICK C. DAVIS**



**Headliner Files  
Mystery Novel**



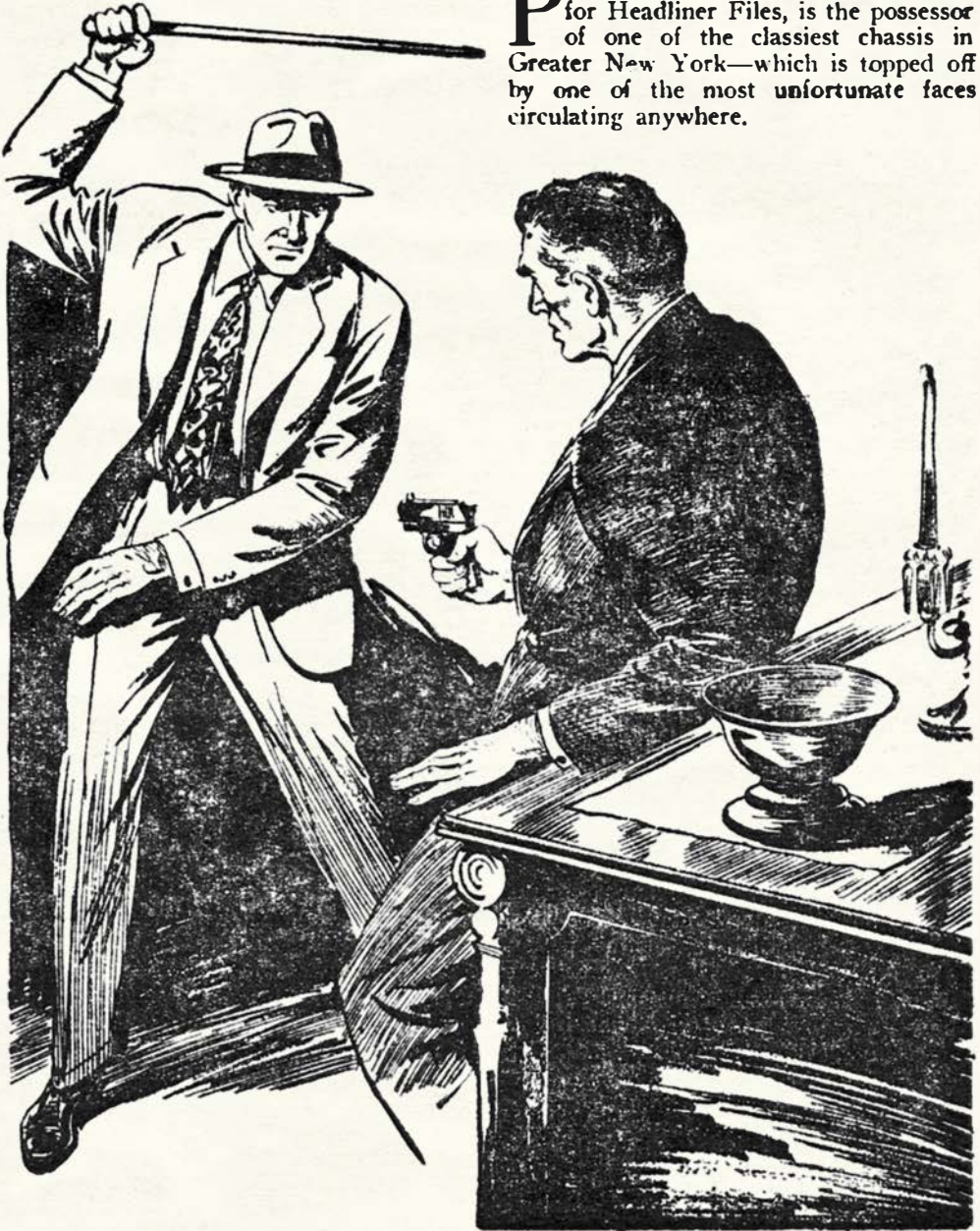
# TAKE ALL

## CHAPTER ONE

Hackett swished his cane through the air...

Doll on the Prowl

**P**OLLY DIGBY, general secretary for Headliner Files, is the possessor of one of the classiest chassis in Greater New York—which is topped off by one of the most unfortunate faces circulating anywhere.



It is always a pleasure to notice Polly, provided I'm careful not to notice her too far up. Being such an incongruous combination of the body beautiful and the face repugnant, she brings me a feeling of frustration whenever she comes to the door of my so-called private office. She appears there easily a dozen times a day. Each time, to my regret, she leaves her shapely parts out in the hall, hidden behind the doorframe, so that all I can see of her is her unattractive face pushing through the opening at me like an apparition on Halloween.

She did it again late this afternoon, when bringing me a brief message: "Miss Hedges is on the phone, pumping us again, Mr. Preston."

This being the rag-tag end of another tattered day, the name didn't register on me. "Have you mentioned Miss Hedges before, Polly?"

"Yesterday," Polly said. "She's the one who buzzes us every day with too many funny questions. This time she's positively avid to know what Mrs. Stuyvesant Whitmore's favorite type of young manhood is."

Since Mrs. Stuyvesant Whitmore was one of the loftiest grand dames in Gotham's lorgnette set, seventy-odd years of age and a great-grandmother, this did seem to be a somewhat dubious line of inquiry.

Polly added, in step with my own doubts, "I don't believe this Hedges lass has told us her real reasons for wanting all the strange information she asks for, Mr. Preston. You said the next time she called you'd take her on, so here's your chance right now."

I reached for my phone as Polly, handing me a scribbled square of scratch paper, hustled her lovely frame back to our main file section where more phones were clamoring.

"Good afternoon, Miss Hedges," I said over the wire. "C. Walter Preston speaking. I'm the business manager here. Please tell me what we can do for you today."

Miss Hedges responded in a captivating, softly throaty voice that purred with a suggestion of closest intimacy. I felt my toes melting in a happy glow, yet at the same time the terseness of Miss Hedges'

answer told me that she meant business.

"Just hustle up the stuff I asked for a minute ago. I need it in a hurry."

"Your questions for today, Miss Hedges," I said, referring to the notes Polly had passed to me. "Eight of them, I see, delving into certain personal angles of Mrs. Stuyvesant Whitmore. A fancy order, aren't they?"

She said in her entrancingly husky tones, and in her forthright manner, "Don't tell me you haven't got the low-down on that glittery biddy."

"We have a large file on this estimable woman—although the information you want is so unusual that I'm pretty sure we'd have to do some special research on it. For example, I can't say off-hand whether Mrs. Whitmore ever invested in a fake gold mine. As for your other questions, it is contrary to our policy to dispense scandal. But if you can explain just what you want such very special information for—"

"I need it in my work. Look, I've already paid for the stuff. What more do I have to do to get delivery?"

Reaching to a small file on my desk, I had extracted the card which Miss Joyce Hedges had signed when making application for our service. It had been okayed by an employee of ours named Thackeray Hackett. Under the heading: *Occupation* it had been filled in: *Free-lance writer for movie mags.*

"Tell me, Miss Hedges, just how is the super-aristocratic Mrs. Whitmore supposed to tie up with Mickey Mouse?"

"Look, Mr. Preston, you've got to give me that stuff." She spoke in a grimly exasperated tone. "I need it for an important appointment that's coming up in a few minutes. I've got to have it."

It was time to tell this troublesome babe off. "Miss Hedges, I'm really very sorry, but we must restrict ourselves to subscribers having a thoroughly legitimate need for our services."

"But wait! You—you can't clam up on me," she gasped. "Not now, when I'm really in a spot for the stuff. Oh, damnit—" and it was a wail of distress—"if only you knew how you're messing me up. You can't scratch me off your list like this."

The next sound that came over the

wire was plain enough—the angry smash of a shattered connection. Had we lost a subscriber? Time would tell, but anyhow it was probably good riddance, attractive as the babe had sounded.

**D**URING this altercation, a young man had propped himself in my doorway. He wore a faint wry smile and his baby-blue eyes were bright with cynical glitters. Although threadbare around the cuffs and down-at-the-heels, he sported a cane—a dandyish, pencil-thin walking stick of supple hickory which he was never without. This was Thackeray Hackett, the licenseless ex-shamus who worked for us for box-tops as a researcher and application checker.

“Thack, when Joyce Hedges applied for our service, you apparently okayed her too fast. She may be using us for questionable purposes which she insists on keeping under wraps. Naturally we can’t let her involve us in any sort of shady deal.”

Hackett shrugged and swung his slender cane. “Her references checked. Besides—” he twisted his lips— “would you care to see for yourself what she’s like, Pres?”

He had a copy of the current *Chi-chi* under his arm. Opening it on my desk, he pointed with the tip of his cane to a full-page color ad. It was intended to sell summer gowns. For my money, it did a more powerful job of selling the girl. She was pictured in a dress of black gossamer net which appeared hardly more tangible than a moonlit shadow. This chick Joyce Hedges had everything that Polly had, plus a heart-stopping, stylish face that looked angelically aloof yet darkly enticing too.

Gazing at this glamorous lass, who certainly must be the most gorgeous female writer on earth, I was appalled to realize how misguided I had been in banishing her from our list so soon.

“Shall I look her over again, Pres?” Hackett suggested, with a smile.

I gave him a frown. “You were a little careless with this case to begin with. She may be dynamite in more ways than one, so this time I’ll check on her.”

Hackett had put on a quirky smile. “Just a minute. You might like to see

Lieutenant Blackley first. He’s here with a lot of official dignity showing on his fat face.”

“Blackley? Waiting? Why, show him right in!”

When Lieutenant Blackley came cruising in, coldly ignoring Hackett, I greeted him genially. He ponderously lowered his two hundred and forty-five pounds into my visitor’s chair.

“I’m sorry that Miss Brown isn’t in the office just now, Lieutenant.” One obvious reason for Blackley’s frequent visits was Clarabelle Brown, the founder and sole owner of Headliner Files. “She flew to London a few days ago to arrange to open a new branch there.”

“Ah?” Blackley looked massively regretful over missing my charming boss. Then he put on a knowing smile. “When the cat’s away the mice will play—as it were, perhaps, Mr. Preston?”

I frowned at him, wondering what the hell he was suspecting us of this time. A man of great distrusts, this Blackley. When Headliner Files first opened shop, he had somehow picked up the notion that we might be fronting for some new sort of shakedown racket. Ridiculous though it was, he had never quite gotten rid of it since. In fact, when dropping in on us unexpectedly like this, it was half in hopes of catching us gloating over our wads of ill-gotten lettuce. Apparently Blackley’s affection didn’t stop him from thinking that the warm-hearted Clarabelle could have unwittingly staffed her office with crooks who began picking her customers’ pockets the minute her back was turned.

“When Miss Brown is away, Lieutenant,” I assured him, “we work like crazy to keep up with ourselves—exactly as we do when she is here. Now, if we may be of service to you, fine sir, you have only to command us, if you will be so good.”

Lieutenant Blackley was not in a joshing mood today. He sat there soberly, saying nothing, a blimp of a man. Black derby, long sideburns, thin hair parted in the middle, handlebar mustache, gaiters on his surprisingly dainty feet. He looked like a gentleman officer of the gaslight era. There was nothing old-fashioned about Blackley’s methods, however. A ranking

member of the commissioner's special squad, he had snared an impressive catch of crooks in his self-picked field of operations, the Broadway sector.

Usually jovial, but disturbingly grave now, he opened his portfolio and removed a photograph which he politely placed in my hands—while Hackett, whom he still ignored, craned over the huge detective's shoulder from the doorway.

"Do you recognize that woman, Mr. Preston?" he inquired in his precise manner.

**T**HE woman was lying on a slab. Her face was marred by bruises. So were her bare shoulders. Bandages were plastered over her punished scalp. Her eyes were closed in her white face, and her colorless mouth hung slightly open.

"I never saw her before," I said. "She looks dead."

"At the time the photograph was taken, she was unconscious. She is still unconscious but expected to recover. A patrolman found her early this morning, just around the corner from this office."

Obviously Blackley considered this a most dubious if not actually incriminating circumstance.

"Surprising things may occur around almost any corner, Lieutenant," I reminded him.

"She is obviously a woman of taste, position and some means. Her purse contained several hundred dollars. She carried no identification at all, but there are various clues. One is this label. I thought you might demonstrate the value of your service, Mr. Preston, by informing me concerning it."

The label was the kind that is sewn into coats and suits. It bore in script, woven in the silk, two names: *Jenny Amyx* and *Chicago*.

"It would also be helpful," Blackley added, "to delve into your dossier on this man, if you have one."

He had plucked a scrap of paper from his case. Enclosed in a cellophane envelope to protect it from handling, it had been torn out of a magazine—the portrait of a man of about forty, clean-cut but undistinguished. Its caption consisted of his name only: Van Shepard.

I said, "He rings no bell with me,

either, Lieutenant," and passed both items on to Hackett, who then headed for our main file section. It occurred to me then that Blackley was looking too bland. Instead of querying us, why, I wondered, wasn't he checking through headquarters' usual channels?

He was saying disarmingly, "We fear it was a hasty attempt at murder which fell a little short of its objective. The picture of Mr. Shepard was one of the items found in her purse. There is another item about which you may enlighten me, Mr. Preston." Now he was getting to the point. "Why did this unfortunate woman also have in her possession the name and address of Headliner Files?"

Lifting another cellophane envelope from the depths of his portfolio, he permitted me to see that memo. It disturbed me. Just then Thackeray Hackett returned, bringing a pungent smile and news that disturbed me further because Blackley might consider it suspicious.

"We have nothing in the place on either name, Pres," Hackett reported. "I'm afraid the good lieutenant will have to rely on headquarters' decrepit machinery to help him muddle through with this one."

"That's enough, Thack," I said quickly. "Lieutenant, I'm sorry we can't help you at all, but if we do happen to pick up any dope, we'll get in touch with you fast."

"I'm sure you will, Mr. Preston," Blackley said, rising and sounding ominously courteous. "Good day, sir."

He veered about with the grace of a schooner in a brisk wind, ignoring Hackett as he would a passing beggar. His abrupt departure caught me by surprise, but I hastened along, piloting him out, and closed the door on him with a feeling that I could stop worrying about one aspect of the situation. For a few moments back there, I had feared that Blackley's visit might tie up with Joyce Hedge's questionable operations. It was fine with me to discover there was no connection whatsoever between the two.

On the other hand, it would have been foolhardy to imagine that Blackley had put aside his suspicions of us. Far from it. He was a man who knew how to keep quiet and bide his time. If there was any illegal connection between us and the bat-

tered dame found just around our corner—which, of course, there actually wasn't—he would sit tight and patiently wait until the moment came when he could pounce, all two hundred and forty-five pounds of him, and pin it down. Meanwhile, his groundless suspicions would continue to smoulder.

RETURNING to the gate in the counter separating our reception room from our main file section, I heard a voice that sounded familiarly husky. I also recognized the emotional quality in it, like two hundred and twenty volts looking for a fuse to blow.

"Honest, I swear nobody'll be hurt. I'm not even going to publish it anywhere. In fact, I'm going to tell it to only one person, Mrs. Whitmore herself, who certainly won't think it's news. Come on, be a good guy and give out."

As I might have expected, Joyce Hedges hadn't taken my no for an answer. She had hustled right over here to continue the squabble in person—which gave her a powerful advantage, her person being as luscious as it was. Comparing her with her picture in the ad as she stood there, leaning imploringly over the counter—spike-heeled, sling-back sandals, slender hips, her russet hair long—I could see that it had not misrepresented her.

The member of our staff to whom she was talking was, of course, Thackeray Hackett, who, when he gets a break, gets a honey.

"Frankly, Miss Hedges, I think I may be able to persuade Mr. Preston to reconsider. Just leave him to me and I'll fix it up for you."

Not jumping Hackett for this piece of effrontery, I kept quiet and watched developments as Joyce Hedges insisted, "That's marvellous of you, but I just can't wait."

"Mr. Preston stepped out a few minutes ago," Hackett said as Mr. Preston listened in, "but I'll go to work on him the minute he comes back, in about an hour."

"A whole hour," she wailed. "But I'm late already!"

Looking sad about this, Hackett said, "If I only knew where to get in touch with Mr. Preston—" He shook his head while Mr. Preston continued to view the

shapely situation. "I'm afraid that's the very best I can do for you—just now, anyway."

"Oh, dammit, dammit, dammit!" she exclaimed. Giving Hackett a flash-bulb smile, she blurted, "I'll phone. Thanks a lot for being so much nicer about it than Mr. Preston was." Then heading about, she brushed past the horrid Mr. Preston who wasn't there, and whizzed out.

I turned a stera eye on Hackett. "Thack, I'm the guy who decides on policy around here. Borderline cases like Miss Hedges' should be left entirely to me. After this—"

He was easing through the gate. "Save your breath, Pres. You may really need it. That little pigeon really flies fast."

I followed Hackett across the waiting room and out. Cheerful lights shone in the dusk along the street. It was unusually warm for late fall and already growing dark. We had no trouble spotting Joyce Hedges. She was the only jet-propelled pedestrian on the sidewalk. Paying no attention to the convivial customers buzzing in and out of the nearby bistros, she headed on to an objective which must be a very hot date.

As we swung after her, keeping her in sight, Hackett said, "Cutting her off with a flat cancellation would have left us in the dark. If she's really pulling something tricky, we have to protect ourselves, don't we? By keeping her halfway happy, we can play her along until we find out what's on the fire."

Continuing to stride along and swing his little cane, Hackett shot me a sharp glance. After a moment I realized why. We had moved into a quieter block, and now I could hear quick footfalls behind us. They came on steadily, the rhythm of someone stepping purposefully along in our wake.

"While we tail Miss Hedges somebody else tails us," Hackett said wryly. "I think we'd better play it through our own way, Pres."

I began to understand what he meant when he halted at the next corner.

"So long, pal," he said, grabbing my hand. "See you in the morning." Then with a friendly wig-wag he went on, still following Joyce Hedges.

This was my cue to cut off in a different

direction in order to see just who our shadow was most interested in. Although I regretted leaving Miss Hedges' vicinity, I crossed the street westward while Hackett continued north-bound after her. The steps behind us had slowed, but now they put on speed again, showing that I was our shadow's man.

In a bar window, I caught a clear reflection of the street behind me and of the shadow who had elected me. She was a cute little thing, her slender ankles twinkling, her mink jacket swinging as she breezed along on the beam. At first glance, swapping Miss Hedges for this babe didn't seem a bad bargain at all. So I slowed a little, to see what she would make of it, and she came right ahead, gaining.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Quail Hunt

THE best way to find out what this chick in mink had in store for me, I figured, was simply to head into the bar. It would provide her with a pleasant and convenient place to trap me.

The bar happened, felicitously enough, to be one of the more chi-chi favorites of the sit-and-sip set. Climbing onto a stool, I exchanged amenities with Mario, the barman, who knew me well as one of his thirstier customers. I put in an order for my customary double scotch just as the girl in mink perched herself on the next stool on my right and piped up:

"Same for me, George."

I gave her an offish glance and let her go on working on me. Her tactics took a not unheard-of direction when she said to Mario as she rummaged in her big handbag:

"O-oh, George, this is terrible. I'm *ever* so embarrassed, George. Why, I rushed out of my apartment without any money. Whatever can I do, George, wash dishes for you—or something?"

This gave me an opening as wide as a chorine's stage. I said, with a fall guy's charming smile: "But you're with me, remember?"

Her cheeks bunched up like little apples and she made her big reddish-brown eyes as round and innocent as a child's. Very

cute, even though it wasn't to be trusted.

"O-oh, thank you lots! I'm really *ever* so terribly embarrassed and I just don't know what I'd be doing without you." Her pixie's face shone like love at first sight and she went right on to the next step. "But it really isn't as if we were total strangers, is it? After all, you know my name. It's Susanna, but my oldest pals all call me Suzie, same as you do."

"That's right, Suzie," I said. "You may call me Casanova."

Judging me artistically, she said: "No, you're not *quite* as handsome as he is, but you'll do. I mean, we *have* met before, in a way. You're the smoothie I saw coming out of Headliner Files a minute ago, aren't you?"

Suzie had hardly any doubts about where I had just come from, of course, having been casing the joint and watching for a likely pick-up to show. Possibly she had forked off after me, rather than Hackett, because I'm more the let's-have-another-cocktail type. So it couldn't have been news to her when I answered:

"I work there. Just a glorified office boy."

"O-oh, why-y, you're just the man I've been wanting to meet, honey!" she said, big eyes again. "Honest, honey, you can do something special for me. I mean if you could just tip me off about one certain thing I'd be *ever* so grateful, really."

She was running it off too fast, which indicated an urgent need for just such a patsy as she hoped I would turn out to be. Although at times it seems pleasant and worth the while to let a babe play me for a sucker, I felt I was being ganged up on by predatory darlings this evening, and this little honey would be more fun if she weren't in such a rush. She needed a bit of firm handling.

I said affably, like a flattered-to-death sucker: "I wouldn't mind it too much if you became overwhelmed with gratitude for me, sugar."

"Well-l—" Suzie snuggled her mink a little closer, confidentially. "There's this certain eager beaver who's *ever* so good looking and terribly rich, or pretends to be, and he says his name is Beauveau—one of *the* Beauveaus. Well, it may all be an act. If he's a phony, honey, I'm just not going to let him put

anything across on me. But I can't tell so far, and a girl's got to be sure, doesn't she? Because he really is so frightfully handsome and nice. So I thought if I could learn more about the family background of the Beauveaus, then at least I'd know if he has his facts straight, and so—"

"So," I took it up, "you'd be ever so thankful if I'd just smuggle you a load of Beauveau family history out of Headliner Files."

"I'd appreciate it, honey, really," she murmured. "Will ya? Because you wouldn't want me wasting my time on a phony, would you?"

This was as much butter as I could swallow in one go.

"Look here, Suzie," I said. "I'd be enjoying this ever so much more if there wasn't such a strong smell of mice around. What is your real reason for wanting the inside dope on the Beauveau family?"

"But, honey boy, I already told you about—"

"Speaking of phonies, how about you? Are you teamed up with Joyce Hedges?"

"Why-y, I never heard—"

"Who are you working for, then? What's your real name? You didn't actually forget your dough, did you? Just let me check before I start sneaking confidential information for free from—"

I had reached for her handbag, a fancy leather job big enough to hold a ten-pound codfish without folding. It seemed to be as heavy and lumpy as a case full of plumber's tools. She grabbed for it as I stripped its zipper open.

"You stop that, you fresh thing!"

A quick tussle resulted, beginning with a whacking slap to my left cheek. I found a tensely struggling girl in my arms and my face full of fur. A wad of folding money popped out of the purse—a bigger roll than I was carrying myself—exposing Suzie's whole play. She snatched it back as something else spilled out and went rolling off among the tables, where amazed customers sat gaping at us.

I heard Mario saying in a scandalized tone, "Please, Mr. Preston, please!"

I WAS now reaching for a card case which I suspected might contain this snappy bantam's real name and address.

At this point, she delivered another open-handed right to the jaw so resoundingly that I spilled backward off the stool. While I scrambled up, her tiny pumps flashed across the floor. They vanished even as I pushed after them. A door went bang in my face.

Noticing a sign on the door reading *Powder Room*, I quietly pulled it shut and went back, conceding temporary defeat.

Mario clucked at me, the other customers buzzed with comments on my public show of impatience and one of them handed me the object which had dropped from Suzie's bag during the altercation. I hadn't time to glance at it then, because at that point a realization struck me. I had come out of the scrap with the intention of camping right there until Suzie showed again, figuring that she couldn't stay in there forever. But now I remembered that this bar was part of a hotel and there were other labelled doors in the lobby. She was probably popping out of one of them already.

I stuffed into my pocket the thing she had lost, whatever it was, slapped money on the bar for Mario and headed out. I did not wish to lose Suzie at this uncertain juncture. It was too important in a business sense to find out what she really wanted from Headliner Files. Besides, dangerous or not, she was a cozy little armful.

I rounded the corner just in time to spot Suzie clicking her heels northward on Fifth. I dodged into a doorway to avoid her first backward glance. At the corner, she paused to search into her rifled purse. She seemed to discover the loss of the thing I had acquired. She stamped her little foot in exasperation and her red lips worked as she called me names, this time not including "honey."

I plucked the thing out of my pocket for a look. It was a flat spool, five inches in diameter and less than an inch thick, wound with what seemed at first glance to be coarse black thread. In reality, it was fine steel wire—the sort used in magnetic recorders. This spool of wire, if it wasn't blank and unused, had been run through such a machine, making it a recorder. I would have to run it through a reproducer in order to hear what it said, if anything. Meanwhile its molecules, magnetically re-

arranged in accordance with certain impulses of sound, would keep a secret of importance to Suzie.

And, I wondered, who else?

She hustled on. I followed her, shoulder brushing the building fronts. It was dark now. Suzie made herself breathless, now and then almost running, until finally she veered eastward and scurried into an apartment house of white stone, which was really an elegant dump.

Puzzled, I saw that Suzie hadn't breezed straight into the main foyer, as might be expected of her mink. Instead, she had dodged in through the service entrance.

Acting as if I knew my way around this plutocratic neighborhood, I approached a slab of wrought iron and plate glass which a uniformed doorman swung open for me. Striding on through the lobby, I came to a private switchboard behind the mail desk where a school-teacherish woman was in charge. She looked like a push-over for romance, so I said:

"Suzie just came in. Be a good scout and buzz her for me."

Teacher said:

"I'm sorry, but Suzie's employer has banned all such calls to her staff."

Beyond that Teacher could add nothing but more sorrys. Outside again, I had learned only that Suzie worked, probably as a social secretary, for one of the seventy or eighty families living in this building, who must consist exclusively of tycoons and blue-bloods. I still had strong doubts that Suzie had levelled with me about the Beauveau scion, because a gal of her connections could get the dope on him more openly than she had tried to get it from me—unless, of course, she had shady purposes to hide. Anyhow, she was a gal whom I still did not wish to lose, for business reasons or any other.

On Madison I spotted an apothecary's, and headed for it. From the phone booth inside it I could keep an eye on Suzie's building.

My call to Headliner Files was answered by Polly. This meant, since it was after office hours now, that it was Polly's turn to yawn through the graveyard watch tonight. Somebody must be on hand at Headliner Files twenty-four hours a day, including Sundays, in case

a subscriber calls for information in a lather.

"Polly," I inquired, "I seem to recall that a family named Beauveau is top-drawer socially somewhere."

"Nob Hill, San Francisco," Polly answered at once, having a memory which makes an elephant seem absent-minded by comparison. "We got a note here saying the queen of the Beauveau clan, Mathella Beauveau, is right now paying her first visit to Manhattan since the Coolidge administration."

"Ah? With a handsome son or nephew, maybe?"

"Our dope says she blew in driving her own covered wagon, alone."

Whose was the phony story, then? Suzie's to me, or the one dished up to Suzie by the guy claiming to be a Beauveau on the make? I could be sure, however, that our entanglements now stretched through the social stratosphere from the Atlantic coast to the Golden Gate. This odd fact reminded me of a character I knew named Thackeray Hackett.

"Any news from Thack, Polly?"

"Not any, Mr. Preston, but Lieutenant Blackley just now buzzed in on one of our trunks here, asking for you. If you'd like him switched over, I can do it."

**K**EEPING an alert eye in Suzie's direction, I gave Polly the go-ahead signal and heard Blackley's fat-sounding voice come over the wire.

"Ah, Mr. Preston," he began in his punctilious manner. "I suggested I would keep you informed concerning the unidentified victim of our attempted homicide."

"She interests me, Lieutenant," I answered cautiously, "but I still can't see how she has any connection with Headliner Files."

He went on in a noncommittal manner which did not help to restore my peace of mind. "She is no longer unidentified, Mr. Preston. Surprisingly enough, we knew her name at the very beginning without knowing it was her name. It was on the label in her clothes. She is a dress designer having her establishment in Chicago, known professionally as Jenny Amyx."



"She's not too famous or Headliner Files would have heard more of her, Lieutenant. And it's still true," I added pointedly, "that we have never had any dealings with her."

"My sources of information in Chicago inform me also that she is unmarried, although a charming, personable and successful woman," Blackley continued. "They add that she is also somewhat mysterious—that is, there is something about herself which she has long guarded, something which she has not divulged to her associates. I have been unable to question her as to this personally because she is still confined to her room in the hospital, unconscious."

"Lieutenant," I put in, still watching Suzie's building—and the way Suzie was built was really something to watch—"would you mind telling me how this case might possibly bear on a highly reputable organization known as Headliner Files?"

Evidently the connection was bad in Blackley's direction. He went on, evidently without having heard me, "My source further informs me, Mr. Preston, that Miss Amyx left Chicago on a very sudden and unaccountable impulse early in the morning the day before yesterday. She left her business affairs to be carried on by her assistants, with no explanation except a cryptic message scrawled on a scrap of magazine wrapper.

"It said merely, 'Back soon from heaven on earth. This is at last the end of my search,' Does this convey any meaning to you, Mr. Preston?"

"The wrapper from what magazine, Lieutenant?"

"That is a point still to be cleared up, Mr. Preston," he answered, soberly enough. "Possibly it may have some connection or other with the photograph of the man Van Shepard, which was found in her purse. As to Mr. Shepard himself, we have learned that he is the sales manager of a company manufacturing beauty-shop supplies with central offices in this city. He is a man of optimism, having married for the fifth time.

"With his current wife he lives in Bronxville, and at the moment is off on a business trip, arranging his itinerary as he goes along—which makes it difficult for us to trace him. When we finally bag him,

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I think he will be in for a rather rough session of explaining himself."

"You're confident that Mr. Shepard is the would-be killer who bashed this woman over her pretty head, in other words—but you still wonder why the victim had Headliner Files' address on her person along with the likeness of her assailant."

"Yes, Mr. Preston." Blackley inquired smoothly, "Isn't it time you told me why she did?"

It was a break for me, and for Headliner Files as well, that an interruption occurred at exactly that point. It gave me no chance to protest against that persistent suspicious question of Blackley's. Given no time to answer him at all, except to blurt out, "Call you back!", I hooked the receiver, squeezed out of the booth and headed west across Madison.

Suzie had reappeared. Popping out of the service entrance, again in her swingy mink, she was flashing her shiny little shoes toward Fifth again, with that large lumpy purse seeming to contain a burglar's kit under one arm. It decidedly wasn't good to leave Blackley questioning an abandoned phone—he might get the impression that I was hightailing it for the border—but losing Susie this trip would have left a few more pertinent questions hanging in the air. For example, what the hell was Suzie up to?

I strode after her at top speed to Fifth. When I turned north on the avenue, she was two blocks ahead of me. At the third corner, she suddenly turned east again. By the time I reached that point I was in a sweat, and the long cross-street had no Suzie in it.

Suzie had evidently entered one of the doors along this classy block. The possibilities were too plentiful. She might just as well have floated off on a cloud of face powder. I drifted along the sidewalk, short of breath, baffled and wondering how I could flush this little quail out of her covey again, wherever she was.

A voice with cynical overtones softly said behind me: "She ducked into that house, Pres."

I TURNED to stare at Thackeray Hackett. He emerged from the shadow of a marble stoop, swinging his rapier-like cane, his baby blue eyes glittering bright

with sardonic amusement at my surprise.

"Fancy meeting you here," I said in sour tones.

"Nothing too surprising about it, Pres." Hackett said quietly. "This is where Joyce Hedges led me. She went into the same house."

"I'll be a monkey's uncle. So it does tie up."

"In fact, Miss Hedges went into the doctor's suite on the ground floor and your diminutive doll ducked into the same berth."

Hackett sauntered across the dark street toward the doctor's apartment. Beside the marble stoop, which climbed to its main entrance, was a private door. As Hackett had observed, professional men favor the convenience of such arrangements; but the wall-space usually occupied by the doctor's plaque was blank. Instead, a discreetly small card, bearing white lettering—it looked Persian—on a black background, was affixed to one of the panes. It read: *Thyra*, and under this: *By Appointment Only*. A one-word invitation was added: *Enter*.

My experiences with that peculiar character Hackett had taught me how useless it was to argue with him once he had picked up a tantalizing scent. Since losing his walnut-panelled agency on Park Avenue two years ago he had been a man teeming with frustrated impulses to exercise his detective's instincts. When he grasped a chance to search out a hidden meaning, like this one, there was no stopping the guy.

It would be as futile as trying to persuade a trained bird dog to assume an attitude of indifference toward a nest of partridges. So when Hackett turned the knob of that door bearing the otherworldly name of *Thyra* and quietly stepped in, I simply saved my breath and went along.

When the door swung halfway open, a faint rasping noise buzzed out of the rear of the apartment. It meant the door was wired for sound. Its effect on Hackett was startling.

He nudged me aside and instantly swung the door almost closed—which stopped the buzzing. Shutting it the rest of the way noiselessly, he glanced swiftly around. I had hardly a chance to size

up the strangely decorated room before Hackett was jostling me across it like a one-man subway crush.

Before I was fully aware of what he was doing to me, he had wrestled me inside a closet, had crammed himself in beside me and had eased the door shut on us both, smothering us in coal-mine blackness.

We heard light footfalls tripping into the room from the regions in the rear. I thought I recognized the step as Susie's. She stopped, said nothing, then went back. Once she was gone, Hackett opened the door a crack and we each cocked an ear through it.

From one of the rooms beyond we heard Susie saying, "Either a few haunts have moved in with us or else we ought to have the electrician look at that buzzer. Nobody came in."

The voice that answered was also familiar. Throaty. It couldn't be anyone but Joyce Hedges'. She said:

"Never mind. The biddies are already late, so that gives us a few minutes more, and sister, we can use 'em. Keep that thing rolling and let's hope there's dope in it. All I need to do is fall on my face just once. Once'll be my finish."

We heard a click, then a faint humming sound. Whatever it was, both Suzie and Joyce kept clammed up now, seeming to concentrate intensely on something. A pencil scratched rapidly. I thought I heard a faint syllabic twanging like a voice talking in a telephone receiver. After a few minutes, all these noises stopped together. Then there was no sound at all except a faint crackle of paper, until the buzzer buzzed again.

Hackett stiffened, holding the half-inch crack open, confident that we couldn't be spotted inside the blackness of the clothes closet. A car had stopped in the street and now visitors were entering. A uniformed chauffeur held the door open for them. One, two, three women were coming in, seeming to tip-toe, as if venturing into a sacred temple. Once they had entered, the chauffeur withdrew. They stood there waiting in eager expectation and slightly scared.

Two of these grand dames were old enough to be my grandmother. The third, being only fiftyish, seemed almost girlish

beside them. Oddly, these ladies, although obviously possessing upholstered bank accounts, looked underfed. The trio exuded an air of hard-headed gentility. They brought into a focus all the mysterious pressures that had been put on Headliner Files tonight.

Among them, and most distinctly a lady of quality, was Mrs. Stuyvesant Whitmore. I knew her well by sight, just as I knew thousands of other celebrities. The youngest, who seemed to have the others under her wing, I also recognized. She was Mrs. Derventer Thumbarton Burstone Cole, née Magnolia Dunlop. And the third—

"Marthella, darling," Mrs. Cole whispered to her, "I'm so happy that Thyra gave us permission to bring you here this evening. You'll be perfectly amazed at her occult powers and just utterly convinced, as I am, Marthella, dear, just utterly."

So the third was, of course, Mrs. Marthella Beauveau, of Nob Hill, San Francisco.

"Shhh!" Mrs. Whitmore warned them—and we all gazed, hushed, at an inner archway draped with lustrous black velvet.

The woman who appeared from the darkness of that arch was enough to start me purring on the spot. She was ageless—but obviously still young. Her skin was dark as bronze. Tall and slender as an obelisk, she wore a veil of gossamer black, through which her maroon mouth was dimly visible. Long, purple-black lashes shaded her eyes and on her raven-black hair she wore a turban of blood red. She came into my life with the electrical effect of a black, silent lightning bolt—one with delectable contours.

I felt instantly and dizzily that in a night full to overflowing with women, ranging from wealthy dowagers to such dishes as Suzie and Joyce, this exotic goddess in her own dark, unearthly way topped them all.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *She's an Angel Now*

**A**S MUCH as a half-inch slit would allow me, I feasted my eyes on Thyra. It was quite a banquet. She did not speak. Her bearing was one

of immeasurable superiority to her aristocratic visitors. She merely inclined her glistening black-and-red head and gracefully turned.

Clad in a flowing toga, her bronze feet in red sandals, she caused herself to vanish through the black curtains. Then her three visitors, tossing thrilled glances among themselves, followed her in single file.

Hackett eased the door open wider and for another minute we cocked an ear in the hush. Then, no longer interested, he dodged across the reception room and out to the sidewalk, jockeying me along with him. We skirted past the limousine parked at the curb, crossed the street while the chauffeur remained absorbed in a track form, then ducked out of sight in the same shadow from which Hackett had originally appeared. Faded back there, we could again case Thyra's establishment.

"Except that this case is made up exclusively of dames, Thack," I observed, "I don't like it. Although I would like to meet Thyra after her working hours, even though I'm afraid the thing she's working at is blackmail."

Hackett flicked me with a glance. "It would be a fatal error for any crook to try to blackmail any women as influential as those three. No. Mrs. Cole's remark was the tip-off. This is a classy fortune-telling setup."

So. This cleared up Joyce Hedges' remark to the effect that she would repeat our information only to the woman who already knew it better than anyone else. Suzie, working with Joyce, had picked me up in order to pump me in their moment of need because their pipelines were being cut off. It all made sense now—all except one angle.

That was, it seemed a hard way of glomming onto such limited amounts of dough as their gullible clients would be willing to shell out to a soothsayer. Logically, then, these occult parlors of Thyra's had been set up for more reasons than the fees—which reasons escaped me.

While we kept an eye on the lair of the dark sibyl, I said quietly, "The only thing I'm perfectly sure of is that my life will be empty until I've met Thyra in person, not behind a crystal ball. As for the rest, Thack, listen to this. . . ."

I was well into a report on my own merry-go-round evening, and illustrating it with the spool of wire I had captured from Suzie, when light glimmered out of Thyra's private door. The chauffeur scrambled to attention. The Mesdames Cole, Whitmore and Beauveau were withdrawing from their communion with the exotic oracle.

As they climbed aboard the limousine we caught such excited comments as, "So amazing—really impossible not to believe in her, my dears—"

One remark came clearly just as the limousine cruised off, Mrs. Cole asserting liltily, "I must say, confidentially, I've felt *so* much more at ease about Colin since Thyra *assured* me how devoted to me he really is."

The big car gone, Hackett watched Thyra's windows and said, "Time's awastin'. We need action, Pres. Come with me while I put the bee on those babes."

He headed for the far corner and an inevitable newsstand. Tucking his hickory stick under his arm, he consulted the phone book, then sidled into the booth. First he dialed a number and a man's voice answered, loud in the receiver, its tone saying more clearly than words, "Oh, for Peter's sake, another interruption."

"Ah? At it late again tonight, are you?" Hackett inquired.

"Honest to heaven, as much as I love my work, it drives me batty sometimes." the guy complained, sounding harassed. "Studio's crawling with kids, new and old. All mighty pretty, but they keep me plenty busy, brother. That's you, isn't it, Herb?"

"No, this is Frankie," Hackett said, and hung up.

It didn't make sense to me, either. And he wasn't through. Right away, he dialed another number. This time the answering voice was a girl's.

"Say," Hackett said with a nasty snarl. "If you don't pop over here, he's gonna be fit to be tied, no kiddin'."

"Tonight?" the girl yipped over the wire. "He didn't tell us he wanted us tonight!"

"Y' think I'm talkin' about next Chris'-mas, maybe?" Hackett grated at her. "Come on, shake those gams!"

Then he cut the connection again—but still with one more bit of seeming lunacy

in mind. Smiling thoughtfully and signalling me along, he strolled into the middle of the street just as a taxi careened up. Hackett's waving cane stopped it. He bowed me in, followed, and directed the driver:

"Chrysler Building, please."

I eyed him as we rolled down the avenue. "You wouldn't care to explain what all this hocus-pocus means?"

Hackett's answer, made half to himself, was, "She certainly is a busy chick, writing for the fan books on the side too."

Then he lapsed into one of his heavily cloaked moods of silence, tapped his cane and looked nettled. When the cab stopped at the Chrysler Building he left the fare to me, of course, and headed across the lobby without detouring for a glance at the directory board. I caught up with him just as he entered an express elevator.

This was no improvement over the earlier part of the evening, but Hackett still wasn't accounting for it. We left the elevator somewhere above the first strata of clouds to enter a room which was not a public hallway but a classy tenant's

foyer. It was empty, yet we seemed caught up in a swarm of pretty girls. All the walls were filled with dazzling portraits, blown up, sparkling blondes, snappy brunettes, redheads in gorgeous color. Scores of 'em, all beaming on me to the exclusion of all other men on earth. No sultan had ever had a harem to compare with this one. It looked like the crossroads of Forty-Second Street and Heaven.

THE inscrutable Hackett strolled right past these beves of angels to a door bearing the name: *Colin Cole*. This dreamy place was, as I recognized now, of course, the Cole Model Agency. The newest in the field, where so many dazzling daisies bloomed, it had rapidly grown into one of the busiest, thanks to the enterprise of Colin Cole and his nice sense of feminine beauty.

Walking in on him unannounced, we found him at his desk, a dapper man looking younger than his forty-odd years, poring over dozens of photos which would presently get pinned up internationally for frequent reference, to set a legion of men

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to dreaming the same dream. He met our intrusion with a resentful frown. Ignoring it, Hackett produced a small notebook from one pocket and a ball pen of the ninety-eight-cent variety, which he held raised with an air of inquiry, like a poll-taker.

"We're Hackett and Preston, from Headliner Files," he announced flatly, giving his boss second billing. "It's our policy to look in at our more important subscribers now and then. You occupy a preferred place on our list of clients and we would indeed regret a cancellation."

Cole peered at Hackett over a picture of a seal-slick blonde in an informal swim suit—if three triangles of silk could be called a suit. "I've no intention of cancelling."

"Ah, but Mr. Cole," Hackett said blandly. "Frankly, we have heard certain disturbing rumors about this establishment."

"Rumors?"

Cole eyed Hackett with a challenging sort of exasperation. For a moment Hackett was silent, wearing a slight leer. I also kept quiet because I hadn't caught up with Hackett's strategy. I could glimpse parts of his figuring, however.

I recalled now, for example, that Mrs. Derverter Thumbarton Burstone Cole, née Magnolia Dunlop, the same Mrs. Derverter Thumbarton Burstone Cole whom we had seen in Thyra's prognostication parlor, had been dropped from the Blue Book two years ago for marrying below herself without the editors' approval. The chap she had married was this same handsome, natty Colin Cole, formerly a theatrical photographer.

Since then, with the help of his wife's considerable dough, he had launched this glamor-vending establishment.

Beyond this connection, it was hard for me to follow Hackett but I winced to think he was irritating one of Headliner Files' most valued subscribers.

"Just what rumors do you mean, please?" Cole asked, an edge on his voice.

"Well, after all," Hackett said. "Why do so many lassies troop in and out of here long after your regular office hours?" Having sensed activity deeper in the suite, he added, with another leer, "For example, tonight—now."

Indignantly Cole slammed down the pictures on his desk. "In the first place," he said forcefully, speaking of himself in the third person, "Cole is competing with well-known, long-established competitors. Cole must offer something special to draw the choicest kids as new models for the best accounts. That's why the Cole Agency is also a school for models, plus a salon for instruction in make-up and hair-styling, plus a first-class photo studio, plus a skilled advertising consultant. This place swarms with beautiful young belles by night as well as by day simply because I insist on supervising every department personally—and I can't do everything at once."

He added, peering at Hackett, "These rumors are malicious chatter. See for yourself what this really is!"

He swung a hand toward a door lettered: *Studios*. Hackett's cane under one arm, notebook and ball pen still ready, he stepped forward to make the most of the opportunity. I was a very close second.

"As far as that goes," Cole added, on a note of bitterness, "you two have popped up no more unexpectedly than my wife used to. Speaking confidentially, boys, Mrs. Cole is a terrifically jealous woman. But she doesn't try to catch me unawares any more. She's learned to trust me. And if she can do it, brothers, it should be pie for you to do it. But go ahead, look around."

But, about to step into the studio, we paused. The door connecting with the reception room had opened. Two babes had hurried in and had tripped to a stop to stare at us wide-eyed—Joyce and Suzie.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Out for Good

**N**OW I got it. Having recognized the connection with the mystic-minded Mrs. Cole and the Cole Model Agency, Hackett had also seen the strong likelihood that Suzie and Joyce were not unknown to Mr. Colin Cole. Both were certainly photogenic enough. At the moment they were also flabbergasted to see that Hackett had sniffed out their base of operations. His cryptic phone

calls, the first to this agency and the second to Thyra's studio, had brought us together in a mutually unexpected way that upset us all—except Hackett.

Joyce covered herself quickly. "Why, hel-lo-o-o!" To Suzie she added, "It's that adorable Mr. Hackett I was telling you about, Susanna!"

"And I'm that nasty Mr. Preston whom you already know, Suzie," I added. "I mean, we've sort of met before, haven't we, in the shape of a left to the jaw?"

Considerable fast talk followed. The girls crowded on Hackett and me, quickly getting out the butter again and applying it lavishly. Suzie was sorry she'd slugged me but she'd explain all about it the minute I gave her the chance, honey, hmmm?

Joyce thought she may have been a little unreasonable and wanted to help us to see it her way. Hackett and I managed to keep our feet, suggesting that as soon as they were finished with their chores here we might give it a hashing-over at the downstairs bar. This brought us back to Colin Cole, who had listened to the whole thing with raised eyebrows.

"I haven't the foggiest idea what you're chattering about," he put in, "but now that you're here, girls, I can use you. I've got some new kids in there who don't know what to do with their lovely long stems. Get busy and show 'em."

Suzie and Joyce, twiddling their fingers at us, said, "G'-bye-e, see you boys la-ater-r," and hustled into the studio. Cole gestured us after them. This time we let nothing hinder us.

Once inside, we found ourselves less in a wholesale grocer's than inside a Lothario's daydream, with overtones of a mad scientist's nightmare, full of fragments of incongruous scenes, blinding lights and beautiful babes.

The room wasn't quite as huge as a Hollywood sound stage. I counted five cameramen and eight assistants, all working at once. It looked like nice work.

Directly in front of us was an orchid-tinted tub heaped up with a sparkling frosting of scented bubbles which contained but did not entirely hide a very cute brunette. I could turn from this spot only because the next cluster of giant spotlights promised to be no less enchanting.

In the next, in fact, an ad for nylons

was in the making. Incredulously wandering on, we found many more delightful lassies. Last and almost least came a swim suit of panther-black sleekness which looked as if it had been varnished on the dream-child inside it.

It seemed impossible, but the staff had apparently been working at this sort of onerous toil all day, and by now they looked bushed. For my part, if I had had any doubts about it before, I was absolutely certain now that I had long ago blundered into the wrong racket.

To add to all this visual lushness, both Joyce and Suzie came hurrying from the adjoining dressing rooms, both in two-piece playsuits, Suzie's being golden-yellow rompers that made her look twelve years old and me feel twenty again. Joyce's were with a tattered Sherwood Forest effect.

As that pretty pair scurried on, Hackett seemed to lose all interest in these fascinating surroundings and turn grim. Next, to my dismay, he was leaving.

"Wait, Thack," I protested. "Please, I don't want to wake up yet." But he kept going, pausing in Cole's office just long enough to remark, with a wry smile, "If Mrs. Cole trusts you, I don't see why we shouldn't." He left me to mumble a few amenities to the fortunate Mr. Cole while he strode on to the elevators.

Once in the street again and hustling north on Lexington, I observed, "I never realized such a paradise existed right in the middle of workaday Manhattan."

"Those two babes may not be too angelic, Pres," Hackett said. "In fact, they may be very mean little girls."

"You mean because they apparently make a few extra bucks by reading the stars for a few bored dowagers? Well, all we need to do about that is quit giving them information. For our regular subscription price, anyway."

Hackett didn't argue. I remained in a glowing mood as we strode on, making mental notes to check on the Cole Agency often.

Lights shining behind the venetian blinds of Headliner Files' windows meant that Polly was still on duty. Our white door seemed to be lost in a thick dark shadow. Striding closer, I swallowed a groan as I saw the mass of shadow tak-

ing on the shape of Lieutenant-Detective Blackley.

HE HAD been standing there, knocking and apparently getting no answer. As we stopped, he peered over one hamlike shoulder at us.

"Good evening, Mr. Preston," he said, sounding less suave than usual. "I have come with new information for you—information which I'm sure will inspire you to cooperate with me more fully."

"Lieutenant," I said, sore for the first time, "I've already cooperated with you as fully as possible, considering the fact that we have nothing whatever to do with the case."

Blackley frowned, clearing his throat. "I know a great deal more about that woman than you imagine, Mr. Preston. In fact, my information on her has taken a surprising, even blood-chilling turn. Jenny Amyx was still living in Dallas, her home town, and was still quite young when she married a man named John Moor. Does the name of Moor strike any sparks in your memory, Mr. Preston?"

Although it did, faintly, I answered, to be on the safe side, "Never heard of him." At the same time I pointedly did not invite Blackley in to continue the discussion. I had already had much too tough a day to want to cope with this crime-busting mastodon now.

"Odd," Blackley said, standing immovably against our door. "John Moor was quite a notorious figure for a short time some eighteen years ago. His notoriety grew out of the discovery that he was living a double life of a truly terrible sort. As Jenny Amyx's husband, he was a quiet homebody. But at the same time, unknown to her, he was using assumed names to marry a succession of overly trusting women. He had no need to divorce these other wives because he made a practice of murdering them one by one and burying them in the cellar of a rose-colored cottage, rented for that purpose, where he had taken them all on their bloody honeymoons—seven in all, it is believed."

Impatiently I pointed out again, "Thoroughly deplorable, Lieutenant—but still no affair of Headliner Files."

Blackley eyed me and went on with smooth relentlessness: "John Moor was never brought to trial for his multiple murders. He fled before he could be arrested and has remained unaccounted for ever since. He is generally believed to be dead. Jenny Amyx, however, womanlike, could never bring herself to believe her gentle John was really guilty of those heinous crimes.

"She fondly clung to the hope that she would some day find him, help him to prove his innocence and resume her happy married life with him. Despite all friendly counsel she continued to search for this monster whom she believed to be a paragon—with the result, as we see now, Mr. Preston, that she somehow got herself very nearly murdered. Need I remind you?"

Thoroughly nettled, I answered, "Then, Lieutenant, you have it! After all these years, Jenny suddenly spotted John Moor's picture printed in a magazine under another assumed name—this time Van Shepard. His business address being given as New York City in the text, she rushed here for a blissful reunion with him. But he wasn't quite so eager. He didn't want this dame exposing his criminal past, so he bashed her head in. There's your whole case. Why are you worrying us about it, when all you need to do is nail this so-called Van Shepard for it?"

"In view of Mr. Shepard's many marriages of record, which suggests that there may be more of them *not* of record, he does appear to be the Bluebeard type," Blackley said. "Certainly he would be willing to pay money to keep his real identity under cover."

"Wait a minute," I said, bristling. "Are you accusing us of a fancy piece of blackmail? That's silly. Jenny Amyx had heard of us, and had made a note of our address, probably with the idea of checking Van Shepard's background before confronting him, so as to make sure he was really her gentle John. But she wouldn't have learned anything from us, and we would have no basis for blackmailing anybody concerned, because, as Hackett told you, we had no information on Shepard at all."

"So you said," Blackley nodded. "However, criminally inclined persons are not



famous for their veracity." This nasty crack at Hackett could include me, of course. "Would you mind checking, Mr. Preston? I would be grateful to see you look into your files again for a folder on Shepard, this time in my presence."

Blistering hot under the collar now, I snapped back, "Certainly! Go right in. We'll settle this right—"

Hackett had already turned the knob. There was no need to use a key; the door had been left unlocked. He had pushed the door wide open for our massive caller. Blackley stood still, startled, and I stared past him, suddenly chilled, as Hackett blurted out:

"Polly!"

I brushed past Blackley and hustled in after Hackett, with the lieutenant looming along at my heels. Polly lay against the wall beside the sofa—still, but groaning a little. Her eyes were closed and her face showed signs of blows which had bruised her skin. She had been out a long time.

**I** KEPT shaking Polly gently as Blackley stood massively over us and Hackett listened all around, holding his cane warily. In contrast to the refined frenzy prevailing here by day, the place was as

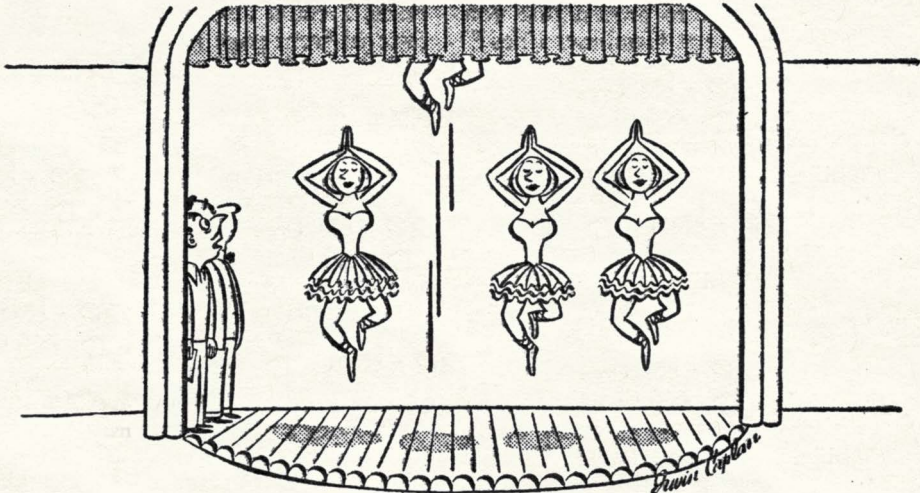
silent as a tomb now. No phones were clamoring, no file drawers were rumbling in and out. All our pretty little chicks had hurried off to their dates long ago.

Polly had been left here alone. Whoever had dropped in briefly to slug her down hadn't stayed; we had found her alone again. Hackett nodded tensely, his sharp ears having satisfied him that the visitor was no longer prowling the place.

I hastened to bring cold water from the fountain. Polly's eyelids were fluttering; now she was staring at nothing. Hackett looked grimmer than I'd ever seen him and I felt my stomach turning. We both liked Polly. She knew we were there, trying to help her, and she wanted to tell us something. I urged her: "Can you talk, kid? Tell us what happened?"

After a moment she managed to mumble, "Noise in here . . . came in to see . . . got hit. That's all. Don't know who . . . but look out. . . . Playing for keeps."

She sagged again. Hackett gathered her gently into his arms and lifted her to the sofa. Turning, I found that Blackley, in his quiet way, had been using one of our phones. He eyed me narrowly as he put it down and said, "I have called an ambulance, Mr. Preston. She will need surgical



"We'd better tell Pavloma to take it a little easier with her Wheaties!"

**M**ANY "top-flight" performers eat Wheaties. Lou Boudreau—"Athlete of the Year"—has enjoyed these 100% whole wheat flakes over ten years! Famous

training dish—Wheaties, milk and fruit. Nourishing. Second-helping good, too! Had your Wheaties today? Wheaties—"Breakfast of Champions!"

attention. Miss Digby is a most loyal employee of this office, is she not? That is, she is loyal to Miss Brown personally?"

I strode toward him. "She is, yes. But just what are you driving at?"

"I believe this was another attempt at murder, Mr. Preston. I believe it was made in a desperate attempt to silence Miss Digby. I believe that you and Hackett found it necessary because she was about to report your blackmail operations to Miss Brown."

The flatly stated accusation staggered me. Before I could mouth an answer, Blackley pressed it deeper.

"Miss Digby has suffered the same barbaric treatment as Miss Amyx. This means you cannot conceal your connections with Miss Amyx any longer. Where is she, Mr. Preston?"

"Where is she?" I echoed blankly. "In the hospital, of course, where you sent her."

Blackley shook his head. "No, Mr. Preston. She is no longer in the hospital. She escaped several hours ago."

"Escaped?"

"Evidently she was playing possum until she found a chance to slip out unseen. The real reason I came to your door a moment ago, Mr. Preston, was in search of her. You're eager to protest that you haven't seen her here at Headliner Files?"

I felt a tug at my sleeve, but in my anger ignored it. "We haven't seen her here!" I snapped. "You won't find us harboring her!"

"No, Mr. Preston?" Blackley said with deadly quietness. "No?"

Feeling that warning tug at my sleeve again, I turned to find Hackett. Leaving Polly lying still on the sofa, he had eased up to us, his baby-blue eyes sharp with glints. Wordlessly he turned his head and pointed with his pencil-thin cane. Looking in that direction, I saw, on the floor between two rows of file cabinets, under an open drawer, the thing which Blackley had discovered moments ago.

The woman wore a man's gray tweed topcoat over her short white hospital gown. She had too-large rubbers on her feet, but no shoes. The open drawer under which she lay, I noticed as I went closer, bore the index tag *Sa-Sk*. Whatever she had been beaten with this time—

evidently the same weapon that had cut up Polly's face—it was not immediately in sight, but it had been used effectively enough.

Jenny Amyx really had turned up at Headliners Files after all. This time she was no halfway job. This time she was all the way dead.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Too Many Dames

WHEN six a.m. staggered up, cold and clammy in the dawn, I was one of the gloomiest guys in New York. Lieutenant Blackley was another. Seated massively in a creaking desk chair in the main file section of Headliner Files, he contemplated me with grim reproach, having spent all these dark hours getting nowhere.

He had promptly called in the homicide squad and several other dicks from the precinct station who were still spooking around the place. Polly had been rushed over to the hospital to be given all the help she would need, and Jenny Amyx' body had been taken care of by the police.

Besides my concern for Polly and my anger over Blackley's immovable suspicions, I could also worry about the sensational front-page news we would make, which would do Headliner Files no good. Other reasons for my misery were the fact that I had missed dinner, a night's sleep and our date with Joyce and Suzie.

"Lieutenant," I moaned, "The only thing I can tell you about this mess is that I don't know a thing about it. You might ask me questions for another week and I'd keep right on giving you that same answer because it's the only one I have. Why don't you grill Hackett instead? Since you really need help, he's the lad to get it from."

Blackley's nostrils twitched at the mere mention of that ex-shamus. "Lacking a license as he does, Mr. Hackett will keep himself dissociated from this investigation—unless he wishes to become a guest of the State at our Ossining resort. Try again, Mr. Preston."

Hackett smiled pungently at this, and I shrugged. "The way this thing figures to me, then, is this. Our dizzy Jenny

really did connect with her long-lost, homicidal husband soon after she hit New York. He greeted her by slugging her down, then lammed. Apparently she's the type who loves rough treatment, and the beating she got made her all the more batty about him.

"Being eager to fly back into his masterful arms at the soonest possible moment — without letting the snoopy old police get in the way—she sneaked out of the hospital in another patient's topcoat and rubbers. Naturally, she couldn't go very far dressed like that. Possibly she phoned her husband to come pick her up, meanwhile keeping out of sight, maybe in a parked car. The hospital is only three blocks from here—this was simply a handy place for her to turn up dead."

Blackley shook his head, unconvinced. "For pity's sake, Lieutenant," I moaned, "why do you keep bearing down on us like this? All you have to do to wrap up this case is find this Van Shepard. If we had any information on him, which we haven't because he's not famous enough, it would be in that file drawer labeled *Sh*. That's why Jenny showed up here. Since you can't locate the guy, neither could she—so she was looking for some helpful information from us about where she might connect with him again. Please, drop all your fantastic theories about us, clamp the bracelets on Shepard where they belong, and let us get some much-needed rest.

"A question, Mr. Preston," Blackley said heavily. "How could Shepard have known Jennie Amyx was to be found here tonight?" He paused for an answer which I couldn't give him. "You see how I look at it? You and Mr. Hackett were here. This woman came in and insisted so strongly on obtaining certain information from you that you found it necessary to restrain her forcibly. That done, you had also to silence Miss Digby. This is, Mr. Preston, a far better explanation for the situation than you have advanced."

I stared at him, too exhausted even to groan. All my protests had made no impression on him. He intended to stand upon his suspicions as immovably as Gibraltar. Feeling immensely convinced by himself, he heaved himself to a standing position, casting a fishy eye on me.

Feeling that he was about to drop Hackett and me into the clink, I rose, with a bitter twist of my mouth said; "Go ahead, Lieutenant, put us through the wringer. You may not get a conviction but I can promise you there's something else you definitely will get—a very cold stare from Clarabelle Brown when she gets back and sees how you've roughed up her firm."

Blackley winced. It had really scored. I listened in vast relief as he answered, "Perhaps I am wasting time here. It will be easier, as you yourself have suggested, Mr. Preston, to find reliable information elsewhere. Specifically—Shepard. We expect to take him into custody tonight. My men, in fact, are watching for him to turn up at this very moment."

Obviously the lieutenant expected this to be tougher on us than on Shepard himself.

"Once we have him in our hands," Blackley went on in his ominously unctuous tone, "and once we have persuaded him to confide in us, shall we say, we shall see every facet of this homicide in a much clearer light—including any possible conspiracy to defeat justice, and blackmail as well. You shall hear from me again very soon, Mr. Preston, and decisively, I assure you. Later, if necessary, I will explain to Miss Brown how advisable it is to avoid employing men of low moral character."

He turned and steamed majestically away. His men seemed surprised that Hackett and I weren't going along in chains, but they hustled after him like a fleet of tugs chugging around an ocean liner.

Well, at least Blackley was sweet on Clarabelle and willing to leave us at large temporarily. On the one hand he felt very sure of us; on the other hand he knew he must proceed carefully before clamping any formal charges on us; but in either case our hours were numbered.

The office became quiet again and numb exhaustion settled even more heavily upon me.

"It'll be plenty tough on us, Pres, if Shepard happens to backfire in Blackley's face," Hackett said thoughtfully. "That'll leave us as his Number One fall guys. He'll descend on us like a ton of Black-

leys, heaven help us—unless we can do a better job of explaining ourselves than we've done so far."

"But," I moaned, "we can't explain something we know nothing about—so Blackley had better hustle up and fry me while I'm still too weak to resist. Meanwhile, I solemnly vow to commit murder on the first guy who wakes me up."

I groped over to the sofa and stretched out in blissful relaxation. I was sinking rapidly when, through a dim fog, I sensed Hackett hurrying out.

**N**EXT thing I was aware of, Hackett was hustling back in with what seemed to be a small suitcase. A moment later I somehow got the impression that he was picking my pocket. Presently a scratchy sound penetrated to me. Muttering blasphemy at this racket, I pried one eyelid up and saw Hackett bending over a desk on which sat a recording apparatus. He was playing back the spool he had just stolen from me.

Glancing up, Hackett explained, "Borrowed it from a friend of mine—radio engineer."

I didn't care. The first sound to come out of the contraption was the characteristic rapid clicking of a telephone dial. Voices followed, one of them Mrs. Cole's. The twang of Marthella Beauveau joined in. These two loquacious gossips really went at it. In a few minutes of chatter they touched on an amazing variety of topics, including the baritone voice at the Met last night. . . . "*Simply thrilling!*"; Mrs. Beauveau's health. . . . "*Disgustingly good, my dear!*"; and Mrs. Cole's husband. . . . "*Fearfully busy, but I don't worry about it at all because I know how devoted he is to me, Marthella.*" None of this monkey talk seemed worth losing sleep over.

Hackett wasn't fascinated either. He jumped the machine to farther parts of the wire, picked up more of the same and finally, in response to my moans of protest, shut it off.

Next I heard him saying, "So!" Prying one eye open again, I saw him peering into someone's folder. He pushed it back into a file drawer, then became busy with the phone book. After dialing a number that didn't answer, he spun off a second

that did—in a familiar, husky voice.

"Miss Hedges," he said with grim crispness, "this is that adorable Mr. Hackett calling. I wasn't able just now to get an answer from the studio of your friend who calls herself Thyra. I wanted to warn her that Preston's on the warpath. He thinks our information has been misused for criminal purposes. She'd better get set to account for herself pronto." As the receiver squealed at him he insisted, "The quicker the better. He's heading for her studio right now."

As Hackett disconnected, I sat up to blink at him expectantly. Worn out as I was, Thyra's studio was one place where I was not unwilling to go. Hackett, however, having flashed his fictitious warning, seemed less eager to do something about it than I was.

Not stirring, he seemed to be waiting for something. Whatever it was, he didn't move until I was dozing off again. Then arousing myself, I became groggily aware that he was easing out the door.

Letting Hackett prow off to snoop on his own might easily become disastrous. Besides, I sensed his objective now was the luscious Thyra. Instantly, for *Headliner Files'* sake, I shook myself awake and started out after him.

I stumbled at his heels into a taxi. Madison Avenue was a lonesome lane as we cruised northward, then across to Thyra's door. Signalling the cab driver to wait, Hackett sized up the joint and caught a glimmer of light at one of the windows, which indicated that my favorite oracle was up and about. Still close at Hackett's worn-down heels, I went after him into that dark-walled room where I had first glimpsed her.

We stood watching the lustrous black draperies of the archway—my pulse stepping up its tempo, Hackett with a twisted shadow of a smile on his lips.

A soft step sounded behind the curtain. My breath stopped for a moment as white hands appeared, gracefully parting them. Then Thyra herself materialized—a woman of electrical presence, a beautiful being from another world.

As before, she wore a cloudy black toga. Her turban and sandals were the same blood-scarlet. Through the veil half-hiding her bronze face, her mouth was

dimly visible, full and dark red. The intensity of her eyes held me. Hackett, however, did not share the reverence I felt for this exotic creature's dark beauty.

"Look, sister," he said with shocking bluntness, his baby-blue eyes full of glints. "The admirable Mr. Hackett can turn into a worse heel than Preston when the circumstances call for it. For example, I'm likely to get a little burned-up and high-handed when I see somebody getting away with murder."

Thyra stiffened. Behind her veil her alluring mouth grew a little tighter. But she kept her silence and didn't flinch as Hackett took a gliding step toward her.

"I have news for you, baby, and all of it is bad," he went on with a slight leer. "This phony tea-leaf temple of yours is closing up shop, effective right now. That's because I'm about to let your chief customer in on the reason it was set up in the first place."

The other-worldly Thyra did not deign to answer this. Her eyes smoldered at Hackett but obviously she considered him beneath comment. She began to turn scornfully away.

Hackett wasn't letting any supernatural princesses walk out on him. With a quick step he placed himself between Thyra and the black curtains, cutting off her retreat. Also stopping her short, he leveled his slender cane and poised its point gently against her.

"Just a second," Hackett said, smiling. "Would you tell me your real name?"

Thyra's reaction, although thoroughly feminine, was a bit unwise. First she swiftly reached out and gave Hackett's face a whacking slap, which didn't budge him. At the same time she struck his cane aside, which was mildly the equivalent of making a pass at a hornet's nest.

Grim-eyed, Hackett whirled his little cane so swiftly that it became a blur and gave off a deep-sounding hum. Several times I had seen Hackett demonstrate what a truly terrifying weapon that cane could be.

But now he flicked it out. I was relieved to see that expert gentleness. Not touching Thyra at all, the tip of the cane whizzed past her face just under her nose and like magic whisked away her black veil.

Her frightened face bared, she retreated—and Hackett moved after her. I felt somehow I should recognize this woman, but the dark bronze of her skin baffled me. Giving me no time for a second look, Hackett's cane went *swish-flick* and several startling things happened to Thyra simultaneously.

Her red turban went flying. Her dark hair was knocked askew on her head and glistening russet waves appeared beneath it.

With an accuracy like a surgeon with a knife, Hackett also nipped through Thyra's toga so deftly as to sever one of her shoulder straps.

Thyra yelped, attempted to hug herself together and wrenched away. Apparently

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this was exactly what Hackett wanted. Like a rapier, one thrust of his cane ripped a wide hole through the folds of her toga. It exposed Thyra's back—and her back was not bronze, but white. Moreover, the less exotic whiteness was marred by a purplish stain.

"Ink," Hackett said, indicating it with a gleeful grin. "From my ball pen. I dabbed it there while we were in the photo studio."

In a furiously husky voice, "Thyra" lashed out at Hackett with, "Oh, I could kill you!"

Staring into that unearthly bronze face, with its broadly painted maroon mouth, I still couldn't recognize it as Joyce Hedges'. Beauteous babe though Joyce was without the trick make-up, I couldn't help feeling that Hackett, in exposing her, had destroyed a being of even greater loveliness. I would have to mull over my disappointment later, however. Right now, having earned himself the fiery resentment of Joyce Hedges, Hackett was quickly heading out.

**D**IZZY, I hustled after him into our waiting taxi. He gave the driver a familiar address, and I saw, glancing back as we rolled off, Joyce "Thyra" Hedges steaming after us. No other taxi was cruising about at the moment, so in this emergency she would need to call upon her broomstick.

We strode into the classy apartment building to which I had trailed Suzie yesterday evening. Hackett informed the doorman, "Mrs. Cole is expecting me." Mrs. Cole actually was, for a buzz upstairs verified this. Evidently Hackett had gotten in one or more extra phone calls from the office during my fitful slumbers on the sofa.

By now I felt almost ready to expect anything at all—but when the elevator had hoisted us to the top floor where Hackett rang the bell at a green-and-gold door, I wasn't quite prepared to find an old pal of mine functioning as the Coles' maid.

It was Suzie. Suzie, the tasty little bantam, without her mink now, but wearing, instead, a black uniform with white apron and a doily on her pretty head. That sizzling little handful of a Suzie, startled to find us there, was trying hard to pre-

tend she had never seen us two before.

With a panicky fright in her eyes, Suzie hustled into the adjoining dining room to announce us. Not standing on ceremony this morning, Hackett strode straight at Suzie's trim little heels, pausing for only half a second in the hallway, at the table where the phone sat. Mr. and Mrs. Cole, at opposite ends of a long table formally set with crystal and family silver, looked up from their iced grapefruit to find their breakfast invaded by the cynical young man with the cane.

"So sorry, Mr. Cole," Hackett said, very politely. "We wouldn't dream of intruding on you like this if it weren't most urgent. Tell me, is it true, as our records have it, that you were born in San Francisco in 1904?"

Eyebrows lifted, Cole answered, "It's true, yes, but how can that question be so urgent? What of it, anyhow?"

What of it indeed? Hackett wasn't saying just yet. Instead he beamed upon the model agent's elderly wife.

"Now Mrs. Cole, if you don't mind. We're aware how deeply interested you are in mysticism. What subject do you ask about most often of the soothsayers you patronize? Perhaps the fact that your handsome young husband is surrounded most of the time by bevyies of the most beautiful girls in all New York?"

Mrs. Cole answered, "I must confess I was once quite worried by that situation, but I have been assured by those in whose word I place great reliance—"

"That he's Old Faithful himself," Hackett filled in. "In fact, the mystical Thyra never lost a chance to strum away on that theme, did she, Mrs. Cole? So what would your reaction be if you should learn that this same Thyra is a phony whose job has been to get you to swallow all that pap?"

Mrs. Cole stiffened as if she's been kicked under the table. She glared at her husband. Colin Cole's handsome face turned the greenish yellow of his grapefruit. It was evident that whatever this woman might do should she lose her trust in her husband, it made him seasick just to conjecture about it. At the very least, she would pull her bankbook from under him, which would cause his expanding agency to collapse with a bang.

"But of course—" Mrs. Cole was forcing a smile—"of course, I just couldn't believe that Thyra is anything but the most gifted—"

At that moment a bell started to ring like crazy. Fists pounded on the outside of the entrance. Startled, Suzie hustled into the vestibule. Opening the door, she squeaked in consternation. The hoarse voice of Joyce Hedges mixed with Suzie's babbling. Next Joyce came breathlessly into the dining room, some of the bronze makeup smeared off her cheeks now. She narrowed her eyes hatefully at Hackett, tossed her head at the gaping Mrs. Cole and turned earnestly to the man with the pale green face.

"The jig's up, darling. Thanks to this rat named Hackett, our whole plan's wrecked. It's all over with this fat matron you're married to. Well, it's okay with me, darling. Now you can ditch the old hen and all her dough. Now you and I can go away together."

Cole turned three shades whiter. It was evident that he had no desire to ditch his wife's dough. The mere suggestion sickened his soul. As if this wasn't already bad enough, Suzie chose this moment to move in, eyes spitefully narrowed, and yank Joyce's arm.

"Whattaya mean, he can go away with you? He's been putting over this slick one for *me*. At least—" she turned her pretty, poisonous eyes on the stricken Colin Cole and added—"at least that's the line this skunk has been feeding me all along."

During a second of terrible silence Mrs. Cole sobbed, "Colin—Colin, you've deceived me shamefully. How could you!"

What this Cananova could really do hadn't yet dawned on her fully. The guilty story could be read on the poor guy's sick face.

The horrible realization hit them all at the same moment. They cut loose at him with the cutting whips of their voices, crowding him into a corner. They were rapidly working up to scratching the wretched devil's face when a sharp *whish* of Hackett's cane startled them into silence.

"Ladies, please," Hackett said while they stared at him. "Instead of berating this vulture you should be congratulating

yourselves—and thanking Headliner Files for opening your eyes to him. You really don't know how lucky you are. Although he's been reasonably well behaved in recent years, he might have reverted to his old method with any one of you at any time. All he needs is the desire to be rid of one of you—and a convenient cellar to bury you in."

COLE stood there, cornered by the three women, waxy-faced as death. We all stared at him as I blurted at Hackett. "Thack—an accusation like that! I hope you're halfway sure of what you're saying!"

Hackett continued, eyeing Cole as he swung his little cane, "We'll get surer as we go along. The stuff we have on this maniac in our files is square enough for his recent years but pretty vague for the period preceding John Moor's disappearance. The tip-off is the fake birthday he picked for himself as a cover-up—1904, San Francisco. It's a favorite period to get born for phonies, because the authorities have to take it on faith. You see, all the public records of San Francisco were destroyed in the great fire of 1906."

I stammered, "But that's a long way from proving—"

"The rest of it is closer," Hackett put in smoothly. "Blackley missed asking himself a key question. That is, why was Van Shepard so careless as to leave a picture of himself in his victim's purse, of all things, and our *Sh* drawer pulled out so significantly too? Why should he go to the extreme of committing murder to protect his secret and at the same time leave himself so pointedly branded with guilt? The answer is, he didn't. It doesn't make sense. So the picture and the drawn-out drawer were both plants."

Staring at him, I asked, "What good did they do—assuming the strong chance that Shepard can clear himself?"

"Certainly Shepard can clear himself," Hackett said emphatically. "The real killer picked his picture in haste, and probably doesn't even know the guy. It didn't matter, actually, who was framed so long as he could come out of it with a clean nose. The killer wanted his frame to fail—didn't you, Cole?"

Cole stood transfixed.

"That, you see," Hackett added, "will show Jenny was mistaken in thinking she had Moor tagged. So Moor, if not dead, was presumably still safe from her. So her death must have resulted from something else not connected with Moor at all. So then he could go on happily being head man of that modernized harem which he calls the Cole Model Agency."

Hackett swished his cane sharply through the air at Colin Cole.

"Proof will pile up," Hackett insisted. "Let Blackley dig for it. All he needs to do is show that a photo of Cole appears in the current issue of a magazine to which Jenny Armx subscribes—and that'll be enough to tie him into it plenty."

Mrs. Cole gasped. "Why! Colin's picture was in this week's *Jinx*."

"And that of Van Shepard, who sells beauty parlor equipment, wouldn't come near Jenny, a dress designer, but would show up near Cole in some trade paper or other, because he has a beautification department in his agency." Hackett smiled a thin smile. "How much proof do we need, anyhow, Mr. Moor?"

Cole—or Moor—thrust at the women closing him in. He dodged to an elaborate carved buffet, yanked a drawer open and twisted back with a revolver in his fist.

"Now!" he said briskly. "Once before I wiped out my identity and began all over again with a better one. I can do it again just as successfully. But I shouldn't like to leave you all back here to do too much talking about me."

Hackett said easily, watching him, "There are five of us here. It'll be quite a messy little massacre."

"Won't it!" Cole said enthusiastically. "I've murdered quite a few women before now, so these three won't be any novelty, but you two will enjoy the distinction of being my first male victims."

"How nice." Hackett added acridly, "By the way, after you've murdered us all, don't forget to remove the spool of wire from the recorder. I mean the machine you have here, hooked up to the phone—the one installed secretly, so that Suzie could sneak a copy of your wife's telephone chatter over to Thyra. It was such intimate details that made Thyra so convincing, wasn't it, Mrs. Cole?"

"When I came in just now, passing the phone there on that table, I started the machine running automatically by lifting the receiver. That mike has picked up a complete record of all the talking we've done here. That spool of wire wouldn't do you any good, Cole, if the police got hold of it, so be sure to destroy it too."

Cole scowled at Hackett. He jerked his gun up—and that motion signaled the end for Mr. Colin Cole, otherwise known as John Moor.

Hackett went swiftly into action with his cane. Lifting it to a horizontal position just over his forehead, he whirled it through the preliminary tactic called the moulinet.

Instantly I heard a series of hissing swishes and sharp slaps ending in explosive impacts. The girls screamed softly. One thump meant Cole's gun had hit the floor and a heavier thump meant Cole himself followed it, with two broken wrists.

Joyce Hedges, staring incredulously at Hackett, managed to find her voice. It sounded huskier than ever as she forced out her words. "All I can say, brother, is he had it coming, and thanks!"

"Gee whiz!" Suzie whispered. "That goes for me too."

"As for me, Thack," I added, "it goes double. I rather think Blackley can stop suspecting us now."

Mrs. Cole did not comment at all, having crumpled to the floor in a dead faint.

I went to the phone and dialed the good lieutenant.

"Lieutenant Blackley," I began.

He cut in, "Ah, Mr. Preston. I was thinking of you just now. It's my intention to drop over to interview you and your ill-chosen associate immediately. We have just learned, unfortunately for you both, that Mr. Shepard has an unbeatable alibi for the murder of Jenny Amyx. That, of course, leave me no choice but to—"

"Not quite, Lieutenant." I said, grinning dizzily. "Better by-pass Headliner Files and drop in at the apartment of Colin Cole. We have a surprise for you."

Disconnecting, I stood there reflecting that, sadly dream-like, among all the lovely girls we had encountered in the case, the one I had fallen the hardest for was the doll that didn't exist.

THE END



# SPOTLIGHT ON SLAUGHTER

• By PAUL W. FAIRMAN •



"Come out with your  
hands in the air."

• •

*Police lines and tommy guns  
couldn't stop newsman Rafferty  
from getting his story  
on a cornered killer.*

**T**HE City Hall press room was deserted except for Rafferty of the *Evening Express*. When the phone rang, he picked it up without taking his long legs off the battered desk and said: "He's not here."

The voice at the other end said, "Cut it out—this is Coyle. Look—they've got Tommy Flagg buttoned up."

"Not anywhere near the City Hall though," Rafferty returned a trifle bitterly.

"In the lower block on George Street. In among those warehouses. The cops have got a tight cordon around the whole area."

Rafferty had been in the dog house for two weeks for having fallen ill with liquor. He was now on the sullen side. "Nice of you to keep me posted, seeing as how I can't get out to buy myself a paper."

"Think you can get through those cops and snag an interview?"

"With Tommy Flagg? Not today or any day."

"With his parents. They live in a tenement right there on George Street. An interview with them while the cops are trying to gun down their son should sell a few copies."

"Why give it to me?" Rafferty was still sullen.

Coyle's voice came sharper, "Not because you rate it, but you lived on that street when you were a kid. You could know some angles. In short, you might get through where a smarter man would be stopped."

"I couldn't get a photographer in," Rafferty hedged.

"We'll skip pix or maybe find something in the morgue. You just get in and get the interview and it'll mean a by-line on page one."

Rafferty forgot his grouch. "I'm practically there," he said, and slammed up the receiver.

A CAB dropped Rafferty three blocks from George Street. There he paid off and hit the sidewalk. He became one with a crowd that moved north: a crowd that sensed the kill and headed unerringly toward it. Soon the crowd thickened, became densely packed against a blue barrier.

Rafferty wormed forward, whistling softly through his teeth. George Street was two blocks in length. It began at Cordell and ran to the railroad tracks. There, a stationary red light marked its end.

The first block was residential. Dirty red brick walkups lined both sides. Garbage and evil smells, rats and humans merged into a product of modern times—the slums. At the railroad end were the

warehouses and the eternal smoke-pall that blurred the sky and befouled the air.

Rafferty shouldered forward, his mind working:

Last night, Tommy Flagg, convicted murderer, whose escape from the death house at the state penitentiary caused a sensation, was cornered by police among the warehouses on lower George Street.

Two burly policemen blocked Rafferty's way. "Why don't you people go home? There's nothing to see here. Go on! Beat it!"

Rafferty glanced at his wristwatch. It was late fall and the darkness was already complete at six-fifteen. Rafferty slid between two outstretched arms.

"*Evening Express*. Gorman here?"

One of the cops grunted. "Hello, Rafferty."

The reporter looked closer. It was Haley from downtown traffic, drawn into emergency service. Haley swore softly. "Damn these blessed taxpayers! Gorman's up ahead."

Rafferty headed toward a group of uniforms inside the cordon.

With swift efficiency, the police went into action. They blocked off the section and allowed no one to enter the siege-area surrounding the George Street warehouses where the killer was at bay. Hampered by crowds of curiosity-seekers, they worked with grim precision. Chief of Police John Gorman took personal charge.

Gorman was a big man with a red face and several feet of gold braid. He said, "No one inside, Rafferty. Too dangerous. Flagg's armed and he's shooting at anything that moves."

"What about the people in those flats on the upper block? Did you get them out?"

"No. We're just trying to keep them in. Flagg's trapped on the lower block. We used a loud speaker and told them to stay inside."

*Tat-tat-rat-tat-tat.*

An inner ring of hard-eyed police surrounded the warehouse area proper. They carried machine guns and tear gas bombs and had orders to shoot to kill. High-powered searchlights, brought up on trucks, licked warehouse walls with tongues of blazing light. Machine guns chattered at in-

tervals as the law moved relentlessly in on the killer. And, somewhere within the tightening circle, that killer crouched, snarling, deadly, alone.

The coal-chute door in the wall of 221 had never been locked. It still swung loose. Rafferty idled close. He'd been pretty fast as a kid with bricks flying around his head. He was slower now, but he made it.

Inside, the musty smells had not changed. A rat skittered in the darkness and started a landslide of mine-run. Rafferty groped his way to the basement door. The snap lock was still on it. He went through it and skirted a blank wall on sure feet, found the areaway he wanted, and achieved the alley with only minor bruises on one shin-bone.

Five minutes later he was in the dim hallway of 256. Scrawled under a tired-looking tin mailbox was the name William Flagg. No signal button. He climbed squeaking stairs, merged into shadows and out until he stopped in front of a door on the fourth floor. The name was repeated on the panel—*William Flagg*—in an illiterate scratching on the dirty wood.

A dramatic facet of the case was revealed when your *Evening Express* reporter discovered that the youthful killer's parents still reside in a flat on George Street where they have lived for years. Risking possible injury or death from flying bullets, your reporter slipped through the police line to bring readers of the *Evening Express* this startling interview with the grief-stunned couple.

Rafferty knocked on the door.

He knocked three times before a sliver of light appeared along the jamb. The

crack widened to reveal a thick, brutal torso, a scowling face, a week's growth of black stubble around a mouthful of rotten teeth.

"What-da-ya-want?"

"Name's Rafferty—from the *Evening Express*." He eased the door inward with his foot. "I dropped up to see if you might want to make a sawbuck."

Dull eyes stared suspiciously while Rafferty came into the interior. The place smelled like a still. The walls were of pale, sickly green. A single, glaring light bulb hung from the middle of the ceiling. A dirt-encrusted sink stood in one corner. Battered furniture cluttered the rest of the available space.

In the center of the room stood a rickety table. Three gin bottles were on it. A woman sat beside it:

"What does 'e want, Bill? What does the guy want?"

The woman's hair looked like the strands of a dirty mop. She was slobbery fat. Her thick arms, her neck, her face, were fish-belly white and her eyes bleary under black mascara eyebrows.

"I dunno, Sophie. He says somethin' about some dough."

William and Sophie Flagg are two respectable, middle-aged Americans, caught in a maelstrom of disaster. They greeted your reporter with grave courtesy when he visited in their tiny flat on George Street.

"Tell 'im to getinell out o' here, Bill. We don't want to see no one."

Rafferty was already inside. "It's easy money, lady; all you have to do is—"

*Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat.*

The light cord began swinging in a short arc. Sophie Flagg's mouth twisted.

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"Tommy guns! The low-down dogs! They're tryin' to mow the kid down. Forty-fifty of 'em! The cowardly rats!"

Rafferty tossed a ten-dollar bill on the table beside the liquor bottles. The man's eyes remained dull. The woman's face lighted greedily for a moment, then hardened.

The couple met an offer of financial help with a firm, dignified refusal. "We are poor," Mrs. Flagg said, "but we do not accept charity."

"What's the ten for?"

"Practically nothing. The *Express* wants me to ask you a few questions, that's all. About Tommy. We want to get, first hand, the reactions of a mother and father under these unique circumstances."

The man stared dully. The woman said, "Cut out the double talk."

"Okay—how does it feel to know the cops are trying to kill your son down the street while you sit here slopping up gin?" Rafferty's sneer was brutal.

Sophie Flagg screamed. "Throw 'im out, Bill! He can't come in here insultin' honest people! Toss 'im on out!"

The man came forward, scowling.

Rafferty held up a hand. "We want to know something about Tommy's youth. You—Mr. Flagg. Did Tommy make a sincere effort to follow in your footsteps? Did he strive to be an honest and upright citizen like his father?"

Flagg came to an uncertain halt. He wagged his head. "Yeah, yeah. That's it. But they bum-rapped 'im. He tried hard but the cops—they was always on 'is neck."

William Flagg described in heart-rending detail his son's formative years. He told in simple and sincere words, the problems of raising a child in the city jungles. His efforts to mix discipline with comradeship; the endless endeavor to teach the lad right from wrong.

Sophie Flagg was mistily eyeing the gin bottle. Her fat lips bobbed as she said, "He went bad at fifteen. That's when 'e got 'is first job. Bring some dough home to 'is family? Help out 'is poor ma and pa? Like hell! Out all the time with skirts and bum friends while 'is ma tried to keep a home goin'."

"That's right," William Flagg said. "He was a tough little squirt from the start. Never anytime brought a buck home."

The woman glared at her husband. "What right you got to set up a yak? Fine example! You and yer two-bit hell raisin'. And layin' drunk a week at a stretch!" Rafferty made notes:

Experienced as he is with human heart-aches, your reporter was deeply moved by the story of these simple, hard-working people as they told of their efforts to keep this boy, their only child, away from the temptations and pitfalls that beset youth today.

The glare of the bright lights, the false friends. "We tried to get Tommy to share his problems and troubles with us," the weeping mother said. "We know how innocent, childish pranks can lead to serious things, as they did in Tommy's case."

Sophie Flagg push a gin bottle across the table. "Have a shot," she said.

Rafferty shook his head. Mrs. Flagg picked up the bottle and indulged in a long one. There were tears in her eyes now. "My baby," she crooned. "They're killin' my baby out there."

"Take it easy, Soph," her husband said. He dropped a clumsy paw on her shoulder. "Take it easy."

Sophie Flagg shrugged. "Get yer dirty hands off me!"

A *rat-tat-tat-tat-tat* bit sharply into the room. Rafferty moved toward the door.

Softly your reporter made his exit from that house of sorrow. As he closed the door, William Flagg was attempting to console his grief-stricken wife.

Rafferty went down the three rickety stair-flights and pushed his way into a jammed street. The action had heightened. Around him were gawking bystanders, shoving policemen. The crowd had pressed in.

He went back into 256 and out between overflowing garbage cans in the rear. A narrow alley and a dark passage brought him inside the hard-pressed outer cordon.

All the searchlights were concentrated on a single spot—the outlet of a passage between two warehouses. A loudspeaker blared: "Come on out, Flagg. You haven't got a chance. Throw down your

(Please continue on page 98)

# I'LL LAUGH AT YOUR FUNERAL



By E. A.  
**MORRIS**

*Her insomniac husband started to get suspicious—so Maude decided to play his favorite slumber tune.*

"I've taken enough abuse from you!"

**S**WIFTLY she walked home through the darkness of four o'clock in the morning. The city was rain-swept and cool. Street lamps cast cones of friendly light on her pretty face and the rain beat against the frown she wore. She was not dressed properly for the weather, had the lapels of her spring coat turned in at her throat and her hands jammed into its

pockets. She was Maude Ferguson and she was worried.

Knowing everything was all right, she laughed at herself. She knew she would find Bill sound asleep when she reached the apartment. He was always asleep when she came in, just as he was always asleep when she went out. He was her husband.

As long as he slept, he could not know that a few blocks back, just before the rain fell, she had kissed Clyde Hammond good night.

Never before had she been concerned about it. Each night, just before going to bed, her husband shook a capsule out a bottle labeled phenobarbital and swallowed it. He was not an addict. He followed his physician's advice. That made it all too easy for her. She would watch him take the soporific dose and lie awake until certain the induced sleep had clutched him securely. Then she dressed and went to Clyde. Simple.

But last night she and Clyde had been drinking. When she returned to the apartment, she dropped her dress carelessly at the foot of the bed. Sometime after retiring, she heard a stirring in the room and opened her eyes. It was Bill, easing himself onto the bed. He had been up! She kept still, tried to keep from breathing hard and asked herself what he had been doing out of bed. She wondered, in a terror-filled second, if he had noticed the dress was not in the closet where he had seen her hang it earlier.

He had said nothing about it during breakfast but had watched her with a peculiar stare. It seemed to her that he was asking himself questions. He had looked at her the same way in church while she prayed furiously. Not for salvation. For protection. The rest of the day had been as any other Sunday.

Now, turning a corner, she brushed a tuft of hair from her wet forehead and smiled away her melodramatic imaginings. If he did discover the deceptions, it would be too bad. It would be horrible—for him.

Halfway down the block, she turned toward the dirty, red brick building, regarded it with scorn and pushed through the doorway. At the second floor she eased her key into the lock, wishing she had let Clyde drive her all the way home.

Now she'd have to conceal the wet clothes. There was little chance of Bill coming across them before they dried, but she hated loose ends like that.

In the living room she slipped out of her wet clothes, carried them quietly into the bedroom and straight to the closet. She knew just where to find it in the dark. Tucking the clothes into a far corner, she was about to turn—when something caused her to draw up abruptly. It was not a sound, rather, absence of a sound. She listened and heard nothing, not even Bill's heavy breathing.

Whirling, wide-eyed and trembling, she walked quickly to his bed. It was empty.

Two rapid strides brought her to the light switch on the wall. The overhead bulb washed the room with light, revealing nothing. No Bill. She went to the windows. Closed. With emotions a mixture of fear, fright and apprehension, she bounded round the foot of the bed and into the bathroom, calling: "Bill. Bill?"

She found nothing but dirty tile and dull fixtures. One more room, the kitchen.

"Bill!"

Not there. Nothing alive but the roaches. She jerked her head toward the living room, back at the kitchen and futilely chewed her lower lip. Clutching her hair with one hand, she fell onto a kitchen chair.

**W**HERE was he? What had happened? Everything was in order, everything in its proper place. Everything—except her husband. Could he have awakened to find her gone? Was he calling on the neighbors she might visit? What to tell him when he came home—if he came home.

But he couldn't have awakened unless someone aroused him. There was the capsule. He had taken it tonight as he did every night. She knew. She had watched him swallow it as she did every night.

There was cold water in the bathroom. A brisk face rinse would perk her up, freshen her so she could think more clearly. She made it through the rooms with slow, sluggish steps. The thing she thought might never happen had descended upon her swiftly, leaving her with a sense of insecurity. She turned the faucet on and picked up the face cloth, only to put it

down immediately. Her eyes were welded to the bottle; the bottle of capsules there on the sink.

Without preconceived intention, she lifted the bottle in a nervous hand. Without knowing why, she unscrewed the cap and let a capsule slide onto her other palm. Replacing the bottle and fingering the brown pellet were motions she did not will. Something indeterminate had prompted her.

She broke the capsule in two, stared at the pieces. Her hand carried one half to her mouth and onto her moist tongue. Hesitantly, she tasted. Her eyes widened as she looked at herself in the medicine chest mirror. She put it to her mouth and tasted again. Now she was sure. There was no barbiturate in that capsule.

It was ground aspirin!

Quickly, she broke another, Angrily, a third. They were all the same in content. Aspirin. Questions fell upon one another in her mind, unanswered. When had he changed them? How could he do this thing? How long had it been going on?

He'd taken the aspirin, feigned sleep until she dressed and went out. Then what? He could have stayed up until she came home, noting the time, gathering all the evidence until the time arrived to speak about it. No. More likely, he followed her to her rendezvous with Clyde and spied on them. She couldn't understand why he hadn't accused her.

Tonight something must have happened. He hadn't been able to get home before her tonight. *Good*, she thought. It gave her the opportunity to do what she knew she must, what she knew she would have to do one day. She was prepared. But was there time enough? She decided to risk it, emptied the bottle, took a packet from her purse and set to work.

Capsules were wonderful. Besides sleeping drugs and ground aspirin, they could hold other things. Unpleasant things. They could be taken apart and the contents changed.

While working hastily, her memories gave added impetus and further justification to her actions. There was this life of miserable drudgery he had wedded her into; this clap-trap walkup apartment located in a squalid uptown neighborhood. An insomniac, having recourse to

drugged sleep, he had made her want for attention. Then, she met Clyde. Clyde, who was tender and attentive, who would stick by her through this. He'd said so.

Two capsules remained unfinished when she heard his tread. Footsteps in the hall, approaching the door. She scooped the capsules into the neck of the bottle, making sure the last two were at the bottom. His key was rattling in the lock. She screwed the cap on and the bottle slid from her fingers, falling to the rug on the floor. With anxious haste she fumbled it into her hand again, sped into the bathroom and placed it on the sink where she remembered it had been. The door was opening. She ran to the chair across from the bed and sat.

The door closed softly and she clenched her hands together to keep them from shaking. She was rehearsing silently what she would say to him when he came into the room.

"Maude, where have you been?" he asked, shaking out of his raincoat and taking a seat facing her. She noted a curious glint in his eye.

"Out," she answered, noncommittally. "Where were you?"

"Looking for you, Maude. Somehow I awoke tonight, and when I found you gone I was worried. I thought something might be wrong and you were out walking it off so I went out to search for you. I was going to call the police when I got back here. Thank goodness, I don't have to."

"How did you happen to wake up tonight, Bill?" Her voice sounded far away. She was listening for his answer rather than to herself.

"I don't know how to explain it. Guess my system is becoming accustomed to the drug and it's losing its effectiveness."

He lies, too, she thought. Why? Why didn't he call her a cheat and accuse her of infidelity?

"What happened, Maude? Where did you go tonight—after I thought you were asleep?" His eyes narrowed and he leaned forward a bit, as if in anticipation.

"I went over to Mrs. Perretti's."

"Perretti's?"

"Yes. She was having a birthday party for her brother. She'd invited me, but I'd forgotten about it. I wasn't tired and needed a little excitement, so I dressed

and went over. I'm entitled to that much pleasure, aren't I?"

"Yes, dear. yes. I thought maybe you'd gone for a walk in the park. That's where I looked for you. Wish you had left a note telling me where you had gone. But then, you couldn't expect me to wake up. Could you?"

"No. Let's forget about it, Bill. Shall we?"

Now she knew. He'd been in the park. That's where she left Clyde every night. No, he wouldn't make an open accusation. Subtle hints. Suggestions. It was a game he was playing with her. Yet, he didn't look amused. He seemed concerned about something. Something other than what she was doing every night. Something he wouldn't talk about.

Looking into his eyes, she thought she saw fear. Of what? It didn't matter. The half knowledge dissipated her own fears and gave her renewed determination. All she had to do was keep him from suspecting, keep him from recognizing the anxiety that must surely be somewhere in her face.

Finally, he said, "All right, dear. We'll not think of it any more."

As she rose from the chair, she smiled and ran a hand through her brown hair. It was silky and soft.

So is a spider's web.

Walking toward him, she moved with a smooth motion, slowly, sultrily.

So does a python.

She slid her arms about his neck, pulled close to him, asked for a good night kiss. She gave her lips and stroked his cheek. Her husband wearily smiled up at her.

"I'm tired," he said. "Think I'll get some sleep. It'll be dawn soon and I've had little rest."

"What if I can't get you up? You have to go to work, you know." She could play the game with him. It would soon be over.

"Call the plant when you get up, will you? Tell them I'm sick. I'm too tired to work today." He yawned and slid his shirt off. His face was drawn, his eyes ringed with black circles, like targets.

She said, "I'll have some coffee before turning in," and she turned, went to the kitchen.

QUIETLY, she put the coffee pot on the range, took a cup and saucer down from the cupboard. A flaming match in her hand, she fired the gas jet and listened. There was the noise of the bottle cap being unscrewed and removed, then the rattling as the bottle was tipped, then the clink as the bottle went back on the sink. Just as she had hoped, he went to the bottle, probably thinking he'd deceived her completely.

He was playing the game to the limit. The noise he made was excessive, to be certain it would be heard, to be sure she would think him asleep in a while. After all, he couldn't possibly mind taking a little aspirin.

"He'll sleep all right!" she said to herself, and went about having a cup of coffee. Now that it was done and she heard him creaking into bed, there came the realization that there was only one way to go now. There would be a cloud of dread around her until she saw Clyde again. Clyde would help. It wouldn't be so bad with Clyde beside her.

She stirred her coffee and looked helplessly at the clock on the wall, wishing she could force the hands around their circuit a few times. Time. It would pass slowly with the tormenting creep of hands on a clock. How long? She didn't know how long it would take. Too long, she thought. If you did something, listened to some music, you didn't notice the passing of time. She flicked on the tiny radio nearby and turned the dial to an all-night station.

After half an hour of popular music and commercials, she was emptying her third cup of coffee. Then, there was that noise. Like the crying of an animal, far away. Then it sounded nearer. A loud groan from the bedroom told her it was happening. He called out to her:

"Maude!" He shouted her name with a sob.

She turned the radio up a little louder and stared into the cup before her. Her eyes closed. She gripped the spoon with white, strained knuckles and squeezed. She hadn't known it would sound like this. The moment had arrived. A moment that began the last minutes of a man she had doomed. Would it take only minutes?

Here, she knew, was the point when



everything could go haywire, when she herself might crack and rush into mad, fearsome flight. She told herself to settle down; running was the most dangerous act of all. Tensed, she forced herself to sit still in the chair.

From the bedroom Bill's anguished voice pleaded: "Maude—please!"

A shudder coarsed through her, but she did not move. There was a creaking sound. The bed. He was trying to get up. If he made it, she'd have to fight. She bolted to the drawer at the other end of the table and snatched up a paring knife. Holding it behind her back, she waited and listened.

There was a light thump and a groan as his heels hit the floor. A brief silence followed. Then, a heavy gasp and a hard thud and the sound of bones striking the floor. She strained to hear something but her ears caught only a low moan.

Leaving the kitchen, she turned on the lamp in the living room and, still clutching the knife, took a step toward the closed bedroom door. Then another step. Two more. She brushed her hand through her hair and put her fingers against the door. Alert, determined, she pushed it slowly inward.

With the door halfway open she saw nothing. She could hear him, though. She pushed again. There was a gentle bump as the door halted in its arc, accompanied by a hoarse voice crying her name. In the lamp light she saw only two spatulate, white objects pointed toward the ceiling. His feet. It must have been his head that stopped the door. With beads of sweat on her forehead, she stepped cautiously over the threshold.

He was splayed out in an awkward

position. He held his hands to his stomach and writhed convulsively. Agonizing lines twisted his face into a hideous mask. Imporing eyes squinted up at her and she drew back, her lips pulled apart in surprised horror. With great effort, she maintained control over herself and kept the knife concealed.

"Maude. Maude, my stomach is burning. It's so hot, Maude! Get me some water. Please, some water!" His teeth came together with an audible click.

She didn't move.

His fingers clutched the perspiration-soaked pajamas covering his chest and stomach. He drew his knees up against his chest and his face went pale in the dim light from the other room. Rolling onto his side to face her, he looked up, begging.

For the first time since the attack started, he seemed to realize that she was making no effort to help.

"Maude, you—you did this! You've poisoned me! You—*agh!*"

He raised his contorted face, rolled slightly toward her and threw a desperate hand out toward her ankle. Quickly, she stepped back. The fear of looking on death left her in this minute when he tried to strike back, but the anxiety of waiting for the finish kept her on edge. Maintaining a nervous silence, she left the now cold room.

Bill squirmed on the floor.

She put the knife aside and, lighting a cigarette, paced the room between the sofa and the door to the kitchen. There were two noises in the apartment. The gay blare of the dance band on the radio contrasting the half-muted moans of a man in the strokes of approaching death.

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# STAR



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She puffed furiously, blowing smoke through her fine nostrils. There was a station break on the radio, then the voice of an hourly newscaster. His voice brought her up sharply, unnerved her.

"An hour ago the body of a man was found—"

Then Maude ran to the kitchen and gave the knob a violent twist. To do murder and have death in the next room is one thing. To hear it talked about, quite another. Something must be done. Something was needed to relieve her close, penned-in feeling. Clyde. There was Clyde to talk to. He had to know anyway and the sound of his voice would be the proper tonic. She had never talked with him over a phone but she knew his voice would have that warmth and comfort she wanted; knew it.

SHE sat at the phone and dialed. There was a buzz at the other end. There were four buzzes, five. She hung up. Clyde was not there; he didn't answer. When she needed him most he was out of reach. Where? It didn't matter that much. She could call him again.

She re-entered the bedroom. She hovered over him and stared down.

His head lolled from side to side, and he tore at himself with his fingers. Looking up, he said, "You don't fool me, Maude. I know."

In a small voice, weak and full of hatred, he uttered, "You're going to run away with him, now. Isn't that it? You're doing this to me just for him. You won't get away with it."

For the first time since he'd gone to bed, she spoke. It was an insolent screech. "Yes! Yes! I've taken enough abuse from you! Yes, I'm going with him!"

He laughed. Painfully, he laughed.

"Stop that!" she yelled. "Stop it! What're you laughing at!"

He just kept laughing up at her, agony in each jerky breath.

Back at the phone again, she dialed a number she had called earlier. Again the result was the same. Again no answer, no Clyde.

Fumbling into her purse for a fresh pack of cigarettes, her fingers closed around her compact. Raising it before her face, she opened it and looked at her re-

flection. The portrait squinted back at her through heavy-lidded eyes, haggard, worn by the inner struggle. Disgusted, she snapped it shut. She found the cigarettes, lighted one, paced the room.

Her caged pacing stopped when she heard the rasping, inarticulate gurgle from the next room. Without looking, she knew it was over.

For the third time she lifted the phone out of its cradle. He had to answer this time. Had to. He had to be there when it rang, pick it up, soothe her. It was getting to be too much for her to bear alone. Shaking fingers moved from one hole to the other and spun the dial in determined arcs. She could hear the buzzing far away. Then there was a click.

"Hello?"

The sound of the voice on the other end brought a gasp of breath and a hissing sigh as she let it trickle out of her lungs in relief. At last.

"Clyde? It's Maude."

"What is it?" His voice didn't sound the way she thought it would. Telephones do that to voices.

"It's—it's done, Clyde!"

"What?"

"Him. Bill. He's finished. We're free now. Do you want me to meet you there?"

There was a pause, a silence from the other end.

"No, no. You wait where you are. I'll come over right away."

"All right, Clyde. But please hurry, will you. I feel so—so alone."

She hung up. Life was beginning again for her. Omen-like, the dawn broke and sunlight spilled over the living-room window sill. She'd have to be packed so there would be no time wasted when he arrived. They'd not stay long.

In the bedroom, avoiding the still form on the floor, she hurried through the motions of getting her small bag and filling it with only those articles she deemed essential. Then she changed to a dress and went about fixing her hair. It was fifteen minutes before she was ready, hat set atop her head, fifteen minutes more with death.

She placed the bottle of capsules in her purse, closed the bedroom door, put out the lights in the kitchen and living room. Then, placing her bag near the door, she

waited for him, fidgeting impatiently and jerking nervous glances at the bedroom door. He should arrive any minute, she told herself. The waiting had been so long and so lonely. It would end soon.

There was a light knock on the door and her name was called in a whisper.

With two eager bounds she was at the door, unlocking it and crying, "Clyde! Clyde, I'm so glad you're—"

But it wasn't. It wasn't Clyde, for whom she had been waiting.

There were two of them. One a tired-looking man of about forty with large eyebrows. His hands were in his pockets. The other, behind him, was distinguished only by his blue uniform. They walked by her, into the apartment. The uniformed one began an immediate inspection of the rooms while the other leaned against the door, looking at Maude. The net had fallen about her.

She had withdrawn into the middle of the room, unsettled and frightened. Where had they come from? How had they known? Bill couldn't possibly have—

"It's in here, Lieutenant," the cop said, as he came out of the bedroom. "Finished. Looks like poison. Can't find the stuff, though."

Maude unwittingly glanced at her purse on the sofa. The man with the eyebrows

nodded in the same direction. When the cop picked it up and turned it upside down, the bottle fell out. He moved a step closer to Maude and said, "Sorry, Mrs. Ferguson. You'll have to come along."

All the work, all the anxiety, all the waiting had gone to waste. She began to cry. The detective lieutenant said, "You'll have to stop that. It won't help matters any."

To the cop, he said, "Bring her along."

She looked at him suspiciously. She recognized the voice. It was the same voice that had talked with her on the phone not so long ago. She was certain. Regarding him with a quizzical awe, she asked, "What were you doing at Clyde's place? What happened? You must tell me!"

Hands still jammed into his pockets, he seemed to be in silent consultation with himself for a second. Then he said, "What do you think, lady? We're homicide men. Wish I could solve his as easily as this one."

Maude's hand flew to her mouth and she bit her knuckles as if to stifle a scream. She could have solved it for him because she remembered Bill sprawled on the bedroom floor. He had laughed. In death, he had laughed.

She could have solved it. Instead, she fainted.

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## Some People!

Arrested for sunbathing nude in downtown Washington, the sun-lover explained that he had got drenched in the rain and had merely wanted to dry off when the sun came out.



A young matron, of Chicago, screamed so loudly when a robber accosted her that her teeth came out. The bandit picked up the teeth and fled.



While "Traffic in Crime" was being featured on the screen of a big movie theater in Everett, Mass., burglars entered the theater and robbed it of \$110.

One young man left his wife at a Baltimore police station as security while he set out to raise \$2.45 he needed to pay off a drunkenness fine.



Asked why he had "kidnapped" a 17-year-old girl and lived with her for a year, the two-timer, of Liverpool, England, replied: "I can't offer any explanation except that she is a very pretty girl and I was fed up with my wife."



Syracuse, N. Y., police are looking for a man who bought forty-two dollars worth of Bibles with a worthless check.

## Shock-a-Minute Crime-Adventure Novelette

*This time the sleek dancer and her hotshot pals  
weren't going to hoodwink Bren Harris . . .  
this time he was walking into their set-up—  
armed and shooting.*

He wondered how her eyes would  
look—if he shot her in the stomach.



# MURDER RUN-AROUND

By **JOHN D. MacDONALD**

## CHAPTER ONE

### Death for Three



AS HE had expected, it was no trick to buy a gun in Mexico City. The plane from San Antonio had towered high over the flat dryness until at last the Sierra Madre, jutting steeply up from tropical slopes, reached toward the belly of the plane and the motors droned a new song.

He had been by the window, and, except for the upholstery, except for his quiet business suit instead of battle dress, it was like that dawn four years before when, at the jump master's signal, he had snapped onto the static line, tested, moved toward the door, hand on the shoulder of the man in front of him, fear tight in his throat. Then the whip of the slip stream, the jar of the harness, the pendulum swing down through three hundred feet of tracer fire . . .

This was very different, and yet somehow the same.

When he shut his eyes he could see the outline of a gun that would fit his hand, a grip that would jar solidly back against the heel of his hand with each shot, sending the faint impact through wrist and elbow to shoulder.

And he could see three faces. The wide florid face of August Brikel, with salesman's smile and eyes like flecks of polished flint. The bird-face of Gowan Teed, with flat hard forehead, sharply pointed nose, greenish eyes constantly in motion. And of course, Laena Severence. Hair the precise shade of ancient and invaluable ivory—a rich gold-white—contrasting with the dark brows. Flare of nostrils,

sway of cheekbones, lips of subtle savagery.

He wondered how it would feel to kill a woman. Would you feel forever soiled? Impact of slug on dancer's body.

After he checked in at a small hotel near Alameda Park, he used the daylight hours to find the gun. He avoided the shops of Juarez and Madera, took a taxi down to the Plaza de la Merced. There he found what he wanted. It was a .38 Special with the barrel sawed short, and the front sight removed. He tucked it inside the waistband of his trousers and went back to the hotel. It was not a gun for long-range work, but it satisfied Brendon Harris. He wanted to be close. Very close.

He sat on the bed with the gun beside him. He looked at his *turista* card. "*Motivo del viaje*"—purpose of the trip. "*Recreo*"—Recreation. The smile strained his lips. Maybe it was recreation. Maybe it would be the most delightful recreation he had ever enjoyed. Tomorrow he would look for them. And tomorrow he would find them.

Dusk had turned to night. He opened the shutters and looked down on the noisy brawling traffic. The lights of the Del Prado shone on the other side of the park. He decided that on this first night here he would go out alone . . .

At eleven o'clock he walked slowly down a block of luxury. The Reforma on the corner, Nick's bar close by, a plush nitery on the other side, a swank restaurant beyond that. He was a big man with square hands and coarse brown hair that wouldn't respond to brush or comb. There was, about him, a look of controlled force, of energy held in check, a hint of ruthlessness.

During the evening he had drunk in many places, but sparingly and cautiously. In one little bar there had been a man at a piano, a girl sitting alone on a stool at the bar. For a moment he had wanted a girl beside him during this evening. But when he looked at her carefully, he saw the puffiness around her eyes, the liquor-glaze, the hand uncertain with the match, and he turned away.

In the restaurant he sat at the counter, ate ham and eggs and drank two *tarros* of the strong black draught beer. He left the place, yawning, half-willing to go back

to the hotel. He walked away from Reforma, turned a corner to the left, and stopped as though he had run into an invisible wall.

The place was called *El Torero*. A small blue neon sign spelled out:

"*Con Laena Severence.*"

He remembered another club in another city in another country. Her name had been in lights there, too.

As he stood there two girls in short dresses, arm in arm, giggled as they brushed by him, turned to look at him and giggle again, calling out something in Spanish which he could not understand.

He took a breath so deep that it made his lungs ache. He walked to the doorway of *El Torero*, pushed by the deep red curtain that hung just inside the door. The bar was at the left, the tables directly ahead, with dance floor and tiny orchestra playing Cuban music beyond the tables. As the waiter stepped up to him, Harris motioned toward the bar. He went to the end of the bar nearest the dance floor, where he saw an empty stool.

The bartender spoke English. Harris ordered a scotch and water and asked when Laena Severence would dance again. In fifteen minutes.

He sat with his back to the bar and sipped his drink as he looked around the small club. It was nearly full. There was a sprinkling of *turistas*, but most of the clientele was Mexican. Against the far wall, two over-dressed American women in their late forties were using shrill school-girl Spanish on the two sleek young men accompanying them. On the floor, a vastly drunken Britisher was attempting to dance with a slim Mexican girl. The hot fierce rhythm of the music was as stirring as a scream in the night.

When he was on his second drink, his lips faintly numbed, his reflexes a shade slow, a man in a white mess jacket pulled a mike out in front of the band and a chord of music cleared the floor. The sidelights dimmed and a blood-red spot shone on the M.C.

The Spanish was like the sputter of firecrackers. The crowd laughed. Then Harris caught the name of Laena Severence. The crowd applauded. The man dragged the mike to one side and the spotlight moved to pick her up as she

came through a side door, onto the floor.

Brendon Harris felt the old and familiar tightness in his throat. Her hair was longer. She wore a tight silver bandeau and a shimmering silver skirt that almost touched the floor. It was V cut in front like a harem-dancer's skirt. The drum alone picked up the rhythm and, as always, she danced without the faintest shade of expression on her face, contorting her body into postures of angular gracelessness that were somehow more enticing than any amount of grace would have been. Her magic stilled the last whisper in the room.

As the drum beat quickened, as the dance grew more abandoned, the thin clear clarinet picked up an oriental counterpoint, a wail that had in it all of the sorrow and poignancy of the East. At the climax of the dance she spun like a silver top. Then, on the last, almost physical blow of the music, with a stamp of her bare feet, she stopped, head thrown back, feet spread, clenched fists raised. The roar of applause was like the crash of a storm wave.

Her next number was pure Spanish, the costume, the castinets as crisp as the stamp of her metal-shod heels against the floor. In this number she was grace itself, holding the gun-fire of castinets over her head as she leaned back, spinning slowly, with a ballet dancer's sureness.

The following dance was the one she had created, had done with so much success in the other club. The M.C. announced it and Harris knew that he was explaining to the crowd that Miss Severence was going to do her imitation of a very proper young girl from the country who goes to the city to become a great actress and is talked into trying to do a

hula—to the great loss of her dignity.

HARRIS leaned against the bar and half shut his eyes. He could almost imagine that this was taking place back in the Corner Club. He watched her through the mists of memory. The dance was the same, with a howl of laughter greeting its finale.

That ended her turn. He borrowed paper, scribbled a note and handed it to a passing waiter along with a twenty-peso bill. He turned back to the bar and ordered his third drink. His fingers were cramped with the tightness with which he had held the glass as he watched her.

Her voice at his elbow was as much a part of him as his memories of childhood. "Bren," she said. "Bren, darling."

He turned slowly. The tyniness of her was always a new shock. Great gray eyes under the dark brows, face so delicate as to almost be too thin, framed by the lush and silky mass of the white-gold hair. She wore a black evening dress, the bodice supported only by two thin black cords attached to the black collar that encircled her slender throat.

The bulge of the gun was hard against his flat stomach. He could hold the muzzle against the front of the dress. Two shots would forever smash the dancer's body. She read his eyes and he saw the shadow of fear, the tiny compression of lips.

"We can't talk here, Bren. Come to a table. That one."

She walked in front of him, her bare shoulders straight, her chin high. He was so much taller that he could look down onto the part in the white-gold hair, its clean white scalp.



He held the chair for her, then sat opposite her.

"Why did you come here, Bren?"

"It's a very trite story, Laena. Sure you want to hear it?"

"You shouldn't be here."

"No doubt. Maybe seeing me makes you remember how easy it was for you to put so many stars in my eyes that I couldn't see what was going on. Or maybe you've done that job so many times that you can't even remember the names and faces. Who are you working on here? Another sucker like good old Bren Harris?"

"I have to know what you want, Bren," she said tightly.

"She has to know what I want! Honey, you left before the fireworks started. But you know what happened."

He held the gun in his hand, leveled it under the table. He wondered how her eyes would look—if he shot her in the stomach.

"Sometimes you have to do things you don't want to do, Bren."

"Poor, abused little girl, forced to do nasty things by nasty men."

Her voice had a small quaver in it. "You were a good memory, Bren. Don't spoil it for me. There aren't many . . . memories that are good."

"Turn it on like a faucet, honey."

"You hate me, don't you, Bren?"

"Hate is a flavorless and colorless word for what I feel about you and your two partners."

"Your eyes look . . . funny, Bren."

"Maybe I've grown up too fast. That could be it. My brother Tommy and I had such big fat plans. And we had the seventy-thousand bucks my father left us. We talked about our plans in the barracks at night. You wouldn't understand about that. And we walked in where angels fear to tread. We went into partnership with your two pals, Brikel and Gowan Teed."

"They convinced us they knew the ropes. Boy, they knew them all right! The Corner Club was going to be a combination of everything Tommy and I liked. When Brikel brought you in to dance for the people, Tommy and I loved it. I even thought I loved you. That's silly to think of now, isn't it?"

"If you say so, Bren."

"You put the big stars in my eyes, honey, while your pals used the Corner Club as a front for peddling the shakes to a lot of miserable hopheads." He dropped his napkin over the gun.

"There are things you don't understand."

"That I'm willing to admit, Laena. I didn't understand why Brikel and Gowan Teed got jittery. I didn't understand why those quiet little government men in dark suits were hanging around the club. I was too busy adoring you. It all went to hell when you pulled out without a note or a word to me."

"Tommy was the one who got the evidence on your friends. He wanted to save our investment. So like a damn fool he tried to bargain with your pals right after you left. They were to turn the place over to us and clear out. This is only a guess, you understand."

"A guess? What does Tommy say?"

Harris stared at her for a long incredulous moment. Then he laughed harshly.

"For a minute, honey, you had me going. Brikel and Teed cleaned out the account. I was drinking too much because you had left. I was easy to manage. I woke up in Police Headquarters. They had had to use a stomach pump on me to drain out the liquor that your pals poured down my throat. It took me a long time to realize that they had found me in my apartment, dead to the world, with a gun in my hand and Tommy on the floor. Only he was really dead to the world. Did you get a big bang out of it when Brikel told you how he'd worked it?"

Her eyes widened. She held her clenched hand against the side of her mouth and said faintly, "No, Bren. Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes. And don't get theatrical. Amateur acting turns my stomach."

"But how did you . . ."

"Get out of it? They horsed around with me long enough to give Brikel and Teed a chance to use their plane reservations. They weren't even citizens. You knew that. They'd been chased out of the country years before and had established citizenship in a nice understanding South American country and had smug-



gled themselves back in to set up a drop-off for their dope shipments, with me as the stooge.

"They took a wax test of my hand and proved that I hadn't fired the gun. The war record helped me. They got me unraveled from the frame that Brikel and Teed had set up. The property reverted to me. It just happened to be on a corner that a chain wanted. I still own the corner and I have a fat lease which pays me twenty-one thousand a year."

"Why do you tell me that?"

"Because I want to brag a little. It cost me three thousand dollars for complete reports on you and August Brikel and Gowan Teed. Honey, I know when and where you drew your first breath. And two weeks ago the agency told me that all three of you are in Mexico City for an extended stay. Brikel and Teed are up here on visas. You are here on an *immigrante* basis. So I'm paying a friendly visit. For Tommy. He couldn't come, you understand."

"Bren, don't talk like that. You don't sound . . . well."

"If you're well, do you just forget it? Do you just talk about good ole Tommy and say that it's too bad that they can't extradite the killers? Do you just say that it's a big rotten shame, or do you come down here and do something about it yourself?"

Her eyes narrowed. "What are you trying to say?"

"I'm trying to say that big jovial Brikel and birdy little Teed and Laena, the lush angel, have lived too long already. Don't you think you've lived too long, darling?"

Her gray eyes were steady on his. "Yes, Bren. I do."

"For what you helped do to Tommy?"

"You won't believe me, so there's no point in telling you that this is the first I've heard about him. You won't believe me if I tell you that there is no personal or business relationship between me and Mr. Brikel and Mr. Teed. I ran out on you, Bren. I ran fast, because I hated myself and what I was doing to you. I tried to run away from you, Bren. But I brought you with me. In my heart."

"Poetic, angel. Very, very poetic."

She stood up quickly. Her lip curled. She said, "I go on again, soon. If you

have a gun, Bren, I'll walk away slowly. Make it quick, Bren. Very quick."

She turned. She walked slowly. At the end of the dance floor, she turned and gave him one quick bitter stare. He was surprised to see the glint of tears.

Bren put the gun back in his waistband. The waiter brought a fresh drink. He remained at the table and watched her as he sipped the drink. In the middle of her second number, he shook his head slowly. The bright spotlight on her seemed to retreat to a vast distance as though he held a telescope reversed. The sound of the music set up counter-echoes in his head, fuzzing the rhythm, blurring the tempo.

He was conscious of faces turned toward him, of wise smiles. He tried to stand up but slumped back on the chair. His head was a stone, a weight too heavy to support. His forehead rested on the white tablecloth. A careless movement of his hand tipped over the dregs of the drink. He felt the coolness of it against his cheek. . . .

. . . aircraft lurching in turbulent currents . . . he sat on the bucket seat with the grease gun across his knees . . . they sat opposite, August, Gowan and Laena . . . wise smiles . . . you have to jump soon, darling, Laena said . . . Soon, soon, sang August and Gowan . . . gray flint eyes, quick bird movement of head, Laena's silver clothes . . . jump soon, out into the night, and he knew that the parachute pack was empty . . . they had taken it . . . stand up, darling, Laena said. Stand up, darling . . . stand up, darling . . . dizzy sway of the plane. . . .

He opened dulled eyes. Most of the lights were out. A waiter was shaking him by the shoulder.

"Stand up, darling," Laena said.

He tried to curse her. There were no words, only a thickness in his throat. She spoke rapid Spanish to the waiter. He came back with another man. They lifted him, supported him out to the waiting cab. Then the cab was hurtling through streets that tipped dizzily and Laena was scent of perfume beside him.

Once again he was being shaken. There were other men. Hallway. Elevator. Clink of key against the lock face. Room that swam in light. Bed. Darkness.

Then there was blank nothingness.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Devil's Doublecross

PAIN rolled and rumbled and surged through his head, pulsing against the back of his eyes. His skin was greasy with cold sweat and the sunlight that came between the blinds was a shower of golden needles piercing his brain. He sat up and gagged, pressing hard against his lips with his knuckles.

Remembering the night, he forced his eyes open again. The room was large, sparsely furnished. He yanked the covers away, swung his feet out of the bed, cautiously stood erect on the cool tile floor. He swayed, clutched the bedpost, then walked heavily over to the closet and flung it open. It was empty. He felt his way around the wall to the door and tried the knob. It was locked. A tall pitcher of water stood on the bureau. He ignored the glass and, bracing his hip against the bureau, tilted the pitcher high, drained most of it without taking it from his lips.

He ripped a strip from the top sheet, soaked it in the remaining water, lay on the bed again, the wet cloth across his eyes.

Then he heard the grate of the key in the door. Laena Severence came in. Her gold-white hair was braided, tied with bits of colored yarn. She wore a cotton print dress, too short to be fashionable, and red sandals on her bare feet. She looked like a small girl playing house.

He said thickly, "I should have been smart enough to expect a mickey from you, Laena."

"It was chloral hydrate. I know how miserable you must feel."

"Your solicitude touches me deeply."

She pulled a chair over near the bed and sat down, her back straight, her eyes on him. She said, "We are going to talk, Bren."

"Is there anything to talk about?"

"I've sent the maid out. Bren, you were heading for trouble. I knew you wouldn't listen unless I could force you to listen. I told the barman what to do for your own good, Bren. Believe me."

"Believe you? I wouldn't believe you if you were on fire and I stood in front of you with a bucket of water. And there's nothing you can say that I'm interested in hearing. When I see you dead, Laena, I'll feel that one third of a debt is paid."

There was no expression in her eyes. She stood up quickly and left the room.

She was back in a few moments with the gun and a towel. She wrapped the towel around the muzzle.

"We're alone in the apartment. The walls are thick. The towel will muffle the shot. Your clothes are in the closet in the next room. If you go down the back stairs, no one will see you leave."

She thrust the gun into his hand, her fingers still holding the towel around the barrel, and came close to the bed. "Go ahead, Bren. I found out once that I don't have what it takes to do it to myself. You have to pull the trigger."

His finger was on the trigger. The seconds stretched out interminably. Suddenly he laughed hoarsely. "Oh, fine! You want to see just how far I'll go. Just how serious I am. Then when the gun clicks, you can run off and tell the other two that Harris really means business. Nice act, Laena."

He twisted the gun away from her and pulled the trigger. The gun bucked and the slug punched a hole in the plaster across the room, high up in the corner.

"That's twice you haven't done it, Bren," she said unsteadily.

The scorched towel dropped to the floor. He held the gun and looked at it as though seeing it for the first time. His mouth was dry.

He laid the gun gently on the counterpane and said, "You wanted to tell me something, Laena."

She sat down again. There was no triumph on her face or in her tone. "You are like a child with a cap pistol, Brendon. You are like a little boy mad because he caught his finger in a screen door. You said you had a report on me. Then you know that my father was an expatriate.

"In 1929, when I was five, my mother drowned in the Mediterranean. She was drunk at the time. A month later my father killed himself in a car, doing a hundred and ten miles an hour on the Paris road. There was enough money left

to educate me in Switzerland. Although I was born on a French passenger ship, the little matter of my American citizenship was something that slipped my father's mind. In 1939, when I was fifteen, I was dancing in a little club off the Rou Pigalle. I had no interest in politics.

"After the German occupation, I was still dancing. I met a young German officer. He was sweet. I was in love, I thought. He hated the war. We tried to get to Portugal together. He was captured and shot for desertion. I spent seven months in a French prison. France was no good for me after the war. Suspicion of collaboration. I wanted to come to the country where my parents had been born. I worked hard on colloquial English. I had my French papers. I went to Portugal. I danced in Lisbon.

"In Lisbon, I met August Brikel. He was nice to me and arranged forged papers. I could not get into the United States legally because of my 'bad' record. But I wanted to get to the states so badly that it was like an incurable disease. August helped me through the four months before I went to work for the Corner Club. I liked you when I met you. One night August came to my room and told me that I must make you fall in love with me. He said that I must quiet any suspicions you might have about what they were doing at the Corner Club.

"August told me what they were doing and said that if any trouble occurred through you, he would make an anonymous report to the immigration people. I still had my French papers, hidden away. I did what he said. But I loved you. I couldn't bear to deceive you. And then I realized that I never could relax in the

States, because just by being there I was cheating what I considered to be my country.

"When I had saved enough money, I crossed into Mexico on the forged papers, used my real papers to apply for Mexican citizenship. Now I'm an *immigrante*. Brikel has no hold over me. I knew nothing about Tommy. After I ran away from you I cried every night. I don't cry any more. Bren. You are the only thoroughly decent thing that has ever happened to me. I ran away because I was doing wrong, and I was tired of doing wrong."

He looked up at the ceiling in the long silence after she stopped speaking. He said softly. "The report wasn't as complete as that. I . . . I don't know."

"I didn't have you drugged just to plead my case, Bren. I know that as far as we are concerned, it's all over. I wanted to tell you about Brikel and Gow-an Teed. They have an organization here, as well as in South America. You can't walk up and shoot either of them. You'd be dead the moment your hand touched the gun. And I couldn't bear the thought of that.

"When August came into *El Torero* two weeks ago, he had two men with him. They were wary men, Bren. It was the second time I'd seen him since I came down here. He has a house he rents in Cuernavaca. He wanted me to come down and visit him. I told him that he could no longer tell me what to do."

He turned quickly toward her, "You fool! You poor, golden-headed fool!"

Her face stiffened. "What do you mean?"

"When August Brikel told you to be

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nice to me. why on earth didn't you come to me with the whole story? Why? I can't understand it."

SHE looked down at her hands. "Because you would have known I was a criminal. That's what I was, Bren, when I was in the States. And even without that, I . . . I'm hardly a bargain. My life hasn't been a round of sorority teas, and sleigh rides and Sunday picnics. It's been scabby little dressing rooms and prison and dirt."

"Shut up, Laena!" he said quickly.

"I left while you could still remember me as something . . . nice."

Slowly she raised her head until their eyes met. He spoke firmly to her. She came to him with a thin lost sound in her throat, and curled against his chest, her forehead pressing against the lean angle of his jaw, a gold-white braid across his face. Tears were a tempest and he enclosed the storm in the circle of his arms until, at long last, it died slowly away.

The words he whispered to her were not connected in orderly sequence. They did not shape themselves into neat and orderly sentences.

When at last she raised her head, her cheeks were streaked, her eyes puffy, but she was smiling.

"You cried too," she said softly.

"Maybe it was contagious. Laena, I feel as though I'd been ill for a long long time."

"Maybe you have been," She laughed softly. "I know you were ill when I brought you here last night."

"I owe you a mickey, darling."

She stood up. "You will need a great deal of food. And then we will talk."

He reached out and caught her hand. "I guess that I wouldn't have killed you. I guess that I couldn't have done it."

Laena raised his hand to her lips. "I guess that you will kill no one, Bren."

He snatched his hand away, said coldly, "A very slight error, Laena. Nothing that has happened between us has changed the fact that Brikel and Teed are walking around. And Tommy isn't."

"No, Bren! No! Even if you succeed, the *policia* will have you. And once again . . . I shall have nothing."

"You almost make me think that all

this was a gag so you could save their lives."

"I know you're trying to be cruel, Bren. I've been hurt too much. It is very difficult to hurt me with words now."

He gave her a long look. "We will talk about it at breakfast."

She handed him a brown paper bag containing comb, razor, blades and shaving cream, as well as tooth brush and paste. "I sent Maria after those," she called.

"Then your horrible secret is out."

"I know that Maria has thought me a strange one—until now. She is singing in the kitchen. I think she likes having a man in the house."

At the door he paused, as they were ready to leave and said, "The gun, Laena. Where is it?"

"But, Bren, I—"

"The gun, Laena." She went obediently off, but without the usual proud lift of her head. She brought it back and silently handed it to him. He checked the cylinder, snapped it shut and shoved it back in the waistband of the trousers. She watched him passively. To lighten the tension he said, with a smile, "You take orders nicely, honey."

She didn't smile. She said, "My people were American but I was brought up as a European girl."

"And yet you ran out," he said thickly. He caught her to him, found her lips. . . .

Over the breakfast table he talked of Tommy. It was the first time he had talked of him since his death.

When he had quite finished, Laena said, "You call him a 'crazy kid' and you say that the biggest job you had in the war was keeping Tommy out of trouble. You must have loved him very much."

"And that's why Brikel and Teed are going to pay off. In spades. You might as well tell me if you know where they are. I can find out anyway. You'll just save me some time."

She drew on the tablecloth with a fork tine. Tiny frown wrinkles appeared between her dark eyebrows. "All right, Bren. If I tell you, can I come with you?"

"Of course not!"

"There is no way you can keep me from coming with you. They are in the rented house in Cuernavaca. It's Wednes-

day now, but they'll be in Mexico City this weekned. Their house is in the Colonia Miraval, a large house with a high wall and a staff of servants. I do not think you could get in there. When they come to the city, they stay at a large hotel. They come in a group, usually with women. They are seen with men who, here in the city, are known to be criminals, but who seem to be outside the grasp of the law. Bren, I don't think you should try to kill them."

He leaned closer to her. "I have to shave this face every morning. I have to look into these eyes. I want to be able to go on doing it without being ashamed of myself."

"Revenge is childish."

"Why do you say that?"

"Back in Nazi France I saw some samples of revenge, Bren. Did I say childish? The word is right if you can visualize a child with a deformed mind and the eyes of a beast."

"This is the job I've laid out for myself."

"Then, of course you must go through with it," she said bitterly.

\* \* \*

The illegal fires, lit by the charcoal vendors, shrouded the flanks of the mountains in drifting smoke that clouded the afternoon sun. The driver sped the heavy rented car through the mountain village of Tres Cumbres, down the tangled ribbon of road to Cuernavaca, golden in the sunset.

Harris rented a room in a hotel facing the zocolo in the center of the city. An hour later, in the gray dusk, he leaned against a gray wall and studied the house in which August Brikel lived. The dark young man he had encountered in the central square spoke adequate English. For ten pesos he had been glad to come along.

"Go over," Harris said, "and rattle the gate until somebody comes out. Ask them if Mr. Brikel or Mr. Teed are there. Say there is someone down at the hotel asking for them. Tell them that it is a Miss Severence waiting down at the Hotel Linda Vista."

The boy repeated the names. Bren Harris moved further back into the shad-

ows. He went across to the gate. The gate tender came out and they talked. The boy came back. "He say, Señor, that the dos señores have go away today at the five hours."

"Did he say where?"

"Si, he say they go on business over the montañas to Mexico and that they do not come back until . . . como se llama . . . how you say, the day after Sunday."

"Monday. Go back and talk some more. Tell him that this is urgent. Where are they staying in Mexico City?"

This time it took a little longer. The boy came back and said, "He say he not know. I think he know, but the señores is giving orders for not saying."

Bren Harris went back and checked out of his room at seven-thirty and ordered the driver to take him back to Mexico City. Heavy buses and trucks choked the mountain roads. Harris sat on the edge of the seat in a fever of impatience. He dropped his bag off at the hotel and had the driver take him to *El Torero*. It was quarter after nine when he arrived. He paid the bill and dismissed the rented car.

The club was nearly empty. The bartender gave him a quick look of surprise. "Scotch and water," Bren said. "Without the chloral."

"I don't know what you mean, sir."

"Skip it. Where's Miss Severence? I want to see her immediately."

"She telephoned here over an hour ago, sir. She is too ill to work tonight. Everyone will be disappointed."

"I'm sure they will be."

Bren drained his drink, threw a five-peso bill on the bar, searched his pocket until he found the slip of paper on which he had written her address.

There were no cars parked in front of the apartment house. He stood as the taxi drove away, tiny warning bells ringing in the back of his mind. The outside door was not locked. He went quietly up the front stairs, placed his ear against her door and listened. He could hear no sound.

He tapped on the door. It opened quickly. Laena looked at him with a start of surprise. "Bren, darling!" She wore a pale green terrycloth robe that reached to the floor.

"Are you alone?" he asked.

"Of course! Just Maria and me, Bren. Close the door and kiss me."

His suspicions faded. He grinned and closed the door and took her in his arms. She lifted her lips. As he bent his head toward them, she made a sudden motion with her right arm and the impact behind his ear had all the dull weight of an explosion. The bones in his legs melted and he went heavily down onto his knees, his arms too weak to grasp her.

Bren swayed drunkenly on his knees, shaking his head, his vision clouded. But he saw her raise her arm again. He tried to lift his arm to fend off the blow. The last thing he remembered was her gray eyes, her expressionless face as he melted over against the floor into an utter darkness. . . .

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Her Way to Kill

CONSCIOUSNESS was a grayness just above him. It seemed that he moved like a swimmer, struggling up toward the grayness. At last he broke through the surface. His neck ached. He found that he was on his side, his head braced at an awkward angle against the wall. He moved away from the wall a bit, lowered his head onto his arm and closed his eyes, waiting for the weakness to go away.

When he opened his eyes, he saw her. The couch was against the wall. She sat facing him; her face bloodless; her eyes holding a look of wildness.

He opened his mouth and swore. She gave no sign that she heard him. He saw the stains then, the dark crusting stain on the skirt of the robe, the red wetness on the back of her hand.

Slowly she closed her eyes. She leaned over on her side on the couch, her feet still on the floor. With the same slowness, she fell off the couch onto her face on the floor and lay still.

It was quicker to crawl to her than it was to try to stand up. Only then for the first time, did he straighten up and look around the room.

August Brikel sat on the webbed leather chair, smiling at him. The familiar face

was as florid as ever, but there was something loose about his mouth. The eyes were still chips of flint, but the polish was dulled. August sat with the fingers of both hands wedged against his body. The front of his clothes was dark and heavy with blood. August had an uncanny motionless about him.

After Bren lifted Laena onto the couch, he went over to Brikel. The drying splatters of blood led from where Bren had been lying over to the chair. Brikel was quite dead.

Bren had gone to sleep for a hundred nights thinking of how Brikel would look when he was dead. But now there was no satisfaction in seeing it. The face, perfect mirror of the soul, showed clearly the evil, a pitiful quality when revealed by a corpse.

Hearing the distant sound of moaning, he traced it to its source in the kitchen. Maria of the long dark hair was crouched half under the sink, her cheek against the wall, wailing endlessly. He tried to talk to her. She didn't look up at him. He soaked a cloth under the sink faucet, hurried back into the living room and gently bathed Laena's face. Her eyelids quivered and slowly she opened her eyes. He saw confusion, changing quickly to terror, and then to a tired resignation.

"Cigarette," she said weakly.

He lit one and placed it between her lips. She exhaled in a long shuddering breath.

"You tried to make a deal, didn't you?" he asked.

She nodded. "I had his phone number. I called and said I would do what he wanted and told him you were on the way. I told him not to kill you and that if he did, I'd kill him with my own hands. He said he would come right away with Gowan and you'd find no one home. His car dropped him off here. I phoned to say I wouldn't be at work. We talked. We decided you would come here. He gave me a leather thing with lead in the end of it. We waited."

"What was the idea?"

"I would hit you and he would tie you up. When you came to, you would know that he was warned. He promised to talk you into giving up the idea and, if that failed, talk to a friend of his to get your *turista* card rescinded so that you would

have to go back home right away, Bren."

"And you?"

"I was buying your life. I did what he told me to. He had that door open a crack and a gun held on you. He made it clear that if I tried to warn you, he'd shoot. His gun has a silencer."

"And then he didn't want to play your game?"

"He came out and stood over you. The hardest thing I ever had to do was to hit you, Bren. He smiled at me. He told me that he'd thought of a better way. He said that his gun was small calibre. He said that there would be very little blood if he shot you between the eyes. Later their people would—would leave you in an alley. He said that you were dangerous to him and that his way was best, as he had a big deal on and didn't want to take any chances of your spoiling things for him."

"And then?"

"Your head was at a funny angle. To shoot you properly he had to bend over to aim the gun. It gave me a chance to get to him. I am small but I am a dancer, and my muscles are trained. I grabbed his arm just above the elbow and dug my thumb into the nerve near the bone. It is painful. He straightened up.

"I dug harder and it made his hand open. The gun dropped and he bent to grab it from the floor. I grabbed for it, too. But it hit the floor and went off. It made a very small noise. I didn't even know he was hurt until he fell across my hand and the edge of the robe. I pulled away. Somehow he got up and walked over to that chair. He was smiling with the pain. Just as you awakened, he died."

Bren looked around and saw the gun.

"Did you touch it?"

"The gun? I picked it up and then I saw that he was dying. I put it on that table." Her lips spread in a wild smile and she began to laugh.

He pulled her up to a sitting position, slapped her smartly, forehead and back-hand. "There's no time for that. Go wash your hands. I have to think."

When Laena came back she was calm. Her face was still pale. She had changed to a wool dress in a rich brown shade that complemented her hair.

"How about Maria?"

"I think she's completely loyal, Bren."

"Go talk to her. She's still moaning. Quiet her down. Send her away."

Laena hurried to the kitchen. He heard the soft sounds diminish and cease. Laena came back and sat, watching him like an obedient child as he paced back and forth. She did not look toward August Brikel although he sat like a ghastly witness to the conversation.

"As far as you know, they are still in the dope business?"

"I think so. They have agents who smuggle it across into the States. The Corner Club was a wholesale distribution point for a metropolitan area."

"And there's a big deal coming up?"

"He said so," she said in a flat voice. Bren could see that her calm was achieved only through great effort.

"How gullible is Gowan Teed?"

"You know that as well as I. I'd say he was anything but gullible."

"Do you know what hotel he's at?"

"Yes"

"Have you got some black thread?"

She frowned in confusion. "Y—yes."

"Use your phone and call up Gowan

## Warning! Act fast on PIN-WORMS



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Teed. Tell him that you sneaked out to phone him. Tell him that I've been taken care of, that August had several drinks to celebrate and wants you to go away with him. Say that August told you that he is going to leave Gowan Teed holding the bag on a big deal coming up, and that the authorities will quiet down if they can get their hands on someone.

"Say that you called him because you know he'll be generous with you for giving him the information. Tell him that August and my body are in your apartment and that you're afraid to go back; that August is making too much noise. What do you think?"

She waited a long time before answering. "I think I see what you mean." She looked at August. "We can slide the chair over there facing the door. The little bedroom lamp doesn't throw much light. With the table beside him and the lamp on it he would look—"

"Exactly."

"But how about the two kinds of bullets in August?"

He snapped his fingers. "You could meet Teed in front and hand him August's gun. I'll clean it off. You could say that you sneaked it out of here and that August has still another gun. I'll let August use mine."

SHE stood with her back against the door. The one small light glowed near August's chair, shining upward on his face. She moved the table a few inches and went back to the door. Bren lay on the floor off to the other side of the table, his face in the light.

He said, "Does the black ink look like blood in this light, Laena?"

"That spot on your forehead. It looks like a hole. It's . . . horrible."

"That's the way I want it to be."

"Turn your head just a little bit this way. Good."

Bren memorized the position, stood up and checked the gun once more. To make the position of the gun more realistic once he had forced himself to wrap Brikel's fat chilling fingers around the grip, it had been necessary to thumbtack the dead man's coatsleeve to the wooden arm of the chair. He bent over and sighted along the gun, saw that it aimed just to the left of

the door, where Gowan Teed would enter.

The black thread was doubled for strength, drawn back and looped around one leg of the small table.

Bren said, "Get down there, Laena. He ought to be along soon. Did he sound suspicious?"

"A little. Puzzled, sort of."

After she had gone, he went to the door and looked at Brikel. In death Brikel had become more of a symbol than an individual. It was hard to imagine that the slack body had constituted a menace. To hold Brikel's head erect, he had inserted the hook of a wire coat hanger in the back of the man's collar, twisted the other portion of the hanger around the top of the back of the chair.

He took his position on the floor, found the end of the doubled thread and waited. He forced himself to take long slow breaths so that it would be easier to hold his breath when Gowan Teed arrived. The minutes dragged on. Had Teed become suspicious of Laena? Had Brikel been in a position where he could have crossed Teed? Bren was becoming cramped from his position. The heavy thump of his heart seemed audible in the room.

There was a soft footstep in the hall, the tiny scrape of leather on tile. Bren half shut his eyes. He could see the door. It opened slowly inward and Gowan Teed stood there, the lamplight making a small glitter on his rimless glasses. The glasses were incongruous in comparison with the lean gun in his hand, the bulk of the silencer lengthening the barrel by a good four inches. His head moved in quick birdlike motions as he took in the room.

Teed said softly, as he pushed the door shut, "Stupid, August. Very stupid to kill him here. You make it difficult. The girl told me something interesting. Put the gun away, August. We must talk."

Gowan Teed stood tense, pointed his weapon toward Brikel. His voice was more shrill. "You're drunk, August. Put the gun away!"

With a slow movement of his fingers, Bren increased the tension on the thread. He had a horror of it breaking. The jet-white blast, the whip-thunder of the shot was enormous, contained as it was in the tile and plaster room.

Gowan Teed fired three methodical



shots. Each shot was a bit louder than the last as the packing in the silencer was worn away. The third shot was as loud as a cap pistol. Harris heard the thud of slug into dead flash with each shot.

Teed reached slowly for the door knob, and then his hand paused. He came on tiptoe across the room.

When he was within range, Bren swung his legs parallel to the floor, striking Teed at ankle level, sweeping his feet out from under him. Teed gasped as he fell. Bren scrambled onto him, found that Teed had a surprising wiriness. He caught the gun wrist and Teed twisted it away, trying to bring the weapon to bear.

Bren flattened down against him, got his right hand on Teed's sparse hair, lifted the head and banged it down solidly against the tile. Teed sighed as his muscles relaxed. Bren lifted himself up, delicately gauged the distance, chopped Teed on the jaw with a right hand blow that didn't travel over eight inches.

The other gun dangled from Brikel's index finger. Bren pried out the thumb tacks, released the thread, unhooked the coat hanger. As he did so, Brikel's body bent slowly forward, head descending. As it passed the balance point, Brikel fell heavily, face down, across the unconscious Teed.

There were voices in the hall. Bren raced into the bathroom and scrubbed the ink from his forehead. He hid there, hearing the door open, the voices louder, Laena's shrill scream.

\* \* \*

The concrete bench in Alameda Park was, absurdly, in the precise shape of an overstuffed sofa. The afternoon sun touched the flowers, the children on bicycles, the men selling *kikas*.

Bren Harris sat and smoked nervously, glancing at his watch from time to time. At last he saw her, a distant tiny figure, the sun making her hair look pure white, her shoulders square in the dark suit. She walked slowly. On impulse he stood up and went down a curving side path, watching until he saw her go by. He followed.

He came up behind her, watching the rhythm of her walk, hair in movement, slight swing of her slender arms.

"Can you pick up girls in this park?" he asked.

She whirled. "Bren, you didn't have to stay. I told you in the note that you should go back. I'm not right for you, Bren. I'm no good for anyone, even myself."

He put his hands on her shoulders. "Shake well before using. Let me decide what is right for me. How are you and the *policia* getting along?"

She smiled. "They think I'm a trusting little girl with naughty friends. Teed's adopted embassy has given him up. He'll be a long, long time in a Mexican cell. Bren, please. Go home and forget me."

"After all the trouble I went to figuring out that you'd be walking through here at this time?"

"Don't joke about it."

A great hairy clattering insect appeared a few inches from her cheek. With a frightened gasp she ran into the circle of his arm, her face against his chest, shuddering.

The super-salesman who held the mechanical monster on the end of a string said, with a wide grin, "Buy souvenir de Mejjico, meester."

Bren looked down at the top of Laena's fair head. He said softly, "No thanks, friend. I've already got one."

THE END



# THE SPIDER'S WEB



By  
**LARRY J.  
MARCUS**

Duke sunk his fist  
into Merton...

*The Spider'd taught him how to grab into the big-time  
so it was only right, Duke reasoned, for the  
Spider to show him how to exit—on a morgue slab.*

**T**HE steel rail under Duke's back trembled. The smooth thunder of the train filled the night air. And the big man held him clamped to the track, getting heavier as the thunder grew louder.

Twisting in the vise-like grip around

his chest, Duke stared into the onrushing red and white eyes of the subway car. He saw the sleepy-eyed motorman and the shining sharp-flanged wheels whirling towards him.

The big man and Duke were at the mouth of the tunnel where the trains went

underground from the El. Coming from the bright moonlight, the motorman would never see the black blur of the two men lying on the tracks.

One of them wouldn't mind—the big man. The .22 slug in his guts had ended all his fears. Duke minded. He screamed for his life.

And nobody heard.

\* \* \*

The previous Monday, Duke Franken had the world in the pocket of his not-too-zoot suit. Heavy zoot stuff was for the kids in the cellar-club gangs, not for big-time operators.

No, Duke's pants were a little pegged and a heavy gold watch-chain with a shiny fob was draped down one leg. But the only other sharp touch was the shirt, egg-shell white with a wide-spread collar. The color was close enough to white to get away with. Even at graduation, Duke had to get away with something.

Yeh, he was going to graduate. Duke was a guy who kept his nose clean. Going on the hook from school would have meant the truant officer. That would have meant bringing his uncle up to school.

Duke lived with his uncle, but the old guy didn't care what he did, as long as he stayed out of trouble. So you didn't throw away big connections by going on the hook.

Besides, he had to be at school every day. He was the local runner for the policy machine—Spider Galler's main racket. A large school like Quincy High brought in quite a piece of change in nickel and dime bets on the numbers, specially with a smart guy like Duke to do the collecting.

Not to mention the tea. It was just a sideline, but there was a nice quick buck in marijuana.

Galler wouldn't like a valuable punk like Duke to be absent—or not to “keep his nose clean.”

So Duke went to school. Because he wasn't dumb, he made passing grades. It took a little copying from kids that sat next to him, but they were afraid to refuse him. He paid one of the mopey guys who liked to study to do his homework. It only cost a few cents, and Spider Galler saw

that Duke Franken had plenty of chips.

Of course, the graduation stuff was strictly for kids, but Spider had insisted that Duke should give it the full treatment. That way, he'd be more useful later on.

Later on . . . the big deals . . . the easy money. There was always room for a smart guy like Duke.

A very white smile split his smooth dark face as he looked into the mirror. Using a towel, he drew his long black hair into a sharp vertical blade at the back of his head. Carefully, using a hand-mirror, he examined the ultra-fashionable “Duck” hair-comb.

In the big assembly-hall, the organ boomed out with “Pomp and Circumstance”. Noreen Kinney took her place alongside Duke. Side by side, they marched down the center aisle to the stage. They came last because they were the tallest in the class. Noreen, in high heels and a floaty white dress, was a little taller. She was wearing a corsage of roses.

They had marched together in rehearsal. But suddenly, with the organ growling inside his stomach, Duke looked at Noreen's slender neck and thought how much it was like the stem of a flower, how the pink face above it was like the petals.

Duke didn't think like that often. It felt funny.

They separated on the big stage, the girls on one side, the boys on the other. But all the time Duke's eyes were on Noreen. He touched his slick hair. She'd be watching him too.

Then the dopey speakers had blabbed their pieces and the graduates had been given crisp white diplomas and everybody was shaking hands and the girls were kissing each other.

Duke didn't speak to any of the guys. He hardly saw them as he headed straight for Noreen.

“Hey, Kinney!”

Her gray eyes got wide with surprise. Duke Franken never bothered with any of the girls at school. In the gym locker-room, the girls said he went out with grown women—not good ones either.

“Kinney, how about we go down for chow?”

They were the only ones in the class whose families weren't there. Duke had

only the disinterested uncle, and Noreen's father was a Combs private cop, nights. They didn't pay him when he didn't work.

"I promised Danny Merton I'd eat with him and his family." The lashes of her dropped eyelids were thick as soot streaks on her soft cheeks. "I'm awful sorry, Martin."

"Aw, call me 'Duke'." He tried to keep it smooth. "It's oke by me—if you want to go with *him*."

She had named the school's star athlete, a husky, clean-looking boy, not too bright.

"We're going to the Shan-King Inn. Maybe we'll see you there."

Duke said, "Yeh, maybe." But he was thinking the hell you will; he was thinking she's too skinny anyhow.

Yet, somehow, after he had stood, looking sharp, on the corner of the boulevard and Kiley and after he had one drink in the Kiley Grill, Duke found he was hungry for chow mein.

AND the Shan-King Inn was the nearest place. . . . The dim upstairs room had dusty colored slides on the dance-floor lights. The four-piece band was tired, tired of playing, tired of Chinese restaurants, just plain tired.

But, for Duke, Noreen's slender white figure and her shiny pale-gold hair made the joint a wonderland. Stubbornly, he told himself he was full of soup. He told himself about the soft little numbers on the boulevard, with their shiny skirts with the wide patent leather belts—how real smart dishes like that went for him, how they were the real stuff.

And, all the time, his eyes were clipped onto Noreen Kinney—as she danced with Danny Merton, said good night to Mr. and Mrs. Merton, and stayed behind to dance some more with Danny.

The music petered out. Danny led the tall girl back to the empty booth, sat down beside her. Suddenly, the girl saw Duke. She waved across the dim room and smiled.

Duke remembered something from a movie. It wasn't done in places like the Shan-King Inn, but he tried it.

He strolled smoothly over to their booth and waved carelessly at Danny Merton. "May I have the pleasure of the next dance, Miss Kinney?"

He was smirking at his own corniness when he saw Merton's hand around the girl's waist and realized that the expression in her eyes was a pleading, frightened one.

Hot waves prickled the back of Duke's neck. Slowly, he washed his hands together, feeling the heavy signet rings on the middle finger of each hand.

"Oke, sweetheart, get up and let's see what else you can do with those paws."

It was a way of getting rid of Merton, and Duke had to be alone with Noreen. With the heavy rings on his hands and the dirty tricks from a hundred street fights, he knew he could take the punk if he got the jump on him.

Merton removed his hand and stood up slowly. His eyes were on Duke's hands. Duke swung the side of his heavy shoe against the boy's shin, then ripped his left hand with the sharp-edged ring off the boy's nose. Merton tilted backwards a second, and Duke sunk his fist into Merton's stomach.

The kid crumpled out onto the waxed dance floor, under the changing lights. A yell of pain wrenched from his mouth.

Something kept Duke from doing what he would have done in a street fight—going after him and kicking him until all his fight was gone. Instead, he watched Merton wipe the blood from his torn nose, and start to get up.

Duke wondered why the restaurant people hadn't done anything to stop it. Hypnotized, he watched the boy get off the gleaming floor.

Merton looked strong and sure of himself as he slowly plodded toward Duke. He was passing a booth when a narrow, highly-polished shoe slithered out between his feet. His weight was forward on his toes, and he fell, suddenly and hard.

From the floor, his eyes swung to the booth. So did Duke's.

It was Spider Galler, slim and hard-eyed, in a loose-fitting gabardine the same yellowish color as his eyes. He stared at Danny Merton, apparently without emotion. But something made the kid look at the two goons on either side of Galler. Their broken-fisted hands were like dirty rocks on the white tablecloth.

Spider let it sink in. Then he said, "Beat it, punk."

Merton had lived in the neighborhood long enough. He beat it.

"You didn't have to do that, Spider." Duke tried to look nonchalant. "Thanks, though."

"Sure, sure, Duke. Smoother that way." Galler made a circle of his thumb and forefinger and waved it gently in front of him. "You know me, Duke, everything smooth."

Noreen came up behind Duke, shivering and scared. Galler looked at her and ran his pointed tongue slowly along his thin pale lips.

"How about doing the honors with the lady, Duke?"

Duke introduced the girl. Spider asked them to have a drink, but Noreen said her father would be getting home soon and would worry. She asked Duke if he would take her home.

Spider shrugged and smiled coldly. Duke wondered what was behind the flat amber eyes.

They went home in a cab. Somehow, he couldn't do the things he usually did when he had a girl in a cab—not with Noreen. He told himself it was just a matter of taking things slow and easy, keeping everything smooth.

At the iron gate to the tenement yard, the tall girl took his hand in hers and said, "Thank you, Duke. You were wonderful."

She gave his hand a warm little squeeze and Duke felt happy—and, for the first time in his life, guilty.

Then she dropped his hand and said, "Ooh, there's daddy."

She ran to meet the bulky figure that was trudging up the street, wearing a private cop's uniform. Duke almost ran away. He wasn't used to meeting cops—especially when they were the fathers of girls he went out with.

Then the old guy was standing in front of him, saying, "Hello, Duke. Nor' was telling me what you did for her. Thanks, son." He looked at Duke with weary, hope-tinged eyes. "It ain't easy for an old man to bring up a daughter decently—in a place like this. It's nice to find a decent young fellow around."

As he spoke, Duke recognized Mr. Kinney as the Combs guard who watched the big shops on the boulevard at night, the

jewelry and haberdashery stores. The neighborhood gangs swore that he was beyond bribes or fear. He had been a regular cop and, unlike most of the Combs men, he knew how to use the heavy revolver that was part of his uniform.

Only a few guys had tried to hoist one of his shops in the past five years. One he had killed. He had taken in the others single-handed, and they got such a pasting in the process that they never tried another job on Kinney's beat—even when they got off through pull or bribes.

Very respectfully, Duke said good night. He wasn't going near *that* dame again.

NEXT evening, he stood on the boulevard, twirling the heavy gold watch-chain with the locket on it, talking hard with some of the sharper punks. But, before eight o'clock, he was looking up "Kinney" in the telephone book.

At nine, he called for Noreen. They walked out by High Point Park and looked at the flowers on the tulip-trees and didn't say much. But, for the next couple of nights, Duke found himself calling at the Kinney flat, going to the movies, buying Noreen sodas, or just walking with her.

Sitting on a bench, up by the reservoir on Thursday night, they kissed very gently.

"Noreen." Duke waited a long time to go on. "You got a picture—you know, a snapshot—of you?"

"Yes, Duke." Shyly she took out the little red wallet and handed him a tiny photo. "You can't have it to keep unless you give me one."

Silent and embarrassed, he opened the heavy locket on the long watch-chain. He took out a penny-arcade portrait of himself—the only picture he'd ever thought enough of to keep there.

He put Noreen's picture in the locket and gave her his.

It made him feel queer, sort of holy. . . .

Friday morning, he slept late, and the phone bell dragged him out of bed. It was Spider Galler.

"Where you been, kid?"

"Around, Spider."

"We got things to talk about."

"I'll see you at the Kiley tonight."

"You'll see me now. I got stuff on my

mind. Get here in half hour," Spider said.

The voice on the phone had never lost its cool smoothness, but it made Duke feel afraid and sick. He heated water and ate a stale seeded roll with his coffee . . . card-board and dishwasher.

Then he dressed as carefully as he could in a hurry, and went over to Spider's. It was an old house, up near the park. Coming in from the June wind off the trees, Duke smelled sour dirt and tobacco smoke.

Galler lounged in an armchair, wearing canary-yellow pajamas and a dark amber robe. It was a big room and, in one corner, were Rocky and Ox. They were playing cards, dopily, with slobbered threats.

"You're a smart punk, Duke. I like the way you operate."

"Thanks, Spider. I sure like working for you. I thought—"

"Don't think! I'm going to make you a collector. You drive a car, don't you?"

"Yeh, but—"

"You get a kid at school to pick up the bets, like I told you?"

"Yeh. Johnny Ritz. I been teaching him."

"Oke. Starting tomorrow, you ride the black heap with Benny." He shrugged slowly. "Benny's been paying off more than is healthy—for Benny. He won't be with us long."

"Thank, Spider. I'll be over with Johnny Ritz first thing in the morning."

"Right. See you." Galler's voice was silky and mean. "By the way, Duke, that kid you were arming Monday night—she's got class."

"She's all right." Duke hoped the hot wave of blood that crawled over his face wouldn't show.

"I go for that young stuff. How about us three should go out tonight, only you should kind of disappear?"

It didn't sound like an order. Duke knew it was. There was a clammy wetness at the back of his neck. He played dumb.

"I don't think—"

"You ain't supposed to. Bring her!"

"It would—I can't. . . ." They always said around the neighborhood that Duke Franken thought fast. "Not tonight, Spider. It'd spoil the deal."

The words hung in the room a minute

before Spider said, very softly, "A deal you didn't tell me about?"

"Only until I got it worked out, Spider." The two mugs in the corner had stopped playing cards. They were staring blankly at Duke. "I didn't want to look jerky in case it fell through."

He stopped, hoping for some respite. Galler's stare was cold, waiting.

"It's ready now, though, Spider."

"How about you should let me decide whether it's ready?"

"Yeh, naturally." Duke had a plan now. "You know Apple's—on the boulevard?"

Apple's was a pawnshop and jewelry store. It was also the leading fence in the district. They wouldn't be able to trace any of the stolen stuff they had in the place—if you could get away with it. To knock it over was the dream of every hoodlum in the neighborhood.

But it was on old man Kinney's beat.

"So what?"

"Well, Noreen is that Kinney's daughter. I been seeing a lot of him. Couple of times, him and me got talking after she went upstairs."

Galler's yellow eyes were incandescent with greed.

"He's been telling me he can't get enough ahead being honest." Duke took a deep breath. "He'd like to be in on one good job, get his split, and get out of that lousy job."

There was a hint of excitement on Galler's thin poker face.

Duke continued, "He figures Apple's would be the best spot—with all that stolen goods and with that fire-escape in the alley."

"You wouldn't be kidding me, Dukie, would you?" Spider's glance whipped to the two goons in the corner and back to the boy.

"I wouldn't dare, Spider."

**T**HEY fixed up the job for Monday night. The boulevard was always quiet on Monday nights. Duke explained that Kinney wanted a smooth job and that he'd settle for one third of the take.

"Promise it to him, Duke. What can he do?"

"Nothing, but we better do the job his way. He wants me and another guy to go

up that fire-escape in the alley to the third floor. There aren't any bars on that window. Maybe I should take Ox."

"I told you to stop thinking." Galler's eyes were glittering now. "You don't think I'd trust a punk and a round-heel on a job like this?"

"Kinney won't deal with nobody but me. He trusts me."

"That means it's you and me." Galler's laugh sandpapered the boy's spine. "Ain't that cozy?"

Duke left without saying anything. He had a lot to think about.

A smart operator would only think one thing. Tomorrow, he'd tell Spider the deal fell through. He'd get a loud ha-ha, but he could make it all right by fixing up things with Noreen for Galler.

He was sitting on the edge of his unmade bed when the phone rang. It was Noreen.

"Hello, Duke." Her voice was little and soft. "I got lonely when you didn't call."

"Been busy." He was gruff, though he didn't mean to be. "Looking for a job."

"Please come over tonight. We don't have to go anyplace if you're tired."

"I'll call you."

Things had changed. It wasn't so easy to be a smooth operator. . . .

Duke went down to the cellar clubroom of the Z-Boys. They were called that because they were the last thing before the reform school. Also, because most of them went to the trade schools, and "Z" stood for zip-gun, the home-made .22 pistol they put together in the school shops and peddled to the other hard punks around the neighborhood.

Charlie No-Hands came in. He was president of the Z-Boys. After a few careful words, five bucks went to Charlie. A slim aluminum tube went to Duke, along with some words of instruction about the .22 cartridge and the rubberband that came with it. The zip-gun went off—not accurately, but with deadly effect at close range.

"Nobody gets to know I got this, Charlie."

"How do you think we stay in business?" As special flattery, he added, "Any friend of Spider Galler's. . . ."

Charlie No-Hands thought Franken

smiled kind of funny when he heard that. . . .

Duke spent Saturday and Sunday with Noreen, going home as late as he could and seeing the girl as early as he could. Mostly they just walked up by the reservoir and Duke was silent, thinking. Sometimes, Noreen would let him kiss her—and he'd feel dreamily happy, and like a jerk. . . .

Then it was Monday, Monday night, nine o'clock.

Like Duke had said, the old cop was at the other end of his beat from Apple's at nine. That would give him an excuse, Duke told Galler, for not seeing them sneak into the dark alley behind the pawnshop. And he wouldn't check the alley when he went past.

They left Ox across the street to watch. Quietly, they slipped into the greasy blackness of the alley. The web of the fire-escape leaned against the wall like a flimsy charred skeleton.

Both of them were silent until they were on the second-floor platform. A narrow ladder led to the third floor and the unbarred window. Duke was in front on the ladder when Spider Galler started to talk in his silky, mean voice.

"With this on the old man, I won't even need a knockdown to this Noreen kid."

The scaly paint of the ladder-rungs grated under Duke's hands as Spider added, "Bet she's pretty solid stuff, eh, Dukie? That quiet kind usually are."

The boy on the rickety platform looked down the black funnel of the alley. Ox was there, peering blindly in. You could tell he couldn't see anything.

Duke was fumbling for the zip-gun in his pocket when Galler's head reached the level of his feet. The man was saying, "That Noreen—" when Duke slammed the square-toed brogue into the gray triangle of face, right between the eyes.

Galler's tall body spun tightly in the air. The head hit ground first. It sounded like an unripe watermelon, splitting on the concrete.

SHAKING, Duke got down the fire-escape to the alley, looked at the sluggish stream on the pavement near Spider's head—what was left of it. He raced to the

street. Ox came up to him and Duke said, "In there. Spider wants you."

The stupid goon charged into the alley, and Duke saw old man Kinney at the corner of the street. He stepped out under the street lamp and waved to the old cop.

"In the alley, Mr. Kinney. Better be careful . . . two of them."

"Only two?" But the old man's laugh was tired. "Stand back, son."

He walked straight into the alley. There was a single flash from the place under the fire escape. Then Kinney's big gun spoke four times. No one came out and Duke slipped away as a crowd gathered.

But Duke didn't have anyplace to go. Rocky and Benny and the rest of Spider's "boys" would be looking for him. If Ox or old man Kinney had had a chance to talk, the cops would be looking for him too.

He headed for the dark back streets. Back streets where the dirt and rubbish piled up by the year, where cats fought hissing battles over old garbage . . . just so they were dark streets, Duke didn't care.

But, when it got to be midnight, somehow Duke was walking in front of Noreen's house, staring up at the gray oblong that he knew was her window.

"Don't be a jerk," he thought—and turned on his heel.

As he turned, a big figure loomed in front of him. A rush of breath carried the word, "Duke!"

Old man Kinney had been following him all the time.

Mechanically, he turned around again, started to walk away from the man who had called his name. But the man followed him. Down one dark street and up another, with the screaming cats and an occasional drunken laugh from one of the tenements, the man followed Duke.

The boy was afraid to run—afraid of what the man might do to stop him. The steps behind him were tired, tired but relentless—never getting any nearer, always there.

Now they were under the El. Terror filled Duke's throat like phlegm. A train rumbled overhead, shaking the lean steel girders. It stopped at the station a block away.

Another train, going in the other direction, was just pulling out of the next station down the line. If Duke could get up the stairs and on to the incoming train before the man behind him, he would be O. K.

Carefully, he timed his steps, felt for a dime in his pocket. Then he sprinted up the iron-treaded stairs.

On the swaying wooden platform, the boy breathed easier as he watched the train come in.

But it didn't stop.

An empty going back to the yards. Duke was alone on the wooden scaffold. The slow steps came through the waiting-room. The door opened, and Duke turned and slipped out to the narrow end of the platform, down where the trains turned to go into the subway tunnel.

His back to the other man, he slid the zip-gun from his pocket, pulled back the rubber-band and clipped it down.

Then, with the shiny vicious toy in his hand, he turned to face the man. Something gleamed in the other man's hand, too. He spoke softly—the one word, "Duke!"

Suddenly, the boy walked swiftly toward him, let go the rubber band. A loud click, that's all it was. But the big man, old man Kinney, fell forward. Duke watched him fall, could not move. And the heavy old arms grasped him around the chest, locked there.

Duke twisted his hard young body. The old man's breath was a quick snoring. Duke pulled hard to get away, and they fell.

Locked together, like sweethearts, they fell—the old man on top—off the platform and on to the track where it went into the tunnel.

And Duke screamed. . . .

It seemed strange when they found them—mangled the way they were—that the old man's hand should be closed on Duke's big shiny watch-chain, with the locket on it that held Noreen Kinney's picture.

Of course they couldn't know, any more than Duke had, that old man Kinney had found the fob in the alley behind Apple's and followed Duke to return it to him—

To keep him out of trouble.



# RENDEZVOUS WITH BLOOD



The heavy iron swung in a full arc.

**I**T WAS warm and muggy all over New York that August evening, but nowhere so hot as at Police Headquarters. A huge, black cloud, blotting out the city lights, promised relief from the heat, but downtown a different storm had already broken.

The cause was Joe Grand, a midtown bad boy who had served two years of a ten-to-twenty stretch for manslaughter. That morning Joe had been ushered down to County Court to blow the whistle on

*Convict Joe Grand slipped out of prison to try and see too-lovely Clara into the next world.*

**By HARVEY**

**WEINSTEIN**

an old buddy. When Joe's guard had turned his back at the recess, the slippery Mr. Grand had wandered out with the spectators.

The teletype clattered to eight states: *Thirty-four years old; five-eleven; one-seventy; long face; dangerous.* "Determined" could also have been used to describe the man who was cautiously threading through the eight o'clock crowds in the theatre district, trying to reach his ex-wife's one-room apartment on West Fiftieth Street.

Joe stepped from the self-service elevator on the fourth floor of the old ten-story building and rang Clara Grand's bell, directly opposite. He would be safe here. Good thing he hadn't told the cops he had a wife, when he'd been tagged for knifing that seaman in a barroom brawl. How he had schemed for this chance to see her again, even to offering to testify. He had to hear her own lips tell why she had divorced him. And then she was going to come back to him, or . . .

Clara opened the door a few inches. "Joe!" she gasped.

Joe shoved inside. The woman's perfume wafted to him as she brushed him in closing the door. *How I need you. Come to me, honey.*

She pushed him off. "What are you doing here?" she asked coldly.

"I had to see you." He was hurt, but kept it hidden.

"Paroled so soon?"

"Yeah," he lied. Now he caught her in his animal-like grasp, managing to force his kisses on her.

The woman fought free. "Now you've spoiled my make-up," she complained.

Joe groaned inwardly. How could she do this to him?

He followed Clara across the room, pleading, "Nobody will ever love you the way I do."

She whirled on him. "You never loved me, Joe Grand. You're selfish and sneaky and brutal, and you never loved anybody but yourself."

Joe seethed with anger, because the truth struck home. Two years before he would have slapped Clara down for speaking like that, but now. . . .

He watched Clara seat herself at her vanity table to fix up again. Reminding

himself that he was hungry, he helped himself to the makings of bread and jam, and then to one of his ex-wife's cigarettes. He wondered why she didn't try to get rid of him.

Clara soon answered that question. "You'd better start thinking about getting out of here," she said with surprising calmness, "or my boy-friend will kick you out. He's due in ten minutes."

So she had a new boy-friend. No wonder she was fussing so much with her auburn hair. No wonder she was prettied up so much in that new green dress. For another guy's arms! He wasn't going to take this from her.

"I'm going to stick around," he said in his tough way. "We'll see who kicks who out."

"Yeah?" Clara gave a short laugh. "He happens to be a detective."

That brought Joe to a halt. For a moment he thought of making a break while he still had time. But where else could he go? And if he did leave, he'd be giving Clara up for all time. But if he stuck around, he might still get an opening to win her back.

"How did you come to meet a cop?" he asked jealously.

"Frank's on the Broadway Squad. He came into the restaurant to eat and he took a liking to me—and I to him."

"Can't say I blame him. But my wife going with a cop—I can't get over that."

"Too bad about you." Clara's soft voice lifted angrily. "At least I won't have to wait on tables all my life if I marry Frank Bell. And I won't have to run around in the middle of the night keeping the likes of you out of trouble."

Joe's crafty mind took a cue from Clara's own words. "Was that the only reason you ran around in the middle of the night?"

Clara's face flamed. "What do you mean by that?"

"You'll find out in a minute. But first, does this dick of yours, does he know you're divorced?"

"He does."

"But does he know you're divorced from me, a convicted murderer?"

Joe had his answer when Clara's eyes wavered. He leered at her. "And does he know you helped me plan robberies?"

"That's a dirty, dirty lie!"

"Sure, honey. You know it's a lie and I know it's a lie, but what will your boyfriend think?"

"He'll believe me."

"Maybe he will, but he'll always wonder. There's a lot of circumstantial evidence against the wife of a guy with my rep. That wondering will grow like a worm in his body, and you and he will soon be through."

Clara's eyes steamed with contempt. "Not even you could be that low, to say things about me when I always was so good to you."

"There's no fat in that, honey. How good and helpful are you gonna be to me in the future?"

"Not a chance. We're through, and that's definite. Now be a sport and go before Frank gets here."

But Joe wasn't worrying so much about the detective. He dreaded meeting this dick, but he sensed that Clara dreaded it even more. He continued to stall, saying: "I've got to talk to you some more. I won't get rough, and I won't spill the beans. On my word of honor."

**W**HATEVER Clara would have said about Joe's honor was dammed within her by the tinkle of the doorbell. Desperate, she pushed Joe toward a closet near the door. "Don't let him see you," she whispered.

Joe eased himself into the mustily fragrant closet, leaving the door partly open so he could see into the room. This was the best break he could have hoped for.

Frank Bell was about Joe's age, but taller and huskier. Joe hated him on sight, not for being a cop, but because of the hug and kiss he gave Clara. The dick said: "Our date's off, honey. Got a detail."

*That's perfect,* Joe thought.

But Clara had to say: "Oh dear! They're always picking on you."

"Not only me this time. The old man has ordered every available man out to grab some con who took a run-out powder today. Say, his name is Grand, like yours—Joe Grand. You wouldn't know him, would you, honey?"

"No, I wouldn't." Clara had backed out of view, but the tension in her voice

reached like a damp hand into the closet and wrapped clammy fingers around Joe's neck.

It was easy to tell by the changing expression on Bell's face that he too had noticed Clara's agitation. He said, "Why are you so nervous?"

"I'm just annoyed that we can't go out tonight." As she said this Clara came forward and playfully pushed her boyfriend into an armchair facing the closet; then she seated herself on the edge of another, so that only her dangling feet and ankles were visible to Joe. They were nice feet too, as Joe knew, but he wished they wouldn't twitch so.

All at once he sensed that Clara was playing a different game, now that she knew the real score. She was pretending to be stringing along with him, so that Joe wouldn't think she was ratting on him, but her real plan was to detain Bell till he got wise to the situation.

Joe's hands desperately groped around the closet floor. They closed upon a dusty flatiron, a mean weapon in a free-for-all.

The dick's eyes were scanning the room. "Something's wrong here," he said. He stood up and walked out of Joe's sight. "Look at this butt. Smoked down to the thumb."

Clara had moved after him. Joe heard her say, "Don't you think it's mine?"

"Yours? You always ditch a cigarette at the half-way mark. And where's the lipstick trace?" He began to fire questions with the rapidity of a Browning Automatic. "Who was here? Was it this Joe Grand? What is Joe Grand to you?" Then in a gentle voice: "You know I love you, but you're holding something back and I've got to know what."

Joe didn't hear Clara answer, but he could picture her as ready to tell, perhaps even then pointing to the closet. He edged forward to see better.

They were in each other's arms. The way Clara clung to her new boyfriend stabbed into Joe's heart. All of his selpity, all his bitterness, flashed down his right arm and tensed his grip on the flatiron. He inched open the door, then lunged forward. One step, and the heavy iron swung in a full arc.

Clara shrieked a warning, but too late. Bell never knew what hit him as the blow

caught him at the base of the skull. Clara tried to hold him as he fell, but he sagged to the floor and lay there motionless.

The woman slumped to her knees and began to wail: "Frank! Frank! I didn't mean this to happen. Speak to me, Frank darling."

Joe knelt by the dick. "Stiff for keeps," he muttered.

Clara threw herself on the couch.

For lack of something better to do, Joe wiped the flatiron and put it back in the closet. Next he wandered about the room, wiping wherever he thought he might have left prints, and finally he picked up the tell-tale cigarette butt and put it in his pocket. He was hardly conscious of what he was doing.

*Killed again, killed again, I've killed again,* he kept repeating to himself. *And I've killed a cop. What they'll do to me when they catch me?*

Joe's aimless feet took him to the window. He looked out and was startled by a jagged flash of lightning that tore across the narrow patch of sky. The following thunder rattled the windowpane. The noise seemed to drive the fog from Joe's mind. A plan began to form in his crafty brain.

He walked back to where Clara huddled. For a moment he studied the shaking, sobbing body of the woman who had once loved him. Then he sat down beside her.

"Go away," she moaned.

"Where?" he asked.

"Anywhere. Back to jail, if they'll have you."

"That might be a good idea. But what about you? You're a witness to all this."

"Just leave me alone. Oh, why did you have to come here? I wish I was dead."

"Do you really wish you were dead?"

Joe ran his hand up Clara's shoulders and let his fingers linger on her neck.

**T**HE woman squirmed around, terrified. Her tears had washed her make-up into streaks so that she looked haggard, and this new fright added to the ugly effect.

Joe took his hand away. "See, you still want to live." He forced his voice to sound soft to ease her fear. "Now pull yourself together. I need your help."

"You need me?" Her eyes held to his, as a fly watches a spider climb down the rungs of the web.

"They're going to fry me this time for sure, if they pin this on me. If you prove to me you'll play ball . . ." To himself he was thinking: *What I'd give to believe what I'm going to say. I don't want to scare you, I'm in love with you, even the way you look. But how could I trust you? You'd turn me in first time I turned my head. So I'm going to give you hope that you'll have a chance to rat on me, just so I can use you to save my own neck.*

He went on: "Play ball and help me now, and maybe we can pick up where we left off two years ago. We can go off somewhere and start in together again. I swear, you'll never live to regret it."

Clara continued to stare into Joe's eyes, as if weighing his sincerity. But her eyes didn't brighten. She said, "And if I don't play ball?"

"Then I'll give you the same as the dick," he said. Again he softened his voice. "But I don't ever want to do that. Well, are you with me?"

"What do you want me to do?" Clara said wearily.

Joe didn't reply at once. First he went to the hall door and listened intently. Satisfied that the building was quiet, he knelt by the corpse and tugged at it to test its weight. Clara didn't even watch him.

"Get out there and ring for the elevator," he told her, "but first open the door part way so I can keep my eye on you." He opened the dick's jacket as he spoke. "I think I can trust you," he lied, "but I'm reminding you there's a thirty-two in this shoulder holster. I'll pot you at the first wrong move."

Clara did as she was told. Joe made use of this final minute to go through the dick's pockets. Money was what he could always use, no matter where he would go. He helped himself from a roll he found in a hip pocket.

The woman signalled to him.

"Hold the door wide," he ordered. He bent down on the floor, head next to the corpse's knees, and heaved the body across his back and shoulder. Breathing hard and bemoaning his unused muscles, he moved across the hall.

He strained his ears for any random sound of footsteps or voices, and each moment he dreaded that someone might come out of a neighboring door. His luck held, but it was not till he had slumped to the floor of the elevator, his lifeless burden dangling behind him, that Joe permitted himself the luxury of self-congratulation.

"All the way up," he commanded the cowering Clara.

She pressed the tenth-floor button. The antiquated elevator jerked into motion with a moan like a monster in agony, then ground and clanked up the dismal shaft.

Clara's face was a waxen study in despair, under the amber glow from the weak dome light. "What are you going to do?" she whispered, so low that he could hardly hear her.

Joe jerked his free hand over his shoulder. "Up and over for this stiff. He doesn't know it, but he's going to commit suicide. After he drops a hundred feet from the roof, they'll never guess what really hit him."

Clara's face turned whiter.

Joe would have tried to needle her courage, but the elevator groaned to a stop. For a split second all was deafeningly quiet, then a thousand spirit whispers seemed to rush about until the noises merged into a clatter overhead. Rain was beating on the skylight at the top of the shaft.

The buzzer rang. "Let's move!" Joe barked. "This place might get more alive than the subway."

Clara held the door open for Joe, then trailed after him as he labored up the stairway to the roof.

Joe leaned against the wall on the top step to ease the weight of the corpse, as he waited for Clara to heave open the heavy door.

The woman staggered back as the heavens greeted them with a jagged blaze of lightning and the down draft blew a torrent of rain into their faces. The following peal of thunder seemed to shake the building.

Joe gloated over this sight. "Made to order," he said. "Quick. Over to the rear."

Clara shrank back. "I can't go through with this part," she said weakly.

"Outside!" Joe hissed, overpowering Clara with a look. "I'm not trusting you out of my sight—not yet."

He followed her into a world of water. The tarred surface of the roof was a morass of puddles, quickly formed by the cloudburst. Joe sloshed around the angular shapes of dumbwaiter shaft heads. He no longer felt the discomfort of the rain; he had been saturated immediately.

JOE dropped to his knees at the three-foot barrier and let the body slide forward, end over end, so that it balanced

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precariously, the head dangling over the void. He leaned out and gazed downward till his eyes could make out the dim court between Clara's building and the lower silhouette of the opposite house. Here and there lights dully gleamed from the apartments below, but no setback loomed to break the fall of the cascading wall of water, or the detective's body.

Joe turned to Clara, who shivered a few feet away, as if she feared to go too near the edge. The woman's hair had been washed down over her face and neck, and her dress wetly clung to her like an extra skin. At any other time and place Joe would have laughed, but now he grimly said:

"Get down on the other side. I'll tell you when."

She took her place, meekly, as if the last shred of spirit had been whipped out of her.

A huge, modern building which loomed out of the murk a few hundred yards to the north was the only witness. Even as Joe gazed upward, wondering if there could be any onlookers at that distance, a ragged seam of lightning began to stretch upward and outward from behind the skyscraper until it illuminated the ghastly scene.

"Now!" he barked.

They heaved together at the legs and up-ended the body into the abyss. One second, two—an earthshaking crash of thunder overwhelmed all sound. It was over.

Clara lay in the puddle at the roof's edge, as if being forced to handle her dead boy-friend's body had robbed her of the last of her strength and will.

Joe dragged her to her feet. "I'll bet nobody heard him land," he boasted. "They won't find him till morning and then they'll never connect it to me."

The woman was pitifully wretched. She clutched Joe for support, then full understanding seemed to return to her. She pushed him off and turned away.

Joe roughly grabbed her by the arm. "Where do you think you're going?"

"I don't care just so I don't have to look at you."

"You won't have to in another minute." The lightning flashed again, from a greater

distance, but brightly enough to paint Joe's face with the murder in his heart.

"No! No!" Clara cried frantically. She fought to break free.

Joe's fist crashed against her jaw.

The woman toppled on the barrier. Her fingers desperately clutched for a hold, but Joe stepped in and hurled her over. Clara was screaming with terror, but the cries were lost in the burst of thunder that saluted her on the way down.

\* \* \*

The lieutenant on duty at the desk of the Fifty-fourth Street precinct house was idly wondering if he should send a squad car after his ten-o'clock coffee, when the outer door opened. In walked the wettest man he had ever seen.

The officer suppressed a grin as he eyed the bedraggled citizen who paused respectfully a moment and then said: "I think you want to see me. I'm Joe Grand."

The patrolman at the switchboard leaped up at those surprising words and ran over to pin Joe's arms.

"Take it easy," the latter protested. "I'm no cop fighter. It's too wet out there. Figured I'd be more comfortable in a cell."

The lieutenant beamed his pleasure. "We've got nice dry ones, too," he said. "Joe Grand! The Commissioner will sure be glad to hear this." He motioned the patrolman to hustle Joe inside.

The lieutenant hastened to telephone the good news downtown. He made the necessary entries on the blotter and was once more beginning to think about his coffee, when the patrolman returned.

"He's as meek as a lamb, Chief," the latter reported. "Still sticks to his story that he moped around in the rain till he couldn't take it anymore. But there's one thing we can't figure out."

"What's there to figure? We were sure to pick him up sooner or later. He played it smart."

"Maybe so," the patrolman replied. "But when we went through the punk we found eighty dollars on him. The funny thing is that the dough is all marked money that the Broadway Squad uses on special jobs. We checked the numbers. Those bills were issued to Detective Bell. What do you make of that?"

# THRILL

## DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE COLLABORATED WITH FLYNN'S DETECTIVE FICTION

# DOCKET



Lizzie Dell was dead—and Race Williams took it personal. No matter whose toes got stepped on, he was going to dig out the killer she'd befriended.



Checking on svelt Yola O'Neil's morgue visit meant learning why her all-powerful Old Man was letting gungsel Eddie Marco cut into his territory.



Yola and Marco got around together, so when she called Race to a mysterious rendezvous he was prepared to find almost anything—but Marco slugged.



Unarmed, he went again to meet Marco. . . . Read the complete thriller by Carroll John Daly —“Race Williams Cooks a Goose”—in the October issue . . . published Sept. 2nd.

# MAD ABOUT MURDER

She said: "You bore me,  
Jack—so we break it off right  
here."



By **SCOTT O'HARA**

**A**S SHE fell, she had reached out with her left hand and had grabbed the sleazy green mesh curtain. The bathroom was small. She lay on her back, her scuffed feet spread, almost under the sink. Her head was cocked at what he felt was a ridiculous angle, because

*Sure the doll was dead.*

*But that didn't mean*

*Jack Forrester was going to pay*

*for his clandestine crime.*



the wall was in the way and she had doubtless struck it as she fell.

He stood in the doorway, his feet braced as though against the tipping of a world, and it was indeed his world which tipped and threatened to project him out into an unknown darkness.

The small bathroom had a fearsome clarity about it. Six inches from her right hand, the green plastic handle of a trick toothbrush with small tilted head gleamed against the cheap marble finish of the black linoleum. By some odd chance, the toothbrush had fallen parallel to the long line of her robed body and the head was slanted at the same abrupt angle as hers.

Small sounds intruded. The gurgle of the thin stream of water running down the sink drain, the metronome drip of the damp end of the shower curtain, a distant car squealing its way around too sharp a corner, a far-off and misty bellow of a tug in the harbor basin. Night sounds.

The room was hot and misty with the cooling steam of the shower she had taken, and thick with the scent of her, the personal fragrance running like a crimson thread through the headier fabric of perfume and creams and lotions. Mixed with other scents was the indefinable odor of death. Death was written in the blued contortion of face and the slit-tilt of eyes, feral, with dry glitter.

He wondered why he should feel nothing.

He had never thought of her as a big woman, though she had been firm in his arms. But a flaccid thickness of arm poked through the pulled-up sleeves, a greenish pallor of skin tones—and the magic was gone.

The magic had been tied to life and vitality. To see her walk away from him had twisted his emotions. He was poorly coordinated, a man who often stumbled—and her compact certainty of movement had made him feel as though they were of two different species.

It had started a year before. Each day he had eaten in the same restaurant at noon. And one day, paying his check, he had glanced at her. She was behind the cage, sitting on the tall stool. Their eyes had met. Always she had pushed buttons and his change had clattered down a metal chute. Then she began to take his change,

reach through the grill and put the change in his hand.

There had been a satisfaction in the mild perfection of his life, Ellen, the suburban house, the clean, sweet, small-animal smell of the children. But a dark girl with a wide mouth and mockery in her eyes had turned his home life to dusty unreality, to empty routine.

When courage was high he had asked to see her after work. Later, it had been advisable to phone Ellen, to explain why it was necessary to stay late in town. Ellen had proved unexpectedly understanding about the extra work that the office was demanding without the offer of extra pay.

The times of staying in the city grew more frequent. Ellen and the office faded back into the same dusty limbo of unreality, while the dark girl became the only reality. The facts about her were simple. Her name was Bertha Lewis. She came from Scranton. Her voice was low-pitched and slightly hoarse, her conversation limited to banalities and clinches. Objectively, he knew that she was rather stupid. Yet he could not account for the aura around her, the heady sense of mystery, the eyes that mocked while she spoke of inconsequential things.

He knew that she found him mildly amusing and that he was of no particular consequence to her. His attempts to analyze her and himself and their feeling for each other only made her restless and irritable. Than she would say: "Give the big words a rest, Jack."

THEN there was a date and she did not appear. He waited for four hours in the dark doorway. The next noon he found a chance to go near her when no one was about and she said in a husky whisper:

"I decided you bore me, Jack, because you talk too much—so we break it off right here."

Jack Forrester went meekly home. He tried to cure himself of her as though she had been a form of illness. But she was in the back of his mind with such clarity, such a remembrance of every move and gesture that it was like a melody which refuses to leave the mind. A symphonic sweep of music that he heard at all hours of the day and in the silent moments of

the night while Ellen slept. He had to be with her again to speak to her, to see if merely by being with her he could make an end to his memory of her.

In the darkness he had waited. A man he did not know had at last left her, a stout man who had braced himself on the sidewalk where the streetlight made his shadow long, a man who had lit a cigarette with an authoritative snap of a silver lighter and who had walked down toward the taxi stand on the corner, his heels smacking against the sidewalk with firm confidence, the end of the cigarette making pink arcs as he swung a heavy arm.

He had gone up, then. A thread of light had showed under her door and he had heard the muted roar of her shower. When it had ceased, he'd tapped and called to her. She had come close to the door and had said: "Forget something, Ed?"

"Bertha, it isn't Ed."

Disgust. Weariness. "Oh! You."

"I want to talk to you."

"Go away. There's nothing to talk about."

"Please, Bertha." Voice low because of those nearby who slept. Voice low because there was shame in pleading.

"Go away or I phone a cop."

He had been silent then, had heard her go back to the bathroom. He had heard the tiny domestic sound as she begun to brush her teeth, the small rasp altering in pitch as she had cupped her mouth around the brush in various positions.

Fury had been acid in his throat. He had thrust himself at the door, barely conscious of the rasp as the lock tore out of the wood, as the knob swung around and thudded against the plaster. . . .

The music of her had been a high symphonic chorus. but now she was dead and the music had turned to a sordid rhythm beat of an off-key piano playing an unimaginative blues, and then had faded away until there was no music at all.

Suddenly, there was a faint sound from her and he felt sweat on his body. Then he realized that some compression of gases within her had forced a passage through her closed throat.

The sound of the running water annoyed him. He reached over to turn it off, pausing as his fingers reached the

faucet, drawing his hand back suddenly. She had wiped the mist from the mirror with one swipe of a towel, and the space she had cleared was partially misted over.

He turned and went into the other room, sitting for a long time on the bed with his face in his hands. When he looked up he could see her right arm and hand, her dark hair and the blue-white of her temple. The sound of the running water was a distant whisper.

Then he moved slowly and with great weariness. It was difficult to force his mind back onto a logical basis. The investigation would be alarmingly simple: *Yeah, there was a thin fella who hung around. Eats here every noon, or used to. Works upstairs somewhere in the building. Sure, I heard 'em spating a while back, then he stopped eating here. Sure, I could identify him.*

*You say, Mrs. Forrester that your husband phoned and said he'd stay in town. Where?*

*Forrester, give us an account of your movements on the night of the murder.*

He inspected the door. The little metal box into which the bolt fitted had been torn free. Using knife blade as a screwdriver, breaking off wooden matches in the torn holes, he replaced the metal part. She had not used the ordinary lock because any skeleton key would fit it.

He gently closed the door, not touching the knob. Stepping quietly, as though afraid he would disturb her, he went to the bathroom, turned off the water by pressing against the handle with his thumbnail. He did not look down at her.

Using a bit of tissue, he turned off the light. Retreating through the apartment he turned off the bedroom lights, the small lamp just inside the apartment door. He turned the knob by grasping the shank of it with the same bit of tissue, closed it gently, went down the stairs and out onto the street, keeping well in the shadows.

The risk of talking to cab drivers was too great. He angled across the street. When he reached the corner, he saw that the stand was deserted. It was twenty after three. The sleeping city surrounded him. The wide sidewalks were empty.

A cruising prowler car turned onto the same street two blocks away. He turned, too quickly, and began to walk away from

it. He heard it slow as it came up to him. It would be too indicative not to turn and look at it. He turned, hoping the hat brim would shade his face from the street light overhead. The car speeded up then, and he saw for a fleeting instant the glint of light on a thick jaw.

He walked fifteen blocks to the railroad station, sat for a time in the waiting room. He dozed off, awakened with a start. At six-thirty he bought a razor, blades, toothbrush, toothpaste, went to the men's room and shut himself in a cubicle. He had breakfast and arrived early at the office.

**D**URING the weary morning he did not permit himself to think of how slim his single chance was, how incredibly slim. He was banking on a certain bravado in the stance of the man who had come from Bertha's apartment, a certain air of being willing to take a calculated risk.

At ten of twelve, he took the elevator down to the lobby and went into the restaurant. He selected a table from which he could observe both entrances. It might even be that the man had met her in some other way, in some other place. There was a new girl behind the grill. A sallow, blonde girl with a petulant mouth and a soiled pink shoulderstrap showing.

The pimpled waiter came over to his table. After he ordered, he forced himself to say:

"Where's the other girl, the cashier?"

"Bertha?" The waiter leered and made a clicking sound with his teeth. "She quit us ten days ago. Said she had prospects."

He forced a wide grin. "Wealthy boy friend?"

"I wouldn't know. She's a smart dish but too rough for me."

The world seemed full of stocky men who carried themselves confidently. Forrester watched them come in in twos and threes, florid, assured, demanding service, talking shop. He knew then that he had failed, that he had not seen enough of the man who had come out of the apartment. There was too little to go on. The chances were too slim.

He finished his lunch, ordered more coffee. The waiter, anxious to get rid of him so that the table could be filled again, glared at him. Forrester put two dollars

on the table and said: "I'm waiting for somebody."

The waiter picked up the money. "Certainly, sir. Take your time."

A man who sat alone finished his meal, went up and paid. Like so many others he was stocky, heavy, confident. He kidded the girl behind the grill, was rewarded with a weak smile. He picked up his change, dropped it into his pocket.

Then he put a cigarette in his mouth, lit it, clicked the silver lighter loudly, walked off with a heavy thump of heels on the tile floor, the cigarette in his right hand swinging in short arcs.

When Forrester reached the sidewalk, the man was forty feet ahead of him. The noon crowd was so thick that Forrester could risk getting within ten feet of the man. He went two blocks south, turned and went into an office building. Forrester stood next to him in the elevator. The man had a squarish face, a crisp gray-ing mustache, a tweed topcoat and a youthful snap-brim felt hat. He had weather wrinkles at the corners of small, shrewd eyes.

The elevator was jammed and several people got off with the stout man at the eleventh floor. Forrester got off too, walked over to the floor directory, saw the man go down the wide hall, turn into an open door.

Forrester followed slowly. When he was opposite the doorway, he could see that the carefully lettered sign on the opaque glass of the door said, "*Kimberly and Hannon.*" In the lower right corner, in smaller letters, it said: "*Laboratory Equipment.*"

The walnut desk of the receptionist faced the door. She was a thin, dark girl, wearing harlequin glasses and typing on an electric typewriter.

As he came in, she glanced up, swept off the heavy glasses and, squinting faintly said: "Good afternoon?"

He smiled. "I happened to be in the building and I saw the man who just came in here. I wondered if it was an old friend of mine from years back. Henry Jorgenson."

"We have no one by that name in the offices. Mr. E. Mills Hannon just came back from lunch."

"Heavy man? Gray hair?"

"Yes. That's right."

"Would he be Ed Hannon?"

She frowned at the impertinence. "I believe his first name is Edward."

Forrester caught the faint movement out of the corner of his eye. Edward Hannon stood in the doorway of an expensive looking office. He frowned and said: "You wanted to see me, young man?"

"Ah . . . no, sir. I just thought you were someone else and I was asking the young lady if . . ."

"You just rode up beside me in the elevator. I believe I noticed you at lunch. I have a feeling you followed me here. Please explain yourself." The voice was crisp, businesslike and faintly indignant.

"Can I see you alone for a few minutes, Mr. Hannon?"

Hannon stared at him without expression. The girl put her pixie glasses back on and stopped squinting. Hannon turned on his heel, said abruptly: "Come in."

As Forrester entered, Hannon closed the office door, crossed over to his desk, perched on one corner, pulled the lighter out of his pocket and began clicking the lid open and shut.

"What is it? Get on with it," Hannon said.

Forrester walked over and sat in a chair near the opposite corner of the desk. It had moved faster than he had anticipated.

"It's about Bertha Lewis," Forrester said.

The man did not change expression. He stopped clicking the lighter and he ceased to swing his leg. For a moment he was very still. Then the two motions began again.

"Kindly tell me who you are. What is your capacity?"

"I'm . . . I'm just a friend of hers."

"I'm rather afraid I don't know the young lady."

"Then how would you know she was young?"

Hannon flushed. "What sort of nonsense is this? You're young. You're a friend of hers. It's an obvious conclusion."

"You seemed to know her last night, Mr. Hannon."

Hannon put the lighter back in his pocket. He stood up and Forrester saw that his fists were balled.

Forrester said softly: "At a quarter of three you came out of her apartment. You lit a cigarette and walked off toward the taxi stand."

**H**ANNON lost most of his autocratic air in a matter of seconds. He went behind his desk, sat on the green leather chair. He smiled. He said: "It was just instinct that made me deny knowing her. The desire to protect her—her good name, you understand. She's a charming young lady. Very charming."

"But she was making herself too expensive, wasn't she. Mr. Hannon? What did she have on you?"

Hannon said, in a husky tone: "I'm afraid I don't follow you. She didn't have anything on me, young man."

"You use the past tense very naturally, Mr. Hannon."

Hannon open his mouth to speak, closed it, swallowed, and said stubbornly: "I don't understand."

"We'll have to go to the police, Mr. Hannon. Right now. We'll have to tell them, you know. Your story and mine."

Hannon looked shocked. "Police? Has something happened to Bertha?"

"Oh, come now!" Forrester said.

Hannon narrowed his eyes. "If you killed her, young man, don't bring me into it."

"We'll both go and tell our stories, Mr. Hannon. When she fell she dragged most of the stuff off the shelf over the sink. There was a lipstick there. As she died, she wrote on the floor with it. She wrote your name. That's how I found you."

Hannon's firm face crumpled. He looked beyond Forrester. He said softly, "No. No. Too quick."

"People have different tolerances, Hannon," Forrester said.

The desk drawer rattled and the gun came out. Hannon's mouth trembled but the round eye of the automatic didn't waver. There was a discreet tapping at the door. Forrester saw the thick finger whiten where it touched the trigger.

"Come in," Forrester called. He held his belly muscles rigid. He closed his eyes.

He heard the door swing open, and the sound of the small automatic was like the breaking of a very brittle stick. Yet there was no hot smash of lead at him.

The girl in the harlequin glasses screamed. Not loud.

Forrester opened his eyes. Hannon still sat erect, but his face was curiously bloated. Like an idiot child he sucked loosely on the blued barrel, the smoke curling from one corner of his mouth. He sagged slowly forward and laid his head almost gently on the desk.

The girl screamed again.

She sagged against the door frame. As Forrester reached her, she sprawled limply across the sill. Forrester stepped over her and went to the phone on her desk.

\* \* \*

John Forrester sat in his comfortable living room and read the paper. It wasn't until he had actually finished the account that he realized that the police to whom he had talked had made good on their promise. There was no mention of him.

The account merely said that Mr. E. Mills Hannon was being blackmailed by a Miss Bertha Lewis and that E. Mills Hannon, through his business contacts, had been able to obtain some crystals of potassium cyanide. He had inserted these crystals in the toothpaste used by Miss Lewis. She had met instantaneous death when she had used the toothpaste.

Though there was actually very little evidence to connect Mr. Hannon with the murder, he had somehow become con-

vinced that the police had proof and had committed suicide in his office.

The police had said they could shut up the girl in the office by telling her that Forrester was from the police. . . .

He put the paper aside and listened to the busy sounds of Ellen in the kitchen. The days of nightmare were over, and by some chance he had been unharmed. He knew that his guilt was great and that he did not deserve to come out unscathed. When he tried to remember Bertha's face, he could see only the bluish distortion, the foam on purpled lips. He shuddered.

Ellen herded the children toward the bathroom to wash up for dinner. She came to him, sat on the hassock and held his hand in both of hers. She looked at him for long moments. He was shocked to hear her say:

"Whatever it was, it's over, isn't it, darling?"

He fought back the temptation to deny that anything had existed. "All over," he murmured.

For a moment her eyes betrayed the deepness of her hurt. "Don't ever tell me about it, darling," she whispered. "Ever." She walked quietly out of the room.

And John Forrester knew that he was not unscathed, that he had lost a portion of something that was very precious, and of great rarity.



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# DEADLIEST DAME IN TOWN



Danford came reeling  
down the steps....

*Like a hole in the head*

*Bennett needed a corpse in his car—  
and man-wild Sally in his hair.*

**Explosive Jim Bennett**  
**Detective Novelette**

## CHAPTER ONE

*Booze-Up Honey*

**W**HEN the bullets hit me, it felt as though a couple of tennis balls had been struck hard against my chest and stomach. There wasn't any real pain, not then, but I lurched backward on shaky legs and stood swaying, my knees

bent. The floor tilted slowly upward, and I lifted heavy hands to push it back. But it kept on coming until I felt the rug beneath my cheek. I didn't fall—I seemed to float down gently against it.

The rug was of a pale green color, and its nearness to my eyes made the whole world seem like a sea of blurred green. I stiffened my legs, and that is when the pain in my stomach began. And then it started in my chest. I drew my knees up to my chin, and I began to cough. The color of the rug beneath my cheek changed from green to red—a thick, glossy red. It looked like blood, and it smelled like blood, and I thought: *Bennett, you've taken a slug in the belly, and one in the lungs, and you're a dead duck.*

From somewhere near me a woman was sobbing bitterly. I felt cool, caressing hands on my face, and a voice murmured brokenly, "Jim. . . . Jim. . . ."

I was fighting pain, and trying to swallow the blood in my throat. I coughed some more, and the rug became wet beneath my cheek. The cool hands left my face abruptly, and a door slammed. It was a dull, far-away sound, with the thud of finality. I lay quietly in the silence, fighting a losing battle with the blackness and the blood. There was nothing I could do about it.

From somewhere I seemed to hear a voice crying, "Hello! Hello!" and I thought of a new twist to an old minstrel joke—*There ain't nobody here but us dead men*—and I cackled silently to myself. The thick salty blood welled into my throat, and I couldn't stop it, and my chest was on fire. I heard the ghostly voice again, and I knew suddenly that it was Sandy's voice.

"Send a doctor! Hurry. . . . Hurry. . . . Hurry. . . ."

I wanted to tell her not to bother, that it wasn't worth it, but I couldn't make any coherent sounds come out. All I could do was choke and gurgle, and I felt the blood bubbling from my lips. I gave up then, and I closed my eyes, and it seemed that Sandy's face was floating on a pink cloud far above me. . . .

\* \* \*

I first met Sally Winters on a cold

November night. She was walking along a highway a hundred miles south of Cleveland. My secretary, Sandy Hollis, had extended her annual invitation for me to spend several days during pheasant-hunting season at her parent's farm. The first day I hunted with Sandy and her father, Homer Hollis. We bagged four pheasants between us, and that night Sandy had a party in the farmhouse for the neighbors and her old friends in town. It had been a nice party. A keg of beer, and whiskey if you wanted it, and popped corn, and conversation before a big fire in the Hollis living room.

I remember Sandy saying, "Shucks, Sally can't come until later. She's got a date with Albert for a basketball game in Centertown. But she's going out with us in the morning. Sally's a good shot."

"Who's Albert?" I asked. I knew that Sally Winters was a 'teen-age cousin of Sandy's.

Sandy smiled. She was prettier than ever when she smiled. Her brown eyes lit up, her white teeth flashed, and the firelight made bronze glints in her hair. "Albert Stacey," she said. "His father is president of the county's biggest bank. Albert works in the bank as a teller."

"Hmmm," I said. "Is this friendship between Albert and Sally serious?"

"Albert wants it to be serious," Sandy said, "but I'm afraid Sally isn't ready to settle down." She hesitated, and then added. "Sally is—well, kind of a problem to the family."

"Maybe a little wild?" I suggested.

Sandy laughed shortly. "A little, maybe. But she's young and cute, and she knows she's cute. I suppose all of us have helped to spoil her. Ten years ago, when Sally was eight, her mother and father were killed in an auto accident. We all babied her after that, and Aunt Sadie raised her. Aunt Sadie lives in town."

"Sally better marry this Albert," I said.

"Or George," Sandy replied. "He's in love with her, too. He isn't as handsome as Albert, but he's so—so sincere. And I'm afraid Albert is too much like Sally."

"Wild, too, huh?" I said.

"He's been in a few scrapes," Sandy admitted, "but he'll probably turn out all right."

"Who's George?" I asked.



"George Danford," Sandy said. "He owns the adjoining farm. He's quite a lot older than Albert, and he's been courting Sally ever since she was old enough to go out with boys—although you couldn't call George a boy, exactly. His folks left him a hundred and eighty acres of the best corn land in Ohio. Farms it all by himself, too, except for some day hands he hires at planting and harvest time." She lowered her voice. "That's George standing by the fireplace."

I looked. A tall young man with slicked-down yellow hair and a chubby red face was standing alone, staring into the flames. He was holding an empty beer glass.

"Poor George." Sandy whispered. "He's sad because Sandy is out with Albert. They're bitter rivals. If it weren't for Chick Roan. I think maybe she'd make up her mind between Albert and George."

I clapped a hand to my forehead. "Another suitor?"

Sandy smiled wryly. "I'm afraid so—and we aren't very happy about it. Chick Roan came here from Cleveland and opened the Sportsmen's Cafe, a wine and beer spot with a juke box. But I hear he runs a dice game in the back room. He's older than either Albert or George. Gossip has it that he has a wife in Cleveland, but he apparently lives alone in a house he rented on Indian Creek south of town. Sally denies that she has been seeing him, but people have told Aunt Sadie, and another, too, that they have seen Sally in his car late at night." She sighed. "I wonder if I caused my folks so much worry when I was Sally's age?"

"Probably," I said, and Sandy made a face at me as I moved away. I went to the beer keg, filled a glass, and carried it over to the fireplace. I took the empty glass from George Danford's hand and gave him the filled one. He looked at me with brooding eyes.

"Thanks," he said heavily, and his gaze swung back to the flames.

"My name's Bennett," I told him. "Sandy tells me you have a nice farm. How much winter wheat do you have out?"

"Forty acres," he said without looking at me. He took a long swallow of the beer. He had clear blue eyes, and his eye-

brows and lashes were a pale yellow against his sun-reddened face. He had shoulders like a fullback's, and hands as big as a catcher's mitt. His heavy brown tweed suit looked too tight for him.

I tried again. "Uh—nice corn country around here."

He nodded glumly. "Yep." He finished his beer in two long swallows and moved away from me. I saw him speak briefly to Sandy. She nodded, patted his arm, and he headed for the door, Sandy went with him, talking pleasantly.

Homer Hollis, Sandy's father, left a laughing group of people at the far end of the room and came up to me with a bowl of popcorn. He was a tall, shy man with kindly gray eyes. "Jim," he said, "if you don't like that store whiskey, I've got some special hard cider in the spring house."

I took a handful of popcorn and grinned at him. I liked Sandy's father, and her plump, cheerful mother, too, and I looked forward to my visits to their farm. A private detective doesn't have much chance to get away from the pace of the city, and to relax in an easy, friendly atmosphere. I had Sandy to thank for that, a smart girl from the corn country who took the fake glitter of the city in her stride. Sandy and I had been holding down the Cleveland branch office of the international agency for a long time. I said to Homer Hollis, "Let's save the cider for tomorrow."

A DOOR slammed from across the room, and I decided that George Danford had left. I turned slowly. But Danford was standing stiffly beside Sandy. Another man stood with his back against the door. He was a young man with a thin dark face and thick black hair. He was hatless, and the collar of his blue overcoat was turned up beneath his chin. I knew by the slack way he stood, and by the glitter of his eyes, that he was drunk.

"Where is she?" he said thickly. "Where Sally?"

Conversation stopped in the room. I saw the hard line of George Danford's jaw. Homer Hollis looked worried, and he stood very still with the bowl of popcorn in his hand. Then I heard Sandy say in a brittle voice, "You should know, Albert. You were with her. What hap-

pened?" Her face had turned white.

The young man pulled a hand over his loose mouth and grinned foolishly. "Thought she came here. Jumped out of my car. Ran away." He turned, and fumbled at the doorknob.

Under my breath I said to Homer Hollis, "Young Stacey? The banker's son?"

He nodded silently.

George Danford stepped forward quickly and grasped Stacey by the shoulder. He swung him around, and I heard the sharp smack of his hand against Stacey's face. Stacey's head slammed back against the door, and he stared stupidly at Danford with glazed drunken eyes.

"Where is she?" Danford snapped. "Talk." He swung his hand again. Stacey's knees bent and he hung on to the doorknob. Danford lifted his fist.

That was when I put in my nickel's worth. I moved forward swiftly, and Homer Hollis was right behind me. I grabbed Danford's arm. "Easy, Georgie, my boy," I said. "That won't get you anyplace."

He lunged for Stacey and tried to jerk his arm loose from my grasp. I held on and pulled him back. It took a lot of pulling—he was all corn-fed bone and muscle. "Dammit," I grunted. "Stop it."

Beside me Homer Hollis said quietly, "There'll be no fighting in my house, George."

Danford stood still then, his big body trembling a little. "I'm sorry, Homer," he said in a tight voice. His eyes were on Albert Stacey.

I let go of Danford's arm and moved up to Stacey. He was standing slumped against the door, his long black hair falling over his face. "Speak up, son," I said. "Where did you leave Sally Winters?"

He raised his eyes to mine, and I saw the misery and the pain in them. A thin trickle of blood ran from a corner of his mouth where Danford had slapped him. Then his eyes glazed over, his chin dropped to his chest, and his head wagged.

"After basketball game," he mumbled, "Sally wanted to go to Sportsmen's Cafe. She . . . drank a lot of sherry, wouldn't eat anything. When we started out here, she—she wanted to drive. I wouldn't let her. She grabbed wheel. Car headed for

ditch, and I put on brakes. Stopped, just in time. She still wanted to drive. I—I pushed her away. She . . . slapped me. Then she jumped out, ran down the road. I followed, couldn't find her. Thought she might have hitched a ride here." He turned away, and jerked at the door knob. "Hell with her."

"Damn you." Danford blurted, and he lunged for Stacey. I stopped him by placing both hands against his broad solid chest.

Sandy said, "Jim, we've got to find her."

"Okay," I said. I grabbed Stacey's arm, opened the door, and said to Sandy over my shoulder, "I'll be back."

Sandy said something I didn't catch, and then I slammed the door, and Albert Stacey and I were walking across the grass to the lane leading up from the highway to the Hollis farm. A low black convertible was parked in the lane behind my sedan. Stacey lurched for the convertible, but I guided him to my car. He didn't protest, and he climbed into my car beside me. I drove down the lane to the highway and headed toward town. Stacey sat limply beside me, his head bobbing. We rode in silence for maybe ten minutes, and then I said, "Where did Sally get out of your car?"

He raised his head, his eyes blinking at the glare of my headlights on the road. "Past next curve," he mumbled. "This side of bridge over Indian Creek."

We made a curve. I saw a bridge up ahead, and I slowed down. We hadn't seen a single car on the highway, but now I saw a pair of headlights approaching in my rear-view mirror. We crossed a bridge, and I had a quick glimpse of water beneath us. The road ahead was clear.

Then my lights picked up a figure at the edge of the highway. A small figure in a long hooded red coat stood with an arm outstretched, thumb cocked. I slowed down and stopped. I saw that the red-coated figure was a young girl with a small round face, big dark eyes, and a plump red mouth.

As I stopped, Albert Stacey raised his head and saw the girl. "Sally," he muttered, and his hand fumbled at the door handle.

"Stay here," I snapped at him. I got

out, walked around the car, and grasped the girl's arm. Fright showed suddenly in her eyes, and she tried to pull away. "What's the matter, honey?" I said. "Don't you want a ride?"

"Y-yes, but—"

I heard my car door slam. Albert Stacey staggered over to us. "Sally," he said plaintively, "why did you run away? You—"

A pair of headlights rounded the curve, fast, and there was a scream of brakes. A small truck angled in ahead of my car and shuddered to a stop. On the side of the truck I saw the words: *Spring Valley Farm, G. W. Danford*. A man jumped out, and I saw his yellow hair gleam in the light.

George Danford ran forward, grabbed Albert Stacey by one shoulder, and his fist came back. I tried to stop the blow, but I was too slow, and Danford's fist caught Stacey over the right eye. Stacey lurched backwards, lost his footing in the wet grass at the edge of the road, and fell into a shallow ditch.

The girl stood swaying slightly. The hood had fallen back from her head, and her long reddish hair caught brassy glints from the lights. She stared at Danford, and then she giggled. "Georgie," she said. "Good old Georgie to the rescue."

I said to Danford, "You didn't have to hit again."

He looked at me, and then down at his big clenched fist. He didn't say anything.

The girl giggled again. I saw that she was a little drunk. She was too young and too pretty to be even a little drunk. She pointed a small wavering finger at me. "Who's that attractive man, Georgie?"

Danford took her arm and said gruffly, "Come on, Sally. I'll take you home."

She pulled away from him. "Don't wanna go home."

Behind her, Albert Stacey was getting groggily to his feet. I went over to him. His clothes were muddy, and there was a lump over his eye where Danford had hit him. He stared at me stupidly. Then he saw Danford, and he started for him. I pulled him back, held him by one wrist, and I spoke to the three of them.

"You're all acting like a bunch of kids scuffling in an alley." I pointed at Danford. "George, I want you to take Albert

back to the Hollis place where his car is, and I want you to see that he gets home O.K. And no more fighting. Got it?"

Danford nodded sheepishly. "All right," he said. "I—I guess I kind of acted out of turn. I'll look after Albert, but what about Sally?"

"I'll take care of Sally," I told him, and I pushed Albert Stacey toward Danford's truck. Stacey opened the door and climbed in like a man walking in his sleep.

"Tired," I heard him mumble. "Wanna go home."

Danford was grinning. I guess he figured that anything was better than letting Sally Winters go with Stacey. "Good night, Sally," he said, and he moved over to his truck.

"G'night, Georgie."

Danford waved a hand at me, got into the truck, made a U-turn, and headed back toward the Hollis farm. I opened the door of my car for Sally Winters, and she moved slowly past me and got in. I got behind the wheel, and as we drove toward town she said:

"I don't suppose it matters, but what's your name?"

"Bennett," I said. "Just call me Uncle Jim."

She sat up straight and looked at me with wide eyes. "Not *Jim Bennett*? The detective? Cousin Sandy's boss?"

I nodded. "Sandy and I work together."

She snuggled up beside me and laid her head against my left arm. "How heavenly," she sighed. "Ever since Sandy told me about you, you've been my hero. You really have."

"How about telling your hero where you live?"

"Must we go home?"

Up ahead I saw a blazing neon sign which read: *Sportsmen's Cafe, Liquor, Beer, Food*. I figured it would be a good idea to sober Sally Winters up a little before I took her home, and I said, "After we get a sandwich and some coffee." I swung into a parking lot, turned off the lights and cut the motor.

"Don't wanna eat," Sally Winters said. "Want more sherry."

"You've had enough sherry," I said firmly.

"Please, Uncle Jim," she pleaded softly. "Wouldn't you like a drink, too?"

Uncle Jim certainly would, I thought, but I said, "It's too late. A sandwich and coffee—then home."

She leaned against me, and her fingers plucked at my necktie. "Please." She smelled faintly of soap and perfume, and her little red mouth was close to my ear. She was either very young, or very wise, or both. Her cool fingers touched my face, and suddenly her soft lips were against mine, and they held a warmth and a firmness which surprised me.

A voice said, "Break it up, sweet-hearts."

## CHAPTER TWO

### In Again, Out Again

SALLY WINTERS' lips left mine, and she let out a frightened little gasp. I turned my head. A man was standing beside my car peering in at us. He was tall and slender, not young, not old, with a neatly trimmed black mustache and even white teeth showing in a crooked grin. He was wearing a loose brown tweed topcoat and a dark brown felt hat. He stood with his hands in his coat pockets, and the light from the café slanted over his smooth tanned face. I couldn't tell the color of his eyes, but they were pale, and there were hard lines at the corners of his thin mouth.

Sally Winters laughed nervously. "Oh, hello, Chick. Aren't you leaving early tonight?"

His pale eyes bore steadily on me. "Yeah," he drawled, "and a good thing I did. Who's your new boy friend?"

"This is just my Uncle Jim," she said hastily. "From Cleveland. Uncle Jim, I want you to meet Chick Roan."

"Hmmm," was all he said.

I got out of the car, held the door open for Sally Winters, and said, "Come on. We'll have a sandwich, and then I'll take you home."

The man named Roan said nastily, "I'll take her home—Uncle Jim."

The girl got out and stood beside me. Her eyes were on Roan, and they were bright with excitement. I remembered what I had promised Sandy, and I took Sally Winters' arm and started for the door of the Sportsmen's Café, cursing

myself for not remembering what Sandy had told me about Chick Roan owning the joint. Sally pulled away from me, and gave me a dazzling smile.

"Uncle Jim," she said softly, "would you mind very much if Chick took me home? I mean, I—I kind of promised him a date tonight—that's why I ran away from Albert." She reached up and patted my cheek.

I shook my head. "We'll have a sandwich, and then I'll take you home, or we'll go home now—without the sandwich. Take your choice."

She stopped smiling, and a small frown marred the smoothness of her forehead. "But I don't want to go home now."

She was sobering up. But drunk or sober, I knew that I wasn't going to let her go gallivanting around with a character like Chick Roan. I had made a promise to Sandy Hollis, and I intended to keep it, and besides I was tired of dilly-dallying around. I grasped Sally Winters' arm, marched her back to the car, and pushed her inside, not very gently.

"You're . . . hurting me," she panted.

"Behave, then." I snapped, and I got behind the wheel.

Chick Roan stepped quickly forward, his chin stuck out. "Wait, you—"

I hit him good and hard on the chin. He grunted and stumbled sideways as I wheeled my car out to the highway. Sally Winters clutched at the wheel, and we swerved toward the ditch. "Stop," she screamed. "I'm not going—"

I swung the wheel as the front tires hit the soft dirt at the edge of the road, and with my free left hand I slapped her sharply across the face. She shrank away from me and huddled, sobbing wildly, in the far corner of the seat. I let her alone. In a few minutes we hit the first traffic light at the edge of town. The light was red. As I waited, I said, "Where do you live?"

"I—I won't tell you," she sobbed.

I figured she needed an over-the-knee treatment with a hard board, but I contented myself by shaking her briskly by the shoulders. "Tell me where you live," I said, "before I slap the living daylight out of you."

She looked at me briefly with awed eyes. Then she covered her face with her

hands and said in a choked voice, "Five-twenty-two Monument Drive. It—it's two blocks past the courthouse."

"All right," I said. "Now sit up like a big girl and show me where."

She dabbed at her eyes and sat up straight.

I drove into town, passed the courthouse. She pointed a finger at a little white house behind a high hedge. A light was burning in a downstairs window. I remembered what Sandy had told me, and I said, "Aunt Sadie is waiting up for you. I see."

"Oh, no," she said quickly. "And she's quite deaf—she won't hear me come in."

The hands of the clock on the dash pointed at a quarter past one, and I said grimly, "Good," and parked my car beside the curb. Sally Winters and I walked silently up to the house. At the steps she turned and looked at me. Her eyes were big and dark, and her red mouth trembled. "I—I'm sorry," she said softly, "for the way I acted. You must think I'm a— a brat."

"Never mind," I said wearily. "Just go in now."

She hesitated, and her eyes searched mine. "Whom would you marry?" she said seriously. "Albert, or George, or Chick?"

I thought of the feather bed in the guest room at the Hollis farm, and I said, "Ask me tomorrow."

"But I've got to decide," she said breathlessly. "I really do. Tonight I told Albert that I'd marry him, but . . . but I'm not sure I love him enough. I like George, too, and Chick Roan is so—so mature, and different."

The door opened abruptly, and a fat woman with high-piled gray hair loomed in the light. "Sally," she said sharply, "where have you been?"

"Oh, oh," the girl said under her breath, and she stepped up to the porch. "Just out at Sandy's, Aunt Sadie," she said. "This is Mr. Bennett. He was kind enough to bring me home."

The woman sniffed, wrinkling her sharp nose. "Booze," she snorted. "Likker." She peered at me narrowly. "Who is that man?"

"I told you, Aunt Sadie," the girl said impatiently. "It's Mr. Bennett—a friend

of Sandy. He just brought me home."

The woman snorted again. "He's old enough to be your father. The idea! Gallivanting around at all hours, drinking likker, with a man his age." She wagged a long finger at me. "Git," she snapped. "Git off my porch."

"Please, Aunt Sadie," the girl wailed. "Sandy Hollis works for him. He—"

"Hollis? Hollis?" The woman leaned forward squinting at me. "He don't favor the Hollis' at all, at all. What kin is he to Homer?"

The girl looked at me helplessly, and I backed down the steps. Aunt Sadie said grimly, "Hollis or no Hollis, it's too late to be bringing a young girl home with booze on her breath. Git."

I got. The door slammed, and the light inside the house went off. I paused to light a cigarette, and then I walked slowly out to the street. As I cleared the hedge, I heard a faint movement behind me, a scrapping sound, and then something slammed against the back of my head. The street light turned into a pin-wheel, and the sidewalk up-ended and hit me in the face. That was the last I knew for a while.

I FELT something prod me between the shoulders. It felt like the end of a ball bat. From far above me, a gruff voice said, "Hey, you can't sleep on the sidewalk in this town."

I opened one eye, and I tried not to think of the pain in my head. My open eye was almost on a level with the sidewalk and I had an ant's-eye-view of a big black object. I opened the other eye, and the black object came into focus. It was a man's shoe. Just above it was the frayed cuff of one khaki trouser leg. I moved my head a little, and I saw another shoe and another cuff. That was as far as I could see without lifting my chin from the cement, so I didn't bother to peer upward.

The ball bat massaged my spine some more. It felt good, and I closed my eyes and relaxed on the cement. Then the massaging got rougher, and one of the size 10's kicked me in the ribs. The voice spoke again, sounding closer. "Git up. Move."

Sighing, I pushed myself slowly to my hands and knees. I waited a couple of

seconds to make sure I wouldn't fall back on my face. I felt a hand on my arm, and I managed to make it to my feet. The hand steadied me, and the voice said: "If you can't make it, sport, I'll call the wagon."

I brushed the hand away. "I'll have you know somebody slugged me," I said huffily.

"The only slugs you had," the voice said, "were too many slugs of whiskey. Stranger hereabouts, ain't you?"

I squinted at him. He was a big man with a broad red face. Red stubble on his fat cheeks glinted in the slanting rays from the street light. An open leather jacket revealed a heavy black-and-red checked shirt. On the front of the jacket was a gleaming silver star a little smaller than a dinner plate. In his right hand he held a long tapering wooden object. I did a double-take, and blinked. It *was* a ball bat. "What's your average?" I said.

He stuck out his chin. "How's that, sport?"

"Your batting average. How're you hitting these days?"

He grinned, and twirled the bat. "The town says they can't afford to buy the night constable a billy club, so I use my kid's bat. Works fine, too—especially on drunks." He stopped grinning and eyed me beadily.

"Honest, Chief," I said hastily. "Somebody slugged me." I lifted a hand and fingered a lump behind my right ear. "Feel," I invited him.

He stepped forward and felt gingerly. "Big as a pullet egg," he declared. "What did it?"

"Maybe a ball bat," I said.

"Now, looky here, stranger," he bristled. "From six in the evening until six in the morning I'm the law in this town. Sadie Winters' house is at the end of my beat, and I never saw you until I was making my one-thirty round. You was right here." He pointed the bat at my car. "That yourn?"

"Yeah," I said, and I began to feel in my pockets. I was surprised to find that I still had my watch and wallet. I moved toward my car. "So long, Chief. Thanks for waking me up."

He followed me. "Now, wait. I gotta make a report of this. Lemme see your

driver's license, make sure who you are."

I showed it to him. He held it to the light, peered at it, his lips moving, then handed it back. "Cleveland, huh? What're doing down here?"

I told him as quickly as possible in words of one syllable that I was visiting at the Homer Hollis farm, and why I happened to be in front of Sadie Winters' house. He nodded, said, "Homer's a nice feller. Good farmer, too. Got any ideas about who knocked you on the head?"

"No, but I hope to find out." I moved over to my car, got in. He stood on the sidewalk twirling his bat as I drove away. As I turned the corner, I gave him a quick beep-beep on the horn.

Twenty minutes later I turned into the lane at the Hollis farm. As I parked beside the big house, I saw that all the visitor's cars had gone, including Albert Stacey's black convertible. I walked across the lawn, saw that there was dim light in the long living room. Quietly I opened the door and went inside. Sandy sat alone before the fireplace. She was wearing a pale blue robe over white silk pajamas, and her tawny hair was drawn tightly back from her ears and plaited into two long thick braids. It gave her face a delicate, almost childish appearance. The firelight danced in the deep brown pools of her eyes, and her lips were full and red. For the umpteenth time I thought how lucky I was to have a girl like Sandy as a Girl Friday.

She turned quickly toward me, and I said, "Relax. Your wayward little cousin is safely tucked in bed." I threw my hat and coat over the stairway bannister, moved across the long room, and sat down beside Sandy.

She touched my hand and said quietly, "Thank you, Jim. I hated to ask you—you're supposed to be down here for a rest—but we've all been so worried about Sally. We country people kind of stick together."

"You're not a country gal," I said. "You're a slick city babe."

She smiled. "Just a farmer's daughter at heart." She nodded at the mantel. "When I told dad that I was going to wait up for you, he wanted to bring some of his cider in, but I thought you'd like that better."

There was a bottle of bourbon on the mantel, and a bowl of ice cubes, two tall glasses, and a soda syphon. "Remind me to give you a raise," I said, and I stood up, made two drinks, handed Sandy one, and sat down again.

I told her all that had happened after I'd left with Albert Stacey to look for Sally Winters. When I had finished, she felt the lump on my head and wanted to put an ice pack on it. I shook my head.

She stared at me with serious eyes. "I don't like it, Jim. Who—who would do that to you?"

I shrugged. "Probably some thug after my watch and money. The constable scared him away."

She stared into the fire. "Jim, I'm sorry I pushed you into this."

I patted her arm. "Forget it. Tomorrow we'll go after those cock pheasants and forget all about it." I stood up and lifted the bourbon. "How about a night cap?"

She smiled up at me, and nodded. As I handed a glass to her, the telephone let out two short rings, followed by a long one. Sandy got up and moved into the shadows at the far end of the room. "That's our ring," she said, and then I heard her low voice.

"Hello. . . . Yes, Aunt Sadie. . . . No, I wasn't in bed. . . . What? . . . Oh, no! . . . Yes, yes I'll come right over." I heard the click of the receiver.

Sandy moved swiftly into the circle of firelight. Her face was pale. She began to untie the silken cord of her robe. "Jim, Sally's gone."

"Again?" I said wearily.

"Aunt Sadie is frantic. She wants to call the sheriff. After Sally went to her room tonight. Aunt Sadie waited a little while and then went to see if she was all right. Sally was gone, and the door to the back stairway was standing open."

"Let her go," I said. "She's got to learn sometime."

Sandy shook her head slowly, and moved away from me. "I can't, Jim. I promised Aunt Sadie I'd come right over."

I sighed, and stood up. "All right, but hurry up. I'd like to get a little sleep before we start stalking those birds come sun-up."

She turned, moved over to me, and

stood close. "Jim," she said softly. "You big lug, you're a sweetheart. Do you know that?"

I grinned down at her, wondering why I had never before noticed the two cute little freckles on the bridge of her short nose. "Get dressed," I said, "before I forget I'm your boss."

Her lips curved in a slow smile. Suddenly she lifted her face and kissed me on the mouth. Then she turned away and moved swiftly to the stairway. "Two minutes," she called softly, and ran lightly up the steps.

I sat on the divan, finished my drink in two swallows, and stared at the fire. When Sandy came down, she was wearing gray flannel slacks, brown moccasins, a fluffy blue sweater and a loose tan garbardine topcoat. I put on my hat and coat, opened the door for her, and we moved silently over the dark lawn to my car.

As I opened the door, the overhead light came on, and Sandy started to get in. Suddenly I pulled her back, my fingers digging into her arm. She turned to look at me, her face puzzled in the reflected light from inside the car.

I nodded stiffly at what I had seen on the car floor by the back seat. She turned her head to look, and her teeth bit into her knuckles as she stifled a scream.

What makes a corpse seem so *dead*? The stillness? A stillness so devoid of movement that you imagine that you can see an almost imperceptible pulse of life? Is it the huddled, pitifully awkward posture? Or the open dead eyes, glazed and staring dully? Or is it the blood that sometimes flows, showing where death has entered? Whatever it is, I knew that the body on the floor of my car was not alive.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### More Murder, Please

I NODDED grimly, pushed her away from the car, and I leaned over the body of Albert Stacey. He was huddled on his side, his knees drawn up, one arm bent awkwardly beneath him. The other arm was flung forward, the fist clenched. The top of his head was a pulpy mass of blood and hair.

I placed a finger on his wrist. The skin was still faintly warm, but cooling fast. I felt in the pockets I could reach without moving the body. They revealed the usual items—cigarettes, money, matches, keys. My eyes roved over the body, and I saw a crumpled corner of a white paper protruding from his right sleeve. I pulled up the sleeve.

A folded piece of paper was tucked beneath the band of a wristwatch. I extracted the paper gently and unfolded it. It was filled with handwriting in ink. I held it closer to the light and read:

*I am writing this because I am afraid Chick Roan is going to kill me. Please tell my father I tried to do the right thing in the end. I took a lot of money from father's bank to pay a gambling debt to Chick Roan. He knew where I got it, and he kept demanding more. The state examiners are due, and tonight I told Room I'd have to get the money back—to cover up. He refused, and I told him I was going to tell father and face the music. He said if I did, he would kill me, but I'm going to confess to father, anyhow—if I can make it home before he gets me. I am writing this in my car in front of Room's house. I am sorry, father. Now I am going to start home. I hope I make it. Albert Stacey.*

I placed the note in my pocket and gently closed the car door. I turned to Sandy. She stood silently watching me, her face a pale oval in the gloom.

"Chick Roan," I said in a tight voice. "He was blackmailing the kid, and the bank examiners were due," and I told her about the note.

Sandy shivered. "But—where is Sally? I didn't tell Aunt Sadie, but I guessed that she might have gone out again with Albert. I—"

"Or Chick Roan," I broke in. "Can you get the keys to your dad's car?"

"Yes, but—"

"Get 'em," I said. "I don't want to drive a car with a corpse in the back seat."

Her fingers tightened on my arm. "Jim, why don't we just call the sheriff?"

"Presently," I said. "I've got a lump on my head, and now there's a dead man in my car. This is getting personal. Plenty of time to call the law in."

She sighed, and then she turned quickly and entered the house. In a minute she came back out and pressed a steel ring

containing two keys into my hands. "I'm going with you," she breathed.

"No," I said.

"Yes," she replied firmly, and she moved away toward the rear of the farm house. I followed her, and I didn't argue.

Homer Hollis' car was a ten-year-old sedan. It started right away, and I backed it out to the lane, swung down the highway, and headed toward town. Sandy said suddenly, "Jim, you didn't bring a gun from Cleveland, did you?"

"Sure I did. A shotgun—for pheasant. Remember?"

"I'm sorry, Jim. This hasn't been much fun for you."

I patted her arm. "Any cousin of your's is a cousin of mine."

We rounded a curve and started down a long hill. On a hillside on our right, the lights of a farmhouse gleamed yellowly in the darkness. I said, "That farmer's keeping late hours."

"That's George Danford's place," Sandy said.

On a sudden impulse I braked the car at the bottom of the hill and swung into a neat stone drive leading up to the house. I stopped beside the steps of a back porch and turned off the lights. Sandy looked at me silently, and I said:

"Danford was supposed to see that Albert Stacey got home tonight. You stay here."

I went up on the back porch and rattled my knuckles on the window of the door. I could see into a brightly lighted kitchen. It was neat and gleaming. A cup was on a white table, and a glass coffee-maker was bubbling on the stove. Danford came through a door into the kitchen. He was wearing a blue-and-white striped robe, and his big feet were bare. He looked surprised as he saw me through the glass, and he hurried to open the door. I stepped inside. The pleasant rich smell of freshly brewed coffee filled the kitchen.

Danford smiled at me. "Good morning, Mr. Bennett. How about a cup of coffee?"

I shook my head. "No, thanks. Sandy is out in the car, and I'm in a hurry. Somebody killed Albert Stacey tonight."

His mouth fell open, and he stood staring at me. I couldn't tell if he was sorry or happy—but he certainly registered surprise. He closed his mouth, and his eyes



were grave. "I know you aren't joking, Mr. Bennett, or drunk. But—" He broke off, turned to the stove, shut off the gas beneath the coffee, and filled a cup with a steady hand.

I said, "You were supposed to see that Albert got home. What happened?"

He took a sip of the coffee before he answered. Then he said carefully, "Nothing. I drove him out to the Hollis farm where his car was. By that time he seemed sober enough to drive safely, but I followed him home—just to make sure. He went into the house, and I came on home. That was about a half hour ago." He paused, and took a deep breath. "This is a hell of a thing. Where was he found?"

"In my car," I said.

That startled him a little. His eyes bugged out, but he didn't say anything.

I said, "Have you seen Sally Winters since I took her home?"

His red face got a little redder. "What's she got to do with it?" he asked in a tight voice.

I shrugged. "I don't know. I left her at her Aunt Sadie's, but she went away again."

I could see the excitement and anger gathering in his eyes, and he began to unhook his robe. "I don't like that," he said. "I'll go with you. Have you called the sheriff?"

"Not yet," I told him. "I'll wait out in the car."

The robe came off, and then his pajama jacket. He was a lot of man, with thick heavy shoulders and massive, bulging arms. His chest was covered with curly reddish hair. "I'll be right out," he said, and he left the kitchen.

I WENT out to the car and sat with my hands on the wheel. Sandy said, "What are we waiting for?"

"George," I told her. "He wants to come along."

She placed a hand on my arm. "Jim, I want to find Sally quickly."

"So does George," I said.

He came out of the house then, not stopping to lock the door or turn off the lights, and got in beside Sandy. He was wearing blue overall pants, a brown leather jacket, and a battered brown felt hat. "Hello, Sandy," he said quietly, and I

kicked the car to life, circled the drive, and hit the highway again.

George Danford said grimly, "Go to Chick Roan's house."

"That's what I had in mind," I said.

He looked at me quickly. "You know—about Sally and Roan?"

Sandy said, "Yes, George. I told him."

Danford said harshly, "He's no good. I told Sally that, but she—"

"You call the turns to Indian Creek," I broke in, "to Roan's house."

"Right," he said, and presently we were driving along a narrow road beside a steep-banked creek. We came to a turn in the road, and I saw a house in a clearing with a clump of stunted pines in the back. Danford snapped, "Turn off your lights."

I cut the lights and coasted to a stop. The moon came from behind the clouds, and the pines cast black shadows over the road. At first the house appeared to be dark, but as I stared I saw a faint glow of light leaking from between venetian blinds.

Danford said in a choked voice. "If he's got her in there. . . ." He opened the car door and got out. I climbed out on my side and started for the house. Danford's low voice stopped me. "Stay here," he said. "I can handle Roan. No use in both of us going in." He moved up beside me, and I saw his eyes glitter in the moonlight as he stared at the house. "If I need you, you'll know it," he said softly, and he started for the house.

I followed him anyhow. I heard a sound behind me, and I felt a hand on my arm.

"Oh, no, you don't," Sandy said breathlessly. "You're not leaving me back there alone."

"Keep behind me," I whispered hoarsely, and the three of us moved in single file, like a Pawnee scouting party. Danford was about ten feet ahead of me when he reached the porch. Suddenly, from behind the house, a dog began to bark excitedly, and I heard the rattle of a chain. Danford froze in his tracks, and I pulled Sandy down behind a fat little fir tree. I peeked around the tree, and I saw a door swing open, casting a broad lane of yellow light full upon Danford.

Chick Roan stood in the doorway. The sleeves of his white shirt were rolled up, and a bright-flowered necktie was knotted

loosely beneath his open collar. A long slender cigar was clamped between his teeth, the red end glowing brightly.

"Roan," I heard Danford say, "send her out, or I'm coming in after her."

The man in the doorway leaned forward, peering at Danford. Then he laughed. "Well, well, it's true-blue George, the faithful farmer boy." His voice was thick with liquor.

Danford moved slowly toward the porch. "Send her out, Roan," he said in a ragged voice.

"Send who out?"

"Sally Winters," Danford said quietly. "I know she's here."

Roan let out a short, nasty laugh. "Look, Georgie, why don't you marry that little redhead and get her out of my hair? If I wanted her here, she'd be here, but I'm not that dumb. Now get off my place."

Danford moved up the steps. "I'm coming in, Roan."

"Don't try it, sucker," Roan said. His right arm moved and I saw the glitter of a blue-steel automatic in his hand.

Danford kept moving. I felt Sandy's hand tight on my arm, and I started to rise. In that instant Roan's gun barked, and I saw the stab of flame.

"Stay here!" I yelled at Sandy. I ran across the grass for the house, my fingers aching for a gun I didn't have. Danford came reeling down the steps into my arms. His right hand was clawing at his left arm just below the shoulder, and he was cursing like a mad man. He tried to lurch away from me, back up the steps, toward Roan, who stood silently in the doorway, his gun steady, the cigar still clenched between his teeth. I held on to Danford's wrist, and I thought I had a tiger by the tail.

I shouted at Roan, "Drop that gun! If you don't, you'll have to kill him. I can't hang on to him forever."

"Let him come," Roan said coldly.

With a violent movement Danford twisted away from my grasp, and stumbled up the steps. I made a wild grab for him, but I missed, and I saw Roan raise the gun, his mouth twisted brutally. Danford reached the stop step. He was bent over, his left arm dangling limply, but he was driving for Roan. Roan's teeth showed as he tilted the gun barrel downward at the

crouching Danford, rearing to spring.

"Stop!" I screamed at Danford, but he kept moving. I jumped for the steps, knowing that I would be far too late. I waited for the blast from Roan's gun.

It didn't come.

There was a dull, thudding sound, and something thumped heavily to the porch. Roan doubled up, his hands clutching his chest, and great coughs shook his lean frame. His gun lay on the porch floor, just outside the doorway, and I saw Danford scoop up the gun and run past Roan into the house. Something else lay on the porch—a jagged stone the size of a big grapefruit.

There was a faint sound, and I turned to see Sandy Hollis standing beside me. "That rock was heavy," she panted, as she dusted her hands. "Did I ever tell you that I was the girl shot-put champ in high school?"

"I believe it," I said. "Nice aim. Roan was fixing to put a bullet into Danford for keeps."

"I was scared for you," Sandy said. "You were smack in the line of fire."

I patted her cheek and went up on the porch. Chick Roan was leaning against the wall, his head down, gasping for breath. I swung him around, pushed him inside. Sandy followed, and I closed the door. I didn't see anything of George Danford, but I heard movement in an adjoining room.

ROAN stumbled to a big leather chair and flopped into it. His smooth skin was red and clotted-looking, and his white teeth gleamed beneath his mustache as he tried to stifle a strangled cough. His pale eyes found Sandy.

"Damn . . . you," he rasped. A fit of coughing seized him, and he bent over, his hands pressed against his chest.

I winked at Sandy. She sat down and lit a cigarette. Her hand trembled a little. I looked around the room. The place was furnishad real fancy. A thick, sand-colored rug, deep chairs, a divan as big as a flat car, shaded lamps. There was a door leading to a kitchen, and another opening into a small room fitted as an office. A third door, at the far end of the room, was closed. I started for it.

As I did so, the door opened and

George Danford came out. Sally Winters was with him. She was wearing the same red-hooded coat she had worn earlier in the evening and her face was pale and her eyes were red from crying. When she saw Sandy, she ran to her. Sandy stood up and put her arms around her.

"Oh, Sandy," Sally Winters sobbed. "I—I've been so scared. I—I thought it would be fun to come here, but he—he—I've been a silly little—little brat. I—"

Sandy stroked Sally's head and looked at me helplessly.

"Get out of here," Chick Roan snarled.

George Danford stood awkwardly by. Blood was seeping through a ragged hole in the left sleeve of his leather jacket, and his ruddy face held a gray tinge.

Chick Roan started to cough again. It sounded as if he were strangling to death. I said to Danford, "Let's look at that arm," and I helped him off with his jacket. Roan's bullet had made a neat groove in the fleshy part of the upper arm. "Not too bad," I said, "but you'd better see a doctor."

Sandy brought a basin of water from the kitchen, washed the wound and bound it with a clean handkerchief. I said to Danford when I had finished, "Roan had murder on his mind. You've got Sandy to thank for heaving that rock."

"Yes," he said quietly. "I know." He hesitated, and said in a low voice. "Do—do you think Sally really cares for him—Roan, I mean?"

I grinned at him. "I think we all know better than that now. She's just a kid yet, and he seemed like big stuff to her. But she's cured now."

"I hope so," he said gravely.

Chick Roan raised his head and looked at me. There was pain in his pale eyes. "Chest," he croaked. "Hurts . . . bad. Get . . . doctor."

"Sure," I said, "and the sheriff, too. But tell me this first—why did you slug me in front of Sally's house tonight?"

His teeth showed in a grimace of pain. "Nobody," he gasped, "punches me . . . gets away . . . with it."

"Uh, uh," I said. "So you followed Sally and me, waited for me behind the hedge, knocked me on the head and then waited for Sally to come down and brought her out here. Is that it?"

"She made a date with me," he sneered, "and I kept it."

"I see," I said, "and when did you kill Albert Stacey? Before or after your date?"

His face went gray, and he started to get out of the chair. I pushed him back, and he slumped forward, his body shaking with a spasm of coughing. I spotted a telephone on a low table, and I picked it up.

George Danford stepped up beside me. "Just ask for Sheriff Sam Goff," he said.

"Thanks," I said, and in a minute I was talking to an old gaffer with a voice like all the vaudeville grandpappies I'd ever heard. I told him who I was, and about Albert Stacey, and where to find his body, and about Chick Roan shooting George Danford.

"By gum," he cackled. "Now ain't that something? And who be you, mister?"

I told him all over again, and then he got brisk and businesslike, and said he would call out his deputies right away, and would I kind of stick around until he got there? I said I would, and then he said:

"Say, mister, who kilt Jerome Stacey's boy? This here Chick Roan feller?"

"Yes" I said, and I hung up.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Gambler's Chance

**A**N HOUR later I locked the door of Chick Roan's house on Indian Creek and gave the key to Sheriff Sam Goff. The young doctor the sheriff had brought along had treated and bound the wound in George Danford's arm. After a quick examination of Chick Roan's chest, the doctor declared that the "manubrium segment of the sternum" was probably fractured, but that he couldn't be sure without an X-ray.

Sandy looked blank. I said to her, "That's double-talk for a bone in the chest," and the young doctor laughed. Roan just coughed. There was murder in his eyes.

A burly deputy in overalls and a cowboy hat took Roan to the local hospital, while I stood on the moonlit porch with the sheriff, Danford, Sandy, and Sally

Winters. The sheriff wadded his jaw with a chunk of cut plug and remarked:

"It shore is too bad about young Stacey. He musta been in purty deep at the bank, according to that note you found on him, Mr. Bennett."

I nodded. "That's right, Sheriff. And Roan didn't know when to stop. He had Albert Stacey's girl running after him, and he had Albert stealing money from his dad's bank, but he killed the goose that was laying the golden eggs. Young Stacey decided to confess and face the music. Roan couldn't have that, so he followed Stacey, killed him, and then dumped his body in my car. . . . Call me when Roan's ready to sign a statement."

"Shore," the sheriff said. He spat over the porch rail. "That reminds me—I ain't even had a chance to see young Stacey's corpse. After you called me, I sent one of the boys out to the Hollis place, and I scooted straight here. What kilt him? Gun slugs?"

"You'll know when you see him," I said grimly, and I went down the steps and out to Homer Hollis' sedan. We all got in. After I took the sheriff to his home on the edge of town, I drove Sally Winters to her Aunt Sadie's house. Sandy went in with her. When she came out, I drove out to George Danford's house. As I stopped in the drive by his back door the sky was beginning to turn gray, and the birds were chirping in the trees around us.

Danford got out, and said, "How about some breakfast?"

Sandy said, "I'd love some coffee." and the three of us went into Danford's bright kitchen. He took a bottle of rye from a cupboard and said to me:

"Maybe you'd rather have a snort of this?"

I shook my head. "Coffee will do me fine." I sat down and stretched my legs.

Danford put some coffee on the stove. Taking a slab of bacon from the refrigerator, he began to slice it. In a couple of minutes the smell of frying bacon and brewing coffee filled the kitchen. I leaned my head back and closed my eyes.

Sandy said, "Jim, you can still get some hunting in—maybe after lunch."

"Maybe," I said lazily.

A telephone let out with a short ring,

followed by a long one. Danford turned away from the stove, a puzzled expression on his ruddy face.

"That your ring?" I asked him. He nodded.

I stood up. "I'll get it. Probably the sheriff wants to talk to me." I entered an adjoining room. It was a combination dining room and parlor with a green rug and old fashioned leather-and-oak furniture. The telephone was on the far wall. I unhooked the receiver, said, "Hello."

A girl's tremulous voice said, "G-George?"

I hesitated. Then I said, "Just a minute," and called to Danford. He came in, wiping his hands on a towel, and took the receiver. Sandy stood in the kitchen doorway watching us. Danford's end of the conversation went like this:

"Hello. . . . Yes, Sally. . . . That's all right. . . . Sure, I understand. . . . Yes. . . . No. . . . Tomorrow? . . . Fine. . . . Good-by, Sally." He hung up and turned to look at Sandy and me. There was sweat on his temples, but he was smiling.

"Sally wanted to thank me for—for what I did tonight." He paused, an embarrassed expression on his face. "She said she had something important to tell me, and that she would see me tomorrow." He paused, and then went on in a quiet voice, "You know, for a long time, I've wanted to—to marry Sally, and maybe. . . ." He stopped and smiled shyly.

I grinned at him. "Congratulations. Invite me down to the wedding."

"George," Sandy said. Her voice sounded so queer that I turned to look at her. Her face was suddenly pale, and she was staring at Danford with big eyes. "George, are you hiding anything? About Sally. I mean? What did she really call you about?"

"I told you, Sandy," Danford said evenly.

Sandy shook her head slowly. "Sally's my cousin, and I think a lot of her. But she's wild, and last night she had been drinking. Was she with Albert tonight, after Jim took her home?"

"No," Danford said in a harsh voice. "She wasn't with Albert then. She told me all about it at Roan's house tonight. She admitted that she'd made a date to see Roan, and she didn't see Albert.

## Deadliest Dame in Town

She—" he paused, and smiled wryly—"and she didn't bash Albert's head in, if that's what you're thinking."

Sandy's face was drawn, and her red lips looked almost black. "George," she said, "don't lie for her. We want the truth. She and Albert had quarreled, and Albert was being blackmailed by Roan. Was Sally helping Roan to get money out of Albert? Did Albert, in his jealousy, threaten to expose Sally too? And then she—"

"No," Danford broke in. "No, no."

"You followed Albert home," Sandy went on, "but he didn't stay there. He went to Aunt Sadie's house, and he tried to prevent Sally from keeping her date with Roan. They struggled, and Sally—"

"Killed Albert?" Danford broke in harshly. "Sally couldn't do a thing like that. Roan killed Albert—he had a damn good reason. Who had a better reason?"

That was my cue. For several minutes I had known what I had to do. I sighed a deep sigh, and I moved slowly around the room until I stood beside Sandy. I was tired and sleepy, and my feet hurt, and my pheasant-hunting trip was shot to hell. I looked at Danford, and I said wearily:

"George, how do you know how Albert Stacey died? That he was killed by a blow on the head?"

He stood very still, his blue eyes staring steadily into mine. "That's a damn funny question," he said evenly. "Sheriff Sam Goff told me, of course."

I shook my head slowly. "No, Georgie, my boy. You're a little confused. Sam Goff didn't tell you—because he didn't know himself. Remember, a little while ago at Roan's house, the sheriff asked me how Stacey had been killed? I didn't tell him then, and nobody told you. And yet just now you said that Sally *didn't bash Albert's head in*. How did you know that Stacey's head was bashed in?"

**H**IS eyes wavered away from mine, and sweat glistened on his forehead. He began to tremble. He began to speak in a rapid voice. "All right, I'll tell you the truth. I tried to protect Sally, but she's not worth it—not worth taking the blame for a murder charge. I—I loved her, but

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## Robert Martin

she's no good." He looked at Sandy with pleading eyes. "You know that Sandy—how she is? Don't you?"

Sandy looked at him with wide eyes.

Danford turned to me. "See?" he cried wildly. "It was like Sandy just said. Just like that. Sally told me. After I followed Albert home, he went to Sally's house, waited for her to come out before Roan got there, and tried to keep her from meeting Roan. Sally was helping Roan get money out of Albert, and Albert told her he was going to confess the whole thing to his father.

"They struggled in Albert's car, and Sally hit him with a wrench Albert kept in the dash compartment. They were parked in the alley behind Sally's house. When she saw that she had killed Albert, she drove to an all-night gas station on the state highway and called me. She was hysterical—she didn't mean to kill Albert. I went to her, and she showed me Albert's body. His head was all bloody. . . . She begged me to help her, promised to marry me if I would. . . . I drove Albert's car back to town, took Sally home. I didn't know what to do with Albert's body—I was half crazy. I drove past the Hollis farm, recognized your car in the lane, and I stopped and put Albert's body in the back seat. I—"

"Thanks," I broke in. "Thank you very much."

He glared at me with wild eyes. "I was desperate," he cried. "I didn't care whose car it was. I was trying to protect Sally." He paused, and pulled a hand down over his wet face. He went on in a dead voice. "But . . . she went to Roan's house after all—after what I had done for her." He raised his eyes to mine.

"I think that is why I'm telling you this. I—I tried to help her, and she . . . she. . . ." He turned abruptly away. "To hell with it," he said in a choked voice. "Call Sam Goff, and let's get it over with. I can't do anything more for her—ever."

"That wrench Sally used to kill Albert," I said. "Is it still in his car?"

He turned slowly. There were tears in his eyes. "What? The wrench? No. No. I—I threw it into Indian Creek where the state highway crosses. I was trying to cover up for her. I knew her fingerprints

## Deadliest Dame in Town

would be on the wrench—the water will wash them away.”

I shook my head. “Plain water won’t disturb fingerprints, and besides, a wrench usually has grease on it. The prints should be very plain. I’d better call Sheriff Goff now. You can go with us to recover the wrench.” I moved toward the phone.

He jumped quickly to head me off. “Wait,” he said wildly. “My prints will be on it. Don’t you see? I handled it, and I threw it into the creek.”

“Sure, sure,” I said soothingly, “but Sally’s prints will be on it, too. That will substantiate your story. What are you worrying about?”

I saw the cold look in his eyes then, and it seemed to me that an icy breeze blew through the room. And I remembered at last that he probably still had Chick Roan’s gun. The sheriff hadn’t mentioned it, and I had forgotten about it.

Danford backed up slowly, and the blue-steel automatic he had picked up on Roan’s porch came out of his hip pocket. The gun shook in his hand, but that didn’t make me feel any better. The range was too short. Behind me I heard Sandy’s frightened gasp, and I spoke to her without taking my eyes from Danford.

“Get out of the way, Sandy. Move away from me.”

From the corner of one eye, I saw her slip slowly around the wall. I said to Danford, “Son, you’re licked. Don’t make it any tougher on yourself. Drop that gun—now.” I took a slow step toward him.

He raised the gun in his shaking hand, and his mouth worked convulsively. “D—don’t try to stop me,” he stuttered.

I took another step. I didn’t really think he would shoot. But he did—twice. When the bullets struck me it felt as though a couple of tennis balls had been struck, rather hard, against my chest and stomach. There wasn’t any real pain, not then. . . .

\* \* \*

It seemed to me that it was a long time before I really knew what was going on around me. Sandy told me that it was forty-six hours. I wouldn’t know. Anyhow, there came a day when I opened



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**Robert Martin**

my eyes and the blurred ghostly figures and the murmuring voices were gone. I saw real people, and the voices made sense. Sandy Hollis sat by my bed. It was a narrow bed in a white sunny room. Sandy looked like she needed sleep, but she was smiling.

"Hello, Jim," she said, and there were tears in her eyes. Behind her I saw a tall young man with gold-rimmed glasses. He looked familiar, and then I recognized the young doctor who had been at Chick Roan's house. A phrase popped into my head, and I said, "Manubrium segment of the sternum." It sounded silly, but the young doctor laughed. I remembered the whole thing then, and once more I could see the gun in George Danford's hand.

"The hell of it is," I said to the ceiling, "that the agency doesn't get a damn nickel out of this."

Sandy laughed, a little shrilly for Sandy, I thought, and then things got hazy once more. . . . When I opened my eyes again the sun was gone and soft lamplight fell over my bed. Sandy was still sitting there.

"I'm hungry," I said to her.

"That's good, Jim."

A fat nurse with a cheerful scrubbed face poked her head in the door. "Visitor for Mr. Bennett," she announced. "Doctor says it's all right—for a few minutes."

Sandy nodded. The nurse disappeared, and Sheriff Sam Goff came in, holding his hat in his hand. He had a wad of cut plug in one leathery cheek, and with his hat off I saw that he was as bald as an egg. With his thin beak of a nose and stringy neck he looked a little like an amiable turkey buzzard. He came over to the bed and ducked his head.

"Howdy, Son. Yo're kind of a hero in this here town."

"That doesn't pay the office rent," I said. I couldn't get it out of my head. It wasn't right. Anytime I get shot up, I like to be paid for it.

The sheriff chuckled, took a folded paper from his vest pocket, and tossed it on the bed. "I am authorized to present this here check," he said. "It's from Jerome Stacey, for yore part in nabbing the man who killed his boy, Albert."

"How much?" I said.

Sandy opened it. "One thousand dollars."



## Deadliest Dame in Town

I felt better right away. I said to the sheriff, "So you got Danford?"

"Yep, son, thanks to Sandy, here. She called me right after he plugged you and told me he'd likely scoot for the Indian Creek culvert on the state highway. Me and a deputy highballed out there, and shore enough, there he was, on his hands and knees in the water, rooting like a hog in August."

"Did you find the wrench?" I asked.

"Shore—right under the culvert in clear shallow water. George was rooting ten feet away from it."

"Fingerprints?"

"Yep. I called in a F.B.I. man from Toledo. All George Danford's. He confessed the whole shebang. About how when you cornered him he tried to throw the blame on Sally Winters—he figured wrong about the water washing fingerprints away. When you told him different, he knew he had to get rid of that wrench. He was crazy jealous of Albert Stacey, and after he followed Albert home he hung around. When Albert came back out, he followed him to Chick Roan's house. He listened at a window and heard the argument between Roan and Albert. So he waited for Albert, killed him, and put his body in your car. He didn't know about the note Albert had written, but that made it all the better for him."

"What about Roan?" I asked.

The sheriff showed yellow teeth in a wolfish grin. "We took care of him, Son. Cancelled his liquor license, slapped a stiff gambling fine on him, charged him with toting a gun without a permit, and shooting with intent to kill. He'll be out of circulation for a long time."

"Good," I said.

The sheriff backed away and put on his hat. "Well, I reckon that's about it." He nodded at me, and at Sandy. "See you folks later." He went out.

I said to Sandy, "How's Sally?"

"She's a changed girl, Jim. I don't think Aunt Sadie will have any more trouble with her." She leaned toward me. "Let's talk about you," she said softly. "For once you had me worried. Do you feel all right?" I felt her cool lips on my cheek. I closed my eyes. I felt fine.

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(Continued from page 36)

guns and come out with your hands in the air."

The words sounded futile, trite, to Rafferty as he inched forward. They seemed like something out of a cheap novel or a grade-B movie. Beside him a searchlight on a truck buzzed and crackled as it spit out glaring white light.

The killer broke from shelter in a whirl of seedy clothing, dead-white skin, and twisted features. He had a gun in each hand.

He crouched under the lights, blinded. He screamed something full of hate and blasphemy.

Then there were volleys of thunder and he was dead. He lay in a twisted heap on the sidewalk, face upward. Rafferty ran forward while two thousand people craned their necks.

Rafferty stood with the cops, looking down at Tommy Flagg. Flagg's dead eyes stared straight into a cold white spotlight.

\* \* \*

Coyle picked up Rafferty's copy: "Hmmm — hmmm — hmmm — good."

His pencil made a few lightning changes.

"A by-line. Page one," Rafferty said.

"Sure a by-line. And what do you think I've been holding the presses for? Don't get too big for your hat though. Go on home and get some sleep."

\* \* \*

An hour later Rafferty came out of Joe's Tavern and picked an *Express* off the newsstand. He opened it, glanced swiftly. Then he rolled it up and stuck it in his pocket.

He caught an owl car home and walked the last block. It was up a dark street spotted with bleak yellow lamps. A cold breeze stirred dead leaves and sent them scurrying along the pavement.

Rafferty hunched into his coat. He felt low, washed out. Why? He straightened up. A by-line. He should wear a grin.

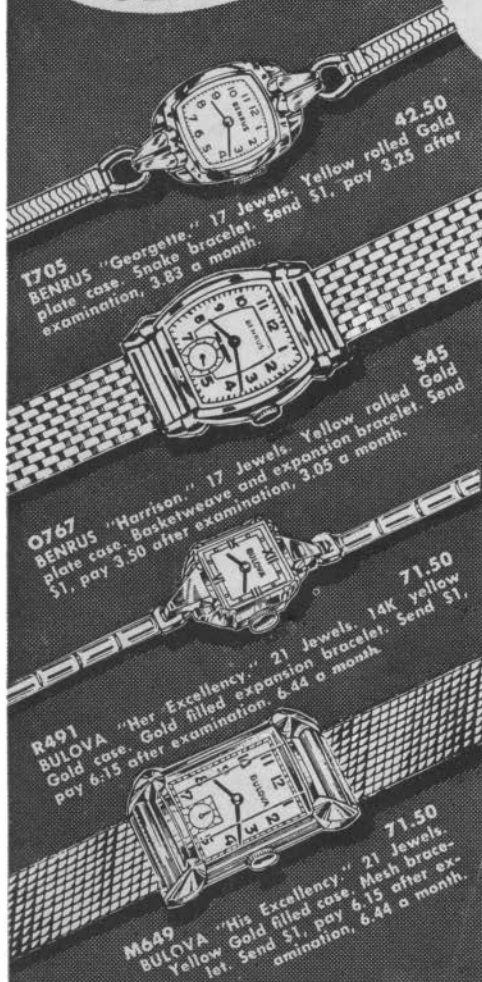
He said, "Oh, hell!" batted the porch railing with the *Evening Express*, began to climb. He said:

"The poor devil looked so lonely lying there. Two thousand people came to see the show—and he looked so damn lonely."

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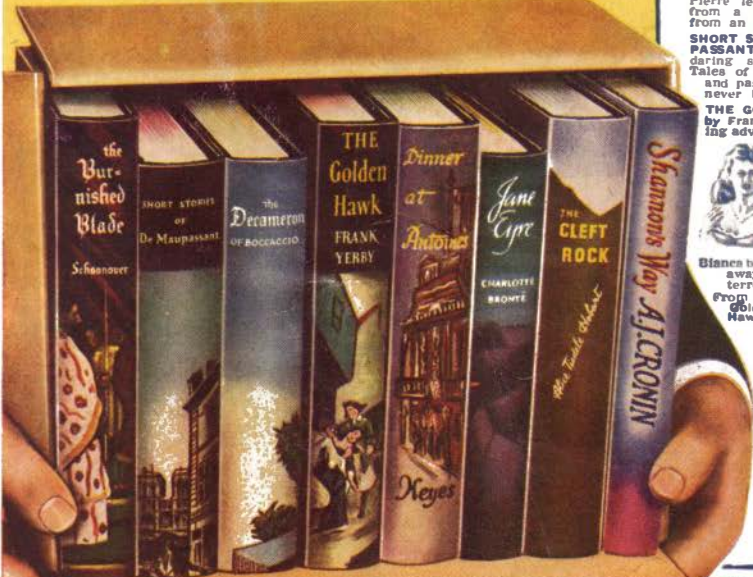
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