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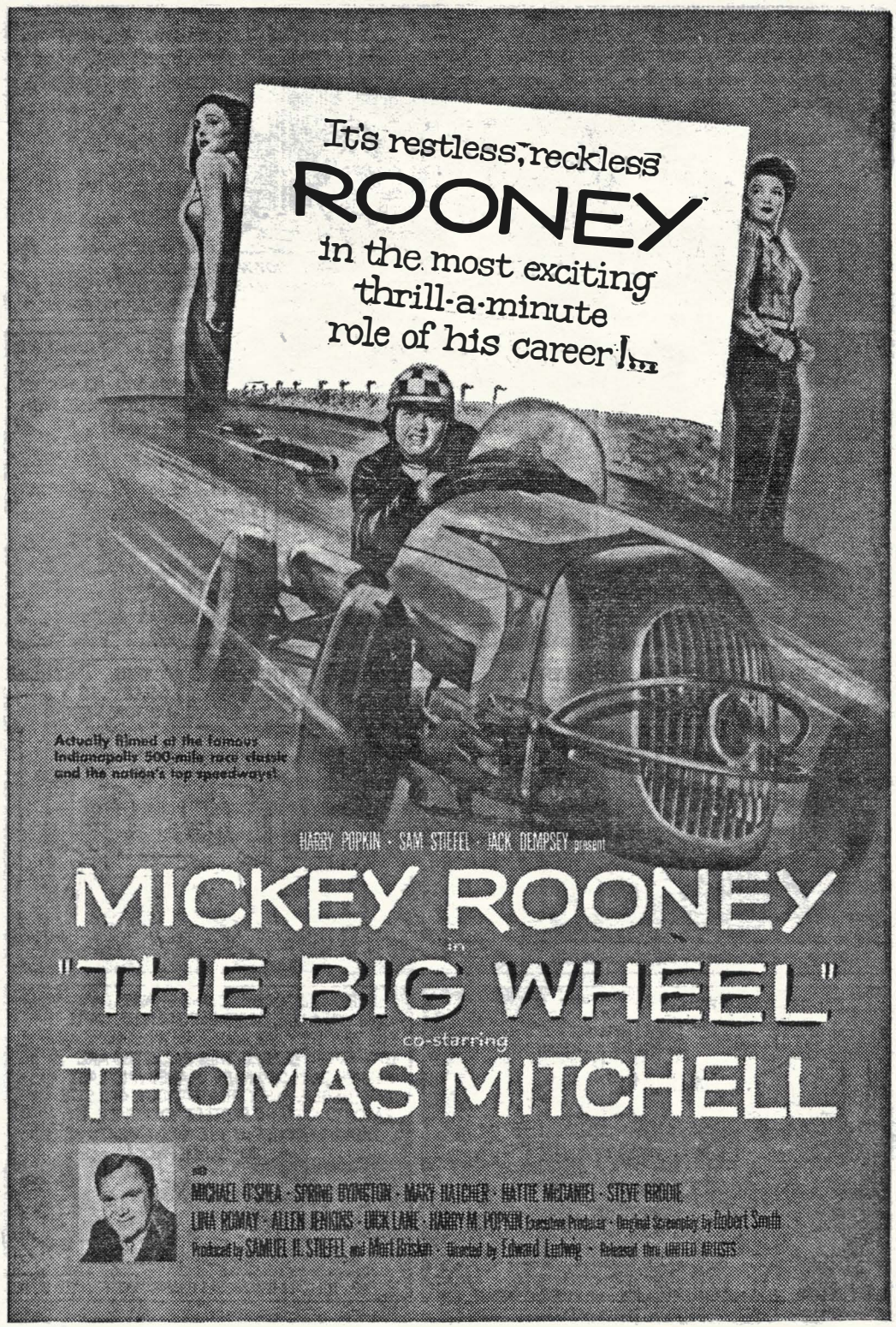
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# NEW DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

Vol. 14 Contents for January, 1950 No. 2

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*(Continued on page 129)*

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By John D. MacDonald

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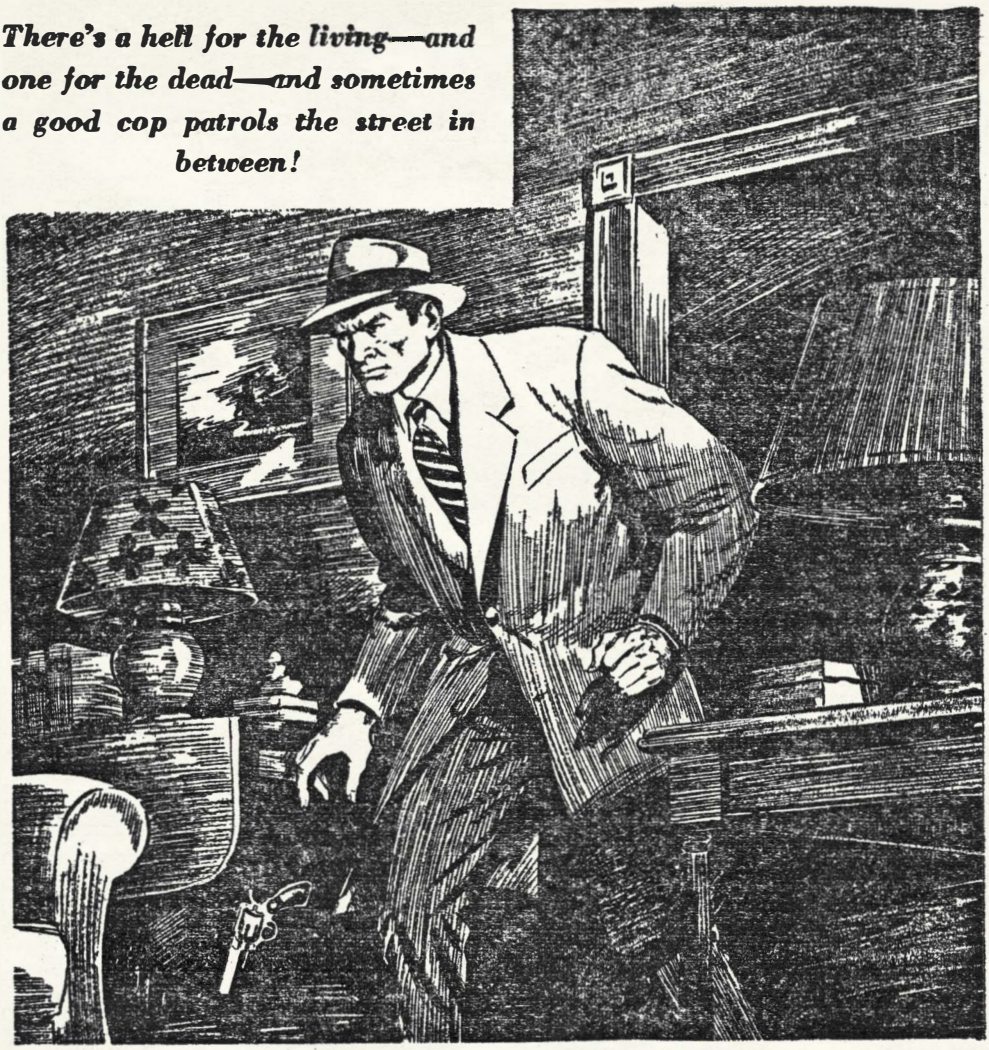

*Rufe's gun pointed directly at his chest. . . .*

## CHAPTER ONE

### Killer Cop

RUFE DONALL sat on the warehouse roof, with his broad shoulders hunched so that he could hide in the black, slanting shadow of the square chimney. The night was sweet and silent, and the roof held some of the sun heat left over from the long day. But the spring wind was brisk, and he wore the collar of his dark topcoat turned up. The city sounds were a soft murmur in the distance. There was little night traffic down on the docks.

He watched the slow swing of the luminous second hand of his watch. The growl of truck gears in the next block startled him. He jumped, then cursed softly.

With one minute to go, he reached inside his coat, and pulled out the Positive. It nestled comfortably in his broad hand.

The second hand seemed to slow down. It touched the hour mark, moved on, and the night was suddenly split wide by the

harsh white beams of the portable spots and floods.

Donall got his feet under him and slowly stood up, the revolver held at waist level. The sirens let go. He liked that. Sirens had a nice, rattling effect.

Five stories below, the hard metallic voice of the P.A. said, "Come on out, Pritchard! Come on out, Pritchard! Come out with your hands high and come out slow."

Rufe Donall grinned tightly. Pritchard would bound up out of restless sleep. His coordination would be off. The weeks of flight would have taken their toll of his energies. Now his hand would be shaking, his mouth dry, his eyes rolling in his head like the eyes of a slaughterhouse bull.

He kept the revolver leveled, kept his eyes on the trapdoor thirty feet away. The floods and spots made his concealment even better.

When the trapdoor lifted a few inches, Donall stopped breathing, held himself absolutely motionless.

The trapdoor came open the rest of the way. Pritchard came out fast, went across the roof in a crouched run, not glancing a second time toward the chimney. Rufe Donall followed him with a slow swing of the muzzle.

Light glinted on an object in Pritchard's hand.

"Hold it, Al!" Rufe snapped.

Pritchard spun and fired with an economy of motion that Donall was forced to admire. Brick dust stung Donall's face. Pritchard took the first slug, stumbled toward the edge of the roof, trying to lift the automatic once more. Donall, firing as though on the range, gave him two more in the chest. The second slug hit after Pritchard was off balance, leaning out over the paved areaway sixty feet below.

He uttered no sound. Donall took two steps toward the edge of the roof before he heard the thick, damp sound of the impact. He stood, breathing slowly, balanced on the parapet, and looked down at the blue uniforms clustered around Pritchard, Allen looked up and made a circle of thumb and forefinger.

"Too easy," Rufe said softly. He turned and walked back toward the trap door. Suddenly he wanted food, a lot of food, and then a warm bed.

He arrived at Headquarters at ten the next morning. Deputy Chief Ballentine called him as he went by the office. Rufe Donall went into Ballentine's office and sat on the corner of the big desk.

Ballentine was florid and bald, with keen little blue eyes. He said, "You catch the editorial in the *Star*, Rufe?" Ballentine handed him the paper. Rufe gave him a quick look.

The editorial was headed: LOCAL JUSTICE.

> At four minutes after three this morning, our local form of justice caught up with Al Pritchard in the shape of three neat holes in Mr. Pritchard: one that nicked the heart, one at the base of the throat and one in the right armpit.
>
> We are beginning to wonder how fortunate we are here in Bryan to have on the public payroll one Lieutenant Rufe Donall, Chief of Homicide, who has brought in his last four suspects thoroughly dead. We wonder if possibly the lieutenant's four years as a Marine Corps sniper in the late fracas didn't give him too fond an ear for the impact of lead on living flesh.
>
> It seems that in the small hours the lieutenant posted himself where he'd get the best chance of practising his uperb marksmanship on the late Al Pritchard. The official report alleges that Pritchard fired first. On page one there is a picture of the roof with a dotted line drawn from the trapdoor to the edge of the roof. The x shows where the lieutenant stood.
>
> Maybe some citizens are wondering why Pritchard wasn't challenged as soon as he emerged from the trap door. If this had been done, possibly the lieutenant could have disarmed Al Pritchard with an arm shot or a shoulder shot.
>
> But it seems that Pritchard was permitted to get to the edge of the roof before Donall challenged him.
>
> Of course, this saves the expense of a trial and an execution—*provided* Pritchard was found guilty.
>
> But in this case, as in the three previous ones, Donall has set himself up as court, judge and lord high executioner.

We are hoping that we never become a suspect in a murder case. We'd rather leave it up to a jury. If the lieutenant comes after us, remember to send flowers.

"Al Pritchard was guilty as hell," Donall said harshly.

"Agreed," Ballentine said. "But the Chief is not a pro cop, even as you and I, Rufe. He may get pretty excited. And a rep as a killer cop isn't exactly a good name to have. Why didn't you wing him as he came out the trap door?"

"You ought to know better than that, Gus. He was facing me with a gun in his hand. He was moving fast. I waited until he had his back to me and until he was silhouetted against the lights. It just happened that he fired too fast and too good. And it just happened that he was on the edge of the roof."

Donall folded the paper neatly and put it on the desk.

Ballentine said, "Hy Daplan, the managing editor, wrote that editorial. Why don't you go over and tell him how it was?"

Donall smiled without humor. "I should play up to a newspaper character?" He turned toward the door. "Besides, maybe he's right."

It took Donall two hours to finish the last of the detail work in connection with the Pritchard case. When he was through the records clerk stamped the file and put it in the dead file. Print data was forwarded to the F.B.I., to be taken from the central active files.

In the city of two hundred thousand, there were only three cases open. Donall looked with approval at the slim folders. Not one case over two months old. Warrants were out on two of the cases, with it a fairly sure thing that the guilty party had fled the city. He had men out doing leg work on those two, trying to get a line on the place of flight. In the third case, three suspects had been hauled in, and had been released with tails. Pretty soon, one of them would feel safe enough to start spending stolen funds. And then Donall would lower the boom.

When he came back from lunch, he found the expected notice to go over to City Hall and report to the office of the Commissioner at two thirty.

When the Commissioner's secretary ushered him into the inner office, Donall was annoyed to see Hy Daplan, the lean, tweedy managing editor of the *Star,* sitting in one of the Commissioner's overstuffed leather chairs, a long leg over the arm of the chair, a look of amusement on his thin face.

"Hello, Killer," Daplan said.

"None of that!" the Commissioner snapped.

John Washington, Chief of Police, stood by the windows. He was a political appointee. He turned and gave Lieutenant Donall a quick, sour glance.

Graves, the Commissioner, was out of the same silver-maned-baritone mold as John Washington. He tapped on the desk top with a seal ring and said, "Please sit down, gentlemen. Yes, Lieutenant. Right over there. I called this informal little meeting because criticism of any member of the force, Mr. Daplan, is criticism of me. I want a frank discussion here."

Daplan said easily, "I expressed my point of view in this morning's paper. Now I'll listen to the rebuttal."

Washington cleared his throat. "Lieutenant Donall, Mr. Daplan has made some rather serious charges against the operation of your division. You read the editorial?"

"I read it."

"What is your answer?"

DONALL sat with his heavy hands on the chair arms. "You said this was a frank discussion, Commissioner. Frankly, I see no need to explain the operations of my division to Mr. Daplan. I see no reason for justification of

my own actions. There were twelve open homicide cases when I took over twenty-one months ago. Since that time there have been six murders in Bryan. A total of eighteen cases. Of those eighteen cases, three are now open. Of the fifteen, four suspects were killed resisting arrest. Of the remaining eleven, seven came to trial with pleas of guilt. They were all sentenced. Of the four "not guilty" pleas, two were given life, one was executed and the other is in state's prison awaiting execution."

"A nice new broom sweeping nice and clean," said Hy Daplan.

"Put it any way you like," Rufe Donall said.

The Commissioner coughed, said, "Very efficient, Lieutenant. I'm sure that even Mr. Daplan will concede that point. We want a city that will be given a wide berth by the criminal elements and—"

"Drop the soap box, Commissioner," Daplan said. "I want to know why Donall let Pritchard run all the way to the edge of the roof before he shot him."

Donall said, "That was the first place he stopped. If I shot him on the run, I might have killed him without giving him warning. I wanted to give him his chance."

"Great chance!" Daplan said. He stood up. "Thank you, gentlemen. This has been educational." He paused by Donall's chair. "You're a queer one," he said.

"How so?" Donall asked, his tone level.

"Your face looks like it had been left in a deep freeze. No expression except in the eyes. Tell me, Donall, not for the paper, just for the hell of it. What was going on in your mind when you killed Al Pritchard?"

Rufe Donall gave Daplan one of his rare smiles. "I was thinking that I had the sear filed down too far. I like a four ounce pull. As I was shooting Al Pritchard it seemed to me that I had the trigger pull down to less than four ounces. And I thought that I'd better draw a new part from stores and file it right the next time."

Daplan's voice was hoarse. "And as Pritchard fell from the roof, what did you think about?"

"I was worried that he'd fall on one of the sedans assigned to the division. It's a nuisance filling out the repair orders in quintuplicate."

"You're a good cop, Donall, but you're a killer. The *Star* is going to make certain that you're assigned to some other division."

"Traffic?" Donall asked mildly.

Daplan slammed the door as he went out.

In the silence the Commissioner said, "Bill Hardy, the D. A., was very disappointed, Lieutenant. He was going to handle the prosecution himself. It would have been a good case. There's an election coming up."

"Tell Mr. Hardy I'll save one for him," Donall said.

"You can go back to your duties, Lieutenant Donall," Chief Washington said.

RUFE DONALL drifted up from sleep to snap awake and grab the bedside phone in his small apartment. Sergeant Allen said, "Rufe? We got us a new one. Sedan's on the way."

"Big or little?"

"Way the hell big. A dish in the Frohman Towers. The call went first to Graves. He'll be there, buzzing like a big bee. I sent Toomey and Haggan over to keep the place covered. The lab boys are about to leave. I'll ride along with them."

Rufe Donall dressed with a quick economy of motion. He splashed cold water on his face, ran a comb through his coarse black hair, adjusted the web strap on the belly holster. It was of his own design, and it held the Positive in a spring clip at a forty-five degree angle, the butt a few inches above and to the left of his belt buckle.

He arrived on the sidewalk just as the sedan came around the corner, tires complaining, siren growling softly.

The Frohman Towers was a tall apartment building of stone the shade of maple ice cream. Neat evergreens, clipped to regimentation, lined the flagstone walk that led to the wide glass doors. Rufe saw the Commissioner's official car, the driver leaning against the front fender, a cigarette glowing in the darkness. There were two Headquarters sedans parked ahead of the Commissioner's car and one behind it. He guessed that the reporters had arrived in the cars parked across the wide street.

There was a small knot of people on the sidewalk, a bored patrolman saying, "Move along now. Go on home to bed. You can't see anything."

As Rufe went up the flagstone walk a flashbulb popped, blinding him for a moment. The reporters said, "Give us a break, Lieutenant. Unfair competition. There's a *Star* guy up there with the body and we can't get in."

Donall stopped. "Who is it?"

"Daplan, the big gun. Pal of the Commissioner."

At the lobby desk, a lean little man with a sharp nose and prominent teeth was saying into the house phone, "No, Mrs. Ferris. There's nothing to be alarmed about. Yes, Mrs. Ferris."

He hung up the phone and laced his fingers together until his knuckles cracked. "Floor?" Rufe asked.

"Did you have to use sirens?" the little man snapped. "The eighth floor. As representative of the owners, I want it understood that—"

Rufe brushed by him and went to the elevator. The patrolman pushed the button. Rufe stood with his hands locked behind him as the little elevator climbed softly upward.

The door to Suite 8-A stood wide open. The other doors were shut and there was a look about them as though people stood behind them, listening.

Sergeant Allen's relief showed in his face as Rufe walked into the suite. French doors opened onto a terrace. Graves and Daplan stood in the terrace doorway, talking in low tones.

Rufe Donall walked over to them. The two men watched him approach. Rufe said, "Why are you here, Daplan?"

Hy gave him a nervous smile, more of a grimace. "I reported it, Donall. I found the body."

"Then it will be understood that you are here on that basis, not as a stand-in reporter for the *Star*."

"Of course," Daplan said meekly.

Graves said, his voice high, "Lieutenant, this is a horrible thing."

"Aren't they all," Donall said. He walked to the bedroom. The police photographer was making a lens adjustment. He leaned over the body on the floor beside the oversized bed and took a closeup of the throat. Another man whistled thinly through his teeth as he worked with the brushes, bringing out prints.

Rufe jammed his hands in his topcoat pocket and looked down at the girl. In life she had been tall, with good shoulders, red-blonde hair piled high, about thirty, thickening a bit at the waist and with a slight fullness under the chin, with broad, slightly heavy features.

The swollen tongue filled the space between her parted teeth and her face had a bluish tinge. Heavy red marks on her throat showed where the fingers had bitten deep. She wore a lemon-yellow light wool dressing gown, smartly cut, red pumps, with high heels, nylons. One high heel had torn a hole in the side of the counterpane of the rumpled bed and this supported one leg, holding it up at an angle. The dressing gown fell away so that they could see the eggshell white of the garter-belt. There was a slight abrasion of the skin on the left side of her

jaw, near the pale white, rounded chin.

Allen said softly, "You see it like me?"

"Started to kill her on the bed. She put up a scramble. Husky gal. Tossed them both off onto the floor. He bashed her one in the jaw to quiet her and finished it. Fingernails?"

"Maybe clean. Can't see anything. The lab will make sure."

The plump young doctor from the Medical Examiner's Office stood by until the pictures were completed. Then he knelt beside her, flexed her arm, felt for warmth at the armpit, took her chin, rolled the slack head slowly back and forth. Squatting, he looked up at Rufe. "It's twenty to three now. I'd say close to midnight. Of course, if you boys can find out precisely when she ate last, I can check stomach contents and give it to you within ten minutes either way."

Rufe said to Allen, "Any other way to fix it?"

Allen shrugged. "So far, nobody heard a thing. The boys have checked overhead, underneath, on both sides and across the hall. No dice at the desk either."

Rufe said, "Go ahead, Doc. We'll find out when she ate. But give Jones a look at the fingernails first."

The plump doctor beckoned to the two morgue men at the doorway. They came in with practised speed, lifted her onto the metal basket frame, strapped the tarp around her, lifted her and went out.

Rufe went over to the dressing table. The top was covered with expensive cosmetics. He liked the way the room was decorated. The oversized bed was the only flamboyant touch. Books were stacked on the lower shelf of the bedside table. He bent and looked at the titles. Toynbee, Hammett, Browning.

The print boys were through. They were taking the last pictures of the developed prints. Rufe opened the closet by sliding the mirror panel back. The closet was vast, packed thick with clothes.

There was a decent Van Gogh copy on the far wall. It seemed hung a shade low. Rufe pulled it away from the wall, found the barrel safe. The knob was too knurled to take a print, but he called the boys back to brush the front of the safe. They found three prints, checked them against the woman's, found that they were hers.

Rufe said to Allen, "Get an order to open that."

"Now you want background on her?" Allen asked. "I haven't got much so far."

"What have you got?"

Roberta Leed. Bobbie to her friends. Ran a decorating business. Moved here eighteen months ago, as soon as the building was opened. She'd been on the waiting list. I got all this from the little man downstairs. Quiet tenant. No loud parties. No trouble. Ran a good business. Three or four different guys took her out. Daplan was one of them. That's all I got."

Rufe Donall went back into the long living room of the suite, where Graves and Daplan were still talking. Daplan seemed to have better control of himself. Rufe said, "I can ask questions here or downtown."

"I have a morning edition to get out," Daplan said. "Would it save time to ask me here?"

Rufe shrugged, nodded to Allen who came over with the police stenographer, who spun a straight chair around, sat down and propped his notebook against his knee.

"Start off by filling in what you know about the background of the deceased, Mr. Daplan," Rufe said.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Body of the Crime

DAPLAN took out a cigarette, lighted it, huffed out a long blue cloud of smoke and then said, "I admired Bobbie. She had a rugged life.

She left home in some little Oklahoma town and went to New York. She got into a little chorus on a night club circuit and came here to Bryan with a show that played at Lamont's English Tavern. That was about nine years ago. She got pneumonia here and damn near died. Bucky Lamont paid all the bills. When she was on her feet, they got married. Bucky was drafted and you remember that he got run over by a jeep in South Carolina. Then she sold the Tavern. She became friendly with a prominent citizen. I don't know who it was. He couldn't get a divorce. He gave her a cash gift when they broke it up. Bobbie had a knack for color and design. She went to night school at the University and worked during the day so she wouldn't dip into her cash. Two and a half years ago she started her business and made it go. She's decorated some of the best homes in town, a couple of theaters and even the lobby and so on of this building. All in all, a nice gal. Maybe a littlt wild, but it was her life."

"How did you meet her?"

"I was best man when she married Bucky. I grew up with Bucky."

"What was your relationship to her?"

"Good friends. I'm a nervous sort of guy. When I was all wound up like a spring, it was good to be with her. But nothing more than that. I'm an amateur cook. I bet I've cooked on that stove out there a hundred times. But if you want to be personal, I kissed her once. It was an experiment with us. It didn't take. We were better off as friends. We had a big fat discussion of world affairs. She was almost too damn anxious to improve herself."

"What happened tonight?"

"I hadn't seen her in a couple of weeks. I was at a dinner party tonight. Whenever I go out, I leave a number to call with the switchboard at the paper in case anything big breaks. She called the paper and got my number. She phoned me a little after ten, I think it was. She said she was blue and she had troubles and why hadn't I been around."

"Did she sound frightened or nervous?"

"Bored and blue."

"What then?"

"I told her that I'd break away when I could and come on over. I figured on spending an hour or so here and then going over to the paper. I broke away from the dinner party at about twenty after eleven. It's only two blocks from here and I had a few drinks, so I decided to walk it. I bought cigarettes at the all-night drugstore at the end of the block. I didn't walk fast. I looked at a couple of magazines in the drug store. Oh, yes, when I left Judge Laybourne's house, I phoned the paper and gave them the number here. I let myself in and—"

"You have a key?"

Daplan flushed. "Yes, but it's not the

way it looks. She gave it to me as a sort of a gag. Here it is." Rufe looked at the gold key on Daplan's key ring. It was engraved, 'To a good cook.' Daplan continued, "When she gave it to me, she said that it was a bribe. The idea was for me to come up and cook the midnight snacks oftener."

"Did you see anyone when you came in?"

"Not a soul. But I could hear the fellow downstairs snoring. He sleeps in a little room behind where the desk is. I came up on the elevator, of course. Both elevators were on the ground floor. The same key fits the front door and the room door. I let myself in here. The lights were on. I called her and there was no answer. I guessed that she had gone out for a walk. She often did that at night. I glanced at my watch and saw that it was ten to midnight. I've been working hard lately. The drinks at Laybourne's made me sleepy. I sat in that chair over there near the fireplace and put my head back. That was a bad thing to do, I guess. I dropped off. The phone woke me up. It was twenty-five to three. There's only one phone here. In the bedroom. I went in and found her. The phone rang a dozen times while I just stood and stared at her. I couldn't move. I heard myself saying her name over and over. When the phone started again, I answered it. It was the paper. The night city editor wanted to ask a question about a head on page one before he locked it up. I told him to kill a story we were running on page one and I had him give me the slot man and I gave what facts I had to rewrite. We'll have a bare story in the morning edition."

"You could have phoned headquarters and then called your paper back, Daplan," Rufe said.

"I already had them on the line. It costs maybe five minutes, and I'd already slept for a long time."

"Could she have come in with someone else and not awakened you?"

"No. I'm a light sleeper."

"Why did you phone the Commissioner?"

Daplan let that question hang in the air for several moments. He said, "I've been gunning for you, Donall. You could make it rough for me. I'm in a bad spot. I wanted protection."

Donall said, "Afraid I'd shoot you down to close the case? Another question, Daplan. When she phoned you, she said she'd wait here?"

"That was the impression I got."

"Had she just come in?"

Daplan frowned. "No. She said she'd taken a shower so that she could get to sleep, but it didn't work."

"Who else did she go out with?"

"The only ones I know of are Bus Cumerford. I guess his name is Wilbur—"

"I know him," Rufe said. "Owns the development up on the Ridge. Housing contractor. Who else?"

"Fred Chanelli. He bought the Tavern from her."

Rufe glanced over at Allen and saw the raised eyebrow. He knew that Allen was thinking of the clip on Chanelli. Petty larceny some eight years back in another state.

Daplan said, "The rest of her social life was with the clients and with some of the people who are in the same line of work."

"No girl friends?"

"Not the type to have girl friends."

"Anything else you can add, Daplan?"

Daplan lit another cigarette. Donall noticed the trembling of the lean, capable-looking hands. Could mean nothing. Could mean a lot.

"If I think of anything, I'll get in touch with you, Donall." He coughed and scuffed his foot along the sill of the door. "How much can I print?"

"Print it all," Donall said. "I'll give

the boys downstairs a statement, or would you rather do it, Commissioner?"

"Ah . . . I think this is a case where the official source should be . . . ah . . . not that you couldn't do it adequately, Donall."

"Glad not to have to bother."

DAWN was a grey threat in the east when Rufe held his thumb against the doorbell of a frame house on a small street full of almost identical frame houses. A grey-haired woman with flabby cheeks that shook as she walked appeared in the sudden glow of the hall light, holding a bathrobe around her. She opened the door.

"What is it?" she asked. "What happened?"

"You Mrs. Link? We want a word with Elizabeth."

"I don't understand. Why are you showing me that badge?" The woman's voice was getting high and shrill. "Elizabeth is a good girl."

A husky, low voice said, "Break it off, Mom." Elizabeth was coming down the stairs. Dark hair tousled, eyes clear. "Who are you?" she asked.

"Police. Lieutenant Donall. We want to ask you a few questions."

"In here," the girl said. She turned on the living room lights, took a cigarette from a brass box. Rufe held the match for her. She watched him over the match flame. Mrs. Link stood in the doorway. "Go back to bed, Mom," the girl said.

"How can I sleep when you . . ."

"I didn't ask you to sleep. I'll come up in a minute and tell you all about it." Donall saw that the girl's eyes were wary and that she had half flattened the cigarette between thumb and finger. "Sit down, gentlemen," she said.

Rufe sat down. The girl remained standing, her hips against a table edge, her right elbow cupped in her left palm. Allen stood by the door, leaning against the frame. Donall said, "You don't seem to have a lot of questions, Miss Link."

"That's your problem, isn't it? You're the dead-shot lieutenant. I've been reading about you." Donall could sense the strain in the husky voice.

"What did you do tonight?"

"I came home from work at a little after six. I had homework. Yardage estimates for a big drapery job. I didn't leave the house. I finished at midnight and went to bed."

"Miss Leed pays you overtime for that sort of work?"

"I haven't heard the rustle of crisp bills yet. She says that Leed and Link might make a good future name for the outfit."

Donall waited until her hand moved in an arc toward the ash tray to stub out the cigarette. He said, "Roberta Leed is dead." He watched her hand. There was no faltering in the slow arc, but the hand swept by the ash tray and the girl butted the cigarette against the varnished tabletop. The stink of scorched varnish filled the room.

Elizabeth Link took three slow steps to the couch and sat down. She cupped her palms over her eyes, sat huddled for several seconds. Then she looked up, dry-eyed with a drawn look around her mouth.

"How did it happen?" she asked.

"Somebody strangled her in her apartment. About eleven-thirty. Any nominations?"

Her eyes were guarded, her tone level. "No."

Rufe stared at his blunt ridged fingernails. He said, "You care a lot for somebody who you thought was in trouble. I smelled that ever since you came down the stairs. You didn't react the way most people react. It didn't look like personal guilt. It looked more like a big yen to cover for the mysterious friend. And you're still covering. So it's someone that you and your boss knew. Better tell me

who now, because I'll certainly find out."

"He didn't do it!"

"The sooner we go to work the sooner we can prove he didn't. Give the guy a break."

"You're a great one to talk about giving people breaks!"

"You believe what you read in the papers, girl. They write that stuff to sell papers."

She leaned back and put her hands on the couch beside her, palms up. It gave her a singularly helpless look. She said, "I was afraid Fred was in trouble."

"Chanelli?"

"I met him in the office. He came to see Miss Leed. He stayed and talked. I . . . I like him. We've been going out together."

"Miss Leed know that?"

"No. I didn't want her to know. She might have felt that I was being . . . disloyal."

"Chanelli's a little old for you isn't he?"

"I'm twenty-four and he's thirty-nine. Does that make any difference? He told me about being in trouble with the police in Detroit. I was afraid he was in trouble again."

"After meeting you, did he go on seeing Miss Leed?"

"I don't know. I didn't ask. She never told me who she was going out with."

"How long ago did he start taking you out?"

"The first date was seven weeks ago tomorrow."

"Where did you usually go?"

"To the Tavern. He has to be there for business reasons. But we've gone on picnics in the country on two Sundays."

"Where does he live?"

"In the Lido hotel, two blocks from the Tavern."

"Pretty big suite?"

"I wouldn't know. I've never been up there."

"Roberta Leed was making money?"

"She handled the books. I guess she was."

"Lots of business lined up for the future?"

"Things have been sagging a little. Four home jobs are all."

"What did she pay you?"

"I take home forty-three eighty a week after deductions."

"Big office?"

"Her office, my office and a big display room. Third floor of the Mercantile and one display window down on the sidewalk. I guess she paid close to three hundred a month rent. She hired outside help—painters and seamstresses—when she needed them on a job."

"Where can we get hold of the books?"

"They're in the office safe. I don't have the combination."

"We'll get an order. Can you give us a line on relatives?"

"She mentioned a cousin out in Oklahoma someplace. I wouldn't know the name or the city."

"How was she to work for?"

"Veddy, veddy charming. She worked hard at it. She resented my college education. I would have quit, but I want to run a business like that some day. Frankly, I detested her. For no good reason."

She saw them to the door. She looked twice as tired as when she had come down the stairs.

Fred Chanelli lolled in the oak chair in Rufe's office and yawned. "You public servants keep terrible hours."

Chanelli was trim and fit with an unlined face, hooded eyes, a touch of grey at the temples.

Donall said, "Sorry to inconvenience you."

"I got to expect this sort of thing. Once you get a little record, you spend the rest of your life playing pattycake with the law."

"And you know nothing about who might have killed Roberta Leed?"

"News to me. We were . . . pretty close for a while. But you know how those things go. We cooled off . . ."

"When did you see her last?"

"On the street ten days ago, I think it was. Maybe two weeks. We talked a little. No hard feelings you understand. She said she was going to meet Cummerford. Me, I don't like the guy. A little too high pressure, you know. He sells those four thousand dollar houses for fourteen thousand a copy."

Chanelli was at ease, relaxed. He yawned again and grinned at Rufe. "This is my sleeping time. What is it? Nine in the morning?"

Rufe reached into the desk drawer, brought out a stiff document with tax stamps on it. He said, "We got this out of her safe in the apartment. Deed to the Tavern."

Chanelli didn't move or speak. But his lids slid a bit further down over his eyes.

Rufe said, "Interesting document. Assessments in Bryan usually run about forty per cent of sale value. You bought the Tavern for thirty thousand. You bought it during boom time, when every little joint went for a fortune. One hundred thousand would have been a decent price. Even a bargain."

Chanelli said, "Is the deed in order? Is it legal?"

"Meaning that I have nothing to go on?"

"You can guess a lot of things. Maybe Uncle Sugar would have taken too big a hunk of capital gains. Maybe I do a cash business for the balance. Maybe the woman liked me. Maybe she owed me money. There's lots of things you can guess."

"I can guess that you had a way to squeeze her. That would seem to fit with the way you do things, Chanelli."

"Like I told you, I can't beef about the way I'm treated by the police. Once you get a little record, any thirty-eight hundred a year genius can call you dirty names and you have to smile and take it."

Rufe slipped the document back in the drawer. He said, "Geniuses who get thirty-eight hundred a year can imagine lots of things, Chanelli. You're having snow-blindness at the Tavern, the same as all the rest of the joints. A month ago you paid a fine for refilling bottles. Another time and you lose your license. I can figure that you stole the Tavern from her because you had a way to make her beg. She had a nice business. Maybe you got greedy to get some of that money back. I can assume motive and I can hold you for forty-eight hours without charging you and then I can make the killing fit you like a two hundred dollar suit."

"And keep your nice, clean record like it says in the paper?" Chanelli had a white look around the mouth, but he managed to smile.

"Better tell me, Chanelli," Rufe said.

Chanelli yawned again. "You go to hell. Any more talking I do is through a lawyer."

"Miss Link would be upset if we kept you here."

Chanelli sat on the edge of the chair. His mouth was ugly. "Keep her out of this!"

"Keep her out? Why so much righteous indignation about another little ball of fluff that you've got your sights on? What is it? Love?"

"She's okay. She's clean. Keep her out of it."

Donall sighed and said, "Pick up your hat and go back to bed, Chanelli. Happy dreams. We know where to find you."

Chanelli hesitated. He licked his lips. He said, "A deal, Donall. I give you a little lead and you keep Elizabeth out."

"You speak your piece and take your chances."

Chanelli said, "Here's the lead. Don't write off Bucky Lamont. Oh, I don't mean that he isn't dead. He's dead enough.

But don't write him off as a dead lead."

"That doesn't make sense."

"You're a cop. You're supposed to make sense out of it. I just have a hunch. Nothing more than a hunch. I've got no grudge about who bumped her. But I don't want to get my hands sticky. Can I go?"

Donall nodded. Chanelli walked out quietly. Rufe sat at the desk staring at the far wall for a good forty minutes.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Heart of the Crime

WHEN Allen came in, Rufe said, "I need sleep. Give me the reports." Sergeant Allen sat down and pushed his hat up off his broad forehead. "No luck so far. Eleven guys we got on it as of right now. Daplan got the phone calls when he said he did. There's no way to prove that it was the Leed woman who phoned him at Laybourne's. Her calls didn't go through the apartment switchboard. Daplan stopped at the drug store and bought two packs of cigarettes. He smokes about three packs a day. There were just two butts in the tray near where he said he went to sleep, so maybe he was sleeping. The deceased left her office at quarter after six. She stopped in a bar and had two cocktails. The barman says she was upset and jittery. She ate at the Crown Restaurant on Macomber at about seven fifteen. One of the boys is trying to find the waitress. I gave that time to the doc and he puts the time of death from twenty-five of twelve to five of twelve. Daplan must have damn near met the killer coming out. We still have to find out where the gold key was made and check to find out if any others were made. Barney is going to work on her books. There wasn't a damn thing in the apartment that's of any interest."

Donall shuddered with weariness. "Do a good check on the movements of Chanelli, Cummerford and the Link girl. Interview the clients she had. You can get the names from Barney. And one other thing. Didn't that little man at the apartment house see her come in after dinner?"

"No. He keeps himself busy. He runs in and out all the time. From what I can tell, he was at the desk about half the time last night."

"Set it all up with the boys, and then take a break yourself."

Donall's clothes felt scratchy against his skin. He went back to his apartment, took a hot shower, pulled the shades against the morning sun and went to bed. In his sleep he moaned often. Twice he said, gutterally, "They're coming! They're coming!" Shortly after that he woke himself up screaming hoarsely. It was an old story with him. He sat on the edge of the bed until his heartbeat slowed and his hands stopped shaking and the cold sweat dried on his body. Then he dropped off into a sound sleep.

At five o'clock he returned to his office and found that Barney had finished with the books. He had Barney come in and give him a verbal report.

Barney said, "Allen told me the babe was jittery. "I'd be jittery too, Lieutenant, if I was in her spot. Far as I can tell, she made some bad estimates and the last two jobs cost her plenty. And she couldn't stand the losses. The bank give us the usual trouble about the safety deposit box. They act like a court order was something they could take or leave alone. Taking the contents of the two safes and the checking account and the whole works, she had about fourteen hundred cash and owed thirty-three or thirty-four hundred. She was a week behind on the rent for both places."

"Can you tell me how much she sunk in the business?"

"I think she started with a pretty fair amount. Ten thousand, probably. And the business made money until these last

two jobs. But I don't know where the hell it went. The check stubs show cash withdrawals, but not in any regular pattern like a blackmail setup. I found pawn stubs for two rings and a bracelet. They couldn't have been much. She got eight hundred for the three of them about two weeks ago. The little girl down in the office gave me a lot of good help. Nice kid. But nervous."

"Thanks, Barney. Get hold of your pal at the Credit Bureau and find out the score on everybody on our list so far. Leave it on my desk. I'll be back by ten."

Rufe found Daplan in his office at the *Star*. Daplan glanced up with a tired smile. "Shut the door behind you, Rufe. This has raised hell with me."

Donall sat down beside Daplan's desk. "Now it's smart to be my very good pal, eh?"

"You're in the driver's seat, Donall. I want to cooperate. When the case is over, I'll be out after you again. But right now we'll have a truce."

"I'll do my job and you do yours. Right now I want to talk about Bucky Lamont. Your good pal. Remember?"

Daplan's eyes narrowed. "What are you driving at? Bucky's been dead for years."

"What kind of a guy was he?"

Daplan shrugged. "Wilder than most. Smart when he had to be. So what?"

"He fell hard for Bobbie Leed?"

"Like bricks. She put a glaze in his eyes."

"And you were best man at the wedding?"

"I told you that once. Look, I could be more help if I knew what you were driving at."

"Miss Leed called you from her apartment?"

"If you're going to sit there and ask questions in a tone of voice that indicates that you doubt my word, Donall, I'm going to be surer than ever that you aren't the man for the type of job you hold."

"All I do is dig around and try to fit things. After a while I get to know what happened. Right now I'm working on a fact. Chanelli bought the Tavern for one third of its value."

Daplan frowned. "That would indicate that he cheated her, or she had a reason for selling so low. Maybe she needed the money."

"It would have taken her two hours to find somebody to steal it for twice Chanelli's price."

Daplan leaned forward eagerly. "Suppose Chanelli was blackmailing her for something. Suppose he squeezed her dry and then she threatened to tell me. Maybe that's why she called me. But Chanelli got there first."

Donall shrugged. "That's just a hunch. Chanelli can't account for his movements at that time. He wasn't at the Tavern. He says he was taking a walk. He could have gotten up there. But I need motive. If you can find out why and how Chanelli was squeezing her. . . ."

Daplan leaned back in the chair and shut his eyes. A cigarette in the ash tray sent a thin grey line toward the high ceiling. Daplan sat with his fingertips touching.

He said softly, "Suppose that within the next few hours I could dig up the reason Chanelli was blackmailing Bobbie?"

"Then I could make an arrest."

"Let me think it over. I have a hunch."

"Phone me at Headquarters."

From Hy Daplan's office, Donall went to the murder apartment. The guard was posted just inside the door. He let Rufe in and went back to his magazine. The place had been carefully searched and everything had been put back the way it was. Donall opened the bedroom closet and stared for long minutes at the rows of dresses, the array of shoes. The faint fragrance of the woman clung to the dresses.

From the apartment he phoned Allen.

Allen had nothing new. Rufe sat on the oversized bed and looked down at the floor where the body had been. The heel hole in the counterpane was the only indication that the room had held violence.

Looking at the case was like looking carefully at a jungle tree to find the Jap sniper. At first it looked like a normal tree. And then little oddities began to appear. A bulge against the trunk, a subtle difference in shading. Slowly the sniper began to appear, as though by magic, as though by willing him to be there one could make it possible to see him.

Rufe's lips tightened as he remembered the jungle trail, remembered the way, after one hundred and four days of combat, something inside him had cracked and he had thrown his rifle aside, had run wide-eyed, panting for breath, ignoring the angry yells of his officers. They told him later that he had been screaming and shouting that "They're coming! They're coming!"

Oh, the doctors had used all the big comforting words, but it was still a hot shame inside of him. A shame that woke him in the night wet with remembered fear. A shame that sent him walking slowly and steadily into the measured fire of a killer's gun. A shame that had given Pritchard the first shot, the shot that had stung his cheek with brick dust.

He went from the apartment out to the home of Elizabeth Link. She was composed. The first question she asked was more of a statement than a question. She said, "Fred didn't do it."

"At least he's not in a cell. Do you know Daplan of the *Star?*"

"Of course. He came into the office a lot."

"I'm quite certain he would."

"I want to tell you what to say and when to phone him. Does he know that you know Chanelli?"

"I . . . I think so. He was at the Tavern one night when I was with Fred."

"Can you come down to Headquarters with me? You may not get back until late."

"I'll do anything I can to help you."

IT WAS quarter of eight when Daplan phoned Rufe. His voice was excited. He said, "Rufe? I think I may have it. When Bobbie was in her cups she talked too much. During the negotiations for the sale, Chanelli would have been smart enough to get her drunk. And Bucky probably told Bobbie about something that happened a long time ago, and she told Chanelli."

"What could Bucky Lamont have done that would put Miss Leed in the bag?"

"Bucky didn't leave a will. I'd forgotten this incident. About twelve years ago, Bucky and I went on a three-day binge. We ended up in Jersey. We met a couple of girls there. We weren't giving our right names. It seemed like a good idea to go over to Maryland and get married. I didn't go through with it. Bucky did. Two days later we ditched the girls and came back to Bryan. Bucky never got a divorce or an annulment."

"How do you make that fit?"

"The girl he married still uses the fake name. Mrs. James Greener. She didn't marry again. She lives with her mother at 1410 Archbold Street, Jersey City."

"How could she prove she'd been married to Lamont?"

"We had our pictures taken by a sidewalk photographer. I still have my copy around someplace. Probably she has too. And she had the license. That would have Bucky's handwriting on it. I was a witness."

"And you think that Chanelli found all this out from her and saw his chance to tell her that she'd either take thirty thousand for a hundred thousand property, or he'd hunt up the legal wife and tell her the facts and let her take over the place? Then Miss Leed had to settle for thirty

thousand or nothing. And you think Chanelli has been bleeding her, threatening exposure which would give this Mrs. Greener a good chance to sue Miss Leed for every dime she had left?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Daplan said hotly. "Now can you make your arrest?"

"I think I can," Rufe said. "Thanks a lot."

"Don't mention it, old man. Glad to help bring a killer to justice."

"Don't print anything yet."

"If you say so. Give me the go-ahead as soon as you can, eh?"

"I'll do that. Say, by the way, this is just a detail, Daplan, but would you send somebody to headquarters with that grey pinstripe you wore yesterday night."

Daplan said, after a short pause, "Why do you want my suit?"

"Routine. We don't want Chanelli to have an out, do we?"

"I don't see how . . . anyway, the suit's at the cleaners."

"Tell me which one. I'll have one of the boys pick it up. He can get the owner to open the shop."

"I don't want the man to misunderstand. I'll get it myself."

Rufe hung up and looked at Allen standing by the door, at Chanelli sitting beside the Link girl.

He said, "Chanelli, you knew Miss Leed's marriage was no good. That's how you beat the price down."

Chanelli shrugged. "I knew the marriage was no good. Bucky told her about it. She got a little boiled and told me. Bucky had given her the picture for a gag. She had it in her purse. Then she started crying about Bucky again and tore up the picture. I fitted it together after she left. But you can't trace the connection. She sold me the joint at a price acceptable to both of us."

Elizabeth Link gave Chanelli a long, puzzled look. And then she moved ever so slightly away from him. Chanelli saw it and reached for her hand. She pulled away from him. Chanelli said, "Don't get virtuous, angel. It's a rugged world."

"More rugged than I thought," she said quietly. There was ice in her voice.

"You can phone him now, Miss Link," Rufe said.

She came around the desk. Rufe gave her his chair. He knelt beside his chair so that his ear would be near the phone.

When Elizabeth was through to Daplan, she said, "Mr. Daplan? This is Elizabeth Link. You recognize my voice, don't you?"

"Of course, Miss Link. What can I do for you?"

"A great deal, Mr. Daplan. But I don't think you'll do it willingly."

Daplan's voice tightened. "Exactly what do you mean?"

"They've arrested Fred Chanelli. Now that they've arrested him, he'll get scared and tell them what he didn't tell them before."

"Are you phoning in a news item?"

"Not exactly. Fred is going to tell them that he met me at midnight the night Bobbie was killed."

"You can prove that?"

"I wouldn't call you if I couldn't."

"What has that got to do with me?"

"I might not back Fred up. I might let the police keep him. You see, he doesn't mean anything to me. He used to, but he doesn't now." As the girl spoke, she glanced at Chanelli. Her eyes were cold and her tone was positive. Chanelli gave a weak smile.

"How does it matter to me that you can or can't give Chanelli an alibi?"

"I've been talking to Lieutenant Donall. He told me all about the case. One thing you told him didn't fit. You see, as I was going to meet Fred, I met Bobbie. Just by luck, she hurried over to take the cab I got out of. We talked. She said that she had a business matter to discuss with you. She had had a few drinks. She said

she had phoned you and you had told her to go back to her apartment and wait for you. She was nervous. And angry."

"Why tell me all this?"

"Mr. Daplan, you know what I'm talking about. And I won't say any more over the phone. I live at 510 Maybree Street. I'm alone in the house. I'll give you an hour to get here. And bring a nice present for me. A green present."

She slammed the phone on the cradle, turned and smiled at Rufe. He got to his feet and said, "Well done!"

Allen said, "You want a net around the house?"

"No. Get Mrs. Link out of there. Take her to a hotel. I'll go back with Miss Link and wait in the house."

Allen scratched his head. "Rufe, how come you elect Daplan?"

"Get Chanelli out of here and I'll tell you."

Allen closed the door after Chanelli left. Rufe said, "I'll make it short. Daplan lied. He made a mistake talking about a shower. Miss Leed wore a lemon-yellow housecoat, nylons and red shoes. She was a decorator. That was a lousy color combination. She, according to Daplan, wasn't planning on going out. So she must have just come in. She phoned him from outside. He told her to hurry on home. And he drifted around for a half hour and made himself conspicuous in the drugstore to be remembered and to give her a chance to get home first. He'd been bleeding her. She called up to say that she was cleaned and she was going to the cops, because she had nothing left even if the legal Mrs. Lamont did sue her. He told her he wanted to talk it over.

"He's a smart apple and knows psychology. He's printed enough murder to know how it isn't done. So he killed her three minutes after he was inside the apartment. Then he went out and sat in the chair for a couple of hours. He probably made himself lay off the cigarettes.

"He lied to me and I began to wonder about him. Every other principal in the case has a limited or lousy credit rating. His is fine, but it didn't used to be a few years back. So he had to be milking her of dough in a nice, friendly way. She knew that he could bring the legal Mrs. Lamont in on the deal and she would lose her business. But when her business went sour, she didn't have anything left to lose. The trouble is that I couldn't figure out how he was squeezing her. So I lied to him about Chanelli's perfectly good account of his movements, and set Chanelli up as a sitting duck, leaving it to Daplan to fill in the motive, thus getting himself in the clear. He was so eager to outline the motive that he gave me too many facts about something that he claimed to have forgotten. Both those vultures were feeding off Bobbie Leed. She wasn't too smart. But she finally got tired of paying when there was nothing left to pay. Daplan is smart. He had it set so that if worst came to worst, his defense attorney could say, 'Ladies and Gentlemen of the jury. I ask you. Would the accused have murdered that woman and then gone and sat peacefully in the living room of the apartment for two hours and more before deciding to phone the police? Is that the act of an intelligent man?' "

"How about the suit, Rufe?" Allen asked.

"I just wanted to upset him a little. He'll spend so much time wondering if we have some grey threads from that suit that he won't be able to concentrate on Miss Link. I want him to have that good old trapped feeling. Let's roll."

ALLEN halted the sedan in the next block and the three of them cut through the back yards to the Link home. Mrs. Link went quickly and meekly, once she found that her daughter would be in no danger.

Allen left with Mrs. Link and then

Donall posted himself in the hall closet. The familiar fear was like a cold hand around his heart. His mouth was dry and he swallowed constantly.

When the doorbell rang, he yanked the Positive free of the spring clip. His hand felt cold against the metal.

Daplan said, "I came out of curiosity, nothing more."

"You brought my present?"

"I might have. But first I've got to know if you're worth it."

"Come on into the front room."

"You're alone in the house?"

"Completely."

"Who have you told about this?"

"Do I look stupid enough to want to share the profits?"

Their voices were further away. Elizabeth had her instructions to make certain Daplan took a chair where he couldn't see the hallway. Rufe opened the closet door silently and moved across the hall, flattening against the wall beside the arched doorway to the living room.

"How do you know there will be profits?"

"Because Bobbie said, 'I'm sick of paying him. I can't pay him any more.' "

"She was talking about Chanelli."

"She said, 'That nickname of his—Hy—is very appropriate. So are his rates.' You know, Mr. Daplan, it's quite a thrill for me to be in the same room with a murderer. Did she struggle hard?"

"Harder than you would suspect, Miss Link."

"How much is murder worth, Mr. Daplan? I would say ten thousand to start."

"I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed, Miss Link."

"Now!" Elizabeth shouted.

Rufe had told her to stand near the couch. He heard the sound as she dropped behind the couch as he had instructed her to do.

Rufe stood framed in the arched doorway and the muzzle of the Positive pointed directly at the chest of the standing man. Daplan's mouth was drawn down at the corners and his eyes were wet slits. He held the shiny little automatic in his hand, but the muzzle was pointed at the floor.

Rufe heard the deep, shuddering breath that Daplan took. For a moment it was as though he became Daplan, felt his fear and panic and regret.

Daplan said, "You did it this way."

"It was the best way."

"Maybe I wrote about you because I knew I was going to have to kill and I was afraid of you."

"I can understand fear."

"You? You have as much nerves as a motor block. Come on, Lieutenant. You like to save money for the state. Think of the taxpayer. Your finger is on the trigger and there's less than a four ounce pull. I'll fall with the gun in my hand."

"Make your try," Rufe said, his voice

like the raucous grate of rusty metal.

Daplan didn't lift the gun. He looked at Rufe and for a moment the wonder ironed out the lines in his face. "Why—you want to be shot at, don't you?"

"Make your try or drop the gun."

"What are you proving to yourself with all this business of being a target? Did you run away once, Lieutenant?"

"Shut up!"

"Close, eh? I want to see you squirm, Lieutenant. You got me to make this fool move. If you ran away once, Lieutenant, being shot at won't make any difference. You'll always remember running away. Was it in the war?"

"Damn you, Daplan."

"I won't oblige you, Donall. Come and take the gun away from me or shoot me where you stand."

Rufe felt the sweat on his body. He dropped his arm, let the revolver thud to the rug. He took a measured step toward Daplan. From a long way off he heard the girl scream. Daplan's face looked enormous and it seemed to swing slowly back and forth in a greyish mist.

As he took the second step he saw the gun glint up, heard the far-away whip-crack of the shot. The slug was a hammer blow that drummed on his chest, a wet tearing, a hotness and the slow upward seep of pain. As he took the third step the second slug hit him at the waist, on his left side. The pain cramped him and he moved forward, bent over as though walking up hill.

He could reach Daplan. The little automatic swept up and he felt his fingers bite into the bone of Daplan's wrist as the third hot crack, close to his cheek, burned his face and half deafened him.

He stared into Daplan's eyes for one endless moment, found the wrist with his other hand, twisted over and down with all the weight and power of his body, hearing the thin snap of bone, feeling the warm wetness under his hands.

He fell heavily across the man who screamed and screamed. When there was a silence, Rufe said huskily, "Phone the department, Miss Link."

Elizabeth Link sat beside his bed in the ward. Her dark hair was carefully combed and her eyes were grave and steady. She said, "I'm not coming here too often?"

Rufe shook his head. "Not too often."

"I thought you were insane. I thought you had gone mad. I talked to Sergeant Allen about it. He told me why."

Rufe's lips thinned to a tight line. "He was in the same outfit. He promised not to tell anyone."

"Do you care, really? If he hadn't told me, you would have. I was here when you were out of your head coming out of the anaesthetic. You're cured now, you know."

"He shouldn't have told you."

"You're a hard, stubborn, bitter man, Rufe."

He shut his eyes for a moment. He said, "So what if you're right? What if I've proved something to myself? What if I'm not afraid any more? Why do you have a right to know?"

"It's time you had some fun, Rufe. I'm just as stubborn as you are. The case delivered you right into the hands of a designing woman. I'm in your life to stay, Rufe."

He didn't move or open his eyes for a long time. She reached over and ran cool fingertips down the angle of his jaw.

He said, "I suppose there isn't much I can do about it."

"Sergeant Allen said you wouldn't struggle very hard," she said. "Not after we both heard you talk as you were coming out of the anaesthetic. About me."

He looked steadily at her for long, long moments. She made a tiny sound in her throat, very like a sob, and then she laid her cheek against the back of his hospital-bleached hand and continued to look into his eyes.

# I'LL DIE FOR YOU

## By Day Keene

***Solve if you can the riddle of the man who died once, killed twice —and talked himself into a living grave three times!***

*He stepped through the window to deal death. . . .*

THE murder wasn't entirely unpremeditated. Jack Carmon had been thinking of killing Kigore for some time. He knew it would be the only way he could get his hands on the two hundred thousand dollars in cash that the other man kept in the cracker-tin safe in one corner of the dingy slum apartment that served Kigore both as home and office ever since the accident which had confined him to a wheel chair.

Not that Kigore was a pushover. Despite the loss of his legs, the former racketeer was still a two hundred pound hunk of tough hombre who slept with ear to the ground and two forty-fives under his pillow. He was a loan shark by profession. The money, he said, was his brains, and Jack Carmon was his legs. He was glad to lend any of his impoverished neighbors any amount they needed without security, provided of course they were

willing to pay a reasonable sum of interest that rose with the extent of their desperation.

Carmon was driving back along the Palisades when he came to his decision. Few of his friends along Broadway would have recognized him. This was his night with Stella, and he realized now that, subconsciously, he had planned this thing for a long time.

It had begun as a gag. Bored with Broadway and Mabel he had compiled an outfit and gone fishing in the Catskills, only to be caught in a sudden summer storm that had battered the smart clothes he was wearing into a sodden mass and gotten him lost to boot. Toward sunset he had come on the village. It lay nestled in the green hills, miles from any highway, looking, in the setting sun, for all the world like a movie set for Rip Van Winkle. Only Shady Point was real. Within one hundred and fifty miles of the largest metropolis in the world, progress and modernity had passed it by. Populated chiefly by members of a friendly religious sect, few of its inhabitants had ever been to New York. They lived as their fathers and their fathers' fathers had lived. Trippers and tourists were discouraged. Few people even knew it existed.

Stella's father, who ran the Inn, had hospitably given him shelter. And once Carmon had seen the breath-taking beauty of Stella, he had been quick-witted enough to formulate a fictitious identity for himself. He couldn't very well tell a girl like Stella or her strict, if hospitable, father that he was by profession a former artists' model, race track tout, and current cracker of skulls for a loan shark whose idea of reasonable interest was fifty per cent per week.

Instead he had given his name as Samuel Icabod and his profession that of an itinerate peddler, specializing in Bibles and religious tracts. The information had pleased both of them. And Stella had set him on fire. To keep the fiction going, he had even rented a room in Highland Falls under the name of Icabod and asked her to write him there. To further the deception he had purchased a broken-down jalopy which he kept in a private garage not far from the George Washington Bridge and exchanged for his own smart convertible whenever he called on Stella.

He had applied for and received both a state and driver's license for the jalopy under the name of Icabod. His landlady in Highland Falls knew him only by that name, and the fact that he used his room so seldom was easily explained by his means of livelihood. He had been careful to stock the room with Bibles and religious tracts, in case Stella's father should check on him. The old man had and, according to his landlady, had gone away much impressed.

*I could kill Kigore tomorrow morning,* Carmon thought, *clip the two hundred grand in the safe, and while every cop in New York is beating his brains out trying to find Jack Carmon, slip into Samuel Icabod and no one would ever know where Jack Carmon went.*

That had been last week. Tonight he had proposed to Stella and had been accepted. Tomorrow he meant to kill Kigore. All murder was a gamble, but the odds were a hundred to one in his favor. Dressed in the ill-fitting cheap suit and black felt hat he always wore when he called on Stella, he didn't even look like himself.

He knew a moment of frustration as he changed clothes in the lonely garage in which he stashed the convertible on the nights that he used the jalopy. Life wasn't fair. He had been born with the looks of a movie actor. He was as good looking as any of the Hollywood and television crowd. But had he ever gotten a break? He had not. Outside of the few lousy

modeling jobs on which he had existed until he had tied up with Kigore, he had never gotten a break. Instead of planning murder for two hundred thousand dollars, he should be making that much a year and living in a palatial California ranch house, complete with marble swimming pool.

On the other hand, two hundred thousand dollars, tax free, was a lot of money. If he handled it wisely, it would last him the rest of his life. He could live in Shady Point with Stella for a year or two, then take off for the far places with strange sounding names that he had always wanted to see.

THE thought improved his mood. He was whistling softly to himself as he drove across the bridge and down into midtown Manhattan. He made one stop before going home.

Mabel was still up and slightly high. He half expected a scene, but there was none. She accepted his explanation that he had been on business for Kigore and kissed him wetly.

"You know something, you good-looking devil, I love you."

Carmon patted her absently. Then he took her in his arms and kissed her. In her way, Mabel had been a good sport. They had been through a lot together. This evening would be the last time he would ever see her. He talked to her a while, then left.

His mood the next morning was foul. When he awoke, the phone was ringing. He stumbled down the hall lighting a cigarette, hoping it wasn't Kigore. He wasn't in a mood for bashing skulls. That part of his life was over. He meant to break only one more head. And that one belonged to Kigore.

It wasn't the legless man calling. It was Ben Levine, the agent.

"Look, Jack. Do me a favor," he began without preamble. "Slip into some clothes and get right over to the Morello Studio. Three weeks ago Tony posed some pictures for some mag. Now the mag is ready to go to press, some dumbkopf in the office has lost both the plates and the pictures, and they've got to do the whole thing over again."

Carmon blew smoke into the mouthpiece. "To hell with it. I'm out of the modeling business."

"I know. I know," Levine placated him. "But one more job won't hurt you. Because it's a rush, Tony will pay a flat one hundred bucks. And when he called me up and told me he needed a good-looking six-footer who looked like a big-shot movie actor, who could I think of but you?"

"Don't give me that," Carmon said. But he was pleased.

"As a favor to an old friend," Levine pleaded. "Slip into a sport coat and a pair of slacks and high-tail it over to Tony's. I need my cut of the dough. You wouldn't want my child and six wives to starve, would you?"

"Okay," Carmon laughed. "For you, Ben."

Hanging up, he padded back into the bedroom and began to dress.

He debated between his sport coats, chose a double-breasted camel's hair with big white pearl buttons, and shrugged into it. The coat would make a good red herring.

*Wanted for murder—Jack Carmon. When last seen he was wearing two-tone sport shoes, fawn-colored gabardine slacks, and an expensive camel's hair coat with big pearl buttons.*

The thought sobered him. This was murder he had in mind. He couldn't afford one slip. He wouldn't slip. Samuel Icabod wouldn't dream of wearing such an outfit. And once Kigore was dead and he was on the other side of the river, he would become Icabod.

Scooping his change from the top of

the dresser, he dropped it into his pocket and left the apartment.

Tony Morello's studio was its usual madhouse of lights and action. The usual hopefuls were waiting in the anteroom. Carmon got a slight lift when the receptionist opened the gate for him.

"Go right in, Mr. Carmon. Mr. Morello is waiting for you in Studio Five."

The picture was, Carmon saw, to be posed in a luxuriously furnished living room. A sultry blonde in an evening gown, who looked like Mabel thought she looked, smiled at him with approval.

"So you're the new lady-killer," she said.

Morello handed him a pearl-handled gun. "Here's the picture, Jack. She's your wife. You're separated and she's been two-timing you. You come in through the French window, there, to take a pot shot at her. She sees you coming in through the window and screams just as you shoot. Got it?"

Carmon nodded. "Check."

He took the position indicated, started in through the window on signal, pointed the gun at the blonde and shot as she contorted her face in fear and screamed convincingly.

From behind his camera, Morello said, "That looks like a good one, but let's take it again to make sure. The damn mag goes to press tomorrow."

They went through the scene again, and Morello came out from behind the camera. "Nice work, both of you. Thanks for coming on such short notice, Jack. I'll have the girl mail your check to Ben."

"Thanks for the work," Carmon said. He swaggered out through the anteroom and down the stairs to the street. He knew he would never see the check. It didn't matter. He wouldn't need it. Ben was welcome to it. It had been enough pay for him to have his ego bolstered. Mabel was right about one thing. He was a good looking devil. Not many men in New York, or anywhere else for that matter, could make a hundred dollars in five minutes strictly on their looks. But it would be the last lift he would have for some time. Clothes did, to an extent, make the man. And Samuel Icabod wore shapeless black suits that made him look like the country gawk he was supposed to be.

Parking his blue convertible at the curb, he climbed the flight of smelly stairs to Kigore's combination flat and office.

The legless man was talking to an excited laborer as he entered. The man was protesting he had already paid two hundred dollars for the one hundred dollars he had borrowed and he couldn't see how he possibly could still owe Kigore a hundred dollars.

Looking at Carmon, Kigore said, "I'm glad you came in when you did. Explain it to him, Jack."

Bunching his right hand into a fist, Carmon knocked the man off his feet, then kicked him. "It's really very simple, Mac," he explained. "You see, you got behind in your interest. And that's just part of what you get if you complain to the cops or try to run out on Mr. Kigore." He hauled him to his feet and made a pretense of brushing him off. "We're very sorry you fell down, and it won't ever happen again as long as you come in every payday and put something in the pot."

"Remember that," Kigore said. "You get back in your interest again, or try to run out on me, and I'll have Mr. Carmon break every bone in your body. Got that?"

The laborer nodded and scurried out of the office.

Looking at Carmon, Kigore said, "Where the hell have you been all morning?"

"Busy." Carmon shrugged. He had never realized before just how much he hated Kigore. Kigore sat back of his desk

in a wheel-chair, raking in a small fortune every week, and all that he got out of it was a lousy two hundred dollars for doing all of his leg and dirty work.

Lighting a cigarette, he glanced at the safe. It was open. But there was also a .45 in the open middle drawer and another one in the shoulder holster under Kigore's coat. He would have to be both clever and fast.

"I got a call from the Morello studio," he continued.

"Sissy stuff," Kigore scoffed. "Besides, you're working for me, understand? And from now on, unless I've sent you out on a call, I want you here by nine o'clock every morning."

"Okay," Carmon agreed. He could afford to be generous.

Still holding the burned match, he rounded the desk as if to drop it in the spittoon behind it. Then, bunching his fingers again, he brought his fist up in a vicious uppercut that had all of his two hundred pounds behind it.

Kigore's head hit the back of the chair. The legless man was dazed but not out. His right hand fumbled for the gun in the drawer and Carmon hit him again. The fingers twitched and were still. Pausing only to close and lock the door, Carmon used the butt of the gun to complete what he had started. Kigore slumped even lower in the chair.

SUCKING hard at his cigarette, Carmon looked at the man he had just killed. Now that he had done it, he wondered why he had waited so long, why he had been afraid. Murder was like posing or touting the horses, a relatively simple matter. All you had to do was what came naturally.

He wiped his fingerprints from the gun and tossed it back in the drawer. He had two outs. One was Sam Icabod. The other was the fact that Kigore was so well hated that any of a thousand men might have killed him. He had less reason than most. He had worked for Kigore. Even the laborer he'd just worked over would testify that Jack and Mr. Kigore seemed on the best of terms.

Taking the dead man's keys from his pocket, he opened the inner door of the safe and peered in. It hadn't been for nothing. The two hundred grand was there, neatly sheafed in bills of twenty and fifty dollar denominations that couldn't be traced. That had been one of Kigore's boasts. The only thing he had forgotten was a suitcase. He found one in the back closet and put the sheafed bills in it. Then, carrying the case, he left the office, locking the door behind him.

Two dozen men would rap on it before the day was over, but none of them would insist on entering. All would be pleased to realize they had a few more hours' grace on the payments that went on seemingly forever. It might be a day. It might be a week before Kigore's body was found.

He decided to use the tunnel instead of the bridge, then drive up the west bank. In Union City he stopped for lunch and killed most of the afternoon by taking in a movie.

Kigore's body hadn't been found. At least it wasn't on the air.

In Fort Lee he parked the car on a dark side street, patted it good-by and walked the last of the distance to the garage where the jalopy was parked. There were a lot of blue convertibles in the suitcase he was carrying.

No one saw him enter the garage. No one saw him leave. They wouldn't have recognized him if they had. The flashy sport coat and two-toned shoes and fawn-colored gabardine trousers were in a roll on the raddled seat beside him. The money in the case was covered with a thick layer of paper tracts demanding to know: HOW LONG HAS IT BEEN SINCE YOU WROTE HOME TO MOTHER?

He stopped once along the way to weight the roll of clothes with stones and drop it into the river. Then he settled down for the long drive. It was after midnight when he reached Highland Falls and his room in the Widow Keeler's home.

She wanted to know if he'd had a good trip. He said it had been fairly successful but the modern generation seemed determined on going to hell. They much preferred going to movies and reading lurid comic books to attending to their spiritual welfare. She agreed with him heartily and was pleased to learn that he and Stella were to be married. She didn't know two finer young people and she hoped they both would be very happy.

Alone in his room, Carmon switched on the twenty-five watt bulb and studied his reflection in the cheap mirror of the dresser. Jack Carmon was dead. He was Samuel Icabod. The stiff white collar and string tie and shiny blue serge suit made him look as dull as Samuel. It was a wonder how a little honey like Stella ever could have fallen for such a guy. Now he had his teeth in the part, he actually looked stupid. He reached for a cigarette and he remembered he had thrown the pack away. Samuel didn't smoke. Samuel eschewed strong drink. He looked not on the wine when it was red, lest it turn and sting him like an adder. Samuel didn't take the Lord's name in vain. He respected, no, revered each and every one of the Ten Commandments.

Samuel Icabod was, in fact, one hell of a dull fellow. For the first time, Carmon began to wonder, even for Stella and two hundred thousand dollars, just how long he could stand Samuel. . . .

IT WAS even worse than Carmon had expected it would be. In the first place, he had forgotten the banns. In fact he hadn't known such an archaic custom still existed. But it would seem it did, at least in Shady Point. Stella was still eager to marry him, but until their names had been published on three successive Sundays in the local church, a sisterly good-night kiss was all he could expect.

Then there was Nathaniel. In every paradise, present or proposed, there had to be one snake. Nathaniel was his. Carmon had seen him around the Inn during his six months' courtship of Stella, but had paid little attention to the youth. Now it seemed the hulking young farmer had been the favored suitor until he had shown on the scene. And despite his pious demeanor and friendly "thees" and "thous" when Stella or her father were around, the youth hated the ground that Carmon walked on. Nathaniel watched him every moment he could spare from his fields, hoping to catch him in some slip.

It had been chiefly because of Nathaniel that, instead of lolling around the Inn as he had expected to do, Carmon was forced to assume the role of Bible and religious tract peddler he purported to be. Every morning, promptly at seven, in the middle of the night as far as Carmon was concerned, but mid-morning to the early rising folk of Shady Point, Carmon climbed into the jalopy and drove the rutted backroads trying to sell Bibles, not even daring to sneak a smoke between isolated hill farm houses for fear someone might see him and report the fact to Nathaniel, who would be certain to make capital of it.

Selling Bibles was a thankless, profitless, chore. It would seem that everyone had one. The farmers and their wives were glad to see him. They were happy to talk or pray or even invite him to a meal but, being frugal, saw no reason to buy a book a copy of which had been in their family for one hundred years.

There was only one bright fly in the ointment. The murder of Ivan Kigore was driving the New York cops nuts. True,

Mabel had reported his disappearance. The Italian laborer had told the police he had been in the office when he left. His blue convertible had been found in Fort Lee. But there the trail ended. He and the money Kigore was known to keep in the safe had disappeared into the blue. During the first week of the search he was reported variously in Seattle, Los Angeles, Agua Caliente, and St. Petersburg, Florida. The papers had even printed two pictures of him, that Mabel had supplied. But he had been wearing a hairline mustache in both and looked much more like a twin to Errol Flynn than even a distant relation of Samuel Icabod.

No. He had nothing to fear on that score. Hollywood had lost a great star. Having assumed the role of Icabod, he was playing it to the hilt. And he was a consummate actor. Carmon admitted it. He had committed a perfect murder. Kigore had been a heel. The community had profited by his death. In a few more weeks, the furor would die down and the case would be put to yellow in the police department's unsolved file.

If only he dared to buy a pint or smoke a pack of butts. . . .

By the beginning of the third week, the enforced clean living was beginning to drive him crazy. He even stopped dreaming of Stella and began to dream of amber fluids in tall frosted glasses and smouldering cigarette butts wasting their aromatic fragrance on the edge of butt-filled trays.

And still Nathaniel continued to watch him. The hell of it was that, even after his marriage to Stella, he would have to continue the role and assumed non-bad-habits of Samuel Icabod as long as he remained in Shady Point. Marriage wouldn't change a thing. He was trapped until he decided that it was safe to move on.

In the middle of the third week, unable to stand the strain of his assumed sanctity any longer, he struck on an idea. Not even the watchful Nathaniel could know how many Bibles and tracts he'd sold on his tour of the back roads. He could say that his stock needed replenishing and drive into New York away from the young farmer's prying eyes and have himself one last time. There would be no risk in it. The police weren't looking for Samuel Icabod. It was Jack Carmon they wanted for murder.

Stella cried when he told her he would be away overnight.

"Go thou if thou must—" She kissed him. "Thou goest on a godly task. But return as quickly as thou canst. Thou art very dear to my heart, Samuel."

Her father insisted on saying an even longer morning prayer than usual to guide and protect him on his journey into the sink of iniquity that he, himself, had never seen nor had any desire to see.

IT WAS all that Carmon needed. By the time his old jalopy had chugged and bucked its way fifteen miles from Shady Point, his thirst was ravenous. The sight of a billboard advertising beer made him drool like an idiot. He had never so wanted to smoke. Fifty miles from Shady Point, and on U. S. Highway 9W proper, he started to pull into a roadhouse to satisfy both hungers and chanced to glance into his cracked rear-vision mirror.

Nathaniel was dumb. He didn't know a gimmick from a speedball. His mouth gaped open most of the time from untended adenoids. Not even his four years in the army had jolted him out of his previous twenty years of Shady Point thinking. But the young fool was persistent. This was his last chance to prove the man who had stolen his girl away from him was unworthy of Stella, and Nathaniel wasn't passing it by. The surplus army jeep he used both for transportation and odd jobs around the farm was just topping the last hill that Carmon had descended.

Cursing, Carmon drove on. Perhaps it was just as well. If he were to stop now, he might make a hog of himself and while the police weren't looking for Samuel Icabod, if he were to be picked up on a drunken driving charge, even an allegedly respectable peddler of Bibles would have a hell of a time explaining the two hundred thousand dollars under the religious tracts in the suitcase under the back seat.

He'd give Nathaniel a run for his money. He drove more slowly now, making certain he didn't lose the young farmer in the jeep. He'd give him something to report back to Shady Point. He passed half a dozen policemen and almost as many police cars but none of them even looked his way. It wouldn't have mattered if they had. His transformation was complete. Carmon doubted if even Mabel would recognize him in the battered black hat, stiff white collar, and string tie.

On the east bank of the river he drove down into lower Manhattan, where the publishing firm from whom he had purchased his Bibles and religious tracts were located. Having done his previous business by mail, they were pleased to meet him in person. They were still more pleased when he gave a whopping big order, to be sent to the Inn in Shady Point, which he explained would be his new headquarters for at least another year. It amused him to pay for the order in advance with Kigore's money. If Ivan knew to what purpose even a small portion of his money was being put, the dead loan shark and former racketeer would be turning in his grave.

It was late afternoon when he finished his business. He ate in a cheap but respectable restaurant, then looked up a Bowery mission he remembered having seen. He sat up in front and out of the tail of his eye saw Nathaniel follow him in and take a chair in the rear.

The service over, he shook the minister's hand, insisted on giving him ten dollars to carry on his godly work, and promptly lost the young farmer in the maze of lower Manhattan.

A half hour later, in a cheap hotel room, he swilled the whiskey he had bought straight from the neck of the bottle and lighted one cigarette from another. But neither did what he hoped they would do. The whiskey merely inflamed his senses—the cigarettes made his throat raw. Over all hung the fear that perhaps Nathaniel had traced him even here.

And there was no use taking chances, not at this late date. He had to have the seclusion of Shady Point for at least another year. With the bottle still half-filled, he emptied it into the basin in his room and threw the unsmoked cigarettes into a basket. Kigore had been a rat, but in the eyes of the law it didn't matter what a dead man had been.

It was morning before Carmon slept. The pint he'd drunk the night before had given him a head. His mouth tasted like a burned blanket. Sunday night would be all right. It would be fine. He would have Stella then. But the intervening two nights would be endless. In the hope of killing them painlessly as possible he bought a handful of magazines from the rack in the lobby of the hotel and tossed them in the back seat of his car before pointing its nose back toward Shady Point. If he never read another religious tract for the balance of his life, he'd read enough to last him.

Stella was glad to see him. So was her father. Even Nathaniel looked sheepish, more sheepish than usual, if possible, when he met him in front of the general store that evening.

*The fools,* Carmon thought. *The fools. They haven't sense enough to come in out of the rain.*

Sunday dawned clear and bright. It was cold but the sun was shining. As he stood looking out his window at the bleak

winter countryside, Carmon thought of the old saw—*Happy the bride the sun shines on*—and laughed.

He picked up one of the magazines he'd bought and failed to read. The simple life had one thing to recommend it. The early rising hour, three hearty meals a day and exercise in the fresh air did make a man sleep nights.

He dressed with more than usual care in the new black suit he'd purchased for the occasion, wore a soft shirt with a collar attached and a dark purple ascot tie instead of the hard collar and string tie he'd affected for three weeks. He still looked like Samuel Icabod, but there was a subtle difference that would please Stella. *It pleased the Lord, Samuel, to give thee a cheerful and a handsome countenance.*

WHISTLING softly to himself, Carmon went down to breakfast. Looking more hang-dog than ever in his best Sabbath clothes, Nathaniel was sitting in the lobby. He was still there when the wedding party left for church.

Carmon was amused. *The kid just can't take it,* he thought. *He's still hoping to get something on me.* He thought, but wasn't certain, he saw the young farmer start up the stairs to the second floor as he helped Stella into the jalopy. *Probably going to search my room as a last resort,* he thought.

Well, let him. There was nothing in the room to prove he wasn't what he was pretending to be. Stella's father, in the back seat, was sitting on the one thing that could link him to Jack Carmon and the murder of Ivan Kigore. He must, Carmon thought, find a more secure hiding place for the money than his locked jalopy. Even in this region of no crime someone might stumble on it accidentally. He'd wrap it in oiled silk and bury it somewhere in the hills until it was time to move on.

It was raining when they reached the church, a cold, hard, winter rain, and the sun was hidden by storm clouds, but Stella didn't even notice the change in the weather. Her unrouged face was radiant.

The ceremony itself would be as simple as her dress. The folks of Shady Point married for life, not for show.

On the steps of the church she asked him, "Thou wilt be good to me, Samuel?"

"You know I will," he lied.

Then the long morning service was over and, accompanied by Stella's beaming father, they walked up the aisle to the altar. Carmon listened, amused, as Stella promised to love, to honor, and obey. In turn he promised to love, cherish, and support her, in sickness and in health, for better or for worse, as long as they both should live.

The minister raised his right hand to

bless them. "Then whosoever knoweth of any reason why I should not join this man and this woman in holy wedlock let him speak now or forever hold his peace."

"I know a good reason."

The voice came from the back of the church. No longer gawky or stupid looking, Nathaniel looked first at Stella, then at the man beside her. "There were those of this congregation who laughed at me when I tried to tell them I had a feeling this man was not what he pretended. But he isn't. *And I can prove it.* For all of his oily words, he is a rake-hell and a blasphemer wanted by the police for murder."

A sick sinking in the pit of his stomach, Carmon turned to face the young farmer. Nathaniel was lying. He had to be lying. Still. . . .

The young farmer strode down the aisle, carrying a short club in his right hand, "What's more, I have already sent for the state police."

Carmon thought he could hear, in the distance, the faint wail of a police siren. Or perhaps it was only his conscience. Either way, this thing was mad. The young farmer couldn't prove he was Carmon. On the other hand, he couldn't prove he was Samuel Icabod, not to the state police. All they would have to do was lift the back seat of his car. And, in a murder investigation, the state police would be thorough.

He attempted to bluff it out. "You're crazy."

Nathaniel pointed his club at Carmon's right hand. "It was in that hand you held the gun."

It was too much for Carmon. Snatching the club with his left hand, he slugged the young farmer with his right and beat his way up the aisle through the clutching hands of the men attempting to detain him.

His face was battered by a dozen blows and he was breathing in great gasps by the time he reached the door. It hadn't been his conscience. A police siren was wailing through the rain now falling in an icy torrent.

He ran for his car and a half dozen fleeter young farmers cut him off.

He wanted to sob with rage. They couldn't do this to him. They couldn't cut him off from the money for which he had killed Kigore. But they had. The whole thing was mad. One minute he had been sitting on top of the world. The next it had blown up in his face. He had lost his new identity, Stella, the money, everything.

The wail of the siren grew louder. The men now grouped around his car stood still, content to allow the police to handle the affair. In desperation, Carmon took to the dripping woods bordering the clearing in which the small church stood.

The slope was steeper than he had anticipated and slippery with the icy rain. He was soaked to the body before he had gone fifty feet. The limbs of the small trees he passed sprang back and lashed at him. He struck at them with his club and scrambled on.

It seemed hours before he came to the bluff. It dropped away sheer for perhaps two hundred feet and at its bottom lay the storm-swollen Hudson River, dotted here and there with great cakes of ice. There was no going on. There was no turning back. He was through.

Carmon sat on a rock in the rain, sucking air into his tortured lungs. It all went to prove something. He wasn't certain what. He realized he was still holding the club he had snatched away from Nathaniel and started to throw it away, then looked at it curiously. It was nothing but a tightly rolled magazine, one of the handful he'd picked up in New York to pass the time away and hadn't gotten around to reading.

He flung it from him then went and picked it up and looked at it again as

he realized what had happened. *No wonder Nathaniel had shouted he wasn't who he claimed to be and that he was wanted for murder. No wonder Nathaniel had known that he had held the gun in his right hand.*

Carmon began to laugh and couldn't stop. It wasn't a normal laugh. It was hysteria bordering on madness.

It wouldn't have happened anywhere but in a village like Shady Point.

He looked at the magazine again and madness in his laughter grew. It was a good picture. It was one of Morello's best. The blonde looked properly terrified. His face was grim and slightly reminiscent of the holier-than-thou Nathaniel Icabod as he stood in the French window, dealing death to the woman who had two-timed him. The caption under the posed picture in the true detective magazine, for which he hadn't even received the one hundred dollars due him, was another masterpiece—

Still the object of an intense police search, Jim Glade, former movie actor and big time gambler, stepped through the window of his former home and dealt death to the woman who had been false to him with his best friend.

The longer he looked at the picture, the more the man in the window looked like Icabod. And because of a fluke, and a dumb farmer, the world had lost a great actor.

And because he was dumb, too dumb to read the small print in the lower left hand corner of the picture. 'These pictures posed by professional models,' because he was too dumb to come in out of the rain, Nathaniel would marry Stella.

Carmon sat back on the wet rock and looked up at the lead-colored sky. On the other hand, he was smart. He had enough sense to get in out of the rain—but he had no place to go.

Not that it mattered greatly now. The State of New York would take care of his future.

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TWO weeks after Giuseppe Zangara shot Mayor Anton Cermak of Chicago, the famous killer was nominated for the city council of Omaha, Nebraska!

To prove that few persons read a petition before signing it, two Omaha lawyers drew up a paper offering Zangara's name for the city office, and secured the signatures of more than three hundred prominent citizens. This in spite of the fact that Zangara's name had been in the newspaper headlines every day since his attempted assassination of President Roosevelt!

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AS LATE as 1681, Massachusetts law made it a crime to observe Christmas. Copied after a similar edict in force in England, the law provided that "anybody who is found observing, by abstinence from Labor, feasting, or any other way, the day known as Christmas Day, shall pay a fine for every such offence or be locked in the public jail."

—*Harry Hanley*

# The CORPSE SAID NO

## By G. T. Fleming-Roberts

### CHAPTER ONE

#### Shortcut to Death

GANTNER was waiting. It was something he did rather well and with a minimum of tension. He was seated in the shabby lobby of Hotel Lynn in a good position to look out through the window at the section of sidewalk illuminated by the dingy electric sign over the entry. Once in a while he would roll a neat cylinder of ash from his slim cigar into the smokers' stand conveniently placed at the right side of the blue mohair-upholstered chair. Then his opaque brown eyes would return to

***An ever-loving killer—a faithful corpse—a man who changed murder—There's a night that was made for this unholy three—a night without dawn!***

*"I told you what I'd do to you," Gantner said. . . .*

the window, the sidewalk, and the long, slanting lines of oyster-colored rain.

At 7:35 a tall, slight man of about thirty, wearing a grey all-weather topcoat and a light grey hat with a rolled brim, came in from the street. In spite of bodily thinness, his face was full and pink and boyish, and he'd tried to do something about that with a flat black mustache that was as sleek as cat fur.

Gantner's sudden wariness was scarcely perceptible. His eyes perhaps became a trifle less opaque, yet they did not follow Steve Kenard as the latter crossed to the waiting elevator. Thirty seconds later, when the rattle of the brass-barred

safety gate announced the return of the elevator to the ground floor, Gantner put aside what was left of his cigar, stood and moved across the nearly deserted lobby. He knew exactly where he was going and what he was going to do. There was heavy certainty in his stride.

"Miss Neidinger's," he said as he stepped into the elevator.

The wizened boy in the tarnished uniform closed the safety gate and grinned crookedly into the small oblong of flecked mirror. "Four-eleven."

Gantner pushed the loose ends of his belt into the slash pockets of his tan raincoat. He unfastened buttons. Elbows out from his body, his flexed arms rotated once—a movement that acquired roominess for well-muscled shoulders. The car jounced to a stop at the fourth floor, and he stepped out into a redolence of new paint—lemon yellow on the corridor walls—and found four-eleven in the short leg of a dusky L. He knocked.

The face that appeared between the door-edge and the casing was that of a girl in her late teens. She had dark, wanton curls and a saucy nose. Her mouth, was moist red, insolent—and he felt like smashing it for her. Maybe later he would. Time enough for smashing her mouth after he'd taken care of Kenard.

Belle Neidinger's big pale eyes considered all of Gantner carefully. Her "yes?" offered wide latitude for interpretation.

"I'm coming in," Gantner said and did, shouldering the door and the girl aside. As he closed the door behind him his brown eyes found Kenard standing in front of the scarred writing desk, looking at Gantner over a well-tailored grey gabardine shoulder. Kenard's fingers did something to the desk blotter before he turned completely around. The smile that elongated one side of his downy black mustache was searching, but when it found no encouragement in Gantner's sombre, homely face, it hid itself behind the gesture of lighting a cigarette.

"Something I can do for you?" Kenard asked because he thought he had to say something. His eyes looked varnished, afraid.

The girl had moved away from the door. She looked from Gantner to Kenard, unable to make up her mind about anything.

Gantner said to her, "You can go somewhere. A long way will be fine. This is for Kenard."

She stared at him, and her full lips pulled slowly apart. Her head jerked around to face Kenard, a lock of dark hair falling over one eye.

"This isn't no—" she began fearfully, but a slight negative motion of Kenard's head checked her. He dropped his lighter into the side pocket of his suitcoat, the movement indolent.

"You heard what the man said, Belle. The bar around the corner, and I'll join you—" Kenard glanced at his watch, a gesture of bravado, Gantner thought, "in about five minutes."

The girl waggled to the closet to get a black, fur-trimmed coat, then to the dresser for her purse and a quick look at her makeup. Then, with a toss of her head for Gantner, she left the room.

Kenard tried laughter. "Have a cigarette, Ed?"

Gantner was erect, listening, his hands loose at his sides.

"No? Well, sit down." Kenard put a hand on the back of a chair. Ash trembled from his cigarette onto the upholstery.

Gantner heard the elevator door open and close. He stepped to where Kenard stood between the chair and the writing desk. When Gantner spoke, his voice was quiet and terrible.

"I told you what I'd do to you if I saw you with that little twerp again. Remember?"

Kenard's smile struggled toward insolence. "I remember thinking it was none of your damned business."

Very deliberately Gantner struck Kenard across the mouth, forehandedly, then backhandedly — two ringing slaps that rocked Kenard's head left and right.

"For Lee," Gantner said hoarsely. "For the kid."

Kenard slashed wildly at Gantner's face. Gantner took the blow on an elevated shoulder, then he stepped in for two close body punches that Kenard found hard to take, and backed to straighten Kenard with a long right to the face. Kenard reeled, grasped blindly at the chair, missed and came down hard on the floor, the back of his head slamming against the radiator beneath the window. His open mouth emitted a gagging sound, and then he was still, very still.

Gantner said, "Get up, you—"

Kenard didn't move. He was almost flat on his back, head propped up a bit by the radiator and twisted to the left, his legs widely spread. Gantner drew a long slow breath and scrubbed the knuckles of his right hand against the palm of his left. It was very quiet in the room. The rain on the window. Nothing else.

GANTNER started toward the door, paused, his thick, flat eyebrows drawn down thoughtfully. He returned to the writing desk, where he inserted a thumbnail beneath a corner of the blotter to raise it. Beneath was a narrow strip of paper bearing a column of figures, each composed of six or seven digits. If they represented dollars, the sum would have been staggering. Nobody had that much money, so it had to be peanuts or something that meant nothing to Gantner.

He let the blotter fall and glanced around without anxiety at Kenard. Some blood seeped from a cut under Kenard's left cheekbone. His eyelids were slightly open, the portions of the eyeballs visible like two little crescents of bone china. But Kenard's feet were closer together than they had been, his knees slightly elevated as though he'd been about to wind up for a quick kick but had arrested the movement when Gantner had turned.

Gantner permitted no outward indication that he had noticed the change in Kenard's position, but walked abruptly to the door.

He thought, *Let the louse think I don't know he's alive. Let him know I wouldn't give a damn if I killed him. . . .*

It was raining as though it would always rain, as though this was the way it would be tomorrow, the day after, and forever. The girl in the alley at the side of Hotel Lynn wasn't worried about what the rain could do to her permanent and her nylons. She lay face down on the rough brick pavement, arms flung out. Gutterwash flowed over one clenched fist —a white stone breasting a torrent.

Gantner crouched and his flashlight played over the still figure. He noticed the girl's sopping black hair had parted at the nape of her neck, that there were runnels of dilute red along the sides of her throat. He reached over her with one hand and lifted her head slightly, then let it down again, shuddering. He stood, and his knees caved. He jammed his flashlight into the slash pocket of his raincoat as he glanced back toward the glow from Illinois Street. In the opposite direction, west, blue neon marked the rear entrance to a taproom and, next door, the small, cindered parking lot where he had left his car. Belle Neidinger, he thought, had been heading for the taproom. This was a shortcut through the rain.

Gantner turned, sprang to the sheltering wall of the hotel building and walked hurriedly toward the west. He was trembling. Inside, in his guts, he was trembling, and he couldn't control it at all.

Gantner's black coupe forded the swollen gutter in Laniard Street and wallowed up the short ramp into the garage attached to the Salvage Motor Parts Company. One of his mechanics, Benny Ott, was working on his own time, resurfacing his personal jalopy for a new paint job, and the snarling emery wheel showered a gloomy corner with brittle yellow sparks. A grim before-and-after picture was suggested by a grey Cadillac convertible which idled alongside, a total wreck, waiting to be torn down for such component parts as might be saleable.

As Gantner parked his car, a tall, broad-shouldered and affable-appearing blond man, wearing a raincoat but no hat, got out of the grey convertible. His face was a perfect oval, fleshy without softness. His eyebrows were little gold peaks of surprise above round, steel-rimmed glasses. You looked at him, at his warm smile, and concluded he was a man who couldn't say no. Later you were apt to wonder, how wrong you can get. Oliver Essig managed the branch office of the Mid-Continent Loan Company directly across the street. He was Steve Kenard's employer.

Gantner slid out of the coupe and indicated the Cadillac. "I touched a man once who owned one of those, Ollie."

"Nina's," Essig said. He beamed proudly at the car. Gantner had seen Essig look at his beautiful young wife in just that way.

"Naturally," Gantner said with a trace of acid, and drew a sharp glance from the ends of Essig's blue eyes.

"What do you mean, Ed?"

Gantner shrugged. "Mink, diamonds, Cadillacs—you naturally associate them with Nina Essig."

"Oh," Essig said it as though he were not entirely satisfied. His eyes picked at Gantner's face. "What's the matter with you, Ed?"

"Nothing."

"You look pale."

Gantner felt pale. He still couldn't get hold of that inner trembling. "Come into the office and have a drop of something to cut the phlegm."

Essig shook his head. "Ott promised to talk to me in a minute about that left rear wheel. It's spraying something out around the hubcap."

Gantner turned and went into the office alone. Joe Thorne, night man on the wrecker, was standing in front of the broad window that displayed chrome wheel rings and bumper guards.

" 'Slippery when wet,' " he quoted.

"Uh-huh," Gantner said. He didn't like to think about sodden autumn leaves on wet asphalt and the blinding glare of lights on rain-streaked windshields. He didn't like to think about broken glass and twisted metal and the screams of the maimed against the utter silence of the dead. Tonight, he guessed, he didn't want to think, period.

He unlocked the top drawer of his olive-green steel desk and took out a half pint bottle of rye which he carried into the washroom. The slug he took was big enough to go right to work when it hit his empty stomach. He corked the bottle, standing for a moment with cold fear crowding the warmth of the liquor. After about thirty seconds, he thought he felt better. He stepped out into the office.

Joe Thorne was stretched out on the couch. He said, "I always hear the phone, boss."

"Sure," Gantner said. "It's okay." He went on into the garage where Benny Ott and Essig stood beside the grey convertible.

"I'm pooped, Mr. Essig," Benny was saying. "Not for your wife, not even for mine, do I pull a wheel tonight. Might be just a seal, might be a brake cylinder."

"Maybe you could jump on it first thing tomorrow," Gantner suggested as he joined the others.

Benny's face screwed up in protest. "She wants it tomorrow."

"Not before ten," Essig said. "If I bring it in early?"

"Sure," Gantner answered for the mechanic. He looked hard at Benny and said, "Sure," again.

Benny Ott didn't reply, but started back toward his locker, jerking irritably at the buttons of his coveralls.

Gantner said, "He'll sweeten up by morning, Ollie. The guy's tired."

Essig slapped Gantner's left arm affectionately and chuckled. "You look a little bit that way yourself."

Gantner said, "Hell—" started to move away. He paused, his brown eyes on the blond man's face. He had to tell somebody. "You know Belle Neidinger, Ollie?"

Essig frowned. "Neidinger, Neidinger. . . ."

"Works for my competition up the street. For Campfield. A kid of about eighteen in the office up there."

Essig tipped back his head. "I've never met her, but I know who you mean. I've seen her at a distance with—" He coughed.

"With Steve Kenard," Gantner concluded, his voice harsh. "She was with him tonight. Now she's dead."

"Dead?" The big oval face fell open.

"She was shot between the shoulder blades and through the back of her head. Her face—" Gantner's lips curled. He said, "I found her."

Essig swore sympathetically.

"And I didn't tell the cops."

"You what?"

Gantner took a fresh cigar from inside his coat and tugged savagely at the cellophane tube. "You heard what I said."

"For Pete's sake, why not?"

"Because Kenard was sleeping one off in her room. That's what I thought, anyway." Gantner nibbled the tip of his cigar. He thought that Essig looked a little stupid. "Hell, Ollie, you know the situation. You knew when I asked you to give Kenard a job in your office. I told you. About Lee. About her pride and how she's tried to keep their marriage off the rocks. I told you about them taking this baby girl from the orphanage. They've had the kid only three months now—three out of the twelve month probationary period before they can make the adoption legal. How long do you think the welfare investigators are going to let Lee have that baby if they find out the kind of a louse she's got for a husband?"

Essig rubbed his smooth round jaw and looked at the floor. "I still don't see—Kenard was drunk, you say?"

"I said he was supposed to be sleeping one off—one that I hung on him. I wouldn't have cared if I'd killed him."

"So when you found the girl you went back to get Kenard out of her room—is that it?"

Gantner nodded. "He wasn't there. He wasn't hurt as badly as he pretended. Look, I'll blueprint it for you: I left him on the floor, went downstairs, and into the coffee shop. My head was aching, and I thought if I got some coffee in me it might help. I was there ten minutes at the outside. Then I headed for my car and stumbled over Belle Neidinger in the alley. Sometime during that ten minute interval, Kenard must have picked himself up and dusted out of there. He was supposed to have met Belle Neidinger in the taproom around the corner. But Kenard wasn't there. The barkeep knows him and said Kenard hadn't been in at all that evening. Why didn't Kenard go to the taproom? Did he know the girl wouldn't be there because he'd killed her?"

THE big blond man didn't answer, because at that moment Joe Thorne came out of the office, slapping his heavy leather gloves across the gusseted

pocket on the right leg of his old flight pants.

"This one ought to be a pip, boss. Head-on in the bottleneck in Wash Boul." Thorne spat on the floor. "I'd hate to be in somebody's shoes—wrong way on a one-way street!"

Gantner nodded and followed Thorne with moody eyes as the night man approached the big white tow-truck at a rolling gait. Then Gantner went over to operate the control of the overhead door, waiting there to flag down Thorne. Gantner sprang onto the running board and shouted over the throaty exhaust of the engine.

"Campfield's man will probably follow you."

Thorne expected that. "I think he hires somebody in the poolroom to tip him off every time we take off after a salvage job.

"All right. If it's junk, bring it in if you have to pay somebody for the privilege." Gantner swung down from the wrecker, unaware until then that Essig had followed him to the door. They watched Thorne roll down the short ramp and plow through the foaming chocolate that brimmed the gutter.

Essig asked, "Campfield giving you a rough time?"

Gantner uttered a short laugh. "And you one of my creditors? Nope, everything is fine, just fine!"

The blond man looked troubled. "Cut it, Ed."

Gantner stared out at the rain. "I don't know, Ollie, how Campfield does it, but he always tops my price. It's beginning to hurt."

"Maybe," Essig suggested mildly, "Campfield just minds his own business." His eyes locked with Gantner's. "Don't be a damned fool all your life, Ed." And Essig walked away toward the grey Cadillac.

The clock said 9:05. Gantner, alone in the office, his heels on the desk, rolled cigar ash into an inverted hubcap that was prevented from sliding off his lean belly by the slight elevation of his thighs. He stared out at the rain, at the fluttering strip of neon in the loan office across dark Laniard Street. He guessed he'd been a damned fool ever since the night he'd first met Lee Kenard. She was Lee Ainsley then, and he'd still had a chance, even with Steve Kenard in the background.

When Gantner had told Lee how he felt about her, she'd said gently, "I like you, Ed, awfully well. I think I'll always like you."

And that was that. You were supposed to go off somewhere and lick your wounds, and pretty soon somebody else would come along—the real thing. But nobody else came along, and Lee was the real thing. There was no one else for him.

An ancient Plymouth coach pulled up across the street in front of the loan office. The Kenard car. Gantner dropped his cigar into the hubcap ashtray and creaked forward in his swivel chair. The driver of the car switched on the dome light. Gantner stood, conscious of a warm inner surge. It was Lee Kenard, and she was busy with something on the cushion of the seat beside her—the baby, Gantner presumed as he groped his damp hat and raincoat off the hook. A moment later Lee Kenard in a hooded grey raincoat slipped from beneath the wheel, hurried around the front of the car and to the entrance of the loan office. Gantner, his coat partially on, snatched a flashlight from the desk and went striding out the front door.

Lee wasn't aware of Gantner's approach, either because of the incessant drumming of the rain or because of preoccupation. She turned from the front door and took quick skittering steps to the narrow passage between buildings on the west side.

"Lee," Gantner called softly. His light beam followed her. He heard her gasp. Then she was coming back into the beam of his flashlight, her face Madonnalike beneath the grey hood. A Madonna of tiredly shadowed brown eyes, of a hurt look about the incredibly sweet mouth.

Lee Kenard caught Gantner's forearm. Her fingers had the strength of frenzy. "He—he doesn't answer, Ed. He's working late tonight, and I got worried." She dashed a glance back into the narrow aisle of darkness. "Steve ought to be in the back room. Isn't there a light in the window?"

Gantner said calmly, "We'll see. How's everything, Lee? It's been ages." It had been, he recalled, only two weeks since he had seen her.

He took her arm and together they moved along the side of the building.

"There *is* a light!"

A sulphurous light came from a small window covered with an iron grating on the wall above a basement stairwell at the extreme rear of the building.

"Steve," Lee Kenard called. "Oh, Steve."

There was no answer. Gantner turned his light on the dripping black pipe handrail that guarded the basement stairwell.

He said, "If I get up on the rail I think I can look in." He pushed the flashlight into her cold, wet fingers, and she was saying, "Would you, Ed? Would you, please. When he's out late, I worry myself nearly sick." Her laughter trembled. "I know how ridiculous it is."

He didn't think it was ridiculous at all. If he had thought so, he wouldn't have climbed onto the handrail to bridge the stairwell and braced his hands against the brick wall of the building. He got onto the top piece of pipe and clutched at the iron grating over the window. The grating was loose in the old mortar and it gave him a bad moment before he was sure it would hold.

"Is he in there, Ed?" Lee's hushed and anxious voice came up hoarsely from below.

He couldn't see the entire room. There was a steel door of a vault built into the opposite wall. To the extreme left he could see the right hand pedestal of a desk on top of which was a full sheet of bond paper with a few lines of typing on it and above the sprawled pencil signature, *Steve.* On the floor, somewhat in front of the desk, was a nickle-plated revolver with black rubber grips. Somebody was sitting in the chair in front of the desk. Gantner could see the grey clad shoulder and sleeve, the dangling empty hand. That was all. That was enough.

He took a slow breath. Lee's voice came up to him, sharp with impatience. "Is he in there?"

"Uh-uh," Gantner said casually. "He's either left or stepped out for a coffee. The night light is on. Watch it, I'm coming down."

He sprang backward from the railing, clutched at Lee's arm, to steady himself, perhaps to steady her—or did there have to be a reason? What he wanted to do was to gather her into his arms and take her away, far beyond the sordid touch of the world.

He made a sound like laughter. "Look, lady, he's probably at home right now."

"Yes," she said as though trying to convince herself. "He probably is." She went back with Gantner to the street. He helped her in under the wheel and turned his light obliquely across the white wicker basket in which the tiny girl slept soundly in her blankets.

"How's Kathy?"

Lee's smile flashed valiantly. "Just fine. She's such a little angel. I couldn't get any of the neighbors to come in and watch her a while, so I had to bring her along."

"Yeah," Gantner said flatly. What Lee meant was that she was too proud to

ask any of the neighbors to look after the baby while she went out to hunt her husband.

Lee's glance, slow with weariness, touched Gantner's face. Then she bent unnecessarily far forward to turn the ignition key. Gantner touched the limp brim of his hat, backed away, and moved unhurriedly across the street, his eyes on the diminishing tail light of the Kenard car. When it was out of sight he jerked open the door of his office, crossed into the deserted garage and to the long workbench along the back wall. His shaky fingers twice overturned the key switch on the cone-shaded droplight before he got it to stay on. Then he searched among the outlay of tools until he found a tire iron.

He went back to the street door and out into the rain.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Look Noble, Corpse!

KENARD sat in a posture chair in front of a drop-head desk. He had fallen forward across the rounded mask of a noiseless typewriter that stood in a pool of blood. The bullet had entered Kenard's mouth to angle upward and smash out through the back of his skull.

Gantner thrust the tire iron into the slash pocket of his coat. He tiptoed around Kenard to look down at the typewritten note on the desk.

> Dear Lee:
> This seems to me to be the logical way to tie all strings neatly. I've made a mess of things, especially for you. But now you'll have your Ed, and I'll have . . .

Gantner's lips moved soundlessly, shaping a new name for Kenard. He picked up the paper, brought out his lighter, had to thumb the wheel three times before he got a flame. He touched the burning wick to the paper and carried it at arm's length into the washroom. When there was nothing else except fragile ash, he dropped it into the john and kicked the flush lever. He watched the swirling black particles until there were none. Then with cold sweat trickling out of his armpits he went back to the desk to do the thing he had to do.

"All right now, louse—" He caught hold of the back of Kenard's coat collar and straightened the corpse in the chair. Then he worked hands, wrists, and finally forearms under Kenard's armpits and lifted the limp figure, kicking the chair to the left. Dead weight—now he knew what that meant. He dragged Kenard to the door of the vault, swung the body once, and let it fall. Kenard sprawled oddly as only the dead can sprawl, head lolling over on the left shoulder, the right against the steel door.

Gantner said through his teeth, "Look noble, damn you!"

Kenard didn't look noble. He looked merely dead.

Gantner returned to the desk where, in the bottom drawer, he found a thick dust cloth with which he mopped up the blood around and under the typewriter. It took time. He had to make several trips to the washroom to rinse out the cloth. It sickened him. The pink water that swirled down the drain sickened him, but he kept at it until the desk was thoroughly clean.

He had washed out the cloth and was scrubbing his hands when the sound of a car in the street outside straightened him in front of the lavatory, lips apart, eyes shiny with alarm. For an eternity the engine idled outside the loan office. Then it was gunned to full power. Gantner breathed again and smiled thinly. The wrecker. Thorne towing in the car that had cracked up in the Washington Boulevard bottleneck.

Gantner wiped his hands on his hand-

kerchief, turned out the washroom light. He stepped to the desk, picked up the .38 caliber revolver, and rammed it into his raincoat pocket. His eyes made a quick tour of the room. Everything looked fine. Kenard might have died defending his employer's property instead of as a remorseful murderer taking his own life. Suppose they never solved the murder of the Neidinger girl, she probably didn't care. This would still touch Lee, but it wouldn't touch her the way the other would. It wouldn't touch the kid.

Gantner shoved a chair with his foot until he had it beneath the window which he had forced. As he did so, he noticed that the toe of his nearly-new shoe was badly scuffed. Both shoes were scuffed. He'd done that on the brick wall of the building, getting in. It was something he thought he'd better take care of as soon as he could.

He climbed onto the chair, stood with knees bent and back to the inner wall. He thrust hands and arms up through the window and straightened slowly. He clawed for a hold on the outside of the sash and sprang. His hips just reached the window sill, and he stayed there by thrusting his head against the outer surface of the glass. He hip-wiggled outside, then he got his right leg up, worked the knee through, then the foot. He was astride the sill now, and his left hand maintained his balance by grasping the lower rail of the sash. He couldn't see the pipe railing on the opposite side of the basement stairwell. What light there was cast his enormous silhouette on the wall of the building next door.

As he used his handkerchief to wipe fingerprints from sash rail and casing he thought, *What a sweet time for somebody to come along. Somebody like a cop.*

That hurried him. He got his leg up and his left knee wedged. He pounded the knee with the heel of his left palm, got it past the sash. The tire iron slipped out of his slash pocket and clanged like a gong as it struck the concrete steps below. He got his left foot free, swung around, and knew suddenly that there wasn't room enough on the sill to support him in that position. He was sliding, and he couldn't reach the rail with his extended right foot. The brickwork raked his back from hips to shoulder blades as he plummeted down through the dark to land with his right leg twisted painfully under him, the left extending down the basement stairs.

He didn't try to get up immediately. He wasn't sure he could get up. White-hot barbs of pain from his twisted knee shot up along the inside of his thigh.

Suppose he couldn't get up, and somebody found him there . . . and found the open window and the broken grating . . .

and found Kenard . . . and the gun in Gantner's pocket. For the first time, he felt afraid for himself. He'd made murder out of suicide. He'd drawn indelible lines of suspicion straight to himself, beginning with his presence in Hotel Lynn and his connection with the two persons who had met violent death. And ending —conclusively ending—if he was found here beneath the window.

That got him up. That had him patting each step frantically until he located the tire iron. Then he hobbled painfully to the top of the stairs and headed back toward the street. He'd have only Thorne to face at the garage, and Thorne would be busy with the junker. . . .

Gantner lived just off North Meridian in an old five story walk-up halfway down the block. His was the corner flat on the third floor. As he angled his car in toward the curb, something prompted him to raise his eyes from the glistening asphalt to the window of his living room. It was lighted, and he hadn't been home since morning.

He jerked the wheel to the left. Fear asserted itself in increased pressure on the accelerator. He sprinted the car past the building, swung north on Illinois Street, and kept going.

*Get rid of the gun,* his mind pounded. *Got to get rid of it right now.*

Ahead, he sighted boulevard lights arching like a jeweled tiara on the bridge across Fall Creek. He slowed. A trolley had just passed the crest of the bridge. There were headlights half a block behind him. Gantner crowded his own car toward the curb. Two sedans passed, throwing fans of water from every wheel. The trolley rumbled off the bridge just as Gantner's car entered the span. Then he was relatively alone as he stopped at the approximate center of the bridge. He reached across to the right hand door, opened it, slid across the cushions. His right leg was stiffening, he noticed, as he straightened it through the door to get out. He took the gun from his pocket as he limped to the limestone rail.

*Now,* he thought, *get rid of the damned thing!* He dropped the gun, his head cocked, listening for the splash. There wasn't any splash, or he couldn't hear it because of the driving rain. Or the gun hadn't hit the water at all—it was down there on an abuttment or maybe a sandbar.

*So what the hell? What are you worried about?*

He backed to the curb. He counted lamp posts from the south end of the bridge. He thought, *I'll come back tomorrow to find out if I can see the gun from here. The murderer always returns to the scene of his crime. . . .*

He laughed shortly and, as he got into the coupe, noticed that a car cruised slowly by. Suppose the gun was visible from this point on the bridge by daylight, and suppose somebody in that passing car happened to have a good memory.

*Hell, now I am looking under the bed!*

He drove back onto Meridian, headed south, and had actually signaled for the right turn onto his own street, when another one of those little incriminating things curdled into a lump of fear in the pit of his stomach—the scuffed toes of his shoes all too readily associated with a brick wall, a forced grating and an open window.

He continued south to pull into a parking spot near the Antlers Hotel. He entered, went down into the basement shine parlor where a boy blackened and burnished his scuffed oxfords. Then he returned to his car, and in another minute parked opposite his own apartment.

The light still burned in his living room window.

SELDON was admittedly a cop in plainclothes. Very plain, rather soiled clothes. Kinky, dirty-blond hair showed beneath his hat at the tem-

ples. He had moist thick lips and a pair of narrow and very busy blue eyes. He stood tall and thin as Gantner entered and kept one finger between the pages of a photo album which Gantner realized must have come from a drawer in the bedroom bureau.

"The super let me in, Mr. Gantner," Seldon said. He had a hard but not unpleasant voice.

Gantner said, "You make yourself at home."

"Always try to." Seldon was not perturbed. "Sit down. Have a cigarette."

Gantner sat down and relighted his cigar. By a concentrated effort he kept his hands steady. Without looking up from the pulsing flame of his lighter he knew that Seldon's busy eyes were going over him carefully, missing nothing, noticing how moisture beaded on the freshly waxed toes of Gantner's shoes.

"Been in a fight?" Seldon threw at him.

Gantner snapped his lighter shut. His frown was quizzical. "What gave you that idea?"

"I notice you limped."

Gantner said, "I don't fight with my feet."

"It's not a bad way," Seldon went on conversationally. "All I ever got out of boxing a guy was a set of bruised knuckles."

Gantner's right hand tightened on the chairarm. He was suddenly aware that his knuckles were bruised. He said, "I'm curious."

"That's two of us," Seldon said, continuing his oblique tactics. "You know a man by the name of Charles Olin?"

Gantner tried to remember. He wondered if whatever this was it might not be associated in any way with Belle Neidinger or Steve Kenard—a spark of hope coolly extinguished by the thin shabby man seated opposite him.

"Charles Olin. You towed in his car a couple of years ago. Says he never forgets a face. He's night clerk at Hotel Lynn."

Gantner's cigar had gone out again. He lighted it.

"Olin," Seldon said evenly, "identified you as the man who asked the elevator operator for Miss Neidinger's room tonight."

Gantner blew a thin plume of smoke. "What's it to you?"

"Not a damned thing, personally." Seldon turned in his chair and put the photo album on the end table, opening the book at the place his finger had marked. "No, I personally don't give a damn. But I've got a job. It concerns a Miss Belle Neidinger. She's dead. Couple of bullets were put into her from the rear."

Gantner didn't say anything. His dark eyes were on the photo album, on the only picture that he had of Lee Kenard. It was only a small snapshot, but his mind enlarged it. His mind saw the exquisitely chiseled features, the soft waves of her light brown hair, her eyes bright with promise—not weary, not disillusioned as they were tonight.

"Mr. Gantner—" Seldon's hard voice rang with danger, and Gantner's eyes sprang to the detective's undistinguished face, "did you hear what I said?"

Gantner's calm was forced. He nodded. "I know how some of you boys operate. You approach a subject backwards. So does a mule. I made up my mind that, when the kick came, I wouldn't let it throw me, no matter what." He drew on his cigar and smiled. "I figured you, Seldon. You're not so damned obscure as you think."

For an instant, the narrow blue eyes held tips of flame, smothered almost at once by pale lashes. Seldon took out a paper notebook as soiled as his own collar. A wet thumb found the page he wanted to consult.

"At seven-thirty, or a few minutes after, you took the elevator up to Miss Neidinger's room."

Gantner said, "I thought I had a date with her. She works for a business competitor of mine—man by the name of Campfield. I can't understand Campfield's tactics, so I've been playing up to Miss Neidinger, hoping she'd tip her employer's hand."

"You thought you had a date with her?"

"There was somebody else there ahead of me."

"Who?"

Lee Kenard's lovely eyes haunted Gantner from the pages of the album. He said, "I don't know. Some guy with a mustache. We had an argument. Belle left the room, and her boy friend said he'd meet her in the tavern around the corner in five minutes."

Seldon stared at him a moment and then again consulted his notebook. "You came down in the elevator at the Lynn at seven-fifty. About ten minutes later, you came back and rode to the fourth floor again. How come?"

Cold sweat trickled down Gantner's ribs. "I had a coffee in the hotel, and when I started to light my cigar I couldn't find my lighter. I went back to Miss Neidinger's room—" he paused, watching Seldon's nod; it implied acceptance and it inadvertently switched on the red light of danger in the back of Gantner's brain. The door of Belle Neidinger's room had been locked. "When I got up to the fourth floor, I found my lighter in the pocket of my raincoat." He laughed. "Ever do a silly, absent-minded thing like that?"

"Practically never," Seldon said dryly. "What took you thirty minutes to drive the four blocks from your garage to this flat building? I telephoned about that long ago, and your night man said you'd just left."

Gantner had his mouth open to say that he'd stopped for a drink—that was foremost on his mind just then—but that wouldn't do. Seldon would check. The dark, chill waters of panic swirled about Gantner, and from them emerged the most logical explanation possible.

"The rain. My engine drowned out. I had a hell of a time drying the plugs and cable nipples in this downpour."

Seldon looked at him for a long time, thoughtfully tugging at an earlobe. Then he stood. "We're looking for a gun. Mind standing, Mr. Gantner?"

The detective's search was seemingly awkward. It was also thorough. When he'd finished, he stepped back, took off his hat and scratched the crown of his head with fingers of the same hand. His forehead was high and the sweatband of his hat had made a deep red groove.

He asked, "Your car doors locked?"

"No," Gantner replied.

Seldon shook his head gravely. "Ought to lock them." He walked to the door and out. He didn't say, "I'll be seeing you," but then maybe he thought that was obvious.

Gantner peeled off his wet raincoat and removed his hat. He turned off all the lamps in the room except one, then went to the window. He watched Seldon cross the street to where the black coupe was parked. He watched Seldon's flashlight finger into the interior, the glove compartment, even under the seat cushions. Then the detective reached under the cowl, did something, came around to the front of the car and raised the long black bonnet. Gantner cursed softly. Seldon would find the grime on the plugs and ignition wires undisturbed. He'd know that Gantner hadn't wiped them, that the engine had not drowned out, that Gantner had lied.

Seldon closed the bonnet, switched off his light, and walked briskly off toward the east through the rain.

Gantner turned from the window, limped to the other side of the room. He already felt confined. He felt the subtle pull of the invisible web of circumstances that had begun to enmesh him. He started back toward the window, paused to stare down at Lee Kenard's photo in the album. Why had Seldon had the book open to this particular page? Did it have to mean anything beyond the fact that Lee had the most lovely face in the world and Seldon was a man?

It meant, Gantner thought, another thread in the web. One that didn't connect anywhere. Not yet. But what of tomorrow, when Steve Kenard's body was found?

## CHAPTER THREE

### Murder for Sure

OLIVER ESSIG'S big face had a mottled look, and a shiny worm of sweat crawled unnoticed on his round cheek all the way to his chin. He held open the front door of the loan company office as Gantner came in out of a chill morning.

"Your friend Kenard—" he began, and swallowed. He waved a fleshy hand toward the back room. "I called the police just before I called you."

Gantner limped ahead of the big blond man, through the open gate in the rail and to the door of the back room. Everything was exactly as he had left it on the night before, except that the blood on Kenards' face had dried into an ugly, brittle mask. Gantner stared for a moment in what he hoped was shocked silence. Then he looked up at the open window and back over his left shoulder at Essig, whose huge figure was inadequately framed by the narrow trim of the door.

"Didn't you get that alarm system fixed?"

"Neglected it." Essig added distractedly, "What the hell could anybody take? It's all on paper—very little cash."

"Maybe somebody was after a note under the impression that an indebtedness could be wiped out that way," Gantner suggested.

Essig shook his head. "Nobody could be that dumb. They're all signed in duplicate—you should know—and a copy is filed with the central office in Chicago. I—" He turned as heavy steps sounded in the outer room. Two uniformed police of the radio patrol had arrived, and they were shortly followed by six men from the Homicide office and an assistant coroner. Seldon was not among them, but then there was as yet no established connection between Kenard's death and that of Belle Neidinger. That would come later. How much later, Gantner didn't know.

The approximate time of death was established. Gantner answered routine questions in a flat, unemotional voice. Yes, he had been in the office of the garage across the street on the night before. No, he had heard no shot, had not witnessed anything peculiar nor suspicious. He provided the name and address of his night man. Then they let him return to the garage where he sat in the office and watched the curious throng gathered outside the loan company. After about ten minutes, his hands dropped and he gripped tightly at the edge of his chair.

A police car had pulled up on the other side of the street and a cop was helping the distraught figure of Lee Kenard through the crowd.

"Damn them!" Gantner muttered. Yet he had known all along that this was inevitable. The hell of it was that he couldn't go to her. He didn't dare. He couldn't do a thing but sit there and hope that through some freak chance the police would fail to establish a connection be-

tween the Kenard and Neidinger affairs. But that wasn't possible. There would be photographs of Kenard. There was the vague description which Gantner had given of the man who had been in Belle Neidinger's room— "some guy with a mustache." There had to be someone in the police department who sifted all reports, made comparisons, and coordinated action. Someone who would conclude that the two violent deaths were part of the same pattern. Then Seldon would recall seeing Lee Kenard's photo in Gantner's album. And Seldon already knew that Gantner had lied. The process might be slow, but it would be sure. There was no escape.

Gantner sat there and watched them bring Lee Kenard out through the crowd on the sidewalk. Her head was lowered and she had a hankerchief over her mouth and nose. She was being partially supported by two police who helped her into the waiting car . . . to take her home, or. . . .

Gantner's teeth clenched. Of course they'd take her home. They couldn't possibly have anything against Lee. She couldn't have climbed through that back window.

The police car rolled away and seconds later its place was occupied by a red ambulance from General Hospital. Kenard's body was removed. The crowd began to disperse. The police spread out along Laniard Street to pick up whatever information they could from neighboring shops and offices. By ten o'clock, there was nothing to indicate that the building across the street had been the scene of a homicide except for a few curiosity seekers who walked by the place slowly with their mouths open.

Benny Ott came into the office from the garage with a list of parts that might be salvaged from the junker Thorne had towed in on the night before. From such a list, Gantner would be able to arrive at the price he could offer the owner—provided Gantner could get his mind on his work.

"And here's my time on Mrs. Essig's job," Benny Ott said, putting a grease-smudged slip on the desk. "I put in a new seal. Her car is all ready to roll, and you notice she ain't. After all the big yak last night I should drop everything and pull that wheel. I'll bet she's drinkin' her coffee in bed right now." Benny Ott offered a not-very-convincing impersonation of Nina Essig sipping coffee, his greasy little finger elegantly raised.

Gantner laughed shortly. "Well, maybe."

Benny Ott started toward the door, paused, jerked a thumb to indicate the loan company across the street. "That guy got knocked off while we were still here last night."

Gantner stared at the mechanic. "What about it?"

Benny Ott shrugged. "Nothin'. It goes to show you don't know what's goin' on around you. Just across the street, even." He went through the door and immediately came back. "We got company," he whispered. "Our pal Campfield from down the street."

Gantner waited until Benny Ott had returned to the garage, then got up and stepped to the connecting door. From it he could see the wreck which Thorne had brought in the preceding night. He could, he thought, also smell it—the gasoline, the burned oil, the dregs of radiator alcohol, the blood. Evan Campfield stood about six feet from the car, sharply dressed in a bright blue suit with peaked lapels and sufficient padding in the shoulders to partially compensate for his lath-like figure. His face was dark, narrow and pitcher-lipped, his eyes set close together. He glanced up at the door and his mouth twisted into his conception of a friendly smile.

"Not worth a damn in a rainbarrel, is

it?" Campfield's voice suggested laryngitis; it was always like that.

Gantner didn't answer. He reached to the hook beside the door, took down his hat and went across the street to enter the loan office. The unattractive middle-aged woman in the front room didn't seem to be doing anything, as though Death had given her a holiday. Through horn-rimmed glasses she resented Gantner's intrusion.

He asked tiredly, "Can I see Mr. Essig, Opal?"

The woman didn't reply, but leaned across her desk to tip up the switch of the inter-com box. "Mr. Gantner, Mr. Essig," she reported, and when Essig's voice came rumbling back she looked up at Gantner and nodded without smiling.

Gantner pushed through the gate in the low oak rail and went to the door of the back room. He paused. From beyond he could hear Nina Essig's voice.

". . . and it does seem to me, Noll dear, that you could conduct your business in a better neighborhood. A murder, of all things! Nice people simply don't get murdered."

Gantner's smile was tight as he pushed open the door. Nina Essig, wearing a simple and probably expensive black suit with a fur stole thrown back from her shoulders, was seated in the chair beside her husband's desk, her slim, nylon-sheathed ankles crossed. Vividly rouged lips—they were petulant at the moment—short-bobbed black hair and eyes like two pieces of charcoal were accented by the creamy pallor of her skin. She went right on talking to the big smiling blond man at the desk.

"I dont' know of anything else that could possibly happen, Noll. First the trouble with the car, then murder, and I've some dreadful important shopping to do if I expect to catch that nine-thirty train for Dallas tonight—" The black, curiously unreal-looking eyes noticed Gantner. Her smile was rubber-stamped. "Oh, hello, darling." Which didn't mean anything except that, at the moment, she couldn't think of Gantner's name, though they had met several times before. She extended an arm gracefully to tap cigarette ash into the tray on Essig's desk.

"Exciting, isn't it?" she asked. That didn't mean anything either. Just talking. "I suppose you find it so. I suppose the beastly event has upset your schedule too and I can't get my car until heaven knows when."

"Any time, Mrs. Essig," Gantner told her.

Essig chuckled happily as Nina gave Gantner both barrels with her eyes. "Why, how perfectly sweet of you!" she said. She gathered up her purse, pulled the stole about her and stood, tall and slim in spike-heeled pumps. She tripped around the desk to place a slim-gloved hand on Essig's mammoth shoulder. "I leave you in your absolutely gruesome setting, Noll dear." She planted a kiss on his expectantly beaming face, straightened and waved airily to Gantner as she went out.

Essig followed his wife all the way with his eyes. "Wonderful, isn't she, Ed?"

Gantner didn't answer. He sat down in the chair Nina had warmed. When he looked at Essig he found the blond man's smile on the wane.

"You don't think so, do you?"

"Do I have to have an opinion, Ollie?" Gantner helped himself to Essig's chrome desk lighter.

"You usually do."

GANTNER drew on his cigar, brown eyes glinting malice. "Well, it's like this: If somebody points out a yacht to me and says, 'Isn't that a beautiful boat?' I don't say anything. I never expect to be able to afford a yacht, and I don't know anything about them."

Essig looked mildly injured. He stared down at his broad, clean fingernails and

didn't say anything. Gantner took out his checkbook and pencil.

He said, "I need some money, Ollie." He made some calculations on a stub.

"What makes you so damned sour, Ed?" Essig asked softly. "Now things are starting to come your way."

Gantner glanced up, his eyes hard. "How's that?"

Essig shrugged. "Kenard. He isn't in the way anymore."

Gantner snapped the point of his pencil. "You shut your damned mouth and keep it shut."

Essig spread his hands. "I haven't said anything to the cops. They'll find out, though. You know that, don't you? As long as neither you nor Mrs. Kenard did it, what the hell do you care?"

Gantner put the checkbook and pencil back in his pocket. "I didn't do it, if that's what you're fishing for," he said, "If I'd killed Kenard, I'd have done it with my bare hands—not a shot in the mouth."

Essig shuddered. "What a hell of a way to get it. Right in the teeth."

Gantner stared at the other a moment. "In the teeth?"

"That's what the coroner said. The slug smashed out two of the lower front teeth." Essig tapped his own teeth and looked as though he couldn't imagine anything worse. A man who banked as heavily upon his smile as Essig did probably couldn't.

Gantner tipped back his head and stared at the ceiling. *Smashed out two lower front teeth,* his mind kept repeating. Two front teeth—like that damned song. Wouldn't a guy who wanted to kill himself with a shot in the mouth put the gun barrel all the way in? Had it actually been murder in the beginning?

Essig was asking, "How much do you want, Ed?"

"About two hundred. This time I'm really going to make Campfield bump it." Gantner watched disinterestedly as Essig took out his wallet and counted out ten twenty dollar bills. Gantner reached for the money.

He said, "If you've got a form right there, I'll sign it and you can fill in the details later."

Essig looked up, smiling and shaking his head. "This doesn't go on the books, Ed."

Gantner stood. "Why not?"

"Just a little personal loan," Essig told him gently. "There are certain definite rules and credit limitations even in the small loans business. And I'm responsible to the home office. You're already into us for about all you're worth. So we'll make this a purely personal matter."

Gantner smiled stiffly. "Thanks, Ollie—" he squared the bills and flipped them back onto the desk, "but I don't do business that way." He left the room and the building to return to his office across the street.

Gantner sat at his desk and tried to imagine that he wanted to kill himself quickly and surely with a shot in the mouth. His cigar was the gun. He put it between his lips, the tip of it against his lower front teeth. He shook his head. He'd never do it that way. He didn't think anybody would. Kenard hadn't killed himself. It had been murder in the first place, set in a suicide frame to offer the police the easiest possible solution to the Neidinger kill—murder, remorse, followed by suicide. And Gantner had changed all that. He wondered how the murderer felt right now. Probably not good. Probably he felt very much as Gantner did—afraid.

The thing had resolved itself into a kind of duel between the unknown killer and Gantner. One or the other would eventually fall into Seldon's web.

*All right,* he thought, *let's go back to last night when I barged in on Belle Neidinger and Kenard.*

He remembered Belle's uneasiness. It

had cracked through her tough little shell, had evidenced itself in a look directed at Kenard and in her fearful, half-formed question. Kenard himself had been afraid, not wholly of Gantner. Kenard had slipped a piece of paper under the blotter on the writing desk—a list of astronomical figures. Not dollars. Only a Washington bureaucrat dealt in such sums. What then? What had Belle Neidinger and Kenard been up to that had called for their immediate extinction?

Maybe Lee knew the answer to that. But then he didn't dare go to Lee. He was afraid even to phone her. Once the police connected Belle Neidinger, Kenard, and Lee, like points of a triangle, Cantner was apt to find himself right in the middle, his position hopeless.

He tried to push the entire matter out of his mind for a moment to take care of his own business—if any. He consulted the memo pad for the name and telephone number of the owner of the car which Thorne had towed in on the previous evening. A Mr. Norman Collins, father of the boy who had been seriously injured in the crackup. Gantner dialed, waited, and after a moment a tired masculine voice answered crossly.

"Mr. Collins? Gantner of Salvage Motor Parts. How's the boy this morning?"

Collins replied, "We have reason to hope."

"I'm hoping with you," Gantner said soberly. "We're prepared to make an offer on your car if you'd care to hear it at this time."

"Go ahead."

"An even two hundred." It was a more than fair price. It would, Gantner knew, clean out his checking account, but maybe if he could unload the scrap he'd been holding for a price hike he'd be able to stay above water for a while longer. After all, this cut-throat competition couldn't be doing Campfield any good either.

Collins said coldly. "I've had a better offer."

"I see." Gantner doodled a couple of whirligigs on the parts list Benny Ott had composed. "Mind telling me from whom?" As though he didn't know.

"The Campfield garage," Collins replied.

"You'd better take it," Gantner advised. "It's not every day you find a philanthropist in the garage game."

He hung up, tilted back in his chair, and wondered how the hell Campfield was operating. And then it hit him. It piled onto him all at once like an avalanche and his brain reeled under the impact. Now he knew the significance of that list of colossal figures which Kenard had secreted under the blotter in Belle Neidinger's room. What a mess he'd made of everything! And it had been right under his nose all the time— Belle Neidinger's fear, her half-spoken question, the list of numbers. Right in his own hand he'd held the solution, even before there'd been murder. After, he'd got into the thing with both feet. He'd obliterated the killer's tracks with his own. He had the solution. Now he had it, and what the hell was he going to do with it? Once the police connected all the points of the triangle, he was stuck. Between now and that indeterminable time, he had to find a way out.

*Think, damn you! A way out. There's got to be a way out.*

He slammed forward in the chair, took the phone directory off its nail, fumbled through the yellow pages until he found the number of the Hotel Lynn. The coarse tremor of his fingers hampered his dialing. When he had the hotel switchboard, he asked where he could reach the night clerk—was his name Olin? Gantner was told that Mr. Olin had left his room at the hotel at 11:00 A.M. He would be on duty at 7:00 P.M. And that was that.

Gantner went out to lunch, not because

he had any appetite but because it killed time. The food lumped in his stomach. By 3:00 P.M. he knew exactly what he was going to do. But then he couldn't make a move until nightfall. He didn't dare. Tip his hand and he was headed for one of two places—jail or the morgue. The choice was Fate's.

By 4:00 P.M. it had started to rain again, a Scotch mist at first, increasing to a steady drizzle. He sat at his desk and waited and watched the rain. He wondered if there wasn't a private hell right here on earth for persons who entertained thoughts of murder. He had often considered killing Steve Kenard. He had given the subject methodical concentration, imagining the circumstances under which he could accomplish it without risking detection.

When the clock in the office stood at 6:15, Gantner went into the washroom. He shaved carefully, put on a fresh shirt. He took a stiff slug of whiskey to blunt the pricking ends of his nerves. He came out, went to the hook on the wall, took down raincoat and hat. He glanced toward the street as the door was opened, and his groan was audible.

Seldon. The points of the triangle were joined.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Web Within Web

SELDON, spinner of webs, the shabby spider in yesterday's shirt and last Christmas' tie, its pale blue fabric mottled with food stains. He'd had a haircut and his sideburns were square pale smudges against his temples. He closed the door quietly, and Gantner stared at his profile. It wasn't much—bumps and hollows, forehead flat, the mouth disproportionately large. Gantner replaced his hat and coat on the hook. He watched Seldon move to the desk, pick up the empty hubcab-ashtray, hold it like a discus, and smack his left palm with the convex side of it. His eyes shifting to Gantner's face were tiny gas pilot flames. He smacked his left palm again with the hubcap.

"I ought to kick your teeth in," he said savagely. "'A guy with a mustache,' huh? I ought to shove this hubcap in your mouth and make you swallow it."

Gantner said huskily, "There's a reason."

"There'd better be." Seldon flung out a hand to indicate the desk chair. Gantner moved to it, sat down as though he had eggs in his hip pockets. Seldon put the hubcap down and hung a hip on the desk corner. "There'd better be a damned good reason—you with the guy's wife in your photo album! What the hell do you think the police are—the studio audience at a quiz show and you're Dr. I.Q. with all the answers down on a sheet of paper?"

The tiny flames went out, the eyes became coldly, discerningly busy. Gantner didn't know why, but he liked them better as they'd been the moment before—angry rather than calculating.

He said uneasily, "I don't know how far I can trust you."

"I'll tell you." Seldon took a bent cigarette out of a crumpled pack, lighted it with a match from a soiled paper folder. "I've kept a lot of secrets. Then there are any number I didn't keep. You can take your chances like the rest of them did. Or you can dummy up, lie, play it crooked, and I'll find out anyway. It'll take a little longer, but I'll find out. Take this guy-with-a-mustache deal. You're in love with Mrs. Kenard, aren't you?"

Gantner nodded slowly. "For five years."

"She's only been married four. What the hell were you doing the first year—looking at her through a telescope?"

Gantner's smile was limp. "I lost out, that's all. A swell motive for killing

Kenard, incidentally. But I didn't. You've seen Mrs. Kenard. Maybe you've seen the baby. The kid isn't theirs—not yet. You've got to serve a year of probation as foster parents before you can file adoption papers. Now do you get it? I tried to keep Kenard's name from being connected with the Belle Neidinger business. Lee can't lose the kid. It would kill her."

Seldon's grunt was visible rather than audible. "Is that all you've got to say?" He slid off the desk as Gantner nodded. "Okay. You keep it up, fella. Keep it up and see where it gets you." And Seldon went out through the door connecting the office with the adjacent garage.

Seldon, Gantner reflected as he moved over to where his coat was hanging, had made no mention of the missing thirty minutes of the previous evening for which Gantner had tried to account with a lie—a lie almost immediately disproved by the detective. But then Seldon wasn't the type to show his hand until he'd drawn a royal flush. Now, undoubtedly, he was looking at tire irons to compare with the marks left on the frame of the loan company window.

Gantner went out into the rain, got into his black coupe, and drove off. He'd gone about two blocks when he realized he had a tail.

Olin, the night clerk at Hotel Lynn, was proud of his memory for names and faces. His own face was just a face—round, pink, and smooth—and he leaned heavily on bold ties for distinction.

"Yessir, when I saw you last night I said to myself, 'That's Gantner.' It's all a matter of association. I associate your name with your business. Garage. Gantner. That's not too tough, but mine is even easier. O-*lin* of Hotel Lynn."

Gantner rested an elbow on the lobby desk. "I'll try to get the hang of it," he said drily. He glanced over his shoulder and spotted a stocky man in a sharkskin suit who sat in a nearby chair and tried to appear immersed in a blue streak edition of the *Times*. *A cop,* Gantner thought. "Now," he asked Olin, "what would you do about a name like Neidinger?"

Olin smiled. "A cinch. If you saw a woman with Niss Neidinger's looks and figure cross this room, what would you think? It's pretty obvious."

"Both pretty and obvious."

Olin slapped the desk and guffawed. A bellhop dozing on a nearby bench was startled awake. "Seriously," the night clerk said, "wouldn't you say to yourself, 'She's a humdinger'?"

"I might," Gantner admitted.

"Well, there you are. Neidinger. Humdinger. Only, of course, she always insisted the 'g' was soft."

"She did? Particular, was she?"

Olin winked. "Yes and no, but don't quote me." He laughed.

"Did she speak as though she had any education? Was she careful about her grammar? Or did she dangle participles, split infinitives, and double negatives all over the place?"

"No, I'd say her English was a little above the average." Olin leaned farther across the desk. "I'd say," he whispered confidentially, "that Belle Neidinger was a pretty high class little tramp. From observation, of course. Purely from observation."

"Oh, sure." Gantner nodded his thanks and left the desk. It was 7:30 and, as he had not yet had any dinner, he stepped into the hotel coffee shop. When he left at 8:45, he still had his tail. The man in the sharkskin suit was driving a maroon Ford which kept about a block behind Gantner all the way out College Avenue to the Kenard apartment. As Gantner parked, the Ford rolled by in the approved manner. Gantner didn't pay any attention to it after that. He didn't expect to see either it or the stocky man in the sharkskin suit again.

The woman who opened the door of the Kenard flat on the second floor was grey-haired and bosomy. She smiled as she took Gantner's hat and went into the bedroom and closed the door after her. Gantner looked about. The place wasn't chintzy—not dominantly feminine. Neither was it overbearingly masculine. It was comfortable, a place to take off your shoes. The kind of home Lee Kenard would always try to make.

The grey-haired woman came out of the bedroom. "You may go in now," she said, "but please be quiet. I just got the baby to sleep."

HE NODDED, tiptoed into the room, closed the door behind him. Lee was propped up in bed, her brown hair freshly brushed and swirling away from her lovely face. She'd put on makeup for him and some of the old serenity had returned to her lovely eyes. He stood beside the bed, held her warm fingers in his big palm, and looked at her. He would never get enough of that—looking at her.

"Ed," she said, her mouth quivering.

"Uh-huh?"

"Just Ed." She sighed contentedly and then snuggled down into the pillows and suddenly turned her head away from him.

"None of that," he said gruffly.

"C—can't help it." She took her hand away from his and reached out to the nightstand for a cleansing tissue. "There," she said after a moment. "There now. It's just that I've felt so alone today, even with Kathy here." She smiled at the crib beside her own bed. Her shimmering eyes turned to Gantner. "Now I don't feel alone anymore. Bring the chair over and sit down."

He indicated the living room with a jerk of his head. "That a neighbor out there?" he asked quietly.

Lee shook her head. "A practical nurse one of the police detectives sent around."

"Uh-huh," he said. He moved away from the bed, got the straight chair from beside the window, and carried it to the door, where he wedged it carefully under the knob. He turned to meet Lee's suddenly worried eyes. He smiled, came back to the bed and sat on the edge of it. "Been getting some sleep, have you, Lee?"

"Yes. The doctor gave me some pills." She glanced at the nightstand, where there was a small envelope which Gantner immediately picked up. He took out two of the pills, packaged them in a bit of cleansing tissue, and dropped them into his pocket. He glanced at his watch.

"Can't stay long. Has Seldon been making it tough for you?"

She looked away from him and her cheeks colored faintly. "Not too. A lot of questions about Steve and—"

He nodded. "The police mind. It thinks in triangles." He looked toward the window. The rain-glistening black rail of the fire escape caught reflected light.

"What are you going to do, Ed?"

"Try to show Seldon a different kind of geometric pattern. Not a triangle. It's a little complex—" He broke off, frowning. "I'm going now, via the fire escape. The policewoman has my hat, so she thinks she's got me. And the man who has been following me has my car. This looked like a good place from which to give them the shake. And then I had to see you." He leaned over her, his face close to hers. "That's the main thing—I had to see you."

Her brown eyes were suddenly afraid. He shook his head slightly. "Don't be afraid." He took her face between big hands and kissed her gently on the forehead. But then her face and her lips were coming up to his, timidly at first, then warm and searching. She broke away suddenly, turned on the pillow, and began to cry softly.

Gantner stood. "That's the way it

should have been here all along, lady."

"I—I know. I've known for a long time. He was . . . rotten. Do you know why he wanted us to get Kathy, Ed?" Lee looked up at him and her expression was that of a person just awakened from a nightmare. "I had a little money my father left me. He'd always tried to get hold of it. Kathy was another method, a new hold over me. And I—dope that I am—thought he was turning over a new leaf. Just as soon as it became evident that I didn't know how I'd ever lived without the baby, Steve began making veiled threats—how he'd have to be a model father or the welfare people might take the child away." Lee stared down at her fingers where they worried the hem of the sheet.

Gantner said, "He threatened to get himself involved in some sort of scandal that would queer him with the welfare people. Forget that, Lee. That part is all over. We'll make out—you and I and the little girl." He moved around the bed and to the window. He was very quiet about raising the sash. He got astride the sill while Lee watched with frightened eyes. He said, "You and I and Kathy. Keep thinking that, angel."

"You and I and Kathy," she repeated as he vanished into the dark.

The woman came into Union Station at 9:20, preceded by a porter with her luggage. Her steps were short and quick, dictated by the narrow skirt of her perfectly tailored travel suit, and the click of her high heels turned heads. Her figure, the exquisite coloring of her face—vivid lips, charcoal eyes against creamy pallor—held the glances.

Gantner stood up from the waiting room bench. He drew a shivering breath that didn't quite get down to where he needed it and moved obliquely across the huge room. When Nina Essig was within three yards of the information booth, Gantner caught her glance. He smiled and his right hand went up to his head in salutation. He wore no hat.

"Imagine, darling!" Nina crowed. "But I suppose Noll sent you to see me off. He's tied up, poor boy. That stupid business of his. Why do people have to borrow money, anyway?"

He thought, *You wouldn't know. You were born so far over the right side of the tracks you don't even know there are tracks.* But he smiled and indicated the big timetable board.

"That Dallastrain is twenty-five minutes late, Mrs. Essig."

The soft black eyes stared at the board. The vivid lips pouted. "How hideously boring! And I thought I was cutting it rather fine. I put my car in the lot at nine-eighteen—"

"You drove down?" Gantner interrupted. This was working out far better than he had anticipated. Essig wasn't with her and she had her car.

"In the lot around the corner. Noll can pick it up tomorrow. But—" she frowned— "this stupid business of waiting!"

Gantner took a quick shallow breath. "Suppose I take care of your baggage. . . ."

"Oh, would you?" Eagerly.

". . . and you and I can step across to the hotel for a cocktail. That's better than waiting."

"Loads better."

"Then if you'll sit down and wait a moment—" But she was already seating herself on one of the benches, and Gantner approached the porter, pressed a dollar into the brown hand, and took over the three pieces of luggage. He cut between two of the stairways leading from the elevated tracks and got to the other side of the station and beyond the range of Nina Essig's vision. His heart pumped furiously as he limped by the baggage checkroom, went through swinging doors, down a ramp into the damp night air.

There were three baggage transfer trucks at the loading platform.

"Which one of you is going north right away?" Gantner addressed the drivers collectively.

A young porter with a packet of tags and a pencil in his hands stepped forward, smiling. "Right now, suh. I'll be there mos' before you is."

Gantner gave the driver of the transfer truck the address—that of Oliver Essig on Riverview Drive.

It was one of those places of subdued lighting, intimate tables, and much yellow plastic upholstery with nail-on-nail trim. You'd have to have a flashlight to look at your watch. Gantner didn't think Nina Essig had a flashlight, and anyway she was depending entirely upon him. She would always depend on somebody.

"I'm an old-fashioned girl," she said as the waiter approached. "You didn't know that, did you, Ed? You presumed I'd order something frightfully exotic."

He didn't give a damn what she ordered, so long as it was wet enough to dissolve two sleeping pills. He'd drop them into his own glass and then distract her attention while he made the switch.

His mind kept repeating, *For you and I and Kathy*. A kind of prayer.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Private Hell

GANTER hoped it didn't sound like his voice as he spoke into the phone. To him it didn't sound like his voice, and he couldn't conceive of himself doing such a thing anyway. But it was a voice and it was with him in the phone booth in the drugstore at the corner of Central Avenue and Fall Creek Boulevard.

It said, "You've got her luggage, haven't you?"

"What—what's that?" Oliver Essig asked stupidly from the receiver. "Who is this speaking?"

"Never mind. You've got her baggage?"

"Yes, but—"

"Well, we've got Mrs. Essig. She's alive and well. You can keep her that way if you want to. If you don't, just don't pay any attention to what I say."

"Wh—what?"

"Shut up and listen, Mr. Essig. We want a thousand bucks. We want it in cash, in small bills, and we've got to have it in a hurry. You're getting off light because we've got to have it in a hurry. Now get this: It's just ten o'clock. At eleven o'clock you park your car near the south end of the Illinois Street bridge over Fall Creek. You walk on the east side of the bridge to a point halfway between the fourth and fifth lamp post. Go to the rail. You'll have the money in something waterproof that'll float. You drop it over the rail. Then you go back to your car and go home. We'll contact you at midnight, if these instructions are carried out, and tell you where you can pick up Mrs. Essig. Got all that?"

Essig stammered that he did.

"Then here's some more. Contact the police, let anybody else in on this at all, and when you next see Mrs Essig she'll be more work for the undertaker."

"My God!" Essig breathed. "B—but give me more time. I can't raise a thousand dollars in cash in an hour."

"Float yourself a loan," the voice from the booth said harshly, and Gantner hung up. He was trembling so violently that he had difficulty in feeding a second nickel into the phone slot. This time he called police headquarters and asked for Seldon only to be informed that Seldon wasn't in.

"Then get him," Gantner said. "Give him this tip: Watch Oliver Essig. Watch him beginning right now. Put a loose tail on him and keep it there." He hung

up, left the booth, and limped out of the drugstore.

It was raining again, hard. Gantner went up the block to where he'd left the Cadillac. Nina was slumped on the right side of the front seat, alseep. Incredibly, she snored. The pills had worked faster than Gantner had anticipated. He'd had trouble walking her out of the cocktail lounge. Within a hundred feet of the parking lot, she'd passed out in his arms and he'd practically had to carry her to the car.

He waited behind the wheel of the convertible. Waiting wasn't easy. He lighted a cigar and tried to relax. He listened to the drumming of the rain on the fabric roof of the convertible and tried not to think. But his eyes never left the illuminiated clock on the instrument panel. Fifty minutes. Now forty-nine . . . so many things could go wrong Everything up to now had gone right. His luck couldn't last. . . .

*Stop it!* his mind dictated. *You and I and Kathy . . . You and I and Kathy. . . .*

It was, after an eternity, 10:50. Gantner glanced at the sleeping beauty beside him, reached out to the ignition lock, and started the car. He drove slowly around the block to get back onto the boulevard, then west to Illinois Street. He turned up Illinois for half a block, parked the car in the shadows, and, leaving Nina, got out into the rain.

He crossed the boulevard, walking as rapidly as his limp would let him. He started down the sloping lawn of the park and diagonally toward the concrete bridge, with its jeweled tiara of light arching against the black dome of the night. Now he didn't know the time, and he didn't dare show a light to find out. Time had deserted him. There was no future, no past. There was only the precipitous present.

At the edge of the stream he got out of shoes, raincoat, and suitcoat, left them there on the bank while he waded in. The water was icy. The bottom dropped suddenly and he had to swim for it, obliquely upstream to get under the bridge at the proper point. He made it, gasping, to the nearest abuttment. There was a ledge somewhat below the surface of the swollen creek—enough for a foothold. He stood on it and the cold wind plastered his shirt against his chest like a vest of ice. He listened. The high, cavernous arch above was like a gigantic ear that gathered in all of the rumbling of the city; it heard only rumbling, was attuned only to that—neither the rush of the individual cars nor footsteps. But against the light from the Meridian Street bridge, he might be able to see the packet when Essig dropped it. And he'd have to drop it. He'd have to take the bait.

*You and I and Kathy. How much longer. . . .*

There was a faint metallic flash, like

the spark of a falling star against the dark. A *plop* against the surface of the water. Gantner plunged from the ledge, his eyes on the spot from whence the sound had come . . . no, downstream. Get downstream farther . . . He lashed out and his right hand struck something. Something hard and light and cylindrical. He clutched at it. He knew that if it were possible for him to look up, he would see Oliver Essig's head sticking out from the rail above. He didn't look up. He fought back against the current to find the ledge on the abuttment again. He stood part way out of the water, the thing clenched tightly in his hand. He knew what it was —a cardboard mailing tube with metal ends. He got off one cap, tried to shake the contents out into his wet hand. He got off the other cap, held up the tube against the faint glow from the east. The tube was empty, and that was good and bad. Good, because he wouldn't have to dispose of the money as he had intended. Bad, because it meant that Essig was onto him.

Gantner's trembling fingers tore the pasteboard tube into fragments that he dropped into the water. He jammed the two metal ends into a sodden trouser pocket. Then he dropped off the ledge and swam toward the spot where he'd left his clothes. He'd done what he could. The rest depended on Seldon. It depended on the police dragging the creek bed to find the murder gun. It depended on certain other evidence—the motive, a matter of record.

Gantner waded up onto the shore. He found his clothes in the dark, crammed wet feet into soaked shoes, put on suitcoat and raincoat. He started back toward the boulevard and was within two hundred feet of the pavement when he heard a slight stir of sound behind him. He started to turn. The hard muzzle of a gun rammed roughly into the small of his back.

"I'M RIGHT with you, smart guy," a voice whispered. Campfield always whispered.

Gantner said, "I've been expecting you."

"Oh, sure!"

"That list of numbers in Belle Neidinger's room. Engine numbers from old wrecks you'd bought. That and the fact that you always outbid me. It had to be you."

"Just keep on going. Back to the Caddy."

Essig would be there, Gantner thought. Either Essig had recognized the voice on the phone, or he'd made a lucky guess. Now he and Campfield faced the prospect of another killing. They'd have to silence Gantner.

He talked while he could.

"It was a neat racket, good for a big steal in a hurry. When you bought the wrecks, you acquired the title for each. You would transfer the titles to phony names, use the titles as collateral for loans which Essig okayed, and split the loan company's dough between you. The titles went to the home office of the loan company and the home office had no way of knowing the cars weren't in first class condition. Then Belle Neidinger and Kenard got their heads together. She'd list the engine numbers of wrecks you got hold of, and Kenard would check them against the engine numbers on the titles that came in as collateral. They knew what you were doing and tried to cut in on the deal. Hush money or else. You and Essig had to get rid of them and fast."

They were crossing the boulevard—Gantner and Campfield, as close as brothers, the lump that was Campfield's gun gouging into Gantner's side.

Gantner said, "Why do you think Mrs. Essig was heading for Texas, Campfield? Maybe you've figured it out. Maybe you remember how close Texas is to Mexico. Essig was sending her down there to

wait for him. He knew he'd played the game for about all it was worth. He was getting ready to make a dash for the border—Mexico, Central America, South America. He'd have left you holding the bag."

"Nuts!" Campfield said.

They'd come abreast of the big grey convertible. Essig loomed large at the wheel. Nina, beside him, slept peacefully.

Essig said almost sadly, "I told you tht you were a damned fool, didn't I, Ed?"

"You did." Gantner got into the back seat, Campfield following closely with the gun. "I'm all of that." Gantner admitted as he dropped back onto the cushions. "Last night, when I barged into Belle Neidinger's room, she was scared. She turned to Kenard and said, 'This isn't no—' but Kenard didn't let her finish. I thought maybe she went in for double negatives and intended to say, 'This isn't no cop,' or something like that. What she actually started to say was, 'This isn't Noll Essig?' She didn't know you, but you were the one both she and Kenard were afraid of. You were the one who got them both."

Essig didn't say anything. He started the car, accelerated away from the curb.

Ganter, oddly calm, said, "I always called you Ollie. But Noll is the more stylish diminutive for Oliver, the one Nina always used. I'll say I'm a damned fool, Ollie. I had the motive and even the name of the killer before the killing took place. Right under my nose, all the time."

After a time, Essig spoke above the swish of the big tires on wet asphalt. "This could be a case of the pot calling the kettle black, Ed. Kidnapping is as serious an offense as murder."

"Oh, hell." Gantner made a sound like laughter. "Nina's train was late. I bought her a few drinks, and she passed out. I couldn't get her on the train because by that time it had left. So I sent her baggage home, and I was bringing her home in her car. Ask her when she comes to."

"Then what the hell was all this for?" Campfield whispered worriedly.

*He's the weak sister,* Gantner thought. He didn't reply. Let them worry for a while. He glanced out into the rain and recognized Laniard Street. He thought he knew what they had up their sleeves. He thought, *you and I and Kathy. Maybe just you and Kathy.* He shrugged slightly. They wouldn't have understood why he shrugged, neither Campfield nor Essig, even if he had drawn them a blueprint.

The car stopped. Gantner got out on the end of Campfield's gun. Essig joined them. They walked in silence through the rain to the door of Gantner's office. Thorne wasn't there. They'd have seen to that. They'd have sent Thorne out with the wrecker on some wild goose chase—an address so far away it didn't exist.

"Unlock the door," Campfield whispered.

That took time because his hands and his pockets were wet. He took all the time that he needed. No past and no future, there was only right now. He lived the present, drank deep of the rain-washed air, making it last.

But the door did open.

Essig crowded in ahead, dropped the Venetian blind over the broad front window and closed the slats. When Gantner and Campfield were across the sill, Essig closed and locked the front door, stepped to the door which opened on the garage, closed and locked that too. He nodded at the desk.

"Sit down," he said, not smiling now. A big, blonde man squarely faced with the sobering business of murder.

Gantner sat down behind the desk. He noticed that Both Campfield and Essig wore cotton work gloves. There were to be no fingerprints, they'd decided.

"I told you, Ollie, that you couldn't

afford Nina," Gantner said, his smile slight. "I tried to imply that. She's a yacht, and you had the price of a rowboat."

Essig colored slightly. "Shut up. Dig out a piece of paper, a fountain pen."

Facing Gantner across the desk was the lathlike figure of Campfield. Campfield and the gun. Gantner deliberately brought out a sheet of paper and his pen.

He thought, *They won't do it until I write a suicide note. I've still got a little time. A little time to think, to pray... You and I and Kathy. You and I....*

"Write this," Essig directed. He was standing on Gantner's left, and one huge gloved hand rested flatly on top of the desk. His eyes behind the round glasses were thoughtful. "Write: 'Dear Seldon. This seems to me to be the logical way to tie all strings neatly.' "

Gantner laughed harshly. "That's one for the In-Love-With-Own-Words department. That's the way you started the other note."

"I like it," Essig said coldly. "You write it."

He wrote the sentence slowly and carefully, the letters reflecting the steadiness of his hand. He had crossed the final 't', had placed the period, when it occurred to him this was something with which he could worry Campfield and Essig.

He said, "You know what I did with that other note, Ollie?" He looked obliquely at the blond man's face.

"What?"

Gantner laughed. "You'd like to know, wouldn't you?"

Essig frowned, and Campfield whispered, "Ask him what he did with the gun."

"Yes," Essig said slowly. "I wondered about that. What did you do with the gun?"

Gantner's face was blank. "I don't know anything about a gun. The last I heard, Seldon was planning to drag Fall Creek at the... Illinois Street bridge, between the fourth and fifth boulevard lights." He spaced the words, letting them sink in. He watched the color ebb from Essig's face, saw the mouth fall open. Essig got it. Right between the eyes he got it.

"Why, damn you—" Essig's voice lifted in a sharp cry of pain as Gantner, holding the fountain pen like a dagger, drove the heavy gold nib into the back of the gloved hand flattened on the desk. At the same time Gantner swiveled in the chair and dived to the floor.

"Don't shoot!" Essig warned the jittery Campfield.

Gantner rolled over onto his back, saw Essig moving toward him. Essig still had the suicide picture in his mind. That was why he hadn't wanted Campfield to shoot.

Essig said, "Ed, you damned fool. You damned fool!"

Gantner laughed. Both of his feet came up, his weight well back on his shoulders, as he rammed his heels into the blonde man's belly. Essig backstepped, doubled over, white-gloved fingers buried in his paunch. He hit the steel waste basket and fell heavily. Then Gantner was up. He was facing Campfield and the gun, and this time Campfield would shoot. He saw the black rage in Gantner's eyes and his own narrow face blanched in panic.

The shot was wild. Then Gantner was in close. He had his hands on the gun too. They fought for the gun, waltzing around, each trying to throw the other off balance. When Campfield jerked the trigger a second time, the barrel was pointed the wrong way. Simultaneous with the shot was the crash of breaking glass. Campfield sagged down onto his knees, rocked over onto his side. Who had the gun was no longer important. There were other guns—Seldon's and another showing through the broken glass in the door connecting the office and garage. An arm with a soiled shirt cuff showing below

the coatsleeve reached in to turn the key on the inner side of the door. Essig was on his feet, not standing straight up, his hands raised to shoulder height. He might have been salaaming before the shabby man who stepped over the sill.

The two cops got the bracelets on Essig. Then Seldon moved over to Campfield, whose breathing came noisily, rather horribly up from the floor. Seldon grunted. He moved to the desk, hesitated a moment before he picked up the phone, his busy little eyes on the note Gantner had started to write.

Seldon nodded. "That'll help, Mr. Essig. That'll help quite a bit." He picked up the phone and dialed. While waiting he said, "After the ambulance gets here, the rest of us will go downtown."

And that was for Gantner. Especially for Gantner.

They were alone in a little room off the detectives' assembly room at police headquarters.

Gantner said, "I can explain everything."

The blue eyes of the cop squeezed to narrow slits between colorless lashes. "You open your damned mouth to explain anything, and I'll see that you go upstate for five years." Seldon's voice was quietly threatening. *"I'll* tell you."

He began explaining. It wasn't all the truth, but it was better than the truth. Gantner had to struggle to keep the smile off his face, and it was hard to listen, because his heart sang.

"...and it had to be Essig, get that? Who else beside Kenard and Essig had keys to the loan office? Nobody. And the killer had to come in through the door —not that window. Would Kenard have sat still while somebody forced that grating out of place and jimmied the window? Like hell he would. The window came later. It was intended to make the think look like murder after attempted robbery. An afterthought on Essig's part. And of course he used a tire iron he picked up at your garage—that wouldn't be hard to do, would it?"

"No," Gantner said. "Not hard at all. Just walk in and help himself."

"So that's it. That with the gun we'll dredge up from the creek. We had a loose tail on Essig. We saw him throw something shiny into the creek. We had a hot tip—" Seldon was not actually smiling, but there was a smile somewhere behind that colorless mask that he wore for a face. "And we've got a phony suicide note he and Campfield attempted to force you to write. I think we've got a case. I think it'll burn Essig. And you—" Seldon stood up with a jerk and thumbed toward the door, "you get out of here."

Gantner walked to the door and out into the corridor and his heart sang. *You and I and Kathy.* The same refrain. Over and over again.

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CHICAGO police, who thought themselves acquainted with every possible alibi, discovered a new one when they recently captured a paroled auto thief speeding in a stolen car. The fellow assumed an injured air and explained that he had taken the vehicle because he didn't want to be late for an appointment with his parole officer.

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Caught prowling in the refrigerator of a house that he had broken into, a Phoenix, Arizozna, resident emphatically denied that he was a burglar. "Your Honor," he explained, "I have high blood pressure. My doctor told me to expose my hands and feet to cold, so I just had to find a refrigerator and put my hands in it."

—*John Carroll*

# A TIME TO KILL

## By William Campbell Gault

***A cool million makes a hot kill—hot enough to make the devil sweat bullets—bullets that whisper, "Come die with me!"***

HE WAS about five feet high and maybe twelve years old. He was wearing long pants, a little too large, and a frayed sweater, a little too small. He had bright blue, inquisitive eyes, now faintly wet from recent crying. His cap was in his hand, because he was inside, in my office, and he had probably been told to take his cap off when he was inside. I liked him, but then, I like all kids.

He had a tangled mop of too-long hair which wasn't quite red. He looked at me, and gulped.

"Trouble?" I asked him.

He nodded, gulping again. "You—you a detective?"

"That's what it says on the door," I admitted, "but you might get all kinds of answers to that, depending on who you asked."

"You don't look like a detective," he said.

I'm about five and a half feet and fat. I'm losing my hair. "What does a detective look like?" I asked him.

"The real ones are big and mean," he said, "and the ones in the movies wear tuxedos and talk smart-alecky."

"I'm a private detective," I said. "My tuxedo's at the cleaners."

He gulped again. "How much do you charge?"

"I get as high as thirty dollars a day. But that's for rich folks. For the people in the neighborhood, I have a special rate. You live around here, don't you?"

He nodded. "Next door."

"You sell papers on the corner?"

He nodded again, his eyes on my face.

"For you, it would run around seven cents a day. That's my standard neighborhood rate."

"You're kidding me," he said, and his eyes began to fill up with tears again.

"Whoa!" I said, "Easy, lad. Let's hear your story first."

He bit his lower lip, and blinked his eyes. Then he blurted, "My pop was killed. He was—murdered," and the tears spilled over.

I gave him my handkerchief and pointed to a chair. "Sit down."

He sat down, his cap in his lap, and dabbed at his eyes with the handkerchief.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Robert Hutson. But—they call me Junior, on account of—" He said no more. He didn't say "because my pop's name was Robert."

"How about your mom?" I asked him. "Where's she?"

"She—she died when I was born."

I studied him. "Think you could tell me, now, about what happened?"

He was very careful. He kept his eyes straight ahead, and one hand gripped the arm of his chair, and he kept his voice even. "Last night, when I came in from selling papers, pop was in a chair, his

*"You a detective?" the kid asked. . . .*

head down on the table, and there were some glasses on the table and a bottle of whiskey. Pop never bought whiskey in bottles. He would drink a little, but he never got drunk. All he ever had in the house was wine, and he didn't drink much of that. I went over to Doctor Schulberg's house, and got him."

"Doctor Schulberg said it was the whiskey, and that my pop was dead. But when he was talking to the police, he said it was poison. He didn't know I heard him. And the police kept talking about suicide. They took me down to the station, and one policeman told me I would have to go to a home. Then they left me alone for a minute, and I ran out. I came here."

"Where did you spend the night?"

"In the back hall, here, downstairs."

"When'd you eat last?"

"Yesterday noon."

"Hungry?"

He shook his head doubtfully. "I—don't think so."

"You haven't any other relatives?"

"Just my Aunt Sue. She's my mom's sister, and Pop wouldn't—Pop didn't talk to her, or anything."

"How does she treat you?"

"I only saw her once."

"What's her name?"

"I don't know. She was married, and then divorced. I heard Pop tell somebody once that this man married her for her money and then found out she didn't have any."

Junior had heard lots of things that weren't meant for young ears, the way it looked. He wasn't a kid it would be easy to fool.

I said, "What makes you think your dad didn't take this stuff?"

"He promised. He promised we'd never be separated."

Well, the cops would be looking for Junior about now. It wasn't really any of my business. The thing to do was to convince him that he would be better off going to the home, or to his Aunt Sue.

So I said, "How would you like to live on a farm for a while?"

He looked at me suspiciously. "A real farm?"

"Well," I said, "it's only about twenty acres and right on the edge of town. My mother's farm."

"Do you live there?"

I shook my head. "I'm a city slicker. Just my brother and my ma live there. It would be a good place for you, for a while. If there was somebody looking for you, they wouldn't think of looking there."

He looked like the danger of crying was past. He said, "You're going to find out who killed my father, aren't you?"

"I'm going to try," I promised him. "Go down the back steps again, and go out the back door, into the alley. Walk north, to Ardmore. There's a coupe parked at the mouth of the alley. Get into that. And it might be smart to kind of stay out of sight. I'll be there pretty soon."

He nodded, looking at me as though I was some kind of oracle.

"You lived next door," I said, "in that rooming house?"

"That's right. The back place on the right on the second floor."

"Okay. I'll see you later."

He went out quietly, and I heard the sound of his feet going down the stairs in the back.

I went out the front way. The place next door had a bluestone front, and they had stopped using bluestone a hundred years ago. They had probably stopped using this as a private home about half that long ago. The landlady's apartment was on the first floor, in the front.

SHE was a thin, sallow woman in a spotted and limp-looking green cotton dress. She looked at me suspiciously when she opened the door.

"Well?"

"I'm checking on this Robert Hutson," I said.

"I figured you were," she said. "You didn't look like no tenant."

I wasn't sure whether that was a compliment or not. "I wondered if he owed you any rent?"

"That he did. Five dollars, for last week."

I took five dollars out of my wallet and handed it to her. I made quite a ritual out of it. "I'm a friend of his," I said.

She sniffed. "You a poet too?"

"Not since I lost my hair," I said. "I'm sort of investigating his death."

"Come on in," she said, "and I'll make you out a receipt."

I went in. It was just one room, furnished in brass and linoleum and oil cloth and painted pine. She got her receipt book, along with a much chewed pencil.

"What is the name, please?"

Friendly, so far as she could be, now. Trying to get a name for the police. In her position, it helped to be on the police side.

"Just make it out to Robert Hutson," I said. "He rented the place."

She made it out to Robert Hutson. Her name, I saw, was Sheila Rose.

"I wonder if I could look at the room?" I asked.

She looked doubtful, and I flashed the buzzer.

"I know you, now," she said. "You're the detective who has the office next door. I thought I recognized you."

"Just a neighbor," I admitted. "Do you have the key for that place, upstairs?"

She still looked doubtful, but she led the way up to the second floor back.

This room was smaller. There was a rickety kitchen table in the center of the room, and some kitchen chairs with the paint worn off in spots, and a rug that looked like it was growing on the floor and not doing too well. There were two cots, one an army cot without a mattress. There was nothing the police had overlooked. There never is.

I left, and went out into the early spring wetness and chill. I walked down Vincent one block to Ardmore, and down Ardmore a half block to the coupe.

Junior was sitting on the floor in the back. "I think you're going to like the farm," I told him.

After a few blocks he sat up in front, with me. I asked, "Was your dad a poet?"

"Yeah. Only he never made any money at it. He said only the bad poets made money at it. Is that right?"

"That's right. What did he do to pay the rent?"

No answer.

"I'm working for you," I reminded him. "We're working together."

"Well, he—sold some tickets, and stuff, some kind of cards where you guess, sort of."

"Football cards, and policy tickets, huh?"

"Well, I guess so. But he was a good guy. We had a good time," he said, his voice tight. "We did all right."

"I think you'll like the farm," I said again. I seemed to be getting into a conversational rut.

We drove through Shorewood, a suburb, and through Whitefish Bay, another suburb, and then we turned left on a gravel road, and up that to a drive, flanked with cedars. We went up the drive, and there was the house, looking clean and low and white. And there was George on the porch, shaking out a rug. George is my brother.

Ma came to the door as we got out of the car, and the two of them watched us, as we walked up.

Ma said, "Who's your young friend, Michael?"

George said nothing. George is quiet, like me.

"It's Robert Hutson, Jr.," I told her, "and he's looking for some place to spend a little vacation."

"You came at the right time," she said. "I just baked a ham."

She had also just baked some pies, and some rolls, we found out later. Junior gave all of his attention to eating. Despite his fine manners, he did very well at it.

So did I. Ma said, "No wonder you're stout, Michael. No wonder you never got a wife."

"Neither did George," I said, "and he's skinny."

George said nothing. But when we were finished, he asked Junior, "Want to go out and help me feed the chickens?"

Junior did, and they left.

Ma said, "Well, Michael?"

"His dad died last night," I told her. "They were going to put him in a home. Nobody knows I've got him. I don't want anybody to know just yet."

"In a home!" Ma said. "That little gentleman. Well, I'll get him some clothes in town, and George can cut his hair. I suppose he'll be here for some time."

"I can't say. I'll tell you more later."

She shook her head. "I wish your dad

were alive, Michael Knowles. You need a father's guidance."

I'm only forty-five.

I helped her with the dishes, said good-by to her and George and Junior, and drove back to the city. I stopped by headquarters to see Al Olson, but he was out.

Back in the office, I smoked a cigar. I read my mail, one letter extolling the virtues of the Easy-Snap handcuffs, and one letter which offered to teach me judo for a dollar ninety-eight. I went over to the window to see if summer was getting any closer, but it was hard to tell. It looked about the same outside. The wind was from the northeast.

About three, this lad dropped in, casual-like. He was wearing a fine tweed suit, an expensive hat and a covert topcoat, open. He had just a little scar tissue over the eyes, and just a little flatness to his nose, but otherwise he was a clean-looking boy.

I knew who he was. He'd won some fights, and lost some, and then quit the ring. He was tall and thin for a welter. His name was Tony Jeswald.

"What's cooking, Mike?" he said.

I shrugged. "Things are pretty quiet."

He took the chair across the desk from me, and lighted a cigarette. "What happened next door?" he asked.

"A poet died," I said, "died in the night, quietly."

"Night?" he asked. "The way I heard it—"

"Well," I said, "evening, then. I just wanted to make a pretty sentence."

He studied the end of his cigarette.

"You're good," I said. "You could go on the stage any time and play leads. But you underplay maybe a little too much."

He grinned. "Aw, Mike, I was trying to be smooth."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. You guys see too many movies. You're on the small end of a very big racket, but it's better than losing what little sense you got in the ring. You make a mistake when you try to act like you're on the big end. What's your business?"

He looked at me sadly. "You talk mighty tough for a little fat man," he said.

"I am mighty tough for a little fat man. Ask your boss."

He pulled at one slightly thickened ear. "Guess you are, at that. This Robert Hutson worked for us, little odd jobs. The boss always wants to know what happens to our boys, no matter how small, you understand?"

I nodded.

"That old bag over there said you were nosing around this morning, and that you'd paid his rent. The cops say it's suicide, but I thought maybe you had a different idea."

"What else do the cops think?"

"I don't know. They're looking for that kid of his. You know anything about him?"

"He's safe. Just between you and me and your boss, it's the kid I'm working for. He says it's murder. I mean to find out."

Tony put his tongue in his cheek and nodded understandingly. "Sentiment, huh?"

"Could be."

He reached into his pocket, and brought out a billfold. "The boss wouldn't want you to lose any money on it."

"Okay. Five dollars, for the rent I paid."

He put the five and a hundred on my desk. I picked up the five.

"The hundred's for the kid," he said.

I picked it up. "You're not buying anything, you understand."

"'Course not," he said. "I know you, Mike."

"If there's anything more you know, it would be smart to tell me."

"I don't know a damned thing," he said earnestly, "but the boss wants me to find

out. So far I've got no place to start."

"Me either, yet." I said.

He rose. "Well, I'll be seeing you around."

"Sure. Don't lead with your chin."

I WENT to the window and watched him climb into a convertible. Naming no names, it was a car that puts more out to meet the eye than it has under the hood. Like its driver.

Tony's boss was Dutch Lehner. Dutch wore cheap serge suits and smoked cheap cigars and drove a cheap car. He could cash in, any time, for a couple of million. It takes all kinds.

I re-read the judo offer, studied the handcuff illustration, and dropped both letters in the waste basket.

The phone rang, and it was Al Olson.

"You looking for me, Mike? The boys said you were down here this afternoon."

"You alone?" I asked him. "Can you talk?"

"Yup."

"What have you got on this death next door, that Robert Hutson?"

"Nothing. Suicide. Got a sister-in-law out on Morris Boulevard, and she's paying for the funeral."

"What's her name?"

There was a half minute's silence. Then, "Here it is. Mrs. Susan Jarvis, 2218 Morris. Hey, Mike, you got something we ain't got?"

"Sure," I said, "my freedom. See you some time, Al, and thanks."

He was spluttering when I hung up.

Mrs. Susan Jarvis, 2218 Morris Boulevard, would be Aunt Sue, who had been married for her money and divorced for her lack of it.

Morris Boulevard is mostly apartments. In red brick, in black tile, in white brick, mostly tall. 2218 was the kind without a lobby or desk, with mailboxes and bell buttons in the lower hall, and three steps up from that a door with a buzzer on it which could be opened from the apartments.

I pressed the button next to the name of Mrs. Susan Jarvis, and was up at the door when it buzzed. I went up in the self-service elevator to the sixth, or top floor, and down a softly carpeted hallway to number 620. I rang the bell there. Chimes.

Somebody said, "Come in," and I pushed open the door and went in.

It was the kind known as a studio apartment, a story and a half high. At least the living room was. The motif was yellow and grey, yellow drapes on the tall windows, yellow and grey striped furniture.

A tall, slim blonde was sitting on a gray-and-yellow-striped semi-circular divan. She wore lounging pajamas, black satin bottoms and black satin embroidered in gold above, and gold sandals, open. Her toenails were sort of scarlet. Her feet were up on the divan.

"Lord," she said, "I deserve something better than this."

"I improve," I told her, "with age."

There was a long and low coffee table in front of the divan, and a bottle on the table. It was about empty. She had a glass in her hand, but it wasn't a cordial glass, it was a tumbler.

*Ma should see me now,* I thought. There was also a long, black and gold cigarette holder on the coffee table.

"Sit down," Aunt Sue said, "and unburden your heart. It's been a busy day." Her voice was weary, her eyes tired. "You don't drink, of course."

"Not from a tumbler," I said.

"That's how I like it," she said. "Were you ever in Seattle?"

"No," I said, "were you?"

She nodded, her eyes sad. "I was born there. It's a hell of a town. I wish I'd never left it. Are you a collector?"

I shook my head.

She gestured with a listless hand to-

ward a cigarette box on the coffee table. I took one, and smelled it. They were perfumed. I put it back.

"I'm trying to get the story on Robert Hutson," I said.

"A nice boy," she murmured. "But a poor poet. Or maybe not poor enough. He married for love. Did you ever marry for love?"

"I never married."

"You should. Just for the experience." She considered me gravely. "I suppose, with your looks and figure, it might be difficult to find someone suitable."

"I'm not Tyrone Power," I admitted.

"No, you certainly aren't. What did you want to know about Robert Hutson?"

"We alone?"

She looked at me sharply, not drunk at all for one alert second. "What makes you think we aren't?"

"The button that opens the door downstairs is a long ways from here. If you pressed it, you'd wait to open the door. You'd want to know who it was." I didn't tell her that the smell of Havana tobacco still lingered in the room.

"A detective," she said. She sipped her drink. Her eyes watched me over the rim of the glass. "Lord, you kill me."

I shrugged, rose. I picked up my hat off the floor.

"Sit down," she said.

I sat down.

"What are you here for?"

"About Robert Hutson, remember?"

"Well?"

"You're paying for the funeral. Maybe it's suicide. Maybe it's murder."

"It's suicide," she said. "But what makes it your business?"

"Junior," I told her. "Junior says it's murder."

There was no sound in the room for a moment.

Her voice, when it came, was husky. "What makes him think that?"

I shrugged. "Maybe he saw something."

One satin-clad arm reached out and she picked a cigarette out of the box on the low table. Her hands trembled as she fitted it into the holder. "Saw something?" Her eyes stayed on the cigarette while she lighted it.

"Maybe."

"Where is he now?"

"I don't know. Maybe Seattle."

"You're lying, aren't you? You've got him."

"No. The police have him, but they're not letting it out. That's something I probably shouldn't have told you, but you're his aunt."

"The police," she said. She exhaled some smoke straight ahead of her, and sat quietly watching it. "The police think it's suicide."

"Do they?"

"Don't they?" Looking at me.

"You'd have to ask them. You're sobering up, aren't you?"

Her eyes came alive, and she said shrilly, "Get the hell out of here. Get out, before I call the police." She was standing up, suddenly, one hand on the back of the divan for support.

I rose slowly, picking up my hat on the way. "What makes you think I'm not the police?"

"Get out," she repeated, and she reached for the bottle.

I left rather hurriedly.

I went down the hall to the elevator. There was a built-in bench next to the elevator, and it was not visible from the hall. I pushed the button, and heard the cage come grinding up.

When it arrived, I opened the outer door, and pressed a couple of buttons, including the first floor button, and got out of the elevator again, and closed the outer door.

The cage went down again, stopping on the floors I punched, and doing it

audibly, in case anyone was listening. I sat on the bench, and lighted a cigar.

Nothing happened. I sat there for ten minutes, getting bored, and then I went quietly back up the hall, and stood very close to the door of 620. Inside, there were voices.

I stood there for a few minutes, trying to get something, but nothing intelligible came through the door. Then the masculine voice got louder, and I went away from there quickly. I went through the door leading to the rear stairs as the door of 620 opened. I went down the stairs as fast as my weight would permit.

I was in the downstairs hall while the elevator was still coming down, and I was outside, in the Buick, when this gent came out through the front door.

HE CARRIED a briefcase. He was wearing an Oxford grey topcoat, a black Homburg hat, and glasses. His suit, or at least the trousers to it, were dark blue. His shoes were black. He looked like a very careful man. You can't go far wrong on Oxford grey and dark blue.

He looked to the right and left, and then turned to the right, walking away from the Buick. He continued straight up Morris, past the first intersection, and I thought he might be heading for the bus stop on Capitol, which was another block up.

Which he was. He stood up there, looking west. A bus came, finally, and he got into it.

I started the car, and drove over to Capitol and down, trailing the bus. I stayed far enough behind while I was out in the residential district, but downtown I tailed it closely.

On Third, the man with the briefcase got out.

There was no place to park here, the curb filled. I turned on Third, and here was a parking lot, and I drove in, and flashed the badge. I had no time to wait for a check. "I'll be back," I said, and ran to the sidewalk.

The man with the briefcase was just turning the corner at Wells. When I got to the corner, he was turning into the wide doorway of the Avalon Hotel.

When I got to the doorway, I could see him, at the desk, getting his key. From there he walked to the elevators, and I waited.

When he got in, and the door closed, I went into the lobby and up to the desk. The clerk was a thin lad, with a pimple or two, and warm brown eyes.

"That man who just got his key," I said, "fellow with the briefcase, what's his name?"

Some of the warmth left the brown eyes. "We don't disclose the identity of our guests to anyone who asks, you know."

My badge made no impression. I said wearily, "Where's the house man?"

He nodded toward the elevators. "Right here. I called for him."

A thin, lanky man was walking towards us. Horse face, a conspicuous gold tooth, a double-breasted blue suit. Hank Walters.

"Mike," he said. "Drunk again?" He put a bony hand on my shoulder. "You know you have to pay in advance if you haven't any luggage."

A comedian. I told him what I wanted.

He nodded to the clerk. The clerk said, "Mr. Jesse Wharton, from Seattle."

"I'd like to talk to him. Give him a buzz and see if he's agreeable." I told him my name.

The clerk had the call put through. It was all right. Mr. Wharton would see me. It was room 416.

The elevator took me to four, and when I got off, I could see a door open, down the hall, and Mr. Wharton of Seattle was standing there, waiting.

I could sense that he was sizing me

up as I walked towards him. His glasses had very thick lenses, and the eyes behind them were pale blue. "You had some business with me, Mr. Knowles?"

"I think so," I said. "Shall we go in? It isn't business for a hallway."

He looked at me thoughtfully, then said, "Yes, of course. Come in."

The door closed quietly behind us.

The regular three-and-a-half-dollar room, with bath. With a bed and a dresser, one straight chair, one more comfortable chair, a small bedside table and a small radio.

Mr. Wharton said, in his careful way, "I can assume by your actions that this visit has something to do with my call at the Jarvis apartment this afternoon."

"That's right. Where were you when that lovely lady and I were discussing murder?"

He considered this. He dodged it. "First of all, may I ask what interest you have in this business?"

"What business?" I asked him. "Murder?"

He winced. He said cautiously, "I don't quite understand."

"Neither do I," I said. "Maybe it was ordinary routine business with you to duck into another room while the lady and I went around and around, getting nowhere."

"You're a very blunt man," he said. "If a seem overcautious to you, consider that I know nothing about you, that I am entrusted with a serious mission, and that there are certain complications."

I said, "I am a private detective. I've been established in this city for twenty years and my reputation is as good as it'll ever get. A lad named Robert Hutson, Jr. came to me for help, and I'm trying to help him. I haven't made a dime on this case, and I don't intend to. Junior has only the paper route."

He smiled as much of a smile as that face would know. He gestured to the comfortable chair, and I sat in it. He took the straight one.

He cleared his throat. "You have been very forthright with me, Mr. Knowles, and I shall be equally honest with you. Junior has considerably more than the paper route. Junior has an estate that can be conservatively evaluated at a million dollars, even after taxes."

He waited for the effect, smiling frostily and cozily from behind his expensive cigar smoke. I stared at him.

"The late Jonathan Squire, his grandfather, willed this estate to him about a week ago, the day before he died."

"That's his mother's father?"

"Correct. And the father of Mrs. Jarvis. Mrs. Jarvis, unfortunately, had no share in the will."

"And Mr. Jarvis?" I asked.

"No mention, of course. From what Mrs. Jarvis told me this afternoon, it will be some time before her former husband is released from Leavenworth. He has been there three years."

"And you?" I asked.

He looked puzzled. He looked wary. "I—ah—make a business of looking up missing heirs. It has paid me fairly well, through the years. In this instance, I was hired directly by the executors of the estate. Being located in Seattle, and being rather prominent—"

"That isn't what I meant," I said.

He coughed. He looked dimly uncomfortable. "Just precisely what did you mean?"

"You played it very cute," I said. "You dealt through Mrs. Jarvis. Maybe you knew her when she was back in Seattle, huh?"

"I had met her. It was a long time ago."

"Okay. So Junior gets his money, and Dad will watch it for him. But Dad is killed, and then, of course, Auntie Sue could adopt Junior, being the only living relative, and become eligible for the estate

in the event something happened to Junior."

"Are you accusing me of something fraudulent, Mr. Knowles?"

"It wouldn't stick, if I did. You're a very careful man, aren't you, Wharton?"

"I have to be, in my work. Mr. Hutson wasn't listed in the city directory or the phone book. Mrs. Jarvis was. I went, of course, to her."

"And this afternoon you played peek-a-boo. It's beneath your dignity, Wharton."

He looked at me, and the blue eyes were bleak. "Of course I contacted Mrs. Jarvis before today. What my motives were, and my plans, I won't reveal to you. As you say, I've been very careful. I am sure the authorities will have no cause for complaint so far as the successful completion of my mission here is concerned."

"You should have been in politics," I said.

He nodded sadly. "Perhaps. Was there something else, Mr. Knowles?"

"Only a murder."

"I know nothing about it, if there was a murder."

"Who's Mrs. Jarvis' friend? Who's paying the rent on that igloo of hers?"

"I have no idea."

"You aren't being very helpful, Mr. Wharton," I said.

"Believe me, if I knew anything of value, I would reveal it. It would be a serious mistake not to, at a time like this."

A nice, sincere closing speech, and probably true. I rose, "If I were you, I'd go down to the police right now, and explain about the whole deal. Just as a cover, in the event Mrs. Jarvis should squeal. Play it safe," I told him.

"An admirable suggestion," he said.

"Cheerio, Mr. Wharton," I murmured.

"Good-day, Mr. Knowles," he said as he closed the door.

I WENT down to the west side station from there, and Al Olson was in. I asked him, "Got any fingerprints on any of those glasses you boys stole from the Hutson place?"

"Lots," he said, "but nobody to tie them to. He could have taken that poison after his friends left, you know."

"Friends?" I asked, "Plural?"

"I don't know. Wait, I'll find out." He picked up a phone and called an extension number, asked some questions and put the phone down again. "All right. one friend, and not a very good print. What's the angle, Mike? A small time grifter dies in a cheap rat trap, and you go padding around like Sherlock."

"I've got his son," I said. "Nice boy. Worth a million dollars. I've got him where he's safe. He'll stay there until I know he's going to be safe. Does any of this make sense to you?"

"Hell no," he said.

"That's what I hoped. I wanted you to look dumb, for that Sherlock crack. You might run out to Morris and crack down on that grass widow, Mrs. Jarvis. You might sober her up and work some truth out of her. If it's in her."

He had me by the shoulder now. "What's it all about, Mike?"

"Murder," I said. "What was in that whiskey?"

"Conium."

"And where does a cheap grifter get conium? Why, for the first time in his son's memory, is he drinking whiskey out of a bottle he brought home? Or somebody brought to him?"

"You got some answers, Mike?"

"I think I've got one—the big one You work on this Mrs. Jarvis. Get her, and hold her. If you can't run her in, put a man on her, all the time. Don't let her out of sight."

"Check," he said. "Keep in touch."

"You'll get the credit," I said, "for the papers."

I drove back to the office. I was hungry, but I wanted to finish this up, if I could. Maybe I wouldn't have to look for him. Maybe he'd be waiting at the office.

I parked the car in front, and went up the stairs. There was a light on in my office. There was a man sitting in the chair on the customer's side of the desk.

He wore a tweed suit and a covert topcoat and an expensive hat. He had scar tissue over his eyes, and a slightly flattened nose, and maybe his ears were a shade thicker than they should be. Tony Jeswald.

He asked casually, "Any luck, Mike?"

I shook my head. "How about you?"

"Nothing. The boss will be hot. You think that kid might know something, or he might have seen something?" Very casual, this.

"That's what I suggested to Mrs. Jarvis," I said. "Did she tell you that?"

"You're not making sense, Mike." Less casual now.

"She told me," I went on, "that she thought I had the boy. There was only one man I told that to. You. She guessed I was a detective, and not from headquarters. A private detective. You phoned her, didn't you?"

"I don't know her. You nuts or something?"

"Okay, listen to me. She's your girl. Maybe she even suggested a long time ago that you give her poor brother-in-law a job. Which you did, selling those tickets. Wharton comes to town with his story and goes to her. She tips you off. Who else would be likely to be drinking with a sad lad like Hutson? You're his boss. You can come and go there any time you want. After he's dead, you and the lady can get married and adopt the boy, and I won't accuse you of the rest, because I'm not sure."

He was watching me. He was licking his lips.

"Both of you talk too much," I said, "and neither of you are too bright. When you're dumb, it's best to be quiet." I took something out of my desk drawer. "They've got a print or two down at the station that might match yours."

He was very pale.

"The cops have got your lady friend, now," I said.

Tony said hoarsely, "The kid'll get his money. The boss wouldn't want you to mix in his business, Mike."

"This isn't the boss's business," I said. "And he doesn't like his boys to think for themselves. This is your own private little deal, and he won't like it."

"The kid'll get his money," he repeated. "Nobody was hurt, Mike, just a guy who had no reason to live."

"Just a man with a kid, and a million dollars to watch." I looked at him, and watched him tremble. "Why don't you go for your gun?"

He saw the gun I had in my right hand, then. He looked at me, and started to reach toward his shoulder, and then he made a break for the door.

I caught him in the back of the leg, right through the knee. . . .

He didn't break down right away, but the Jarvis girl did, and the print matched up, and that was all they'd need. I left the station around eight, and drove right out to the farm. They were all sitting in the living room, Ma and George and Junior, and I told them as much as I had to.

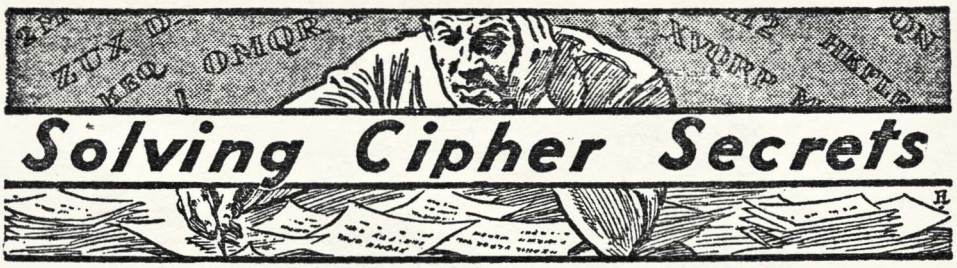
"It's a rotten world, Junior," I told the kid.

"It's nice out here, though," he said. Do you think I could stay here, after I get all that money?"

"I don't see why not."

"Why don't you stay out here? It's nice. It's not rotten. Do you think you'd like it, living here?"

"It would drive me daffy, Junior," I said. "It's a rotten world, but I kind of like it."




**Founded in 1924** **Article No. 847**

**M. E. Ohaver**

**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. 5283—Early Exit. By Londoner. Try OK, and ending -OKT, -EONKP, as *in, -ing,* and *-tions.* ZKU (*-n-*) and ZE (*-t*) will then follow as *and* and *at.* Next, complete ZYNDE (*a-o-t*) *and YDE* (*--t*), both lacking the same two letters.

XCXHDEONKP GXAX VNALXARB SXRU OK UZBEOLX. YDE YDPB FOHMFNHMXEP, FORVXAOKT ESX HANGUP, VNAHXU ESX FAZHEOHX NV SNRUOKT ESXL ZE UZGK, YXVNAX RZATX KDLYXAP NV FXNFRX GXAX DF ZKU ZYNDE.

No. 5284—The Big Parade. By Mrs. I. M. Watts. A new fan offers her first attempt at composing a crypt! Note pattern ULGU for a start, continuing with PAUL and phrase PDND ZYU.

AZFVAEAUAKD HGUNYZE TYNDR BANBVE DXHOYSDD PAUL FVDEUAYZE. YPZDN NDXAZRDR PYNCDN ULGU AJ HVTOAB PDND ZYU BVNAYVE, ELYP PYVOR LGKD ZY TVEAZDEE.

No. 5285—Man versus Beast. By °Sc. D. Compare short words XYGZ, GY, and OX. Substitute in *UXYODUK, and fill in. Pattern-word YIKKRYT will then be easy to guess.

*UXYODUK YIKKRYT EIYTIR RAUKPT IKBOA BQRS PYGE XYGZ RCQUITBOGK, RFRK OX DQUTR AUTBT BVRKBS GY BQOYBS ZOART. UKBRAGER DUK'B RAGER XYGZ QIKBRY!

No. 5286—Worldly Possessions. By Zadig. Note three-letter connective BVF between longer words. Try for endings -YYGY and -YGY. Thus to GZBYGZ and BZZGYX.

LERODG BZZGYX XZBAL UNEYG LEDTGXY BVF LBDT QOGRF: YNEG NEZV, LROGZY, DPL DBTG, ESGZYNEGY, LBOZ EH KRBYYGY, AGBX-ZBXOEV DEPLEVY, GZBYGZ,

XUE HPYGY, YBDT EH LGBVPXY, CPVFRG EH LBLGZY.

No. 5287—Mass Transportation. By °Theodore W. Midlam. Note OBY in series of words separated by commas. Letters thus found will unlock OBBKOR. Next, OSU and AFSUUF.

VGAF GN FXU FZUBFD-FXSUU JHRRHGB OBBKOR FSOBAHF LOAAUBCUSA HB GKS EHFHUA OSU EOSSHUY JD AKJZODA, FSOEPRUAA FSGRRHUA, JKAUA, OBY AFSUUF EOSA.

No. 5288—Reckless Riders. By †Fern G. Thrice-used ending -HDY occurs once after a double. With D known, compare EDDVEF and EFF. Follow up with EYN, etc.

SEPO-PHOHDY AUDBNZBEDBZ, EFF VDONP NHYSB CNEPZ UR EYN, GPUKHON AVBN ZHYSB EB EDDVEF *ZSNBFEDO PUONU. FEPHEB-ZGHDDHDY AUXTUCZ, GHZBUF-GEALHDY AUXYHPFZ PHON XHFONZB GUDHNZ EKEHFETFN.

No. 5289—The Old Appeal. By *Sara. Distinctive pattern words FGFAHAAFHU and BOAAXAB provide entry. Check KFL and ending -LLAL. Then substitute for D in FAD and DKGBHB.

"FAD OVVE" NYGFRB NKZE FGFAHAAFHU ZAFHTYS AYK. OAR-V'-PTHHVF BOAAXAB, MGFZUAL DKBM-OGEA DKGBHB, MKLLAL UGMB, NVFFAHB, BUKDOB, KFL DUKH-FVHB!

No. 5290—A Weapon of War. By Vedette. Identify ending -PXGG. Substitute in RSPPG and PSRX, both lacking the same two letters. Follow up with GRSH, GHERX, OEGRG, etc.

"DEATH," *HEMS-YXFXPNLXY PSCTSY YXEDU GLKEJ, YXEYPJ HXKFX LNSGNH, EPONGD NYNKPXGG, RQQXZD PSRX GHERX FXHNO, LXHXDKEDXG ZPNDUSHV, GNOX VEG OEGRG. GRSH ZNHDEZD RSPPG BSDUSH DBN OSHTDXG!

No. 5291—Successful Effort. By °Volund. Study endings -N, -B, and -BNB; also -RRZ, using the only Z in the crypt. Then complete BVGRB and DGBNB.

TURN OVERAND, VAANSTAGHL DNYUDP, DEHB FGAX LDNVA RNVTB AUFVDP YDUBBCVD, TRVHAB TURN, DGBNB LDVYNKERRZ, BVGRB UOND CVD. YDUFP VTTRVEPB.

No. 5292—Robinson Crusoe. By H. L. Kruger. A classic adventure unfolds in this final cipher, an alliterative text, every word beginning with the same letter. Find your own clues, fans!—Asterisks in crypts indicate capitalization.

CGPFB CBPGO CXVD. CPSO CHFKVKPF CTUB CXPFOTUFE. CUZO, CSODG CPHAESN. CUT CHAFVCO, CBPPGX COUC. COUFRXOE CXVDTFORL, CUSKUYOE CHDDSVOC. CRUSOE CHBBVG, CRUAAOE COUYVFG CXPFO. CGUFGOE CXOSGOF.

READER response to this department is certainly most gratifying! And especially so, since this issue marks the beginning of the 26th year of "SCS"! Many new fans are heeding our invitation to send in solutions, and numerous old-timers are returning to our friendly circle after time out for various reasons. Latest newcomers include W. A. Buck, Eleanor Curran, A. E. Cusick, Jim Devine, Ellen Edmonds, Virginia Hawkins, Grace Knapp, Mrs. W. H. Long, Deer Park, Merlin Shute, Harold R. Smith, Geraldine Taber, and R Van Trump.

And old-timers, again joining up with the faithful, include °Kay Vee See, gone since Dec., 1941; *Statist, away for four years and; the following, absent one to three years: †Anidem, †Mrs. H. H. Bailey, °S. H. Berwald, †Bombardier, *R. C. C., †Canco, °H. Hun, †Jughaid, and Sport La. Our heartiest greetings, fans! Latest solving scores of all cryptofans are given in our *Cipher Solver's Club!* More names in subsequent issues!

No. X-5294—Mathematical Cipher. By John DeVore. All three problems are alike, except for use of different keywords. Find the five-word message hidden in the secret keys!

```
  (a)          (b)          (c)
  S C T K      D P S L      X I A Q
         A            T            B
  L Y R I D    F I H O E    E U N T O
```

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| S<br>D<br>X | C<br>P<br>I | T<br>S<br>A | K<br>L<br>Q | etc. |

Current puzzles comprise ten fine crypts, an intriguing division, and a clever cryptarithmic cipher, No. X-5294 by John DeVore. Solve the latter mathematically, or as a multiple anagram. To test your perseverance, try the mathematical approach. To anagram, make ten slips, as shown, each bearing a column of three letters having the same digital value. Try various combinations of these slips, to produce likely letter combinations in all three lines. The correct order will unscramble the secret message, and with slips then numbered *0*-to-*9*, left to right, will unlock the multiplication and prove your solution. Can you solve it?

No. X-5282. This compound cipher utilizes rail fence transposition in combination with Caesar alphabetical shift substitution.

*Text:* ticmo . . . hsopu . . .
*Cipher:* UJDNP . . . ITPQV . . .

Explanation of †Diana Forrest's "Double Cipher," No. X-5282 in last issue, is given herewith. Frequency count should reveal the one-place forward shift in the alphabet, and inspection would be sufficient to indicate the transposition scheme. Answers to current ciphers will appear in next issue. Keep your answers and all contributions coming, fans! No. 5293—Cryptic Division. By †Jayemen. Two five-letter words, numbered from 0 to 9, form the key. The second multiplication and subtraction show values of L and S.

```
F O R ) S P O R T ( F S I
        Y T P
      ---------
        0 F S R
        0 L E L
      ---------
          0 P R T
          0 S F P
        ---------
            0 S I
```

## ANSWERS FOR LAST ISSUE

5271—Since interesting several friends in becoming avid cryptogram club members, I now have some stiff competition in scoring high points.

5272—Scientists have found a mysterious ocean-wide layer of water, about five hundred feet thick, one-fifth to one-half mile below surface, which reflects sound. A "phantom bottom" of the sea!

5273—Although the wife of Noah isn't named in the Bible, ancient Jewish tradition relates that she was Naamah, the sister of Tubal-Cain.

5274—Gypsy promises rheumatism cure. Takes woman's life savings, rubs money over, folds in paper, puts in trunk, departs. Victim unlocks trunk, opens paper. No money! Plenty of rheumatism!

5275—Andrew Carnegie, whose benefactions totaled over three hundred millions, gave away more money than any other Scotchman who ever lived.

5276—Whirring vacuum cleaner awakens exhausted daytime sleeper. After several vain attempts, wrestling with elusive Morpheus, vexed night worker finally seeks movie, dozes undisturbed.

5277—Hard-hearted husband rubs eyes with onion at wife's funeral, fakes tears. Explains smell: "Just ate hamburger sandwich with everything!"

5278—Kindergarten children build block houses, skip around room, sing songs about raindrops, make necklaces, draw pictures, pretend sleep while resting, then frolic some more.

5279—Ovoid stars cause eager stir amongst scientific gentry; dart through fiery trough, vanish dimly into far-off space, lost amidst unknown eons.

5280—Some excerpts from daily crossword puzzle: "equivocating" means "weaseling"; "symbolic diagram" means "graph;" "geometrical figure" means "ellipse"; "oscillate" means "swing."

```
5281—Key: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0
          D A V E N P O R T S
```

All answers to current ciphers will be duly credited in our *Cipher Solver's Club.* Address: M. E. Ohaver, *New Detective Magazine,* Fictioneers, Inc., 205 E. 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y.

*Sometimes a cop gets a chance to write off a case with his own blood—but he's got to be—*

# DEAD RIGHT

## By Jack Bender

FOR over a week now he had felt a vague uneasiness, an impression of impending disaster which puzzled him with its elusiveness. His mind refused to offer even the slightest clue on which to base an analysis, and yet he was convinced that something indicative must exist and that surely he would discover it.

Because of his profession he was not annoyed; he had learned to trust his hunches with a measure of respect, even knowing he could not hurry them. It would come to him in time. And then, with his ability to reason or to doubt, he would be able to decide if he had any cause to worry. But for now, he had enough to think about.

He sat in a large easy chair in one corner of the living room, near the window, smoking, his eyes aimlessly studying the grey skies beyond. Sometimes this helped, he'd found—the bleak, unending vastness seemed to stimulate his intuition. For a long while he stared out through the slanting drive of the rain. He did not move until he heard someone at the door.

Rising, he punched out his cigarette in a tray. He was a tall man, given to sturdiness throughout his entire body; his hair was dark brown, but thinning, his face faintly ruddy and undistinguished. He was thirty-nine years old, and looked it. He did not look like what he was, a detective first grade, Homicide.

Standing in the doorway, his wife regarded him with annoyance for a moment. "Haven't you finished dressing yet?" she demanded. "Now you know we'll be late."

She swept into the room, wet and irritated, and set her packages on the table. "Everytime we promise to go over to Mary's you try to find some way to get out of it. If you don't like my sister, just tell me."

He said nothing. He neither liked nor disliked Mary or her husband. They didn't interest him at all. Today, particularly, he was not in the mood for their small talk.

"If you weren't going to get ready, you could have gone to the delicatessen for me. You know I like a snack before I go to bed."

"I don't," he said.

She was a big woman, a year his junior, handsome in a large and striking manner. Her broad-featured, soft-skinned face was not meant for pouting. She looked more ludicrous than hurt. "You'd think you would have saved me the trip in this rain. What a day!"

"You could have ordered the stuff. They'd have sent it over."

She snorted, which he interpreted to mean that she did not think it worth the tip to the delivery boy. He wondered vaguely what she did with their money; his salary wasn't terrific, but it was more than enough for the way they lived. He supposed that people thought she was a good wife. He knew better. He despised her miserliness; her passion for thrift and saving embarrassed and annoyed him, but it was a subject he was content to avoid.


*She toppled over the edge of the platform, screaming. . . .*

He let her handle everything, his insurance, the growing bank account, all the family finances, while he contented himself with escaping into his job.

"I'll get dressed," he said.

She took off her dripping coat. "We should be leaving now. Mary doesn't like to hold up dinner." She took the packages out into the kitchen and he started to go in the bedroom.

"I don't suppose you took the dog out, either," she called. Her voice was harsh.

"No," he said.

Putting on his fresh white shirt he wondered if Mary's husband, John, would be there. John—civil service, like himself—was a subway guard, and sometimes worked on Sunday. If John were not there, he could possibly excuse himself immediately after dinner and get away somewhere. He went back to the closet and took his raincoat instead of the top-

coat which his wife had set on the bed.

"Won't you please try to hurry!" she said. "You always dawdle so! Enough to give a body the fidgets."

"I'm coming."

"Don't forget the umbrella."

As they were going out the door, the phone rang.

She sighed heavily. "Oh, my Lord! Won't we ever get going!"

It was Lieutenant McElroy calling. The Corby case. A patrolman out in the sticks had picked up a vag, who turned out to be the missing Frank Corby. He was being brought to Headquarters now. Corby, the lieutenant said, had confessed to murder.

He was placing the phone on its cradle when his wife came in from the hallway, frowning at the additional delay.

He had told her about the case. "I'll have to go downtown. I was working on it."

"I knew it. I just knew it!" She shook her head from side to side in a familiar gesture of impatience. "You and that damn Department make me sick!"

He frowned. In the ten years of their marriage he had never lied to her about his work. "I'll drop you off at your sister's," he said. "Or better still, you take the car. I'll stop by later. This won't take very long."

They went downstairs to the garage. "Did he confess how he did it? The way he killed her, and managed to have an alibi? You couldn't figure it out, you said."

"The lieutenant didn't say."

Riding downtown in the subway, he reviewed the Corby case, grateful that he had something new to occupy his mind. The vague uneasiness he'd known for over a week seemed stronger, but now he was suddenly eager to avoid attempts to diagnose its reasons for existence. Which was as puzzling as the mystery itself.

So he thought about the Corby thing.

It seemed Frank Corby's wife, Amanda, had fallen in front of a subway train. A week and a half ago, at one o'clock in the morning, she and her hubby had had a row; she walked out on him. About a half hour later, a subway motorman swore she fell from the platform in front of his train as he pulled into the Sammath Street station, and there wasn't time enough to get the brakes on. There'd been nobody on the platform to push her, and Corby was in the apartment of neighbors at the time. It looked like an accident, or suicide, but it smelled a little, too. Some of the Corbys' neighbors testified to the constant bickering—over money matters, mostly—that had gone on all the time; he was quite a spender. He had a double indemnity policy on his wife; her accidental death was very handy; his dropping in on his neighbors, on the pretext of apologizing, a little while after his wife had walked out, seemed too convenient an alibi for an innocent man. So the Department had given it the look-see, and Corby made it more suspicious by getting panicky and suddenly taking a powder. Until tonight, when he had come in, he had been missing.

In his own office at Headquarters, he picked up the Corby folder, then went down the hall to Lieutenant McElroy's office, where a patrolman whom he didn't recognize stood outside near the door. Inside were another patrolman and McElroy. They looked strange. Their faces wore a queer pallor and lines of nervousness had worked in under their eyes.

"Oh, it's you," McElroy said. He took a deep breath, and nodded toward the shattered window that faced the inside courtyard. He smiled grimly. "You're late," he said. "Corby went that way."

The patrolman looked silently at the broken window. The sounds of voices and activity came up from the courtyard, five stories below.

"He was off his rocker," McElroy said. "We'd just started questioning him when he broke. He was out of that chair and through the window before we could stop him." The lieutenant snapped him fingers. "Like that."

"Did he tell you how he managed to murder his wife?"

McElroy shook his head. "We hadn't got anywhere with him on that, when. . . . Dammit, I wish we could have got it wrapped up. Now it's going to hang open, and we'll hear from the Commissioner, I suppose." The lieutenant snorted. "And I told my wife I'd be back in time for dinner."

Which reminded him of Mary's dinner, and he wondered if his wife had got there yet. He looked at his watch, absently noting the time. Outside the rain beat down, and the peculiar feeling of uneasiness tugged more strongly at him. . . .

When he left Headquarters it was no longer raining. The odor of the city's clean pavements was a familiar one, which ordinarily he found pleasant, but tonight nothing pleased him. He felt queerly at odds with the world. The business of Corby bothered him, yet, when he thought about it, he knew he was being silly. He'd been a cop too long for that. It was one of those things.

A passing car startled him; he flinched. He began to tremble, and his breath refused to come, as sometimes happens in extremely cold weather. Perhaps he was ill. A cold coming on. He walked faster, hoping that the exercise would stir him from this numb-limbed, bone-chilled state. He had a fleeting sensation of panic, as if he were running from some relentless, inexplicable pursuit.

Two blocks away from Mary's house there was a corner saloon. Though he did not drink as a rule outside his home, he went in and ordered whiskey at the bar. He was tremendously annoyed to find that his hand was shaking when he raised the shot glass to his lips. He gripped it.

After three drinks he had warmed considerably and his head felt better; the prospect of dinner at Mary's did not seem such an oppressive thing.

IT WAS quite late when he got there. John and Mary seemed amiable enough, but his wife was obviously annoyed. He could not help mentioning the Corby case. It seemed to dispel the dull flatness of the atmosphere which he had learned to recognize as an habitual aspect of their visits.

"Did you find out how he killed her?" his wife asked, strangely intent. He recognized the familiar question before he realized that she had never shown so much interest in a case before. "Well, did you?"

"Huh? Oh, no," he said. "We're still up in the air."

"Seems to me," John said, "he was pretty slick. Like I was saying, before you got here, there ain't many ways you can rig up a murder, using the subway. But—"

Mary said, "Do you have to go?" and he saw that his wife had risen and was making the motions that told them she was ready to leave. There was the usual round of small talk, and fumbling for coats and umbrellas, and then they were out in the dark hallway in their own private shell of coolness. He knew his wife was angry with him, but she didn't mention it until they got down to their car a few minutes later. "You could have called, at least," she said accusingly. When he got in behind the wheel, she made him move over. "I'd better drive. You smell like a brewery."

He had no idea how a brewery smelled. Neither, he was certain, had she. He knew perfectly well he was not drunk; he was exceedingly sober. "I'm not drunk." He did not insist.

Slumped in the seat, he kept his eyes

straight ahead on the still-damp streets as his wife drove them homeward. His head began to throb, and he was suddenly afraid to look at the woman beside him.

The car jerked abruptly, its motor coughing. The motor caught and they went a few yards further before it coughed again.

His wife looked over at him. "I'll bet you didn't put any gas in the car."

It was something he'd meant to do. "Forgot all about it." Why hadn't she noticed the gauge when she'd driven over to her sister's?

He opened the car door. "Maybe I can find some place open. I'll get some gas." He discovered himself almost desperate in his desire to get away.

His wife laughed coarsely. "The bars are closed by now." She took a cigarette from her bag, lit it, and blew the smoke almost gently against the windshield. "It's too far to walk," she said, "but the subway is probably running." As if in answer, they heard the rumble of an underground train and felt the street shiver slightly beneath the car.

"You can come back for the car in the morning," she said. "We'll take the subway." They got out, she sliding over to his side, nudging him through the door. She slammed it after her and he heard the tools clanking in the back seat.

"Sammath Street." His wife was reading the street sign in the faint light from a distant street lamp. "We're not too far from the station."

*Sammath Street. Sammath Street.* What was so familiar about that? Oh, yes, of course, the subway stop where Corby's wife had been killed.

"My umbrella," his wife said, "I left it in the back seat," and went back to the car.

"Leave it," he called. "It's not raining."

But she fumbled around for a few minutes, clanking tools. Then she slammed the door and, with the umbrella clutched in her hand, followed him to the stairs.

His headache was worse, if anything; he felt cold because the liquor-warmth had gone, and the darkness increased his inexplicable sensation of panic. His wife said nothing as he hurried toward the station.

However uncomfortable the subway had seemed on past occasions, he found its breath of fetid atmosphere a strangely comforting thing now. His lungs filled with the stale, familiar odor, he found himself breathing easier, and the dim lights were better than the treacherous darkness of the streets. He paid their fares and they went down the long flight of stairs to the platform below. The place was deserted. He saw the metal post where Corby's wife had stood, three feet from the edge, and his mind began to come to life, seeking the answer to the case.

A night like this, he thought, same time, same station, and a woman toppled to her death, all by herself, alone, her husband several blocks away, with friends, witnesses. And yet her husband said he'd murdered her. How—how—

As he leaned to peer closer at the base of the metal post where Amanda Corby had stood, the sudden explosion of pain burst across his neck and shoulder, driving him face down against the cement flooring. He did not black out completely. He could sense rather than hear his wife behind him, ready to swing a second blow. It was this intuitive warning which had pulled him out of the way already, he was sure. He scuttled sidewise, crablike, moving abruptly toward the edge of the platform, then tried to look over his shoulder as he attempted to rise.

The second blow also missed his head. She was using the jack handle from the car, he saw. It swung in a vicious arc and bit deeply into the broad part of his back as he ducked under and sought to grab her arms. The blow drove him to his knees, moaning into his wife's furious,

animal-like snarls. They grappled and she stumbled over his body, then her scream—the only sharp sound of this strange combat—followed her body as it plunged down onto the tracks.

From the platform's edge he watched her, and he knew that she was badly hurt. Her leg projected at an improbable angle beneath her, blood worked in a creamy wash across her face. Reaching into his pocket he found his whistle and blew three sharp blasts.

He and the station change-clerk, who had responded to the police whistle, were waiting for the ambulance when the approaching subway train trembled the station. Fascinated, he saw his hat, lying near the edge of the platform, move quickly out toward the incoming train, and suddenly he began to see things very clearly.

"You knew how Corby killed his wife, didn't you? You figured it out at Mary's, from something John said."

His wife glared silently at him, while he got the umbrella and went over to the post where both Mr. and Mrs. Corby had stood. He looked down at the comb-like grill that made up the platform edge. Because the platform did not quite meet the side of the train, the grill moved out to cover the dangerous gap. He stood on the grill, testing the umbrella in various positions against the post, then looked at his wife for a long moment. A chill touched him, then was gone. A feeling of relief, of escape, overwhelmed him; his headache, he discovered, had disappeared.

At the far end of the station, he found an alcove with a public phone. He dialed the familiar number and said, "Sorry to get you up, McElroy, but I thought you'd be glad to know we can write off the Corby case. Yeah, I'm at the Sammath Street Station now. The way it was, Corby killed his wife first, then left her on the edge of the platform, propped against a metal pillar with an umbrella or something. When the train comes in, there's a sort of sliding grill on the edge of the platform—it moves forward and she topples forward with it, right in the path of the train. The trains don't run very often at this time of night, so he had time to get back to his neighbors' apartment. . . ."

*She would have gone back to Mary's,* he thought, *and said I had been too drunk or too quarrelsome. That would have been her place for an alibi.*

"Yeah, I know he was taking a chance, but what the hell, he'd killed her and had to fix up something. How do I know how he knew about it? Sure it will work. Somebody just tried it again."

McElroy really popped awake, then.

"No, no, nobody killed. Everything's under control. I'm taking the prisoner down to the hospital, and we can worry about booking her in the morning."

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UNTIL comparatively recent times, local English law prescribed a special punishment for any person caught robbing a church. After the thief was executed, his corpse was carefully flayed and the skin nailed to the door of the church as a warning to others who might be tempted to break into it.

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About the middle of the sixteenth century, an English cook poisoned her employer by putting arsenic in a pot of stew. Convicted murderers of that time automatically drew a death sentence, but the law left the method of execution to the presiding judge. In the case of the cook, His Honor ruled that she be placed in an iron caldron and cooked to a stew. —*Harold Whiteside*

# WHO DIES THERE?

***They made a grim bargain—the cop who needed justice and the dead man who needed a face—a bargain that cried a warning—killer beware!***

THE body was a mess. According to the widow's story, when McNary opened the door and saw who it was standing on the porch, he had instinctively thrown up his hands to protect his face. But the flesh of his hands had been little protection against the blast of a double-barreled, sawed-off shotgun fired from a distance of two feet. Both his hands and face were bloody pulp, and McNary was very, very dead when someone finally located Sheriff Sampson, who was fishing for snook in the rip-tide in the mouth of Dead End Pass.

That in itself was bad. To make it worse both the state and the county patrol, and even the F.B.I., who had been trailing Mrs. McNary for months in the hope she would lead them to McNary, reached the beach cottage before Sheriff Sampson did. Sampson decided bitterly that he had as much chance of collecting the ten thousand dollar reward on McNary as a snowball has in hell.

When he did arrive on the scene he stood on the edge of the crowd, wondering what in the name of time to do with the two ten pound snook he was holding. He solved the problem by thrusting them, stringer and all, into the hands of an admiring summer tourist. Even then, before he could enter upon his official duties, he was forced to stop and inform the man what type of bait he had used.

"Grunts," he hold him. "But they're only good off the mouth of Dead End Pass on an outgoing tide. Other places they bite mostly on pig fish, except off Bunces Pass, where they like mangled shrimp."

As conscientious a fisherman as he was officer of the law, bait was a sore spot with him. It hurt the artist in him to watch some well-meaning fool bait for redfish with cut-bait in water where they'd only hit fiddler crabs, or vice versa. Fishing, in his opinion, was a science. A man finding himself in Ybor City might order chicken and yellow rice. But the same man at Steve's Rustic Inn would order steak. It was the same with fish. To catch a fish, you had to give it the particular type of bait it wanted.

Sergeant Rand of the county patrol saw him pushing his way through the curious around the porch, and formed a circle with his thumb and forefinger that was almost as wide as his grin. That meant Steve was in. Steve had been first on the spot. The dodger read dead or alive. And Steve would get it all. Neither the state boys nor the F.B.I. were allowed to accept reward money. But it was, Sampson thought, positively indecent, the way the man was gloating. And in the presence of death. After all, money was only money. He swallowed hard. Baby would never forgive him. Ten thousand dollars would have sent her out to Hollywood with the clothes and financial backlog that Baby claimed was all she needed to get her start and become a star.

**By John Corbett**

*Sampson came over the window sill. . . .*

The widow was telling her story for the record. "We were having a bottle of beer when the knock came on the door. I said I'd go, but Mack was nearest. He pushed open the door and looked out. Then he threw up both of his hands, as though to protect his face, and the rat on the porch let him have it."

Giles, the F.B.I. man, asked if she had seen the man well enough to identify him as Joe Hovak.

"Just his back. He was a big man, as big as Mack. It could have been either Joe or Frank."

"It must have been Joe," Giles said. "I got a teletype at the office this morning that Frank Garvey was picked up in L. A."

No one paid any attention to Sampson. He stood, transferring a stray fish scale which had stuck to the palm of his right hand to his trousers, reviewing what little he knew of Mack McNary. He'd read of the case in the papers. He had, he believed, gotten a dodger on McNary some months before. But who would ever have thought a big time swindler like McNary would have chosen a place like Palmetto

Beach in which to hide out with May?

"Mack had been here how long? I mean in this cottage?" Giles asked.

The widow said, "Four mouths."

Sampson felt the back of his neck get red. He would have one sweet time explaining this to Baby.

"Now, about the money," Giles said.

The Widow McNary shook her head. "I don't know where it is. It's probably stashed down here along the beach somewhere, but Mack didn't have time to tell me." She rested her forehead in her hands. "I wish Mack had never cut the caper. All it's brought us is trouble."

One of the state boys said, "He shouldn't have been such a hog. He should have split with his pals."

Sampson remembered more of the case. McNary was reputed to be the smartest con man in the business since the retirement of Yellow Kid Weil. With the help of the brothers Joe and Frank Hovak, he had taken a respectable Ohio manufacturer for a reputed two hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars in a 'hot' factory switch deal. Sampson had read of the affair at the time, but the mechanics of the swindle had been too complicated for his simple mind to follow. What was more important was the fact that McNary had failed to split with his pals, and one of them had found him and blown off his head with a shotgun. Sampson made a mental correction. McNary *had been* the smartest con man in the business. He had never seen a deader man.

Giles said, "In other words, there is almost a quarter of a million dollars stashed here along the beach somewhere?"

"That," the dead man's wife admitted, "is something I don't know. The money could be in a vault in Orlando or Miami. I hadn't seen Mack in five months, up until a few minutes ago. You fellows were pushing me too hard, and we were afraid I might lead you to him."

Giles said, "Evidently we weren't the only ones who were following you here."

Dry-eyed, she sat cursing Joe Hovak under her breath.

Sampson studied the widow. A brassy blonde in her middle thirties, who was reputed to have started life as stripteaser, the mileage was showing on her. Too many Old Crows had left the imprint of their feet around her once baby-blue eyes. Her once-beautiful curves were showing the strain too.

Giles noticed Sampson for the first time. "Oh. It's you, sheriff," he said.

SAMPSON felt even more like a fool. He knew what Giles was thinking. If McNary had lived in the beach cottage for four months, he should have spotted him. That was easy to assume, but not as simple as it sounded. Time was when the beaches had been semi-deserted in summer, and a man had time to poke his official nose into his neighbor's business. But with the realization of the general public that West Coast Florida was as cool in summer as it was warm in winter, the beaches were crowded the year around. And one fat man in a pair of swimming trunks looked very much like another.

"We," Giles explained, "were right on her tail. We knew that sooner or later she would lead us to McNary." His smile was wry. "But it would seem we closed in thirty minutes too late."

Sergeant Rand of the County Patrol beamed. "I was the first guy here. My radio buzzes that I should investigate a shooting at the Trade Wind Cabanas. And who do I find but McNary—dead."

Sampson asked if anyone had seen the killer.

"A dozen people," Giles told him. "And their description stacks up to Joe Hovak. A big man wearing a white suit, with a snap brim straw hat pulled down well over his eyes, and driving a big blue Buick with license tag 4W-5460."

One of the state troopers consulted his notebook. "Which same car was stolen in St. Pete this morning," he contributed.

"We were going to Havana," the Widow McNary said. "We were going to take a bus this afternoon. From here to Miami by bus and from there to Havana by boat, all for forty-eight dollars and fifty cents."

A second F.B.I. man, whom Sampson didn't know, finished dusting the murder weapon and comparing the prints he had raised on the shotgun with those on a card he had taken from his briefcase. "It was Hovak all right," he told Giles. "I got a perfect set of prints off the stock, and McNary's prints are all over the cottage."

Giles used the phone to call his Tampa office and put out a general alarm on Hovak. One of the state troopers followed his example. When they had finished, Sheriff Sampson made a tardy third, although he doubted greatly if the killer was still in Palmetto County. If Hovak was wise, he had ditched the stolen car and was miles away by now.

There was a mild commotion on the porch, and County Coroner Phillips, late as usual, wheezed his bulk into the cottage and looked at the body with distaste. "And I'm supposed to work on that?" he asked sourly.

Giles nodded at his assistant, who handed him a sheaf of papers, then he led Mrs. McNary into the kitchen of the cottage. "Just give us check, Doc," Giles told Phillips. "The widow has identified the body. So have half a dozen neighbors." He looked at the dead man's battered hands. "But because we can't possibly get any prints off those, would you mind checking his height and bone structure, and all that?"

Seeing Sampson, Phillips smiled, "Hi, Elmer. How's Baby?"

Sampson beamed his appreciation. "Just fine, Charlie. She turned down two jobs for summer stock, and she's coming home tomorrow." He added quickly, "Just for a short rest, you know, before she goes on to Hollywood."

Phillips knelt at his task. "Fine. That's just fine, Elmer."

Giles was new in the Tampa office. He asked Sergeant Rand, "What's this Baby business?"

The county patrol grinned. "Don't let the old man hear you. Baby is his daughter."

"Pretty?"

"Naw. The old man thinks she's a combination of Linda Darnell and Yvonne DeCarlo. But Baby's just a sweet little cracker kid with a shape like a boy, freckles across her nose, and a yen to be an actress, on account of the coach of the senior high school play said that she had talent. She's been in New York three years, studying to some academy or other. It's just about bust Elmer, but I ain't never seen her in no picture yet. And me and the Missus go to the movies three times a week regular."

"Oh," Giles said. He was sorry he'd asked. He wasn't interested in Sheriff Sampson's domestic affairs. He still had a killer to find. Also the missing money.

"For a long time," Rand continued, "the old man would show you the latest picture of her and tell you how good she had done in the last play the academy gave. But the boys kinda discouraged him, and lately—" He stopped short as he realized that Giles was no longer listening to him. The F.B.I. man was squatted down beside Phillips, intent on the task at hand.

"Well?"

Phillips wiped his fingers on a piece of gauze. "The dental chart seems to check with what's left of his jaw. Why? Have you some doubt he's McNary?"

"None whatsoever," Giles said.

Sampson stood first on one leg and then the other. For all the good he was doing, he might as well have kept on fishing. He

walked to the screen and looked out. The crowd had grown until it was blocking traffic on the beach road. With a vague idea of making himself useful, he pushed the screen door and started out, only to have the door, held closed by too powerful a spring, slam in his face and knock his hat off.

Several men in the room behind him laughed.

Ignoring them, Sampson pushed at the door again. Again the screen slammed shut. He tried it a third time, this time pushing it open with one hand, then trying to cover his face with both hands before the door could close. It seemingly was impossible. Ignoring the door further, he examined the fine mesh screen. Looking up. Giles asked, "What's the idea, sheriff?"

Rand spoke before Sampson could. "Shh. Don't disturb the mastermind. The big fisherman's detecting a new fly."

Most of the men in the room laughed. The F.B.I. man wasn't amused. His eyes thoughtful, he got to his feet, dusted the knees of his trousers, and joined Sampson at the door.

There he too pushed at the screen and tried to cover his face with his hands before the door closed. When he failed to succeed on three tries, he said, "Yeah. I see what you mean." He examined the screen in the door even more minutely than Sampson had. Then, turning, he looked into the kitchen, where the now weeping brassy blonde was anointing the memory of her late husband with a stiff slug of bonded bourdon. . . .

FORTY-EIGHT hours in a cell hadn't changed the Widow McNary's mind. She still held to her story that she and McNary had been having a bottle of beer to celebrate their reunion when there had been a knock on the door. She had offered to go to the door, but McNary had said he was nearest. He pushed open the door and looked out. Then he had thrown up both of his hands to protect his face, and the rat on the porch had let him have both barrels.

She hoped that when they caught Joe Hovak they would do unprintable things to him before he was tried. She didn't know anything about the spring on the screen door. Hovak might have held the door open with one hand, for all she knew. By the time she had reached the door, her husband had been dead at her feet, and all she could see of the departing killer was his back.

Giles asked her, "And McNary didn't tell you where he stashed the money?"

The widow was emphatic on that point. "No. He did not. He didn't have time. I hadn't been in the cottage five minutes when he was shot."

Sampson cleared his throat apologetically. "And you two having been apart so long you had a lot of lovey-doveying to do, I suppose?"

The Widow McNary gave him a dirty look.

Giles asked, "And if we release you, where are you going now?"

The blonde said she didn't know. "Gather up Mack's things probably and head on for Miami. I'm not going to stay in that lonely joint that Mack was holed up in."

Sampson said, "I wondered about that. I mean, McNary picking such an out-of-the-way spot." He beamed, "But sometimes out-of-the-way places have their compensations."

The Widow McNary gave him another dirty look, then looked back at Giles. "You found Hovak's fingerprints on the gun?" she asked.

"We did."

"And you've identified Mack to your satisfaction?"

"Yes. I would say we have."

"And there's no charge against me?"

"None."

"Then slap one against me and book me or release me." She looked at the watch on her wrist. "You've held me the forty-eight hours the law allows you."

Sighing, Giles pushed back his chair and stood up. "Okay." He picked his straw hat from the desk and shaped it to his head. "Run her out to the cottage for me, will you, Sheriff? I've got to get back to Tampa and get started on the paper work."

The beach cottage was a mess, both inside and out. Outside, great yawning holes lurked in every likely location. Here and there on the beach, a dogged searcher, lured by the prospect of so much buried money, still dug by lantern light. The interior wasn't much better. Giles and his assistants had been orderly in their search. Not so the state and the county patrol. The contents of drawers and tables had been overturned on the floor. The contents of the dead man's two suitcases had been piled in a heap on the bed.

The Widow McNary was scornful. "The fools. The bloody-minded fools! They all had so much to say when Mack clipped that guy from Ohio, but, boy, are they ready to steal it from him."

The sealed cottage was stuffy. Sampson opened a window for her, and along with the night wind the sound of a woman weeping filled the room.

"She should cry," the blonde said. She poured herself a drink. "What's the latest on Hovak?"

Sampson told her they'd found the Buick, but Hovak hadn't been picked up as yet. He opened another window, then pawed idly through the things on the bed. "You want me to wait and drive you on into town, or you going to stay here tonight, or what?"

The blonde said, "I'm trying to decide." She looked over her drink at the crumpled picture that Sampson had picked from the effects on the bed. "What are you looking at?"

He told the truth. "A picture. Nice looking girl, too. Your sister, maybe?"

The blonde took the picture from his hand. "No." She started to say that she had never seen the picture before, thought better of it, and bit at her lower lip instead.

Whoever the girl in the scanty French bathing suit was, she was a little honey. She was flat where she should be flat. She curved where she should curve. Her eyes were dark and inviting. The smile on her lips was a promise.

Looking over the blonde's shoulder, Sampson read the inscription aloud, "*'Love and kisses. Always and always. The Little Girl Next Door.'* Nice," he commented. "Nice. I wouldn't mind living next door to her myself." He walked to the front door. "Well, I've got to get along. But if you do decide to leave tonight, you can always get a taxi." He was suddenly sympathetic. "You must feel pretty bad, huh, Mrs. McNary, not seeing your husband for so long, and then having everything happen like it did?"

Only the two windows were open. It was still hot in the closed-up cabana. The Widow McNary walked out on the porch with him, still holding the picture in one hand. "I feel like hell," she admitted. "How would you feel if you saw your husband killed right in front of your eyes?"

The light on the porch of the next cabana was on now, and the woman they had heard weeping was sitting in the swing. Only she was a girl, not a woman. She looked at Sheriff Sampson and the blonde woman, gave the Widow McNary a venomous look, then switched off the porch light and went inside.

There was no doubt in either of their minds. The crying girl was the girl of the scanty French bathing suit. Embarrassed, Sampson tugged at his collar. "Yes, sir. I've got to get along. But now don't you feel too bad, Mrs. McNary. If you aren't

holding out on Giles about the money, and I know you aren't, I doubt you'll be bothered any more." He added, earnestly, "If I were you, I'd forget about McNary and get myself another man. An honest one this time." He patted her shoulder. "A good looking woman like you, even if you are getting on in years, can always get a husband."

"Get out," the blonde ordered. "Get out!"

Shrugging, Sampson waded in the sand to his car and drove off down the dark beach road.

The blonde watched his twin tail lights out of sight, then walked back into the cabana and studied her face in the bathroom mirror, tears of strain and self pity trickling down her raddled cheeks.

"The dog! The dirty dog," she told her reflection.

There was still a stiff drink in the bottle. She drained it, then switched off the light and tried to see into the next cabana.

The shade of the bedroom was partially drawn, but the light was on and she could see the lower half of the girl's body as she moved around the room. What she could see was pretty. The Widow McNary wondered how many times Mack had sat here enjoying the view. Then she realized what the girl was doing. She was transferring her expensive clothes from the closet and the dresser to the equally expensive-looking luggage on the bed.

Knowing Mack, he had probably bought them for her.

The widow McNary called her an unprintable name. The nerve of her. The nerve of Mack. *Love and Kisses. Always and always. The Little Girl Next Door.* She realized she was still holding the picture, and crumpled it into a ball.

*What I ought to do,* she thought, *is go in there and scratch her nasty little eyes out. The gall. The colossal gall of them. And me working in a hot hashhouse for thirty-five dollars a week until Mack wired it was safe to come on down here!*

But Mack had wired her. She clung to the fact for consolation. Then a new and frightening thought assailed her. She had told Mr. Giles the truth about the money. Mack hadn't mentioned the money during the few minutes they'd had together to assure her it was safe. But what if Mack had entrusted the money to the little hussy next door?

She walked into the kitchen and found an unopened pint in the pantry that she didn't remember seeing there before. Refusing to look a gift horse's neck in the cork, the Widow McNary cracked the seal, took a drink, then looked out the back door at the car ports in the rear of the row of cabanas. There was no car in the port of the cabana Mack had occupied, but a gleaming, brand new black-and-chrome convertible stood in the stall belonging to the house net door. As she watched, the girl next door came out and put one of the smart bags she had seen on the bed into the luggage compartment, then locked the compartment carefully.

She was wearing a white silk bolero suit now and carrying a white cordé purse to match. More, she was no longer crying. In the harsh glare of the overhead light, she looked frightened. After placing the bag in the compartment, she glanced furtively at the unlighted cabana from which the Widow McNary was watching her.

The blonde renamed her under her breath. "The witch. The dirty little witch!"

With a last furtive look, the girl reentered the lighted cabana and began to close and lock the windows. She took some change from the white purse, dropped it into an envelope, wrote a name on the envelope and stuck it with a hairpin to the outside of the front screen door. Then, sitting at the kitchen table, she wrote a check hastily, stuffed it in the neck of a milk bottle and put the bottle on the back porch, before making a last tour of the cabana

to make certain she hadn't forgotten anything.

FROM her vantage point on the back porch, the aging blonde watched her sourly. She no longer needed the picture to tie the girl in with Mack. It was one of Mack's cardinal rules never to leave any minor beefs or debts behind him that might crop up to trip him, and the girl was an apt pupil. She hadn't forgotten a thing. She had even remembered to pay the paper boy and milkman.

The corners of her mouth turned down, the Widow McNary took another stiff drink from the bottle, then, setting the bottle on the rail of the porch, she walked silently down the back path to a spot just outside the harsh yellow pool of light cast by the overhead bulb in the car port.

The girl came out carrying her other bag. Locking the door behind her, she put the key under the mat, gave a last quick look at the unlighted house next door then walked briskly down the path to the car port.

Stepping into the light, the blonde asked her, "Going somewhere, dearie?"

The girl set the bag she was carrying on the cement and clutched her purse in both hands. "I beg your pardon?"

The Widow McNary said, "You should. But I asked you a question, dearie. Going somewhere?"

Some of her composure recovered, the girl opened the door of the car, put the bag on the far side of the front seat and then slid in beside it. "Why, yes. It just so happens I am. But what business is it of yours? Who are you?"

"You wouldn't know?"

"No."

"I'm Mrs. McNary."

Opening her bag, the girl found her ignition keys. "Oh. The wife of that—er—man who was killed the other afternoon."

"That's right. And you didn't know Mack, I suppose?"

Close up, the girl was even prettier than her picture. She even smelled nice.

"Why—er—no."

"You lie! And I know you're lying. That old fool of a sheriff found your picture in Mack's things. He wanted to know if you were my sister."

"Younger sister, undoubtedly," the girl in the car taunted.

Reaching in through the open window, the blonde snatched the white purse from her lap. "If Mack gave you that money, I'll kill you. Now get out of that car and let me look in those bags." She reached her arm through the window a second time. "Give me those keys."

This time the girl in the car was prepared. "The hell I will." She pressed a button, and the window glass in the convertible started to ascend, raising the blonde's arm with it.

"Damn you!" the blonde screamed. "Damn you!"

Retrieving her arm, she clawed at the door of the car, but the girl inside had pressed still another button, and the door refused to open. No longer frightened, she put her thumb to her pretty, snub nose and waggled her fingers. "That for you, sister," she taunted. "And if you want to know what I have that you haven't got, the answer is 'Not a thing.' " She smiled sweetly through the thick safety glass. "Only what I have is fifteen years younger."

There was a surge of power under the gleaming hood, and the car glided out of the port. The blonde, powerless to do any thing, hurled invective after it. Reaching the highway, it skidded in a fast turn, throwing up a shower of loose sand. Then, hugging the road, it picked up speed and roared rapidly out of sight.

Realizing she still had the white purse in her hands, the Widow McNary pawed through it frantically, seeking some clue to the girl's destination. She found what she was looking for in an inside pocket, along with half a dozen clippings concerning the caper that Mack had cut in Ohio.

The tickets had been stamped that morning in Tampa. They were via Pan-American Airways from Tampa to Lima, Peru. And there were two of them.

Her eyes green slits, suffused with hate, the Widow McNary ran heavily back to the cabana, thumbed hastily through the classified section of the phone book, then dialed a number.

"I want a cab," she told the dispatcher who answered. "Send a cab to the Trade Winds Cabanas."

Here and there a light still burned in a window back of a wrought-iron balcony, or showed briefly through the windows of a cigar factory as a watchman made his rounds. But the big and the little cafes were closed. There were few pedestrians on the street. For the most part, Ybor City slept.

The hotel was small and on the second floor. The stairs were dimly lighted. The register lay open on the desk, and beside it a sign that read: RING FOR CLERK. Still breathless in her haste, hoping she wasn't too late, the Widow McNary flipped the pages of the register until she came to the name Sam Gomez. Then her heels tapped their way down the hall, which was sodden with sleep and ancient cooking odors.

The room was at the end of the hall, the closed door dimly lighted by a red EXIT sign. She listened a moment, then rapped.

For a moment there was no sound. Then bedsprings creaked and a man's voice asked cautiously, "Who is it?"

"You know damn well who it is," she told him. "Open this door right now or I'm going to yell copper so loud it will wake everyone in the hotel."

THERE was the sound of a cautiously shot bolt. A key turned in the lock. A man's bulk loomed large in the open doorway. Despite the fact his eyes were heavy with sleep, he had a gun in his hand. "What the hell's the matter with you?" he whispered tersely. "Are you drunk, May? Or have you gone crazy or something? I told you I'd meet you in—"

"Ha," the big blonde said. "Ha." She pushed past him into the room. "Where is she?"

A big man, given to fat, with a newly-

grown smudge of mustache on his upper lip, he stood trying to make her presence make sense. "Where is who?"

For answer she slapped him with her open hand. "Don't give me that. 'Love and kisses. Always and always. The Little Girl Next Door.' " She slapped him again. "And I saw her, damn you, and she laughed at me. How much of our money did you give her, outside of buying her those clothes and that car?"

He smelled her breath. "You're drunk."

"Why shouldn't I be?"

"Honey," he begged her. "Please. Please keep your voice down. This is a burning rap. And believe me, I haven't the least idea what you are talking about. I haven't given any money to anyone." He pulled a battered suit case out from under the bed. "Outside of what it cost me to live, every penny of it is right in there."

No longer quite so certain of herself, May McNary looked, half-heartedly, in the clothes closet, then sat on the sway back bed and buried her face in her hands.

The big man shook her shoulder. "May. Honey. What is it? Talk."

Even in the red glow of the EXIT sign, the face she lifted to him was white. "I'm afraid I've cooked us both," she said finally. "The old fool of a sheriff found something wrong about the door. And he baited a trap for me, knowing I'd lead him to you."

"That's right," Sheriff Sampson agreed from the door.

From the fire escape outside the window, Giles added, "And don't try to use that gun. Come to think of it, you'd better drop it. Come on. Let's hear it fall."

The big man swung in a half crouch, saw three guns covering him from the window, and allowed the gun in his hand to clatter to the floor. "Well. That would seem to be that. I was afraid I was stepping out of my class when I went in for gunplay," he said.

He sat on the bed beside the blonde, keeping his hands on his knees and in sight. Sampson switched on the ceiling light and walked on into the room. "That's right. You're under arrest, big fellow. And I'm afraid this is one rap where that glib tongue of yours isn't going to be of much use to you."

Followed by the two state troopers who

had been present at the cabana, Giles kicked out the screen in the window and stepped over the sill. "Nice work, sheriff," he complimented.

Standing open-mouthed back of Sampson, County Patrolman Sergeant Rand asked, "But how in the name of time did you know, sheriff, that Mack McNary's wife would lead you to Joe Hovak?"

Sampson grinned at him. "I didn't. I didn't need to know. I knew where Joe Hovak was."

"You knew?"

"Sure. He was the guy who was killed on the beach. The guy on the bed is McNary."

Sergeant Rand swallowed hard.

The con man on the bed asked for and received permission to light a cigarette. "And there, it would seem, goes the ball game. Where did I slip up, Sheriff?"

"The screen door in the cabana. You should have checked the spring. There was too much spring to it. You couldn't possibly have pushed it open, covered your face with your hands and received two charges of shot before it slammed shut again. And the man who did the shooting couldn't have held it open. A ten gauge, double-barreled shotgun, even a sawed-off one, is a two-handed weapon. Once we had that, the rest was fairly easy to figure out."

McNary cursed without heat. "It's the little things. A lousy spring."

Sampson continued. "Then too, a man isn't often shot in such a manner that the charge destroys both his face and his fingerprints. As I see it, you're not such a bad fisherman yourself. You lured Hovak down to the beach, probably baiting your hook with the promise to give him his share of the swag. You and Hovak were of a size. Your bone structure was about the same. Then, working on a tight time schedule, and having stolen the Buick that morning, you and your missus shot him five minutes after she arrived. From then on, it was in the bag. Joe Hovak was wanted for murder. You were legally dead. There was no charge against you or the 'Widow' McNary. And as soon as the heat cooled off, the two of you could have skipped the country and no one would have been the wiser."

McNary was philosophic. "Well, you can't win 'em all. But what in the name of time did you feed May to bring her running over here to raise hell with me, with half of the law in Florida on her tail?"

"Sucker bait," Sampson said quietly. "I just said to myself, now, under the circumstances, just what bait would she be the most apt to bite on? And the answer was a pretty girl she thought you'd been playing house with." He grinned, "The Little Girl Next Door."

The blonde attempted to justify herself. "You should have seen her, Mack. She was a little honey. And she said—"

"What?" Sheriff Sampson asked flatly. "She didn't say a thing. All Baby did was let you look at her and hook yourself on your own conclusions."

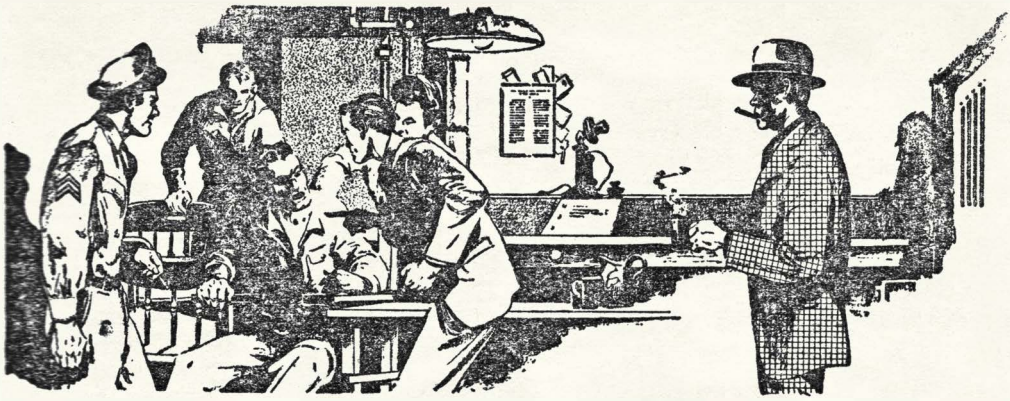
There could be no question of the reward now. And after returning the two plane tickets and paying for the car and the clothes and the luggage he had bought for Baby on tick, there should be plenty of money left for the financial backlog Baby would need.

"You see," he added to the blonde, "she's going to be an actress."

The blonde said sourly, "Going to be? What the hell do you think she is now?"

His face as red as the back of Sheriff Sampson's neck had been in the beach cabana, and his voice as sour as the blonde's, Sergeant Rand said, "Now wait. Just a minute. You mean to tell me that smooth little doll in the Caddy was Baby? Why three years ago—"

"Oh, that," Sheriff Sampson grinned. He handed the county patrolman a picture of Baby in her French bathing suit. "That was three years ago."



# THE THIRD DEGREE

## By Hallack McCord

*(Answers on page 109)*

SO YOU think you're a sleuth, eh? Then here's your chance to prove it. Below are listed twenty questions dealing with crime and criminal investigations. If you can answer eighteen or more of these questions correctly, you're definitely crack detective material. Answer sixteen or seventeen, and you're good. But answer only fifteen or fewer, and you're falling into the ranks of the pseudo-Sherlocks. Good luck!

1. If a crook acquaintance of yours told you he was looking for an "owl's head," which of the following items would you think he was seeking? A stuffed bird? A charity worker? A heavy revolver? A policeman's club?

2. What is the meaning of the underworld slang expression, "oak towel?"

3. If a crook told you he was a "slough worker," what type of crookedness would you think he was engaged in?

4. If a criminal acquaintance of yours told you he was headed for a "skin joint," where would you think he was going?

5. If a known victim of poison showed symptoms similar to those displayed by a person with malignant cholera, would you think the person might have been poisoned with castor beans?

6. What is the particularly unique symptom often shown by the person who has been poisoned with an "ordeal bean of Calabar?"

7. True or false? A poison is said to have a "cumulative action" when it is not eliminated as fast as it is taken in, generally speaking.

8. True or false? In general, a poison which is secreted through the pores will prove more deadly in a cold climate than in a warm one.

9. True or false? Nicotine is a poison which can be administered through the skin?

10. True or false? So far as modern science can determine, a person's fingerprints are pretty much a combination of those of his father and mother.

11. True or false? A person is likely to show a different fingerprint pattern when he is old than when he is a small child, shortly after birth.

12. True or false? If blood on cloth is exposed to the rays of the sun for a period of time, chances are it will turn bright red.

13. If, following a stabbing murder, the killer scrubs the floor of the murder room, is it possible and probable that blood stains can still be resurrected by the scientific detective?

14. What is the *modus operandi* of the typical furnished-room thief?

15. In the language of the underworld, what is a "pants-pocket worker?"

16. True or false? Confidence men have been known to go so far as to arrange a fake wrestling match in order to fleece a victim.

17. Of what use might a piece of soft lead be to a crook attempting to obtain the contents of a letter sealed with wax?

18. True or false? Digitalis is a poison which kills generally within one to 24 hours.

19. In the slanguage of the crook, what is a "Sam?"

20. True or false? The term "roust" means to pick pockets in a closely crowded gathering.

# ASKING PRICE—MURDER

## By Lance Kermit

IT HAD been a hot day at the plant, and the clatter of those big beams seemed to stay with him all the way home. He was a sole cutter at Reyenbach Shoe, and had been for the three years since the war. Before that, he'd worked in the sole leather stock room. Before that, he'd been young—and on the farm.

He came up the three flights of stairs to the two rooms and antiquated bath he'd called home since the war, and he hated every step of the climb.

He came into the musty, hot drabness of the two rooms to find his wife sitting near the living room window, a glass of lemonade in her hand. Her dress was white and clean, the place as clean as any reasonable man had a right to expect.

She smiled at him, and asked, "Bad day, Joe? There's some more lemonade in the icebox."

"Bad day," he said, and found the strength to smile. That was important, he knew, to both of them.

In a corner of the high-ceilinged kitchen, the ice box stood, an ancient affair with brass hinges he'd enameled himself. He took out the pitcher of lemonade and picked up a glass on his way back to the living room.

His wife looked at the pitcher, and her smile was wry. "Are we going on a lemonade binge?"

He poured out a glass, and drank half of it. He asked, "Where's Tommy?"

"Out somewhere. He said something about a league game, at the playground. He's probably there."

"I hope," Joe said.

"I told him to stay out of the streets," Jane said quietly. "He promised. He's a good boy, Joe. He's—in conflict with his environment." She smiled again. "I sound like a professor, don't I?"

Joe was quiet, stairng through the open window to the narrow street below. The clatter of the beam machines was still with him, and the stink of leather and the decaying death of an ambition.

He was talking more to himself than to her when he said, "I'll always be a rube. On the farm, I used to read those Horatio Alger stories, so help me. I not only read them; I believed them."

"You're a rube who's been around," she said. "You've seen most of Europe and a lot of these United States."

"With a rifle in my hand," he qualified it.

"That didn't affect your vision. What's bothering you, Joe? I mean, why is it worse today?"

"The heat, I suppose," he said. "I started at Reyenbach's fifteen years ago. I worked hard, those first years, and studied. I saved my money, and never missed a day, sick or well. A smart man would have seen it was a blind alley. A smart man would have forgotten Horatio Alger and got out."

***Everybody is allowed one mistake—the kid had made his and was as good as dead . . . better, for he could still teach his killer that—two can die!***

"Maybe. Those were bad years. Those were the years when dentists and lawyers were on relief, if you remember, and lots of smart people. We were lucky to have the Reyenbach checks through those years. And then a war came along. You didn't start that war, Joe, but you helped to finish it. You've nothing to be ashamed of, Joe Calvin. You've got nothing in the world to apologize for."

"Yes I have," he said stubbornly. "A man who brings a wife and son to a dump like this has got plenty to be ashamed of."

"That's something else that isn't your fault. If you want to pay a hundred and ten dollars for an upper flat in an ordinary neighborhood, we can do it, Joe. We can live on beans. But we'd be fools, wouldn't we? We've never been that."

"You haven't," he said, "except to stick with me."

"Joe—," she said. "Don't talk like


***As Whitey got into the cab, Joe hit him. . . .***

that. There's places where the air is clean and the rent almost sensible. You don't have to stay in the shoe factory."

"I haven't been a farmer for fifteen years," he said. "I was twenty when I left the farm."

"You were thirty when you started to be a soldier. But you learned enough about soldiering to win a silver star."

His laugh was dry and bitter. "I'll tell you something about that, Jane. With a silver star and a dime, you can get a cup of coffee."

"That's an old joke," she said quietly, "and it was never funny. Joe, we've got the bonds, every last one of the war bonds we bought. I haven't cashed any of them. If you want to get out, let's. I'll go any place you want to go."

"I know you will," he said. "I wish I had your courage—and your faith."

She winked at him. "I'll have some more of that lemonade, before you finish it." She watched him pour it, and looked up to meet his eyes. "Thirty-five isn't old, you know. It's only half a life. You've got the best half ahead."

He didn't argue with that. In two rooms, in this heat, there was no place for cynicism. He said gently, "It's been a bad day, baby. I'll feel better when the heat's gone."

He sat by the window while she prepared supper. He was thinking of the long hours he'd put into the farm, as a boy, and how he'd hated it. He didn't put in those kind of hours now, but they took more out of him. There was no sense of accomplishment now.

He was still sitting there when Tommy came in.

Tommy had his mother's eyes and his father's chin. He was thin, but with a rawhide strength, and he could whip a ball home from second base with any of them.

He was fourteen now. He might wind up in Yankee Stadium, or he might wind up at Reyenbach's. Or worse. A good kid.

"How'd it go?" Joe asked.

"We won, 4 to 2."

"How'd you hit?"

"Two out of five. Singles."

"That's nice hitting. The gang beginning to shape up?"

"Pretty good." The boy put his glove on a chair and came over to sit near his father. "Dad—we need uniforms. We look crummy, up against some of the teams in the league. They've got backing that buys the uniforms and gloves for 'em. The gang's going to have a meeting tonight, and figure out a way to make some money."

"Good idea," Joe said. "You had me scared for a minute. I thought it was a touch."

Tommy was looking at the carpet. "No —no, I know you haven't got the money."

A swift resentment stirred in Joe, but his voice was pleasant as he said, "Take a tip from me, Tommy. Stay out of the factory."

Tommy said nothing. He was still staring at the carpet.

Joe was to remember the scene later, to remember the strange look of guilt on Tommy's young face.

The heat held, and the humidity. The flat seemed to trap it, hold it through the nights. Joe and Jane sat on the front steps of the building until late, every night, trying to get what breeze there was. But no matter how late they went up to bed, the place was an oven.

Tommy was gone every evening until nine or nine-thirty, and if the heat bothered him, he gave no sign of it. A couple times he brought some ice cream home with him, and they ate it out on the steps.

Joe asked him, "How are you boys making all this heavy money?"

"Tickets," Tommy said, "for all kinds of things. Dances and ball games and fights, and stuff."

The next day, Joe was swinging a load

of bends up onto the platform when the foreman came over to tell him he was wanted on the phone.

That had never happened before. It could only mean trouble, and Joe thought first of Tommy.

Jane's voice was tight, there was a hint of hysteria in it. "Tommy's been arrested, Joe. He's still here, with the detective. Hurry home."

He didn't waste time asking questions. He was there, in a cab, in fifteen minutes. His shirt was soaked through, and the perspiration was running down his back and legs when he got to the third floor.

Jane was sitting near the window, white and exhausted. Tommy was standing near the rear of the room. There was a bulky man sitting in a chair nearby.

"What's happened?" Joe asked.

"Your boy's in trouble," the man said. "I'm Sergeant Calvano, out of the East Side station. Your boy's been peddling dope, reefers."

Joe stared at his son as though he were a stranger.

TOMMY said, "No, I didn't, Dad. Honest I didn't." His voice was high, almost out of control. "I sold some baseball pool tickets, but I didn't sell that other stuff." He was trembling.

"Take it easy, Tommy," Joe said. "If you're innocent, we'll find it out." He looked at the sergeant. "What—how do you know about this? Are you sure?"

"He's admitted he sold pool tickets. Maybe he personally didn't peddle any marijuana, but his gang did, and he knew about it."

"Is that true, Tommy?"

The lad looked at his father, and at the floor.

"Where'd you get them, the tickets, I mean?"

Tommy's voice was low. "A guy brought them over to the school, over to the playground. I don't know his name. Funny looking guy. The fellows called him Whitey."

It was quiet in the room, and the heat seemed to close in. Joe felt smothered. He looked at the detective. "What's going to happen—to him, I mean? Does he have to go with you?"

Sergeant Calvano looked at Jane, then back at Joe. "Not now. I guess it'll be all right to leave him in your custody. He'll go up in front of Judge Evans, in the juvenile court." He rose. "First time he's been in trouble?"

Joe nodded. Jane said quietly, "He's always been a good boy, Sergeant.

"Too bad." The sergeant expelled his breath, and wiped the back of his neck with a limp handkerchief. "That's more than can be said for some in that gang. Some rough boys he's been playing with."

"Baseball pool tickets," Joe said thoughtfully. "There isn't a man in the shop who doesn't buy them, one time or another. I've bought 'em myself."

"But not reefers—I hope," the sergeant said dryly. "It's getting to be quite the thing for these squirts, reefer parties. They're cheap, and easy to get." He went to the door. "Better keep him in the house until you hear from us." He went out.

Jane was crying quietly.

Joe said, "Sit down, Tommy, and tell me about it."

There wasn't much to tell. They had sold tickets for fights and dances and picnics, but the commission wasn't much, and a couple of the boys had suggested the pool tickets and the marijuana.

"I knew they were wrong," Tommy said slowly, "but—well, it paid off. There was lots of money and customers. But I couldn't sell those reefers. I just handled the pool tickets. Then, one of the kids who'd been buying them every week got sore, and squealed to his folks, and they called the—the cops."

"The whole team in this, Tommy?"

He nodded. "And some others. Some tough guys that hang around the playground." He was trembling, again.

Joe said, "It's the first time you've been in trouble, Tommy. That's pretty good, in this neighborhood. You know anything about this Whitey that you didn't tell the sergeant?"

Tommy shook his head. "Nothing. He's just a creep that hung around over there, guy about thirty."

"I see." Joe looked over at his wife. She was under control now, but still pale.

"It's the first time," Joe said to her. "He'll probably be put on probation." He went over to stand near the window.

There was a cab in front of the building, and the driver was getting out. Joe knew him, Mike Balistreri, who lived on the second floor.

Joe asked Tommy, "Young Mike Balistreri in this, too?"

"I guess so," Tommy said. "I mean—" he stopped.

Joe knew what he meant. Tommy didn't know if Mike had been caught, and Tommy was no squealer. Joe said, "His dad's home, and it's too early for lunch." He went over to put a reassuring hand on Jane's shoulder. "I'll go down and talk to him."

Mike Balistreri was about five and a half feet high, and a little broader than that. He had enormous hands and a round head and the softest brown eyes in the world.

The soft brown eyes didn't fool Joe; he knew Mike had gone through the Italian campaign. Joe asked, "Young Mike in this, too?"

Mike nodded. "Come in, Joe."

Young Mike was sitting near his mother, and his mother was crying. He had his father's eyes, but his mother's slimness. He was the best shortstop in the ward, and had the finest voice in the Gesu choir.

"Calvano was here," Mike said. "He goes to our church. He says it probably won't go so hard on Mike and Tommy, because they haven't got any records. It'll probably be rough on the others."

"How about the higher-ups?" Joe asked. "How about this Whitey, and the men over him?"

Mike's laugh was cynical. "I asked Calvano about that. They've got the lawyers and the alibis. They've got the money. You know what will happen to them."

Young Mike said quietly, "Pa, I don't want any trouble with Whitey. He's tough, Pa. He carries a gun."

"No kidding," Mike said. "I'm scared. He shows up around me, he'll be eating his gun."

Young Mike's brown eyes were wide. "Pa, when we get to court, I don't have to squeal on Whitey, do I?"

His father turned slowly, to face his son. "He your buddy? Why shouldn't you? He fixed your ball team, and good, didn't he? He's got you in a jam. What do you owe him?"

"Nothing, Pa. But the others won't tell about Whitey. And if me and Tommy do, well—don't you see, Pa?"

"Sure, I see. If you and Tommy don't, Whitey gets off. And your buddies sit. That's what you want, Mike?"

"It won't do them any good to tell about Whitey," he said. "Pa, I—" He broke off, chewing his lower lip.

Joe said, "Let me know what develops, Mike," and went to the pay phone in the lower hall.

He phoned the plant from there and told his foreman, "I won't be in for a couple days, Al. Trouble at home."

Then he went back up to his own place. Tommy was sitting on the studio couch; Jane still sat near the window.

Joe said, "There's no point in moping. A kid with fourteen years behind him has one mistake coming. Tommy's made his. It's the last one, isn't it, kid?"

Tommy nodded, and tried to grin.

Jane said, "I'll make some iced tea." She stopped on the way to the kitchen to ask, "How about the Balistreris?"

"Mike knows the sergeant who was here, and he figures Tommy and young Mike will get off all right. But the others have records, I guess. Young Mike is scared of this Whitey. He's afraid he's going to have to testify against him."

Jane sniffed, and went on to the kitchen.

Tommy said, "Will we, Dad? Will we have to tell about Whitey?"

Joe regarded him steadily. "Don't you want to?"

Tommy didn't answer.

"Scared of him?"

Tommy's nod was almost imperceptible.

"If you don't tell about him," Joe said slowly, "you're still on his side of the fence. That would be your second mistake, Tommy."

Tommy said no more.

*Heroes,* Joe thought. *They carry guns and they've got the money. They've got the cars and the clothes and the kids would all like to copy them.*

After lunch, he went out with Jane to get the groceries, to the big chain store six blocks away. Practically every place they passed was on the same order as theirs, converted older homes, ancient apartments. And if the mayor's pet slum clearance plan went through, it still wouldn't solve the basic error. There were too many people in too small a space.

Joe said, "Honey, we've been lucky. Tommy's been a good boy, until now. And don't worry about this. It's going to be all right."

It should have been all right. Tommy and Mike and the others went up in front of Judge Evans at nine o'clock Monday morning. The judge didn't ask about Whitey; that was outside his province.

Tommy and young Mike were put on probation for a year. The case against the others, all of whom had sold reefers, was put over for at least another week.

That was Monday morning, and Joe could have gone back to work on Tuesday.

But Calvano came to see him Monday afternoon. The sergeant said, "If I can get Whitey, maybe I can break him down. But I've got to have a reason to hold him. Nobody wants to identify him, none of them I talked to, anyway. How about your boy?"

Tommy was there while they were talking, and Joe looked at him. "Well, Tommy?" he asked.

Tommy said, "It would be—squealing, Pop. I—can I have a little time?"

Calvano said, "Maybe the judge would go a little easier on your buddies, Tommy, if we broke up the ring. We can't do that unless we break down Whitey." His smile was humorless. "Think of that while I go down and talk to Mike."

When the sergeant left, Tommy didn't look at his father. And Joe didn't look at Tommy. It was, he suddenly realized, putting to much of a load on a fourteen-year-old boy. It was asking him to do something those tougher, older boys hadn't the nerve or the sense to do.

IF TOMMY talked, they could pick up Whitey. But Whitey, even if convicted, wouldn't spend his life in jail. Joe didn't know much about racketeers, but he had a feeling that Whitey would need to fake some show of revenge. And the revenge would be on Tommy and young Mike.

Joe said, "Don't worry it any more, kid. You're not going to squeal on Whitey."

"Joe—" Jane said, and there was shock in her voice.

He looked at her, and back at Tommy. "You understand, boy? I'm telling you not to."

Tommy looked at his dad, and the relief was evident on his thin face. "I understand, Dad."

Again, Jane said, "Joe—" Her voice,

despite its shakiness, had some relief in it, too. "Do you think that's—right?"

"I know it's right. Don't worry about it, honey. You've had enough worry already."

Calvano came back then, and his face was grave. "Young Mike won't talk. I can't go into court, unless somebody talks. Tommy?"

Joe said, "Aren't there ways you could make Whitey talk? Or is that only in the movies?"

"Not with this chief, or this D.A.," Calvano said. "There was a time, well—" He was looking at Tommy. "Now I need a case, and Tommy can give it to me."

Tommy shook his head.

No emotion showed on Calvano's broad face. It was as though he'd been expecting it.

Joe said, "He's fourteen years old and you shouldn't expect it."

Calvano's eyes on Joe were blank. "Shouldn't I? You think it's the right start for the kid?"

"The first law is self preservation," Joe said. "When he's a man, he can act like a man. I'll do his thinking for him until then."

"This was your idea, huh?"

"That's right. You got kids, sergeant?"

"That's neither here nor there. If it's your idea, it's your guilt. You'll have to live with it."

Joe nodded. "I know that."

Calvano looked at all three of them, and came back to Joe. "I'll be back later in the week. Give it some thought until then."

"Sure," Joe said, but he didn't mean it. It was just another way of saying good-by.

They heard the sergeant's heavy tread in the hall, and going down the stairs. Nobody in the room said a word. They were waiting for Joe to speak.

Joe stood up and said, "I'm going down and talk to Mike Balistreri. Don't you two worry about a thing."

He started down the stairs, and saw Mike on the way up. Mike waited for him, there at the foot of the stairs. The stocky Italian wasn't looking at Joe. He seemed to be miles away.

When Joe drew abreast of him, Mike said, "This Whitey got to my kid. He got to him yesterday. The kid's scared green."

"Do you blame him? Go back to when you were a kid, Mike. Figure it from there. I told Tommy not to talk."

Now Mike looked at him, wonder in the round face. Wonder, and then something else, speculation.

Joe said, "It's not their fight, Mike. We brought 'em here."

Mike nodded in understanding. "That's right. This Whitey left a phone number with the kid. He wants young Mike to let him know how Tommy stands. If Tommy's mum, he's got nothing to worry about."

"If you've got the number," Joe said quietly, "I've got a nickel."

Mike called from the pay phone in the hall. He said, "Whitey?" and then, "This is Mike Balistreri's dad. Calvano's with Mike now, and I think it's going to be all right. The kid's no squealer. But there's something else, and I wondered if I could talk to you someplace."

A pause, and then, "I don't want to say, over the phone. But me and Tommy's pa don't want any trouble with you boys. We got enough trouble just making a living."

Another pause, and then, "A couple bucks would sure help. Not that you owe it, Whitey. You're not buying anything. The kids won't talk, if we get paid or not."

When Mike hung up, he turned to face Joe. "He doesn't want to come here. He says it would be risky, for a while. He says to pick him up at the corner of Broad and Adams."

Joe said, "I'll be with you in five minutes. You'd better tell the wife you'll be gone for a while."

"She doesn't ever expect me until I get here," Mike said. "I'll wait for you."

Joe felt unreasonably cold as he went up the steps. It was still in the nineties and the humidity hadn't dropped, but he wasn't conscious of the heat.

Tommy and Jane were sipping iced tea, and the radio was on, softly. Joe said, "I've got to go downtown. I don't know when I'll be back. No matter how long I'm gone, don't worry."

Jane rose. "Joe, there's something wrong, isn't there? It's something you haven't told me."

"There's nothing wrong," he lied. "Honey, I know exactly what I'm doing, and why. That's all I want to say about it."

He came over to kiss her on the forehead. He turned to Tommy, then. "You don't have to say cooped up in here. But stay out of trouble. Why don't you and your mom take in a show?"

"You're not going to tell me where you're going?" Jane asked.

"I'm going downtown with Mike. Down to Adams and Broad. I don't know where we're going from there."

"Why, Joe?"

He didn't answer. He went to the door and out. Mike was waiting in the cab, and he climbed in.

Mike said, "I'll drop you off at Perry, pick up Whitey, and come back for you."

"That'd look queer to him," Joe said. "It's better if we both met him."

"Okay. I've been thinking of a place. It's a hot place, corrugated iron. If this heat holds. . . ."

The corner of Broad and Adams wasn't a busy corner, and the man standing there had white hair and a thin, pock-marked face. He was dressed in white linen and he wore a panama hat with a colorful band.

"In the bucks, I'd say," Mike said, and braked the cab to a halt.

The white-haired man could have been an albino, but the eyes weren't pink; they were a deep brown, almost black. He looked at Mike and back at Joe without any expression whatever.

"Whitey?" Mike asked.

The man's nod was almost imperceptible. He hadn't moved.

"This is Tommy's dad," Mike said genially. "Maybe we could all go someplace and have a beer."

"Maybe." Whitey paused, and then something like a smile came to his thin face, and he climbed in.

The back of his neck was exposed as he entered the cab, and that's where Joe hit him.

He fell flatly forward onto the floor of the cab, grunted, and Joe tapped him with the jack handle. He was quiet.

Joe felt sick, and he could hardly see the round outline of Mike's face.

"Drag his legs in," Mike said," and get that door closed. Check him for a gun." The cab pulled away from the curb.

He had a .32 revolver in a shoulder holster. Joe took it and put it in his pocket.

Mike said, "This place is a garage, up near the river, a one man garage. He does all my work. He's on vacation this week. I've got a key."

"He'll probably holler when he comes to," Joe said. "Maybe I'd better gag him."

Mike threw some rags back he took from the glove compartment. "That might be a good idea," he said.

They said no more all the way out to the garage. There, Joe unlocked and opened the garage doors, and Mike drove the cab in.

Compared to the stifling heat of this small, metal incubator, it could have been January outside.

Joe said, "It'll be just as hot for us." He had difficulty getting his breath.

Mike said, "We'll have water. And There's two of us. We'll work in shifts."

Whitey groaned as they lifted him out. Whitey's eyes opened, and they weren't pleasant to see.

Mike said, "All we want from you is your life story, including all the names of your friends and associates. There's no hurry. We can wait."

He sat him on the floor, the wall of the garage propping his back, and pulled the gag from his mouth. Whitey's hand came out to scratch at Mike's cheek.

Mike drew his head back, and as it did, he threw a heavy right hand flush into Whitey's mouth.

There was the snap of a breaking tooth, the smack of the blow, and blood was running down Whitey's chin.

Whitey opened his mouth to scream, and Mike said, "Shoot him, Joe!"

Whitey's mouth closed like a trap, and there was terror in the thin face now.

Joe said, "We're not fourteen, or fifteen, Whitey. You're in a man's world, now. Try to act like one."

"I've got a memory," Whitey said. His voice was hoarse.

"Alive, you've got a memory," Joe told him.

"It would be a pipe," Mike said. "I came here and caught this monkey trying to jimmy the garage. He pulled a gun on me, and in the struggle it went off, and there's poor Whitey, dead. That's a pretty good script for a cabbie, huh?"

"You think Calvano wouldn't know? How dumb do you think he is?" Whitey's voice was gaining assurance.

"He's not dumb. He's my buddy. We're lodge brothers," Mike said amiably. "You want to hit him this time, Joe?"

Joe shook his head. "We don't want to mark him too much. If they fish him out of the river, we won't want him all marked up."

"Working stiffs," Whitey said. "You don't fool me, or scare me. You guys don't know what you're doing. You think the gang won't be looking for me?"

"They probably will," Mike agreed. "I hope they find you, Whitey, before it's too late." He looked up at Joe. "I'll take the gun, and the first shift. You take the cab home and figure out a story for your wife." He grinned. "First time I've stood guard in years."

JOE WENT home. Less than an hour had passed, and Jane's face was tight with worry.

Joe said, "It's a deal Mike and I are working on, and if it goes through, things are going to be a lot better. I've got to meet him again, in four hours."

"You had me worried when you left," she said. "I sent Tommy to the movies."

That was Monday afternoon, and Joe took food and beer to Mike when he went back. Mike did the same for him on the next shift.

The heat was constant in the garage, but it seemed to grow, and Joe hit the water jug often. The beer was for a treat, for every hour on the hour. They had to stay alert; dozing off could be fatal.

When Joe came back at three, Tuesday morning, Mike had a dim light on. The stocky Italian said, "Our boy's got a toothache, that one I broke. He'll be screaming any second now."

Whitey was face down on the concrete floor, stretched out full length.

"And if he starts to scream?" Joe asked.

"We'll have to put him away," Mike said. "We're in this too deep to back out, now."

Joe could see Mike's face, and the grin on it. But Whitey couldn't. Whitey groaned, and rolled over, to face them.

The grin was gone from Mike's face,

now. Whitey's black eyes went from Joe to Mike, and he began to curse in a ragged whisper.

Joe and Mike took a deep drink from the water jug.

"The sun'll be up pretty soon," Joe said. "It's going to be another scorcher."

Mike lit a cigarette and blew smoke toward the man on the floor. "There's some tire chains in the luggage compartment of the hack," he said quietly. "They've got to have a body before they've got a case. Soft bottom in that river."

"I suppose," Joe said, "it's all we can do. It looks like he isn't going to talk."

Whitey's tongue was thick, and his words were blurred, but they were ugly words and easily recognized.

Joe said, "I haven't killed a man since the war. It's not easy, this way, is it?"

"No," Mike said, "it's not easy. But it's a thing we've got to do, Joe."

Mike left, and Joe sat on a bench near the wall, never taking his eyes from the prone figure.

Whitey's chin was smeared with dried blood, and it seemed to Joe that Whitey was trembling. But the light was too dim to be sure.

Joe's mind went back over the remembered years of the thirty-five behind him, from the farm to the city to the army. There hadn't been many big moments in his life. Leaving the farm was one, and meeting Jane and marrying her, and Tommy's birth, and going into the army. Those were highlights.

And this was. He was outside the law, and he knew it. Whether he was outside the right, he couldn't judge. He didn't think so, or he wouldn't be sitting here.

He'd taken over Tommy's battle, and that seemed right to him. Tommy was fourteen, and his son. Tommy's battles were his, the big ones, at any rate.

They could release Whitey now, and never hear a word from the law. Whitey wasn't conditioned to going to the law with his troubles. And Whitey had threatened young Mike Balistreri.

At six, the heat grew worse, as the morning sun began to scorch the metal sides and roof of the garage, making it a hothouse.

Whitey started to moan, and his fingers dug at the concrete floor, as though seeking something to grip.

Joe said, "I hope by now you know we're not kidding. You've got a chance, with the law. You haven't got any with us."

At seven, when Mike came back, Whitey was just inches this side of sanity. Whitey started to talk.

He named some names they both knew through the newspapers; he named one name the District Attorney had tangled with unsuccessfully just recently.

Mike said in a whisper to Joe, "Better get Calvano. You'll probably find him at home, this time of the day. I'll stay here."

Joe nodded. "The toughest part's ahead. This monkey's got some money behind him."

"Don't I know it," Mike said. "But I keep remembering how scared the kid was."

At eight-thirty, Joe parked the cab in front of the Equity Building, and went up in the elevator to the fifth floor, to the offices of the Atlas Sporting Club.

It was an old building on the east side, a building that had seen better days. But the offices of the Atlas Sporting Club were well furnished, and the boss of the Atlas Sporting Club was well fed.

He was a big man, with enormous shoulders and a square, hard face. His name was Steve Keller, and he was the man who'd tangled with the D.A.

He came right to the point. "I sent for you because I've heard some rumors, Johnson. The rumor is you know what's happened to Whitey Calvert."

"He's hiding," Joe said. "He told me

to tell you the heat's on and watch it."

"Why didn't you tell me, then?"

"I didn't want to get mixed up in it," Joe said quietly. "I've got enough troubles without getting tangled with the law."

Keller smiled. Keller's smile said what Whitey had voiced. *Working stiff.*

Keller said, "I know Whitey pretty well, and I wouldn't want him to be in any trouble. You know where he is?"

Joe shook his head.

A voice behind Joe said, "I think he's lying, Steve."

Joe turned to see a short, fat man standing in the doorway. He had a jowly, dull face and eyes like Whitey's.

Keller said, "This is Whitey's brother, Johnson."

Joe said nothing.

"There's all kinds of trouble," Keller went on. "You don't want any trouble with the law—or with us—do you, Johnson?"

"That's right," Joe said.

"You'll take us to Whitey?"

Joe nodded.

Keller looked at the short man. "Two of us should be able to handle it, don't you think?"

The short man laughed. "I don't see why not."

It was close to a hundred when Joe pulled the cab up in front of the metal garage. The sweat was pouring off him, but he was cold inside.

Keller said, "You walk ahead, Johnson."

Keller's hands were at his sides, but the squat man had one hand in the pocket of his jacket as Joe threw open the door.

Whitey was propped up again, facing the open doorway.

Then Mike stepped into view, the revolver in his hand.

The squat man came forward, his eyes on Whitey, taking no notice of Mike. He came into the stifling heat of the garage, and stared at his unconscious brother.

When he turned to face Mike, his face was a mask. His voice was casual. "Put that gun away, you dope. Whitey had it coming."

Mike's gun was lowered, and he started to shove it into his pocket.

That was when both Keller and the fat man went for their guns. That was when Calvano and his boys opened fire.

"And then?" Jane asked.

"Then Calvano suggested we try and trap the big boy," Joe went on wearily. "So he sent this stoolie to Keller, and Keller sent for me. Whitey was still talking when I left the station. They've got a case now."

"And Keller's got lawyers, and money."

"So have the civic organizations," Joe answered. "They're both in it all the way now. Things are really popping down there. The papers are behind us too. Anyway, they were when I left the station, at eleven."

"You left the station at eleven and got here at four, Joe?"

He nodded, and looked at her fully. "I had Mike's cab. I took a drive up to Reedsburg. It's only an hour from here. I was talking to a realtor."

Jane started to smile. "So?"

"So there's forty acres of peat land just going to waste, on the edge of town up there. They don't know how to handle peat in this neck of the woods. I was brought up on it. There's a house too."

"You sure you want it, Joe? This'll be a better town to live in, now that you've got things started. You've got fifteen years of seniority at Reyenbach's, Joe."

"I know it," he said. "And if this was the best town in the world, it wouldn't be good enough for me or mine. Don't you want to take the chance, Jane?"

"I certainly do," she said. "I've a hunch, Joe, that the next thirty-five years are going to be the best."

# Answers To THE THIRD DEGREE

*(Questions on page 97)*

1. If your crook acquaintance told you he was looking for an "owl's head," you should know he was seeking a heavy revolver.

2. According to the slang of the underworld, an "oak towel" is a policeman's billy club.

3. A "slough worker" is a crook who specializes in robbing residences in the daytime.

4. If your crook acquaintance told you he was heading for a "skin joint," he would mean he was going to a store offering fine furs for sale.

5. If a poison victim showed symptoms similar to those of a person suffering from malignant cholera, it is quite possible he had been poisoned by castor beans.

6. The heart of a person poisoned by the ordeal bean of Calabar is said sometimes to continue to beat after respiration has ceased.

7. True. A poison has a cumulative effect when it is not eliminated as fast as it is taken in, if taken over a period of time, of course.

8. True. In general a poison which is secreted through the pores will prove more deadly in a cold climate than in a warm one.

9. True. Nicotine has been administered through the skin with deadly effect.

10. False. A person's fingerprints, so far as science has determined, are not a mere combination of the prints of his father and mother.

11. False. A person—barring injury—retains the same basic fingerprint patterns throughout life.

12. False. On some fabrics, if blood is exposed to the rays of the sun for a time, it will turn grey, or some other dull color.

13. Yes. Even though a killer has scrubbed the floor of the murder room carefully, it is still possible and probable that the scientific detective might, through careful searching, discover blood stains.

14. Typically, the furnished-room thief hires a room, studies the habits of manager and roomers, then enters the rooms of roomers when they are likely to be out, stealing whatever he cares to.

15. A pants-pocket worker is a pickpocket —one who is very skilled in his particular calling, by the way. Among pickpockets he is highly respected.

16. True. For a thousand dollars or so, confidence men have been known to go so far as to arrange fake wrestling or boxing matches in order to fleece a victim.

17. A soft lead plate placed on a wax seal and tapped with a hammer would thus take on the impression of the seal. The seal could be reproduced by this mold after the crook had opened the letter.

18. True. The fatal time for digitalis is usually from one to 24 hours.

19. A "Sam" is a person who is considered dumb.

20. True. "Roust" means to pick pockets in a crowded gathering.

# STRANGE TRAILS

## When the Devil Came to Sala

THE GOOD PEOPLE OF SALA, SWEDEN, FIRST REALIZED A SINISTER FORCE WAS OPERATING IN THEIR VILLAGE THAT DAY IN 1931 WHEN A TAXI DRIVER FROM NEARBY VASTERAS WAS FOUND IN A STREAM, SHOT IN THE BACK, HIS BLOODSTAINED CAB NOT FAR AWAY. TWO DAYS BEFORE, A PAYROLL CLERK IN VASTERAS HAD BEEN SLUGGED FROM BEHIND AND ROBBED... POLICE LINKED THE TWO CRIMES BUT WERE WITHOUT CLUES.

THEN AUTOMOBILES BEGAN VANISHING INTO THIN AIR UNTIL 70 HAD DISAPPEARED.

MEANWHILE, WIDOW BLOMBERG'S COTTAGE UNACCOUNTABLY BURNED DOWN IN THE NIGHT, WITH THE OLD LADY INSIDE. HARASSED POLICE SUSPECTED MURDER AND ROBBERY; BUT THEY HAD NO WAY OF KNOWING THAT ACTUALLY A CAR HAD BEEN DRIVEN UP BESIDE THE COTTAGE, A HOLE BORED IN THE WALL, A HOSE ATTACHED TO THE EXHAUST PIPE INSERTED, THE WIDOW'S BEDROOM FILLED WITH DEADLY CARBON MONOXIDE, HER HOARD OF 40 CROWNS TAKEN, AND THE HOUSE FIRED.

SALA WAS SURE THE DEVIL WAS LOOSE WHEN A CONSTRUCTION SUPERINTENDENT AND HIS WIFE WERE SHOT AND KILLED AND THE 12,000-CROWN PAYROLL LIFTED, ALL WITHOUT TRACE.

# —— .. to MURDER

by LEE

ON JUNE 19, 1936, THE BULLET-RIDDLED BODY OF A LIME-WORKS PAYROLL OFFICER WAS FOUND SPRAWLED OVER HIS BICYCLE BESIDE THE ROAD, HIS POUCH LOOTED OF 30,000 CROWNS.

POLICE WERE STILL WITHOUT A CLUE TO THE STRANGE SERIES OF CRIMES, AND MIGHT HAVE CONTINUED SO HAD NOT A GIRL IN A REFORMATORY TOLD A WEIRD TALE WHICH A FRIGHTENED SALA YOUTH CONFIRMED. AS A RESULT, SIGVARE THURNEMAN, 26-YEAR-OLD HABERDASHER, AND SEVERAL FRIENDS WERE ROUNDED UP AND THE WHOLE STORY CAME OUT.

THURNEMAN--PIANO VIRTUOSO, ACCOMPLISHED MAGICIAN AND HYPNOTIST, AND STUDENT OF YOGA--HAD CONVINCED HIS FRIENDS HE POSSESSED UNEARTHLY POWERS AND FORMED THEM INTO A CRIMINAL ORGANIZATION CALLED THE MAGIC CIRCLE. COMPLETELY UNDER HIS DOMINATION, THEY'D COMMITTED THE SERIES OF BAFFLING CRIMES, STEALING THE CARS BY MEANS OF AN INGENIOUS STARTING DEVICE OF HIS INVENTION, THEN CLEVERLY DISGUISING AND SELLING THEM.

AS ITS MASTER STROKE, THE MAGIC CIRCLE HAD PLANNED TO DYNAMITE THE STOCKHOLM POST OFFICE AND ROB A NEARBY BANK UNDER COVER OF THE CONFUSION.


THUREMAN WAS COMMITTED TO AN ASYLUM, SEVERAL MEMBERS OF THE MAGIC CIRCLE RECEIVED LIFE SENTENCES - AND THE DEVIL NO LONGER BOTHERED SALA.

# DOOM STREET

## By Russell Branch

***The dead man had blood in his eye, and I had blood on my hands—and a hundred-grand frame-up that could only be solved if we both made a killing—over my body!***

### CHAPTER ONE

#### One Man in a Tub

I EXPECTED to find him sooner or later, sure. Only not so soon, and not in my bathtub.

But there he was. Sandy-red hair, ham-and-eggs face, two hundred pounds of dead weight. Just like the picture in my mind and the one in my pocket, except for the blood. His wallet matched everything—including the blood.

I put the wallet in my own pocket, and pondered briefly about one hundred-odd thousand dollars. Then I picked up my Gladstone, which the bellhop had dumped in the middle of the bedroom, and went back downstairs.

The clerk looked surprised. "Didn't you like the room, sir? I know the maid hasn't had a chance to clean it yet, but—"

"It's fine," I said, "except that it's occupied."

Now he looked puzzled. "But two hundred thirty-five checked out earlier this afternoon, sir."

"That he did," I said, "that he did. He only forgot one thing—his body."

The clerk was afraid I was kidding him. Then he was afraid maybe I wasn't kidding. At any rate, he had to go see for himself. I sat down in the lobby and waited, surrounded by clucking members of—according to their badges—the Southern Poultrymen's Association.

The clerk came running back downstairs and grabbed for his phone, watching me and looking as if he'd scream should I so much as reach for a cigarette.

I lit one anyway, and wondered why I hadn't stuck to the cello my mother bought me when I was eight. . . .

At nine o'clock that morning I'd been sitting in my own office and wondering the same thing. In other words, there hadn't been a thing in sight, except the morning's crop of bills on my desk, until Mr. C. P. Britt walked in with his broken arm.

He introduced himself by fumbling out an engraved business card with his left hand. "I'd like to engage your services, Mr. Rhodes. Your exclusive services—you are free?"

I said that was a nice word for it, and my eyes went irresistibly back to that black silk sling with the white cast inside.

"No—" he shook his head with a faint grin, "nothing to do with this. My sloop jibbed and I forgot to duck, that's the reason for this. Quite a job, bringing in a forty-footer with one hand."

That I could believe. Britt had a hard, compact build and a tan such as you don't expect of a middle-aged investment broker. He also had the kind of a face that would bring in a forty-foot sailboat, single-handed, left-handed, or no hands. What I couldn't believe was that he would forget to duck anything, ever.

"You're undoubtedly acquainted with my firm?" he was asking.

I nodded, although the biggest investment I'd ever made was in a Nineteen

*Weigand burst into the shack. . . .*

Forty-seven Ford. But then every punk in the city knows Britt & Merrill, at least by name.

"Then you know our reputation," he went on. "You can appreciate what it would mean if anything threatened that reputation."

I nodded wisely. "The suckers might

scare off, huh? I've seen that happen."

"Our clients," he said with reproachful emphasis on the word, "have the utmost confidence in our integrity. Customer confidence, may I point out, is the very keystone of investment service." He paused suddenly. "Mr. Rhodes, can I be assured that anything I tell you here will go no further, under any condition?"

"You picked me," I said. "Suppose you tell me why, if you didn't intend to trust me."

He mentioned a friend of his who had been very impressed with me. I could have mentioned that what had impressed his friend mostly was the fact that I had saved his nineteen-year-old daughter from making her debut in Tehachipi, but I didn't.

Something—as I learned when we returned to the main topic—was threatening the very keystone of Britt & Merrill. Something over one hundred thousand bucks, that was missing from their customers' accounts. Also missing, as of yesterday morning, was the junior half of Britt & Merrill.

"You gave him a nice head start," I remarked.

Britt frowned. "I assumed at first that Mr. Merrill had merely gone off on a business call. But—well, it so happens that we are having our books audited, and when the auditor began to run into trouble late yesterday, I began to worry."

He shook his head sadly and went on. "I still can't quite believe it of Mike, but the fact remains that our books are going to prove short, and he is still missing."

"And you want me to find him and haul him back?" I shook my head. "Not that I couldn't use a job right now, Mr. Britt, but you're going at it the wrong way. It's a simple matter of embezzlement and your guy who may be in any of forty-eight states by now. Your best bet—"

"The police?" Britt was way ahead of me again. "Mr. Rhodes, if I have to go to the police, I might as well close up shop and forget the investment business. If it were just a defaulting clerk or a bookkeeper—" He finished with a shrug which said: *As Merrill goes, so goes Britt.*

"So what if I do find him? That's no guarantee I'll find the money too. He's probably blown it already."

Britt gave me his dark ghost of a smile. "Not Mike; he has too much respect for money. And as far as that goes, we're both bonded anyway. No, it's the name I'm trying to save, Mr. Rhodes, the name and the business."

I got his point. He didn't have to draw me a diagram of a forty-foot sloop to prove it. I agreed to give it a whirl, and we got down to particulars.

Britt had already covered the obvious beginning points himself, and I quickly gathered that he was plenty leery of having me retrace the same ground. If I poked around the office, somebody would be bound to smell something cooking—or at least gas escaping—and as for Merrill's apartment, Britt himself had already interviewed the manager.

"How about his friends?"

"Mike's something of a lone wolf in his private life," was the answer, and I gathered that the accent was on the wolf. "I probably know him better than anyone else, and I assure you I didn't have the slightest idea, still don't."

I tilted back in my swivel chair and studied my visitor curiously. "Just how the hell do you think a detective works, Mr. Britt? How do you expect me to find him without asking some people some pregnant questions?"

Britt glanced at his wrist watch. "Tell you what, Rhodes. Give me the rest of the morning to see what I can learn, and then if I haven't turned up a lead of some sort, you can take it from there." He smiled thinly. "Pregnant questions and all."

He got up, glanced at his wrist watch again, said "I'll phone you by noon," and was gone as suddenly as he'd arrived.

BUT it had been nearly one, and my belly had been arguing with itself, before the phone rang. A bored female voice started to ask for Mister . . . and then Britt's voice drowned her out impatiently.

"Rhodes, I've got it! Glencove Beach. He took the Sunrise yesterday morning."

"You should be in my business."

"Just dumb luck. I happened to overhear the switchboard girl here in the office tell somebody that Mr. Merrill was out of town—and when I took her up on it, she said she had overheard Mike inquiring about train schedules by phone on Monday afternoon."

I wondered what that same switchboard girl was overhearing now. I wondered how a guy with a hundred grand at stake could be that stupid, and why he had picked on a jerkwater resort town not more than one hundred and twenty-five miles away, and I wondered most of all why Britt thought he might still be there.

"It's a beginning, anyway," he was saying anxiously. "Can you leave right away? You'll remember what I told you, use your best discretion?"

I told him I'd leave right away, subject to a quick sandwich, that I'd be driving, and that I'd surely use my very best discretion.

So here I was, sitting in the moldy lobby of the Glencove Beach Hotel, and being discreet as all hell. The clerk was still watching me, the southern poultrymen were still discussing cannibalism among pullets, and upstairs, in Room 235, Michael Merrill was still sitting in a bathtub soaking in his own blood.

It was a pretty status quo, but like most such it didn't last. Two men pushed abruptly in through the dusty glass door. The one in the lead was built like a plumber, the younger one was a skinny drink of water who could have crawled down any standard drain pipe.

But they weren't plumbers, not in those uniforms. I got up.

"And this—" the clerk introduced me—"is the man who found him."

He might just as well have said, this is the man who killed him. But the chunky guy only gave me a casual glance out of his close-set eyes, turning just enough so that I could see the gold badge on his pocket flap.

"Okay, let's go," he said.

We went back up the worn, carpeted stairs, all four of us, while the southern poultrymen watched our procession curiously. Chief of Police Weigand, as the clerk informed me importantly, barged into the bathroom, while his tow-headed cohort peeked eagerly over his broad back.

"Slim, you go call Doc Stearns."

The kid withdrew reluctantly, and after a few moments the chief backed out, wiping his hands on his pants and muttering to himself.

"Clean—not a billfold or a paper on him! How's he registered, Ben?"

I held my breath for the answer to the hundred-thousand dollar question.

"Samuel Brown—uh—he had a visitor. A woman."

I'm afraid I did a double—but so did the chief, for that matter. "Where the hell is she?"

The clerk looked uncomfortable. "They—uh—she came down almost right away, she checked him out—told me she'd be waiting in the car outside when Brown came down."

"When?"

"Right around noon, I reckon—maybe a little after."

"You saw the car, the license number?"

The clerk shook his head helplessly. "Out-of-state, I think, and the car was a Buick sedan, or maybe a Mercury. Dark blue, anyway, and brand new. They're

hard to tell apart, those cars, nowadays."

The chief expressed his opinion of this information in one disgusted word and turned a pair of close, shrewd eyes on me.

We studied each other with mutual interest and then he said, without raising his voice, "Take him, Slim."

Apparently Slim had already returned from his phone call; I suddenly found myself with one wiry arm wrapped around my Adam's apple and a sharp knee digging into my sacroiliac.

My reaction was nothing to be proud of; just sheer, stupid reflex. I grabbed the arm around my neck, twisted sideways, and heaved.

The kid landed on the opposite side of the room like a heap of toothpicks, collected himself, and started to come back again. He had a nasty look in his green eyes, and I watched him carefully—but I was watching the wrong horse.

The chief drove an arm like a piledriver into my kidney, hooked in with his left, and landed on the back of my neck with both feet.

At least that was the way it felt. When I straightened up again, he had the gun out of its clip and pointed straight at me. My own gun, that was.

"Now," he said quietly, "what about you?"

I TOLD him that my name was just what it said on the register, Richard Rhodes, that I had a permit for the gun, and if he'd wanted it all he had to do was ask for it.

"Nobody asked him whether he wanted his throat cut," Weigand retorted, indicating the stiff. "Let's see that permit."

There wasn't any way out. I flipped open my billfold and handed it over.

"Mmm—what're you doing in Glencove?"

"The City with a Smile," I said, quoting the sign that had welcomed me. "Vacation your cares away."

"Vacation—in October?"

"You're still getting conventions," I pointed out, "and in my racket you take 'em when you can get 'em. Summer's the busy season."

He looked down at my cards again. "Who's the dead guy?"

"You're asking me?" I was properly amazed. "Hells bells, I just drove into this town half an hour ago. I never saw him before, and I don't care if I never do again. The clerk here can tell you how much I know about it."

The clerk said anxiously, "That's right, Carl. Joe was hardly back from lugging his bag upstairs, when Mr. Rhodes came right back down himself. Wasn't up here more than two or three minutes."

"But long enough to find a dead man behind the bathroom door," Weigand said slowly.

"Any rookie can tell you that stiff's been cooling for several hours at least. Look at the blood," I said.

His eyes narrowed and his mouth opened, but our charming conversation was cut short right then by a lean, grey-haired gent with dark pouches under his eyes. He could only have been the doctor.

The doc verified what was already obvious—that the victim had had his throat slit by some very sharp instrument, that he had been dead for at least two hours, probably longer, and that he, the doctor, had five more calls to make and a baby to deliver before supper.

Slim busied himself making an inaccurate sketch and ruining fingerprints with a correspondence school kit; the local mortician arrived and departed with a full basket; the chief did some more fruitless snooping and questioning. As for me, I made myself as inconspicuous as possible and tried to hide the hole that the dead man's wallet was burning in my coat pocket.

I thought the local law had forgotten all about me, until we got back into the

lobby again and a big hand suddenly closed around my wrist like a pipe vise.

"Let's get this straight, Rhodes. I may be just a hick-town cop to you. I may not be light on my feet or fast with my tongue, but that don't necessarily mean I'm fat in the head too.

"I don't believe you came here just for a vacation. I don't think you've told me all you know about this. When I find out for sure, you're going to see the inside of a hicktown jail—and that's a promise."

"Fair enough," I said amiably. "How about that gun?"

"Your permit isn't good in this state," he said, "and neither is your license. When you leave we'll see, but you won't be leaving until after the inquest. In fact, you're going to stay right here."

The poultrymen were watching again, and the clerk was having kittens. He muttered something about there only being that one room vacant.

"Mr. Rhodes is a big-city dick," interrupted Weigand with the first sign of humor I'd seen in his beefy face. "He don't mind a little blood."

## CHAPTER TWO

### Doublecross

AS A MATTER of fact I didn't—not if it would give me some privacy and a chance to look over that room again. I had to wait until an elderly, arthritic maid had changed the bedsheets, and she fled without going near the bathroom, but that was all right with me too.

All I got out of it, however, was the trouble of cleaning up my own tub before I finally stepped under the combination shower.

There wasn't a trace of a hundred thousand dollars anywhere, not unless you counted the ninety-three in Merrill's wallet.

There wasn't a trace of the murder weapon, of course. Not even an old safety razor on top of the medicine cabinet.

In short, there was nothing except what my own eyes had already told me and what Chief Weigand had deduced. "Brown" had been surprised in the bathroom, had been hit over the head, or more likely had been shoved backwards so that he hit his own head on the tub or the tile. Then his throat had been sliced with one careful, deliberate stroke.

As for his visitor, the clerk had described her as a gorgeous brunette, but that probably fit almost any female under forty, in the clerk's watery old eyes. And it did seem unlikely that she could have manhandled Merrill's two hundred pounds while it was still on the hoof.

When I finally got all the pins out of a new and clean shirt my watch said six, and I figured that was a conventional supper hour in this town. The hotel dining room was closed off-season, it seemed, but the night clerk recommended Mamie's down the block.

So I went to Mamie's, where the chicken raisers were eating friend chicken, and ordered the same from a thin waitress. Then I inquired after the washroom.

She jerked her thumb over her shoulder. I walked through the service door and through a greasy kitchen, found an outside door to the alley, and kept on going.

The guy in the corner service station allowed that I might use his phone, and dug up a dog-eared local directory for me. I fumbled with it until a car pulled in that looked like it could use a lot of service. Then I picked up the phone and put in a long distance call that was going to eat into the profits at the end of the month.

When the attendant came back in to fill an oil container, I carried on an imaginary conversation with myself regarding Mary and all the kids, and finally Britt's

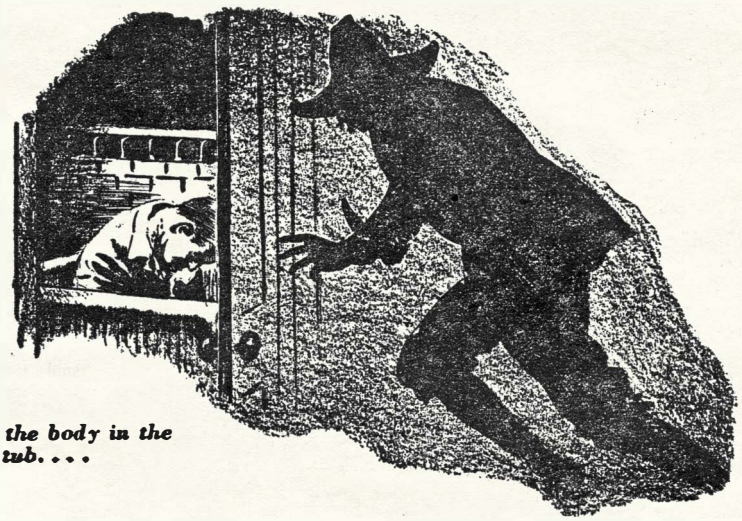
heavy voice came through. Irritated, too.

"I've found Junior," I told him, "And let's go easy on the names."

"What? Oh—it's you."

"It's me," I agreed. "Junior can't talk; he's got a sore throat." I went on from there, and Britt finally got the idea that Junior's sore throat was quite permanent. What worried him even more, I gathered, was the fact that the piggy-bank was still missing and Junior couldn't remain anonymous for long.

"I'm doing my best," I told him, "but I could use a little moral support. You don't know the governor in this state—or even the chairman of the parole board, do you?"



*He left the body in the tub. . . .*

"I'll cover you all the way," he promised me quickly, and went on to tell me the latest development at his end. It seemed that just fifteen minutes ago—in fact that was the only reason he was still in the office—one of their clients had shown up, and in a very suspicious and troublesome mood indeed.

"I stalled him off," Britt said. "A very queer-looking old duck, name of Charles Potter, looked like he didn't have a nickel. But apparently he's one of our biggest accounts; Mer—Junior's always handled it personally, by phone and mail. He told me Junior had an appointment to meet him earlier today at your local hotel, but didn't show up, and now he wants to know who, why and wherefore. To the tune," Britt added sadly, "of something like ninety thousand missing from his cash balance and the securities which we held for him."

Such astronomical figures were beyond me, but not the implications. Merrill had tried to stall off this flush character himself, something had happened, and the character had hot-footed it straight to the horse's mouth to see about his dough. The answer, maybe, to all my problems—except that he had disappeared three minutes before my call, according to Britt, with a reluctant promise to await Junior's return before going to the police.

"Where does this Potter live?"

"I just looked it up," Britt told me. "Some little spot named Soundview. I've never heard of it, but maybe—"

"Wait," I tossed it around in my weary mind and finally placed it. "Sure! It's a fork in the road about four-five miles north of here. I passed it on my way in."

Then I said, "He's not the only missing link," and went on to tell Britt about

Junior's beautiful visitor, who had departed without even saying good-by.

A long silence, while I wondered whether I was being too subtle even for Britt, and then his voice came back grimly.

"She sounds like my ex-wife—but the hell with that. It's the piggy bank I'm interested in, and I don't care how you get it back."

"Your ex-wife!" I yipped, and the attendant looked around curiously from the cash drawer.

Britt said bitterly, "Don't let it throw you. Just keep on plugging, and don't forget I'm behind you, one hundred per cent."

I muttered something about seeing him in jail, and hung up. Because there were already too many cynics in the world, I also left a couple of bucks on top of the cash register, and took the rear way back to Mamie's.

The waitress looked as if she had just been about to call the pulmotor squad. My fried chicken was cold and as greasy as the kitchen, and my appetite was gone, but my bonnet was full of bees.

Charles Potter wouldn't be home, not if he had been in the offices of Britt & Merrill twenty minutes ago, but that made it so much the better to get a line on him.

I got my line from the farmer in the Model A who picked me up on the edge of town. I knew better than to use my own car, which was still parked conspicuously in front of the hotel, but as usual my thumb provided reliable transportation—as well as information.

"Crazy Potter?" The farmer cackled and shook his head as if the smallness of the world was too much for him. "Shore—I know old Potter. Give him a lift into town only yesterday, matter of fact. Rid in that same seat yore settin' in now, mister, he did."

My driver enlarged at some length upon that coincidence as well as on Potter's character, and by the time he dropped me off at the highway fork and the dreary little waystop marked Soundview, I had gathered the following:

Potter's first name, at least locally, was "Crazy." He was an old geezer with long white hair, who apparently subsisted mostly on nuts. About once a month he hiked into town, unless somebody gave him a lift, and then hiked all the way back again with his arms loaded with supplies.

I gathered that no one saw anything of him in between times, but everybody recognized him. How could they miss, since his inevitable costume, summer or winter, rain or shine, was short knee-britches, a white butcher's coat, sandals, and a big, floppy straw hat?

His trip yesterday had brought him into town about eleven-thirty, and my fountain of information said he had remarked the occasion well since Crazy Potter had his legs covered, for once, and a conventional felt hat, all of which had led to the guess that he was taking the train somewhere.

"Lives in an old tumbledown shack, side o' the crick, about a mile down," my friend told me as I got out. "You can't miss it, leastways you can't miss smelling it, even though there's some as say the old boy's got a million dollars in gold buried back there somewhere."

He added skeptically, but with obvious concern for my safety, "I wouldn't know about that, friend, but I do know he's got an old double-barrel I wouldn't want pointed in my direction."

I thought about that as I set off down the narrow path which followed the creek; I wished I had stopped off by my car in town to get my flashlight. Not that I needed it with that full harvest moon rising ahead, but just because it would have been comforting to have something in my hands.

Bugs flew in my face, frogs gave me the horse-laugh, vines tripped me up, and finally something loomed up ahead near

the bank of the river. Against the moon, it looked like something out of Salvador Dali by way of Bellevue.

There was nobody home, at least nobody alive and awake.

I circled the shack once, tried to peer in through a broken pane, and finally went back to the sagging front porch and eased open a board door that hung by one hinge.

A match showed me a kerosene lamp sitting on a warped table, another match got it going. I adjusted the flame, closed the chimney, and turned around to find trouble at my back.

THE trouble wore a dirty khaki uniform and a gold star.

He didn't have Slim with him this time, but another more rugged character who might have been his own double—except for the uniform.

Weigand did the talking, however; his brother just moved in closer to me.

"Rhodes, you're under arrest."

"For what? Illegal entry, or just sneering?"

"For concealing evidence in a homicide case. That'll do for now."

"Such as?"

"Let's say the wallet we found wedged behind the water bowl in your hotel room. The wallet belonging to Michael Merrill, deceased."

I batted a couple of eyebrows. "He probably hid it there himself, whoever he is."

"Not with his throat cut," Weigand said. "I looked there this afternoon and nobody's been in that room since, except a maid and you."

I began to realize that I had underestimated the local law, but I wasn't going to toss in my chips that easily.

"You take me in on a rap like that," I told him with my hot little tongue, "and you'll wish you hadn't. I'll have a smart lawyer down here so fast your head will swim—a lawyer with a writ in one hand and a suit for false arrest in the other."

"I'll risk it," said Weigand complacently, and he nodded toward the eager beaver with the handcuffs. "While you're talking to him, you better tell him the rest of it too. Like the fact that you came here to locate Michael Merrill and a hundred thousand dollars in stolen money. That at six-ten tonight you put in a long distance call to Merrill's business partner, one C. P. Britt, and that you hitched a ride out of town even though I had warned you to stay put."

I didn't even feel the bracelets slipping over my wrist, or the thud that my mouth must have made as it fell open.

"What is this—a conspiracy?"

Weigand shook his ugly head and smiled. "Just a small town, Rhodes. Wait until you see our jail."

It wasn't quite like one of those deals in the movies—I mean I couldn't quite reach through the bars and help myself to the sheriff's keys and gun after he had conveniently fallen asleep.

But on the other hand, only a short back hallway and a flimsy swinging door separated the tank from the front office, and by straining my ears I could hear some of what went on that evening.

I could hear the high-pitched voice of the hotel clerk quite plainly, for one. "But how the heck was I to know, Carl? He wasn't registered that way, so naturally I didn't—"

"Naturally," interrupted the chief's deep rumble. "But you're sure that. . . ."

"Of course I'm sure! How could anybody miss old Crazy Potter?"

I gathered that Potter had come into the hotel around noontime, inquiring after none other than Michael Merrill himself, and that the whole thing had slipped the clerk's mind until now, when the name Merrill had suddenly come to mean something, like a corpse in a bathtub.

Sometime after that, Weigand came back and offered me another chance, along

with an old army blanket, but I only told him one thing. "If you're looking for Potter—and you should be—I can tell you he's at least one hundred and twenty-four miles away from here."

"Sure," said Weigand, "he took the local this noon."

I spent the rest of the lonely evening deciphering the obscene scribblings above my bunk, including one about the chief of police which I heartily agreed with, and wondering what strings C. P. Britt would pull and what sort of high-priced legal talent he would fetch with him in the morning, and then I fell asleep.

Breakfast came on a tray, served by the chief himself, along with the observation that Mrs. Weigand was a mighty good cook. By the time I had waded through orange juice, oatmeal, two eggs and a stack of wheatcakes, I knew where Weigand had got his shape, and when he came back for the tray I asked him to convey my compliments.

"She figgered you had a hard day ahead of you," was the chief's answer to that one.

When he finally showed up again, maybe an hour and a half later, I had run short of both cigarettes and patience.

"Arraignment? It better be."

He shook his head. "Inquest. You plan on behaving yourself, or do I need the bracelets again?"

I told him I'd never know a man yet who could outrun a slug, particularly right after breakfast, and we ambled down the street to the Funeral Home.

The coroner's jury was there—in fact the whole town was there. The mortician was there, and Doc Stearns, and Michael Merrill under his sheet. Even C. P. Britt was there, but he seemed to be all alone with his broken wing, and he looked at me as if the face was familiar but he couldn't quite place the name. That in itself should have started me worrying—in fact, it did.

The inquest established just about what I expected: that Michael Merrill was deceased to boot; that he had become such by an act of wilful violence on the part or parts of person or persons unknown.

The payoff questions came later, back in the chief's office.

"Now, then," said Weigand, folding his hands comfortably over his own breakfast, "I gathered from your testimony, Mr. Britt, that Rhodes here is working for you?"

Britt answered, not very enthusiastically, "I hired him yesterday morning, yes."

"For what purpose?"

"Why, I—as I indicated before, Merrill had been missing since Monday evening, and I was anxious to locate him. He—well—frankly, we've run into some difficulty with our books, and I needed Merrill to help straighten things out."

Weigand had that stupid look back on his face, and I could see Britt visibly relaxing as he went on. "Just an apparent irregularity in our accounts, Chief, and this is all highly confidential, of course."

"Nothing confidential about a sliced throat," murmured Weigand. "I don't understand high finance, Mr. Britt, but how much does an 'apparent irregularity' amount to, in ordinary dollars? Say a hundred thousand in cash and negotiable paper, more or less?"

I grinned to myself as Britt gave a good imitation of a man who suddenly finds his buttons open in public. "Well, as a matter of fact—"

"In cash?"

Britt stammered, "Not exactly, although it could be, of course. I mean, it shows up on paper as customers' accounts which don't balance, securities supposedly purchased but never delivered—that sort of thing."

Weigand scratched his head. "What do you know about a man named Potter, Charles Potter I think it is?"

Britt looked startled again and repeated what he had told me over the phone the previous evening. Then he asked curiously, "How did you find out about him?"

"He was asking for Merrill at the hotel yesterday," the chief answered offhandedly. "We learned he took the midday local north, too—which checks with your story."

"But he may be the murderer!" Britt protested impatiently. "Look—he became suspicious about his account and started putting pressure on Merrill. Merrill made an appointment to meet him here, hoping to satisfy him or at least put him off. But they quarreled, maybe Merrill even attacked him in desperation. Potter killed Merrill instead, then took the first train to the city in a last frantic attempt to regain his money."

"Maybe," said Weigand. "We'll know more about it when we locate Potter. But the point I'm interested in now is that with all this going on—with your clients complaining and your books short—you thought a private detective was the answer, instead of the legal authorities?"

"When you put it that way, smile," I said, but they both ignored me.

"I hoped to avoid a scandal that would wreck the business," Britt answered with simple dignity. "I thought it was worth a try, at least, especially since I knew that Merrill had inquired about train schedules to Glencove. But of course, the minute I learned that Merrill had been killed—"

He paused and washed his hands of me with one self-righteous glance. "I hoped Rhodes would be discreet, of course, but I certainly wouldn't have condoned any attempt to hinder a murder investigation. That's why I called you, immediately."

*And this,* I thought to myself, *was the guy who was going to back me all the way, one hundred per cent!*

I said nastily, "As long as you're being so cooperative, Britt—why don't you tell the chief about the ex-Mrs. Britt?"

There was a moment of sharp silence. Then Britt said blandly, "When Rhodes called me yesterday evening, he did mention a woman."

"From his description, I suspected the worst. But I was mistaken; she had spent the night with her mother, apparently, and she returned home yesterday."

Weigand's answer to that was to reach abruptly for his phone. He asked the operator for a city number and a name I recognized as belonging to our homicide bureau, and then, while he waited, he turned back to Britt again.

"What made you think she might have gone with Merrill?"

"She was in love with him," Britt answered flatly.

"And you could have murdered him for it?" I suggested.

"I could have," he agreed smoothly, "except that somebody else saved me the trouble." He glanced at Weigand, who had one ear glued to the phone and another aimed at us. "As a matter of fact, my first thought was that maybe the money had proved too much temptation for you—until I learned exactly when Merrill had been killed and remembered that I had talked to you at your office about the same time."

We glared at each other with the mutual affection of two guys who have nothing in common but an alibi, and then I realized that Weigand had completed his call.

He had already given the lieutenant at the other end some good reasons why they would oblige by picking up and holding one Mrs. C. P. Britt for questioning, but now he was saying mostly, "What . . . when? Yeah. . . ." and I realized I was seeing him jolted for the first time.

He was still looking jolted when he finally put the phone down; he stared at his battered old desk for a moment before raising his eyes to Britt.

"Mr. Britt, I've got bad news for you.

Mrs. Britt was found dead about an hour ago."

## CHAPTER THREE

### Homicide House

THEY even helped the guy get off, so help me. Weigand himself checked on the train time for him; the green-eyed Slim rushed him over to the station in a police car, and probably even carried his bag aboard for him.

It was all very touching—except that it left me holding the same old bag I'd been stuck with all along.

"You get the brass-plated doughnut hole this round," I told Weigand scornfully. "There goes your killer, sucker."

He shook his head absently.

"Name one with a better motive!" I snapped. "Merrill not only took his money, but his wife as well."

"I thought you talked to him, up there in the city, between twelve and one?"

"Sure . . . over the phone. I assumed, or rather he deliberately led me to believe, that he was phoning from his own office. But one gets you ten that it was a long distance call instead, and that the girl who asked for me by name was a long distance operator making a person-to-person call, and not his secretary!"

I paused for a breath. "Look. Britt came into my office just after nine. I didn't hear from him again until nearly one. Time enough to hop a train—"

The chief was wagging his stupid head. "The Sunrise is the only one south in the morning, and the local the other way gets here about the same time."

"Okay, okay—so he drove. He sneaked into the hotel the back way, killed Merrill, phone me from some town just north of here, and was back in the city by the time I was down here sticking my neck out for him."

Weigand was about as easy to convince as solid marble. "All that with a busted arm?" he asked skeptically.

"You didn't see him bust it and neither did I. And what about this Charles Potter deal? All you're doing is—"

"What about Potter?" Weigand interrupted. "Sure, we know he asked for Merrill at the hotel, and we know the reason why. But it hardly seems likely, if he was plannin' murder, that he'd ask for his victim at the desk. If he wasn't—well, the clerk had already told him nobody named Merrill was registered there."

I gave up. "Okay. And you've got another murder on your hands, or at least your conscience, if any. Britt's ex-wife."

"Suicide. You heard what I told him."

I snorted. "Suicide!"

"Your big cops up north are satisfied," Weigand answered. "She took too many sleeping pills. And what you didn't hear, because I didn't want to be the one to break it to Britt, was that she left a note confessing she killed Merrill."

It took me a second or two to absorb that. "A note? A signed confession?"

Weigand shook his head. "Not signed, but it was in her own handwriting and no doubt about it, they said. Something like this: 'I hereby confess that I killed Michael Merrill in the town of Glencove Beach on Tuesday, October 4th and that no one else was involved in any way and I am making this confession of my own free will.' "

I snorted again and we sat there a moment, each busy with his own thoughts. A big blue fly buzzed wearily against the dirty window beside Weigand's desk, and he absent-mindedly smeared it with a newspaper.

I got up. "Well, I don't see what I'm sitting around here for."

"I don't either," said Weigand indifferently.

"How about my gun?"

"Send it to you. Express. Collect."

IF EVER a guy was glad to shake the dust of a small town, it was the guy named Rhodes who headed out of Glencove Beach in a 'forty-seven Ford about five minutes later.

I had been given the gate by my own client. I had spent a night in a jerkwater jug. I had lost my .38, along with my self-respect.

But the best I could do about it now was thumb my nose at the COME AGAIN painted on the back of THE CITY WITH A SMILE, and shove on the gas pedal.

Four minutes later I rattled across the bridge which went with Crazy Potter's creek. Fve minutes later I had slowed down enough to make a U-turn, seven minutes later I had pulled off the road behind the shiny new Buick sedan which was hidden deep enough in the brush to escape the casual eye.

It had escaped mine, until I had glanced back over my right shoulder and saw it.

The Buick was empty, and so was the distributor, after I had helped myself to the rotor.

I didn't follow the path this time. I made it the hard way, through the underbrush. The shack on the river bank didn't look like Dali by day and from the rear—it just looked ugly and dangerous.

Something touched my shoulder gently. He must have had Indian blood in him, for all his heft; either that or I was seeing things. It was Weigand, one hand on his gun, the other one on his lips.

He didn't give me time to be startled, he just gave a quick nod and moved out. We hit the rear door together.

In the dim light inside something whirled, and C. P. Britt's dark face stared at us like doom itself. He backed away from the old wood stove, his arms covered to the elbows with ashes. Both arms. Around his neck, his empty black sling

dangled like a hanging useless mask.

"Higher," Weigand growled, with a flip of his gun.

Britt raised his right hand—I yelled—and a gun roared, all in the same moment.

Britt folded with his eyes on me, and I'm sure he died thinking that I had shot him. As it was, I didn't know myself until I turned around.

Weigand finally straightened up and glared at him, himself. "Dammit, Slim, I told you to cover me, and nothin' more."

Slim said imperturbably, grinning through the broken pane, "If that ain't covering, I don't know what is."

I nudged the straight razor that had fallen from Britt's hand, I went over to the stove and looked at a sooty heap of what had once been crisp green paper, and then I looked sharply at Weigand.

"You sure must have done one hell of a job searching this place."

"Bait," he said.

"You mean you found these—and left 'em here?"

"Figgered somebody just might come back for 'em," Weigand answered in a hick drawl he must have gotten out of a book. "What I can't make out, though, is why he picked on poor old Crazy Potter."

My turn had come at last. I plucked a floppy old straw hat from a nail on the wall, I picked up a dirty old white duck coat from a chair, and I handed them both to Weigand.

"There's your Crazy Potter, my friend. Those plus a wig you'll probably never find."

Weigand stared down at Britt, back to the clothes in his hands. "But—hell, Rhodes, I've seen 'em both—"

"You saw just what Britt wanted you to," I said. "When you saw Potter, which wasn't very often, you saw those."

I went on. "There never was any Potter, except for Britt's occasional trips

down here. I think he was bleeding his own company, not Merrill, and he was probably covering it up under a fictitious account with a fictitious customer named Charles Potter.

"It was Merrill who got suspicious, and Merrill who came down here to interview this mysterious out-of-town customer. Britt had to play his game to the hilt then. He hired me for a front and an alibi. He killed Merrill and left a trail—including that razor and a couple thousand dollars which he could well afford—pointing toward Crazy Potter as the murderer."

"But he came back."

"And I seen him on the train with my own eyes not an hour ago," added Slim.

"Sure. He went as far as the next stop, where he had left his car. And he came back because of the one thing he hadn't accounted for—his ex-wife."

"But—" Weigand was still butting—"how about that confession, that suicide note. The boys up there say—"

"I know, that she wrote it with her own little hands. I'm sure she did, but only because Britt pulled his broken arm act on her and made her think he was going to sign it. He had to work fast, you see, and get her out of the way before she learned that Merrill was dead.

"So he beat her to the punch. Probably pulled a big confession scene with her, talked her into writing out the details for his signature, and then doped her up."

I finished with a shrug. "You'll have to get those details from somebody else, chief. But one gets you ten that it stacks up to something like that."

Weigand didn't say yes, no, or maybe. He just turned away. "Slim, you go get Doc Stearns. And while you're about it, fetch Mister Rhodes' gun for him."

Slim looked at Weigand, then he looked at me. Then he handed me the gun that had just killed C. P. Britt.

## The Witness Chair

*(Continued from page 6)*

biblical custom, the practice was encouraged by some of the leading lawyers of Europe.

Offenders were 'arrested,' dragged before the tribunal and given attorneys for their defense. If found guilty of a major crime, such as murder, the animal criminal was usually condemned to death. In such cases, the execution was public and solemn. Often the doomed brute was dressed in human clothing for the occasion.

Wolves, rats, and moles were among the wild animals brought before the courts of France, Italy, and Germany. Swine were the most frequent offenders among the domestic animals, for they were usually both fierce and hungry. Many a child was injured or killed by a savage pig, and vigilant law-enforcement officers would promptly take the brute into custody. Where the jury returned a verdict of premeditated murder, the death penalty was automatic.

Not even the insects escaped the strong arm of the law. Flies, weevils, grasshoppers and other pests were frequently involved in court actions. When the defendants stubbornly refused to heed the subpoena, they were found guilty by default. The usual punishment was excommunication.

Far from regarding animal trials lightly, the public officials of the Middle Ages often went to great lengths in the prosecution of an offender. In one celebrated case involving a horde of rats, the matter was appealed from one court to another for a period of more than twenty years. The legal fees involved came near causing the bankruptcy of an entire province of France!

Edward Reilly
Boston, Mass.

Here's one about a man who went in for volume production—of death:

Dear Editor:

Visitors to Chicago in the early 1890s were frequently shown, as one of the city's marvels, the hundred-room mansion of wealthy Dr. H. H. Holmes. Neither the visitors nor his neighbors suspected that the castle was being used as a wholesale murder factory.

The actual room in which his victims met their death was likely to vary from time to time, since Holmes sound-proofed a whole section of the mansion as a slaughter chamber. One room was piped for asphyxiation by gas, another was equipped for hanging, and a third served as a torture chamber. After killing a victim, Holmes would send the body to the cellar through a chute.

Authorities estimate that approximately two hundred women were lured to the Doctor's castle, by offers of matrimony, where each was killed. Since he sometimes had several 'wives" living in different parts of

the house at the same time, Holmes was often forced to dispose of two or three on a single day. In such emergencies, he had three methods of disposing of the bodies—the vast cellar was equipped with a vat of corrosive acid, a pit of quicklime, and a crematory.

How long the mass murder might have continued, no one knows, but Dr. Holmes deviated from his custom of killing only single women. His first male victim was the source of his being caught.

George Underhill
East Chicago, Ind.

And then there was Henry Rector, who worked up suspense that lasted long after he died:

Dear Editor:

In the Court of Appeals building, Albany, New York, is one of the world's riddles of architecture—a flight of stairs extending for four floors without supporting pillars.

The stairway is the work of Henry Rector, who was convicted of murder in 1838 and imprisoned in Sing Sing. An architect and skilled stonecutter, he was given the task of cutting the marble for the stairway of a building then being erected in Albany.

When all the marble was cut, authorities shipped it to the contractor—who found that there was no provision for supports. He was unable to proceed with construction, and went to Sing Sing to ask Rector's assistance.

Questioned, the condemned man admitted that he had deliberately revised the plans. The angry builder declared that it was impossible to erect the stairway without pillars; Rector offered to go and supervise the work if the governor would grant him a pardon upon its completion.

Governor Marcy accepted the strange proposal, and Rector, still in chains, directed the construction of the stairway. When it was successfully completed, the governor kept his word and freed the condemned man.

Though numerous architects later examined the structure, they confessed themselves unable to find a keystone, or to understand what holds the marble edifice in place.

Joseph Victor
Newburgh, New York

That brings us to the end of our file for this issue, crime fans. We hope that more of you will send in stories of the unusual, the grotesque, and the murderous for *The Witness Chair*. We'll be happy to use them. Until we hear from you, or meet you in our next issue, then, it's "Case Closed." Happy crime hunting!

—THE EDITORS

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