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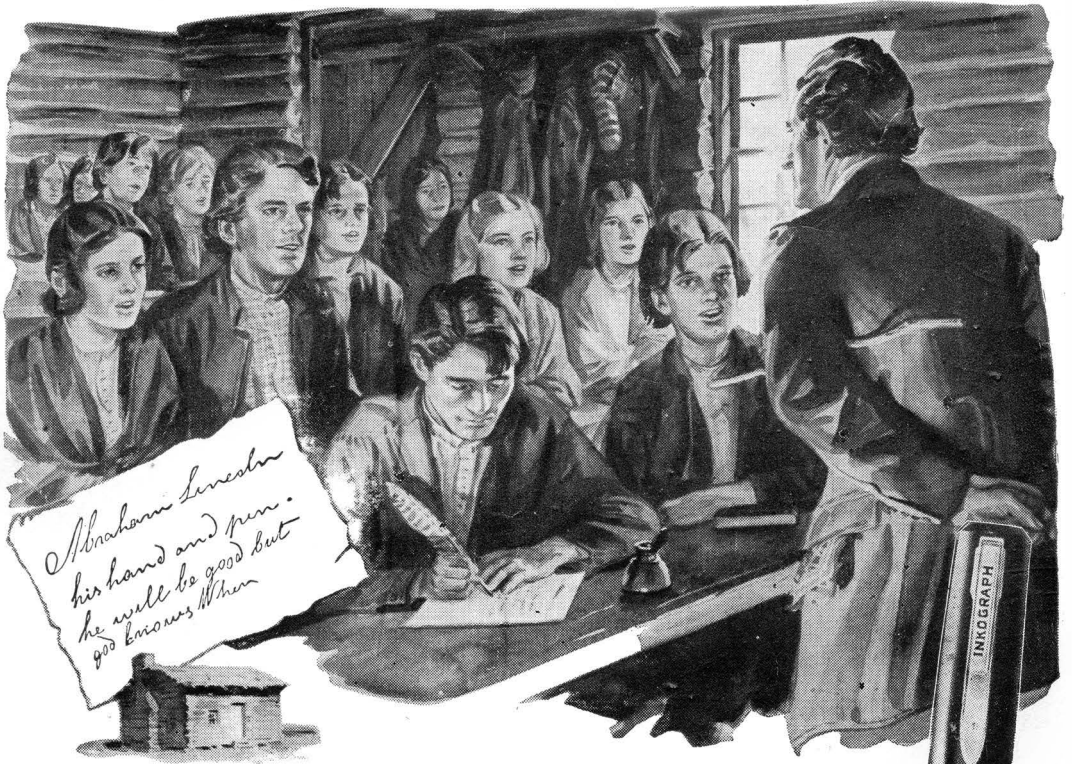


**QUIETLY
MY HANGNOOSE
WAITS**

A MATT MERCER MYSTERY
by **DAY KEENE**

**IF I SHOULD
DIE —**

by **CYRIL PLUNKETT**
POWELL-CORBETT
HARRISON-LEWIS
AND OTHERS!



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JULY ISSUE OUT MAY 3rd!

Volume 33

May, 1946

Number 2

FAST-PACED MYSTERY NOVEL

- QUIETLY MY HANGNOOSE WAITS.....Day Keene 26**
Because their dirty dough couldn't erase from my mind the innocent kid they'd groomed for the gallows, I stood to lose my twins, my wife—and my life!

THREE EERIE MURDER NOVELETTES

- IF I SHOULD DIE—.....Cyril Plunkett 10**
When I awoke to find my belt around a dead man's neck, I was to wish I'd died during the night's ghastly, fantastic nightmare!
- MY KINGDOM FOR A CORPSE.....Ken Lewis 60**
Dead as she was, she still had the power to make Riley go through crimson miles of murder!
- SHADOW OF A SLAYER.....C. William Harrison 82**
With their mocking kindness, they gave me gifts I did not want—and kept from me the only thing that could save my life!

FIVE UNUSUAL SHORT STORIES

- IT'S YOUR NECK!.....George William Rae 22**
When the notion strikes us citizens of Danton, we take the law into our own hands—and then somebody gets mighty hot around the collar!
- THE BURNING SNOW.....Ralph Eldred 46**
The only one who *knew* I was sane lay cold and still. But if I were crazy, it was a strange madness of my own making.
- THIS WAY OUT.....John Corbett 53**
Joe Cortez ran into strange trouble—all because he'd never been a corpse before.
- TILL DEATH DO US PART.....Dana McGuire 72**
The black squawl looming over the bay wouldn't stop *me* from sailing again—but it was going to stop my Nancy—and for good!
- EACH MAN KILLS—.....Talmage Powell 77**
No-'count Bill Pratt wasn't much to pin your hopes of living on, when your own kin thought you'd murdered your husband.

—AND—

- MYSTERY'S DARK PORTALS.....A Department 6**
Gaze into the crystal ball of crime. . . .
- MACABRE MUSEUM.....Mayan and Jakobsson 45**
An exhibit of the weird and unusual in murder!
- THE LONELY DEAD.....Laura Wirta 8**
If you want to stay healthy, don't ask a shade to dinner!

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"What's he got that I haven't got?"



LOOK at the successful men you know. "What have they got" that you haven't?

Very little, probably. In most ways these men are no brighter or naturally more capable than average. Many of them probably have no more formal education or better natural aptitudes than you.

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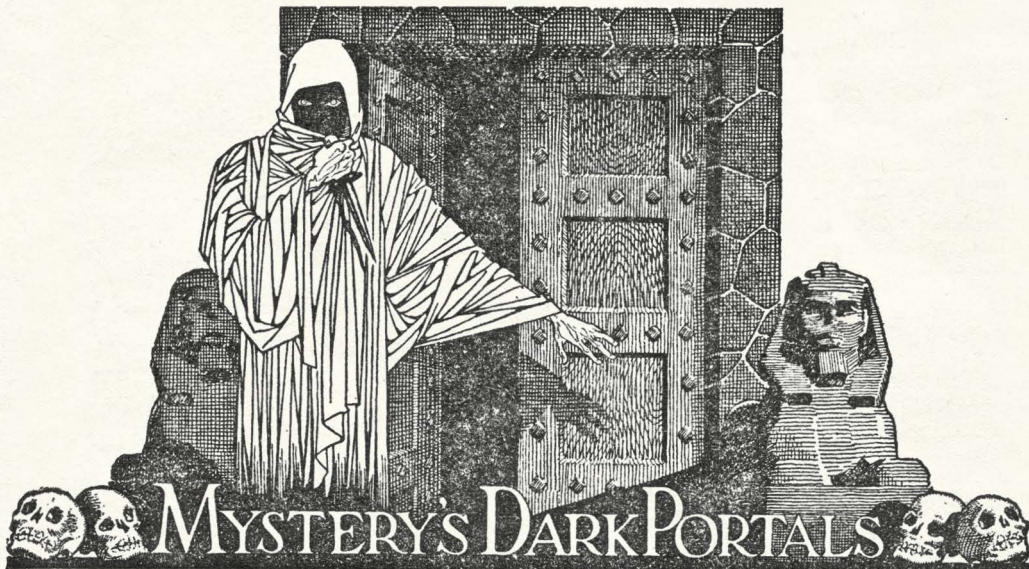
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MYSTERY'S DARK PORTALS

ME? I'm Lynn Reed. "Boy Detective" the hot-shots on the Homicide Squad call me. But "boy detective" or not, I knew when I got my white-gloved hands in that lousy murder-pie, I was right smack in the middle of one of the biggest cases in the country. And you couldn't see a clue for dust.

The only thing we had to go on was Belinda.

Belinda had the dope on that Carles kidnapping that shocked the country five years ago. Hundreds of thousands in ransom had been paid—and the child had never been returned. The identity and whereabouts of the killers had baffled the best minds in the country. But the gang who snatched the kid knew when they had a good thing, and they were hanging on to it—even if it was only a corpse. It was a *three-million dollar* corpse, and a lead-lined coffin awaited anybody who tried to take it back to its mama!

But Belinda had pictures to prove that the corpse was still alive!

It looked like I'd elected myself to fill that coffin! For Belinda had written me that a guy I knew was in "serious trouble," and I'd better meet her tonight after her carnival act stopped for dinner.

But let Andrew Holt give you a corpse-eye view of what happened then:

Belinda made the usual taunting wisecracks that went with an act like hers, but between the barker and the rifles, they were lost. She stopped and lay still in her black nightgown under the dirty pink satin comforter, waiting for the next pitched ball to hit the button under the raised stage bed and sprawl her out onto the floor. When it

came, she rolled wearily to the floor and stayed there.

"Hey, Belinda," the barker yelled. "What's wrong, kid?"

"I think she's passed out," I said, making for the stage. "Let's have a look."

On her pillow, the red smear looked like blood. I touched it. Lipstick. She'd tried to write something before blacking out.

The barker took her hand and yelled in her ear. I didn't bother. The blue-rimmed little hole just at the base of the hairline made it unnecessary.

"Somebody call a doctor!" he screamed to the excited mob. I touched his wrist.

"Forget it," I said. "Better you should call the cops. She's dead. . . ."

And where did that leave me? Right behind murder's eight-ball—filling the rôle of preferred candidate for the coffin or the chair! Don't miss Andrew Holt's exciting feature-length novel of the biggest corpse snatch you've ever witnessed, in the *July Dime Mystery*.

* * * *

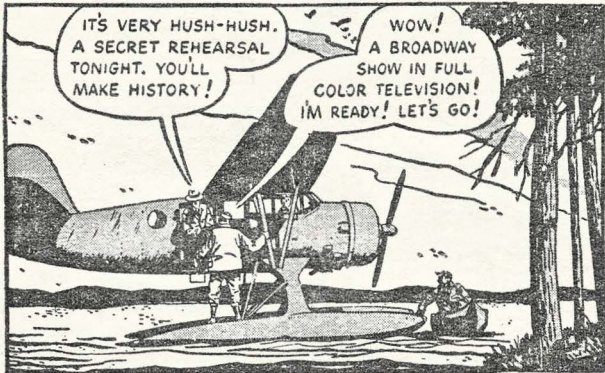
This month, we have a surprise for you, on page 45. Many murder-mystery fans have intimated that you'd be interested in an illustrated feature depicting some of the weird happenings of real life. And in *Macabre Museum*, we think we've found the combination you're looking for.

Here are pictured, brief tales of the bizarre, the exotic, the extraordinary, but crimes that actually happened!

The July issue will be published May 3rd! See you then!

—The Editor

Bob Got Out Of The Woods In A Hurry When...



YOU ALWAYS GET REFRESHING, GOOD-LOOKING SHAVES WITH THIN GILLETTE BLADES, FOR THESE ARE THE KEENEST, LONGEST-LASTING, LOW-PRICED BLADES YOU EVER USED. AND BECAUSE THEY FIT YOUR RAZOR PRECISELY, THEY PROTECT YOUR FACE FROM THE SMART AND IRRITATION CAUSED BY MISFIT BLADES. ALWAYS ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES

THIN Gillette BLADES 4 for 10



THE LONELY DEAD



The ghostly voices that speak to some of us on earth are merely trying to be friendly. But if you entertain them—beware. They may try to repay your hospitality!

IF YOU believe that while there's life there's hope, having a ghost around to talk to is a comfort.

Mattie was fifteen, a ranch girl out Arizona way, who combined riding and shooting with ghost-conversing via the ouija board—ouija being, according to some, a combination of the French "oui" and the German "ja," both meaning yes. In other words, a ghost who will answer your questions through the ouija is supposed to be an agreeable soul. So you could have knocked Mattie down with a stray sprig of ectoplasm when her pet spirit told her she ought to shoot her father.

"I shook all over," Mattie confessed.

Still, there were extenuating circumstances. Mattie's mother had been the American Venus of 1916, a national beauty contest winner, and here she was on a ranch in Arizona, a rose blooming in the desert. The year was 1933. She was unhappy and the ghost knew why. The reason was papa.

So one day, Mattie brought her shotgun to her shoulder and peppered Papa through the back, as specified.

This resulted in mother's being convicted of murder and sentenced from ten to twenty-five years, of which she served two. Then she was granted a second trial, which never took place, leaving her officially exonerated, while Mattie did some time in a school for delinquents and was paroled.

About all you could say about the ghost was that it was a sly one, first sending Papa up in them hills and then convincing Mattie that Mama was lonely—when all the time *it* just probably wanted company!

Then there's the story of Will Hebner, the lonesome spirit of the Ozarks. Will used to be married to Cora, and they had their little home in the foothills of the famed mountains. Yet, even in life he was lonely and, according to his wife's account, kept answering matrimonial advertisements. He even went so far as to leave her eighteen times to marry somebody else. But he always came back to her, usually better off financially than when he'd left.

She retaliated by achieving six marriages of her own—profitably and without benefit of divorce.

Along about 1937 Will vanished again.

Cora did the chores as usual, until she, too, felt that she would like to see a few people. Neighbors who had been following the Hebners' goings on with considerable interest, noticed she was getting nervous one day when she shot and killed a buzzard which had been hovering about the place. This was against the law.

However, it got to be time for Will to show up again—and right around then Cora inserted another of those ads in a matrimonial paper, describing herself as a loyal, loving widow. Soon she got an answer. She left, and the neighbors decided to take a look about the place.

When they caught up with Cora, she insisted hers and Will's had been a happy, even an ideal arrangement, and had saved their marriage from that fatal ennui which destroys so many homes. She added that there was no reason to get excited just because she was far from home—in Miami, Florida—and about to wed a total stranger—and because Will couldn't be found.

Will, however, *had* been found. Neighbors and law enforcement officials had dug up his complete skeleton in the storm cellar of their little love-nest. A broken nose and dentistry identified the skeleton positively as Will's and there were signs that he had met a violent end.

Cora Hebner was arrested and charged with murder, over her own protests. Will would come back for her, she insisted—he always had before. Wherever he was, he would get lonely. . . .

Shortly before her trial officials felt they'd found enough discrepancies in her story of her life with Will to have an airtight first degree murder case against her—and shortly before her trial they found her dead of poison in her cell!

She had had no visitors and should have had no poison—yet they called it suicide. But Cora Hebner left the following note:

. . . now you can't deny that Will was here . . . not only once, but twice. He gave me this [poison] the first week I was here. He came on a dark and stormy night. . . .

Well, what would you say? That the ghosts are lonely and, if you believe in 'em and entertain 'em—they'll ask you up?

Laura Wirta



**INTRIGUE IN
MEXICO CITY!**

**KILLERS IN
THE SHADOWS!**

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THE RHUMBA!**

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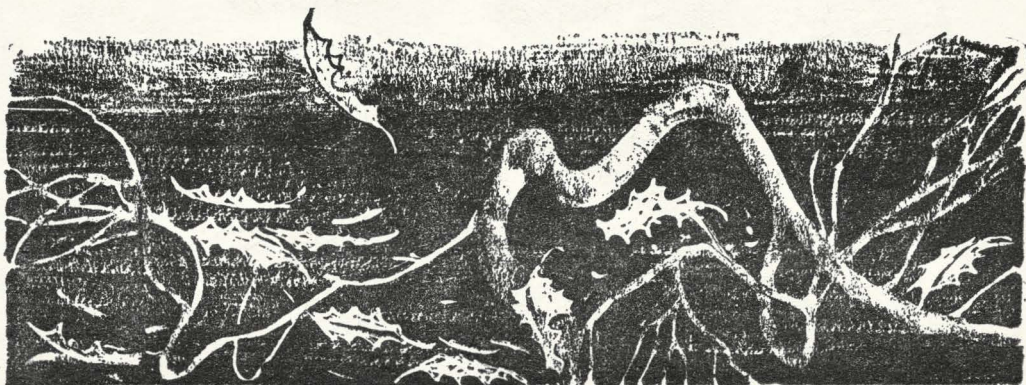
Produced by PHIL L. RYAN · Directed by EDWARD H. GRIFFITH





"Your belt, Joey?" Norb asked harshly.

I had a nightmare so fantastic, so weird, I dreaded the inevitable awakening. And when I awoke to find my face bruised, my clothes bloody and my belt around a dead man's neck, I was to wish I had died that night, instead of living to fill the murderer's hangnoose that was already tagged with my name!



IF I SHOULD DIE—

Spine-Chilling Murder-Mystery Novelette

By CYRIL PLUNKETT

CHAPTER ONE

Dead or Alive?

I KNEW from the beginning that the dream would end in murder. The only real surprise was that the nightmare raced on and on, and that I remained alive through it. Because I was going to be the body. *Jocyn, it's curtains for you this time*, I thought when the lights went out, and the whole thing started.

Scene by scene it unfolded—relentlessly, with no relief from fear, no let-up in the tension. One moment I could see the bar—myself sitting at the bar, drinking with Pete Carr—

Darlene—Darlene. . . It came from the mist, the corkscrew fog. It rose, a thin wail, *Darlene—!*

"Pete, you're wrong," I pleaded. "Pete, I don't give a hang about her, really."

The point is, I was fully aware it was a dream, aware these things about to happen couldn't possibly happen. To begin with, Pete Carr wasn't bad guy. He was big, of course. Rumbled when he talked, rolled when he walked, drank too much for his own good. But I'd never known him to be ugly. Yet there I was in the whirlpool, spinning, crying, "Pete, you can't settle it by murder!"

He answered from the rainy darkness with strange laughter. His voice leaped from icy crags, rose from rocky chasms. "Pete!" I screamed. "*She made all the passes!*"

He had me by the collar of my coat. Just held me like that, my feet off the ground, and hit me. He hit me with a hammer. *Good God, he was going to pound me deep into the ground!*

"Pete," I whispered, "listen to me. You've got it all wrong, Pete. I never made love to Darlene—"

No hope, no reasoning with him, no way to stop him—there was no one else around. My head was bursting. I was in the ground now up to my neck. My lips.

My feet broke through the earth's crust. I fell into a hole. Pete Carr, was shouting up above now, fighting to retain his balance. Then he fell into the hole and we went down for miles and miles, into a pit that seemed to have no bottom.

We landed on a hard rail track, in the dark. The subway. . . .

I couldn't move; I was paralyzed. But the strength of Pete Carr! With no more than my body and a hammer, to have cracked right through the subway. I marveled that I still had a head, and that I was conscious while Pete Carr, apparently, was dead.



But he wasn't dead. He made sounds like snoring. It struck me then that I must lie here until either he awakened or a train came. Pete might not regain consciousness for hours, but a track walker might happen along and save me. I counted seconds, hours. I tried to raise my voice, to call, "Help!" Surely someone on the street would see the hole and wonder.

I had no voice. It wall all inside my head. Suddenly, I could move. I sat up. At that moment I heard a train whistle! My head began to spin. I couldn't see the headlight—yet.

The train was coming and Pete Carr was unconscious.

Would Pete say, if I pulled him off the track and saved him, "I was wrong about you, Joey, and I'm sorry." He would not! He'd kill me. It was Pete Carr's life—or mine. No one ever would know. No one could ever say, Joey Forsythe did it." The headlight was a white eye in the rainy gloom now, blinking nearer, and nearer.

I got up. "Darlene," I'd say, "it's different. He's dead." What the hell, I was a man, wasn't I? She was blonde, young and lovely. "Darlene," I'd say, "I've been a fool. Sure I've wanted you. You've driven me half-crazy."

He was conscious, trying desperately to rise? He'd heard the train, knew that death was roaring at him from the darkness? My hands moved instantly, two hands totally apart from me. Two hands that reached down, tore off my belt. I had only a split second to look into his eyes. Then the train whistled again, almost upon us, and he made a frantic lunge. I stopped him, kicked. His whole body jerked, and he tried to crawl. I laced my belt to the rail and around his neck.

It was over like that. The wheels cut off his head! The train flashed by—I just stood there laughing. *You're dead, Pete Carr, you're dead.* His blood was on my hands. I looked at my hands and doubled up with laughter. . . .

THERE was a field to cross on the long way home—a unfenced, rainy field. I waded knee-deep in wet clover, and my legs were aching. Eyes peered at me, watching my progress from the darkness. Eyes like headlights blinking. The strangest eyes I had ever seen.

Fourteen cows, staring brightly. Seven fat cows, seven lean ones.

A bell began to ring, and the cows all blinked. Then the light went off. The light went off every time the bell rang. Suddenly the seven greedy-lean cows started toward me.

I ran. The thick clover tripped me. I looked back. The cows were nearer every moment. The field seemed endless. I knew at last. I couldn't escape. My pants were sliding off. I had no belt to hold them up. I'd left the belt back in the subway with Carr's body.

I'd lost her—Darlene. Now the greedy cows were lunging for my legs. They nibbled at my shoes. I cursed them, kicked them, but they ate my shoes—

I heard someone say, "Now what do you suppose happened to *him?*"

CHAPTER TWO

Black Daylight

I GROANED, tried to turn over. My head was as big as a balloon. I had subways in my head; the trains were rushing through it madly. Clickety-clack, clickety-clack—*wham*. When I moved, when I blinked my eyes and tried to get them open, a lot of busy little men began drilling holes. My head was full of holes, like a Swiss cheese, like a sieve. Clickety-clack, clickety-clack—*wham*.

"What do you suppose happened to him? He never stayed away this long," a voice asked shrilly.

Then the voice lowered a little. "I guess she's pretty worried."

I recognized the voice. It belonged to Georgie Holt, the man in the room at the end of the hall. He was in the hall now, talking to Nat Varden, the other roomer. I'd been asleep. I'd had a dream. My God, what a dream! For a moment I couldn't separate the dream from reality.

Were these two men outside my door talking about *me*? Or wondering what had happened to Pete Carr?

"I drove the car out of the street for her," said Varden.

Mrs. Carr, of course. Only one "her" in the building—Darlene.

"But I thought the car was locked?" said Georgie.

"Yes," said Varden, "but she had a duplicate key. She never knew when Pete would lose his key. So I went out and put the car in the garage for her."

"You think something could have happened to him, Mr. Varden?"

I quit trying to get my eyes open. Quit trying to think. I had a queer, tight feeling.

"I understand," said Georgie, "that Pete had a lot of money on him last night, Mr. Varden."

Well, Pete always had a lot of money on him, didn't he? Pete was lousy with it. It grew for him on bushes.

They didn't say anything else. Apparently they'd passed each other in the hall, like ships in the night. Apparently they had both retired behind their own doors again. I sighed then and opened my eyes.

Day, bright daylight. The rain was gone, forgotten. My room had two windows, though, this morning. If it *was* morning. It wasn't morning. My window faced the west, the sun was shining through it. It was afternoon. But *two* windows when there should have been but one? Two shades, two separate sets of curtains? And two hands on my right arm! I looked at my arm. All right to the elbow—just one elbow. All right to the wrist—just one wrist.

I made a lot of the fact that my eyes refused to focus, that my right arm had two hands and ten fingers. The fingers had brown stains on them. I scowled. But all the while I was thinking, *Something happened to Pete Carr*. Then I sat up in the bed. The room spun and turned black. My stomach began turning over and I groaned.

"Mr. Forsythe?" Georgie Holt called.

"Mr. Forsythe! Are you sick?" He rapped.

He tried the door, began pounding on it. "The door is locked, Mr. Forsythe. Can you let me in?"

I tried it again, sat up, rolled half off the bed. Put both feet down on the floor and sat there like that, swaying. The vertigo was coming in waves. I'd have an almost lucid moment, then black out. I had socks on, I could see that. No shoes? I had to wait for another wave of blackness. My clothes were rumpled, dirty, and stained. My shoes were on the floor, but everything was wrong. My shoes didn't make sense. Last night cows had nibbled at them—I put my hand over my eyes. It was all mixed up, it came in waves. I shook my head and tried to get my bearings.

"Mr. Forsythe?" Georgie called again, anxiously.

"Yes, I—I'm coming."

I got over to the door, unlocked it, hung on it. There were two of him. Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde? Now he slid together, became one. But it wasn't fair, the way I felt, to see the apples in his cheeks. His blond hair was parted neatly in the middle—apparently he had just washed up. He had that scrubbed look.

"Good heavens, Mr. Forsythe!" His eyes became owlish behind the thick lenses. "You look green! Should I call a doctor?"

I pushed him out of my way. But he followed me up the hall to the bathroom, chattering all the way. In the bathroom, finally, I got what he was saying.

"Mr. Forsythe, you're c-covered with blood!"

It was blood all right. Even then I argued with the bleary image in the mirror. *Can't be blood*, I thought. I felt of the nose in the mirror; it was swollen, it hurt. The guy in the mirror didn't even look like Joey Forsythe. Same curly black hair, of course—a mess now. Same brown eyes. Same five feet nine and the same broad shoulders. But my face couldn't be bruised and puffy like this!

I passed one weak hand over it; and all the while Georgie stayed there with me. He would start out, and turn back. He'd just come home from work, he said.

"Maybe," he said, "you're still wobbly. Maybe if you walked back to your room alone you'd fall. Mrs. Carr would hear it. Then she'd come up. She'd be frightened."

Mrs. Pete Carr—Darlene. Pete Carr owned the building. The Carrs had the first floor, and there were six rooms upstairs for the roomers—up a private stairway. Three roomers, at present. Myself, of course, Varden and Georgie.

"Georgie—" My lips were cracked. "Georgie, didn't I overhear you say something about Pete—?"

He'd followed me back to my room. Now he stood at the door, one hand on the knob. "Yes, he's missing, Mr. Forsythe."

I said queerly, "You mean Dar—his wife doesn't know where he is?"

"Since last night." Georgie nodded brightly.

"What time last night?"

"I think she said he left about ten."

"And she doesn't even know where he went?"

"All she knows—" But Georgie seemed abruptly to remember I was ill. "You got enough troubles of your own, Mr. Forsythe. You need another nap. But if you want anything—"

I wanted something, all right. A new head without a lump on it. But Georgie couldn't give me what I wanted even more—reassurance.

ONE window again. Five fingers on my hand. Two black shoes on the floor where they should be. But no Pete Carr. For a while I stared at the window. I could look back on the night now with some degree of clarity. I'd gone down to the Monroe Street bar. A drizzly night like that there'd been nothing else to do but have a beer or two. Ten o'clock? Ten-fifteen, when Pete Carr had come in?

"Hello, Joey," he'd said.

"How about it," he'd said, "have a drink, kid, on me?"

I could count the drinks on one hand, he'd bought me until last night. Pete Carr was no fool; Joey Forsythe had nothing to offer. But last night he'd kept the drinks coming.

They went down like tenpins. Single shots at first; double after three.

"Look, Pete," I'd said. After eleven? Midnight? "I can't take them like this."

His eyes were narrowed, hard. "Panty-waist, eh?"

"Nuts. You're bigger—you got storage. Look, Pete, I'm no sap. There's shome—something on your mind. It's Darlene."

He'd leaned back against the bar. "What's the matter with Darlene?"

"That's it, that's what's on your mind."

"So that's what's on my mind."

"Okay. But what's it got to do with *me*?"

Now I looked at the window. I could recall that much of it clearly. Then it got hazy. The juke box seeped into it, playing jive. People got into it.

Yes, I remembered the dream, too. Every little piece of it, but I didn't want to bring the dream into it. The dream was horrible, fantastic. What I wanted were facts. Carr had wanted something last night. That was a fact. He'd wanted me drunk. Drunk he'd thought I would talk—and apparently I *had*.

Why? What made me think that? The dream again? The fight we'd had? I couldn't keep the dream out of it. One thing was certain. Pete had suspected Darlene. He'd suspected *me*. So whatever had happened, wherever he was, the thing to do was pack and get away from here fast.

What would I use for money? I owed the Carr's two weeks rent already. You had to have a job to have money. I had blown the last one, so I had no money. I'd had one buck and forty cents last night. I reached into my pocket, to see how much was left. My hand came out with a folded twenty. There was something folded inside the twenty—a key.

I was less surprised to find the twenty and the key than at my own reaction. You're puzzled, maybe, if your pockets turn up something that shouldn't be there. You might be amused; you might be annoyed—but *my* heart began to miss beat after beat suddenly. This wasn't my key. My key wasn't the Yale type. My key was still in the door; I'd come in last night and had locked it from habit. This wasn't my twenty. I hadn't seen that much at once in weeks!

Key to Norb Randy's house, maybe? Norb lived a few blocks up the street, he was married to my sister. Had I gone around to Norb last night and nicked him for a twenty?

The trouble was, I'd had too much to drink. Swell chance I'd have to nick Norb for a loan in that condition. Besides, Norb had never given me a twenty. Five bucks was his limit. Norb worked for his dough, he would tell me. The way he said it he could make it hurt. He was on the Force—a homicide detective.

So this wasn't Norb's twenty, and apparently it wasn't Norb's key. Where *had* I got it?

Ever try to pull a rabbit from a hat? Reach into the past when there wasn't any? I got off the bed. I'd been in a fight last night. I'd been hit on the head, but the feeling I had now wasn't physical. It was in my mind. A word in my mind that whispered and pleaded. Hurry! Hurry! Get the bloodstained shirt off. *Hurry!*

Hide the shirt where? My teeth were chattering as I stuffed it in the dresser. I combed my hair. The comb fell out of my hand. I put on my shoes, stood up and something was wrong. My pants were loose at the waist. Automatically, I reached for my belt, to take it up a notch. There was no belt there.

I put both hands on the dresser, gripped it. No belt? But I'd *had* a belt last night. One my sister had given me when I'd come out of the army. It had a silver buckle with *J* for Joey. I'd worn that belt last night!

I looked in the dresser for it, pawing through each drawer. Then I ransacked the closet. *You fool, you left it on the tracks, by the body.* I tore the covers off the bed and shook them. . . .

She didn't knock. She just opened the door and slipped in. Darlene Carr. "Hello, Joey," she said.

CHAPTER THREE

A Corpse To Remember

A SWEET face; baby face you'd call it, maybe. She was twenty-five, but she didn't even look twenty. Today she had on red shoes with high heels, a red skirt, a silky white blouse with balloon sleeves. Lots of pale blonde hair, way down to her shoulders. Today she wore red tear-drops, fastened to her perfumed ears.

She was looking at me queerly, her back against the door and her red lips parted. "Pete didn't come home last night, Joey."

How could he come home, honey, when he's dead? How did I *know* he was dead? Vital statistics wouldn't accept the proof I had—a dream.

I just looked at her, all tangled in emotion. I wanted to reach out, put my arms around her, hold her. I was afraid to touch her, afraid even to speak.

"We had a quarrel last night, Joey—Pete and I. "We quarreled about you, Joey. Maybe he's left me."

Oh no, not Pete Carr. Pete never gave up anything he could hold onto—especially Darlene. He was crazy about her. He would follow her with his eyes as though he couldn't

believe that she had married him. Oh no, Pete Carr would sign no quit-claim for his "Baby".

"Joey, I—I tried to waken you before. I knew you were home. I rapped at your door. I—I wanted to warn you."

Twenty hours too late? After I had seen Pete Carr last night? After I knew he'd suspected her—and me? I mumbled something. Maybe it was "thanks." I reached around for my coat, stopped as she said:

"I heard you come in last night, Joey."
"What time?" I said.

She blinked at the frayed, raw edge of my voice. "Three or four o'clock," she said. "I couldn't go to sleep, the things he'd said! He'd gone out looking for you, Joey—" She caught her lip between her little teeth. "Was the Ford there, Joey, when you came home this morning?"

"Was it where?" I said.

"Why—across the street, where we found it this morning. Joey, what on earth—*oh!*" she said. She'd noticed my bruises, I guess, for the first time." She swayed toward me. Her hands found me, clung to me. "Joey, he found you!"

There were tears in her eyes; she was beating with clenched fists against my chest. "Joey, I hate him! I hate him!"

I heard a door close in the hall. Not Georgie's; this was too near. I heard footsteps in the hall; they stopped, then came on toward my door.

"Forsythe?" Nat Varden called through the door. "Are you alone?"

I didn't answer. Darlene had pressed a quick finger to my lips.

"Are you all right, Forsythe?" said Varden.

"I'm all right. I'm coming down in a minute."

"I'd like to talk with you, before you go out to dinner. It's important, Forsythe."

Varden, though a young man, dined quietly alone at a small place just around the corner. When he'd returned, he seldom went out again evening. Had he overheard Pete and Darlene quarreling last night?

"I'll see you in a few minutes," I said.

He turned, went back to his room with flat decisive steps.

"Joey," Darlene whispered, "Pete found you!"

"I saw him at the bar," I admitted.

"Darling, your face!"

Georgie's door opened at that moment. I held my breath. But Varden's room was Georgie's goal. He rapped on Varden's door. The whole building was on edge with Carr's disappearance.

"Mr. Varden?" Georgie began calling.
"Mr. Varden?"

"Joey—Pete hit you!" Darlene breathed then.

"Wait," I said. Too often had Georgie seen me talking to Darlene. Varden, too, for that matter. They must not hear her, must not guess she was with me.

"Joey, what will we do?" she was moaning. Georgie went into Varden's room and the door closed. I relaxed a little.

"Something happened, I know it!" she said. "Joey, what did you do?"

"The hall is clear," I said. "You'd better beat it."

"I know. Joey, I know! I mustn't be found with you—now."

Now? Then something *was* different? Had she sensed Pete would never come home now?

"Be careful, d-darling," she was pleading. "You'll tell me as soon as you c-can?"

"I'll tell you," I nodded.

For one moment she stood close to me. She kissed me. Then she was gone.

I watched from the door. I could hear Georgie, in Varden's room saying to Nat Varden, "She says it's happened before, he's stayed away like this. But the car's the thing, Mr. Varden. Maybe I'm fussy, but I can't help it. I don't like it. I think something is wrong, and we should call the police."

I went straight on past, down the stairs, outside. Straight up the street, swiftly, to Norb Randy's.

ONCE I'd had an operation and I'd needed blood; I'd got it from Norb Randy. Then Sis and Norb would send me cigarettes overseas. Coming back, it was Norb who'd got me my first job; Norb I could touch for a five spot. It's easy to form habits. He was older by fifteen years than I, in his forties. What else could I do but see Norb Randy?

I walked into the yard. They had a big yard with bushes and trees. It was the shadows from the trees that got me. I fought off the shakes. Then I walked to the kitchen door.

Norb came to the door. His sleeves were rolled, his collar open.

I looked beyond him, whispered, "Sis?"

"Gone. I just packed her off to a movie. He was frowning. "Joey, who hit you?"

"I—I don't know."

"Tanked?" he said.

I sat down in the kitchen, put my face in my hands, tried to get control. Then I said, "Pete Carr's missing."

His lips tightened a little—that's all.

"I was with him last night, Norb."

"Norb, I—I don't know what else to say! I admit I was tanked, but I don't remember the brawl or know what happened." I told him all about the dream. There was an electric clock above the sink. For a minute after I'd finished, there was no sound but the clock's.

"Let's see the key," he said then. I gave it to him, together with the twenty.

"You aren't positive it's Pete's car key?"

"What else can it be? Apparently I drove the car home."

"Tanked like that?"

"But Pete couldn't, not if he's—" He knew what I meant. *Not if Pete Carr was dead.*

He jiggled the key. "Where is the rest of Carr's dough?"

"I don't know anything about the dough he was supposed to have had on him. All I know is what Georgie said—"

He'd turned away abruptly, tossed the apron aside and went up the hall, to the phone.

Pete Carr had just been reported missing. I could see Norb's shoulders stiffen: I was in it officially, they said. Two detectives were already on their way to talk to Darlene.

WE DROVE to the bar in Norb's car. The cops were in it now, not just Norb. I just sat looking straight ahead and seeing nothing.

Ben Trask was behind the bar. But he shook his head and said he hadn't been on duty last night. "I was here though," he admitted.

Norb had ordered beer. Now he turned the glass around on its own wet ring. "See Joey here with Carr?"

Ben looked at me, grinned. "Sure. I threw 'em out."

"When?" Norb said.

"Little after midnight. What's the angle? Copper?"

"That's right," Norb said.

Ben's eyes were getting brighter every minute. "Assault and battery because I rushed the kid here?"

Someone tossed a quarter on the bar; Ben reached for a bottle and glass. "Look," he said to Norb, "with one guy it's an ounce, he's fuzzy. With the next guy, it's a quart. These monkeys had too much, that's all, and they got loud. They walked back to the men's room. The juke was on, but even then you could hear 'em."

Ben slid the glass he'd filled on up the bar. "A fight was brewing, so I rushed 'em."

Still Norb worried his glass. "Then what, after you bounced them?"

"Copper." Ben picked up a cloth and began to wipe the bar with it, "that's my stop."

We went back outside. An alley ran alongside, black within but ruddy at the street from the window's neon. Norb got a flashlight from the car. We walked unto the alley until we reached a cement court.

Norb's ray hugged the ground. "Remember this, Joey?"

"You think Pete and I came here?"

"I think you two exchanged blows. Trask

checks, the dream checks and the bruises. Look, Carr 'drove you through a crack, into the ground.' Okay, we've got cracked cement."

He threw the ray suddenly at me. "Want to tell the truth now, Joey?" He didn't raise his voice, but he got something into it that made it razor-sharp. "A story to ring true has got to jibe. You got no job—you had no money; Carr had big money on him last night, apparently. Then you were in love with his wife, a fact we know he discovered. That's the story I see, and if Carr remains missing it jibes. It's damned good motive for murder!"

"You fell for the babe. You're no plaster saint. I know you. And it won't help you any, kid, that we're related. I'd sweat you the same as anyone else, maybe harder. I'd keep it in my craw that you picked me for a sucker, for your first rehearsal."

Uh-huh. Norb would help me. Sure he would. He was married to my sister. Norb would be the one—he'd fix things. I shivered as he snarled on.

"Facts, that's what I want. My feet on solid ground. You know damned well *why* Pete Carr is missing. Something happened in that fight. You killed him. Then you lost what brains you had left. You used his car and dumped him. You drove home in his car. Today, you realized that you'd muffed every play in the whole rotten business."

"All right, Norb," I whispered. "I get it. Copper with a gun. You got me where you want me."

"So you think I'm just another dumb cop?" His light shook, then snapped off abruptly. He reached out for my arm. His fingers bit into the flesh, stayed there. The headlights of a car had slashed the alley, red blinkers on the fenders.

"Missing Persons, Norb growled. "To see Trask. Here's where they get wind of you, kid." His fingers tightened on my arm. "Keep your chin up, Joey."

CHAPTER FOUR

Nightmare

WE GOT by Missing Persons, walked straight up the alley, back into his car. We drove the few blocks to the Carrs.

He cut around the block, rolled into the alley; and from here we could see the upstairs. Georgie's room was lit; Varden's room was lit. We could see that Darlene was at home. One dim light on the first floor.

The garage was open. We slipped inside. Now, of course, I knew what it was Norb wanted. *Please don't let the key fit*, I thought. The case could hold or fall apart right here. Norb got behind the wheel. Then I heard a

clicking sound. He was suddenly like concrete. "It fits," he said.

"Easy, Joey."

He got out. He opened a rear door on the car. His flashlight made a white hole on the seat, then moved onto the floor, stopped, considered, stayed there.

I looked across his shoulder. There was an ugly brown stain on the floormat. "Norb," I cried, "it's blood!"

"Watch it," he snapped.

"Back to our car and don't stumble."

We drove aimlessly, it seemed. I would plead with Norb. Suppose the key did fit? Suppose there *was* a brown stain. We hadn't

proved it was blood. It could have been there long before last night, even if it was blood.

He stopped, suddenly. I looked around, dismayed. We were in the country. No moon, nothing to see. Hills, knobs upon the spring night. Dark shadows that were trees, their limbs like bones, naked, black without flesh.

He cut the lights. "Crawl across the seat, Joey. Get down in back, on the floor," he snapped.

I looked at him. It didn't make sense. Then I heard a new thin sound. A train whistle.

"On the floor, kid. Hurry! Lie with your face up, eyes toward the train, but closed."

Dumbly I obeyed, crawled across the seat.

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No use to ask whys of him. Suddenly it was as though a noose had been jerked tight around my aching throat.

"See the headlight yet?"

"With my eyes closed?" I said.

"*Through* the lids, I mean."

"Oh my God, Norb!" I said.

The train passed at that moment—as in the dream—a roar, a blast of its whistle, a frantic rush of steam. I lay wet with sweat, both hands clenched, my whole body trembling.

"Don't open your eyes. All right, did you see the headlight?" he repeated. "Feel it flash across your lids?"

I had.

"Then Joey, listen. Get this right. *Did it blink?*"

"N—no."

"Sure?"

I opened my eyes. He'd snapped on the dome light. He was on his knees, leaning over the front seat. His hands were gripping the seat. There was a queer, blinking red glare behind him.

"Did you even think of it as blinking, Joey?"

The red crossing lights behind him were blinking. But I hadn't "seen" red. I hadn't known the crossing lights were there!

"The white light didn't blink?" Norb pressed. "You didn't even have the thought, from association, because you knew there should be crossing warning blinkers?"

Something happened to him, at my negative answer, as he turned and sat down again. He'd shrunk, it seemed, deflated. A moment passed. Then he sighed.

"I guess I'm not so smart," he said slowly.

"Norb, I tried to tell you. The footrail—"

"Sure, the rail in your dream, under your head. The floor of the car was your 'subway.'" He was nodding. "I knew it."

My throat was raw with tension, my voice hoarse. "Pete knocked me out, put me in the car. I—I bled. It's my blood, the brown stain."

"Is it?" he said queerly. "All of it? Carr planted the twenty and the key too, Joey?"

"Why wouldn't he? He knew about Darlene. He was going to fade, make it look bad for us. He wanted to get us in a jam. The rest of it was sheer dream-nonsense. All we've got to do is separate reality from nightmare."

"You think that's all there is to it, Joey?" he said, still with the same queer note in his voice.

"Norb, you're missing it! There's no continuity, no timing in a dream. That's what's throwing you off—no timing."

"Time?" He began hitting his hand on the wheel.

"Norb, look. I heard the train. Then I wanted to 'kill' Pete. My subconscious wanted

him out of my life, so I could have Darlene. Of course I didn't *actually* kill him, and that's where it comes in, the dream-trick, the timing. He didn't fade out *with* the train at all, but later, after driving me home."

"Timing?" Norb said again softly.

I GOT it when he didn't turn around, when he didn't drive back home. I got it when we crossed more tracks; in twenty, thirty minutes when we saw the beacon at the airport light up in the sky. It swung around on its high tower, bright one moment, dark one moment, blinking off and on.

I knew then this was near the end. I knew it by the sweat that began running from my armpits. I knew it by my heart, the throbbing in my head. I knew it by what happened to my stomach. I knew it wasn't going to be the way I'd said at all. This was the place, somewhere around here. Norb had found it this time.

He made the final calculation by triangulation. Mathematics—it was finally that simple. The tower was the perpendicular, straight line. Like you'd tie a string up there on the tower, and then draw it far out for the angle. He wanted *distance* from the tower, the one spot where, unlike the spread-glare of the train's headlight, the tower light ray could be seen on an angle through a car door, from the car floor. Where, lying on the floor, I'd have to see the light, or sense it, even with my eyes closed.

He worked around this circle, from the light. He found the exact area when he threw his spot light on a field and we saw cows. Small field, only three cows—not fourteen. Three cows grazing in a meadow of clover. One cow wore a bell, the tinkle of it faint from where we'd stopped on the road. *The bell would ring, the light would snap off and on—* Remember?

There was a woods a little off to one side. Not much of a woods, but it was thick with underbrush. And then a lane appeared, two clay-yellow ruts. It had rained last night, and here the ground still looked soggy. There were tire marks that showed where a car had turned in, treadmarks as plain as plaster casts.

I sat shaking my head. A dream could be explained like this? Subway—the back seat of a car. Train—on tracks we'd crossed to get here. Cow bells, cows munching on clover. Light above, blinking on and off. Still I shook my head. What about the rest of it? The part that had ended in—murder?

We got out. My legs wouldn't hold me. For whole minutes then I hung on the car door.

"Footprints," Norb was saying, off to one side, flatly. "They go into the woods. They sink deep. Now look, the prints coming *out*."

Uh-huh. Lighter. My teeth began to chatter with the implication.

Norb shot a hard glance at me. "Try your shoe in one of those prints."

If the shoe fits, wear it. Now, even the flashlight in Norb's hand seemed to be blinking.

"What's the matter, kid?"

"I—I'm going to be sick.

"You do as I say," he answered in that flat voice.

My prints. My shoes had made them. I'd called it, inning after inning. Dreamed it, play by play. For there was a depression in the ground, a hole, a little farther away. Clothes in it, a coat, crooked legs, a hand. Eyes that looked straight up into the sky—and didn't see anything. The body sprawled grotesquely.

"Carr?" It was Carr, all right.

"Your belt, Joey?" Norb was saying then, harshly.

Yes, my belt around on Pete Carr's neck, laced so tight that his eyes and his puffy tongue were sticking out.

"Okay," Norb said softly. He turned around and started for the car. "We know where we're at now, Joey."

CHAPTER FIVE

No Margin in Murder

ALL I'd wanted was a job. Good pay and hard work again. A new car, maybe, and in time, a home. Easy, I'd thought. You just let the hooks down and they caught, and from then on you were a solid citizen. Someone people respected. There'd been a girl in my plans, too, someone I would meet. Darlene?

At first, I'd argued with myself. The grass across the fence only looked greener. What the hell, I'd say, she's married. Mrs. Pete Carr. Hands off.

So that had been the trouble. I couldn't let the hooks down; she was at me all the time. I'd had no peace almost from the time I'd moved in with the Carrs. Instead there had been only conflict.

Now, we walked back to the car. We got in. I waited. "You're under arrest, Joey." That's the least I expected. I waited, but the explosion didn't come.

He started in a quiet voice, Norb did. Queerly, almost musing. He'd let the motor run, but the power was still there; and he talked just like the motor, softly, smoothly.

"We can accept it that you had a fight with Carr. We've got a fair idea when it happened, where, and why. We believe it ended when you fell unconscious, in the 'subway'. We know now, too, what the 'subway' was—the back seat of Pete's car. Then we begin hitting

snags. It was Carr who took the big ride, not you. And according to your dream, he took it lying in your 'subway', with you. All right, Joey—who drove the car?

"Say the dream was pure fabrication. Say your mind was warped this afternoon, and you grabbed the dream for defense. Or say the dream was no dream at all, *but your unconscious mind straining to capture events as they actually happened.* That's different, isn't it, Joey? In that case timing's not the word we want, but tabulation. Your mind couldn't grasp events in their proper perspective, couldn't fit events into their proper slots. Your mind simply retained every *impression.*"

"I'm with you," I answered faintly.

"All right! Then if we can trust these impressions, as I now think we can, both you and Carr were driven to this woods, unconscious. Carr was murdered here, in the woods, while you were still unconscious. Circumstances were cleverly planned, and finally you were returned to his house, in his car. You were to be found there this morning. In the meantime, obviously, you recovered sufficiently to stagger up to your room.

"The point I'm driving at, Joey, is that someone knew you had a motive for murder. Either they overheard this at the bar or they knew it from observation. So now what have we got? A different situation and an entirely different motive. We don't eliminate Carr for his wife—your motive; we rub him out for his money!"

He paused, pulled cigarettes from his pocket, gave me one. I dropped it. He grinned, lit one and put it in my lips.

"Joey," he said, "I wonder if you've told me everything. "You *think* you've told me everything," he went on then slowly, "but take Trask. He maybe the focal point. The killer had to know you and Carr were quarreling and *be* there to take advantage of that situation. How about Trask? He threw you out. Then what? Did he follow you?"

A curtain had come down at that point. The lights went out. It was hopeless, it was black, impenetrable. I told him so.

"You've got to break the curtain, Joey! It's no maybe anymore. It's your *life* now, kid. "Close your eyes. Start the other way and work back. The threads are there. They've got to be there. Reach for 'em. Start when you awakened in your room. 'What do you suppose happened to him?' this Georgie said. Remember?"

"I remember. Then I got up."

"Oh, you want to go *ahead*? Okay. But you dropped a stitch right there, Joey. The way you told me, you looked at the window. Two windows, you said. Then you looked at your hand. Two hands on one wrist, you said."

"I—I got up, sat on the edge of the bed. My shoes were on the floor, by the bed. I looked at them. I—I remember how silly they looked, one black one and one brown one."

"What?"

"One black one and one brown one."

"But you didn't tell me that!"

"Norb, I—I did. I mean I said everything was screwy."

"Wait a minute. Did you put your shoes on?"

"On? No, I dived for the bathroom. I was sick—"

"Then you left your shoes in your room?"

"Sure, I—I came back with Georgie—"

"He came into the room with you, you said. Got you into bed. All *right*. Did you only hear him, Joey? Or actually *see* him?"

"I guess my eyes were closed," I said.

"So when finally you did put your shoes on, everything was all right again. Both shoes were black?"

"Sure they were, Norb," I said.

He began to laugh. It was a strange sound. It had a strange lilt in it, and still it was stony. "A sweetheart," he said. "Foolproof, every inch of the way—and it flopped on a crazy thing like that. A black shoe and a brown one.

"Joey, that's *it!* The cows nibbled at your shoes, you said. It wasn't the cows, of course; you only heard the cow bell and the cows. The murderer took off your belt. Then he took off your shoes. Maybe you kicked him, maybe he dropped a shoe. Anyway, he *thought* he wore *your* shoes, to leave *your* footprints. He came back to the car, finally, to change again to his own. But it was dark. He couldn't risk a light. He couldn't distinguish color in the darkness.

"Joey, he put on the wrong shoe. That's it! Then, you didn't stay in the car, as he'd planned. You got up later, staggered up to your room. From habit you locked the door to your room. Maybe he didn't even see his mistake until morning, but then it was too late . . . he had the wrong shoe and couldn't get into your room to exchange it!"

The motor roared. The gears clashed. My head jerked back as the car leaped beneath me.

"Joey, we've narrowed it down. It's Varden or Georgie. Georgie was in your room, and Varden could have slipped in while you and Georgie were in the bathroom. Joey, whoever it is, we've got him! *Because now he doesn't know which shoe he wore into the woods!*"

LIKE that—and the lights were on again. Streets were streets again. I could breathe again.

"But remember," Norb was saying crisply,

"the killer knows he might have made this one mistake. He's scared, and therefore he's dangerous."

"Not with you around," I said. "Not old Norb." Norb had his gun? Yes, Norb had a twenty-five he always carried. "Georgie dangerous?" I said. "Varden dangerous? Hell!"

We were halfway to the Carr's before I settled down and faced the facts. Did Georgie and Nat Varden both wear the same size shoes? My size? Could be. Did both men own a pair of brown shoes? Could be. Had the killer already disposed of his brown shoes this evening?

"The way we're playing it is like diving off a spring board, Joey," Norb said. "No coordination and you'll come down on your belly."

We'd go softly to my room. Norb would wait behind my door. The door would be open a crack. Then I'd knock on Varden's door and on Georgie's door, and the killer would think me alone. I'd say, "I want to talk to you about your shoe."

That was what Norb wanted. The killer must think he still held the whiphand, and betray himself by his interest. *Only* the killer would care to talk about a brown shoe at two o'clock in the morning.

We dropped the car at the corner, walked. Then we were inside, creeping up the stairway. Darlene must not hear, of course.

We paused halfway up the stairway, to listen—heard nothing. The hall was asleep, dozing in a dim light from a central bulb. The doors were closed. I put the key in my lock, turned it. I stepped aside and Norb slid in. I slid in, closed the door, reached out for the light switch.

It clicked. That's all—clicked. We had only that split-second warning. Then a hard white ray shot from the gloom. It nailed us to the wall. Norb's right hand streaked for his holster, but it stopped halfway and hung there.

"Hold it," a flat voice had said. Not from behind the flashlight. From the other side of the room. My nerves began to tingle. Nat Varden.

"We've waited a long time for you, Forsythe," said Varden.

I waited for Norb to take it. He would know what to do; he would give me a cue. He didn't. He didn't even glance aside at me.

"Ideas," Varden said then softly, "are hard to erase. Sometimes it's smart to kill them before they are born."

The queerest thoughts were racing through my head. Red shoes, red painted toes. Red lips and a red skirt. Teardrops that hung from her ears, I thought. I thought of how it might have ended on a sweet note.

"There are two of us, Varden," Norb broke in at that moment.

Varden laughed. "You know," he said, "that's what I meant by ideas. They lead to cops. In this case we had one loose link, a shoe—"

"Suppose I say you wore it into the woods," Norb interrupted.

"Did I?" Varden passed it off that smoothly. "But you're too late now. Those shoes are gone—but ideas can't be disposed of like that. Frankly, Randy, you're the one I got worried about. You wife phoned tonight. Then I had to change my plans.

"I saw that Forsythe might ask you for your help," Varden was now saying coolly. "I realize he might have faint alarms about last night. After all, he'd been with Pete Carr. He'd remember that much, and he knew, tonight, that Carr was missing."

I doubt if two whole minutes had elapsed. Hours, it seemed. Weeks and months and years. I was dripping with sweat. The tension had become malignant, gnawing.

"So the way I see it now," Varden finished in that clammy-cold voice, "Forsythe confessed to the murder. You refused to cover for him. You were going to take him in. You had it out right here. Obviously he pulled a gun—*this* gun—and killed you."

"And himself?" Norb added.

"And himself," Varden agreed dryly. "Like it?"

I got it at last, why I'd thought of red shoes, red lips and red teardrops. There was a haunting fragrance of perfume in the air. *Darlene stood behind the flashlight.* Baby face, soft words, soft arms and soft shoulders. Varden and Darlene! Varden's goal: Carr's wife, Carr's life, everything Carr had. Every move they'd made together made, part of a plan. Never seeming interested in each other—oh no! I was chosen for the goat. Pete must brawl with *me*. I must have the motive for murder.

I looked straight at the flashlight. "You little tramp," I said.

She giggled, and said, "Want the rest of it, Joey? How I'll scream and run to Georgie's door and keep him down there until Nat has put your prints on the gun—"

There was a click from the darkness—Varden, drawing back the hammer on his gun. She giggled, "Happy journey, Joey!"

Someone knocked on the door. . . .

IT HAPPENED so unexpectedly. I *think* Norb darted to one side; I don't really know. I *think* Varden hesitated for that one fatal moment. I know that she gasped, and the flashlight wavered.

Then Varden's gun began blazing. But he was shooting in the dark. I already had Darlene. My hands were on her neck, I whirled her, and now I saw the spot-flash of the gun. Now I heard Varden cursing. Then Darlene began to scream. . . .

The screams gurgled in her throat, finally stopped. Varden's gun stopped. Norb had shot twice. Norb found a lamp and lit it.

"Not that way, Joey," he said. He pulled me from Darlene. A red teardrop came off, in my hand.

I just looked at it. "See who is at the door, Joey," Norb said.

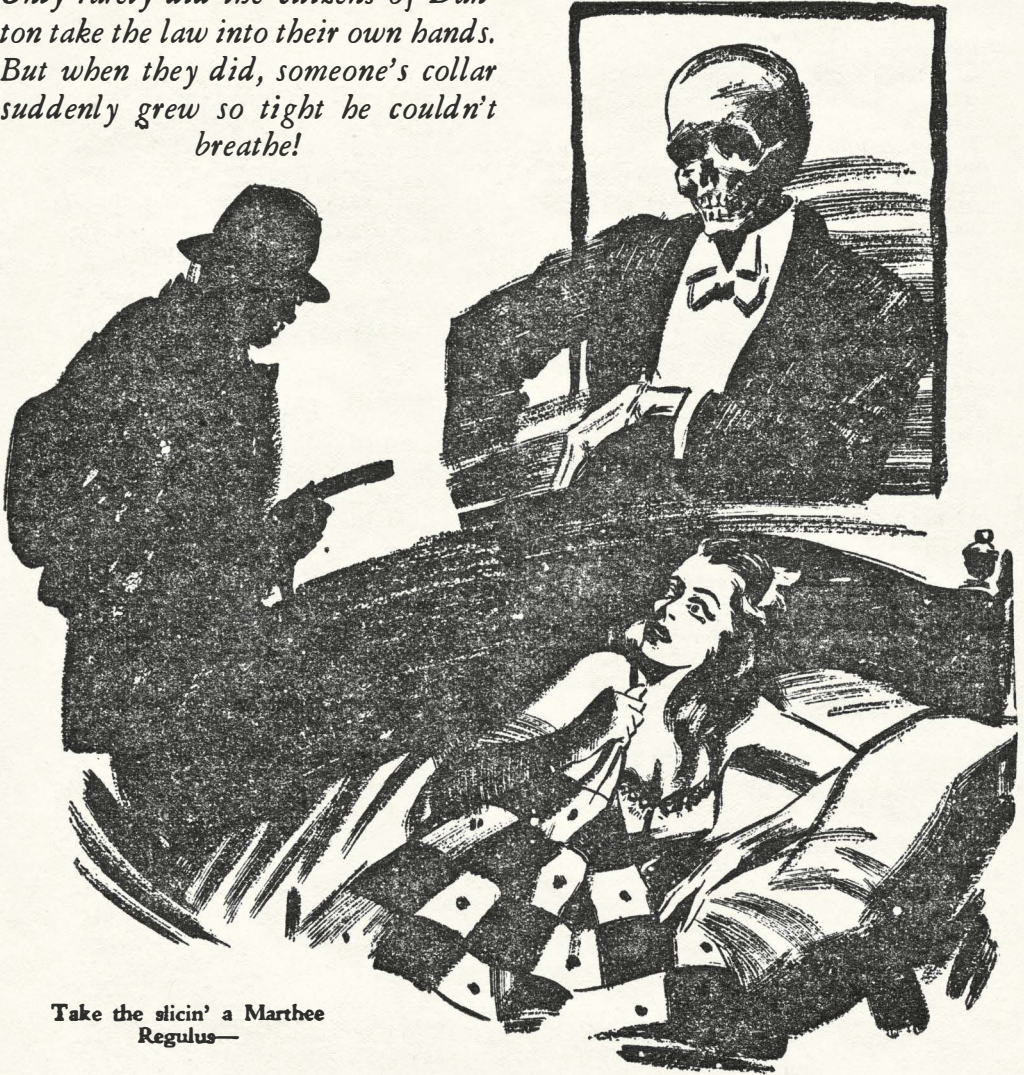
Poor Georgie. Fussing right on through it, right up to the end. He'd started from the bathroom, hours back, this afternoon while I was sick in the bathroom—remember? He'd seen Nat Varden coming from my room. He'd recalled this, worried about it all evening. It seemed he'd laid awake, and then heard us come in. . . . Poor Georgie. He looked beyond me, saw Norb with the gun, saw Darlene—and Varden. Georgie gave a small moan and collapsed.

I went downstairs to phone. Afterwards, I stood at the street door, waiting, drinking in the night. The street had never seemed so still, so peaceful. . . .

THE END



Only rarely did the citizens of Danton take the law into their own hands. But when they did, someone's collar suddenly grew so tight he couldn't breathe!



Take the slicin' a Marthee
Regulus—

By GEORGE WILLIAM RAE

I'LL tell you we make no pretense to extra brains here in Danton, but sometimes we can be right smart when the notion strikes.

Now take the slicin' a Marthee Regulus— That mornin' I was more tired'n usual cause I'd spent the night in the jailhouse charged with bein' drunk and disorderly. It wasn't new. I'd done it before.

I was tired, but I went downta the shop bright'n early as usual. Before I put on a clean starched coat I dusted around and tidied up a bit, as it was Saturday.

I set out my barberin' tools, clippers, thin-

nin' shears, tonics and so on, then set to honin' my two razors. One thing I always saw to personal was the honin' a my two razors.

I take pride in the right-smart way I can handle a razor. If it's not honed by someone with the right know-how it just don't slice.

Well, that morning, as usual, Jedge was first in an' I shaved him up proper. He didn't ask for a massage, so I didn't suggest it. One thing 'bout the barberin' business I do detest is the sellin' a "extras" by purrin' into a customer's ear that he should have a rub or an expensive lotion or suchlike. One thing I never did do.

IT'S YOUR NECK!

Well, Jedge tole me. "Too bad 'bout Marthee," he said to me.

"How?" I asked.

"Ain't ya heard 'bout the slicin' a Marthee?" Jedge said.

"Jedge," I said, "Make sense."

"Why, Willie Jones' boy went overta Marthee Regulus' place'n found her liein' in a poola blood liketa a lake." Jedge said.

"No!" I said.

"Throat slit from ear ta ear."

Well I hadn't heard about it, I told him.

I had his cheeks and mustache done, and began on the throat an' neck. Ain't conceit. I can clean a neck with the best of 'em.

See, I always begin on the left side an' have a special wayta pull the skin down so's the whiskers stand straight up an' the razor slices against the roots—clean an' pretty an' fast, too. Oh, I take pride in my shavin's. Ain't many can handle a razor like I can.

When I'd cleaned him good and scalded a little color into his face with a real hot towel, Jedge told me, "Willie Jones' boy found her all right. She was cold dead, they say. Sheriff Woods said she'd been dead all night long. Poor thing. Such a quiet-livin' body, too."

I wiped up my razor real careful and put it away.

"Yes, she was a quiet poor-thing." I said to Jedge.

"Sheriff Woods called it murder," Jedge said.

"Murder?" I said.

AFTER that I was busy putting perfumed water on his face, wipin' it good an' dry an' powderin' it up proper-like.

The Jedge got up. "God help the butcher that did the awful thing," he said, an' went out.

I tidied up a bit more an' soon a coupla haircuts walked in. One waited while I worked on the other. They didn't say much. But they looked white-mad and what little they did say was enough.

Warren Pollard, he's the grain man downta the co-op, an' Jimmy Rucker, he's the owner of a big farm.

"It's a Gawd-awful thing that our women can't be left tuh live in peace, even." Pollard said.

"Yes, it sure is an awful thing." Rucker said.

"What you referrin' to, gents?" I asked.

"The slicin' a Marthee Regulus," they told

me. "Allow as the feller that did 'er'll be right sorry he did."

The way he said it made my blood run cold, an' I'm no coward, long's a razor's within reach.

"Quick justice's the thing," Ruckus said.

Pollard, who was in the chair right then, swung around and they looked at each other. Both a them was tremblin' mad. "Jedge Lynch'd teach him," Pollard said.

After that they kept quiet and I didn't say anythin'. I'll tell you why. I hate one thing in the barberin' business an' that's a long-talkin' barber. Leave the talkin' ta womenfolks, radio ann-ouncers, so on. Talkin' barbers I do detest.

They went out together. One waited for the other. After that, as usual, it was quiet an' I read the morning paper an' yawned a lot an' finally stood with my hands behind me lookin' out a the window at Main street.

Nothin' much on Main street. A few stores, the co-op, the hotel across the street with some cane chairs dozin' in the sun.

As I looked out, I noticed a crowd collectin' outside a Phil Mallory's Pool Emporium which set catty-corner from my shop down Main street. They was a lot of them. Some a them was the reg'lar idlers, bums you might say, but Pollard an' Rucker and' Shields an' Jonesie—you wouldn't call them bums.

I'll tell you, Jedge Lynch is a cold fella to have around your home-town. I shivered. I don't generally, but I did this time an', as I say, I'm no coward.

Then I dusted again, as business seemed to be collapsed, an' I'm a fella that likes to keep busy. One thing I detest in the barberin' business is a barber who warms his back-side in slack time 'stead a puttin' it to good use for his own benefit.

TEN-FIFTEEN. Sheriff John Woods walked in. John Woods is a big fella. They don't come with shoulders like John's got, too often—nor with his great strength.

"Mornin' John." I said. He'd put me in his jailhouse last night but that wasn't much. I'd been drunk, is all. Oh I'd raised hell with the boy that ran the Danton Tavern, you might say. All I said was that booze is bad for the kidneys. An' what d'ya think? They bounced me! Well, I raised hell an' in I went. Drunk an' disorderly. What d'ya think a that?"

"Mornin' Rance," he said.

"Shave, John?" I asked. Let bygones be

bygones, I thought. I won't act mad 'cause he run me in.

"Yeh," John said.

I lathered up. "Why so glum." I asked him, brushin' his cheeks.

"I'm only one man," he answered. "Wish I was a hundred."

"Why so?" I asked. "What's up, John?"

He looked at me. "Don't you know?" he said.

Then I caught on. "Oh *them*." I said glancin' out a the window.

They was more a them now. They was more a them, an' they was collectin' in those awful little groups that men always collect in when somethin' horrible is in the air. I'll tell you it's an icy wind to have whistling around your home-town. I began to feel like I'd never felt before.

"Plannin' on doin' anything to stop 'em?" I asked John.

"If I was a hundred men, I could," he said.

"I called the militia. But that takes time. They don't know how fast Judge Lynch gets elected."

I'll tell you I know John Woods—since we was boys I've known him. I'll tell you he's no fool. He knows when he's licked.

"Who're they huntin', John?" I asked working my fingers into the lather on his cheeks, chin an' throat.

"Don't know," he said detached.

"It's on accounta the slicin'?" I asked.

"Yes, you know Rance," he told me.

I took up my newest razor—the one the drummer sold me a year or so previous. He said it was genuine surgical steel, the kind they use in scalpels. It was a good one. None better. I stropped it good.

"Bad 'bout Marthee." John said.

"Very," I said.

"Bad life she had."

"Don't I know," I said.

Outside, the crowd was growin' faster'n a litter a wildcats.

"Yes, you know," he told me.

Then I knew why John Woods was gettin' a shave in the middle a Judge Lynch's election.

"Yes," I said, trying the slicin' edge on my thumb. "Yes, I know John," I told him. The blade wasn't quite right yet. I stropped it some more. I wouldn't use a dull slicin' edge.

"Marthee Regulus," John said. Then he pained like he was thinking, an' swallowed again. The skin was sure taut on his throat, all right. "She had nothin' but misery." John said. "She was plenty good, but she had nothin' but misery. First it was her Paw, drunk an' all. Then it was his dyin' sickness, drawn out an' all. Then it was her havin' ta marry that city fella an' her baby dyin' an all. Yes an' she coulda had happiness, too. It could a been different."

"Yet it could." I said.

"The city fella runnin' away an' leavin' her an' never showin' back—that was the worst a all," he said.

"Yes, that was the worst," I said.

I BEGAN on the left cheek. John was quiet now, an' there was only three sounds in the whole world, you might say. The scrapin' a my razor, the tickin' a the pendulum clock and the murmur a the boys outside electin' Judge Lynch.

"She coulda had much better," John said as I snapped off the first row a lather onto the piece a newspaper on his chest. Suddenly he was lookin' me right in the eye, funny-like.

"She coulda married *you*, Rance," John said. "You always did love 'er."

"She could a," I said. "But she never did give me more'n a hello now an' again."

"What about last night?" he shot at me.

I lifted the razor off his cheek fast-like. "*How?*" I asked.

"You was seen leavin' her place last night 'bout seven, Rance," John said. "She was sliced at six, six-thirty."

"Indeed?" I said.

I began shavin' him again. One thing I don't like in the barberin' business is a barber that gets excitable.

"You've seen her lately more'n you think people know about, Rance. You'n I are friends. Don't deny it."

"I ain't denyin'," I said.

Just then it seemed's though Judge Lynch won the election, cause the boys headed for the jailhouse with a growlin' quietness that made my scalp creep. Oh, I'm no coward, but I can't deny I was sorry for the poor devil they'd find in that jailhouse.

"You still got that darky-boy in the jailhouse—the one you pinched last night?" I asked John.

"Yes," he said through white lips. "My God, they'll string *him* for it sure."

"Sure they will," I said commencin' on John's mustache. "Judge Lynch'll string the likeliest one, John."

Nobody outside now. The sound a poundin' commenced, though, from the direction a the jailhouse. They probably got a rammin'-pole from Healy's woodyard down near there.

The jailhouse was stout. It would take plenty a pounding to bust in the door. The place was fairly new—just built five years ago. 'Bout the time that city fella ran away an' left poor Marthee Regulus.

"Nothin' I can do," John said. "God knows that boy is innocent."

He looked at me. I was beginnin' on the left side a his throat as I usually do.

Suddenly John Woods said in a choking voice, "It isn't right! He's innocent!"

"Is he?" I said.

John looked at me. His lips curled and his teeth showed—just like animals do.

"I came here to do it," he said. "I tell you, Rance, you're under arrest."

"An' I tell you, John," I said, "you're under a surgical steel slicin' edge."

We looked at each other. He didn't stare me down.

"You sliced her 'cause she wouldn't have you," he hissed through his teeth. "You did it, Rance. I arrest you. You're guilty."

I LOOKED at him. I felt my heart whangin' against my ribs like that ram was goin' against the jailhouse door.

Sudden-like, the rammin' stopped, an' I knew they was inside the jailhouse.

John said, "I got a gun in my fist."

Ever feel a slicin'-edge begin ta bite into your throat? Well I'll tell ya, John Woods did then.

I skipped around behind him quick-like. "Drop it," I said to him in the mirror, holding the slicin'-edge closer.

He looked at me an' said, "For crysakes don't." But he knew I would. He dropped it.

"Don't stir, John," I said, pullin' the white-cloth off.

In a while the distant murmur from the direction a the jailhouse grew louder. They was comin' out.

First thing they was into the shop. Pollard leadin'. They had the darky boy with 'em. The rest a Jedge Lynch's electors stuffed into the shop an' bulged out into the street.

When they seen the way I had John Woods, they stopped talkin' an' stood stock-still. You coulda heard a hair fall to the floor.

"You find it?" I asked them. They nodded soberly.

John watched them in the mirror.

"Right under the bull-pen in the jailhouse," Rucker said. "The boy here had a dozen holes

pounded down into the cement. Somethin' awful is in that cement."

"A soft thing," I said. They nodded.

"That's why I got arrested last night." I said. "'Cause I'd seen what he'd done ta Marthee. I had a suspicion somethin' awful was buried under that bull-pen. Other times I'd been arrested, I'd noticed an awful smell in that jailhouse."

They looked at me. They was so shocked that the lynchin' fire gone out a them.

"He did it for her land." I said. "He's tried an' tried ta buy it, but she wouldn't sell. Same reason he killed her husband, the city fella, then spread the story the man'd run away. Marthee never did believe the man'd run away."

They looked at me. "So it's Marthee's husband's under the jailhouse floor?" they said.

"Been there for years," I said. "I suspicioned it recently an' was plannin' another way ta catch the killer. Then he did that awful thing last night."

They looked at the darky-boy.

"He'll have to do some fast talkin' now, I'll tell ya," Rucker said.

"You chisel thing an' hammah is in the jailhouse," the boy said to me. I could see he'd remember the chilly breath a Jedge Lynch on his neck for years.

"Thanks for diggin' in there, boy." I said. "You was smart to do what I told you."

Then they all looked at John Woods, lying there under my razor. I'll tell you he found out how smart we could be in Danton when the notion struck. He didn't move much under the slicin' edge—no sir.

"We'll save him for the chair, boys," I said, "What do you say?"

"Save him for the chair," they said. "Don't let him get away."

I'll tell you he wasn't getting away from me—*ever!*

THE END

NEXT TIME SAY
BRIGHT STAR
 for a better
FLASHLIGHT
 and better
BATTERIES

FAMOUS SINCE 1909



"We mean to have him, Sheriff!"

They don't bury their dead, down in the delta; they seal them in mausoleums above ground. And that's where it looked as though I'd breathe my last. For the five bigtime hoods were holding my wife and kids hostage, and they'd beaten me to a pulp—all because I wouldn't forget about the innocent kid they'd groomed for a date with the gallows!

CHAPTER ONE

Keep Away from the Dead

IT WAS like driving through a dead world. We hadn't passed a house or seen a living thing for miles. Moss-hung trees met over the car to form a funeral grey arch. Black swamp water crowded the road on both sides.

There was no sound but the thick sucking of the tire treads on loose gravel, the eternal croaking of the frogs, the *pit-pat-pelt* of the rain on the metal roof of the Caddy and the soft sobbing of the twins.

"I don't believe that the longest road must end," Sherry said.

I was beginning to doubt it myself. We had left New Orleans at ten o'clock that morning,

QUIETLY MY HANGNOOSE WAITS

A Matt Mercer Mystery Novel

By DAY KEENE



and had been driving steadily ever since, mostly due south, over second and third grade gravel and dirt roads.

I pointed out, "You wanted to see the mouth of the Mississippi. Remember?"

She gave me a dirty look and hugged the twins closer to her. "That's right. Blame it on me. It's all my fault, as usual," she said angrily.

I could have said that it was. But I didn't think it would be wise. Sherry has red hair. Besides I have learned, the hard way, that there are tricks to getting along in marriage. Not goofing off at the wrong time is one of them. But I knew that delta country. I had been in it before. And it had a way of leading to trouble.

"Cheer up," I tried to pour oil on the troubled waters. "According to the speedometer, it can't be much farther now. And there is bound to be someplace where we can eat and sleep in Pointe Lafitte."

"Why is there bound to be?" she wanted to know.

She had me there. There wasn't any reason why. Point Lafitte was only a dot on the map. And the last three larger dots that we had passed, Lake This and Bayou That had been very little more than a cotton gin, a general store, a church and a filling station. No reason why this should be better.

It had begun with the snow storm. It had begun to snow while I was packing my bags. After that there had been no reasoning with Sherry. She was fed up to the breaking point with Chicago.

We hadn't been anywhere, as a family, for ages. And if I was driving south on a case, she and the twins were going with me. Didn't I want to be with my family? Didn't I love her any more? She and the twins wouldn't be a bit of bother. If there were no suitable accommodations in Pointe Lafitte, she and the kids could return to New Orleans and wait there for me until I had concluded by business. Besides, she had always wanted to see the mouth of the Mississippi. Like almost any married man, I had agreed. But I was beginning to wish I hadn't. There didn't seem to be much to the case. But I didn't like the smell of the country.

BILL CARSE of Amalgamated Underwriters had called me in three days before. It seemed that shortly after Pearl Harbor one of their New Orleans agents had written a big policy on a young plantation owner near this Pointe Lafitte. It had been an old type, straight-life policy without the new war clause most of the companies had inserted in their policies to protect themselves and their stockholders against excessive losses due to deaths in the Armed Forces.

The underwriters had raised hell with the agent but the first premium had been paid and the policy delivered. A few days later, the insured, a lad by the name of Antoine Gaspard, had been inducted into the Army and for four years he had ducked bullets while the company had sweat them. But there had been nothing they could do. The insurance had been taken in good faith. Gaspard had paid his annual premiums promptly. And he had lived through the fracas to return to Pointe Lafitte.

The joker was that two days after arriving home he had been arrested and indicted for the murder of the girl he had married shortly before going to war. And if he went to the chair, the underwriters were out two-hundred thousand dollars.

"Now, understand me, Matt," Carse had told me. "We don't expect you to interfere with the course of justice. We don't want you to. Gaspard has confessed he killed his wife. If he did and is executed, it's a legitimate loss. But this came in the mail the other morning, forwarded from our agent in New Orleans."

"This" was an almost illegible, badly-spelled scrawl on cheap, blue-lined, tablet paper—

dere mister inshurence people
yung massah antoine doan du it. thet
weemen he marriage to was bad. no mat-
ter what he say he do, he doan.
respectably yours

The signature could have been almost any four words that totalled nineteen letters, but after puzzling it out I told Carse, "I make it 'Carekeeper Of The Dead'."

"Yes. That's what we got," he told me.

I switched on my lights. What little daylight was left was screened out by the moss-hung trees. The twins had stopped crying and gone to sleep. Sherry sat closer and told me she was sorry that she had been cross.

I said she'd a right to be cross, that she was hungry, and if I'd had the brains of a gnat, I'd have had the hotel pack us a lunch before we had left that morning.

She made a wry face. "And if I'd stayed at home where wives belong—" She leaned forward and peered through the windshield. "Glory be. Lights. We must be coming into Pointe Lafitte."

We weren't. The lights were in front of a roadhouse, of sorts. I parked the car in front of the gas pump and walked in. There were four men in front of the bar and one behind it. All swung their heads without moving their bodies as I walked in. If they had been talking, they'd stopped.

The lad behind the bar was thin to the

point of emaciation, with a knife scar that ran from the right corner of his mouth up to his right eyebrow. Before I could open my mouth he informed me, "If it's gas that you want, stranger, I'm sorry, but we haven't any."

I didn't like the way he said it. If I had been alone I'd have called him on it. As it was, I said I had plenty of gas but I also had two hungry kids and a wife in the car and I wondered if he could rustle us something to eat.

He hesitated, briefly, shook his head. "No. We don't serve food." He leaned both palms on the bar. The only light in the bar was a small watt bulb over the cash register but it made his scar stand out. "You a salesman?" he asked me.

I said that I was not.
 "Just—touring, eh?"

I was ready to smack him by then. Because of Sherry I didn't. "You could call it that," I admitted. "Okay. So you haven't got gas and you don't serve food. That's fine by me. How far am I from Pointe Lafitte?"

He ignored the question to ask one of the men at the bar. "What do you think, Charlie?"

The lad he called Charlie shaved me with his eyes. I'll be damned if I know," he shrugged.

The scar-faced lad turned back to me. "All right. Let's put it this way, Mister. If you're just seeing the sights, I'm sorry I spoke out of turn. Pointe Lafitte is two miles down the road. Either hotel is fair and both restaurants are good."

"And if I'm not just seeing the sights?"

He showed me the butt of a gun in a shoulder holster. "Then I'd turn my car around if I was you."

It was the wrong thing for him to say. I was tired. I was hungry. I wanted a drink. I forgot about Sherry and the kids and told him where he could put his gun, adding that if he didn't feel strong enough, I would be pleased to assist him.

"Watch him!" one of the other lads said sharply. "He's heeled."

A brief, ugly silence followed. Then the scar-faced lad smiled thinly. "So it would seem." He picked up a glass and began to towel it. "Okay, Mister," he concluded the conversation. "You asked for directions. You got 'em. Scram!"

They began to talk in whispers, watching me in the back-bar mirror. I boiled a moment longer, then walked through the croaking of the frogs back to the car. The brush-off bothered me. So did something else but I couldn't quite figure it out. And then I had it. None of the lads were conchs or cajuns. They were all big-time, city hoods.

"What did they say?" Sherry asked when I got back.

I told her they said that Pointe Lafitte was two miles down the road, that both hotels were fair and both restaurants were good.

"See? What did I tell you?" she crowed. "Now aren't you glad we came along?"

What daylight there had been was gone. Night had settled over the swamp like a great black vulture. The rain had increased from silver brads to hard-driving forty penny spikes. Light flooded the rear-vision mirror as a car swung out from the road house and loafed along behind us.

"Yeah. Sure. I'm tickled pink," I lied.

THERE was little about Pointe Lafitte to distinguish it from any of a hundred southern towns. It was built on a wide, black, sluggish stream. There was one main street, a cotton gin and warehouse, perhaps two dozen stores and churches, and a court house.

But Scarface had been right about one thing. The Frenchman who ran the Cafe Petite could have made a fortune in Chicago or New York. I was up to here, and pleasantly, with *Huitres Nature*, *Torte au Sherry*, and *Bouillabaisse à La Marseillaise*, by the time we checked into a hotel.

The hotel wasn't so hot. The ceiling leaked

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for one thing. Jean Lafitte could have slept in either of the sway-backed beds, and probably had. The twins had gone back to sleep as soon as they had eaten. I helped Sherry undress them, then picked up my rain coat, saying that as long as it was so early I might as well try to see the sheriff if I could.

She kissed me. "You're worried, Matt."

"I'm puzzled," I admitted. I was. I doubted that the city hoods had anything to do with the Gaspard case, but I still couldn't figure what five of them were doing in a run-down back swamp road house, or why my just showing my face in the door had rubbed them the wrong way.

The clerk wasn't at the desk but an ancient white-poll'd Negro bell-hop in a black alpaca coat, was holding down a hard bench by the stairs.

"They a man heah jist askin' your name, suh," he informed me politely.

I had expected that but I asked him to describe the man. It could have been any of the four hoods who had been in front of the bar. I peeled an ace from the sheaf of lettuce and tucked it in the pocket of his coat. "Thanks. Now tell me this. What colored boy in Pointe Lafitte do you know who might sign himself 'Carekeeper Of The Dead'?"

"That Willy," he said promptly. "You see, he ain' quite right in his haid. Willy all the time seein' daid men walkin' around in the ol' Gaspard buryin' ground."

I walked on out to the street chewing that one over. If what the old man had told me was correct, Bill Carse was out a hundred a day and my expenses for nothing more than checking on a crank note.

The rain had lessened to a dribble. There were quite a few people on the street. A pretty, black-haired girl in a red raincoat nodded pleasantly as she passed and said, "Good evening, Moses."

I said, "What the hell?" I'm no young rooster by forty years, twenty of them spent as a master sergeant of Marines. In my time I've been called a lot of things. But it was the first time I had ever been called Moses. Then I realized the old Negro had followed me to the door.

He was still bowing and scraping when I turned. "That Miss Gaincourt," he cackled. "She quality. She the young lady who gwine to make marriage with young Mister Antoine until," his voice filled with disgust, "until he marry up with that no-count white trash from N'Orleans jist befo' he go to war."

I could have pumped him for more information. I was to wish that I had. But I figured that he'd keep. Besides, I always make it a practice to hear the law's side of the story before digging into the rumor mines.

I lit a cigarette and walked up the street

toward the courthouse. I'd gone, perhaps, half a block when it happened. The lad stepped out of an unlighted feed store doorway and rammed what felt like a .45 into my *bouil-labaisse*.

"Hold it, Mercer," he ordered.

I held it. It was semi-dark where we were standing, but light enough for me to see that the lad with the gun in my supper was the hood whom Scarface had called Charlie. "What's the big idea?" I asked him.

He said, "You're Matt Mercer, all right. You don't scare worth a damn, do you?" Before I could say yes or no, he continued, "We had you wrong. We had you pegged for some wise free-lance hood who was trying to chisel in."

I said nothing.

He asked, "How much do you want to turn that Caddy of yours around and point it back toward Chicago?"

"How much am I bid?" I stalled.

"Twenty grand. And not a penny more," he said crisply. "Sure. We know. You're a big shot agency man. You've been doing federal work during the war. But the war's over, see? Now how about it? Do you take twenty grand to get out of town and stay out? Or—?"

He left his counter-proposal open. But I knew what he meant and he knew I did. There was a bare chance I could side step his first shot and slug him. But it wasn't likely. "I tell you what," I told him. "Give me a chance to think it over. Call me at the hotel in half an hour."

He hesitated, agreed. "Okay. Half an hour. But get this. And get it straight, Mercer. Don't have any funny ideas. This thing is too big for us to let any private shamus or any fed try to stop us." He melted back into the unlighted doorway. "Now get going—up the street."

I walked on slowly. I was into something up to my neck. The hell of it was I hadn't the least idea what it was.

CHAPTER TWO

I Killed Her

THE SHERIFF'S office was on the ground floor of the courthouse. A plump cheeked lad of thirty odd with a wide-brimmed panama perched on the back of a head of curly black hair was sitting behind a battered desk bearing the name plate—"Sheriff Laval." He wanted to know what he could do for me.

I told him my name was Matt Mercer, that I was a private-agency man from Chicago, and that I was representing the Amalgamated Underwriters on the Gaspard case.

He didn't offer to shake hands. "What's the matter?" he demanded. "The company

trying to wriggle out of paying off on Gaspard?"

I couldn't see it was any of his business but I assured him they were not.

He gave me a white-toothed smile. "Not that it will make a hell of a lot of difference to Antoine, or to Raoul, for that matter." He nodded me to a chair. "Sit down. Have a drink. Sorry if I seemed abrupt. But this has been a nasty case all around. And I'll be glad to see the last of it."

I sipped the drink he poured into a water tumbler. It was good whiskey.

"Okay. Let's have it," he continued. "So the company isn't trying to wriggle out of paying off. But they've sent you down here. Why?"

I took the note that Carse had given me from my wallet and laid it on his blotter. "I'm just checking up, that's all. Two-hundred thousand dollars is a lot of money."

He grinned. "And Willy is crazy as hell." He handed me back the "Carekeeper Of The Dead" note. Don't tell me you drove all the way down here on a wild-goose chase like that?"

I said I had. But I was beginning to feel like a fool. He was the second person in less than half an hour to tell me that Willy was crazy. "Just the same, I'd like to see this Willy," I insisted.

He grew suddenly serious. "By all means, Mercer. I'll drive you out to the Gaspard place anytime you want to go." He tapped the note. "But this doesn't mean a thing, it's only the misguided loyalty of an old family Negro. Antoine pled guilty yesterday." He bobbed the back of his head at the steel door behind him. "I've got him back there now. He's to be sentenced tomorrow morning."

"And he did kill his wife?"

Laval shrugged. "I know of no reason for him to say that he did, if he didn't. But if there is any doubt in your mind, or in the mind of the insurance company, why don't you talk to him?"

I said I would be glad to. There were five cells in the lock-up, one a solitary sweat-box with some poor devil moaning behind the heavy door. "A violent drunk," Laval informed me.

Antoine's cell was larger than the others and comparatively well-furnished. Besides the built-in bunk there were a table and two chairs and a small portable radio.

The radio was dialed in to a dance band but as Laval unlocked the cell door, Gaspard switched it off and stood up to face us. I liked him on sight. He was a wiry blond lad with a deeply bronzed face and a ready smile.

"This is Matt Mercer from Chicago, Antoine," Laval introduced us. "It would seem

that the insurance company has some doubt you killed your wife."

Gaspard's smile turned wry. "I killed her all right," he told me. There was a catch in his voice. "But I wish now that I hadn't. They're going to burn me sure as shooting."

"Now, now," Laval attempted to console him. "There is no use of borrowing trouble. The jury recommended mercy. You may only get a few years."

Young Gaspard scoffed, "With old Judge Gaincourt on the bench?"

He was over my head. I said so and asked if he would mind giving me a few details, as for example why this Judge Gaincourt should have it in for him.

"He's the grandfather of the girl I was supposed to marry," Gaspard told me. He pointed to a framed picture on the table. "That's her there."

It was the girl in the red raincoat!

"I wish to God now I had," he added bleakly. "I must have been out of my mind."

I ASKED if he cared to tell me about it. It wasn't a pretty story. But it wasn't particularly unusual.

He and the girl had planned to marry the following June. It had been because of the forthcoming marriage that he had increased his insurance. But a few days later the Japs had bombed Pearl Harbor. He and his cousin Raoul, both college men and reserve officers, knowing they would be called, had gone to New Orleans for one last fling. The fling had become a binge. The binge had turned into one of those things. And he had awakened some five days later with a dark brown taste in his mouth, to find himself married to an attractive young lady whom, it transpired, had danced out of the chorus of one of the better Latin Quarter floor shows and into big-money.

I liked the way he told it. He didn't whine.

"So I'd made my bed," he said frankly. "And I'd slept in it." He brushed his blond hair out of his eyes. "There was only one thing I could do. I transferred my insurance to her and took her back to the plantation."

He continued. Despite the unhappiness he had brought to the girl whom he had really loved, and to himself, he had been determined to make something of his drunken marriage. But it hadn't worked out that way. His wife had been cheap and fickle.

After his induction into the Army, she had grown discontented on the plantation, and after a series of local affairs, she had gone back to New Orleans and lived high, wide, and handsome, on money milked from the plantation by one means and another. If she had stayed gone all might have been well. But she hadn't.

She had returned a few days before he had been discharged and had been waiting to flaunt her indiscretions in his face. One quarrel had followed another. And, during a spell of depression brought on by heavy drinking, heart-sick over what he had done to his life, what he had done to Renée Gaincourt, he had shot his wife.

"With my service automatic," he concluded grimly.

I said, "Tough," then added, "if things do go wrong for you tomorrow, do you want your beneficiary to stand as named?"

He said he didn't give a damn who got the money, returned his back on me and tuned in the dance band again.

Laval wanted to know if I was satisfied.

"It would seem Willy is wrong," I admitted.

As he locked the cell, Laval asked *sotto voce*, "If I'm not being too curious, who does get the two-hundred odd thousand dollars he's insured for?"

I told him that according to the photostatic copy of the policy I had, his wife, first name unstated had been named. But now that she was dead, so far as I knew the entire policy would go to the second named beneficiary, his cousin, Raoul Gaspard.

He swore softly. "The hell you say. Raoul's dead."

"Dead?"

He nodded. "He died in the Battle of the Bulge. There was a telegram from the War Department almost a year ago."

"And his next of kin?"

"He hasn't any," Laval told me. "He and Antoine were the last of the Gaspards."

And that was that. "Okay. So I've wasted my time," I admitted. "I'll start back in the morning. But now tell me this. What do you know about a roadhouse two miles north of town?"

He looked at me sharply, then wiped the sweat band on his panama with his forefinger. "Why, nothing much. Why?"

He was lying. I could tell it by his eyes. He was getting a cut, and a good one, of whatever was going on. On the other hand, it was none of my business. I had Sherry and the boys to think of. I couldn't afford any trouble. "Okay. Let it go," I backed down.

The girl in the red raincoat was waiting in the office. She was a little southern honey if I'd ever seen one. Ignoring me, her eyes round, she told the sheriff, "I don't suppose, after refusing to for all these weeks, that Antoine will see me. But would you ask him, Sheriff, please."

Laval seemed genuinely embarrassed. "I wish you'd stop trying to see Antoine, Renée. All you're doing is making it harder for him

and breaking your own heart," he told her.

"It's my heart," she answered.

He hesitated, then walked back down the corridor, leaving the steel door open but closing the barred one behind him. "Look, Renée's out in the office again, Antoine," he told Gaspard. "Why don't you see her—once?"

The answer from the cell was terse and to the point. "No. For God's sake, no. Tell her to forget me."

I was watching the girl. There was a strange expression on her face. When Laval returned she said, "Anyway, thank you for trying, Sheriff."

He remembered his manners and introduced me as Matt Mercer, a private investigator from Chicago, sent down by the insurance company to make certain there was no hokuspokus going on.

She said she was pleased to meet me. I thought she was going to say more. She didn't. She thanked the sheriff again, and left.

"So—?" he asked me.

"So the company's lawyers can figure out the beneficiary," I told him. "I'm headed back north in the morning." I fired a parting shot. "And if you happen to see the boys before I do, you can tell them where to put their twenty grand."

I left him gaping.

IT HAD stopped raining but the air was fresh and clean with a tang of salt spicing the sweetness of the magnolias. I looked at the luminous dial of my watch. It had been seven-thirty when I had promised the hood I would give him his answer in half an hour. Now my watch said four minutes after eight. I started for the hotel, hoping that he hadn't called and frightened Sherry.

Pointe Lafitte's one main street was dimly lighted, but for the yellow pool outside the sheriff's window the courthouse grounds were dark. And someone was waiting for me under the dripping, feathery, fronds of a huge pineapple palm.

"Mr. Mercer—please."

I thumbed the safety back on my gun and dropped it into my pocket. As I half-expected, it was the girl. "You shouldn't have done that," I told her. "I might have shot you by mistake."

Keeping her voice to a husky whisper she said bitterly, "It wouldn't have mattered much. Antoine never killed that woman, Mr. Mercer."

I pointed out he had confessed he had.

She said hotly, "I don't care. He didn't do it." Tears sparkled in her eyes. "He told me the night that he came home from war that he was going to divorce her, that it was me he had loved all the time." It was perfectly

clear in her mind. "He didn't do it, Mr. Mercer. There was no reason for him to kill her. "When I didn't say anything, she added, "You're a detective. You can prove he didn't kill her. And if you will, I'll pay your fee—no matter what it is."

I said there was no question of a fee, that I was already retained by the insurance company to check into the matter—but there didn't seem to be anything to check.

She caught the lapels of my raincoat with her hands. "But there must be. Antoine is protecting someone. He's afraid the truth will come out. Otherwise, why won't he see me? And why won't the overseer at the Gaspard Place even let me on the grounds?"

On a hunch, I asked her to describe the overseer. Her description could have fitted almost any of the men at the roadhouse, with the exception of Charlie and the scarfaced lad. His name, she told me, was Gleason, and the late Mrs. Gaspard had engaged him.

Something was definitely rotten somewhere. But for the life of me I couldn't figure out who was doing what, or who was getting paid. It couldn't be a matter of intimidation. The most a lad can lose is his life. And young Gaspard had confessed in open court as freely as he had confessed to me. Besides, his story rang true.

The tears in her eyes threatened to spill

over. Her voice was little-girl meek. "You will help me, won't you, Mr. Mercer?"

"Look. Tell me this," I stalled. "What do you know about Willy, the 'Carekeeper Of The Dead'?"

If she heard me she ducked the question. Tears streaming down her cheeks, she begged, "Please, Mr. Mercer. Antoine didn't kill her, I know. Honest, Mr. Mercer."

"All right. Don't cry," I gave in. "I'll—"

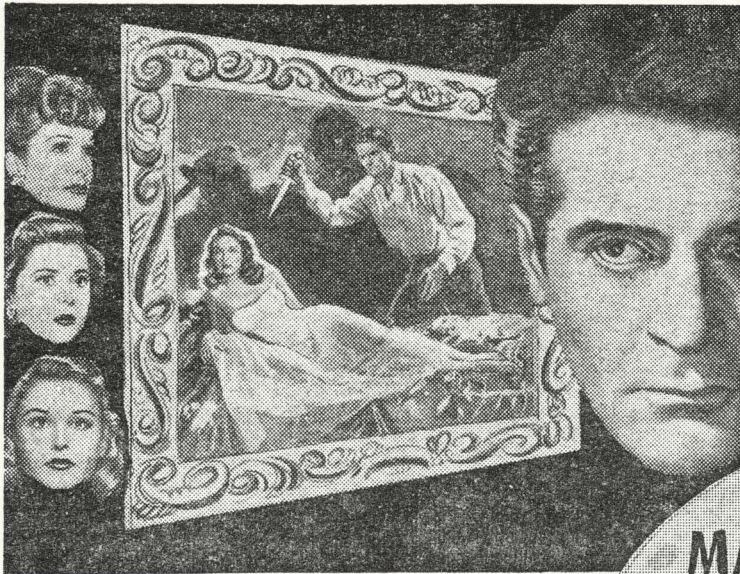
She pulled herself up on her tiptoes and kissed me. "Thank you. I *knew* you'd help me."

There were a dozen questions I wanted to ask her. Before I could, she was gone. I called, "Miss Gaincourt!", sharply, took a half dozen steps after her—then flung myself flat on the wet grass as flame spat from behind the bole of a huge palm. By the time I had my gun in my hand, night had closed in again and there was nothing at which to shoot. Then I remembered I hadn't heard lead. Whoever had done the shooting hadn't been shooting at me. *They had been shooting at the girl!*

"Miss Gaincourt," I called softly.

Nothing moved. There was no sound but the drip of the rain from the palm fronds on my coat and the distant, deep-bellied hooting of a steamer far out on the Gulf.

Then Sheriff Laval called from the doorway



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of his office. "That you out there, Mercer? What's all that shooting about?"

"I'll be damned if I know," I told him.

CHAPTER THREE

Bury Him Deep

SHERRY was braiding her hair when I walked into the room. She looked at me in the wavy mirror and wanted to know where I had been so long and why I had kept the gentleman waiting.

"What gentleman?" I asked.

She picked an oblong packet from the dresser and handed it to me. "The gentleman who left this. He said he had an appointment to meet you here at eight o'clock."

I glanced at the twins, and asked if she had let him into the room.

She said, "Certainly not. But I did talk to him in the hallway and he asked me to give you the whatever it is in the bundle."

I tapped the packet on my palm. I knew what it contained. Sherry wanted to know why I didn't open it. I described Charlie instead and asked if he had been the "gentleman" who left it. She said he was.

I cracked one end of the packet. "Then there should be twenty grand in here." There was, in fifty and one hundred dollar bills.

Her eyes wide, Sherry turned in her chair and wanted to know what I had done to earn twenty thousand dollars in the short time I had been in Pointe Lafitte.

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing," I told her.

There it was. Twenty grand. No questions asked. No favors to be done. All I had to do was pack Sherry and the kids in the car and point it back toward New Orleans. It was easy money.

Sherry shook her head. "No one gives anyone twenty thousand dollars for doing absolutely nothing."

"That's what bothers me," I admitted.

Then she spotted lipstick on the side of my mouth. "Some woman kissed you."

I said that was so, sat down on the edge of the bed and looked at the sleeping kids. Twenty grand would buy them lots of ice cream cones and rompers. But it was dirty money, how dirty I had no way of knowing.

"Why," Sherry demanded, "should any woman want to kiss you?"

I looked at myself in the mirror. I'm no Clark Gable, but with my grizzled hair, saddle-leather hide, and broken nose, I stand out in a crowd. "That's often puzzled me," I admitted.

When I had walked into the room I had been ready to tell Sherry to pack up the bags, we were leaving. There had been no sign of Miss Gaincourt on the courthouse

grounds, although the sheriff and I had searched them for the best part of half an hour. When I had phoned her grandfather's home she had been in but had refused to speak to me on the grounds that she had never heard of me. The whole set-up smelled in my book. I had come to Pointe Lafitte to ascertain a single fact—young Antoine Gaspard's innocence or guilt. He, himself, had confessed his guilt. The other business, whatever it was, was none of my affair. No one was paying me a dime to stick my neck out. The best I could expect was lead. But the money had changed everything. I was being paid to put my tail between my legs and slink out of town like a whipped cur.

Sherry has a one track mind. "Who was she?" she wanted to know.

I told her, "Renée Gaincourt, the former fiancee of the lad who killed his wife."

"And why should she kiss you?"

I put the twenty grand in my inside coat pocket, slipped my gun from its holster and laid it on the dresser. It was entirely business. I promised to help her spring her lad and she was grateful."

She sniffed, "Grateful!" Then she wanted to know what the gun was for.

I said, "To shoot with. I've got to go out again to see a man about twenty grand. But if anyone tries to get in while I'm gone, well you know what to do."

She forgot about the lipstick, crossed the room and clung to me. "No. Don't go, Matt. You're in trouble. You're in danger."

I said that was possible, but that danger was part and parcel of my racket and she had known it when she had married me.

MOSES wasn't on the bench in the lobby.

There was a foppish young clerk at the desk. I asked him if he could tell me how to get to Judge Gaincourt's residence. He said he would be pleased to, also that he knew why I was in town, and that he had always wanted to be a detective.

I lied that he'd undoubtedly make a good one and while he was still puffed up asked if he had known the former Mrs. Antoine Gaspard.

"Did I know her?" He closed one eye in what he believed to be a salacious wink. "There was one hot number. No one-man woman. Catch?"

I said I thought I had a vague idea what he meant. "A stepper, eh. I don't suppose you'd know if she had any *special* boy friend?"

He hesitated, briefly, leaned over the counter and confided. "Yes. There was one. Sheriff Henri Laval."

I scoffed, "Don't give me that."

He lifted a pink palm shoulder high. "So help me."

I picked up the paper with his directions and walked on out to my car. The deeper into the affair I got, the less sense it made. Antoine Gaspard had shot his wife for her alleged extra-marital activity, still so far as I could tell he and Sheriff Laval, the favored boy friend, were on the best of terms.

It was raining but not hard. I took my spare gun from the glove compartment and followed the directions on the map. It was an old house, set well back from the road. A bald little man with a beak nose and a myopic squint opened in answer to my knock. I asked if he was Judge Gaincourt. He said he was and I introduced myself.

His voice shrill with anger, he cried, "Go away," and tried to shut the door in my face.

I blocked it with my foot, telling him, "Nix. I'm tired of being pushed around. And you and I are going to have a little talk."

He said that as the presiding judge at Gaspard's trial, it would be unethical for him to discuss the case, especially as Gaspard came up for sentence the following day.

I pushed him aside, closed the door and leaned against it. "Look, chum. What's this all about?" I asked him. "Just because she wants to spring the lad, if possible, why should someone take a pot shot at your granddaughter?"

He said that I was being palpably absurd and he had told me so over the phone. His voice thin he continued:

"My granddaughter no longer has any interest whatsoever in Antoine Gaspard. He is a profligate, a wine-bibber, and a libertine. He is rotten all the way through, or he could never have done what he did to Renée."

I could understand the old man's vehemence. It was hurt pride. And if I had been Antoine's lawyer, the first thing I would have done would have been to ask for a change of venue. Even pleading guilty as he had, throwing himself on the mercy of the Court, he had a small chance in a courtroom presided over by Judge Gaincourt.

His face an apoplectic purple, he wanted to know my interest in the affair.

I told him, "A hundred dollars a day and ten percent of two-hundred thousand dollars, if I can save the company the loss."

He pointed a dramatic finger at the door and ordered me to leave his house. I told him not until I had seen his granddaughter. Then a door slammed somewhere in the rear of the house and he squeaked, "Renée!" shrilly.

Her voice, when it came, came not from the rear of the house but from the top of the winding stair.

"Yes, Grandfather—?"

"I heard a door," he explained. "I was afraid—"

"It was the wind," she told him. She looked

at me incuriously. There was no recognition in her eyes.

"Remember me?" I asked her. "The name is Mercer."

She said, "How do you do," and turned to go.

"Just a minute," I stopped her. "One of us is crazy. Don't try to tell me that I didn't meet you in Sheriff Laval's office a little over an hour ago and that you didn't stop me on the courthouse grounds and ask me to—"

"I'm afraid you're mistaken," she said quickly. "I—I haven't been out of the house all evening."

"See?" the little judge crowed.

I was beginning to. There was an old-fashioned candelabra directly over the girl's head and rain gleamed in her hair like jewels. I had a part of the picture at least. She had promised the old man that she was through with Antoine and whatever help she attempted to give him had to be done on the sly. "Perhaps I was mistaken," I admitted. "It must have been one of his 'other' women."

The judge said, "Sir!" and opened the door.

I'd done all I could do there. I walked out to my car, keeping a close eye on the shadows. No hoods materialized but there was a note tied to the wheel. I read it by the dash lights—

Please, Mr. Mercer. You must believe me. There is something radically wrong. No matter what he says, Antoine *did not kill that woman*. Those shots at the courthouse prove it. *Someone knows I know*. Please, please, help me, Mr. Mercer. I don't know what it is. But it has something to do with the plantation.

I turned the note over. On the back was a rough map—a series of lines and turns ending in a square marked "Gaspard Plantation." A wavy line was marked "The Gulf." A straight one was "Deep River." A quarter of an inch down the page was a smaller square labeled "Willy's Cabin".

IT WAS a gravel road, but good, with swamp water on both sides most of the time. I crossed several small rivers on wooden bridges, then a fairly large one, then struck a stretch of higher ground that looked like it might be farm land. I inspected it with the spot. It was.

As far as the spot would carry I could see a lush field of cane. A quarter of a mile up the road, I came to a level spot where the shoulder was solid enough to park, and transferred to shank's mare.

It was like being back in the jungle. As soon as I'd switched out my lights, the night and the rain and the bugs closed in around

me. There was running water nearby and I wasn't too far from the Gulf. I could smell the salt. There was no moon. I'd walked perhaps a quarter of a mile, when I saw the plantation house as a deeper blob of black against the night.

The upper story was dark but light spilled out one of the French windows on the lower floor from a large wood-paneled library. One of the men I had seen at the roadhouse was sitting at a desk working on a set of account books. I decided he was Gleason, the overseer whom the late Mrs. Gaspard had hired.

I watched him for a few minutes. There was nothing furtive about his actions. He was just a man working on books. I pressed my nose closer to the glass. There were a dozen large portraits in the room, all of men. There were several in knee britches and ruffs. And there was one of the lad in the jug, his blond hair strangely out of place among the black hair of his ancestors. But all of the faces, including his, were strangely similar. Except for their manner of dress, a tilt of a nose here, an expression in the eyes there, they all could have been the same man. It was obviously one of those families where family resemblance runs strong.

Then Gleason looked up from his books, yawning, and I stepped back from the window. I wanted to talk to the "Caretaker Of The Dead" before I talked to him.

I found the cabin without too much trouble. It was on a fairly high knoll that sloped down to the river and what appeared to be a small wharf or landing. Behind it a low stone wall inclosed the Gaspard burying ground. Despite the muggy, semi-tropical heat the shutters of the cabin were closed but behind them a kerosene lamp burned dimly. I slipped my gun from its holster, and used the barrel to tap on the door. "Willy!"

There was a pause, then a bass voice rumbled, "Who out there?"

I told him it was the man from the insurance company.

The man who opened the door didn't match his voice. He was little and black with stringy white hair that hung almost to his shoulders. "What man from what insurance company?" he wanted to know.

He looked like something out a haunted house. And he was either a consummate actor or he hadn't written the note. I took it from my wallet and showed it to him. You are the "Carekeeper Of The Dead," aren't you?"

"Yes, suh. That's me, first name Willy," he admitted. He took the note in black, claw-like fingers and held it to the lamplight. "But I doan write this, Mister." (I noticed he was holding it upside down). I ain' never learn how to read or write. What this for? What it say, Mister?"

I told him it was a note supposedly signed by him, saying that Mr. Antoine hadn't killed his wife.

He shook his head. "That ain' so, Mister." A sepulchral note crept into his voice. "I ain' there when he do it." He pointed toward the low white wall. "But she buried right in there. An' lots of times when the Gaspard daid come out of their graves at night, I see her sit on a tombstone an' cry because she so sorry she so bad that Mr. Antoine have to shoot her."

And that was that. I lit a cigarette. If he hadn't written the note, and it seemed obvious that he hadn't, I thought I knew who had. I dropped my gun back in my pocket, thanked the old man for nothing, turned to go back and talk to Gleason, turned again—my head only this time—as the hard round object prodded the small of my back.

"Hold it just like you are," Willy warned me. He didn't sound crazy now. "It's okay. I got a gun on him," he added in a louder tone of voice.

The scarfaced lad rounded the corner of the cabin. "Damn you anyway, Mercer," he cursed me. "You wouldn't play it smart, would you, sucker? You wouldn't take the dough and scam. Well, okay. Take this!"

He was slightly to my left and behind me. I rolled away from the blow and into one from Willy that almost tore my ear off my head. Blind with pain, I shot through my pocket and heard one of them grunt. But before I could shoot again, a third gun barrel snaked out of the night, tearing my hand from my gun and knocking me to my knees. Miles away someone asked, "He get you bad, Willy?"

"Bad 'nuff," the colored man answered. He sounded genuinely puzzled. "But what's all this 'bout an insurance company? What he talkin' 'bout? Who write a letter in my name sayin' that young Gaspard doan kill his wife?" he asked.

The third man demanded, "Have you really gone crazy, Willy?"

Scarface said, "No kidding. That's what Mercer told Willy. It looks like we had him wrong. One gets you ten the Feds aren't even wise yet, that he came down here on something to do with young Gaspard."

Pain had glued my eyes. I managed to unglue them. The third man was Gleason, the overseer. He said he would be damned. "So we made a mistake?"

All three men looked at me. I clapped my hand to my side. My gun wasn't in my pocket. I hadn't even a pocket. My hand had ripped it out under the force of Gleason's blow.

Scarface kicked me under the chin. "So—we'll bury our mistake. We'll bury him deep."

CHAPTER FOUR

Carekeeper of the Dead

THE ROOM was small and hot and smelled of dry decay. Both the floor and the walls were concrete. So was the ceiling. The only air there was seeped in through a small, slotted opening on a level with my eyes. I hadn't the least idea how long I had been unconscious. I hadn't expected to come to. The last I remembered was Scarface boasting that they'd bury me deep.

I stood staring out into the night. There was nothing to see. There were no sounds but the night things and the gurgle of the river. I tried to puzzle out where I was—and then I knew.

They don't bury their dead in the delta country. They seal them in mausoleums above ground. I was in a concrete crypt on the Gaspard burying ground. But I hadn't been buried alive. They weren't through with me yet. I still had the twenty grand in my inside coat pocket.

I sat down with my back to the wall, fished a crumpled cigarette from my pocket and struck a light. I wasn't alone in the crypt. I had a Gaspard for company. But he had been dead a long time. His coffin was stone and sealed.

The case still failed to make sense. Only one thing was clear. The hoods hadn't known about the note, and they weren't concerned whether Gaspard lived or died. They had more important irons in their fire. It had something to do with Uncle Sam. One of them had tagged me in the roadhouse. It was well known in certain circles that, after failing to get back my old rating because of the arm I had lost in a war-preview on the Yangtze, I had done undercover work for the old man with the whiskers. And they had jumped to the conclusion that I was still working for him. In fact, Charlie had told me frankly—*"Sure. We know. You're a big shot agency man. You've been doing Federal work during the war. But the war's over—see?"*

He had also said: *"Now get this and get it straight, Mercer. This thing is too big for us to let any private shamus or any fed try to stop us."*

It had to be big. It had been worth twenty grand to them just to get me out of town! It could be dope, but I doubted that it was. I know most of the boys who traffic in powdered death and none of their faces had been familiar. Still, the location was ideal. An incoming ocean steamer could unload almost any type of cargo into speed or fishing boats before proceeding up river to New Orleans. Five states—and hundreds of small ports with no customs or control stations—

were within easy cruising distance. A contraband load of almost anything, dropped off at the mouth of the Mississippi, could be smuggled into Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama or Florida.

The more I thought about it, the more logical it sounded. The Gaspard place was their stash. Willy, and his "Carekeeper of the Dead" act, and his "daid" that walked at night, were merely clever gimmicks to keep the local curious but superstitious hoi-polloi away from the Gaspard place. Miss Gaincourt had been refused admittance to the grounds by Gleason for the same reason.

The more I thought of the girl, the madder I got. It was her fault that I was where I was. I took the "Carekeeper Of The Dead" note from my pocket and compared it, by matchlight, to the note and map that she had left on the wheel of my car. The writing was disguised but similar. Blindly in love with young Gaspard, afraid to ask for help openly because of her Grandfather, she had sent the misspelled note, attributing her own feelings to Willy.

I said to hell with her and sat thinking of Sherry and the kids. I doubted the hoods would harm them. They had a bear by the tail, as it was. I wasn't an unknown. My mysterious disappearance would call for an investigation. And if what I surmised was correct, the less attention they attracted to themselves or Pointe Lafitte, the safer they would be.

Somewhere in the night, much closer this time, a steamer hooted. I got to my feet to look out the slotted window, turned toward the door instead as a key grated in the lock of the crypt.

Then the beam of a flashlight blinded me. Back of it Charlie, "It would seem you got yourself in a mess, Mercer."

He beckoned me out with his light. Another hood and Willy stood behind him. Both had sawed off shot-guns. Fourth and fifth hoods were locking the doors of crypts similar to the one in which I had been imprisoned. I looked down the hill at the river. The moon had broken through the clouds now and I could see a trim speedboat tied up at the landing. It had come in silently on the tide.

Charlie beckoned me down the hill toward the manor house. "Don't get too interested in what doesn't concern you, Mercer. Get going. We've got another deal to offer you."

I scoffed, "Don't tell me you aren't going to bury me deep?"

"Don't be too certain," he said quietly. "We may have to yet."

WITH three guns in my back, I walked toward the low stone wall past one of the crypts that one of the hoods had been locking.

As we passed it, a guttural voice muttered something in a foreign tongue and a second similar voice answered. I kept on walking, the small hairs on the back of my neck tingling. I knew now what their racket was. And Charlie hadn't been whoofing when he said that they might have to bury me yet. I couldn't see how they could possibly afford to let me go.

Gleason and Scarface were waiting in the lobby. Charlie motioned me to a chair near the desk. "How much do you know about our racket?" he demanded without preamble.

"Not a damn thing," I lied. I took the note that had brought me to Pointe Lafitte from my wallet and laid it on the desk. "Willy tells me he didn't write it. But that's what brought me here for the Amalgamated Underwriters. I merely wanted to make certain that the lad was guilty as charged."

Charlie glanced at the note, demanded, "This Antoine lad is carrying how much insurance?"

I told him two hundred grand. He swung around to Gleason.

"You didn't tell me that."

"I didn't know it," Gleason said. "I leased the place from his wife. I was in New Orleans the night that he returned. I only saw him once. And that was the afternoon he surrendered to the sheriff."

Charlie made a wry face and turned back to me. "Then if we hadn't lost our heads and offered you that twenty grand—"

I told the truth. "I'd have been a hundred miles away from here by now." I took the packet of bills from my pocket and laid it beside the note. "There's your dough. I don't give a hoot about your racket. I wanted to see you, yes. But only to tell you where you could put the twenty grand."

Willy brushed his long white hair out of his eyes. "He lyin'. He jus' use that note as a excuse to come here spyin'."

"Who wrote it?" Charlie asked.

I told him I thought I knew but it wasn't any of his business. He said I was in no position to get tough. I said I realized that, but neither was he for that matter. "Go ahead. Bury me deep," I warned him. "But I'm not exactly an unknown. And you can't bury me deep enough to keep my missing body from smelling."

He grinned, "I suppose your wife will complain to Sheriff Laval?"

"Okay. So you have him in your vest pocket," I countered. "You can't buy the Amalgamated Underwriters. It's stale-mate."

He shook his head. "No. We're in this too deep. We stand to make too much to let you upset our gravy boat one way or another. So we're going to do the only thing we can, lift your wife and kids from that hotel—"

Ignoring the guns behind me I got to my feet fast, and knocked him off his. What happened to me was one thing. But Sherry and the twins were an entirely different matter.

He went down spitting curses with me on top of him, trying to tug his gun from his shoulder-holster before one of the other lads could shoot me. I couldn't get at his gun but they didn't dare to shoot for fear of hitting him.

"Kill him. Shoot him!" Willy rumbled.

Somewhere in back of me, Scarface said, "No, you fool! Don't!"

HE KNOCKED up the gun in time to allow the deadly pellets to blast the picture of Gaspard off the wall instead of tearing our heads from our shoulders. Still tugging at Charlie's gun with my good hand, I gave him the cork and steel and as he went limp, whirled shooting, only to have one of the lads whose name I didn't know shoot the gun out of my hand, while still another lad closed in and slugged me.

I landed on my side, rolling. But none of them tried to plug me. Charlie was sitting up, shouting, "Don't shoot him. We can't afford to kill him—yet!"

I've been in some brawls in my day but that one was a lulu. It was five against one, me spotting all of them ten to fifteen years. The only advantage I had was that they didn't want to kill me. I was to find out why, soon.

Three of them rushed me at once. Instead of backing away, I led with the steel mitt and slugged, using every bit of dirty fighting I had picked up in barroom brawls from Shanghai to Managua. I was down. I was up. I was down with two of them trying to ride me and slug me at the same time. It couldn't last long. And it didn't.

Scarface, using his boots again, skidded me into a corner of the room so hard that one of the big gold framed pictures tore loose from the molding and shattered on the floor, missing my head by inches. But in ducking back, my hand felt the stock of one of the double-barreled shot guns that a hood had laid down, the better to slug me.

I swung the barrels to cover the room. "Hold it!" I warned them. "You don't want to kill *me*." I was so winded I was panting. "But I don't care how many of *you* I get." I got to my feet unsteadily. "And I'm walking out of here—now."

I backed toward the big French windows, noting for the first time that Charlie was no longer in the room. "You and you," I picked out Scarface and one of the other hoods. "You walk in front of me, straight down the road to my car. And if big-time Charlie or anyone else tries to stop us—"

I stopped, staring across the room at the high arch that led into the hallway. Her eyes as big as saucers and her face as white as death, Sherry was standing in the arch holding a sleepy-eyed twin with both hands.

"Daddy fightin'," Matt Jr. pronounced gravely.

"Das bad," his sister said, sniffing. She looked up at Sherry. "Tell 'addy to stop it, mama. His face is all covered with blood."

Charlie was standing behind them, a .45 pressed to the nape of Sherry's neck. I had closed one of his eyes. His nose was still dribbling blood. "You're too quick on the draw, Mercer," he said coldly. "We've had your wife and kids for half an hour."

"I told you to shoot through the door," I told Sherry.

She was trying hard not to cry. Her lips quivering she said, "I couldn't. They—they told me that you'd been wounded, and before I realized it was a trick—"

"Nix," Charlie cut her short. "All we need now is a bawling woman. Nothing is going to happen to you or to your kids, as long as Mercer does what he's told."

He told Scarface to take the shot gun from me. I handed it to him stock first. I've heard of some guys being noble and sacrificing the woman they loved, and maybe even their kids, for what they considered their duty. Not me. Sherry and the twins come first. "You're calling the figures," I told Charlie. "What do you want me to do?"

He said, "Young Gaspard comes up for sentence tomorrow. But he won't burn for quite some time. So you are going to wire Amalgamated that it may take you a month or so to complete your investigation."

I asked, "And during that month—?"

He told me, "You and Mrs. Mercer and the children are going to be the guests of Mr. Gleason, the overseer of the Gaspard plantation. As long as you send in daily reports, reporting progress, Amalgamated ought not

to worry about you too greatly. But no funny stuff, understand?" He lifted the .45 to Sherry's nape again. "Just goof off once and—"

I said that I understood.

Charlie nodded to Gleason. "Take them upstairs to what used to be Mrs. Gaspard's room."

I crossed the floor to Sherry.

"It—it's going to be all right?" she asked.

I said, "Sure." But it wasn't, I knew. And Charlie knew I knew. By snatching Sherry and the kids, he was merely stalling for time until he could figure out a plausible "accident" that would pass muster with whatever state officers might be sent to investigate our deaths. I picked up Matt and little Sherry. "After you," I told Gleason.

Little Sherry scowled over my shoulder at Charlie. "He bad mans," she confided in my ear.

I just held her a little closer. It was all I could do—right then.

CHAPTER FIVE

Accidents Will Happen

FOR a long time I lay listening to the drip of water from the eaves. It wasn't rain. It was condensation. Morning had dawned bright and clear. Neither Sherry or I had closed our eyes. She had cried in my arms what was left of the night. She wanted to see the mouth of the Mississippi. She did. It was like a honeymoon, with the sword of Damocles hanging over our heads.

I padded over to the window in my stocking feet. A stable hand was currying a horse. It was a pleasant, pastoral scene.

There was only one door leading to the hall and one or another of the hoods sat beside it constantly. I had combed the rooms for a weapon but there was none. It was a comparatively easy drop from the windows to

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the terrace for a man. But not for a woman or a pair of three year olds.

At eight o'clock the twins woke up and wanted to go home. I had to tell them that we couldn't, and they wanted to know why.

"Because your mother's a fool," Sherry told them.

She was still reproaching herself when Gleason and Scarface brought in our breakfasts on trays. Both were sheepish. They were bad and they were tough but they weren't women or kid killers, and having to snatch Sherry and the twins had put them on a spot.

Gleason gave me a pad of telegram blanks and told me to write a wire to Amalgamated telling them of my change of address and reason therefore. I addressed a brief telegram to Carse saying that Mr. Gleason, the overseer of the Gaspard plantation, had offered me the hospitality of the manor house to facilitate my investigation.

When they had gone, Sherry tried to get the twins to eat. Both were too excited. I spoke to them sharply and little Sherry pointed out that I hadn't eaten my own eggs. I choked them down as a good example. Then the twins spotted the river from one of the windows and wanted to walk down to the bank. I had to tell them that we couldn't, that we were playing a game and had to stay in the room.

"I don't wike this game," little Sherry said. "An' I wanna go down to the wiver."

I told her to keep quiet and eat her breakfast. She ate, her eyes filled with tears. I couldn't take it. I opened the door to the hall and told the hood on guard that I wanted to see Charlie.

"He's gone to Pointe Lafitte to send your telegram," he told me.

I asked how about my wife and kids having the freedom of the grounds, and he told me nothing doing, that Charlie had left strict orders that none of us were to step outside the door.

The rest of the morning passed somehow with Sherry inventing games for the twins to play and me, mainly, staring out the window trying to figure out some gimmick that might spring us out of the jam. The plantation had been a beautiful place in its day. It still was. The outhouses and barns were well kept. A rolling park led down to the river. His long white hair glistening in the sun, Willy was busy in the bury-ground, pruning this and transplanting that, and generally "carekeeping" for his "dead."

Shortly before noon Matt handed me a letter. "We playin' postman," he informed me.

I thanked him for the letter and asked him where he got it. He said, "Mama found 'em

in a dwar all w'apped up with blue wibbons."

I WALKED into the other room. Sherry was sitting on the floor surrounded by letters. She looked up from the one she was reading and wanted to know who had been married to the late Mrs. Gaspard.

I told her "Antoine, the lad in the jug."

She wanted to know, "Then why should some man named Raoul be panting on paper until he can hold her in his arms again?"

I read the letter Matt had give me. It began, "My Dearest Darling" and continued in a similar vein. The writer had seemingly known the late Mrs. Gaspard for some years—and well. I thought of the pictures downstairs, and asked Sherry to sort through the letters and pick out those with the oldest postmarks.

She found one dated December 25th, 1941, postmarked from Camp Claibourne. It had the whole story in black and white. The protracted binge from which Antoine had awakened married to a chorus girl had been strictly a business proposition engineered by his cousin Raoul. The girl was supposed to split the take with him and judging by the later letters, evidently had. If Antoine was killed in action, Raoul expected half of the insurance and the estate, and had said so in writing. The only hitch in his plans had been that he had been killed instead of Antoine.

Sherry looked at me hopefully. I put the letter in my pocket. "It doesn't mean a thing to us," I dashed her hopes. "But if I could get it into the proper hands, it might mean something to Antoine. No jury reading that could possibly burn the boy."

The "room" was really three rooms—a bedroom, sitting room, and bath. We were in the bedroom. Charlie walked in from the sitting room. I didn't like the look in his eyes. "Having fun?" he asked.

I said I could hardly control myself.

He wet his slips. Gaspard was sentenced an hour ago. And what do you think he got?"

I said all the odds that I had heard quoted had been on his getting the chair.

He shook his head. "No. In view of his heroic war record, the judge gave him twenty years to life." There was a moment of unhealthy silence then he added, "I'm sorry, believe me, Mercer. But I had already sent that telegram."

He ground his cigarette out in a tray and left the room. I tried to light one but my good hand shook so badly I had to use the cork.

Sherry sensed the strain if she didn't get the full impact of his meaning. One hand fondling her throat, her eyes sought mine.

I inclined my head toward the other room. "You kids sort all the letters into piles," I told the twins.

In the other room I gave it to Sherry straight. As I saw it, the hoods had intended to let us live for a month or two, or until whenever their business was completed. But they couldn't very well, now. Amalgamated wasn't the type of a firm to carry an investigator at a hundred dollars a day on a case in which their possibility of immediate loss had been removed. If I didn't show in Chicago in a day or two, Carse would begin his own investigation. I had stated that I was staying at the Gaspard plantation. And our hosts couldn't afford to have us there when and if the law arrived looking for Mercer and Company.

But with us dead and out of the way all they had to do was lie low until the heat was off again. Gleason could swear that we had started north. No one could prove differently.

Her eyes wide she said, "Of course. I should have realized." She buried her face on my shoulder. "But they can't harm the children, Matt. They can't. They are too little to talk. Even I don't know what it's all about."

I wasn't positive, but I had a fair idea. Gleason and Charlie and Scarface and the other hoods were merely cogs in a large international organization of whose existence I had learned while I was still working for Uncle Sam. For a price—and a big one—the organization guaranteed to smuggle wanted men whose names were on the war criminal lists into the United States and to furnish them with new identities.

If I was correct, there were several of them locked in crypts in the burying ground now, their first station on the underground. The streamer I had heard hooting had dropped them off a few miles out in the Gulf. A speedboat had brought them the rest of the way. Tonight they would move on.

Sherry wanted to know if I thought we could expect any help from the local Sheriff. I said I doubted it very greatly. I looked down at the drive. One of the hoods had driven my car up from the turn-off. I asked Sherry if she had the spare set of keys in her purse.

THE afternoon dragged into evening. When I heard steps on the stairs I went in and lay down on the bed. The twins had their instructions.

It was Scarface and Willy this time. They hadn't any trays. Both of them were nervous. When he didn't see me, Scarface asked where I was. Sherry told him I wasn't feeling well and that I was lying down.

He strode into the bedroom. "Come on. Get up, Mercer. We're all piling in your car and—"

The room was semi-dark. He didn't see the chair leg. I let him have it flush between the

eyes, laid him on the bed and took his gun. I didn't know if I'd killed him or not. I hoped so.

The old colored man's eyes went wide when he saw me with a gun. He opened his mouth to yell and I told him, "You do and I'll blow out your tonsils." He closed his mouth and I clipped him with the gun-barrel. The only sound was the thud of the steel on his skull.

"Now, Daddy?" Matt wanted to know.

I shook my head and cracked the door a trifle. If there was more than one guard in the hall, I was sunk. There wasn't. The guard's back was to me and he was glancing at a paper. I tiptoed a step and a floor-board creaked. As he turned I warned him, *sotto-voce*, "If you're smart you'll keep your trap shut and your hands just as they are."

He didn't. He went for his gun instead, and I had to shoot him. "Now!" I told Sherry and the twins.

She raced down the stairs behind me carrying a twin in each arm, their arms around her neck and their faces buried in her shoulders. The door to the library opened as we hit the lower landing. I vaulted the rail to draw attention from Sherry and the kids and two slugs plowed through my cork arm. Gleason's third shot went into the ceiling, as I drilled him through the throat.

I ran out the front door to the drive. Sherry had the twins on the floor in back, but hadn't been able to start the motor. I pushed her over in the seat and ground the starter as a blast of slugs starred the windshield. Then the motor caught hold and roared. I leaped it like a cat at Charlie, who had stepped out of a French window and was leveling his sub-machine gun for a second burst.

I couldn't tell if I hit him or not, but looking back through the rear window Sherry cried out that first one car, then two, then three, were roaring down the drive behind us.

"'At was fun," Matt said in my ear.

I told him to get down on the floor again and take care of his sister. The road hadn't been built for speed but I drove it like a race track, bending all curves on two wheels. As we neared the highway, Sherry screamed, "Look out, Matt! It's a road block!"

It wasn't. It was a jalopy moving so slowly it looked as if it were parked. I slewed left toward Pointe Lafitte in front of it, missing his left front fender by a hair.

A mile or so up the road the driver of one of the cars waved me back as I started to pass him. "Take your time, brother," he shouted. "There ain't going to be no excitement until we get there."

I kept my eye on the rear-vision mirror and loafed along beside him. Sherry asked what he was talking about.

"The lynching," he told her, grimly. "He

hadn't no call to do it. And old Judge Gaincourt was well-liked."

I continued to jockey the Caddy along side his flivver. "What's the matter with Gaincourt?" I shouted.

"He's daid," the man in the other car told me. "Not satisfied with getting life, when he should have gone to the chair, young Gaspard got away from the Sheriff when he was taking him back to jail and before Laval could capture him again, the ungrateful young pup murdered Judge Gaincourt in cold blood. At least a dozen people seen him."

"And where's Gaspard now?" I shouted.

"Back in jail," he told me. "But we aim to take him out."

Eight or nine cars behind me a pair of headlights swung out of line. I gunned the Caddy. One miracle had happened. I couldn't expect another. But once I had Sherry and the twins in a safe place, I had some unfinished business to attend to for Amalgamated Underwriters. I had the whole Gaspard picture now. It had been perfectly clear all the time. As clear as a bottle of peroxide.

CHAPTER SIX

Gallows-Candidate

THERE were perhaps two hundred fishermen, farmers, and townsmen milling around in the courthouse square when I got there. There was no shouting and no cursing. Their silence was even more deadly.

I elbowed my way up under one of the magnolia trees to a spot from which I could see the doorway of the jail. Laval was standing in the doorway, his hat cocked on his black curls, a double-barreled shotgun in his hands. He didn't look worried to me. What little resistance he intended to make would be strictly for the record.

As I reached the tree a white-haired planter warned him quietly, "Step aside, sheriff. We've come for Antoine Gaspard. And we mean to have him!"

A stocky man standing beside him added, "This isn't a lynch mob, sheriff. This is justice."

Laval covered him with his shot gun. "Stand back, Major Claybourn I feel as badly about Judge Gaincourt as the rest of you. But you boys aren't going to hang Antoine. I have my oath of office to think of."

A bronzed-faced, bare-headed lad wearing the hip boots of a shrimper or an oyster-man said, "We mean to have him, Sheriff."

He spat a stream of tobacco juice at Laval's feet. Laval side-stepped angrily to escape the fluid, and the stocky lad he had called Major Claybourn wrenched the shotgun from his hands, both barrels discharging over the head

of the crowd as he did so. Two more men closed in immediately and pinned the sheriff's arms behind him while the planter relieved him of his keys.

I asked the man next to me, "Where do you think they'll hang him?"

He pointed to a huge banyan tree on the edge of the Courthouse Square, and turned back to watch the planter and Claybourn and the lad in the hip boots lead Antoine Gaspard out of the jail. The blond youth seemed dazed. He stared at the mob stupidly. The three men had to support him.

For the first time, the crowd roared. It wasn't a pleasant thing to hear. Their faces, in the flickering flames of the pitch-pine torches, were ugly. The three men led the youth toward the banyan tree. The two men holding Laval followed without releasing their hold on him, as if in fear he might somehow stop the lynching. No one was paying any attention to the jail. I walked in through the open door, back to the inclosed solitary cell and rapped on it lightly.

"What? Over so soon?" a surly voice demanded.

I tried the door. It was securely locked. "No. Not yet. But soon," I answered the voice.

When I reached the outer edge of the mob around the tree, the planter was adjusting the noose on Antoine's neck. I forced my way through to the front row. The crowd had grown moderately quiet again. "You're a doing a fine job, chum," I told the planter. "The only trouble is, you're hanging the wrong man."

He wanted to know who I was. I told him.

"Hang the goldangyankee with Gaspard," someone in the crowd shouted. "If he's an insurance man, all he is trying to do is save his company a loss."

A LYNCH mob is a beast. And the beast roared again, at me this time. I roared right back. "Okay. Go ahead. Hang the wrong man and be sorry for it the rest of your lives. But get this and get it straight. Antoine Gaspard didn't kill his wife. And he didn't kill Judge Gaincourt. Sheriff Laval and his cousin Raoul framed him for his insurance!"

The planter said I seemed to be pretty certain of my ground. I said I was, then turned back and faced the mob. "But before I begin. If there is a doctor in the crowd I'd like to have him examine Gaspard, and tell us whether his apparent stupor is caused by fear or whether he is so drugged that he doesn't know he's in Pointe LaFitte!"

The fisherman in hip boots scowled at me. "So he's drugged. So what? I saw him kill Judge Gaincourt."

"You mean you saw Judge Gaincourt killed," I corrected. "But Antoine didn't kill him. His cousin Raoul is the lad you want." I gave Major Claybourn the letter that Sherry had found and asked him if he would read it aloud to the crowd.

He hesitated, briefly, read it through with the aid of a flashlight, swore, "Why the dirty, conniving cheat!"

The planter protested, "But Raoul is dead. He was killed in the Battle Of The Bulge."

I said, "You mean he was reported killed. With eleven million men involved, it is only natural that such mistakes occasionally happen. The report of Raoul's death was one of them. For reasons of his own, he let it pass. Maybe he wanted out of the Army. I wouldn't know. But I *do* know that he beat Antoine home and slipped into Pointe Lafitte secretly."

Laval screamed hysterically, "He's lying!"

The planter told the two men holding Laval. "Keep close holt on him. He's too worried for there not to be some sense to this." He turned back to me. "Go on."

I debated telling them of the set-up Raoul had found at the Gaspard plantation and decided not to, for fear it would confuse the issue. The hoods and their merry little game of smuggling fugitives from war criminal fring-squads could wait.

"You can judge from the letter you have just heard," I continued, "that Raoul had hoped that Antoine would be killed so he and the girl could split his two-hundred thousand dollar insurance. But he wasn't. Also, they both knew there would be hell to pay when Antoine did return. They knew he'd divorce his wife. The chances were that having come through the war, he would live to a ripe old age. And that didn't suit Raoul's plans. So his crooked mind conceived a plan. He'd let the law kill Antoine. All he needed was a crooked sheriff. And he found one in Sheriff Laval who had been playing around with Antoine's wife. A bottle of peroxide is strong. So, he bleached his hair, waited until Antoine returned, then slugged him, killed the late Mrs. Gaspard, and surrendered both himself and his unconscious cousin to Laval, and that was that."

Major Claybourn demanded to know that if what I said was so, where had Antoine been all the time?

"Not ten feet from his cousin," I told him. "They couldn't kill him. They needed him for fingerprints and such. Besides, he had to live to take the rap. So they put him in the solitary cell and kept him drugged. It was Raoul with his bleached hair who stood trial and pleaded guilty. They expected him to get

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the chair. It was Antoine who would go to it of course.

"Once he had been sentenced and out of their hands it wouldn't matter what he said. The more he raved, the more the state authorities would think he was attempting a phoney insanity gag. But they didn't dare to allow Renée Gaincourt to see Raoul. She'd have detected the switch in a minute. So Raoul merely refused to see her, and couldn't force him to."

I continued, "It was almost a fool-proof plan. Raoul and Laval intended to switch Antoine to Raoul's cell immediately after the death sentence had been pronounced. But Gaincourt upset their plans by giving him life. Insurance companies only pay off on dead men. That's why the judge had to die, to whip you boys into lynching Antoine so Raoul and Laval could collect."

The crowd roared—but not at me this time.

Major Claybourn protested, "But how could Raoul collect Antoine's insurance as long as he was listed as dead?"

I SAID he couldn't. But all he had to do was sneak out of town after the excitement of the lynching had died down, hole up somewhere where he wasn't known until his hair had grown out in its natural color and then turn up as an amnesia case, the report of whose death had been greatly exaggerated.

The two men holding Laval hustled him up to the tree. Only the lad in the hip boots was still dubious. "You've made a lot of talk, stranger," he said. "But before you began you said that you could prove it. How about making good?"

I said I would be pleased and asked who had Laval's keys. He said he did. "Okay," I told him. "Then open the door of the sweat box and bring out the lad you find in there. You see, pressed for time as they were, Raoul hasn't had a chance to scam. So Laval locked him, for safety, into the same cell where they have been keeping Antoine."

A dozen other men went with him. They returned in a few minutes with a fighting, cursing youth who, with his black hair bleached yellow, resembled his cousin as one chorus girl's gam does the other. He cursed me up one side and down the middle.

Ignoring him, I told the mob, "There is just one more thing that you gentlemen might like to know. Last night, here on the courthouse grounds, a mysterious burst of shots was fired at Miss Gaincourt as she tried to enlist my aid in proving Antoine innocent of the crime with which he was charged." I looked at Laval. "The sheriff and I searched

the grounds thoroughly for the would-be killer. And while I am making no accusation, I believe if I had examined Laval's gun I would have found him."

Laval whimpered, "I didn't aim to kill her. I only meant to frighten her away from you." He shook his fist at the still cursing youth. "It was you who told me to shoot at her, Raoul."

When the beast had stopped roaring, I asked Major Claybourn if he thought they could carry on from there without my assistance. He thanked me soberly and said they could.

I slipped my good arm around Antoine's waist. "Then with your permission, gentlemen, I'll deliver this soldier to his girl. I am informed that following her father's death, Miss Gaincourt moved into the same hotel at which my wife and children are stopping."

Everyone who could reach him slapped Antoine's back as we passed through a lane the lad in hip boots opened through the mob. I walked him slowly up the street, my hand on my gun.

Renée was in our room sobbing on Sherry's shoulder. At sight of her Antoine showed his first glimmer of undrugged consciousness. He said, "Renée," and tried to hold out his arms. He couldn't. But she could and did. And how!

Only one thing still bothered me. I asked Renée about it later, when she had calmed down enough to talk.

It was you who wrote that "Carekeeper Of The Dead" note, wasn't it?" I accused.

She admitted it was, saying that she had known that Antoine was innocent all the time, but she hadn't dared to help him openly for fear it would further incense her grandfather against him. Therefore, not knowing that Willy was one of the mob at the Gaspard Plantation she had used his local name, hoping it would intrigue the insurance company into sending down an investigator.

I said that was fine but how did she know he was innocent.

She said, "Why—just because."

I didn't seem to be getting anywhere so I let it go for the time. But later I asked Sherry over a double casserole of *La Bouillabaisse a La Marseillaise*, "Can you tie that, huh? Because. Now wasn't that some reasoning to touch off this whole affair?"

She looked at me blankly a moment then wanted to know, "Why? What was the matter with Renée's reasoning? Any woman in love always knows when the man she loves is innocent."

"Yeah?" I scoffed. "Why does she know?"

You guessed it. "Because," Sherry smiled.

THE END

Macabre Museum

Mayan & Jakobsson

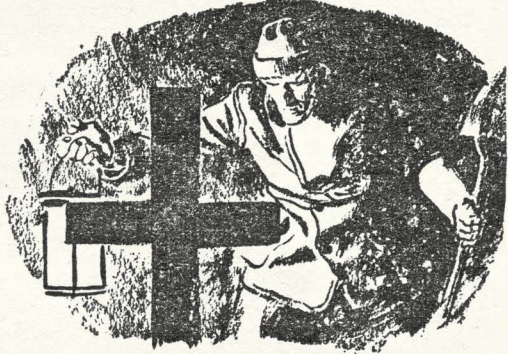


For three years the ghost of Giuseppe Veraldi lurked under the bridge where his body had been found—waiting to walk and talk with a pretty girl. In Maria Talaricos, he found the lady of his choice, and so he borrowed her for a pasear. Through her, he told neighbors and his mother the story of his death—a grim story of murder, where none had been suspected; of treachery by four of his friends, who had attacked him, beaten him to death and thrown him off the bridge. Then he slipped quietly away and Maria came to with no recollection of her “date.”

Her story, however, while not permissible evidence in the courts of Catanzarro, Italy, resulted in a police investigation placing blame on the four!

The love-torn corpse sighed. It hardly rattled her as she found her skeletal self dug up, toted a few miles and buried again. It had happened too often. But it was a little bewildering to a pair of hard-working cemetery keepers to find one of their guests so restless. Here today and gone tomorrow is not supposed to apply to corpses.

She turned out to be Stanka Stoyadonovich, of Lapovo, Yugoslavia, whose husband had never gotten along with his mother-in-law. After Stanka's death, her mother stole and buried her—but her grieving husband secretly dug her up and reinterred her in a cemetery more to his liking, her mother stole her back, etc. By the time the matter got to court, Stanka was in the possession of the old lady—which turned out to be nine points of the law!



Fritz Haarman was probably the most efficient murderer this world has ever known. He operated a butcher shop in Hanover, Germany, at the end of the last war. With fresh meat at a premium, and German lives as cheap as Hitler was later to prove them, Haarman killed some six hundred members of the super-race, and sold their cadavers over the counter to unsuspecting housewives, thereby helping to solve the food shortage both by reducing the number of consumers and allaying the survivors' hunger. He also sold his victims clothing, trinkets and gold fillings for what they would bring—and, since he killed only young males, probably unwittingly helped in placing *Deutschland Under Allies* in 1945.

Like most perfectionists, however, he was unappreciated and was sentenced to death in 1925.

Nearly a score of white-bled corpses were credited to the bloodthirsty vampire of Dusseldorf, Germany, before his own desire to have the world appreciate his strange appetite led to his downfall—if an honest-to-goodness real-life vampire can be said to have such. Chances are, Peter Kuertin was simply elevated to hell, via the hangrope.

His victims ranged in age from men and women of fifty-five to kids in their early teens. He chose them indiscriminately by the light of the moon. Oddly enough, he delighted in being present and mingling with the unsuspecting police at the scenes of his crimes, and even went so far as to notify the authorities as to where they might find bodies.

His capture resulted in the revival of capital punishment in pre-Hitler Germany.



THE BURNING SNOW

By RALPH ELDRED

IT WAS beginning now. I could feel it—the vague increase in the room's temperature. The faint, scarcely detectable smell of burning—like the breath of some forgotten autumn. The tenuous gray drift of ashes through the shaft of moonlight from the window.

I lay back on the bed and tried to relax. I pulled the blankets tighter, though already I could feel my body stippled with the blister-shaped globules of sweat. My fingers groped toward the bedstand, crushing out my cigarette. And the fingers shook.

The fine sift of ashes swirled faster through the moonlight, now. The acrid smell of smoke burned my eyeballs, peppered the taut membranes of my throat. A little trickle of tepid perspiration crawled down my right cheek, and a nerve there twitched.

The vibrant throbbing had begun. The sound that was not a sound. The voice that was not a voice, perhaps; but merely a morbid phantasy of my own imagination, repeated so often that it had become real to me, gathering force and shadowy substance for my ears, alone:

"Malcolm . . . Can you hear me, Malcolm? Can you see me? The little flakes of ash that danced around you? . . . Can you feel me? On your forehead? On that hand that lies across the coverlet? In your eyes? . . . I hope so. Then we will always be together, just as we were before. . ."

"You'll like that, won't you, Malcolm? I was always the strong one, you the weak. . . You relied on my strength—and hated it. Till finally your hate overcame your need of me, and you tried to make me weak, too. Weaker than you. . . But you chose the wrong method, Malcolm Grayson. Fire destroys the weak. But the strong, it only hardens and tempers. . ."

"No, Everard!" I whispered. "It wasn't me! Surely you must know that! Surely, the dead must know the truth?"

Across the room, Euripides, the cat, arched his back and spat. The shadowy walls seemed to waver and contract. The moonlight blurred for a moment.

I was out there by the lake again, pulling the locked bolt from the still-smoldering ruins of the boathouse. The bolt that had fastened the boathouse door, imprisoning Everard inside while the flames gnawed through the rotting timbers and fed on his flesh. With a scream, I was hurling the twisted metal out toward

the deep dark water again, afraid of being accused of my own brother's murder, though I knew in my heart and soul that I was innocent. . .

A feathery laugh seemed to shake the walls around me. A dry husk of sardonic mirth. *"Well, we shall see who is stronger, Malcolm. The quivering lump of bone, blood and gristle which is you—or the double handful of ashes you're made of me. . ."*

"No, Everard!" I shouted. "I didn't do it! I couldn't have—"

A sibilant rush of air was my only answer. A bitter wind, like unseen fingers plucking at the blankets, stirring the window curtains till they flapped. The voice was gone, and the faint smell of burning; and the moonlight was bright and cold across the floor, with no grey flecks to mar its clarity. . .

Somewhere on the second floor, below, a door slammed and footsteps began to pummel the stairs leading up. It wasn't till then that I realized I was screaming—jaws wide, chest and throat convulsed, while panic rode the keening cry through the night.

AUNT SAMANTHA was the first to reach my room—as always. She'd been the first to answer my frightened wails when I was a child. Her grey hair was done up in two braids at the back, but her faded pink wrapper swirled about her in wild confusion.

"Malcolm, dear! What is it? What frightened you?"

Her piquant, high-checked face was white and drawn, her grey eyes clouded with anxiety. But her voice was low, soothing.

The others crowded past her, pushing into the room, as she flicked the wall switch. Uncle Randy—his bald pate white and shining without the toupée, his bulbous body grotesque in the shapeless nightshirt. His wife Deborah, her pepper-and-salt hair piled stiffly on her crown, her pinched features quivering with curiosity. Their daughter Ila, some of her ripe young beauty erased for the night, her golden curls awry, her full lips pale without their makeup. Euripides turned from the cold tiles of the fireplace and *miaowed* hostilely.

Uncle Randy ignored him. "What happened, my boy?" He had the kind of deep mellow voice you'd expect from a former concert baritone. But his small black eyes bored into mind obscurely. I stared miserably at the foot of the bed.



"I didn't do it. I couldn't have!"

Their greedy eyes told me they thought I was crazier than a loon, while the only one who knew I was sane lay cold and still. But in spite of the night voices, the smoke whorls over the snow and the cat who talked, I knew one thing: If I were crazy, it was a strange madness of my own making!

"Just another nightmare, I guess. I'm sorry."

Aunt Deborah stopped worrying her thin lower lip with long sharp teeth. "An ordinary nightmare, this time?" she asked avidly. "No—funny smells? No ashes?"

"Deborah!" Uncle Randy was stern. "I told you not to bother the boy with that nonsense again! You know how nervous and high-strung he is!"

"Just a nightmare," I shivered. "I'm sorry. . ."

Cousin Ila stepped forward and took my hand. Her green eyes were milky, her nails long and pointed, like Euripides' claws. But the pressure of her fingers was warm.

"Poor Malcolm," she murmured. "If there were only something we could do—But you and Everard were always such inseparables that no one else ever really learned to know you. Won't you give us a little of your confidence, now? Let us at least try to help you?"

I could feel Aunt Samantha watching her disapprovingly. I withdrew my hand. "It's all right. I'm sorry I made such a fool of myself."

Aunt Samantha spoke gently to the others. "Come on, now. Let's all go back to bed and let Malcolm get some rest. That's what he needs."

Uncle Randy nodded gravely. "What you need's a vacation, son. Something to take your mind off the fire—Everard's death—everything. You'd have the money to take it, too, if only you'd let us sell the place, as Everard intended—"

Aunt Samantha cut him off. "Stop badgering the boy, Randolph. We've been over all this before. If you must bring it up again, at least wait until morning."

Uncle Randy shrugged, resignedly and drew the nightshirt closer about him. "All right, Samantha. Brrr, it's cold in here! Guess I'll have to adjust the blower fan in the furnace again tomorrow. Good night, my boy."

He trudged off into the hall, Aunt Deborah and Cousin Ila following. Aunt Samantha lingered a moment beside the bed.

"You know, Malcolm," she mused, "perhaps Randolph's right, after all."

My eyes widened. "You mean—sell Elmshaven? Let them chop down the trees to make a golf course? Turn the house into a gabbling country club? No thanks! They can keep their money! And Uncle Randy and the rest can wait for their share of the estate! There's still enough left for us to live on—you and I. If we're careful—"

"She smiled gently. "No, dear. I know how you feel about Elmshaven. It's always been like a kind of private world of your own, to you, ever since you were a little boy. In a way, I've come to feel the same way about it.

But perhaps you do need a change for awhile. You've scarcely left your room since the funeral."

I shrugged. "I haven't felt up to going out," I said shortly. I knew how the tongues would be wagging, back in town. How the quarrel Everard and I had had the day before he died would be common knowledge by now.

She nodded. "I know, dear. But you can't refuse to see people, indefinitely. Ila's giving a skating party tomorrow night. Most of the young people from town will be out. I do wish you'd come down and try to have a good time. It'll work wonders for you, I'm sure."

"All right," I said tiredly. "All right, Aunt Samantha. I'll try."

After she'd turned out the lights and gone again, I stood by the window a long time, smoking and thinking, while my mind traveled back over the years we'd spent together here, Everard and I and Aunt Samantha.

That horrible nightmare voice had been right about one thing: Everard was always the strongest—the leader, the dashing, the adventurous. I was the follower—the timid, the sickly. Father had never seemed to notice. He spent most of his time in town anyway, looking after the mill. But Aunt Samantha, the sister of my long-dead mother, had noticed—and understood. She'd laughed with Everard; but she'd cried for me.

And she'd backed me up, that one time I dared to stand against my brother, to assert my rights, to let some of the resentment against all his years of dominance flare into the open—though Uncle Randy and the others had sided with him.

Father had been dead almost five years, and we'd lost the mill. Neither of us was much of a hand for business. Everard was always too occupied with his girls, his parties, his hunting. And I had neither the training nor the stomach for it.

So we'd lost the mill, and only Elmshaven remained. And now a group of promoters had offered us a hundred thousand dollars for it, planning to convert it into a resort. I'd refused point-blank to sign the papers—and by the next night, Everard was dead . . .

I drew on my cigarette and let my gaze wander over the rolling acres visible through the window. The elfin meadows where we'd romped as children; the wooded slopes, now sere with winter. Far to the left, its banks fringed with pine and willow, its surface sheathed with ice, the lake was a silver dollar under the moon. Only a few sticks of crumbling charcoal, a pile of blackened empty oil drums beneath an overhanging elm, remained to mark where the boathouse had stood.

As I watched, a pillar of mist, a swirling miasma, seemed to rise above the spot, blotting it out. The moon hid between wallowing

cloudbanks; and for one agonizing moment, the sky seemed filled with falling ashes. Ashes which silently fingered the window, piling up on its outer ledge. Then I understood. Snow. . .

THE NAUSEA began soon after dinner the next night. I told myself that it was merely my mind playing tricks on me again, seeking some way to escape the ordeal of facing the skating party guests. But the vomiting was real enough; and when I went to my room to pull on breeches and sweater, I was so dizzy I could scarcely stand.



Aunt Deborah

So I asked Aunt Samantha to make my excuses, and spent the early part of the evening in bed, watching through the window the flickering bonfires of the skaters; hearing the far tinkling laughter from the lake.

The party had adjourned indoors for a late evening snack, when my room began to change temperature again, and the voice whispered to me through the ashes and the burning.

"Malcolm, are you listening? This is the anniversary—remember? It was just a month ago tonight that they found my ashes mingled with the ruins of the boathouse. . . Lest you forget, I have arranged a special demonstration. . . Look out the window. Do you see it? The flames, the whorls of smoke? . . ."

Sickly, desperately, I dragged myself forward across the coverlet, stared out across the gleaming expanse of snow. Far around the lake's edge, in the exact hollow where the boathouse had stood, a tiny tongue of flame seemed to leap skyward, gathering force and substance as I watched.

The embers of a skater's fire, fanned to new life by a freshening breeze? Impossible! There had been no bonfires within a quarter of a mile of that spot. . .

The whispering laugh seemed to ruffle the air around me. *"You see, Malcolm? It's still burning. Just as it will always burn, in your heart and in your soul, till you put it out—with your own blood. . ."* I screamed.

The sounds of gayety broke off below. Again, footsteps pounded up the stairs. Ila's this time—her cheeks still glowing with the cold outside, her blond hair streaming out behind her.

"Malcolm! What is it?"

I pointed to the window. "The boathouse! It's burning again!"

Her green eyes swung to the scene outside, clouded bewilderedly.

"But, Malcolm—there's nothing!"

I looked again. "But there is! Don't you see—how the fire highlights the trees? That pile of oil drums in the background?"

Her cheeks had whitened now, her eyes widened with fear—fear of me, not whatever might be outside.

"Hush, Malcolm! They'll hear you!"

"Let them!" I shouted. "Let them all hear—and see! I'm going out there now and put it out! I'm going to catch whoever lit that hellish thing, before he has a chance to get away!"

She put out a hand as if to restrain me, but I shook her off; dashed out into the hall and down the stairs, my bathrobe flailing around my knees, my slipped feet slapping the carpet. She followed, calling me back.

But there was no turning back, now. The others had caught sight of me in the hall below. I had a quick, kaleidoscopic impression of shocked, staring eyes and hushed voices. I ignored them, raced back through the kitchen where Aunt Samantha and Uncle Randy were toasting sandwiches; out through the rear door into the snow.

Behind me, I heard someone shout, "Come on—let's see what's up!" And new light striped the snow as others burst through the door to follow.

The spot where the boathouse had stood, so plainly visible from my third-floor window, was screened from the house at ground level by a low knoll surrounding the basin where the boats had been tethered. From here it was impossible to tell whether the fire still burned or not. I raced on through the three inches of snow that had fallen that morning, my earlier nausea forgotten in the urgency of the moment; those behind me panting to keep up. And when, at last, I topped the knoll—there was nothing. . .

Only the grey boles of the trees at the lake's edge beyond. Only the heap of rusting oil cans sprawling cold and desolate beneath the stars. No fire, no smoke, no embers—not even a melted hollow in the snow. It's three-inch blanket stretched white and unbroken from the windswept ice to the rise on which I stood.

Aunt Deborah stepped from the crowd of bewildered onlookers. Her beady eyes glowed in the half light, and her voice throbbed with suppressed eagerness.

"What was it, Malcolm? Another—manifestation? Another message from the dead?"

"Deborah!" Aunt Samantha said sharply. "Malcolm was ill tonight—physically ill. He needs rest and understanding—not some kind of psychic hocus-pocus! Come, dear, let's go back to the house, where it's warm."

Ila's voice was numb with horror. "But,

Aunt Samantha, he said he saw the boathouse burning again! He said he had to come down and put it out—”

“I *did* see it!” I shouted. “There *was* a fire down here in this hollow. I know there was. . .”

Uncle Randy glanced significantly at the unbroken snow. “There, there, my boy,” he said cajolingly. “Sometimes the mind plays strange tricks on us, in the lonely darkness of our rooms. I dare say we’ve all had similar experiences, if only we’d admit it. Tomorrow, you’ll be laughing about this, with the rest of us.”

A morbid shudder seemed to pass through the others. I looked at their blanched, rigid faces, at their blank, staring eyes; and for the first time I read the thoughts taking shape in their minds.

I collapsed in the snow and began to sob. . .

After they’d got me back to my room, with something warm inside me to lull my nerves, I lay on the bed until dawn, writhing beneath the impact of the thing I’d seen in their eyes back there on the knoll, heard in the voices of Ila and Uncle Randy.

Crazy. . . *Crazy*. . . CRAZY!

Euripides vaulted up on the covers and turned to scan my face with his yellow eyes, his mouth half-opened, as if to speak. . .

THE TALL thin man with the black goatee came the next morning. Aunt Deborah ushered him into my room, with fat little Dr. Ralls, our family physician, puffing at his heels. He introduced himself as Professor Maynard, a scientist interested in psychic phenomena.

But he didn’t fool me. He’d ask less than half a dozen questions before I realized he was a psychiatrist. “It’s all right,” I told him. “The voice—the smoke—the ashes—none of them hold any terror for me, now. I’ve found out the ghost was an impostor.”

“An impostor?” The professor’s black brows arched politely.

“Yes. Everard told me last night, after the fire.”

“Everard!” Dr. Rall’s flabby jowls shook. “But Everard’s been dead for a month.”

I nodded. “In a medical sense, perhaps. But the spirit of the murdered is ever restless. That’s why he took possession of Euripides’ body to speak to me last night.”

Euripides stirred from the empty fire place, arched his gaunt back, and yawned.

“Th-the cat?” Dr. Ralls was quivering all over, now.

“Of course!” I said irritably. “Euripides was Everard’s cat. He was with him that day in the boathouse, but was able to squeeze out through a hole in the foundation when the fire started. What’s more natural than that

Everard’s soul, separated from its own husk of flesh, should choose the cat as the vehicle of its continued existence?”

Professor Maynard masked his reaction admirably, but I could see that he didn’t understand. I did my best to convince him. Hadn’t a large portion of the so-called civilized world accepted the doctrine of metempsychoses—the transmigration of souls—ever since the dawn of time? Weren’t there huge segments of the world’s population, even today, who regarded the phenomenon as a proven fact, as natural and inalterable as hunger, thirst, love?

He shook his head sadly. Obviously, he thought I was merely trying to rationalize my hallucination. Dr. Ralls was still staring at me with rapt, incredulous fascination.

“But you said you actually heard the cat talk! That it spoke to you with the voice of your dead brother!”

I shrugged futilely, knowing there was nothing more I could do to make them understand. After they’d started down the stairs again, I tiptoed across the room and glued my ear to the crack in the hall door.

“A terrible thing!” Dr. Ralls was mumbling. “The Graysons are one of the oldest and finest families around here! The boy has always led a sheltered, retiring life. But if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes—”

Professor Maynard’s rumbling tone cut him off. “Of course, there’s only one thing to be done. He must be committed at once. I’ll sign the application for a hearing before the state board of alienists, as soon as the family can have the papers prepared.”

I lay in the bed the rest of that afternoon, while the grey shadows lengthened across the snow and the winter night, with its veil of stars, descended. But it was not fear and despair and bleak uncertainty which kept me twisting and turning beneath the covers this time. It was a mounting wave of cold, brooding fury against those responsible for my plight. I’d show them, the blind, stupid fools. I’d show them who was crazy!

Long after Aunt Samantha had removed my supper tray, and the house had grown quiet for the night, I slipped out of bed, pulled on my slippers, and tiptoed silently down the stairs. My throat was tight and my eyes were burning—but there was something cold and hard where my heart should have been. . .

THEY found Aunt Samantha’s body the next morning, when they went up to see why she hadn’t come down for breakfast. She was lying in the bed as though asleep, one of her cold white hands still gripping an empty sleeping tablet bottle.

Uncle Randy convinced the coroner that it was an accident; but Cousin Ila was tight-wound and hushed. I knew what she was

thinking. First Everard, and now Aunt Samantha.

Yet I had been the most surprised of them all at her death!

I certainly hadn't expected this to happen. I hadn't killed her! Daylong, I pondered her death, depressed and moody. And then at last I thought I understood. She had always done whatever she thought best for me. This, then, was her final sacrifice.

Aunt Deborah brought up my tray that evening. She said for me to hurry and get back my strength, because we'd all be taking a short trip soon. After she'd gone, I chuckled beneath my breath. She didn't know about the new strength I'd found, two nights ago. None of them did. I decided it was time to let them know.

I got up and tiptoed down the hall to Everard's old room, which hadn't been opened since the funeral. Inside, I flicked the wall switch, and stood there a moment, looking at all the old remembered things. The bed, the dog-eared books, the hunting pelts, the rack full of guns.

Euripides edged through the door behind me and maiowed.

I crossed to the gun rack and pulled out a .12 gauge automatic shotgun, inspected the five fat shells in its magazine. With the gun under my arm, I started downstairs, Euripides following.

They were gathered in the drawing room, sipping port—Uncle Randy, Aunt Deborah, and Cousin Ila. They looked up as we entered. Their eyes fastened on the shining gun barrel, and fear stamped their faces. Uncle Randy glanced sickly at the phone on the desk beside him, his grubby fingers twitching involuntarily.

I shouldered the big shotgun and shook my head. "No!" I rapped. "You're dealing with a madman now, remember. I can shoot you down in cold blood—all three of you—and

suffer no worse consequences than you already have in store for me."

The brittle tension snapped in Aunt Deborah's face, leaving it a mass of flaccid wrinkles. "They'll hang you, Malcolm!" she gibbered. "Yes, they will! They'll hang you if you—if you so much as touch a hair of our heads!"

I laughed, a crazy whacking sound. "Hang me? A poor demented creature who belongs more in a hospital than a cell? Nonsense! Didn't a dozen members of the town's finest families see me dashing through the snow in my night clothes, mad as a loon? Didn't Dr. Ralls and Professor Maynard hear me babbling the insane messages that I had received from a cat?"

"They'll put me away in some sanatorium, that's all. And a year or so later, after the discovery of another of these amazing new therapeutic techniques which seem to be springing up every day or so now, I'll merely allow myself to be 'cured'. I'll come out a free man—with the estate all mine, to do with as I please!"

Ila's eyes were numb with misery. "Malcolm," she choked. "That fire—There really was a fire that night. I saw it, too—just as Daddy said I would. Only he told me I mustn't let on. He said it might cost us thousands of dollars, if you ever found out that fire wasn't just a hallucination."

I nodded. "I know all about that now. I found the oil drum on top of the pile last night. It must have been rigged up even before the snow fell. It would have been effective under any conditions. But the snow made it even better."

I turned to Uncle Randy. "All you did was to put a little gasoline in the drum on top of the pile, then string a wire from its rim over one of the top branches of that overhanging elm and down to the lake's edge on the far side of the tree. When the time came for the demonstration, Aunt Deborah, who had stayed



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behind on the ice when the skaters went into the house—no one would miss *her* during a party—simply tossed a burning stick into the open can, then hauled on the wire, swinging the blazing drum into place beneath the tree where the boathouse had stood.

"By keeping the wire taut, there at the lake's edge, the can wouldn't touch the snow at all—just hang suspended a foot or so above it. And when the brief flames from its open mouth had died, she merely pulled in more of the wire, hauling the can up into the tree top where it wouldn't be noticed in the darkness, and looped the free end of the wire around those nails you'd driven into the far side of the tree trunk at the lake's edge.

"After that she circled back, brought up the rear of the crowd chasing after me. The next day one of you slipped down there again, cut the can loose, and replaced it on top of the pile. . . . It was clever. You'd even doctored my food that evening, to make sure I'd be in my third-floor room—the only place from which the hollow was visible—when the fire started."

AUNT DEBORAH'S beady eyes were glazed with horror. "Why, you're not crazy, at all. What you told Professor Maynard about the cat—all of that—was just an act!"

I grinned. "Just an act. I wanted plenty of authoritative proof that I really was out of my mind, in case I found it necessary to kill you all, later. I knew I had to fight cleverness with cleverness, when I finally realized the truth, that night after the fire. Take the way you'd found to damper the furnace, so that some of its smoke and floating ash came up through the heat vent instead of the flu. The way you reversed the over-sized blower fan, to suck the room clean again, afterwards. The tiny microphone hidden in the coal bin, and connected through the chimney to the speaker concealed in my fire-place. . . .

"All those things were very clever. They might have worked, if they hadn't been based on a false premise. But you assumed that it was *I* who locked Everard in the boathouse and burned it down. And I knew who it really was."

Uncle Randy ran a nervous tongue between pasty lips.

"Samantha?" he croaked. "I wondered about her, later—"

I nodded. "Her mind had been slipping for a long time. You see, I'd always been her baby, the focus of her warped maternal impulses. Everard was too self-sufficient, even as a boy. That's why she kept on sheltering and pampering me, even after I'd become of

age. I was still her little boy, and she wanted to keep me that way, always. Then, when Everard threatened to sell the place, she couldn't bear the thought of that relationship being broken up. She knew she'd lose me, then.

"And besides, coming from my mother's side of the family, she wouldn't be eligible for any of the money from the estate.

"Later, when she thought that my brooding over what she had done had really driven me crazy, she couldn't stand it any longer. She committed suicide, rather than sign the papers which would have started me on the road to the state hospital."

Uncle Randy eyed me hesitantly, his gaze still focused on the gun. "And—just what do you propose to do now that you have found out all this, my boy?"

I grinned coldly. "You can forget the 'my boy'. If I did what I should, I'd shoot you down right now. But if you'll just take that pen on the desk, and write out a full account of your methods and motives here during the past month, I'll be willing to forget the whole thing—so long as you never come near me again, or make another attempt to get your hands on Elmshaven. But if you ever start this insanity thing again, hoping to get yourself named administrator in my place, so help me I'll kill you if it's the last thing that I ever do!"

His jowls quivered. "You—you'll turn the confession over to the police, and charge us with attempted fraud."

I shook my head. "No. I'll just keep it as insurance against the future. In a way, I feel I really owe you something. Having to see this thing through by myself—with no one to face it for me, as there's always been in the past—I've gained a little of the confidence I'll need to remake my life. I'm not claiming to be a changed man overnight. It's not that easy. But at least, thanks to you, I have developed the desire to stand on my own feet, at last. And the first step in that transformation is to get rid of Elmshaven."

He blinked at me incredulously, asking questions with his eyes.

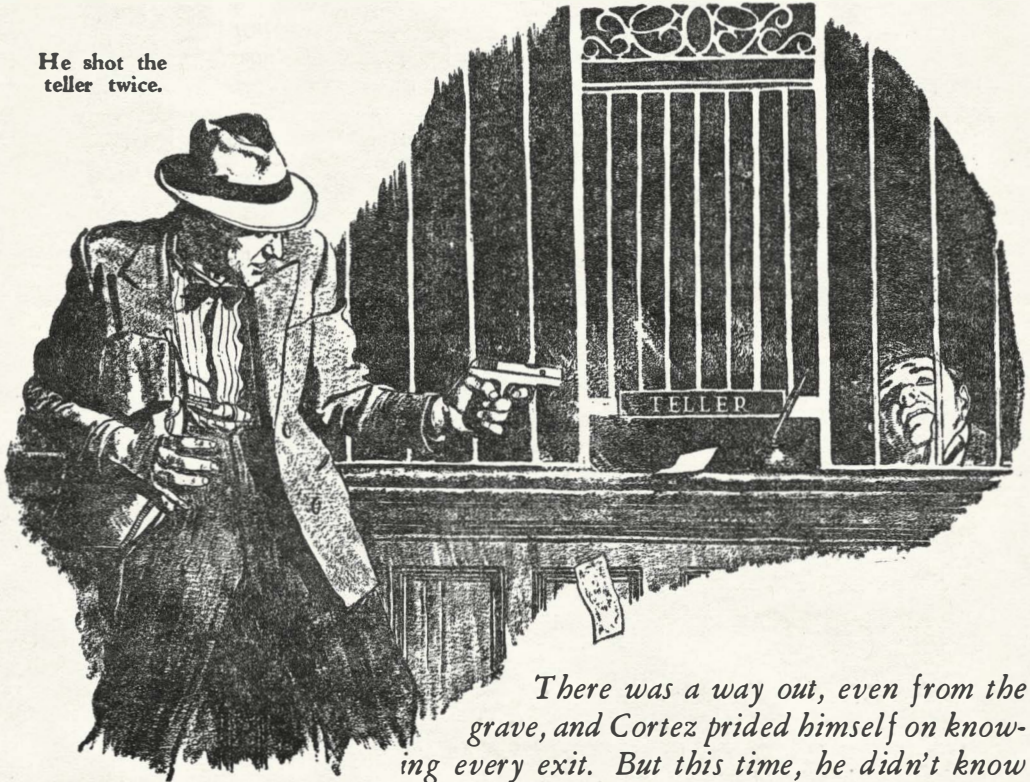
"Oh, I'm not going to sell it," I grinned. "You won't get your hands on any of the money. I'll just lease it—to an orphanage or something, so there won't be enough income from it to let me merely go away and hide somewhere else. As administrator, I can do that without your permission. You see, I really do mean to make a new man of myself—if I have to shoot all three of you to accomplish it!"

I gestured threateningly with the shotgun. Uncle Randy sighed and reached quickly for the pen.

THIS WAY OUT

By JOHN CORBETT

He shot the teller twice.



There was a way out, even from the grave, and Cortez prided himself on knowing every exit. But this time, he didn't know where to turn—because he'd never been a corpse before!

DEATH comes to all men. It was not strange it should come to Joe Cortez. Only his manner of dying was unique. It was, however, Cortez's own idea, born of desperation and a dead sea gull on the beach.

If I were dead, he thought, all my troubles would be over. There was only one thing wrong with death as the solution of his problem. He did not want to die. Still something had to be done.

Connors cleared his throat, repeated, "Twenty-four hours. I'll give you that much time to raise the money."

Cortez turned, hopefully, from the window of his swank Beach Club suite. "And if I can't raise it, you'll lodge a complaint with the sheriff's office?"

The old grove owner thought a moment,

shook his head. "No. You're too smart for the local law. But you can't double-talk a bullet. I want my money back. I mean to have it."

"Okay," Cortez concluded the interview. "I'll see what I can do."

Long after the old man had gone he continued to stare out the window. Connors had been a bad mistake. But how was a man to know? He had looked like any other pigeon waiting to be plucked. He, Joe Cortez, had twenty-four hours to raise forty thousand dollars. The thing was obviously impossible. As he recalled his bank balance he had less than two thousand dollars in his account.

He considered flight and knew, suddenly, it was useless. His luck had run out. No matter how far he fled, Connors would find him and

kill him. Fear fingered his spine like a curious ghou. He wondered how it would feel to be dead. He looked back at the dead sea gull just as a lazy green swell engulfed it and swept it from the beach.

Exit the gull. Its troubles were over. His were just beginning. He could, of course, go to the County Attorney and plead guilty to any of the several indictments pending against him. But he had no more desire to do time than he had to die. A cell in a sense, was a grave, and almost as deadly. Besides, he had Claire to think of.

The thought of her cheered him slightly. She was an expensive little baggage, but worth it. If Jane would divorce him so he could marry Claire, it would give him a sense of possession.

He turned abruptly from the window and poured himself a drink. He was acting like a fool. He had been in tight corners before. There must be something he could do. But what? He had twenty-four hours in which to raise forty thousand dollars. Pigeons didn't grow on trees. And even if he could flush one it would take him three or four weeks to score. He had worked on Connors for two months. He wondered, suddenly, how the old man had found him in Florida when Joe had fleeced him in California, two thousand miles away.

Cortez stared at his reflection in the mirror. His sport clothes were expensive, well-cut. His teeth were white in his bronzed face. His graying temples added a distinguished note. He looked every inch the prosperous investment counsellor he pretended to be. His smile was wry. The "dummy" had come a long way from department store windows. If it wasn't for old man Connors, there was no telling how far he might go.

How far he might go. . . The thought intrigued him. If he could get as far as Yucatan, or Guatemala, or Honduras—He returned to the window. Yucatan was just across the Gulf. Now that the war had ended a man could sail from Tampa to, say, Cuba. Once in Havana he could change his name, buy a fraudulent passport and lose his former identity completely in any of a dozen Central and South American countries. Claire would go with him, gladly, if he had the money to indulge her tastes.

But that was wistful thinking. He had less than two thousand dollars. And he had a hunch that where ever he went old man Connors would find him. Damn Connors.

THE dead gull was still tossing on the waves. Cortez regarded it thoughtfully. The gull was dead. But he didn't want to die. But if only there was some way that he could pick up a lot of money fast. and also trick Connors into believing he was dead—

He turned the idea in his mind. *Into believing he was dead.* The idea didn't sound bad. He crossed the room again, studied his reflection—and had it. He knew where he could raise the money for flight. He knew how he could trick Connors.

It would be slightly risky, true. It would be the first act of violence he had ever committed in his fifteen years of living on the thin edge of the law. It was possible he might be shot at. It was possible he might have to shoot someone. But on the other hand, at no time would he be in any more danger than he would be if he failed to settle with Connors. The old man wasn't bluffing. He had worked hard for his money. He meant to have it back. If he didn't get it—he would kill him.

Cortez chuckled. The old man himself had called the turn when he had asked if he intended to file a complaint with the sheriff's office.

"No," he had answered. "You're too smart for the local law."

And that was so. The Beach Club was in an isolated section of the county. The local sheriff was a senile fool, the coroner a common drunk who spent most of his waking hours draped over the Beach Club bar.

He sought for flaws in his idea, and corrected them. Perfect timing would be the essence of the fraud. By the time the affair had been reported to the State Police he would have to be dead and buried. He doubted they would violate his grave. They would have no reason to.

A great deal would depend on Harry Benton. But Harry would do as he was told. He had done so for years, for the short end of each swindle. Cortez had often wondered why. Not that it mattered greatly. But it was fortunate, he reflected, that in the hope of swindling some elderly pigeon who would accept a doctor's word, above all others, Benton had posed as an M.D. since his arrival at the Club. Benton's certification of death should be accepted. No one at the Beach Club knew they knew each other, other than as casual friends.

Yes, he could trust Harry. It might be best, however, to also confide in Claire as a double safety-check. Or should he? Cortez's smile widened as he pictured the scene. No, he wouldn't confide in Claire. It would be more effective to have two women weeping over his coffin. Once he had been resurrected would be time enough to have Harry tell Claire to pack and join him in Havana.

HE STOOD motionless for a long moment studying his reflection. His eyes grew blank and glassy, his body rigid. Not a muscle twitched. There was no visible sign of breathing. Satisfied, he relaxed and poured himself a

drink. He hadn't lost the knack. It was like riding a bicycle. Once a man had mastered the art of being a display-window dummy a few moments practice brought it back.

His self-confidence returned in surging waves, aided by the whiskey. He had been a fool to be afraid. There was a way out of every hole, even a grave, if only a man was clever enough to see it. He was still preening, pleased with himself, when Harry and Jane returned from their afternoon swim. He greeted Benton blithely, "Dr. Benton, I presume."

A bald little man with a big nose and a wisp of a goatee, Benton nodded gravely. "Yeah," he said.

"Yes," Cortez corrected. "M.D.s don't say 'yeah.'"

Benton shrugged and lighted a cigarette. Cortez turned his attention to his wife. Her body was still young but time and worry had etched faint lines in her face. She was still pretty in a simple sort of way. But she was thirty-five, and looked it. She also looked as if she had been crying.

"What have you been bawling about?" he demanded.

His wife made a futile gesture with one hand. "That woman, Joe. I saw her on the beach. You brought her down here after you promised me—"

Cortez slapped her face hard, with his open palm.

"Shut up! And get out of here. I want to talk to Harry."

The bald little man opened his mouth to say something, thought better of it. Jane Cortez went to her room, the imprint of her husband's fingers red on her white cheek.

When they were alone Cortez told Benton. "We're in a jam, and a bad one. Connors has tracked us down."

His hand shaking slightly, Benton poured himself a drink and pointed out that he had had nothing whatsoever to do with that particular swindle.

"Don't weasel," Cortez said sharply. "We've worked together for years. If I go down you go with me. And Connors has given me twenty-four hours to return his money."

Benton sipped his drink. "And if you don't—?"

"He says he'll shoot me," Cortez said. "I believe him. So, listen. This is what we're going to do."

He talked earnestly for half an hour, overriding the other man's objections, plugging up new loopholes as they appeared. When he had finished the bald little man admitted, "You know, it might work at that." He nodded at the closed bed room door. "But how about Jane?"

"To hell with Jane," Cortez said curtly. "I'm tired of her sniveling. I'm heading out

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of the country with Claire." He tempted, "You'll join us of course, where ever we wind up, to get your share of the loot." He dug a sly knuckle into the little man's ribs. "And we'll find you a nice sloe-eyed senorita, eh?"

Benton looked at the closed door again. "Okay," he agreed. "It's not a bad idea at that." He hesitated, briefly. "But if I were you, Joe," Benton advised, "I'd get me a bottle of amytal or some drug similar and dope myself to the eyes before I went into my act. Remember it's been fifteen years since you made a living as a dummy."

"I intend to," Cortez nodded. . . .

THE sun was a ball of fire suspended from an inverted brass reflector. There were no clouds. There was no wind. Even the fronds of the palms that lined the single main street of Coral Key drooped limply in the noon heat. The only signs of human life were two women chatting under the wood marquee of the mortuary, a group of guests from the Beach Club exclaiming over the shell novelties in the window of the gift shop, and a drunken fishing guide snoring soddenly on a bench in front of the liquor store.

His throat contracted to the point of aching, Cortez parked his car in front of the bank and looked in through the plate glass window. There was only the one teller on duty. He should have little or no trouble. But what his score would be was problematical. The bank was small, but from the glimpses he had had of the vault, kept a more than average supply of cash on hand. It was necessary, the teller had explained, to cash the checks of the sponge and food fishermen who, until the Beach Club had been built, had been Coral Key's sole reason for existing.

"Yes," he had informed Cortez, "we usually keep between seventy-five and one hundred thousand dollars cash on hand as a convenience to the wholesale and commission men." He had scoffed at the idea of the bank ever being robbed, pointing out that Coral Key was built on a narrow spit of land extending into the Gulf for some two miles and connected to the mainland only by a causeway, easily blocked. "No one but a fool would ever attempt to rob us," he had chuckled.

Cortez scowled at him through the window. *Or a very clever man*, he thought. *A man who means to "die" as soon as he stashes the money!*

He made certain his gun had a shell in the chamber, then leaving his motor running, picked a large briefcase from the seat and strode into the bank. "This is a stick-up," he announced without preamble. He thrust the brief case through the grill of the teller's cage. "But just do as I say and you won't be hurt."

The teller gaped at him open-mouthed.

"You're crazy, mister. You can't get away with this."

"I'll be the judge of that," Cortez said curtly. "Put what bills you have in the till in the case and let's get on back to the vault."

The teller, a sandy-haired, middle-aged man, did as he was told. It took even less time than Cortez had figured it would. The brief case bulging with bills, he tucked it under one arm and started to back from the bank—when it happened.

A gun appeared in the teller's hand, seemingly out of nowhere, in reality snatched from the wall of the vault. He was fast, but Cortez was faster. His heart pounding in his ears he shot the teller twice, then fled from the bank to his car.

THE shots had awakened the fishing guide. He sat up on the bench and stared stupidly at Cortez as the other man flung the briefcase into the car and slid behind the wheel. Two of the women in front of the gift shop screamed. Someone called, "Why, it's Mr. Cortez!"

Cortez leaped the car from the curb just as the teller staggered out onto the walk calling, weakly, "Stop him! Someone phone the toll gate on the causeway. He just robbed the bank!"

Cortez glanced in his rear vision mirror. The teller attempted to lift his gun and, failing, crumpled to the walk. His throat contracting again, Cortez told himself that he was sorry he had had to shoot the man. Not that it mattered greatly. Even if the teller died he was still safe. There was nothing the law could do to a "dead" man.

He patted the bulging briefcase. If he was any judge it contained more than seventy-thousand dollars. With the difference in exchange, he and Claire could live a long time on it. He might even turn honest. The thought amused him and he smiled. All that remained to be done was dispose of the money and "die."

A half mile from town he turned left up a rutted side lane and hid the money-filled case under a clump of saw palm some five-hundred feet from the road, marking its location well. It was unlikely that anyone would find it until Harry could reclaim it.

The whole affair had taken only a matter of minutes. No one had seen him turn down the lane. When he drove back through Coral Key the natural assumption would be that finding the causeway closed, he had turned back in desperation.

There was a cluster of men in front of the bank, the sheriff among them, when he roared back through the town toward the club. He thought, but couldn't be certain, that the sheriff fired after his car. They thought they had him now. They thought that they had him trapped.

Leaving his car in the drive he strode

through the bar to the lobby, noting with satisfaction that Tompkins, the coroner, was even drunker than usual. Harry hadn't let him down. The bald little man was perched on a stool beside Tompkins. He lifted a quizzical eyebrow. Cortez nodded curtly and strode on.

The air-conditioned lobby was spotted with tightly knitted groups of people. The news had traveled fast. Cortez caught a brief glimpse of Claire, her eyes grown wide with fear, and wished now he had told her that the whole thing was a swindle, that everything would be all right.

An impetuous kid caught at his arm as he started up the stairs. "Not so fast, killer!"

Cortez struck him in the face and strode on to his suite. It was a matter of timing now. Every second was precious. He had to "confess" to Jane and "kill himself" before the sheriff arrived.

He found his wife reading in the living room of their suite. She stared at him, startled, as he closed the door and leaned against it. "Something's wrong!" she accused.

Cortez nodded grimly. "Everything's wrong. I—I just tried to rob the bank and I'm afraid I killed the teller.

"But they'll never burn me," he mumbled.

She tried to bar his way into the bedroom. He struck her brutally, with his fist, and closed and locked the bedroom door.

"No, Joe. No!" Screaming, Jane beat at the locked door with her fists. "No, Joe!"

Cortez lit a last cigarette and grinned at his reflection in the mirror over the dressing table. So far so good. If anyone should ask him—not that they would—he had been pretty damn clever.

HE TOOK the vial of cyanide from his pocket that Harry had stolen from Tompkin's bag, poured its contents down the drain and flushed the bowl thoroughly. It was the little things that burned a man. He meant to make no mistakes.

Holding the vial firmly in one hand he used his other hand to extract a half-dozen amytal tablets from an envelope and held them ready until he should hear Harry's voice. It had been smart of Harry to suggest them. They would dull both his senses and his pulse without rendering him completely unconscious.

He waited, tense. Damn Harry! Why didn't he come? He must hear Jane screaming. It was essential that he be first into the room. He had to confide the whereabouts of the money before Joe went into his act.

Then he heard Harry's voice. "Jane, what is it?"

A babble of male voices drowned out her answer but heavy fists pounded on the door. "You, inside there. Mr. Cortez. Open that door. An' the resh of you stan' back."

Cortez swallowed the tablets in his hand and lay down on the floor. It was time to go into his act. His death convulsions would have to be convincing. Tompkins was drunk—but he was a doctor.

Heavy shoulders were thudding against the door now. The lock gave with a splintering of wood. Tompkins stood swaying in the shattered doorway. Harry dropped on one knee beside him.

Writhing in pretended agony, Cortez waited until the little man's ear was close to his mouth, then whispered, "Side road. Half mile south of town. Under clump of saw palm. Right-



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hand side. Tenth of a mile in." He writhed.

"What's he saying?" Tompkins demanded.

"He said he took cyanide," Benton lied. He smelled Cortez's lips. "If he did, he's a goner."

Cortez ceased writhing and lay still. His eyes grew blank and glassy. His trained muscles relaxed in simulated death. He had fooled crowds before but never one so important. No one was trying to make him smile now. He wasn't on display in a window with a placard stating the store would pay fifty dollars to anyone who could pick the live man from a half-dozen similarly dressed dummies. He was playing for keeps this time and the slightest twitch of a muscle would betray him.

He lay staring blankly at the ceiling. Somewhere Jane was crying.

"Suicide, eh?" the coroner said thickly.

Harry pried the cyanide vial from his hand. "So it would seem, Doctor. Outside of a few convulsions, I'd say that death was practically instantaneous." He handed Tompkins the vial.

"Practically instantanyous," the drunken coroner agreed. "Thash the way cyanide kills. We both know that, don' we, Doctor."

"We do indeed," Benton said. "But if you'll just hand me your stethoscope, Doctor, I'll be glad to make this official and sign the certificate."

Cortez fought an impulse to smile. The bald little man was clever. He wondered—as he had a hundred times before—why Benton had been willing to work with him so many years for the short end of each swindle.

He felt his shirt unbuttoned and the cold metal cup of a phonendoscope applied to his naked chest. Benton took his time. He wanted his verdict to stick. "Dead," he said soberly.

"Dead," the coroner echoed, and covered Cortez with a sheet.

Jane sobbed louder. Someone said something about an inquest, then the drug began to take hold and Cortez grinned under the sheet. Between himself and Harry, they had put it over. The coroner's inquest could bring in only one verdict: "Death by the deceased's own hand."

THE afternoon wore on. People came and went. A few of them lifted the sheet. Then the inquest got under way. Cortez listened, amused, through his drugged haze.

Jane testified, sobbing, that her husband had been worried but shame kept her from mentioning Claire. His voice sounding old and tired, Connors told the jury how Cortez had swindled him out of his life's saving, how an unsigned telegram had informed him that Cortez was at the Beach Club. He admitted frankly that he had threatened to kill the dead man, if he didn't return his money within twenty-four hours.

"And I'd have done it, too," he concluded his testimony.

There was a swelling sympathetic murmur. Then the fishing guide swore that Cortez was the man he had seen run from the bank. Two of the women who had been in front of the gift shop corroborated his statement. Slightly sobered, Tompkins summed up the findings.

It would seem to him, he said, that panicked by Mr. Connors' understandable threat, the deceased had struck on the wild idea of holding up the bank in an attempt to repay Connors, and also give him a stake to flee. But not knowing the terrain and finding the causeway guarded, he had doubled back to the hotel, realized his game was up and had taken his own life rather than face trial for the murder of the bank teller. Both he and Doctor Benton could assure the jury that self-administered cyanide had been the cause of death. The door to the room had been locked. It had been necessary to break it down.

The verdict was "Death by the deceased's own hand," but one of the jurors wanted to know what had become of the money.

That, Tompkins explained, was in the sheriff's province. But the briefcase had undoubtedly been tossed from the speeding car, and as soon as the inquest was concluded, a party of searchers would be detailed to comb the underbrush along the highway.

Cortez knew a moment of fear, then realized he was being foolish. The first search party would not stray far from the highway. Long before they reached the spot where he had stashed the money, Harry would have recovered it and sealed it in the metal shipping coffin that would supposedly contain his body.

Gentle hands lifted the sheet. Tears wet his cheeks. "Oh, Joe," Jane sobbed. "Why did you do it. Why?"

Benton drew her away and covered Cortez again. Then everything grew hazy. The drug had taken a deeper hold on his senses than Cortez had figured it would. His body felt light, relaxed. Then everything blacked out. . . .

He came to with a start, smelling flowers, then realized where he was. It was all part of the plan. Both he and Harry had agreed that Jane would want a brief service before his "body" was sealed for shipment. He was lying in a satin-lined coffin in the Coral Key mortuary. For want of something better to do, he tried to recall what he knew of the place. It wasn't much. All he could remember was that it had a wooden marquee and a tall white chimney in the rear. He wondered vaguely what the chimney was for.

THEN an organ began to play softly. Cortez grinned inwardly. Harry was doing it in style. Then a shadow blotted the light and

Claire stood over him, looking down into the coffin.

"Stick to you and I'll wear diamonds, huh?" the blond girl told the "corpse." "Yeah. Why, I can't even pay my hotel bill! You hear me? I hope you burn in the hottest hole in hell."

The "dead man" writhed in inner agony. These weren't the tears he had expected. Claire was overwrought. He should have told her of the swindle, as he had originally planned. If only he could tell Harry to tell her.

Her shadow went away and another shadow replaced it. "I'm sorry, son, if I drove you to it," Connors voice said gently. "I'm sorry for that poor teller. You don't deserve much sympathy."

And to hell with you, too, Cortez thought. He was growing bored. His hands were concealed by the tufted satin. He tried to move a finger, and couldn't. He was too deeply drugged. Only his sense of hearing was normal. Well, it wouldn't be long now.

He was rid of Jane. He was free of Connors. He had put over the perfect swindle. In a way, it was a shame that no one would ever know of it but Claire and Harry. It was something to boast about. He was rich.

The organ music ceased and a pleasant voice began the burial service—"In the midst of life we are in death—"

Cortez listened, absently. As soon as Harry had taken him out of the coffin, he'd catch a night plane for Tampa.

The pleasant voice continued, "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust;"

Harry could tip off Claire. Then the three of them would catch a steamer for Havana.

Still the voice went on, "... in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection unto eternal life."

And that was that. Somewhere near the coffin, Jane sobbed. Then her shadow clouded the light. "Goodbye, Joe. I—"

"Don't cry, Jane," Harry's voice cut in coldly. "He's not worth one of your tears, I

know this isn't the place to say this, but I'm hoping that maybe Joe can hear me. I love you, Jane. I've loved you for years. You're the only reason I've stuck around and taken the dirt Joe has handed me."

"You have, Harry," Jane said simply. "And I'm grateful. But I wish he hadn't gone this way. The whole thing was so futile—with the sheriff finding the money right there by the road where he had tossed it."

Harry said something that he couldn't hear and both of their voices trailed off. Clammy sweat bathed Cortez's body—

"The whole thing was so futile with the sheriff finding the money right there by the road where he had tossed it."

But he hadn't tossed the money by the road. He had hidden it five hundred feet up the lane under a clump of saw palm. Something had gone radically wrong. Damn Harry! Why didn't he come back and explain?

THE coffin swayed and dipped and he realized that he was being carried out. Now they would seal him in the shipping coffin and Harry would take him away. Jane must be mistaken. The sheriff couldn't have found the money. It belonged to him. He had killed a man to get it.

Practised hands lifted him from the coffin and laid him on a metal slab. A fierce flame lighted the room. Cortez tried to scream and couldn't. His drugged larynx refused.

He saw the whole thing now. He had put over the perfect swindle. He had made the perfect score. But he, himself, had been the pigeon. He wasn't going to Tampa. He wasn't going anywhere. He knew now who had tipped off Connors in the hope that the old man would shoot him. He knew why Harry had stuck around for the short end of each deal. He knew why Harry had been so willing to assist him in this last perfect swindle. He knew who had helped the sheriff "find" the money. He knew, too, the purpose of the tall white chimney in back of the mortuary...





CHAPTER ONE

Lesson of the Dead

I HADN'T seen Rosalie Kummer for six years, and I thought she was almost out of my system, till the night Pudge Dodd and I drove out to Oscar Willmott's place in Wildwood Heights. We were working on the burglary of the Willmott Land and Investment Company office three nights before, when a rodman had gunned Oscar's partner and lifted a hundred grand in cash and securities.

The heist had all the marks of an inside job. But because Oscar was still a power in local politics, we tried not to think about that. Then, when there was nothing else left to think, we made a point of arriving during dinner and throwing our weight around to cover our nervousness.

The pinch-faced housekeeper took us into the dining room and announced, "Lieutenant Walter Dodd and Sergeant Jeff Riley of Police Headquarters."

Oscar—a bald, hunched little man with birdlike eyes—looked up from his roast duck and scowled. So did his son Lyle, a soft-mouthed lad who worked in the office for a pittance and stayed in line because of the inheritance. The only one present who didn't seem to resent our intrusion was Lyle's wife, a brown-haired, blue-eyed girl introduced as Crystal, who had been one of the old man's stenographers when Lyle married her.

I didn't catch on, at first. Her hair-style was different, and her make-up, and even the

"People do fall out of windows by accident," he said sharply.

way she talked. It wasn't till she smiled up at me through the sudden tightness in her eyes that I realized I'd ever seen her before.

"Sergeant Riley . . ." she murmured. "Do sit down, Sergeant. You needn't apologize."

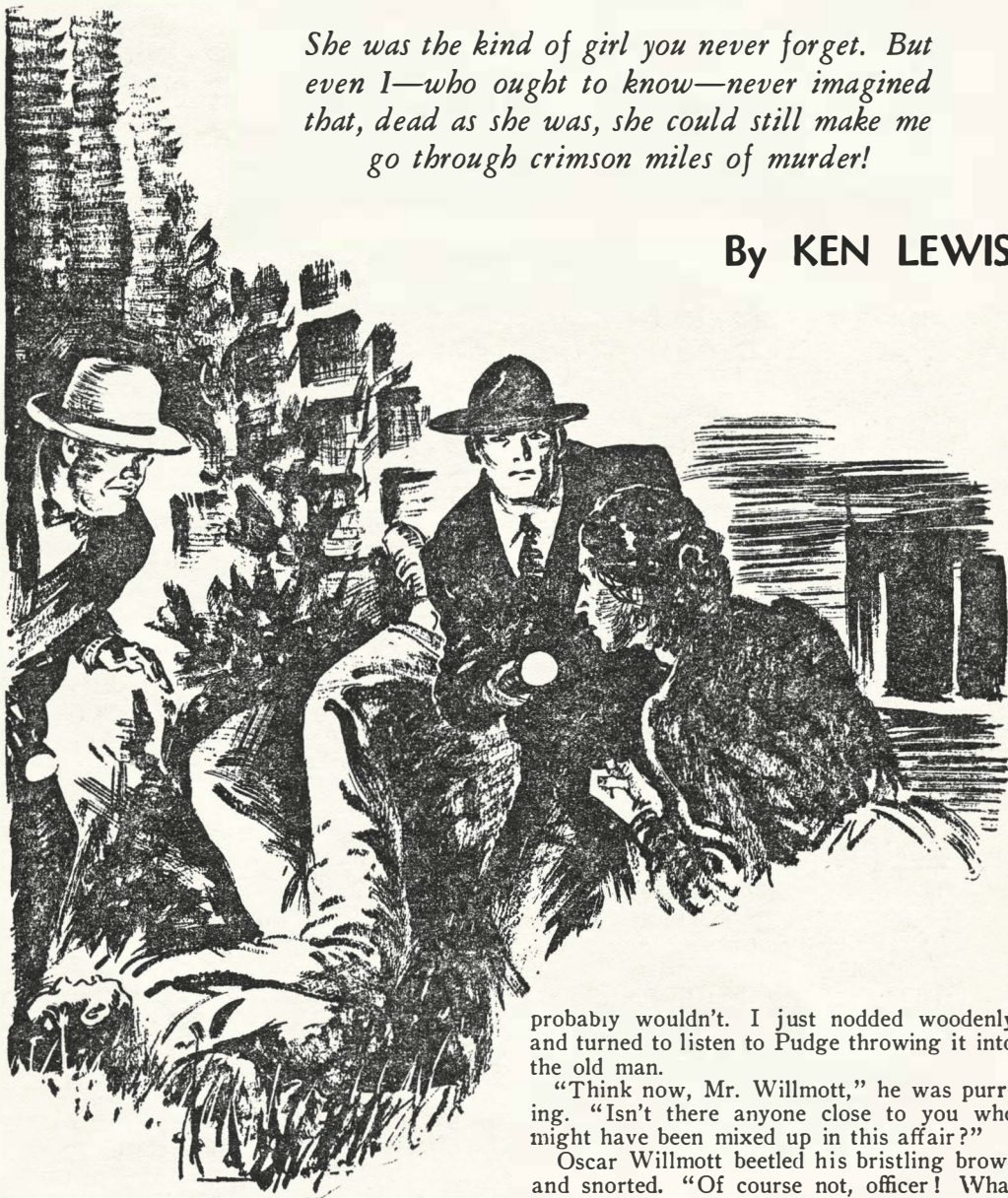
I knew she was asking me not to give her a tumble in front of the old man and his son. And I knew, too, that for no reason at all I

MY KINGDOM FOR A CORPSE

Exciting Crime-Mystery Novelette

She was the kind of girl you never forget. But even I—who ought to know—never imagined that, dead as she was, she could still make me go through crimson miles of murder!

By **KEN LEWIS**



probably wouldn't. I just nodded woodenly and turned to listen to Pudge throwing it into the old man.

"Think now, Mr. Willmott," he was purring. "Isn't there anyone close to you who might have been mixed up in this affair?"

Oscar Willmott beetled his bristling brows and snorted. "Of course not, officer! What

are you getting at? You know that only myself, my son, and my partner, Albert Knopp, have been working in the office this past year!"

"That's just what I'm getting at!" Pudge's voice had hardened. "Isn't it true that your firm was almost on the rocks? That your partner suspected you of dipping into the till behind his back? Isn't that why he went to the bank and checked those securities and cash out of the vault that afternoon, to inventory the remaining assets personally? Wasn't he working on that when he was killed?"

The old man's face had begun to redden and his thin lips to quiver with suppressed fury. "Poppycock! You got that from Knopp's wife! She's always hated me! Knopp was just working late on our usual semi-annual audit!"

Pudge pursed his blunt lips and let his brown eyes bore into Oscar's. He'd thrown away his kid gloves for good, now. "Nevertheless," he rasped, "you listed a hundred-thousand loss in the burglary. And with Knopp dead there's no one to dispute that figure—or claim half the theft insurance you had covering the premises. Do you wonder we begin to detect a slight odor?"

I'd been watching the girl called Crystal, trying to see what all this might mean to her. But I couldn't tell anything. And I hadn't really expected to. She was that kind of a girl.

You couldn't call her pretty, exactly. Her legs were a trifle too thin, her forehead too high, her lips too full and pouting. And remembering the years I'd known her as Rosalie, I certainly couldn't call her good. She'd been an expert thief and paddy roller at fourteen, a consort of cheap punks and pool room sports at sixteen, a gunman's moll at twenty—tempting and tricky and rotten almost to the core. And I don't know why I put in the "almost."

And yet there was something about her. Maybe the way she looked at you sometimes, so you couldn't be sure if her lapis-lazuli eyes were the most angelic or the wickedest you'd ever seen. Or maybe it was the "almost." According to her lights, life had given her a pretty raw deal, I guess, and she was out to make life pay for it. But there'd always been something that didn't quite fit that picture. . . .

She sent a wide-eyed glance at the others. Lyle Willmott was fidgeting uncomfortably, but the old man just stood up slowly.

"Is there any evidence to go with these—these outrageous insinuations?" he demanded.

Pudge's bulldog jaw jutted. "I thought maybe you'd save us the trouble of digging that up."

"Then get out! Get out right now! Tomorrow I shall speak to the Commissioner!" Oscar Willmott's face was a sickly purple, and he was shaking.

We got out.

I DIDN'T mention Rosalie till we'd almost reached headquarters. And then I brought her up in a roundabout way.

"I've been checking the slug we dug out of Knopp against our ballistics files," I said. "The gun it came from's never been tagged as evidence, but it's had quite a local history. It first showed up about thirteen years ago, when a two-bit storekeeper named Adolph Kummer used it to massacre his wife and four of his kids, before turning it on himself. Only two of the Kummer kids survived—a thirteen-year-old girl named Rosalie, who ran out and hid in the weeds before the old man got around to her, and a six-year-old boy named Freddie, who spent a couple months in the county hospital, and with a slug still in his skull when he was released to an aunt."

Pudge grunted. "All that in the file?" he asked.

I shook my head. "It happened down in our neighborhood, near the tracks. I remember it as a kid. Two of the neighbors who got there first claimed that the gun, a cheap little .32 revolver, was still in the old man's dead fist when they found him. But by the time the cops got there someone had glommed it. It never did turn up. . . .

"The next guy to die from a slug from that gun was a cheap little pool-room ace named Eddie Verro. He was wanted for a couple fat holdups at the time. The cops picked up a second punk for the killing. But because the gun had disappeared again, the D.A. let him cop a manslaughter plea. The funny thing is, the second punk was going with this same little Rosalie Kummer, then twenty, when it happened."

Pudge eyed me askance.

"It probably doesn't mean anything," I said. "I wouldn't have mentioned it at all, if we hadn't run into old man Willmott's daughter-in-law tonight."

"You mean that Crystal dame?" Pudge questioned.

I nodded. "Her name may be Crystal to Oscar and Lyle Willmott. But it's Rosalie Kummer to me!"

Pudge snorted. "Go on, rib me. Be real funny."

I shook my head. "I didn't recognize her myself, at first. Someone's showed her how to fix her hair different and put on a new face. But I grew up with her. I'd know those eyes anywhere."

He thought about that. "So you think she's kept her old man's rod all these years. That she maybe used it to pull the burglary. . . ."

I shrugged. "It's just something to think about. That and the fact that Oscar has kept his kid on an ordinary clerk's salary since the wedding, and the kid might get tired of waiting for some real dough. From what I remem-

ber of Rosalie, she's mostly been interested in just two things: Rosalie, and dough."

Pudge frowned and pulled the car into the station. "Nuts. My chips are still on the old man."

I decided to let him keep them there awhile.

THE rest of the night was mine and I spent it drinking bourbon in my room. Halfway through the second pint, I began to accept the fact that you never get a girl like Rosalie completely out of your blood.

Pudge came in around dawn, without knocking. I smelled something burning when he refused a drink. His eyes were tight with strain and lack of sleep and the corners of his mouth turned down above his hard blunt chin.

"I been checking on that Kummer dame," he growled. "Why didn't you tell me you and her took out a marriage license six years ago?"

I shook my head. "It didn't mean anything. I tore it up the next day."

"You mean it was never used?"

I nodded.

"Then how come it was issued?"

I grinned owlishly. "I told you it didn't mean anything. She just thought I had something she wanted at the time."

"And you didn't?"

"Huh-uh. It was some other guy. And she didn't have to marry to get it."

His eyes narrowed. "Just what was it she wanted that you didn't have?"

I blinked and tried to get my gaze to focus on his flat red face. I could tell he was plenty hot about something and had decided to take it out on me.

"The guts to kill a guy for her," I told him cheerfully.

His eyes hooded. "And who was the guy with all these guts?"

Again I shook my head. "I told you it doesn't matter. He's already paid for it. One thing about Rosalie—you could never call her cheap. You paid plenty for anything she gave you."

"You talk like she was dead."

I poured myself a drink. "Maybe she is—the old Rosalie. Maybe she's reformed."

His eyes darkened bleakly. "You've said yourself there's only one way to reform that kind."

I shrugged.

"What about Buttons Farrell?" he barked suddenly.

I gave him the grin again. "So you found out about Buttons, too. Is he still doing that stretch in Leavenworth?"

He shook his head. "Got out last week. You told me yourself they let him cop a plea."

"Then Rosalie'd better start worrying," I mused. "It must have been his dough—the

dough he killed that other punk for—that paid for her remodeling job. Buttons won't like it, when he finds out she married Lyle Willmott while he was gone."

Pudge's flat nostrils contracted. "Rosalie doesn't have to worry," he told me softly. "She won't have to worry ever again. A track-walker found her an hour ago, down in that cut below the north dyke. Her head was about a foot from her shoulders, on the other side of a rail that a thirteen-car streamliner had just passed over. . . . You been here all night, alone?"

I could feel the fever oozing out of my veins at last. I shivered a little.

"I can't prove it," I snapped, "if that's what you mean."

He was still eyeing me queerly as I stumbled out the door ahead of him.

CHAPTER TWO

Jungle Cat

IT WAS a good place for murder. I don't know why I'd never thought of it that way before; I'd been here often enough, fooling around tracks and river as a kid. High bluffs walled the railroad cut on the north, the town side; and on the south a steeply sloping earth-fill embankment mounted to the top of a twenty-foot concrete dyke.

Beyond the dyke a quarter-mile belt of sandy wasteland stretched to the river's edge. Half-cleared as a hobo jungle during the depression, the wasteland had again been overrun by tangled undergrowth, cut by small streams, willow-fringed along the shore; a home for rabbits, terns and water snakes.

Clad in organdy and silver sandals, Rosalie's body sprawled on the tie-ends beside the far row of tracks, with her severed head lying between the rails. The brown hair was still coiled primly on her crown, but the pouting lips were soot-flecked; her blue eyes bulged.

"Even if it could be an accident," Pudge mused, "what in hell was she doing clear down here?"

I straightened from the corpse and shook my head. "No accident. Flanked wheels never made a nice clean cut like that. My guess is, it was done with a thin sharp knife which we'll never find—unless you want to dredge the whole damned river."

He eyed me speculatively. "So you figured that, too," he said softly. "I wonder when?"

"Just now, you dope! What else?"

He nodded slowly. "Maybe. Or maybe you figured it all out before it happened. You seem to know the layout pretty well. . . ."

My wrists tightened and I could feel the blood pounding in my temples. "Look, my fat little friend—you don't think I did it?"

He looked at me that way a moment longer, then made his brown eyes bland and shrugged elaborately. I ironed out my fists.

"Anyway," I said harshly, "she wasn't killed here. Not enough blood. Shall we see if we can find where I slipped her the shiv?"

He gestured lazily. "No matter. It won't be far. The harness boys can find the exact spot when they get here. She wasn't dragged much or brought in by car. No road, except the right-of-way. And no tire tracks along it. . . . What I can't figure is why she was down here at all—unless she was meeting somebody. Somebody she couldn't afford to refuse, because of what he knew about her past. You knew about her past, Jeff. And you hated her. I could tell by your eyes when you saw her last night."

Hated her? My God!

"She had a brother," I said softly, catching sight of a familiar figure beside the little knot of trackworkers nearby. "The kid with the slug in his skull—remember? He wasn't out of the hospital long till he ran away from his aunt. They'd been afraid to probe for the slug, and it kind of interfered with his thinking. He had spells, sometimes, when he got too excited. . . ."

"The aunt was glad to get rid of him, I guess. So he came down here and started living with a one-legged tramp who had a shack on the river. But Rosalie never forgot him. She always managed to keep in touch some way. . . . Didn't she, Gandy?"

I stepped up to a squat heavy oldtimer who was stolidly surveying the corpse. He had fierce blue eyes and a pulpy red-veined nose above filthy white whiskers and a mustache. The right leg of his ragged jeans was tucked in on itself just above where his knee should have been, and he leaned heavily on a burlap-padded crutch.

He swivelled the fiery eyes at me and grunted as though he'd never seen me before. I grinned at Pudge.

"I met Gandy at a very tender age," I explained to Pudge. "He used to come to our back door cadging handouts. He had a quick tongue to tell about where he'd been and what he'd seen, and most of us kids would steal for him any day to keep him talking. Then he lost his leg—went to sleep drunk on the tracks one night, didn't you Gandy?—and after that he couldn't get around to beg any more. He had to take up fishing. Till Freddie Kummer came along to run his errands for him. . . . Where is Fred, anyway, Gandy?"

"Cop," he muttered, half under his breath. "Lousy, sloughfoot cop!"

My jaw hardened. "I said, where's Freddie?"

He looked up as though he'd just now noticed me. "Fred?" he repeated in a high

creaky voice. "Fred ain't around no more. I ain't seen him."

"No? Then take a good look." I pointed to a tall hulking figure in blue jeans who had just topped the dyke-wall at the head of the path above. A figure with rough-cut brown hair, a long angular jaw, and vague unhappy eyes. The figure sidled toward me instinctively, as though we had last seen each other just yesterday, instead of six years ago. One of his hands twisted at a jeans button, and his slack lips worked soundlessly a moment, struggling with the effort of speech. But the words, when they came, were slow and distinct.

"It's Rosalie, ain't it, Jeff? I know. . . . She was gonna take me away from here—to a doctor. She said she knew where she could get her hands on some money, and me and her was goin' away together. . . ." He began to sob like a child.

I put a hand on his shoulder and looked away. "She was always going to take you out of here, Freddie," I murmured. "Sometimes I think she even believed it, herself."

I looked at Pudge. "Any dough on her?"

"Uh-uh. Not even a compact."

I thought about that.

"Jeff!" Freddie blurted suddenly. "There's sump'n you gotta know! I . . . I . . ." His mouth stayed open, but the lips stopped working. His eyes began to roll queerly in his head.

I put out an arm to catch him, but Gandy fended me off. "You leave 'im alone!" he howled, shaking his crutch. "I ain't gonna let no cops make a fool of him! Come on, Freddie!"

He swung off jerkily up the path, pivoting on the crutch, and disappeared over the embankment. Freddie followed slowly. Pudge stared after them and spat. "Not gonna let any cops make a fool of him, huh!"

Doc Mortenson left the body and glowered at the narrow, crooked trail we'd followed down the face of the north bluffs. "How the hell will we get her out of here? We can't lug her up that cliff without a derrick!"

"Borrow a handcar from the section boss," I said. "Take her back to the depot that way, then transfer her to the meat wagon. I'm going to have a look at the other side of the dyke."

I WAS panting by the time I reached the dyke-top—the incline was that steep. Below, the thicketed wasteland spread out before me, as lushly walled with foliage as a dwarfed tropical jungle. I followed the path down the far side of the embankment, moved along it to where a second trail, faint and newly made, branch off to the right. Above the bushes a few feet ahead, a column of flies and gnats hung buzzing in the air. I parted the under-

growth and crouched, studying the sticky dark brown lacquer which had splattered leaves and sand.

Rosalie Kummer's life-blood. . . .

Other than a slight depression in the weeds, which might have been made by her killer crouching in ambush or by her own toppling body, there was no indication of a struggle; no knife, no cloth-tufted briars, nothing.

On a hunch, I followed the new trail to the right.

I'd gone perhaps twenty steps when I came to the dirty canvas lean-to tucked into the little hollow. A man's feet, toes up, protruded beneath the fabric wall. I pushed open the flap and found the feet's owner lying on his back on the sand floor. His eyes were closed and he breathed thickly through his open mouth.

He had a small compact body, covered at wrists, neck and jawline with dark wiry hair. His forehead and knuckles were pink with recent sunburn, but the skin along his ankles had a sick unhealthy pallor. He wore a rumpled black suit and his thin lips were vicious even in sleep. One of his slender outflung hands kept opening and closing spasmodically about the neck of an empty gin bottle.

I bent to sniff the bottle, nodded, and prodded him with my foot. He groaned but his eyes stayed shut. I had to slap him hard on both cheeks before he finally quivered and sat up. His right hand lifted shakily, snaking toward his inside coat pocket. I kicked it away.

"A rod wouldn't do you any good anyway, Buttons. Not without a fresh load of hop to go with it."

He shuddered twice and mumbled, "What's it to you, copper?"—dully—even before he opened his eyes. They were small and black, and they widened a little when they focused on me.

"Jeff Riley. . . . What the hell do *you* want?"

"You," I said. "For killing Rosalie Kummer."

The black eyes jerked at that, then narrowed again as remembrance slid into them. His mouth twisted.

"That lousy little—"

Before I could stop him, he'd swivelled around on his behind and was clawing at a brick set flush with the ground beneath where his head had been. I let him pry it loose and pull a closed cigar box from the hole beneath it. But before he could open the lid, I stuck my Police Special in his face and shook my head.

"Naughty, naughty. Mustn't touch."

"Hell, I gotta have a smoke!"

I shrugged. "Smoke," I said, "or a .32. . . ? That can wait. First tell me how it felt to kill Rosalie."

Again the black eyes hooded. "So somebody finally got to her. . . . Hell, I been under almost all night. What's it to you, anyway? You still sweet on her?" He laughed.

I shook my head. "I forgot. I guess you don't know I went on the cops, shortly after they sent you up. They told me to bring in Rosalie's killer. Let's go."

His thin dark face suffused with blood. He said, "—you, copper!" and threw the brick.

I made the mistake of trying to shoot him and dodge at the same time. I did neither. The brick sloughed into my forehead, and after that, all my worldly cares were forgotten for awhile.

CHAPTER THREE

Hell's Hideout

I CAME to with a tribe of gremlins doing a war dance in my skull, and Pudge bending over me sourly.

"You pick a hell of a time to take a nap," he grunted. "I should have gone on without you."

I put a hand to the hot, throbbing knob on my temple, and the hand came away sticky. I pointed to the tiny drop of blood on the corner of the upended brick beside me.

"Even you can't be that dumb," I groaned.

His eyes narrowed. "All right. Who was it?"

"Buttons Farrell. He must've been living down here since he got out of stir. I tried to bring him back alive and he conked me."

"And took your gun?"

I looked about the canvas-sheltered enclosure and failed to see it. The cigar box was still lying beside its hole, open now and empty.

"Apparently."

"Then why didn't he finish you off with it?"

I shrugged. "Could be he didn't want to stand a murder rap."

Pudge snorted. "He chilled the dame, didn't he? One more wouldn't make any difference."

I palmed my forehead in a futile effort to still its throbbing. "He's the logical choice," I admitted. "He could have intercepted her on her way to see Freddie, and paid her off for crossing him while he was in stir. Taking the other stuff was probably an afterthought. He wouldn't be likely to know about that, beforehand."

"What other stuff?"

"The stuff he had hid in the cigar box. The stuff he glommed from her corpse. My guess is, it was the loot from the Willmott office burglary."

His brown eyes flickered. "Why?"

I sighed. "Look," I said tiredly. "A couple of things about all this stick out like your thumb. You said yourself nothing was found

on her. That doesn't make sense. She'd have had some kind of pocketbook or handbag. Women always do. Then, Freddie told us she 'knew where she could get her hands on some money.' That she was going to use it to take him out of here. . . . The Willmott burglary obviously had an inside slant. And Knopp, Oscar's partner, was killed with a rod that's twice before been more or less tied to Rosalie."

Again he snorted. "Hogwash! You yourself said she wasn't the kind of doll to let any dough get away from her. If she got a slice of the Willmott swag, she'd keep it herself—not bring it down here to waste on a halfwit brother."

I shook my head. "That's one of the funny things about Rosalie. Getting Freddie out of here and fixing up his thinker was almost an obsession with her. Don't ask me why. . . . Maybe it was the good streak that's supposed to show up in all of us sometime or other. Or maybe, in her eyes, it was just an affront to her ego, having a brother like Freddie running arounds loose.

"She took him to a doctor here in town once, and learned that he'd probably be quite normal if only the pressure of that slug could be removed from his brain, but that it was a job which only a damned good—and damned expensive—surgeon-specialist would ever even touch. After that she was always talking about some scheme to pay for the operation."

Pudge eyed me patronizingly for the "if." "For God's sake!" I flared. "I suppose I framed this up, too! Pitched this fake hideout, then used it to bop myself silly in!"

His brown eyes were bland again. "It's not beyond the realm of possibility. You probably knew Farrell had been sprung, and would make a perfect patsy for Rosalie's kill."

He shrugged. "We'll know soon, anyway. I'll put a couple harness men to scouring the brush."

I resisted the impulse to smash his flat nose flatter. It wasn't easy. . . .

When we reached the main path again, I saw Freddie's broad blue-clad back and shaggy hair disappearing around a turn, in the direction of Gandy's shack down by the river. If he knew anyone was within a thousand miles, he gave no sign.

"We drove out to break the news to the Willmotts.

THE same pinch-faced housekeeper, Abigail Smithers, her name was, let us in. Her gray eyes were hostile beneath their pince-nez. But Oscar Willmott showed a change of pace. His wizened shell of face actually cracked into a smile when he met us in the drawing room, though you could see it cost him something to do it.

"Come in, gentlemen!" he gestured, with

painful heartiness. "I'm glad you called. I've been waiting to apologize for my attitude last night."

Pudge eyed him narrowly. "You talk to the Commissioner?"

"Er—yes. He assured me of his implicit confidence in you. And I can see now that your suspicions, though groundless, were after all quite natural. So just to show my good faith in the matter, I'm offering a reward of \$5,000 for the solution of my partner's murder and the return of the missing securities. I've already informed the reporters."

Pudge's eyes brightened. He thought about that for a moment, then nodded magnanimously. "You're certainly no piker, Willmott. Five grand would just about pay for a little chicken ranch I've had my eye on, out in the valley. Against my retirement, you know." He eyed me smugly yet covertly, like Tabby waiting for company to leave before she can go to work on the goldfish bowl.

"Then I hope you get it, Lieutenant," Oscar assured him.

I suppressed a sneer. "Does the reward still go if the killer turns out to be one of the family?" I snapped.

For a minute I thought he was going to throw us out again.

Pudge cleared his throat uncomfortably and told about Rosalie's body being found. When he finished, the old man's eyes were dark and inscrutable. "You'll want to inform Lyle yourself, of course," he said. "Abigail will show you to his room. . . ."

We could hear Lyle Willmott restlessly pacing his room as soon as we reached the third-floor hall. He flung the door open at our knock, his white face drawn and haggard.

"Have you found her?" he demanded. "Crystal?"

Pudge studied him expressionlessly. "Were we supposed to be looking for her?"

"You know that! You know I reported her missing at two A.M.!"

Pudge shook his head. "We didn't know. We're Homicide, not Missing Persons. Suppose you tell us about it."

The Willmott heir wiped sweat from his pastry brow and closed his eyes. His thin shoulders slumped. "What's there to tell? She's missing, that's all. She left our table at Danny's Place last night to powder her nose, and never came back. I suppose she thought I was too drunk to notice at the time."

"But about two A.M. you came to and discovered her gone. Then what did you do?"

"Reported her missing, of course, and then came home. I've been waiting for word ever since." His soft mouth began to pout.

"Anybody see you come in?"

His eyes opened bewilderedly. "Why, no. Should they have? Dad and Mrs. Smithers

are usually in bed by ten," he said puzzled.

Pudge frowned. "Brace yourself, son," he said almost lazily. "Here it comes." He sketched in the bare details of the body's discovery.

While he talked, Lyle Willmott's white face grew even whiter and his eyes seemed to glaze with grief and shock. He slumped limply on the bed and began to rock back and forth, mechanically, in rhythm with the words. When they stopped, he didn't add anything to them. He didn't even ask any questions. He just turned his pale face to the pillow and lay there prone, twitching a little, spasmodically, now and then.

We left him that way. If it was an act, I never want to see another like it. It was five minutes before I could even swallow. . . .

I spent the rest of the afternoon and early evening catching up on my shuteye on the squad-room lounge. I wanted to be around the minute Pudge's harness boys turned up any sign of Buttons Farrell. But by nine P.M., when Pop Hannegan yelled in to me from the desk, there'd been no reports from the river.

"Some dame named Smithers on the phone," Hannegan said. "She asked for Pudge, but he's across the street lappin' java so she said you'd do. She seems kinda excited."

I yawned and lifted the receiver. It was hard to recognize the vocal hysteria at the other end as belonging to the Willmotts' pinch-faced housekeeper.

"Please come as quick as you can, Sergeant Riley," she quavered. "Mr. Willmott wants you and Lieutenant Dodd to handle it, because you know the circumstances."

"Handle what?"

She went to pieces. "Oh, I can't stand any more! I can't. First Miss Crystal getting killed, and then that horrible quarrel, and now Mr. Lyle's d-dead, too!"

CHAPTER FOUR

No Hidin' Place

LYLE WILLMOTT'S twisted corpse sprawled among the shrubbery on the Willmotts' south lawn. He lay on his neck, head angled absurdly from his shoulders, legs upended in the arbor vitae screening the house foundation.

Pudge moved his flash from the body and regarded the old man beside us almost solicitously. He'd been acting more like a faithful family retainer than a cop, ever since Oscar had announced his reward.

Our host's beady eyes were blank in the moonlight. "A terrible thing," he repeated, as though fascinated by the words. "A terrible thing— It was an accident, of course. He'd

been drinking too much over his wife's death. He must have lost his balance when he went to open the window."

I beamed my flash at the third-floor bedroom window directly above, and made a rude sound with my lips. Pudge whirled.

"People do fall out of windows by accident!" he said sharply.

"Sure. But they don't usually stop to unhook the screen first."

"The screen must've been unhooked already! The weight of his body falling against it shoved it out that way!"

I swallowed a couple of uncomplimentary allusions to his ancestry and drifted back to the front door while they were still trying to decide what to tell the reporters. Abigail Smithers was huddled disconsolately in her room.

"What about this fight you mentioned?" I asked. She sniffled even louder for a moment, then squared her shoulders. "I'll be fired for that slip!" she said defiantly. "But I don't care! It's so! First that boy came with that note, and then I heard Mr. Willmott shouting in Lyle's room, and then—this!"

"What note?"

"The one Mr. Willmott took to his room. It's still there, I guess."

She led me to the third floor. On the way to the old man's door further down the hall, I took a look at Lyle's room. Except for an empty Scotch bottle on the dresser and the open window with its screen pushed out at a 45-degree angle, it seemed undisturbed from that morning.

A dirty sheet of foolscap lay on the desk in the second room. "This it?" She nodded. I picked it up.

It was a mortgage granted to the Willmott Land and Investment Company by a farmer south of town. The shakedown note was block-pencilled across the back.

"Putt the reward in a big coffie can and seal the lid with tape and tos is off the brickyards brige at midnite. The rest of the stuf wil be maled to you tomoro. It was tuk off yer dater-in-law body down by the tracks. You woodn want the cops to no this wood you."

There was no signature.

My eyes narrowed. "When did this come?"

"A—about an hour ago."

"Who brought it?"

"I don't know. Some boy I never saw before."

"What'd he look like?"

"He was big and—and sort of dumbl. He had on a blue shirt and overalls, and he needed a haircut. He seemed to have trouble with his speech—"

"Abigail!"

Oscar Willmott burst through the hall door, eyes blazing. "Get out!" he roared at the housekeeper. He swung to me. "I am not under suspicion of murder, Sergeant! You have no right to rummage through my personal effects! Lieutenant, I demand the immediate discharge of this officer!"

Pudge churned across the rug and snatched the mortgage out of my hand. "What's this?"

"Part of the loot from the Willmott burglary."

"Hiding a little evidence, Jeff?" He was wearing that funny look again.

"Freddie brought it," I volunteered, while he scanned the note.

"Sure. You wouldn't be dumb enough to show up yourself. But as soon as you found out Lyle was dead, you sneaked up here to reclaim it before the whole thing came out!"

He turned to Oscar. "Mr. Willmott," he purred. "Get ready to write that check! Because I'm going to do even more than have this stinker fired. I'm going to prove he's the rat behind all your troubles!"

He got out his gun.

"Riley was once engaged to your daughter-in-law. I'm sorry to say this, but I'm afraid she wasn't a very good girl. When he found out she'd married into your family, he cooked up a sweet little blackmail set-up. This note proves he's a blackmailer. . . . I wouldn't be surprised if the burglary was his idea, after he learned she had no cash of her own. Then, when he found out she was going to double-cross him and use the loot to run off with a half-wit brother of hers, he killed her to get it.

"He tried to blame the kill on another of her ex-boy friends who just got out of stir. That's already been disproved. I've had men combing that river area almost since dawn, and they've found no trace of such a man."

He turned back to me. "So much for Buttons Farrell," he sneered. "After you glommed the stuff from her body, you even got Freddie to be your accomplice and deliver the shakedown note, didn't you? You wrote it to sound like his work, so if there was a slip-up he'd have to take the rap. But he hasn't got enough smart to dream up the blackmail angle. You're the one who knew how bad it would look for Oscar here if the burglary loot was revealed as having turned up on a member of his own family. . . ."

"Freddie's all set to swim out and pick up the coffee can for you too, isn't he? Well, let him! We'll toss him a phony and nab him when he makes his try. By the time we're through with him, he'll be damned glad of the chance to finger you!"

PEOPLE with tempers like mine should stay out of this business. Once in it, they usually don't last long, anyway. Why I'm still alive,

I'll never know. . . . By the time Pudge finished, all I could see was his face bobbing around like a big round moon in a sea of red. It's true—you really do see red, when you're mad enough.

I did something to the moon with both fists, and it went away.

"Make the most of it, little chum," I hissed. "It's the only reward you'll get for this night's work!"

I was spurting through the front door downstairs before I remembered that he'd had a gun in his hand and it had gone off during the process, leaving a scorched hole in the side of my coat and something warm oozing down my ribs. The pain didn't really begin till after I'd beached his coupe at the top of the river bluffs and was scuffling down the path toward the tracks below.

My watch showed 11:30 as I topped the dyke embankment beyond. Any minute now Pudge's men would begin to infiltrate the brush near the bridge a mile downstream, searching for Freddie. My only hope was to find him first. Because once he was picked up and turned over to the rubberhose boys, it would be only a matter of time till he'd confess to anything they wanted him to.

A full moon grinned weirdly through scudding clouds as I moved down the path toward old Gandy's shack. A loon called from some far bar ahead, and the great sluggish snakeback of the river made small sucking sounds against the sand. But for the most part the wasteland waited under a pall of brooding silence.

The shack on the sand was dark when I arrived. I pushed through the gunnysack which served as summer door, and beamed my flash about the squalid interior. A newspaper lay on a table, folded back to the Willmott story. The address of the big house in Wildwood Heights had been underlined with a stub of pencil.

Under the bed's filthy mattress I found my own Police Special. I looked around for something else, till an unimportant noise outside reminded me that time was wasting. The important thing was to find Freddie! He was probably already holed up near the bridge, waiting for the splash of a coffee can.

I shouldered past the gunnysack again.

A leaky flatbottomed rowboat, empty but already too low in the water, was anchored a few feet out. A shallow trough in the sand led down to it. I got a pair of oars out of the shack, eyed the boat's dipping gunwales and the wide sinuous reaches of the river beyond, and decided to chance it. Even swimming, if it came to that, would be better than trying to work downstream on foot through the tangled brush and driftwood along the shore.

Besides, though I probably couldn't see

Freddie from the water, at least he'd be able to see me.

I pulled up the anchor, grabbed her prow, and shoved. The old scow gave a wallowing lurch and moved a scant six inches from the bank. I climbed in, fitted the oars, and heaved. By putting everything I had into it, I finally managed to work her into midstream; but the best I could do after that was to keep her drifting along at about the rate of the current. She shipped water with every pull on the oars, and acted as though her keel was tied to the bottom.

Sweat funnelled into my eyes and my side was giving me hell. I wondered if Pudge's slug had done more than merely scratch me, after all. I beamed my flash along the sides, looking for a trailing rope somewhere which would mean we were dragging some kind of anchor. I didn't find any rope, but I did find four three-quarter-inch fishhooks spaced along the gunwales, with their barbs sunk in the wood, and their shanks pointing down at the water off-side. To the eyelet of each was affixed a length of heavy fishcord which stretched down along the outer boat wall to disappear beneath the surface.

I thought of the shoreward furrow in the sand outside Gandy's shack, and suddenly I knew why the old tub rode so low and was so hard to manage. After that I let her drift with the current, using the oars only enough to keep her in the channel. I didn't want to lose my sea-anchor.

When the high arc of the brickyard bridge began to blot out the stars ahead, I cupped my hands to my mouth and yelled for Freddie. The words spread out like ripples through the darkness, and when the bluffs and bars stopped kicking the sound around, I got my answer.

A small-calibre gun barked from some thicket along the shore, and a slug splash-skipped across my bow.

I reflected that a man low in a boat in shifting moonlight makes a poor target, and the gun didn't sound like a modern precision model. I decided to try again.

"Freddie!" I bawled. "Can you hear me? Come out here! I've got to see you! I brought you something from Rosalie—something she left you!"

The second shot spanged from the near oarlock and ricocheted screaming across the water. I revised my opinion of moonlit targets and flattened myself in the stinking bilge, counting under my breath: Empty chamber under the hammer. One shot for Knopp. One for someone else. Two, so far, for me. . . .

The silence continued. Apparently he was saving the last shot as an ace in the hole.

A faint splash sounded off shore. I crossed my fingers, did the nearest thing I'd ever done to praying, and let some of my sweat mingle with the bilge water laving my right cheek.

An hour later—or it may have been two minutes—a gleaming brown arm snaked over the stern and Freddie's sad eyes stared in at me.

I inhaled prodigiously, peeled off coat, pants and shoes, and slipped over the side to join him. My feet touched bottom ooze and I grabbed the gunwale, told him to help, and began to drag the boat toward a bar twelve feet ahead. It grounded in three feet of water and I waded on up the sand, Freddie following.

Just as I grinned and opened my mouth to speak, a searchlight came to blinding life on the bridge rail overhead and a bitterly familiar voice bawled exultantly:

"Hold it right there, Jeff—unless you think you can outswim three riot guns!"

I grabbed Freddie's arm to keep him with me and sagged sickly to the sand. From the bank opposite, an outboard motor began to throb, coming to take us off.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Wrong Corpse

PUDGE had really done himself proud. Oscar Willmott, the Chief, and the Commissioner himself were among the welcoming party when we came ashore. Some of the boys covering the shoreline had even found old Gandy putting out throwlines somewhere upstream and brought him along for the celebration.

Pudge stepped forward, cocky as a bullpup to frisk me. He found my Police Special in my pocket and sneered. "So Buttons Farrell stole your gun, huh? If I'd done this this morning I'd've known right then you were lying."

He turned to Freddie. "All right, you—start talking!"

Freddie's eyes were hostile. "I ain't gonna talk to no cop," he said sullenly.

Pudge's lips drew back and so did his fist. I stepped between. "Wait a minute. Freddie, even you can see I'm not a cop any more. You'll talk to me, won't you?"

Freddie studied his toenails. "We-ell," he began. "You always been good to me, Jeff. I guess if you think I ought to—"

"You shut up, Jeff Riley!" Pudge squalled. "Commissioner, these two are accomplices! Riley has this poor imbecile hypnotized into saying anything he wants him to say!"

The Commissioner was eyeing me speculatively. "Listen to me, Freddie," I said. "All I want is the truth. Just answer each question exactly as it happened, and everything'll be all right."

FREDDIE nodded nervously. I smiled at the Commissioner. "Okay, sir?"

He regarded us expressionlessly. "You may proceed. Riley."

The sweat began to dry on my forehead. I looked at Freddie. "Did you deliver a note to Mr. Willmott tonight?"

"If he lives in that big white house across from the golf course out in Wildwood Heights, I did."

"What did it say?"

He blushed in the searchlight's glow. "Aw, Jeff—you know I never had no chance to learn to read."

"Were you waiting to swim out and pick up a coffee can tossed off the bridge, when I called you to the boat just now?"

He nodded.

"Who told you to deliver the note and get the coffee can?"

His face fell. "I reckon I won't tell nobody that, Jeff. I promised—"

I sighed. "Did you kill Buttons Farrell this morning?"

He shook his head. "I ain't even seen him all day."

"But you do know he's dead?"

Again his head shook. "I thought he was just drunk when I seen him last night."

The sweat began to stipple my forehead again. I took the kind of breath you take when you're about to jump into an ice-cold shower, and my voice was low and tight.

"Did you kill Rosalie, Freddie?"

His big face puckered miserably and his toes began to twist in the sand. "He said she was only kiddin' me!" he blurted. "That she wasn't gonna take me away to no doctor, at all! He said she was really givin' that money she mentioned to Buttons Farrell, to help him git away from the cops again, and if I didn't believe it I could go over there and find 'em together right now!"

"And you did?"

He nodded tragically. "She was there, all right. Just comin' outa his tent. I—I guess I kinda went crazy. I don't remember. . ."

His eyes began to roll up in his head again. I stepped forward quickly and grabbed his shoulders.

"I knew it!" old Gandy wailed suddenly, shaking his crutch. "I knew they'd git it outa him if he was fool enough to talk to 'em at all."

He appealed to the Commissioner. "When he gits too excited, Freddie has spells sometimes. He ain't responsible fer what he does when he's in one o' them! That's why I told him to fix up the body on the tracks that-away, after I found out what he done that night."

I looked at Freddie and nodded gently. "So that's it. When you saw Rosalie with Buttons, you had one of your spells. When you came to she was lying beside you with her throat cut and you had a bloody knife in your hand. You thought you'd killed her."

The tremor had passed. His eyes were still

miserable, but normal again. I shook my head.

"You didn't do it, Freddie. Maybe you don't know it, but when a person has a spell like yours, he's completely unconscious the whole time. You couldn't possibly have used the knife while you were lying there out cold."

A dull light began to glow in his eyes, brightening as they widened. He fell suddenly to the sand and hugged my knees, while great racking sobs shook his body. I knew they were sobs of relief, not remorse.

"This person whose name you promised not to tell—he was with you last night, wasn't he? By arousing your suspicions, he tried to get you to kill her yourself. When you threw a fit instead, he saw a chance to kill her himself, and make you think you did it. I wondered how he got her body over the dyke. I couldn't picture you helping him, if you knew the truth. . ."

"And now I'll tell you something else. She wasn't double-crossing you, Freddie. She went to Buttons, not to give him money, but to get something valuable from him. Something she meant to use to pay for your operation!"

PUDGE snickered derisively. "That makes a lot of sense, don't it?"

"Sure. If Buttons had killed her to get the burglary loot, he wouldn't have been in such a hurry to reveal its hiding place to me this morning. The reason he couldn't wait to dig up that cigar box was because he realized then that she'd drugged his drinks the night before—in order to steal the swag which he already had hidden there! He had to see if the box was empty. . ."

"It was. She'd taken both the loot and the gun he'd used on Knopp during the original holdup. And *her* murderer, in turn, took it off her body and later used it against Buttons himself, after Buttons guessed the truth and went to him to try to reclaim the stuff."

Pudge snorted. "Nuts! We only have this half-wit's word for it that Farrell was ever down here at all!"

My jaw hardened. "First, let's get this straight: Freddie is not feeble-minded. The only reason he can't read or write is because nobody ever taught him. Actually, he's a victim of traumatic epilepsy caused by the pressure of that old slug against his brain. Given the proper medical treatment, he can be completely cured."

I grabbed the prow of the rowboat, which I'd insisted on towing along behind the outboard when they brought us off the sandbar, and gave a prodigious heave. The bow came clear of the water, and the head of the corpse lashed to the boat's bottom was plainly visible in the searchlight's glow—even to the bullet hole in the forehead.

A gasp rippled through the staring crowd

of onlookers. Pudge seemed dazed. "Farrell! . . . Bu-but my men looked all day, and they couldn't find him—"

"That's because he was already dead when you gave them the assignment. He must've contacted Rosalie's killer, and got shot for his pains, right after he broke away from me. And the killer realized he couldn't waste time digging a grave, with cops likely to show up any minute. Furthermore, if he just tossed the body in the water it would turn up eventually and might be traced to him. But who would ever expect to find a corpse lashed with fishline to the bottom of a floating boat? He could bury it later, after the heat died down."

Pudge shook his head bewilderedly. "Then you think Farrell was the Willmott office burglar. He killed Knopp. Rosalie drugged him and stole the loot from him afterwards. Then somebody killed *her* to get it, and later killed Farrell in order to keep it.

"But Knopp was shot with Rosalie's gun!"

I nodded to him. "She loaned it to Farrell for the job. He'd hit town from stir and was trying to blackmail her, I imagine, by threatening to expose her past to the Willmotts. She had no cash to pay him off, but she could keep him quiet by loaning him the rod and tipping him when to pull the burglary. Then, by drugging him later she could get the loot herself, and by taking the murder gun with his prints still on it, she could make him give up the blackmail pitch."

Pudge still wasn't buying. "But why should Farrell hang around here three days with the swag in his possession? Why didn't he lam?"

I sighed. "That goes back to something else." I turned to Oscar Willmott.

"Lyle jumped, didn't he?"

His beady eyes threw catfire through the moonlight. "It was an accident!"

"Look, brother," I said grimly. "Either he jumped or you pushed him. Somebody's prints are going to be on the lower inside frame of that screen. It was shoved out too far for them to have been wiped off afterwards."

The wizened shell of his face fell apart suddenly and his shoulders slumped. "He jumped," he said dully. "God know why—"

I nodded at Pudge. "Remember Knopp's widow told us that Knopp suspected some kind of hanky-pank with the company assets. He was right. Only instead of Oscar doing the dirty work, it was Lyle. That's why Lyle did the Dutch. He was crazy about Rosalie—she had a way of doing that to her men—and he blamed himself for her death. When Oscar showed him the note Freddie had brought, Lyle thought Rosalie had staged the burglary to cover his embezzlement, and had been murdered by the blackmailer as a result. Rosalie knew about the embezzlement, of course."

"But what's that got to do with Farrell's hanging around here all this time?"

I grinned. "Farrell couldn't help himself. He had no getaway scratch. When he looked over the loot after the burglary, he found out there wasn't a thing there that an ex-con could convert. Lyle had already embezzled all the cash and easily negotiable stuff. Rosalie, on the other hand, had figured on making a deal with the old man for the remainder, then going away somewhere with Freddie."

Pudge studied a moment. "Then all we gotta do," he said bitterly, "is still find her killer and prove he did it. Hell!"

I nodded. "He's right here among us," I assured him. "I doubt if we could ever dig up enough evidence to pin Rosalie's murder on him. But we can stick him for killing Buttons Farrell—and one murder rap's as good as another."

He eyed me morosely. "How?"

"By the gun he shot Farrell with. I've got a hunch he still has it on him—probably the missing securities, too. The only trouble is, if I counted right that gun's got one slug left in it."

There was a moment of sudden, chilling silence. Through it a ragged voice called shrilly from somewhere just beyond the circle of light.

"You're damn right it's got a slug left in it! I'll use it on the first one that makes a move!"

IN THE end, it was Oscar Willmott who saved us—by twisting abruptly to kick a cripple's crutch. The final slug whistled harmlessly overhead, and then old Gandy was writhing in the sand, filthy whiskers twisted in a grimace, the empty revolver clutched in a gnarled paw.

After they'd pulled the stocks and bonds out of his jeans and snapped the nippers on him, Pudge turned to me.

"But why should he use that broken down old heater, and leave a good gun like yours behind?"

I grinned. "A gun like mine's got too much kick for a man on crutches. . . . Too bad about that chicken ranch you were going to buy with Oscar's five grand."

His brown eyes soured. "I suppose *you'll* turn the dough over to the Widows and Orphans Fund!" he sneered.

I shook my head. "Not this time. This time it goes to carry out a bad girl's dying wish. Freddie may not be worth it, but just the same he's going to have his operation and his chance. Who knows—he may turn out to be a cop and collect a few rewards himself some day."

THE END



Suppose she was there under the landing with me?

TILL DEATH DO US PART

By DANA MCGUIRE

THE GANG at the Chesapeake Boat Club thought I was nuts when I said I was going to take Nancy sailing in the bay. The storm was heading our way fast. They said we were crazy to venture out in it.

Crazy I was, all right! Like a fox!

I laughed at the poor dopes. There wasn't a one of the crowd who could handle a sailboat as well as I; and I had my own reasons for taking Nancy on that little trip.

I said to them, "So, all right! Let it blow! My wife and I go sailing every Sunday, don't we?"

I can see Hal Wallis now, camera in hand—he must sleep with the damn thing—standing on the pier, his face red from arguing with me to change my mind.

"Look, Jim," he was saying. "There's going to be a bad blow."

Hal was a club member on Sundays and a photographer on the *Times* the other seven days of the week. He would have married Nancy himself, three years ago, if I hadn't happened along and swept her off her feet.

I was fresh out of M. I. Tech, easy on the eyes, and big, like I am now. But, Hal—he'll always be a skinny punk with a camera. Sounds as if I don't like him? Well I don't—I never did! If it weren't for Hal Wallis. . . .

But Hal wasn't the reason I took Nancy sailing that Sunday. Not that shutter hound. Nancy's luscious sister, Helen was the real reason.

Helen was modeling in New York. She was only twenty, but she was a sweet dream. Dress Lana Turner in a shoulder length bob of soft, red-gold hair, poke a dimple in the left side of her face, and there you have a

Nancy and I took the little sailboat out every Sunday, and she didn't intend to let the black squawl brooding over the bay stop us. But I knew then that it would stop Nancy from ever sailing again!

rough draft of Helen Miller. Of course, Nancy didn't know how I felt toward Helen. But then, neither did Helen, for that matter. It was just one of those things.

But Hal was still sounding off about the storm. I said, "So what?" and helped Nancy into the boat. "We aren't going to let a little wind spoil our afternoon, are we, Nancy?"

Nancy laughed and shook her blonde head, which was partly covered by a brightly colored scarf she'd tied under her chin.

"Mama goes where papa goes," she said,

Hal got real pleading. "Look here, Nancy," he said. "Can't you do something with this dope?" Meaning me. "Feel how chilly the air is getting."

"And see how black the clouds are." I laughed, pointing, and jumped into the boat. "Goin' to be a Nor'easter, boy."

But still Hal wasn't satisfied. "Be sensible, Nancy!" he argued.

Nancy laughed and called up to him, "If Jim has his heart set on going, I'd better go along, too. Jim's a big sissy, you know. He's never learned to swim. I might have to rescue him!"

"Okay, you hard headed lugs," Hal gave in, "If you gotta go, you gotta go. But I want a picture for posterity!" He raised his camera and pointed it at Nancy.

"This ought to make headlines," he said loudly.

Nancy laughed and made a face. "Make it a good one, Hal. I want to look pretty on the front page."

"That's right," I added with a show of enthusiasm, and cast off the line. "Wave goodbye to the gang."

HAL caught Nancy just as she waved gaily and said something to me. So I waved and smiled and said something to her. Then I ran up the sail, which caught the wind and billowed out with a flutter, and the boat headed out into the bay.

"Poor Hal," Nancy said loudly from the bow, because the wind was blowing so hard. "He seemed so upset."

"Yeah," I said, seeing a mental picture of the punk and his camera in front of me. "Hal's been upset for three years, now."

Nancy lifted an eyebrow and said, "You're never liked him, have you?"

"Sure I like him," I lied. "Hal's all right. He's a good photographer."

Nancy tilted her head to one side, like she always did when she wanted to be coy and said with a silly giggle, "Why . . . Jim! I do believe you're jealous!"

"Don't be idiotic," I said. She made me so mad with that crack, I wanted to knock her overboard right then and there.

Next thing, she was hollering at me to turn back. I shouted at her to come in to the midship and lend some weight to port. It was raining hard as the devil and the bay was washing in over the gunwales.

I got her to brace her feet to starboard and press down with both elbows on the port gunwale. The wind had ripped the scarf from around her head and her wet hair lay flat and sticky looking across her face. She was scared plenty—and so was I.

Nancy kept begging me to turn back, and finally she cried out, "If it's Hal you're thinking of. . ."

I burst out laughing. "Don't pat yourself on the back." I lit in to her. "It isn't Hal—it's Helen!"

She threw a hand up to her face and cried, "My sister!"

I said, "Don't act so dramatic. Didn't you know?" I knew she didn't know, but I wanted to make it sound as if I'd been open about it, all along. It hurt her plenty. Her face took on a hang-dog expression and when she spoke, it was as if she had to drag the words out of her mouth.

"How long has it been going on?"

I said, "Ever since Helen visited us last month."

She asked if Helen loved me, and I said she would—in time.

"She's only a child," Nancy said. She was on her knees, then, holding on to both sides of the rail.

"But how she is growing!" I said, and let the sheet start to slip through my fingers.

Nancy started to spring at me, screaming at me to let Helen alone.

"I'll let her alone!" I shouted, and let go the sheet. The boom swung around and struck her, knocking her into the water. She screamed once, when she fell, and quickly disappeared. I watched aft for her to come up—but she didn't. The boom had knocked her unconscious.

Well, the first act was over, and beautifully done.

Now for Act Two. . . .

HAL WALLIS, swinging his camera and looking scared to death, was the first person I saw when I brought the boat in and made her fast alongside the landing.

Hal kept shouting, "Where's Nancy? Where's Nancy?" I thought he was going to jump off the pier into the water.

I put on a blank expression and acted like I was all broken up. I wanted it to look good. I wanted all the blame for Nancy's disappearance.

Somebody in the crowd—I don't remember who—helped me out of the boat. Everybody was talking at once. I started to totter, pretending I was too weak to stand alone. Somebody saw me and put his arm around my waist.

Hal was standing there. I caught a glimpse of his face. It was white as a sheet and he was good and mad. Hal charged at me like a wild bull, shaking me by the shoulders and shouting, "What happened? Where's Nancy?"

I shook my head and said she was gone, surprised as hell at the emotion in my voice.

"I tried to save her," I said, bowing my head and letting my knees buckle, like I was going to collapse.

Somebody caught hold of me and said I was all in and they'd better get me to the club house. I closed my eyes and doubled up and they carried me into the club and laid me out on a lounge. Somebody threw a blanket over me and everybody crowded around. I nearly suffocated. But everything was turning out just the way I wanted it to.

I heard Hal shouting at them to stand back and give me air, so I cracked my eyes open a little and saw him coming through with a glass of brandy in his hand. Hal knelt down beside me and raised my head a bit, touching the glass to my lips.

"Here, drink this," he said.

I groaned and opened my eyes. Time to start my act. Besides, I needed that drink.

I got the brandy down without any trouble at all—naturally. Then I guessed it was about time for me to start explaining things. I'd gotten them all pretty well teed up, by then—especially Hal.

I caught hold of his arm very dramatically with both hands, and sobbed, "Why didn't I listen to you?" The old voice sounded like I was really having a time of it.

I thought Hal was going to cry. "How did it happen?" he asked. I believe he really pitied me.

"The storm struck us broadside," I began, taking my time, because I wanted to keep up the shocked appearance I had managed to display so far. I even panted a little. "Nancy was sitting in the bow. I shouted at her to take over the tiller while I hauled in the sail, and we'd ride out the storm. As she started aft, the wind shifted suddenly. The boom

swung around and struck her. She went over the side. I couldn't go after her, I couldn't help her, because I can't swim—you all know that! I threw over the life ring, but it didn't reach her. She was carried away. I saw her disappear." I let the word "disappear" trail off into a broken sob.

After that recital, I relaxed and waited for somebody to say something. There was plenty of talking going on, all right, but I couldn't make out what was being said. So I cracked my eyes open just wide enough to catch their reactions. What a sight!

Everybody had turned away and voices were humming all at once. Hal was on his knees beside me, the empty glass in his hand, staring across the room at something that wasn't there.

I was feeling good. I had committed the perfect crime. Nancy was gone and I was shouldering all of the blame—openly. Even Hal was sympathetic. I gave myself a mental pat on the back.

Then all of a sudden a terrible thought struck me, almost rolling me off the lounge. In my eagerness to let them know how much of a hero I'd been, I had forgotten to get rid of the life ring! The thought of the thing still in the boat, almost paralyzed me. I'd have to get back there and get it, somehow, later on. In the meantime, I prayed that no one had noticed it.

AFTER awhile, Hal drove me home and helped me into bed. He acted pretty decently about it, too. But this time, it was I who was sitting on pins and needles. It had gotten dark outside, and I wanted Hal to leave so I could get back to the boat. Hal made a cup of hot tea and brought it in and set it down on the bed table beside me.

"Anything else you want?" he asked. "Anything I can get you?"

I said no, and thanked him. The only thing he could do for me was leave. I turned my head. Hal was looking at a picture of Nancy, smiling up at him from behind a glass frame on the bed table.

"You know," he said, turning to me suddenly. "I feel damned sorry for you—for her sake."

I smiled like a bosom friend. "Thanks, Hal," I said. "You've been swell."

Hal said, "See you later," turned and walked away.

I allowed Hal plenty of time to get out of the neighborhood, before I got up and started to dress. I'd have to get down to the boat landing—fast. If anyone had seen the life ring in the boat, after my having said I'd thrown it to Nancy while she was struggling in the water, my goose was cooked. It was a fifty-fifty chance, and I had to take it. I told

myself that maybe in all the excitement no one had paid any attention to what was in the boat.

The next thing was to get out of the house without being seen. I had to take a chance on that, too; and on the telephone ringing while I was gone, or somebody coming to the door. My car was in front of the house, where Hal had left it, so I decided to go out the back door, come up the driveway, and make a dash for the car. There was no one on the street, and if the neighbors heard me drive off—well, I just had to risk it and think up some sort of an alibi, if they did.

About a quarter of a mile from the club, I slowed the car down and turned off the highway onto an unused side road through the woods. The road came to a dead end facing the bay. At the end of the road, I turned the car around so that I would be all set to scoot out of there after I got back. Then I climbed out and started walking up the beach.

I could hear conversation coming from the club and I guessed the gang was eating, so I wasn't expecting to run across anybody on the landing. On the other hand, the storm that afternoon had turned the air chilly, and the water was still a bit rough.

Keeping well in the shadows, I crept along the beach until I reached the landing. Then I laid down on the sand and listened. I didn't hear anything but the water splashing against the piling, and the pier looked empty. I guessed the coast was clear, so I got up and ducked down to the water's edge.

Taking off my shoes and socks, I started to wade out between the piling under the pier. The boat was bobbing up and down in the water, right where I'd left her. At sight of the little craft, a wave of excitement swept over me. I thought of Nancy, out there in the bay—or, worse still. Suppose she had washed up and was there under the landing with me? My teeth began chattering like a clacker box.

I caught hold of the rail to steady the boat,

and waded aft to the tiller. I stretched out my hand and felt the life ring on the after thwart. My fingers trembled like mad as I unfastened it. Then I started to make my way back, stumbling, to the beach. I didn't stop to put on my shoes and socks, but grabbed them up in one hand, while I held on to the ring with the other, and made a beeline back to the car.

Reaching home, I stopped in front of the house, put on my shoes and socks and scooted up the driveway to the back door. I didn't stop until I was safely in the bedroom, where I flopped, panting, into a chair, shaking like a leaf and wet through. But I had the life ring, and no one had seen me.

In a couple of days, I would throw it back into the bay. That would be just the right amount of time it would ordinarily have remained in the water before being washed ashore—from where we were.

I hid the thing inside the mattress on the studio couch in my den, then went to bed.

The next couple of days I spent running to the telephone and answering the door. Friends of Nancy's and mine. Some called; some came around and wept a little; others just sat. They all said the same thing—"You poor guy!" "Tough, Jim!" "If there's anything I can do. . . ." And so on.

Everyone seemed more concerned over me then they were over Nancy—just how I wanted them to feel. But I wished they'd get out of there and leave me alone. I was jumpy as the devil. Of course, everybody attributed that to a natural state of affairs. But the truth was, I was scared—scared plenty. I had killed my wife.

Everywhere I went in the house, I could feel that Nancy was somewhere near. Whenever the floors creaked, or the curtains blew. Whenever there was music, whenever the wind was sighing in the trees.

That afternoon Hal dropped around for a few minutes with a friend of his, Ed Fenton of the homicide squad. But there was nothing



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unusual in that. Fenton had often been a guest in my house before. Hal and Ed were good friends and often worked together. I went over the whole thing again, for Ed's benefit. But I didn't mind. I guess I'd told the story about that Sunday afternoon a hundred times—since it happened. I knew it by heart now.

We talked about the newspaper's account of Nancy's disappearance. Made the front page, all right, just like Hal said it would—picture and all. I guess my face must have flushed, because Hal called me a poor man and Ed patted me on the back sympathetically trying to cheer me up.

We had a drink and they left. Then I went into the den and took the life ring out of the mattress on the studio couch. After it got dark, I was going to carry it up the beach, a mile or so from the club, and heave it over into the bay. The tide would do the rest, and that would cinch it. Nancy's body would wash ashore, too, I guessed. But I hoped I had gone far enough in the bay for the undertow to carry her body out to sea.

AT SEVEN o'clock, the door bell rang. It was Hal. I invited him in, surprised at his sudden return.

"Later," he excused himself. "Get your hat. We're going to the morgue."

The morgue! "Nancy?" I asked in a low, tense voice.

Hal nodded. "Yeah. She washed up late this afternoon. You've got to come down and identify her."

My mouth dried up and I swallowed hard, but I managed to say okay, and went for my hat.

We didn't talk much on the way. But when we reached the morgue and got out of the car, my knees were shaking.

"In here," Hal said.

I had never been inside a morgue before. Everything was white and still as death. Still as death. That was a good one!

Hal led me down a passageway between rows of slabs holding bodies covered in white. I remember the clacking sound our heels made on the bare floor, and how damp and chilly the room was. I remember seeing Ed Fenton and another man I recognized as Doctor Quigley, the city coroner, standing beside one of the slabs at the far end of the room. I knew what was under that white cover. And I wasn't going to like seeing it.

Hal introduced me to Doctor Quigley; and when I turned to speak to Fenton, I was trembling all over. Ed was holding a brown envelope in his hand. Doctor Quigley drew back the cover.

"Is this your wife, Mr. Casslin?"

I swallowed hard. "Yes," I said, and turned away. Nancy wasn't . . . pretty anymore.

Quigley covered her over. I looked at Hal. Ed was handing him the brown envelope. Quigley coughed and began putting on his coat. Hal opened the envelope and took out a couple of pictures, holding one up in front of me so that I could see it.

"Recognize it?" he asked. It was the one he had taken that Sunday afternoon on the landing, just before Nancy and I shoved off. She was waving and smiling.

I swallowed hard, stalling for time. "Yeah," I said, slowly. I'd have to be cagey and not commit myself. "Yeah, I've seen it before. That's the one in the papers."

Hal said, "Good!" and stepped up close to me. He was mad. "Now maybe you'll tell me what you've done with the life ring!"

That was like a slap in the face. "The life ring?" I stammered, trying to pull the words out of my mouth. "I . . . I don't know, Hal," I said weakly.

"You must have gone back to the pier Sunday night and gotten it," Hal said. "It was gone when I got there."

I shook my head. Hal looked like he was going to strike me.

"Jim, you've lied about this all the way through." His voice sounded all chopped up. "You killed her! I don't know why, but you did. I've known it from the beginning, but I've had to wait for . . . this!" He pointed to the bulky thing under the cover.

Doctor Quigley coughed again. You could hear it echo around the room.

"When did you find out?" I asked Hal. I had to know. It was all over, anyway, and in a way, I was glad.

"In the club," Hal said. "When you slipped up about throwing Nancy the life ring." He held the second picture up in front of me.

"This one you won't recognize," he said grimly.

I looked at it. They were helping me out of the boat. My head was bowed.

"See the ring there, on the back seat?" Hal touched the spot with the tip of his index finger.

"Yeah," I said after a time, feeling like all the blood had rushed out of my head. "I see it."

Ed Fenton said, "You'd better come along with me, Casslin."

I nodded. Hal was putting the pictures back into the envelope.

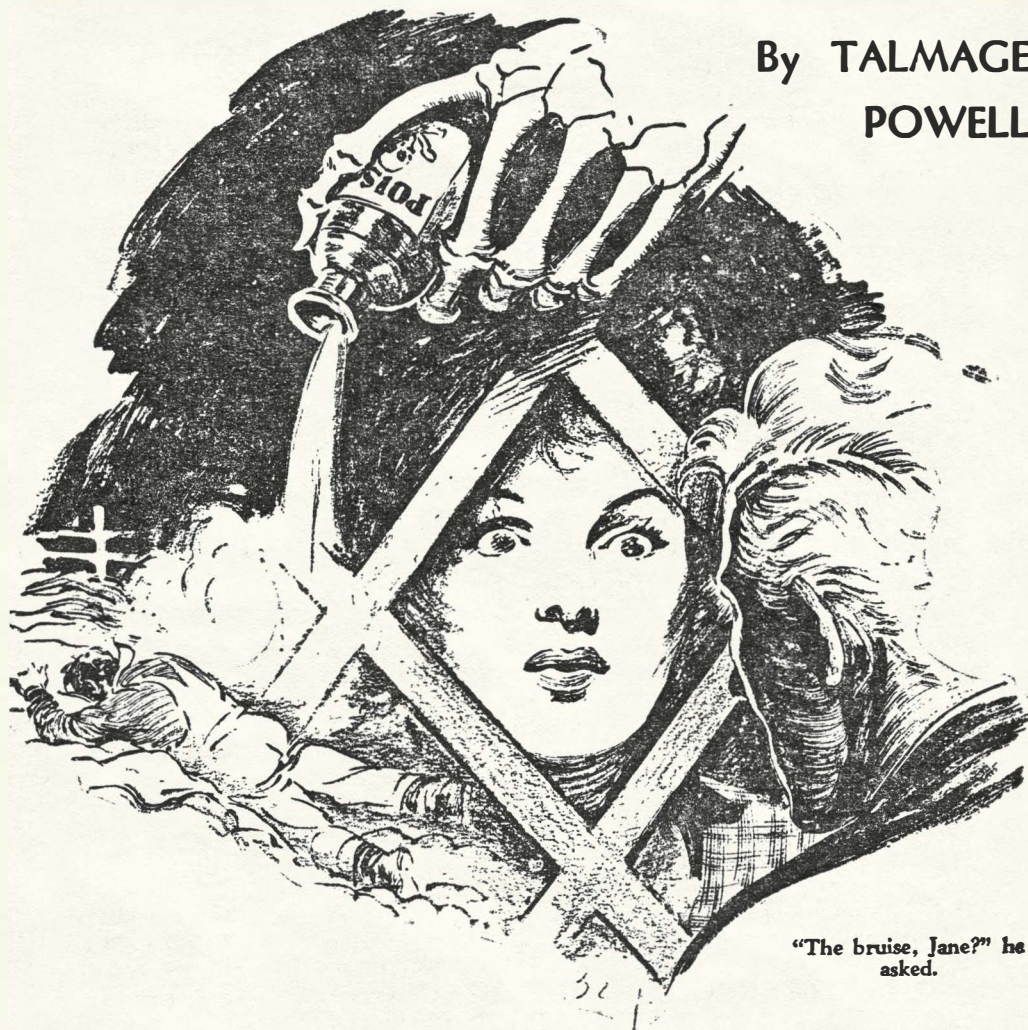
He said, "When are you guys going to get smart and stop making mistakes?"

I must have laughed. Anyhow, I wasn't trembling anymore.

"Never, I guess. It's guys like me that keep people like you in jobs!"

EACH MAN KILLS—

By TALMAGE
POWELL



"The bruise, Jane?" he asked.

FROM his office window, he could see the sweeping panorama of the Smoky mountains tumbling raggedly into eternity. He felt the breath of spring, the budding of laurel and rhododendron, the faint chill of winter that was still in the high, thin air. It was a time for growing laziness, but he was putting on his coat with fast, jerky gestures.

He slammed out of the office, down the rickety stairway. His mind was flaming. He was thinking of murder and love and madness—and past mistakes.

He came out on the dusty street. Several lank hill men turned to look at his haggard face and prematurely graying hair. He was thirty-five, but his face might have been

The hill people had their own code. To kill one's husband by poisoning his daily bread was punishable by quick death, evil though the man had been. But no-count Bill Pratt had his code, too. . . . It didn't include standing silently by while the woman he had loved was killed by her own kinsfolk.

fifty. A close observer might have seen strange lights in his eyes.

He heard the electric hum of words all along the street. Poison—the most loathsome method of killing the mind of a hill man could conceive. . . . “Shore am sorry for her. It was good enough for Tim Hopkins, gettin’ kilt. But not that way. Not with poison. Too much like a snake. I reckon it’ll be the gas chamber for her. . . .”

He tried to shut his ears against the words as he hurried along. He’d first heard ten minutes ago. She was already in jail. Tim Hopkins was dead, an autopsy already hurriedly performed. Death by poisoning.

He walked like a man dying. He stumbled a little on a loose brick in the dusty sidewalk. A man in overalls saw him stumble. “Well, William Pratt. Drunk again. First time in five years, too. He’s heard. Can’t say I begrudge him a drunk right now.”

The hill man might have been adding to the man at his elbow: “Him? That’s William Pratt. A lawyer. Comes from that Pratt family up in Holliday Cove. Used to be in love with her, and it’s my guess he still is. He was a wild ‘un back then, just a young fool. She never could stand his drinking. Then Jane up and married Tim Hopkins—who turned out a lot worse. Poor gal. Never could do any good trying to get herself a man. But when she made her marriage vows to Tim Hopkins she stuck to the bargain—until today when she stopped it permanent-like!”

A wild young fool. . . . He remembered that last argument. He’d never understood her intensity—until it was too late. He’d laughed and had another drink of ‘shine. No woman could boss William Pratt!

He remembered the whiteness of her face, the great emptiness inside of him as she’d opened the front door, showing him out of her house that last time. He’d slipped the flash in his pocket, walked out the door like a man made of wood. The laughter soured in him. But she would call him back. Hadn’t she always?

But she didn’t—not that night. Hell, he was a Pratt. His great-grandfather had pushed into these Carolina hills when there was nothing but wilderness, primeval silence, the empire of the Cherokees. The Pratts didn’t beg their women.

Less than a week later she had married Tim Hopkins. Then the Pratt pride was all that young Bill had left—that and the new, too-late understanding of the intensity of her.

THE JAIL lay before him, a cluster of people growing outside the backed brick walls. Because of you, Pratt’s mind branded him, she’d rebounded, married Tim. Hopkins had always wanted her, possibly all the more

because it had seemed he could never have her. She hadn’t really known Tim Hopkins before that marriage ten years ago. But she had learned.

Hopkins—who’d put marks on her cheeks—who’d once beaten a mule to death to show the animal the sun rose and set on Tim Hopkins. Hopkins. The ego-maniac, with his farm, his grim brutality. The man she had finally escaped through poison’s doorway. All because of Bill Pratt and his young pride ten years ago, his hot-headedness. His moon-shine.

A lane opened in the knot of people before the jail. He knew every living soul there. He walked through the silence they created and the dust stirred by their feet. He sensed that they knew he had never stopped loving her, even though he’d never breathed her name in all that time, except in the lonely, private agony.

Inside the jail, he saw Clem Rainey, the sheriff, taking off his hat and mopping his weather-seamed face. He asked Rainey, “In back?”

“In back,” Rainey said. “Last cell on the right.”

The corridor in back was short, dark, musty between the two rows of sour-smelling, flat-barred cells. The bars were criss-crossed to form diamond-shaped spaces in space.

For a moment, he faltered. He heard her breathing. She swirled up out of the gloom of the cell like a dream, achingly remembered.

“Bill. . . .” Her voice was the same—almost. Her face hadn’t changed much. Small, delicate body. Small, delicate face. Beautiful because it reflected the intense heart beneath the flesh.

He touched her hand, groping through the bars, and for a moment his pulse strangled him. Then very quietly he said, “I want you to tell me about it, Jane.”

She told him nothing gossip hadn’t informed him. Tim Hopkins had eaten dinner, his noon day meal. He had gone out to the field. A hired hand had found him later, dead on the earth he had claimed so possessively. The autopsy had revealed that Hopkins had died of arsenical poisoning, administered in the biscuits she had baked. Now she was in the cell and Clem Rainey had broken his silence a quarter of an hour ago, lashing the town to excited life with news of depressing death.

She finished speaking. Pratt thought of ten wasted years, ending in this. His eyes felt like granite. “The bruise, Jane?”

“I bought a dress,” she said simply, “without his permission. I had to have a dress. For ten years I managed to draw breath without his permission—but, Bill. . . . I. . . . I didn’t poison him.”

He swallowed against the tightness in his

throat. For ten years Hopkins had tried to break her—like the mule. But the fire of her hadn't died. Her spirit was still whole. Being intact, it would never have formulated the dark, twisted thought of poison. A gun perhaps, but not poison. It was proof enough to Bill Pratt that she hadn't done this thing. Or perhaps he had needed no proof from the first moment, only her word.

She said, her fingers tight on his, "Will you get Peg for me, Bill? Will you get Sheriff Rainey's wife to look after my child?"

"Yes," he said. "You mustn't worry, Jane."

He turned to go, paused, turned back again. "Jane, I haven't touched a drop of 'shine in five years."

Her smile and strangled sob fused, like a ray of sunlight stealing through a dark, dismal room. . . .

THE ROAD snaked up the lonely sheerness of the mountainside. Rising above, dropping below to distances beyond the eye, the banks of the road were grown over with scrub pine, poplars, ancient oaks, budding wild flowers, blackberry brambles. The house was a white wooden frame structure, set back from the road, flanked by dark, moist, new-broken land.

Pratt heard the sobbing of a child as he rapped on the screen door. The late afternoon sun was dipping behind the haggard outline of the jagged peaks in the west, tinting them with blood. The great silence of the vast hill night was settling like a thick blanket, unnerving to one not born to it, broken only by the sobbing of a child. . . .

Heavy feet came clomping down the hallway. A bulky shadow stopped a yard short of the screen door. "What do you want, Pratt?"

Pratt looked at old Red Hopkins' squat body, his heavy face. A man who looked as though he might have been made of mud. A lumpy face set atop a mud image of a body. His eyes held a muddy look of sorrow; his hair were strands of red claybank. Pratt tried to forget that this man had fathered an egotistical son who'd spent ten years trying to crush a woman's spirit. Pratt told himself it would be only fair to remember that this man had sacrificed a son to the great god, murder.

"I want Peggy," Pratt said. "I want the little girl."

Hopkins' laugh hushed even the child's faint sobbing in the depths of the house. "The young'un?" he mimicked. "My grand-daughter? You know her mother killed my son?"

"No," Pratt said. "I don't know it. And until a jury says so, her mother has every right to the child. Her mother asked me to get the child. I'll take Peg to Sheriff Rainey.

You can see her there if you want to. It's the least you could do."

"The least?" Hopkins whispered. "The least I could do would be to take care of killing that woman myself! We'll get her anyway, Pratt! My boy, Josh, has a story to tell to that jury you talked about. Josh'll never let 'em get away with letting his brother's killer go free."

"Maybe Josh would like to talk to me now."

"He's in town. If she was a man, Josh would have a crowd together already to tear that jail down and use a rope!"

Pratt's mouth was white at the corners. "All right, I'll talk to Josh later. I'll be wanting to hear what the hired hand who found Tim's body had to say, too. But right now, I'm taking the little girl!"

"You can't have her, Pratt. It ain't healthy for you on my land. You'd better go."

"Not without the child," Pratt said. His hand came out of his pocket. He held the gun with all the ease of a hill man.

Red Hopkins dropped his gaze to the weapon. "So this is the way it is?"

"If it has to be."

"I won't forget this, Pratt."

"I don't expect you to." Then he remembered: *yesterday he had a son. Today nothing—except a dead body in the morgue loaded with arsenic.* "But I hope," he added, "that someday you'll try to understand."

Hopkins laughed thinly, looked at the gun once more. "I don't have no choice, do I? All right, I'll get the girl."

"Call her out. You stay here—and look at the gun."

Without taking his gaze from Pratt, Hopkins raised his voice, "Peg!" A door opened and she came down the hall, clinging to shadows, a child of six, spindling up straight and tall out of her babyhood. "We're going to see your mother, Peggy," Pratt told her.

She squealed with delight. Red Hopkins was still standing in the doorway when they pulled away.

The child watched the road. Pratt stole glances at her. She was no stranger. He'd snatched glimpses of her every chance he got when her mother had brought her to town. "I'm Pratt. You can call me Bill, Peg."

"Awright, Mister Bill. Are we going to see my mama soon?"

"Soon, yes." He searched the child's face, relaxed inside. There was nothing of Tim Hopkins about her.

"Peg, I'm going to help you and your mother," Pratt began.

"Why, Mister Bill?"

"Because I want to," he said. "I want you to tell me something, Peggy. I want to know everything that happened at your house today."

Dust streamed behind them like the tail of a comet. He turned the car around a hairpin turn. Peg sat straight. "Awright," she said solemnly. "Me and mama went to town after breakfast. Mama bought a dress. Then we went home. He. . . . He hit my mama, Mister Bill. . . ."

"Mister Bill," the sob said, "he said he had broke the mule once and that . . . that . . . she was no . . . better'n a mule Mister Bill, my mama is better'n a mile, ain't she?"

His knuckles were white on the wheel. "Your mother is the greatest person who ever lived, Peggy."

She repaid him with a small smile.

"And then?" he prompted.

"I ran away from him and sat down in the back yard. I heard my mama crying and he laughed and said the dress didn't mean money and she was a fool and that the dress wasn't a dress, but it was a sy . . . symbol. What is that, Mister Bill?"

"A symbol, Peggy, is a kind of thing that means a lot of other things. A flag is a kind of symbol. And I guess the dress was a sort of flag. Not to her. She bought it simply because she needed it. A red flag—to him. He looked at the dress and saw a spirit living on. It lashed him to desperation. Symbols, Peggy, are just about the most important things in the world."

"Yessir, whatever it is you're talking about."

He gave her a smile. "And after you went out of the house?"

"I went back in. My mama had stopped crying. I thought of a new game. Mama was out of the house and I heard him coming and ran outside again."

"That's all? That's all that happened until you had lunch?"

"Yessir, Mister Bill."

His teeth felt on edge. *Arsenic in the biscuits she'd baked. But she and Peggy had had lunch with him. . . .*

He said, "Did you and your mother like the biscuits for lunch?"

"We didn't eat any, Mr. Bill. There was only a little flour in the bin. Mama had forgot to buy some. She was too worried about the dress, I guess, while she was in town. So he was mad about the dress and about the flour and wouldn't let us eat the biscuits. He made us eat cold bread."

His hands were slick on the wheel. First came the hot wave washing down his spine: Damn him, forbidding his wife and child bread! Then the gushing coldness: Or a shrewd method of murder . . . forget to buy more flour . . . knowing he will be angry . . . that he will consume the fresh bread . . . that . . . Sweat was murky in the creases of his forehead.

"But there was someone else in the house, Peggy? Someone who could . . ."

"No sir. There was nobody in the house the whole morning but me and mama and him."

CLEM RAINEY smoked his cob pipe, spat in the hard earth of his front yard. "So you got the young'un, Pratt?"

"I intended to get her. You'll let Jane see the child?"

"I reckon I'm man enough and sheriff enough to lead a woman at gunpoint from the jail across the yard and let her set for a minute in my living room."

"I won't forget it, Rainey."

The lank sheriff shrugged. "I play fair. Even with a killer."

"I wouldn't exactly call her that, Clem."

Rainey's eyes were flinty. "You're a thick-headed fool, Pratt. Because it's her, you're being as blind as an addlepat bat. The poison was in the flour. She made the biscuits. I've questioned the hired hand who found Tim Hopkins dead in the field. The hand said nobody besides Tim, Jane, and Peggy were in or out of the house all morning. The man working the south forty with him backed the hand up in that."

Rainey sucked on his pipe. "I ain't a complete fool, Pratt. Jane used part of that flour for breakfast, according to her own statement. But nobody died. Yet at noon time the flour was deadly, which means that it was poisoned sometime between breakfast and noon dinner. And nobody, no outsider was in that house in that time! She's the only one who had opportunity. Ten years of that madman's torture would be motive enough for any woman."

Rainey's words hung in the lowering darkness. Rainey added, "That would be enough for a fair jury. But after Josh Hopkins gets through shooting his mouth off around town, we'll never get a jury without a foregone opinion. And Pratt—there are men in this town who would consider lynching the lawyer who'd tried to defend a woman that fed her husband poison!"

"I don't give a damn what they'd consider," Pratt said flatly. The thought of lynching didn't hurt him. What hurt were Rainey's words.

But what hurt most of all was the first long shadows of doubt creeping across Pratt's own mind. Then he thought of the dark cell with the bars criss-crossed before her face. Ten years and the foolish mistakes of youth which had led to this. He saw the gamble clearly before him. The odds a thousand to one against him. But suddenly he didn't care whether she was guilty or not. The only important thing was keeping her alive, setting her free. . . .

"There was somebody else. Somebody who sneaked in the house. There has to be somebody else. . . ." He turned and stumbled to his car.

The first farmer Pratt passed answered his question. "Shore as hell, Josh Hopkins is in town! You won't have no trouble finding him, neither, Pratt! Fact is, Josh says he's looking for you. He was at Wilcie's Tavern a few minutes ago."

The place was crowded with men, thick with smoke from pipes and Durham quirlies, beer glasses tinkling, harsh voices rising in laughter. Then someone spotted Bill Pratt standing inside the door of the tavern. A wave of silence swept over the place. Men stiffened at their tables. The knot of men at the bar split. Josh Hopkins turned to face Pratt.

For a moment, Pratt stood without moving. Flesh crawled along the small of his back. He looked at the mountainous, denim-clad bulk of Hopkins and thought, "Every hill town has its Josh Hopkins, the man who can outdrink, outswear, and outfight everybody and anybody. He wrings horse shoes in two with his hands for the sheer fun of it and nobody yet has taken his bet that he can knock a colt unconscious with a blow of those fists. . . ."

Then Pratt began moving, without will of his own. Like a creature detached, toward the big, laughing man who seared him with his beetle-browed gaze.

"Well," Hopkins said, "the lawyer in the case. You're planning to defend the woman who murdered my brother, ain't you, Pratt?"

"I'd thought about it some," Pratt said.

The bar, the frozen men faded; there was only this titantic human bulk shuffling toward him in the writhing smoke pall.

"If she was a man," Hopkins said. "we'd have done lynched her. Poison!"

"Maybe she didn't—"

"Everybody knows she did it," Hopkins said harshly. "I been telling the whole town all about it. Just like I'm going to tell the jury."

"I've heard that. Your pa told me you had a tale to tell. Clem Rainey told me you were telling it. I guess you won't mind telling me?"

"Why wouldn't I tell you, lawyer-man?" Hopkins' chest shook once with a short, lashing chuckle. "Peter Doyle is in the market for land. He was going to buy the south forty from Tim. He was supposed to go to Tim's house this morning. I got a little land to sell myself. I'd looked for Pete Doyle, failed to

find him. So early this morning, I planted myself on the knoll above Tim's house, planning to head Pete Doyle off and talk to him first myself.

"I was on that knoll all morning, Pratt, I couldn't be seen from the house, but I could see half the valley. Nobody could have got in a quarter of a mile of the house without me seeing him. But Pete Doyle didn't come. I learned later he's been in South Carolina since last night. Nobody came. Not a soul came or went out of Tim's house except him and the little girl and the woman who poisoned him!"

A man moved his foot in the silence.

"It's true," Hopkins breathed, "that I was gonna rook Tim on the land deal. It's true that me and the rest of the family didn't like him. He was crazy. But now he's dead. A. Hopkins is dead, Pratt! That flour was poisoned between breakfast and noon dinner, or Tim would have died earlier in the day. The only person who could have poisoned it is in jail—where she's gonna stay until they put her in the gas chamber in Raleigh! It won't be healthy for you to defend her, Pratt. We're gonna have her life!"

Pratt heard the smack of flesh on flesh, a man's breath whistle out. His arm went numb to his shoulder; he knew he had hit Josh Hopkins flush in the face.

HOPKINS shook his head like a dog shaking water. Before Pratt could move, Hopkins had seized his collar. Hopkins hit him three times; but Pratt saw the huge fist looming only once, felt one burst of blinding pain. Then he was unconscious.

The shock of landing bodily in the gutter in front of Wilcie's Tavern reeled his senses out of blackness. He lay for a moment, hovering in a gray world of pain, feeling the warmth of blood in his mouth. He heard the mutter of men standing over him, Josh Hopkins' voice. Then the mutter faded, and he knew the men had gone back in the tavern to drink to a woman's trip to the gas chamber.

After a minute, strength enough returned to push him to his knees. Pain spread through his face. He daubed with his handkerchief, ignoring the stares of the few passersby. Every turn led to the same end. Tim Hopkins' flour had been poisoned after breakfast and before noon. No one entered the house in that time except Tim, Jane, and Peggy.

(Continued on page 89)

MILLIONS ARE STILL IN RAGS!



Give all the clothing, shoes and bedding you can spare to the
Victory Clothing Collection—today!





Eerie Novelette of a Man Who Was Searching for Himself

With their soft, sinister voices, they soothed my shattered nerves. They presented me with money, a lovely wife and possessions most men would be proud of. But they put me behind bars to hide from me the one thing that could save my life!



•SHADOW of a SLAYER•

By C. WILLIAM HARRISON

CHAPTER ONE

Lost—One Identity

HE COULDN'T remember. He didn't care much. He had managed to sit up on the small cot in the small room, but that was all. The strength wasn't in him at that moment to do more.

He sat there with his head down and his palms pressing tightly against his temples, as though that pressure could help stop the hurt. But it didn't. Those small hammers kept beating his brain, keeping the pain alive. A man can stand only so much hurt, and this man sitting on the small white bed had taken his limit—long ago. How long ago? Days maybe, years, a lifetime; he didn't know. His senses were too drugged by hurt to hold any value for time or events.

He heard the door to his small room open. "Hello, Steve."

He listened to that voice without interest. The words came to him, touched him, and shunted away. They didn't sink into him, stir any feeling of understanding.

"Hello, Stephen Blake."

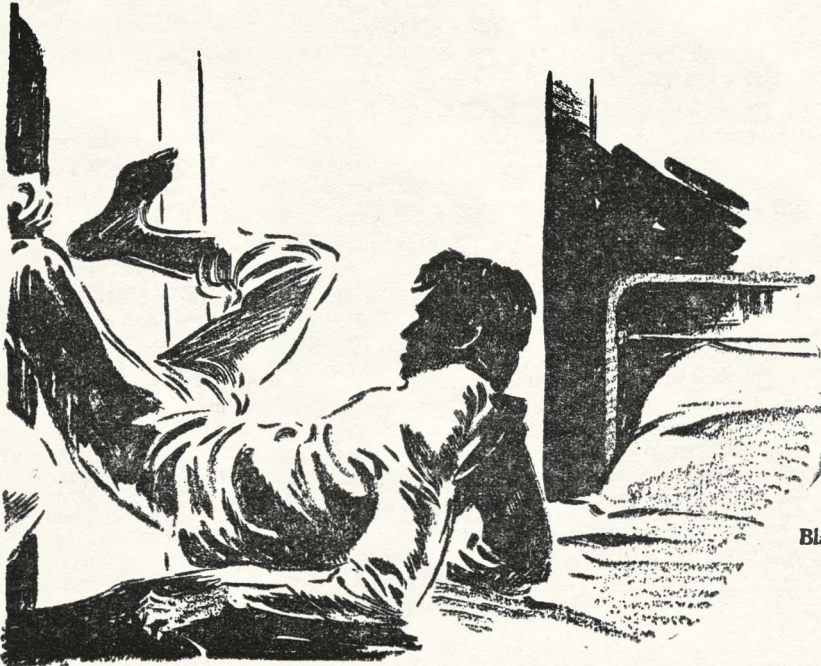
He took his palms away from his temples, and lifted his eyes. His gray glance looked at the girl in white, and then moved indifferently on to the man beside her. The girl was smiling, but the man was watching him with intent gravity. He had a vague feeling that he had seen them both somewhere, but he couldn't remember where or when. He didn't care.

"How do you feel today, Mr. Stephen Blake?" the girl asked.

Stephen Blake? Was that his name? It was the third time she had used it, and she had spoken only to him. He rolled the name over in his aching mind, tasted it, and found it unfamiliar. Stephen Blake, *who?* From where? And what was he doing here? He tried to remember, but there was a locked door in his mind, and he couldn't find the key to it.

The girl glanced quickly to the man beside her, and then brought her eyes back to the man on the bed. She was tall, and had a shape that any man, in his right mind or out of it, could appreciate. Sunlight slanting down from the small barred window high in the wall put a warm, rusty glint in her hair.

"You don't remember us, do you? I'm your nurse, Nora Hathaday."



Blake jerked up his leg and kicked.

The man on the bed said nothing. He was trying desperately to remember.

"And this is Doctor Phillips. Surely you must remember us. We've treated you for the last two weeks."

"You have? What for?"

"Doctor Phillips can answer that for you."

There were no chairs for the nurse or the doctor. There was only the bed—little more than a cot—bolted tightly to the wall and floor. Stephen Blake looked at the cot, at the small bare room he was in, at the single small window set high in the wall. Iron bars webbed the window. *Bars?*

He looked at the doctor. "Amnesia?" The pain in his head was sharpening again. "Is that what's wrong with me—loss of memory?"

Doctor Phillips hesitated. He was a short man, heavily built, with square features and close-cropped hair. He nodded slowly.

"You might as well know it, I suppose. Yes, Mr. Blake, amnesia. But don't be alarmed. You'll only retard your progress if you allow yourself to become emotionally upset."

Blood was beginning to pound through Stephen Blake's veins, washing with a hot, un-rational wildness over his brain. Amnesia—a door locked on the memory of everything that was his past. He tried to break through that door with a sheer effort of will, but that was futile. It only increased the pain wracking his body now.

The room unsteadied before his eyes, and he heard the doctor's urgent voice as though from a great distance.

"You've got to keep calm, Mr. Blake."

He wanted to lunge to his feet, smash down the walls that sealed him in this small room, to escape out doors where unbroken sunlight might take the darkness out of his brain.

"If you don't quiet down, I'll have to call in the attendants," the doctor said.

ATTENDANTS? Steve Blake could remember them hazily, big, white-coated men who sometime in the past had rushed in against him, pinning his arms. Once Blake had fought, and one of the attendants had used fists with brutal expertness. Blake remembered that. Later—no, many times during those hazy recent days—they had used a hypodermic needle that had brought quick dreamless sleep.

Yes, Blake told himself, I've got to keep calm.

"That's better," Doctor Phillips said. "We can do little to help you, if you don't make a constant effort to control your emotions. Amnesia is no more than a wall which shock or emotional strain has built up between you and your memory. It need not be a permanent condition."

Blake clenched his right hand, fitted the fist

into the palm of his left. He pressed them hard together. Big, strong, capable hands, they were. But what were they good for, what skill did his hands know? He couldn't answer that.

The doctor was saying, "The main thing for you to do is rest. And don't worry. If you will make an honest effort to co-operate with us, perhaps in a few months. . . ."

Stephen Blake didn't know why he said it, but the words came plunging out of him. "You mean it will take *months* for me to get back to normal?"

"Perhaps." Doctor Phillips' eyes narrowed slightly. "Why do you ask?"

"I—I don't know. It just came out. . . ."

Phillips crowded him, "Does time mean anything in particular to you? Do you have a feeling of neglecting something that should be taken care of at once? A feeling of urgency?"

The man on the bed labored with himself. This room, the doctor and nurse, the sunlight slanting down from the barred window—all these things were real to him; they were *now*, today. But he couldn't bring back yesterday. He could feel today, see it, smell it, but behind today there was only a dark tunnel of blankness.

He said gropingly, "For a moment I had the impression that there was something I had to do soon. But I can't remember what it was." A light flickered in the black nowhere of his memory. "If I don't get out of here soon, I won't have a chance to keep her from doing it."

The doctor bent forward slightly, a clinical brightness in his eyes. "Her? Keep who from doing what, Mr. Blake?"

The man on the bed closed his eyes. He brought his hands up, rubbing the tips of his fingers hard into his temples. He opened his eyes.

"I don't know. It was like a light that came on, and went off. There is a woman somewhere; I feel that. But I don't know who she is, or what she means to me."

"Try to remember, Mr. Blake. Try hard."

The nurse spoke up quietly, "But you told him to rest and *not* worry."

The doctor's side glance was quick and irritated. "I'm the doctor, Miss Hathaday. Please don't lose sight of that."

She flushed, and looked away.

Doctor Phillips went on, speaking to the man on the bed. "Brain trauma is a difficult thing to deal with, Mr. Blake. Sometimes rest and quiet is the best curse. Sometimes a definite effort on the part of the patient to remember his past brings a quicker cure. Try to remember; try as hard as you can. Who is the *her* you mentioned? What is it you want to keep her from doing?"

"I tell you I can't remember."

A hot pressure was building up inside Steve

Blake's head, hurting him. He was trying to remember, and it was bringing out a sweat on him, a feeling of unreasonable violence that needed to be released. He tried to keep his voice quiet, but its tone rose and thinned in spite of him.

"I don't know. I just can't remember."

"You might be in here a year, Mr. Blake, even longer than that. Sometimes a victim of traumatic amnesia *never* regains his memory. You don't want that, do you. You've got to be cured so you can prevent that woman from doing whatever she is about to do. You don't want to spend the rest of your life in this institution, do you?"

Institution? So this was an asylum for the insane!

Nora Hathaday said anxiously, "Please, doctor. You're only disturbing him more."

"Be quiet, nurse, or leave."

The pressure grew, pressing against the walls of Blake's head. Noises came into him, wild laughter, the roar of motors and big guns, the swelling tumult of discordant music. He found himself thrusting up from the bed, to his feet. Tension was in him, sweat was on his body and on his hands.

Doctor Phillips' features were an indistinct blur—cool, penetrating eyes, a soothing voice that was anything but soothing to him.

"You want to remember, don't you? You gave yourself a lead—that woman—don't give up trying to follow it. Why do you have to get out of here and go to that woman?"

"I don't know!" Steve Blake's voice was thin and wild-pitched. Yes, it was. "I've got to get out of here. You can't keep me locked up. If I can get out—get away—" He struck out blindly, savagely at the doctor's face.

Phillips shouted, "Attendants! Jack Monday—in here!"

Men in white were rusing into the room toward Steve Blake. Big, strong, powerful men. The doctor was pushing Nora Hathaday hurriedly out of the room.

Blake tried to get to the open door they were going through. But those men in white were between him and the door. He flailed at them, but they rushed in against him, pinning his arms to his side.

One of them, tall and powerful, heavy featured, laughed softly. "You ain't strong enough to be tough, Blake."

Jack Monday. Somehow Blake knew this was the man's name. He felt Monday's fist crush into his stomach, driving what strength he had out of him.

One of the men said, "Take it easy, Jack."

"When they go wild, you *got* to do it this way."

Monday's fist clipped the point of Blake's jaw. It sank in his stomach again, folding him over. The fist came down on the back of his

neck. He fell, half across the bed, with darkness and blinding light swirling over his brain.

"What he needs is the needle again. You like the needle, don't you, Blake? You ought to like it, you've had it enough. It makes a good boy out of you, makes you sleep."

The needle didn't hurt. It pricked the flesh of Blake's arm, and warm darkness took all those flickering lights out of his brain. He knew nothing more. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

When and Where?

STEPHEN BLAKE came awake slowly. His drugged senses still held the sound of wheels rolling, freight train wheels that rolled endlessly. In the background was a girl's mocking laughter. She was a tall girl, cool and beautiful, and when he reached for her she faded from him. And when she vanished in the darkness, he could hear the close black explosion of flak, and feel the reconnaissance plane lurch like a stricken bird, start its final screaming plunge toward—toward where?

Toward Germany? Toward Japanese soil? It was a dream full of maddening detail, yet without the reality of events that he could remember. The earth kept rushing nearer, and he screamed.

"Sh-h, be quiet, Mr. Blake."

He swept his eyes open. He was on his bed, cold with sweat, and Nora Hathaday was bending over him.

"You've been dreaming," she said.

"Yes." But it seemed too real to have been a dream. He asked, "What time is it?"

The nurse laughed softly. "Would that make any difference?"

He forced himself to relax. "No. I guess not."

"It's been two days since you had your last fling with Dr. Phillips and his attendants. You're a difficult man to manage sometimes, Mr. Blake."

"I'm sorry." He remembered the doctor's questions, and how they had torn irrationally at the loose threads of his control.

He looked up at Nora Hathaday. "Should you be in here? Alone, I mean?"

She smiled. "Technically, no. It's against the rules at this hour, if that's what you mean."

"I didn't mean that. I meant that if I should go off my rocker again—"

"I'll take the chance," she answered quietly. "You were having a dream. Would you mind telling me about it, Mr. Blake? I'd like to help you if I can."

He tried to tell her about it, but it didn't make sense, even to him. "It was all mixed up. There were train wheels on a railroad."

"What kind of train? Passenger?"

"No. Freight, I think. I'm not sure. I could only hear them. Then there was a woman, very pretty . . . blonde, tall . . . and she seemed to be laughing at me."

"Was her name Selba?" the nurse asked.

He was silent a moment, trying to remember. "No, not Selba. Madge, Margo—something like that, I think."

"Your mother's name was Margo—Margo Blake."

He shook his head, for the first time almost certain. It couldn't have been my mother—not the way this woman laughed. And she was too young."

Nora Hathaday nodded. She looked at a paper in her hand. "Your mother died when you were six years old. Could this woman you dreamed about have been your wife, Mr. Blake?"

"I don't know. I could only see her for a short while, and she was laughing at me. Why, I don't know. Then she vanished, and I seemed to have been in a plane struck by flak and falling."

"Over Germany," the nurse said.

He looked at her with surprise. "Was that it?"

She read from the paper in her hand. "—member of 23rd Fighter Squadron, shot down over Germany on August 27, 1943. Rescued immediately." She looked down at him. "Does that mean anything to you?"

"No. I had the impression it was a reconnaissance plane."

"It was a fighter plane," she told him. "We haven't much to go on at present, only a few papers found in your pockets, but I'll tell you all I can about yourself. Maybe it'll help."

"Your name is Stephen Blake, age 27, married to Mrs. Selba Blake, who was a civilian employee of the American Embassy in London, at the time you met her. Your home is at 5548 Hamdon Road, here in Indianapolis. You are owner of the Central Hosiery Mills, and therefore are quite wealthy."

BLAKE tried all these facts on like an old coat. They fit, or they didn't fit—he wasn't sure which. But what reason could the nurse have to lie to him? None, of course, and he had to accept something as truth. He had to have something solid to build his past on.

So he was wealthy, was he? That was fine. But he could not remember anything about it. He looked at his hands. Strong, hard hands, with an odd brownish stain on his fingernails. Where had that stain come from?

Nora Hathaday was saying, "There was a small photograph in your wallet. Your wife is very pretty, Mr. Blake."

"I always pick pretty wives," he answered vacantly.

"You don't remember her at all, do you?" the nurse murmured. She smiled. "But don't let that worry you. We've communicated with your wife, and she understands everything. She wanted you to know that you have nothing whatever to worry about other than getting well as soon as possible. She struck me as being very competent to handle your business affairs."

Was that irony deep below the cool surface of the nurse's tone? Steve Blake searched for it, and wasn't certain what he found. "You mean my wife is handling everything for me now?"

"Yes." Nora Hathaday seemed suddenly ill at ease, as though she had said more than she had intended. Her casualness was forced. "Someone had to take over for you to close the deal." She looked away quickly.

"What deal?" Blake asked.

She moved her shoulders impatiently. "I really must be going now. If Doctor Phillips should find me here—"

"No, wait!" Blake sat up on the bed. He reached out a hand, touched the nurse's arm. He said urgently, "Please don't misunderstand—I'm not getting ready to throw another wing-ding."

She studied him anxiously. "Are you sure you feel all right?"

Blake nodded. His head ached, but none of that hot pressure was inside him, none of that wildness of approaching delirium that had swept through him before during moments of strain.

Nora said, "I probably shouldn't tell you this. But then I shouldn't have come here in the first place, so I may as well go whole hog." She took a breath. "Your hosiery mill is being sold."

"So?" He thought that a thing of such importance as this should have stirred something in his memory. But it didn't. All he felt was curiosity.

"Most of the details were drawn up while you were overseas. You were discharged from the Army a month ago, and as I understand it you were on your way home to close the deal when you . . ." The nurse hesitated.

"Lost my mind?"

"Lost your memory," she corrected.

Blake said, "And when that happened, my wife had me declared incompetent, and had herself made the legal administrator of my property. She's handling the sale of the hosiery mill?"

"Yes." A low, worried word.

She stood there quietly watching him, expecting violence to rush through him as it had before during moments of stress. But it didn't. He took it calmly, attaching no great importance to what the nurse had told him.

Selling a hosiery mill must involve a huge

sum of money, and after all his wife, even if he could not remember having a wife, had done the only thing she could do under the circumstances. She had had him declared temporarily incompetent, and had taken over the deal herself. She was only acting for him. He asked, "Has the deal been closed yet?"

Nora shook her head. "There are some legal angles that I don't really understand. One doctor has already examined you, but it seems the court demands the verdict of at least two psychiatrists before it can appoint your wife guardian. The second man is supposed to visit you tomorrow."

The room's door opened. They both looked around, and Doctor Phillips was standing just inside the room, anger in the blunt lines of his face.

Nora Hathaday said quickly, "I thought if I stopped in and talked with him, I might be able to help—"

The doctor spoke with a cold run of temper. "You know the rules, Miss Hathaday. If you ever visit another patient alone and without my orders, you will be discharged. I trust you will remember that."

He looked at Steve Blake, and tried to smooth out his anger with a smile. I thought you might like to make a record of your dreams and impressions as they come to you, Mr. Blake. Such things are a great help in cases like this."

He left paper and a fountain pen on the foot of the bed.

CHAPTER THREE

House With a Thousand Rooms

HIS brain was a house with a thousand rooms. Once he had been able to wander through those rooms at will, but now all their doors were locked. Stephen Blake had a name, but it had been given to him. He had a few details of his history, but they had been given to him. He did not have the feeling that any of these belonged to him, that they were a real part of his past.

Stephen Blake, ex-fighter pilot, age 27, married and wealthy. He had that much. Sitting there alone in the small, severe room, he searched for more. Association of words and ideas—that was his ticket.

He put the writing paper on his pillow, and held the fountain pen ready. He began looking around the room, searching for objects on which to build his experiment. The fountain pen in his hand! Why not start with that?

He wrote on the paper: Pen. And then he scratched down the first word to come to him. *Ink.*

Pen—*Ink.* The ink he was using was a faded brown color. Brown—*sepia.*

Where had that word "sepia" come from? It meant nothing to him, only a meaningless shadow out of the darkness of his memory. He went on, writing hurriedly, desperately.

Bed . . . *sleep.* Heat . . . *cold.* Light . . . *shadow.* Why had the word "shadow" jumped into his mind, instead of darkness? He didn't know, and he refused himself the time necessary to search out an answer. After all, this was no more than an experiment by a desperate, groping man; it could help, or it could do him no good whatever. All he could do was write words, and then record whatever his mind most quickly associated with that key word.

Door . . . *lock.* Hospital . . . *doctor.* Drink . . . *whiskey.* That was a thought! He wished he had a drink right now, scotch or rye, good or bad. He was fighting himself and the opacity of his memory, and strain was beginning to cause his head to ache again. He found it increasingly difficult to keep his thoughts from wandering, but he stubbornly continued to work with the paper and the pen's brown ink.

Man . . . *woman.* A woman had come into his dreams, laughing at him, filling him with anger and a bitter sense of hurt and loss. He didn't know who she was, yet he felt she had once been very close to him. Margo, he was certain that was her name. Margo who?

Bird . . . *flight.* Sun . . . *moon.* War . . . *peace.* Life . . . *death—murder* Murder? Why had murder come into his mind. His temples throbbled. His thoughts wavered, drifting off at a tangent, bringing out of the nowhere of his past a picture of a man.

The man was dead from a blow that had crushed the back of his head, his features palely distinct against the darkness of night. Was this some G.I. who had been struck down by war? No, he was a civilian in unkempt clothes, and the rumble of a passing train was somewhere in the background. Two men and a woman were somewhere near the dead man, but Steve Blake's uncertain mind refused to give them an identity.

Against the silence of the hospital room, Blake's pen scratched loudly on the paper. His vision was no longer steady, and his head ached with a growing hot pressure.

Paper . . . *print.* Newsprint or photographic print? Window . . . *glass.* Wife . . . *husband.* Tree . . . *palm.* Glass . . . *lens.* The stain on his fingernails—nothing would come into his mind from that.

The pressure inside his head suddenly swelled and burst. He lunged to his feet, realizing in a reckless way that this was insanity. There were things outside that he had to do, places he had to see. The obsession swept through him, slashing the last strands of his self-control.

He ran to the door, jerked on the knob, but the door was locked. He yelled hoarsely. He kicked on the door.

A man's voice came to him through the locked door from the corridor outside.

"Go back to your reading, boys. It's Blake pitching another one. I can handle this screwball alone."

IT WAS Jack Monday's voice. It cut into Stephen Blake with its promise of another beating and another stab of the hypodermic needle. The hospital attendant seemed to have a liking for that sort of thing. But now it brought a measure of cunning into Steve Blake.

He hurriedly crossed the small room, threw himself across the bed, fighting against the unreasoning impatience that was in him. The door opened, and Jack Monday came into the room, a big, flat-shouldered man with small eyes and a thin, dour mouth.

"Having yourself some more fun, Blake?" Monday taunted.

"I'm all right." Was that Blake's voice, hoarse, panting.

Monday grinned strangely. "Sure you are. All you screwballs are all right. But you'll be double all right after another shot from this needle."

He came across the room to the bed, thoroughly confident. He bent, bringing up the hypodermic needle. Blake jerked up his leg, and kicked. He drove his heel into the attendant's stomach, heard the swift rush of air out of the man's lungs. He rolled off the bed and to his feet, driven by an instinct that was almost animal.

Jack Monday tried to shout, but the air wasn't in him. He tried to back away, escape. But Steve Blake followed him. Steve drove his fist against the man's jaw, he struck again. Jack Monday went down, loosely, a thread of consciousness still unbroken in him. Blake bent over the man.

"Where are my clothes?"

Monday groaned. He tried to get up. Blake slapped him impatiently. "My clothes, damn you! Where are they?"

"A-27. . . . room locked. You can't. . . ." The attendant's voice sagged into unconsciousness.

Blake found the ring of keys in Jack Monday's pocket. He pushed erect, and went to the open door. The corridor was dimly lit at this late hour of night, and empty. He paused, uncertain which way to go now that he had won his first step toward freedom. His clothes were in room A-27, and he had the keys. But in which direction was A-27?

One end of the hall seemed to tunnel deeper into the building, so he chose the other length. He moved softly on bare feet, past closed

doors with small peepholes in them—the rooms of other inmates. The numbers on the doors diminished, A-30, A-29. He came to an open room, and could hear the murmuring of two night attendants playing cards.

One of them said, "Funny about that guy Monday. Phillips seemed to hire him just to take care of that Blake fellow. You ask me, Monday slugs too much."

Steve Blake felt his stomach draw into a hard knot lump. He stepped past the open door, and then breathed easier. He moved steadily down the corridor, and once he thought he heard, from the direction of the room from which he had escaped, a muffled thud and a low moan of agony.

He searched the ring for the numbered key, and fitted it into the door of room A-27. He found a suit neatly hung in a closet, and dressed hurriedly. It was an expensive piece of cloth, expertly tailored, and fit well enough—but he couldn't remember it.

He went again out into the corridor, and followed its sharp turn past a row of darkened offices. He tried a door and found it unlocked. As he was passing through, he heard a man's quick shout behind him. "There he goes!"

He threw a glance over his shoulder, saw Doctor Phillips and two attendants—but not Jack Monday—running after him.

Blake whirled, broke into a desperate run down the steps and into the night. He crossed a close-cropped lawn, and dodged into a growth of evergreen shrubbery. He changed direction sharply, with a cunning that was instinctive rather than conscious.

Somewhere in the black distance behind him, he heard an attendant's puzzled cry. "He must have got across the street somewhere. I can't see him."

And Doctor Phillip's alarmed shout, "We've got to catch him. That man is a homicidal maniac!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Shadows in the Night

HE HAD no plan, no pattern for action. He had escaped from the hospital mainly because of an almost frantic desire to be free from the close, bare walls of his room. His obsession that had swept all else out of his mind.

Now that he was free, he didn't know what to do. He was a stranger in a city that should have been vividly familiar to him. The nurse, Nora Hathaday, had said that Indianapolis was his home, but much as he tried, he couldn't remember it.

He had a growing feeling of having escaped from one small friendless world, only to have

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(Continued from page 81)

Five minutes later, his steps sounded hollow on the wide planks of Clem Rainey's front porch. Clem answered Pratt's knock. Rainey looked at his face as the door swung wide. "You look like you had an accident, Pratt."

"Yes." Pratt stepped in Rainey's plain, scrubbed living room. Rainey's buxom wife looked at Pratt's battered face, shrugged, and looked back at the knitting in her lap.

"I want to see Peg," Pratt said.

Rainey's wife looked up, blinked behind her steel-rimmed glasses. "The child saw her mother. Now she's in bed, asleep. You can't wake that little girl up, Bill Pratt."

"Then I'll have to ask *you* kindly to wake her, Mrs. Rainey."

She looked at him again, her eyes catching some of the intensity of his own. Then wordlessly she laid aside her knitting, rose and left the room. Rainey sat down, puffing at his pipe, and watched Pratt like a kibitzer at a high-stake poker game.

Mrs. Rainey came back in the room, smoothing Peg's dress. The child rubbed her eyes, shook her tousled curls out of her face. "Hello, Mister Bill."

He dropped beside her. "Peg, I want to hear about this morning."

"But I told you once, Mister Bill."

"I know. But I want to hear again. I want you to tell me every last thing you can possibly remember. And we'll see how much ice cream you can eat tomorrow."

Her childish sigh sounded troubled. "Well . . . if I just have to. . . Me and mama came to town. We . . ."

"Did your mother buy anything, anything at all, besides the dress?"

"No, sir."

"The arsenic," Rainey broke in, "could have come from Tim Hopkins' stock of bug killer."

Pratt nodded, looked again at Peg. "Then?"

"We went home, and I went outside. I heard him yelling at my mama. Then I went back in the house. I didn't see him. I . . . I found something to play with . . . I was a bad girl, getting it . . . I wasn't going to tell. But I don't like to be bad and now you've asked me . . . Mister Bill, a box of mama's medicine was in the bedroom, open. It was full of some kind of powder. I . . . I just wanted to take it to the back yard and make my dolly a cake."

"And you took the box?"

"Yessir."

"Then you went out of the house?"

"Then sir. I started out. But when I got to the kitchen, I heard him coming. I didn't see mama anywhere. I was scared. He beat me awful when I did somethin' wrong."

Pratt clutched her wrists. "So you hid the box of medicine!"

"Yessir. I couldn't think where to hide it. If I ran out in the back yard, he would see it in my hand. So I dropped it in the flour bin. Later, when nobody was in the kitchen, I went back and got it out. But a lot of the medicine was gone from the box, Mister Bill. I just wanted to make my dolly a cake. . . ."

PRATT'S breath wheezed. Rainey's pipe stem cracked between his teeth. Mrs. Rainey clutched the arms of her chair and whispered, "May the Saints preserve us!"

"You get it, Rainey?" Pratt's words were hoarse. "You see his mind? For ten years he had tried to conquer her. He had always conquered everything. But not her—and day by day, week after week it grew and bubbled in his mind. It grew until it became a nightmare, a matter of life and death to him, until he imagined he must die in an agony of defeat or conquer this woman. Then today, the dress, the symbol that he had failed utterly, that she would never be conquered, like fire in his mind, driving him, goading him—until in that moment of blind, raging madness he loaded her medicine with bug killer."

"And reaped his own reward," Rainey stood on his feet, trembling a little. "Funny—the way a man can sow murder and reap suicide."

"There was only three of them," Pratt said simply, "in the house. The natural thing was to hope the child had seen something."

Peg began crying. "What has happened, Mister Bill? Did I do wrong?"

Mrs. Rainey gathered the child in her arms. "You did nothing, child. That's the way it will always be told. It was his bargain, his doing. From beginning to end." She carried Peg out of the room, mothering her tears away with soft words.

Rainey said, "It'll be easy to prove. Further analysis of the flour will show not only arsenic, but Jane's medicine as well. And analysis of the medicine, along with the child's story. . . ."

Rainey sighed, sat down, and peeled off his shoes as if he didn't intend to move all night. Pratt waited a moment; then he shook Rainey's bony shoulder. "What about—"

Rainey cocked a grizzled brow and speared Pratt with his gaze. A smile tugged his lips. "My corns hurt too bad to walk to the jail, Bill."

"You damned old—there's not a corn on a single one of your toes!"

"I know," Rainey chuckled, "but we can pretend, can't we? I'd just be in the way, wouldn't I?" Then he tossed Bill Pratt a bulky ring of keys.

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(Continued from page 88)

trapped himself in a larger world of even greater strangeness and hostility. He could feel an irrational sense of panic rising in him.

Doctor Phillips had shouted, "That man is a homicidal maniac!"

He could never remember feeling any desire to kill. But there had been moments of surging black violence back there in the hospital room. Maybe he had known those same moments before they had taken him to the hospital; maybe he had been able to kill without knowing it or remembering.

The thought frightened him. He broke into a run, and forced himself to slow to a walk by sheer force of will. He tried to remember what had been behind his first wild desire to escape from his hospital room. He had wanted to go someplace, yes, that was it. But where?

Nora Hathaday's words echoed through his mind. "Your name is Stephen Blake, your home is at 5548 Hamdon Road."

A siren was crying on some darkened street, the sound drawing closer. He flagged down a taxicab, and got inside. He gave the driver the Hamdon Road address, and the man meshed the gears and pulled away.

Blake was surprised to find money still in his pockets, money and keys and papers that said this suit had belonged to Stephen Blake.

He paid the driver, and told him to wait. He crossed the long lawn, with eyes that were restless and eager. The lawn was terraced and beautifully landscaped, rising gently to the big sandstone house with the tall gables and white porch pillars. He had to try three keys in the lock of the door before he found the one that fitted.

He walked inside, closed the door behind him. He groped for the light switch, found it. He was in a hallway, and at one side was a drawing room. He surveyed all details around him, and wondered why the familiarity of this house should continue to evade him.

A thin old man in a dark blue robe came out of a room far down the hall and watched him with open alarm. No recognition in that old man's eyes—only alarm.

Blake asked narrowly, "Don't you remember me?"

The old man's voice trembled. "I'm sorry, sir. I'm new here."

"This is my home," Blake said. And he added, "Are all the other servants new?"

"Yes, sir. All of us. If you wish—perhaps I'd better call Mrs. Blake."

"No!" The sharpness of Blake's voice startled him. He tried to smooth it out. "I'm Stephen Blake."

Fright became a definite thing in the old

SHADOW OF A SLAYER

man's eyes. A rough laugh ran out of Blake's throat.

"Yes, Stephen Blake, so they tell me, fresh out of the nuthouse. But don't be afraid, I'm not the homicidal maniac they say I am. I only came here—"

The woman appeared at the upper stair landing. She was tall and slender, with a peach-colored dressing gown wrapped tightly around her.

"Rogers, what is—" Then she saw Blake standing near the door. She was visibly startled, but tried to hide it with a smile.

"Stephen! Why, Steve darling, what are you doing here?"

SHE came down the stairs with the smoothness of cool water flowing down the face of a rock. But tension was in her, strong and hard with alarm; Blake could see it alive in her dark eyes.

Her voice was softly urgent. "You escaped from the hospital?"

"Yes." He was raking his mind, plumbing the darkness desperately for memory.

She moved close to him, her arms slipping around him, her body soft and yielding.

Blake thought frantically, "*This is Selba! If I'm ever to remember anything, it's got to be my wife!*"

She pressed closer to him, her arms taut. "You shouldn't have, darling. You've been ill. . . ."

"It'll be all right," Blake said. "I'm going to be all right."

"Of course you are, dear." Her face was turned up to him, and he studied its lines. Was that a hardness he saw around her mouth and in her eyes, or was that his imagination?"

He felt her hand slide up the back of his neck, pulling his head down. Blake didn't resist. He knew she was making motions with her other hand to Rogers, the house man, trying to tell him to call the hospital, but he didn't care.

He kissed her. And then he pulled quickly away. Her eyes were on him, cool and faintly mocking.

"You don't know me, do you?" she asked.

"No," Blake answered, "I don't know you from Adam, Mrs. Blake!"

He turned then, and walked quickly out of the house.

The night man at the city morgue was a thin, dyspeptic fellow with faded watery eyes and a petulant tone of voice.

"Hell of a time of night to do business. You say this corpse you're worried about was brought in here about two and a half weeks ago? That would be about October ten. What was it, man or woman?"



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C. WILLIAM HARRISON

"Man," Stephen Blake said.
 "We get lots of male stiffs in here, old ones and young ones, black and white. You got to give me a better description than that. How old was he?"

"About my age."
 "Size and coloring?"
 "About like me."

The morgue attendant grumbled, "Sure it ain't yourself you're hunting for?"

"No," Blake answered, "I'm not sure."

He was tired, and there was a dull throbbing in the back of his head. He was a man following a dream, a desperate man chasing shadows through darkness. It was as if he were in an endless black tunnel, and he could see light at the other end, but he could never quite get to it.

He said reasonably, "All I know is what I told you. The dead man should be about my height and weight, age around 27, maybe up to 30. He was white, his clothes were dirty."

Curiosity was beginning to pinpoint the morgue attendant's watery eyes. "And where was it you saw this dead guy?"

Blake shook his head. "I don't know. I'm not even sure I saw one. It was night, and I was sick."

The night man smiled drily. "Another word for drunk."

It came through the shadows in Steve Blake's mind, the quick bright flame. "Yes," he said, "that's it. I was drunk." He could remember that much. Drunk, very drunk. But he couldn't recall why he had been drunk, or how long. It was a single door opening in his mind, but there were a thousand others still locked.

He said anxiously, "I know this all sounds crazy to you, but it's important to me. I've got to know if I really saw that dead man."

"You better keep bottles away from your mouth, brother," the morgue attendant growled. He ran his finger down the page of an open book on his desk. "October ten we got nobody in. There was a woman brought in on the eleventh—she'd knocked herself off. Nice lookin' woman too, I remember."

"Try a day or two before the tenth," Blake urged. "I'm not at all sure of the date."

"You ain't sure of anything, seems to me." His fingernail rasped on the paper. "October eighth, no business. The ninth—that was my day off—but it says here two bodies were rolled in. One fellow about forty, redhaired, finger missing on left hand." Blake shook his head.

"Other guy has been partially identified, but not enough to get his body claimed yet. He was killed by something that caved in the whole back of his head. Murder, in other

SHADOW OF A SLAYER

words. I'll have to get an okay from headquarters before I can let you see him. That all right with you?" His eyes were bright and hard.

Blake said, "Yes."

THE NIGHT man dialed a desk phone. His voice was low in the mouthpiece. "Brecker? This is Lamont, down in the morgue. A guy just came in to see the D.O.A. you brought in on the ninth. . . . yeah, that's the one. How's that?" The attendant's watery eyes traveled over Stephen Blake, and a trace of alarm crept into his tone. "Yeah. . . . yeah. . . . that about tears it. Then it's okay with you to show him the body?"

He cradled the phone. He murmured, "Wait till I get the guy's slab number." He was slow doing it, obviously stalling for time. He bore down too hard on his pencil, and broke the lead. His curse was anything but casual. He went to the sharpener, putting a new point on the pencil, and he didn't take his eyes from Blake.

A door opened somewhere in the rear of the room, and footsteps sounded hollowly in the silence of the place. Stephen Blake smiled faintly.

"Now you can relax."

"I never did feel comfortable around screwballs who escape from the crazy house," Lamont said. He spoke to the man who moved up to Blake's side. "Glad you didn't waste any time, Lieutenant."

Lieutenant Brecker, the homicide detective, was a tall spare man with a lank face and heavy brows.

"We've had a call out for you." He said no more than that. He motioned to the morgue attendant, and they crossed the office, keeping Blake pinned between them. The adjoining room was bare except for two long tables on rubber-tired wheels. One entire wall had been devoted to the built-in lockers.

Lamont checked the number on one locker, opened the sealed door, and pulled out the slab. A draft of cold air fanned Stephen Blake's face, and the faint fleshy odor knotted his stomach. Lamont pulled the white sheet off the body. "This is him."

The man was tall and lean, his body a bluish white, and his eyes stared upward with the glassy vacantness of the dead.

Tension began rushing through Stephen Blake's nerves, clogging his brain with that aching pressure. He tried to fight it out. He couldn't. Noise that was like a heavy waterfall began rushing through his ears, and Lieutenant Brecker's voice came through distantly.

"This the other guy you killed, Blake? We found him near the Big Four tracks west of

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the city, with his head all bashed in. When you escaped from the hospital, Doctor Phillips warned us you were a homicide maniac. You killed the hospital attendant, Jack Monday, tonight. Did you kill this guy, too?"

"No. . . . no! But that denial echoed only in Steve Blake's mind, in the hot, aching confusion of his brain. He was trying to think, trying to remember.

Brecker prodded him with his soft, insistent voice. "You're sweating, Blake; your face is pale. What's the matter, does looking at the guy you killed make you sick?"

There was a darkness swirling into the edges of Blake's vision. He bent, forcing himself to look at the dead man's hands. The fingernails were clear and white—unstained. Could that mean what he thought it meant?

He was once more in that stricken plane, spinning through bursting flak toward the war-torn earth. And then the girl's face rushed through the oblivion of the crash, and mockery was in her eyes and in her laughter. Margo was laughing at him. Margo who?

Lieutenant Brecker was saying, "You don't need to be afraid, Blake. They'll say it was war shock, they'll say you killed without really knowing you were killing."

A freight train had grumbled by through the night, and this man, this fellow who now lay on the morgue slab had been on the ground, his face pale in death. There had been two other men nearby, and a woman, but Blake had not been able to see them.

The homicide detective said, "You want to know about this fellow you killed, Blake. We couldn't find his address, and probably we'll never know where he came from. But he must have come in on a freight, and you met him and killed him. His name was Thacker—David Thacker, a photographer. . . ."

Blake was rushing down a long dark corridor, and suddenly lights flashed through the darkness, and the locked doors of his memory crashed open. He turned, wheeling slowly toward the detective. He started to say something, but words refused to come. He fell. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

I'm Not the Man You Think!

HE WAS again in the hospital's small white room when he came awake, and Nora Hathaday was smiling down on him.

He sat up on the bed, pushing the nurse's protesting hands to one side. There was movement near the doorway, and he looked in that direction. It was the homicide detective talking with Doctor Phillips, preparing

SHADOW OF A SLAYER

to leave. Mrs. Selba Blake stood at one side.

Doctor Phillips was saying, "I'm sorry this had to happen, Lieutenant. The attendant, Jack Monday, was careless. He should have known better. But you can be certain Mr. Blake will not escape again."

Brecker nodded. He started to turn away.

The man on the hospital bed spoke up quickly. "Wait." The detective turned back. "I'm not Stephen Blake. It came back to me in the morgue, but I must have passed out before I could tell you. My name is David Thacker!"

Surprise lightly touched the detective's face.

The man on the bed said desperately, "Can't you see I'm telling the truth? I'm Dave Thacker. My home is in Santa Barbara, California."

Doctor Phillips said calmly, "What he's saying is quite normal enough for a man in his condition. A form of hysteria, the hallucination that he is someone else."

The detective shrugged. He took a backward step through the doorway. The man on the bed shoved to his feet.

"Damn you, listen to me! They're trying to do this to me, and I know the reason. I'm Dave Thacker. I was in the Air Force, shot down over Germany. I was put in a prison camp and beaten. Then I went into a hospital when our troops took over. You can find my fingerprints and record in Washington."

Doctor Phillips murmured, "Perhaps we should give him a sedative. If we don't, he'll get violent again." He reached into his pocket for his hypodermic case, but the detective held up his hand.

"It won't hurt to let him talk."

"But I'm the doctor here, and—"

"I'm the law," Brecker said, "and I'm curious to hear what he has to say. Go on, Blake, or whoever you are."

He dropped weakly back to the bed. "I'm Dave Thacker." He was trying to keep his voice quiet, to place in order those many things which were yet not entirely clear to him. "I was just out of the Army hospital when I got back to my home in Santa Barbara. I was still weak. I went to see my fiancée—her name is Margo Wade—and she told me she had been married to another man for more than a year. That, after all the months I'd spent in that Kraut prison camp, and the way she laughed at me did something to me.

I went out and got drunk, but I couldn't forget the way she had laughed at me. I stayed drunk for a long while, I don't know how long but it must have been several weeks. I was drunk when I got on a freight train headed East, but I don't remember much of that."

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C. WILLIAM HARRISON

Doctor Phillips said narrowly, "The usual imaginings of a sick brain."

"You'd like Brecker to think that, wouldn't you?" He leveled his tone. "Look, Lieutenant, what I'm saying may not seem clear, but it's because I was drunk and still sick from that plane crash in Germany. Finding out that Margo had ditched me, put me on the verge of losing my mind. Doctor Phillips and his man, Jack Monday, found me and pushed me over the line. It didn't take much to make me lose my memory—some beatings and the constant influence of their narcotics."

"Why?" Brecker asked curtly.
 "They wanted me to think I was Blake."
 Doctor Phillips' laugh was edged with sharpness. "Lieutenant, I haven't time for this sort of nonsense."

Thacker went on, "When I came to, not remembering anything about myself, they told me I was Stephen Blake. Miss Hathaday helped, even though I don't believe she knew what she was doing. They told me I was Steve Blake, and I had to believe them. By 'they,' I mean Doctor Phillips, Jack Monday, and Mrs. Blake.

"Those three were working together to get control of Stephen Blake's money. They murdered him just after he got home from the war, but they didn't want a murder investigation to tangle up their plans. They needed someone to pose as Steve Blake—me. I fitted in perfectly as long as I remembered nothing about myself, and Doctor Phillips kept me from recovering by constantly needling my emotions and letting Jack Monday smack me around and shoot me full of dope.

"They would have had me, as Stephen Blake, pronounced mentally incompetent, and then Mrs. Blake would have had control of the Blake money and hosiery mill. After they had what they wanted, they would have put me out of the way with a fake suicide of a man declared insane."

Doctor Phillips looked quickly at Selba Blake. He said to the detective, "Lieutenant, this is preposterous!"

"Uh-huh. Go on, Thacker."
 "It was Phillips who murdered Jack Monday after I knocked Monday out making my escape tonight. It was a perfect way to pile up more against me, and at the same time avoid a third pay-off. I might not have suspected I was not really Steve Blake if I had not experimented, trying to bring back my memory, by writing down words and what I associated with them. I used a fountain pen and paper Doctor Phillips gave me. I remember some of that experiment. When I wrote down the word "paper" the first thing that came into my mind was "print." A photo-

SHADOW OF A SLAYER

graphic print, Lieutenant. The word "light" brought "shadow" to me, and a photographer's main work is with lights and shadows. I looked at the window and it suggested glass. Glass suggested lens. It's all written down on that paper. I carried it with me."

He tossed the paper to the detective. Brecker opened it, glanced down. He lifted his eyes sharply, held out the paper so Thacker could see both sides. Doctor Phillips laughed meaningly. The paper was empty, no sign of writing on it!

SHOCK drove deeply into Dave Thacker. But he *had* to be right. If he was *not* crazy, there could only be one answer.

He said, "Look at this stain on my fingernails, Lieutenant. I was in the reconnaissance branch of the Air Force. Pictures were my business. This stain came from photographic developers I had to use in my work."

He took a deep breath. "Doctor Phillips must have given me pen and paper to help keep me from recovering my memory by using the element of shock. He wanted me to write on the paper, and later only imagine that I had written anything. You'll find this fountain pen he gave me is filled with disappearing ink!"

Doctor Phillips tried to break through the open doorway, but Lieutenant Brecker said "No" softly, and used his fist capably. He bent and snapped a handcuff around the doctor's wrist. He straightened, looking at Selba Blake.

He said, "Handcuffs are adjustable, Mrs. Blake. This other half will fit you."

Dave Thacker turned to Nora Hathaday. "You know all my secrets now, about the other girl I mean. Would you be interested sometime soon in playing second fiddle?"

The nurse smiled. "It might," she said softly, "make interesting music, don't you think?"

THE END

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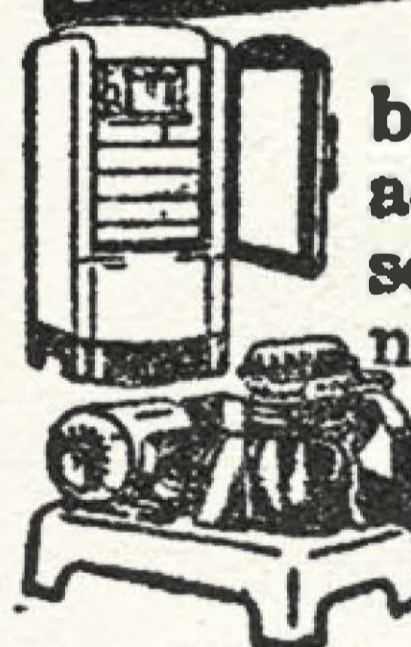
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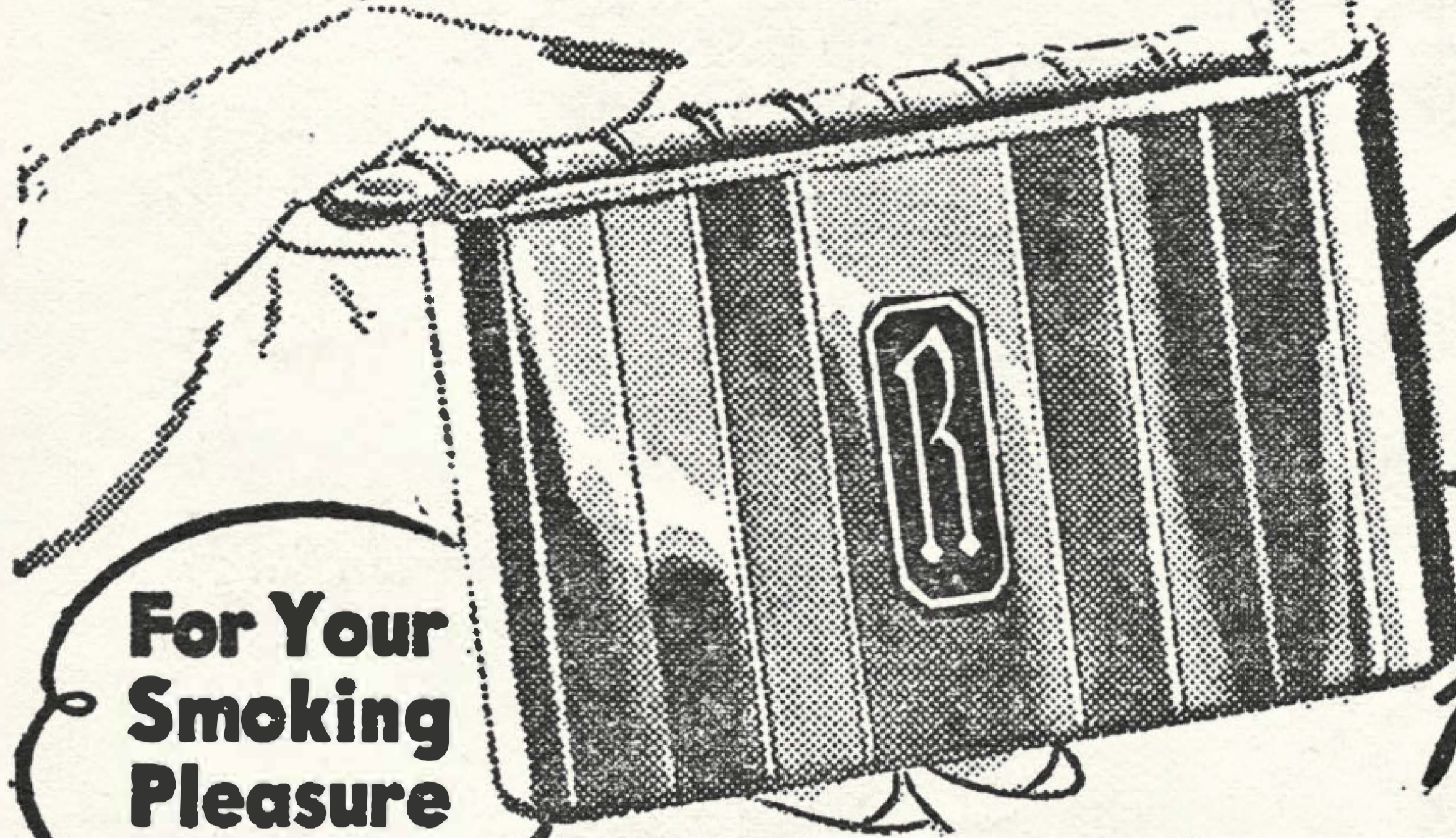
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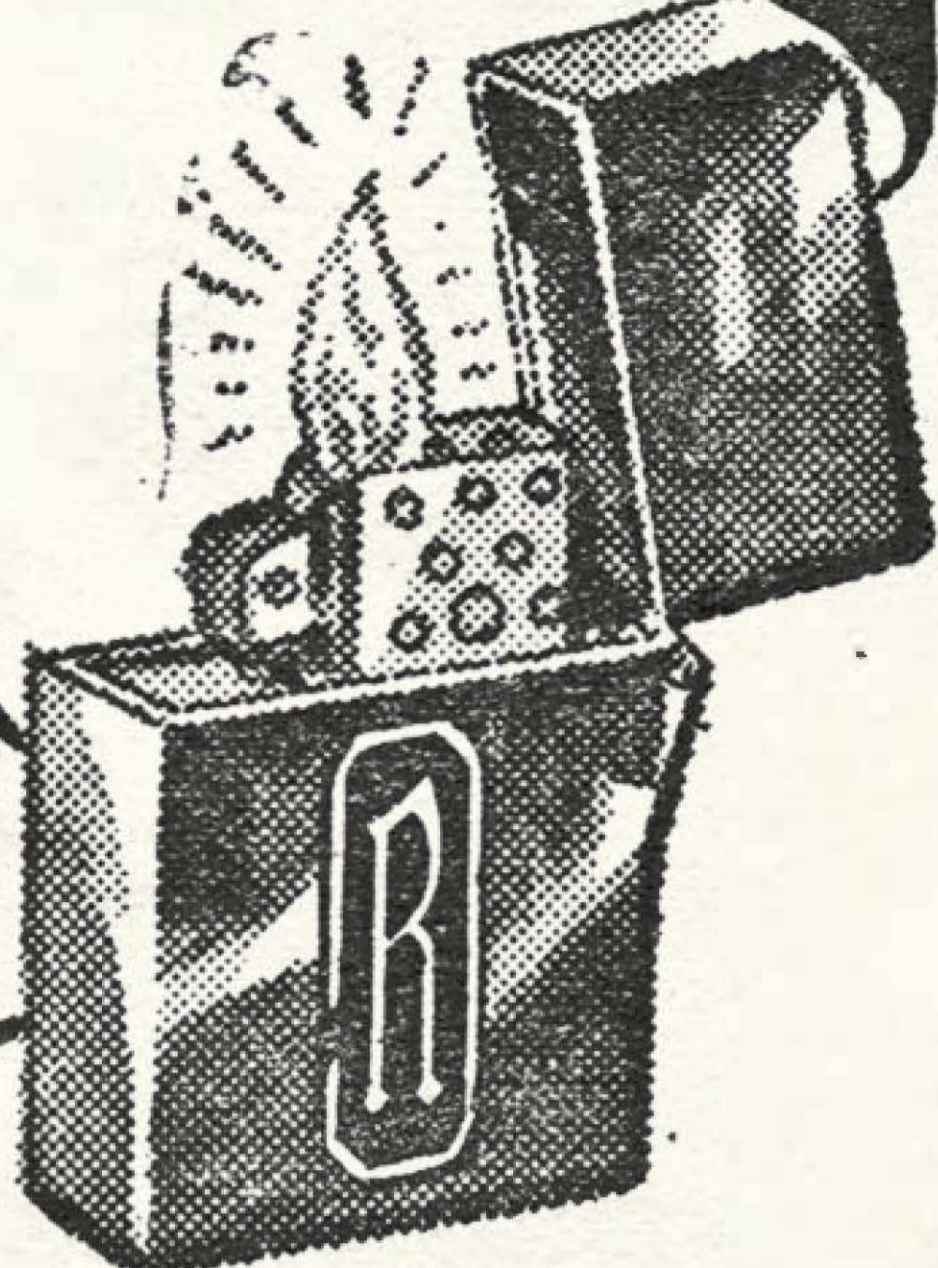
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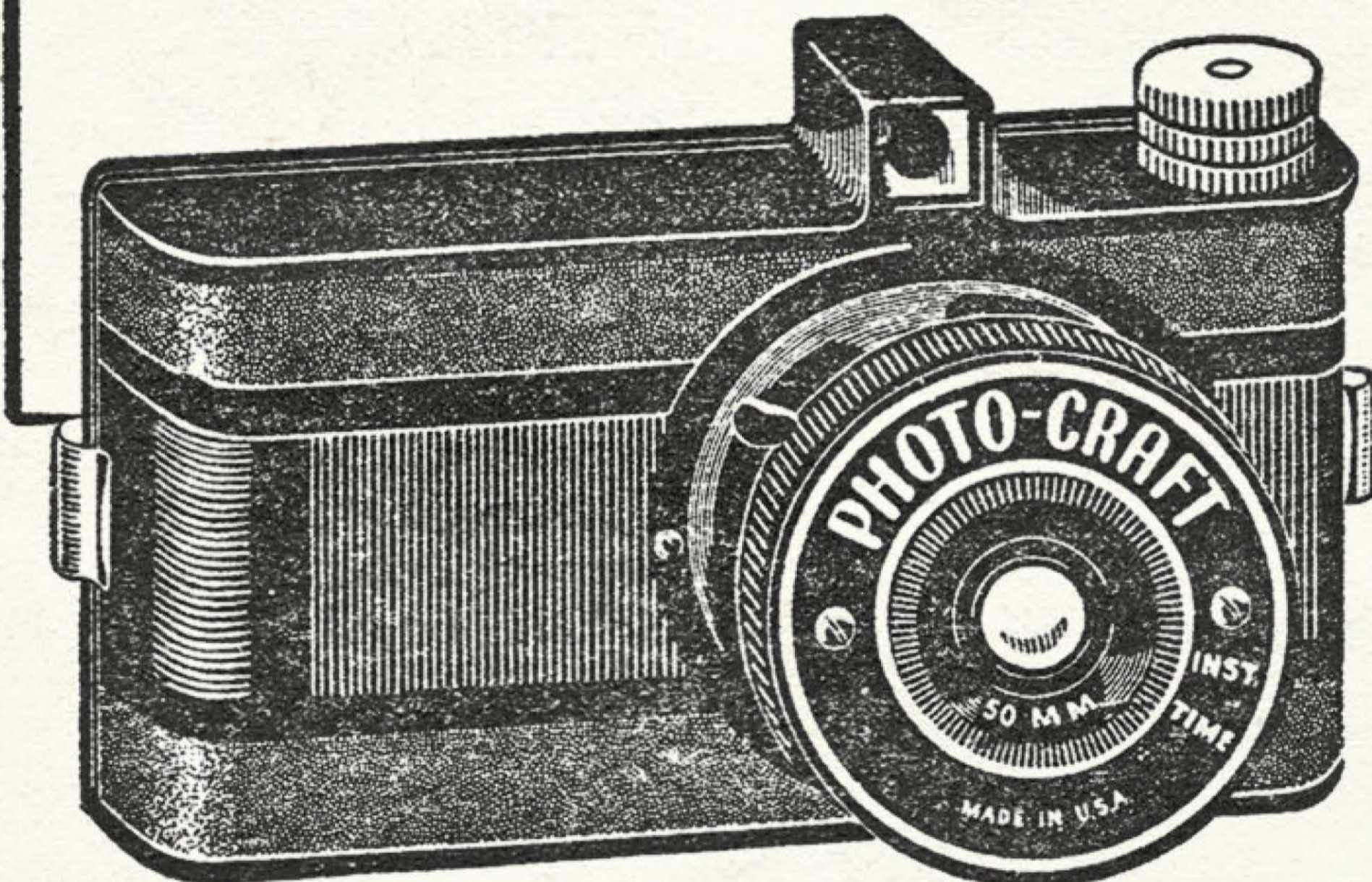
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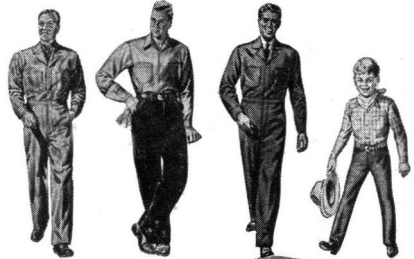
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