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NOVELS!

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A MATT MERCER STORY

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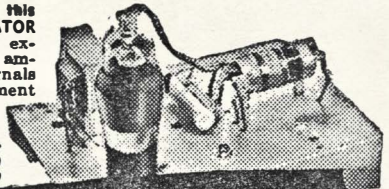
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FEBRUARY ISSUE OUT JANUARY 2nd!

Volume 32

January, 1946

Number 4

TWO GRIPPING CRIME-MYSTERY NOVELS

- CLAWS OF THE HELL-CAT**.....Day Keene 10
Gwen was a nice girl; only trouble was that she did a vanishing act every time she took a few drinks. . . . And this time she put both her expensive feet square in the red middle of Murder—which looked as if there'd be plenty left over as a serving for Matt Mercer, too!
- WANTED—A DEEPER GRAVE!**.....Cyril Plunkett 40
What more natural than that an inventor of safes and vaults would build the most burglar-proof one in the basement of his own home? . . . Besides, it would come in very handy if—as I knew I would be—I was stuck between the Devil and the Law, with no place to hide the body!

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TWO SHORT STORIES OF MURDER

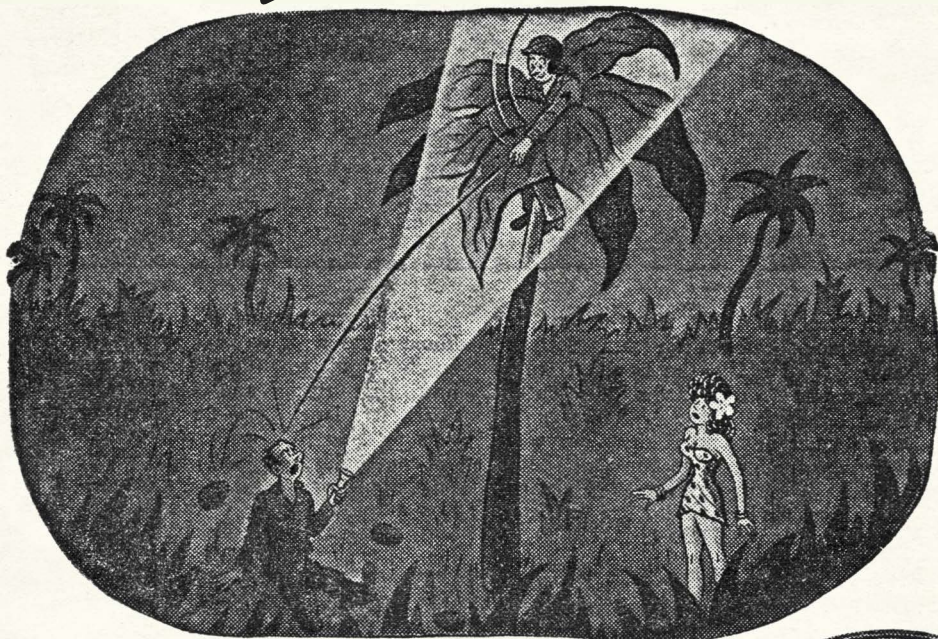
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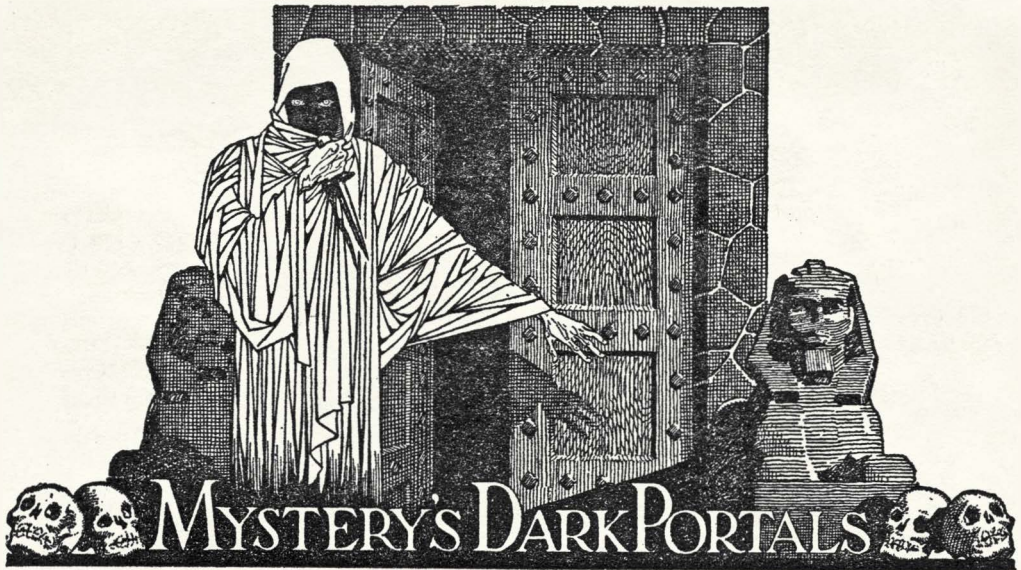
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IN ITSELF, the fact that the egg was hard-boiled had nothing to do with the case. Neither did the battered watch nor the carpenter's square, for that matter. But if First Grade Detective Al Penny hadn't been shrewd enough to total them correctly, the chances are a hundred to one that Glenda Hall would have burned as per schedule, and the death of the naked man who staggered into the Manhattan Bar would have stayed in the unsolved file until the report was yellowed with age and green grass grew on the grave of the youngest patrolman on the force. . . ."

That is a small taste of the next murder-mystery dish which will be ready for you in the next issue. And thereby hangs a story in itself.

We have gone on record—and we're still there, by the way—by saying that we try to steer clear of the stories that depend on "clues"—on these tricky bits of evidence found at the scene of the crime. Too often, we feel, have readers been subjected to dull accounts and a question-and-answer routine to find out who killed whom—and who cares, anyhow? In fact, clues as such leave us pretty cold.

All right then. . . . Why the chunk of story just quoted above—in which there certainly are enough mention of clues to tie up 'steen murders?

Because, although the mystery element is certainly there, and the clues are as weird an assortment ever to tie the red skein of murder around one of our favorite characters—Day Keene's Doc Egg—the story in itself uses such clues in their proper place.

In other words, this new novel by that master of murder and mayhem in fiction, is

really dependent upon suspense and tense human drama; upon well portrayed characterization right from the snakiest homicidal hood up to that strange and colorful Times Square character, Doc Egg—the little druggist who gets fighting mad and mad to fight any kind of criminal. And particularly the kind of homicidal hombre who sets out to get a million dollars, if only he can send a frightened and innocent girl to the chair for cold-blooded murder!

We think that this Day Keene novel is one that will be awfully hard to forget. But here's one warning: If you suffer from a weak heart, *Dime Mystery* stories are distinctly *not* your dish! Because this one, we really believe, will "send you"—as it did us—from the waterfront bar where the badly beaten, naked man appeared and promptly died, to teeming Times Square after midnight; to a Park Avenue pent-house, and a little rendezvous in a deserted cemetery, where there was just one too many bodies. . . .

And there will be more fiction to thrill and chill—unforgettable crime-mystery stories by such men as Talmage Powell, Ken Lewis, William R. Cox, and other of your favorite crime writers.

For example, how would you like to be called to investigate a family of huge Aztec stone images who are reported to be galivanting like crazy around a wealthy home. . . . And find that those massive monoliths of murder had picked you for their next living sacrifice? You can read about it in R. Sprague Hall's "When the Dead Gods Walk!"

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The Editor,

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Death in the Cage

By ERIC CARLTON



Vladimir rated tops as an animal trainer, but he met more than his match when he tried his prowess on a pair of bad lions . . . with the help of his murdered wife!

CIRCUS people don't like outsiders to come among them. Many of them are superstitious, frightened of jinxes, believers in more than luck or chance. To be a real carney you should be born a carney—and maybe they have a case, at that.

There's always the strange story of Vladimir Golea. . . .

First consider that strange, topsy-turvy existence for a moment—a community where freaks are normal, where it is a matter of course to risk your neck for applause, where the domestic animals are man-eaters—a community like that could look at the outside world and perceive in its bizarre, unknowable, sinister qualities. For among the rest of us, a freak is not always marked by two heads or an extra two feet of height: he may be a mental cripple, a savage more feral than lions—and who is to know? It may be more than your life is worth to walk with him on a lonely street, but you cannot stretch a net to guard against him. . . . No, to a carney the circus is safer than the highway beyond.

There was once a boy named Vladimir Golea, the only child of a prosperous urban family in Rumania, who had looked at too many spangles and listened to too many drums. Though he received the usual upper middle-class European education, and could have gone on to inherit his father's real estate business, his one ambition was to be an animal-tamer. It was a dream many boys have—and forget. But Vladimir had precocious charms far beyond his years. At fifteen, he ran away from home with a traveling show owned by a handsome woman who took a quasi-maternal interest in him.

She trained him in his young life's ambition. She made him famous. Soon Vladimir Golea and his lions were known all over Europe, and in gratitude, Vladimir married the woman who had made him what he was. Though she was quite a few years older than he, she still was beautiful and, for a time, the couple were ideally happy, traveling with their circus—and going hand in hand at sunset to throw steaks to the lions together.

Yet as the years passed, Madame Golea's beauty faded. Vladimir, who had become a success at fifteen, aged more slowly, though they still seemed ideally happy. He had ap-

parently skipped a part of his life—had never really awakened from his childish boyhood dream, which had somehow miraculously become reality. To him his wife was still the grand lady of the show that was his life—he had never grown up.

He was a freak more monstrous than any in the circus—only nobody knew it; not even himself.

One day Vladimir met a young dancer and evinced some interest in her—and Madame Golea blew up. Eventually he pacified her and nothing happened outwardly, until Madame Golea came into her fortune.

She left the show, then, went to Paris. Vladimir explained to the troupe that a wealthy relative of hers had died, had willed her his money, and she had to be present at the litigations. He evinced some concern over his quarrel with her, and over the fact that, now that she was independently wealthy, she might sell the show. They must all do their best to make the show pay, so that he, as its manager, could compete with his wife's new affluence—or they might have to look for new jobs.

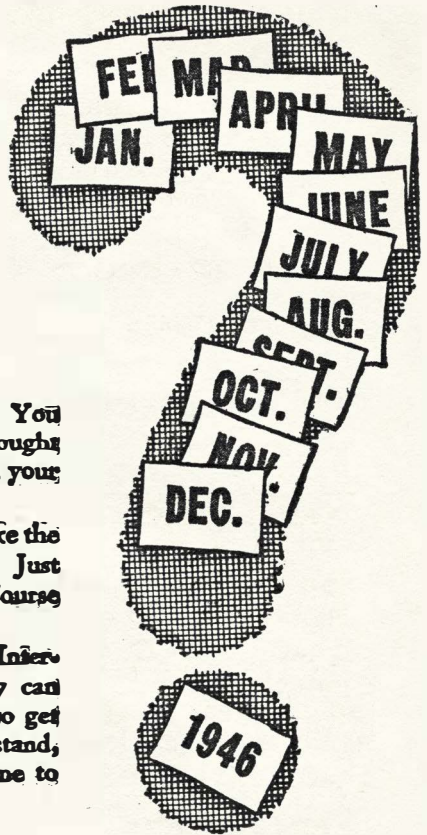
Vladimir himself set the example. He had recently acquired two new lions, untrained and untamed and more ferocious than any the circuit had ever seen. Around these he built an act more daring than any of his previous feats, and it was almost as if the lions themselves understood, for they put on an act that made Vladimir's name a byword in carney circles. No one else could handle them—in fact, if anyone approached their cage with Vladimir they went into a frenzy of rage. It was almost as if they were jealous of the man who was their master.

Seasons passed and the show prospered. Madame Golea never did come back, and Vladimir explained again to the troupe. She had grown tired of carnival life, liked that of Paris more. He saw her between seasons. As for himself, he was a showman first, last and always—a fact that was evident to all.

Then Vladimir fell seriously ill. Taken to a hospital and informed that he was dying—he awoke at last. Death was a reality that could not be dispelled by a dream, and for one stark, terrified moment Vladimir Golea saw himself as he really was and had been.

(Please turn to page 95)

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CLAWS OF THE HELL-CAT

It takes something like that Hare case to make me wish I'd been a fireman instead of an agency cop. All I had to do was to find the missing heiress to umpty-eight million bucks, who left her husbands as often as she took a drink; figure out Joe Connor's angle for trying to shoot me, cross-question a dead Army Joe, keep the D.A. off my neck, and remember that my wife likes to see a living husband come home to dinner!

CHAPTER ONE

The Voice That Wasn't There

IT BEGAN as a missing wife case. Harry had taken the call, and all that I knew about it was what he had told me over the phone. That wasn't much. Shortly after two o'clock a lad who had introduced himself as the confidential secretary of a Mr. J. E. Hare had phoned and asked if the Mercer Agency would send one of its best men to 247 Willow Road on a matter of some importance. He had refused to give any further information other than to say that any reasonable fee would be paid promptly, whether or not the agency decided to accept the assignment.

Being in the Willow Road neighborhood, I

By DAY KEENE



"You! Drop it! Quick!" I barked.

had dropped over. I didn't know J. E. Hare. But, whoever he was, he had money. Number 247 was a sizeable stone house set well back from the road on a plot of landscaped ground, enclosed by a six foot high wall well-iced with broken glass. The wrought iron gate was large and impressive, but open. I drove in up a tree lined drive, still trying to place the name. The only Hare whom I could remember had been a half-caste hare-lipped barman in Sydney.

The house was in keeping with the grounds. A white haired butler let me in, one eyebrow cocked in disapproval. Even after he had heard my story he didn't seem any too certain that I had come in the right door.

"You say your name is Mercer? A private agency man?"

"I have my own agency," I corrected.

He waved the point aside as immaterial. "And according to your story," he accused, "someone representing himself as Mr. Hare's confidential secretary phoned your office an

hour or so ago and asked you to call on a matter of some importance."

I didn't like his tone and said so. "Look," I told him. "I don't know about you or your boss. But I have things to do. Now either take me to this J. E. Hare or tell me that he has changed his mind and doesn't want to see me."

He hesitated.

"Okay. That's that," I said. I opened the door and started down the stairs.

"No. Please, Mr. Mercer," he stopped me. "I didn't mean to be rude. Just a moment, sir. I am certain that Mr. Hare will see you."

He walked down the hall past the stairs leading to the second floor and disappeared through a pair of carved doors before I could tell him to skip it. I debated taking a powder, and didn't.

I lit a cigarette and sat down in a high-backed chair facing a suit of armor. I had waited perhaps three minutes when a good looking pint-sized blonde pointed her sweater

down the stairs and saw me. She stopped in front of my chair, exuding an aura of friendliness and gin.

"Hello, man."

I said, "Hello." The kid wasn't over eighteen but she was so high that she was having trouble in getting her eyes to focus. More, though I couldn't call her name, her face was vaguely familiar.

"You want a drink?" she asked me.

I told her thanks but that it was a little early for me. Then she wanted to know if I had a cigarette.

I offered her one, and lighted it for her. "I like you," she confided. "Who are you? What's your name?"

I said that my name was Matt Mercer. Then she wanted to know what I did. I told her, and she stopped being friendly.

"Oh. A private detective, eh? What sort of a jam is she in now? Gwen wants some money, I suppose."

Not knowing who Gwen was I didn't say anything.

The kid was wearing a dirndl skirt with patch pockets. She fished a silver flask out of one of them and tilted it to her lips without taking her eyes from my face. She suddenly wasn't pretty anymore. Her eyes were too old.

"And he'll send it," she continued. "My money." She nipped at the flask again, quick tears plowing through her make-up. "My money! Understand! Well, give her this for me!"

Before I could duck she slapped me with the flask and ran on back upstairs. I got to my feet spitting blood.

"What the hell!"

The butler reappeared and handed me a folded handkerchief. "Forgive her, please, Mr. Mercer. Miss Hope is not herself. She has been under considerable strain. I am certain that you understand."

I didn't. But I was too busy looking in one of the hall mirrors to make certain that my bridge work was still intact to press the point.

"Look," I asked him, "who is Gwen? Why should she want money? And on what page of whose rotogravure have I seen that young refugee from a Keeley cure who just belted me?"

He smiled thinly. "I am afraid that you are being facetious, sir. This way, if you please."

I followed him down the hall, mentally cursing Harry.

HARE was a big, good-looking, man, almost too good looking, in a theatrical sort of way. He was sitting behind a desk in a book lined library. But he wasn't reading a book. He was riffing a deck of cards. In his middle

or late forties, all he needed was a pink coat to climb into one of the English hunting prints on the wall and begin yipping "Tally Ho."

His eyes were a cold, steel-grey. His accent was strictly old school tie. "I don't believe, Mr. Mercer," he said coldly, "that I have had the pleasure of meeting you before. To what do I owe this honor?"

He continued to riffle the cards. I started to get hot under the collar—then I began to smell a rat. "You are J. E. Hare?" I asked him. "And this is 247 Willow Road?"

"I am, and it is." The red showing above his collar began to spread into his cheeks. "Come, come. Speak up! Stop beating about the bush. Never mind repeating your story about someone sending for you." He got to his feet and leaned on his knuckles. "Speak, damn you! What kind of a mess is Gwen in this time? And how much is it going to cost me?"

I looked from him to the butler. The white haired lad was holding a gun. "Just a precaution," he informed me.

"Sit down and cool off," I told Hare. "Believe it or not, I'm leveling. Someone did phone my office representing himself to be your confidential secretary."

"You talked to him?" he demanded.

I shook my head. "No. But Harry, my partner, did." I sat down on the edge of his desk. "Now suppose you climb off your Tally Ho and tell me what this is all about."

Hare looked at the white haired lad. He studied my face and put his gun away. "If I may venture an opinion, sir," he told Hare, "I am very much inclined to believe him."

Hare spread his hands in a futile gesture. "But that fails to make sense, Dawson. Why should anyone phone Mr. Mercer and say that I wished to see him, unless—" He thought better of what he had been about to say, sat back in his chair again and resumed his shuffling of the cards.

"Unless what?" I demanded.

Dawson wet his lips. "Unless you are to be used as a contact, sir," he told me. "Frankly, I thought you were. That's why I acted as I did."

Hare glanced up and said sharply, "Tell him nothing. It's none of his affair. And I won't pay him a ruddy dime."

I said that that was fine with me and got up to go.

"No. Please." Dawson begged me. He turned to Hare. "We can't go on like this much longer, sir. We don't know the customs of the country. And we either have to confide in someone, or call in the police."

Hare said he was damned if he would. But Dawson insisted, and he did. It wasn't an unusual story. I had heard it before, but never

in the confiscatory brackets. Hare told it in beautiful English but broken down into every day language it summed up Mrs. Hare as a dipsomaniac and a tramp of the first water whom he wished to God that he had never met.

I could have kicked myself for not having recognized the little blonde. Gwen was the much married Cordovan heir and the little blonde was Hope Cordovan, her daughter, who had been dragged from one count to no account all over Europe, Gwen having married some six or seven times. And before Hare was well started I recalled reading some six months before that Gwen's last marriage had been to an English colonel of Lancers whom she had met in India.

I LOOKED at Hare as he talked. If he had ever had any illusions, he had lost them.

"And then about a fortnight ago," he continued, "after promising on her word of honor that she would abstain from drinking I returned to find her gone. She phoned around midnight, intoxicated, and informed me that she was staying in town with," it was a bitter pill for him to swallow, "with a friend." Color crept into his face. "I told her that I'd bloody well divorce her if she did, and that if she had no consideration for me she might at least think of her daughter. She called me a name and hung up." He continued to handle the cards. "And that is the last that we've heard from her, directly."

I asked, "And indirectly?"

He hesitated briefly, took a scrap of paper from his wallet and tossed it across the desk. Typed on a piece of Chalmer's House stationery were the words:

Dear Johnny:

Please cash a check for ten thousand and give same to a messenger whom I will send. In one of my usual messes. Believe me, dear, I am sorry. Your repentant—

Gwen

The name was scrawled in a shaky hand. I handed it back to Hare. "So—?"

He said, "So I cashed a check as she requested. After all, it is Gwen's money, rather she holds it in trust for her daughter. But no messenger has appeared. And the note came three days ago."

Dawson looked at me hopefully. "Just what do you think that we ought to do, sir? Should we inform the police?"

"I'll be damned if I know," I admitted. I nodded at the note. "The signature is hers?"

Hare nodded. "Indubitably." Color crept into his cheeks again. "But I'm in a bit of a spot you know. I'm damned if I do, and damned if I don't."

I said that I understood.

Dawson suggested. "Perhaps, sir, as long as you have your own private agency, and have been called into the case so mysteriously, you might consider a commission."

I agreed that I might. But I made it plain. "No key-hole peeping. I'm not that kind of a detective."

Hare thawed completely for the first time. "Thought not. You don't look like that kind of a Johnny. See it now. Former soldier, what?"

"Yeah. But that's neither here nor there," I told him. "Just what would you want me to do?"

"Find Gwen," he told me promptly. "If she is in need of assistance, aid her. If she is merely being indiscreet—" he shrugged. "Then that would be my problem."

I said that was fair enough and named a fee. He said it was damned high, but he'd pay it.

"And you wouldn't have any idea," I asked in parting, "who might have called my office and posed as your secretary?"

Hare shook his head. "I would not."

And that was that. I put his check in my pocket and Dawson led me past the armor to the door. "You will do your best, sir."

"I'll do what I can," I told him. "How about phone calls? Have there been any for Mrs. Hare since she has been gone?"

He shook his head. "None out of her social circles."

He said that he would have to consult Miss Hope and would mail a detailed list to my office.

"Okay. I'll keep in touch," I told him.

I walked on down the steps to my car. It could be just one of those things. Or it could be a snatch. But if some mob had intended to use me as a contact, something had slipped up somewhere. Or it could be that now that I knew the facts I'd be contacted.

I was. But not in the way that I expected. The slug smashed through the rear window of the car, fanned my cheek, and starred the windshield. I slipped out from under the wheel, my own gun in my hand. The shot had been fired from the wrought iron gate. But whoever had fired it was gone. On the far side of the wall a motor roared into high and quickly faded out.

Dawson opened the house door.

"Did you see him?" I demanded.

"Only his back, sir," he told me. "But I gathered that he was short and stocky. And I know that he dropped his hat."

I whipped the car in a sharp U turn and drove up the drive to the gate. The hat was lying on the grass. It was an expensive Stetson with the initials J. C. stamped in gold on the sweat band. I picked it up.

Joe Connors was the only short stocky hood I knew whose initials were J. C. and kidnaping wasn't his line. He was a gambler. More, it had been fifteen years since Joe had done his own shooting. I tossed the hat into the car. It wasn't much. But it at least was a starting point.

CHAPTER TWO

Trail of the Golden Girl

TOMMY MORRIS, one of Connors' boys, was shooting the breeze with a pert young redhead under the marquee of the Parisian. He nodded cordially as I parked. I asked him if Joe was inside. He said that he was and went on talking. If my showing up worried him any, he was concealing it well. And he was Connor's driver.

Maybe you know the Parisian, maybe not. It is a big brick former warehouse that looks like a barn but isn't. It's one of Chicago's show clubs and a must on every visiting fireman's list. The prices are high but the food and the liquor are good, and the floor show is young and stripped as far as the moral code will allow. Joe's real take came, however, from the games on the second floor.

It was only later afternoon so the tables were still stacked, a porter was mopping, and a line of cuties in rompers were rehearsing a new routine. I watched them for a moment then asked the porter if he knew where I could find Connors.

He said that he thought that he was upstairs.

"Just go up?" I asked, off hand.

"No, sir," he informed me. "So far as I know, sir, Mr. Connors been upstairs all afternoon."

At night when the games are running the stairway is lousy with guards. There is even an electric eye to spot any concealed gun that the boys may over-look. But both the eye and the guards were off.

Lord and Mason, two more of Connors' boys were drinking their breakfast at the gambler's bar. A short, stocky, man, in his middle forties, Connors, in his shirt sleeves, was examining a warped roulette wheel, peering down critically.

"What's the matter? Won't the gimmick work?" I asked him.

He looked up sore, then saw who I was and held out his hand, smiling, "No damn it, it won't. It gives the sucker an even break. Long time no see, Matt. I thought I told you and Sherry to drop around anytime and the check would be on me."

I shook hands saying that he had, but that the twins hadn't been very well and we had been spending our evenings at home. Then he

saw the hat in my hook, looked at the initial in the sweatband, mildly puzzled, and wanted to know what I was doing with one of his hats.

If it was an act, it was good.

"I'm back-tracking the hat," I told him. "Believe it or not, Joe, somebody wearing this kelly just took a shot at me."

I hadn't raised my voice but Lord and Mason heard me. They sauntered up with their hands in their coat pockets. I unbuttoned my coat.

Connors shook his head. "Cut it out. What's the idea, Matt? Trying to hang something on me?"

"No. I'm just stating a fact," I told him.

"And this shooting happened where?"

I gave him the Willow Road address, adding, "At present the residence of one J. E. Hare who would seem to be Gwen Cordovan's current husband."

Connors said, "Ah," very softly and looked at Mason.

The hood took a note book from his pocket and thumbed through it. "That's the address," he told Connors. "You get in to see the dame, Mercer?"

I said that was none of his business, that I had called regarding a hat. He told me not to get so wise. I said I wasn't getting wise.

"You're always too wise," he sneered. "And too tough. You think that just because you used to be a top kick of marines that you can get away with murder." He took hold of my coat lapel. "Look. I asked you a question."

I told him to take his hands off me. He didn't. So I hit him. He caromed off a craps table, spitting curses, and making motions toward his gun. But he didn't quite dare to pull it. Mine was in my hand.

"Cut it out, both of you," Connors roared.

"The hat, remember?" I said. "Also the butler who sees the shooting tells me that the lad with the gun is inclined to be short and stocky."

Connors nodded. "That's me. I mean I describe that way. But I haven't left the joint all afternoon. And I can prove it. Besides, why should I shoot you?"

I admitted I didn't know. It didn't seem logical that he had. "Okay," I agreed. "So it wasn't you who flipped that shot at me. Then who did? Why was he wearing your hat? And what the hell's eating on Mason?"

Connors shook his head. "I'll pass on the first two. But the answer to number three is a rubber check for five grand."

ACCORDING to his story, Gwen, who through the years and at times when she wasn't in Europe had pushed a lot of money

across his tables, had gone broke bucking the tiger and had asked Mason, who was running the game, to okay a check.

Mason told me, "And like a fool, I did. Now all I get is a run-a-round from a butler who tries to tell me that she isn't home. Look. I'll ask nice this time. Did you, or didn't you, see her?"

I told him that I had not. "And she cashed this check in here, when?"

"The night before last," he said.

"She was alone?"

"No," he said. "She was not. She was with a good-looking young Army sergeant."

"And she was wearing how much jewelry?"

"Quite a bit, as I recall," he said.

"And this Army sergeant was a big tall guy?"

Mason shook his head. "No. He was short and stocky. He—" He stopped short and looked at me.

"I wouldn't know," I told him. "I'm not the deducing type. All I can do is ask questions."

Connors accused, "She's missing. The butler wasn't stalling. She hasn't been home since then."

"Since long before," I told him. I used his phone to call Hare and asked him if he knew that his wife had given the Parisian a bum check for five grand.

When he stopped swearing he wanted to know when it was dated. I told him the night of the day that he had received her note.

Then he asked the same question I had.

"No," I was forced to tell him. "She was with a young Army sergeant. I'm going to check on that angle now. But before I do I wonder if you can tell me just which of her jewelry she was wearing on the day that she left home."

He said most likely her daughter could. There was a brief pause before she came to the phone. She sounded almost sober.

"Hello, man. I'm sorry I hit you. Honest!"

I said that was all right and explained what I wanted of her. She said that her mother had been wearing a pair of five carat diamond earrings, her engagement ring, and a diamond and emerald bracelet.

"Worth how much?" I asked.

She said that she hadn't the least idea but that there were forty-four diamonds and eight emeralds in the bracelet. She didn't sound very worried. "Something has happened to mother?"

I told her I didn't know. Then Hare came back on the wire and asked what I thought that he had better do about the check. I said that if I was him I would pay it and he said he would.

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"And you've still no idea who phoned you?" he asked me in conclusion.

"I have not," I told him.

He hung up without even mentioning the shooting in front of the house. I figured at the time that it was one of two things. Either Dawson hadn't told him, or he didn't give a damn.

Both Connors and Mason insisted on buying me a drink for straightening out the check matter. I had a couple, meanwhile asking Mason for the young sergeant's description. He said the lad had been short and stocky, in his twenties, and handsome in a rural sort of way. "Why? You think he bumped her for her rocks?"

I shrugged and let it go at that.

"They were both high as a kite," he admitted. "And if she hadn't dropped so much dough in here, I'd never have taken the chance." He shook his head. "Those society dames. Fifteen years she's been coming in here. Almost always with a different guy, and every year she looks younger."

Lord made a crack about hormones and Connors wanted to know if I knew how many times Gwen Cordovan had been married. I said that I thought that it was six times, finished my drink and walked on out of the club.

It was still hot and still light. Tommy was still talking to the red head. A few feet down the street a bunch of little girls, their short summer dresses swishing with their movements, were jumping rope and playing sky-blue on the sidewalk with a well-mashed tin can for a lagger. Hearing them laughing and screaming, like kids will, made me think of Gwen Cordovan's kid. Hope had probably never jumped rope or played sky-blue in her life. All that she's ever had was money.

I drove down the outer drive to Randolph, cut west into the Loop toward the office, then changed my mind and drove on down Michigan to the Chalmers House. Gwen's note had been written on its paper. And it might be that Al Gandy could give me a line on Gwen and the young sergeant.

I had a feeling that I was overlooking something. Then I suddenly realized what it was. Gwen was holding the Cordovan money in trust for Hope. It amounted to plenty of millions. Yet a five thousand dollar check of hers had bounced while Hare could write a good one for ten thousand. He could even offer to pay off the one that she had given to Connors.

More, Hope had said:

"And he'll send it. My money! My money! Understand! Well, give her this for me."

I changed my mind again, swung back through the Loop and parked in front of the Times-Examiner. Harry Gold was on the city desk.

"I'm chiseling information," I told him. "Give with the loquacious. What do you know about this J. E. Hare whom Gwen Cordovan married in Cairo?"

"Not a damn thing," he admitted, "except that he was a colonel, or former colonel, of Lancers or something." He eyed me shrewdly. "Why?"

I said that I was interested in knowing if he had money of his own.

Gold shook his head. "I doubt that very much. But neither has Gwen for that matter. The way that I understand it, she only holds the Cordovan money in trust until Hope is nineteen."

I asked, "And if something should happen to Gwen, and then a little later to the kid?"

He was all ears. "What could happen? Why should anything happen?"

I said, "This is off the record," and told the whole story to date, concluding, "I'm not overly bright. I admit it. I don't think 'em out. I wear 'em down. But the whole case smells fishy to me. How come Hare can write checks on the kid's money while those that Gwen writes bounces?"

He thought a moment, picked up his phone and asked Miss Hanelley, the society page editor, if she would mind stepping out to his desk for a moment. He asked her the same question.

SHE smiled, "That's really very simple. As I understand it, due to her unfortunate, shall we say, craving, in the past Gwen Cordovan has always run through whatever sum of money has been allotted her by the estate long before the end of the year. So, as I understand it, as a curb and a protection, the board of trustees representing the estate asked Colonel Hare if he would mind administering the allowance. I hear he agreed, unwillingly." She smiled wryly. "But I doubt he'll be bothered much longer. I understand they are parting."

I asked her if she had heard of Gwen's latest romance with a youthful Army sergeant. She said she had not and wanted to know his name. When I said that I didn't know it, she lost interest.

I persisted. "One more question, Miss Hanelley. What if something should happen to Gwen before she and Hare separate?"

She said, "The money still goes to Hope. And that will be in the next few weeks, on the day that she is nineteen."

"But if something should happen to her before she is nineteen?"

"The money reverts to the Cordovan foundation."

"And Hare wouldn't get a dime?"

She shook her head. "Not a dime."

"Thanks. It was just a thought I had."

I called the office from the lobby. Harry said he was just locking up and wanted to know how I made out at 247 Willow Road. I briefed the case for him and asked if the party who had represented himself as Hare's confidential secretary had contacted the office again.

He said he had not but pointed out an angle that I hadn't known. The caller had said he was calling from River Forest, the suburb in which Hare lived. It was possible that he had been. If so, it was a toll call and the phone company would have a record of the station from which it had been made. I told him to find out what he could and if he turned up anything interesting in the next few minutes to call me at the Chalmers House. Otherwise I would be back at the office inside of half an hour.

The Chalmers House is old but still expensive and caters to the General-Grant-slept-here set. I found Al Gandy parked in back of a potted palm watching a group of slim young things trip in and out of the elevator. "Women ain't what they used to be, Matt," he complained. "There ain't enough meat on their bones to set a tasty table. Let alone, one a guy would hate to get up from."

I said that I hadn't noticed any of the younger male generation pushing back their chairs and asked if the Chalmers House had had the honor of housing Mrs. J. E. Hare, nee the Countess Anzelli, nee Gwen Cordovan lately.

The question seemed to amuse him. "So they've got you bird dogging, eh?"

I pointed out that I had asked him a question.

"No. Not since before the war," he told me. "Although, while I didn't see it myself, according to one of the barmen, Gwen raised quite a scene in there a few nights ago. In fact they had to ask her to leave."

He went in with me to talk to the barman. The lad was still sore about the incident and voluble.

"So she has money," he expounded. "In my book she still is a tramp. And I am very nice about it, Mr. Mercer. 'If you will excuse me, lady,' I tell her, real polite, 'I think that you have enough and I will not be able to serve you a drink.'"

"Then what happened?" I asked him.

"Then she calls me names no lady ought to know. And so does the young punk who is with her. In fact they are very nasty and I am forced to ask them to leave."

I asked him if he was certain that the woman was Gwen Cordovan.

He grinned, "I should be. She tells me fifty times she is Mrs. Hare, the former Gwen Cordovan, that she has enough money to buy the joint if she wants, and that she has been

drinking for too many years not to know when she has enough."

"That dame," Al swore admiringly. "What I wouldn't give for her stomach."

I could have made a wise crack, but I didn't. I had a hunch I'd run into pay dirt. "Her escort didn't identify himself?" I asked the barman.

He shook his head. "Not to me personally. But he is a sergeant. Mrs. Hare called him Mike—" He fished in a drawer in the back-bar. "And after they are gone, the porter finds this on the floor where Mrs. Hare drops her purse and spills everything all over, she is that tight."

He handed me an envelope with the typed address—

Sergeant Michael Slavin
6331 S. Shannon St.
Chicago, Illinois

"That's back of the yards," Al said.

There wasn't any letter in the envelope. There was some small hard object. I spilled it out on my palm. It was an earring with a broken screw bob.

"Costume stuff," the barman explained. "But I spoke to the night manager and he said we had better keep it in case she should call around."

Al picked it out of my palm. "That's good paste, if it is paste."

"It isn't. It's a diamond," I told him. "It's one of a pair of five carat stones that her daughter said Gwen was wearing."

Al laid it gently on the bar as if he was afraid he might break it.

I COPIED the Shannon Street address and walked out to my car. The missing woman had been gone two weeks. It was certain she had been on a binge. It was equally certain, as Hare had put it, that she had been indiscreet.

When she had left home she had been wearing a fortune in diamonds. Still, she had passed a bad check at the Parisian. She had sent her husband a note, stating that she was in a mess, and had asked him to raise ten grand. To my mind that suggested collusion on her part with a party or parties unknown.

But the fact that the ten grand had never been called for made it another matter. Then, there were the phone call and the shot at me to consider. They suggested a snatch with the snatchers losing their nerve, which happens in three cases out of five.

I checked the time element. She had been in the Parisian on a Wednesday. It had been later that same night that she had made a scene in the Chalmers House. Both times she had been accompanied by a stocky young Army

sergeant whose name, it would seem, was Slavin. That had been three days before. No one had seen her or heard from her since.

I let in my clutch and rolled south. I wanted to talk to Mike Slavin. But even then I was beginning to grow a suspicion that by the time that I caught up to the convivial Mrs. Hare she would be beyond any assistance I could give her.

CHAPTER THREE

Where's the Blood?

IT WAS still light but growing dark when I drove under a Belt Line viaduct and parked in front of 6331 South Shannon. The kids had begun to gather under the street lights, some just talking and some playing games. The group nearest me were playing shinny with a tin can and some taped-up sticks. It was the closest that most of them would ever get to golf, or to hockey for that matter. It was that kind of neighborhood.

The house was as poor as the street. An unpainted frame story-and-a-half affair, it was set closer to the alley than the street and leaned wearily toward its nearest neighbor.

Almost every house in the block had service stars in their windows, some of them three and four. It was also that kind of neighborhood, poor but fiercely proud.

As I slipped out from in back of the wheel a grimy faced ten year old demanded, "How's about watching your car for you mister?"

I flipped him half a buck, grinning, "Sure. Why not?"

He grinned back like the dirty-faced little pirate he was. So it was a hold-up. So what? Even poor kids like spending money. I knew. I'd been born on a similar street.

There was a light in the rear of the house but none in the front room. I unbuttoned my coat and banged the door.

A broad-faced young Slav opened it. "Yeah? And what do you want?" he asked coldly.

I said that I wanted to see Mike Slavin.

He hesitated briefly, said, "Come in."

The hallway was hot and stuffy and smelled of cabbage and fried pork. An open door leading off the hall disclosed a tumbled unmade bed. If Gwen Cordovan was there, it was one hell of a love nest.

My guide told me, "Right back this way."

I followed him down the hall into a lighted kitchen. Three men were sitting around a table drinking beer and playing cards. None of them were in uniform. None of them answered Slavin's description.

"This guy wants to see Mike," the lad who had let me in told them. "For my money, he's the dick Mike warned us might show up."

I didn't get the set-up. The faces of the men at the table had been friendly. Now all three stood up. The oldest, a big man with a drooping white mustache, tapped my chest with a finger the size of a pistol barrel.

"You detective?" he asked me in broken English.

I said I was.

He poked at my chest again. "You come make trouble for Mike?"

I was getting fed up with the case. "Look. I'll make plenty of trouble," I warned him, "and that damn fast! Start talking. Where is Mike holding Mrs. Hare?"

That struck one of the lads as funny. He bent over slapping at his thigh. "He wants to know where Mike is holding Mrs. Hare."

His small eyes ugly over his high cheek bones, the old man started to poke at my chest again. I slapped his hand away. And that was a mistake on my part. His other hand came up like a counter-balance and belted me into the table. It broke under my weight and I landed in a foam of beer and cards, trying to get at my gun and not being very successful because all four of them had jumped me.

"Kill him! Kill the dirty shamus!" the lad who had let me in screamed.

All of them did their best. The only thing that saved me was the fact that they all were so eager to kill me that they were kicking each other's shins as often as they were me. More, killing is a science. I was an expert at it. And they were amateurs.

I rolled, knocking one of the lads off his feet, snatched a chair by a leg and beat a clear path around me long enough to get at my gun.

The old man was shouting, "Mike good boy. You no make him trouble." He began a hefty kick, saw the gun in my hand and stood on one foot poised like a dancer. The blood drained from his cheeks like someone had pulled a stopper. "No shoot, please," he begged. "Just get mad for Mike. No mean to hurt you."

THE other three lads fell back against the wall, their palms raised shoulder high.

"Of course not," I told the old man. "I'll bet you tell that to all your corpses." I put a slug into the baseboard to whet their memories, then turned my gun on the lad who had let me in. "What's your name?"

"Tom," he gulped. "Tom Slavin. I'm Mike's brother."

"Where's Mike?"

"In Valdaro," he said promptly. "Valdaro, Indiana. You know, the place where you get married."

I asked what the hell he was going there.

He said, "Getting married."

That one stumped me for a moment. "He's getting married? To whom?"

The kid stared at me wide-eyed. "I—you said—we thought that her family sent you. That's why we—" he stopped, embarrassed, and not a little frightened. "Look. You ain't a city dick, are you, mister?"

There is a difference. I let him sweat while I turned over to the new joker I had drawn. Gwen knew that Hare was through with her. She had no inhibitions, and few morals. And drunks, especially women, did do the damndest things.

"Stand right where you are," I told them. "Don't move an inch." I walked on through the house, looking in every room. It was poor but it wasn't as dirty as I had thought, just the untidy house men keep. And there were no signs of any woman having been there recently.

I walked back out to the kitchen. None of them had moved. They didn't look like kidnapers to me. I pointed my gun at the old man. "What do you do, Stanislaus?"

"Please, mister. I Stepan," he told me. "I Mike's father." He made a vague gesture at the night. "Twenty years I work in Yards. No ever make trouble before." I'll be damned if he didn't start crying. "Just want Mike be happy."

I put my gun away. "All right. Let's have it," I said. "Someone tell me the story."

Their eyes elected Tom. He managed to be coherent with some prompting from the old man and the other two lads, who turned out to be neighbors. Boiled down, Mike Slavin, home on furlough, enroute to the Pacific, had met a swell queen, 'society stuff', as he called it, in one of the better Loop bars. Having only two weeks of his furlough left and being no fool, Mike had made hay while his star was shining. She was, he said, a widow with plenty of money. That afternoon he had brought her home to meet his father and his brother and had told them that he and Mrs. Hare were on their way to Valdaro, Indiana, to be married.

"This was when, what time?" I asked.

He told me about six-thirty. I looked at my watch. I'd only missed them by an hour, I found.

"She told us," Tom concluded, "that her family didn't want her to get married again. And that if a private dick should show we should rough him up a bit to discourage him from butting in on her and Mike's honeymoon." He spread his hands in a futile gesture. "So—we tried to."

I reached for a cigarette I didn't have. One of my eyes was swollen shut. Sherry had told me that morning that the Elberts were coming for dinner. I knew what she'd say when I called her. What Hare might want to say, he couldn't say over the phone.

"Okay. So it's a mistake all around," I

admitted. "But just to make sure, one of you describe the blushing bride."

The old man said she was blonde and pretty and very jolly. She had insisted they all have a drink.

I said, "I'll bet."

Tom whistled. "And did she have diamonds. A green and diamond bracelet and rings, and a big diamond in one ear."

The old man followed me to the door. "My Mike. He don't do anything wrong?"

"I don't think so, Dad."

I didn't. The whole onus, as I saw it, was on Gwen. She had wanted Slavin. She'd got him. But the case was sour in my mouth. Two and two still made three. Nothing I had heard yet explained the phone call, the star in my windshield, or Joe Connors' hat.

There was a phone booth in the saloon on the corner. Hare answered the phone himself. I gave him what I had, concluding, "So I guess it's up to you."

He rose considerably in my estimation. Instead of cursing, all that he said was, "Well, she's rather jumped the barrier this time."

I said that it would seem so.

"No, please, Mercer," he stopped me from hanging up. "Name your own fee, but carry on. Locate Gwen. Hold her by force if necessary. Then call me back again. I'll be waiting at the phone."

I reminded him of our bargain.

He said, with quiet dignity, "I'm not asking you to peep in key-holes. I'm not even thinking of that aspect of the case. I'm thinking of her daughter. The poor child has gone through Hades. She mustn't be hurt anymore. All that I am asking you to do is to locate Gwen and phone me. I'll start for wherever you are immediately. With me on the scene, whether this bigamous marriage has taken place, or not, I may be able to run a bluff, pass it off as a joke or something, and thus keep it out of the papers. In her right mind and sober, Gwen wouldn't do this to Hope."

I thought of the kid's wistful, "Hello, man," and her equally wistful, "I like you." Then, there was the phone call, the slug, the hat. Walking out on the case now would be like leaving in the middle of a picture.

"Okay. I'll play chump," I agreed. "But it's going to cost you plenty. And you stay close to your phone all night."

He promised that he would. I bought a drink and a handful of slugs. But something was screwy somewhere. I didn't have much better luck with the slugs. Harry wasn't at the office or in any of the bars that he supported.

I USED the next to the last slug to call Sherry, told her I was on a case, that she and the Elberts had better sit down if the roast

was still fit to eat, and to expect me when she saw me.

Having quite an extensive vocabulary, and having squandered quite a few points on the roast, she taught the operator a few new words and banged up the receiver.

I called her back with my last slug. "But you still love me?"

She smacked a kiss into the mouthpiece, said, "Yes, God help me!" and banged up her receiver again.

I walked out chuckling and built up the dirty-faced little pirate's movie and ice cream fund by another half a dollar, asking as an after-thought, "You wouldn't happen to remember the kind of a car that Mike Slavin was driving?"

He wanted to know if Mike was in trouble. When I said that he wasn't, he grinned.

"Then he was driving a maroon Buick club coupé with white side-wall tires."

The trail wasn't hard to follow. I drove the most direct route to Valdaro, stopping from time to time at likely looking roadhouses that I thought might have attracted Gwen's eager eye.

The other side of Deep River a barman said, "Yeah. They was in here. They have three drinks apiece." He winked. "Then they remember where they're headed and blow out in a cloud of dust."

I wasn't hooting. Even the farms were few and far between.

It was after nine when I reached Valdaro. The town hall and the license bureau were closed but one of the group of men gassing in front of the building admitted to being the town clerk and wanted to know what he could for me.

I told him that I was supposed to be the best man for a young friend of mine but it was beginning to look like I'd missed him. He wanted to know his name.

"Sergeant Mike Slavin," I told him.

He let go a stream of tobacco. "He and Miss Hare got a license not over ten minutes ago." He peered across the street at a pair of lighted windows over a hardware store. "I think they went over to Charlie's. He's one of our J.P.s," he explained.

I started to cross the street, stopped as one of the men asked him, "That the couple in the red Buick, the sergeant and the blonde with all the diamonds?"

The clerk said that was the couple he meant.

The other lad told me, "Then you've missed 'em all right, Mister. I was just locking up when they came down. Both of them were pretty high. Him especially. But she slid in back of the wheel and seemed to be doing okay." He pointed up the street. "The last I seen of them, they was headed out 45 toward Michigan City."

I debated calling Hare and asking him if he knew if Gwen had a cottage in the dune country and decided to let it wait, figuring that if I hadn't caught up with them by then that I could check the angle from Michigan City.

But I didn't get that far. Five minutes out of town a state patrol car whipped by me with its siren wailing. I found out why a half mile down the road.

There was a sharp right curve over a culvert, but the red Buick hadn't made it. It had plowed off the road instead, torn up dirt for fifty yards and smacked into a big oak so hard that the whole front end had telescoped.

AS I parked, the white-faced farmer who had called the law was telling the young trooper, "They must have been going about ninety."

"You see it, chum?" I asked.

He said he had not. His story was that he had heard the squeal of brakes and the crash while he was at the far end of the curve and had stepped on his own gas only to have another car roar around the curve almost forcing him off the road. "They was racing, I think," he said.

Gwen had been thrown from the car. There was a nasty gash on her forehead that exposed white bone. She was dead. The sergeant was still in the telescoped mess.

The trooper gagged and turned away. "And sudden death."

Other cars were stopping now. A fat little Doc Yak who had been one of the group in front of the Valdaro Town Hall and who turned out to be the local coroner, waddled up to the wreck, glanced at the dead woman perfunctorily and wagged the dead lad's head. "Hmm. It's the couple that Charlie just married. Fractured skull and a broken neck. Both died instantly. Damn this drunken driving." He picked his jury before the gathering crowd. "You, Sam, Bill, Jake—"

When he asked if anyone knew them I told the same lie that I had told in Valdaro, adding that if he would impound the jewels and what money they might have on them, as a favor to their families, I would see that their bodies were taken back to Chicago.

So they were dead. I was still working for Hare. I had some influence in Chicago, but none in Indiana. And I wanted the bodies out of sight before some smart Joe of a reporter put booze, the name Hare, and the diamonds, together—and came up with the correct score.

He said that was impossible, that their bodies would have to be claimed by their next of kin and that I'd better try to get them on the phone.

So I'd made my try and failed. Both Hare

and her kid would have to face it. I got the robe from my car, started to cover Gwen's body, looked at the wound in her head again and suddenly realized why it looked so strange.

There wasn't any blood.

The wound was deep enough to have killed her. But it hadn't. I lifted one of her arms unobtrusively, then laid it back on the ground, the short hairs on my neck tingling.

She had reputedly been driving the car. She and Slavin had reputedly been married only a few minutes before. A dozen witnesses, including the coroner, could testify to that fact. But something was screwy somewhere. Rigor mortis was setting in.

She had been dead when the car had crashed. She had been dead for at least an hour.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Knife-Cure for Harry

THE hotel was just north of the Loop, not far from the Parisian. Gold sat on the edge of his bed nipping at the pint I'd brought with me, but not enjoying it very much. "You're crazy, Matt. Either crazy or drunk."

"Yeah? I just came from Valdaro," I told him. "Call your sheet and check. One of the press services should have the flash on the wire by now."

He did as I requested, hung up, sobered. "They're dead all right," he admitted. "But that doesn't prove it was murder. The local coroner has signed a certificate reading accidental death."

I pounded, "For God's sake use your head, man. I don't care how many people swear she was driving the car. I don't care how many saw them getting married. Gwen Cordovan was dead when the car smacked into that tree. She had been dead long enough for rigor mortis to set in."

He wanted to know what I wanted him to do about it.

I said, "Get in touch with your Cairo cor-

respondent. Get him on the overseas phone. Find out all you can about this J. E. Hare and I'll pay all the charges."

"You've talked to Hare?" he asked.

I said I had. "I phoned him from Valdaro to come down and get the body. That's why I'm here."

Gold looked at me sharply.

"I haven't a thing," I admitted. "He's treated me fine so far. He is taking it like a man. But. . ." I tried to explain, and couldn't. It was one of those things you feel but can't put into words. It's a tilt of an eyebrow, a gesture, a tone of voice, the way that a man shuffles cards.

I got up to go. "And find out especially, if you can, if he had a wife or a girl friend who somewhat resembled Gwen."

He swore, "By God—!"

"There could have been a switch," I pointed out. "She could have been in that other car that almost ran down the farmer."

"And young Slavin—?"

"Duped, drunk, or doped," I told him.

He reached for the phone on his night table, hesitated. "But Hare can't possibly inherit. Miss Hanelley told us this afternoon that according to the estate—"

I admitted, "That's an angle I've still got to hurdle. And I can be all wet. Maybe the gremlins did it. But I *know* Gwen Cordovan was murdered."

He picked up his phone again and asked for the overseas operator. "Okay. The story is worth a gamble. Where can I reach you?"

I told him I didn't know but that I would call him back in half an hour.

"Better make it an hour." He cupped his hand over the mouthpiece. "Where are you going now? Over to see Harry?"

I turned, one hand on the door knob. "And why should I go to see Harry?"

He said, "I thought you knew. A squad car picked him up in front of the Parisian a little after eight tonight. It seems he was crossing the street and a hit and run car—" he stopped,

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his eyes gone wide. "He was working on the case?"

I nodded. "He was straightening out an angle." The sour taste was back in my mouth. The case refused to run straight. I'd had the same feeling before, sitting in on a rigged poker game and not being able to spot just who was dealing the seconds but with too much in the pot to quit. "Where have they got him? How bad was he hurt?"

Gold told me, "Mercy Hospital. And the last I heard he was still unconscious but they said that he'd pull through."

I said, "He'd better." Corny, sure. But I meant it. We'd been through too much together for me to feel any other way.

The night was as black as hell and almost as hot. I stopped under the hotel marquee to light a cigarette and try to untangle my thoughts. The lad I was looking for could be Hare. I had a hunch it was. He was too smooth, a sharper. After his seeming reluctance to bring me into the case he had kept my nose on the trail until I'd wound up with a pair of corpses and a perfect alibi for him.

"But I couldn't have slain her, your honor. I was home, and Mr. Mercer can so testify."

The only thing that threw that off was that only the lad who had killed her, myself, and Gold knew that she had been murdered. Her death was listed as accidental and would remain so unless I could dig up enough evidence to demand an autopsy.

On the other hand, Harry getting it where he had, brought Joe Connors back into the picture. And according to what Miss Hanelley had told me, Hare *couldn't* inherit the money. But God knew Connors couldn't. It was a mess.

"Cab, sir?" the doorman asked me.

I told him no, I had my car. Both Sherry and Beth were in the Mercy waiting room, dry-eyed but they had been crying. Harry was stronger, they said, but still unconscious. Beth, for a bride, was taking it well. I asked if I could see Harry and Sherry said that she'd take me up and for Beth to stay where she was.

In the cage, Sherry touched my face, her eyes wet with tears. "They've hurt you, Matt. This is a murder case?"

I said it was and she pressed closer to me. That was all. It was enough.

"It was a car that hurt Harry?"

I said that I doubted that very much. They had him on the fifth floor. The long corridor was hushed, and dark, except for an exit light here and there and the light over the night nurses' desk. All hospitals make me gag. They also set my left wing to aching. That is, it feels like it's aching. It isn't. Cork and steel don't ache and they'd sawed off my real wing in Shanghai.

"This is Mr. Mercer, my husband, the partner of the patient in 512," Sherry told the night nurse. "Is it all right if we just peek in?"

The nurse said it was, as long as we just peeked.

I started down the bed-pan alley, turned back and asked the nurse if she had been in surgery when they had dressed Harry's wound. She said she had not but that it was down on his medical chart as a multiple concussion with the X-rays showing no pieces of skull pressing against the brain.

"And he was hit by a car?"

She said so she understood.

"But in your opinion," I persisted, "could his injuries have been caused by a beating? In other words could he have been slugged with a sap and pushed out into the street?"

She said she was certain she didn't know but that it seemed very unlikely as the police officers who had brought him in had listed it as a hit and run case. I made a mental note to stop at the office on my way out and get the prowl cops' names from the record.

Sherry brightened. "Oh. I see you did get a male special."

The nurse looked at her blankly.

Sherry explained, "The male nurse in the white coat that just went into Harry's room."

I DIDN'T hear what the nurse said. I was racing down the hall tugging at my gun, Sherry's heels clacking behind her. By the time I reached the doorway of 512 the lad was bending over the bed. I couldn't see his face. I could see the knife in his hand.

"You! Drop it! Quick!" I barked.

He turned instead, dropping the knife but whipping a gun from a shoulder holster. I didn't know who he was. I didn't care. I let him have four—in the face.

The shots rocked the hall like a cannon. Patients began to scream. All the lights over the doors went on.

I walked in, switched on the bed lamp, and looked at Harry. The knife, a razor-sharp stiletto, was lying on the sheet. But I'd been in time. It hadn't bothered him any. Neither had the shots for that matter. His eyes were still closed but he was breathing normally.

I kicked the lad on the floor over. There wasn't much left of his face. But what there was left was strange to me. Just as I'd thought I was getting my darned hand straightened out, I'd drawn another joker.

"You've killed him!" the nurse screamed in my ear.

"Yeah. I meant to," I told her. I walked back out in the hall, making a snap decision. In another three or four minutes the joint would be lousy with cops.

Sherry's fingers were hot on my wrist.

"This means more trouble, Matt? Trouble with Inspector Haig?"

I shook my head. "No. Not tonight." So far I'd been working for a fee, because I'd been sorry for a poor little rich kid whom I had felt was getting a bad break, and because I was naturally curious. But the attack on Harry had made it personal. And if they wanted to play that way, that was all right with me.

"No," I repeated to Sherry. "This thing is breaking too fast." I thumbed a fresh clip in my gun. "Put this in your bag and shoot any son who tries to get in that door before the cops get here. Harry knows something. Something damn important."

She took the gun without question. "And you—?"

I kissed her fast. "I'm scrambling. Tell Haig that I'll see him sometime tomorrow."

I had wanted to stop at the office, find out the names of the cops who had picked up Harry, and ask to look through the stuff that had been in his pockets in the hope that he might have written down something. But by the time that I hit the lobby Doyle and Corrigan, riding No. 23 out of East Chicago Avenue, were effervescing through the door.

"What's up?" Doyle demanded.

"It's terrible," I told them. "Up on the fifth floor. Someone just cut a nurse's throat."

They boiled on into the elevator. I walked on out the door. I had nothing to fear from the law. But I hadn't any time to waste on a lot of official red tape.

A few blocks up the street I parked in front of one of the all night bars that dot the near-north side and called a couple of lads who sometimes worked for me when there was too much for Harry and me to handle. I told them both to get down to Mercy as fast as they could make it, one to stay close to Sherry and 512, the other to wait in the lobby of the hospital for a phone call from me in case the cops were able to identify the dead hood.

Then I bought a couple of drinks, a ham sandwich, and a beer, and headed for the office to pick up my spare gun, damning Gwen Cordovan, Hare, and Connors. The nightmare was getting me down.

Starting at two o'clock that afternoon I had been lied to, shot at, punched, and kicked. It was almost four in the morning. And after fourteen hours of bars, diamonds, and red herrings, I was beginning to reach a point where very little more would push me off my chump.

If nothing had detained him, Hare should have returned from Vardaro with the body, and once I had re-heeled myself I meant to have it out with both him and Connors.

I rode up to the office thinking that I had better start with Joe to give Gold time to

complete his phone call. If Hare was a phoney I'd have a lever to work with. But first of all I'd contact the phone company. Whatever they had told Harry had been enough to get him slugged—if he had been slugged.

The hall was hot and stuffy. My heels made hollow clicking sounds. Even my key sounded unnaturally loud in the lock. I slammed the door behind me, reached for the switch—and froze. Moonlight was streaming in the windows. All of them but one. Two black hulks blotted that out.

Someone was waiting for me. And there was no use reaching for my gun. I hadn't any.

CHAPTER FIVE

Mr. Hare—And the Hounds

MASON'S voice cut through the dark. "Hold it, Mercer. Just like you are. So far, you're doing fine."

I asked if it was all right if I switched on the lights. He said it was. There were two of them, Mason and Lord. Both of them had guns in their hands.

"You got the key out of Harry's pocket when you slugged him," I accused.

"It dropped out," Lord admitted. His anger was genuine. "What the hell are you trying to pull? What are you trying to pin on Joe? And while I'm at it, where have you got him?"

I closed my eyes at that and sat down at my desk without being told I could. "One of you wouldn't have a cigarette?"

Lord hesitated, pulled a pack from his pocket and tossed it on my desk, the gun in his other hand never once leaving my belly.

I lit the cigarette, remarking that I thought there was some mistake; the last time that I had seen Joe being in their presence at the Parisian.

"Don't give us that," Lord sneered. "Harry tipped your hand when he barged into the joint wanting to know why one of us had called you up representing ourselves to be this guy Hare's confidential secretary. Start talking. What the hell are you trying to pull?"

"Then you did slug Harry?"

"We roughed him some," Mason admitted.

"But you didn't make the phone call."

"You know damn well we didn't."

He wasn't lying. There was no reason for him to lie. He had the gun. "No, I didn't know," I said. "I never even thought of you lads in that connection." I spread my good and bum palms on my desk. "And I don't know what's happened to Joe. That's my story. If you don't believe it, you'll have to shoot. How long has he been missing, and from where?"

Both of them chewed that over.

I continued, "We've had our disagreements. But have I ever lied to you boys? Have you ever heard of me lying to anyone on anything of importance?"

Mason was forced to admit he had not.

"More," I told them, "I just came from Mercy Hospital where somebody tried to finish the job that you boys began, tried to finish it with a knife."

"What the hell?" Lord demanded.

I said, "I've been wondering that for hours." I opened my bottom desk drawer and took out a bottle. "Now either shoot, give me the whole story, or get the hell out of here."

I had a drink while they talked it over between them and decided to tell me as much as they knew.

Shortly after Harry had barged into the Parisian accusing Joe of making the phone call, and wanting to know why, Connors had taken Gwen's bad check and had gone out to see Hare himself to try and find out what was cooking.

When he hadn't returned in two hours Mason and Lord had followed him only to be told by Hare that after collecting for the bad check Connors had left for my office with the avowed intention of beating my face in.

I wanted to know why.

"You and Harry," Mason said thin-lipped.

Lord told me that Hare had told them that he had told Joe Connors, that I had phoned him and had positively identified Connors as the short stocky man who had flipped a slug at me. More, I had said that I was undecided between beating in his brains and swearing out a warrant accusing him of attempted murder.

Mason said, "So we checked with headquarters, found out that no warrant had been issued, and when Joe fails to show up we reason that you snagged him. But he didn't shoot at you, believe me."

I told him I did believe him, that the way that I saw the picture someone was running a whizzer on both Joe and myself. "But tell me this. Could anyone have made that phone call from the Parisian?"

"Anyone," Mason shrugged. "There's a phone booth in the downstairs bar."

"And they could have picked up one of Joe's hats at the same time?"

He said that could be, Joe being very careless with his hats.

"Then it was Hare for my money," I told them. "But I wouldn't begin to know why he should want to snag Joe." I looked from their guns to my phone. "But Harry Gold is phoning Cairo in an attempt to smell out Hare's background, and it could be that his call's gone through."

Lord said for me to call him.

Gold was biting his nails waiting for me to call. "You named it, Matt," he crowed. "Boy, what a story. Hare is a former English colonel, all right, but he was cashiered some years ago. Since then, and up until the time he married Gwen, he made his living as a con man and trans-Atlantic gambler. He always worked with an older man who would seem to answer the description of the lad posing as his butler. More he did have a blonde girl friend by the name of Stella. But she is supposed to have died some months before Gwen and Hare were married."

I said I guessed that sewed it up except for a few details.

"But damn it, man," Gold protested. "You've still got a hole in your case big enough to drive a tank through. I just got one of the Cordovan lawyers out of bed and he swears that there is no way that Hare can get his hands on any of the estate other than what is left from this years' allowance."

"I'm headed out to work on that angle now," I told him.

When I hung up Lord and Mason had holstered their guns. "We'll tag along," Mason said.

I said that was fine with me, and slipped my spare gun in my holster.

A siren was wailing down State Street by the time we reached the street and I told them that we had better use their car, as Haig was probably burned up because I hadn't stuck around Mercy.

Mason wanted to know why that should burn Haig up. I told him and his lips grew thinner. He knew that he and Lord had a beating coming.

Dawn wasn't far away. There was a milk truck but no cars on Willow Road. The big gates of 247 were closed and locked. The wall was too high to climb, even disregarding the glass.

"So—?" Mason asked.

I told him to drive the car up on the sidewalk, as close to the wall as he could get it and we could use the top of the car as a ladder. It wasn't a perfect arrangement but it worked. And the jump on the other side wasn't too bad, the ground being soft and springy.

The house was built in an H. The middle and left wings were dark. So were the upper floors. But light streamed out onto the lawn from the open right wing French windows. Somewhere a girl was crying as though her heart would break.

I had told them what had happened in Valdaro on our way out to the house and Lord wanted to know if it was the dead woman's daughter who was crying. I said I imagined it was. I also said that I wanted to talk to her, if possible, before we went to work on

Hare, it being just possible that she could furnish the missing pieces of the puzzle.

Then Mason coughed and the sobbing stopped abruptly. A window was opened or closed on one of the upper floors. We froze as close to the house as we could but when nothing more happened I figured that it was just one of the maids trying to get more air.

I tiptoed across a flower bed to one of the lighted windows. The little blonde who had popped me with the silver flask was stretched out on a chaise lounge, alternately sniffing and sipping at the flask. There was no one else in the room. I tapped lightly on the glass then stepped out where she could see me.

She opened her mouth to scream, saw who I was and said wanly, "Hello, man."

I asked her if Hare was home. She said that he was not.

"Then I want to talk to you," I told her.

I walked on into the room. She stood up weaving slightly. "My mother's dead," she told me. "That—that's where he's gone. Down to bring her back."

She buried her face on my shoulder. I patted her bare back, feeling like a damned old fool, and glad that Sherry couldn't see me.

"I like you," she repeated her crack of that afternoon.

"I like you, too," I told her. "Now pull yourself together."

She wanted to know who Lord and Mason were. I introduced them as friends of mine. Then Mason, trying to be pleasant, told her that she looked a lot like her mother and started her off crying again.

When she had quieted down I asked her who was home. She said that she was alone, Hare having taken Dawson with him when they had left for Valdaro. Then Lord described Connors to her and asked her if she had seen him.

She bobbed her head and told him between sniffles, "He was here tonight, about eight o'clock, I think. He and Mr. Hare quarreled dreadfully. But I couldn't hear what it was about because Mr. Hare came out in the hall and told me to go to my room."

I looked at the boys.

"He played us for suckers" Mason said. "But we'll be here when he gets home."

Lord wondered if one of us hadn't better open the gate from the inside and move the car, it being a dead tip-off that there was someone inside the grounds.

I said I thought it was wise and started for the window but the kid caught at my arm.

"Don't leave me. Please. He won't be home for hours. There was some delay in Valdaro, I know. Because he just called up from there about five minutes ago and wanted to know if you had been here looking for him."

"He's wise that you're wise," Mason said. "But why drag Joe into the picture?"

I said I was damned if I knew, and picked up the stitches of my own knitting by asking the kid if her relations with her step-father had been friendly.

SHE said she didn't know him very well, her mother having left her in Spain while she had gone on to Cairo. In fact she had never even seen him until she had returned to Chicago the month before after having been abroad since before the beginning of the war.

I said, "In other words, you were twelve when you were home last."

"Twelve going on thirteen," she corrected. "And while I guess Mr. Hare married mother for my money like all the others did, he is an improvement over the count."

I asked her if he had ever tried to get her to sign any legal looking papers.

"A few," she admitted.

"It only takes one," I told her. I hesitated, debating whether or not to tell her that I believed that Hare and his girl friend had cleverly murdered her mother in the first steps of a bid to gain control of the Cordovan fortune. I decided to spare her that, but Lord upset the apple cart with the best intentions.

"You watch what you sign. And you watch your step, kid," he warned her. "The way that Mercer has it figured out, this guy Hare and his girl friend Stella, did away with your mother. And you may be next on his list."

She busted out weeping again and buried her face on my shoulder. "You won't let him hurt me. You won't, will you, Mr. Mercer?"

I assured her that I would not but she leaned on her flask for a double take only to find it was empty.

"In that cabinet," she sniffled to Mason. "Hand me a bottle, please."

There was only one left, rye. Mason glanced at the bond date and whistled. It had been old enough to register when war had been declared. I tore off the seal, uncorked it, and handed it to the girl. She poured herself a stiff slug, started to raise it to her lips, then tardily remembered her manners.

"Excuse me. Won't you gentlemen join me?"

None of us refused. It was good but I'd tasted better. I downed mine looking at the little blonde and thinking, "If you were my kid I'd spank some sense into your pretty pink panties and put you on a buttermilk diet." She was a scant nineteen and travelling the same pace that her mother had traveled before her.

Mason and Lord had a second drink. I said that I'd had plenty and that we'd better run in the car.

"Check," Mason said. He tried to get to

his feet, and couldn't. He looked at his glass, then me, a swift scowl twisting his lips. His hand inched up toward his gun only to drop to his lap as his head lolled back against the cushion.

Lord raised himself to his feet, stood wavering a moment, then crumpled to the floor.

I shook my head to clear it but it wouldn't clear. Five hundred B-29's were roaring in my ears. The floor of the room was tilting like the deck of a battle-wagon.

I looked down at the girl beside me. She was watching me, amused, her lips drawn back from her teeth, her eyes cold and calculating. She wasn't pretty any more.

I knew how Hare meant to inherit. I knew whom I had heard sobbing. I knew a lot of things. The hell of it was, it looked like I'd learned them too late.

CHAPTER SIX

Until Death Us Do Part

I WAS cold. I was stiff. I was tired. My chest hurt so badly I could hardly breathe. I thought I could see old man Stepan persisting in shaking his fist in my face, shouting that Mike was a good boy. I pushed him away and panted on—smack into the fat little corner.

"It was an accident, hear me?" he screamed. "They were drunk. And she drove into the tree. Don't you make a fool out of me in the papers."

I tried to push him away and couldn't. Somehow he'd fallen flat on my chest. Then I realized it was all in my mind. Full consciousness returned slowly.

The place I was in was dark. The air was foul. I was lying on my back, my cork arm twisted under me. And there was something or someone on my chest. I wriggled out from under, found a match and struck it.

Lord had been piled on me like a length of cord wood. His face was bloody but he was breathing soddenly. Mason was lying a few feet away. I couldn't tell if he was dead or alive. Joe Connors lay beside him, a puckered brown hole in his forehead. There were rows of racked bottles along the wall. Pending future and permanent disposal, we'd been tossed into the wine cellar.

In the last flame of the match I tried the door. I had expected to find it locked. It was. There wasn't any window.

Now that it was too late the whole thing was crystal clear. I had been played for a sucker from the start. The only thing that I couldn't figure was why I was still alive. Then I touched the side of my head and knew. It was sticky with clotted blood and swollen like a balloon.

My being alive was strictly accidental.

We would be missed, of course, but there was little but my conversation with Gold to point the finger at Hare. And by the time that the finger was pointed, three hoods and one private detective would be planted deep in the earth somewhere.

I broke a neck off one of the bottles, drank some, and palmed the rest to the side of my head. It burned but the pain cleared out the rest of the cobwebs. Whatever I did, if anything was possible, I would have to do fast. The air in the vault, or lack of it, was burning holes in my chest.

I frisked my pockets without much hope. But in even clever murders there is usually one mistake. And they had made one with me. They had taken my knife and my gun, but whoever had frisked me had somehow overlooked the small piece of stiff celluloid in one of my upper vest pockets. It was as good as a key to the vault. In seven states out of ten it's considered a burglar tool and possession can get you one to ten. I had taken it away from the 'loid' man of a ducat mob and forgotten I even had it.

As it was, it was close. By the time I had gimmicked the lock I was too weak to even crawl. I wormed out of the vault on my belly sucking in lungs full of air.

The basement was large and dark. It was night. I had no way of knowing how long I had been out. When I was able I dragged out Lord. There was no use fooling with Mason. He and Joe had gone to keep Mike Slavin and Gwen Cordovan company. From a single well-planned murder, as often happens, the breaks had caused them to pile one corpse on top of another.

I was out of the vault and on my feet. But I still wasn't in the clear. The lads upstairs were well-heeled. I wasn't. I picked up the furnace shaker, laid it back and broke the neck off another bottle. It makes a nasty weapon.

The stairs opened into the kitchen. There was no one in the kitchen but in the butler's pantry just beyond I could see Dawson uncorking a bottle of Scotch. I slipped out of my shoes and stalked him. It was a pleasure.

Unaware that I was behind him, he wiped the neck of the bottle with a napkin, put it on a tray with five glasses, picked it up then turned and saw me.

His face went a fish-belly white. "You're dead!"

"Don't bet on it," I told him.

He set the tray down and went for a gun. I gave him the glass in the face, at the same time stoppering his gurgled scream with my steel left fist. He made some small noise in falling, but not much. I pried his gun out of his hand.

The dining room opened on the hall and was across from the library with the big carved doors. At the far end of the hall I could see the little blonde offering her cheek to a hatchet-faced old dowager whom curiosity had pried away from her evening of contract bridge.

The only make-up the blonde was wearing was a smear of lip stick. Her hair hung in a girlish bob. She was wearing a plain black dress with a touch of white at the throat. She looked slim, and young, and pathetic.

"So sorry, my dear," the old bat lied. "But when our time comes we must all pass on."

The little blonde agreed that we must and

they both disappeared into the living room. I couldn't see it but I knew what was in there.

I started across the hall, stopped as I heard, or thought that I heard, Sherry's voice.

"Then Matt did not come here this morning, or at any time during the day?"

Back of the doors, Hare lied, "He did not." It was Sherry. "I think he's a damned liar," she said. "Harry Gold told me—"

"Inspector," Hare cut her short, "I must protest and terminate this scene. Mrs. Mercer's charges are fantastic and so are those of this newspaperman Gold. I loved Gwen



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very dearly. And I have not seen nor heard from Mercer since he phoned me from Valdaro. If he has disappeared, I'm sorry. But why in the name of time would I spirit him away?"

"Because you murdered your wife," Sherry told him. "Matt told Harry you did."

"This is fantastic," Hare scoffed.

Haig rumbled, "It would seem so to me. But you do admit Gold's charge that you are a former confidence man and gambler?"

Hare made a good point. "I do. I have never tried to conceal my identity. But it certainly isn't a crime for a gambler to fall in love."

A VOICE that I didn't know broke in, "Gentlemen and Mrs. Mercer, please, I think I can settle this matter. Because of Mr. Mercer's rather mysterious disappearance, Mrs. Mercer has made a serious charge. She, because of an alleged conversation between Mr. Mercer and this newspaperman, has accused Mr. Hare of killing Mrs. Hare, his motive being the Cordovan money. But the charge is palpably absurd for two reasons. In the first place, Mrs. Hare's death has been established as accidental, and fifty miles away. In the second place, I can give you my word as one of the Cordovan Foundation lawyers that Mr. Hare will not inherit one penny of the money."

Haig asked, "Who gets it?"

"Her daughter," the other lad told him. "According to the terms of the trust, it is to be turned over to her in just a few more days."

Hare said, "Thank you, Mr. Phillips."

"Well, I guess that's that," Haig said. "But I'll be damned if I know where Matt's gone to. Or Joe Connors and Lord and Mason for that matter."

I still wasn't quite certain of Connor's place in the picture. But having botched the actual killing, Hare was doing a good cover job. He might be suspected of a lot of things but no one could ever prove it with me dead. I was the fly in his ointment, and very pleased about it.

The voices except for Sherry's sunk to polite murmurs and I knew that Hare was suggesting a drink before Haig left. Sherry kept insisting that I couldn't "just disappear."

Then the buzzer rang in the butler's pantry. I crossed the hall, walked into the library and closed the door behind me, asking Hare, "There was something that you wanted, louse?"

He said, "Oh, God!"

"Yeah. There goes the ball game," I agreed. I crossed the room in three steps, belted him off his feet. "Now get that blonde in here," I said. "And don't give me an argument."

Curry and Johnson were with him. He sent Curry for the girl. Sherry didn't say anything but her eyes were wet and shining.

The blonde's eyes grew wide when she saw me and she nibbled hard at a knuckle to keep from screaming. I sat on the edge of the desk where I could kick Hare again if he showed any interest in rising.

"Now I'll tell the story," I began. "This louse on the floor here married Gwen with all of this in mind. It's Gwen out there in the coffin. But it wasn't Gwen who toured the bars, or passed out bad checks, or made love to young Slavin. That was Hare's girl friend Stella wearing Gwen's clothes and diamonds and making damn certain that she left a wide, broad trail. Gwen had been out of the country for years. And Stella got away with it fine merely by staying away from the café society group one of whom might have been sober enough to spot the deception.

"It was Stella who talked young Slavin into marriage. It was Stella who drove to Valdaro and married him. Hare stayed behind to make good the alibi that he had suckered me into providing. But Dawson—his partner and not his butler—followed in a second car with the real Mrs. Hare who had been kept out of sight and on a whiskey diet for two weeks. What happened in the car, or possibly before they started, I wouldn't know. But Gwen grew unmanageable and Dawson was forced to slug or choke her. Her heart rotten with booze, she died. And that is what cost them the ball game.

"I know how a head wound bleeds. And Gwen had been dead for an hour when Dawson rendezvoused with Stella the other side of Valdaro transferred her to the death car along with the passed-out young sergeant pointed the car off the road, jammed the accelerator, then jumped off the running board."

Hare whimpered "Don't believe him. He's crazy."

"You were crazy when you brought me in on the case" I corrected. "I'm not brainy, but I'm persistent. And you made a second bad mistake by dragging Joe Connors into the case by having one of your stooges sneak one of his hats and drop it to point to his joint as the starting place of Gwen's trail."

It was coming too fast for Haig. He wanted to know where Joe figured. I told him I wasn't certain, that at first I had figured Joe in on the deal but that after talking to Lord and Mason I had changed my mind.

"After Harry accused him of being in on the deal," I told him, "I think Joe came out here to see what was cooking, recognized Hare as a former trans-Atlantic shark and demanded to be cut in. He was, for a piece of lead."

"Joe's dead?"

"He's down in the basement," I told Haig, "along with Lord and Mason."

Haig told Johnson to go see. He went out in a hurry.

I called after him, "And there's another stiff out in the butler's pantry. At least I think he's stiff. I hit him with that in mind."

Haig said, "Damn you, Mercer. No matter what has happened you have no right to take the law in your own hands."

Sherry hooted. "What should he have done? Wait for you to identify his body?"

I told the rest of the story fast, admitting that three things still struck me, one the phone call having been made from the Parisian, the second who made it, and the last the attempt on Harry's life. I said that I believed, however, that after Hare had been forced to shoot Connors, the attack on Harry had been an after-thought, hoping that the police would trail Harry back to the Parisian and thus forge a plausible reason for Connors to disappear, giving the impression that he was laying out a murder rap until the heat had cooled.

Hare repeated, "The man is crazy. What would I stand to gain?"

I asked the lawyer how much there was in the Cordovan estate.

"But this is insane," he protested. "I told you before. I tell you again." He pointed at the little blonde. "Everything goes to her."

"Yeah. That's what I mean," I said quietly.

Sherry got it then. "Oh, oh."

"It was you, wasn't it, baby," I asked the blonde, "who took that shot at me and dropped Joe Connors' hat. All that you had to do was to go out the back and drive around in front."

She told me to go to hell.

Phillips was shocked. "You mustn't let this get you, Miss Cordovan," he said primly. "No matter—" He broke off abruptly, staring at the blonde. "You mean to say," he asked me, "that—"

"That's what I mean," I said. "They gave

this year's Oscar to the wrong actress. That's why they had to get rid of Gwen. Hope having been abroad for years, it was easy enough for Stella to play daughter-following-in-mama's-foot-steps to the general public and old buddle-duddies like Phillips. *But they couldn't get Gwen drunk enough to pass a tart off on her as her daughter!*"

Sherry said, "With her hair up and wearing high heels, she was Gwen. With her hair hanging she was Hope. But she wouldn't have fooled me a minute." I refrained from pointing out that she had. "Look at those crow's feet around her eyes."

Stella called her a name. Sherry slapped her. And the battle was on. Not being able to slug her myself, I was glad to let Sherry do it. But Haig stepped in and stopped it.

"Cut it." He leveled a finger at me. "All right. You know so much, Mercer. Where is the real Hope Cordovan? Dead?"

I shook my head. "No. You'll find her locked in one of the upstairs rooms. I wouldn't know, never having been an heir to millions, but I imagine that they had to keep her around for her signature and such."

Phillips held out a hand on behalf, he said, of the Cordovan Estate. I told him where he could put it. Then I yanked Hare to his feet.

"We had an agreement, remember? I was to locate your wife and tell you. Then I could name my own fee." I slipped his wallet out of his pocket and counted out ten one-hundred dollar bills.

"This will just cover it nicely. Your wife's in a coffin in the front room. You married her for better or for worse, until death should you two part. But I wouldn't grieve about the separation, rat. It shouldn't be too long."

"You're a hard man, Matt," Haig said.

I touched the clotted blood on the side of my head. "Yeah? And where would I be if I wasn't?"

I knew what he was thinking. So did Sherry.

"Don't you dare tell him," she said.

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MURDER--MY AUNT!

By BRUNO FISCHER

"Mort," my Aunt Celia told me over the phone, "you must come to New Hollow this minute and take that dead man out of my cellar. He makes me uncomfortable, and I can't call the police. . . . Because, you see, I killed him!"

A FEW minutes after I came in from lunch Aunt Celia phoned me. "Mort," she said, "come right over."

She said it as if she lived around the corner. Her home in New Hollow was twenty-three miles away by car.

"I've been planning to visit you," I told her.

"And I might be able to make it for the week end."

"You must leave this minute." She paused for breath and then said: "Mort, there's a dead man in my cellar."

"What's he doing there?"

"Lying on his back and—" She snorted.

"This is no time for flippancy. He makes me uncomfortable."

I couldn't imagine any man making Aunt Celia uncomfortable, not even a dead one. She was one of those soft, fluffy widows who nearly always got her way by the aid of a smile. If that didn't work, she lied as blandly as a politician.

Like the time she was anxious to consult me about some property she wanted to buy and I had told her I couldn't make it till the next day because I was busy on an important case. An hour later she had called back and moaned that she had just fallen down the stairs and broken both legs. When I got there in a lather after burning up the road, I found her standing erect and unbroken, wearing a smile that would have melted a homicide lieutenant.

This, no doubt, was more of the same to get me out there.

"That's just what I'm doing, Mort. You're a detective."

"Only private," I said. "I don't rate. There are state troopers in New Hollow who delight in removing dead men from cellars."

"There are complications," Aunt Celia said slowly. "You see, it happens that I killed this one."

I didn't say anything.

"Did you hear me, Mort?" she demanded.

"You said you killed a man and he's in your cellar."

"Don't be so placid about it. I imagine I'm in a predicament. I expect you here immediately." And she hung up.

I started to call her back to let her know that this particular lie of hers wouldn't work. I changed my mind. Aunt Celia was the closest person to me since my mother had died when I was ten. That story about a dead man in the cellar was a whooper even for her; it must mean that she needed me pretty badly.

So I went into Gilder's office—Joseph F. Gilder, head of Gilder's Confidential Investigations—and wangled the afternoon off.

New Hollow is the whistle stop where I was born and bred. When I got there, I stopped off at Fleet's drug store for a chocolate malted. Old Will Fleet slid up on the stool beside me. "Well, Mort," he said, "how's the detective business?"

"Just one crime after another," I said.

"You aim to do anything about Groot?"

"Who's Groot?"

"You haven't heard?" Will cackled at the opportunity to tell a story. "He's a lad from the city who's been staying at the Manor House these last three-four days. It seems your cousin Pearl got sweet on him and your aunt Celia doesn't like it none."

I nodded glumly. Aunt Celia had had two brothers. One had sired me and the other Pearl. Both brothers had been dead many

years, and Aunt Celia, a widow living alone, had taken us both under her wing. I had cut loose to make my own way, but Pearl, waiting to marry, continued to live on Aunt Celia. Pearl was pretty, if you liked them buxom, and she had a reckless eye for any male who slicked his hair back with grease.

"This Groot claims to be a liquor salesman," Will Fleet went on, "but nobody in town heard of him selling anything to anybody. Too smooth. Makes you think he bathes in oil. Seems Celia told Pearl to stay away from him, but Pearl won't. So guess what Celia does? Yesterday afternoon Pearl and Groot are walking arm in arm down the street together. Celia steps up to them, and with maybe a hundred people watching she slaps Groot in the face." Fleet chortled.

I wasn't amused. It was plain that Aunt Celia had brought me up here to break up an affair between a man and Pearl. It wasn't going to be fun.

I WAS draining the last drops of the malted when a girl down at the other end of the counter got off a stool and walked toward the street door. My eyes followed her. They couldn't help themselves. She had golden hair and an oval painted face that belonged on a magazine cover, but that wasn't what did it. She wore a white sweater and blue slacks, that revealed a lovely figure.

Old Will Fleet gave me a dig in the ribs. "Ain't she something? She's a model."

"That explains it," I said.

"I don't mean a model for clothes. For artists. Name's Harriet Silk. She's posing for that painter fella, Rufus Woolsey, who had that cabin behind your Aunt Celia's house." He sighed. "Wish I could paint."

He elaborated on the tales he had heard of artists and models. They weren't original or exciting. I dropped money on the counter and went out to my car.

Aunt Celia had twenty acres and an imitation log cottage on the side of a hill two miles beyond New Hollow. During the summer she rented the bungalow at the rear of her property—now occupied by Woolsey, the artist—but in the winter her house stood in snow-bound isolation. Living alone there with Pearl, she'd got into the habit of sleeping with a loaded rifle beside her. She was pretty good with it.

Aunt Celia was knitting in the living room. I kissed her dutifully and said cheerfully: "Well, where's the corpse?"

"I distinctly remember telling you that he is in the cellar," she said primly. "I don't know, Mort, why you never believe anything I say."

"I'm here," I said, "so why keep laboring the gag?"

She rose without haste and stuck her knitting into her knitting bag. She was, I suppose, around fifty-five and often looked forty—all soft curves and fluffy clothes and unhurried motions. "Come with me," she said and started to turn toward the door. She stopped and frowned up at the fireplace. "How did that picture get crooked?" she demanded.

She meant the original oil painting in a heavy gilt frame hanging above the fireplace. It had been there since I could remember. It showed a couple of cows grazing in a field against a background of mountains. The cows didn't look much like the cows I had seen, but the greens and yellows and purples were deep and rich and fresh. The frame hung slightly crooked.

"Please straighten it," Aunt Celia said.

"I thought you wanted me to view a corpse," I said with heavy sarcasm.

"We'll wait. You're a big man, Mort. You can reach it without standing on a chair."

I straightened the frame. "You think a lot of this picture," I said.

"It's a nice picture and Pudgy painted it himself and gave it to me for a wedding present when I married Homer instead of him."

"What kind of name was Pudgy for an artist?"

"Pudgy was merely what I called him. I wonder what ever became of him." She roused herself and headed once more toward the door.

I started to get cold chills when she actually led me through the kitchen and down the cellar steps. And there in the cellar was a dead man lying on his back and staring up at the ceiling.

"You see!" Aunt Celia said triumphantly. "Every word I told you was the truth."

ONCE he had been smoothly and darkly handsome, but a smashed nose spoiled the effect. That's where the bullet had entered.

"Groot?" I muttered. "Not Edgar Groot?"

"That, I believe, was his full name. Did you know the creature, Mort?"

"Not to speak to," I said, "But I'd heard of him and saw him once or twice in the city. He was a con-man."

"Does that mean a convict? I wouldn't be surprised."

"No, a confidence man. He knew all the crooked methods of separating people from their money."

"Well, he certainly tried to worm himself into Pearl's confidence," Aunt Celia said sternly.

I shook my head to get rid of the nightmare fog in it. This wasn't real—certainly not Aunt Celia, standing so tranquil and undisturbed over a man into whom she had put a bullet.

"Is that why you killed him?" I asked. "Because of Pearl?"

"Certainly not." She looked mildly indignant. "I shot him because he was burglarizing the house."

"Burglaring?"

"Don't echo my words. You said yourself that he is a criminal. It happened last night after I had gone to bed. Pearl had not yet come home. I assumed that she was out with Edgar Groot and I was angry, but I very soon learned that I did her an injustice. I heard stealthy footsteps downstairs. I took up my rifle, which I always keep near my bedside, and went downstairs in my bare feet and surprised him in the living room. "He was prowling around—"

"Well, he wasn't wearing a mask, but he hadn't rung the bell to get into the house and instead of switching on the light like an honest man he was shining a flashlight about the room. I said, 'What do you want?' and he nearly jumped out of his skin and turned the beam on me."

"And you shot him down," I said weakly.

"Naturally my intention was to turn him over to the police. But apparently I gave him the impression that I was particularly inept and harmless in spite of my rifle. Possibly that was because I was in my nightgown and my hair was in curlers. He leaped at me, so I had no choice but to shoot him." She glanced dolefully down at the dead man. "It was his fault for being so foolish."

Aunt Celia made it sound good. She could make any story sound good—up to a point. From here on it would be tough going even for her.

"And then he got up and walked down to the cellar to die," I said acidly.

"Your humor was always on the heavy side, Mort," she told me. "I dragged him down here by his ankles." She shuddered slightly. "It wasn't pleasant."

"Why didn't you call the police to remove the cadaver? We taxpayers pay them to do such jobs."

"In spite of what you may think, Mort," she said huffily, "I am not stupid. Everybody in New Hollow is aware that I did not care one bit for the attentions this individual paid to Pearl. Indeed, I had slapped his face on Main Street only a few hours before he compelled me to shoot him. What would the police think?"

Exactly what I was thinking now. That Edgar Groot had come to call on Pearl and that Aunt Celia, disapproving of him, had shot him dead in the living room. I didn't say that out loud, but my silence and whatever was in my face were as good as words.

She said testily: "If you don't believe your own aunt, Mort, do you think the police will believe me?"

"I'm sure they won't," I conceded miserably. "What have you in the house worth stealing?"

"That's the point—nothing. I don't keep money in the house and neither Pearl nor I have jewelry worth anything. There isn't even any family silver. I cannot imagine what gave the creature the notion that my house was worth burglarizing."

"Does Pearl know?"

"Certainly not. I dragged the body down here last night before she came home." She tapped the concrete floor with her foot, and for the first time I noticed that a small area of the floor beside the body was chipped and hacked. A pick and a shovel stood against the wall. "I am afraid, Mort, that this sort of work is not for a woman," she said. "I tried this morning, but I haven't the physical strength."

"Try what?" I gasped.

"Why, to dig a hole in the cellar floor," she said, somewhat surprised at the sluggishness of my mind. "That is the usual method to dispose of a body, isn't it? Then there is the need to pour fresh cement over the hole. I don't know how to do it. You are a strong and capable young man, Mort. It should take you less than an hour to dig—"

"Me?" I exclaimed. "My God, you brought me here to make an accessory of me!"

Primly she folded her hands in front of her. "I called you here to help me out of an uncomfortable situation. If I cannot appeal to my own nephew for a little assistance, I must say that—"

She broke off. There were footsteps in the kitchen overhead. Tensely we listened. The cellar door opened. The footsteps started to descend. There was more than one pair.

Aunt Celia sighed. "This is unfortunate," she said.

PEARL'S lush figure appeared first. Directly behind her came the gangling form of George Bell—a local lad who had been Pearl's swain since she'd been old enough to

roll her hips. She couldn't make up her mind about him, especially as he had a chronic inability to hang onto a job more than a month at a time.

"We heard voices down in the cellar," Pearl said blithely. "Why, hello, Mort." Suddenly she made a sound like a hurt kitten. She was low enough on the steps to see the thing on the floor.

So was George Bell. "Holy cats!" he cried. "What happened to him?"

"He died," Aunt Celia explained. It was a masterpiece of understatement.

Pearl regained her voice. "It's Edgar Groot. Auntie, did you kill him?"

"In a way," Aunt Celia admitted reluctantly, "but it was entirely his fault."

She told them her story. They reacted the way I had; they didn't believe her. An expression of horror spread over Pearl's face. George Bell looked scared. He edged toward the steps.

"So we must all cooperate to avoid scandal and inconvenience," Aunt Celia concluded, ringing in two more accessories. "George, please help Mort dig a hole."

"I," George said hoarsely, "am getting out of here." And he went in a hurry.

Aunt Celia followed him as far as the foot of the steps, then stopped and turned to me. "Mort, do you realize what he's going to do?"

"Call the police," I said, "and a good idea."

"Mort, you have to stop him. Bring him back so we can all talk this unfortunate incident over."

Sooner or later I would have had to call the cops myself. In the long run, that would be best for her, not to mention the rest of us. I was confident that Aunt Celia could talk the toughest state trooper and the hardest-hearted district attorney into agreeing that the incident, as she called it, was merely unfortunate. But her version had to be better than the one she'd told us; some of the holes had to be plugged up. That needed time. So I chased after George Bell.

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When I reached the porch, his gangling form was scooting down the driveway. "George!" I called. "Just a moment."

He tossed me a startled glance over his shoulder and then put down his head and pumped his long legs madly. For all his awkwardness, that lad could run. By the time I reached the road, he'd doubled the distance between us, and my lungs were already on fire. I stopped, realizing that I was licked, and started slowly back to the house. And for the first time I noticed the golden-haired girl leaning indolently against my car which was parked near the house. It was artist's model, Harriet Silk, whom I had observed with pleasure in Fleet's drug store.

"I suppose," she remarked pleasantly, "that he was trying to make time with your girl."

"I haven't got a girl." I ran my eyes approvingly over her. "I hear you work for Rufus Woolsey. This is my aunt's house. We're practically neighbors."

"A slow runner," she said, showing dazzling teeth between very red lips, "but fast otherwise."

"These are nice nights for strolling in the moonlight," I said.

Harriet Silk removed the body beautiful from against the fender of my car. "You don't think I spend my nights in that old buzzard's place? I commute from the city every day."

"Isn't that a coincidence?" I said. "I live in the city too."

"So we're still practically neighbors," she told me with a slow smile and moved off toward Woolsey's cabin farther up the hill.

As I watched that walk of hers, I regretted for the first and only time in my life that I wasn't an artist with the privilege to employ models.

AUNT Celia and Pearl came out on the porch. Aunt Celia called: "Take your eyes off that hussy and come here. Pudgy's painting is gone."

Harriet Silk looked back and gave me a final smile. I smiled back, somewhat encouraged. Then I went up to the porch. "Gone?" I said.

"You have the most irritating habit of repeating my words," Aunt Celia said. "It's vanished, missing, no longer over the fireplace."

"That's funny," I muttered.

"If you mean odd, I agree. Not twenty minutes ago I asked you to straighten the frame. Now there's only a blank wall."

"George Bell was in the house," I pointed out. "But why would he want it?"

Pearl was standing by limply, looking dully out into space. Now she roused herself. "But that's impossible. George came in with me and we heard voices in the cellar and went down to investigate.

He wasn't away from me for a moment."

"Well, somebody took it," Aunt Celia asserted.

Pearl started to sob. "How can you worry over a stupid picture at a time like this? George is going to call the police and there is Edgar Groot in the cellar and you killed him and you'll be arrested and—" Her breath gave out. She wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her dress.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Was that picture valuable?"

"It had a sentimental value to me," Aunt Celia said. "It was painted by Pudgy whom I might have married if I hadn't married Homer Elliott instead. Why, when Rufus Woolsey offered me as much as thirty dollars for it, I turned him down."

"Why did Woolsey want it?"

"He said the colors appealed to him." Aunt Celia grabbed my arm. "Do you think Mr. Woolsey stole it?"

"I don't know," I said. "But we've got a dead man to worry about. Let's get your story straight before the police arrive."

"Mort, you're impossible," Aunt Celia said indignantly. "I've told you what happened twice, but you don't believe anything I say if I swear on the Bible.

I didn't argue. We went back into the house. Aunt Celia led the way, and in the living room doorway she stopped dead. Her profile was to me and the one eye I saw bugged. I stepped around her and went into the room.

The painting of the cows and grass and mountains hung over the fireplace. The frame wasn't even crooked.

"But it can't be!" Aunt Celia protested. "A few minutes ago it wasn't there. Didn't you see that it was gone, Pearl?"

"I didn't notice," Pearl said listlessly.

I sighed wearily. I couldn't keep up with Aunt Celia. "All right, you have your picture back," I said. "Now when the police come and ask why you shot Groot—"

Aunt Celia wasn't listening to me. She crossed the room and peered up at the picture. Then she said with determination: "That's not the one."

"Not the one what?"

"The picture. Pudgy's picture. It's not it."

I joined her in front of the fireplace. "It looks the way it always looked."

"It's not the same," Aunt Celia insisted. "Look at that cow—the one on the left. It's leering. Pearl, is this Pudgy's picture?"

"I don't know and I don't care," Pearl burst out. "They're going to arrest you for murder, Aunt Celia, and all that worries you is a silly painting."

"It is not silly," Aunt Celia protested in outrage. "Pudgy never painted a silly picture, and this one is the best he ever did." She

scowled up at it. "That is, this one is silly, with a leering cow, but Pudgy's never was."

I kept glancing through the window on my right which showed a piece of the road. The police were due. I said: "Get this straight, Aunt Celia. Tell the police that Edgar Groot came here last night to beat you up because you'd slapped him in public. He started to and you grabbed your rifle and shot him. Groot has a bad reputation and a jury always believes a woman when she says—"

"Mort," she broke in huffily, "how dare you suggest that I tell a lie?"

I felt as limp as Pearl looked. Try to do something with a female like that! And before any of us could say any more, the door-bell rang.

"The police!" Pearl moaned.

None of us moved. The bell rang again. The police, I knew, wouldn't go away if they weren't invited to enter, so I sang out without enthusiasm: "Come in."

IT WAS only Rufus Woolsey, the artist. He was a little man with a big face in which a shapeless vein-streaked nose took up half the available area. You could tell he was an artist because he wore a smock splotted with paint of many colors. In the two or three times I'd met him before he hadn't been sober. He wasn't quite sober now. He held an empty aluminum pot by the handle.

"Pardon the intrusion," he said diffidently, "but my refrigerator isn't working again and I ran out of ice-cubes. May I borrow some?"

Aunt Celia had no interest in ice-cubes. Her interest was not even primarily in the dead man in the cellar. She said: "Mr. Woolsey, is this the picture that was hanging on the wall?"

Woolsey peered. "Yes, of course. Charming use of color."

"Come closer, please."

Woolsey came closer and peered some more. "That man was a fair draughtsman, but his colors—"

"Mr. Woolsey, did that cow on the left ever leer?"

"Leer?" he said in bewilderment. "As a matter of fact, there is a glint in its eyes. Strange."

"Pudgy never painted a leering cow," Aunt Celia asserted. "You are an artist, Mr. Woolsey. Is this the picture you wanted to buy from me for thirty dollars?"

"You mean you've changed my mind about selling it?" Woolsey said eagerly. "I've the thirty dollars right here in my pocket. Of course it isn't worth it, but the use of color—"

"I don't want to sell it." Aunt Celia's hands fluttered. "Help yourself to ice-cubes."

He went into the kitchen and I went to a window to watch the road. Aunt Celia

wouldn't listen to reason and change her story of the killing. I heard Rufus Woolsey in the kitchen at the refrigerator. He took an eternity getting the ice-cubes and leaving through the back door.

When he was gone, I turned from the window. Pearl was still buried in the chair and Aunt Celia still stood in front of the fireplace.

"You know, Mort," Aunt Celia said reflectively, "it's not only the cow. The mountains are less purple and that silver birch in the corner has become stunted."

"That'll help to keep you out of jail or the electric chair," I said sourly.

"Oh, yes, that. But I've done the best I could. You couldn't keep George from calling the police, so what is there for me to do but face it."

"Listen, Aunt Celia! If we could find a reason why Edgar Groot would come to this house to rob anything—" I felt something jump inside of me. For many years that painting had been part of the house, but I had never bothered to look at the signature of the artist in the lower righthand corner. I looked now. It was just a scrawl. "Who painted this?" I demanded.

"I don't know who painted this," Aunt Celia said, "but Pudgy painted the other one."

"He must have had a name beside Pudgy."

"It was Smith."

"Smith!" I grunted. "That's as ridiculous for an artist as Pudgy. Was he a successful artist?"

"He was very poor." Aunt Celia looked sad. "I think that's why I married Homer Elliott instead. I'm afraid I broke Pudgy's heart. He went off and nobody ever heard of him again." She raised misty eyes to me. "So you see why Pudgy's picture means so much to me. Except that this picture isn't Pudgy's."

That was when somebody yelled farther up the hill. I swung from the fireplace. The voice rose again—this time in a strident scream.

"I hope," Aunt Celia said anxiously, "Mr. Woolsey didn't fall and hurt himself. He wasn't quite sober."

The scream wasn't that of a man who had merely stubbed his toe, but I didn't take time to point that out. I dashed out of the house.

There was a twisting road leading through brush and birches leading up to Rufus Woolsey's cabin. Once I looked back and saw Aunt Celia and Pearl panting after me.

Rufus Woolsey was on the sloped clearing in front of his green-shingled cabin. He lay face down, his arms and legs sprawled grotesquely. Near his right hand was the aluminum pot. Half the ice-cubes had spilled and were melting rapidly in the heat of the sinking sun.

I was bending over him when the two

women came up. "Why is he lying there like that?" Aunt Celia demanded.

"He can't help himself," I said. I pointed down to the area between his shoulderblades. The smock was spotted with paint, front and back, but obviously that ragged red splotch was not paint. "Somebody slipped a knife into him. He's dead."

Pearl sat limply down on the grass and covered her eyes.

"Oh, dear!" Aunt Celia said. "What are we going to do with him, Mort?"

"We do nothing," I snapped at her, "except wait for the police. It's not required that we hide every murdered man we come across. Unless"—I eyed her suspiciously—"unless you know something about this."

"Mort, you have an evil policeman's mind. You know perfectly well I was with you when we heard him scream."

"Sure," I agreed, "but two slain men within five hundred feet of each other have to be connected in some way. You admit you shot Edgar Groot, so—"

Suddenly I realized that all along I'd been on the wrong track. I didn't yet know which the right one was, but it was my job to look for it. I went into the cabin.

Rufus Woolsey had turned the living room into a studio. Nobody was in there. A pile of canvases were stacked in a corner and there were a dozen oil paintings on the wall. The only painting that interested me was the half-finished one on the easel. It was the one Harriet Silk had been posing for. She was wearing something, but not enough to matter.

I didn't have the chance to give it the attention I wished. Outside Pearl yelped my name. On the way out I regretted that I hadn't brought a gun along.

But there was no killer on the prowl. There was George Bell lying around the corner of the cabin and Pearl and Aunt Celia bending over him.

"Another one!" I said.

Then I saw that he was still very much alive. Pearl was helping him up to a sitting position. Near him was the rock that had knocked him out. There was blood on it. It wasn't much bigger than a baseball, which was lucky for him.

"Wow," George said thickly, "have I got a headache!"

"I thought you went for the police," I told him.

"Who—me? I never said so."

"That's right," Aunt Celia put in. "We only assumed he did."

George Bell clung fiercely to his throbbing head. "I was scared when I saw Groot dead and was asked to help bury him. That's why I ran. I'd gone about a mile when I got to thinking that maybe Pearl was in trouble and

needed me and that I shouldn't run out on her like that.

"I was at Pine Corners and I took a short-cut back over the hill. I was coming up behind this cabin when I heard a scream. I broke into a run, but when I turned the corner of the cabin, somebody hit me and everything went black." George groaned and asked: "Who screamed and why?"

"Mr. Woolsey," Pearl informed him, pointing. "He was murdered."

"Oh!" George stared at that motionless shape in the grass and shuddered. "What kind of place is this—men getting killed right and left?"

"Only two," Aunt Celia said somewhat apologetically. Then she added quickly: "I don't mean two aren't more than enough, but you can hardly speak of bodies falling right and left, like in a war."

I said: "George, did you see who hit you?"

"No. I was turning the corner of the cabin when somebody came up behind me and I went out cold." He looked up at us darkly. "How do I know it wasn't one of you?"

"We were all together, George," Pearl assured him.

"So what? All three of you are in it. Your aunt admits she killed Groot. Why not Woolsey also? And then one of you knocked me out." He pushed himself up to his feet. "That's it. You're a gang of—"

Aunt Celia cut him off, but not to protest his accusation. There was a faraway light in her pale eyes. "You were knocked out with a knife, George."

"How can you be knocked out with a knife?" George said testily. "Even a heavy handle wouldn't give me a sock like that."

"It was this rock," I informed them, nudging it with my toes.

"Why not a knife?" Aunt Celia persisted.

"What's the matter with you?" George said. "I know—you're just trying to muddy up the whole business. I was a fool for not calling the police right away."

I wandered away from them, back to the corpse of Rufus Woolsey. I was always forgetting that Aunt Celia was a lot smarter than she gave the impression of being. But too much of it still didn't make sense.

The others were tagging after me. George Bell took a good look at Woolsey and turned his head away. Pearl started to sob again.

"Mr. Woolsey was a nice man," Aunt Celia said sorrowfully. "He painted very pretty pictures. He reminded me a little of Pudgy, though Pudgy was much younger in those days and never got drunk."

"Pudgy Smith," I muttered, groping. "Smith!" There was a flash. Light banished darkness. I grabbed Aunt Celia's shoulder. "Was his first name Alexander?"

"He hated it," Aunt Celia said. "He hated me to call him Pudgy, but he hated Alexander more."

"My God, Alexander Smith!" I swung toward George. "Did you see Harriet Silk when you approached the cabin?"

"No, I didn't."

"She goes home at four-thirty every day," Aunt Celia said, "and it's past five now."

"That's what Woolsey thought too," I said excitedly, "but it was around four-thirty when we saw her walk back in this direction." And I made a dash for the cabin.

The studio was still empty. I went into the bedroom.

Harriet Silk was halfway through a window which faced the path over the hill. I grabbed her. "You were too curious to hear what we had to say outside," I said. "You stayed behind too long."

She got both hands on the sides of the sash and tugged. I tugged the other way. She fell back against me and we both went down in a heap.

"Alec," Aunt Celia said severely, "you are old enough to carry on as you please, but you might have warned us to stay out."

She and George and Pearl had come into the bedroom. Harriet and I got up. Her red mouth twisted in scorn.

I studied her. In white sweater and blue slacks she was something to dream about, but at the moment I had no eye for feminine pulchritude. What attracted me above those slacks was the long narrow bulge running down the left leg.

"Let's have it," I said.

"Don't you dare touch me!" Harriet Silk said.

I sighed. "Aunt Celia, you and Pearl take it from her."

"I see." Aunt Celia's eyes glittered. "You and George wait in the other room."

I took George by the arm and led him out and closed the bedroom door. Harriet Silk put up a battle. We heard a couple of yells and then grunts and a chair falling over. But Pearl was husky and Aunt Celia indomitable, and in a minute we were told to come in.

They must have wrecked Harriet Silk's slacks, she was huddled on the edge of the bed with a blanket wrapped around her. Aunt Celia was unrolling a painted canvas.

"This is it!" she exclaimed. "Pudgy's picture! I told you the one in the house was a fake."

I looked over her shoulder. The signature could be deciphered: "A. Smith."

"Alexander Smith," I said. "There was a long feature article about him in the Courier last week. He went to France fifteen years ago and died ten years later. It was only then that he became famous and his pictures fetched

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fantastic prices. It seems that before he left America he presented pictures to friends. They've become rich as a result, but it's believed that there are still more of his paintings owned by people who don't know what they're worth."

Aunt Celia said rapturously: "I always knew Pudgy would amount to something." Her face clouded. "And to think that that scoundrel, Rufus Woolsey, offered me only thirty dollars for it."

"He was afraid to offer you more because you might become suspicious," I said. "He had his own plans to get it. When nobody was in the house, he came in and worked on a copy. But I suppose he blabbed about it to Harriet Silk."

The model shrugged. "That old sot had the nerve to ask me to marry him. He was cock-eyed drunk at the time, and when I laughed in his face he told me he'd be rich soon and why. When he sobered up, he forgot what he'd said."

I handed her a grin. "You rang in Edgar Groot to get the painting. The idea was for him to make love to Pearl and persuade her to run away with him and take the painting along. Then he'd ditch her and keep the painting, and Aunt Celia couldn't go to the police for fear of scandal. Only it didn't work."

"I should say not," Pearl declared. "Perhaps I was foolish for a day or two, but yesterday I told him I never wanted to see him again."

I nodded. "That picture had to be obtained through trickery so that it could be sold on the open market. A stolen picture couldn't, but Groot decided to take a chance and sell it before Aunt Celia discovered she'd had a genuine Alexander Smith. So he tried to steal it and was shot. You're in the clear now, Aunt Celia. The law recognizes your right to shoot a burglar."

"I'm glad you finally believe me," she said.

"Woolsey's method was more sensible," I went on. "While we four were in the cellar a little while ago, he stole the painting and then substituted the copy in the original frame so the theft wouldn't be noticed. That was why it disappeared and then was returned within a few minutes."

Aunt Celia said grimly: "And then George Bell murdered Mr. Woolsey."

GEORGE Bell stood there, gaunt and deadly, with a .32 automatic in his hand. Then he was the killer—he must have had the knife, too. He was jittery anyway, and he still saw a chance to get the painting.

There was a breathless silence. I said bitterly, "I knew it too, Aunt Celia, but I was playing safe and saving it for the police."

"It was so obvious," she said, only a trifle shaken. "The murderer had stabbed Mr. Woolsey and still had the knife. Why didn't he also stab George? The rock was a little one; it was likely that he would at least be glimpsed by George. The murderer couldn't afford that. He'd killed a minute before, so why not again? Besides, Mr. Woolsey didn't thrash in the grass, which means he died at once. So he couldn't have screamed. That left George to scream—twice, at intervals. So he wasn't knocked out at once and had a chance to see who hit him."

George Bell showed his teeth. "Harriet Silk socked me and took the picture from me. I was figuring on getting it back from her in my own way."

"I suppose you saw Woolsey making the copy when you came to call on Pearl and nobody was home," I said, trying to keep the conversation going. "You became interested and looked at the signature. Probably you'd read the same article I did about Alexander Smith. You had only to ask some of the old-timers around here to learn that long ago Aunt Celia had almost married an artist by that name."

George's bony hand was tight on the gun. "That's close enough. Pass that picture over, Mrs. Elliott."

"This is absurd," Aunt Celia said in annoyance. "We'll have the police after you, George."

"No, you won't," George said softly.

I never felt so sick in my life. Pearl fainted dead away and Harriet Silk huddled deeper in her blanket. He was a murderer and we knew it and his only chance was to liquidate all of us. And with us dead he could get full price for it in the open art market.

Aunt Celia was the only one of us who wasn't greatly disturbed. She rolled up the canvas. "Well, if you insist," she said regretfully, and handed it to him.

Eagerly George reached his left hand for it. She jerked the roll back as if changing her mind, and he reached farther to snatch it from her. That took him off balance, and she struck him sharply across the face with the roll.

I don't think it was the force of the blow as much as the shock of it that staggered him. The room was small. By the time George Bell recovered, I was close enough to hit him. I mightn't be much of a runner, but when I hit them they stay hit. I stooped beside his lax body and came up with his gun.

Aunt Celia brushed hair back from her brow with a fluttering gesture. "I was expecting you to do that, Mort," she said approvingly. "After all, you must have learned something as a detective."

What a woman, my Aunt Celia!



The Devil's Ill Wind

By EJLER JAKOBSSON



If, by some weird chance, the Devil were to appear as boss terrorist of a teeming, prosperous city, could the cops hope to hold him with any fetters struck for human use?

IF YOU ever want to know about the devil, you go ask the cops in Chicago—anybody who's been on the force there for enough years to know. Ask Captain John Norton—who put the arm on the devil.

He'll tell you. The cops will tell you of entire families in Chicago's slum sections being murdered, one by one, to keep the secret of the "Evil One"—they'll tell you of a reign of terror that beggars description, of fear that locked the lips of even the law-abiding. They'll tell you of good being forced to collaborate with evil, of law living with lawlessness. They'll tell you of the time when a self-avowed Satan declared war on the cops—and then they'll tell you that, despite his dreams of immortality, Satan is yellow!

Just when he began his depredations in the City of the Winds is shrouded in mystery. He came out of the muck and murk of poverty and greed that ever lurks on the fringes of a great city, concealing his origins, hiding in cowardly anonymity, making others do his bidding. It was not until he had spread dark wings over a large number of lives than had ever dreamt of him that the police grew aware of his existence. An inexplicable murder here—a profitable holdup there—with all witnesses either dead or silenced by a strange code of dishonor—a still small flame that threatened to become a conflagration—these were the first tip-offs.

The police rounded up five gunslick kids and chalked up a murder against each. They sent them to the gallows—and all five of them went with sealed lips, paying homage to a mysterious evil genius who was their master. They deserved to die, perhaps, but primarily they were members of large families, others of which would suffer if they squealed. And all over the slums of Chicago, mothers of other large families said their prayers for the five who died silently, and for such of their own broods as still remained—while fathers, only slightly more bold, muttered curses against someone identified only as the "Evil One."

That was how the police learned of the school for crime, complete with texts on how to cope with the latest police techniques; it was so they learned of swift retribution visited not only on recalcitrant pupils, but upon those they loved—by an anonymous schoolmaster who openly boasted that no one lived long enough to disobey him twice—and who kept proving his boast right under the noses of the police. It was thus they learned, too, of how an entire population could be turned against its own guardians of law and order. When they sought to close in on the anonymous devil, they found themselves hunted instead. The shooting of two investigating officers convinced them that this was war.

But it remained for Captain John Norton to develop the payoff wrinkle. Until now the police

had been looking for a man willing to testify, at any cost, to the "Evil One's" identity. Captain Norton, too, started out, like Diogenes of the legend, to look for a man who wasn't afraid of the devil. But where Diogenes looked for an honest man, Norton looked for a lia—and when he found him, he threw the book at his man.

Just how he did it may lie between himself and the souls of the innocent victims of Chicago's self-claimed Satan—but he got a lead. He followed it up. . . .

Satan's arrest proved surprisingly simple. He submitted to handcuffs tamely. His trial was hardly worth the mention—he was convicted readily and sentenced to die. Even those who had only known him as the "Evil One" came out of their fugitive fear long enough to testify.

Waiting in his death cell for the date of his execution, the devil got ready to play his ace in the hole—his immortality against man-made justice and the hangrope. With a sardonic grin he began to fade away, to shrink—as if to vanish.

There was still enough of him attached to his mocking grimace for them to hang on the appointed day, and with a sigh of relief the officials watched the emaciated devil finally flutter in their ill wind for the prescribed time. Then they cut him down and delivered him to the waiting hearse.

But as the hearse sped away an alert attendant noticed something peculiar about it and gave an alarm. A squad car took off in one of the strangest pursuits in squad-car annals.

When they caught up with the hearse they found it equipped with oxygen apparatus, hypodermics—all the modern hospital paraphernalia for resuscitation—plus a doctor in attendance and a lawyer, who tried to tell the boys in blue they were out of bounds. The boys countered with another technicality and got the hearse back into the prison.

The prison doctors looked over the devil's cadaver once more and gave their report—and if there was an Irishman among those cops, he must have crossed himself. For they found out now that, because of his extreme emaciation, the devil's neck had not been broken in the hanging—he had simply asphyxiated. And if reached in time and worked over at leisure with the paraphernalia in the bogus hearse—he might easily have been brought back to life.

But it was too late now, and the boys in blue had got their man, both before and after death. For man he proved to be. It was Salvatore Gardinella—but for some time now, in his unremembered grave, the devil's name is—mud!

• • WANTED—

As a symbol of the security I've always wanted, I had that special bank-vault built in my basement. Why not? Wasn't I the inventor of the best, most burglar-proof safes and vaults in the country? Besides, it might come in handy as a good place to hide the body—when my nightmares came to life!



CHAPTER ONE

The Spider's Web

TO BEGIN with, for years I'd dreamed of murder. Why? Well, why are people in their sleep, always falling off high buildings? Why does any dream taunt one with its terror? Is it fear—of a job to do, an experience, a person, a threat. Of a condition in life, or cowardice, or is it simply maladjustment. But you carry that fear in a corner of your mind, and carry it to bed with you, buried deep in your subconscious.

I'd wake up at night, cold, taut and sweating—until reassured that the body—the *real* body—lay sprawled now only in my mind.

Smith was now my name—Edwin C. Smith. But I forgot that the Smiths are always good for gags. . . .

A DEEPER GRAVE!

By CYRIL PLUNKETT



Spine-Tingling Crime Novel

That I, therefore, was still free to lay my head back on the pillow. That death had only come to haunt me.

There was always a body, for ten whole years. Then then there was always a problem of what to do with the body. In my dreams, at least, I never solved it. I always awakened too soon.

Then I'd read accounts of crimes, murders and electrocutions, and feel a certain sadness, a queer sympathy or affinity for the wretched fellow. For the truth is I had killed a man one night ten years ago, in Seattle.

That was over. That was done. I dammed it up inside, and I'm sure Connie has never suspected. She'd only say, "Darling, you were so restless last night!"

"Uh-huh. Nightmares again." Easy explanation.

"Well," she'd say practically, "no coffee for you, dear, at bedtime tonight."

Connie was blonde and gay, slim, all too kind. She never saw beyond the obvious. She did not realize that I, her husband Morrie Crane, manufactured locks and safes and vaults because those things are synonymous with security.

That's all I've ever wanted in the past ten years, security. I've fought for it; and psychologically, I suppose, this will explain the recurrence of the *same* dream. Death and the body. Always a murder to hide, and a body. Always a threat, a dark fear.

Consider the radio program, *Meet the People*.

I could have said no thank you, when confronted with the invitation to go on the air, on the program *Meet the People*. Such "success" programs are, to my mind, corny any-

way. Yet I worked for days on ideas for the script—alias Jimmy Valentine stuff. Someone locked within a vault which only I could open. I was good—had to be for these millions of listeners. I *used* the program to convince myself as well as them that I'd attained my goal of security. That Morrie Crane was a man of accomplishments now, and position; that he could never, never be suspected of murder.

My friends look on me as a solid, substantial citizen. I play poker and golf, belong to clubs and serve on numerous committees. I own my own business, have investments, a fine home. I have also what probably is the only bank vault in existence—outside of a bank.

Perhaps you heard me that evening on the air, the way they introduced me? Morrie Crane, the man who built a bank vault in his basement, which now he, himself, is unable to open.

Everyone believes me when I say the vault is essential to my work. For experiments, you know. "Yes, he's very thorough," I've heard people say. But really, the vault is there in the basement because I wanted it like that. To know it was there, to look at it. Of course I can open it. I can open anything. So you know now what it is I'm after?

A device I could seal, and which, if need be, *no one else could open*.

AT SEVEN this April evening I put in a call, long distance, to Connie back home. I had been East these several days on business, a routine trip, and until this evening everything had gone smoothly. But tonight I knew something was wrong. I knew what it was and why. From the limbo of the past a knife had been flung. The grave had opened,

somehow, and fantastic as it seemed now, fingered me with danger.

I stood in my hotel room scowling at the window.

The street was gray, dismal, wet with slashing rain. People scurried below, unbelievably bent and small and depressed at this distance. I hated them. I hated myself, this blanket of doubt, and the rain and the slow growth of darkness. It was just such a night, that other night in Seattle, and suddenly I felt utterly lost and alone.

Alone with Buzz Sloan.

In just such a room as was this. Meaner, yes; darker, just a little; a hotel on a side street, with fog outside muting the lonely sounds from the harbor. Yes, just such a night as was this. . . .

"Look here, Crane," he'd said. He'd little pointed teeth that he'd showed when he was in a rage. He'd had eyes like small black buttons. His face was too thin and too white, and a nerve in one cheek began jerking. Drugs sang in his veins—I'd seen that.

His hand had reached across the room that night, to clutch me by the collar, to spin me at the door. "Look here, Crane," he'd said, "you can't walk out on me like this."

The curious thing was how innocent it was at first, and how it all began. I didn't even know his full name. Sloan, of course. He'd called me on the phone, arranged this meeting; but his first name wasn't Buzz. All I knew though was Buzz, and that he'd just offered me a thousand dollars. Big money to me, in those days.

A thousand dollars for one hour's work! "All you got to do," he'd said, "is open the safe—"

I was in Seattle, at the time, to open a safe. Those things happened; combinations were lost or forgotten, mechanisms became jammed. It was in the papers about me, Morrie Crane, the lock-and-vault Houdini. I had never lost a chance to build a reputation, to get publicity. So I was in Seattle on a well publicized and legitimate deal, to crack a vault for a bank.

"Look," he'd said, "You're the one for it, Crane. I knew it when I read about you in the papers. And it's my dough in that safe. I tell you I've been gypped. It belongs to me, I'm entitled to it. It's in a house—I'll take you. I know the lay, there'll be no one home. All you go to do is open a safe. . . ."

Then, sensing my refusal, he said, "Look here, Crane. You're not going to queer this deal for me. So I was a sap, so I thought I could sell you, so I spilled my plans. Well, damn you, you're not going to the cops!"

We'd stood at the door for a minute, and I began, "Mr. Sloan—"

"Take your hand off that knob!"

"Sloan, you fool, I've told you I'm not in-

terested in your plans. I mean just that. Furthermore, you didn't tell me *where* the house and the safe was, and I don't know the name of the owner—"

He snarled, "Crane, you're not going to crab my plans!"

He had a knife in his hand, a spring blade that snapped out at me. I grabbed for the knife and balled my other fist. I hit him and he fell. He fell on the knife. The knife was sticking in his chest when I rolled him over.

The point was—always was—I'd wanted security.

I'd wanted a chance to grow and prosper. However innocent, no man could figure in a fatal crime without some taint, some suspicion. What did I *know* of Buzz Sloan? Nothing. That was the damnable part of it. Nothing. Suppose he had a police record? His plan, to rob a safe, argued that he did. Now there was a thousand dollars to explain.

The first thought in my head, I guess, was blackmail. Police might think this was *my* money—if they found me here. The police might think I'd brought the money, to pay Sloan, and so make of it a motive for murder.

I opened the door. There was a man in the hall, walking toward the stairs. He turned, but I closed the door again and he didn't see me. I walked back to Sloan, and now there were a thousand sounds I had not heard before.

There were footsteps, upstairs, pounding down a hall; and a clock was in the room, ticking fast with excitement; and the window shade began to move and whisper, "*Crane, for God's sake remember what you touched!*" There were sounds sifting from the fog, outside. The ragged bawl of car horns; moaning, throaty whistles from the harbor.

I stood at the window, utterly lost and alone. I could see nothing but gray, the lights below looked gray and fuzzy; and people were emerging, small and bent and worried.

He was dead; that was the fact to be faced. It hadn't been my fault, but was there one thing to be gained by explanations?

All right, who knew I was here? He'd given me his floor and his room; I'd walked straight up. But no one *knew* I'd gone to his room. Certainly he'd told no one of the plans he'd had and that he would see me.

Still I heard new sounds, my own breathing; and suddenly I made up my mind. I walked out as I'd walked in, down the stairs, across the lobby, down the foggy street. I walked to my hotel, packed, left and caught a train. I read one piece of it, only one, in the *Denver Post*.

Fingerprints, I read. Then I had not wiped them all away? For a moment I stared blankly at the paper. But my prints were not on file! They never had been taken!

I read another word. Sloan's death, they said, was murder.

Ten years of fear. And after all this time, could a grave open?

Now, abruptly, the buzzing of the phone, my long distance call, broke in upon my morbid preoccupation with the past. It was Connie's voice on the phone, with a lilt in it.

"How lovely!" she said. "Darling, you remembered!"

Remembered what? Buzz Sloan?

She chattered on, "It was a day just like this, Morrie, almost at this very hour—"

The date pad on the desk stared up at me. Of course. April. Friday the thirteenth. A day like this and almost at this very hour. Something happened in my chest.

"Yes, Morrie," she said, "it seems like yesterday, that wonderful night that we met."

I suppose every man, at sometime or another, comes up short at thought of his responsibilities. Here was a milestone, the thirteenth, an anniversary; and she was glad, with fond memories of the years we'd had together. God knows I'd wanted her to be happy, had tried to make her happy, had tried to build for her more than a home. She was thirty-three—we'd been married nearly thirteen years.

Was that it, the feeling that I had? Nostalgia, and not fear of that—that other anniversary?

"Darling," she was saying, "it's doubly fortunate you called just now. Jerry Denham is here. He just bought a painting for his wife, for her birthday next Sunday. Darling, it's priceless!"

Jerry Denham could buy old masters. He was probably worth a million.

"And he doesn't know what to do with it, Morrie," Connie said. "He simply can't take it home—it's to be a surprise, you know. He thought we might keep it for him, these few days, in the vault."

Remember what Frankenstein built, and how it turned on him? But there were friends

with money, jewels and whatnot, important people for whom I could not well refuse a favor, always asking that I keep their valuables overnight, or over the week end. Actually it was a fine compliment to my honesty, a tribute to my work, and I never refused these requests. Connie knew I would agree; she had the vault's combination, and knew the latest in the stream of Crane protective devices.

"Oh Morrie," Connie whispered then, "I'm so lonely. I wish you were home."

She surprised me, shocked me. She bubbled with life as a rule—but somehow I knew she had shivered. She had felt it too today, the pressure, the loneliness. I let the wires sing a moment with silence. Then I shook myself, my mind. "Everything all right, though?"

"Yes, truly, darling, fine."

My right hand was clenched. "Mail?"

"I've put it on your desk. There was nothing urgent."

"Connie, did you notice a letter from a man—a man named Sloan?"

"Sloan?"

"You remember, last month—"

"Oh, Morrie, that queer note?"

Queer note? A voice from the grave, that's what it was. One month ago, a plain white envelope, postmarked Chicago, and innocent, until I tore it open—

"That queer note?" she was saying now, her voice slowing and puzzled on the phone. "Buzz Sloan? You never told me, darling, what it meant—"

"Then there hasn't been another one? Today?"

"No, I—"

The children were fine. Still my right hand was cramped as I opened it.

But who, I thought, could have discovered I had known Buzz Sloan? And what did they want, what was behind it, after all these years? "Remember me?" the note had read, "Buzz Sloan?" Just that. Just those four barbed words. Just an earthquake.



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The pressure settled once more like a shroud as I said good-bye to Connie and replaced the phone.

I met him at the bar, some thirty minutes later. He came from the phone booth, scowling; and then he saw me, took the next stool, looked sharply at me. "Pardon me," he said, "aren't you Morrie Crane?"

CHAPTER TWO

Terror at Twelve

HE WAS no one I had ever known. Jim Regent was his name, he said. He'd recognized me from my picture in a magazine—another Crane publicity stunt—and of course he'd heard me on the air, in *Meet the People*.

I wanted nothing quite so much tonight as someone to talk to. Someone to help me forget. I waved my hand and brought the bar-keep.

"Whiskey and soda," said Regent.

I said, "Make it two."

"What luck," he said, "running into you. Thank God it happened like this."

He was about forty, well knit, dark, very well dressed. We moved to a booth. And the rain, the dreary street, my loneliness slipped suddenly away. Here was music, very soft; and people, chatting. Here was warmth and life.

There was something on his mind, I knew, and I wondered what he'd meant by saying, "Thank God, it happened like this." But his first concern had disappeared, although he did consult his watch every few minutes as though he had a pressing appointment.

We talked about safes and locks—Crane safes, naturally; yes, they went through every conceivable test. Yes, under my own supervision, in my own laboratory. As a result they were now largely rip-proof. And Crane safes had the magic recessed dial. Did he understand the methods used by yeggs? He didn't? Well—I talked to keep my mind busy with these things I knew—the Crane dial could not be knocked off with a sledge, and then the dog punched back with a center punch and mallet. Oh, he was tremendously interested in everything I said—and you know Morrie Crane.

"How about nitro?" he said abruptly.

I laughed. "Practically a lost art."

"What happens," he said, "if the combination is lost or forgotten?"

I drained my glass and chuckled. "If a safe can't be opened, you send an SOS for Morrie Crane."

He looked at me, pulled a wallet from his pocket and took a hundred-dollar bill from it. He laid it on the table.

"Crane," he said, "that's a retainer. I'll pay as high as four more like it when the job is completed. I'm in a jam, Crane, and it's vital that you help me."

I'd stuck out my chin. I'd asked for it. *Oh come*, I could still have said, *not at this hour!* I could have laughed and passed it over, before he explained. I could have pleaded an engagement. The trouble was I'd wanted company; and then I'd had several drinks.

"Oh come," I said, and laughed. "That's my business, Regent. If the deal is legitimate, of course I'm interested."

"The deal," he said grimly, "is certainly legitimate. Briefly, Crane, here's the situation. I am president of a manufacturing concern in this city. I've been out of town, and returned unexpectedly only this evening. Just today the combination was changed on our safe.

"Now ordinarily, in a spot like this, I could call our treasurer. But he left for the mountains for the weekend. I've been on the phone the last hour, and can't locate him. There are certain papers in that safe which I must have tonight. Failure to get them and re-figure a contract could even result in ruin."

A moment passed. His gaze was level, filled with hope. I liked the way he stated his case and then stood on it and waited. I liked it that he didn't plead.

"Whose safe?" I asked

"One of your own jobs. It's a Crane."

"I'll need identification."

He smiled. His smile was calm and sure, convincing. "In the first place, Crane, we couldn't get into the shop if I were unknown. We'll have to be passed through the gate, by the watchman." He tossed me his wallet. The card compartments were jammed. Cards from country club, lodges, his car registry, insurance. Then he pulled from his pocket letter-heads of firms known the nation over.

Attention: James Regent, President.

Dear Regent . . . Dear Jim . . .

I returned the letters and wallet. "How far?"

"Twenty minutes by car. I have a car."

He phoned for his car. Wealth all right, I thought. A chauffeur. Security. . . . Coming from the rosy lounge the dreary, rain-filled street surprised me. So I hadn't escaped it. It had been here, lurking. I shivered a little as we waited beneath the marquee.

His car came then, not the limousine I'd expected but a small coupé. The driver wore a blue business suit, a slouch hat, a raincoat and gloves. Regent said to him, a husky young fellow, "Did I break in on a date, Donny?"

Donny, the driver, grinned and said, "That's all right, Mr. Regent."

"Donny," Regent said to me, "is about to become a husband."

I laughed and said, "Congratulations." Then I got in first; Regent seemed to want it that way. Regent got in. Donny closed the door for us. Then this Donny lit a cigaret before he got behind the wheel.

Donny swung off the lighted street, into the darker drive. We passed a car, going the other way. Donny said, "How does it lay, chum?"

Regent said, "I got a wonderful break, Donny. Mr. Crane is an expert on safes."

Donny said morosely, "It's still a hell of a night."

Regent laughed, reached into his pocket. The dash light revealed him, smiling at me. "Comfortable?"

"Yes, plenty of room," I said.

"You know, Crane, I've heard a good deal about you. You're entitled to your pride. I understand pride in accomplishment and a product." He removed gloves from his pocket, continued as he drew them on, "Frankly, I like you. I certainly hope you get that box open."

"Don't worry."

"Never fail?"

"No, I haven't yet."

We sailed through the Park and across town, and went down a side street. Here were warehouses, factories. Donny asked abruptly, "Do I park in front?"

"No," Regent said thoughtfully. Better not."

We pulled up alongside a building. Eastland Manu—I read. Office. The darkness was heavy and I couldn't quite make out the rest of it. There was a high wire fence between us and the building, an entrance, a gate. And a watchman, as Regent had said.

The watchman came from his shed, unlocked the gate for us, saying, "Did you locate Mr. Jones, sir?"

"No, I didn't, Joe. But this is Mr. Crane, an expert on safes. He's going to open it for me."

"Well that's a bit of luck, sir!" said Joe.

"You bet it is," said Regent. He turned to me. "About how long would you say, Crane?"

"I can't say until I've seen the job."

"This way," said Regent.

Donny went ahead, with a pencil flash. We climbed a short flight of concrete stairs, walked down a wide, dim hall, came to a small room without windows. Donny's flash found steel and rested. I laughed under my breath.

"What's the matter?" asked Regent.

"It's one of the earlier models."

"Does that mean the job will be easier?"

"It shouldn't take too long."

"You know," he said, "I'm rather a funny fellow. Ask Donny—"

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"He's a swell guy and a cynic," Donny interrupted.

"That's right, Crane, as far as it goes. What I was about to say, I've always believed this Jimmy Valentine stuff was vastly overrated. Ironic, isn't it, that I'm going to enjoy the demonstration and myself proved wrong!"

He was seated on the desk as I approached the safe. I opened the safe without much trouble. I swung the heavy doors at last and turned to say, "There it is, Mr.—"

Mr. Regent? Mr. Regent? Something was wrong with my head. I reached up to feel it. It was sticky with blood.

Then I looked around. The room was dark, but the hall door was open. *The safe was open.* I lay on the floor, before it. . . .

I LAY very still. Despite knowing where I was, I had the feeling that I lay on a cliff at the very edge, and that the slightest false move now would cause me to plunge over. There was a mighty throbbing in my brain.

"Regent?" I whispered.

I wanted the sureness of him, to believe that he and Donny were near. I wanted to believe the answer to all of this was an accident.

"Crane, you slipped, you bumped your head." That's what I wanted desperately to hear now.

"Regent?" I whispered. But there was no answer. A rumble outside, from the street; a steamboat, far off, in the river. Just silence then.

I groaned and sat up, frantic with the first sharp stab of fear. Yes, the cliff-brink was very near. It was the terrible, bottomless pit of unconsciousness, and I swayed, stumbled as I rose, blind for a moment, clawing the wall and clinging to the door for support. It was over then, the threat of darkness. I'd fought through it, into the clear.

Regent was gone. Donny was gone. I shook my throbbing head. I remembered the watchman. "Joe!" I called. And the little room began to leer. *You fool*, it seemed to say, and the walls resounded with it. I nodded, understanding at last that a crime had been committed by Regent, Donny, and the watchman. And unwittingly by me. I understood that someone, Donny probably, was behind me when I'd swung the safe door open, and had hit me.

I leaned against the wall and fought for strength. I cursed them. The thing I couldn't understand, however, was why I had been left behind alive. And I attacked this curious flaw promptly. "Jim Regent" was doubtless an alias. His cards, his letters, all that had been faked. Donny had no last name, but I could describe them both. I could set police on their trail.

Then Joe, the watchman. It seemed fantastic, their utter stupidity. An employee

could not fake his work record, especially in wartime. How did the watchman expect to remain out of it? For obviously Joe, the watchman, was in it, had helped them get in. If he were not in it, then where was he?

I could call the police—as I fully expected to do—report what had happened, and in time identify the three men, and then finally walk out of the mess.

I stood another moment by the door, trying to weigh all of it, tie it all up quickly. I wanted to make no mistake that would eventually jeopardize my security. That point must be kept very clear. My security. It was then that I moved, swayed just enough from the door that the dim hall light fingered once more into the room. I saw my hat, lying on the floor. I picked it up—and then I saw the shoe.

I began to tremble. The merry-go-round began its old familiar tune. *I'd wake up in the night like this, cold and scared and sweating, until reassured that the corpse sprawled only in my mind. . . .*

Oh, no, I thought. Not again, after all these years. Please—please don't let the dream be real *this* time!

It was real. It was Joe, the watchman. His head, where gray hair had been, was a bloody mass. The match I'd struck fell from my fingers. I tried to light another and it broke. Now my throat was tight, an aching muscle, and I couldn't breathe or swallow. I couldn't close my eyes, as for ten years I had done, and go back to sleep. Nor feel, as for ten years I had felt, that the past was closed and done with. *Remember me—Buzz Sloan?* Yes, it was Buzz Sloan all over again.

There was one awful moment of cameo-like clarity. A flash of pure reason, as though my mind had split wide open. I dared not call the police. Yes, they would believe me. Morrie Crane would have no motive for opening *this* safe, and killing *this* man. My position for the moment would be secure. *But routine would demand that they check the room for fingerprints. And my prints would be taken, as a matter of course, for comparison.* Then what?

"Look here, Crane. There's something very strange here. These same prints were picked up ten years ago, in a hotel room in Seattle!"

In Seattle?

"Why play dumb, Crane? We've checked. We know you were out there at that time. We know now you were the man who called on Sloan—"

Innocent of any crime, any crime at all, and certain to be judged, and burned!

Flight? Of course! It was like jerking my hand out of flame, the instinctive reaction. I was conditioned to flight. I'd done it before, *had* to do it now again.

I turned from the room, ran into the hall. The wrong way, into a dead end. I turned, ran again, the right way, past the still little room that had become a tomb, down the concrete stairway. The turn came too soon. I fell, scrambled to my feet, still sobbing. The door defied my hands. I hammered on it, cursed it. And then, breathless with new hope, I was outside. Running in the rain, the big night around me. The gate, thank God, was open.

There was a girl outside, standing stock still with surprise, not ten feet up the dark walk. I pulled up face to face with her, dismayed and panting. A bell began tolling in that awful moment, striking off the hour. A booming note that clamored through the night as she snapped on a flashlight.

I spun from the unblinking glare, and she screamed. Her cry was thin, piercing, and it didn't seem to stop. The bell kept right on tolling with it, in my mind. All the sounds I'd heard, tumblers falling, rumbling in the streets, the far off whistle, clashed within my mind.

CHAPTER THREE

Dragnet

EVEN then, through that night and the next, I failed to sense the falling shadow. If finding Regent or Donny could have helped clear me—but circumstances made me care nothing of them, want nothing of them. I was blind with fear, with terror of that other death, in Seattle. I knew, the picture was all wrong. I knew Regent was not stupid; that I had been allowed to live for reason. But all this was wrapped up in the snowball already rolling down the hill. The shock was too much. I was blind, I say, to the core, to all but the shell, to escape. I had done no wrong—I wanted nothing but my freedom. Security.

It was twelve-thirty when I snapped into something resembling sanity somewhere along the river. I was stunned to see the river, to realize that never now could I go back and plead my case with safety.

"Inspector, try to understand. Twice I've been involved, innocently, in death—"

They'd love that, of course! The police would nod their heads, pat me on the back. "Sure, pal, we know. We'd have run too. Maybe there's a statute of limitations out there, on murder. Maybe Seattle won't want you. Maybe it's all right now, chum."

Like hell!

The river whispered, a worried slap of water against piling. I thought of Connie and the kids, and turned away from the river, after a while. There was the city, my hotel, a bed. I held my breath at every corner, taut lest someone call and stop me.

"A bit late tonight, Mr. Crane," said the clerk at the hotel.

I had to get my key. He looked at me. But I had wiped the blood off my face and my hands. "A call for eight, as usual?"

"No," I said, "not tomorrow."

"Good night, Mr. Crane."

I walked unsteadily down the hall, upstairs, to my room. The key fell twice from my hand at the door; once outside, once when I was in.

That night. The flood of thoughts that long, long night. But I'd escaped once, I could escape again—if I was cautious and clever. Once more my fingerprints would be worthless to the police, if my hands were never found for comparison.

So the girl's description was the thing, the real danger. And to what extent depended on who she was, what she was, how well her powers of observation had been developed. She could miss me by a mile; after all, she'd seen me unexpectedly, and then only for a moment. Or she could hit it on the head—and if she hit it on the head, would someone then begin to wonder who it was that could unlock a safe? Would he put two and two together, recall Crane was in town?

In that event I was lost. The minute the cops realized I was in town the mill would start to grind. The girl could tie it up even before they checked my prints, the second she'd see me.

I wasn't clever. I tried to catch a train the next morning.

And saw the dick, in time. I dodged into the crowd and walked away, across the station. If he bought a ticket I'd be safe, I thought. But he just stood there, watching everyone who did approach the ticket window.

I took a cab downtown. Unquestionably the murder had been discovered. The girl hadn't been in that neighborhood at that hour for nothing; hadn't screamed for nothing. She must have seen the open gate, and reached the right conclusion. She must have realized that something had happened, and reported it promptly. Should I keep the cab, motor to the next town, catch a train there? Fine, if the girl's description was faulty. But if it wasn't, a trip like that would invite the cabbie to remember.

There were two patrolmen sitting in a squad car at the bus depot.

Maybe it was just coincidence? Maybe the girl, as yet, had reported nothing? Saturday morning. Maybe the plant wasn't running and Joe's body hadn't been found? Maybe I was missing my last chance this morning to get out of town? My hotel bill was paid. Thumb a ride? But that wouldn't work either; that was the cabbie all over again, and an invitation to remember.

I drank black coffee at a restaurant counter,

and there scanned the morning paper. Too early. The sheet went to bed at eleven or twelve. There was nothing in it of the murder. But every nerve was twisting, upside down in me, pleading for action. Every minute that passed was hopelessly squandered. What could I gain by this waiting? People on the street, in the restaurant, any one of whom might be the one who'd stop, and frown, and turn.

I got up abruptly, got out of the restaurant. A girl was coming up the street. A nice kid, about twenty, in a blue suit, a blue tam. She looked at me. I saw the flash of something in her eyes. Recognition? The emptiness, the flutter in my stomach disappeared again as she walked on past.

I took a few steps, in the other direction, turned around—and she'd stopped. She was looking in a store window. Just at that moment *she* turned.

THE trouble was she'd been but a figure in the darkness, the girl behind the flashlight last night. She might have been slim, she might have been short, she might have been tall. She'd jumped into my life and right out of it. So this girl in blue could be the one, and it could have been sheer chance that we'd met again this morning. It sometimes happened that way. I'd read of it a thousand times, the long arm of coincidence.

I drew in a deep breath, crossed the street. Here it was, the first real hazard to be won. Every move now must be clever. I saw her reflection in a store window. Yes, we were walking in the same direction.

I came to the corner. *She* paused, too.

I swung right, up the side street. *She* was coming up the side street, too.

My teeth began to chatter. We didn't hurry. No question, though, about it now. She stopped everytime I did, for as long as I did.

Well, why was she waiting? Why didn't she start yelling, "There he is! Catch him!" Oh, waiting till we met a cop? Of course that would be the end of it. I could stand stock-still—or beg for a bullet by running.

Ahead was a hotel. I went in, straight across the lobby, to the desk. I looked back, from the desk. *She* was coming through the doorway, and again our gaze locked, so she knew I was on to her. I saw her flush and bite her lip. She took a chair, crossed her knees and became very busy with her compact. I got it, thought I had it finally. She wasn't *sure*. She'd seen me only for a moment last night. Now she wanted to know who I was, where I belonged.

The clerk had turned to me.

"The gentleman in 641," I said jerkily. I could see the key slots, and 641 was in, the key slot empty.

"Mr. Rockley?"

Fine. I was getting the breaks maybe at last. It might have been a woman.

"Yes. Please phone Mr. Rockley I'm on my way up. The name is Edwin Smith."

The clerk looked at me a little queerly, but he said, "Yes, sir."

I tried to saunter for the elevators. From the corner of my eye I saw the girl rise and walk to the desk. All right. I knew what I was doing. There was a side exit. I dived for it; outside, grabbed a taxi. I dropped the cab four blocks up the street. Now what would I do? Risk the same thing all over again? The police would start moving, once *she* established contact. I couldn't return to my hotel or attempt to re-engage my room. Edwin Smith must be kept apart from Morrie Crane.

The thing proved amazingly simple. I walked into another hotel. A man was checking out as I approached the desk. I heard, "Yes, your car is at the side entrance, Mr. Brawley." Mr. Brawley spoke about his mail. "Yes, Mr. Brawley," they said at the desk, "we'll forward it to Atlanta."

Mr. Brawley had a round red face and bright blue eyes. I caught up with him halfway to the door. Naturally he was in a hurry.

"Smith. E. C. Smith," I said. "The clerk just told me you were driving south, Mr. Brawley."

By now we'd reached the door. By now I was walking on fresh eggs. "Urgent business," I was saying. "Not a seat available, plane or train—"

Mr. Brawley understood. He was delighted to have a passenger. The only trouble was Mr. Brawley's curiosity. Because just before getting in his car, I'd bought a paper. Noon edition, the ink not dry yet, and with one word that had caught my eye—and his—immediately. Murder.

Mr. Brawley was vitally interested in murder. He told me so before we'd gone two blocks. It seemed he had a federal job, in Atlanta. We rolled a few more blocks. Something to do with the penitentiary.

Crooks and crime were Mr. Brawley's meat. "Read it," he said, with a nod toward the paper.

I closed my eyes, winked them hard when I opened them again. It felt as though I'd started out to walk upon a tightrope, wobbling like a drunk. I wet my lips, but they were parched and numb.

"What does it say, Smith?"

Say? What could I say? I read aloud, "Eastland Company Safe Looted."

"Payroll?"

"No, it—it doesn't say what was taken."

"Blow it?"

"Hell," he said, "that looks like an inside job."

I stared straight at the paper. I could feel him frowning. Open country now, the high-way ahead.

"Who was killed?"

I tried to keep my voice calm, to control my breathing. "A man named Clink. Joe Clink, the watchman. . . ."

"What the hell, Smith. I can't read your mind! What does it say?"

"He was sapped."

"They got any idea who done it?"

You bet they had an idea. The girl had taken care of that. Miss Sally Severn, picture on the inside page. I was afraid to turn the page. It could have been a dope, a lush, a half-wit. It could have been a girl with glasses on her nose, astigmatism. But it wasn't. This girl was no fool. She had her wits about her. She knew what she was doing.

That's right. She described *me*.

Brawley said grimly, "That's what I want. The description."

Uh-huh. Police were searching for a tall dark man, about forty. Weight, about 180. A man wearing a blue pin-stripe and a gray snap-brim. She'd even seen the ring I was wearing, the diamond Connie had given me, big, two carats. Why wouldn't Miss Severn have seen it, in the bright light of her flash-ray?

"He was short," I said. "Seemed young, a stocky fellow. Blond hair, sandy blond, they think."

"Better tear that part out," said Brawley. "We'll keep it handy. You never can tell. One time a trusty walked off from Atlanta—"

I knew. I knew. And thumbed a ride with Brawley.

"Made a habit of it, always to keep my eyes wide open," said Brawley. "It pays. I see things other people don't. Once I picked up a killer in a ball park. Fact. In Brooklyn. I'd read about this guy just the night before. Maybe you remember the case? The kid who sat around after the murder, eating peanuts? Well, this guy at the park was eating peanuts, sat two seats away."

He flipped a switch, the radio. He began to punch buttons. Like a train on a single track, bound for one goal, news. He caught the tail end of one broadcast:

"Police files were being scanned this morning. It is hoped the girl will be able to identify the killer."

Oh no. Not that way. I was safe so long as they approached it that way. Brawley drove at thirty-five, limped along, smoked two cigars—and kept punching buttons.

Then we caught a flash:

"The man gave the name of Edwin Smith. Malloy, the hotel's house detective, spotted him almost as soon as he came in. 'His eyes were too bright,' Malloy said. 'He was hot—I could see that the way he kept looking behind him. He stood a while at the desk, white as a sheet, both hands shaking.'"

Malloy, the flash continued, had not heard, then, about the murder. He'd followed Smith to the elevators, but Smith had turned aside abruptly, darted out the side entrance. Smith had got away in a taxi before Malloy—

Not the girl then? The little blonde in the blue tam had not been Sally Severn? She hadn't been following me? It was my own actions—I'd brought this on myself? My stomach had tied itself in knots. I was half sick as the flash concluded:

"Police are now questioning a guest of the hotel, a Mr. Rockley."

"The sap," said Brawley. "They'll get him. They always get 'em, Smith." Brawley chuckled "Say! Smith, eh? You got no safe-crackers in your family, have you?"

The Smiths were always good for gags, eh Brawley? Yes, Mr. Brawley was a card. The joker. But Mr. Brawley was going to kick himself, today—if I got away from him before he tied E. C. Smith with Edwin Smith, before he punched the *right* button. It could happen any time, at any minute. There was no time to lose. It could bawl out from the speaker, right this minute . . . killer, tall and dark and forty. . . .

Saturday. The little towns we hit were filled with shoppers. The streets were jammed with cars. Every time I'd see a cop he'd be looking at me. Then Mr. Brawley hung himself upon his own rope. It was almost five now, and we stopped in one of these small towns. He stopped to buy an evening paper.

"Should we dine now too?" he suggested, getting out of the car.

"Isn't it a bit early," I said.

He grinned. "Then how about a drink?"

"If you don't mind—"I began. I had to cut it off like that. My teeth began to chatter. A bus was coming up a side street, and this was it, the only chance, perhaps, I'd ever have.

I watched the street light. Red against the bus. It would hold the bus another ten or fifteen, twenty seconds—

"Be back, about ten minutes, Smith," said Brawley.

He disappeared in the crowd just as the street light was turning. Chicago, the flag read on the bus. I made a dive for it.

So far now, so good. In the country. I could breathe. A powerhouse beneath me going sixty. No Brawley. And no sirens.

I writhed and jumped and wriggled in the seat, figuratively I mean. I counted posts. Telephone posts, fence posts, sign posts. So many made a mile. Each mile was like a rivet in a bridge. That's what I was building. A bridge from hell, from horror, and from Brawley.

Still no sirens?

Maybe he'd had two drinks? Maybe they had dulled his razor edge? Maybe by this time, this far south, the evening papers failed to carry *all* the story? Maybe he still believed the killer was young, blond, stocky? I got all tangled up in maybes. They were like roses, that I picked from this bush of hazards and sharp thorns.

We topped a hill. I saw a factory stack, a steeple. Roofs, white houses. All of it that spelled danger. Corporation limit. It flashed by on a post. One more post. Safest town in the whole state. Wait a minute—just another post; or more, an omen? Asphalt now instead of concrete, and the tires sucked at it, whined with it, beneath me.

We stopped two minutes. We wound up again, climbed back into the hills. Every mile was to the good now, every minute very precious.

One more town, maybe I could close my eyes. One more town. . . . I stuck with the bus till midnight. Made a switch then, to a train. Not Chicago. *Home*. The last big jump, by plane, got me in early on Sunday evening.

So Edwin Smith had been born, had lived one awful day, had died again, thank God. Morrie Crane was okay. Now Morrie Crane was back in his own balliwick, and here he had important friends.

When the cops stopped *him* all they wanted was five bucks for a ticket to their annual ball. Nothing in the papers—here. There were other murders to catch headlines, nearer. Back east the Malloys, the Brawleys and the Severns were searching for a needle in a haystack.

I felt pretty good about it now. Funny. I could even dismiss the note I'd got: "*Remember me—Buzz Sloan?*" I was like a man with murmurs in his heart; he felt all right, so they wouldn't get him. The shadow was there, plain to be seen, but I was too excited, blind to it. I was almost glad there had been a Buzz Sloan. Events could happen for the best, *would* happen for the best.

Except for Sloan in my past, I might have stuck it out there by the safe. Suppose then the web had proved sticky? Suppose once I'd got entangled I would have smothered in its skeins?

No, you never knew about hunches, dreams, kinks in the gray matter, or pages from the past. Or for that matter about maybes. You

never knew when maybes would be good or bad. Whoever had sent the note obviously wasn't sure of himself. It was someone who had played a long shot, some crook friend of Sloan's, perhaps, who'd been in prison all these years. Someone with the idea of black-mail.

But what the hell; I was safe, I was home, it was over! And a thing like that couldn't happen again.

No, sir. No more bodies!

CONNIE said on the phone. "Oh, darling, where are you?"

"Airport. Just got in. Look, say it again. I want to hear you say it again. Say, 'Darling, darling, where are you?'"

She laughed. "You've been drinking."

"Haven't touched a drop!"

"Happy?"

"As a lark. Hon, you don't know how happy. I'm just full of it, hon. Look, how about your putting the kids in the car and driving out here for me."

"Morrie, I can't," she said. Her voice lowered a little. "Company."

"Well then," and I grinned, "what I want is food. Lots of it. Anything you've got, in heaps. Put kettles on the stove. Set my plate, two plates—"

"Morrie," she whispered, "it's grand to have you home."

I had a few serious thoughts in the cab, on the way. It would be: "Have a nice trip, Mr. Crane?" "Hello, Morrie—missed you at the club this afternoon." All for a man of position, responsibility. But after all, this time it hadn't been an accident. A murder had been committed. Joe Clink's death hadn't been my fault in any way, but I knew who had looted the safe and who had killed him.

Yes, this was different from the Sloan thing, when no one but Sloan had suffered. This was murder, and I owed a debt to society. I'd have to do something about it, tell the police somehow about Donny and Regent. And soon.

But how? An anonymous letter? No, nothing that could be traced to me. I was out of it and I would stay out. The thing to do was to subscribe to an Eastern paper, and then clip words from it. Paste them on a clean white sheet, I *know who killed Joe Clink*. Like that. Gloves on my hands, no fingerprints. Then I could have the letter mailed from some town far off.

That would do it. Write it off and put a period after duty. So I felt relaxed and sleepy. This little Severn was the gal though. Too bad, in a way, she'd missed. She had brains all right. Make a mental note, Crane, to be on the lookout for her, for Sally Severn. Not much chance, to be sure, that I'd ever run

into her again. And a long, long time would pass before I went east again! No more publicity either. Stick that in your hat, Crane. No more radio programs or pictures in the papers and in magazines. Remember Brawley.

I tipped the cabbie a dollar and ran up the walk. I met Connie at the door, and held her tight in my arms. But her eyes began to widen.

"Morrie," she said, "you look terrible!"

"Uh-huh. Travel."

"Didn't you sleep? You look like a tramp. Darling, run upstairs and bathe and change before you see him."

Wait a minute. Before I see—who?

She put her finger to her lips. "The man, darling. I told you. The company. He came just before you phoned, and he wants to see you."

"Business?"

My voice must have sounded like a whip. She winced. "That's what he said."

"On Sunday? Who is he?"

"Why," she said, "a Mr. Smith."

Oh yes. Smith. Ten million in this country, more or less. The Smith are always good, too, for a gag—eh, Brawley?

"Connie, what does he look like?"

"Shh!" She was puzzled. "He'll hear you! Slip upstairs, darling, and—"

"Wait a minute. This may be important. Where is he?"

"The library, of course! Morrie, what's the matter with you? It's just a man, on business—"

I pushed her aside. I walked up the hall. Walked on eggs again, on stilts, on the tight-rope. The door was ajar. I pushed it. Stood then in the doorway, without breathing.

He was seated in my chair, the window behind him, the last lonely ray of the sun. He sat deep in the leather way down, on his spine. He had a cigaret between his thin lips, the smoke from it curling.

"Hello, Crane," he said. "I'm delighted to see you!"

It was Regent.

CHAPTER FOUR

Death by Design

I CLOSED the door, closed out Connie and the world for a moment. These were *my* books, *my* paneled walls, *my* desk of black walnut. This was where I lived, where I belonged. This was my home, place of refuge and security.

He laughed. "But surely you're not surprised, Crane?" And there were needles in his laughter. It made my own throat sore. It got into my eyes, smarting like acid. The last

role, I thought, the last act. And no rain check this time. I would have to play it out.

"Oh, come, Crane," he said, "it's really not so bad. On the contrary, I—"

"How did you get out here?"

"That's obvious. By plane, today."

"Why, Regent?"

There was a decanter and glasses on a stand by the chair. He looked at me, shrugged, removed the stopper and poured pale gold into a glass. Then he raised the glass.

"I've been intrigued by this wine from the moment your wife showed me in. Note the depth, Crane, the character. Beautiful color. The taste?" He sipped, smiled and said, "Heady."

"Why, Regent?" I repeated.

"But I'm telling you! I like gold in a glass." His brows were black, like silk. "But I like it better in my pocket. I never get enough of it." His teeth were white, even and glistening. "For my pocket."

"Where is the other one? Donny?"

He set the glass down. "Donny doesn't live here any more," he said. His eyes shimmered a moment. "I dislike stupid people, Crane. Can't abide them. They're better off dead."

"First Joe," I said. "And then Donny. Now it's my turn. Is that it?"

"Look, Crane." His voice didn't raise, but he made it whip-like, crackling. "I spent a lot of time on this job. Had it in mind, played it for months. The watchman, of course, was a fool and lived in a fool's paradise. I had no intention, ever, of letting him live to soften for the cops. The same applies to Donny. Clearer now?"

"The rest of it."

He shrugged. "You became Mr. Smith and skipped. Admittedly you found yourself in an awkward situation, and every man of position, I suppose, has a horror of becoming involved in a murder. Or shall I say in *two* murders?"

Something happened inside my chest. My heart jiggled.

"The point is," Regent said softly, "I knew you would skip. I've studied you for weeks, Crane. Very likely I know more about you than you do about yourself."

He stopped again, and I said at once, "Go on," and he began to laugh.

"Certainly! I like to talk. Right now I'd like to talk about an alibi. Let's get one thing clear in your mind, Crane. I have an alibi. There are important people ready to swear I wasn't within a hundred miles of that safe last Friday night. I can depend on them, for their happiness depends on *me*." His gaze fastened on me, sharply. "You follow me?"

"Go on."

"Oh, you want it in words? All right.

You can't touch me. It's *your* prints the police found on that safe. It's *your* description the girl gave them. Motive isn't important, you made it unimportant. You became Mr. Smith, the man who betrayed guilt in every move he made. So there it is—*half* of it."

Our gaze locked. He knew I read it in his eyes. He smiled a little. "The *other* half, Crane? Buzz Sloan? You still want it in words, Crane?"

"Sloan came from an important family. A black sheep, but even though he'd been kicked out, it seems someone still loved him. Someone wanted his murder solved."

"It wasn't murder, Regent."

"No?" He chuckled. "Read the books, Crane. That's what I did. That's the way it stands, and I repeat, someone wants this murder solved. People get ideas like that, even after years, and especially when they've got a conscience, perhaps. And age, and too much money. Anyway, they hired me, a private dick—"

I cut in, "And you stumbled on a pal of Sloan's, someone very likely he'd confided in, that he was going to hire me and then rob his family. You discovered I was in Seattle that week; and then you sent me a note. You discovered I was strangely indisposed, away from the office two whole days after getting that note."

He yawned. "Clever fellow."

"Isn't that your department, Regent? All right, I seemed to betray guilt, but it was a nebulous thing, a thing you still couldn't prove, for the police had those prints out there, not you. You realized that if I were approached and laughed at you there'd be no gold. So the brain cells went to work. It's an interesting mind you have, Regent. It soars to genius."

HIS eyes were narrowing, grim and sharp. "It's the kind of a mind," I said, "that walks the razor's edge. It's the kind of a mind that would frame me into a new crime. Thus you'd be sure to collect something from the Eastland safe. If I'm clean on the Buzz Sloan case I'll stand pat. I'll string with the police and report you. But you're covered, you've got your alibi, you've faded and you're reasonably safe. However if I react as you *hoped* I would—"

I drew in a long breath, held it. Then I said, "All right, Regent. You're holding the cards now and you know it or you wouldn't be here. How much?"

He turned back to his glass, re-filled it, admired it and drained it. "What can you afford, Crane?"

I excused myself and walked out to the kitchen, standing there, looking at the garden.

With its April green and the lilac buds almost purple. Tulips in neat little beds. Daffodils and jonquils, no longer yellow but eerie white now in the early dusk. Almost time, I thought, to put the garden chairs out. A robin found a worm and pulled on it. Got it, all of it. Gobbled it like that. No more worm. No more garden. No more Connie.

"Did he go?" asked Connie.

I said, "No, not yet. Skip the dinner, hon. I won't want it."

A shadow crossed her face. "Bad news?" "It—it's going to cost us money."

"The business?"

"That's right," I said. "The business."

She kissed me, and went out in the garden, walking down the grassy slope, on past the pool, to the fringe of trees bordering the gully. The kids were playing in the gully, I could hear them. She'd promised she would keep the children out there, quiet, till I'd finished.

I watched her in the gray light, till she disappeared. Then I returned to Regent.

"This way," I said.

I led the way downstairs, into the basement. He knew about the vault, down there. *Meet the People*. Meet Morrie Crane.

He was amused when he saw the vault. Amused, still, when I opened the great doors. Iron grill inside, like you see in any bank. A chair inside, a table. I paused, got good control of my voice and turned to him.

"I'll change the combination, Regent. Look, I'll do it here, right now. Connie knows it, but I'll change that. Give me a confession, Regent, and I'll file it away. I promise you it will be safe, for I've got no duty now, only to myself. This Joe, the watchman—he was in the plan with you, he asked for death, deserved it. And Donny deserved it. So I don't care where you go or what you do. All I want is some measure of—of security. Ten thousand cash, Regent, for a confession."

He laughed.

"Ten thousand, Regent. Please," I whispered.

He laughed.

It was very simple. He walked into the vault with me; he had to, to accept the cash. He walked into the trap just as I had, with his eyes wide open. There was nothing to it. There was almost nothing that I had to do but shove him. Yes, the rest was simple. A Crane protective device, controlled by an electric eye. Steel shutters, like a bulkhead, that snapped shut on him.

I heard his one thin cry before the great doors closed. And the frantic tap-tapping of his fists. Then there was no sound at all, he was in another world. And I shivered, started back upstairs. The first floor, library, glass to wash and put away. Living room and hall—

the house was very still now and secretive. Yes, the house, the vault, could hold its secret—and its breath.

Connie was still in the garden. I stood around a while, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, no song in my heart, no savage exultation. Finally I sighed and plodded on upstairs.

THE shower was running, but I heard her. She'd come into the bedroom.

"Yes," I answered.

"Did Mr. Smith leave? I didn't see him go," she said. "Did you call a cab for him, darling?"

I stiffened a moment. But there was no catch to it. Nothing to it. He had come, he'd gone. Who would ever want to search for Jim Regent?

"He walked."

She was opening drawers, laying out a shirt for me, shorts and sox, a tie. "I didn't like him, Morrie."

"No, I didn't either."

I turned the shower off as she called back from the bedroom doorway, "You'll eat now, won't you? In a little while, dear?"

But I didn't even dress, not yet. Just sat on the bed, put my face in my hands, looking at my hands. Funny how I'd guessed it wrong. Buzz Sloan's body hadn't been the one, after all. Joe Clink's body hadn't been the one, after all. Destiny, not I, had been clever. Destiny, all dolled up in rouge and lipstick and a false face, wrapped up in a package labeled Justice.

'*Judge not lest ye too be judged.*' But damn it, Regent was an admitted killer! Any jury in the world would render a verdict of guilty—if they knew. Opinion would nod its mighty head, glad to see him stay down there and die—if opinion knew. A vault, all right, but it could be the other kind, for burial, if I

went through with it. If I left him down there weeks and months. The only wreath on his door, would be a Crane deluxe combination.

I put on my clothes. The nicest thing in life was just—to breathe. To take a deep breath, let it out, pull it in again. Oh God, just to breathe. And to have a home, Connie and two children. *The nicest thing in life was to live without fear.*

How much time had passed? An hour? More than that. A lot of time, by now. Lights were on, downstairs; no doubt the children had come in. I thought I'd heard them, but suddenly it was too still. "Connie!" I called. I stood halfway down the stairway, calling, "Connie!"

There was a car in the driveway, where no car should have been. It surprised me. I ran to the front door, out onto the terrace. "Connie!" But she wasn't out there either; and then the lightning struck, a blinding bolt of mental flame that burned into every nerve, right through me.

"*Connie—*" I shouted.

Oh, my God, it was Jerry Denham's car. You remember. This was Sunday, his wife's birthday. He'd come for the painting tonight, the Reubens, and they'd gone down to the vault!

I ran up the hall, started down the basement stairs; and there was a laugh, just before I reached Jerry Denham, Connie.

Connie was saying, "But something must have happened, Jerry. Morrie must have changed the combination. It won't open."

Yes, I've always felt a certain sadness, a queer sympathy and affinity for the wretched fellow. *I've always wondered, if I, face to face with the need for murder, could go through with it.*

They turned around, looking right at me.

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"Morrie!" said Jerry.

Connie said, "It won't open."

They saw that I had gripped the stair-rail, that I swayed. Connie's gaze was fastened on me and her eyes were widening with dawning horror.

"*But I didn't see him go,*" she'd said. She knew. And she was my security, always had been. Now I saw that. Now I understood that I could fight until the end, and keep her love—or I could lie, and let Jim Regent die, and lose her.

She knew he was in the vault.

"There's a man in there," I whispered.

I suppose she screamed. I would face whatever I'd have to face now. Face it because murder never was for me. Face it with a gladness that was heavy as lead.

"I'd set the time lock," I was saying. *Please God, Denham must not guess there was no time lock, must believe this was the reason for delay.* "He was a detective. He'd come to discuss vaults with me." I hardly knew what I was saying. "It was an accident, beyond my control. Denham, damn it, believe me! There's no danger."

"No!" Connie suddenly was standing beside me, gripping hard my arm. Chattering, "No danger! Jerry, you must understand. It's one of Morrie's safety features. Air, abundant air, pumped into the vault—"

* * *

It was very strange though. Say you're certain it will rain; but sometimes clouds pass and it doesn't. Even stars do fail, although you'll swear they won't. It's like races, the long shot sometimes does come in.

I call on Jim Regent every month or so. "Smith" is his name now, the name that he gave Connie. Remember? No one ever traced him. Donny's gone, so I guess no one cares. I pay for Regent's keep, in the asylum.

He doesn't know me, of course. He spends his days tearing at a collar that he doesn't wear, that just isn't there, tearing at the bars and trying desperately to open windows. "I'll smother!" he screams, over and over. And he keeps on his gibbering.

People sometimes wag their heads. Morrie Crane and his vault, they will say. Oh, they knew a tragic thing like that was bound to happen some day. And that poor Mr. Smith, who got caught one night by one of Crane's new-fangled inventions. He didn't know, of course, that there was air there in the vault for him to breathe—

We've closed the book, Connie and I. She has never asked me *why* "The man" was in the vault. Or why, when I could have opened it at will, decision had been slow.

We lead a quiet life, and she is very, very dear to me. . . .

THE END

King of Crime

IT WAS a lovely morning in San Diego—the California climate was at its best, birds sang in the trees along the boulevards and on the cornices of the First Baptist Church—and in the church the Reverend Herbert Wilson listened to his flock singing, too, with a happy gleam in his eye. For he had just had an idea.

He would become a master criminal of this most beautiful of all creations—the kingpin racketeer and gangster of them all!

It was simple, it was safe, it was ideal. The birds were dumb, though happy; his congregation was dumb, the police were dumb—and even in California, the sun does not shine at night! And who would ever suspect the Pastor of the First Baptist Church of San Diego?

First Reverend Wilson enrolled in an industrial course of oxyacetylene welding, to master the acetylene torch. Next he went to Washington, D. C., and spent hours in the Bureau of Standards, right under the government's nose, studying explosives. After that, in fact, the Reverend became one of the country's leading experts—on locks, safes, and burglar alarm systems.

Then he set out. His first job, the safe of a large grocery chain, netted him \$100,000. Encouraged, he ranged up and down the country with his hand-picked gang, burglarizing trains, banks and business houses of all descriptions—from the Atlantic to the Pacific. For years he prospered fabulously, an honest-to-goodness super-criminal, leaving never a clue—and finally having even Uncle Sam so alarmed that all trains were loaded with Marines to protect freight!

And all around Herbert Wilson's palatial estate the birds were now singing—maybe they weren't so dumb at that.

But if the cops could afford a thousand mistakes—and so could the birds—Herbert Wilson couldn't afford one. One night in San Francisco, he had just blown and emptied a lucrative safe—and taken off his gloves—when the police arrived. Too late as usual. Chuckling, Wilson reached up and turned off the light by twisting the bulb—and vanished.

But he left his fingerprints on the bulb. Later the police plucked him right out of his pet easy chair in the library at his palatial estate—and put him in the pen for life.

And since that day in 1922, the birds and other dumb creatures haven't given a prayer if the ex-Reverend Herbert Wilson ever heard them or not! He never learned from them what he sang to the cops!

Lauri Wirta.

Drink to the Dead!

By TOM MARVIN

Deep down, little Judy Carew knew she shouldn't really be frightened, for Lew, her husband, was the best shot on the Force. . . . But that was before Mrs. Pallow called, bringing the strange wine that did not cheer, and the glib reassurances that only brought Judy a new and starker terror. . . .



"It is my duty to tell you," she said, "because your husband is going to die soon. . . ."

AS SOON as the door closed behind Lew and she heard him bound down the apartment stairs, she went out on the back porch and collected her basketful of empty bottles. In the blackness she felt the sting of sleety snow on her face; across the dark block she heard Holy Angels' chimes striking ten o'clock. Now and then the gusty wind blew a note away from her hearing, leaving the even measure of the chimes in-

errupted, like a row of teeth with gaping holes.

Shivering, she thought: another night that I'll sleep in my clothes.

The moaning wind shortened her breath. She stepped back into the kitchen, bent over the weight of the basketful of bottles. She closed the squeaking door, and bolted it. For a moment she stood holding the bottles and looking down the long hall of the apartment.

Every light in the six rooms blazed, yet she was terrified by this home to which she had come as a bride three days before.

Why did they take this dreadful place?

But, of course, she knew why they had taken it. They were lucky to get any apartment at all. It was either this home or none.

She carried the basket to the door of her bedroom, waddling a little with its weight. There were empty milk bottles, ginger ale bottles, three of Lew's beer bottles. She set them in a row, shoulder to shoulder, across the threshold of her room. Anyone who came into it at night would kick them over. What would she do then?

In the apartment above she heard the crippled man's cane. He crossed the floor, dragging his useless leg, with a dreary rhythm. She had seen him once or twice in the hall, a stooped man, taciturn, always well dressed, with a certain attractiveness about him.

He lived alone. His name was Mr. Bone, and Lew, who obviously liked him on sight, said he had a face like the buffalo on a nickel, heavy and bearded and perpetually looking at the floor. She was not really afraid of the crippled man, but his cane drove her frantic. Sometimes at night, Mr. Bone would come down the hall stairs and his cane would miss a step and strike her door.

She set the alarm clock for seven which would give her time to arouse and return the bottles to the porch before Lew got home from work. How Lew would tease her if he knew. "Little country wren, afraid of the city."

Drawing the shades, she thought: It's ridiculous to be afraid of nothing. I'll go to sleep!

She took Lew's spare pistol from the drawer and set it on the dresser. She placed Lew's spare flashlight on the floor near her bed, where it could burn silently all night.

But as she started to take off her dress her resolution vanished. She heard the laboriously measured *thump-thump* of Mr. Bone's cane and she slid shut the fastener on her dress and seized the foot board of the bed, her heart beating fast.

I can't! she thought wildly. I won't!

Stepping over the row of bottles she went quickly into the brightly lighted living room. Another night she'd sleep in her clothes.

She'd read until exhausted, curl up under the India print on the sofa, jump up when the alarm rang to dash water on her face and change her dress. When Lew came home for breakfast and his daytime sleep she would crawl into bed too, and he would think there was something wrong with this wife of his, who slept all night and all day, too. . .

She heard a gentle knock on the hall door.

For a moment she was too startled to raise her voice. She whispered: "Who's there?"

"Mrs. Pallow, dearie. It's your landlady, Mrs. Pallow."

She had been married for three days and lived in this town for three days and she had neither made a friend nor had a visitor. Almost eagerly she opened the door.

"I've heard you traipsing around every night," Mrs. Pallow said. "And I brought something to calm you down, dearie."

Mrs. Pallow held up a terry cloth knitting bag and took from it a wine bottle, half full.

"Come in, Mrs. Pallow, do come in," she said. "I'm Judy—I mean, Mrs. Carew."

"And a lovely little Judy Carew you are," said Mrs. Pallow, stepping across the threshold. She was a large, slow-moving woman with a smooth face and austere hair-do. Only the pupils of her dark eyes seemed quick and alert. "Fetch some glasses, dearie. You mustn't be terrified this way."

"It's only that I'm not—accustomed to the city," Judy Carew said. "Everything's so new." Setting two wine glasses on the table she looked quickly at Mrs. Pallow. "But how did you know I was frightened?"

Her guest's smooth face expressed surprise. "But, my dear, of course, I would know!" She filled the wine glasses and handed one to Judy. Hauling her knitting from the bag she said: "Now let's just visit."

"But how did you know?" Judy insisted.

"Oh, come." Mrs. Pallow said patiently. She sat in a wicker rocker and her long needles began to click.

OUTSIDE, the Holy Angels chimes struck quarter past ten, and Judy Carew looked at the wine glass in her hand. She had never drunk anything but a little beer, with Lew.

Lew's sole advice on drinking had been: "Never drink alone; that way you won't go on a bat." Well, this wasn't drinking alone. She had a guest. The wine slid warmly down into her stomach.

"But how did you know I've been frightened?" Judy persisted.

Mrs. Pallow's long needles paused. "I'm a medium, dearie."

"A medium?" said Judy politely. "You mean you—oh, you foretell the future and things like that?"

"Quite easily, dearie. And accurately."

"How fascinating," Judy said. She sipped the red wine again, feeling comfortable, almost amused. "Tell me something else about me, Mrs. Pallow. What else do you know?"

"Why, I hadn't thought about it, dearie," Mrs. Pallow said. "What else would you like to know? . . . No, let's not talk about that. Sometimes people don't like the answers."

"Tell me," Judy said recklessly. "Anything! Tell me anything."

Taking a spectacle case from her terry cloth bag, Mrs. Pallow set the glasses on her pinched nose. "Let me look at you, Judy."

Obediently Judy stared into the woman's quivering eyes. The unaccustomed wine had made her both warm and carefree. For a long moment Mrs. Pallow studied her, and then she said gently, almost to herself: "But whatever possessed me to rent you this place?"

"Why not?" Judy demanded. "Indeed, why shouldn't you have rented it to us?"

"Because," the soft voice said, "You won't stay here long."

Lifting the spectacles from her thin nose, Mrs. Pallow tucked them into her knitting bag, and the long needles flew again.

"Why won't we stay?" Judy cried.

"My dear," Mrs. Pallow murmured.

"But why?" Judy insisted.

"You shouldn't ask, child. . . Here, your glass is empty." She poured more red wine into Judy's glass.

"But, Mrs. Pallow, now I *have* to know!"

"Because," said Mrs. Pallow, gently. "Oh, don't think me cruel! Please! It's my duty to tell you. . . Because, child, your husband is going to die soon."

"No!" Judy cried.

A little of the red wine spilled on her grey wool dress. She looked at Mrs. Pallow, peacefully rocking, and felt the heat die in her flushed face. Her hand shook again, and another drop of red wine washed over the rim of her glass. "But," she cried wildly, "That's absurd. He—he's healthy as an ox." And then, triumphantly: "Why, he's a *policeman!*"

"Yes, I know," Mrs. Pallow said.

I shouldn't have drunk this wine, Judy

thought numbly. It makes everything sound so grotesque. Why, I imagined she said Lew was going to die.

"I'm sorry," Mrs. Pallow said. "I was duty-bound. . . Here, get a towel and wipe off that wine before your dress is ruined."

In a daze Judy found herself walking into the kitchen, dabbing at her dress, staring woodenly at the bolted rear door that squeaked like a cat when you shut it. In the living room, Mrs. Pallow was raising her purring voice: "Mr. Carew left early, dear?"

"Yes," Judy said. "Yes. Lew and his partner had to practice on the target range."

What was she talking about? What was it Mrs. Pallow had said? Some terrible thing about Lew. . . She heard the chimes striking ten-forty-five in their misfit way. . . She had missed the ten-thirty chimes completely.

She went unsteadily back into the living room. Mrs. Pallow had packed up her knitting, and on the table stood two more red glasses. "Bed time," Mrs. Pallow said. "A nightcap to your health."

She drained her glass and waited while Judy, with eyes shut, emptied hers. "Now you'll sleep relaxed," Mrs. Pallow said.

Her smooth face seemed to Judy to be bulging and buckling like a child's painted balloon, now grinning, now glowering. But always the pupils in the dark eyes fidgeted. "Good-night," Mrs. Pallow said, and softly closed the door.

"Good night," Judy responded. "Good night, Mrs. Pallow. Good night, you—you witch!"

She put her hand on the wall and the wall moved and she clutched at it. Under her feet

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the carpet seemed to roll and shift. The lights swam, the table revolved and the wine bottle whirled madly too. She went for it in a rising rage, her legs rubbery. But her groping hand missed the bottle time and again as it spun around. In the bottom a glassful of wine sloshed carmine red. Then she had the bottle in her hand, but it slipped to the floor. She kicked at it and fell onto the sofa and couldn't move. . .

SHE was going to a party. . . People moved as in a dream, slowly, silently. . . It was something special, a Hollywood dinner party. Her escort was something special, too, an elusive combination of every movie star she had ever seen, with a clipped but warm voice, like Basil Rathbone's or like Lew's. He carried gardenias for her shoulder. She looked down at the flowers, and then she saw she was wearing a black satin swim suit. She shrieked and ran upstairs to change. . . There was a man in the room, a man who used a cane to drag himself across the floor with a dreary rhythm. . . A rhythm that whispered of loneliness and old age and death. . .

She was sobbing and quivering and unable to manage her fingers. She felt a gentle hand on her and then the clipped but warm voice said:

"Judy."

Without opening her eyes she said: "Will we miss the party?"

"Judy." Urgent and concerned the voice burrowed through the fog of her mind, sounding familiar, sounding like Lew's.

"But I was just going out with Basil Rathbone," she said petulantly.

"Wake up, Judy. For the love of God, what's wrong?"

"Only, I was wearing a black satin swim suit," she said wildly. "And I had to go back to dress, and there was the man with the cane. . ."

"Judy, I've got to talk to you!"

She felt her tired fingers open and close spasmodically. Her hands felt webbed. "It was fun while it lasted. I almost got to a real Hollywood party."

"Judy, listen to me!"

Hands shook her. She sat up and saw Lew's white and strained face on a level with her own. "What?" she said numbly.

"Judy, I've just killed a man!"

Perhaps she screamed, because Lew slapped her.

"But he killed you!" she wailed. "Don't you see? She was right, after all. He killed you, and now you're dead. . ."

"Judy, you're dreaming! Lord, how I wish it was a dream! Judy, understand me. I killed a man. I shot him once, and he died. . ."

SHE had his face buried in the front of her wine-stained grey dress. Over the top of his head she looked at the hateful room, the lights still blazing in the early winter morning, the red roses in the carpet, the wine bottle under the table, which no longer whirled in mad gyrations.

I knew there was a dreadful mark on this place! She thought.

She was wide awake now, fearfully and sharply awake. "There, there," she crooned to him. For all her fear, a tremendous relief flooded through her. She was wrong after all. He isn't dead. The other man is dead.

"Lew, I love you so. It will be all right. Policemen have to kill sometimes. It's their duty."

"But Judy, you don't understand. I killed him without a reason. God, I practically killed him in cold blood. I killed Mr. Bone. A helpless, defenseless cripple."

"Lew!"

"I heard somebody in the hall and I blasted away. I don't know why, maybe I was scared. Maybe that target practice last night made me trigger happy. . . I shouldn't have done it, I didn't have any good reason. Judy, I could die for this!"

Giddiness nauseated her. In the swimming pattern of red roses on the floor she saw Mrs. Pallow's austere face, the luminous pupils still fidgeting, bulging and changing like a child's painted balloon, glowering and sneering, but mostly laughing.

"You'll be all right," Lew said tonelessly. "I've got to turn myself in."

He straightened her limp legs on the sofa and tossed the India print over them. She heard him at the telephone, talking to the desk sergeant.

"Regan, this is Patrolman Carew. I've just killed a man in the hallway of my home. . . Yes, he's dead. . . No, he's not a prowler, he lives in this building. Yes, I know it's a job for homicide. But, Regan, do me a favor. I want my partner down here. Call Eddie Judd, will you?"

He came back into the living room. "Don't go to pieces on me again, Judy. I'll get somebody to stay with you. The landlady, Mr. Pallow. . ."

"She's a witch!" Judy screamed. "She's a horrible, evil, leering witch!"

"Judy." He sat on the edge of the sofa, holding her.

When the plainclothesmen arrived he motioned them into the dining room. As they talked in low, monotonous voices she lay shivering under the India print thinking: Mr. Bone. Mr. Bone. With a nice face like the buffalo on a nickel. If I could only hear your cane thumping around up there. What a lovely sound. Let me hear it now, please, God.

Lew came to kiss her good-bye. "I'm going downtown," he said. He seemed to have a better grip on himself. "Eddie Judd is here. Sure you don't want Mrs. Pallow to stay until. . . . Until—?"

"No!" Judy sobbed.

He kissed her quickly. "So long, country wren." She heard the men's footsteps, the lobby door closing, automobile engines starting. They slid away from her.

"Lew!" she cried.

Eddie Judd came into the living room and sat in the slip-covered chair. He set his cap on the table and ran thick fingers through his red hair. "How about a little breakfast, Judy?"

"I couldn't bear it."

"Hot coffee. Bacon. A couple eggs over."

"He's going to die. In an electric chair. My Lew."

Eddie Judd said nothing.

"He never harmed a fly. And now they say he killed a crippled man. . . . That she-devil!"

"Maybe a bowl of oatmeal. Some orange juice."

Eddie plucked the India print from her. "What in hell. . . . what did you spill on your dress?"

"Wine," she said. "Witch's wine. I got plastered on it last night."

He smiled at her kindly, pushing her toward her room. "What are those empty bottles doing there?" he said.

"They keep harm away from me," Judy said bitterly.

He looked at Lew's spare pistol, lying on the dresser. "That keep harm away from you too?" He didn't touch the weapon. "Is this Lew's spare Positive? Was it lying here all night?"

"Yes," Judy said. "Let me dress, Eddie."

IN THE bitter winter morning they walked to the restaurant on Wilcox street. Nothing seemed real to her, the carnation in the bud vase, the smell of coffee, the grainy face of the waitress. Eddie Judd undid the top button of his tunic, sighing.

"If he only had a reason to shoot the guy! Any reason."

She tried a warming swallow of coffee. "What did he tell the homicide men?"

The red-haired policeman shook his head gloomily. "Pretty damned slim story, I'm sorry to say. Lew and I rang out at eight o'clock this morning, as usual. He went straight home. He opened the lobby door and the hall light was out. He heard a noise."

"A cane?"

"More of a rustling sound. It was black in the hall, and Lew said something like: 'Who's there?' The rustling stopped. He

didn't like that, so he drew his gun. Then—he's not sure about this—but he thinks somebody swung at him in the dark. So he fired. Then he did catch a crack on the head and he passed out."

"A cane?" Judy said.

"Looks that way. Looks like the crippled guy was able to belt Lew once before he died. Anyway, Lew woke up in the dark. His cap and gun and the cane were on the floor. The crippled man was on the stairs."

"Don't you see!" Judy said. "Self-defense. Mr. Bone tried to kill Lew with his cane."

"Did he, now?" Eddie said morosely. "What for? Mr. Bone had a perfect right to be in his own hallway at half past eight in the morning. And Lew can't *prove* anybody attacked him, least of all a cripple."

She began to nibble at her breakfast. She was surprised to find she could stomach food. "You know what?" Judy said suddenly. "I'm all through being scared. I finally have something to be scared about, and now I can't be. I've got work to do."

"What work?"

"Look," Judy said. "We live on the first floor. Mr. Bone had the second. Mrs. Pallow is on the top floor. How did she know I traipsed around my apartment all night? Because she spied on me. She saw me getting my bottles off the porch. She has keys to all the apartments. I'll bet she's been in our place when Lew and I were out."

"What of it?"

"She brought her infernal jug of wine downstairs last night and sat there with her eyes flickering and told me Lew was going to die. Don't tell me all that talk about death was just coincidence. That woman is touched in the head."

"What else was it?" Eddie Judd asked reasonably. "After all, she said Lew was going to die, and she missed the bus on that one."

"But he still might!" Judy cried. "Don't you see it all?"

"No, damned if I do," Eddie said moodily.

A waiting taxi was parked at the curb when they returned to the apartment. Judy clattered up the cement stairs and stepped quickly into the lobby. She saw a woman fumbling at the door.

"Looking for someone?" Judy said.

The woman stiffened, then turned round, frightened eyes on her. She held her purse tight against her leopard coat for a moment. Then she said: "I'm selling silk hose."

"I'll take some," Judy said. "Where are they?"

"They—they're three dollars a pair."

"Where are they?"

"Oh, yes! I left them in the cab." The woman in the leopard coat brushed past Judy and ran down to the cab. It moved off.

"Stockings!" Judy said. "I'll bet she was trying to get into Mr. Bone's apartment."

"Now why would you bet that?" Eddie Judd asked patiently. "The homicide men have been through it. Nothing there. Bone was a bachelor, pretty well off. Collected coins and books. Kept no pets."

He looked directly at Judy. "And no sign of any women friends. I've got a master key. Want to go up?"

"No." She returned his level glance. "You bring that master key back here at four o'clock this afternoon."

He nodded. "Will you be all right, alone?"

"Yes," Judy said firmly.

She let herself into her apartment. She gathered up the empty bottles and dumped them into the garbage receptacle. She took a bath, set the alarm, and went to sleep.

EDDIE JUDD returned on time, carrying a tubular package, wrapped in newspaper, under his thick arm. "Vino," he said, patting it. "Made it myself. Help yourself, you little wine bibber."

Again, Judy thought. She shuddered. "Throw that foul red stuff down the sink."

"Red, my hat. It's green. Persimmon wine, and home-made." He set it on the table. "Well, it's four o'clock."

"Eddie," she said. "Eddie, listen. Mrs. Pallow goes to the grocery at this time every day. When she leaves, you go upstairs with your master key. I don't know what to look for, but look everywhere. Look every place."

"They usually hide stuff in the flour bin," Eddie said. "But I've got no business cracking into her place."

"Who will know? I'm thinking of Lew. You rummage in all the woman places you can think of! Hear me? In the broiler. In the sewing basket. Under the mirror in her makeup box, if the old witch has one."

They sat in the darkened living room until Mrs. Pallow came downstairs. "Now get started," Judy ordered. She sat nervously at her front windows, watching the street for Mrs. Pallow's return. Eddie had been gone a half hour, and she was growing jittery when he knocked.

"Brother," he said softly, holding up a wide yellow envelope. "What I found among her dress patterns! Nine letters of Mr. Bone's."

"From her?" Judy asked eagerly.

"From a dame named Edna Otis. Love stuff. And take a look at this snapshot in one of the letters. Edna herself, no less."

It was the woman of the leopard coat and the round and frightened eyes. Judy felt her heart throbbing until the sofa shook with her trembling body. "See?" she said wildly. "She was here today to get these letters. Didn't I tell you?"

Eddie shook his head bewilderedly. "What?"

"Why, I'm a medium too!" Judy cried. "I've got a bottle of green wine and I foretell the future, dearie. Quite easily and accurately. Why, I can even foretell the past and—Eddie! Where are you going?"

He had clamped his cap on his thick red hair. "To see if anybody's home at Edna Otis' house. You just sit around with your lovely bottle of green wine and make like a medium until I get back."

Twilight had seeped through the apartment but she disdained to turn on the lights. Yesterday I would have turned to ice, she thought. She picked up Mrs. Pallow's wine bottle and saw that it was completely empty. Funny, she thought, I could have sworn there was a glassful left last night.

On an impulse she went out into the hall, where Mr. Bone had died. Someone had scrubbed the tile. In one corner she saw the doorstep, a housebrick sewn in carpeting, and she sat on the steps in the dark, turning it over and over in her hands. She rubbed it on the heavy carpet of the staircase, fuming to herself: I know Mrs. Pallow did it! I think she's crazy as a loon."

Her telephone was ringing, and she ran up the stairs. It was a homicide lieutenant named Vogel. "What do you know about a woman named Edna Otis?" he said. "She's a friend of Lew's? Eddie Judd just brought her in."

"Oh, glory!" Judy cried. She was almost too breathless to talk. "Don't you see how plain everything is? That witch did it. I—I'm going to get her down here tonight. At ten o'clock." Her voice rushed on, chattering at Vogel. "Yes, ten o'clock would be just right. I'm going to have a party. Won't you come, too, Mr. Vogel? I'll have green wine. . . ."

"Witch?" said Mr. Vogel. He sounded as confused as Eddie Judd. "Ten o'clock?"

Mr. Vogel was repeating, "Hey, hello, hello," as she replaced the receiver. She put the telephone down and leaned against the wall, taking slow, deliberate breaths. Then she dialed Mrs. Pallow's number.

"I don't think I told you," Judy said, "That I'm a medium, too. I'm giving a demonstration at ten tonight, and I'll expect you here."

"Impossible," Mrs. Pallow said.

"Mr. Bone," Judy said clearly, "Will be present."

She hung up the receiver and stood in the dark hall, thinking: Now I've done it. Now I've committed myself. I'm scared to death. No, I'm not! I'd take a bigger chance than this for Lew!

AT QUARTER of ten she was dressed and waiting. She wore an unrelieved black suit; she had left off her rings and makeup

and had drawn her hair tightly down around her ears from a middle part. At five minutes of ten she turned a single lamp in the living room and opened the bottle of green wine.

Sitting in a chair, her heart racing, she waited for ten o'clock.

What if she doesn't come?

Across the dark block Holy Angels' chimes struck ten. She counted each note, gripping the arms of her chair. As the last sound faded she heard a knock on her door.

Mrs. Pallow stood there.

"Come in," Judy said. "Mr. Bone will be down soon. He's upstairs dressing."

"Upstairs!" Mrs. Pallow said.

"Yes. Don't you hear him?"

Over the heavy breathing of her guest came the sound of a man dragging himself on a cane across the room above them.

"But, Mrs. Pallow," Judy said companionably. "You shouldn't be so frightened, dearie. Here—a little wine to relax you." She pointed to the two glasses on the table.

"Green!" said Mrs. Pallow.

"But it's really only wine, you know," Judy said. "You don't think it's poisoned? Here, I insist."

Mrs. Pallow's pulsating gaze leaped at her. "Who's upstairs? Mr. Bone is dead. *Dead!*"

"Of course he's dead. Mercy, you don't think he's coming here except in spirit? . . ."

"No. I—I hate wine. What—what are you going to ask Mr. Bone?"

"Anything you like," Judy said. "But remember, sometimes people don't like the answers."

"This is ridiculous," Mrs. Pallow said. She put her hands on the back of the wicker rocker and her arms trembled. "What if I refuse?"

The dreary thump and drag sounded again overhead. Mrs. Pallow's fidgety gaze fixed on Judy from a white and shiny face.

"Then," said Judy, "I'll have Edna Otis talk with him."

"Who?" Mrs. Pallow breathed. She sank into the wicker rocker. "How did you know?"

"But of course I would know, my dear! Here, your wine. Mr. Bone must be almost finished dressing. He is attractive, isn't he?"

Mrs. Pallow twitched. "You!" Her voice lifted shrilly. "You! You're no more a medium than I am! What is it? Out with it!"

"Let's wait for Mr. Bone. . ."

"Out with it. Out with it, I say!"

"You killed him, of course," Judy said softly. "You thought he was all yours, but when Edna Otis came along you went wild. You decided to kill him. You knew my husband is a policeman and would have a gun. You came here last night with your wine and pills to drug me. You knocked me out and then you came back and got Lew's spare Positive

and emptied the remaining wine so it couldn't be analyzed."

"Just before Lew came home you called Mr. Bone down into the hall and shot him. Of course I couldn't hear you. You put Lew's spare gun back on the dresser. Then you put out the hall light and waited for Lew. You had that doorstop, that brick wrapped in carpeting, and in the dark you rubbed it on the stairs. It made a rustling noise. A totally strange noise that Lew couldn't identify. You decoyed him into shooting. Then you leaned over the bannister and hit him with Mr. Bone's cane."

Mrs. Pallow said craftily: "And how would you prove it?"

"By the bullet that Lew fired! It's buried somewhere in the steps, under that deep rug piling. Lew's gun did kill Mr. Bone, madam, but it was his spare Positive. And you fired it!"

"You witch!" Mrs. Pallow screamed. "You smug little poisonous witch!"

"And the police have got Edna Otis' letters to Mr. Bone! And they have Edna Otis, too! Eddie!" Judy shrieked. "Eddie!"

Mrs. Pallow hurled her like a doll against the wall, and something crunched inside Judy's head and for a reeling moment she stood paralyzed. Upstairs she heard the hard clatter of Eddie Judd's shoes as he dropped Mr. Bone's cane and sprang for the stairs.

But red-haired Eddie Judd was seconds behind Lieutenant Vogel, who flung open the closet door and in the same motion launched himself from his hiding place to Mrs. Pallow's straining back. He tore her away from Judy and pinioned her arms in a vicious armlock until Eddie Judd came thundering down the stairs.

Judy made it to the sofa. Her head reeled and she was conscious that somebody covered her with the India print. She heard husky voices in the dining room, interspersed with Mrs. Pallow's high-pitched rantings, and she lay there not caring if she ever got up again.

Lieutenant Vogel looked in on her at last. "How goes it?" he said. He shook his grey thatch at her. "Mrs. Carew, don't *never* mess with anybody who's got jumpy eyes like that. They're either full of dope or crazy. Take your choice, it ain't good."

"I guess I'm just a goose," Judy whispered.

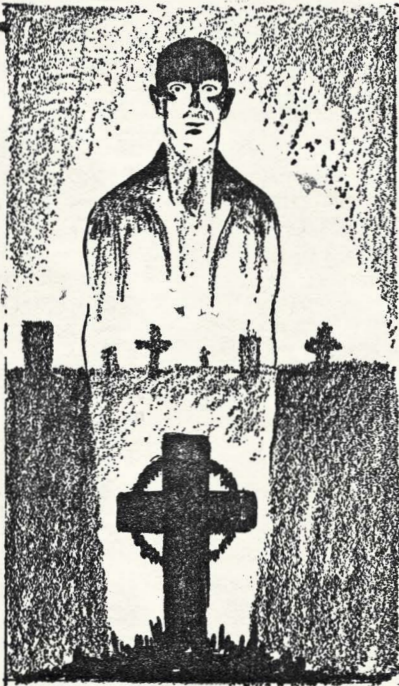
"Hardly. You turned a neat trick. Course, we would have nabbed her sooner or later ourselves. I trust. . . . Say, she's no more a medium than my Aunt Tootsie. She's just out of her head. We're taking her downtown now, and we'll send Lew back to you."

She threw off the India print and began looking for her shoes. "You will not!" Judy said. "I'll go get him!"

THE CORPSE MAN



When Jonathan Isles, quiet, respected gem salesman, awoke with aching head and poached eyes, and read the story of his own violent death, he knew he'd have to come to life again—and fast! For his own daughter was charged with his murder, for the quarter-million dollars which Isles had never stolen!



CHAPTER ONE

Give A Man A Life He Can Lose

HE WAS Jonathan Isles, and until three days ago the most spectacular thing he'd ever done was to risk his neck and snatch a kid out of the street away from a run-away truck once. He'd seen one war back in '18, but he'd done nothing spectacular even then; just a hard, dirty, slugging job in the infantry. He'd lived the way he believed a man should live. If some of his principles had cost him dear, he hadn't regretted it, because on the face of it, he didn't believe that right principles ever cost a man anything.

But three days ago everything had changed. He had died. He had lain five feet eleven and a half inches in his coffin and his daughter had wept because of his death.

Now he sat on the edge of the creaking bed in the dingy hotel where he was registered under an assumed name. He ran his hand through his greying, salt-and-pepper hair and considered it a sorry joke; for now, after



She yelled, "He's putting something in his mouth, Mel!" and kicked him in the teeth. . . .

three days of death, he had to go back; he had to return to life.

It was all here, in the paper bought in the seedy lobby a few minutes ago—his reason for having to return. Or perhaps it was in his mind; had been in his mind for three days, but he had stalled, alone, dead, seeing the wreckage that had come with the end of his life, reading his name in the papers, dragged in the dirt.

He arose, haggard. His face was normally strong, his body hard from regular exercise in the hours when he wasn't working at his confining job; but now his face was lined and he felt the years riding his shoulders.

The last light of a hot, close day made bright threads on the drawn, cracked, green blinds. He thought about Frances, his daughter, and the diamonds, and facing twenty years in prison. . . . Coming back to life was going to be one sorry mess. . . .

His laugh was harsh; it had been easy

By TALMAGE POWELL

enough to die. The motion picture in his tortured brain clicked, whirred back to three days ago, to the day he had died. . . .

* * *

He had been on the road a week. Fifteen years of hard, honest work had made a jewelry salesman of him with Elite Jewelry Company. He had started at the bottom; he knew, himself, that he was not a hotshot salesman, but he knew jewelry; and the suave approach and sophisticated handsomeness he lacked, he made up for with other things.

It had been a hard week for Jonathan Isles, but not a good one. His mind had stayed home with Frances.

He had always been amazed that he had fathered anything as beautiful as Fran with her pliant tallness, her softly angular face, her tumbling black hair and laughing violet eyes. Only her eyes didn't laugh anymore. Not since Bill Conlan had been reported missing in action.

She'd wanted to marry Bill before he'd gone over, but he had said no. Save it for later, he'd said, when Bill was back again and they could have a lifetime instead of a few haunted days. Bill, rebellious at first, took it well. Still, Isles could never forget the smouldering resentment in the boy's eyes—a resentment that was reflected by something close to hatred in Fran's now. And Bill was gone and Isles knew that Fran felt she would never see him again.

It had awakened something grim in her, something John Isles had never before seen in his daughter. One day she was his Fran, his lovely daughter; then quite suddenly she was cold, a stranger, with too much paint on her face, a hard note in her voice, seeing too many men, chasing like mad to places she shouldn't have gone. She was trying to escape, smother the heartbreak, tear the bitter-sweet ghost of Bill Conlan from her young, aching mind. . . .

Isles' wife had died when Fran had been born, a life for a life, that's the way it had been. Fran was all he had. And yet, because he seemed to remind her of the past and all it contained, he wasn't sure that she hadn't begun to hate him.

He felt it the moment the War Department

telegram came. For Isles had seen things Bill's way, sided with Bill. And maybe if it hadn't been for Isles, Fran and Bill might have been married before Bill had shipped. They'd have had that much anyway, Fran felt; and now Isles lived with the bleak knowledge that his own actions had caused her to blame him in some measure, to estrange them both.

So Isles had finished up his out of town trip and returned one day early. He wanted to see Fran, to be near her. He also wanted to see Cicero Jewett, the big, gorrilla-like financier. Jewett, Isles had heard, was willing to back solidly a jewelry business to catch and expand with the huge post war trade. After happiness for Fran, a business of his own was the one thing that Isles wanted. "Like a kid with a dream," he had laughed at himself once.

In his quiet banker's gray, he crossed the outer office toward the office of Haynes, his rotund boss. Haynes had been tied up, kept him waiting for an hour. Then when Isles was in the swank office, Haynes had asked about the trip, offered him a drink.

"Thanks, no," Isles said to the man behind the gleaming desk. Without being abrupt, he drew Haynes immediately down to business. Isles was in a hurry because of the hour he'd just lost, waiting for Haynes.

"Your report ready?"

Isles nodded, handed the report across the desk. Haynes laid it aside carelessly, said, "We had the vaults worked on while you were gone, John. So I'll give you the new combination, since you'll continue to have access to the vault, insofar as the sales force is concerned."

Haynes wrote numbers on a slip of paper, handed it to Isles. "I wouldn't carry this too long, John. Better memorize it and burn the combination."

Isles nodded, his mind truant, leaping ahead to the appointment with Cicero Jewett, for which he was late, to seeing Fran again and getting some of the black worry about her off his mind. "Sure thing, Mr. Haynes."

Then he was out on the street, cutting through traffic in his black coupé. He'd had a hard time getting this appointment with Jewett; as it was, he pushed into Jewett's office ten minutes late.

Jonathan Isles had spent months planning the details of a business of his own. But now a flock of little things had built up to cloud his speech; he'd had to rush, and he wasn't a man who could rush successfully. He was late for the appointment, and he felt Cicero Jewett's impatience. He looked and felt drab and tired from his week, and Fran's silence during that time had un-nerved him.

Where was she going? What was she doing? With whom? Hell, she was his daughter. If she got in any kind of trouble. . . .

He realized that Cicero Jewett was toying with objects on his desk in such a manner as to denote boredom. He had to pull himself together, stop mumbling his words, to talk successfully to this man.

But Jewett was saying, "Yes, yes, Isles. Frankly, it might sound well, but I. . . Well, knowledge of the business isn't everything, Isles."

And that was that. Cicero Jewett might as well have said, "I'm looking for a different type of man, Isles. Jewelry is a smooth business, a very subtle trade, and if this interview is any indication. . . ."

IN HIS small, black coupé again, Isles turned toward home. The day was bleak with the knowledge that he'd muffed it. If he'd sounded like a shilly-shallying fool to Jewett, it was his own fault. Jewett would find a smoother man, a more aggressive man who could direct all his efforts and arguments toward one cardinal point.

The day turned bleaker still when Isles opened the front door to his small, white bungalow and heard, above the mumble of voices in the back of the house, Fran's high, strained, studied laughter.

Isles, standing in the living room, didn't move for a moment. That other voice was familiar. Silently, he crossed to the dining room, from where he could see Fran and the man out in the kitchen. She was mixing a drink, and he was standing close to her.

The man was tall, yet compactly built, wearing a blue business suit with casual ease. He was blond and might not have been bad looking, had it not been for the dark lights in his flat grey eyes and the way his tight cheekbones gleamed. He was Leroy Traxler, and Isles felt cold down in the bottom of his stomach.

Isles had learned that Fran had been seeing a lot of Leroy Traxler, and Isles had done a little quiet investigating, found that Traxler owned a cozy black and chrome place known as Club Thirteen. Isles had gone to the club a time or two. He had seen a few things, suspected a lot more, heard a word dropped here, another dropped there. All of it added up to the fact that the man who owned Club Thirteen was rotten clean through; not the man John Isles wanted his daughter seeing—not by a hell of a long shot!

Now, looking at Traxler smile at Fran, Isles felt his palms grow with the deathly fungi of clammy moisture.

Isles faded back from the doorway. He'd see Traxler, and on Traxler's own home ground. He didn't want to jump Traxler here; that would make a martyr of Traxler in Fran's eyes, and do more harm than good. Isles had helped to keep her from making a

decision of her own and marrying the man she'd loved, hadn't he?

So as silently as he had entered the house, Isles left it. Traxler and Fran never knew he had been there and gone; he was sure of that. He got in his car again, rolled it from the curb without gunning the motor, and drove to Traxler's Club Thirteen, his lean face set, showing his years only slightly.

He liked and wanted a calm, quiet life; but he was lean and hard and in prime condition. He wasn't sure that he couldn't take Leroy Traxler apart with his bare hands. He meant to give it a try. . .

On his previous visits to Club Thirteen, Isles had learned that the name of one of the barkeeps was Joe. He was the fat, soft one who kept sucking at a tooth rather than have it pulled. He waddled up to Isles. "What'll it be?"

"Rum and soda, I guess." And when the drink came: "Joe, what time will Traxler be in?"

"You want the boss for something?"

I want to murder him, if it takes that, Isles thought. Aloud, he said, "Just wanted to talk to him a moment, that's all. He might be interested in some specials we've got on diamonds."

"He buys a lot of ice, all right," Joe chuckled, raising his colorless brows knowingly. "Why don't you take that booth over there? I'll give you the high sign when he wanders in."

Isles took the booth indicated. When he looked up at the bar again, Joe wasn't there. He spotted Joe in a phone booth in back, making a call. Joe was looking at him, strangely, jerking his gaze away when he saw Isles watching.

Isles frowned, slouching back in the booth. "Nerves," he muttered. "Everything has got me in such a state, I'm thinking that everybody is against me, even the barkeep."

Fifteen minutes had passed when the shadow fell across Isles' booth. He looked up.

A man and woman were standing there. The woman was a thin blonde, with eyes as hard as sea-green glass, her mouth a brazen slash of red.

SOMEHOW the man looked familiar. Isles frowned; he was positive he had never seen either the man or woman before. But the man's size, the general outline of his features, his graying salt-and-pepper hair. . . "Jonathan Isles?"

Isles nodded, watching the man and woman as without invitation, they slipped into the booth. The man was looking at him hard, just as hard as Isles was staring at the man.

"I'm Mel Searcy," the man said in his deep, brittle voice. "This is Miss Maney," he gestured to the blonde who was lighting a cigarette.

Searcy glanced up to call an order for drinks to Joe, the fat barkeep. Isles said, "Seems that I've seen you somewhere before."

Searcy laughed and said, "Stand up."

Frowning, Isles stood up. Searcy stood with him and at Searcy's gesture, Isles looked at their reflection in the mirror behind the bar. It hit him with a jar, the reason for Searcy looking familiar—Searcy looked a lot like him, a devil of a lot like him. In dim lighting, under a swift glance, Mel Searcy might even pass for his double.

Isles sat down, watching Searcy closely. He didn't like this. It caused a chill to ripple down his spine.

"A man doesn't really know what he looks like, does he?" Searcy insinuated. "A woman—she's different; she looks in a mirror a lot; she's familiar with herself. But now, you take a man. He looks in his mirror only when he shaves, and he's not really seeing himself then, just his whiskers."

"We look somewhat alike," Isles admitted. "Our general features, our size and coloring."

"Sure," Searcy laughed, "under proper conditions, we might pass for the same guy."

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CHAPTER TWO

The Night I Died

Isles looked from Searcy to the girl. She hadn't spoken, but her eyes had grown harder. Isles found himself gripping the edge of the table. "I don't think I care for that drink you just ordered, Searcy."

"Now is that nice? Fact is, I had a little deal I wanted to talk over with you, in private. Traxler wouldn't mind if we used one of his back rooms."

Isles saw it first in Searcy's eyes; then he dropped his gaze to Searcy's coat pocket. Isles knew that Searcy was holding a gun on him.

"See what I mean, Isles?" Searcy's voice was softly persuasive.

"No. I don't think I do."

Lila Maney laughed. Mel Searcy explained coldly, "I'll come right to the point, Isles. The first night you came in here, a pal of mine saw you. He thought for a moment you were me, until he'd walked up to speak to you. He heard you talking with Joe, the barkeep. You mentioned that you worked as a salesman for Elite Jewelry.

"That pal of mine got to thinking then, Isles. You, a fairly close ringer for me, working for the city's biggest wholesale and retail jewelry outfit. So the friend phoned me. You beginning to see the light now, mister? We better go into the back room, huh, and let me explain the rest of it? Or do you want to take it out here?"

Isles considered his chances. Searcy's gun wasn't three feet away from him, but he'd never get to Searcy quick enough. The bar was almost deserted at this hour, and Isles knew that the barkeep had tipped Searcy off that Isles had come in the bar. That meant he'd have to deal with Joe, too; that Joe was at least passively on Searcy's side. Isles would be a dead duck in seconds if he tried to make a break. He had to stall for time. Not only that, he wanted to find out what crooked scheme this man had in mind, and stop Searcy if he could.

The air in the booth was electric with waiting. Searcy's eyes were small. "If you value your skin, Isles, you'll take a walk with me right now."

Isles rose slowly. Searcy let out a thin breath. He jabbed the gun in Isles' ribs. "Don't get notions," he breathed. "There are lots of ways one guy can shoot another guy and get away with it. Joe there could say you got huffy with the dame, tried to throttle me, and I had to let you have it. That's just one example! You don't need any more."

The lone patron at the bar walked toward the door, passing Isles. Isles gave the man a hard, frantic look, Searcy's gun biting deeper, but the man didn't give Isles so much as a glance. And the booths were empty. Searcy had things his way. . . .

THE nightclub at the left and rear of the bar had not yet opened. The room beyond that, a small, private dining room. Searcy closed the door behind them. Lila Maney dropped in a chair as if extremely bored with all this.

Isles, shaken with reaction and anger, cursed himself for a fool for not having made a break in the bar. But things had happened so quickly; and that gun had been on him, bringing a sickening, unaccustomed sensation. He hadn't faced a gun since '18, and that somehow had been different from this; he'd been expecting it then.

The gun was in plain view now. "That friend of mine that saw you here, Isles," Searcy began, "he and I did a little quiet snooping, what with the beginning of an idea in our minds. We learned that you not only worked for Elite Jewelry, but were a very trusted man. It's too bad that you're going to rob the company vault, Isles!"

"Damned if I will!"

Searcy laughed. "Strictly a rube, Lila," he said to the girl. She said, "Yeah, chum, are you dumb! You see, Mel nosed around and met a girl who works in your office. He gave her a dinner, a few drinks one night, and she let slip that you got access to the company vault. So you're gonna give the combination to my boy friend Mel, Isles. Now do you get it?"

He wiped sweat off his face. He got it. Mel would get the combination. Mel would summon the watchman to let him in. The watchman would think it to be Isles and when Mel was close enough for the watchman to see his mistake, it would be a simple job for Mel to take care of him. Then Mel would open the vault and take his own sweet time.

Queer things tumbled through Isles' mind as he sat looking at Mel's gun. That combination, the new one was still in his wallet! Damn Haynes for keeping him that hour, causing him to rush to see Cicero Jewett and momentarily forget the combination was still in his wallet! But deep down he didn't blame Haynes. Only himself. After fifteen years of careful, hard work, to make this kind of a slip. . . .

Sick inside, his thoughts tumbled back eighteen years. To the rainy night he'd sat by his wife's bedside and heard the doctor say, "We'll do the best we can. But she has given you something, Isles, a beautiful girl child. . . ." Fran. . . . He'd hurt her deeply and now he'd have to hurt her again. Provided, of course, that there was any love there to be hurt. But there was pride, at least. . . .

Isles said, his voice thick, "You're out of luck, Searcy; they worked on the vault while I was on the road last week. The combination has been changed."

Lila laughed shrilly and called him a dumb chum again; Searcy said, "You'll have to think of something better than that!"

Isles said flatly, "Then why don't you call that girl you met who works in our office? The one you got tight, the one who let slip that I had access to the vault? She'll tell you the vault has been worked on!"

A flicker of indecision crossed Mel's face. Lila said, "You're not going to fall for anything like that, are you, Mel? If the combination was changed, he'll have the new one. Beat it out of him!"

Isles heard Searcy's breath thicken. He was half out of the chair, his hand stabbing for Searcy's gun, when the first blow struck. Searcy's gun avoided his clutching fingers by a fraction of an inch, slammed into the side of his head. Isles plunged to the carpet, suddenly sick, weak, blood seeping from his temple where Searcy's gun had struck.

Searcy stood over him. "I'll give you ten seconds, Isles, to start rattling out a vault combination—and it had better be right!"

Isles shook his head numbly, wishing the mist would go away. Searcy would beat him senseless in an attempt to make him talk. Then Searcy would search him minutely; that would be routine with Searcy—and that combination was still in his wallet. . .

Isles rolled on his back. Searcy stood over him, poised, taking no chances. Lila Maney had risen, stood near the door.

"Wait." Isles's voice was thick. "I'll tell you. But give me a second. . . My head. . ."

His hands were busy beneath him, his fingertips working frantically, easing the wallet from his hip pocket as he lay looking up at Searcy as if trying to form words through the daze that clutched him.

The wallet came free; his fingers touched the paper on which the combination was written. He gathered himself; he would have only one chance. He wondered how hard it was to swallow a piece of paper.

"All right," Searcy said harshly. "Give, Isles!"

Isles moved then. He hurled his body up, over. If he could only bury his face against the carpet until he'd swallowed that combination!

He heard Lila Maney's shrill scream. "He's putting something in his mouth, Mel!"

Then she kicked him with her sharp high heel in the teeth; the blow stopped his hand that held the combination only inches from his mouth. He tried to fight the smothering fire that seared his brain. It seemed that he heard somebody raining blows on bone, and knew it

was Searcy striking him with the gun. He was powerless to move. His hand lay limp on the carpet, his brain smothering in a black, throbbing pain, and the combination was like a white beacon fluttering from his limp fingers. . .

At first, Jonathan Isles was aware of the flat taste in his mouth. He opened his eyes and sunlight beat into them. He lay a moment, dizzy, his hands spread on the wet earth. Then, groggy, he got to his feet.

It was still day. No, it was a new day, with the light in his eyes coming from the red rim of sun still hanging low in the east. Fog clutched the earth in slimy fingers. Mel Searcy had done the job up brown. Isles knew that he had been lying here in this field all night.

He looked about at the thick, dense grass, damp with beads of dew, the gaunt pines that stood blackly against the new dawn, the yellow street lights that winked off while he was looking at them.

He was in that huge tract of vacant land not a quarter of a mile from his own house. Once the tract had been a proposed new subdivision; but it had never got beyond the paper stage.

Then he noticed that his ring was gone, his fountain pen, a piece torn from his coat that included the label. His hand stabbed; yes, his wallet was gone too. Only a few loose bills were in one side pocket.

He staggered out of the field, toward the sidewalk. His teeth went on edge as he thought of the beating that Searcy had given him. That was a score to settle! Isles' head and face were as sore as a dog with an advanced case of mange. He guessed it looked about as pleasant, too.

He reached the sidewalk. There was one thing he could do. Go home, clean up, and get the police on Searcy's trail. Even if they laughed at his story at first, they'd have to check the angle of Searcy. And they'd sweat the truth out of him. Searcy was his one hope.

A paper boy came down the street, his bag heavy. He was headed, Isle guessed, for a route that included the section of houses on beyond this vacant tract.

The boy saw him, stopped. "Gee, mister, you sure must have pitched some bender!"

Isles shook his head at the boy like a wounded grizzly. The boy laughed and said, "Was you snoozin' while the excitement was goin' on back up the street?"

"Excitement?"

"Yeah, late last night. A car burned, not a quarter of a mile from here."

Flesh crawled along Isles' back. He licked his lips. "Do you have an extra copy of the paper, son? I guess it'll be in the paper, won't it?"

It was all there. . . .

Isles stood on the sidewalk and read the black print in the chill early morning while the city slept and the paper boy went whistling on down the street.

A quarter of a million dollars in diamonds was missing from the Elite vault. The watchman had not seen the man distinctly until the man had unexpectedly hit him, knocking the watchman unconscious, but the watchman was sure the man in the dim light had been Jonathan Isles. In getting away, the story continued, Isles had torn his coat, leaving a piece with the label dangling unnoticed on a window catch in his hurry to get away.

A passerby had seen a black coupé leaving the alley behind the Elite building, the same make and model car that Isles drove. Subsequently, Haynes, the general manager of Elite, had stated flatly that it must have been Isles. He had the combination to the vault, and with the other evidence added. . . .

Then Isles saw the picture of a flame-scarred coupe on the second page as he turned to finish the story. The rest of the column of print leaped in his gaze:

The story of the trusted employee who turned bandit after fifteen years hard, honest service, had a most ironic end. Less than an hour after the robbery, at about midnight, Jonathan Isles was shot to death in his car, two blocks from his own home. The car was then drenched with gasoline and set afire. By the time firemen arrived and succeeded in controlling the giant funeral pyre, the car and its occupant were reduced to charred remains. Isles was identified by a ring he wore, the remains of his wallet, and by his daughter who saw his charred body at the city morgue an hour later, and who said the body must be that of her father, despite its almost unrecognizable condition.

It is believed that Isles had an accomplice who murdered him and set the blazing inferno after Isles apparently had tried to refrain from splitting the quarter-million diamond loot. Thus far, the diamonds have not been recovered, and after extensive questioning, police as yet have not ascertained who Isle's accomplice might have been.

Fog fingers clutched his ankles. He crushed the newspaper in his hand, his mouth working. He'd just read the account of his own death, but he knew every detail of last night; he couldn't have known those details better if he had been there the whole time. . . .

Mel Searcy had taken the combination, Isles' car keys, ring, fountain pen, the piece of his coat. Searcy had dummed Isles' senseless form, carried out the robbery. Then Searcy had gone toward Isles' house, intending, Isles was certain, to pick up Fran, hold her, in case that Isles got any idea about going to the police with the truth.

But there had been someone else! Someone

who had murdered Searcy, leaving the world to think that Jonathan Isles was dead, and taken a quarter of a million dollars in diamonds. Someone who had smashed Isles' last chance—for Mel Searcy, dead, could never clear Isles of the robbery charge.

Isles needed time to think. While the day was still young, he used the few loose bills in his pocket to rent a room in a fourth-rate hotel, where no questions were asked.

* * *

Up in that narrow, dingy room, he was sick, deep down in his soul. He considered going to Lila Maney, Searcy's girl friend? If he could find her, make her tell the police the truth. But he knew the police would never take her word. Hadn't the watchman almost positively identified Isles? Wasn't the label from his coat there? Did he think they were fools, paying a cheap tramp like Lila Maney to attempt a crazy alibi? He could almost hear their hard laughter. . . .

He walked the floor, wondering, thinking. He thought of Bill Conlan, maybe in an unmarked grave somewhere on a Pacific island, of Fran, of the woman who had given him Fran, and of the promises he had made over her grave. . . .

He looked in the wavy mirror and searched the face of the dead man who stared back at him. He was fighting mad, madder than he had ever been in his life. But what could he fight? What could he do, except return and go to prison for stealing diamonds he'd never had his hands on?

Get Fran! Then get the hell away from here, to a city where you can start over under another name. But something deeper, a steady current that ran strong through his soul, held Isles from that. So he hesitated, wondering, and three days passed.

The third day, he sneaked down, bought a paper, went back to his room. And then he knew that the decision was made for him, that he had to go back and live again, no matter what it cost him. They had discovered his accomplice, the person who had murdered him.

It was Fran, his own daughter.

CHAPTER THREE

Die Twice!

THE story in the paper was stark and simple: On the night of the murder, a woman who lived in the neighborhood had seen a black coupé parked with its lights off. As she watched from her porch, where she'd gone to put out bottles for the milkman before retiring, she had seen Frances Isles—or

someone who looked very much like her—jump from the coupé and hurry toward the Isles house. Later, she was awakened by the arrival of fire engines, seeing the now blazing coupé from her window. She had gone to the police with her story, which they had kept from the press until their investigation progressed.

The police had gone to the Isles house and questioned Frances. She denied everything, but under questioning admitted that she had been seen several times in places patronized by known crooks. Homicide Lieutenant, Willard Barker, in charge of the case, had instituted a routine search of the house. In the dining room, a lone diamond had been found in the buffet.

In his statement, which the paper quoted, Barker had said. "Officials of Elite Jewelry identify the diamond as one stolen from their vault by Jonathan Isles. It is apparent that the diamonds were hidden for a time in the buffet. Upon their removal, this diamond we found evidently dropped from the bag, unnoticed. We have failed to unearth the rest of the jewels, and Frances Isles denies knowledge of them.

"We believe that Frances Isles, criminally inclined, was at least an accomplice, if indeed she was not the mind behind the robbery, and killing. She drew her father into the affair, shooting him when he later realized what he was doing and attempted to back out. We have enough to start with, and we expect to get evidence to indict Frances Isles for first degree murder!"

Isles crushed the paper in his hand, his white, stubble-covered face drawn. It would cost him twenty years, but he'd get Fran out of this! He arose, reached for his coat. He heard the click of the latch, jerked around as the door slammed back and Leroy Traxler, flanked by three hoods, stepped into the room.

"Going out, Isles?"

"I'd intended to," Isles admitted, "how did you find . . ."

"We got ways," Traxler said, advancing into the room. "I knew a guy once named Mel Searcy, Isles. I saw that body in the morgue, had a hunch it wasn't you. Nothing concrete, but you see, I got wind from a certain party that Searcy was planning a fast robbery. When the car burned and all, I had a feeling you'd turned the tables. You quiet guys sometimes have a habit of doing that. So acting on my hunch, I checked the flea-bags until I got to this one and had a twenty-dollar talk with the clerk. And here I am."

One of the hoods had closed the door. The key was in the lock. The hood smiled thinly, turned the key and said, "Yeah, here we are!"

Isles backed until he was against the wall. "What do you want, Traxler?"

"That's what the lawyers would call an irrelevant question, Isles. The police think your kid killed you, when actually she killed Mel Searcy. But that don't matter. What does matter is a quarter of a million in diamonds. You and your kid pulled a fast one, killed Searcy, and got away with the jewels. Where's the ice, Isles?"

"I don't know."

Without a word or gesture, the squat hood who breathed as if he had adenoids, stepped in close. He was fast; the sap in his hand knocked Isles to the floor.

Senses spinning, Isles heard Traxler say, "When you've got enough, Isles, say the word. I might even give you a couple grand to get away on."

The two thin hoods grabbed Isles' arms, hauled him up. The squat one bored in. Isles kicked, hard and high. The squat hood doubled, gaping; Isles thought bleakly that he had given the man kidney trouble for life, but it was no satisfaction. The two hoods holding him jerked his arms to the breaking point and the heavy man straightened with a bellow, flung himself at Isles, flailing with the sap.

Shout? Better save his breath, his strength. No one would pay too much attention in this

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hotel. Isles had picked his hiding place too well.

Time lost its meaning. It was one long, mad moment with fire and roiling blackness chasing across his brain. Twice he dimly heard Traxler say, "Be a good guy, Isles. Don't tire my lads out." Isles told him to go to hell once; he didn't have the strength for it the next time.

Then it was over, and he was opening his eyes. He'd been unconscious, but for how long he didn't know. The bright threads of light had gone from the cracked, green blinds. Night. Maybe they would go on, until tomorrow, the next day.

Lids cracked, he looked at them. Traxler sitting on the bed, smoking. The squat hood leaning against the wall; one of the thin hoods was standing near the window, the other occupying the only rickety chair in the room.

Isles set his teeth against the pain. Somebody said, "He's coming out of it."

The thin hood moved from the window, a gun in his hand. He nuzzled Isles with his toe. Isles lay like a wet sack, lids lowered; then his hands moved like a piston. His fingers closed about the hood's ankle. He jerked, hard. The hood yelped, flung out his hands to catch his fall, and his gun slipped from his fingers.

The room exploded. Traxler bit a curse at the careless hood, and Isles was after the fallen gun like an eel. If French mud had been on the floor of that room, Isles easily could have imagined himself twenty-seven years younger, fighting another fight for basic principles which weren't a whole lot different from those involved right now.

He was four feet from the gun when the first shot gouged splinters from the floor beside his cheek.

He heard Traxler screaming orders, the room bucking with gunfire. Then his fingers were on the gun; he was rolling toward the corner, snarling, fighting back.

Somebody shot out the light and the silence was earsplitting in its suddenness. In the midst of it, feet pounded in the corridor, voices rose outside the room.

Isles let the window shade fly up, dropped quickly; three shots whined over his head.

He inched up again. A shadow loomed before him, and Isles pulled the trigger. The shadow screamed; Isles tumbled out the window.

Their shots followed him down the rusty fire escape, dogging his heels like hornets whining on the steel steps. Then he dropped to the alley, and darkness swallowed him.

The twin globes of a precinct station house glowed in the murky night like twin sentinels. Tired, dirty, his face bruised, his breath still short, Isles crossed the street.

He stood for a moment before the steps

leading up to the twin doors of the precinct station. Twenty years in prison—a trade to keep Fran from seeing the little green door that led to doom.

Inside the station, Isles pulled the gun he'd taken from Traxler's hood, and the desk sergeant looked as if he didn't know whether to duck or start shooting.

Isles handed the gun across to the cop. "I'm Jonathan Isles. You'd better get Lieutenant Willard Barker down from headquarters. He's in charge of my case—he arrested my daughter for murdering me, you know."

The sergeant's jaw dropped. He seemed about to say, "Nuts—you think I believe in gremlins?" Instead, he decided to act on this gaunt, crazy apparition who stood before him and ask questions later. In a flurry of pompous motions, he seized Isles by the wrists.

"Clancy! Hallorhan!"

A door down the corridor popped open. Two coatless cops came on the run. John Isles' laugh was tinged with bitterness, for each cop took an arm as if they were afraid he'd try to get away.

Lieutenant Willard Barker was a tall, rangy man with flat features, as if his expressionless face had been painted on a dish. Little tufts of sand-colored hair grew out of his ears, and he had a habit of scratching them now and then. He sat on the edge of a desk in a back room of the precinct station. Isles was in a chair. Several cops hovered like shadows.

Barker didn't move until Isles had finished speaking, telling Barker what he had to say. Then Barker said, "We'll go down to headquarters. Clancy, you come along."

Barker's black car was parked at the curb out front. Isles was pushed in, between Clancy and Barker. Barker drove.

Isles breathed in the silence as Barker tooled the car away from the curb. He looked from Clancy to the flat face of Barker in the dash-light.

"Lieutenant, I can see my daughter?"

Barker didn't speak.

Isles licked his lips. "You'll let my kid go?" His throat was tight. Something was wrong. It was in the silence, the way Barker held his eyes straight ahead. "You—You'll let Fran go?" Isles repeated.

Barker spoke finally. "We can't let your kid go. She's in this thing as deep as you are! Hell, that stuff I gave out to the papers about your kid murdering you was just a plant. I knew it would make you crawl out of your hole!

"It was a pretty slick scheme you and your kid cooked up, Isles," Barker's flat voice continued, "if a few things hadn't gone haywire. A scheme to pull the perfect robbery, get away clean with a quarter million in diamonds by fading right out of life. We're going to

hold your daughter as your accomplice. And you, Isles—you're the guy we're going to stick with the first degree murder rap, for the murder of the man you killed and burned in your car, to make the world think you were dead!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Crawl Back in Your Coffin

ISLES' heart dropped in the bottom of his stomach and lay there. All of it had been for nothing—for worse than nothing!

His gaze swept from Barker to Clancy. Clancy laughed in his face. And then Isles gathered himself, thinking: I haven't got one damn thing to lose!

Barker shouted a curse as Isles' foot came smashing down, pinning Barker's foot and the accelerator beneath it to the floor. The car leaped ahead. Isles' fingers clutched the wheel, twisting it sharply.

Clancy cuffed at him. Barker took one hand off the wheel to try for his gun. In the cramped front seat, neither maneuver worked.

They were on a dim, little-used street. Like a rocket, the car swayed, shot drunkenly across the street. A store front rushed up into the headlights, and Barker forgot his gun, trying to get the wheel away from Isles. They missed the store front by inches. A tire exploded as the front wheel hit the curb. Then the night was filled with rending noise and concussion as the car struck the lamp post.

Glass showering, the car rebounded, slewing around in the street. The hollow iron post buckled and came toppling down.

Isles clung desperately to his senses. Barker was slumped over the wheel, out cold. Isles took the stunned Clancy's neck in his hands and beat Clancy's head against the twisted door post. Clancy went limp, and Isles tore his way out of the mangled car.

The few passing cars were stopping. A crowd was gathering, from nowhere, it seemed. Isles swept through the gathering people, plunged into the mouth of a black, beckoning alley. Somebody was shouting behind him; then the voice faded. Isles and the black night were close companions.

Again he was running. To what? One thing was sure; if this thing was cracked, it was up to John Isles to do it, and do it alone.

He wondered where to start. Then he remembered one statement that Traxler had made when he and his three hoods had burst into the dingy hotel room: "I knew a guy named Mel Searcy once, Isles . . . I got wind that Searcy was planning a fast robbery. . . ."

Isles wondered who had told Traxler that Searcy was planning a robbery. If he could make Traxler tell where he'd got that infor-

mation, maybe Isles would have himself a murderer.

Night was deep, the moon riding dismally behind leaden clouds. Here in the alley behind Leroy Traxler's Club Thirteen, traffic out on the street was a subdued hum. From inside the club, Isles heard faint music.

He inched the window further. He had to crack the glass with a handkerchief-wrapped stone, reach through and throw the catch. He pushed himself into the corridor. There was little light, but he had a hunch he'd find Traxler's office back in this part of the building.

Two doors turned off the corridor; behind the glass panel of one of them a faint light glowed, the panel itself marked "Private."

Isles touched the knob. It turned silently. He let the door swing back, stepped inside the room, on the thick pile of carpet.

He was in an elaborate office, furnished in big, square stuff—a desk, a few leather chairs, a liquor cabinet. It was deserted, save for the girl who stood facing the farther wall. She'd swung a picture back, opened a wall safe.

She heard the click of the closing door, whirled. Isles saw the tight green dress, the bleached hair, icy green eyes, a thin, flaring nose. In her hand was a gun, a .45 automatic, Isles guessed. She pointed the gun at him.

Isles said, "Lila Maney, Mel Searcy's girl!" "Well, damn me—the dead man! Isles!" Her voice was shaky. "Have a chair, chum!"

He remained standing. The sight of him had jarred her, but the gun in her hand was steady. "You're looking for the diamonds," he stated, glancing toward Traxler's safe.

Her scarlet mouth tightened in anger. "I thought maybe you might have the jewels already," Isles said. "Once or twice I thought you might have killed your boy friend, Mel Searcy, and taken the diamonds."

"Talk with sense!" "Then what did happen after you and Searcy picked me up here in the Club Thirteen bar three days ago?"

She shrugged. "I left Mel after he carried you out the back way," she said. "I was to meet him later, the next day across the state line. I wasn't takin' the chance of being along when he dumped you and pulled the robbery of the Elite Jewelry vault."

"He was making the cake for you to eat." Her eyes were like drops of frozen sea water. "Something like that. But it seems the jewels got lost."

"Sure," he croaked a laugh. "A quarter of a million dollars just floating around somewhere with everybody after it. Some pretty awful things can happen for big money."

He looked at the gun. "What are you going to do?"

"Make you tell me where the diamonds are, Isles. I think we've all been a bunch of

suckers. I think you know. There's every chance in the world that you'd have them, because I happen to know that everyone else concerned is hunting for them!"

He looked at her obliquely. "Maybe you're right, Lila," he said softly.

She let out her breath, saying more to herself than to him: "Why not? Hell, Mel Searcy didn't *look* like a crook, either! Maybe you're slicker than Mel and me and everybody else put together! Damn you, Isles, you've got the diamonds!"

He forced a soft laugh.

She swayed closer, a smile consciously softening her lips. "Look, John, you and I ought to be friends. We could make a great team."

"Maybe." He didn't look impressed. "But you don't think I'd talk business while you stand and hold a gun on me, do you? Why don't you put the gun on the desk?" He took an easy step toward her. "The diamonds—"

She backed, the smile still pasted on her mouth. "I like you, John,—but right where you were standing. We'll be good pals—after you tell me where the diamonds are. Considering what you've said, you're going to produce."

Then without warning the door was opened and the voice of Joe, the fat barkeep, said, "Boss, a guy out front wants to sign a check."

Joe saw then that Traxler, his boss, wasn't in the room. He saw Lila Maney whirling toward the door. And he saw the spare, battered, graying man lunge at Lila, grabbing at the gun in her hand.

Joe let out a squawk. He turned and thundered down the corridor like a berserk elephant.

Isles muttered a curse. Lila Maney clung to the gun, clawing like a cat with her free hand. Isles couldn't duck all her blows.

He twisted hard; she tripped—and held to the gun, screaming in shrill terror, clutching the automatic in the belief that her life depended on it. Then quite suddenly she released the weapon. Isles staggered. He heard Lila Maney sob in a voice very different from that which had formed curses. "He—he was trying to kill me."

A cop in uniform stood in the door; behind the cop hovered the fat face of Joe, the barkeep. The cop held a gun. "Drop it!"

Isles let the gun sag, and the cop came down off his toes and walked into the room. He picked up the automatic that Isles had taken from Lila Maney. She began to whimper of how Isles had been about to blow her brains out.

"Save it," the cop said. "We'll all go to headquarters and straighten this thing out." He looked at Isles, and chuckled. He said to the bartender who had ventured in the room, "Thanks for the tip-off, Joe. Every cop on the

force has been briefed plenty on Isles. They got a call out on him that ain't been matched since Pretty Boy Floyd. I'll get out of harness for this!"

Isles was grim. "I hope you enjoy it. . ."

CHAPTER FIVE

Dead Men Sometimes Talk

ISLES raised his head from his hands, looking up from the hard cot in the cell as the shadow fell across him. Lieutenant Barker stood outside the cell, gripping the bars. A strip of white bandage showed beneath Barker's hat.

"Ready to talk, Isles?"

The gaunt, grey man said nothing.

"It's been quite a night," Barker said. "The bull-pen, here, has been doing a booming business, right along with the rest of the department. We got Lila Maney canned temporarily on a disturbing the peace charge. We got Leroy Traxler and two of his hoods locked up, howling for lawyers, for that shooting fracas you pulled off in the flea-bag. You hurt one of the hoods pretty bad, Isles. He's dying with a bullet in his stomach."

"They were trying to kill me," Isles said.

"Yeah." Barker pushed his hat back.

"You ready to talk? No? Well, I just ambled back to tell you the charge is tight as hell now, Isles. We found the gun, the gun that murdered Mel Searcy. Just got the report from ballistics. It was the gun the beat-cop took from you, Isles, in Traxler's office, the .45 automatic that you were trying to shoot Lila Maney with."

Isles rose from the cot, trembling.

"Listen Barker," he said. "You hate me, think I'm a killer of the worst kind. I know that, but you've got to give me a break! Get us all together in a back room—me and Lila Maney and Leroy Traxler and his two hoods. Give me a chance, Barker!"

"Why?" Barker demanded. "What for?"

"Because I'm innocent. Because you've got to give me every chance a man deserves, even a killer. Because, damn it, this is United States air you're breathing, Barker!"

Barker gripped the bars, knuckles white, looking hard at Isles. Finally Barker spoke softly, "There'll be half a dozen guns on you every second, Isles. I'll give you that chance you're talking about—and I just hope you even look like you're going to make a break!"

Isles was ushered into the smoky, windowless room by Barker and three cops, all with drawn guns. Two other cops were already there in the room with Lila Maney, Leroy Traxler, Leroy's two lean hoods; the squat, wicked boy, Isles had put him out of commission back in the hotel.

Traxler bounded out of a wooden chair as

Isles, Barker and the three cops entered. "My lawyer here yet, Barker?"

Barker ignored him. Lila Maney stopped her pacing as Barker closed the door, shutting them all here together. "I ain't done anything," she whined.

"I wouldn't be sure of that," Isles said.

A hush fell in the room. Lila Maney whitened a little.

"You're not goin' anywhere, Lila," Isles said. "Because the gun I took from you in Traxler's office killed Mel Searcy!"

"You're crazy," she shrieked. "That wasn't my gun—it was *yours!* The gun you were trying to murder me with!"

Isles laughed softly. "It won't hold water, Lila. You might as well tell the truth. Barker will see that it couldn't have been my gun."

"How will I see?" Barker said calmly.

"You'll see that it's Lila's gun, not mine, that her story of me trying to kill her is all wet," Isles said, "when you do one little thing, Barker—check the time element!"

He turned to Lila Maney. "Barker knows the exact time I crashed his car and got away from him, Lila. He also knows the minute—it's on the report—that the beat-cop broke into Traxler's office and picked you and me up, along with the gun that murdered Mel Searcy. And the time will show that I had to hurry, even going directly, to reach Traxler's club at the time I did. I had no time to detour and pick up a hide-out gun. And I certainly had no gun at the time I got away from Barker—which means that I had no gun when I entered Traxler's Club Thirteen. There were only two of us, Lila—you and me. It's your gun!"

It was a thin bluff, Isles knew.

That finished the trick. Lila Maney backed against the wall, her eyes frantic, seeking escape; there was none, only hard, cold faces surrounding her, the hot light overhead. She wilted. "All right! I was lying! But the gun still wasn't mine! It was—"

"—Leroy Traxler's," Isles finished for her. "Sure, and you'll talk, Lila. You and Searcy

were pals of Traxler. Searcy and Traxler planned the robbery. Searcy tried to cross him, and Traxler killed him.

"Traxler told you, Lila, that there'd been a slip, that somebody else had got the diamonds. You went in his office to see if you could find the diamonds, found the gun in his safe, knew it was the murder gun. You could have blackmailed Traxler's teeth out with it. He had hung onto it in case it became expedient for the gun to be found in my or Fran's things."

"All right, wise guy," Traxler said, on his feet. "But how do you know she got the gun from my safe? Can you prove it?"

"No," Isles admitted, "I can't prove it—but I can come close enough to cause Lila to talk plenty. Her confession will clear it all up."

"I knew Lila had not had the gun when she entered your office. She had no handbag, and she never could have hidden a big .45 in that tight green dress! She stopped out front in the bar and had a few drinks, making herself look casual; then she slipped back to your office—and she couldn't have been lugging that gun around in her hand all that time! So I knew she must have come in possession of the gun after she entered your office."

TRAXLER'S two hoods didn't move. Traxler bolted for the door. He moved about two yards before gun barrels in the hands of four cops beat him to the floor.

It was very quiet then, and Barker cleared his throat. Lila Maney sagged in a chair, whimpering, begging to make a deal.

Barker ordered the room cleared. Then there was no one in the room but Barker and Isles, and Barker said awkwardly, "Smart." Then he added: "But the diamonds, Isles?"

"I don't know," Isles admitted, his voice suddenly tired. "But maybe Fran can tell you something. After all, you found one of the diamonds in the dining buffet, didn't you?"

"We'll see about that," Barker said. He stuck his head out the door, shouted an order.

(Please turn to page 96)



FOR QUICK RELIEF FROM

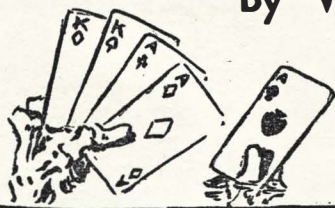
TIRED, ACHY MUSCLES

Sprains • Strains • Bruises • Stiff Joints

What you *NEED* is
SLOAN'S LINIMENT

RED SKY IN

By WILLIAM R. COX



It was curtains for Tom Kincaid's Coronet Pictures—and for that ex-gambler king as well—unless he could dodge the crimson lens of Death's own camera. . . . Which was just waiting for Ronnie Vesper's whispered: "Ready . . . Action . . . Murder!" to grind out destruction and sudden death!



CHAPTER ONE

Meat for the Killers

TOM KINCAID put the telephone in its cradle and came across the living room of Roxanne Queen's house in the Hollywood Hills. His tanned features were composed, his hands steady, going through his

slightly grizzled, close-cropped hair. He did not look like an ex-gambler-king, he did not even look like the head of Coronet Pictures, a producing company, and least of all did he look like the beloved of a glamorous motion picture star.

HOLLYWOOD ● ● ●

He said, "That was Jeff Clarke. There are strangers in town."

Roxanne Queen was thirty, but she looked twenty-two. Her blonde hair needed very little touching-up, her figure inspired the admiring whistles of millions of service men who had pinned her on walls all over the world. Her wide mouth had a humorous quirk and from her emanated more than beauty skin-deep; a goodness and generosity and calmness that made her the great actress she had become. She said, "Strangers in town? Is that a gangster expression? Sounds like an old Cagney picture."

Matt Durkin, small, dapper to the point of foppishness and Tom's companion for

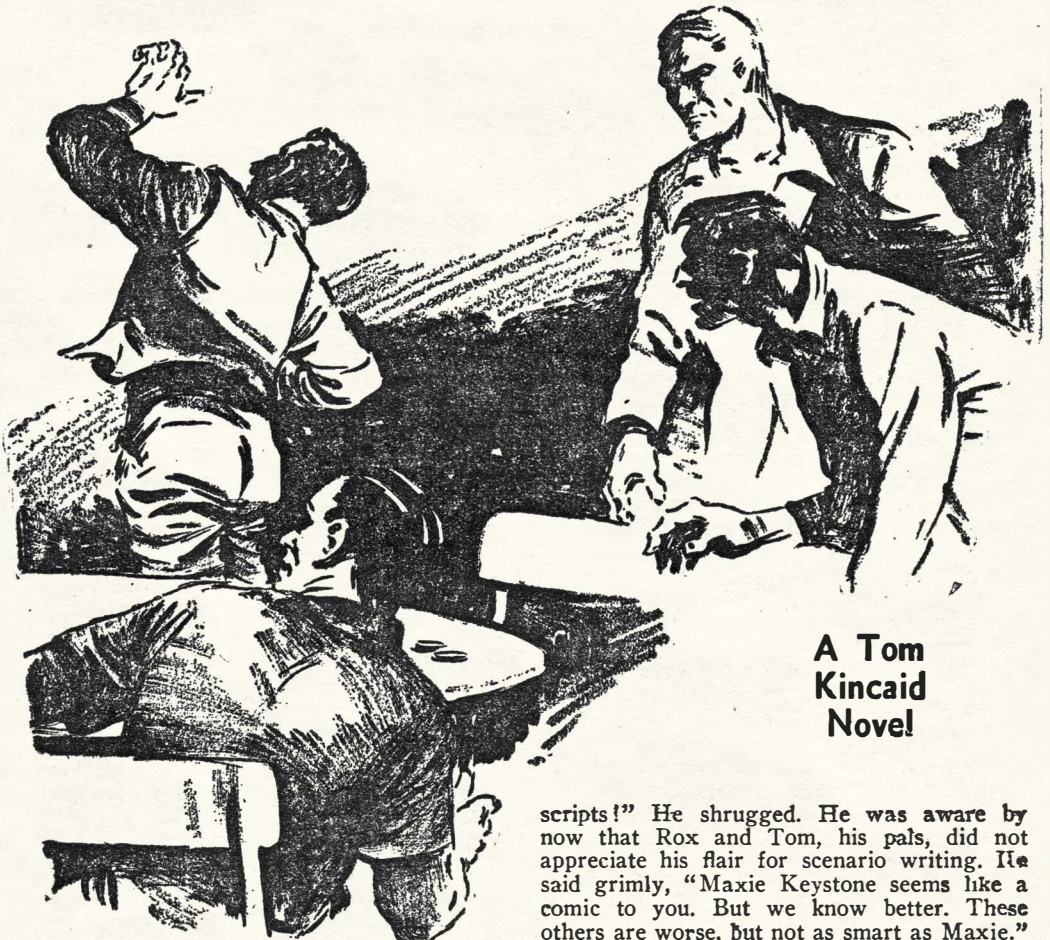
twenty years up and down the nation, said shortly, "I been expecting it. Maxie Keystone can't ruin us any other way, so he is bringing in the mobs."

Tom said slowly, "Jeff reports that Pig Lurton, Dan Deal and Mordecai all slipped into Los Angeles County at various points. Fugitives from Murder Incorporated. But the L.A. cops have nothing on them."

Matt nodded. "Lurton's a big gunsel with a mob at his call. Deal's a loner, the most dangerous of 'em. Mordecai—there's a character. Knife specialist."

Roxanne said, "Are you kidding me or writing one of those scenarios of yours?"

Matt said, "If I couldn't write better



He came lunging across the room as Matt swung one of his guns around. . . .

A Tom Kincaid Novel

scripts!" He shrugged. He was aware by now that Rox and Tom, his pals, did not appreciate his flair for scenario writing. He said grimly, "Maxie Keystone seems like a comic to you. But we know better. These others are worse, but not as smart as Maxie."

Tom Kincaid poured himself a short bourbon. He said, "Darling, pictures are screwy.

Hollywood is full of characters. Many strange things happen here. But believe me, darling, there are stranger things in the underworld than Hollywood dreams of."

"You think Murder Incorporated was a newspaper joke?" Matt asked.

Roxanne said, "Men committed to murder as a profession? I suppose there are such men. But I can't really believe in them. I know Maxie Keystone. He seems tough, but rather funny in spots. Ronnie Vesper is a dangerous swish—but you cannot make me believe either Ronnie or Jack Carey would go in for wholesale, cold-blooded murder. I know they have done it and probably will try it again—but down deep I just can't believe it." She laughed disarmingly at them. "Now I've been perfectly inconsistent, go ahead and call me a damned fool!"

"I just call you sweetheart," grinned Tom. He gazed fondly on the blonde woman who had made him a Hollywood figure, a respected craftsman in the cinema world. "Matt and I'll take care of Keystone. You get up in that part for Languid Lady."

She said, "You haven't time to hunt down gangsters—and besides you may get hurt. And besides, I just won't believe in any Pig Lurtens. There's work to do."

She went off to her bedroom, next to Mrs. Rafferty's bedroom. Tom and Matt were staying in the house for the present, while Tom's own ranch was being built in the Valley, where he preferred to live among the cowboy stars and away from the chi-chi people of the picture colony. Matt went to their own room a moment later and Tom went out to the porch which commanded a view of the mountainside high above town.

It had been a hot day, but the evening was cool and his drink snuggled cool in his hand. He lit a cigarette and put his feet up and rested his head back upon the slope of a chaise longue, a comfortable job on rubber wheels.

Tom thought about his past, of the far flung gambling empire which he and Matt had owned, the string of square gambling houses across the nation. He had been a national figure then, just past thirty.

George Grey, an ex-banker turned master crook, smashed that dream for Tom Kincaid. It took years for him to catch Grey and eliminate him from the scene. But he had won, in the end.

Meantime Roxanne had him in the picture business. It had not been difficult for Tom, a top gambler, to meet the movie moguls on their own ground and gain their respect. With some money won gambling with crooks and Roxanne's considerable fortune, the three of them had formed Coronet Pictures. They were now making films and releasing through

United Artists and doing very well. Tom had skipped the lower rungs of the Hollywood ladder and begun as a producer, had gathered around him sensitive, clever men and women and Roxanne had proved the dramatic sensation of the year.

But there had always been a flaw. There was Ronald Vesper, multimillionaire, his secretary, Jack Carey and his male star, Sam Valenti. And there was Vesper's associate, Maxie Keystone. They wanted Roxanne, first, to co-star with Valenti. Then they wanted Coronet Pictures out of the way to make room for Vesper Film, Inc.

Then they wanted the lives of the enemy who had beaten them, flouted them, made better pictures, put them in the red. Tom knew it, sitting on the cool verandah, sipping his modest drink. Maxie Keystone, once of Brooklyn, was a cold-blooded, somewhat merry murderer. He fancied himself as a gambler, also, and he was out to get Kincaid. And whoever was with Kincaid.

Vesper had tried clever stunts, and had failed. Now Jeff Clarke of the L.A. police reported the mobsters at hand. Maxie had taken over from Vesper. There was a new Supreme Command. Guns would flash and Hollywood streets would run with blood before this was over, if Tom did not move first.

HE KNEW Maxie. He knew the way his gang moved when it was organized with money like Vesper's behind it. A quick kill, a getaway. Then another kill. They could pick off Matt, Tom—Roxanne. . . . Yes, they could do it. One at a time, off-hand, brutal murders, with the police a jump behind as money helped the killers escape. And if Maxie had prevailed and made up his mind to strike. . . .

There was a soft whisper of sound, like a bee going by, but the screens of the verandah prevented it from being a bee. There was a thocking sound, and a piece of Roxanne's sturdy house splintered.

Tom rolled off the chaise longue onto the floor. His glass crashed on the tile and a piece of the ice went down his neck, but he lay very still. Instantly he knew that whoever had fired at him was either shooting from the other peak in the hills which commanded Roxanne's house, or was close, using a silencer on a fairly high-powered weapon.

He began wriggling toward the French windows. There were no lights behind him—he had not been that foolish after Jeff Clarke's warning. He kept a rifle and a favorite .38 revolver handy in the living room these days. He wormed his way along, seeking the deepest shadows.

A footstep crunched on the gravelled drive-

way behind the house. He moved faster, sweating, and was almost to the cabinet that held his revolver. He heard a voice say hoarsely, "There he is!"

He flung himself aside, behind a divan. He did not call out, for fear of bringing Roxanne or Matt unarmed and half asleep into the line of fire. He picked up a footstool and shielded it across the room, so that it crashed against a small table.

Gunfire ensued immediately and he jumped again for the cabinet, grabbed his .38 and ran to where the flash of a weapon showed a man outside the house. He aimed carefully, fired, then he knew he had missed. He was a marksman, he never took his eye from his target, but the assailant had gone down before Tom had put a bullet in him.

He went forward, toward the man huddled on the walk. Then he saw a small figure, two guns presented, against the house.

He dropped his .38 to his side and said, "Was there only one, Matt? Are you sure?"

Matt Durkin wore purple pajama tops with shorts below. He balanced the two guns and said, "This sport was easing in to make the kill. I heard the bullet hit from the rifle. If there's another of them, he's over on the far hill."

Tom dragged the dead man to the front of the house, then turned on a small light. He saw Mrs. Rafferty, in a wrapper like a sheet and curlers, he saw Rozanne, her face white, but calm. He looked at the scarred, ugly features of the would-be killer and said quietly, "One-eye Morgan, employed by Pig Lurton. We'll have to move, kids. They've got the front of the house pegged."

Matt said, "Uh-huh. I was writin' on my new scenario, Hearts Is Trumps, when I hear this rifle bullet. I grab my roscoes and slide out, figurin' it might be a deal like that, not knowin' whether they got Tom by his cigarette butt or not. I ketch this guy with his pants at half mast, but he's just a punk. They will send more like him and we are too far from town."

Roxanne said, "I see what you mean. . . . It does happen here, doesn't it?"

Mrs. Rafferty said, "I quit! I'm leavin' right now!"

"Yes," Tom nodded. "Pack up. We're all leaving now."

"There's no place to go!" Roxanne said. "The hotels are jammed. Nothing's for rent."

Tom said, "You forget the studio I rented. It's right on Sunset, the rooms are large and comfortable. All we need is a few beds and things."

Roxanne said, "Tom, we can't live like that!"

He said, "Not for long, darling. But if you stay here you can't live at all!"

"Uh-huh," said Matt. "I'll get my papers, and let's go. My scenario'll have to wait, dammit."

"For what?" asked Roxanne. "Murder?"

Matt looked at her and grinned thinly. "You never saw us go to work, did you, darlin'? Old Tom's in there collectin' his guns. This, baby, is it!"

THE studio was an old, abandoned one which had belonged to the early Hollywood days, and Tom had refurbished it with money made from their first pictures. Now it was going along full blast. It was nothing to make M-G-M shake in L. B. Mayer's boots, unless the trend toward independent companies making careful, intelligent films with great appeal were to fill that function, but to Coronet Pictures it represented a lot of money.

Roxanne noticed the new employees, chiefly discharged Marines, coming up from San Diego footloose and job-hungry. They wore dungarees and did odd jobs, but mostly they were alert and they prowled. The picture went along swimmingly for a week and Roxanne was getting used to dwelling in her done-over dressing room despite Mrs. Rafferty's complaints and there were plenty of things to think about.

She was playing opposite Stanley Bly in

Kidneys Must Remove Excess Acids

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If you have an excess of acids in your blood, your 15 miles of kidney tubes may be overworked. These tiny filters and tubes are working day and night to help Nature rid your system of excess acids and poisonous waste.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, head-

aches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Kidneys may need help the same as bowels, so ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills.

Languid Lady, and that ugly-handsome, bored-fieri contradiction in actors was apt to steal any scene. Jason Hogue was directing and he had a girl in the show, as he always did, and was pitching for her. She was a sharp little character named Eva Waycross, and of course everyone called her Lil Eva. She was cute and only nineteen.

Roxanne's stand-in, a girl named Molly Dowling, lounged into the dressing room and said, "Darling, can I borrow your car?"

Roxanne said, "You certainly can. I never use it. I'm just a home girl—home on the lot!"

Molly said, "Mr. Kincaid is tough, isn't he?" She was Roxanne's height, of course, and general build, but she did not resemble Roxanne in any way except that her hair was tinted the shade which was Roxanne's natural coloring. She had vague acting ambitions, but was not a very bright girl.

"Awfully tough," said Roxanne. "And very wonderful. . . . Did you see Jason slide Lil Eva into the ballroom scene with that handsome extra, what's-his-name? Hogging the dolly shot. . . ."

"His name's Morton," said Molly. "He's cute. . . . Can I take the car now, darling?"

Roxanne threw the keys to the girl.

Languid Lady was going slow. Jason Hogue was careful, very expensive and very good. If he liked girls on the set, that was his business, Roxanne thought, so long as he kept them out of the hair of the star. She laughed at herself for even thinking that way—she was really generous and Lil Eva was no threat.

It was the end of the day, and she decided to look up the young actress and get straight with her. She left the dressing room and walked down the row of doors which sheltered the other members of the large cast. She found Lil Eva and Hogue together, whispering. She went over and put her arms around both of them and was merry, funny and kind.

Hogue was a nervous, thin man, rather hard-boiled. Eva was pretty and mercurial. Neither could resist Roxanne and in a moment they were all laughing. Jason bought cokes from the machine and they sat down and went over the morrow's work as amicably as possible.

Hogue said, "Rox, I'd rather work with you than anyone, and I was hoping you'd take Eva under your wing. God, you must have brought up a hundred starlets. You're a great woman, Rox."

The blonde star said wryly, "But I'm not nineteen."

Eva said quickly, "I wish I was your age. I know enough to realize I won't be an actress until I am!"

"That's it," said Hogue. "You can get

places with the proper backing, but you won't really be an actress. That's where a good director comes in. Look at Bacall. . . ."

There was a roaring of engine, a screeching of brakes. Roxanne found herself on her feet, running for the door of the barn-like studio building. Outside was a huge yard, enclosed by a high fence. The gates were being closed by two dungareed guards, and Roxanne's car was panting in the middle of the yard.

Molly fell out of the car, white, shaking. Her quivering forefinger pointed. "Look! They shot at me! A big sedan, full of men! Look how close. . . ." She turned even whiter and sank to the ground.

There was a hole in the leather upholstery, shoulder high. Tom Kincaid came running from the office. One guard was already in the street, a rifle in his hands. Matt Durkin had a holster under his arm and was issuing crisp orders. Tom went immediately to the car and examined the bullet scar.

Roxanne said, "I loaned her the car. . . . My hair-do and hers are so alike. Tom, they might have killed the child!"

Tom said, "Looks like they meant to."

He got into the car and started the motor. He drove it experimentally over the parking line next to a storehouse. He got out and came back and said, "Take the girl to the nurse's room and keep her there. She's suffering shock."

He went over and checked the guards. Matt was patrolling the fence with an ex-sergeant who looked like Lon Chaney in his palmy days. Roxanne followed him and said, "Tom, this has got to stop. We can't make a picture under siege."

"The police cannot do anything until they have something to work with," said Tom. "I'm going to call Clarke now."

Roxanne said, "It's affecting my ego, hiding out like this. I'm a show-off. I like to be seen around."

"Sure," said Tom soothingly. "Pretty soon. . . . Where you going, Jason?" he asked the director.

"Molly left her bag in the car," said Hogue. "She's okay now. Needs her lipstick and stuff. You'll want to question her. . . ." He hurried over to the convertible.

Roxanne said, "I guess I shouldn't have let her have my car. It's hard to think about it all the time."

Tom took her arm, started toward the office building. Jason Hogue was opening the door of the car. The top was down and when he bent forward his body disappeared from view. Tom said, "I'm trying to keep the thing rolling until we get a break. I'll have a confab with Clarke—he's a good guy. Vesper has a lot of influence, you know, and it's hard for

an honest policeman to go up against him."

There was a grinding, rumbling roar, a sudden bright blast. Four ex-marines hit the dirt, instinctively digging with their hands, then recovered themselves and leaped up, staring wildly around. The walls shook, the storehouse building shivered.

Roxanne screamed. "My car! Oh, Tom. . . Jason! Jason!"

Tom was rooted for one moment. Then he turned away and gathered Roxanne under one arm and took her to the office and picked up the telephone with a heavy hand.

Roxanne sat hunched in a leather chair, weeping, the tears running through her fingers. Outside Matt was barking directions and the Marine sergeant was getting his men against the fire which was looking for victims. Men and women were speaking in shaking voices, called to learn if friends were safe.

Matt came to the window and said harshly, "Nobody hurt but Jason. We haven't found much of him, poor guy."

Roxanne's shoulders shook. Tom said into the phone, "Clarke, please. . . Hello, Jeff? They just bombed us. Killed Jason Hogue. Send out the bomb squad. Planted it in Rox's car. . . Yes, only Hogue. It was meant for anyone it could get, I suppose."

He hung up and said in a low voice, "Why didn't it go off while I was in the car? I looked and I missed it."

"No!" said Roxanne. "Poor Jason—it's bad enough."

Tom said, "I'll have to direct. We'll suspend, Rox, for now."

She said, "If we go broke, let's call it off. They'll hurt the others, Tom. I can take it for me—for us—but the kids. . . They'll hurt the kids."

Tom said, "I know. We'll keep the guards, explain to the company what is happening and I'll go to war against Keystone and Vesper."

"Me too," she said. "I'll fight them, Tom. It's just—I can't stand dragging the others into it."

She had control of herself again. Tom said, "Shall we see Molly? Clarke'll be here, but I want to see her first."

They walked across the yard. The Marines had the fire stopped, but the shambles which had been the convertible was too hot to touch. They were trying to find peices of Jason Hogue.

IN THE nurse's office Molly was lying on a couch. They had not told her of Hogue's death and she was comparatively calm. She said as soon as she saw Tom, "It was my fault. . . I had a date with that handsome boy, Morton. We were going to the beach. The car was at the corner, and I saw a big, black

car, with a pig-faced man staring at me. I made a U-turn, heard something and felt the breeze of the shot." She shuddered.

Tom said, "You didn't stop the car at all?"

"Oh, yes. . . It was like a nightmare. I didn't cut hard enough for the U-turn and almost hit a tree. I had to back up, and I swear they fired again at me. But you couldn't hear any shots. . . just whining noises. It was at the corner of De Longpres Avenue. I managed to get squared around and head for the gate. I knew the boys would be watching. . ."

Tom said, "Could someone have slipped up and planted a bomb while you were backing up?"

The girl's eyes widened with terror. "A—bomb? Is that what I just heard? Omigod!" She fainted.

Tom got up. He said to the nurse, "Keep her here. She looks too much like Rox at a glance." He led Roxanne outside and said, "We can't trust all the people on the lot. Don't go anywhere, even in here, without one of the guards near you."

She said, "It's pretty ghastly. But I'm beginning to want to fight."

"Clarke will be coming in," said Tom. "I'll talk to him. The cops are all right and their bomb squad is famous."

He kissed her lightly and left a man to guard her door. He went across the yard and into his office and Matt was there with Jeff Clarke. The big, lean cop said, "There's a lot of politicking going on, but we're with you. Vesper is spending his millions recklessly, trying to put you in a jackpot. He's raked up all that old gambling stuff and is trying to make out you were crooked. We know better, but a money-spender can always buy a politician or two. Anyhow, I'll do all I can."

"Sure you will," Tom nodded. "I've got men deputized to guard the lot. I'm going to direct the picture myself now that poor Hogue is gone. But Vesper and Keystone are all out this time. I'm fighting, Jeff."

"You'll get in trouble," Clarke objected. "When the bomb squad gets through, they'll—"

"—find nothing," said Tom. "You go ahead and follow police procedure. That's your job. I'm taking a short cut."

Tom had the phone in his hand. He gave a number to the studio operator and Clarke jumped, staring. But Tom waited, then spoke into the mouthpiece, "Carey? . . . Kincaid."

The soft, deep voice of Ronald Vesper's secretary said coolly, "How are you, Kincaid?"

"Hot," said Tom genially. "How about that poker game Keystone is always beefing for?"

"Keystone?" said Carey blandly. "Can't answer for him, Tom."

"I'll be glad to play at Vesper's—with Matt, of course, tonight or tomorrow," said Tom calmly. "Table stakes, say a hundred thousand behind each corner."

There was a moment's pause. Then Carey said, "Are you good for two hundred thousand in cash, Kincaid?"

"Seeing is believing," said Tom.

Ronald Vesper's voice cut in from a connecting phone, lisping silkily, "Kincaid? I heard you! Old boy, it will be a pleasure! I've been dying to get into a poker game with famous you! Bring the cash and I will endeavor to locate Keystone. 'It will be a lark!'"

Tom said, "It just will, won't it, sweetheart?" He hung up the phone and stared at Clarke.

The cop said, "You're walking into it. My hands are tied."

"Uh-huh," nodded Tom. "You may have to throw me in the clink before another sun is set."

"I'll bring you cigarettes," said Clarke grimly. "Meantime we will work on what we have here."

"You get the legal proof," Tom nodded. "I'll hand in the bodies of the men I already know are guilty!"

CHAPTER TWO

All for One—One for All

IN AN upstairs room of the huge mansion just outside Beverly Hills, Ronald Vesper turned and said, "He's coming here!"

Maxie Keystone was a little man. His face was sharp, his eyes were slits, his long hair was combed back from a low and cunning forehead. He clung to his New York clothing, brilliant as the plumage of a tropical bird, built to accommodate the gun holster beneath his left arm. He said, "So what? Kincaid's a smart tomato. He'll have protection some place close."

"Nobody can get in," Vesper said, his pink face beaming. "No one but Kincaid and Durkin. I've arranged it. We'll just *have* them."

Keystone said, "No funny work until I get my hack at him inna card game. It's my ambition. Kincaid was the greatest poker player inna world in his day. I wanna trim him one time."

"My dear boy!" said Vesper listlessly regarding his manicured fingernails. He had a round face and china blue eyes and his effeminate air did not detract from his essential toughness. "It matters so little. They are bringing two hundred thousand in cash. At pok r— or by accident—we shall have that money. Of course the police will know he is here. It must be subtly done this time."

Keystone said, "Sometimes that talk of yours

slays me, Ronnie. It don't make no difference where it's done, nor how it's done. It's gettin' rid of the bodies that counts, and I got a diploma in gettin' rid of stiff's."

Jack Carey came into the room, his dark eyes dull. He was followed by Sam Valenti, the modern Valentino with muscles, a sullen brute who was a bobby-sox wow in Vesper Pictures. Carey said, "If you're counting on cheating Kincaid, be ready to shoot."

Keystone said, "Cheatin'—smeatin', you dopes. We brother-in-law him, and if I can ring in a cold deck okay. Otherwise I play him. He's big time—I'm big time. I'll gamble Kincaid down to the bricks, then cut his throat. You lugs are too soft. You take too long. You lost a million bucks tryin' to buck him. I'll ruin him, but I wanna beat him at poker foist, see?"

"Crude," whispered Vesper. "Too awfully crude."

"Yeah?" sneered Maxie. "We blown up half his joint, ain't we? And I got it fixed to do more'n that if we don't take him tonight. I got it fixed to blast him and his broad and the whole woiks. Who did the woik? Who brought inna bunch? Why, you—"

Carey said wearily, "Knock it off, Maxie."

Vesper was smiling, as though he enjoyed the abuse. He said, "Don't mind Maxie. He says the cutest things when he is aroused."

Sam Valenti growled, "To me he is not so cute. If I did not want Kincaid so bad, I would un-cute Maxie one time."

"If we fight among ourselves," said Carey drily, "Kincaid will eat us for a late supper tonight. Are the men posted?"

Maxie said, "My guys? You on'y gotta show 'em a pitcher of the punks you want. Thassall. Pig Lurton and Dan Deal are the toughest hoods inna country outa jail. Mordecai'll cut a throat an' go without lunch to do it. They got boys with 'em that eat nails and spit rust. They're all over the joint!"

Carey said, "Er—this poker game is yours, Maxie. Are you going to put up our end of the cash?"

"Am I nuts?" demanded the little ex-racketeer. "This is for blood. Every man fer hisself. This is sport!"

Carey said, "It's deadly business for us. Sam and I haven't any such sum."

Maxie sneered. "The boss can put it up. Can't you?"

Ronnie Vesper's blue eyes were clear and bright. He said, "Why—of course."

Carey started to speak, closed his mouth tight. Valenti slouched out of the room, a big, brown male animal with the disposition of a bear and the morals of a snake. Maxie said, "I gotta cheer up the boys. Send fer your dough, Ronnie dear. I expect to take some offen you, too!"

When they were gone down the stairs, Carey said, "You haven't got it, Ronnie. You can't raise it. Kincaid's beaten you down and you've spent too much on this campaign against him."

"Nobody knows that but you and me, Jackie," Vesper said. "I can raise a hundred thousand in cash—just!"

"Four-handed poker?" asked Carey.

"Oh, no!" smiled Vesper. "Remember that remarkable counterfeit money we once almost had to distribute?"

Carey said, "Kincaid won't fall for that."

"We split the real money three ways," said Vesper imperturbably. "Intermingled with it, we place the spurious bills. They're really good-looking, Jackie. In the excitement of the game. . . . Just easy!"

Carey said, "Don't underestimate Kincaid."

"Who, me?" squeaked Vesper. "But Jackie, it is Maxie who underestimates him. I think he's terrific!"

"He'd be much more wonderful dead," muttered Carey.

"Oh, yes, indeed," nodded Vesper happily. "He will be dead enough before he leaves here. On the way out, I think. With the big, hired sedan ready at the main gate to draw off pursuit and the old station wagon to carry the bodies away. The pier at Santa Monica would be a good place, don't you think?"

"No," said Carey coldly. "Too obvious."

"Ah!" nodded Vesper. "Perhaps. I shall study over it. Never fear, Jackie, I shall have a solution. . . . We could buy a crematory if we had the money. . . . Say-y-y! I wonder! That gives me an idea."

Carey said, "You can't just buy a crematorium."

Vesper said, "I could *try*, couldn't I?"

TOM KINCAID came back from the corner of De Longpres Avenue and entered the lot. He walked across the yard and the bomb squad was gone, and so were the homicide men. Molly Dowling came out of the studio building and called to him.

He waited until she came close and said in a low voice, "Go to the make-up man and have your hair dyed black."

She said, "I wanted to go out and I didn't know how. That would solve it, won't it, Mr. Kincaid. My mother is ill—I called her. If my hair is dark I don't look like Roxanne at all, do I?"

"No," he said. "But you mustn't go out, unless your mother is dying. Because the police won't like it. I've got you checked in for your own good."

A man came up and paused, listening. Tom wheeled and saw that it was Morton, the handsome extra. Morton said, "Excuse me. I was going to take Molly home."

Tom said, "Stay here with her instead, will you? It'll be safer that way."

Morton looked sulky. "But we had planned to go to her mother."

"Look, you two," said Tom patiently. "This is murder. Jason Hogue got killed by a bomb which was meant for Roxanne and did not go off on schedule. I only want you to stay on the lot overnight. I'll call Molly's mother."

"I'll do that," said Morton, frowning. "Molly and I—well—I know her mother pretty well."

"Okay," said Tom. He went into the office and looked at Jeff Clarke. The detective shrugged and said nothing. Tom sat down and lit a cigarette.

Matt came in with a small bag made of alligator hide and put it carefully on the desk. "Two hundred gees," he said. "And we're carryin' it into a sewer."

Clarke said, "I should stop this. Gamblin's against the law."

Tom said, "You never heard of this. It's off the record."

Roxanne came in, wearing a tan gabardine suit and low-heeled shoes and looking as beautiful as a worried woman can look. She said, "That's all the money we have in the world, darling."

"More," said Tom agreeably. "I put the arm on some gambler friends for about fifty thousand."

Roxanne said, "Vesper will be all ready for us."

"Us?" cried Matt. "You're stayin' right here! I won't have you in that kinda danger!"

Tom said quietly, "She is going along, all right. It's partly her money. She can at least kibitz."

He patted her shoulder, went out and found his tough sergeant, and gave him some orders. It was almost nine o'clock and the stars were bright in the California sky. He walked around the lot with the sergeant, checking everything. He walked close to the cooling wreck of the automobile, but there was nothing there he did not already know.

The bomb squad would have the details tomorrow. They would know what kind of a bomb, where it came from, and if the lab was on its toes as usual, they would even hazard a guess as to who made it. Not many people can make a time bomb, even a defective one, and the L.A. cops were noted for that sort of research.

He said to his ex-marine, "Murder can be best practised by bold methods, it is true. But these people have gone too far. If you watch as I tell you, all will be safe here and there will be a building left for Coronet Pictures. If you miss, we're sunk whether I am successful tonight or come home on a shutter—if I come home at all."

"I getcha, Boss," said the Marine. "Go knock 'em over."

Tom went back to the office and Clarke was gone. He sat behind the desk and Roxanne dangled one of her amazingly slim and shapely legs over its edge and Matt sat near the bag and worried visibly. Tom said, "They'll try to disarm us at the gate. That won't work, if we have to shoot some of them. After we go inside, there'll be some devil's scheme or other. We can deal with it as it comes up. I am counting on Keystone to play poker."

"I know what you mean," nodded Matt. "Keystone fancies himself, the little jerk. He knocked over the New York crowd regular. He plays 'em right, he knows his percentages—and he runs in a cold deck if you're not sharp."

Roxanne said, "I'll watch him for that."

Tom said drily, "That's the girl, Rox."

She said, "You think I can't? I got eyes like an eagle, darling. I know you see everything, but I see things, too. I know, for instance, that there's a spy in the works here."

"More than one," Tom assented. "Too many for them all to be on our side."

Roxanne said, "Okay, then. We understand each other. I'll watch Maxie."

They were all on edge, Tom realized. His own nerves were rock-like, and he had a very good idea of that into which they were walking. He had no illusions about the Keystone gang's toughness, their brutality, their animal cleverness.

Tom nodded. "Let's go downtown and have a good meal."

"No—out on La Cienega," said Roxanne. "A really good one at House of Murphy. Call them. . . ."

Tom said, "No calls. We walk down to the corner and hail a cab on Sunset. We don't take the first one, either. Matt, chain that bag to your belt. Keep your guns handy and stay together."

Roxanne said, "I swear, darling, it's more like Alan Ladd than This Gun For Hire."

Tom said, "I don't really think we're in danger until we get into Vesper's house, but let's play it close."

Matt muttered, "Goin' into that house is not conservative."

They walked out through a gate and the lights of Sunset Boulevard were bright as they moved toward Vine Street. A cab drew in, but Tom waved it on. He took the third one which offered and told him to drive to La Cienega.

The first cab dropped back, then picked up and followed. Tom jerked a thumb toward it and said, "At least they are keeping tabs on us."

Roxanne said, "I'm beginning to get into the rôle. I feel both haunted and hunted."

"I'd like to stop and go over whoever is

tailoring us," Matt said feverishly. "I'd learn 'im. . . ."

Tom said, "This is the last adventure, kids. Tonight we either finish them, or we lose. I'd like to play it straight across the board, knowing it's the big hand, betting it wide open."

Roxanne said softly, "That's right, darling. That's your game."

Tom said, "If one of us gets it, I guess the others wouldn't want to go along. It would scarcely be worth while."

Matt said, "No. It wouldn't be any good."

Roxanne grinned, showing her perfect teeth. "All for one, one for all?"

"Yes," said Tom. "Like that."

After a long ride they turned in on La Cienega. The following cab slowed, waited until they had dismounted and paid off the driver. Tom slid his hand inside his jacket, but the shadower made a circle and went back towards Sunset. Tom went in the famed restaurant and ordered a double dry Martini—a drink he rarely essayed. A big evening was coming up—the biggest.

CHAPTER THREE

Death Deals a Cold Deck

THE cab wheeled in past the big gates, which were open. There were no guards visible. At the front entrance Tom paid off the driver and the three stood upon the threshold of Ronald Vesper's fabulous establishment, Roxanne clinging to Tom's arm, Matt with the little bag clenched in his hand.

The door opened and the porcine face of the man in the hallway was smug. He said, "Welcome to our parlor, folks! Come in, come in. Everything is set."

Tom said, "How are you, Pig? How's your shooting people?"

Pig Lurton said, "Fine, fine! Meet Dan Deal and Mordecai."

Dan Deal was consumptive, rail thin and dangerous. Mordecai was short, greasy and evil, his eyes on Roxanne, his thick lips slightly moist. They bowed, smirking.

Tom said, "Very nice reception committee. Three of the greatest thugs in the country."

"Wonderful types," Roxanne nodded. "Which one, do you suppose made that marvelous bomb?"

Tom said, "I couldn't even guess, they're all so clever!"

Pig Lurton's pursed mouth essayed a smile. He bowed and said, "This is all very charmin', but the Boss awaits. G'wan up, ya jerks!"

Roxanne went first, Tom close behind. Dan Deal's feverish eyes never left Matt's bag. The three goons fell in behind and the procession went along the wide hall to the game

room at the end of the corridor, a huge, air-conditioned chamber complete with bar and deal tables for six games. In the center, one table was set up, chips racked in neat rows. Roxanne perched on a bar stool and said, "I saw Ronnie win sixty thousand dollars from a certain producer in here one night. The man killed himself later."

"He shoulda died from shame," muttered Matt.

A door at the end of the room opened and Ronnie Vesper stepped through. He was wearing a lavender shirt outside his fawn colored slacks and barefoot sandals. Jack Carey, slouching, burly, was next, then the hulking Valenti.

Tom said, "Hail! The robber band!"

"Oh, *you*," said Vesper. "Roxanne, my dear. We did not expect you!"

"But you're pleased," nodded Roxanne. All our eggs in one basket, that's us. My, isn't Sam getting fat!"

Valenti's face went dark crimson. He had carried the torch for Roxanne since his first view of her and his overweening ambition was to make a picture opposite her to prove his acting ability. Vesper said, "Oh, come now, no quarreling. Maxie! Where is Maxie?"

The three gangsters had retired to the hall. Tom heard voices, low-pitched. Then Maxie Keystone came in, carrying a huge leather wallet in his hand. He slapped green bills on the table and caroled, "Tom, this is indeed a pleasure ol' boy, ol' boy. This I have been lookin' forward to."

Matt went to the table and carefully separated the money from the alligatorskin bag into two piles. He said, "Let's cut the nonsense, and get down to business." He threw new decks on the green baize and added, "We're playing with these and you can examine them."

Maxie said, "You think I would try and shove markers or tapers on Kincaid? I am not an amachoor, Doikin."

"Okay, okay," said Matt. He was impatient, he was slightly nervous. He broke out a deck and said, "Cut for position, too."

From her stool, Roxanne whispered, "Luck, baby. Mama will be watching for cheaters."

Tom grinned at her. He was perhaps the most relaxed person in the room despite the airiness of the host and his friends. He had a plan which he was keeping to himself. It was not much of a plan, but if it worked, he knew they could escape with their lives, if nothing else. He needed, however, to be loose in the house for a little while and this was his immediate problem.

The cut fell with Keystone dealing, Matt next to him, then Valenti, Carey and Tom, then Vesper to complete the circle. They

sat down and bought chips, their money stacked. The crisp new bills were impressive—six hundred thousand dollars worth.

Matt put his little bag on the floor and Tom kicked it away, so that it rested near the end of the bar where Roxanne sat sipping a Tom Collins. The gunsels did not linger in the room.

Tom thought about this for a moment. No one had attempted to take away the revolver they knew he wore under his sports jacket.

There was something wrong with this set-up, although of course Pig Lurton and his pals would be within easy call, or watching from some secret place in the walls of this room.

At sight of the chips and the cards, something in Tom changed. A metabolism took place, his senses became twice as alert, his pulse slowed, his brain became cold and calm. He was, first of all, a gambler, a successful gambler. Perhaps that was the secret of his success in the unpredictable business of making pictures. He watched Maxie Keystone deal from hooded eyes sharp as x-rays, privy to every secret of manipulation of the pasteboards.

He was able to follow the cards and calculate the percentages with only a skilled part of his brain. The other parts were left free to hazard guesses, to follow hunches. Now he was wondering at something far more important than even this dangerous poker game.

There was an undercurrent in the room. He could not detect immediately its cause, but his gambler's instinct told him it was present. He kept his face serene and listened to Maxie's chatter.

KEYSTONE was a talker. There are all kinds of good poker players and the little gangster from Brooklyn was the garrulous kind. Tom had met them a thousand times, letting off steam by their constant comments and complaints. Vesper was in-between, the apparently good-humored but satiric type. Valenti played silently, as did Carey.

Tom drew jacks and played for ten dollars. Despite all the money, the game, like any neighborhood gathering, started low. He fingered his three card draw, watching the others. Matt was out. Valenti bet twenty. Carey saw him. Tom, without examining his draw, said flatly, "Up one hundred."

Vesper said, "Oh, my! But I'll play!"

Keystone took one card. He grinned at Tom and said, "My two pair was best goin' in, palsy. I raise two Gs."

Valenti sullenly showed kings and dropped. Carey followed. Tom shrugged and peeked at his cards. He saw a third jack and frowned. Then he said, "Just another couple, Maxie?"

Vesper said, "Really! This is but murder!" and dropped.

Keystone had looked at his one card. He said, "Just to make it interestin', how about a grand? I improved em?"

Tom said, "Uh-huh. Now I know you did." He folded his three jacks away. Maxie raked in the chips, chortling, "I'll run these big shots outa the game. You gotta know when to knock 'em down, thassall. They fall just as easy as you punks."

"That's right," Tom agreed. "I hope you made that high flush honestly, Maxie."

The little racketeer chuckled. "You'll never know!"

But Tom did know. He had watched Maxie take his look and he had seen what the others could not perceive, no matter how hard they stared. He had seen the glow of confidence of the one-card buyer over the three-card buyer. Maxie had filled something, all right. The first lesson, Tom thought contentedly, was to know when to fold up the hand. It had saved him many thousands of dollars in his day.

The luck went to Maxie. Vesper, Carey and Valenti had to buy. Vesper was banking, but chips ran short and Maxie sold him some. The little Brooklyn character was happy as a bug on a rock in the sun. Green bills changed hands and Tom's quick eye followed them.

He saw Maxie tuck a thousand dollar note into his stack, saw the deft fingers of the racketeer caress the bill. Then he saw Maxie's fingers slow down, go back, feel again of the texture.

The game proceeded, but Maxie was quieter after that incident. Tom wondered, playing his cards as best he could. They were running against him. Matt was holding about even. The pressure was piling up as Valenti and Carey proved their ineptness. Vesper was out a few thousand, but the other two went down faster.

Tom picked up three aces on Valenti's deal. There had been no attempt at crooked work by anyone so far. Roxanne, silent as the tomb, had been watching Maxie for the cold deck. Matt and Tom could smell a Greek bottom or a second card.

Carey passed and Tom opened for a modest fifty, not caring to scare the others out. Vesper played. Keystone said, "Up a hundred." That was Maxie's game, all right, and right now it seemed directed at freezing out Valenti and Carey, whose stacks were lowest. Tom put a part of his highly geared mind to work on this. He fingered his cards as Matt saw the raise and Valenti also stayed. He took one card, spiking up a king, just calling Maxie a heist.

Vesper took two. Keystone again bought one, Matt one and Valenti three. Valenti was pushing his luck, which was nil, very bad poker, Tom thought.

He said, "I will now, having got you all in, bet one grand."

Vesper screamed, "Not at me, you dog. I'm out!"

Maxie held his cards tight. He said deliberately, "Here is one hand which I like good. I raise."

He shoved in another thousand. Everyone dropped, watching the two contenders. Tom said, "And a thousand."

Maxie said, "I tap you, Kincaid!"

Tom shrugged. He had about three thousand dollars worth of blue and red chips. He pushed them into the center of the table and said, "I ought to nail you right now, but you wouldn't call."

Maxie said, "Full house, wise guy!"

"Yeah," said Tom. "But I have it the hard way. Aces full of kings." He flipped the cards over and for a moment every man's breath was bated. The game had assumed tremendous proportions by now, Tom realized. There was murder and worse afoot, there were killers in the house determined to do their dirty work no matter who won. But the fascination of the game, the pitting of wits of these old enemies had transcended everything else, for that time.

Maxie said, "Well I'll be a monkey's son!"

Tom stacked the chips. Keystone was ahead at that period. The cards went around. Tom won three medium sized hands in a row. Valenti threw down aces up, which had lost to Tom's three deuces and growled, "This man is cheating us! Such luck can't be!"

Keystone turned on him like a striking stake. He snapped, "You crumb, you don't belong inna game anyway. Get out if you don't like it! Kincaid's honestier than all of you put together!"

In the background Roxanne murmured, "A dim compliment, if I ever heard one!"

Valenti opened his mouth like a fish on a river bank, staring at Maxie. Then he shut up grimly and hunched over his cards. It was Carey who said, "Kincaid, I'll buy from you now. You're higher in chips than Maxie."

Tom counted stacks of chips. He was aware that Keystone was watching hawk-like as the transaction took place. He collected two thousand dollars from Carey and placed the bills before him in the rack. There were two bills. The top one was new. He touched it, turned it over.

The bill beneath was spurious. It had been artificially aged, but Tom's expertness left no room for doubt. It was a phoney thousand dollar bill. His eyes raised, met Keystone's, and he saw the grin at the edges of the little gangster's mouth. It was a puzzling thing, but somehow or other it made Tom's blood boil.

(Please turn to page 86)

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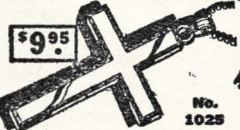


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(Continued from page 84)

For a round or two the cards ran against him. He was debating something. He got the deal and was in a hand with nothing coming to him. He ran up the deck idly. They were all looking at his big, spatulate fingers, seemingly slightly clumsy, although the cards ran through them like water. He ran up a hand and just for spite he fixed the cards the way he wanted.

He threw the good hand to Matt Durkin, a four card straight flush, which was also their secret signal that dirty work was afoot. Matt looked vaguely perplexed, so he had not detected the counterfeit money.

It was no use to gamble their good money against phoney stuff, Tom reasoned. He had played with strict honesty so long as all was equal. But if these suckers thought they could throw bad bills against Kincaid. . . . He caught himself up. His mind was still clicking. There was something wrong with the set-up. He remembered that he had something to do. He dealt the draw, with Matt pushing straight flush against a full house held by Vesper. Matt cleaned up several thousand on the pot and Vesper was low. He had to buy from the chips in the center. Tom watched Matt finger one of the bills and saw the recognition in the little fellow's face.

But it was Keystone he could not figure. Maxie kept barking at Valenti and Carey and Vesper. It could all be an act, but something in Keystone's accents bit too truly home to be altogether a piece of stage business. Tom glanced at Roxanne and saw that she had got onto it also.

He rose abruptly and said, "I have to make a phone call to the studio. Excuse me."

He walked out of the door into the hall before they could get their absorbed brains off poker and onto the main business of the night. He chuckled to himself, wondering how much time he would have. He went down the hall fast, looking for Pig Lurton. He shot out the front door without having seen anyone. He ran to the gate and back.

He came into the house, still travelling at top speed, ran into a downstairs powder room and flushed the toilet. Then he ducked straight through to the back of the house and into the kitchen.

There were scattered remains of food, and a few other things he thought he recognized. He dove under the sink, in a cabinet lined with tile. Vesper's housekeeper was neat, but there was a round, black object carefully nesting in excelsior.

Tom went up the stairs fast, carrying the little box with its heavy contents. He put it down outside the door and entered the room. Vesper was on his feet, Valenti and Carey were out of the room. Only Maxie Keystone

sat, leaning back in his chair, grinning like a skull.

Vesper said, "Really, Kincaid. Must you race all *over* the place?"

"Sit down," said Tom calmly, "and call your stoges."

Valenti and Carey came back in, slightly flushed and completely baffled. Roxanne caught a wink from Tom, leaned back and switched out the lights in the room.

Everyone shouted at once. Then the lights came back on and Roxanne said innocently, "Gee, I thought I was adding to the illumination, gents. I'm sorry as hell."

Valenti slammed down his cards and said, "What the hell's going on here? Where are Lurton and the others, dammit?"

Keystone said, "Shuddup an' play cards, you joik!"

Tom picked up his hand and smiled. Things were not going so badly, at that. He had the set-up in his mind, now. It was a diller, and he was ready enough to meet it. There was a fine chance they would not win—but at least, he reflected, he know the score.

CHAPTER FOUR

Whipsawed!

IT WAS two-thirty by Tom's strap watch.

He dealt a fast hand which gave Matt fours and Vesper a full house with aces. Carey and Valenti were already out. They sat back, their faces heavy.

Tom's fingers had never been so nimble. Matt ran Vesper down to his last stack, tapped him. Vesper shoved back his chair and said petulantly, "Now I *am* angry! I have no more chips. I want to borrow, Maxie!"

Keystone sneered. "You know the game. It's freeze-out."

Tom said, "Matt'll drop. That leaves it to you and me, Maxie."

Tom had most of the money, but Keystone had held onto his original stake. He said quietly, "I dunno, Kincaid. Mebbe I woulda better stood in bed."

Tom said, "Yellow?"

"Nope," said Keystone without rancor. "Tell you what I'll do. Let the Queen deal cold hands. You an' me don't handle the tickets at all, see? I'll go you twenty grand a hand."

On a hunch, Tom said, "All real United States money?"

Vesper gasped, then coughed to cover up. Keystone said, "I woiked off the phonies, din't I?"

Tom was separating his winnings, shoving the spurious notes into a heap. Valenti and Carey grew taut, watching. Tom said, "I think you have one which is no good."

Keystone rifled his money, tossed out a

RED SKY IN HOLLYWOOD

bill. "Uh-huh. C'n you imagine rats'd run in stuff like that in a ge'pmun's game?"

"Yes, I can imagine them," said Tom. "Rox, come and deal for us."

Matt got up and pocketed his winnings. They bulged in his thin sports clothing, but he packed his pockets. He sat on a stool where Rox had been, at the bar, poured himself a short drink. Then he loosened his light jacket.

Roxanne's blonde head bent, she dealt the cards expertly. They fell face up, a king to Maxie, a jack to Tom, a nine, a deuce, a five—another jack. The others were meaningless. Without turning a hair, Keystone passed over twenty thousand dollars and said, "Run 'em again. You're cute, baby!"

"Thank you so much," Rox said. She dealt. Her hands were steady, her face serene. She dealt Tom a pair of nines and they stood up.

Valenti and Carey were so tightly drawn they seemed shrunken, watching the bundles of money change hands. Vesper, less intent, seemed preoccupied. Once he went to the window and stared out at the grounds, scowling.

Five hands straight, Tom won. Maxie Keystone handed over his last sheaf of crisp, green bills and said, "You're a gamblin' fool, Kincaid. I always said you was and I got no reason t' change my mind. You run them out without hoitin' me, because you knew I wouldn't run in no funny dough—then you took me honest."

Tom said, "If you weren't such a murdering little character, Maxie, I would like you very much."

"Come, come," lisped Ronnie Vesper. "Enough of this charade. You have had your fun, you cunning little gamblers. Now let us get down to business."

He still seemed to be listening. Maxie Keystone was buttoning his shirt. He seemed to be wearing no weapon. He said, "You'll haff to excuse me, folks. . . ." He went to the hall door, opened it and slipped out. Tom made no move to stop him.

Vesper called, "Keystone! Where are your men?"

There was no answer. Tom said politely, "Could Maxie be angry on account of that counterfeit money you ran in?"

Vesper called, "Maxie!"

Matt was handling two .22 caliber target pistols at the bar. Tom went over, bent down for a second, then straightened up. He had the packs of bills flat in his pockets. He said, "Roxanne, my dear, it is time to leave these gentlemen. They have problems of their own. We are intruding."

Vesper squealed, "Maxie!"



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"Damn you, Kincaid," Valenti burst forth. "You won't get away while I'm alive!"

He came lunging across the room, past the poker table. Matt swung one of the guns around and pinked him in the ankle. He dropped, rolling on the floor, cursing.

Carey had a hideout gun in his belt. Tom got close to him and snapped it away, breaking Carey's wrist in the process. Tom said, "The pay-off, eh? I've been aching to hurt you people since a long time, now."

Vesper screamed, "Maxie! Kincaid, don't you touch me!"

"I wouldn't, even with an eleven-foot pole," Tom said. "We'll leave you to bandage the hurts of your pals."

Matt said, "Leave them alive? They killed Jason Hogue. They've killed plenty others. Let me take them, Tom. We got to fight our way out of here anyhow. Lemme finish this."

Tom said, "No fair shooting sitting ducks. Get going, Rox. Tail her down, Matt. . ."

He paused at the door. Vesper was almost hysterical with rage and impotence. Valenti and Carey were groaning with their hurts. Tom said, "Just stay in here awhile. Maxie's deserted you, of course. You know that by now. You were too filthy even for Maxie. Just stay in here and think it over."

He slammed the door. He drew out keys, found one that fit, locked the portal. He ran down and repeated the process on the other door. Then he hurtled down the stairs, stealing a glance at his wrist watch.

He hit the front drive and there was no sign of Maxie Keystone nor his merry murderers. He said, "Get moving, kids. They've got quite a start on us."

Roxanne panted, running down the driveway, "I don't get it, lover. Who's got what on who?"

"Keystone and his gang," said Tom calmly. "Maxie wants into picture business. But he never did like his associates. So he is personally attending to our studio."

Roxanne said, "You figured that out, huh?" "His men were not here when I took a sneak look," said Tom. "As soon as he could, he took a powder."

Matt muttered, "Those dirty murderers—we should have finished them, Tom. They meant to let us have it."

Tom said, "There's a phone at the gate here." They paused at a small brick gatehouse. He picked up the receiver and dialed a cab company. He said to Roxanne, "Valenti, Carey and Vesper will find their own reward. In fact, I was able to arrange a bit of justice, I hope."

Matt said, "The bag! I forgot the alligator bag!"

RED SKY IN HOLLYWOOD

"Uh-huh," said Roxanne. "Tom tipped me to slide it behind the bar and leave it there."

"That was a nice li'l bag," said Matt injuredly. "I paid fifteen bucks for that bag."

Tom said, "Well, you see I found something downstairs and thought I'd make them a present of it."

"You put it in the bag when I turned out the lights," Roxanne nodded. "I gathered that much. You were giving me so many signals I could only hope I got them straight."

Tom said, "These things are evidently un-dependable, but. . . ." His face was serene as he watched the house on the hilltop. The cab toiled up the street below.

Roxanne said, "Luck was with us in the end. Those five straight hands I dealt—how I wished I could cheat them! But we won."

There was a sudden roar. The ground shook beneath them. The mansion of Ronald Vesper rocked on its foundations, then seemed to settle as flames erupted from upstairs.

It was a very loud explosion. Tom said harshly, "One of their own making. I found it, put it in the bag, figured the time element and started it going just before we left. The same kind of bomb that killed Jason, I'll bet."

Matt said in awed accents, "You planted it on them, left it in there with 'em—locked them in!"

"It was a homemade time bomb," Tom said grimly. "If it didn't work, they would live. If it did, they died of their own device. All I did was give them a chance to test it out."

THE cab driver was staring at the house. Tom coolly picked up the phone and turned in an alarm. He said to the driver, "We're in a hurry. It's worth a hundred to get down to the Coronet Studios in the least time it can take this hack."

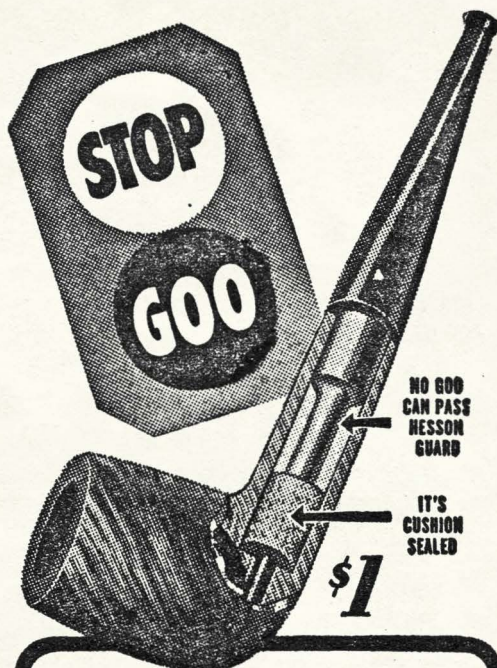
The cabbie lost interest in the fire. He was a Hollywood driver and knew no speed limit. He went down out of the hills with the facility and skill of a race track chauffeur. He pelted down Sunset and made the right turn and jammed his brakes. His passengers practically fell out. Tom handed him two hundred and said, "Take a vacation and forget you ever saw us."

The cab driver went away as fast as he had arrived. Tom said, "Down the street is trouble. We're carrying a lot of cash. If we get hurt, it'll spill all over."

Roxanne said, "Look! There's the big, black sedan. But where are the guards? I don't hear any noise!"

Tom said, "You won't—yet. Come on!"

He led the way down to De Longpres Avenue and along the side of the administration building which bordered the south end of the



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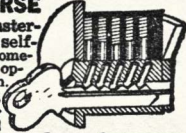
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lot. They came to a door and a man stepped out of the shadows. Roxanne gasped and stood rigid, but Tom said, "Hello, Jeff."

Clarke said worriedly, "Where you been? I pegged the hired sedan Keystone was driving, but I haven't seen anyone."

Tom said, "You won't—until you get inside."

Clarke said, "You mean Keystone is in there?"

"He's got his gang in there," nodded Tom, "I don't know about Max. He's a pretty shrewd customer." He tapped on the door.

An ugly face peered out. Then the ex-Marine sergeant said relievedly, "Just in time. C'min and have fun!"

They went in. Several of the guards were about, grinning. There were some trussed up figures deposited against the walls of the office. Clarke said, "Looks like a full house."

"Crunmy bunch," nodded the ex-Marine carelessly.

Clarke said, "What's the idea, Kincaid?"

"I think I know," said Tom. "But I don't see Maxie."

He picked out Pig Lurton, Dan Deal and some minor lights. They were tied and gagged and they looked extremely unhappy. The ex-marines had not been gentle with them. But Mordecai and Maxie Keystone were missing. Tom said sharply, "You sure you got everyone who came in?"

"Took them one by one," nodded the guard.

Tom looked sharply at the last figure in the bound line of prisoners. It was the handsome Morton, the extra, and he was frightened half to death. Tom said, "I see. . . wait here, all of you!"

He dashed out into the yard. He could have taken help along, but this was a thing he wanted to do alone. It was, he told himself, the finale. This would ring down the curtain. If he survived, he would be able to live and breathe with freedom. If he lost. . . Roxanne and Matt, despite all protestations, could somehow carry on.

He went straight across the yard and into the studio building.

CHAPTER FIVE

Red Harvest

THE ceiling was forty feet above him, and the set for Languid Lady sprawled before the camera and its sound equipment. It was dark as night, but he knew the switches. He made his way to the box and paused, listening.

There was a scurrying mouse which seemed, frightened, but mice, he reflected, always

RED SKY IN HOLLYWOOD

sound that way. Flight was the first instinct of man and mouse.

Somewhere in here, he thought, was the answer. He was not afraid, himself, but he was somewhat unwilling to see what he was sure had happened. He shrugged, drew the .38 revolver from beneath his arm and snapped on the lights, ducking sideways, gun ready.

The girl sat in a brocaded chair which was part of the drawing room set. The scene was supposed to represent the dwelling of a rich New Yorker, with lavish furnishings and the chair was a good replica of a period piece. The girl had dark hair and her face was pinched and she hung sideways, but still sat, arms dangling, legs sprawled in front of her.

There was blood on the carpet. The knife had been removed, but the stain across the girl's bosom was frightful. The killer had slashed at the girls throat either before or after he stabbed her.

Tom threw the switch and threw a soft blanket of darkness over the dead form. He moved out the soundproof inner door, across the anteroom, out under the stars of the California pre-dawn. This was the hour when men's pulses lagged, when the miasma enveloped them. Mordecai was loose in the lot of Coronet Pictures, with his keen blade and thirst for blood, and Maxie Keystone would be somewhere near.

The game was already lost, of course, or the girl would be alive. Maxie Keystone knew it. Maybe Mordecai, who was merely a pathological killer, did not know it, but Keystone was smart. What would he do?

Tom ran heavily across the lawn. He came close to the high wall. All the guards and the policeman were in where the prisoners had been assembled. There was a dark corner where the fence could be scaled. On the other side was the big black sedan, unwatched in the excitement.

From afar he heard Roxanne's clear voice calling, "Tom! Wait for me, Tom!"

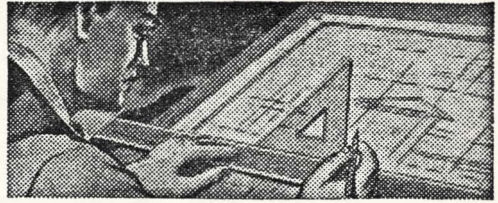
He heard the scrambling noise then. He dropped to one knee and said, "Maxie! Nix!"

A shot was the answer, and feet going fast away. He heard a grunt and from the shadow Mordecai waddled, the knife in his hand. Tom fired once. Mordecai stepped forward, but his knees were unjointed. He stumbled and the knife fell from his hand. Then he tumbled onto the knife.

Tom leaped over him, noting only that the haft had stuck in the soft earth and that the killer was impaled on his own blade. Maxie was ahead of him, fleetfooted.

At that moment the floodlight came on. Clarke had brought it in and was attempting to pick up the actors in the drama. Across

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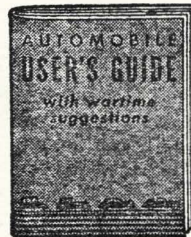
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WILLIAM R. COX

its brilliant lane a figure flitted. Clarke fired, but Maxie Keystone kept running. He was indeed like a mouse, seeking its hole in the wall, Tom thought. He made no attempt to shoot the running little man. He started running toward the studio building again, the only possible shelter Keystone could attempt.

The door opened and closed, and the heavy inner door beneath the warning red light which called for silence when the sound apparatus was working slammed dully. Tom dashed through the first portal, opened the second, banged it shut without entering. A fusilade of shots pinged the metal cogging and he ran around outside.

There was an entrance on the back, never used. It was a small door and he squeezed through it as silently as possible. The vast stage was silent and the odor of cordite from Keystone's shooting was faint but distinct.

Tom regained his breath. He walked around and gained the back end of the set where the dead girl sat. He wiped perspiration from his brow and tried with all his will to relax his muscles and his mind. There was still no sound.

He walked to the front of the set. Standing there, his gun balanced, he said calmly, "All right, Maxie. They're milling around outside. It's just you and me, now. I'll give you first shot."

From directly ahead of him the shrill voice of Keystone said, "Don't grandstand me, Kincaid. I ain't beat yet."

"I know, I know," said Tom wearily. "You won't give up until they strap you to the chair."

"Can I help it Mordecai kilt the broad?" said Maxie. "You ain't got a thing on me."

"The bomb squad, Maxie," said Tom patiently. "None of these people in your crowd know how to make those Chicago footballs except you. I happen to remember you cut your eyeteeth in the Cammora."

Keystone said, "What I like about you, Kincaid, you put it onna table. Is this L.A. bomb squad that good?"

"They'll dump it in your lap," said Tom. "And besides, I left that other one with Vesper and his lads."

There was a silence. Then the voice before him said, "That's watcha did when you was ganderin' the joint tonight, huh? That was a fast move you made. You missed the mob, huh? You figgered we'd hitcha here, and so you got yer hard guys ready?"

"I figured that out before," said Tom. "When I knew you had planted Mordecai's relative here."

"How'dja get onto that?" asked Keystone.

"With her hair darkened, she would look like that," said Tom. "Like Mordecai. I knew him in the old days. Molly Dowling was a ringer for him, except for the blondened hair."

Maxie Keystone said, "You are a smart operator. I gotta admit it. So you got Vesper and them other joiks?"

"Your bomb did it," Tom reminded him. "I don't show. So far as the cops are concerned, you did it!"

"Well, whaddaya know?" said Maxie wonderingly. "Look, Kincaid, one thing before we let go at each other. Izzat broad of yours smart with the pasteboards too?"

"No," said Tom. "Those last hands, the showdown hands, were plain luck."

"I shoulda known then," Keystone muttered. His voice sounded very close. Tom had not been able to detect any movement, but for one moment he thought Keystone had slipped close under cover of their conversation. He leaped backwards, slipped in the blood from the girl's body, almost fell. Keystone said sepulchrally, "The luck's run out and I only got me roscoe and a big scameroo left. So-long, Kincaid. And you're goin', too!"

A door banged and Roxanne's strong, clear voice said, "The megaphone, Tom! He's got it hooked in for sound!"

Tom heard, understood. He swung the muzzle from the spot before him to a target at his right. He saw Keystone's gun blast fire.

He was crouching beside the brocaded chair. The sound of bullets into flesh was unmistakable. The body of the girl fell at last from her sitting position. It went tumbling floorward.

Tom held his fire upon inspiration. Roxanne was going toward the lights. There were footsteps scurrying as Maxie made his break, believing that the fallen body was Tom's.

The overhead lights came on with dramatic suddenness. Tom, prepared, closed his eyes tight, holding them that way by tremendous effort of will. When he opened them Keystone, who had not that much foresight, was still blinking, poised at the exit door, his gun wobbling toward Roxanne standing at the switchboard.

Tom said, "And so-long to you, Maxie." He feathered the trigger of the gun.

MAXIE KEYSTONE tried to bring his own gun around. He made a valiant effort to stay erect, one hand on the knob which was to have led him to a dash for liberty. He swayed there, unable to pull the trigger, his face tight with determination. Then he



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WILLIAM R. COX

let go the door and dropped with a slight crash to the floor. He did not move again.

Roxanne Queen came forward, steadily, her hand outstretched. She took one shuddering look at the figure of the girl and said, "Molly was planted—my own stand-in."

"She and the handsome extra were to let in the mob to-night. They intended to destroy the studio and perhaps kill us if we came in. Maxie, king of getaway artists, had an idea he could take enough of them away to make it stand up," said Tom. "Maxie was bred in the school of getting away with murder."

She said, "Tom—tell me. Do you believe all this is over?"

He held her hand tightly as Matt Durkin came plunging in, stopping dead at sight of Keystone. Clarke was right behind Matt. They went on to the stage and stared at the murdered girl.

Clarke said to Roxanne and Tom, "Just called the bomb squad. They took the junk and found out it was made on an estate in or near Beverly Hills, by the planting traces, by an expert in home-made bombs. . . ."

"Maxie," nodded Tom. "He had one hidden out with which to do away with Vesper and his guys."

Clarke said, "Well, it's a nice clean-up. Morton wants to talk very bad. If he can involve Vesper and the others. . . ."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry," said Tom. Clarke reached out and patted Tom's pocket. He said, "Your dough is leaking."

"That?" said Tom. "Oh, yes. A little cash deal I had on hand."

Clarke said, "Okay, Tom. It can ride the way it is."

Matt came close and grinned. He said, "Take them outa here fast—all of 'em, even the corpses. That dead babe was the tip-off. She went out and got that first bomb tagged onto Roxanne's car. She was supposed to send Tom after her bag, but he wasn't there, so poor Jason Hogue went for it, and the thing went off. If the timing had been okay, Tom woulda got it. He was in the car, drove into the parking space. . . ."

Tom said, "Her story was a lie. I checked that down at De Longpres Avenue. There weren't any scattered bullet holes around. Also, the bullet hole in the upholstery was at such an angle that it wouldn't have hit her unless she leaned all the way back and held her head up. Who drives a car that way? Also, no gang attempting homicide will fire just a single shot at the victim. . . . So the whole thing was faked, nobody had mistaken her for Roxanne and I knew she was a fake. After that, it was easy."

Matt said, "She sure looks like Mordecai

RED SKY IN HOLLYWOOD

with her dark hair. That's something for you to check, Clarke."

The policeman said, "You two! Okay, I'll clean it up. . . ." He shook his head, leaving them.

Matt said, "First thing, you guys gotta get married. Second thing, I gotta get to work on Hearts Is Trumps and produce it with the dough I won tonight. Third thing, that Lil Eva is pretty cute, you know it? She been cryin' on my shoulder in there. I think she ought to have a better chance."

Tom said, "You've gone Hollywood, you bum!"

Matt laughed, going out the door. Roxanne said, "But he did have one good idea. The mess is cleaned up. We could get married and fight with each other!"

"I've always been a gambler," said Tom gravely. "And that's a good bet. A very good one!"

THE END

DEATH IN THE CAGE

(Continued from page 8)

He sent for detectives.

When they came he said, "I want to confess I killed my wife." The detectives looked interested. Golea went on. "It was that night in Budapest, the night before our seasonal grand opening a few years ago. She had been nagging me again—a little dancer I had noticed—she was jealous. We made up and went to feed the lions together, as usual and—" Golea paused, stared back over the years, deep into his memory.

The detectives stared, too—but they did not look nearly as interested as before. One of them had turned a faint shade of green, and muttered what was probably the Rumanian equivalent of, "Oh, hell!"

This roused Golea, who then told them what they no longer wished to hear. "Yes—I fed her to the lions. I had two new ones then, magnificent brutes, completely untamed—yet I knew I could handle them. But I had never been able to handle her—" Golea mercifully went back into his dream before he died. That dream from which he had never awakened since he first saw the glitter and tinsel and make-believe of the carnival world that is a part—usually a saner one—of every boy's dream.

He relaxed back on his hospital cot and closed his eyes. "Imagine," he said, as if this explained everything, "a tamer of lions—who could not control his wife!"

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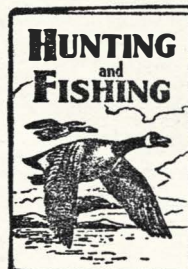
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TALMAGE POWELL

(Continued from page 73)

A cop answered in the corridor, and feet moved out there.

Isles waited; then suddenly Fran was standing in the doorway, and the cop who had brought her from the cell faded away. She looked at Isles; and after a long time she said, "Pop!" the way she used to say it.

She touched his cheeks and they didn't feel bruised any more. Then Barker cleared his throat and said he was sorry as hell but there was still a little official business to clear up.

So Fran told him.
That night of the murder, she had seen Isles' black coupé pass the house, very slowly. She had been watching for it, because he was late.

"That would have been Searcy driving," Isles said, "thinking he'd pick up Fran in case he needed a little human bargaining power if anything went wrong."

The way the car had slowed and then moved on past, Fran told them, had caused her to come out on the sidewalk, and watch the car. The car had parked, and she had walked down the sidewalk. She was near when the car door opened and a man jumped out. She saw the man running across the vacant field, another man jump from the car and follow him.

"Then Traxler must have been in the car with Searcy," Barker said. "They couldn't decide on a course of action and got in a row over the jewels."

"Then," Fran nodded, "I saw the second man—who must have been Traxler—catch up with the first man. They began fighting out in the field. I could barely see them, just dim shadows. I thought at first it was Pop and somebody trying to rob him. I didn't know what to do.

"I looked in the car and saw a black bag on the floor. It was open, and diamonds had been scattered over the floor of the car. I scooped them up, got out of the car with the bag and ran. I hid them first in the buffet, decided that wasn't so good, and put them in the coal bin, where they are now—except for that one diamond you have, Lieutenant Barker, that dropped from the bag in the buffet without my noticing it.

"Then everything happened so quickly. Pop accused of the robbery; I thought he—he was dead."

"Traxler fixed it that way," Isles said, "burning Searcy's body, knowing everyone would think it to be me. With me accused of robbery and 'dead', he thought I'd be the perfect fall-guy, leaving him in the clear."

The way Fran looked at him caused Isles to feel ten years younger. "Go on talking," he prompted her gruffly.

THE CORPSE MAN

"I tried to think," she said, "of some way of getting the diamonds back to the company so it wouldn't look as if—with the story I had to tell—that pop had stolen them. Then I was arrested, and I was afraid to tell of the diamonds at the time, because it would have supplied too strong a motive. But—Well, I would have told you, Lieutenant Barker, where the diamonds are before it was all over."

"Save it," Barker growled, "I feel enough like a heel already."

They left headquarters, and Barker drove them toward the snug, white bungalow that belonged to Jonathan Isles. On the way, Fran slipped her hands into Isles' palm and said in a still voice, "I've been a fool, Pop. It took so much trouble to show me what a fool I'd been. . ."

Isles said nothing. But he felt as sure that Bill Conlan would turn up one of these days, to come back to a woman who deserved and loved him.

They got out of Barker's car, went up the walk. The house was the same, except perhaps it was warmer with a calm peace. Fran disappeared; her steps sounded on the basement stairs.

Barker shuffled his feet, twisted his hat in his hand, tried to make an apology. Fran came back in the room, handed Barker a black bag.

He took it, fingered his hat band, opened his mouth once more to frame words to apologize to the gaunt, gray man, who stood smiling at him.

Barker was interrupted this time by a knock at the front door. Isles opened it. A big, hairy, gorillalike man stood there. Cicero Jewett, who had a couple of fortunes to back a jewelry business, stepped in the room and closed the door.

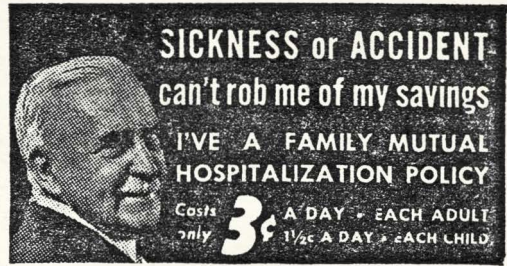
"The thing broke just in time to catch a newscast, Isles," Jewett said. "I heard. I—it's a devil of a time of night to make a call, but I. . . Hell, what I said still goes. It does take more than just knowledge of the business. It takes a man who can drive toward one central point, and laugh at the odds!" He looked at Isles and grinned. "You can call your boss and tell him to go to hell tomorrow, if you want to."

After a long time, Jonathan Isles said, "Will you let Fran get you a drink?"

Jewett chuckled. "I'd be mighty damned glad to!"

And Lieutenant Barker was a harried man no longer. He finally managed to make his apology. He said, "Count me in on that, John. I'll have a slug of you bourbon—neat! Maybe two!"

THE END



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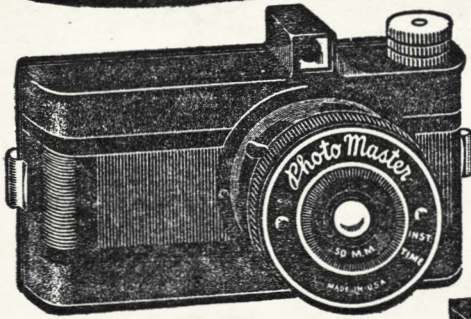
So-Lo RUBBER REPAIR KIT

Saves rubber. Easy to use—just spread on, let dry. Millions sold! Complete Kit, enough for 20 average repairs, 29c. At Hardware or 10c Stores.

Millions Save with So-Lo Menders

Calling All Camera Fans!

Genuine Photo Master CANDID CAMERA



The Ideal Gift
For Mother, Dad, Sis,
or Brother

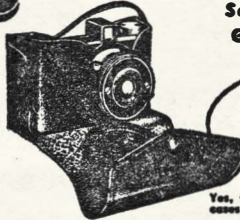
\$3.98

POST PAID

TAKE PICTURES YOU WILL TREASURE!

Imagine getting a genuine Photo Master with a ground and pitch polished lens in the face of one of the most drastic camera shortages in our history! A camera designed to take pictures in full color as well as black and white! A camera that will enable you to graphically record the events and people of the present for you to enjoy in the future. Yes, start today to take pictures of things as they happen. It's a real thrill that will bring you reflected pleasures for years to come. So order your Photo Master now! And if after the postman delivers it you don't think the \$3.98 you paid for it is the best \$3.98 you've ever spent—return it within 10 days and we'll refund your money cheerfully—and quick as a flash!

Sold on a "Examine At Our Risk"
GUARANTEE OF SATISFACTION



This Made-To-Measure
CARRYING CASE
only **2c** with purchase
of Camera

Yes, you can have one of these made-to-measure carrying cases worth 75c for only 2c with every camera ordered.

Look At These Features

- ★ Genuine Simpson Ground Pitch Polished Lens
- ★ Extremely Simple, Foolproof Operation
- ★ Takes 16 Pictures on any Standard No. 127 Film
- ★ Also Takes Excellent Pictures in Full Color
- ★ Level View Finder

Biggest Smokers' Value Ever!

WINDPROOF LIGHTER and CIGARETTE CASE

Both For Only . . .

\$2.98

POST PAID
TAX FREE

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



A Matched Set
You'll Be Proud To
Give or Get

Both Personalized

With a Rich Silver on Black
MONOGRAMMED INITIAL
of your own choice

MAIL THIS COUPON FOR SMOKER SET

NATIONAL NOVELTIES—Dept. R26
608 So. Dearborn St.—Chicago 5, Ill. PRINT INITIAL IN THIS BOX

Please rush Feather Lite Windproof Lighter and Matching Cigarette Case personalized with initial printed in box above.

CHECK ONE

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

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

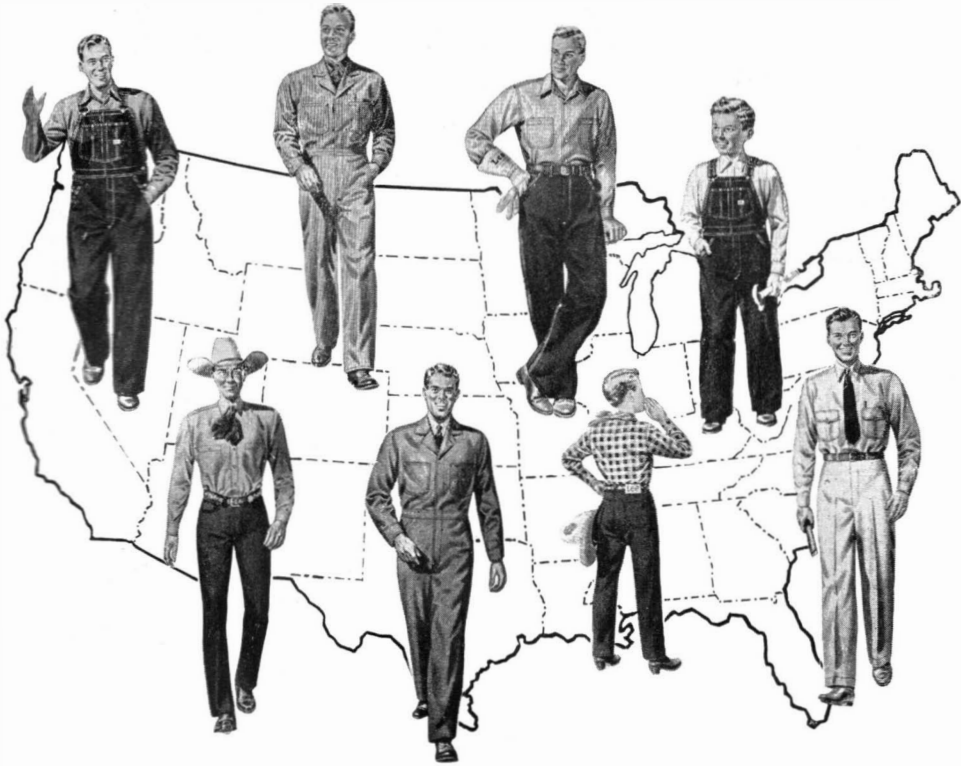
MAIL THIS COUPON FOR CAMERA

NATIONAL NOVELTIES—Dept. PC40
608 South Dearborn St.—Chicago 5, Ill.
Rush Photomaster at \$3.98 with Carrying Case for only 2c extra. Satisfaction guaranteed or money back if returned within 10 days.

CHECK ONE

- I am enclosing \$4 for payment in full. Send Camera and Case Postpaid.
- Send Camera and Case C.O.D. I will pay postman \$4 plus postage costs. If you want 3 rolls of No. 127 Film (enough for 48 pictures) for only \$14 plus 15c postage and handling costs CHECK BELOW.
- I am enclosing \$4.96 for payment in full. Include 3 rolls of Film postpaid.
- Include 3 rolls of Film C.O.D. I will pay postman \$4.96 plus postage.

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



SOON...You'll Step out in the BEST LOOKING work clothes ever!

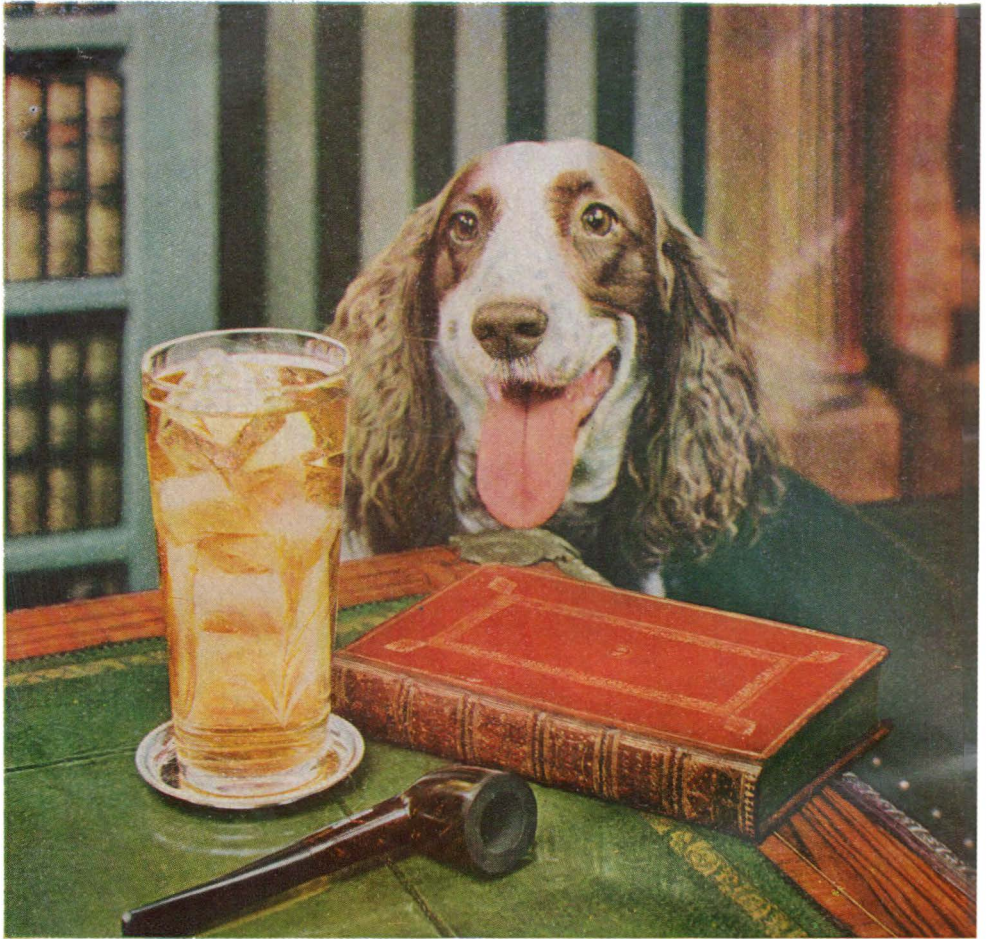
Soon as production catches up with demand your Lee Dealer will have the finest line of Lee Work Clothes ever made! Longer-lasting fabrics! Important exclusive features! And to top it all, the grand comfort and better appearance of Lee "Tailored Sizes". No other work clothes gives you as much for your money. Look for the famous Lee label!

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WORLD'S LARGEST MANUFACTURERS OF UNION-MADE WORK CLOTHES



"Nice evening the boss is lining up for himself"

NEXT to a companion like Skippy, the pleasantest prop we can suggest for your fireside evening is a Calvert highball.

For here's a pre-war quality whiskey that's definitely *the real thing*...so smooth and mellow it simply can't be imitated!

Little wonder that year after year, Calvert is reported "the whiskey most often asked for by name".

Why not curl up *tonight* with your pipe, book and a Calvert highball? But be sure it's Calvert... if you want *the real thing*.

CLEAR HEADS CHOOSE **Calvert**



It's the Real Thing

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