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AND SO TO DIE

by Daniel Winters

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Daniel Winters has been writing top quality fiction for so long that he has become a fantastic figment of his own seven-foot imagination. All efforts to probe into his background now meet with adroit evasions or elicit grandiose claims—the most credible of which is probably that he served in the Navy during the war and is actually named Bill. Concerning the accompanying story he writes, "Daniel Winters, former private investigator and free lance pearl merchant in Mexico, tells us that oddly enough this yarn is based on solid fact, and though the characters are lightly disguised, anyone who was in the Mexican city of Mazatlan in 1938 will have no difficulty recognizing them." As usual, Mr. Winters errs. The year was 1983. We *were there. Nevertheless* And So to Die *is a moving, powerful story—for which Mr. Winters will be long remembered!*

And So to Die

by DANIEL WINTERS

THE TRIP INTO Los Monteras from the airfield was a brutal, jolting ride in a car that hadn't been new for fifteen years. Howell surveyed the magnificent scenery with a jaundiced eye. Mountains falling away into the sea. At some other time, under other circumstances, he knew he would enjoy this. But not now. Now it was becoming monotonous, and he hoped that this would be the town. He'd hit most of them along the coast; Acapulco, Manzanillo, Mazatlan, Culiacan. Maybe Los Monteras was the one he was looking for.

And he noticed now, as he had from the plane, the huge clouds building up over the sea. Enormous thunderheads, bulging and ominous, packed tight and high all along the horizon. Late August and sweltering heat, and the big rains coming. He cursed Mulry viciously, silently.

Once in the town, he saw that it was smaller than the other cities he had visited, but still a fairly sizeable place. Shops on the main street, a dun-colored church overlooking the principal plaza, a lantern-strung pavillion on the edge of the harbor. A big railroad siding,

and then the old hotel, El Magnifico.

He had an idea what it would be like. From the airfield he had called the two good hotels, but they'd been filled. An attendant had shrugged and said, "Maybe El Magnifico. . . ."

The driver stopped the car as if he were reining in a runaway horse, and Howell gave him a ten peso note, took his bag and stepped into the street. One look at the three story El Magnifico was plenty.

He walked up the few steps of the entrance into the lobby. A dispirited potted palm held the center of the small room, and three or four stained and weary overstuffed chairs lounged against two of the walls. The desk was almost hidden from the entrance by the palm, and he headed for it.

As he skirted the palm, a voice in back of him said, "Joe!"

He stopped and set down the bag and turned. He looked at her and was surprised. Not surprised to see her, for he had known he would catch up with them sooner or later, or that Mulry would become tired of running and wait for him in some spot like this. He was just surprised at the lack of reaction within himself. None of the big things happened. The torch refused to flame, the old fires were dead. Love can take an awful beating in four years. It can be killed if you kick it around enough. She had. It was the same pretty face, the same lovely body, but this meeting did nothing big to him. It was almost as if he had never been married to her. He'd been conditioned for this. She'd whittled away at his faith through the years until she had totally destroyed it. What should have been a terrible moment was nothing at all. He simply did not care.

He said, "Hello, Laura. How you been?" And he saw that she was frightened.

She had come out of a chair near the door and was only a few feet from him, now, and she didn't stop until she was much closer, until she knew he could feel the warmth of her. Then she stopped and the full mouth parted slightly and she said, "Joe."

He looked at her and was suddenly filled with a silly impulse to laugh, but he killed it. He said, "How's Mulry?"

The big eyes were suddenly filled with tears. "Joe, he's awful. You don't know."

He noticed the last faint remains of a bruise under her left eye. He knew all about Mulry. Or what he didn't know he could guess. He couldn't deny himself the question. "You having a good time?"

She didn't pretend, now. She didn't bother to use any of the artifices at which she was so beautifully practiced. "Joe, take me back. Please, Joe! It'll be different this time. I promise, Joe. I can't stand him! Take me away from him!"

He shook his head. "I'm sick of combing your slobs out of my hair. This one you're stuck with. For as long as he lasts."

The fright came back into her eyes. "Joe! You're not going to do anything silly."

"I'm not going to do a thing," Howell said, "as long as I get forty thousand bucks. That's all I'm after. Not Mulry.

Not you. Just forty thousand that belong to me."

She was pleading. "Don't you care, Joe? Doesn't it mean anything to you?"

He rubbed his nose. "Not a thing, kid. You kicked me around until I don't bruise any more." Then he said, "And where is Mulry? Where is charming Arthur?"

"He's out, Joe. Fishing, I think." She took his arm. "Joe, if we started right now, right away . . . I'm all packed, Joe. We could get the late plane, and you wouldn't have to see Mulry, and then when we got back to New York. . . ."

She was looking at him, and she must have been stopped by what she saw in his eyes. He removed her hand from his arm. "How did you know I was coming in today?"

She shrugged. "He calls Culiacan every day to see who has plane reservations. He knew when you left New York. He—" She stopped, suddenly aware that she had said too much. He stooped, picked up the bag. He said, "I'll be seeing you around, kid," and walked over to the desk. She did not follow him.

The man at the desk was slim, very dark, with a thin mustache that contrasted sharply with the startling whitenees of his teeth as he smiled. Howell knew he had been watching them. He said, with the faintest trace of a European accent, "Mr. Howell, I imagine? They called from the airfield. It is indeed nice to have you with us."

Howell said, "Good. How about a room?" And he thought, *This is a slick geezer. I wonder how much he knows? I'll bet he knows the whole score. This guy could pump Mulry dry in half an hour.*

The man extended his hand. "Palmapous is the name. I am the owner. If there is anything you wish, I will be glad to be of service."

Howell took the hand, there was nothing else he could do. It was slim but strong. He said, "Just the room. I'm tired."

"But of course," Palmapous said. He banged on a tinny bell. "José!"

A small, white-haired man of great age shuffled into view. Palmapous took a key from a board at the left of the desk, handed it to the old man, spoke rapidly in Spanish. The ancient eyed Howell's bag with a sad air, and Howell picked it up. He said, "You just lead the way. I'll do the lugging."

The old man nodded and headed for a flight of stairs leading to the upper floors. Howell followed. Behind him, Palmapous said, "Anything you wish, Mr. Howell, you will please let me know."

Howell said, "Thanks," and went up the stairs.

THE OLD MAN led him down a short hall on the second floor, stopped in front of a door numbered 26, inserted the large key in a keyhole beneath the knob and opened it. Howell went in, put his bag on the floor, gave the old man a peso and said, "Thanks." The man handed him the key and left.

The room wasn't as bad as he thought it might be. The walls were covered with faded paper, the ceiling held an

interesting pattern of cracks, but it looked fairly clean. The linen on the double bed seemed to be fresh, there was a large chair by the window, and a pitcher and basin topped a chest of drawers. In his time he'd seen worse.

He looked out the window, down upon the street. There was a *cantina* on the corner, a restaurant three doors removed from it. He suddenly became aware of his hunger and his thirst. Some cold beer, something to eat, was what he wanted. The late afternoon was dying quickly, and he watched the last of a magnificent sunset across the mountain-embraced harbor. If Mulry were really out fishing, he'd have to be back pretty soon.

He washed at the basin and shaved, the small mirror reflecting the lean face, the heavy shoulders. He put on his shirt again and stood tall in the shadowed room. He picked up the weatherproof golf jacket he'd been wearing, and the weight of the gun in the pocket was reassuring. He went out, locking the door behind him.

Laura was not in the lobby now. He glanced at the desk, expecting to see Palmapous, but the dark man wasn't there.

The girl behind the counter was tall, well built. Her chestnut hair was shoulder length, framing a face that fell barely short of beauty. Her mouth was wide and touched with cynicism and her eyes held the beginnings of a tired knowledge. She'd probably be about twenty-five, he guessed.

She said, "How's the room?"

He shrugged, walking to the desk. "All right, if the bed isn't alive."

"You'll survive," she said. Her voice was low without being throaty.

He said, "What are you doing here?" She didn't belong in the joint. There was too much class about her.

"Well, it was a dark and stormy night when Father left, and Mother said to me, 'Rita,' she said—"

He grinned, and she grinned back at him. He said, "Okay. I stuck my nose out. It's just that you don't go with the rest of the package."

Her curtsy was brief, then she folded her hands on the counter and shrugged her fine shoulders. "A chorus job in a big club in Mexico City. A bunch of us came down, and the club folded in a month. I listened to a fast-talking agent who sent me up here to one of the big hotels on the beach. Two weeks and they change the show. You go broke on deals like that. I hooked on here. The pay is terrific. In about six years I'll have enough saved to get back to New York."

"It's tough all over," Howell said. "You'll make it."

The girl nodded. "I always do." Her grin was refreshing.

He liked her. Her eyes were grey and frank, her chin held just the proper amount of determination. He said, "The Greek looks like a guy who would give you trouble."

"A healthy slap in the puss cured him the first day. But I can add. I speak the language fairly well and he thinks I give a little class to the place. Anyway, his bankroll is more important to him. We get along."

Howell said, "Good. How's the food?"

She shook her head briefly. "Don't bother. There's a little place across the street. Tell Maria you're a friend of mine." She indicated a door that led off the lobby. "The bar. Better than you'll find in town."

"That matter was on my mind. Have a drink?"

She shook her head. "It's a little early for me. Bring the subject up later, maybe."

He said, "I'll see you," and turned away. Her voice brought him back. "Mr. Howell!" she said.

Her face was serious. "Take care of yourself."

He studied her, and his instincts told him that this was someone you could turn your back to with safety. "What's on the fire?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. I've hear your name mentioned a couple of times in the last week, and it doesn't seem to me that they figure on electing you mayor."

"The Greek?" he asked.

"Si, Señor. The Greek and other people."

He considered that. It would fit in. He said, "Thanks, Rita," and went into the bar. It was dark and cool and boasted one other customer. He told the bartender, "Beer." The first was for the plane ride, the second for the trip into town. The third he took time to taste, and it was cold and good. He lit a cigarette.

The man down the bar said, "It looks that we are going to have the rain. The big rain."

Howell looked at him. Short, fat, perhaps fifty; an affable smile on the round, friendly face. Howell said, "Yes. A lot of cloud over the mountains. You due for them about now?"

The man nodded. "The big one." He chuckled. "By some it is called 'The Big Rinse.' Very heavy."

"How long does it last?"

"The really big one? Four days, a week perhaps. Then the fine weather, the coolness coming a bit later."

Four days or a week. He wouldn't need that long to settle his business, once he saw Mulry. But once having seen Mulry, he wouldn't care to hang around this place for a week. Not if Palmapous was in on this deal. That Greek would know people. He could be dangerous. But he wouldn't go out in a plane, he knew. The baked-earth airfield would be a swamp. It would have to be the railroad, if that was running.

He said, "The railroad runs during the big rain?"

The fat man shrugged. "Sometimes, sometimes not. It is dependent upon the amount of rain. It has been known to wash out."

That was fine. Take the forty from Mulry, then hang around for a week and give him a chance to get it back.

The little man left, nodding amiably, and Howell finished his beer, paid his bill and went through the lobby. A fat man was at the desk, talking to the girl. When she saw Howell she beckoned to him and he went over. "Mr. Howell, meet Señor Ramirez, the town's best lawyer."

They shook hands, and Ramirez smiled. "A pillar of justice. A goat is killed by a truck? Call Ramirez. Two

chickens are stolen? Ramirez has the case. Rita is merely being kind."

The girl said, "Nonsense. How about that Gonzalez boy? He'd be doing twenty years if you hadn't taken his case. And how about the big power company that wants you, and the railroad? And the packing plants? How much did you get for the Montez family when the girl was hurt?"

The fat man shrugged. "Occasionally I am of use, it is true, but only occasionally." He looked at Howell, then at the girl. "Perhaps Mr. Howell would like to join us tonight, if he is doing nothing else."

The girl looked up, and again Howell was aware of the fine qualities inherent in her eyes. The grin was ingenuous. "Big poker game on Friday night. Ten centavo limit. If you're not careful you can go for as much as five pesos. A kitty for beer. Senor Ramirez, Luis the cop, Mr. Ancil from three hundred six, and me. Maybe Juan, Maria's husband, from across the street. You'd be welcome."

Howell said, "Count me in. And that reminds me. I think I'll try some of Maria's cooking."

Ramirez smiled. "The cooking of El Magnifico you have been warned about? Barnados is a very fine man. None better. But as for his cooking. . . ."

"Let us say another place has been recommended."

Ramirez beamed. "Fortunately."

Howell said, "See you later," and went out into the street.

The somber sky was hastening the death of the day. The clouds were massed overhead, now, a pillowed roof to the world. Angry and swollen, filled to bursting, they rolled in over the peaks that surrounded Los Monteras. Howell knew they could not contain their burden much longer, hoped the rain would hold off.

The restaurant was clean, Maria solicitous, the beer he ordered while waiting for his dinner cold and delicious. He lit a cigarette and thought about things.

IT HAD BEEN two months since this thing had started. Two months of anger and patience and travel. Travel on planes and trains, and on buses that should never have been licensed to carry a goat. Anger that sustained itself, fed upon itself.

He'd been sitting in the office of the garage on the West Side that morning, examining bills, making out checks, wondering just why the hell a woman would need two mink coats. Laura had said her coat was old. Two years old. His bitterness was older than that, he might have told her. But she had carried on, and finally he'd said okay, and she'd been delighted.

And last year it had been the trip to Paris. He hadn't been able to go, but he'd said fine, if she wanted to go alone it would be all right. So she'd gone alone and she'd tried to buy Paris in six weeks, and that was when he'd had to get the mortagage on the garage. The garage had always made money in the few years he'd owned it. Plenty of money. But there wasn't a hell of a lot left in the bank, and the days ahead looked lean.

He'd mailed the checks and opened the morning paper, and from the racing page the name walked out and belted him on the chin. Dock Walloper. The fifth at Belmont. Running in a field he figured to beat at very juicy odds. 20-1 in the morning line. It was a hell of a silly price.

He went out and got a *Telegraph* and spent an hour studying the race. As far as he could see, it was still Dock Walloper. A big five-year-old chestnut that had raced well enough as a three-year-old and had then been plagued by hard luck. A bowed tendon, a bad cough, a couple of lousy rides, poor racing luck. But still a good horse, better than those he was r u n n i n g against, if he was in good health.

So he called a guy, and the guy said yeah, Dock Walloper was in good health, fit to run, but a dog in his heart. But Howell had seen him run. There was no doggie in the chestnut.

He thought to go out to the track, but it was Lou's day off and no one to mind the office, so that was out. He looked at the sheet again, and he knew that this could be the way out of his money trouble. If he had the guts to jam the dough in there, the horse might do the rest.

He picked up the phone and called Mulry. He'd been giving Mulry his bets for a couple of years now. He said, "Howell," and Mulry said, "Yeah, kid. What's on your mind?"

"The fifth at New York. Dock Walloper. Five thousand to win."

There was a pause, and Mulry said, "That's a lot of fish, junior. You don't go that big."

"Today I do."

"You know something?" Mulry asked.

"I don't know anything you don't know. I've got a hole in my head you could roll a pool ball through, or I wouldn't be playing." He started to hang up. "You got it?"

Mulry said, "A slight technicality. I can't handle anything that big. I've got to pass it along. And the big guy wants to see the color of that kind of money."

"What the hell. I've got a garage that's worth a lot more than that."

"Sure, kid. But what with the mortgage and all . . . you understand."

Howell said, "All right. Send someone around for it in half an hour." He hung up. There was one thing he didn't understand. How did Mulry know about the mortgage? He never talked about the business to anyone. He must have slipped up.

So he went up the street to the bank and drew the five thousand. It left a slim fifteen hundred in the account. Mulry's messenger came for the dough, and that was that. He leaned back in the desk chair and started to sweat out the hours. There must easier ways of making money, he thought.

Mulry had an idea how it could be done. He'd talked about it to Howell. "I was in Mexico a couple of years ago, and when a guy I knew found out I was going back to the States, he sold me a couple of pearls. You buy them for peanuts down there, and it's no trouble getting them across. The customs people are pretty easy with tourists. Hell, I just put these in my pocket."

"Then what?" Howell had asked.

Mulry had shrugged. "I brought them back to New York and gave them to Harry Marks. I made five hundred on the deal, and Marks made money."

Harry Marks, Howell had thought. Harry the hot-stuff kid. Harry and his boys, Patsy Fusco and Rico Ferdinand and the rest. They'd handle anything hot if it wasn't too big. Anything smaller than the Queen Mary. Anyone who dealt with Harry Marks was crazy. You couldn't trust him as far as you could smell him. But he said nothing to Mulry. It was none of his business.

And Mulry had said, on that occasion, "That's the way to make it, in a lump. If I ever make a good score I'll go down there, buy half the pearls in Mexico and bring them back to Harry. The trick is to get them right from the divers. Those dopey kids think a twenty dollar bill is all the money in the world. Then I'd just sit back and relax for about fifty years."

It was funny how Howell had remembered that, later.

And about three o'clock of that day when it had started, he'd suddenly remembered that it was Wednesday and the races were being televised. He'd yelled for Willy to take care of the office and had gone down the street to Kelly's. The television set was tuned in to the races.

There was a lot of pre-race palaver by the announcer that almost drove Howell crazy. He watched Dock Walloper parade in the paddock and remembered the blazing white star on the big bay's forehead. The price was down to 12-1, then 10-1, but it was still a steal. His own money, he knew, was knocking down the odds. The big guy must have been a little leary and was laying it into the machines.

The start was good, with Flamingo, the favorite, breaking nicely on the rail. And then, for a mile and a sixteenth, Howell held his breath.

In fourth position all the way, Dock Walloper started to move at the stretch turn. But Flamingo was eight lengths out in front, running strongly, and Howell knew that the boy on Dock Walloper had made his bid too late. The hay ate ground, and Flamingo started to come back to him, but there wasn't enough time. Fifty yards out he still had a length to make up, and Howell was vaguely aware of the cold sweat streaming down his sides. He'd pulled a dilly this time.

They hit the wire closed up, and another ten yards would have seen Dock Walloper a going-away winner. Howell swallowed the tightness in his throat and turned away from the bar, then heard the announcer say that the judges had called for a picture. He turned back to the screen, and the guy was saying what a fine race it had been, what wonderful horses, what fine rides they'd received, and if Howell had been near him he would have strangled him.

And then they led Dock Walloper into the winner's circle and it was official, and the camera hit the tote board and there it was, his horse, paying an even sixteen dollars. Seven to one. Thirty-five thousand great big dollars in his pocket. He bought the house a drink and went back to the garage of-

fice and collapsed into the chair at the desk. He gave Willy twenty bucks and told him to get on home and take his wife out to dinner. It was a day to be gracious.

He fiddled with a paper and pencil; forty thousand dollars coming back from Mulry, the mortgage cleared, something really nice for Laura, and still twenty thousand left in the account. He'd have to send that horse a bag of oats.

THE NIGHT MAN came on at six, and Howell called Laura to tell her to figure out something special for tonight, but she wasn't home. He went up to the apartment, and there was the note, saying that she'd gone up to her sister's in Westchester and would probably stay the night. She'd call him tomorrow.

He was down at the garage at ten the next morning. Mulry would be by about noon with the dough. The dough and a sour puss and a lot of questions about why he'd picked the horse.

At half-past ten Harry Owen came in for his car. Harry was the big guy, the layoff man, probably the biggest book in the country. He shook his head and said, "Joe, you really bit a chunk out of me yesterday. Thirty-five gees. Sometimes I have to work a week for that."

Howell grinned. "I bleed for you, Harry." But it was all right. Mulry had called in the bet. He had heard a distant whisper in the back of his head all morning. Mulry might have held the bet, figuring the horse didn't rate. And he wouldn't have been able to pay off. But it was all right now.

Owen said, "He stopped by after the races, yesterday, and picked it up. You ought to buy yourself a new hat. That thing looks lousy."

Howell was busy all day, and he didn't think about Mulry until it was time to go home You don't worry about money in the bank. But he called Mulry, and there was no answer, but that was all right, too, because there was no reason why Mulry should be in the office now that the races were over.

He went home. Laura wasn't back yet, so he poured himself a couple of drinks and went over to Sammy's for a big steak. He was just leaving when Harry Owen came in with Freddy Mangini.

Owen said, "You see Mulry today? He didn't make any book. I guess I called him five times."

A cold hand patted Howell on the back. He said slowly, "Maybe the guy is sick."

Mangini said, "Yeah, sick." He said it slowly, then snorted through his broken nose.

Owen said. "He pay you?"

Maybe it was because he didn't want to look like too big a chump. Howell said, "He mailed it to me."

Owen shrugged. "He mailed his other wins, too. I don't figure it."

Freddy Mangini looked at Howell. He said. "It's real tough to figure."

Howell went home. He opened a bottle and sat listening to the radio. He was plenty worried. He called Mulry's apartment, but there was no answer.

It was nearly eleven o'clock when he

sat straight up in the chair and snapped off the radio. He walked to the phone, then hesitated. But he asked himself what he could lose.

He got his information from the second airline he called. Yes, Mr. Mulry had taken last midnight's plane to Mexico City.

Chapter 2

DEAD CERTAIN

HOWELL WALKED BACK to the chair and sat down. Thirty-five thousand bucks gone out the window. Forty, counting the five he'd put up. A vacation for Mulry. He felt sick at first, then anger banished that. He started checking back along the line to see where he could have prevented it, but it was no good.

Then he remembered the funny look Freddy Mangini had thrown him, and he tried to figure that. It sent him over to the phone again, and he put a call through to Westchester.

Laura had not been to her sister's. They hadn't heard from her in a week.

He chewed on that until he'd digested it, then called the airline people again. Yes, Mrs. Howell had been a passenger on last night's flight to Mexico City.

Okay. Mangini had known about it. Probably a lot of people had known about it. But not him. That was the way it had been with Bill Sharley, and with John Morton, the producer, and with Kenny Kamp, the big time comedian. The whole town had known about it before him. And always he'd taken her back. Always he had listened to her entreaties, her promises, her tearful oaths. The thing had been dying within him for a couple of years, now, but he'd kept it alive out of habit.

The blazing anger he'd first felt toward Mulry had become a cold and resolute flame. A guy took your dough? Rough. A guy took your wife? A tough deal. But a guy taking both your wife and your dough? That was opening the umbrella.

He was in no hurry, then. It took him almost two weeks to complete the sale of the garage, wind up his affairs. It left him with plenty of money, and he had nothing to do but look for Mulry. Finding him would be a job, he knew. They'd use their right names going down and coming back, for there was no sense in making trouble with the Immigration people. But in Mexico they would call themselves something else.

And when he hit Mexico City and had looked around for a few days and hadn't found them, he started asking some questions. About pearls. He got a lot of answers, found out what he wanted to know. And then he hit he road.

It had been hard work, but not entirely disappointing. He hit towns that Mulry and Laura had been in a month before, three weeks before, two weeks before. He was traveling faster and lighter than they. Mulry was on business. Howell merely had to find out if they had been in the city and if they had left. And they were easy to trail. Laura was a woman people remembered without difficulty.

He had known, since he'd started, that he would find them. He had determined that before he left New York. Either he would find them or Mulry, aware that he was being followed, would make a stand at some point where he thought conditions were right. Someplace where he could count on some help. Where he could team up with a gent like Palmapous.

Howell had been around too long to be wrong on the Greek The smooth oiliness of the man, the insatiable curiosity of those sharp eyes, the assured manner that was as phony as a tin dime. He was a guy who would work with Mulry whether Mulry liked it or not. He'd have the know-how that Mulry would be forced to use. If there was any larcenous money being made in his vicinity, Palmapous would get his share of it.

He paid for his dinner, complimented Maria on her splendid cooking and went out into the street. It was fully dark now, and the first great drops of rain had begun to fall, each one kicking up a spurt of dust from the road. He ran across to the hotel.

The girl was still at the desk. When she saw him she smiled, as if in relief. "Well! It's nice to see you," she said.

He sensed something behind the words. "What makes?"

She shook her head. "This place must be giving me the willies. I didn't know whether or not you were back, and about twenty minutes ago one of our local pool room characters went upstairs, then came down again in a few minutes. I thought you might have been rolled or something." Then she smiled. "How was the food. Did it click?"

He made a circle with his thumb and forefinger. "On the beam." He leaned on the counter. "There's a woman here. . . ." He described Laura. "What's her name?"

"Mrs. Johnson," the girl said. "But don't get any ideas, though she's the type would give them to you. Mr. Johnson is around." Her face was serious. She started to say something, then checked herself.

Howell said, "And Palmapous and Mr. Johnson have been known to mention Mr. Howell in their conversation?"

She said evenly, "Mr. Howell knows a lot more about this than I do. His crystall ball is working overtime tonight." Her eyes were questioning.

"They're a fine team," Howell said.

"Don't sell the Greek short," the girl said. "He's got it up here," she tapped her temple. "In a corkscrew kind of way."

He studied her. "How much do you know?"

She shook her head. "I hear the sounds, but they don't mean anything to me."

"Where would Mr. Johnson be today?"

"Fishing. He says. Only there are never any fish."

Howell nodded. "We thank you. Maybe we can buy you dinner some evening."

Her eyes were frank. "Twist my arm."

Howell straightened up. "How about the card game? Where do you play?"

"Senor Ramirez' room. About eight thirty."

"Okay. See you later." He went up the stairs, then down the hall silently. He put his ear to the door for a full minute, then unlocked it and pushed it open, standing to one side. The room was dimly lighted by the cantina and the restaurant across the street, and it was empty. He went in, closed the door.

It was only then he saw the figure in the big chair near the window. He knew the contours of that head better than he knew his own. He said, "Laura, it's no use carrying the thing on any further. You beat it to death, and all the talk in the world isn't going to change—"

And now he was close enough to see, protruding from the base of her throat, the heavy handle of the knife. Laura was all through talking.

He stood there for a moment, stunned and unbelieving. The rain was falling in full force now, the sound of it a steady, pounding liquid roar through the open window. And in a moment Howell knew how this thing had happened.

She had come here to plead with him to take her back, relying on this privacy, this intimacy, to gain her point. She had sat here, waiting in the half light of dusk. And someone had opened the door silently, had seen the figure in the chair, had thrown the knife with murderous accuracy. He was supposed to have been sitting in that chair.

HE WENT TO the edge of the bed and sat down, and for a little while he was not in a scrawny Mexican town. He was meeting her for the first time, seeing her fresh beauty. He was riding with her in an open car, delighted with her profile and the dark hair swept back by the wind. They were on beaches together, drenched with sun and laughter.

He knew again the joy of bringing to her gifts she would delight and exclaim over; the male pride he had known when he walked into a room with Laura on his arm and the heads started to turn. He relived the happiness of loving as he had loved her, and he did not dwell on the later times, the occasions of ugliness, of bitterness. He had known, somewhere deep within him, that the loveliness of the thing would fade and become shabby and tarnished, but he had fought the knowledge successfully for a long time, and if the price for his early happiness had been great, he had not been overcharged, for she had given him much.

And now she was dead in a tawdry room and he wished her alive, for her only sin was the selfishness of the child she had been and her inability to realize that the gaudiness of the bauble did not determine its worth. She had been stupid and vain and unthinking, but she had given him great joy and this was an end she did not deserve.

Standing, then, apart from her, he came back to the moment and wondered how she had gotten in. He recalled the ancient nature of the lock and knew that probably any key in the house would open any door. He'd find out about that.

He went into the hall, tried his own

key in number 27. It opened with a minimum of effort, and the room was happily empty. He left the door open.

Back in the other room, he picked up his bag and shaving kit, moved them into 27. Returning to 26, he made sure he had left nothing there but a rich part of his past for which he could do absolutely nothing, then gently closed and locked the door on a badly fated dream.

In the other room he smoked a cigarette and thought again of Laura, and his forty thousand dollars had diminished greatly in importance. Mulry's greed, his own pursuit of the money, Palmapous' ready connivance at thievery—these factors spelled murder. He was sick in his body and his heart and the cold pleasure he had taken in this chase was suddenly gone.

It would benefit no one to report the killing, at the moment, for all the fingers of guilt would point to himself, the vengeful husband. Palmapous and Mulry would conceivably go scot free, under those circumstances.

And that was something he would not allow. His anger and his actions became cold and purposeful once more. He had one job to do now. He had to wait for Mulry. He wanted Mulry, and Palmapous, and whoever had thrown that knife. And he wanted forty thousand dollars.

This considered but miscarried violence was the doing of the Greek. Of that he was sure. It was true that Mulry might be somewhere in the vicinity, might have arranged the thing himself. But Howell doubted that. Mulry was probably out hunting for pearls. But the girl had told Howell that his name had been mentioned between the two, and certainly Mulry had given the Greek a good description of him, had said it was desirable to be rid of him once and for all. The Greek didn't even need a description. Palmapous had seen him talking with Laura, and his name was clearly on the register. It had remained only to kill him in some quiet way and get rid of the body. And someone had slipped.

Howell took his jacket, weighted reassuringly, and went down to the lobby again. The girl was still at the desk. He said, "Have you any envelopes around? I've run out."

She nodded, turned to a cubbyhole of a room to the right of the desk. "Mr. P. hides them. He thinks writing is an extravagant gesture."

And during the moment she was gone, Howell reached across to the keyboard, hung Number 26 on its proper nail, took 27 and slipped it into his pocket.

The girl came back with a half a dozen envelopes in her hand and a frown on her face. She gave him the envelopes, leaned on the counter. "Mr. Howell, there's a mirror in that room. I don't know exactly why, but it's there. Now, what goes on around this layout? I like to be kept informed."

There were footsteps in the lobby entrance just then, and Howell turned. It was the Greek. He wore a raincoat and was closing an umbrella, shaking the water from it. He was smiling, the teeth greatly in evidence, and he was humming a strange little tune. He came around the miserable little tree

quickly and his eyes rested on Howell.

The smile was frozen for a moment and there was a shocked disbelief in the eyes. The barely perceptible freezing of expression lasted for only the smallest part of a split second, then the charm was alive and working again. But Howell had seen it.

Palmapous said, "Mr. Howell! You have met our Miss Hayes, I see. One of El Magnifico's major attractions." The man was a magnificent actor.

"You can't argue with me about that," Howell said.

"You are satisfied with your room?" Palmapous asked. "Number 26 is one of our best."

"I wouldn't know about that," Howell said. "I have 27. But it's all right. No complaints."

The Greek frowned. "27? But I distinctly remember giving José the key to 26."

Howell shrugged. "You could be right, but—" he dug into his pocket, came up with the key and extended it to Palmapous. 27 was boldly printed on the tag. "No," he said. "It's 27, all right."

The Greek shrugged. "In the press of business. . . ." He went behind the counter and started rummaging through a mess of papers on a table.

The girl said nothing.

Howell said, "By the way, I think there's a Mr. Johnson staying here. Have you seen him around?"

The Greek pursed his lips. "Johnson? Johnson? Oh, yes. The gentleman who is so fond of the fishing."

"Very fond of fishing," Howell said. And he thought, *Don't be too cute, Palmapous. Don't overdo this thing.*

"He went out this morning," the Greek said, busy again with the papers on the table. "I do not think he will be back. He said something about going down the coast and staying overnight on the boat."

Howell said, "Well, I'll probably see him tomorrow."

Palmapous turned to give him a smile that completely lacked enthusiasm. "Of course. Tomorrow."

Howell nodded to the girl and went up to his room.

The rain was a constant, heavy roar, but he was becoming used to it now. He sat in a chair near the window and watched the curtain of water fall, almost obscuring the lights across the street, giving them an aqueous quality that made them seem unreal. And he wondered where Mulry was, right now. He could be in the next room, for all Howell knew.

But he couldn't go looking for him. The girl, Rita Hayes, might know. But Howell didn't think so. Palmapous would know, of course, but he didn't expect any information from the Greek. He could only sit and wait, and when Mulry was ready he would come along. Or there would be an incident such as had occurred in the next room. Howell had no intention of letting that happen. If they finally got to him, they'd have to work harder than that.

He glanced at his watch, and it was half past eight. Time for the card game. He took his jacket and left the room, went up to 315 and knocked on the door. A soft voice told him to come in.

Ramirez was alone in the large room, in a big chair with a book. The fat man smiled. "Welcome, Mr. Howell. It is good to see you. Sit down. The others are not here yet."

Howell sat in a nearby chair. The room was much larger than his own, and at one side a bridge table and chairs were arranged for the card game.

"I didn't mean to be early."

Ramirez had laid his book aside. He smiled. "I benefit from your promptness. The rest will be here soon. Except Rita. She will be a bit late."

"Working?"

Ramirez shook his head. "Mrs. Barnados, the wife of the cook, is not well. They have many children. Rita goes over in the evening and does what she can. Puts the younger ones to bed, rubs the back of Mrs. Barnados. Things like that."

Howell glanced out the window. "It'll be a wet mission tonight."

RAMIREZ SHRUGGED. "The rain means nothing to Rita." He looked at Howell. "You like Los Monteras, Mr. Howell?"

"What I've seen of it is very nice."

Ramirez nodded. "Magnificent scenery, beautiful harbor, wonderful people. And that is all." Howell said nothing, and the man continued. "Primitive methods of schooling and hygiene, miserably paid labor, one small hospital for twenty thousand people."

Howell said, "Why don't you leave?" He remembered what the girl had said about the big power company and the railroad.

Ramirez looked at him and smiled. "You cannot walk away from ignorance and corruption. They follow you." He tapped his forehead. "Knowledge is a tether and any semblance of conscience a chain. These are my people, Mr. Howell. I stay and correct as much as I can."

"Perhaps if you had more money, more influence. . . ."

Ramirez shook his head. "The building is from the ground up. From within the people. And money means very little to me, since long ago I found that it could not smile and that in large amounts it causes much trouble. Frequently the wrong people collect it and misuse it. I need a bed for sleeping, food for eating, a roof against the sun and rain." He smiled. "What more does a rich man have?"

"Sometimes the stuff is handy to have around."

Ramirez nodded. His eyes asked no question, but they were very knowing as he looked at Howell. He spoke slowly. "And sometimes it is responsible for great evil."

Mr. Ancil from 305 came in, then, a lean, spare man of sixty who spoke in clipped and British accents. He shook hands with Howell and said, "Welcome to Los Monteras, the Monte Carlo of the Pacific Coast, Howell. Have to watch these other chaps carefully. Lost two pesos last week."

They talked against the muted roar of the rain. Howell discovered that Mr. Ancil was an artist, found the climate of Los Monteras ideal for his health. "Awfully easy on the purse, of course," Ancil added.

Ramirez answered a knock on the door and said, "Ah, Luis! We are proud to have the law with us this evening."

Luis was a huge man, bigger than Howell. He had to be, Howell thought, to support that mustache. He was dressed in suntans and wore at his waist a .45 automatic, which, in contrast to the man's great bulk, looked like a toy. His booming laughter filled the room, rose without effort above the sound of rain, and Howell was forced to smile a bit at the man's evident good will.

Juan, the husband of the woman who ran the restaurant, was the next entrant. Thin, burned to a rich mahogany color by the sun and the weather, he smiled shyly at the other occupants of the room and shook hands with Howell when they were introduced. Ramirez remarked simply that Juan was a fisherman. The stout little lawyer said, "I do not think Rita will be offended if we start to play without her."

They played, and Howell found it a good game, although he would not have believed that he could play for stakes as small as this and be interested. The others were intent, knowing and skilled. The Englishman, Ancil, surprisingly possessed a card sense which was unusual.

But always Howell thought of Laura, lonely in the room below. It would be more fitting if at this time he could spend some time with her, do something to add dignity to her death. But there was little anyone could do for her now. This was a part of his job. Through these people he might be able to be of some use to her—or to the times they'd had together—bring to light the person who had murdered her.

And he kept thinking of Mulry, wondering when he would come, and if the thunderous rain would change the man's plans, whatever they might be. He tightened up once at a knock on the door, but it was Palmapous. The Greek put his head in and said, "Everything is all right, gentlemen? There is nothing you would want?" But his eyes were anxious, Howell noticed, and the man's attention was directed toward himself.

Ramirez said, "There is nothing at the moment, and no need to knock. The door is open."

Palmapous bowed and closed the door, and Ancil said, "Luis, why not throw that carrion in jail for twenty years? Only thing about Los Monteras I don't like."

Luis grunted. "We are very careful who we permit in our jail. It is a new one." Howell laughed with the rest.

But he knew, too, that Palmapous was keeping an eye on him, keeping him on ice until Mulry arrived. And he wondered if the Greek would tell Mulry about the body in Room 26, if it was still there. He thought not. Palmapous probably was in no position to gauge the affection of Mr. Johnson for Mrs. Johnson, and he had certainly made one hell of a mistake.

The girl came in at nine-thirty, and the men at the table all got to their feet. Ramirez walked forward and took her hand. "Rita! We are glad to see you!" And it was obvious that they all were. Her hair was damp from the rain, but

it had been brushed and she had evidently changed.

"Sit down," she said. "You'll have me feeling so ladylike that I'll be afraid to win a hand."

They all sat down, and the girl took a chair between Ramirez and Howell. The lawyer said, "Rita makes of our poor card game an event, a social occasion." His eyes sparkled. "Juan is the only married man among us, and the rivalry is keen." He looked at Howell and said, "Of course, Mr. Howell, I speak without knowledge of your status. Are you married?"

Howell slowly shook his head. "No, I am not married." The dissolution of that bond had been accomplished spiritually long ago, but only today in fact.

He wondered what the others at the table would think of him if they knew—a man who could sit in a penny card game when on the floor below his wife sat silently with a knife in her throat. There would not be so much friendliness here, he suspected, if that were known.

The game was good, the girl played well, and though Howell appreciated these facts they could not fully command his attention. He was facing the door, and he wondered at what moment Mulry would walk in. He knew, somehow, that he would see Mulry tonight. The man would gain nothing by delay, and it was necessary to him that Howell be disposed of, or he would have a shadow on his neck for months and years to come. He could not run forever.

The game went on, the voices of the players adjusted softly to defeat the steady sound of the rain. Within an hour Howell knew the men about him pretty well, liked them all. Ramirez chose his company well. Here there was no pretense, and the petty sum they gambled for was merely an excuse for assemblage, although in truth several of them could afford no higher stakes. And if Juan or Luis were to lose five or six pesos, Howell knew they would regard the expenditure merely as the cost of an evening spent among friends.

Palmapous' visits were regular, spaced at intervals of a half hour or so. He personally delivered the cold beer which the kitty provided, and was solicitous about the comfort of the players. Ancil said, upon one of the Greek's departures, "Mine host is overly considerate. This has never happened before. Howell, has your presence anything to do with this excellent service?"

Howell grinned. "He's just fond of me."

Luis rumbled, "He is fond of no one but Palmapous, of nothing but money. This evening his behavior puzzles me." He frowned.

Ramirez said, "Let us not waste even part of a fine evening discussing that one. Ramirez will open for two centavos. The more daring ones only will stay."

And each time the door opened, during the earlier part of the evening, Howell could barely suppress a start. But it was never Mulry. Just the Greek bearing beer. After a time Howell got used to the visits.

But the waiting, the expectancy, be-

gan to get to him. The room was cross ventilated and the undiminished rain cooled the atmosphere, but he sweated. He knew Mulry would come and that he would have been warned. And such being the case, he would probably come with company.

Late in the evening Howell started to relax. The simplicity of these people, their common goodness, was a sedative. They lost meager pots with wit, with fierce and simulated anger. They won with smiles and shrugging mock-modesty, all the while declaiming their impossible skill, their superhuman powers of insight.

Promptly at twelve, though he had no watch and there wasn't a clock visible in the room, Juan arose. "The fish," he smiled, "will not wait for me in the morning. I must go."

"The fish!" Luis said. "A fine excuse for a henpecked man." He rose and stretched enormously. "I will accompany you and see that Maria does not beat you too badly."

They left together, and Ancil said, "Blokes took all the money with them; might as well leave myself. No profit here." He shook hands with Howell. "Must stay at least until next Friday night, Howell. Needed a sixth." He left.

Ramirez fished the box of ice that held the beer. "Three bottles left. We are the winners, after all."

And while he was opening them, Howell thought of something that had been on his mind. "That gent who went upstairs while I was out eating. You recognized him?"

The girl was a little puzzled, then she smiled. "You mean the juvenile delinquent?" She nodded. "He's the only one who doesn't whistle when a gal walks past the corner. The kind you have to watch. His name is—"

The door opened again, then, and Howell barely looked up, accustomed by now to the Greek's frequent visits. Then his head jarred on his neck as he snapped it up again.

Mulry stood in the doorway. Mulry and another man.

Chapter 3

PURSUIT IN HELL

MULRY HAD CHANGED, he noted. The man was leaner, burned by the sun of the land, and the greediness always evident in his eyes had become intensified.

The other man was stocky, red-headed, and his pale blue eye were expressionless. His nose had been broken badly and never properly fixed, and a thin scar emerged from his left eyebrow and ran halfway across the temple. This was Mulry's assistant, Howell knew. He was slightly drunk.

Mulry said, "Hello, Howell. Nice to see you." His lips were cracked from the sun, his voice hoarse.

Howell nodded. "It's been a long time." He looked at the girl and Ramirez. He said, "Suppose we go down to my room and have a drink." He didn't want them involved in this.

Palmapous edged in the door behind Mulry and his friend, closed it quietly.

Mulry shook his head. "I'm tired. No more drinks tonight. I heard you were here and just wanted to say hello." His smile was thin and wolfish. "What brings you to this forsaken hole, Howell?"

Howell wished that the huge Luis and his gun had not departed earlier. He looked at Ramirez, and their eyes were both on him. The girl was puzzled, Ramirez merely interested and observant.

Howell said, "You know why I'm here, Mulry."

And Mulry laughed at him, shook his head. "I haven't any idea."

Howell got up and walked to the side of the room. If anything happened here, he didn't want the girl or Ramirez hurt. And he saw that Mulry wanted to resolve the matter right here.

He said, "It's a little matter of some money, Mulry. Exactly forty thousand dollars. Let's say you owe it to me."

Mulry shook his head, his mouth laughing silently. "No, Howell. It took me a little while to figure out why I was so anxious to lose you, but I finally got it." He turned one of the chairs and sat down, his arms resting on the chairback. He said, "What forty thousand, Howell?" His grin was assured. "You got papers or something? You report this to the police anywhere?"

Howell was silent. He'd anticipated this.

Mulry said, "Howell, get lost. Pack your bags and get out of here before you run into real trouble." He nodded at the man standing beside him. "I don't think Brady likes you, Howell."

Howell looked at the pale, unblinking and slightly drunken eyes. The man said nothing.

He turned to Mulry. "You owe me forty. I'll get it. One way or another."

"No," Mulry said. "I won't give it to you, and if you try to take it, it's just robbery. You can shoot a man for trying to rob you, can't you Palmapous?"

The Greek had been silent. Now he said, "It is permissable, Señor Johnson." He hesitated over the name, and Howell could sense his confusion.

Mulry said, "You see? You haven't got a chance at that money, Howell. Besides, I don't have it any more. Not even half of it." He reached into the breast pocket of his khaki shirt and drew out a small leather bag caught at the neck by a thong. "I've been making investments." He shook the bag and there was a muted tinkling sound.

Mulry lit a cigarette. "Now, if a man went to the trouble you've gone to, Howell, to get his wife back, it would be reasonable. But all this yak-yak about money is stupid."

Howell looked at the Greek. Palmapous was sweating now, drying his hands on a handkerchief. He turned to Mulry. "You seen Laura tonight?"

Mulry shook his head. "Hell, I just came in. I been busy."

"She's down in room 26," Howell said. "She's just sitting there waiting. With a knife in her throat."

Mulry came out of the chair fast. He looked at Howell, then turned his eyes to the Greek. Palmapous wet his lips with a nervous tongue, put a finger inside his collar and pulled it away from his throat. "This is nonsense, Señor—Johnson. I do not know why

Mr. Howell says that the Señora is—"

Mulry sat down again slowly, the frown leaving his face, a soft smile replacing it. "So that's why you've been following us, Howell? Not a matter of money at all, eh? You were sore at Laura. You just wanted to get your hands on her for running off." His head wagged dolefully. "I'm afraid that temper of yours has got you into a lot of trouble, Howell. You shouldn't have done anything like that. It was stupid. The place is too small to get away with it."

Palmapous was smiling tentatively now. The fast mind had accepted the facts, realigned them into their proper order. The Greek knew now how fond Mr. Johnson was of Mrs. Johnson.

Mulry said, "It's a sad thing, a man killing his wife. You read about it all the time, but you never figure it will happen to a friend of yours." He was smiling, a thin, bitter, satisfied smile. "Hell, I would have sent her back in a week or two, Howell. She was the sort of woman who can get on your nerves."

Ramirez and the girl had said nothing. The girl's face was pale, her eyes on Howell and filled with questions. Ramirez was motionless in his chair, his arms folded, his attitude attentive.

The full flood of his anger made Howell unthinking. He said, "Mulry, you've come a long way. You were always a stinking little louse, but you've improved on yourself. You take me for forty and you sell Laura a bill of goods. You weren't the first one to do that, and it hardly mattered. Now you and this—" he jerked his head at Palmapous, "have things all figured out so that you're clean on the whole deal." He pounded his fist on the table. "But it won't work, Mulry."

Mulry grinned at him. "Why not? It's perfect."

Howell said, "No. It isn't perfect. Because I won't let it work that way."

Mulry said, "Don't forget Brady."

Howell looked at the man and snorted. "You think some punchdrunk slob like that is going to horse me around? You should have brought a little more help, Mulry."

He wasn't thinking much about anything, now, but was filled only with his anger and a resolve that Mulry wouldn't bring this off. He started around the table, and Mulry got off the chair, backed to the wall and yelled, "Brady! Take him!"

The man reached for his hip pocket, and Howell took a beer from the table and hit him in the face with the glass, then he was on him. Brady was back against the wall, cursing, wiping at his eyes with his left hand, his right going after the gun. Howell grabbed the right hand, held it behind the man, twisted. The man collapsed in his hands, the gun falling to the floor. Howell held him erect, smashed his elbow into his jaw and let him fall.

HE REACHED DOWN for the gun, and turned, rising just in time to see the gleam of metal as Palmapous' hand emerged from under his coat. Howell shot him twice, the gun booming in the room, and the Greek went over backward with an amazed look on his face.

Howell stood there and said, "All right. That's the way you wanted it, Mulry. Now you can—"

But Mulry wasn't in the room. The door was open and in the hall there was the sound of pounding feet. Howell threw the gun on the floor with a curse and started after him, aware of nothing but a black rage.

He heard Mulry fall once, going down the stairs, but when he reached the lobby the man had made the street. Howell went down the stone steps and the rain hit him almost like a solid thing. He caught a glimpse of Mulry, thirty or forty yards away, in the light issuing from a *cantina.* The man was headed in the direction of the harbor. Howell went after him.

The rain was a heavy liquid curtain that resisted him, beat against him, dragged at his feet. He fell sprawling in a gutter after the second block, got up again with his hands and knees cut. Ahead of him he could catch an occasional glimpse of Mulry under a light, and he had no other desire than to get his hands on the man's throat.

He lost Mulry for thiry seconds, at one point, stood irresolute at a corner, the rain lashing at him. Then he caught sight of the figure entering the railroad yard and changed his course. Under one of the siding lights he saw Mulry fall, stagger to his feet. He was gaining.

He ran heavily now, the cobbled streets behind him, the railroad yard a sea of mud. His anger grew under the physical effort and the lashing rain. His thoughts were channeling themselves sanely now. Mulry and Laura, and a small leather bag of pearls. Laura dead in the hotel, Palmapous dead in the hotel, and Mulry out ahead of him in the teeming blackness with all that was left of the whole miserable affair.

Somewhere to his right he heard a locomotive come to surging life, and the big beam of its light cut through the rain, spotlighting Mulry. The man was up ahead, staggering, running weakly. Howell increased his speed.

Mulry, still in the light of the advancing locomotive, struggled up the bank of the track, clawing, scrabbling at the mud and stones. He was on top of the bank for a moment, glanced over his shoulder. Not twenty feet away, Howell knew he was visible to the other man. Mulry shouted once, then started to cross the track.

He didn't have a chance. Blinded by the big light, one hand thrown over his eyes, he staggered across the track. He never made it. The locomotive, picking up speed, hit him and tossed him to one side, went on into the night.

Chilled, Howell waited for the small string of freights to pass, then went over and up to the trackside. Mulry was a sodden lump in the ditch beside the track. A brief examination showed Howell that he was dead, broken and hammered.

He stood there for a moment and looked at what had once been a man without principle, without conscience. There was no pity in his heart, and he knew that, if it had been anything, the end had been too quick, too merciful.

Then he thought of the pearls. He examined Mulry without reluctance. The little bag was there, and its weight told Howell that most of the money was

right here, in another form. These would come in very handy. He looked once at the corpse and walked away. Mulry's own evil had turned upon him, destroyed him.

And walking slowly back to the hotel, he knew what he would do with the pearls. Half of them, perhaps, he would keep. The other half would go to Ramirez, for Howell had learned much from the little man in their brief friendship.

They had been gained through violence and evil, but their purpose would be good. Ramirez could do much with what their price would bring. They had been responsible for thievery, betrayal and murder in an unbroken sequence. At last they would have a virtue other than their beauty.

The card game had not been an irreverent thing, a waste of time. He had learned much from Ramirez, from the simplicity of Juan, from the goodness of a girl who would go out in this rain to tend a neighbor. He had learned a great deal, and he would apply it to the future.

He slogged back to the hotel, the bag of pearls heavy in his hand.

THE UMBRELLAS WERE like black mushrooms around the open grave. The one shielding the priest was held by an attendant. The liquid Spanish was as absolving as the steady rain, seemingly gentled for the moment, which fell upon the coffin.

Howell stood there, remembering again for this brief moment. The hillside graveyard looked upon the sea, and here Laura would know a peace she had never experienced in her short life.

The girl, Rita, was at his side, silent, her fave averted. There were in her, Howell knew, questions and doubts which he hoped would be dispelled with time.

Ancil was there, correct and rigid. Juan and his wife Maria shared an umbrella, and Maria was silently in tears. Luis was a mountain in his poncho, the face impassive, the mustache streaming rain.

Ramirez only was absent, and Howell wondered idly at this.

The coffin was lowered into place, and as the priest gently scattered a handful of wet earth upon it, the sound of bells arose from the town below. They reached through the rain timidly at first, then with more assurance. The rich gravity of their mourning tolled through the small valley.

The small party walked from the cemetery, and behind him Howell heard the heavy sound of earth upon wood as the workers finished their task.

They were halfway down the hillside when they met Ramirez. The little lawyer was panting with exertion.

He stopped for a moment to catch his breath, then he said, "The bells. Almost I forgot to instruct them about the ringing of the bells." He looked at Howell and his smile was sad. "I thought she might like the bells."

They still tolled, but it seemed to Howell for a moment that the sound had lost its mournfulness, had assumed instead a note of peace and of promise.

He gripped Ramirez' shoulder. "Yes," he said. "Thank you. She would have liked the bells." ♣ ♣ ♣

Mr. Wickard had two experiences in common with a great many people—as his conscience stretched, so did his wallet. Unlike most people's, however, Mr. Wickard's wallet proved far wiser than his conscience when he bought his way out of the electric chair—only to wish he hadn't!

Mr. Wickard's Wallet

by C. WILLIAM HARRISON

"YOUR DAUGHTER HAS been a cripple since she was born, Mr. Turner. But that is no reason she must remain a cripple all her life. An operation by the proper surgeon would enable her to walk."

"An operation like that costs money."

"I'm here to give you that money. It's up to you."

"I don't know, Mr. Wickard. I don't know what to do. I've been an honest man all my life. I want to keep on being honest. I don't know what to say."

"Call my money a gift."

"It's a bribe no matter what you call it."

"Then it's a bribe. But look at your daughter out there in her wheelchair. She has her right to skate on the sidewalk and run with the other kids. She has a right to a normal life, Mr. Turner. It's your duty to give it to her."

"But how do I know I'll be called for the jury? Or that I'll get your case?"

"You will be. I'll see to that."

"Well—"

"A thousand dollars now, Mr. Turner. You'll get the other four thousand when you make the jury bring in a verdict of manslaughter."

HE WAS A lean and thoroughly cool man who showed none of the wear of the trial. The court was packed with intent silence.

The strain of the trial had clamped down hard on the defense attorney. "I don't like it, Mr. Wickard," he whispered.

Carl Wickard smiled very faintly.

"There may be enough to convict you," the attorney argued grimly. "I'm not one to build up false hopes, Wickard. You've played with the law too long, and you're on the spot now. I did the best I could."

Wickard said, "You did a good job,

Joe. I've got a feeling I'll get off with manslaughter."

"You haven't got a chance," the attorney said.

Carl Wickard looked at the jury. They showed nothing that he could read, and it gave him a moment of fear. He looked at Bill Turner, and his confidence came back. Turner was haggard and gray. *Fighting his conscience,* Wickard thought. *But he's not forgetting his daughter.*

The prosecutor moved out in front of the jury, and there was an inexorable force behind his words.

"This man—" he pointed at Carl Wickard— "is a murderer. It's the duty of you, the jury, to find him guilty of murder in the first degree. For years he has engaged in any number of illegal activities without being brought to justice.

"The law found one weak link in his organization—George Malloy. But George Malloy was killed before he could talk. Carl Wickard murdered George Malloy. Again I must admit there is but little proof, but we do know this: George Malloy died when struck down by Carl Wickard's automobile.

"The defendant's argument is that if he had wanted to kill Malloy he would not have used his own car, that if he had been foolish enough to use his own car he would not have abandoned it without making an effort to remove the evidence of his act. This is the argument of a smart man who has made a fool of justice innumerable times.

"You know what he has done in the past, even though we can offer no factual proof. And you know that it is beyond any stretch of the imagination that it is coincidence that Wickard's car was stolen by some unknown person just before striking down and killing George Malloy—the one man in this city who could have put Wickard behind bars.

"Moral evidence can be, and is in this instance, stronger than factual evidence. It is your duty as honest citizens to weigh everything that has been brought before you, and find Carl Wickard guilty of murder in the first degree."

The jurymen filed out, and court recessed; and twenty hours later, when court convened again, Carl Wickard showed the strain of waiting.

But when the foreman stood up, he said, "We find the defendant guilty of manslaughter, and recommend that he receive the maximum sentence."

Ten years! It was better than the twenty years George Malloy would have given him. It was better than the electric chair.

Ten years and five thousand dollars was a cheap price to pay.

And when Bill Turner visited him in his cell two days later, Wickard did not hesitate in handing over the balance of his bribe.

"It'll always be on my conscience," Bill Turner said.

Carl Wickard grinned. "You earned your money. It cost you twenty hours in that jury room. You must have had a tough time swinging the other eleven over your way."

Bill Turner nodded. "A tougher time than you'll ever know," he answered. "They all wanted to acquit you." ♣ ♣

"I was sitting at my typewriter, staring at a blank wall, and seeing a red-eyed man crawl across it. 'Fiend though you are,' I thought, 'there is probably something human in you!'" With truly staggering insight Mr. Rogers has, in this masterpiece, put his finger on the nub of all fiendship. A monster we flee from on sight, but a fiend shares our bed and board, partakes of our joys, helps build our tomorrows only to destroy them—and us. We'll be surprised if Mr. Rogers' red-eyed crawler isn't someone you know—mother, father, brother, sister, aunt, uncle, neighbor or sweetheart. For all we know—he may even be you!

The Last Mrs. Hankler

by JOEL TOWNSLEY ROGERS

MRS. INGEBORDE HANKLER, fortyish, dark-haired and buxom, pushed aside the starched white muslin curtains of her kitchen window an unobstrusive handsbreadth before starting in to make her rhubarb pie that afternoon.

With a blank and lusterless yet unwinking gaze she peered out through the aperture thus exposed at the rear yard of her modest rural home, on the outskirts of the quiet and unexciting little crossroads hamlet of Tuckleberry, Massachusetts. She had lived here for four months now as the loving bride of her latest—and still current—husband, old Doc Hankler.

The rear view of the Hankler estate, or any other part of it, was not one to charm the aesthetic eye, not even of a confirmed country-lover, which Ingeborde was not. It was one of these lonesome suburban-looking properties which are found not infrequently in the rural districts, scattered sparsely along country roads. A five-room shingled bungalow with a ramshackle garage or woodshed in the rear, a chicken-coop and a dejected vegetable garden, all crowded on an eighth of an acre of flat and weedy land.

This was the house, the Hankler rural bungalow, in which Ingeborde dwelt and quietly moved about and peered forth from the kitchen window before making her rhubarb pies.

Ingeborde's husband, Doc Hankler, was not really a doctor, nor was that

his given name. His name was Ezriam — Ezriam Piddenbody Hankler — but nobody remembered it, which was quite understandable. He was called Doc and had always been called Doc for the same reason that many other men are inflicted with the name, because somewhere back in the dim mists of his boyhood, a half century or more ago, he had wanted to be one, and the nickname had just stuck.

He was an undersized little man with a great deal of dignity, a former Boston milk wagon driver. After forty years of delivering Grades A and B and Certified and Raw to sleeping households he had finally retired five years ago. He had bought this little rural paradise for his wife, who had been a frail, sickly woman needing quiet and country air.

And quiet and country air were two things, at least, which Tuckleberry and its environs had in abundance.

There was no one else to breathe and pollute the air nearer to the Hankler place than the next-door neighbor a quarter mile up the road. She was a widow, with nine children, by the name of Mrs. Hiniatra. The next door neighbor a quarter mile down the road was the childless widow of a Boston policeman killed in line of duty. She went by the good old Scottish name of Mrs. Campbell. Except for the occasional mooing of a far-off cow or the crowing of a rooster, there was an absolute quiet in Tuckleberry. A quieter place could not have been found this side of the graveyard. There had never been in the whole neighborhood a holdup, a divorce, a bank failure or a major fire. There had not even been a murder.

But in spite of the country air and quiet, the first Mrs. Hankler, whose name had been Nellie, had died last spring, after thirty years of wedded happiness and devotion to her husband, old Doc Hankler. On the rebound, three months later, Ingeborde had met and married him—just how or why he doubtless wasn't quite sure yet himself. He was a gentle, courteous, harmless man. Also he was confused and heartbroken by his loss. Ingeborde generally specialized in new-made widowers who had been devoted to their first wives. She had found them the easiest.

The grey light of a sunless December afternoon lay over the world outdoors. The lilac bush outside the kitchen window was a tangle of brittle looking scrub. The twisted, wormeaten crabapple tree which grew down along the fence beyond the ash heap was leafless and black as death. The vegetable garden was a rectangle of brown, half-frozen mire.

Out on the path which led towards the woodshed a mangy Rhode Island Red rooster, a pet of old Doc Hankler's, stalked forlornly, its scaly neck jerking and retracting as it surveyed the inhospitable ground for worms. In a pen of shiny new chicken wire beside the woodshed, a pair of tame rabbits—one white with pink eyes and one spotted brown-and-white with milk-blue eyes—crouched with their long ears laid back, shivering constantly. The Doc had brought them home only yesterday.

The poor old Doc and his rabbits.

It was not upon the bleak, rural landscape or livestock, however, that

Ingeborde's green, unflickering gaze was fastened in that moment she peeked from behind the kitchen curtains. The scene might have been one of apple blossoms and singing catbirds in the prime of May, and it would have been the same to her. She had never been a country bride before. She had always lived in cities. The only kind of a view which appealed to her was the sight of washing on clotheslines strung across a tenement courtyard, and of pushcarts and trucks on a crowded, noisy street. However, she did not expect to live here for the next forty years. When she was a widow, doubtless she would find a buyer for the place. And in the meantime she was not entirely discontented with the quietness and loneliness of the rural life as the bride of old Doc Hankler.

THROUGH THE OPEN door of the warped, ramshackle woodshed at the back, Ingeborde could see his scrawny, wisp-thin little figure now. He was engaged in his regular afternoon task of sawing wood. He had set up his sawbuck on the dirt floor of the shed, and had laid a four foot length of cherrywood upon it to cut into stove lengths. With one scrawny knee planted upon the log to steady it, he was sawing slowly and patiently.

He had taken off the ancient cutaway coat he always wore and had laid it carefully folded on a broken chair. He had placed his frayed silk hat on top of the coat, and had rolled up his shirt sleeves. His bald head, surrounded by a rim of silver-yellow hairs somewhat resembling a halo, was waxen white.

Ingeborde's crocodilian eyes surveyed him fixedly and without expression. He had looked so feeble when she first made his acquaintance that she had felt some misgivings as to whether she might be able to get any insurance on him if she married him. One foot in the grave already, he looked like. A broomstraw of a man. But he was wiry. One of these stringy, birdlike little men who, as the saying goes, take a good deal to kill.

As if subconsciously aware of Ingeborde's stare, though not of her thoughts, old Doc Hankler paused and straightened up. He pulled a rumpled handkerchief from his hip pocket and wiped his forehead, glancing towards the house. Quietly Ingeborde drew back from the aperture.

He wasn't quitting and coming in yet though, and not for a long time probably. He had picked up his axe now. He laid the short length of wood that he had just sawed off against the chopping block at his feet, and swung at it with a faint, resounding whack. He would be working out there till dark, thought Ingeborde. She drew the curtains quietly together again.

A pot of boiling beans bubbled on the wood range. From the radio in the dining room there came the subdued music of some afternoon dance band. Ingeborde liked music. Giddy dance music. She kept the radio going most of her waking hours. When they started to talk, she switched the dial to some other station that had wahooing saxophones.

She had planned to give the Doc beans and pie for supper tonight. Boston baked beans and rhubarb pie. Her famous rhubarb pie. It was not the first rhubarb pie that Ingeborde had made, not by several dozens. She was an expert pie maker and an all-around good cook. The way to a man's stomach lies through his appetite, as the old saying goes. Make it taste good, and they'll eat it and even ask for more. And Ingeborde knew how to make any dish appetizing. She was an appetizing dish herself, with her red-painted mouth, her greenish eyes beneath arched, thin-plucked brows, her plump figure, her sleek, heavy hair that generally was an unchanging golden blonde, though now it happened to be black.

A good cook, and an appetizing dish. Otherwise, she would not have been married so frequently. For Ingeborde, like her aged bridegroom, had been married before. However, unlike her bridegroom, she had been married more than once before. She was an old hand at marriage.

She had been married at least six or seven times, not counting that first one, whom she had married before she had become quite such an expert cook. That first one had spat out his pie one night at supper, glared at her and got up without a word and departed hastily out the door, with a wild look in his eyes. She had never seen or heard of him again.

Beyond that she had been Mrs. Snyder, Hansen, Petruzelli, Cusak, Globb and Veecher, though she hadn't thought it necessary to mention all those previous episodes to Doc Hankler when she married him. He had understood she was a Mrs. Mary Jones, widow of an Iowa hog farmer.

Ingeborde had already arranged all the utensils and ingredients for her pie upon her kitchen table. With the dexterity of experience she got to work and rolled the crust and put it in the pan. She dumped the rhubarb filling in, sprinkled a judicious measure of white powder from the battered aluminum shaker. She stuck her finger into the mess and tasted it, on the tip of her tongue, with one eye closed. It was a little bitter.

However, rhubarb is always a little bitter. It needs plenty of sweetening. From the shelf above the table she took down the granulated sugar canister and opened it and measured out two level teacups of sugar which she dumped into the filling. Then, for good measure, she sprinkled the battered aluminum can over the mess once more. She tasted it again, and it was quite sweet enough now.

Deftly she put the top crust on, sealed it around the edges with quick dabs of her thumb, thrust a fork three times into it and popped the pie into the oven.

The front doorbell rang as she closed the oven door and straightened up. For an instant she paused, a little breathless, her eyes rolling sideways in her head. She turned and snatched up the aluminum sugar shaker from the table, thrusting it up onto the shelf above, behind the row of tea and coffee canisters.

She seldom had a visitor. Big, placid Mrs. Hiniatra up the road had called once, soon after Ingeborde had first ar-

rived, but since she could speak no word of English and was exceedingly taciturn in her native Finnish, there had been nothing to do but sit and stare. The acquaintance had got nowhere.

Sharp-eyed little Mrs. Campbell down the road had dropped in half a dozen times or more during the first two weeks of Ingeborde's bridehood. With any encouragement at all from Ingeborde she would gladly have become an intimate, being one of these loquacious women who have an insatiable need for someone to talk to. But since she had been an old and close friend of the first Mrs. Hankler, and had the face of a snoop, Ingeborde had done her quiet best to discourage Mrs. Campbell. Her visits had ceased.

Once a forty-year-old boy working his way through Yale had come to the door selling magazine subscriptions. Once there had been a lost motorist asking the way. But for days and weeks and months on end that doorbell did not ring.

Still, there was no reason why it shouldn't ring.

INGEBORDE TOOK A deep breath and went to answer the door, wiping her hands on her apron. On her way through the dining room she paused to turn the radio dial from some tabloid drama, which had now started, to a station which had music.

It was just Mr. Dinks, the nice young insurance agent. Who else had she thought it might have been?

"Won't you come in, Mr. Dinks?" she said.

He came in and sat down on the edge of a rocker, laying his briefcase on his knees. He pulled forth a fountain pen from the battery in his vest pocket and opened his briefcase, while Ingeborde sat watching him with her motionless eyes.

"You've probably wondered why I haven't been around before this, Mrs. Hankler," he said apologetically. "In regard to the application for the new five-thousand-dollar policy, I mean. The fact is, it took time to investigate—"

"To investigate?" said Ingeborde.

"Yes," he said. "To investigate Mr. Hankler. The home office is always a little strict. We're a conservative old company. There was some question as to whether the outstanding policies for two thousand and three thousand which Mr. Hankler took out a number of years ago in favor of his first wife, and which have now been endorsed to name you as beneficiary, were not sufficient in view of his financial circumstances. We don't like to overload our clients, you understand, as a matter of business policy.

"Then there was, of course, the more essential matter of his age. After all, sixty-six is not a spring chicken. Though it's not a cooked goose, either, is it?" Mr. Dinks giggled at his own joke. "How, by the way," he said, "is Mr. Hankler?"

"He's fine," said Ingeborde defiantly. "He doesn't know what it is to be sick. He's as young as a twenty-year-old. Always full of steam. He's out now sawing and chopping wood to beat the band. I feed him right and take good care of him, and that's the answer. He's a wonderful husband. A wonderful

man and husband. He may be sixty-six—that's on his other policies and nobody can get around that—but he'll be able to show some of you young fellows plenty when he's a hundred."

Mr. Dinks flushed faintly in the face of Ingeborde's bristling defense of her ancient bridegroom. He felt that it was in some way a disparagement of himself. He was conscious of her red lips, her white teeth, her warm-colored face, the little light that flickered at the back of her eyes. She was maybe forty years old, well say thirty-eight, and almost old enough to be Mr. Dinks' mother. Still, it was funny why she'd marry an old crow like Hankler. Mr. Dinks straightened his tie and brushed his thin hair with his palm.

"Yes," he said. "The medical examiner gave a fine report on Mr. Hankler. A splendid heart and first class arteries. So in spite of the age, the company decided to grant the application."

"Oh," said Ingeborde, relaxing. "So you're issuing it, are you?"

"Yes," said Mr. Dinks. "Didn't I say so? I've got it here with me. He seems a good risk, age considering. After all with your good care, as you say, he may live to be a hundred. As for the question of overloading, why, you are the one who knows what you can afford to meet. I guess every woman thinks a lot of her husband, particularly when she's first married to him, and it seems as if no amount of insurance could ever make up to her for ever losing him."

"That's true indeed," said Ingeborde, rendered momentarily voluble by release from tension. "That's only too true. Not if it were a million dollars. I only wish it were a million dollars—I mean, the way I see it, the more you are insured against something, the less it ever happens. I knew a man once in Chicago, and he liked to smoke while he read in bed. And about once every month he would fall alseep that way, and he would wake up and the mattress would be all on fire and half the house would be burned up and the firemen would have to come. Till finally he took out some insurance and gave up smoking and began chewing gum, and he never had a fire again. I don't know if you've noticed it, but that's the way it always happens."

"Yes, that's right," said Mr. Dinks, shaking his fountain pen and trying to frown some ink out of it. "That's the way we all feel about it. I wish somebody someday would invent a fountain pen. Damn it, an inkspot on the rug—I'm sorry. Chicago, did you say, Mrs. Hankler?"

"Chicago?" said Ingeborde, putting the brakes on.

"I thought you said something about a friend in Chicago. I wondered if you had ever lived there."

"I've never been within a thousand miles of there," said Ingeborde. "I said Chibago—Chibago Falls, Vermont. It's a town you never heard of."

"Oh," said Mr. Dinks. "Well, here's the policy, and the premium for the first quarter is a hundred and seventy-seven dollars and ninety-three cents, as I believe I quoted you. As soon as we have received Mr. Hankler's check for the amount, the policy will be in force."

"I happen to have the cash," said Ingeborde.

She unfastened a safety pin on the inside of her dress and drew forth a folded wad of bills which she counted and handed to him.

"Nine twenties," she said. "I thought I might as well have it ready."

"One hundred and eighty dollars," said Mr. Dinks. "Right to the T. I'll give you your change. And thank you, and I'll make out a receipt."

HE FILLED OUT a receipt blank upon his knees. Ingeborde took it and examined it with practiced care. She inserted it carefully in the fold of the policy he had given her, which she likewise had examined. Then she went to the walnut drop-lid desk in the corner and got out a green cashbox in which she put both policy and receipt.

"Well," she said, with a little sigh, "that's the end of that."

"Not the end," said Mr. Dinks in waggish reminder. "Not quite the end, I hope. That doesn't come till you have collected on it."

"I hope I never live to collect on it," said Ingeborde firmly.

"No, that's right. I hope you never do," said Mr. Dinks piously. "I hope Mr. Hankler lives for a long, long time. I hope he lives to be a hundred. But, after all, Mrs. Hankler, you can't get around it that death comes to all of us eventually. It's a thought, I mean, that you as a devoted wife must be braced for. And, of course, eventually you will have to collect."

"I suppose so," said Ingeborde with a sigh. "But it's not something we like to think about, is it?"

"No," said Mr. Dinks piously, rolling up his eyes and holding them there a moment. "Still," he added, with a dash of boldness, "you must admit that you will make a very handsome widow, Mrs. Hankler. Maybe some of the rest of us will have a chance then."

He ended the statement on a slightly rising inflection, with what he thought was great subtlety.

But Ingeborde ignored Mr. Dinks' implied suggestion, as if she had not understood it.

"Well," said Mr. Dinks, fumbling uncertainly with his receipts and papers.

He would have liked to linger. A warm, cozy house on a cold, raw afternoon. The radio softly strumming Hawaiian music from the dining room. Comfortable chairs. Pleasant smells of cookery emanating from the kitchen. And the old man out in back chopping wood, as the faint, reiterated whacks from back there indicated. Certainly more agreeable than ringing doorbells on cold-eyed insurance prospects for the next hour or two. Mrs. Hankler might not be so young as some of these young jitterbugs, but. . . .

Mr. Dinks closed his briefcase with elaborate care and arose lingeringly, buttoning up his overcoat by degrees, procrastinating as long as possible over the operations.

"Well," he said, "be seeing you in three months time, I suppose, Mrs. Hankler."

"What for?" she said.

"Why, the next quarterly premium," he reminded her with an air of brightness. "I thought I might as well stop

by to collect it. Or would you rather have Mr. Hankler mail it in to the office?"

"Oh, the next premium," said Ingeborde indifferently. "Why, by that time—"

She closed her small red mouth with an audible snap.

"Yes, by that time?" said Mr. Dinks.

"Why, by that time—just as you like, Mr. Dinks. We'll see about it when the time comes. The fact is, I hadn't thought about it."

"Then I'll drop by. Three months from now. Nothing more certain than insurance premiums," said Mr. Dinks, with a greater attempt at brightness, "not even death and taxes as the man used to say."

She smiled briefly at him.

Perhaps it wasn't all quite so pleasant as Mr. Dinks had imagined it a moment ago. The house didn't seem quite so warm as he had thought it, somehow. The radio in the next room had come to the end of its seductive tropic music.

There was something just a little cold in the smile of Mrs. Hankler's red, red lips. There was something in her eyes which spoke of graves. And suddenly Mr. Dinks, as he put his hand upon the knob and opened the door to the cold, raw out-of-doors, was glad that he was going from that place.

"We now bring you our regular afternoon broadcast of the latest happenings in the world, near and afar, brought to you through the courtesy of Rux, the breath deodorant," said the voice of the radio in the dining room. "London! Tonight the leader of the opposition, Winston Churchill, left the House—"

And so did Mr. Dinks.

Chapter 2

LADY KILLER

THROUGH A CRACK in the not quite closed door, Ingeborde watched the insurance agent for a moment as he went skittering down off the front porch steps, down the gravel path towards his car parked on the dirt road. Mr. Dinks' departure was reminiscent of the frantic and erratic speed of a fly, still slightly groggy, which has torn itself away from a sticky spider's web. Neither she nor he understood the emotions in him.

As for Mr. Dinks, he would feel vaguely ashamed of his incoherent and unnamed feeling when he looked back, having reached some place of refuge. As for Ingeborde, Mr. Dinks' flight was not a particularly new phenomenon to her. She had found young men inclined to be that way with her before. They might be mildly attracted, start to preen themselves and flirt, and then suddenly get a fit of nervous prostration or heebie-jeebies or something, and shy away. Through the crack in the door she watched Mr. Dinks.

The radio in the dining room was still blatting forth its news. She turned and hastened in there, on her way back to the kitchen, to switch it off.

"Chicago! The body of the late Oscar Snyder of this city was disinterred today by the medical examiner—"

Ingeborde had turned the dial onto a blare of brasses and kettledrums before the newscaster's words had quite penetrated her understanding. She still had her fingers on the dial, standing frozen, staring down at the loudspeaker grill as if a ghost had emerged from it. Frantically she spun the dial back again to catch the station the news broadcast had been on.

" . . . Unmistakable evidence of arsenic having been administered in lethal quantities. . . ."

There, she had it again! She sank down into a dining chair beside the radio, her knees feeling weak beneath her, listening with her red lips dry and tight.

"The disinterment of Snyder brings to six the total number of poison deaths now definitely attributed to the Borgia of Chicago, who for a number of years carried on her career of marrying lonely old men and, after insuring their lives for substantial amounts, doing them to death through the means of slow, cumulative poison.

"The crimes of the Borgia only began to be uncovered last spring, when the suspicions of a distant relative prompted an autopsy on the late William Veecher. Mr. Veecher's death had been certified as due to kidney disease, but the autopsy revealed that he had died of arsenic, purchase of which was traced to Mrs. Veecher. When the police closed in, however, they found that she had fled. Since then her previous history has been gradually uncovered and evidence of her other crimes brought to light.

"Known variously as Verna Veecher, Greta Globb, Carrie Cusak, Angelina Petruzelli, Hildegarde Hansen and Ingeborde Snyder, she is believed to be the same as an Ingeborde Krackenheimer, a registered nurse, who was deprived of her license in 1925 for malpractice, following the death of one or more of her patients under peculiar circumstances. This person later served a six-month sentence for shoplifting. She is described by the police as being a striking blonde, about forty-five years old, about a hundred and sixty pounds in weight, of an ordinarily quiet and undistinguished manner, but inclined to be hilarious and somewhat boisterous when drunk. In spite of the favorable impression which she gives to most people who meet her, she is utterly cold-blooded and without scruples of any sort.

"She is fond of occasional dancehall visits and sessions at bars. She is believed to be still in Chicago, possibly married again under another name to some other unsuspecting, intended victim. The police express themselves as confident that they will track her down. And now, ladies, a word for Rux, the breath—"

Ingeborde turned the radio dial.

"Chicago. The body of the late Oscar Snyder of this city was disinterred—"

SHE HAD STRUCK another news broadcast. She spun the dial again, with haste.

"You will now hear a talk by Dr. J. P. MacGufferson, the famous criminal psychologist, analyzing the case of Chicago's marrying murderess, the so-called Bride of Death, brought to you

through the courtesy of Soapso, spelled S-O-A-P-S-O, which relieves you of those grimy hands—"

She turned it again, a little frantically.

"This is Station WARK, Clay Bluff, Arkansas. Now for just a look at the latest news reports. Dispatches from Chicago tell us that the marrying murderess—"

"This is station WORG, Saw River, Oregon. A news bulletin from Chicago has just come in—"

"Ingeborde Krackenheimer, a former nurse—"

"Bride of Death—"

"Described by the police as a striking blonde, with two gold upper teeth conspicuous when she smiles. A frequenter of taxi dancehalls—"

A cacophony of sinister, bodiless voices cackling from every station, whichever way she desperately turned the dial. A host of demons, gabbling and jeering at her. Suddenly, from every corner of the map, the air of the whole world was filled with them.

Ingeborde snapped off the switch.

She got up after a moment of the ringing silence. Her knees still felt a little weak beneath her. She went into her bedroom off the dining room, holding to the doorpost a moment for support as she passed through. She stood there in front of her dresser, leaning over to look intently at her reflection in the somewhat distorted mirror.

Her black hair, dead black, falling down in a smooth, straight bob, had always been a golden yellow before, and she had worn it in curls and frizzled spirals on top of her head. Her eyes, with their level and inexpressive look beneath the thin, black hairlines of brows—she had changed the whole expression of her eyes, and even the apparent cast of her whole face, by almost denuding herself of the heavy, golden brows which had made her eyes seem bluer and more babyish than they were. It was almost an Oriental look her eyes had now, green and motionless, dark and torpid, a look suggestive of Egypt somehow—if Ingeborde had had the thoughts to express it—and of twilight on the dark waters . . . crocodiles.

Eye to eye, Ingeborde stared at herself in the lumpy mirror, taking in each feature, with her face bent close. After a moment she smiled deliberately with her mouth, not with her eyes, lifting up her upper lip, exposing all her smooth, white teeth, as flawless as china.

It was smart of them to have traced me back, she thought. *Smart and patient. I had an idea they might do that, eventually. But that's as much good as their pains will ever do them. And that's as smart as they'll ever be. They can't trace me now. They've got my fingerprints from that bit I did fifteen years ago, but what of it? They don't even know what I look like now. They're still looking for me in Chicago And they wouldn't know me now even if they saw me there.*

She picked up her lipstick and repainted with care the small rosebud of her mouth. She got out a small dye bottle from her bureau drawer and retouched the thin black line of her brows.

It gave me a jolt, she thought. *But there's nothing to worry about. They'd never think of me living in a dump*

like this, twenty miles from even a jukebox or a movie, married to a poor, pint-sized old New England dope who doesn't even drink sarsaparilla.

She set her pearly teeth in more firmly with her forefinger and thumb. She picked up her hairbrush and brushed her hair carefuly, bending her head to the mirror to look for any signs of lighter color at the roots.

So they've traced me back, she thought. *Well, let them. I know when to have a good time and when to lie low. After I've got rid of old Hankler I'll stay on here for a while. Not a cop in forty miles. I'll get rid of him quick, she thought. I'm sick of him—the polite, apologetic little termite. Not an ounce of blood in him. I'll double the dose and finish him in a week. Sawing wood and sawing wood. Him and his rabbits.* She brushed her cinder-black hair, looking with quiet pleasure into the crocodilian eyes.

Suddenly as she stood there, brushing her hair, working the fright out of her mind which the crackling radio had put there for a moment, Ingeborde was aware of the creak of a floorboard and the faint rattle of pans or canisters out in the kitchen.

She stood frozen, the brush clutched in her hand. Some one was out there! Some one prowling. It might have been only her wisp-thin little bridegroom, of course, come in for a drink of water and fumbling around for a drinking tumbler. Except that she heard, as she listened with ringing eardrums, the faint, slow snoring of his bucksaw from the woodshed.

Some one was—

"Murderess — murderess — bride of death," she heard a voice muttering from the kitchen. "Six husbands killed. Well, if that ain't a fine goings on! Now where does she keep that powdered sugar can?"

GREY-WHITE OF FACE, Ingeborde went rushing from her bedroom in a soundless tiger fury. From the dining room, as she leaped through it, she could see out in the kitchen the shriveled, hunch-shouldered form of her neighbor down the road—Mrs. Campbell.

Gabbling and muttering to herself, Mrs. Campbell was standing on her tiptoes to reach up to the shelf above the kitchen table, pushing aside the canisters arranged there, and feeling with her fingers for something else.

"She always kept it around here," muttered Mrs. Campbell.

Her searching hand had found the battered aluminum sugar shaker back of the canisters, where Ingeborde had thrust it out of sight. She pulled it down and looked at the white powder dusted on its top, in the instant that Ingeborde with a soundless rush came leaping in from the dining room and snatched it from her.

"Glory be!" said Mrs. Campbell, jumping back like a grasshopper.

Ingeborde breathed quietly. She looked at Mrs. Campbell with her terrible eyes, inching towards her, holding the heavy silver brush in her hand.

"Well?" she said. "Well?"

Like the tolling of a bell. If Mrs. Campbell knew anything, if she sus-

pected, she was not going to leave this place alive.

"Glory be! Why, howdo, Miz Hankler," Mrs. Campbell gabbled apologetically. "Kind of cold out, ain't it? I didn't know anybody was at home. You kind of put a start on me. I knocked and nobody answered, and it was so quiet I kind of thought nobody was at home. The door wasn't locked, so I come in. My nephew Fred is visiting me for the afternoon from over in Wissawotamay; he's just been stationed there and he's mighty fond of sugared doughnuts. He likes them hot and sizzling out of the grease and rolled in powdered sugar an inch thick.

"I made him up a batch of some and then found I didn't have a lick of powdered sugar in the house, and thought I might just run over neighborly to borry some. I remembered where Nellie, that was the first Miz Hankler, used always to keep it, in her powdered sugar can up on the shelf, and knew she wouldn't mind if she was here. She and me was always borrying. Didn't mean to intrude," she said, with an air of somewhat miffed pride, tossing her head back at Ingerborde's cold stare, and remembering other occasions when Ingeborde had frozen her. "Those that don't want to lend aren't obligated to. Though I always thought it was just human and friendly."

"I haven't got any powdered sugar," said Ingeborde between her teeth. "And you know it."

"Well, what's that in that shaker right in your hand that you snatched away from me, for lawk's sake?" said Mrs. Campbell with mild indignation. "It's white and it's powdered and it's sweet, ain't it, and what else could you call it but powdered sugar?"

"No," said Ingeborde. "It's bitter."

"Bitter?" said Mrs. Campbell.

"It's alum," said Ingeborde.

"Alum?" said Mrs. Campbell. "I never heard of nobody using that for cooking?"

"Yes," said Ingeborde. "Powdered alum. I keep it to dust on my hands after washing dishes. It softens them."

"Well, I never heard of that," said Mrs. Campbell. "Live and learn. More new household hints they think up every day. I'd certainly been in a pretty mess if I'd used that on my doughnuts, wouldn't I? Alum—bitterest tasting stuff ever invented. Makes my mouth pucker just to think of it. I'm glad you was to home. You ought to keep it in something else, though, or somebody might get hold of it by accident and get an awful mouthful. I'd as soon have poison—what's the matter, Miz Hankler?"

"Matter with what?" said Ingeborde.

"Why, I mean how quiet it is in here. You always have your radio going, seems like. That's why I thought you wasn't home. Radio playing to beat the band morning and afternoon all day long. I like to kind of listen to it myself at times, but it'd drive me crazy all the time, just listening and never able to get back at it with a word of your own at all. But you haven't got it playing now."

"A tube went bad," said Ingeborde.

"Then you didn't hear all the news about the murderess?"

"What murderess are you talking

about?" asked Ingeborde too quietly.

She held her heavy hairbrush with a firm grip. She looked with her cold, unwinking gaze at Mrs. Campbell's wrinkled face, her thick-lensed, faded eyes, her long snoop nose and loose-lipped, gabbling mouth. She wet her own lips—staring at Mrs. Campbell still with her terrible eyes.

"What murderess?" she said.

"Why, good lawks," said Mrs. Campbell. "She killed six husbands out in Chicago. She poisoned all of them, one after 'nother. Nobody ever suspected a thing about her for years. Living natchel and going about her regular business just like you and me. They call her a mass murderess."

Mrs. Campbell settled herself down on a kitchen chair, though she hadn't been invited. With the swift and eager gesture of a champion prizefighter disrobing himself for battle, she untied beneath her chin the knot of the scarf that she wore over her gray, scraggly hair, to give her jaw more play. Her faded eyes behind their bulging glasses looked at Ingeborde with the fanatic glint of the born gabbler who has captured an unwary listener and will not let him get away alive.

In the warm kitchen beside the stove where the beans bubbled and the pie baked. Alone with Ingeborde.

Chapter 3

SPEAK OF THE DEVIL

"A MASS MURDERESS," Mrs. Campbell said with relish. "It gives you the creeps to think about her, don't it? Six husbands she killed, one after another. Poisoning them while she smiled at them, and then poisoning them a little more while they got sicker and sicker. She'll be killing more and more, too, you can bet your bottom dollar on it. I'd hate to be a man out in Chicago, with her loose and on the prowl.

"Well, that's what you can expect in cities. That's what you've got to put up with if you want to live in them. Look at Jack the Ripper in London, and nobody ever found him, and he killed ten or twelve. Look at the blond strangler out in Los Angeles, and he strangled eight or nine. Look at the torso murderer they had for years right in Boston where I used to live, and every few months or so they'd find a leg or arm or head wrapped in a newspaper stuck in a sewer or floating in the bay, men and women that he'd killed just for the fun of it, they figured. Maybe he's still doing it, and nobody's found him yet. I almost think I saw him once, too, myself."

Mrs. Campbell paused for breath, her faded eyes slightly bugging outward behind their glasses with a remembered excitement and terror, her jaw still working, though for the moment soundlessly.

"There was none ever any bigger and worse than him," she said, "and we had him right in Boston. And maybe I met him; I'll always think to my dying day I did. My husband used to be a sergeant in the police force, Miz Hankler. His name was Sergeant Campbell, and he was on the detail looking for the torso killer for months and years, so I knew all about him. And once sergeant let

me go down to South Boston with him to look at a bundle they had found floating out in the bay.

"It was scary in the fog and all, and the whistles blowing and the ships creeping, and a rowboat coming in to the pier with a drip-drip of oars, bringing the bundle. There was a big crowd had collected, waterfront loafers and roustabouts and all, as they always did when the word got around that they had found another bundle. And more than likely the killer himself was among the crowd there waiting, it kind of occurred to me, because that was the district he always did his killings in, and he must have lived somewhere around there.

"There was a man in a blue polo shirt standing rubbing elbows right next to me that I'll never forget to my dying day, a great big red-headed, bull-necked brute with a mashed-in nose and big freckled arms like a gorilla, and a dagger and two bleeding hearts tattooed on one of them. I almost fainted when I looked around and saw him standing there beside me, with his eyes rolling around in his head and a kind of bloodthirsty look on his face while they unwrapped the bundle.

"He saw me staring at him. 'Why the bug-eyed glare, sister?' he growled at me. 'Do you think I'm your Aunt Nellie or something?'

"He said that to me, Miz Hankler. I could hardly say a word. I felt the most awful strangling in my throat. 'I know who you are!' I said to him. 'You're the mass murderer himself!' I said to him. 'You killed and cut up that poor thing in the bundle!'

"'Sure,' he said, 'and I'll cut you up sometime, sister, and cook you with eggs for breakfast.' He said it right to me, Miz Hankler! Right at my ear, kind of growling. I gave a screech and fainted."

Mrs. Campbell paused for breath dramatically.

"There was nothing else for a lady to do," she said. "When I opened my eyes, I was sitting on the pier and everybody around staring at me, but he was gone. Sergeant—that was my husband, Miz Hankler—sergeant thought at first I had screeched because they had been opening the bundle, though there wasn't nothing in this one this time, as it happened. There was just some old banana skins and empty sardine tins and Crackerjack boxes that somebody had had on a picnic and wrapped up in a newspaper and dropped off an excursion boat. That wouldn't have made me screech and faint. When I told sergeant it was because I had seen the mass murderer and he had confessed to me who he was, sergeant just laughed himself sick.

"He wouldn't believe it. He said that the man was a detective—Detective Pat Reilly, one of them who had been stationed amongst the crowd to look for suspicious characters or actions. They always had lots of them mixing among the crowds that way whenever they found a bundle, though it never done no good.

"All right, detective or not, I guess I know a mass murderer when I see one. And as I live and breathe, to my dying day I'll never forget that I was near to one and talked to one, as near to one

and talking to one as I am talking to you right now. Goodness, it scares me yet. I guess you've heard about him all right, Miz Hankler?"

"Heard about who?" said Ingeborde quietly.

"Why, the torso murderer," said Mrs. Campbell. "Everybody's heard about him."

"What's that got to do with me?" said Ingeborde.

"With you?" said Mrs. Campbell in blank surprise.

INGEBORDE STOOD motionless. Unconsciously, she had been inching towards Mrs. Campbell as the little woman gabbled. But she stopped now. She stood motionless, relaxing. Through every muscle she rippled and relaxed. Mrs. Campbell had no thought of her at all, she realized. No thought of any kind. Mrs. Campbell was just one of these goofy murder fans, a soul who reveled in the thought of dark, bloody events and the doings of maniacal murderers who killed out of love or mania. Ingeborde herself was not maniacal. She worked only for profit.

"I don't know anything about any murderers," said Ingeborde. "I've never been in Chicago."

"Is that a fact?" said Mrs. Campbell, with a shade of indifference. "They're awful things, Miz Hankler, take it from one who knows. Though kind of scary and exciting, too, to think of. I wonder if they'll ever catch that one in Chicago. A brazzy blonde, they said over the radio, with two gold teeth that would knock your eye out. It seems as if they ought to be able to catch her, knowing just what she looks like. But it seems as if they never do."

Ingeborde smiled, with her white teeth, politely. "They do their best, anyway," she said. "If you'll excuse me, the beans—"

"Well," said Mrs. Campbell with a sigh, arising. "I've got to be getting back to Fred. My nephew Fred. I didn't mean to stay so long, I just meant to run over for a minute. But it's always so interesting listening to you, Miz Hankler, and getting your idea of things, that the time just flies.

"It's kind of lonesome around here. Sometimes I miss the city. But every night on bended knees I give thanks than I'm not living back there any more where all those murderers are. Still, it kept you kind of keyed up, the exciting things always happening, murders and robberies and divorces and fires, and sergeant on the police. He got killed. He got killed in our back alley.

"Somebody hit him on the head one early morning with a milk bottle when he was coming home from the midnight shift, and I woke up and heard him groaning, and went out to him in my nightgown in the rain. I'll never forget the broken glass all around and my bare feet getting cut with it, and the rain falling, and his poor mashed head on my lap and his blood on my gown. He looked at me and didn't see me, and his lips that moved as if he wanted to say something, but never did.

"You don't mind if I wipe my eyes, do you, Miz Hankler? Yes, that was the way he died. Just kind of killed. And we lived in a nice part of town,

too. Out in Alston Park Gardens with all pretty little houses and flowers and trees, and nice neighbors all around. It must have been some tramp. It couldn't have been the torso killer, anyway, because he was always way down in South Boston at the other end of town, and he always cut them up in pieces."

"But with the sergeant dead and gone, I moved away. Took the insurance and bought my little place out here where I could grow my own radishes and beans, maybe, and keep some chickens and not worry about the cost of living no more. It's kind of quiet. It's kind of quiet and lonesome. It wasn't so bad when Nellie was alive—she was the first Miz Hankler. She was kind of quiet, herself, but she was always somebody to talk to, and that's all a body needs.

"Every day I was always running over half a dozen times like this to borry a cup of sugar or a dab of buter, and then sit down to chat. She was my oldest friend. We lived next door to each other for seven years in Alston Park Gardens, practically in each other's houses, and every morning while the menfolks was sleeping, we'd pare our potatoes or wash our curtains together, and every second Friday of the living world when sergeant and Doc had their days off fall at the same time, we'd all four of us go off on a picnic together in the woods or at the beach, if it was spring or summer, or if it was winter, we'd sit at home together playing dominoes and eating sandwiches and drinking ginger ale together all day long.

"Oh, we had some good times. That's the reason why, after sergeant was killed, and I moved out here, there was nothing Nellie would have but that Doc must give up his milk route and take his savings and buy this place next to me and bring her out here, too. She was a wonderful woman, Nellie. A wonderful neighbor and friend to me, and a wonderful wife to Doc.

"A wonderful, wonderful wife. She wasn't as young as you are, though, Miz Hankler, nor as pretty, and I didn't mean that she loved him any more than you do. Well, as I say, I've got to be getting back. Didn't mean to stay but a minute, but I've enjoyed listening to you talk. What'd I come for? Oh, yes, powdered sugar. If you haven't got any, confectioner's would be nice. You're always such a good cook yourself—the cakes you make and all—I guess you would have some confectioner's. Goodness," she said, sniffing, "that's a good pie I smell. What kind is it—apple?"

THE SNIFF WAS the first apparbreath which she had taken in five solid minutes. The miserable old parrot. Ingeborde had never heard such a lot of inane blat.

She had removed the pot of simmering beans from the stove while Mrs. Campbell had been gabbling, and had poured them into the earthenware beanpot. Sprinkling on salt and pepper, she had put in a lump of seared salt pork, and placed on the beanpot cover. Opening the oven door to put the pot in for the final baking, there had surged forth that rich and fragrant odor of baking rhubarb pie which had caused Mrs.

Campbell to sniff and then comment.

"Rhubarb," she told Mrs. Campbell. "It's Doc's favorite."

"Rhubarb?" said Mrs. Campbell, a little wistfully. "Well, it certainly smells nice. I never had much luck with rhubarb myself, and there's none I like so much. You certainly feed him well. You take good care of him. Do you make it very often?"

"Twice a week," said Ingeborde. "I'll make an extra one for you next time if you like it."

'Oh, I wouldn't want to put you to the trouble, Miz Hankler," said Mrs. Campbell, quite delighted.

"It would be a pleasure," said Ingeborde.

She accompanied Mrs. Campbell to the kitchen door—in fact, getting her weight behind the little parrot woman, she almost bumped and pushed her to the door, and out through it—to make sure that at last Mrs. Campbell was really going. The shades of dusk were already falling over the bleak Hankler backyard as the two women emerged onto the kitchen porch. Out in the woodshed at the back, beyond the bare, forlorn garden, old Doc Hankler's wisp-thin, coatless figure could still be seen.

He had paused in his sawing for the moment. Wiping his forehead with his handkerchief, he glanced towards the house.

He could not see Ingeborde and Mrs. Campbell on the back porch, watching him in that moment. He stooped and gently picked up the mangy rooster which had stalked out along the path towards the woodshed. He held it in his hands a moment, fondling it, and then, with a swing of his white, fishbone arms, he placed it up on his shoulder, where it perched in great dignity and content.

He talked to it over his shoulder, muttering and chuckling to it, and then set it gently down to his feet again. For a moment he vanished from sight inside the shed, then appeared again at the small side door which opened out onto the pen where the two rabbits crouched shivering. He reached out and picked them up, rubbing the ears of each in turn and softly talking to it, then depositing them inside the shed. In a moment again he appeared at the woodshed front door, wiping his forehead and looking vaguely at nothing before resuming his sawing.

"Rabbits," said Ingeborde in quiet, stony mockery. "He has a box with straw fixed up for them inside that he puts them in. He treats that chicken like a mother."

"Poor old man," said Mrs. Campbell with a sigh, shaking her head. "I waved and hollered to him when I came in, but he was so hard at work he didn't see me, and he's getting so deef now he didn't hear me at all. You tell him that I called, anyway, and left him my regards."

SUDDENLY, TURNING TO face Ingeborde, she put her hand upon Ingeborde's arm, with a tender and affectionate gesture.

"You are a good wife to him, Miz Hankler," she said with earnestness. "A good wife. Comparisons are odious, and

I don't make them. Nellie was a good woman, and she was my best friend, too. She did her best by him according to her lights. But I'll say this, I don't think she ever gave him much chance to be very happy. No, he never seemed so contented and happy with her as he is now. She was always too strict. It was always don't do this, Doc, and don't do that. And she loved him, of course, and he loved her, but a man's not happy as he should be when he gets too much of that. You humor him in his little foibles. You let him enjoy himself in his own little ways. And I can see he's happy. I'm glad of that. Let him be happy, I say, in the few days he's got to live."

"What do you mean?" said Ingeborde. "What do you mean, he has only a few days to live? What do you mean to insinuate, you—you—"

In the darkling shadows of the porch, glaring at Mrs. Campbell. In the shadows, with her terrible eyes. Oh, why hadn't she obeyed her furious, instinctive impulse and bashed out the old gabbler's brains there inside! Bashed her brains out in the kitchen, and burned her in the furnace! Oh, damn her, what did she know about that battered sugar can? What had she seen or smelt or guessed with her snoop nose?

"You—you—" Ingeborde said stiffly.

Mrs. Campbell's hand was still upon her arm.

"Ah," said Mrs. Campbell. "Don't take it so much to heart, you poor thing. You haven't noticed. You wouldn't dream of expecting it, being only a bride and all. But he's been getting so white looking of late, whiter and whiter looking, and every day, as I've seen him going past my house down to the mailbox at the crossroads, looking more frail and frail. It's his heart. It's his heart, Miz Hankler. He's always had a bad heart, and that was what worried Nellie so, and helped drive her to her grave. But you can't wrap a heart in cotton batting. When its time comes, it must stop. We none of us live forever, Miz Hankler. And some day, before you know it, poor old Doc is just going to drop."

Ingeborde wet her lips. "You think so?"

"I know so," said Mrs. Campbell profoundly. "Perhaps I oughtn't to have told you. Just let you live in bliss. But the shock when it happened would be worse that way for you. You've got to be prepared to face it, you poor thing, Miz Hankler. Any day now. Almost any day."

"Thank you for telling me," said Ingeborde. "I—I won't let myself break down."

"That's the brave girl," said Mrs. Campbell tenderly. "That's the brave, brave girl."

With a sympathetic headshake, she gave a final pat to Ingeborde's arm. Then she went down the porch steps, and out across the side lawn. Ingeborde watched her till she was out upon the road, and walking briskly and steadily down it towards her house a quarter mile away. With cold eyes—with giant laughter roaring deep inside her, though no sign upon her face.

Ingeborde blessed the old parrot. What Mrs. Campbell believed about

Ingeborde's wiry, wisp-thin bridegroom —that his heart was on the point of death at any moment—was a piece of misinformation she had probably conveyed in her own gabbling way a dozen times already to everyone within the vicinity. To coroners, doctors, undertakers, grocers, mailmen, parsons and whatever representatives of the law had jurisdiction in Tuckleberry—in lieu of local police.

And since Mrs. Campbell was the oldest acquaintance of old Doc Hankler, and had been a confidante of his first wife, they must all assume that she knew what she was talking about, and his death at any moment therefore would not come to anyone as a surprise. At any moment, any day. The alibi was already prepared for Ingeborde. Not even a casual inquiry to follow. The death certificate only a matter of a doctor's scribbled signature on an official form.

He had had a bad heart, poor old fellow. He had had a bad heart for years, as his first wife had always known. And so there he lies, poor old fellow. Anything but his heart it might have been, doctor? Well, hardly, with a case history like that. . . .

Ingeborde blessed Mrs. Campbell and also the late Mrs. Hankler, who had been the mistaken source of that erroneous information, and who from the grave must now serve as witness and corroborator of Ingeborde's already airtight alibi.

He wasn't ready to knock off yet, old Doc Hankler. Still sawing and chopping wood into the dark. Ingeborde went quietly back inside her now darkened kitchen, and opened the oven door to look at the beans and pie.

Chapter 4

OUT OF THE PAST

THE PIE WAS done, and she removed it. Still, for a moment she did not put on the light. The gabbling voice of Mrs. Campbell seemed to echo ghostily in the kitchen. In the quiet darkness still, her voice ran on and on. And Ingeborde felt a twinge strike in her liver. She didn't know why, but so she did. Mrs. Campbell's talk about murderers. Mrs. Campbell's talk about Nellie.

In the darkness, in the warm and steaming kitchen, it seemed to Ingeborde almost that the ghost of the first Mrs. Hankler moved there. She could see her—lean and haggard.

"Go away! Go away!" whispered Ingeborde.

It was nothing. It was only the white muslin curtains, stiff and motionless at the window.

Still for a moment Ingeborde felt the terror. The endless voice of Mrs. Campbell. The ghost which was not there. And for a moment Ingeborde leaned against the kitchen table on which she had placed the steaming, fragrant pie, her hands clutching the rim of the table top and the sharpness of the edge of it cutting across her like a dull knife. Trying to think. Trying to think and to remember. Trying to think what Mrs. Campbell had said in her gabbling voice. For it seemed to her now that what Mrs. Campbell had said had not been

witless. That somehow every word of it had been laden with dreadful portent. With the laughter of great devils and the weaving of the sinister, mocking fates. And Ingeborde felt the greatest terror of her life. Still, she tried to think and to remember. But she could not think, nor could she remember, for she had not listened. She might as well try to bring back the spilled out water, or the night wind that has gone rushing by. Only talk of murderers, murderers. Only talk of Nellie, Nellie. Only the drip-drip-drip of oars while they brought in a bundle. Only Mrs. Campbell's husband dying in the night rain.

It was nothing. It was nothing. There had been no portent in Mrs. Campbell's words. There was nothing to try to reach back and remember. She was Ingeborde. She was cool, brainy person, with a supermind. There was nothing that could touch her. There was no one who suspected. There was nothing that could happen to her. The alibi was already prepared for what she was about to do. She was safe.

She pulled the cord of the kitchen light above her. The echoes of Mrs. Campbell's voice were heard no more. All suddenly now was cheerfulness and warmth and brightness.

"I must have got a chill, standing out on the back porch with that old parrot," she told herself.

The beans would soon be done. It was time for her senile bridegroom to come in and get washed up for supper. She heard the slow, patient thuds of his axe out in the woodshed. She opened the kitchen door and stood in the doorway, looking out through the gathering darkness.

"Doc!" she called. "Yoo-hoo! Supper! Beans and rhubarb pie for you tonight! Come in and get washed up!"

But with his deafness and the sound of the axe he could not hear her.

"Yoo-hoo! Doc! Supper!" she called again.

But still he did not hear her. She hesitated a moment. Then she pulled her coat from off a hook beside the door, threw it over her shoulders and went out. She went slowly down the path towards the woodshed in the back.

"Supper, Doc! Rhubarb pie!"

FRED CAMPBELL DUNKED a doughnut in his cup of coffee, drained it off on the edge of his cup, and popped it into his mouth. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and brushed some crumbs off the front of his blue state trooper's blouse. With less enthusiasm than he had felt a half hour before, but still not willing to call it quits, he eyed the doughnut plate in front of him on his aunt's kitchen table.

There were still three doughnuts on it of the two dozen which had been piled there. Fred Campbell leaned his six feet four, two hundred and thirty pound bulk back in his creaking chair. With a determined gesture he loosened his belt another notch, which was the last.

"Might as well finish a job while you're about it," he told himself aloud. "Slow and patient does it, Sergeant. The troopers always get their man. Never call quits."

He picked up another doughnut, broke it in half and dunked it. The kitchen door opened, and Mrs. Campbell came in.

"Hi, Aunt Gabby," he said. "Thought I might as well make myself a couple of cups of coffee and sample one or two of your doughnuts while you were gone."

"Oh, Fred—without any powdered sugar," she said miserably. "And you've eaten them most all. Why, they ain't fitten for a hog to eat thataway. I was going to run over just for a minute to borry some powdered sugar, only she didn't have any; she had confectioner's instead. And while she was getting it for me she got to talking, and you know home some of these real talkative women are—"

"Sure," said Fred Campbell, taking a great gulp of coffee. "Sure, I know. She got hold of you and started to talk your ear off; and you didn't have a chance to get a word in edgewise, and before you could explain to her that you had just run over for a minute and had to leave right away, why three-quarters of an hour had passed and it was six o'clock. I know."

He swallowed another half cup of coffee. "Which one of the neighbor women was it this time?" he said. "The Finn lady up the road you told me about, who knows only one word of English and is nuts, or the deaf-mute hairdresser down in the village?"

"It was Miz Hankler," said Mrs. Campbell with dignity. "The second Miz Hankler. You remember the Hanklers that used to live right next to us for seven years in Alston Park Gardens when you'd visit us when you was a boy? You remember Aunt Nellie and Uncle Doc, Fred?"

"Sure, I remember," said Fred. He set down his coffee cup.

"Well, they live out here now," Mrs. Campbell went on. "They've got the place right next to me—I guess I've told you in my letters. They've been living here for five years now, ever since right after your uncle got killed that night and I moved out. Doc—your uncle Doc—he retired from his milk route, because there was nothing else your Aunt Nellie would have but that he must do it, and move away from the city, and out where everything was quiet. And so they did, and they've been living here ever since. And it's been mighty nice to have them, just like back in Alston Park Gardens. Only she died, your Aunt Nellie. She died last spring."

"That's too bad," said Fred. "I guess you wrote me that she had died. She was a nice woman, but kind of sad. She used to give me the cookies. I remember I used to wonder as a kid why she was always so sad. How is old Uncle Doc? Still alive and kicking?"

"Oh, he's all right," said Mrs. Campbell. "Except for his bad heart, of course, which will carry him off any minute. But it's been that way for years. He's getting a little older than he was, and right recently it's seemed to me that he's been looking a little thinner and whiter even than he used to, though there never was much more blood in him than in a worm. But except for that, I guess he's just about the same. Your Aunt Nellie's passing left him all alone, of course, and she had always bossed him around so

much and babied him so that he was just lost without her. He married again, last August. He married the second Miz Hankler. She's a widow woman that he met somewheres, and so he married her and she lives with him."

"Quite unusual," said Fred Campbell. "What sort," he said, chewing another doughnut meditatively, "what sort of a woman is she, anyway, Aunt Gabby?"

"Oh, she's nice," said Mrs. Campbell with enthusiasm. "She's awful nice. She's very educated and refined. A fine housekeeper and a wonderful cook. She makes the best kind of pies. She's certainly very fond of Doc and she certainly treats him well. They're both mighty happy.

"She's a more easy-going type than Nellie, and that's better for the Doc. He was tied to the apron strings a good many years. He had to walk the chalk line mighty straight with Nellie. It was always don't do this and don't do that. Your heart, Doc, or your asthma. Maybe you kind of remember how your Aunt Nellie was.

"But Miz Hankler, second Miz Hankler, the one that he's got now, she's not a worrisome kind like that. She don't nag him. She lets him enjoy his little foibles. For instance, the old wild cherry tree they had in the yard blew over against their house on the big storm last month, and it had to come down, so Miz Hankler got a couple of the Hiniatra boys to cut it down for her for seven dollars. They only cut it off into four foot lengths to get it down, though, which was too big to use, and she was going to have them saw it up into stove lengths and split it for the kitchen range for five dollars more.

"But then Doc spoke up kind of apologetic like, and said how he would love to saw that wood himself and save the money, and how all his life he had been crazy about sawing and cutting wood, and maybe she would let him buy himself a saw and axe and he could saw it up this winter, to give him some exercise and something to do, if she wouldn't mind.

"Well, you know what your Aunt Nellie would have said if he had asked her a thing like that. Her face would have gone all white and she would of grabbed holt of her stomach, and she would have said, 'No, no, oh Lord no! You know, Doc, your heart!' Or something like that. She would have about bitten his head off. She never let him have a saw. But Miz Hankler didn't mind."

"So he's sawing wood now, is he?" said Fred meditatively.

"YES," SAID MRS. CAMPBELL. "Miz Hankler didn't know about his bad heart, and I didn't like to tell her. She let him buy himself a sawbuck and a red bucksaw, and she let him buy a steel wedge and a good axe. The Hiniatra boys piled the wood out in the woodshed for him, and he's been sawing and chopping to beat the life every day for the last month out there, and he's enjoyed doing it. I don't know that it's been so awful for his heart, and it's given him a lot of pleasure. That's one thing that shows how Miz Hankler humors him. For another thing, there's the rabbits. You remember, maybe, how

fond he always was of those rabbits."

"I thought it was kittens," said Fred.

"Any animal," said Mrs. Campbell. "He was always just that fond of any animal. But Nellie would never let him have any. He couldn't have a dog, he couldn't have a cat, he couldn't even have a squirrel or a canary. She'd put her foot down; she'd get all white, she'd say the fur gave him the asthma. One time, back in Alston Park Gardens, he brought home a couple of tiny kittens that he had found one early morning along his milk route—little tiny blue-eyed things that somebody had put in the gutter to die—and he had heard them miaowing and he got out and picked them up and brought them home. And for once Nellie relented, or pretended to relent, because she kind of liked them herself, I reckon, and felt sorry for them, and she let him keep them for a week out in a box on the back porch.

"He used to feed them with a medicine dropper. But after a week they disappeared. Nellie said they had run away, but I always had a sneaking feeling that she had drowned them. It wouldn't be natural for kittens that young to run away. She was just jealous of them, that was all."

"I remember," said Fred Boogie. "I remember those kittens. Excuse me, I didn't mean to interrupt."

"She never let him have a living pet," said Mrs. Boogie, a little indignantly. "She was a wonderful wife and she was devoted to him, and she was my best friend and all. But still, I will say that she was mean to him, not that she wished to be. But she was mean—it was just her nature—and jealous of him so much that she wouldn't even let him have a pet.

"But Miz Hankler—the second Miz Hankler—why, she doesn't mind. She says let him go ahead and keep a zoo if it makes him happy. He's got a scrawny rooster that she bought to eat one day, but it was too scrawny for the pot and not worth her giving one of the Hiniatra boys a nickle to chop its head off—they didn't have an axe then themselves—and he asked her if he might keep it for a pet, and she let him. He loves that rooster. It's a caution to see how fond he is of it. It's the first pet he ever had. He's taught it all kinds of tricks and it's just like a child. You ought to see that rooster."

"I've seen roosters," said Fred, a little wearily. "I don't think they're very bright."

"All right. But anyway, he's got it for a pet. Which is more than Nellie Hankler would have ever let him have. And only yesterday he brought home a couple of tame rabbits—"

"Go on," said Fred. "I didn't say anything. It was just my belt squeaking. Go on, Aunt Gabby. Rabbits."

"Yes," she said, "a couple of tame rabbits. One white with pink eyes, and one spotted brown-and-white with eyes white as skimmed milk. One of the Hiniatra boys sold them to him for a quarter, and he brought them home, and Miz Hankler let him keep them. Before you know it he'll be teaching those rabbits all kinds of tricks. He'll be teaching them to come when he calls them; he'll be teaching them to fetch carrots and little sticks; he'll be teach-

ing them to dance I wouldn't be at all surprised—"

"He'll be teaching them to squeak," said Fred Boogie.

"He'll be teaching them to what?" said Mrs. Boogie, somewhat indignant. "Don't talk nonsense, Fred Campbell. I'm not so dumb as I may look, even if I was married to your uncle. Rabbits don't squeak."

"Not more than once, anyway," murmured Fred. "Go on, Aunt Gabby. I didn't mean to interrupt while you were talking."

"Well, where was I?" said Mrs. Campbell, somewhat thrown off her track of discourse. "My land, Fred, the way you talk nonsense you throw a body off. Where was I? Oh, yes. You asked me if Miz Hankler was nice, and I said that she was just the nicest person ever—"

"They're all nice according to you, Aunt Gabby," said Fred wearily. "I didn't ask you that. So long as they listen to you go on and on and on they're always nice."

"Why, Fred Campbell! I never heard such mean talk in my life!" said Mrs. Campbell, almost weeping. "In all the years that I was married to your uncle—'

"He never said an unkind word, I know," said Fred. "He never barely said a word of any kind. He never had a chance.

"You were already talking when he woke up, and you were still talking when he went to sleep. You were talking when he married you, and you were talking when he died. And maybe if you hadn't been, maybe if you hadn't been gabbling and jabbering and thinking only of your own feelings and the sound of your own voice—maybe if you had only kept still for just one minute, while you were kneeling out there in the alley in the rain among the shards of the broken milk bottle that had clubbed him down.

If maybe you had just kept your jaw motionless for just one minute, and your mouth shut and your vocal cords at rest, you might have heard him say who it was that had killed him, Aunt Gabby.

"For it must have been someone he knew and had recognized. It must have been someone that he knew pretty well. He was a cop, and a good one, and though he was friendly and easy going and not what you'd call a suspicious type, still he was too old a hand at the game and too experienced ever to have let a prowling burglar or anyone else unidentified get close enough to club him. He wanted to. He tried. But no. He didn't even have a chance to talk while he was lying. He just died that way."

Fred gulped down the last dregs of his coffee a little viciously. He got out a penknife from the hip pocket of his trooper's uniform breeches, and pared his nails.

Mrs. Campbell sat silent for a long moment, swallowing, fumbling with her hands in her lap. Her eyes blinked behind her glasses. She swallowed again. She put up a withered, shaking hand and felt the dry skin of her lips and her throat.

"I wish your uncle had talked that way to me just once, Fred," she whis-

pered. "It would have done me an awful lot of good."

Chapter 5

THE LOGIC OF MURDER

FRED CAMPBELL NODDED. "No hard feelings, Aunt Gabby," he said. "You make good doughnuts, and your heart's all right."

"What was it you wanted to know, Fred?"

"I was just shooting out an idle inquiry about this dame that old Hankler married," said Fred, still paring his nails. "Married last August, you said. A widow, you said, and a good cook?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Campbell.

"She couldn't be maybe around forty-five years old?"

"She could be, Fred. But she looks a mite younger."

Fred nodded. "Yes, she'd look younger," he mused. "Red lips, and a little paint. Plump. That's the way all widows look. Or ought to, anyway. What else does she look like, more or less?"

"Why, let's see, her hair is kinda—"

"Wait! Don't tell me," said Fred Campbell. "Let me guess. Her hair is kind of dark; no brassy blonde about her. Her teeth are nice and regular and white, none of those flashy fillings."

"Yes, that's right," said Mrs. Campbell meekly.

"Where does she come from, anyway?" he said. "Did she happen to tell you?"

"Well, I don't believe she ever said. Oh, yes, she did. Of course she told me. She came from—"

"Don't tell me," he said. "Let me guess." He examined his fingernails critically. "Well," he said, "It might have been San Francisco or it might have been Atlanta, Georgia. It might have been Paducah, Portland, Peoria or Peru. But it wasn't Chicago, anyway, was it? She's never been in Chicago?"

"Yes, that's right," said Mrs. Campbell meekly. "She's never been within a thousand miles of Chicago. How did you know?"

"There aren't going to be any blonde widows for the next two years," said Fred with a grin. "There aren't going to be any gold fillings. There aren't going to be any, particularly, who have ever been within a thousand miles of Chicago."

He clicked his penknife and tucked it away again.

"Smart girl," he said. "Smart, cold-blooded, murderous sweetheart. The way she always changed her name from one marriage to the next—Verna, Greta, Angelina, Carrie, Hildegarde—even before there was anyone wise to her, and before there seemed any danger at all. That shows she's smart and brainy.

"And there was some question raised about the death of her last husband, because of a second cousin who had hoped to inherit something from the old man, and whom she hadn't happened to know about. She always tried to pick them without any relatives—if possible—had started to raise a stink, and she smelled an investigation coming, she was smart enough to get out in plenty of time, and to get out without leaving a track behind her.

"And she would be just smart enough to reverse completely the whole pattern and the whole setup of what she had been. She had always been blonde, so now she's a brunette. She had always been a big, hearty laugher, with those two gleaming gold teeth, so now she probably hardly smiles at all, and then only to show her white, regular store teeth. She always lived in the city, so now she's probably living in some little country place. Ingeborde! Ingeborde Krackenheimer. What does she say her name is—Mary?"

"Who?" asked Mrs. Campbell. "Who are you talking about, Fred? I'll make you some more coffee if you want it, but no more doughnuts. Mary? I don't know any Mary. The only Mary that I know of is Miz Hankler. She was a Miz Mary Jones—say!" she exclaimed with indignation. "Why Fred Campbell! You mean you think Miz Hankler might be that lady on the radio? That lady mass murderer! Why Fred! I would hate to have your mind! I would just hate to have such a terrible mind! Why you just try to think the worst and nastiest things that you can about everybody. Miz Hankler, a lady mass murderer! Well all I can say to that is that if she is, then I just don't know a mass murderer when I see one!"

"Probably not," said Fred Campbell meditatively. "Probably not. There are probably a million dark-haired widows in America. There are probably a million who have never been within a thousand miles of Chicago and a million who aren't named Ingeborde, whether they're named Sally, Ann or Mary. There are probably even a million of them who would gladly marry old Doc Hankler to have a husband and a home. Or there may be a million and a half. And a few of them may even be good cooks. There's not a chance in a million and a half that she is Ingeborde. I just happen to have a suspicious mind. I just happen to be full of too many doughnuts. I apologize. Forget that I ever thought it. Only I would kind of like to know how much insurance there is up on Doc Hankler. And, mama, would I like to see her fingerprints!"

"Don't you call me mama, Fred Campbell!" said Mrs. Campbell indignantly, bustling to boil coffee water. "You're no blood of mine."

"Yes," said Fred Campbell quietly, with an imperceptible hardening of his jaw muscles. "Yes, I've just got a low, suspicious mind, and I've always had one, even when I was a boy. I remember when the torso murderer was prowling back home in Boston, and every other month or so they'd find another portion of one of his victims, and the newsboys would be shouting extras, and you'd be afraid of your own shadow in the night.

"WHY, I CAN hear the whistle blowing yet down on the waterfront in the rain and fog, and they had found another bundle floating in the water! And the flashlights moving, and the scary voices shouting at each other, and the baying of the dogs. And the searching through the city dumps, and the prodding into sewers. And then, before they had even got his latest victim all together, once more on some black

street at some black hour, there'd be a long scream heard again, while people hid in bed behind their locked windows.

"How many years was he at it? It must have been nearly a dozen. How many did he kill in that ghastly way? At least twelve or thirteen. And they never found him. No, they never found him.

"I was growing up through all those years," Fred went on, his big fist loosening and clenching again on the tabletop. "I was little and scared, and I was scared for years. I lived down there in South Boston right where he did his work, not out in the nice quiet suburbs of Alston Park Gardens on the other side of the city, miles and miles away.

"I was one of the bunch of kids out hunting frogs that day who found that hand in the swamp. I can still feel a cold sweat all over me when I hear fog whistles blowing on the waterfront, and think of that day we were all fishing from the pier, and suddenly I hooked something big, something dragging and big, and hollered to all the kids to help me, and we hauled it up, to find it was a bundle.

"Boys and old bums, and women old and young, ugly and beautiful. He took them all, he wasn't particular. And they never found him, because there wasn't any pattern to him. All that they knew was that he was a homicidal maniac. And they figured he had probably once been a doctor or a hospital orderly anyway, or maybe a butcher, because of the way he cut them up kind of neatly. But that wasn't enough to find him on."

The coffeepot was bubbling. Mrs. Campbell poured out a cup for Fred.

"My Lord," he said, "how scared I was! And even when the folks sent me out to visit you and Uncle Fred in Alston Park Gardens, though it was miles and miles away from where he did his work, and all so quiet and peaceful, even there I was just as scared. I used to watch and wonder about Aunt Nellie Hankler, and why she was always so quiet and sad. She would go around doing her housework in the mornings when he was sleeping upstairs, kind of glancing suddenly over her shoulder; and she would sometimes creep up to the door and listen to him sleeping.

"She never let him carve a roast at dinner, and kept all the knives counted and locked up, and she never let anyone else wash his shirts for him, but always did that alone, after peering over them inch by inch. She always grew so white and clutched her heart when somebody mentioned something about the torso murderer or the latest bundle they had found! I used to wonder—"

Fred Campbell paused, with terrible eyes. He poured two spoonfuls of sugar into his cup and stirred it.

"I used to wonder about Doc Hankler, whose delivery route was down in South Boston, each night and every night, and who never got in till just before the break of dawn. I used to wonder why he always dressed so formal, and was so dignified and polite, and why he liked to be called Doc, and if maybe all his life he hadn't wanted to be a doctor and have some one to practice on. I used to wonder about those two kittens that he brought home, and that suddenly disappeared."

Mrs. Campbell had set down the coffeepot on the stove again. She stared at him with her jaw hanging.

"Yes," he said. "I used to wonder. And finally when I got old enough—that was five years or more ago, and I was seventeen and about grown up—I got up my nerve enough to tell Uncle Fred what I had been wondering. He only laughed at me. He said the Doc had lived next door to him for seven years, and they had gone on picnics together and had played rummy, and he knew the Doc like a brother and he wasn't a man who would hurt a rabbit.

"But then, after a little while, it seemed to me that he got a little more serious, and kind of got to thinking. What he thought about it I never knew, though. Because a couple of days later my application for enlistment in the marines came through approved, and I was off to Parris Island. And I didn't learn till I came home that Christmas—my folks hadn't wanted to write me about it because I had thought so much of him—that Uncle Fred had been killed one night three days after I had left, and five days after I had had that talk with him, in the alley back of your house in Alston Park Gardens. Killed just before dawn when he was coming home. Struck down by a milk bottle in someone's hand, whom maybe he had been interrogating and hadn't been enough afraid of. And so maybe what I had said had kind of interested him, and maybe it had killed him."

Mrs. Campbell stared at the grim-eyed young trooper.

"Oh, no! Oh, no!" she said.

"You had moved away, and the Hanklers had moved away, by the time I heard about it," he said a little wearily. "And there would never be any way to prove it at all. Not unless you caught him red-handed—red is right. It probably wasn't him at all, though, anyway. Anymore than it was any of the hundred or five hundred suspects that they had picked up and sweated, some of whom confessed."

He stirred and stirred his coffee.

"Probably not. Probably not," he said. "I've just got a twisted, unpleasant mind. I've just got too much horrible imagination. It doesn't even mean anything that there hadn't been another torso killing for the past five years in Boston. There hasn't been one anyplace else for that matter, either, including Tuckelberry. He's just dead, probably. Or reformed—" Fred took a deep swallow from his cup. "Woof! This stuff is hot. Which is more than I'll ever be as a cop, probably. . . ."

HE FELT THE saw blade go through the two-foot length of wild cherry limb that he had been sawing on with the feeling of a particular item of operation well done—the little whisp-thin, bald old man within the shadows of the woodshed.

He leaned his red bucksaw against the broken kitchen chair in the woodshed, on which his dignified cutaway coat lay neatly folded, with his dignified hat on top of it. He straightened up, rubbing a kink in his back for a moment. The sawed log had fallen from the sawbuck into two one-foot sections on the dirt floor. He stopped and set up

one of them against the chopping block, and picked up his axe from the ground. Now came the pleasantest part, if anything. Measuring the stroke with his eye, and weighting the axe an instant, he swung the blade above his head, and brought it down with precision.

The wood split straight down its center with a sweet, ripping sound, and the two halves flew apart. He picked up one of the half sections, and set it up against the block, and with a second swing split it in two again. He split the other half in the same way. He leaned his axe against the frame of the woodshed door, and gathered the scattered wood from the shed floor. He placed them neatly on top of the stack of split stove-lengths which he had been building up for the past month at the back of the woodshed.

He had a good cord already for the kitchen range, and he would have another yet before the old tree was all split up. It would come in mighty handy for pies and cakes this winter, the good pies and cakes that she made, and he had enjoyed the work every minute. It made him feel fine and gave him an appetite. He had always been a worker; steady and reliable. That milk route for thirty years.

He got out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead. It was getting dark, and he had about done his stint for the day. It was about time to go in and get cleaned up for supper. But he might as well do just one more.

The next log on the jumbled pile had been cut from the trunk and fork of the old wild cherry tree. It consisted of about two feet of the trunk and about eighteen inches of the two forked limbs, so that it looked somewhat grotesquely like a human torso which had been cut off at the shoulders, with the stumps of two legs which had been cut off at the knee. The log which Doc had just finished sawing and cutting up had been shaped altogether like a log. But this was the next one which lay on the jumbled pile tossed into the woodshed by the Hiniatra boys for him to cut, and it had that grotesque shape.

He hoisted it in his white, stringy arms, panting a little with the strain and the exertion, and laid it across the buck. He placed the edge of his saw upon it. For a moment he looked down at the misshapen log in the darkness, and he felt a little deeper breath come into his nostrils, and the muscles of his arms quivered.

He rubbed a hand over the log's shape gently and carefully, feeling a pleasure in the smoothness of the bark, in the undulating shape.

He had been only a woodcutter cutting wood before, though doing it with patience and with precision, and with a good deal of enjoyment in the task for its own sake, as any job should be done. But now he was a man of skill and professional expertness, with a delicate operation to perform. He was a surgeon, a world famous scientist, known in every great medical school and every capital of the world for his uncanny understanding of the human body. He was about to perform in an operating amphitheater before a crowd of admiring fellow surgeons and young students sitting in tiers rising all around him. A great and delicate operation which no

one else would have the understanding for or would dare.

He paused a moment, with a gesture of rolling up his sleeves, though they were rolled up already. He wet his finger, and ran it scientifically along the saw blade to test it keenness, as a great surgeon would. He lifted his eyebrows quizzically and ironically at the breathless, admiring watchers around him in the amphitheater. He twisted his mouth, and gave them a curt nod. With a steady hand, with steady blade, he began to saw, just across the mark which he had made.

All about him in the tiers, the watching surgeons were nodding and whispering to each other, staring with awestruck eyes. He could head their breathless whispers like the murmur of a summer breeze. "That's Hankler for you! Only Hankler could do it. Only Hankler would dare to do it!"

He smiled quietly to himself, ignoring them. A smaller man would perhaps have stopped half way through the operation and bowed in acknowledgement of their wonder. But he was indifferent to all of that. He was really very humble, as all great men are. He went quietly about his tremendous, history-making operation.

The body was separated into two pieces. Now the admiring surgeons stood up spontaneously in their tiered seats all around, their hands beating in uncontrollable applause.

There was one young student who even threw his hat into the air, but that was going too far. There must be an air of dignity about a professional man. Doc frowned at the too enthusiastic offender. He made a deprecatory gesture

"Really, gentlemen, save your handclapping and huzzahs. It is nothing. It is all just a matter of an inborn skill. And I am really very humble, gentlemen."

VERY HUMBLE, LOOKING down deprecatorily at the body he had so brilliantly sawn in two, and the red blood spurting from it.

But now he was more than a surgeon. He felt the breath surge hot and strong in him, the great breath of divinity, the sweep of almighty life.

Crouching, with glaring eyes, he looked around him in the shadows of the woodshed. His eyes lit on the spindle-legged rooster pecking at his feet. He reached down and swooped his hand at it. He had it by the neck. In his other hand he had seized up the axe. Holding the axe by shortened handle, he brought it down across the middle of that struggling, feathery body. With bubbles on his lips, with glaring eyes. He brought it down again, again, till there was only mangled blood and feathers mixed with the dirt upon the woodshed floor.

Crouching, axe in hand, he looked around him with burning eyes. He reached his hand into the straw-filled box, beneath the chickenwire cover, where the two rabbits crouched and quivered. It was the brown-and-white one he got hold of first. It gave one rabbit shriek. . . .

He stood in the welter of fur and feathers and bone, panting, trembling, looking towards the house. The kitchen

was now alight. The kitchen door opened, and he saw the woman standing there, framed in the light.

She was calling out to him. "Come to supper! Beans and rhubarb pie!"

She was coming out towards him. For an instant a bolt of terror, a terror of discovery and retribution, shot through old Doc Hankler. He looked around him for escape, whimpering a little beneath his breath.

But then he remembered she was nice. Not like the other one, that white-faced, terrible, skinny old other one, who had been so tyrannical and mean to him. Who had scolded him so hard when he had had his excitement with those kittens. Who had made him go without desserts for a week. She had always been mad at him after he had had one of his lovely, beautiful, delirious times, even though he had denied to her that he had had them. She had told him that it was bad, bad, bad. She didn't want to see him have a good time, ever. But this one was different. She liked fun too.

"Yoo-hoo, Doc! Supper!"

She was coming out towards him. He watched her, softly chittering to himself, crouched back in the darkness of the woodshed, holding his axe.

"Rhubarb pie, Doc!"

With her red lips, her plump figure. She was full of life. She was full of blood. She liked good times and excitement, too. She wouldn't mind.

She would enjoy it, even. He would let her share all this excitement with him. He would initiate her into the delirious ecstasy. She was nearer now. She was there. Old Doc Hankler lifted up his axe in both his white, wiry arms as she stepped, with her searching crocodilian stare, into the dark shadows of the shed.

Ingeborde opened her mouth in one deep, despairing scream. . . .

"GREAT JUMPING JEHOSOPHAT!" said Fred Campbell. "Did you hear that scream?"

His coffee cup had sloshed in his hand. It had spilled over the front of his blue uniform blouse. He set it down shakily. He stood up, listening, with his jaw muscles tight.

"It was Miz Hiniatra up beyond the Hanklers, I reckon," said Mrs. Campbell hushedly. "Taking one of her Finnish baths. She allus whoops that way. Though generally she don't do it till there's snow on the ground, and there ain't any yet."

Fred Campbell stood listening. But the scream was not repeated.

"There isn't any more of it, anyway," he said. "And thank heaven for that. It hit me like an axe going through my brain. Hand me a towel, Aunt Gabby, and I'll mop off my uniform. I guess I'll have to send it to the cleaner's when I get back to Wissowotamay. Thanks."

He slapped his gun, unloosening the holster latch.

"Well," he said, "thanks for the doughnuts and the coffee. It's been a damned pleasant afternoon. Sorry if I said anything about your neighbors, Aunt Gabby. It's just my low, vile mind. But I think I'll stop over there and see if I can get a reasonably good set of Mrs. Hankler's fingerprints on my way home." ♣ ♣ ♣

If your blood runs hot for the cold that burns—for the fire that cools—for the drink of the frozen North. . . . you'll heed this invitation to court its lethal queen, for whom the skookum *giants died. You will also swear strange vengeance over her grave with Hoh Hoh Stevens, the mightiest man-catcher of them all—whom you may have met in the past. For Hoh Hoh, part cop, part killer and eight parts titan, ranks with fiction's immortal sherlocks!*

Cold Is the Grave

by H. H. MATTESON

CHOKING THE HELLCAT to death wasn't just a job for anybody. Up here in the far Aleutian Islands, when they tag a nickname onto anyone, it means something. And the Hellcat was all ways a *skookum* lady. She weighed close to two hundred pounds. Her mother was one of them stout native women that can paddle a skin boat all day ag'in a head tide. Her father was one of them Jap fish hands that have been encroaching into our islands for years. They say this Jap was a wrassler back in his own country and terrible strong.

Anyway, this Hellcat lady herself was strong enough to roll a bull walrus uphill. Unless you ketched the Hellcat dead drunk and helpless, choking her to death wasn't a job for no invalid.

Not only had the party that choked the Hellcat to death been man enough to subdue her down, in spite of her being herself forty devils in a fight, but he'd been *skookum* enough to not only bust in her windpipe entire, but to break her neck clean when he done it.

The hand that choked the Hellcat to death, and broke her neck was a hand that had the squeeze of a ship's clamp.

And that fetches us to the logical suspects. The way the Hellcat died—choked to death and neck broke—they was three men, and three men only, in the far Aleutians that could of done it.

Going back prior.

The Hellcat, account of owning salmon trap locations and rights, from her Aleut mother, was terrible rich. The Apex Cannery alone paid her twenty thousand dollars a year for some fishing locations.

She was married temporary to a Chinese, Tom Yun. Tom was the China boss, the *tyee* of likely two-three hundred Orientals that worked in the Apex Cannery.

Tom Yun was a suspect of choking his woman to death. Here's why.

Back in China, Tom had been educated to be a dentist. Them Chinese dentists don't use no forceps. From little children, they stab their fingers into rice bags, bend twigs and then nails, and eventually they get such a grip in their fingers they can reach in, snub onto a tooth, and yank 'er quick and easy. Tom Yun was one that could of choked the Cat to death and broke her neck.

A beachcomber, they called him Paseisei, was a suspect. He could of choked the Hellcat to death. Paseisei bent silver dollars together for fun. Hoh Hoh Stevens, our *skookum* young deputy United States marshal, him being about the strongest man in all the North, could of choked the Cat to death and broke her neck.

When they found the Hellcat, all a heap, like a dead sea lion, cast up on the beach, her throat streaked, her windpipe collapsed in, her neck broke, why, seeing that no ordinary hand done the deed, everybody begun estimating who could of done it.

Tom Yun could of, and had motives.

Paseisei the beachcomber could of, and had plenty of reasons.

Hoh Hoh Stevens could of done it, and, most of all, everybody figured his motives was strongest of all. Evidence pointed strong to Hoh Hoh. Much as he hated to, Joe Albright, our chief, he talked with me, and then, reluctant, he sent me out to overhaul Hoh Hoh and put him under arrest.

Likely I better break out the log and start at the beginning.

I and Hoh Hoh and Joe was setting on our office steps. An Aleut come paddling frantic down the channel, hit our beach and landed running. This fella gurgles excited how there's a row on at the Tow Head, and that the Hellcat and her suitors is fighting desperate and killing each other.

"Suitors!" says Joe. "Suitors!" Why suitors when the Cat is married already to Tom Yum?"

This Aleut, Simiak, he spills his story. It seems that about noon, when a lot of hands of the Apex was sunning on the wharf, the Hellcat comes paddling by in a skin boat. She stands up wobbly in her *umiak,* waves a tin can of vodka whiskey at the men, and declares herself emphatic.

"I'm plumb disgusted with my husband, Tom Yun!" she bellers. "I aim to divorce him a lot. Then I aim to annex on a new husband. If they's a man, a real man, amongst you that thinks he can qualify, come on over. We'll derrick a drink or two and discuss it all friendly."

With that, the Cat comes about, paddles home and staggers up the slope with her arms full of them tin cans of one hundred and twenty proof Vladivostok whiskey.

Natural, when a fortune of three-four hundred thousand dollars is the bait, and this Hellcat is worth that much easy, they is always reckless gents will-

ing to assume matrimonial troubles.

In just about no time, suitors begins arriving on the Hellcat's beach. They's a big Finn, who mild cures salmon, a fish slimer, a scowhand, a pile-driverman, and others.

The Hellcat, she receives the suitors equal and impartial. She slops out drinks liberal to the swains as they set around in the big front room. Very soon that celebration gets its head of steam and you can hear the singing and yelling halfways acrost Bering Sea.

Anyway, the *cly wauwau,* the racket, gets so loud, that hands at the cannery that hadn't joined the suitors, they think murder is being done, and send this Aleut to fetch us officers to subdue it down.

Joe, untangling this Aleut's story after a while, he turns to me and says, "Dode, maybe you'd better caper over to the Tow Head and mollify them suitors before blood is shed. Maybe some of 'em has got warlike on the Cat's vodka, so you'd better take Hoh Hoh along for shock troops."

This is meat and strong drink for Hoh Hoh. While, natural, Hoh Hoh is tame as a seal pup in a mud wallow, nothing diverts him like a fight. Besides, the idea of suitors battling over a lady already married sufficient, Hoh Hoh says, promises entertainment of the highest order.

I AND HOH HOH paddles to the Tow Head. From afar, we hears yells, howls, a bang like someone hit the piano with a pile-driver. Sure, the Cat has got a piano.

We go on up to the Cat's *barabara.* No one hears me knock. I yank open the door. Six suitors is present as well as the Hellcat. Swole lips, black eyes, teeth missing and such shows more or less fighting has went on among the swains. Empty vodka cans is scattered about. The Cat is just gurgling more drinks out for the candidates when I and Hoh Hoh go in there.

At that moment, no fight is in progress. Instead, to gain an approving smile from the bride elect, two suitors is vying in feats, a fish handler trying to pull a scow man down with a broom handle.

I and Hoh Hoh refuse drinks. I look around. The room is a wreck. The curtains have been tore down, the windows are busted out. They hain't but one whole chair in the place, and, plenty to our surprise, setting on the one good chair, way in a dark corner, is the sure enough husband, Tom Yun, the Chinese fella with the chilled steel fingers.

The Hellcat balances her clost to two hundred pound of meat, waves a can of vodka, scattering liquor all around, and in that bull walrus voice you find amongst lots of native women, she rumbles, *"Klahowa,* Dode, and you too, you *skookum* young feller!" meaning Hoh Hoh. "You two gents ought to winch up a couple of drinks and aid me in celebratin'. Sure. I aim to divorce Tom Yun, and select me a brand new husband."

"Thanks," I says. "No liquor when I'm on duty, which I am, and Hoh Hoh similar. This here prenuptial party is far too boisterous. You-all batten

down on the racket or the hull passel of you sleep this night in our snug little *skookum* house."

I hadn't noticed, but while I'm rebuking the Hellcat, the door into the back of the house had opened a crack, then closed. Hoh Hoh he steps over, opens this door, walks through, closes it.

It's then that hard devil's face of the Hellcat went sinful and murderous. She makes a jump to foller Hoh Hoh. I lays holt of her, but I might as well of grabbed a sulphur-bottom whale by the tail.

But the Cat gets stopped at that. Tom Yun kind of floats out of his chair, and he fastens them cargo hook fingers of his onto the Cat's thick arm, and turns on the squeeze.

She just shrieks with the pain. Later, when we find her dead, Tom Yun's trademark is still on her arm.

But she stops cold. She don't foller Hoh Hoh into the kitchen. Instead she resumes slopping out drinks to the suitors. All the time though, I seen she was worried about Hoh Hoh being in the kitchen.

After a while, Hoh Hoh opens that kitchen door. He kind of waves encouraging to someone in there I can't see, closes the door and fastens a look on the Hellcat.

He steps over and whispers something to the Cat. She moves sternways, and it's plain something has been said to her for once that scares her plenty.

When we're returning to our skin boat, Hoh Hoh speaks up. "Dode," he says, "what's all about this kitten, the daughter of the Hellcat? It was her, the Kitten, that waved for me to come in. What about her?"

"All I know," I says, "is that the Hellcat has got a daughter. This girl hain't allowed to go nowhere, see no one, except rare, when the mother is along. Them that has got a peek at the Kitten says she's as purty as a young spruce tree in the silver."

"Purty!" explodes this Hoh Hoh. "She's the purtiest thing I ever seen standing in *muckklucks*. Besides, Dode, if that girl—Chee Chee she says her name is—if that girl has got one single drop of Aleut and Jap blood in her veins, I'm a crocodile with a topknot and pink tail feathers. They's mysteries there, Dode. I aim to solve 'em or start a seam."

Hoh Hoh sends our skin boat just foaming along for likely a minute, then he stops. We drift, and he goes on.

"It was Chee Chee looking through that door crack, kind of scared and appealing, that sent me into the kitchen. You know what, Dode? That girl is as innocent as a baby puffin bird. When I went in and closed the door, she just stares at me with them big brown eyes. Then she hauls up the bird skin parka she's wearing. All acrost her legs was welts like you'd whipped her with a strand of barbed wire. She pulls down off her shoulder the doeskin waist she's wearing. All over her shoulders is welts, thumb thick, laying on her skin like ropes. Then she points to the wall There hangs a sharkskin whip that could flay the hide offen a polar bear. The Hellcat had whipped the girl with that sharkskin whip!

"Then Chee Chee goes on to tell me,

Dode, the reason her mother aims to divorce Tom Yun is that, frequent, Tom interferes, won't let the Cat whip her with that sharkhide knout. Well, Dode, I aim to interfere similar and moreso. I aim to spread the reckoning before Joe Albright. I want Joe to give me the word and I'll camp at the Tow Head, and I'll take and scatter that Hellcat's lights and liver all over the fixtures does she ever make one more swing with that sharkhide whip. That's whatever."

Hoh Hoh hadn't took up paddling yet when a big fishing dory loaded with Chinese fellas went by us, headed for the Hell Cat's *barabara.* I had Hoh Hoh slide us ashore. I told Hoh Hoh to wait. I skun back through some larch brush, and kind of squinched down back of the Cat's *barabara,* where I could see and hear.

Just three of the Chinese in the dory come up to the Cat's house. I kind of sidled over to where I could see better. The door was open. In the doorway stood the Cat, looking plenty ornery at the visitors. Tom Yun was kind of peeking furtive over the Cat's shoulder.

One of the Chinese, him wearing a skull cap with a button on top, begins to speak formal, and in good language. He finishes his oratory, and then Tom Yun speaks up.

"These are officers of my tong, of which I am the head," said Tom Yun, kind of proud. "These members, a committee, feel and declare that it will be a disgrace if the master of the tong is divorced. The committee, after deliberation of the tong, desire Mrs. Tom Yun to be advised that if she persists in her present determination to divorce the said Tom Yun, and marry another, the tong will be forced to subject the present Mrs. Tom Yun to what is known as the thousand deaths. The committee awaits a reply, and an assurance."

THE COMMITTEE GOT a reply and got it prompt. The Hellcat hops into the house, snakes down a big brass candlestick, and jumps out amongst the Chinese, swinging the stick violent. "To hell with you!" she howls. "You *hyak* out of here or I busts you wide open!"

The committee just bows very dignified, goes down the beach, gets into the dory and rows away. Tom Yun, looking as untroubled as a channel codfish, sets on the little front step. But the Hellcat, plenty ugly by now, she goes back into the *barabara,* and turns loose on the suitors.

"You're a passel of sick squaw ducks!" she howls. "You slobber down my vodka very ardent, but they hain't a man of you dast come to the front to kick them Chinese into the bay. My future husband, that's got to be a man, hain't amongst you. Get out! *Kalata-wa!"*

Well, them suitors goes dragging their tails out of the *barabara.* And Tom Yun just sets on the step, and is still setting there when I snuk back through the bush, and joined Hoh Hoh where he was waiting on the beach.

When I and Hoh Hoh gets back to the office, Joe had gone, leaving a note

he'd been called away official. Joe don't get back until the following morning, and Hoh Hoh is just getting organized to tell Joe about Chee Chee when a big *umiak* puts in. Out of that *umiak* steps the Hellcat, fairish drunk, but no ways in the inebriate class with the giant gent she's got with her. This gent is the beachcomber, the strong man called Paseisei, that entertains the boys in fish camps and so on by bending silver dollars together, tearing decks of cards and similar feats.

The Hellcat kind of leads and drags Paseisei into Joe's office. "This here is my husband soon to be," she announces proudly.

"But you got a legal husband, Mrs. Yun," says Joe.

"Used to have. No more. There."

The Cat she fishes in a beaded warbag she's got dangling at her belt. She snakes out a piece of the leg bone of a ptarmigan, and slings this bone piece onto Joe's desk. "There," says the Cat. "I'm divorced from Tom Yun."

Joe picks up the bone, looks at it, throws it down. The Hellcat has got him by a tail holt.

You see, the United States government has decreed that all native customs among the Aleuts, the Eskimos, the Thlinkets, all far North and Alaskan tribes, shall be respected and held valid.

An Aleut man and woman marries by breaking the leg bone of a ptarmigan, each one keeping half. They're married. When one Aleut takes and slings away his or her part of the ptarmigan bone, they're divorced. Joe is hogtied by orders from the *tyees*. The Hellcat is divorced, and that is all there is to it. Nothin' can be done.

The Hellcat seen Joe was kind of hesitating, "Oh, we're divorced all right, I and Tom Yun," she says. "Double divorced. This morning I slings my half of the bone on the floor and tromps on it. That's divorce enough. But when he hain't looking, and before he can settle them iron hook fingers of his into me, I ketch him by the stern of his pants and heave him into the yard, and a handful of salt after him. I scatter salt copious on the doorsill, too, and that makes the divorce double. Tom left peaceable, and went over to the China house.

"Now, Paseisei," says the Cat, giving a jerk to the beachcomber who stands weaving about, both eyes shut, "get conscious, because we're getting married."

Paseisei's head just rolled like his neck was a rubber hose. The Hellcat goes on very talkative, seeing she's cargoing plenty of vodka under her hatches. Hanging tight onto the giant beachcomber, she relates us the story of her newest romance.

"Paseisei here, my new man," she says, smirking silly, "him landing on my beach this morning early was providential. None of them sculpins gargling down my liquor yesterday was fitten. Not a man amongst 'em. But this gent, Paseisei, I seen at once he was the man for me.

"He stood on the beach there, and I kind of estimated his beam and tonnage, and I steps to the door with a can of vodka in my hand, and I give him a hail, and he comes on up, and we took three-four drinks, and we

talked how lonesome we was, and in no time, with a few more drinks, we agreed on articles to marry. Here we be, Mister Marshal. Break out your book and get ready to roll your game. We want to get married. Paseisei says no bird bone wedding for him. He wants 'er legal and United States. Break out your book, Mister Marshal."

It's then the Hellcat kind of let go her holt on Paseisei. He doubled at the hips, like a hinge, dove forward, and rammed his head ag'in Joe's desk, knocking hisself cold.

"This contracting party hain't in no state to take the vows," said Joe. "Pack him off. If he ever gets sane, and knows what he's about, fetch him back. Wedding deferred."

I aid the Hellcat in dragging Paseisei to the beach. We dump him into her skin boat, and the disapponted bride elect, she paddles away, swearing very malignant.

Seems like, that on the way from our office to her *barabara,* the Hellcat changes her mind entire, like women does. She don't aim to marry Paseisei at all. When she beaches her skin boat, instead of packing Paseisei into the house, and nurturing him back tender and sober, she just dumps him out onto the beach.

Hours later, the tide coming in and surrounding the sleeping Paseisei with ice cold water revives him up. He staggers up to the house, belts on the door and demands admittance as the future lord of the shebang. The Hellcat, instead of a loving welcome, she pokes a eight-gauge goose gun through the window, tells Paseisei he's been abdicated a lot, and to take it hence on the *klatawa* before she pumps a handful of shot in amongst his digestion.

WELL NOW, THIS Paseisei, seeing three-four hundred thousand dollars go *stohing* on him, fetches away in the tops entire. He howls and swears, bombards the front of the shanty with rocks. The Hellcat lets go with her goose gun, and Paseisei collects a few punctures aft, then he goes stampeding toward the beach to get out of range.

Some of them boys over to the cannery heard this ranikaboo, the bellering and shooting. They went over, a passel of 'em, careened this Paseisei, hogtied him, and fetched him in to us. Even after we'd put Paseisei in a cell and locked him up, he wailed and swore and took vows to kill the Hellcat for deluding and defrauding him.

Just prior to Paseisei being fetched in, Hoh Hoh had had a chance to break out the log, and tell Joe all about Chee Chee, an her getting whipped so brutal.

"You just go surging back to the Tow Head, Hoh Hoh," Joe said. "You tell that female hellion does she lay a hand of violence on that girl again, we hurl her into the *skookum* house. There she'll stay till she posts plenty *pil chickamin,* to insure that child's safety."

When Hoh Hoh arrives, he's some amazed to see Tom Yun standing at the front door. Barring the entrance to same, however, is the Hellcat. Tom Yun is pleading with the Cat to take him back as husband. Tom holds out

his half of the matrimonial ptarmigan bone as he beseeches to get reinstated.

In reply, the Hellcat makes a swinging kick, knocks the ptarmigan bone out of Tom's hand. Then the Cat turns herself loose abusive and profane. As Tom walks past Hoh Hoh on his way to the beach, Hoh Hoh says the look in that Chinaman's black eyes makes rattlesnakes look like loving pets.

The Cat sees Hoh Hoh approaching up. She slams the door. Hoh Hoh he knocks loud. She don't open up. But he hears her moving around in the front room.

So now Hoh Hoh yells through the door to the Cat that if ever she lays that sharkhide whip onto Chee Chee again or abuses her in any manner, he'll keelhaul her and cargo her off to jail.

Hoh Hoh is walking back to his skin boat, when he hears the wildest terrified screams emanating out of the house—screams and the thud of a whip.

Hoh Hoh goes plowing back, kicks in the door, charges into the kitchen like a killer whale. Chee Chee is huddled into a corner on the floor, arms up to protect her face.

Forgetting entire that the Cat is a female specie, just seeing this Chee Chee on the floor, blood flowing from her arms and shoulders, Hoh Hoh he goes crazy similar.

His first swinging belt just about lifted the Cat out of her *mucklucks*. She hits the floor distant, the Cat does, on one ear and the side of her face. She goes sliding acrost the boards, picking up splinters copious till she bangs up against the mop board. There she lays, all ways resembling a half-ton sea lion that got itself washed ashore.

It's a long time the Hellcat lays there. But she revives up after a while. She gives Hoh Hoh a look that would blister paint. Then he repeats his warning, for her never to lay a brutal paw on Chee Chee again.

The Cat just lays there, saying nothing, doing nothing, her eyes smouldering.

Hoh Hoh is plumb uneasy when he returns back to the office. "I hain't tamed that Cat none as yet," he tells I and Joe. "She's a specie, that Cat is, like a wolverine, or a black panther."

Joe sets thoughtful, twiddling a pencil in his fingers. "Tom Yun was here just a few minutes ago, Hoh Hoh. Tom wanted I should appoint him legal guardian of Chee Chee so he can protect the girl physical and financial."

I and Hoh Hoh ponder. Chee Chee is sole heir to plenty *pil chickamin*.

"I couldn't appoint him," said Joe. "He hain't a United States citizen. But you be, Hoh Hoh."

Joe snakes a paper out of his desk, fills it in rapid. "I'm putting the girl's name, just Chee Chee. When we learn her father's name, we'll fill it in complete. Hoh Hoh, you're Chee Chee's guardian from now."

Joe stamps the big eagle onto the bottom of the paper and that sure makes 'er a document.

Hoh Hoh take that paper like it made him a duke or something. It's getting on to dark now, but Hoh Hoh starts out, never saying what he aims to do. We let Paseisei out, him being cold sober by now, but plenty sick, and ugly, and no ways reconciled to the

rude rebuff his bride elect had give him.

All I know of what follered is what Hoh Hoh told me later.

The way Hoh Hoh told it was he went straight with his guardian paper to the Tow Head. It was terrible dark, and he kind of had to fumble his way up to the Hellcat's *barabara.*

No one answers his knock. He yanks open the door, strikes a match. Chee Chee is laying unconscious, all blood, on the floor. Hoh Hoh lights a whale oil lamp, starts a fire, puts Chee Chee on the bed, and very tender washes her cuts.

THE CAT NEVER showed up, Hoh Hoh said, and he figured she'd gone somewhere on a special big drunk. The first Hoh Hoh knowed about what happened to the Cat, he swore, was when a Aleut boy came delivering some *muckamuck* from the trading post, coffee and bacon. Then the Aleut just stabs his thumb toward the beach and says, "Hellcat, *yahka mamook memaloost'.*" That's "The Hellcat's dead," in regular talk.

There Hoh Hoh said he found her, dead as a beached candlefish. She hadn't been shot. Or beat.

Hoh Hoh said he was looking over the body of the deceased very searching, when, of a sudden, though he hadn't heard her at all, there stood Chee Chee, looking from him to her dead mother, back to him.

Hoh Hoh told the Aleut boy to put water behind him getting word to I and Joe of the killing. Similar, this younker, as he paddled past the cannery, bellered out the news. When I and Joe got there, fifty people was tromping around, looking at the corpse, estimating that crushed-in throat and arguing bitter.

Gradual but sure, suspicion swung to Hoh Hoh. Tom Yun wasn't on the scene. Paseisei wasn't. Hoh Hoh was.

Hoh Hoh, he kind of told his story to I and Joe. While we considered the killing of the Cat all ways a pious deed, we figured Hoh Hoh done it.

Joe he broke it diplomatic to Hoh Hoh, "Hoh Hoh," he says, "I expect you to kind of remain amongst us."

Hoh Hoh jerks his head. "I get it, Joe. I *cumtux.* I'm under arrest. Can I say a last word to my ward, before I go into durance?"

"Sure," says Joe.

I hain't aiming to snoop, but when I goes by the *barabara,* I seen Hoh Hoh with his arms around Chee Chee, and she's crying bitter.

Well, the Hellcat was buried. Not overlooking no bets, Joe had me haul in Tom Yun and Paseisei and lock 'em up. Hoh Hoh, he was under technical arrest, too, but we didn't lock him.

It took two-three days to have the inspector who was to conduct the trial fly out from Juneau. Then the inspector conducted the hearing. Tom Yun had a alibi. Fifty Orientals swore Tom Yun dealt fantan all night in the China House the night of the killing.

Paseisei had a alibi. A fox farmer, five miles from the scene, swore the giant beachcomber spent all night at his place, drinking up his whiskey.

Hoh Hoh didn't have no witness.

Chee Chee said her mother beat her brutal, and that she didn't know nothing until hours later she revived up to find Hoh Hoh bathing her wounds.

The Inspector shook his head. "Mr. Stevens," he said, "while I would like to decorate you for conspicuous service, I've got to hold you to stand trial at Juneau for homicide."

Hoh Hoh just nods. We turn Tom Yun and Paseisei loose. Paseisei departs off rapid. Tom Yun just stands there. Chee Chee, like Hoh Hoh had described her, stands there in that terrible purty birdskin parka, both her little hands poked up into the flappy sleeves.

Chee Chee stands a long time looking at Tom Yun, then at Hoh Hoh, and back at Tom Yun. Chee Chee, remembering all the times Tom Yun has went to the front for her, is terrible fond of him. But them brown eyes of hers lights different far, when she looks at Tom Yun and then at Hoh Hoh.

Very slow, her eyes just shining glorious now at Hoh Hoh, Chee Chee pulls a hand out of the sleeve of her parka. Holding in her little fist is a purple silk cord, thick as a pencil and about seven feet long.

"I," she kind of stammers, "when he," pointing to Hoh Hoh, "was looking at the body of my dead mother there on the beach, I picked this up from the sand. I said nothing. I hid it in my sleeve. I—I thought it better."

Both Joe and the Inspector snatched for the purple silk cord. Both of 'em, dealing with Chinese for years in the North, knowed what it was. It was a strangle cord, used by a tong when they execute someone in the ceremony of the thousand deaths. Members of Tom Yun's tong had cast that purple silk string around the Hellcat's neck, had yanked it so violent it crushed in her windpipe and broke her neck.

What members of the tong done it, we never found out. Them tong brothers just don't tell on each other.

Right away then, Hoh Hoh was free as a sea gull.

A old Russian horsehide trunk found in the *barabara* of the deceased Hellcat throwed a light. Chee Chee wasn't no Jap and she wasn't no Aleut. She was the daughter of a Tom Malloy, who years before had spotted some terrible good fish locations way out West.

Tom was a widower with a baby girl. The Hellcat had got hired to cook and so forth and care for the child. Tom had got killed trying to get a sea lion out of a set net. The Hellcat had just went on, year after year, fetching Chee Chee up, running the fish business. Them days, the islands was plumb wild and remote. Nobody paid any attention.

Now this Hoh Hoh took himself serious as guardian of Chee Chee. The girl, her being simple and innocent, she says very clear she wants to marry Hoh Hoh.

But Hoh Hoh says she's just a kitten. She has her whole life ahead of her and she shouldn't be tied down to someone older. She's going to the States to go to school for three-four years. He says after that—well, who knows?

And with Chee Chee, anything Hoh Hoh says is right with her. ♣ ♣ ♣

Meet Carstairs, who's almost human . . . Doan, who's almost a cop . . . and the killer who was almost innocent—till It tracked Itself down as a corpse! Seldom have the traditional elements of a mystery thriller been brought together in a happier combination—welded by that priceless ingredient that is the hallmark of that deathless being—an author.

Till the Killer Comes

by NORBERT DAVIS

THE STATION WAGON trundled around the corner into the narrow, deeply shaded street, idled down the block with scarcely a whisper from its motor and parked in at the curb. This was no ordinary station wagon. It was a custom job, and in the good old days when you could buy such things it had set its owner back just $3987.92 F.O.B. Michigan plus tax.

It looked something like a sportily streamlined combination of a limousine and a high class hearse.

Doan was driving it. He was plump and not very tall, neatly and soberly dressed in a grey business suit, and he had a round, unlined face and a complexion like a baby on a supervised diet. He was a very innocent and nice and harmless appearing person, but that was all strictly camouflage. He was innocent and nice only when it paid him, and he was as harmless as a rattlesnake.

"We're here," he said, looking over his shoulder.

The back seat of the station wagon ran around in a semicircle to fit the rear contour of the body, and it was designed to seat six persons comfortably. Carstairs was filling it all up now, and dangling over the edges here and there. He was snoring with gentle gusto.

"Hey, stupid," said Doan.

Carstairs opened one eye and watched him.

"Come on," said Doan. "You've slept long enough."

He opened the door beside him and slid out into the street, and then opened the rear door. Carstairs mumbled under his breath and began to assemble himself in sections, cracking his joints and grunting with the effort.

Carstairs was a dog, but it would be impossible just to let it go at that. In the first place he was a Great Dane, and

in the second place he was enormous. Standing on four feet, after he had untangled himself and climbed out into the street, his back came up even with Doan's solar plexus. Had Carstairs worked up energy enough to stand on his hind legs he could have looked right over Doan's head, hat and all, without the slightest effort.

"You see that wall over there?" Doan asked.

Carstairs examined the wall across the street from them with disapproval. It was really something in the way of a wall. It was two stories high and made of grey granite blocks that looked cold and sullenly unyielding in the morning sunlight.

"There's a prison behind it," Doan said. "A prison is a place where they put criminals—well, not all of them, as you very well know, but the ones they catch. Keep that in mind in the future."

Carstairs grunted and sat down. The sun hadn't risen high enough to shine on the pavement as yet, and it was cold. Carstairs stood up again, muttering disgustedly deep in his throat.

Doan pointed. "That small door there is where they let the criminals out after they're through with them. Keep your eye on it."

Carstairs watched the door without any noticeable signs of interest. The street was very quiet, and the tree shadows made motionless, dappled patterns along the base of the prison wall. Somewhere a clock began to strike the hour with sullen, rumbling booms. It was ten o'clock.

"Just right," said Doan.

There was the cold rattle and snap of bolts, and then the recessed door in the wall opened and a man stepped out through it and stood hesitantly on the sidewalk. The door closed behind him with a sharp clack. The man winced slightly. Then he pulled in a deep breath of free air and started up the street.

"Hey, you!" Doan called.

The man stopped short and half turned.

Doan crooked his finger invitingly. "Come here."

The man hesitated again and then walked slowly across the street. He was young, and he was dressed in a brown tweed suit that had cost quite a lot some time ago. He had black, close-cropped hair and heavy black brows and contemptuous brown eyes with little greenish flecks in them. His lips were thin and hard and twisted down a little at one corner.

"Are you Bradfield Owens?" Doan asked.

"Yes."

"I'm Doan," said Doan. "This is Carstairs. He's my asisstant, or maybe I'm his. We've never straightened out the relationship."

"Very interesting," Owens said. "So what?"

"Colonel Ephriam Morris got you paroled," Doan told him. "It was quite a job. Parole boards are a little leery of guys who go around sticking knives in people and stuff like that. He wants to see you."

"What if I don't want to see him?"

"Just go right over and rap on that door," Doan answered. "They'll let you back in."

Owens shrugged. "Okay. Where's Morris?"

"Where he always is. On his farm. That's where we're going to take you."

"What am I supposed to do when I get there?"

"Run the damned place," Doan said. "What did you think Colonel Morris got you paroled for—just because he liked your pretty brown eyes?"

"No," Owens said grimly. "I didn't think that. Well, let's go."

IT WAS DUSK now, and Doan was still driving. The road looped in long, loose curves through country that was just slightly rolling.

"I've only driven this road once before," Doan said. "We're pretty near there, aren't we?"

Owens nodded. "Yes."

"I don't hear any loud cheers from you."

"No," said Owens glumly.

Carstairs grunted and complained to himself, shifting around in the back seat, and then snuffled meaningly just behind Doan's right ear.

"Okay," said Doan. "Screwloose, back there, wants a drink and a walk. Is there any place we can stop near here?"

"Yes. Cleek's Mill is just around that curve ahead. It's abandoned, but there's still a dam and a millpond."

Carstairs snuffled more urgently.

"All right," said Doan. "I hear you."

"He's a nice dog," Owens remarked.

"Well, no," Doan said. "Not exactly nice. As a matter of fact, he's meaner than hell."

"I meant that he was a good specimen. He's one of the finest Great Danes I've ever seen."

"He is the finest you've ever seen. He's got four hundred and eighty-nine blue ribbons to prove it, but they weren't judging him on his good disposition. He doesn't have one."

"Did he cost a lot?"

"He didn't cost me anything. I won him in a crap game. Of course the upkeep is a little heavy. He eats three times as much as I do."

Carstairs made an ominous, rumbling sound.

"All right!" said Doan.

The road swung around in a sharp curve, and the mill loomed to their right, blending into the thick shadow of the trees close behind it. It was a two-story brick building with a steeply peaked roof, the harshness of its outline blurred and melted by the thick growth of vine that covered it. The windows gaped like dark, empty eyes. The creek that ran along the road had been dammed to make a pool that gleamed deep and smoothly stagnant.

Doan bumped the station wagon along a weed-grown lane that ran up to the wreck of a loading platform, and then he stopped with a sudden jerk. They could see on the far side of the building now, and there were two figures facing each other in the shadow. One was crowded in against the wall, and the other loomed over it in gaunt and gangling menace. They were too interested in each other to have seen or heard the station wagon.

Doan turned off the motor. "What's all this?" he asked.

The figure crowded in against the wall was a woman—short and dumpy in a shiny black silk dress and wearing steel-rimmed glasses set a little askew on her pudgy nose. She was holding a short, crooked stick in her hand.

"Aw!" said the gangling figure, making little tentative grabs at the stick. "You're scared! You don't even dare hit me! Yah!"

This one was what could be roughly called a youth. He had hulking shoulders and a lopsided, out-of-proportion face with loosely blubbering lips. He wore an old pair of overalls and a stained shirt and a dirty slouch hat with the brim ripped off on one side.

He feinted again at the stick in the woman's hand and then suddenly twisted it away from her.

"Now," he said, malignantly gleeful. "Now what you gonna do, huh?"

"That's Joady Turnbull," Owens said. He flipped the catch on the station wagon door and stepped out. "Joady! Quit that! Leave her alone!"

Joady Turnbull swung around with a sort of awkward grace. He stared unbelievingly, his lips loose and slack in his smeared caricature of a face.

"Brad Owens," he said. "Brad Owens. They went and let you out of the jail."

"Yes," said Owens.

Joady Turnbull made a thick, choking noise. "And you got the nerve to come back! You think you're gonna get away with that?"

"I think so," said Owens. "And I think that you're going to stop annoying Miss Carson."

"You gonna make me?"

"Yes," said Owens.

"How?" Joady Turnbull jeered. "You think you're gonna stab me, too? In the back?"

"No," said Owens evenly. "I'll just break your neck."

"But not now," said Doan, getting out of the car. "I'll tend to that if it's necessary. Listen, goon, run along and haunt some other neighborhood."

"I know you," Joady Turnbull said. "You're that city detective old Morris brought down. You don't scare me."

"Then you're even more simple than you act," Doan told him. He opened the rear door of the station wagon, and Carstairs got out.

Joady Turnbull backed away two steps. "I heard about that there damned big dog!" he said uncertainly.

Doan nudged Carstairs with his knee and said, "Woof."

CARSTAIRS BAYED suddenly. It was a solid, rocking blast of sound with a deep undertone of savagery in it. Joady Turnbull backed away three more steps, stumbling a little. Carstairs watched him with eyes that gleamed greenish in the dusk.

Doan said, "If you're not out of sight in five seconds, I'll have him give you a little demonstration that his bite is worse than his bark. Get on your horse and gallop."

It took Joady Turnbull the count of two to absorb that. Then he whirled around and fell over a bush and scrambled to his feet and ran. His feet slashed through the drift of fallen leaves, and then he disappeared in the thicket beyond the mill.

Carstairs grunted contemptuously, shook himself in an irritated way. Then he strolled over to the mill pond and lapped the water, making a noise like rain on a tin roof and sending the ripples scurrying in frightened haste.

"Would he really have attacked Joady?" Owens asked.

"Sure," said Doan. "He likes nothing better than to bite people. But he won't hurt you, lady."

The woman was still crowded back against the mill wall. She had been watching Carstairs with a sort of fascinated horror, and now she looked at Doan with her eyes wide and dilated behind the steel-rimmed spectacles.

"D-dogs frighten me," she said with a little catch in her voice. "I—I thank you for—for interfering. . . ."

"Aren't you going to say hello to me, Norma?" Owens asked.

"Yes! Of course, Brad! I'm so upset —Joady and you and the dog. . . ."

"I'm here, too," Doan reminded her.

"This is Mr. Doan, Norma," Owens said. "Apparently he is my—ah—guardian for the time being. Doan, this is Norma Carson. She teaches the lower grades in the Ramsey village school."

"Pleased," said Doan. "Who was the ghoul we just chased off?"

Norma Carson looked uneasily at Owens and then away again. "That was Joady Turnbull."

"I suspected that," said Doan. "Is this the way he usually goes on, or was he celebrating some special occasion today?"

Norma Carson said, "You see—I refused to have him attend any longer the grades I teach in school. . . ."

"I may be wrong," Doan remarked, "but he looked a little elderly to be attending the lower grades."

"He's a moron," said Norma Carson. "I mean, really he is. He just can't learn anything, and he's so much older and larger than the other children."

"I get the picture," Doan said. "If he bothers you again, tell him Carstairs and I will pay him a social call."

"Are you a parole officer?" Norma Carson asked.

"Right now," Doan said. "It's nice work if you can get it—I hope."

Owens said, "Norma, can we give you a lift into town?"

She shook her head. "No, thank you, Brad. I have my car. It's parked up the road. I came to the mill here because I'd heard there were some swallows nesting in it. I wanted to show their nests to the children. But Joady came up here while I was watching for them."

Carstairs came back to the car and sat down with a self-satisfied sigh.

Doan rapped him on top of the head with the knuckle of his forefinger and said, "Get in the car, dumbness."

Carstairs climbed in and dumped himself on the back seat so enthusiastically that the springs groaned in protest.

"Brad," said Norma Carson hesitantly, "are you going back to The Square?"

Owens shrugged. "Apparently I am."

"After all that's happened?"

"I don't have any choice, Norma."

"Jessica is there."

Owens frowned. "I was hoping she wasn't."

"I *hate* this town and all the nasty,

mean-minded people in it for what they've done to you, Brad!" Norma said. "And that goes for Jessica Morris, too."

"I lived through it," Owens said. "Forget it. We'll have to run along. Good night, Norma."

THEY GOT BACK into the car and Doan turned it around and bumped out along the lane again to the main road. Every once in a while Owens silently pointed out the turns to be taken in the roads.

"You might sort of explain this and that to me," Doan requested, "just so I can pretend I know what the score is here."

"You know, of course, that I murdered a man," Owens said.

"That's nothing to brag about," Doan told him. "I've finished off a couple of dozen more or less in my time."

"I stabbed this one in the back."

"I've never used that method," Doan said. "I'll have to give it a ring some time. What was this party's name, as if it mattered?"

"It does matter. His name was Turnbull."

"So?" said Doan. "Any relation to the mental giant we just met?"

"Yes. His father."

Doan nodded. "Well, that might explain the way he acted when he recognized you, although if heredity means anything I'd say you did the boob a favor. Was the old man as stagnant in the head as the kid?"

"Even worse. He was stupid in a sort of mean, vicious way that grated on everyone's nerves"

"What did you tell him for? He give you a dirty look?"

Owens sighed "We gave him work sometimes as an extra hand when we were short of help This particular time he was harrowing with a tractor over in the north field It was a new tractor. I told him several times to watch the oil and water and not let it get too hot. He let the water boil out, and then he was too lazy or too contrary to walk two hundred yards to get some more. He ran the tractor until the engine seized. When I came around to see what he was doing, he was pounding the block with a wrench. The motor was just about ruined."

"What'd you do?"

"I lost my temper."

"Imagine that now," Doan commented. "Just over a little matter like that. What then?"

"I bawled him out, plenty."

"Did it kill him?"

"Not that, no. He got nasty and threw the wrench at me."

"The Turnbulls are certainly an attractive family," Doan said. "Did he hit you?"

"Yes. In the head. I don't remember a thing that happened after that. Not a thing."

Doan glanced at him sideways.

Owens shrugged. "Believe it or not, I honestly don't. When I came to, I was in the hospital under police guard"

Doan said, "I had an idea when this started that we were going to talk about a murder."

"We are. According to the evidence, Turnbull started to run after he threw the wrench at me. I threw my knife at

him and hit him in the back when he was about twenty feet away."

"Whose evidence?" Doan inquired.

"There were no witnesses. The field is not close to any houses, and there was no one else near. The evidence was the tracks on the ground, my knife in Turnbull, and the positions we were lying in when we were found."

"Uh," said Doan. "It seems to me that the matter of self-defense might come in there somewhere."

"No," said Owens. "Turnbull was running away when the knife struck him and killed him. He wasn't attacking me."

"Uh," Doan repeated. "It seems to me, just offhand, that there's something missing in this little tale."

Owens nodded slowly. "Colonel Morris."

"How does he fit in?"

"He's very unpopular around here. He's accumulated about five thousand acres of the finest farm land in the state through some pretty sharp deals in mortgage foreclosures. He owns the bank in Ramsey."

"He runs the bank, so they put you in jail," said Doan. "Well, maybe it makes sense."

Owens cleared his throat. "You see, lots of people are anxious to get back at him for one thing and another—and, well, I was supposed to be his prospective son-in-law. It seemed a good chance to get him through me."

"A little tough on you," Doan observed. "This son-in-law thing. Let's look at that a little more closely. It might be something."

"I was engaged to his daughter."

"The plot thickens," Doan said.

"Perceptibly," said Owens bitterly.

Chapter 2

CARSTAIRS TAKES A CASE

"OPEN UP A LITTLE," Doan invited. "Are you engaged to Colonel Morris' daughter now?"

"Certainly not," Owens said.

"Did she give you the brushoff?"

Owens stared at him, narrow-eyed. "Is this any of your business?"

"Oh, hell no," said Doan amiably. "I just ask questions because I've got nothing else to do until I get to this farm."

"Then what are you going to do?"

"Ask more questions—of other people."

"Ask them of me, instead."

"You're a hard guy to please," Doan observed. "That was just what I was doing. Did this party of the second part give you the brushoff?"

"Her name is Jessica Morris, and she did. Now are you happy?"

"Oh, very," Doan said. "Are you?"

Owens said slowly, "You're going to carry this matter a little too far, friend."

"Probably," Doan admitted. "I've got no sense of discretion. Are you?"

"No, you fool! Would you be?"

"All depends," said Doan. "How does this Jessica stack up? Bowlegged? Knock-kneed? Halitosis?"

"No!"

"I only asked," Doan said. "I didn't see her when I was down here before. What kind of a brushoff did she hand you?"

Owens breathed deeply. "Very kind. Very polite. Very diplomatic. She believed in me. She trusted me. She blubbered all day long at my trial. She wrote me nice letters when I was in prison—affectionate at first and getting less and less so all the time. Finally I received a clipping from the Ramsey paper. She was engaged to a man named Gretorex."

"Cute," said Doan. "Is she married to him now?"

"I don't know."

"Who is he?"

"He's a gentlemen farmer."

"Oh," said Doan.

"He hunts foxes—on a horse."

"Tally-ho," said Doan. "Does the dame go for that brand of daffiness?"

"I suppose so. She evidently goes for him. And the colonel likes him."

"There's no accounting for tastes," Doan comforted. "This Norma Carson, the schoolma'am, doesn't seem to think so highly of Jessica."

"She's prejudiced. You see, she and I were raised in the same small town. We've known each other all our lives. She thinks the setup here prejudiced the jury against me and that if it hadn't been for the colonel and Jessica, too, that I would have never have been convicted under the circumstances. Jessica didn't seem to care about what happened to me."

"What do you think?" Doan asked.

Owens scowled. "I don't know. The colonel is hated. I don't think he's technically dishonest, but he's very sharp and slippery in a business deal, and he doesn't have any more mercy than a weasel."

"Well," said Doan, "it looks like things are a bit complicated here. It's a good thing the colonel hired me to sort of straighten them out."

Owens snorted. "How do you think you're going to do that?"

"I'm a genius. I don't have to think. I just sit down and wait for an inspiration."

"You'll need one," Owens said sourly.

"Where do we turn off here?" Doan asked.

"The next block to the right."

"There it is," said Owens after a while. "The showplace of the county. All lit up as usual."

The house sprawled across a fold of ground up and back from the road. The architect who had designed it had taken a good long look at Monticello and Mt. Vernon and other colonial showplaces before he had started working.

Fine gravel rattled under the station wagon's fenders as Doan wheeled up the long, curving drive, and stopped opposite the front door.

"Ah, there!" a voice boomed at them. "Hello!"

THE MAN WAS at the top of the veranda steps, looming huge and solidly confident, with the light gleaming sleekly on his bald head. He was dressed in tan trousers and a tan tweed jacket and a darker tan shirt. He looked like the country squire in a whiskey advertisement. He beamed and rubbed his hands joyfully and came hurrying down the steps.

"Ah, there, Doan. It's a pleasure to see you again. And you brought him

with you? Ah, yes! I knew you would. I had every confidence in you. Brad, my boy! Brad! Welcome home, lad!"

"Hello, Colonel," Owens said, getting out of the car.

Colonel Morris clapped him on the shoulder. "Why, you're looking fit, lad! Yes, you are! And it's good to see you! Indeed it is! I could hardly curb my impatience. I swear, I've been pacing the floor all day."

"I've done that a few times, too," said Owens.

"Eh? Oh, yes. Of course. But it's past now, my boy! Past and done with and better forgotten. Now just step right in here, lad, and . . . eh? Oh, yes. Here's Jessica."

She was standing on the veranda, a little out of the pathway of light thrown from the front door. She was wearing a white dress, and her hair gleamed darkly lustrous in the shadow. She made no move to come closer.

"Jessica," said Colonel Morris. "It's Brad Owens come back from . . . well, come back."

"She knows where I've come from," Owens said.

"Hello, Brad," Jessica said evenly.

Owens nodded politely. "Hello."

"Eh!" said Colonel Morris. "Well. . . ."

"Ahem," said Doan.

"Oh!" said Colonel Morris. "Yes. Surely. This is Doan, the detective fellow, Jessica. You remember I told you he was fetching Brad from the . . . from the city."

"Hi, Jessica," said Doan.

"What?" said Colonel Morris, startled. "Here! This is my daughter!"

"I wouldn't even count that against her," Doan assured him. "Are you going to leave her all your dough when you croak?"

"Well, of course I— What do you mean, sir?"

"I was only asking," Doan said. "I wouldn't know as much as I do if I didn't ask people things. Are you married, Jessica?"

"No," said Jessica.

"Somebody should do something about that," Doan said. "Aside from the dough you're a pretty neat little number just as you stand. Don't you think so, Owens?"

"That's immaterial," said Owens coldly.

"Not in my book it isn't," Doan denied. "You don't find girls with figures like Jessica's and dough too on every street corner. I know, because I've looked."

"Here, you!" the colonel bellowed furiously. "Stop your infernal insolence! I'm your employer, sir!"

"You'll find that out when I present my bill," Doan assured him. "Well, let's go inside where it's comfortable and sit down and have a long chat about the political situation. Jessica and Owens probably want to talk, too."

"We have nothing to talk about," Owens said coldly.

"No," said Jessica. "Good night."

She walked across the porch and through the front door.

Colonel Morris scowled at Doan. "Sir, I resent your attitude and your words. Hereafter, if you find it necessary to address my daughter at all, do so with more courtesy."

"Okay," said Doan. "But I'll have to

charge more for special service like that. Are we going to stand out here and gab all night? I'm tired."

Colonel Morris breathed deeply. "Come into the house, please. I have some matters to take up with you, Doan. Brad, your clothes and personal effects are in your old room in the left wing."

"I'll go there now," Owens said. "This has been rather a long and busy day for me."

"Would you like Cecil to get you something to eat?"

"No, thanks," Owens said. He turned to his left and walked on along the veranda.

Colonel Morris nodded at Doan. "Come with me."

They started toward the front door, and then Colonel Morris stopped and pointed a stiff, accusing forefinger.

"Do you propose to take *that* into the house?"

"Carstairs?" Doan said. "Yes. He's afraid of the dark, and when he's scared he howls."

"Well, let him howl!" Colonel Morris sputtered.

"Oh, no," said Doan. "You've never heard him. The last time he let loose, he broke three plate glass windows and stopped a grandfather clock dead in its tracks."

CARSTAIRS SETTLED THE argument by pacing dignifiedly through the front door into the hall. Colonel Morris followed him, muttering to himself. Doan trailed along behind them down the hall and into a room that had been fixed up as a combination study, den and office by someone who had expensive, if not very original, taste.

There was a fireplace with a high, broad mantel cluttered up with ship models and hunting prints on the wall and an enormous flat executive's desk in one corner and deep leather chairs.

Doan sat down in one of the chairs, sighing. "I could use a drink now," he observed.

"Humph!" said Colonel Morris. He picked up a square, cut-glass decanter from the stand beside the desk and looked at it. It was empty.

"Cecil!" he shouted. "Ce-cil!"

The rear door of the study opened, and a man put his head inside. He was bald, and he had a limp, corn-colored mustache and eyes that were just slightly crossed.

"You're gonna bust a gut sometime, yellin' like that," he said. "What you want?"

"There's no whiskey in the decanter!"

"Of course not," said Cecil. "You drank it."

"Bring some more!"

"I was goin' to in a minute. Just keep your pants on, will you?"

He pulled his head back, and the door swung shut.

Colonel Morris slammed around behind his desk and sat down with a thump. "Insolence!" he seethed, the veins in his cheeks standing out in bright, cherry-red knots. "Nothing but insolence. The world is going to the dogs, sir!"

"If it does," Doan said, indicating Carstairs. "I'll get my share."

Carstairs was sitting in the middle of

the floor, examining the room with an air of supercilious disapproval. Cecil opened the door and came back in the room. He was carrying a white crockery jug. He pulled the cork out with his teeth and poured liquor from the jug into the decanter. The liquor was just off the color of water, slightly yellowish, with an oily, smooth thickness.

When the decanter was full, Cecil upped the jug in the crook of his elbow and took a long pull out of it.

"You the detective?" he asked, glaring at Doan.

"Right," said Doan.

"I don't like detectives," Cecil said flatly.

"Oh, you'll like me, though," Doan said. "I'm something special."

"You'll be something dead if you don't stay out of my kitchen," Cecil assured him. "I'm the cook around this dump, and I don't like snoopers, and what I say goes. The deadline of my bailiwick is right at that door there. Don't cross it."

"That'll do, Cecil," Colonel Morris said.

"Don't interrupt me," Cecil ordered. "I don't have to work here, you know. I can get a job any time for twice the dough you're paying me and meet a better class of people at that. I suppose I've got to feed that cross between a water buffalo and a giraffe, too."

"Yes," said Doan, "but you'll love him when you get to know him. He has a beautiful character."

"Hah!" said Cecil skeptically. "What does he eat?"

"Steaks," said Doan.

"What kind?"

Doan stared. "You mean you've got a choice?"

'Hell, yes," said Cecil. "I've got a couple of cows hung out in the freezer. I can hack off any kind of a piece you want."

"Oh, for the life of a farmer," Doan commented. "I think a filet would do nicely for him. About two pounds. Grind it up and just warm it in the oven. Don't cook it. You might dig up one for me, too, when you get through with him."

"Okay," said Cecil. "Come on, clumsy."

"Go with the nice man, Carstairs," Doan ordered. "He's got a steak for you. Steak. Meat." He licked his lips elaborately.

Carstairs stared at him incredulously.

"Fact," Doan assured him. "Real meat."

Carstairs instantly heaved himself to his feet and started for the door, eyes narrowed in anticipation. Cecil held the door open for him and then nodded meaningly at Colonel Morris.

"Don't go and drink yourself dumb, now. You know the doc told you to lay off the stuff."

"Get out of here!" Colonel Morris shouted furiously. "Mind your own damned business!"

"Phooey to you," said Cecil, closing the door emphatically behind him.

"Insolence," Colonel Morris muttered. "Unmitigated, infernal insolence, no matter where I turn!"

"It's enough to drive a man to drink," Doan agreed. "Are you going to?"

"Eh? Oh, yes. Here."

Colonel Morris took two outsized shot

glasses from the rack under the stand, poured liquor into them, and handed one to Doan. Doan drank it.

The liquor felt as smooth and slick as plush in his throat.

"Like it?" Colonel Morris asked.

"Sort of tasteless," Doan said. "Pretty weak stuff, too, isn't it?"

SOMEONE SUDDENLY SET off a small charge of blasting powder in Doan's stomach. The room tipped up at one corner, spun around three times, and settled back slowly and gently.

"Weak?" the colonel repeated softly.

"Wow!" said Doan, swallowing hard, "No. I take that back. What is it, anyway?"

"Just corn liquor. Cecil makes it. That's why it's necessary for me to put up with his boorish impertinence. He has a still hidden somewhere here on The Square. He won't give me his recipe or even show me his methods."

"Can't you find the still?"

Colonel Morris chuckled. "No. Cecil is an oldtime moonshiner. Sheriff Derwin has caught pneumonia twice sitting out all night on Fagan's Hill watching with night glasses and trying to spot Cecil visiting his hideout. Derwin would like nothing better than to bring a moonshining charge against Cecil and against me as his employer. Will you have another drink?"

"No, thanks," said Doan. "That stuff goes a little rough on an empty stomach."

"Then to business," said Colonel Morris. "Do you know why I hired you for this particular job?'

"Sure," said Doan. "Because I've got such a worldwide reputation as a brilliant detective."

"No," said Colonel Morris. "Hardly. I made many inquiries from official sources. I was informed that you were shrewd, violent, tricky and completely unscrupulous."

Doan shook his head sadly. "That's nothing but slander. I devote all my time to good works."

"I can imagine," said Colonel Morris dryly. "However, if you can curb your blasted impudence, I think we will get along." He leaned forward and tapped his stubby fingers impressively on the desk top. "I anticipate trouble, Doan. A lot of it."

"Trouble is my business," said Doan.

"I suppose you've had sufficient initiative to make inquiries of Brad Owens about the death that occurred here?" the colonel asked.

"We talked about it some."

"Good. That was a most vicious miscarriage of justice. If the jury hadn't been composed exclusively of halfwits and enemies of mine, he would never have been convicted. As it was, it took me two years and every bit of influence I have to secure his release even on parole. There is a great deal of bitternesss in the neighborhood because I was even able to do that. You are to see that the bitterness doesn't take any—ah—material form."

"I get it," said Doan. "If anybody opens his mouth, I bat him down."

"That is putting the idea crudely but lucidly," Colonel Morris agreed. "I feel that Owens is almost a son to me, and I will not have him persecuted further."

"And besides," Doan added, "you need him to manage your farm."

Colonel Morris' red, overripe face darkened slightly. "That is the kind of remark I would prefer that you keep to yourself. Such cynicism sickens me."

"Me too," Doan agreed. "All right, I'll sort of walk around behind Owens and interview anybody who sticks out his tongue. How long does this go on?"

"If there is trouble—and I believe there will be, as I said—it will come soon. Resentment of the sort felt against Owens—and myself—shows itself immediately."

There was a furious, strangled yell from the rear of the house, and an instant later the door burst open and Cecil raged into the room.

"What kind of an animal is that you own?" he yelled at Doan. "Was he raised in a pigsty?' '

"Yes," said Doan, "but a very clean one. What did he do this time?"

"He sneezed in my cake dough! After I fed him! What kind of manners is that? He sneezed right in it on purpose and blew it the hell all over the drain board!"

"What did you do?" Doan asked. Before he sneezed, I mean?"

"Why, I just took a short snort of corn, is all."

Doan sighed. "That was it. Carstairs disapproves of drinking—violently. The smell of alcohol gives him the pip."

Cecil gasped. "You mean to say he won't even let me drink in peace in my own kitchen?"

"Probably not," Doan admitted.

"The hell with that noise!" Cecil shouted. "Then he ain't gonna eat in my kitchen! You hear me, Colonel? After this, that damned dog eats in the dining room!"

"Here, here!" Colonel Morris echoed, aghast. "That infernal beast in the dining room? Impossible!"

"Impossible or not, that's where he gets served," Cecil snarled. "And he'd damned well better keep his nose out of my cake dough after this. You! Come out of the kitchen!"

Carstairs strolled unconcernedly through the door into the study. Once inside, he stopped short and turned his head slowly and ominously, glaring at the glass still in Doan's hand. Doan put it down quickly.

"I've only had one," he said.

Carstairs snorted in utter and contemptuous disbelief. He walked over to the corner and lay down with his head in it and his back to the room.

Doan shrugged. "Oh well. Since he's going to sulk about it anyway, I might as well have another drink or two or even three. Roll out the barrel."

Chapter 3

MURDER IN THE NIGHT

DOAN WAS LYING flat on his back in bed, gurgling peacefully in his sleep and blowing alcohol fumes at the ceiling, when an object that was cold and gruesomely moist pressed itself against his cheek. Doan woke up, but he wasn't startled at all. This had happened many times before. Carstairs' nose, properly applied, was a very effective alarm clock.

"All right," Doan said. "What's your trouble now?"

It was pitch dark, and he rolled over and fumbled for the reading lamp on the bedstand and snapped it on. Carstairs was sitting on the floor at the head of the bed, watching him narrowly. Seeing that he had Doan's attention, he paced over to the door of the bedroom and stood looking at it.

"Listen, lamebrain," Doan said, "if you think I'm going to get up in the middle of night and escort you on a tour, you'd better start thinking all over again."

Carstairs looked over his shoulder, his ears flattened tight against his head. He growled very softly.

"So?" said Doan. "Some matter that needs my attention?"

Carstairs turned his head back to stare at the door.

"Coming right up," Doan said.

He got out of bed. He was wearing only the top of a pair of pajamas. He pulled on his trousers, put his suit coat on over his pajama jacket, and slid his bare feet into a pair of old moccasins he used for bedroom slippers. He jerked the bed covers back and unearthed a .38 Colt police positive and dropped it into his coat pocket.

"Let's go," he said.

He opened the bedroom door and bumped Carstairs in the rear with his knee, commandingly. They went out into the hall. It was darker even than the bedroom had been. Doan fumbled along the wall, and then Carstairs nudged in against him. Doan put his hand on Carstairs' spiked collar, and the dog led him, seeing-eye fashion, down the length of the hall toward the front of the house.

At the stairs, Carstairs stopped, and Doan felt out cautiously with one foot until he located the top step. They went on down into the smooth, stagnant blackness of the lower hall. Carstairs headed straight for the front door and stopped in front of it.

Doan snapped the night latch and opened the door. Outside, the moon was fat and red and bulging, low over the rim of hills that enclosed the valley, and in its thin light familiar objects assumed brooding, weirdly twisted shapes. The air was dry and cold and sharp in Doan's throat.

"If this is just a gag to give you a stroll in the moonlight, I'll beat your brains out," he threatened.

Carstairs ignored him. He was testing the faint stir of wind, head held first on one side and then the other. He went down the steps of the veranda and trotted in a circle, muzzle lifted high. He stopped suddenly and looked back at Doan.

"Lead on," said Doan. "I'm with you."

Single file, they went along the front of the house and on past the west wing. Carstairs stopped again, made up his mind, and then angled down the back slope. There were shrubs here, high and shaggy in the moonlight, and they worked their way through them. A row of barns and outbuildings stretched, solid and sturdily white, ahead of them, and Doan could hear faintly the stab of hoofs on board and the rolling wet crunch of corn in animal teeth.

"I'm getting damned good and tired

of this," Doan stated angrily. "Just what. . . ."

A creek meandered across the pasture beyond the barns, and Carstairs was standing near a bend where it looped lazily back on itself on the lee of a dense, close-cropped clump of brush. His ears were pricked forward, and his shadow lay thin and spindly and black on the ground in front of him.

Doan came up to him quietly, alert now, his hand grasping the revolver in his coat pocket.

"What?" he whispered.

Carstairs rumbled deeply and softly in his throat.

Doan saw it, then, too. It was an object pushed in under the brush, lumpy and motionless and limp, with the dim light gleaming a little on the paleness of what could only have been a face.

Doan drew his gun. "I see you, bud," he said. "Just speak up nicely."

There was no answer, and the lumpy bundle did not stir. Doan cocked the revolver, and then Carstairs moved in cautiously, his head lowered. He snorted suddenly and loudly.

"The hell," said Doan.

He moved in too, shoving Carstairs aside with his knee. He leaned down and poked the bundle with the barrel of his revolver. It was a slack and solid weight. Doan poked harder, and the head rolled back so that the moon shone on the pallidness of the face.

"Joady Turnbull," said Doan softly. "Fancy meeting you here."

Joady Turnbull's eyes stared dully and sightlessly up at him. A trickle of blood, glistening black and jagged in the moonlight, spread over his chin. Doan lifted him slightly and saw the knife handle sticking up, grimly solid, from his back just over his heart.

"Very neat," Doan commented.

HE TOOK HOLD of the handle and pulled the knife free with a little grunt of effort. He dropped Joady Turnbull, and the body rolled loosely back under the brush. Doan stood up and examined the knife. It was not graceful or deadly or designed for murder. It was a work knife with a thick, broad blade that could be used for almost anything from pulling nails to cutting down a tree.

Doan stared at it, whistling noiselessly to himself, and then he stopped that and looked at Carstairs. Carstairs had turned his head and was watching a clump of willows that made a thick, dark clot on the far side of the pasture where the creek ran out into the next field. He began to pace toward it, stiff-legged, and Doan trailed right along behind him, the knife still open in his left hand, the revolver in his right.

They approached the willows slowly, circling a little, and then a voice said wearily, "I'm right here, if you're looking for me."

"Well, well," said Doan. "Good evening and all that. We're not intruding, I trust."

"You are," said the voice. "But I don't suppose there's anything I can do about it. There's a path just to your left."

Carstairs found it, and Doan followed him along the tunneled blackness with the branches whipping stingingly across

his face and the dried leaves whispering slyly together. There was a little opening here with the dappled, dark sheen of the creek moving slowly past. Owens was a bulking shadow seated on a fallen log beside the water.

"I saw you coming across the pasture," he said. "What did you find back there?"

"Three guesses," Doan answered. "On the other hand, let's not play games. I found Joady Turnbull, and he's deader than a salted smelt, and just what the hell do you propose to do about that?"

Owens' body jerked. "Joady—"

"Turnbull," Doan finished. "Remember him? He's the one who was lying out there with a knife in his back."

"Knife," Owens whispered in a shocked, thick voice.

"This one," Doan agreed, holding it out.

Owens moved back. "That—that's mine. That's the one— I—his father. . . ."

Doan stared, trying to see his face in the dimness. "You mean that this is the same number you stuck into his old man?"

"Yes. It— it's called the Farmer's Friend. I always carried—"

"This is a pretty dish of goulash," Doan remarked. He knelt down on the creek bank and, holding the knife under the chilling water, scrubbed its blade and hilt with his fingers vigorously. "How did you get hold of it again?"

"Me? Why, I've never had it since the day that Joady's father and I—"

"Huh!" said Doan. He found a handkerchief in his pants' pocket and dried the knife carefully. Then he snapped the blade shut and put the knife in his pocket.

Owens said incredulously, "What are you going to do with that?"

"Never you mind," said Doan. "And as of now, you've never seen it, and neither have I."

"Do you mean you're going to conceal—"

"Look," said Doan. "Remember me? I'm the guy who was hired to keep you out of trouble. If you have to be consistent when you murder people, I wish you'd be a little more careful about it."

"But you can't just—"

"Oh yes I can," said Doan. "But after this, if you're going to murder people at night, I'm going to charge Colonel Morris time-and-a-half for overtime."

Owens came up to his feet suddenly. "Do you think—are you saying that *I* killed Joady Turnbull."

"What am I supposed to think?" Doan asked.

"Why, what reason. . . ."

"You tell me," Doan invited.

Owens leaned forward dangerously. "I had nothing whatever to do with it, you fool! I had no idea he was anywhere near here, alive or dead!"

Doan stared at him speculatively.

"Don't you believe me?" Owens demanded.

Doan sighed. "The hell of it is, I think maybe I do. You don't strike me as being completely nuts. Oh, this is a fine state of affairs. I think I'll resign."

"Resign?" Owens repeated blankly.

"It wouldn't be so bad," Doan explained, "if I only had to keep the police, or whoever, from proving you did the

dirty work. But now I'll have to dig around and find out who's really guilty, or else they'll certainly hang you for it."

"Hang?" Owens said dully.

"Somebody wants to see your neck stretched," Doan said absently, "and he strikes me as one of these gents who believe that if at first you don't succeed you should try, try again. It's all very discouraging at this point. If you weren't killing Joady Turnbull, just what were you doing out here at this hour of the night?"

"I couldn't sleep," Owens said. "After two years in a cell . . . I just thought I'd walk down here and sit for a while. It's quiet, and we—that is, I—used to come here often."

"Which way did you come?"

"Through the north gate. It's on the far side of the pasture from where you came in."

"Uh," said Doan. "How do you let the cows and horses and junk out of those barns?"

"Why do you want to do that?" Owens demanded.

"We'll track up the pasture. We'll let the animals run back and forth a while and confuse the issue."

"But—but that would be destroying evidence!"

"Don't worry," Doan said gloomily. "I've got an idea the guy that thought up this little caper will strew some more around."

Carstairs growled warningly. Doan turned around quickly, the revolver poised in his hand. Dried leaves rustled somewhere close in the shadow, and then a voice whispered:

"Brad! Are you here?"

Owens stiffened. "It's Jessica!" he breathed.

"Hail, hail, the gang's all here," Doan said sourly. "I hope she brought something to eat. We'll have a picnic lunch. Come join the band, Jessica."

SHE STILL WORE her white dress, and she was plainly visible groping her way cautiously closer. "Brad," she said uncertainly. "I was sitting up, and I saw you come down here, and I thought—"

Owens said to Doan, "As you've probably gathered by this time, we used to meet here quite often and sit and look at the moon."

"A harmless pastime," Doan said.

"You used to like it," Jessica said.

Owens nodded curtly. "I used to be stupid, too."

"What do you mean 'used to be'?" Doan asked. "You're giving a pretty good imitation of it now."

"Mind your own business."

"Okay, okay," Doan agreed. "But it wouldn't hurt you to talk to the girl."

"I don't want to talk to her."

"Why not, Brad?" Jessica asked.

"I'm not interested in making polite conversation with the future Mrs. Gretorex."

"I'm not the future Mrs. Gretorex," Jessica said steadily.

"The paper said you were."

"The paper was wrong. Gretorex comes here quite often, and some busybody called up the editor and told him that Gretorex and I were going to be married. The editor called Gretorex and asked him if it was true, and Gretorex

said that was his intention, so the paper printed the story. I didn't know anything about it until I saw it. I could have made the editor print a retraction, but what could that possibly have brought about?"

"H'm," said Owens doubtfully.

"Brad," said Jessica. "Don't you remember asking me to marry you? I said I would. I intend to."

"What?" said Owens.

"He's a nice fellow," Doan said to Jessica, "but he's a little slow on the uptake."

Owens said, "Jessica! You don't know what you're saying!"

"Oh yes I do."

"But you can't. You couldn't possibly—"

"Take a deep breath," Doan advised helpfully.

"Shut up!" Owens snarled at him. Then: "This is all the most ridiculous nonsense. Why, you don't even love me, Jessica!"

"I'm the best judge of that," Jessica informed him calmly. "You offered to marry me, and I intend to hold you to it."

Owens turned on Doan. "Now see here—"

Doan said, "Since I'm stage managing this reconciliation, I'd advise you to kiss her about now."

"Oh, be quiet! Jessica, your letters to me didn't sound as if you still loved me!"

"It's a little hard to write love letters to someone who won't answer you or even let you visit him."

"I couldn't. . . I didn't want you to think—"

"Dumb," Doan observed, "but he means well."

"All right," Owens said. "Since you're so clever, just explain to her what you found in the pasture."

"Yes," Jessica added. "I saw you come across from behind the barns. What did you find?"

"Nothing to get excited about," Doan told her. "Just a body."

"Joady Turnbull!" Owens snapped. "And he was stabbed with my knife!"

Jessica stared. "Your. . . The same knife—"

"Yes! Now I suppose you'll tell me you don't believe I did it!"

"I'll believe what you tell me, Brad."

"You're the only one who will!"

"Don't forget me," Doan said.

"Oh, you!" Owens said. "You don't count."

"I do so," said Doan. "My opinion on a matter like this is vital."

"What are you going to do?" Jessica asked faintly.

"He thinks he's going to conceal the evidence that links me with the murder!" Owens blurted. "He's crazy!"

"Like a fox," Doan said amiably. "Now look. Let me explain things to you in simple words. You are out on parole. If you are even faintly suspected of being involved in anything slightly illegal, your parole will be revoked. Aren't you tired of jails?"

"But it's only a matter of time before they suspect me, anyway!"

"That's what I want," Doan said. "Time. Now you scram over and let the cows out of the barn. I would myself, only they might moo at Carstairs and scare him. And just keep in

mind that you weren't here tonight and you don't know anything about any bodies or pastures or knives or what-the-hell. You were in your room the whole time, and I was with you. So was Carstairs. So was Jessica."

"You can't involve her—"

"She's already involved," said Doan. "Didn't it ever occur to you that she might need an alibi herself?"

Owens breathed in noisily. "Don't you dare insinuate that she—"

"Oh, run along," said Doan.

"Do what he says, Brad," Jessica directed.

"Now there's a woman with brains," Doan observed.

Owens spun around, muttering fiercely in an undertone, and slammed out through the brush.

Jessica came a step closer to Doan. "If he says he didn't—didn't have anything to do with Joady. . . ."

"I don't think he did," Doan said. "I wouldn't be sticking my neck out like this if I thought so. I'm not completely cracked. Someone wants people to think Owens is out to eliminate the Turnbulls."

"Then it might be that Joady's father. . . ."

"Say," said Doan admiringly, "you are pretty smart at that."

"If you could prove—if you *could*—I'd give anything. . . ."

"I hate to bring up these commercial matters," said Doan, "but how much would anything be worth in cash? A thousand bucks?"

Jessica swallowed. "I—I haven't that much. My father gives me only an allowance."

"I'll shake it out of him," Doan said, "with a slight assist from you. Let's get out of here before the cows get in."

Chapter 4

PUTTING ON THE DOG

SUNLIGHT, COMING through the open front door, made a bright, slanted outline on the rug in the front hall as Doan came down the stairs with Carstairs shambling along, limp-legged, behind him. Doan started toward the back of the house and then heard angry voices from the porch. He turned around and went outside.

There was a long, low convertible with a right hand drive and high, slanted fenders standing in the drive. A man stood in front of it, his head held high and arrogantly, his hands pushed deep in the pockets of a tailored suede sport jacket. He wore boots and riding breeches, and he had a voice that sounded as though it came from directly behind his beaked nose.

"This is a situation," he said, as though that settled it, "which is absolutely intolerable."

Jessica was standing on the edge of the porch, and Owens was leaning against a pillar beside her, scowling darkly. Colonel Morris teetered back and forth from heel to toe at the top of the porch steps, looking extremely unhappy about it all.

"Intolerable," the man with the beaked nose repeated. "A man of your sensibilities, Colonel, should have realized that. You should have consulted me."

"We didn't think it was necessary," said Jessica.

The man looked amazed. "Well, naturally it was! A man of my experience is able to give sensible advice on such matters. Who is this person with the—ah—dog?"

"Doan," said Doan. "You could only be Gretorex. This is Carstairs. Don't mistake him for a fox. He probably wouldn't react properly."

"Naturally he's not a fox," said Gretorex. "He's a Great Dane."

Carstairs sat down and scratched himself absent-mindedly.

"He thanks you kindly," Doan said. "What were you beefing about?"

"Ah?" said Gretorex. "Beefing? Oh. I was objecting to the presence of this person—Owens—in this vicinity at this time. As I said, the situation is intolerable. People simply won't stand for it. There'll be serious trouble. I warn you."

"Consider us warned," said Doan. "Why don't you go chase a fox?"

"What?" said Gretorex. "Well, really, this isn't the season for fox hunting, you know."

"Then chase yourself," Doan advised.

"Here!" Colonel Morris intervened. "Doan! Mr. Gretorex is a respected neighbor of mine, and I put great value on his opinions. I didn't realize the repercussions . . . I rather feel. . . ."

"I'll leave right away," said Owens.

"Wait until I pack my things," Jessica requested.

"Eh?" said Colonel Morris.

"What?" said Gretorex.

"If he leaves, I leave," said Jessica.

"Oh, I say!" Gretorex blurted in horror. "You really can't do that, you know. I mean to say—"

"Go ahead," said Jessica. "What do you mean to say?"

Gretorex swallowed. "Well. . . . The Owens person is a criminal—a convicted one. You can't just go away with him."

"Try me and see what I can do," Jessica invited.

"But, my dear girl, *think*!"

"I'm through thinking. Now I'm going to do something about it."

"Wh-what are you going to do?" Gretorex asked warily.

"Marry Brad."

Gretorex went back a step, shocked to his core. "Oh, but this is unbelievable! Colonel Morris, do you mean to say you will allow a murderer to abduct your daughter into—into a life of crime?"

Colonel Morris sighed. "There's no respect for parenthood any more. She's stubborn and defiant."

"What's more," Doan added, "she's of age."

Colonel Morris nodded gloomily.

"Well!" said Gretorex. "My dear Jessica, think of the terrible consequences of such a rash act. And you mustn't feel too broken-hearted over the little quarrel we had regarding that item in the paper. You were sarcastic and rude and—quite impossible—but I'll forgive you, my dear. I'll marry you myself!"

"Thanks," said Jessica. "Some other time."

There was an echoing yell from behind the house. It vibrated in the still air, and then there was the hurried

pound of running feet on packed dirt.

"Here we go again," said Doan.

A MAN IN OVERALLS swung himself frantically around the corner of the house. "Colonel Morris! Down there—in the p-p-pasture—"

"Here, here!" Colonel Morris snapped. "Get a hold on yourself, man!"

"There's a fella," said the man, gulping. "And he's there in the pasture—lyin' there. And he's dead with a stab in the back. And—and he's Joady Turnbull!"

"Mercy me," Doan commented. "A murder. And so early in the morning."

Colonel Morris made a strangled sound. "Murder! Joady Turnbull!"

Gretorex had got back his arrogant confidence. "I don't think, Colonel, we need worry about this killer and his attentions to Jessica any longer."

Colonel Morris' face was leaden-colored. "Show me!" he shouted incoherently, lunging down the steps.

He disappeared around the corner of the house with the farmhand thumping along behind him.

"Maybe we'd better notify what passes in this neck of the woods for the police," Doan suggested.

Gretorex smiled thinly. "I'll attend to that personally. And with pleasure!" He slid under the wheel of his car and headed it for the highway in a sudden ripping blast of power.

"Bad news sure travels fast," Doan remarked.

Cecil came out on the porch and pointed a finger at Doan. "Listen, you. If you want me to get you your breakfast, you get up when the rest do around here. All my help has run out on me on account they're afraid of gettin' their throats cut, and I'm runnin' the whole damned shebang, and if you want your bed made, make it yourself."

"Okay," said Doan, following him back into the house. "Did you hear that Joady Turnbull has been found murdered?"

"I can't think of anybody I'll miss less," Cecil informed him. "What does clumsy eat for breakfast?"

"Just gruel. With lots of cream and sugar and no lumps in it. I eat ham and eggs. I'll bet Joady Turnbull and his old man were good hunters, weren't they?"

Cecil stopped short and turned around. "They hunted rabbits and stuff some."

"Did they ever hunt stills?"

Cecil's gaunt shoulders hitched up threateningly. "If they had, they wouldn't have found none, and if they had found one, they wouldn't have been stabbed in the back. They'd have been shot right between the eyes. Just keep that in mind. Now sit down and eat your breakfast and keep your big mouth shut."

Some time later Doan was staring, glassy-eyed, at the ceiling. In front of him, on the dining room table, were the scant and tattered remains of what had been the equivalent of six restaurant orders of ham and eggs. Carstairs was lying under the table, gurgling and grunting in surfeited content.

Colonel Morris came into the room, followed by a second man who walked with a limply disconsolate slouch, long

arms dangling loosely. His pants were baggy at the knees, and his coat was rumpled in front, and his whole posture gave the impression that if you patted him on the top of the head he would slump into a small heap.

"This is Sheriff Derwin, Doan," Colonel Morris said in a worried tone.

Doan burped. "Excuse me," he said. "How are you, Sheriff?"

Derwin leaned down and looked him right in the eye. "I know you, all right. I heard plenty about you. Don't try to put none of your slick tricks over on me."

"Not right after breakfast," Doan said. "Not, anyway, this breakfast. Cecil is certainly a whiz-bang."

Color surged up into Colonel Morris's face. "Doan! There's been a murder, do you understand that?"

"Sure," said Doan, sighing contentedly.

"Well, don't sit there like a stuffed toad! This is serious! Do something!"

"He ain't gonna do nothin'," said Derwin. "Not if he wants to keep walking around outside my jail, he ain't. I got this case sewed up, and I don't stand for no monkey business from the likes of him."

Colonel Morris's face was turning purple. "Doan! This—this imbecile claims that Owens murdered Joady Turnbull! He proposes to arrest Owens!"

"Let him," Doan advised lazily. "Owens has been arrested before. One more time won't hurt him. We'll get him right out again."

"Oh, you will, will you?" Derwin inquired. "And just how do you think you're gonna do that little thing?"

"You haven't the slightest shred of evidence connecting him with the crime," Doan said. "We'll be on your trail with a habeas corpus for him in a half hour."

"Humph!" said Derwin. "If he didn't do it, then who did do it?"

"That's your question. You answer it. What time was this murder put together?"

"Doc Evans says Joady's been dead about ten hours."

Doan nodded. "Some time around midnight. Owens has an iron-clad alibi."

"What?" Derwin demanded.

"Not what. Who. Me. I was with him all the time. We were talking things over in his room."

"Hah!" Derwin jeered. "You think anybody'd believe that? You'd say it, anyway."

"Jessica was there, too," Doan said.

Colonel Morris made a gurgling sound. "Jessica!"

"Don't get excited," Doan advised.

"When?" Derwin asked skeptically.

"From ten o'clock last night until four o'clock this morning, more or less, as the case may be."

"Jessica!" Colonel Morris bellowed furiously.

Jessica came into the dining room. "Yes?"

COLONEL MORRIS gestured wildly. "Doan has the infernal insolence to say you were with Owens and him last night!"

"I was," said Jessica.

"It was all very proper," said Doan. "We were playing cards. Five card stud. A fascinating game. By the way, I won a thousand bucks from Jessica. She said you'd pay."

"A thousand—" Colonel Morris repeated numbly.

"One thousand and three dollars and ninety-one cents, to be exact," Doan said. "But I'll skip the small change."

"Shut up, all of you," Derwin ordered. He looked at Jessica. "Was you with Owens like he says?"

"Yes."

"All right," said Derwin grimly. "All right, for now. But I got my ideas. That stab in Joady looked mighty like the one his pa got, but this time I ain't found the knife—not yet. And somebody let the cows out so they'd trample up the ground. And I bet I know who."

"I never bet," said Doan. And then he added hastily, "Except in poker games."

"Your time's comin'," Derwin promised. "You think you're pretty smart, but you ain't seen nothin' yet. Colonel, you're responsible for Owens. I'm leavin' him here now, but I'll be back, and I wanta find him here." He pointed his finger at Doan. "And you too."

Twilight made shadows that were thick and gloomy in the study where Doan was napping when someone twisted his foot and woke him up.

"Umm?" he said, rolling over on the couch and blinking sleepily.

"The mastermind at work," Cecil sneered. "Listen, dopey, here's someone who wants to talk to you, and you'd better pry open your ears and listen."

Norma Carson's steel-rimmed spectacles made shiny circles in the dusk. Her face was pallidly drawn, and her hair straggled loosely down over her forehead.

"Oh, Mr. Doan!" she said. "You've got to do something! They're coming here! They are! And it's partly my fault!"

Doan sat up. "Who's coming, and what's your fault?"

"Those—those loafers and bums from town! It was that beast of a Gretorex. He talked to them and worked them up and gave them drinks, and then when Sheriff Derwin didn't arrest Brad Owens for Joady's murder, he said that they should take the law into their own hands!"

"Think of that, now," said Doan.

"They'll come here!" Norma gasped. "They—they'll lynch Brad!"

"How would that be your fault?" Doan asked.

"Joady told all over town that Brad had you send your dog after him. There at the mill. He said the dog attacked him, and he barely got away with his life. They're talking about tarring and feathering you!"

"Don't worry about it," Doan soothed her. "I'll handle things. You run on back to town now. It wouldn't be so good if the school board found out about this Paul Revere act of yours. Cecil here sure won't say anything, though."

Norma left reluctantly. Cecil went through the door, and slapped it shut emphatically behind him. Carstairs was lying on the floor with his head in the corner. He had slept through all the disturbance.

Doan got up and kicked him in the rear. "Up on your feet, brainless," he ordered.

Carstairs sat up and yawned, and then stared at Doan with an air of cynical expectancy.

With Carstairs padding silently behind him Doan went through the hall and out on the front porch in time to see Norma Carson's dingy coupe turn out into the highway and head back toward town. Doan sat down on the front steps. He took the police positive out of his pocket, flicked the cylinder open to make sure it was loaded, and then slid the gun into the waistband of his pants under his coat.

He sat there, looking dreamily thoughtful, while the shadows thickened and deepened and crawled softly across the sweep of the lawn. A few early stars made bright pin-pricks in the darkening purple haze of the sky, and then there were other bright pin-pricks, lower down, that moved and jittered jerkily in pairs, that were not stars.

Doan nudged Carstairs in the ribs with his thumb and pointed. "Company coming," he said.

Carstairs grunted, and his claws scraped a little on the porch flooring. Doan sat unmoving while the pin-prick headlights of the cars crawled closer on the town road.

Suddenly the front door banged deafeningly behind him, and Colonel Morris raged out on the porch. "Scum!" he bellowed. "Infernal, impudent swine! Do you see them?"

"Yup," said Doan.

The colonel stamped down the steps past Doan and stood at the top of the drive.

Doan jerked his head at Carstairs and then got up and sauntered quietly around the side of the house and down the back slope through the thick hedge. Light showed mellowly through the windows of the barns, and there was the high, thin whine of a cream separator. Following the sound, Doan went around to the front of one of the buildings and in through the wide doors.

Jessica was tending the separator, and she snapped the switch and stared at Doan.

"We're having some visitors," Doan told her. "The unwelcome variety."

Owens came in from the back carrying two shiny tin pails. He set them down, and milk spilled a little, frothily thick, on the cement floor.

"Don't tell me you've finally decided to lend us a hand?" he said to Doan.

"In a manner of speaking," Doan said. "There are some rough and ready parties on the horizon who have the idea of hanging you on a tree like a Christmas stocking. You and I and Carstairs are going for a hike in the woods and study the local bird life and all that."

"Run away?" Owens asked incredulously.

Doan nodded. "Just that."

"And you," he told Jessica, "are to run back and put on a little diversion for the boys. You weep and wail and wring your hands and tell them that Owens has left you flat."

Jessica stared at Owens for a moment, biting her lower lip, and then she turned wordlessly and ran out of the

building and up the slope toward the big house.

"They might trail us," Owens said. "If they should have dogs. . . ."

Doan smiled and indicated Carstairs. "He likes nothing better than a light snack of well-buttered bloodhound. Let's be on our way."

Chapter 5

TRAIL TO MURDER

THIS WAS THICK timber, on the north side of the valley, and it was darker than the inside of a cat. Doan bounced his chin off a low-hanging branch, stumbled backwards, and nearly stepped on Carstairs. Carstairs growled warningly.

"The thing I don't like about woods at night," Doan said, rubbing his chin, "is that they're dark. Do you know where we are?"

"Certainly," said Owens. "Keep close behind me, and that way you won't have much trouble."

"Okay," said Doan. "Is there any place near here where we can park and watch our backtrail?"

"Yes. Fagan's Hill is on ahead a ways."

"You can see the farm from there?"

"Yes. You can see the whole valley"

"Is there anyplace else like that?"

"No. All the other hills are timbered thickly. Fagan's Hill was once, but some early party dug a big quarry out of the side of it. It's not in use now, but the cut and the erosion made a sort of a cliff out of it. It drops off steeply, and there are no trees to cut off the view."

Doan said, "You told me that you don't remember stabbing Joady Turnbull's father."

"I don't."

"I know," said Doan. "Would you remember doing it if you had?"

Brush crackled against Owens' legs, and he was much closer suddenly. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, I think the reason you don't remember stabbing him is because you didn't do it. Someone else handled that end of it for you."

Owens' breath made a harsh noise in his throat. "What are you—"

"Easy," Doan said. "Take it easy. I've got a gun, and Carstairs is right behind you, and we're nervous people."

Owens said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"It's simple," said Doan. "You didn't kill Joady Turnbull, or his old man either. I want to know if you know who did."

"If I knew, do you think I'd have gone to jail for it?"

"Maybe," said Doan. "Just maybe."

"You fool! Why?"

"To protect the person who did do it."

Owens' shadow contracted a little. "You—"

"Don't try to jump me," Doan warned. "That won't work. Answer my question. Do you know who did the dirty deeds?"

"No!"

"I do," said Doan. "And I don't think you're going to like my answer."

Owens was breathing heavily. "What

kind of a trick are you trying to pull off now?"

"I'm trying to earn a bonus," Doan told him. "A little matter of one thousand bucks, and I see it fluttering prettily right in front of my snoot. Turn around and lead us to Fagan's Hill."

"Why?"

"Because I'm telling you to," said Doan, "and brother, I'm not fooling. Lead on, or I'll dump you here and find the place myself."

Owens stood there for leaden seconds, leaning forward, trying to see Doan's face, and then he turned without any more words and headed through the tangled darkness. They went on steadily in silence, climbing slightly. Doan had his left arm in front of his face to protect it from invisible slashing branches. He was holding the revolver in his right hand.

At last Owens' face made a pallid blob as he paused and looked over his shoulder. "It's about a hundred and fifty yards ahead," he murmured.

Doan reached back and got hold of Carstairs' spiked collar and hauled him ahead. Go ahead. Go on. Watch."

Carstairs slid on ahead of them, his head swinging alertly from side to side.

"Follow him," Doan ordered. "Don't make any more noise than you have to."

Owens walked on slowly, picking his path, and Doan kept in step right behind him. Owens stopped again. Doan looked around him. Carstairs was standing still, his head tilted, testing the night air with noisy little sniffles.

Doan sighed. "I'm on the beam tonight." He stepped past Owens and nudged Carstairs with the revolver barrel. "Go on. Get him. And take it easy. Hold. Hold, you hear?"

CARSTAIRS MUMBLED sullenly and then seemed to fade away silently into the shadows. There was no further sound, and Owens and Doan waited, listening to their own breathing. Then a man yelled frantically.

Instantly Doan cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, "Don't run! Don't try to get your gun! Don't move and he won't touch you!"

He threshed his way ahead up the slope with Owens pounding along behind him. The timber thinned into stunted brush, and they broke through it into a small clearing. There was a man sitting on the ground, both his hands raised protectively.

Carstairs was crouched squarely in front of him, his head thrust forward until his muzzle was no more than a foot from the man's face. His fangs glistened, white and shiny, in the dimness, and he was growling in a continuous, ugly mutter.

"Okay," said Doan. "Relax, stupid."

Carstairs quit growling and yawned in a bored way. He backed off and sat down.

"Gaah!" said the man in a choked voice. "He come without no warning and—and jumped at me!"

"Hi, Sheriff," Doan said.

Derwin caught his breath.

"I sent him on ahead," Doan said, "because I thought you might hear us coming and sort of shoot before you looked."

"Huh?" said Derwin. "Why?"

"I thought your conscience might be bothering you."

"Huh?" Derwin repeated. "Conscience?"

Doan poined. "On account of that."

The valley stretched out in a long, smoothly graduated scoop ahead of them, rolling up on its sides into the timbered shadows of the hills. The Square was immediately ahead and below, far down, as small and miniaturely perfect as an expensive doll house with lights bright and tiny in its windows. Other lights, mere pin pricks, moved and churned around it—in front and on the sides and in back among the smaller, lower outbuildings.

"Friends of yours?" Doan asked.

"What do you mean?" Derwin demanded.

"Look," said Doan. "We're grown up. We know the facts of life. No one could gather up a mob that size in a little joint like Ramsey village without the sheriff knowing all about it. You knew all about it. You just didn't want to stop them, so you kept out of their way."

"Humpf," Derwin said sullenly. "Well, damn it, I—I figured. . . ."

"You figured maybe the mob would scarce Owens so that he might confess to something."

"So maybe I did," said Derwin. "And he's guilty!"

"And you're so dumb it's pathetic," said Doan.

Carstairs suddenly stood up and growled.

Doan swore in a bitter whisper. "No, I'm wrong. I'm the dumb one."

"What is it?" Owens demanded.

"I figured Derwin would come up here to see what was going on. I never thought that the murderer might, too."

"What?" said Derwin. "Hey!"

"Shut up," said Doan, watching Carstairs.

Carstairs had lowered his head and was staring into the darkness at the back of the clearing. A stick snapped loudly there. Carstairs started forward.

Doan kicked him in the ribs. "No!"

"Why not?" Owens whispered.

"This is different," said Doan. "This party sees us. I don't want Carstairs full of buckshot. You out there! Come on in! I know who you are!"

Doan shoved Owens. "You and Derwin go to the left. Run for it! Circle around and drive back in toward the cliff here!"

Then he nudged Carstairs with his knee. "Come on!" He ran across the clearing and crashed into the brush on the right side of the clearing.

The darkness closed in tightly. Doan felt for Carstairs, grabbed the spiked collar. Carstairs lunged ahead, and Doan smashed and clattered along behind him, swearing great oaths in a bitter monotone.

"Make some noise," he ordered. "Woof!"

Carstairs bayed savagely, and the sound rolled and echoed ahead of them. Doan fell into a gulley, and Carstairs dragged him, willy-nilly, up the other side, going ahead in great, heaving jumps. He bayed again and then stopped short. Doan fell over the top of him and scrambled to his feet. He stood tensely, listening.

"I know you're close to me," he said.

"You're not going any further in this direction."

There was the whistling sound of an indrawn breath. Carstairs leaped in that direction, and Doan got him by the tail and hauled back, digging in his heels.

"No! Take it easy, lamebrain! I like you without holes in your hide better!"

He got a new grip on the collar, and they went ahead in a weirdly tandem fashion with Doan caroming off trees and wading sightlessly through brush that crackled angrily.

"Derwin!" Doan yelled. "Owens!"

"Here!"

"Here!"

"Circle back this way!"

CARSTAIRS STOPPED uncertainly, started in one direction, turned and went in another.

"Make up your mind," Doan panted.

Carstairs slowed up, and Doan hauled on the collar, gasping for breath, and then the darkness seemed to thin a little, and the undergrowth fell away ahead of them.

"Ah," said Doan. "This is it." He slapped Carstairs on the muzzle. "Back! Keep back."

Carstairs grumbled and grunted indignantly, but he edged in back of Doan's legs. Doan went ahead slowly, the police positive poised.

The ground sloped steeply down, and then they were abruptly in the clear, looking out over the empty black space of the valley. There was a figure right on the edge of the drop ahead—dark and wavering there, unsteady.

Doan said, "There's the party of the first part."

"Who?" Derwin said. "Who—"

A small, soft breeze from the valley ruffled the brush-tips and touched the figure on the cliff edge.

"Why," Owens said in a numb, incredulous voice, "why it's Norma Carson!"

Her spectacles glinted a little, turning toward them, and then she turned and gathered herself.

"Hey!" Doan yelled.

There was nothing on the cliff edge, and then like an echo to his yell there was a thin, chilling shriek that tapered off into the rolling, rumbling smash of rocks rolling.

Derwin ran toward the cliff, threw himself down on hands and knees and crawled forward.

"Oh," he said in a sickened voice. "Oh. Clear down on those sharp rocks, and she's all twisted and smashed. . . ."

He got to his feet and ran back across the clearing, heading for the smoother slope farther along the hillside.

"Norma!" Owens said. "I don't—I don't understand."

"She killed old man Turnbull and Joady."

"Killed?" Owens repeated, still numb. "I can't believe she would. . . ."

"It took me quite a while to get the idea, too," Doan admitted.

"But why?"

"Well, did you ever notice the way she looked at you or the way she looked when she talked about you?"

"What?" said Owens.

"She loved you, you dope. You thought no one saw old man Turnbull

smack you with that wrench. But Norma did. She thought you were killed, and she gave herself away completely. Probably got hysterical and took on at a great rate. Old Man Turnbull got the idea. He was scared because he had socked you, and he put the pressure on her. She was supposed to say you hit him first or something.

"That was about the end of him. Your knife had probably fallen out of your pocket, or else she found it while she was trying to find out how dead you were. She gave it to Turnbull—in the back."

Owens swallowed. "But then, when I was arrested—"

"I'm afraid you won't like Norma so well after this," Doan said. "I'm afraid she figured that if you were in jail, she wouldn't have you, but neither would Jessica."

"Oh," said Owens.

"Norma probably figured on gathering you in when you got loose," Doan went on. "She never dreamed that Jessica would stick to you—especially after she maneuvered that little phoney rumor of her engagement to Gretorex and sent you the paper so you'd know."

Sheriff Derwin's voice came to them faintly from below. "Doan! Owens! She—she's dead. Oh, Lordy!"

"Go get a doctor or an ambulance or a hearse or something," Doan ordered.

"But about Joady. . . ." Owens said.

"Joady was mean," Doan said. "Joady was dumb like his old man. He was so mean and dumb he died. He was mad because Norma wouldn't let him go to school. Probably people needled him about it. He took to following her around and pestering her—like at the mill. He followed her once too often. She had to come, you see, and find out if you and Jessica were going to get together again. She had to know that. She was sneaking around the joint last night, and Joady followed her, and she caught him at it. He would have told on her."

"What about the knife?" asked Owens, still dazed.

"After it was used at the trial, it would just be filed away in some drawer in the courthouse as an exhibit. No one would suspect a schoolteacher of anything if she was around the courthouse, and certainly no one would ever dream she would pinch a knife."

Doan took the knife from his pocket, opened it and wiped the blade and hilt on his coat front. He flipped it over the cliff edge.

Owens drew a deep breath. "You—you know, it's a little hard for me to grasp all this. . . ." He hesitated uncertainly. "You *are* a pretty clever detective after all!"

"I'm the best there is," said Doan. "I told you that in the first place. You better run on back to Jessica."

"Well. . ." said Owens, "thanks."

He turned and started back.

"Have Cecil put on a couple of steaks for us!" Doan called. "And, hey! Don't forget that thousand dollars!"

Owens ran on, unheeding.

"Love," said Doan, nodding to Carstairs.

Carstairs slowly and thoughtfully licked his chops.

Doan nodded. "Yup. Steaks are good, too." ♣ ♣ ♣

It isn't absolutely necessary to be a pickpocket to achieve the Miracle Score—namely, to come suddenly into possession of a large sum of other people's money. But if you are one, it helps to remember what Danny forgot—that there's many a slip between the cop and the dip!

Miracle Score

by JOHN D. FITZGERALD

MIKE'S TAVERN ON Eighth Avenue is patronized by many light-fingered characters who think that a callous is a cowboy's horse. Danny the Dip used to be one of Mike's best customers, until he became the victim of a gross miscarriage of justice that drove him stir-bugs.

We miss Danny around Mike's, and blame everything on the Miracle Score. . . .

I'll never forget the night that Harry the Hook and I were sitting in Mike's, nursing two short beers. Fingers Nolan came into the joint and told us that Danny had been sentenced to the indef at Riker's Island Pen.

Harry the Hook took his long beak out of his short beer long enough to remark, "Tough break. Danny is a good boy."

"But you don't get the point," Fingers pointed out as Mike slid a short beer across the bar to him. "Danny copped a plea."

Mike laid his fat elbows on the bar and grabbed his double chin in his hands. "That don't make sense!" he said. "If Danny pleaded guilty, he must have made a deal with the D.A. for a sixer. I never heard of a guy copping a plea and getting more than six months. You say Danny copped a plea and they gave him the book. He couldn't have got any more time if he'd stood trial."

"That ain't the half of it." Fingers was indeed full of astonishing news. "Danny not only copped a plea, but he showed the cops where he ditched the leather."

We were all astounded by this unbelievable statement. Danny was no Johnny Come Lately. Danny had been digging citizens for their pokes for many years. The first thing a good dip

learns is to ditch the leather. If the cops don't find the pocketbook in the dip's possession, they can only book him for jostling. But if the cops find the pocketbook on the dip, they can book him for larceny from person.

The difference between jostling and larceny from person is the difference between doing six months on the Island and doing the indef for three years.

"I can only state," I said sadly, "that it don't sound kosher. It is the same as if Danny turned stool pigeon against himself."

As if in answer to our dilemma, who should pop into Mike's but Duke Ryan. I looked at the old-time con man with his nice gray mustache and goatee to match. He was indeed a substantial looking citizen, and his merry blue eyes held the innocence of a newborn babe. I got an idea.

After explaining to Duke about Danny, I sprung with my idea. "Duke, you have a very honest and kind face. You are also known as one of the best short-con artists in town. It would be very easy for you to do an impersonation of Danny's grandfather. I'm sure you have con enough to obtain a pass from the Commissioner of Correction's office to visit your poor grandson, Danny, at Riker's."

Duke took his cheaters, which hung on a long black ribbon, and fastened them on his aristocratic nose. "Gentlemen, I shall be delighted. It will be a very unique experience to visit the Island and return the very same day."

Now, I have been around Broadway long enough to know that the big black streak on the Hudson River each morning is caused by the mascara on the eyes of all the dolls that cried themselves to sleep the night before. I also know that the foam on the East River is caused by all the guys who cried in their beer the night before. But I have never heard a sadder and more heart-rending tale than Duke brought back from Riker's after visiting Danny.

On the morning that tragedy overtook him, Danny was working a downtown, West Side Express. At Seventy-second Street a likely looking mark got on the train with several other subway riders. Danny eased himself over behind the mark and fanned him. It was a pleasant surprise to discover the mark had a nice fat poke in his right britches pocket. When the subway train stopped at Times Square, Danny helped himself to the mark's wallet as he pushed and heaved with the crowd to get off the train.

Being a good dip, Danny immediately weeded the money from the pole and dumped the empty wallet into a waste-basket.

The bundle of bills felt thick, and the temptation was great to count them. Danny steeled himself until he reached the privacy of his room in a little hotel off Times Square. As he pulled the money from his pocket, his eyes almost popped out of his head. In a trance he counted the bundle of thousand-dollar bills. There were ten of them. Ten thousand dollars. It was a Miracle Score.

Danny had heard of many Miracle Scores, but never thought he would be lucky enough to make one. Only the summer before, Larry the Gimp had

dug a citizen for his poke in the subway and found himself with a Miracle Score of six thousand dollars. Louie the Flopbeater dug a drunk for his poke on a Fifth Avenue bus one time and found he'd made a Miracle Score of eight thousand dollars.

Then a terrible fear seized Danny that maybe the money was phony. He ran down the hall to Benny's room.

"Bum Note," Danny said hoarsely, "Is this G Note genuine?"

Danny couldn't have gone to a better expert on paper money. Bum Note was such an expert that the United States Government had made him a standing offer of a pension of five hundred a month if Bum Note would let the government make all the paper money for its citizens.

"This," said Bum Note, handing the thousand dollar bill back to Danny, "is a genuine G note."

Danny, back in his room, began making plans to spend the Miracle Score. He had visions of winter sunshine, bathing beauties and the bangtails pounding down the stretch at Hialeah. He decided to leave for Florida immediately after he had changed one of the G notes.

WHEN THE TELLER in the bank on Fifth Avenue told Danny he would have to get the money from the vault, Danny felt no alarm. The teller was gone quite a while, but Danny didn't mind. He was daydreaming of Miami Beach and a blonde.

His dreams were rudely shattered when he was suddenly grabbed by two bank guards, who propelled him into a small office in the back of the bank. In a few minutes a sleepy-eyed old man and a bright-eyed youngster came into the office.

"You," the sleepy-eyed old man said to Danny, "are under arrest for sticking up the Third National Bank and killing a cashier!"

"Me?" Danny screamed. "It's a bum rap! I'm no heavy guy!"

By this time, the eager-eyed youngster had found the other ten thousand dollar bills in Danny's shoe. "You don't know anything about it, eh?" the eager-eyed youngster says, waving the G notes under Danny's nose. "Then perhaps you can tell us how you came into possession of ten thousand dollars of the loot."

Realization came to Danny quicker than a hiccup comes from bicarbonate. The guy whose pocket he'd picked had been one of the stickup mob. The numbers of the large bills had been given to all New York banks.

There was poor Danny with the electric chair staring him right in the kisser. He knew the only way to save himself was to be a stool pigeon against himself. He told the cops the truth and took them to the subway and showed them where he'd ditched the leather. In the wallet the cops found a 4F draft card and a driver's license. Within a couple of hours they had rounded up the mob that stuck up the Third National and bumped the cashier.

Danny, firmly believing that cops are appreciative, patiently waited for them to thank him and let him go. What

a terrible thing it must have been for him when they took him to court and charged him with larceny from person.

The judge took one look at Danny's long police record and made a speech. "You," he spat at him, "are a bum citizen, a parasite, a low character, a confirmed criminal and a menace to society. I sentence you to the Island for the maximum term."

Danny brooded so much over this gross miscarriage of justice while serving his three years that he went stir-bugs. He got so nutty that he swore he would never again dig a citizen for his poke. When he was released, he went to work in his uncle's grocery.

He got so down in the dumps that he turned to a redheaded cashier in the story for sympathy. This doll took advantage of his stirry condition, and one day when he was a little stirrier than usual, she married him. To top it all off, the doll keep pounding it into Danny that if they had a mouthpiece in the family, such a miscarriage of justice couldn't happen again. That is why Danny became the papa of a little red-headed boy who is going to be a lawyer when he grows up.

We never see Danny around Mike's any more. He is now a partner with his uncle and strictly a poor working stiff with a ball and chain and a kid. We all feel very sorry for the poor guy, and think it a shame that such a good pickpocket should end up in such a terrible mess. But just last night Harry the Hook said something kinda funny.

"You now something," Harry said as we sat in Mike's, "there are times like when I'm eating my beans all alone in the Automat—times when I'm trying to sew buttons on my shirt while all alone in my dinky hotel room—times when I'm all alone in my cell at Riker's Island while doing a bit for digging some citizen for his poke—that I get to thinking about Danny. And I get to wondering if maybe he didn't get a Miracle Score after all and don't know it." ♣ ♣ ♣

But, Your Honor . . . . By LON PERRY

■ Failure to attend church constituted a felony in sixteenth-century England. For the first offense, the punishment was six months' imprisonment. The second offense drew a sentence of a year. And the third offense was punished by life imprisonment.

■ Lord Mansfield, later to become Chief Justice of England, once presided over a municipal court. Among the offenders whom he tried was a man who had committed a petty offense, but was unable to pay a fine. The judge was reluctant to imprison him, but felt that some punishment should be administered. Noticing that the prisoner had a very fine set of whiskers, Mansfield grimly sentenced him to be shaved!

■ Our sturdy Puritan forefathers were authors of some of the strangest punishments of all time. A case in point is that of Mr. Josias Plainstowe, convicted of fraudulently obtaining corn from the Indians. The judge sternly handed down sentence: for the remainder of his natural life, he was to be called "Josias," instead of "Mr. Plainstowe!"

Here is the most ruthless man you've ever met—a killer whom death could not soften nor bullets stop—yet whose relentless fists battered to their last futile gesture that softest thing a man ever finds—the heart of a woman in love. It is with a definite sense of accomplishment that we welcome Miss Brackett to these pages—which many of you will find unforgettable!

The Case of the Wandering Redhead

by LEIGH BRACKETT

I KNEW I HAD her that night. I climbed the dirty stairs, watching my breath steam in the cold, smelling the stale cabbage, and thinking, *Tomorrow she'll be out of this. Tomorrow she'll be Mrs. Marty James.*

Six flights, almost running, thinking of Sheila Burke.

Her mother let me in. A white-haired woman in a faded dress, who wanted to slam the door on me but knew it wasn't any use.

I grinned at her and went in. "Hello, Ma," I said.

She said softly, "Don't 'Ma' me, you cheap little hoodlum."

I turned around, slow, so she could see my clothes. "I've grown up," I said solemnly. "I'm a big hoodlum now."

She looked at me. Hot blue-green eyes like Sheila's. "No, Marty. Inside you're little, and you'll never be anything else."

She went out and shut the kitchen door on me. I didn't care. I'd waited a long time for Sheila. Any other dame—but she wasn't a dame. That's why I played her slow, and let her fight, because I didn't want to break her. Gentle her, sure. But easy, so she'd still be Sheila when she gave in.

I knew she was where she'd have to give in, now. Tony'd been watching her for me. He knew how her credit stood with the butcher and the guy at the grocery store. A girl's got to eat, and so does her ma.

I sat down, in that cheesy little dump that was twin to the one I grew up in. My heart was choking me, and the palms of my hands were wet.

Then I heard her on the stairs out-

side, and the door opened, and Sheila was standing there looking at me.

Even the hard electric light couldn't spoil her. Her red hair, with its own fire inside it. Her white skin, really white, like milk in a bottle. And her eyes, blue-green and full of sparks. She was wearing some crummy rags out of a basement, and she looked better than any dame walking Fifth Avenue inside a thousand bucks.

Funny how things happened. I just passed her on the street one day, and after that there wasn't any other woman in the world. Funny. Yeah.

I got up. I said, "Hello, Sheila." I couldn't breathe.

She said, "You had it figured pretty close, didn't you? Just how long Ma and me could go without eating." Her eyes met mine, tired, a little scared maybe, but hot. Her voice had an edge on it.

"You fight clean, Marty! Hounding me out of every job I can get, sending those cheap gunsels of yours to hang around me until the boss kicks me out before I can steal the building. Oh, yes—you fight clean, all right! Just like a dirty rat in a drain."

I said, "It's the only way I know to fight, honey." I said to her. "Aw, look, Sheila. I don't want to fight you. I never did. I just . . . I love you, Sheila." I put my hands out.

She slapped me hard across the cheek.

I stood staring at her. Then I closed my eyes and just stood, sweating. Her voice came from a long way off, low and furious.

"Can I get it through your head? I hate you, Marty. I hate everything you stand for. All I want out of life is decency and peace and maybe a little happiness. You can't give me any of them."

It was hard to talk. I still couldn't look at her. I said again, "I love you, Sheila."

"You act like it. Oh, Lord, Marty, why can't you let me alone!"

"I love you, Sheila."

"I'll never marry you." I could see her face now. It was cold and shut away. It was something I couldn't touch.

"You've got blood on you, Marty. You're not in my world."

I started toward her again. I don't know what I was going to do. Only I had to make her understand, somehow, that all that didn't matter. That where she was concerned I wasn't Marty James the racketeer, but just a guy in love. In love so I wanted to cry with it, like I used to cry for the stars when I was a kid.

Somebody said from the doorway, "I don't think she wants that, mister."

He must have been outside in the hall all that time, beside the door where I couldn't see him. He had three big paper bags of groceries in his arms. He was about four inches taller than me, big and bony and loose and young, with farmer feet and knobby hands and clothes that looked like they came off a scarecrow.

I stared at him for a long time. He had mild gray eyes under a fuzz of light hair, and a queer, hard, icy look that didn't match the rest of him. I shivered and dragged my breath in and went toward him.

Sheila got between us.

"It isn't any of his fault, Marty! I picked him up in the park. You had it figured right, Marty. I had to get food from somewhere. Tod pawned his watch. He's just a clean kid off a farm."

I said, "That's tough."

She took hold of my coat lapels. "It isn't his fault! Let him alone, Marty. He's not in your class."

I RUBBED MY KNUCKLES. I looked at the groceries the kid had bought for Sheila. I thought about him standing out there listening to me spill my insides out. Watching me get my face slapped, and then telling me to lay off.

I said, "Shut up," and pushed her away.

Ma Burke must have come in some time, because I heard her voice behind me. But just then the kid spoke up, sort of choked and raspy. He was white around the lips all of a sudden, not looking at anybody.

He said, "I ain't lookin' to have no trouble."

I watched him a minute. Then I laughed. He shut his eyes and stiffened up, and that was all. I turned back to Sheila.

She had that still, white look again. "You won't listen to me, Marty. You won't let me alone."

I said, "I've taken a lot from you, Sheila. More than I ever took from anybody. I've played easy. I've given you time. Okay. Now let's quit this. It isn't doing either of us any good. We'll get married tomorrow."

"No," she said, very softly. "No."

"Don't make me get tough, honey. I don't want it like that. But I—" I had her in my arms, then. She was cold and still, but her hair had a warm smell like flowers in it. I kissed her. I never kissed any woman that way before.

Her lips had no life in them. I let her go, and from a long way off I heard feet running hard up the stairs. I turned around, slow.

It was Tony, my sidekick. A dark little guy in a tight striped suit, a prime gunboy with eyes you couldn't see into. He was out of breath, but he said, "Boss," and jerked his slick black head.

I said hoarsely, "Get out."

Tony flipped his black eyes around. "I been on the phone to Capper, Boss. Business. And right now." His eyes stopped on Sheila and stayed there. He said softly, "Cripes!"

Things began to come back in focus then. My breath stopped choking me, and I could see again. I picked up my hat. Sheila hadn't moved. Ma Burke was beside her now, looking cold hate at me.

I said, "Okay, Sheila. We'll talk some more later."

She shut her eyes. She was locked away again, something I couldn't touch even when I kissed her. She whispered, "I'll say the same thing. Always."

I didn't answer her. I started out. The kid was still standing by the door, holding the groceries. I hit him across the mouth with the back of my hand. He didn't move. The blood ran out over his lip, and he didn't even look at me.

I said, "If I see you here again, I'll beat your face off."

I went down the dirty stairs—six flights, not seeing them, not even hearing Tony's feet hit the treads behind me. I got into my car and got the flask out of the glove compartment. Tony slid under the wheel and started driving. After a while I put the flask away and said:

"Buckwald?"

Tony nodded. "I got the tip from Capper ten minutes ago, when I called to check with him. That guy's a smart stoolie! So damn smart I'd plug him if I was you. Anyway, he says Buckwald has your horserooms all cased and he's gonna move in soon as a couple guys get in from St. Paul. He don't know you smell a thing."

"Where's Buckwald now?"

"Home with that blonde wife of his, feeling like a hog on ice."

I leaned back, rubbing my knuckles. They get stiff like an old man's, I guess from the scar tissue in the joints.

"Okay," I said. "You know where to go."

Tony looked at my hands. "You're gonna need something meaner than that, boss. Buckwald is a hard boy."

"All by himself with a dame? Don't kid me. Besides, that's what I keep you around for, Tony. To pack the gun."

"Sure," he said. "Sure." He looked at my hands again and laughed. "Cripes! This is gonna be good."

Buckwald lived in a block of flats that was pretty snooty about not being slum even if it was right next door. He was one of those ambitious guys, and there's never room for two in one territory. I'd known for a long time I was going to have to slap him down, or else.

We went up the back way. Nobody saw us. I wasn't thinking of Buckwald. I was thinking of Sheila's white face, locked away and untouchable, and wondering why I felt sick. I knocked on Buckwald's door, with Tony standing by my left shoulder.

A woman's voice said, "Who is it?"

"Western Union," I told her, keeping my voice high.

She opened the door. A flashy blonde in a red negligee. I pushed in fast. She opened her mouth, but nothing came out. A big, good looking guy in shirtsleeves got up off a sofa, knocking his drink off onto the floor. Buckwald and Del. Tony was just behind me.

Yeah. Tony, my pal, my sidekick, my prime gunny with eyes you couldn't see into. He hit me then, back of the ear, with the rod I paid him to carry.

WHEN I COULD see again I was sprawled out in an overstuffed chair. My wrists and ankles were tied with handkerchiefs. Buckwald sat in front of me, still in his shirtsleeves. He was holding a .25 Colt automatic. Tony was leaning against the wall near him, working on a highball and watching me with his black eyes. Capper had come in from somewhere, the bedroom I guess, and was standing beside me, close, bouncing a sap up and down on the palm of his hand. He was a stocky, red-headed guy with a dumb-looking pan that wasn't dumb at all.

Del sat on the arm of the sofa, swinging her long leg and smoking. She was some looker, all right. But Sheila had it over her like a tent.

Buckwald grinned at me. "I don't want to plug you right here, pal. Del don't like blood on her carpets. But I can take you through the eye with this toy, and don't think I won't if I have to."

A .25 doesn't make much noise, and it's as good as a cannon if a guy knows where to put his shots. Buckwald did. I said, "Okay, Buckwald. I'm the original Johnny Sap. Now what?"

"Now we wait a while for traffic to slack off, and then we take a little ride in your car, just as far as the railroad bridge. After that. . . ." He shrugged his beefy shoulders. "Why worry yourself?"

Tony snickered. "Pity to waste a whole quart of good Scotch on him."

"Yeah," said Buckwald. "But we got to make it look good."

I began to get it. You knock a guy dizzy, pour a bottle of booze over him, leave his car in gear and jump, fast. The cops don't find anything but little pieces of a guy with too much in him to drive. Accidental death, and good riddance. No kickbacks on a murder rap.

"It's a good trick," I told him. "Seems like I saw it in a movie one time, but it's still a good trick."

"Sure," said Buckwald. "It's tough on you, Marty, but that's the way it goes. I been on the bottom long enough. I figure it's time for a change. After all, that's the way you climbed up, on Hank Bligh's neck."

"Yeah." I looked at Tony. "Only I played it a little different We stood up facing each other, and Hank went out blazing. I'm still carrying his lead."

Buckwald shrugged. "No percentage in that, Marty."

"No. I guess not." I was still looking at Tony.

He looked right back. Black, hard eyes and a rat's grin. "It's your own fault, Marty," he said. "You don't tend to business no more. When a guy goes simple on a dame, like you have, it's time for a change."

Capper laughed, bouncing the sap up and down on his palm. "It's all over town," he said. "Marty James, the big gee, the hard boy with the fists, jumpin' through hoops for a babe that wouldn't step on him if he was a rug. They're getting a kick outa you, Marty."

I said, "Yeah?" I started to get up. Capper hit me across the throat with the sap. Not too hard. They didn't want too many marks on me. I sat down again and spit up some blood, and Del said, "Can't you for cripe's sake wait'll you get off my furniture?"

Buckwald grinned. He was enjoying himself. "Sorry, Del. Just relax, Marty. You heard what the lady said."

I bent forward over my knees, coughing blood onto the handkerchief tied around my wrists. I just stayed there, covering my face. Tony went for another drink. Capper moved around to look down on me.

"Hell," he said. "And I always thought you was tough."

I had the knot chewed loose, then. Not much, but enough to pull one hand

out. I rammed my elbow into Capper's gut and dived forward.

Right then I knew I was going to have to eat Buckwald's lead. He got up shooting, and he'd have had me, only I rolled over my shoulders so that I got the first slug in the thigh instead of the head. It hurt, but a guy can take a .25 steel jacket if he has to. The second one burned my ribs, and then my heels had whipped over and hit Buckwald low.

He folded up, and caught his gun hand on the way down. He tried to slug me, but he was too sick for a minute. I pinned one on his jaw. I was mad. I think his neck was broken before I shot him.

Del started screaming, a shrill flat sound with no sense in it. I kicked and squirmed to get Buckwald off my legs. My feet were still tied. I could see Capper coming, with the sap, and a Colt .45 in his left hand. He was still doubled over, looking green, scared and ugly.

Tony was close to Del. He had his own rod out, and he hit her under the jaw with the barrel of it. She lay down on her face, quiet.

"Shut up, damn you! You want the cops?"

She didn't hear him, not then. He jumped over her, coming for me. He was in the same spot Capper was. He packed a Police Positive. The apartment was soundproofed, but not good enough to soak up the noise of a couple of heavy guns blasting. They were going to try and beat me down before I could untangle myself from Buckwald.

They knew one thing. They didn't want me walking out of there alive.

I hooked the cushion out of the chair Buckwald had been sitting in and threw it into Capper's ankles. I was scared of that sap. The force of the throw helped twist me over, so I was on my hands and knees. I pulled my feet out from under Buckwald. Capper stumbled over the cushion. The sap whistled down past my ear and whacked the floor, and while he was still bending over I straightened up and hit him across the temple with the flat of the .25. He fell down, and then Tony was on top of me.

I took the first blow on my shoulder. It damn near broke it. Tony was good at pistol-whipping. I couldn't stand up with my feet tied, and he was too smart to get close enough to be dragged down. He stayed behind me, moving faster than I could, so I couldn't see to shoot, making me roll and dodge. And about that time Capper came to enough to take a shot at me. He was past worrying about the noise.

THE SLUG WENT past my nose and caught Del just under the eye. That was tough on Del. But she never knew it, and a gunman's girl knows what she's sticking her neck out for. I put one of my baby bullets through Capper's cheekbone before he could fire again, and rolled away over him, fast. Tony's .38 whammed. He missed me by a quarter inch, and by that time I was on my knees again. It was tough having my feet tied. There was a lot of noise in the room.

It scared Tony. He beat it for the door, crouching and taking two snap shots at me over his shoulder. He missed. Not much, but he missed. I guess I missed him the first time, too. The second one took him through the neck.

He turned around, slow, leaning his shoulders against the door. The gun dropped out of his hand. He opened his mouth. Blood came out, and he put both hands up to his neck and slid down the door, like a man who is very tired. He watched me with his black eyes, and I still couldn't see into them. He coughed once and then fell over on his side. A hell of a mess, but Del wouldn't be worrying about carpets any more.

I worked fast. I cut the handkerchief off my ankles and put it and the other one in my pocket. I wiped Buckwald's gun and closed his fingers on it. My rib wound was just a graze and there were two holes in my thigh, so I knew I wasn't carrying Buckwald's card away with me. Then I jammed my hat down over my eyes and turned up my collar. I picked up Tony's gun and kicked his body away from the door, and went out.

There were heads sticking out of doors along the hall. I fired a couple of times into the ceiling. The heads went away, fast. I ran for the back stairs. My leg hurt, and I was trailing blood. I felt tired and heavy and sick, and the sweat was turning cold on me.

I beat the sirens down the stairs and out to the side street where my car was parked. I got away clean, but so close I could feel the cops breathing on me. I wiped off Tony's gun and threw it away. I drank what was left in the flask and then drove, not hurrying at all, to a room I paid rent on. A room that wasn't anywhere near my apartment.

I've seen too many guys go up because they needed clothes and bandages in a hurry and couldn't go home to get them. I wasn't going to get caught that way. Nobody saw me. About thirty minutes later, changed and cleaned up, I was climbing the cold, empty fire escape to Sheila Burke's window.

Six flights, with thin snow beginning to fall, thinking of Sheila's voice saying, *There's blood on you, Marty. You're not in my world.*

I though, *All right. That's the way it is, Sheila. That's the way we'll play it.* I was colder than the snow, and numb.

I pushed the window up and climbed through. I had a gun in my hand. A .25 that I took away from a dame once, before she could kill me.

I said, "Just sit tight. Everybody. And don't yell."

I don't think they moved at all while I went around locking doors and pulling window shades. They were still at the table, Sheila and her mother and the grey-eyed kid. They were eating lemon pie with meringue on top, and the place smelt good of food. Sheila didn't even put her fork down. I can still see her white face, watching me.

The kid put his hands flat on the table, and the glazed, queer look came over him again. Ma Burke looked like she wanted to pray.

I said, "I've just killed three men. Nobody saw me to identify, nobody can prove I was there. But the cops are going to look for me because two of the men belonged to my crew. I've got to have an alibi, and I haven't time to go all over town trying to buy one. So I'm telling you. I had a dinner here in this room with you. I haven't been away from here."

Ma Burke started to get up. I think she was going to throw the coffeepot at me. "Take it easy," I snarled at her. "Get another plate and dirty it, quick."

Ma Burke went out in the kitchen, and I moved around where I could watch her through the open door. The kid was watching me, not moving or speaking. I couldn't read his eyes. They made me think of Tony's. Funny, because they were grey, but I couldn't see into them. I shivered all of a sudden. I was tired as hell, and I hurt.

Ma Burke came back with a plate with some stuff on it, and a cup. I said, "Don't forget the silver. Okay. Now sit down and keep still. You, Sheila—go get your coat on."

She got up, slow, staring at me with big, still eyes. "Coat?"

"Yeah. We're going to get married."

The kid made a noise in his throat. Ma Burke sucked her breath in, hard. I said, "Shut up! I been carrying the license for a long time, Sheila. I know where we can get a sky pilot to do the job. Hurry up, will you?"

She whispered, "My God, Marty, haven't you any heart?"

"I don't know, kid. I thought I did. Maybe you killed it for me. I don't know. But you three people stand between me and the chair, and a wife can't be made to testify against her husband."

I looked at her. She was beautiful. She was like something the wind might cut out of a snowbank, with the red fire of her hair on top. Her eyes met mine, and there was an awful coldness in them, like I'd killed the spark inside her.

It was hard to talk. "I didn't want it like this," I said dully. "But that's the way it is. I guess maybe your ma and the kid catch onto something else, too As long as I have you, Sheila, nobody better talk. Because I can always get you before anybody can get me."

Sheila's throat worked. I could hardly hear her voice. "You haven't any heart, Marty. You haven't a soul. You aren't human."

"Yeah. I'm human, Sheila. Human enough to go crazy over a girl. Human enough to be scared of dying, strapped down in a chair with no chance to fight, and all because a couple of dirty rats got back what they were handing out." I rubbed my hand across my eyes. "Get your coat. I want to go before the cops think of coming here."

The kid got up on his feet, then. He didn't say anything. He just came for me, swinging, and he looked half nuts.

I dropped the gun in my pocket. I let him hit me three or four times in the face, rolling my head enough to kill the force, and then I laid him out. He was clumsy and wide open, and his size didn't do him much good. The women screamed a little when he fell.

I said, "He's okay," and got down beside him, pulling the gun out again,

and unwinding the muffler I had around my throat. "A hell of a Galahad. Is he nuts, charging a gun like that?"

Sheila whispered, "You wouldn't understand. You couldn't ever understand."

I put the .25 in the kid's hand. "Don't tell me he's in love with you."

"No. It's a long story. You wouldn't understand. Why did you let him hit you, Marty? What are you going to do now?"

I WRAPPED THE MUFFLER around the gun and kid's limp hand to deaden the noise, and then got my finger behind his on the trigger. I fired three shots into the wall and then put the gun back in my pocket and the muffler around my neck.

"I got two holes in me," I said. "Now I got an explanation for them. A paraffin test will show powder specks on the kid's hand. The third shot will take care of what I couldn't get off my own hand. I'll say it went off when I took it away from him." I laughed, not because anything was very funny. "You get it, Sheila? We were fighting over you. The nice kid trying to hold off the gunman. I guess that'll make sense even to the cops."

I yelled at her then. "Get your coat on, damn it!"

"All right," she said, with no feeling in her voice at all. "All right, Marty. I'll get it."

She turned away, and then Ma Burke started for the door. Moving slow, not looking at me, talking quietly over her shoulder.

"I'm going to call the police, Marty. You can kill me, sure. But it'll be tough to explain away the body."

Sheila cried out, "Ma!" in a little, strangled voice.

Ma Burke said, "Be quiet, baby. I didn't bring you up to be a gangster's wife, not while I'm alive."

I said tiredly, "Oh, hell, Ma, don't make me hit you." She didn't stop, and I started for her, and Sheila came across the room toward both of us.

Then the kid got up on his hands and knees and said hoarsely, "You hit me."

At that I looked over my shoulder at him. He was getting up, hanging onto the table. His face wasn't human. It wasn't sane. He said again, "You hit me."

I said, "Sure. Behave, or you'll get some more." Ma Burke was reaching for the key. I went over fast and shoved her away, and the kid yelled. He was white as new snow, and his eyes were blazing. He let go of the table and came toward me on his big feet, and his voice was soft and quiet and deadly.

"Don't touch her again," he said. "Don't touch her."

Sheila cried, "Tod! Tod, don't!"

He didn't hear her. He came on, his big fists swinging loose.

Sheila ran to me and tried to hold my arm. I put the heel of my left hand under her chin, and shoved, and she staggered back.

I left the gun in my pocket. I didn't want to kill the kid, and I knew he was too punchy to see it anyhow.

The kid said softly, "He used to do that to my mother. My stepfather. He

beat her. He used to make her crawl in the mud, out on the stinkin' farm. She used to cry all the time, because he beat me, too."

He swung at me. I dodged and knocked him down, but he got up again. He must have had a cast-iron jaw. He said, almost whispering, "You hit me. Ain't nobody gonna do that to me any more."

I knocked him down again. He didn't feel it. He was crazy. He caught me around the knees and pulled me down, and he was heavy and strong as a dray horse. He landed a couple of haymakers on me before I clapped him over the ears and stunned him so he let go. And by that time Ma Burke had the door open, and Sheila was standing in it so if I was going to shoot I'd have to hit her first.

She was beautiful, standing there. She was something I could never touch, any more than the stars I used to cry for.

The kid moved. He was getting up again. Sheila said, "And you thought he was a coward. He didn't want to fight, Marty. He isn't safe when he fights. His stepfather beat him from the time he was a little kid, and that's why he left the farm when his mother died—because he knew the next time he'd kill his stepfather."

She looked at me. White, still, and locked away. "You can kill him, Marty," she said. "He's still dazed. Why don't you kill him, for spoiling your plans?"

I watched him get up on his feet again. He couldn't see much, but he was coming in again. Maybe he thought I was his stepfather. Or maybe he didn't care, because I was somebody that hit him, and pushed women around.

I ducked under his hands and pushed him, hard. He fell over. I could have killed him, sure. But it wouldn't have done me any good.

I couldn't hear Ma Burke on the stairs any more. And I was tired.

I looked at Sheila. I couldn't think. I couldn't even feel. I just looked at her a minute and then turned away across the room and climbed out on the fire escape. I didn't say anything. There didn't seem to be anything to say. The last I saw of her, she was crying, leaning against the doorframe.

Down six flights of cold iron in the thin snow and not seeing or feeling anything, thinking of Sheila Burke.

Her mother must have met the prowl car just as it pulled up in front, hunting for me. They met me down in the alley. They took my baby bullets, and handed me their .38's.

Maybe six or eight hours, now. Maybe less. Anyway, there won't be any chair. I'll go out clean, which is more than I deserve for being such a chump. But that's the way it goes in this business. A guy makes a dumb play, he pays for it.

If I'd never seen Sheila Burke, if I'd stuck to dames like Del who know what's what and won't throw you in a pinch. . . Yeah. But I didn't. I had to reach for the moon. Simple, Tony said. He was right. I brought it on myself. A sap crying for the stars.

But I still wish I could have kissed her just once, when she wanted to be kissed. ♣ ♣ ♣

SOLVING CIPHER SECRETS

by M. E. OHAVER

Founded in 1924

Article No. 853

A CIPHER is a secret writing. The way to solve ciphers is to experiment with substitute letters until real words begin to appear. In solving, notice the frequency of certain letters. For instance, the letters e, t, a, o, n, i, are the most used in our language. So if the puzzle maker has used X to represent e, X will probably appear very frequently. Combinations of letters will also give you clues. Thus, the affixes "-ing," "-ion," "-ally" are frequent. Helpful hints appear in this department each month. Study them carefully.

CRYPTOGRAMS

No. 5355—Modern Maxim. By Alma L. Roy. Hints for new beginners: try one-letter-word E as "a," and SUN and SUNY as "the" and "then." Use these letters in ONESUNZ and NYSNZF.

VK *TEZDU DBTNF VY GVRN E GETH, SUN ONESUNZ TEY TEX HN E-GXVY'! HAS VK *TEZDU NYSNZF GVRN E GVBY, SUNY *OVYSNZ VF ZNEGGX BY SUN GET!

No. 5356—Brought by Bugs. By Dr. G. Kiln. Common short words YSA, YK, and YSFKBVS will help with KBYZFATP. Or endings -ULV, -ULVH, and -YUKL will unlock TVK, etc.

HUG XALYBFUAH TVK, YSA *ZETXP *CATYS, QUFBEALY ZBZKLUX RETVBA KBYZFATP, XKNNBLUXTYAC YK SBNTL ZAULVH ZJ DEATH, HOARY YSFKBVS NKHY KD YSA PLKOL OKFEC, PUEEULV LATFEJ STED KD YSA RKRBETYUKL.

No. 5357—A Private Opinion. By Vedette. Identify phrase OYL OFTR. Substitute in PUMP TNPRRF, and fill in missing letters, with BPS and JESTBURY next in line.

PUMP TNPRRF SHOD JESTBURY: "XPR BOAST RGSZ UK BPS VZSTULSYB RK BPS *E. *T. OYL OFTR BPS GUNS VZSTULSYB XREFL LUS?" VEVUF: "BPS EYLSZBOASZ."

No. 5358—Keyboard Carillon. By H. L. Kruger. Look into phrase LUCO CODED, and three-letter connective RAZ. Then complete TDRVUECUS, RESDAZUAJ, etc.

BFT TDRVUECUS XURAF MDVV-CFAD FT "SOUND" SOFTZ, ECTUPD RAG PDG LUCO CODED RESDAZUAJ UACDTQRVE, NRHFT EUKCO, XDTBDSC BUBCO, CLF XDTBDSC BFYTCOE. COYE:

NUZZVD *S, *R, *D, *R, RAZ *Z. CTG UC!

No. 5359—Correct Attitude. By †Helcrypt. Correct guesses for NASHS'E, NAS, and NAST provide all but two letters in ENONSYSTN. Next, SZSHXNAUTM, checking with EOX, HUMAN, etc.

KSELGTKSTN BGDRE FAG EOX "NASHS'E TGNAUTM DSBN," FUDD BUTK PGYBGHN UT NAS ENONSYSTN: "UB TGNAUTM UE DSBN, NAST SZSHXNAUTM YVEN IS ODD HUMAN!"

No. 5360—A Sly Move. By †Rebbina. Ending -VGAE supplies all letters for two-letter words GV and VA, and GE- prefix, also all but first and last letters in PAGEGEK.

CLOWNER AS HGVX-SNUB BNVUAE FYULOYR CYU GEHABY VND UYFAUV, ZCGHC UYNR: "AHHLFNVGAE, FAAU-CALOY TYYFYU." PATGEKQX OZGVHCYR CXFCYE VA AVCYU YER AS ZAUR "CALOY," PAGEGEK GV VA "TYYFYU."

No. 5361—Second Sight. By William Thomas. Compare phrase GX DNR, and short words XGS, OUT, and NOAR. Follow up with BODRS, GBU, KGBRS; etc.

DSGELYOK *OHRSLYOU XLFN GX DNR VRUPF *OUOZKREF NOAR PEERS OUT KGBRS RCR-TLALFLGUF, XGS ALFLGU OZGAR OUT ZRKGB BODRS. UODPSR'F GBU ZLXGYOKF!

No. 5362—English Is Like That! By E. D. H. Start with endings -OUEVH and -UVS. Then complete the 1st and 3rd words, noting OTFEAST and OTEFEAST.

VUVD BURRDFDVO XFEVAVGUPOUEVH REF "EAST": LEAST, OFEAST, TUGGEAST, BEAST, YEAST, OTFEAST, FEAST, EAST, LEFEAST; FTZKUVS FDHXDGOUCDYZ MUOT GEM, ERR, AX, HE, GYEGN, BE, GARR, RYAND, OTEFEAST.

No. 5363—Tropical Tableau. By *Sara. Note ending -NPON and two-letter NE. Next, suffix -HOV, twice-used, leading up to *PATHSPO.

*PATHSPO RUGFOBET: AFTOR, DTPSYFO, KHKERP NTFFR; GHQPTBR RGHNXFTHOV ECFT RUTPL-BTFOSXFB TESYR; UPTPYFFNR RXTHFYHOV, TXLNXKHS NE BHRNPON BTZKR.

No. 5364—Upon the Deck. By Landlubber. Spot your own clues, fans, as usual, in this final crypt! Asterisks are prefixed to capitalized words.

FSEPTAV-DECK HNTL BCTVTAH: HFEKY, XCBR *HFEATHU "YHFEKE," HOBCK, HPRZBSTQTAV ABZTSTLP; UYECL, "VYAH KY DUBYNC," YDDSYHTEHLTDH; KTERBAK, HGNECY LTSYH, RYCDUEALH; EAK DSNZ, LCYXBTS, FYEHEALCP.

NEW CRYPTOFANS continue to join up with our regulars in cipher solving, and we are also happy to report renewed activity on the part of several old-timers, again accepting the subtle challenge of cryptograms!

*Legerdemainist dropped out upon the death of his wife, in Mar., 1946, with a score of 681, †Mrs. Legerdemainist having a score of 175 at that time. *Shadyside queries, "Do you still have a record of answers I sent in years ago?" Yes, indeed! *Shadyside's total was 604 when she laid her solving aside in Mar., 1948. Complete records of all cryptofans are always available, and even a single solution enters the solver in our permanent files. Total scores of 100, 500, and 1000 answers are indicated by prefixing a dagger, star, or degree to the solver's name or cryptonym. In this connection, †Helcrypt is celebrating his entry into the †Hundred Club, score 108 in July last.

No. X-5366. Gronsfeld Cipher. By °Jaybee.

VII INFYU-FF-PLU, PV
INPAHT PJ WJF PLNZ,
JRTNIUNZ XKG OEWKPRDN
FQENFQ RH *GVDPDI, ZCT
VHRMEFGE MQ *UFZHPUIHP
*FMJJUC-*QKOI EA ULH
RESIVGOX ENVI, ZJJXH,
COH UGE XUKDSOQS.

°Jaybee's No. X-5366 presents a message in the so-called Gronsfeld system. A prearranged numerical key is written under the plain text, one digit under each letter, the key being repeated as many times as necessary. Each letter is then enciphered by counting forward in the alphabet the number of places indicated by its individual key-digit. To illustrate, the message "Come at once," using 612 as key, would become IPOK BV UOEK in cipher. Thus, 6 counts forward from "c," first message letter, would give I as first symbol in cipher; one count from "o" would give symbol P, etc.

Many ingenious methods have been devised for solving systems of this kind. Here, as a special clue, look for the three letter word "the," occurring four times in the message, and represented in four different ways in the cryptogram. Answer to °Ty Roe's No. X-5354 in last issue: *"We here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom."—Lincoln.* The key phrase: NEVER FORGET WHAT THEY DID HERE.

No. 5365—Cryptic Division. By °Jack-Hi. Value of P is shown in 1st and 2nd subtractions. Next, E in 2nd subtraction. The key is numbered thus: *012345 6789.*

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SNAGS)TRAITOR(IIT
      ARNIG
      RPIPIO
        ARNIG
        SPOETR
        ITGRPO
          RTTAA
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ANSWERS FOR LAST ISSUE

5343—It is supposed that "T" in the phrase "To fit to a T," alludes to the T square or try-square used by carpenters, joiners, mechanics, etc.

5344—In every conflict some appropriate patriotic phrase is coined. An apt slogan suitable for World War Three might be: "Up and atom!"

5345—Cayo Hueso, Spanish for "bone key," so-called from many Indian skeletons found in that part of Florida, was habitually mispronounced "Key West" by early English sailors. The name stuck!

5346—Known by Hawaiians as "House of the Sun," Haleakala, largest known dormant volcano, has crater area of ten square miles and twenty-mile circuit, and is over ten thousand feet high.

5347—Farmyard weather-prophets have faith in this sign: "When roosters crow between sunset and midnight, watch out for sudden weather change!"

5348—Three series with common connectives for clues: candy, understand, and andiron; solace, lassos, also balsomine; nonplussed, surplus, plus plush.

5349—With windows mirroring East Side sky-line, reflecting world longing for peace, majestic United Nations secretariat building appears complete. Incubator for lofty ideals.

5350—Menes founded Memphis, built temple Ptah. Won first recorded triumphs of oldest ancient civilized nations. Perished in hippopotamus struggle, deified by admiring countrymen.

5351—Juvenile visits fortune teller. Mystic hazily outlines picture, advocates quixotic behavior. Duck, entering scene, cries "Quack!" Wise bird!

5352—Three male confederates wearing flying jackets snake-dance upon busy street, female come-on screams shrilly, pickpocket jostles distracted onlooker, deftly lifts billfold. Team work!

5353—Key: 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
M O D E R N W A Y S

All answers to current ciphers will be duly credited in our *Cipher Solvers' Club.* Address: M. E. Ohaver, *New Detective Magazine,* 205 E. 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y.

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WALT COBURN'S WESTERN
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