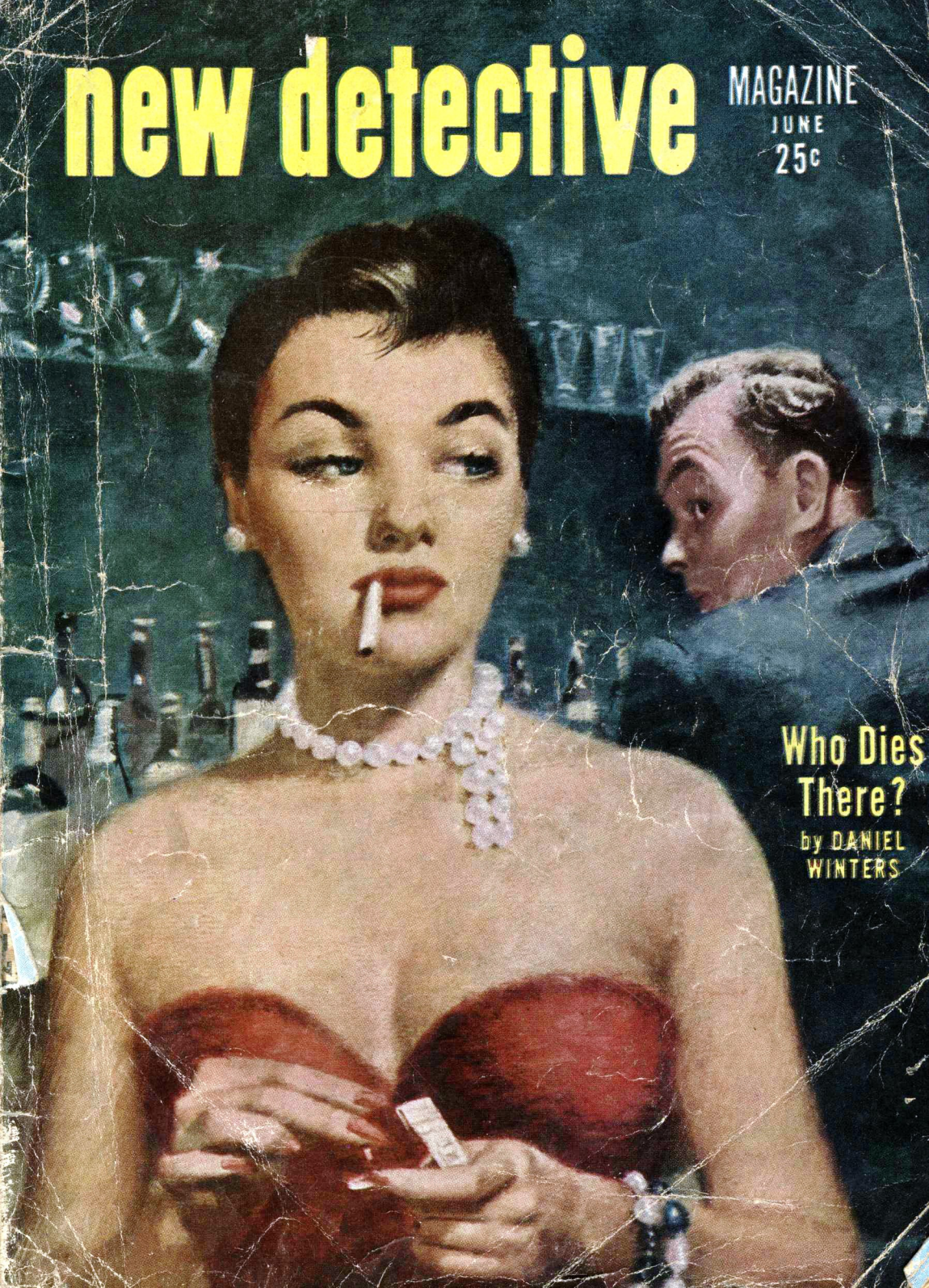
new detective MAGAZINE

JUNE
25c



Who Dies There?
by DANIEL WINTERS

new detective

VOL. 16 MAGAZINE NO. 2

CONTENTS FOR JUNE, 1951

fiction

departments

NEXT ISSUE OUT MAY 18, 1951

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

Published bi-monthly by Fictioneers, Inc., a subsidiary of Popular Publications, Inc., at 1125 E. Valle Ave., Kokomo, Indiana. Editorial and Executive Offices, 205 East 42nd Street, New York City 17, N. Y. Henry Steeger, President. John J. McVarish, Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter at the Post Office at Kokomo, Indiana. Copyright, 1951, by Fictioneers, Inc. This issue is published simultaneously in the Dominion of Canada. Copyright under International Copyright Convention and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction, in whole or in part, in any form. Single copy, 25c. Annual subscription for U.S.A., its possessions and Canada, $1.50; other countries 38c additional. All correspondence relating to this publication should be addressed to 1125 E. Valle Ave., Kokomo, Indiana, or 205 E. 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope for their return, if found unavailable. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts, but assume no responsibility for their return. Printed in the U.S.A.

"It is my conviction," Joel Townsley Rogers writes us, "that the plural of spouse is spice. . ." Yet nowhere will you find the implicit tragedies in a plurality of spouses treated with more understanding and insight than in this heart-searching tale of the murder of America's Sweetheart. To us this is one of the great detective classics of all time—and one we'll have difficulty matching for the rest of '51!

The Return Of the Murderer

by JOEL TOWNSLEY ROGERS

A LONG TIME ago her murderer had left her for dead, but she was not quite dead. He had botched the job, to a partial extent—had done it in such fury, and had made such haste to get away, that some little pulse was still beating in her. She had even recovered some glimmering of consciousness for the time being.

She lay there on the living room floor of her little suburban home, moaning in the darkness.

"King!" she moaned. "Oh, please, King!"

The darkness was thick and unbreathing. Somewhere close beside her, a man's low-pitched voice murmured soothingly, with an inhuman irony.

"Just look at the matter sensibly, my dear. No one knows that I am here with you. Your husband does not know. None of your friends know. There are only you and I, so why be afraid? Only trust me. All I want is to see you happy darling. I would not hurt you for the world. . . ."

She breathed in small gasps.

The quiet, resonant voice intoned on, with its meaningless, incongruous words. But it was not the voice of anyone she knew. It was not the voice of anyone in the darkness with her. Only the voice of an actor speaking his lines from the low chairside radio, which she had turned on in some blind gesture as she dragged herself along the

floor, feeling upward, trying to find a light switch or the phone.

She had been an actress herself, and in her life she had acted and forgotten many plays. The falsely tragic words of the unreal drama murmuring from the radio now had no meaning for her, and made no impression on her, if she was aware of them at all.

"Where are you, King?" she murmured, with motionless lips. "Oh—King!"

A whisper that made no sound.

She felt something warm and wet touch her right wrist presently, where it lay flung out on the floor beside her at the rug's edge, like the touch of the wet muzzle of a dog. For a moment it penetrated her darkening consciousness with a sense of fellowship. Her little dog had found her, so she dreamed, and in his poor dumb way was trying to express his sympathy for her, his grief and love.

"Good—" she tried to breathe. "Good boy—"

There was nothing that he could do to help her. But he was something that cared for her, something warm and alive to have beside her in this dreadful darkness.

Yet it wasn't the nuzzling muzzle of her little dog, she realized presently. She had merely moved her wrist a little, with an involuntary gesture, into some spot of warm wetness lying on the floor. It was the wetness of her own spilled blood. Nothing more.

There was something she had meant to do. Had tried too hard to do. A little while ago. Or maybe hours ago. Lock the doors, that was it. Crawl to them and reach up and bolt them so he could not get back in. And find a light switch and the phone.

Get hold of the phone, where it stood on the table in the living room, and pull it down beside her, and turn the dial slowly and carefully around to the last fingerhole. Dial Operator, and when someone answered say, "Doctors, police, please hurry! I am hurt. I am afraid that he will come back again. Please, please hurry!"

In a clear, distinct voice so they would understand. They would send someone to help her. Even if they understood only the first two words. It was something she must do. She must do immediately.

She had reached the table in the living room some time ago, she thought, and had caught hold of the end of the linen tablerunner. But she had not had sufficient strength to pull the phone off. Or if she had, it had dropped somewhere on the floor near her, with all the litter of photographs and magazines and ashtrays and bridge cards. There was no strength left in her to grope around and find it, and turn the dial, and say even that one word.

And it did not seem so important any more.

She lay there, too hurt for any more pain. All the agony of those savage merciless blows was behind her, and her senses floated on dark distant streams.

Memories of glamorous days, of golden hours. She had been a beautiful woman, and she had been loved by many men. She had known wealth and luxury, adulation, all that a woman can know. Now in the darkness she lay dy-

ing, while beside her with meaningless words of tenderness, in false tragic tones, the radio murmured on and on.

But there was no one with her in the darkness. He had gone a long time ago, the cruel, inhuman fiend who had struck the life out of her with such merciless and sadistic fury. He was no longer there to hurt her.

Only let her die like this, alone. Softly and quietly. It was not so hard as she had always thought.

SOMEWHERE in the dark, drifting distances around her she heard a quick, small tinkling sound—*pertink!* Like the striking of a sharp thumbnail on a drinking glass.

The sound shattered her dying dreams with bubbles of nighmare terror. Brittle and sharp as glass. Oh, he had come back to find her! He had come back to make sure of her, before she was quite dead! All that agony, all that hurt again! No, oh, no!

. . . . *Pertink! pertink! pertink! pertink!* . . . The little sound persisted.

Only the little silvery voice of her electric clock upon the mantlepiece, striking the hour of ten, or eleven, or midnight—she could not count, she could not be sure. Nor did she care. She was drifting off on those dark streams of eternity in which there is no time.

I, I, I, she thought, *am dying, dying. Please only let me die like this, in peace. . . .*

"You—"

The harsh terrible voice awoke her, pulling her back to consciousness again.

"Have just been listening to *The Woman in the Dark*. . . . An original mystery play by King Glore. This is the first of a series of a regular weekly feature presentation of the Consolidated Broadcasting company. Next week tune in at the same time to *A Nickel for Your Life,* also by Mr. Glore.

"When you hear the note of the bell the time will be exactly—"

A fading whisper. There was faint music coming from it when it was audible again. Playing *Liebestod. The Death of Love.*

"King! Oh King!"

Back to those dark floating dreams again, drifting outward on the tide. Perhaps to escape in merciful death before he should return . . .

There would be nothing to tell who her killer had been.

No one had seen him come or go. It might have been any one of several men who had been in her past life. Of course it might have been some burglar who had broken in, and who had been caught by her in the midst of his depredations, and so killed her.

In the very commonplaceness of her life, the most commonplace of explanations would suffice. Yet in death the shadow of a lost glamor must still lie about her.

Her name was Nina Bicks now—Mrs. Claude C. Bicks. Her home was a modern and attractive little whitewashed brick suburban home, with prettily landscaped little lawn, situated on a pleasant little street called Terrace Drive, in a pleasant residential section of Washington, D. C. She was married to a minor government clerk.

In life she lived here with him and

her little white wooly dog, going to the movies occasionally, playing bridge with some neighboring couple, quite as if she had never known any other kind of life, or would ever want to . . . she who had once been Nina Wandley of the movies, with a name that had been known to millions, and a lovely alluring smile that had once brought the hearts of all men into their throats.

Nina Wandley, of *The Beauty and the Beast,* written and directed by King Glore, who had been her first husband. Slender, golden, nineteen-year-old Nina of *The White Orchid,* of *Tears in Darkness*. Tragic, lovely Nina of that memorable picture, *The Stopped Clock,* with its symbolic pictorial effects and its terrific impact of suggestion, in which the stopping of a clock upon the screen indicated her death off stage. . . .

King Glore, golden Nina's first husband and lover, the greatest play-maker of them all. Finished and burned out long ago. But there had been a genius in him then. . . . Fifteen years ago, back in the old silent days, of course.

With the advent of sound Nina had retired from the screen. Her voice was too small and frail. New types of stories, too, had demanded new acting tempos. The same gesture and expression, in the same dramatic situation, which had been eloquent and moving in pantomime, were only laughable when accompanied by dialogue delivered in faint childlike tones. The only picture in sound which golden Nina Wandley ever attempted, even though Tito Barry had played the male lead, had never left the projection room.

King Glore himself didn't survive, and faded from the scene, after a reckless and defiant attempt to fight the tide with one or two last extravagant silent epics of his own, which he had formed his own company to produce, with everything he could raise or borrow, and which had lost him a million dollars. He had already lost Nina Wandley then.

She had left the glittering scene completely. She had remained still glamorous, with a fame that could not be forgotten overnight. With a wistful loveliness that some men could never forget, beautiful, moneyed, still at the beginning of her twenties, she had become Nina Wandley Barry, the one great love of Tito Barry—then at the height of his own skyrocket fame as the Great American Lover. The golden hours of life had still gone on for her.

As Mrs. Wade Cleveland, III, afterwards, of the Cleveland motor millions, with her great houses in Detroit and Bar Harbor and Palm Beach, with her yacht Golden Lady and her racing stable, colors white and gold. As Nina, the lovely Prinzessa Variogli, of a name older and prouder than Rome's. As Lady Nina Vanners, shooting tigers in Nepal and rhinos in the East Indies, feted by maharajahs, flying the Himalayas with her fifth husband, Sir George Vanners, Major the Right Honorable Pukka George. . . .

There had been a time, of course, when in the film magazines and gossip columns her imminent return had been periodically forecast. But after a while there had been less of all of that, and for a number of years now, none at all. It had been accepted that golden

Nina Wandley had left the screen definitely and forever, her name one of a legended past. Many old-time moviegoers, if hearing it again, might have thought of her as already dead, remembering her only a lost dream of their youth.

Yet for her, who had once been Nina Wandley, the clock of life had still been ticking on, through many golden hours. She had had almost all of it.

She had come back from Australia after Singapore and Java, after leaving valiant bent-for-hell old Pukka George Vanners dead in Sumatra, with his clubbed elephant gun in his hands. She had come back with the memory of the last words which old Pukka George had said to her.

"I have always been meaning to concoct a dashed fine play for you, Nina," old Pukka George had said. "But the skill wasn't in me. In whatever way I tried to alter it, it was always King Glore's old story. Now it doesn't matter any more. I thank you, Nina. You have been more than kind. Remember twilight on the Koonga Hills sometime. I should like to take that thought with me, anyway, as I go. But for you there is no escape, is there?"

"Escape?" she had said, with her quiet tears, not understanding him—"Why, yes, tonight, on the boat for Java, don't you know? They are taking all the women. They feel they have more than a fair chance to get us through. Don't think about me any more."

"WHAT will the next role be like, I can't help wondering?" old Pukka George had said, a little tiredly. "For the play still goes on for you, since you are young and very beautiful. Only the scene will change, as it always has. Old Pukka George, after dancing Mike Variogli. Variogli, after dour Wade Cleveland. Cleveland, after beautiful child-brained Tito Barry. Barry, to get away from Glore. But you will never get away from Glore, I have the feeling, Nina. He wrote the first scene, and he will write the last. He alone, of all the men who ever loved you, ever really knew you."

"King Glore!" she had said, with a catch of her breath, with a white fear for a moment in her heart. "Why do you say that? The only man in the world I ever hated, or could hate. He has a dark and ugly mind, with murder in it. I have never seen or even thought of him for years. I never want to see or even think of him again, alive or dead."

"One does not think, dead, Nina," said old Pukka George with his cool quiet smile. "I shall be the only man of those who have loved you who will never think of you again. The Moi boys' song, and the fires by the black river.... No, you will forget those things, also, and that's best. And that's all, except that I have loved you very much, my dear. Only this one thing I love more."

And with his smile on her, with his monocle in his eye, he went.

The same cool smile had been at the edges of his lips where he had fallen. So the Dyak boy had reported who had lain all day among the dead, and at night had slipped back through the Jap lines to tell about the battle at Bloody Sands.

Claude had met her in a crowded downtown cafeteria in the heart of jam-packed Washington, into which she had dropped at six o'clock for a pot of revivifying tea. Claude had been sitting at a small table not far from the door, with his elbows on the table and his fingers locked together, contemplating the scene. Lady Nina Vanners had paused beside the vacated place.

"Do you mind if I sit here?" she had asked, in her small silvery voice.

"No, ma'am, I reckon not," Claude had told her respectfully.

She had sat down, pushing aside the dirty plates left by her predecessor, unwrapped her sugar lumps, and poured out her tea, with small graceful gestures of her hands. Claude—not actually conscious of her yet, and having replied only out of a mechanical hill-country courtesy, had continued his survey of various characters which interested him.

CLAUDE REMEMBERED that scene afterwards—how she had quietly sat down across from him, like a shadow, and how he hadn't noticed her at first. He remembered other people who had been in the cafeteria—a dark-haired, big-limbed Wave ensign, with rosy cheeks and dark flashing eyes; a lean dark young air-force captain wearing a row of campaign ribbons above his silver wings, with a white scar down the side of his face and narrow gun-sighted eyes beneath his pulled down cap-visor. . . .

"You enjoy people a great deal, don't you?" said Lady Nina Vanners, a little tiredly.

"Yes, ma'm, I reckon I do," Claude said—a little embarrassed, as if he had been caught in something.

"You seem to take everything in," she commented. "I've been noticing how your eyes have been wandering around everywhere. You seem to have a rather keen sense of life."

"In a way I pretty much do, I reckon," he replied.

For the moment still, he noticed nothing in particular about her.

"The way I look at it," he added, "it's all a kind of play. I sort of like to watch things and study people. You take about anybody, I reckon, even the dumbest, and you can make some kind of play out of them, if you've got the brains to analyze them. It makes you feel kind of like a god to sit and watch them."

"You are a playwright?" said Lady Nina Vanners, sipping her tea.

"I've never done any yet," Claude admitted with his homely grin. "But ideas for plots are always popping into my head. Some day when I get around to it I'll do a good one."

"You seem to be rather confident of yourself," she commented.

"Well, why not, ma'am?" he said with a homely grin. "I'm Claude Bicks."

She was English, he thought, because of the kind of English way she had of talking, and because she drank tea. She must have lived a lot, he thought—at least, a good deal more than he had.

Claude Bicks saw those items about her, yet they were all he really saw. If he had seen just one more thing, one thing that old Pukka George had spoken of, one thing that the other men in her life had all known, that King Glore

himself had not been able to avoid seeing—he would probably not have left the house without her on this night she died, six months later.

But Claude Bicks simply did not see it, though he noticed all those other items. He would be married to her five months, and never have an idea of it.

Chapter 2

"YOU'LL BE MURDERED!"

AN EXTRAORDINARILY homely and insignificant-looking man, Lady Nina Vanners thought, sipping her tea—about the most unattractive that she had ever met. Old Pukka George Vanners had been a handsome dog all his life, with his great body and high-colored face and the cool ironic smile, and the eyes of the women had always turned to him. Quite uncouth and plebeian, too, she thought—old Pukka George, on the other hand, had been an aristocrat to his last smile. Not too well educated, either, with a certain crudeness of language—Pukka George had been Harrow and Balliol. Dressed atrociously, in a spinach-colored jacket of dubious wool, and ill-fitting shirt without a vest, and a garish rayon tie—Pukka George had gone in for handloomed tweeds and tattersalls, and would not have sat down to dinner in a Naga village without first donning dinner jacket and black tie.

For that matter, old Pukka George would sooner have gone hungry than dine on a forty-cent cafeteria plate. Would sooner have been eaten by red ants than dine at six o'clock. Would sooner have died as he had died, than be sitting in this crowded dish-clattering place at any hour, twelve thousand miles away from the gun-shattered palm trees and the bloody sands.

But old Sir Pukka George Vanners had had a complicated and involved mind, the product of much formalized education and too much formalized old civilization . . . The homely, uncouth and somewhat simple man opposite her who gave his name as Claude Bicks, thought Lady Nina Vanners, could have nothing but a direct mind—perhaps a strong and vital, an original and creative mind, perhaps only a shallow one, but at least a mind uncomplicated, refreshing by contrast. A mind that would find no pleasure in the thought of its own death, either. He was no pukka hero.

She had always preferred older men—he was comparatively young—no older than she herself, she guessed. Younger than Tito Barry had been, certainly, with his mud-packs and wrinkle-masks to preserve his beautiful child-like looks. Younger than bald dour cigar-chewing Wade Cleveland, or monkey-wrinkled Mike Variogli. And far, far younger than old Pukka George.

Yet King Glore had been as young as that when she had done *Tears in Darkness* and *The Stopped Clock* for him, at the time of his great genius. . . .

"I knew a playwright once," she said, sipping her tea, "very arrogant and proud of his own play-making genius and contemptuous of all others, who used to say that there are a million commonplace men sitting somewhere at any given hour, watching some scene and

imagining themselves as dramatists—as gods above it all. One of the most ordinary, he used to say, of all delusive vanities. Because they see some little fragment of character or action in their minds, they think they are creators. Only after years of sweat and application, he always said, could a play be written even technically perfect. Yet," she added, smiling at his homely face, "I suppose there must be such a thing as a raw crude genius."

She set her cup down.

"Why not really do a play sometime," she said, "and let me see it? Perhaps I might be able to help you with some criticism and suggestions."

"You, ma'am?" Claude said, respectfully but incredulously.

Nina smiled to herself, liking his homely respect—Pukka George had always talked a little down to her, in his dry clipped way, as if she were no more than a half-grown girl. She liked his incredulity, as well. To him she was no more than any ordinary and desirable woman, and she was a little tired of being a personage.

Still, she might as well tell him.

"I am supposed to be rather a good judge of play values," she said. "I used to be on the screen. Perhaps you remember my *Tears of Darkness.* I was Nina Wandley."

She saw the blankness behind his look. She bit her lip, and smiled. That, too, was amusingly different. Old George Vanners had been in love with her from her first picture, *The White Orchid,* eight or ten years before he had ever met her. Claude Bicks had never heard of her.

He was rather original, she thought, behind his uncouth homeliness. Perhaps, in his very ignorance, he did have some crude power of genius, which would help her to shake the spell of King Glore.

"I have an hour or so before dinner," she said, "and you have finished your own? Perhaps we could go some place and have a drink. I am La—Mrs. Vanners. I'd like to hear more of your playwriting ambitions, Mr. Bicks. Where would you suggest?"

"We could get a coke right here, of course," Claude said, arising with alacrity. "But they charge ten cents for them. They have them at the drug store across the street for a nickel."

Old Pukka George would not have crossed the street to save five pounds. His drink had been his own special brand of liqueur scotch, which he carried with them even into the Naga hills.

"A nickel coke, by all means!" she said, almost gaily. "I hate to throw away money needlessly, too, just between you and me. It always hurts something deep inside me. I was married to a man once, a movie playwright, who would toss away any sum of money just on a whim. He didn't even know the meaning of a nickel. But I spoke of him before, didn't I—"

They had reached the revolving door. For an instant she paused, stood shivering—Nina Wandley, Nina Barry, Mrs. Wade Cleveland, III, the Princess Variogli, Lady Nina Vanners—fingering the rings on her hand. Her face had gone a little white, and there was a glassiness in her eyes.

Claude Bicks remembered that mo-

ment in the back of his mind. He could not help seeing her pallor, the shiver that had run through her.

She had caught the door, going out now. He wondered as he followed her, if she might be going to faint.

"Anything happen, Mrs. Vanners?" he inquired solicitously, as they did in plays.

"It wasn't anything," she said with an effort, smiling wanly at his homely face. "I don't know why I should have thought of him, mentioned him twice. He was a terrible man really, with a terrible mind. He wrote plays in which something horrible was always happening to me. One time we were having a quarrel—it was the day I was leaving him and he said I should be murdered some day by a man I loved. A polite way of telling me that he would like to murder me himself, I suppose, if he thought he could get away with it."

She glanced back, almost involuntarily, at the bright crowded place they had just left, its revolving doors whipping with a constant stream in and out at this crowded meal hour in the jam-packed city.

Claude Bicks turned his head, too, though down the walk and street. But he didn't know the man who had come into her mind—what his name was, or what he looked like in any way. He saw a taxicab at the curb a few yards down, and a big man with heavy shoulders and a craggy face beneath thick iron-gray hair getting hurriedly into it. Claude Bicks didn't know who the man was who had come into her mind, and so he couldn't have told it if he should have seen him.

The taxi started off. Nina turned her face and glanced idly at its tail lights. The green sign came on. She, who had been Nina Wandley and all of that, crossed the street with the homely, insignificant man from Carger County to get their nickel coke. . . .

Never again to see him, alive or dead. That had been her wish. King Glore, the greatest play-maker of them all, her first husband, her first lover, on those heights of fire and snow. Beautiful alluring Nina Wandley, dying in the darkness! Ah, the darkness itself was a clue to her killer, and why he had willed her death in his damned soul. . . .

ONLY THE very finest people lived in Woodmont. There was Colonel Ryder next door on one side, who was a big man at the War Department. There was Mr. Slemp on the other, who was something big in retail shoes. There was a congressman living just a little ways down the street, and sometimes you could see him out mowing his lawn in the early summer mornings.

People like that. All the neighborhood were big shots. Even Claude's chief at the Bureau of Livestock Audits didn't live in half such a fine house.

The whole inside of the house was furnished with things that Nina had picked out herself, piece by piece. Some things she had even sent away for to New York. She was a good buyer, and economical according to her own lights —but even so, it had all cost a mint.

They had an almost new sedan in the basement garage, only six thousand miles on it. They had a big dark-haired

young maid, Carlotta, with rosy cheeks and snappy black eyes, who came in every afternoon and stayed till after dinner, all dolled up in a little white cap and apron, and good-looking as they come. They had a little woolly dog, which Nina had bought herself as soon as they had settled down.

Claude had to admit that he didn't care for the mutt himself, though there was no use in hurting her feelings by telling her. She had always had one just like it, she said, ever since one of those fellows she had been married to had given it to her—that fellow Tito, it had been, Tito Barry. It had been killed by a car while she had been married to Cleveland. Only she wasn't sure that it had been an accident. Maybe Wade Cleveland had run over it intentionally. Maybe it hadn't even been a car, but he had beaten or trampled it to death—he had had a bad temper, and the dog had sometimes nipped him—though it was terrible to think that any man would do a brutal thing like that.

She had got another in Rome just like it, but it had been poisoned. Then she had got another which she had eight years, but had left behind her in Sumatra, where it had probably become Jap chow long ago.

That wasn't what Nina had said about it herself. She was romantic. She wouldn't like to think of her little dog as having been eaten. It was like her to hide from the facts of life. But he had always felt that things might as well be looked at straight. That was the way everybody did back home in Carger County.

She had got herself a little dog, anyway. The pooch was only a small item, and it didn't bother him particularly. Probably none of the fellows she had been married to had liked her dog much either. Maybe even Barry had given her the first one just as a kind of joke. But she was fond of it, just as if it were the same dog as the first one and the others that she had had for thirteen or fourteen years.

And so they had the house and a car and a maid and the little dog, and it was a fine way of living.

Living out here, Claude went to the office by the bus line, four blocks away. About once a week, he flagged little Colonel Ryder in the mornings, who had plenty of gas and drove down every day. It was only thirteen minutes by car downtown along Washington's broad straight streets, without much other traffic to hold you up, any more. By bus, of course, it took more than an hour, with the change to make.

In the evenings when Claude got home, Nina had a cocktail and he had a coke on the porch, and then they had dinner. Not just everything on one plate. Soup or grapefruit or something like that first, and then maybe a roast to carve, and salad and dessert and coffee, with flowers and candles on the table, and Carlotta passing everything, with the candlelight shining in her bright eyes, and maybe the chairside radio in the living room playing some kind of music.

After dinner, sometimes Nina and he would take the car and go over to the Woodmont, dropping Carlotta off at the bus line on the way; and once or twice a month they went clear down-

town to one of the big movie palaces, when there was something special that Nina wanted to see, and somebody acting that she wanted to analyze. Sometimes they went over to the Slemps, or the Ryders, if the Colonel was taking the evening off, to play bridge. Other times the Slemps or Ryders came over to their house, and the women would all admire Nina's nice things, and say what a lovely home she had, and what exquisite taste; and then they would play a rubber of cards, and have crackers and cheese and beer afterwards, with a coke for him, and a highball if it was Colonel Ryder.

They were nice friendly neighbors, though Colonel Ryder almost never seemed to remember his name, always saying to Claude in the mornings, when Claude had flagged him on the street and he had stopped his car, "Certainly! Glad to give you a lift down, Mr.—ahm—neighbor. How is that fine handsome wife of yours? Haven't seen her in quite a bit. She's well, is she?"

CLAUDE had been working on a play ever since that evening he had first met Nina.

It was something that had come to him while they had been sitting in the cafeteria, even before they had got up to go across the street and get a coke and have the rest of their evening together.

Nina would be in it herself, of course—it would all be built around her.

He had been working out the details in his own mind. But he hadn't got them quite all organized yet. He was young, and there was plenty of time to do it in, it seemed to him. Even six months or a year from now—

Sometimes, after dinner in the late summer evenings, or on Sundays or Saturday afternoons, Nina might remark that she thought she would go out and do a little more work around her garden, and why didn't he go up to his study and try working on his play? Generally, when she suggested it, he did go up for a while.

But it was silly. The play was something he had to work out in his own head. It wasn't just a bunch of words to write down on paper. He could think about it one place as well as the next. He didn't need a study to do it in. He would get it all worked out in his head eventually.

So he would just sit there at his desk and look at the wall for maybe fifteen minutes or half an hour, and scratch his neck and yawn, thinking of things in his head; and then drift back downstairs again and go out in the kitchen to get a drink of water and kid with Carlotta, till Nina came in from her gardening in the dusk with her earth-stained cotton gloves on her hands, bringing her shears and trowel, and a bunch of new-cut flowers to arrange in the vases.

"Well, here you are! How it is coming, Wonder Man?" she would say, with her silvery little laugh.

"It's coming," he would tell her.

Sometimes she called him Wonder Man like that. It was a name she had made up for him. Mrs. Ryder had kind of gasped and choked over her highball when Nina had called him that at the bridge table one time, and had

started calling the colonel—who was a kind of scrawny little man, only about five feet four—Goliath, which had made the colonel mad. It was kind of conspicuous in public, maybe. Still, he rather liked it. . . .

For five months Claude Bicks had enjoyed this easy, dawdling life, for a longer time than he had been aware. A longer time in the life of a woman than of a man. She can't always wait. And before Claude Bicks was aware of it, life and death were rushing fast around the pleasant little whitewashed brick house at 119 Terrace Drive. Death for beautiful Nina Wandley. . . .

Chapter 3

SUSPECTS FOUR

ONLY THE NIGHT before last, Nina had come in from her gardening, and had asked him about the play.

"Been working over a few ideas in my head, Nina," he had told her. "I'll have it all finished for you to take a look at, one of these evenings."

"I suppose I'll just have to be patient," she had said in her frail voice, a little tired. "I know it's the sort of thing that can't be rushed, and still be any good. And it's going to be good, isn't it, Claude? I am really quite eager to see it, though, even in a rough draft."

And she had laid her cotton gardening gloves and shears down beside the sink, and had dropped the flowers she had brought into the sink, running water over them.

"I was just thinking," she said suddenly. "Tell me—it's not going to be just another *White Orchid* or *Stopped Clock*, is it, Claude?"

"What?" he said. "Those flowers?"

"The play you're doing," she said. "Of course, it couldn't be. You never saw any of those old films of mine, to try to imitate them, even subconsciously. And you must have your own individuality and your own style. You're not he, at all. But I was just thinking of something that Pukka George said to me before he went, about him."

"About who, Nina?"

"Glore," she said. "King Glore. That I would never get away from him. That he had written the first play for me, and he would write the last. It makes me feel depressed when I think about it. As if I were in the grip of some dark invisible force that I could not escape. As if everything were an old play through which I were moving, making half-remembered gestures. Like a dream of something known before."

"Good gravy," he said, with his homely grin. "Don't always be thinking about my play, Nina. It won't be like anything that guy Glore ever did, or anyone else, either, I'll bet you. Come on, if you're feeling low, let's take the car and go down town to the Odeon. They've got *Springtime Joy* on this week, with Hilda Rainey in it, and a good stage show. You've been looking forward to seeing it."

"I know I have," she said. "But I don't know if I'm in the mood for it tonight."

There was a scratching at the back door. She opened it, letting in her little white woolly dog.

"He was out in the garden with me. He didn't seem to want to come in. He

seems quite thirsty, doesn't he?" she said, watching the little animal with a faint frown, as it went to its water dish and lapped noisily, and then slunk away beneath the gas range, with a groaning sound. "I think I'll take him to the vet's tomorrow.

"Carlotta hasn't been looking so well, either, recently, it rather seems to me," she said, arranging a bowl of yellow marigolds, with delicate careful hands. "I mean, haven't you noticed she's seemed a little pale? Or it is just my imagination?"

"Carlotta?" said Claude Bicks in mild irritation. "What will you think up to worry about next?"

"Perhaps tomorrow or the next night we'll go to the Odeon," she said. "I really don't think I feel in the mood for anything tonight."

"Well," he said, "in that case maybe I'll go alone."

"Oh, please don't!" she said. "Please don't ever go away without me, Claude!"

And she had burst out weeping, clinging to him.

Two nights before tonight.

THEY had gone down to see *Springtime Joy* that night, anyway, and she had enjoyed it, once she got there. Not because it was a good movie, for it wasn't. But just because it was so bad, it had amused her, and she had felt quite gay. And afterwards they had stopped for a drink at a little bar, a few doors down the street from the Odeon, a classy little place called the Blue Bar, not too crowded, with mirrors and blue tables and red leather cushions along the walls—he had learned by now that a drink to Nina didn't mean just a drugstore nickel coke—and she had had a highball there and he had bought himself a soft drink, and they had put nickels in the juke box, and had sat there drinking their drinks, watching the people at the bar, and had had themselves a big exciting time, about as big a time as they had ever had together. Claude had treated himself to three cokes altogether, at ten cents a throw, and Nina had almost been persuaded to take another highball.

When they had reached home, she had even mixed herself another highball in the kitchen, and had taken it upstairs to drink, though ordinarily she never had more than one an evening. She had been still catching at little snatches of *Springtime Joy* tunes as she got ready for bed.

"I might," she said. "I might, at that. If your play is really good, Claude. I mean, go back. I always thought that nothing could ever induce me to consider it again. It seems such a trivial art. I had put it quite behind me. But it might be rather amusing at that, for a time. You could get a writing job in Hollywood, at a big figure. We could sell the house here for three or four thousand more than it cost, and find another out there just like it, for probably somewhat less. Hilda Rainey—think of her being rated as a star! It's too ridiculous. Nothing but a big-boned peasant, with no more emotional depth and expression than a wooden horse. Doesn't she rather remind you of someone?"

"Kind of, now that you mention it,"

said Claude, concentrating, with a mild frown between his colorless brows. "Yeah, I know what you mean now. She kind of looks like that Wave ensign in the cafeteria that night I met you, Nina. She was just going out the door, and she kind of looked back. But I didn't know you noticed her yourself."

"She reminds me of Carlotta!" said Nina with her silvery little laugh. "Just imagine Carlotta as a star! Speaking of stars, I didn't tell you at the time, Claude, but while we were having our drink, I had the most amusing experience!" She laughed again. "I thought I saw one of my ex-husbands!"

"Yeah?" he said, not particularly interested, hanging his coat on a hanger from his closet.

He turned around to her, where she sat on the edge of her bed sipping her highball and laughing.

"Not that one who was going to kill you, you mean?" he said.

"Heavens!" she said. "Heavens, no! That would hardly be amusing. Tito Barry, I mean, my second husband. It wasn't really he. But there was some old gray drunk sprawled at the bar, with a pouchy face and without any teeth, who reminded me of Tito."

"Does he know where you live?" Claude said. "I was just thinking. We mentioned Woodmont and maybe Terrace Drive by name, didn't we? Suppose this guy overheard us, and came to look you up, sometime during the day while I'm at the office?"

"You wouldn't be jealous, now would you, Wonder Man?"

"I didn't mean it that way," said freckled Claude Bicks. "You know I didn't. I reckon I can hold my own with any of them. But if the guy's a moocher, suppose he might try to hit you for a five spot, or even fifty?"

"It could hardly have been Tito," she said. "Tito was really beautiful, and this man was a terrible old goon. He just reminded me a little in his eyes. But that wasn't all. As we came out of the Odeon before, I saw a taxi going by with a driver who looked like Mike Variogli, Prince Variogli, my fourth husband! Probably all taxi-drivers do look like Mike, of course. But it struck me as amusing. And just after we came into the bar, a pompous bald-headed Marine lieutenant-colonel went by on the sidewalk outside who might have been the double of Wade Cleveland! It did seem so funny. Seeing three of them on one night!"

"But not that first one who was going to murder you? Glore, the guy who wrote those movies?"

"No," she said. "Not him. I never want to see him again. I have the feeling that I never shall."

She laughed again, finishing her highball.

"It's been a gay evening," she said. "We'll have to have a lot more."

"We sure will," said Claude.

Never thinking that they wouldn't have a lot more. Never with an idea in his head, two nights ago, that she would be dead tonight.

CLAUDE BICKS HAD never left the house in the evening without Nina before this evening. And he wouldn't have done it now, except for a combina-

tion of circumstances and coincidences.

First there had been those three men who had popped back into her life. Wade Cleveland and that Italian fellow, and that grey old goon.

They had found her, in one way or another. All the men whom she had ever been married to before, except Glore that she never wanted to see again, and that last old Pukka George fellow who was dead. But Cleveland and Variogli and Tito Barry, all popping back into her life again tonight.

Claude Bicks hadn't ever been jealous of any of them. Whom she had loved, and who had loved her, didn't interest him. He had figured, when he first met her, that she had lived a lot more than he had, and it was just something to take with ice.

He wasn't any more jealous of them when they appeared tonight—Wade Cleveland after telephoning, and the other two by surprise. He had been a gentleman to them, receiving them nicely at the door, helping them off with their coats and hanging them in the coat-closet for them, showing them into the living room and offering them the silver cigarette box and striking lights to hold for them, going out into the kitchen to get beer for them, while Nina —who was feeling just a touch of arthritis—had sat with her feet curled up on the couch beside her, laughing and bright and friendly to all of them.

He hadn't been jealous, and had acted like a gentleman, though it wasn't hard to see that they all hated him, and maybe would like to murder him, just because he was married to her now and they would never be again.

Murder! Yes. When he thought back on it, he had got an idea of murder from them almost at first sight.

Still it hadn't been anything very definite and real. He hadn't believed for a minute that they would actually murder him, just out of crazy jealousy. They hated each other about as much as him, or maybe a whole lot more. And it hadn't seemed very likely, on the face of it, that any sensible person could believe that they might murder Nina—fellows who were crazy about her as they all seemed to be and who didn't have anything to gain from it.

Though now they had, as it happened.

But Claude Bicks had just been bored with them. . . . with their talk about people and about old times. It had seemed to him that it would be the gentlemanly thing for him to get out and leave them to enjoy their visit with her. Still, he might have been too indolent or procrastinating to have done it, if it hadn't been for Carlotta's feeling sick, and wanting him to drive her home.

On the spur of the moment he had got out the car, about half past eight or a quarter of nine, leaving those three fellows in the living room talking and visiting with Nina, and had driven Carlotta to the place where she lived, over in Georgetown. After dropping her off, he had gone on down to the center of town, where he had left his car in the garage, and had gone around to the Odeon.

The last show was just going on, the girl at the ticket window had said, and would be over around midnight. Claude

Bicks had bought a ticket and gone in, to stay away from home till the last of the three would have left, if they didn't all leave together. . . .

Wade Cleveland and Mike Variogli and Tito Barry, each of them had found her, in this quiet and commonplace role she was playing now. They had come back into her life tonight, in their different ways—on this night chosen by the Play-maker for her death.

WADE CLEVELAND had known pretty well all the time where she was, of course. He had had agents and contacts. For the last ten years or so, ever since she had left him, she had never been completely out of the range of his information. Just as she had never been out of his thoughts for a day, his golden lady, his beautiful and alluring Nina.

Heavy and stolid, tenacious and possessive, there had been that dull aching hope in him for a long time that some day she would come back to him. While she had been living in Rome and Capri with that monkey Variogli, he had kept himself informed of her daily doings by regular reports from a Roman detective agency, supplementing the pictures of her and the mentions in the glamor magazines: . . . "At the Rome opera . . . at the court ball . . . On the beach at the Lido the Princess Variogli, the former Nina Wandley. . . ." . . . with that damned hairy monkey-on-a-string grinning somewhere in the background.

But it was only an interlude. He had always known it. She had to have her fling. She would be coming back to him, to her great houses, to her horses, to her yacht, to all that he had to give her. When the cable had arrived that she had left Variogli, he had dropped everything, and rushed on the Normandie to Southampton, by plane to Paris, where she had gone. It had been during those ghastly panic days of '33. That little trip of his had cost him five million dollars.

But he had been too late. She had already embarked from Marseilles to return home eastward around the world. He could not follow her, with business as it was. He had to come back, bombarding her with radiograms and cables at all ports, to be ready to meet her boat in San Francisco. Only to learn from a newspaper item that she had met that fellow Vanners, the big-game hunter, in the Straits Settlements, and had married him.

An old man, more than sixty years old, with not more than two or three thousand pounds a year to his name. He must have used some devilish Eastern drug on her. Maybe he was keeping her by force. . . . Wade Cleveland couldn't keep detectives on her trail any more, not in the Naga Hills. But there had been an occasional brief newspaper item about her—about her having shot some record tiger, about her flight over Everest. He had got news of her, in addition, through his Eastern business contacts—while her mailing address had been always available from the bank which held trusteeship over the fund which he had set up for her, in lieu of dower rights, at the time of their marriage.

As the months had become a year, and

then another, Wade Cleveland had thought dark thoughts of hiring someone to do away with old Vanners. It had been no more than a dark thought, of course. He was Wade Cleveland. But sometime the old man would die, and release the spell he had on her. She would come back to him.

As the years had become more years, there had been no longer the brief newspaper items. Flying Everest was no longer rare. There had been no more record tigers. Wade Cleveland had not lost complete track of her at any time, though, till Singapore.

Then, for a while, in those terrible weeks and months, everything had been disrupted. His Eastern correspondents were Jap prisoners, were dead. There had been some sort of a rumor that old Vanners had been killed, but without confirmation. The world was burning. In one night ten million dollars in oil that had belonged to Wade Cleveland had gone up in smoke, after the crash of the rubber stocks.

He might have saved a good deal from that holocaust if he had been able to lay his hands on a quick million then. The little million which he had turned over to Nina in trusteeship when they had married, with its little thirty thousand annual income, had seemed hardly more than assuring her of pin- and taxi-money at the time. But it had loomed terribly large in those furious crashing days. When the word had come from Port Moresby that she was dead, from some refugees from Java who had seen her plane fall and the Japs machine-gunning it, he had tried to get the bank to dissolve the trusteeship—since by the terms of it, in case of her death without issue prior to him, the fund reverted to him.

The bank had refused, awaiting full proof, and the long processes of the law, before dissolving it. Reasonably, of course. There had come a rumor a few months later that she was still alive, had reached Darwin with a swarm of other refugees from the Islands. But when Wade Cleveland had got definite word of her again—he had been at Parris Island then, with the Marines—it had been to learn that she had returned to America, had married again, and was living quietly in Washington.

Chapter 4

THE ACE OF DEATH

HE MUST HAVE realized, even with his dour and stubborn determination, that this third marriage meant an end. She might have found him, if she had wanted to. She was not being drugged and held captive in the East. She was not just having a fling with Variogli. The thing was really at an end. Golden Nina went on. She did not go back.

Still, being in Washington this evening, at the end of a three day stay, and having a brief time to spare, he had wanted to see her.

He had found her number in the phone book, under the name she now had. Mrs. Claude C. Bicks of 119 Terrace Drive, Woodmont 4641. He had called her up from his hotel room.

"Wade? Wade Cleveland? How on earth did you ever find me? Yes, I'm

married to a young playwright now. Oh, yes, quite happy. What are you doing, Wade?"

Her soft sweet appealing voice drove him crazy for a moment. His hand tightened on the instrument as if he would crush it in his grip. The sweat was over him, and his brain was dancing with white lights behind his heavy mask of face.

Still there was no use in giving way to it. No use at all. He would never have her again, golden Nina. A less obstinate and bull-headed man would have realized it long ago. No use of showing her how he felt. Just be dull and heavy Wade Cleveland. Hearing her silvery voice again, and wanting to see again her beautiful face.

"In the Service," he said heavily. "I have only about an hour now, Nina. Held late at the department. I have a reservation out at midnight, and papers to go over before then. But I wanted to talk over some matters about your trust fund with you, while I'm in town. Could you give me a short while alone with you if I should come out?"

"Why, yes, I think so," she had replied, a little hesitantly. "You aren't going to try to persuade me to turn it back, by any chance, are you, Wade?" she had added, with her silvery laugh.

"Nothing like that," he said heavily. "It's yours for life. Just some suggested alterations in investment, requiring your consent, which might give you a better return. The war has disturbed a great many investments."

"Oh, Wade, you aren't broke yourself, are you? You couldn't possibly be!"

"No," he said. "I'm all right. If you've finished dinner, I'll come out right away."

He hung up. He would always, always, want her. The only quietness he had known in the thought of her had come with the rumor that she was dead.

He put on his forest-green coat, with the silver oak leaves on it. He had gone back into the Service in the fall of '42. He had been with the Marines in the first World War, as a shavetail of twenty-one, and they had taken him back as a captain. He was a good military man, and he had had two promotions since.

He took his blackjack from his bureau drawer and thrust it into the side pocket of his coat before he left. He had been a man of power, with enemies. He had been in the thick of many bitter labor battles, in the days when he had still been an executive and major stockholder of Cleveland Motors. He had got in the habit then of carrying a blackjack with him, as other men always carry gloves. But Nina was wrong when she had suspected that he might have clubbed her little dog to death with it. The damned animal had nipped his calf, and he had just swung his foot instinctively. It hadn't been his fault that he had been All-American once, and that his kick had sent the dog against the wall and broken its neck. It had been dead when he laid it out on the gravel and run over it.

At the desk below he paid his bill, checking out, and left his bags with the porter till he should call for them. He went out into the moonless October night. A taxicab cut in to the curb as he reached it.

"One hundred and nineteen Terrace Drive," he said as he climbed in, without looking at the driver. . . .

MIKE VARIOGLI had known where she was for a month or so now, ever since an evening when he had seen her getting out of her car with an insignificant-looking man at the garage around the corner from the Odeon movie palace. An inquiry there had got him the fact that it was her car, and her name. Her address had been merely a matter of looking at the records in the license office.

Once or twice, on trips out to Woodmont, he had gone past her address; and one of those times he had thought he had glimpsed her in the garden at the back, slight and golden-haired, stooping among her flowers. It had given him a sickly feeling, but he had kept on.

It had been a glorious year that they had together. The Varioglis had fallen on humbled days in the past two or three generations from the centuries of their great wealth and pride—his father an olive-grower, his grandfather a provincial banker. He had mortgaged the ancient family jewels to the moneylenders to finance that year, except for those which he had given her to adorn her loveliness. It couldn't have lasted a day longer than it had, with the hotel bills for the last week unpaid, and he down to his last five lira. But he had crowded everything into that one year. It had been like a magnificent play, of which he had been the author and producer.

He regretted none of it. He had thought, at the last, it was true, of proffering her a Borgian cup, and drinking it himself. But that would have been puerile. It would have been like an artist ripping his canvas to pieces because it was completed. There is the pleasure of contemplation of a finished and perfect thing, and he would contemplate that great year for the rest of his life.

The Variogli family jewels, of course, had been entailed, and had not been his to bestow upon her as her own individual property. They belonged to all the Variogli princesses who had been before, and all who would come after. However, he would never marry again himself; and with only his sickly young brother, dying in the sanitarium in Switzerland, the family line would die with him.

He had not imagined that Sebastian would recover, that he would marry that red-faced German woman with her loud shouting voice, and beget himself a son. The German woman, of course, had begun demanding the Variogli jewels for her son, or at least an accounting of them. He had put her off as long as possible. Two years ago, in Tunisia, when his commanding officer had told him that orders had come through to return him to Rome for a legal inquiry, he had quietly walked off and away across the desert to the American lines. He had formerly lived his years in Hollywood and New York, and he had been married to Nina, and he regarded himself as half, at least, an American citizen.

He had been sent to the States with

other prisoners. It had been no harder to walk away from prison camp. He had no business driving a cab in Washington, of course.

He would not dream of asking Nina for the return of the Variogli gems which he had given her. It would hurt his pride. He would sooner be a thief than a beggar.

Some day he would see her again. Yet it might not have been tonight, except for Wade Cleveland. He had seen Cleveland entering his hotel two nights ago, near his customary stand, had recognized, in the Marine lieutenant-colonel's uniform, the dour and heavy personality, the rich man from whom he had taken her, with monkey mockery.

With somewhat the same monkey mockery he had kept his eyes out for Cleveland. And tonight, when Cleveland had come out to the curb for a cab, he had cut in to pick him up.

"One hundred and nineteen Terrace Drive," Cleveland had said.

All Mike Variogli's sense of ironic coolness at contemplation of a perfected picture, went from him. He would never have her again himself. But, so help him, Cleveland would never have her, either. . . .

"Here you are, sir. One-nineteen."

He had stopped on the street, in front of the white brick house standing at the top of its terrace, amidst its pleasant little lawn.

"Wait for me, driver. I'll want you to take me back."

Wade Cleveland had gone heavily up the steps, and along the walk and up the stoop, had pushed the chiming bell. He had turned around in irritation to see the monkey-faced taxi-driver, who had followed him up.

"Damn it! What's the matter with you? Are you worrying about your money? I'll pay you off when I'm through with you! I told you to wait."

His small eyes glared at Mike Variogli's grinning monkey face, with a slow surge of ugly recognition. He gripped his right fist in his coat pocket.

"Damn you! I'll pay you off now!" he said.

Claude Bicks opened the door. Wade Cleveland removed his hand from his coat pocket. Mike Variogli, who had made a gesture of pulling a handkerchief out of his hip pocket, tucked it away again. He had gone in with Cleveland.

TITO BARRY had got her name in his subconscious mind at the bar two nights ago through a whirl of lights. Life was only those occasional brief whirls of light, and then the long grey days of misery in between.

But it had been a whirl of lights that night, and he had dreamed that he had glimpsed, amidst them, her lovely face. He had fallen down upon a seat somewhere. With his head upon his arms, he had gone off to sleep.

Yesterday in the early afternoon he had awakened, in a white iron bed in a dingy room.

He lurched upright. He had gone to sleep with his clothes on. He felt around in his pockets. In his side jacket pocket he found his false teeth, which he must have thrust away for safe-keep-

ing some time last night. He found his wallet, but it was empty, except for the pawn ticket for his good suit, and the picture of Nina in it. There was no small change in his trouser's pocket.

The image that he had seen of her in the bar before he collapsed was still in his mind, though, more real than most of the dreams. And words that he had heard being spoken around her, as she had sat there, tinkling, laughing . . . *Mrs. Bicks . . . Woodmont . . .Terrace Drive. . . .*

They had a small and compact shape about them; they still remained in his mind, when pulled forth from the subconsciousness, as something definite, not the meaningless whirling of a dream.

He looked in the phone book to see if there was such a name and address. When he had tapped a dime upon the street from a pedestrian, he had spent half of it to call up. . . .

"Yes?" Her frail silvery voice. "Oh, you must have the wrong number. . . ." as he muttered some offhand name.

He could not go out to see her like this. His appearance would shock her. He had been older than he had let her or the world know. Carrying on youth through middle age. Suddenly in a night, it had seemed, all the years had rushed over him, when she had left him. He had gone to bed still beautiful Tito Barry. He had waked up an old grey man. He wanted her image of him to remain always beautiful and young.

He had had luck, though, yesterday. He had hit upon a drunken sailor who had peeled off a ten-spot from a roll of bills, and had gone lurching on. He had taken it into a small poker-game which ran in the back-room of an all-night barber shop where he sometimes hung out, and had come out with more than forty dollars at the end of twenty hours.

He had treated himself to the works then. A Turkish bath, shave and haircut and all the fancy trimmings. He had redeemed his good suit, and bought a new shirt and tie, underwear and hat. In a drugstore he had bought hair-dye and cosmetics, and had taken a two-dollar hotel room, changing his clothes and making himself up with the old careful art. Pressing his face to the distorted bureau mirror, he had felt that it was a passable approximation of Tito Barry again, with his flesh only a little saggy beneath the powder, and still with his lavender eyes, not too noticeably bloodshot.

He wanted to appear beautiful in her eyes for one last time, because she herself was life and love and youth and beauty to him, the embodiment of his time of highest apogee. Those three or four years of riotous prosperity and fame that he had had while he had known her, had come to him only after a long and meager and obscure career as a bit man on Broadway and in the sticks. Then suddenly, almost overnight, it had seemed, he had come into the glory and the money as the Great American Lover, and into that height of glory as the lover of beautiful Nina Wandley, less than half his age, and already famous when he had been unknown.

He had thought that it would all last forever, though it hadn't. He had saved nothing from those brief resplendent years, except his half of the title to one

small piece of property. All the other things that he had bought during his life with Nina—the Spanish palace with its swimming pool, the cars, the horses—had all gone in the crash at the end. She had already taken her share with her, relinquishing her half of the title—in exchange for cash, which he had raised through mortgages and loans that he had begged from friends.

The one item of property which he had not mortgaged and divided and lost was a cemetery plot in that lovely place out in Hollywood which he had bought one time, more or less as a joke—in the same way that on an earlier occasion he had bought her her little white woolly dog—peeling off a thousand-dollar bill, and having the deed registered in their two names, and thinking no more about it.

He had forgotten about it when it came to the separation, and so had she. The deed had turned up among some old papers he had saved, when he had been packing to come to Washington three months ago in search of some job entertaining soldiers. He would like to find out from her now what she wanted done with it. Whether she might want to sell her share—he could not buy it himself, but some purchaser might be found—or whether she might want him to give her his share. Or whether she would prefer to keep it in joint ownership as it was, and both of them to lie sometime in one grave together. His last tie to her.

He clung to it.

So he had the deed to her grave in his pocket when he took the bus out to Woodmont and Terrace Drive after dinner that evening, with his face like a painted corpse.

SHE COULD NOT have known that she was going to die, with those three men there, or certainly she would have begged for help. She had some premonition, without a doubt. She was more analytical and probably more intelligent than Claude Bicks, and so she could hardly have avoided some inkling. She must have regarded it as just a shadowy and senseless alarm. She let Claude Bicks go out, anyway, without a word of protest, though he had never left her before, and she had never wanted him to.

She had had that touch of arthritis, and after dinner had settled down on one of the couches.

"How about some gin rummy, Claude?" she said.

He set the card table up in front of her, laid down a pack of cards and a score-pad and pencil for her—she was always better at figures than he—and seated himself.

"Cut for deal?" he said.

"I'll bet you a nickel, Claude," she said with a quiet breath, "that I can call the card I turn up."

She cut the deck which he had shuffled, and held up the cut to him.

"Ace of spades?" she said with a quiet breath.

"You called it," he said.

"I do it every time," she said. "Do you want to see me do it again?"

"Not particularly," he told her. "Still, if you must."

He cut and shuffled the cards thor-

oughly, a little clumsily, with his freckled hands, the index finger missing from the right, and set the deck down before her. She made the cut, lifting up the card again, watching his face.

"What is it, a whole deck of spade aces?" he said.

"I did it twice," she said with a shivering breath. "Claude, don't you know what the ace of spades is? I thought that they had it even in Carger County. It's death!"

"That sort of stuff is crazy."

"Why is it?" she said quietly.

"Why, in the first place, nobody can tell when he's going to die, or anything, just by fooling with a pack of playing cards," said Claude sensibly. "In the second place, nobody can die twice. You cut it twice. That shows it doesn't mean anything."

"I took it just for a repetition," she said. "It would be rather ghastly, wouldn't it, to die—and then to have to die in the same way all over again?"

"Once ought to be plenty," he said.

The phone rang. She laid the cards down. The instrument was on the table back of her couch, within her reach. It was Wade Cleveland calling. He was coming out.

"What does he want, you suppose?" Claude Bicks said incuriously, when she had explained who it was—that third one she had been married to.

"I don't know," she told him, with a faint frown. "He said it was something about business. It might be just an excuse. But I have a suspicion that everything hasn't been going so well with him. He wants to talk to me a few minutes alone when he gets here."

She had not picked up the cards again. She did not feel like playing now. And Claude had not really been interested—he was not a particularly good card-player. She made little circles, drew figures and dollar signs, on the pad in front of her, then tore the page off and crumpled it up, tossing it into the fireplace, where it caught and was consumed in the low fire of red embers which burned.

"Do you want me to get out when Cleveland comes?" Claude said idly.

"Oh, heavens, no!" she said. "Why should you?"

"Would you bring me my mirror and makeup things from my dressing table?" she said. "I want to see if I look beautiful enough. Just my mirror and rouge-stick would be enough. I can't move with this silly arthritis."

Claude went up and got her mirror and lipstick for her, and returned them to her dressing table when she had looked herself over and touched up her lips slightly. She was writing little words and drawing little pictures on the pad again, and crumpling them and throwing them away, when he came down once more.

It had been a little after half-past seven when Wade Cleveland had called. The door-chimes sounded at a little after eight o'clock. Wade Cleveland, in his imposing Marine Corps uniform. And the little monkey-wrinkled taxi-chauffeur with him, and coming in with him.

"How lovely of you, darling! Why darling, you too!" said glamorous Nina Wandley.

She gave a gay silvery little laugh, with a helpless gesture of her hand.

"I'd jump right up and kiss you both. But a touch of silly arthritis," she said. "Isn't it too perfectly idiotic? How handsome and imposing you look in your uniform, Wade. And Mike, you always were a devil."

Tito Barry, walking from the bus line, was at the door within a few more minutes.

"Tito! Why, it's beautiful Tito! Darling! Isn't this just all too gay?"

Chapter 5

OUT OF THE LID OF HELL

THE THREE OF them had found her tonight, in this commonplace role she had. Not slum-living, exactly. Still not exactly the great Spanish-Moorish palace in the Beverly hills, with its swimming pool; nor like the magnificent homes in Detroit, Bar Harbor and Palm Beach; nor the rented marble palace in Rome and the villa on the bay at Capri.

Still she was quite happy. They could see it. She sat there gay and laughing at them. Wade Cleveland with his heavy mask of face. Wrinkled little Prince Ilario Variogli. Tito Barry, like a painted corpse. Claude Bicks passed the cigarette box, and struck and held the matches for them. Only Wade Cleveland preferred his own cigar. Glamorous Nina Wandley sat there gay and laughing with them.

"And afterwards we went up into the Koonga hills. Pukka George really had to shoot that tiger. . . ."

Whatever, individually, they might wish to say to her—whatever phrases they had formed upon their lips, and thoughts within their minds, in anticipation of seeing her again, beautiful Nina—they could or would not utter in the others' presence. It had to be all talk about things that concerned none of the three of them personally and alone—about her life out in the east, about her present quiet and happy life, even about the old films, *Beauty and the Beast,* and *The White Orchid,* and *Tears in Darkness,* which she had done for Glore. About the weather. About the butter shortage. About politics and the war. . . . She sat there quite helpless, with her silvery laugh, careful to give no glance more ardent and direct to one than to another, shaping letters on the pad in front of her, and crumpling them and tossing them into the embers, where they caught and were consumed.

And how much awareness she had that she would die tonight, heaven only knew.

Claude Bicks went out into the kitchen to get beer, where Carlotta was sitting, looking a little listless and pale.

"Bunch of horse's necks," he said. "Guys that the Missus used to be married to, that are all still nuts about her. They're sure an awful-looking bunch of mutts. They'd make wonderful characters for a play, only nobody would believe they were possible. I came out to get some beer for them. What's the matter?" he said. "Aren't you feeling well?"

"Oh, sure, I'm feeling fine."

"You aren't thinking about quitting, are you?"

"I didn't say I was," she answered somewhat sullenly. "I'm just not feel-

ing well. I think I'll tell the Missus."

Claude got some cans of beer out of the icebox, and opened them into tall beer glasses.

"Don't do that," he said, thinking it over. "It would only worry her. She worries about everything, anyway. Maybe if you aren't feeling well I could drive you home."

He went back into the living room, carrying the four beers on a silver tray. He hadn't bothered to pour himself a coke. He would go on down to the movies to *Springtime Joy* again, after dropping Carlotta at her place, and get himself a coke or maybe two at the Blue Bar afterwards, and maybe stick some nickels in the juke-box and call up Nina before he came home.

"Carlotta's feeling a little off her feed," he said to Nina as he passed the beers. "I thought I might as well drive her home, and then go to the movies."

Nina Wandley nodded, lightly smiling, writing idly on her pad. She did not look at the uncouth and insignificant man to whom she was now married, in this, her most commonplace role. Perhaps she was ashamed of him. In the presence of Prince Variogli with his two thousand years of ancient name and pride. Of Wade Cleveland of the motor millions. Of even the corpse of Tito Barry. They all had something, or had at one time. He had never had anything, and would never have.

"It's boring to you, of course, Claude," she said, as if talking to a child. "If you pass a delicatessen, you might get some cigarettes and things. I'll make a list of the things I want you to bring back."

She wrote, and tore off the page, as she sat there helpless. She lifted her eyes and looked at him as she gave it to him, smiling. Claude Bicks took it and stuck it into his side jacket pocket. He went out into the hall and got his coat.

"See you fellows a little later, maybe," he said.

He went down the basement steps and through the game room to the garage, where Carlotta was already waiting in the car. He opened the doors and backed out the undercut drive, and drove away, at eight-thirty-seven by his watch, leaving Nina with those three men who had popped back into her life tonight like out of the lid of hell.

He only wanted to stay away till they were gone. And which one of them was the last to leave he never knew.

MR. AND MRS. SLEMP on one side, and Mrs. Ryder on the other, did not know either. There was a cab that had stopped around eight o'clock in front of the Bicks's little whitewashed brick house next door, and which was there perhaps an hour or two.

Somewhere around half past nine, or maybe it was a little earlier or later, the cab went away, its departure preceded by the sound of angry voices at the curb, which had brought Mr. Slemp to his front windows, peering out into the obscure night. The next street light was down a little distance, and he couldn't make out the men. But the altercation was brief, and the cab went away. And someone went running down the sidewalk. And someone went walking.

No one noticed what time the lights went out in the Bicks's attractive little house at 119 that night, anyway. They were still on when the cab and the footsteps went away. But sometime after that they went out. The little house was dark.

No one knew that beautiful glamorous Nina Wandley was there in the darkness, dying. No one but the man who had killed her and left her there.

WAVES of oblivion must have swept over her. Out of them, at some later moment, perhaps a dim consciousness for an instant would come back to her, and she would hear the ringing of the front door chimes, with their three soft notes, repeated. But again the waves of oblivion would sweep over her.

Waves of oblivion. . . . The fires by the dark river, the Moi boys singing, the leopards crying. . . . The beautiful Princess Variogli in her white ball gown and with her jewels descending the grand staircase of her house in Rome to receive her guests. . . . The horses at the barrier, they're off! . . . Glamorous Nina Wandley and beautiful Tito Barry dancing in the night club. . . . King Glore with his dark shaggy mane and his lean young craggy face tilting back in his yacht chair and lifting his megaphone to his mouth: *"Wandley!"* shouting. *"Don't ham it! Don't overstate it! When you die, just die quietly! By God, I won't even let them see you doing it! Just the clock slowing, the clock slowing. And then it stops. . . ."*

Waves of oblivion, waves. . . . The echoes of words of endearment, the taut emotion-charged voices of men in love. *. . . I have loved you very much, my dear—only the battle I love more. . . . It has been perfect, my Princess Nina. I turn my pockets out, and no regrets. . . . You're mine, Nina! It drives me wild when I think how much I love you! Do I look heavy, does my face look dull and heavy to you? It does to most, I know. But inside me, when I look at you, when I only think of you and your sweet voice. . . . A love to last ten thousand eons, my sweet Nina. The poets on the farthest star will sing of it when all this world is dead. In heaven together or in the grave together, it is all that I shall ever ask of God, with your sweet dead breath against my face. . . .*

Nina!

The echo of that hard young voice. Perhaps she heard, perhaps she stirred. Perhaps she moaned in the darkness, remembering it, where she lay dying.

Nina, you know what you are to me, and you know also what you are. Doesn't it always happen, that a man like me, with everything always burning up inside me and a great damned brain, a man built to create worlds and hurl them down in fire, has to give his heart and every feeling in it to a cold potato girl like you! I'll love you to the end, Nina, and I'll tell you the end, Nina. I can see it now. . . .

Waves of oblivion. Floating outward on the dark river. The echoes of the voices fading in her ears. . . .

The darkness around her would have become all silent, should that fading spark of consciousness return to her again. The murmuring voice of the radio would have stopped. The soft ceaseless whir of the electric clock upon

the mantelpiece, above the fire which long ago had died, would have stopped.

In the dark terrible silence perhaps she heard him returning.

His voice, his step! His quiet step returning. His voice quietly calling her within the darkness. He had come back! The murderer had come back! To finish now what he had bungled, what he had not quite done before.

Coming with a creeping caution towards her in the darkness. *Nina! Are you alive still, Nina?* Oh, Oh, he had come back before she had quite died and so escaped him! All that agony, all that mortal pain again! No, oh, no! Keep him away from her! Don't let him get her!

It would be pleasanter to think that the last spark of life went from her long before that moment of consummate terror when his step came towards her, and that she did not live to hear him calling her nor to feel him creeping on her, nor his murderous hands again.

There was no cry which was heard by anyone, when her murderer returned. Only the silence and the darkness.

And the lights would come on, and men would speak. And she would be lying dead there, with her hand beside the name she had traced with blood upon the floor, in her convulsive dying gesture. Beautiful Nina Wandley.

Chapter 6

DEATH AND TAXIS

AT MIDNIGHT IN his pullman washroom, Wade Cleveland washed his face and hands, without removing his overcoat, for the car was a little chill. The smoky blackness rumbled by the windows. They were some distance out of Washington.

Wiping his face and hands, he surveyed the two clawed scratches down his cheek. He pressed the flesh together, pressing back a narrow ribbon of skin which hung loose. He took a styptic pencil out of his kit and dabbed the scratches with it, to stop the slow oozing.

"You must have run into the same dame I did, Colonel," said a lean, dark young Air Force captain, with a white scar down his face, grinning with narrow gun-sighted eyes. "Give me a couple of gook jets for mine."

"It wasn't any woman," said Wade Cleveland heavily. "I got into a fight with a damned taxi driver, who ditched me out in the suburbs in Washington and scrammed. If I hadn't been buttoned up in my coat, I'd have laced him plenty. But he just scratched and ran."

"Believe it or not, but I was waiting for a taxicab, too," said the young Air Force captain.

Wade Cleveland sat down on the leather-cushioned bench and lit a cigar. It went out after a puff or two, and he chewed it, with heavy jaws. He opened his briefcase on his knees and took from it a sheaf of papers which he began to read through with small, slow, careful eyes. The lean, dark Air Force captain glanced at him a moment longer, flipped his cigarette away, and then went out.

At Baltimore an M. P., boarding the train, looked into the washroom, swinging his club.

"Excuse me, Colonel," he said, "but you've got the silver oak leaf pin miss-

ing from your right shoulder. Better replace it with one from your collar, sir."

"Why, so it is, isn't it?" said Wade Cleveland, looking down and feeling his shoulder. "I must have torn it off some place. Do you want to see my papers, soldier?"

"No, sir. I guess you're okay."

AT MIDNIGHT a small monkey-faced driver stood before a high golden-oak desk in an old red brick building with green light globes outside, downtown in Washington.

"Hacking license under the name of Hilary V. Prince," said the man behind the desk. "According to information, however, your name is Variogli, Captain Ilario Variogli, of the Italian army, alias Prince Mike Variogli, and you are an escaped prisoner of war from the camp at Saunders, West Virginia."

"Nice fellow," said Mike Variogli with a grimace. "I suppose the big clown hot-footed it to the first phone he could reach. I expected there would be an alarm out. I should have blown town, I suppose, a couple of hours ago. Okay. I did him in once, and no regrets."

"We'll have to notify the Army that we have him," said the man behind the desk. "This business of false driver's papers looks like it might be something more than just an escaped prisoner of war, though. There may be an espionage angle in it. Haven't I read in some magazine or newspaper article about some little Fascist shirt named Sebastian Variogli, who was married to some German big Bertha who was a sister or cousin of Goering's, and used to be one of the top shirts around Mussolini and Hitler? Might be the same family. Right here in Washington. Let's see what he had in his pockets."

The man behind the desk dumped an envelope out.

"A woman's emerald and diamond ring," he said, "in an old-fashioned, heavy gold mounting of two twisted snakes. Is it your own property, Variogli?"

"Certainly!" said Mike Variogli. "It's an old ring of the Varioglis, a thing done by Cellini. The two serpents are the Mercurial caduceus, the war-gonfalon insigne of the Varioglis from the time of the Second Crusade. I gave the ring a few years ago to—I lent it—"

"He may have just picked it up in his cab, of course, where some passenger dropped it," said the man behind the desk. "Keep it in mind in regard to any reports of lost or stolen rings. It might, of course, have been burglarized. There have been a few burglaries out in the Woodmont section this last month. Take him away."

AT MIDNIGHT Tito Barry went swaying down F Street, in downtown Washington, carrying his hat and topcoat, with red-veined eyes and rumpled hair, amidst the late pleasure-seeking crowds of uniforms and clerks. A girl's elbow beside him brushed him, and he turned his painted face to her.

"It has been lovely, hasn't it, Nina?" he said tenderly. "I had to come back to you, for just that last good-by, after those two other fools had gone. I didn't realize that you had accompanied me downtown."

Staggering, he seized her arm.

"My hotel is only a block or two away," he said. "I have a hotel room for tonight. A poor thing, but my own. Yet why think of poverty or wealth, Nina? Where you and I are, there will always be the singing of bright birds and silver fountains splashing and many-jeweled flowers springing under golden skies. For we have love. We have love, Nina. Come with me, my love queen."

He realized then that it wasn't Nina. It was a dark-haired big-limbed girl, large-shouldered, broad-hipped, with rosy cheeks and bright, dark, flashing eyes. She looked like that new young movie star, Hilda Rainey, though she couldn't be, for she was in the uniform of a Wave ensign. She pulled her arm away from him. She swung back her right fist straight and hard, and smashed him in the face. . . .

He was sitting on the sidewalk, with the lights whirling about him and his head rolling. There was a crowd of many legs and feet around him, and the dark-eyed Wave ensign who looked like Rainey was kneeling beside him, holding his shoulders up.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm really sorry. You were blind drunk, of course. I should have overlooked it. But your face was so repul—I hope I didn't hit you too hard? I caught you before you fell. I didn't want you to crack your head on the sidewalk. Can't you get up?"

"Thank you," he said. "Thank you, indeed."

A policeman came surging through as he staggered dizzily up, with two or three men's arms supporting him.

"What the trouble here?" the policeman demanded.

"Just a drunk, officer," the Wave ensign said. "A horrible old—an old gentleman a little drunk. He jostled me in the crowd, and then ran into an obstruction."

"Thank you," said Tito Barry. "Thank you all, indeed. I'm very sorry."

"Here's your hat and coat you dropped," the girl said. "Here—these things, I think you dropped them—they must be your teeth. You have him all right, officer?"

"Okay, Ensign. You're all right, are you, fellow?"

"Thank you. Thank you indeed. I'm quite all right now. I'm very sorry."

"Better get moving along then," the policeman said. "Move along, please, folks, the rest of you-all. Wait a minute, fellow. Here's a piece of paper on the sidewalk that maybe belongs to you."

"Ah, yes," said Tito Barry. "So kind of you. I do not know what I would have done if I had lost it. It is the deed to my grave."

"It don't look like any deed to nothing to me," said the officer, glancing at the scrap of white paper as he handed it over. "Just some mash note from a dame. But maybe it does belong to you. Can't never tell what they will fall for. You were sitting on it, anyway. Take it, if it's yours."

Tito Barry thrust the piece of paper into his side jacket pocket, with his false teeth. He bowed to the officer, with a sweep of his arm, hat in hand.

"I salute the guardians of our dignity, of our lives and property!"

He went lurching down the street, and turned the corner, and another block, to his dingy third-rate hotel.

In his little air-shaft room, Tito Barry locked the door behind him. He kicked his way with tangled feet through his old suit which lay sprawled on the floor. At his little washstand he picked up the rum bottle he had bought this afternoon, with his new shirt and cosmetics. He tore off the seal and unscrewed the cap, and poured out a drink into the dirt-scummed water-tumbler, downing it at a gulp.

He filled the tumbler with water then, and reached in his pocket for his teeth, placing them in it. He pulled out the small piece of paper which the policeman had picked up for him. He read it over, with a swaying head and bloodshot eyes, sitting on the edge of his bed.

It had been scuffed and sole-printed by feet upon the sidewalk, of those who had helped him to get up. But the delicate penciled writing, with its ornamental little flourishes—the round loop dots over the i's and the exaggerated capitals—was still quite legible.

DARLING, I LOVE YOU SO. I CAN'T TELL YOU NOW, WITH THE OTHERS LISTENING. PRETEND TO GO, AND COME BACK AS SOON AS THEY HAVE GONE, DARLING.

Tito Barry sat on the edge of his bed, with his wavering eyes, and read it. He put it to his drunken lips as if it were her living face. He pulled out his brass watch, trying to concentrate on the two black hands.

"Tomorrow," he mumbled. "Tomorrow, darling Nina . . . within one grave together."

His head flopped backward, with a collapsing spine. He sprawled down upon his bed, with the crumpled note clutched in his fist upon his breast—the last love letter written by beautiful glamourous Nina Wandley to the only man she had ever loved.

Beautiful glamorous Nina Wandley, dying now within the darkness of her little house six miles away—and perhaps already dead now—in her last and most commonplace role.

AT MIDNIGHT Claude Bicks looked at his wrist watch. The time had been two minutes of nine when—after dropping Carlotta off at her place in Georgetown, and garaging his car around the corner—he had entered the Odeon, just in time for the last show, as the girl at the ticket window had told him before he went in. *Springtime Joy,* the last feature, would be over a few minutes after midnight, she had said.

Just a few minutes more of that final scene, between that little Four-F Eben Gulick, with his dark curly hair and pug nose and dimpled chin, and luscious Hilda Rainey; and then the audience would be pouring out. He would drop in at the Blue Bar, a few doors down the street, and see if Colonel Ryder was there yet, or have a coke and play a couple numbers on the juke box until the colonel came in.

He would telephone Nina from there, and after the colonel had finished his drink and had telephoned Mrs. Ryder, he would ride out home with him, leaving his own car in the garage to drive home tomorrow after work. They

charged a dollar for just a few hours like this, anyway, and wouldn't charge any more if he kept it there till then. He would save a bus fare tomorrow that way, and it would be more company going home tonight with the colonel.

Of course he might not go down to the office at all tomorrow. It might seem as if he ought to stay home with Nina, after tonight. He guessed the Bureau of Livestock Audits could manage to get along without him for one day. If he didn't go to work tomorrow, and didn't pick his car up till the day after, that would be two bucks. Still, it was better to do it that way. He hated throwing money away a good deal worse than sin, but after all, an extra buck wasn't all the money in the world.

It made him kind of laugh to think he could be saying that to himself. He had always been pretty saving. In the seven years he had been in Washington he had saved almost five thousand dollars, which wasn't bad at Washington prices. He had gone without a lot of good times to do it, too. He had never even spent a nickel on a coke for a girl before he met Nina.

Well, the play was about over. Only one last clinch between that curly-headed Gulick guy and Hilda, and then down to the Blue Bar, and telephone, and go home with the colonel. . . .

Boy, wasn't she a luscious apple, though, that Rainey dame! Those lips, those great big flashing eyes. Oh, boy, oh, boy! He couldn't help thinking about her, looking at the picture of her. He sure would like to go out to Hollywood and meet her. He bet he'd knock her over. Not just a kind of senseless looking fellow, like that little, curly dimpled Eben Gulick half-wit, but a fellow with a kind of character in his face, and a kind of indefinable appeal about him, and a kind of special intelligence and sense of humor, in his own quiet way. Boy, he bet he could snap his fingers at her, and she would come to him like that.

It sure was funny, Nina's noticing that Hilda looked kind of like Carlotta, a couple nights ago. He hadn't figured that she observed things at all, like him. He had almost swallowed his chewing gum when she said that. You could have knocked him over with a tooth pick.

Well, *Springtime Joy* was over now. And so out with the oozing crowds. . . .

THE MAN WITH the craggy face and the iron-grey, shaggy hair and heavy shoulders paused to examine the glassed posters of present and coming attractions in the outer lobby of the Odeon, amidst the outward surging crowd from the last show around midnight. He lit a cigarette.

Springtime Joy. He flipped the burned match stem away between his thumb and forefinger, with a *zing* like a taut bow-string. He proceeded outward with the throng.

"Pretty good film, wasn't it?" said a man moving out beside him.

The man with the craggy face paid no attention.

"Kind of long, though," said the man beside him. "Gets you kind of tired of sitting."

The man with the craggy face had an idea that he was being addressed. He paid no attention.

"Yes, sir," said the man beside him, bringing up a wrist-watched arm. "Twelve-nine. Just about three hours and eleven minutes, wouldn't you say, brother?"

The man with the craggy face looked sidewise with his black eyes at the insignificant beanpole man with the sandy hair, the mild pale eyes beneath straw-colored brows, the bony face freckled like a ripe banana, in camel's hair topcoat and without a hat, who was oozing out beside him onto the walk.

"I came into the theater at eight-eight precisely," he said. "I sat in the nineteenth row, in the fourth seat to the right of the right-hand center aisle. The main feature was *Springtime Joy* with Hilda Rainey and Eben Gulick. There was dancing act, a newsreel, and Donald Duck. The show was over at twelve-five, and I emerged upon the sidewalk at exactly twelve-nine. My name is Godfrey Jodkins, and that is all I know about it."

The freckled man laughed awkwardly.

"You sure are a man for details, Mr. Jodkins," he said. "My name is Claude Bicks myself. I didn't get into the show till just a couple of minutes before nine, and missed Donald Duck. Didn't get started from home till about eight thirty-five, for a matter of fact, and I live quite a ways out. Had to drop our maid over in Georgetown and garage my car. I saw all of *Springtime Joy,* anyway. I kind of liked that stuff along about the middle where she sort of turns around to him and says, with a kind of laugh—"

"My God, is it really possible?" said the man with the craggy face.

"No," said Claude Bicks. "Of course it isn't really possible. There were more dumb fool things that couldn't have really happened, and even a halfwit could see what was going to happen next. I'm a kind of a playwright myself—"

"Incident from *The White Orchid,*" said the man with the craggy face. "The playwright speaks."

"What's that, Mr. Jodkins?"

"Next to the last scene from *Beauty and the Beast,*" said the man with the craggy face. "He dropped the maid and garaged the car."

"As I was saying, Mr. Jodkins—"

"Oh, go home!" said the man with the craggy face.

"Go home?" said the freckled man, dropping his jaw. "Why, what has happened at home, Mr. Jodkins, for gracious sakes? You don't mean to tell me—wait a minute, Mr. Jodkins!" he said, as the big craggy man turned his shoulder. "Who are you anyway? How do you know where I live? Why, you tell me to go home, and I bet a nickel you don't even know where my home is—"

"Oh, yes I do," said the man with the craggy face. "I know damned well. Go to it!"

He strode away.

He strode into the bar with the blue lights out front a few doors down the street. With the blue walls and the red cushions and little red tables adorning its intimate interior. He leaned his elbows on the bar, with his big craggy shoulders hunched.

"Throw me a zombie quick, Ignatz," he said. "I've just heard the dead talking."

"Howdy, Mr. Glore," said the barman with a fat healthy laugh. "When did you get in from New York this time? And how are the boys around Broadway and Forty-Sixth? You must have seen a bad play again."

"Rotten," said King Glore heavily. "Dead and stale since time began. Just got in on the eleven-thirty, and the boys around Forty-Sixth are still eating oats. All asking about you, Ignatz. I see you have *Springtime Joy* up the street here. I dropped into the outer lobby, passing by, just as the show was getting out, and saw that it is posted for all week. I hear it's not so bad for a light love thing."

"You ought to have walked on into the inner lobby, and seen some of the stills they have up, Mr. Glore," said the fat man. "Hilda Rainey, she's some girl."

"Not my type," said King Glore heavily. "Thanks, Ignatz. Toss me up another while you're about it."

He took his second drink and settled down at one of the small tables. He pulled the matchbox out of the brass ash tray on it, and dumped out the matches. He piled them up carefully, in the beginning of a tower of sticks.

Chapter 7

"STINK, DO I?"

THE FRECKLED MAN came in and stood at the bar.

"One coke, please," he said, laying down a coin. "Could I have three nickels change? I've got to make a phone call to my wife before I leave, and I want a couple for the juke-box. Has Colonel Ryder been in yet?"

"Little shrimpy colonel? I know who you mean, sir," said the barman. "Regular customer. No, sir, not yet tonight. He's generally in about this time, though."

King Glore reached over to an adjacent table for another box of matches. He built those up on top of the others, with a bent glance. Eyeing him with a mild pale stare, the freckled man sauntered over to the juke-box, drink in hand, and stuck a nickel in. He paused a moment to listen to the music. He started in a circle toward another table, hesitated, turned off at a little different angle, and then came on and sat down at the table where King Glore was building his tower of matches.

"Excuse me, Mr. Jodkins—"

"What, you again?" said King Glore, not looking up from the match stick he was carefully placing.

"Yes, sir, it's me. You remember we were just coming out of the Odeon together after both seeing the show—"

"Why are you required to haunt me?" said King Glore, a little savagely.

"Haunt you, sir? Why, I—"

"Let the dead lie," said King Glore.

"What dead—"

"You stink," said King Glore.

"Stink, do I?" said the freckled man mildly, with mild pale eyes. "Well, be as unpleasant as you please. I always believe in talking and acting like a gentleman myself, and being friendly. What I've been wondering about is how you knew where I live?

"I suppose you're a neighbor of mine out in Woodmont, and have seen me on the bus or somewheres. I'm generally pretty good at observing people and things, myself, though frankly I don't recall your face, if you don't mind my saying so. I've only been living out in Woodmont five months, since we got married; and of course maybe I don't know quite all the neighbors yet—we're still kind of honeymooning. First evening, as a matter of fact, that I've ever been out of the house without my wife. But some old boy friends of hers happened to drop in, and I thought I might as well go to the movies—"

"My God, it isn't possible!" said King Glore, staring at him. *"Tears in Darkness!"*

"What are they?"

"Oh, God!" King Glore said. "I thought I told you to go home!"

"Why you don't even know where my home is—"

"Hell!" said King Glore.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Jodkins, sir. Did you use a cuss word to me?" said the man with the mild eyes.

King Glore looked at him with his black eyes, beneath his craggy brows.

"Your home is hell," he said. "I told you to go to it."

He bent his eyes again to his tower of matches, placing one more carefully.

The freckled man swallowed. He lifted his soft drink and took a sip from it. He arose a little uncertainly after a moment. He went over to the juke-box and put another nickel into it, with his eyes over his shoulder. He sat down at another table, sipping his drink.

King Glore had not yet finished the drink he had sat down with. Letting that first zombie work. He reached over and collected another matchbox from another table. *Tears in Darkness!* he thought. What a genius had been in him when he wrote it! Who was this banana-faced fool, anyway? Reminding him of *Tears*. Maybe the freckled man had seen that old play, the play of the perfect crime—quite a few million people had. But it couldn't be possible that he was such a fool as to be imitating it. The husband in it had been beautiful and cunning, though cold as a rattlesnake. It was simply incredible that it was being acted out by a fool in life.

Though whoever the fellow's wife was, he pitied her.

Tears in Darkness! My God, she had been beautiful in that! She couldn't act, of course. She never could. All the art that she had ever had, he had breathed into her. But she had been beautiful.

BEAUTIFUL AND ALLURING —and cold as rock.

Not so much that she had been greedy, though she had always looked to the main chance, and had taken only the men who had the money. Stingy, more. Hating to give, money or herself. With a small cold meanness in her, haggling over everything. She'd get a triumph out of bargaining off three dollars and fifty cents from the price of a fifty-dollar bottle of perfume—better to have done without the perfume, he thought. She would count the quarters he had left for a waiter's luncheon tip, always pulling back one or two, if he would let her.

Damn it! Damn it! Better to toss the world away and to create new worlds, than to be like that, so mean and clutching, hating to give, hoarding, squirreling. Hoarding her own small heart, her own beautiful cold self. Colds as rock; but beautiful.

She had wangled lovely contracts, with her allurement, even when she had been no more than eighteen—fresh from some little Iowa town, or had it been Colorado? He had got nothing for himself, at all, from those great things she had done for him—*Beauty, Orchid, Tears,* the *Clock*. He had let her have his own share, if she wanted it so much. He had made his dough, and plenty, and had spent it plenty, out of those lesser pot-boilers he had done, the mystery things and the sugary little love stories and the flying things about the first world war.

It was a joke to think how terrified she had been, after he had lost his shirt and pants, a million cold, in those last extravagant silent things he had done—too bullheaded, too young and vainglorious, to see that overnight even the crudest talkie had suddenly become more than the greatest kind of silent masterpiece—how terrified that he might come and ask her for the loan of a few thousands.

She had stopped going places where she might have run into him. Had left instructions even with her servants, he had heard, that he was not to be admitted if he should come to her door out there at Wandbar. As if he would have asked her for anything. Not because he hadn't been quite that hungry, necessarily, but because he knew she would have turned him down. He knew her, and she knew he knew her. That was why she hated him.

A million bucks, and almost half of it borrowed. He had been paying, for seventeen years, ninety cents out of every dollar he had earned. He would probably be paying till he died, but he would not die till he had come clean. He had been a young fool. But a man's young only once.

There had been a genius in him there for a while, at least. And he had had Nina—as much as any man could have her, and had ever had her—for a part of those years, anyway. Her first lover; her first husband. Fire and snow—but scaling the mountain heights.

She had taken poor Barry for a ride, of course. What he made was theirs. What she had was her own. When they had come to the split, Barry had raised half in cash to give her of Wandbar and whatever else he had, and had lost the rest himself. Romantic sort of fool. . . .

Cleveland, of course, had given her everything. She had got a million from him in marriage settlement, just as pin money. Variogli had given her that year, and she had had her glamorous life and her jewels out of it. She had married some old fellow out in the Straits after that, and had probably lived on what he had, whatever it was, worrying about how he spent it. With all her own money, the first dollar she had ever earned, the money from Barry, the million from Cleveland, the Variogli jewels, all salted away—squirreling.

It wasn't money, of course, that she had ever been after, though she had never married a man who couldn't give

her something. But if it had been money only, she would have stayed with Cleveland. What she had really wanted, of course, was the glamor of the incomparable heights when she had been golden Nina Wandley.

Barry, she had thought, would put her back on the peak again. But poor Barry simply couldn't. He was only a rocket himself. Even if he had been the everlasting sun, he couldn't have made her golden Nina again, of the *Orchid, Tears,* the *Beast,* the *Clock*. It had been he, King Glore, who had breathed that life into her cold marble flesh in the days of his great genius.

And Cleveland, she had hoped, would start that producing company. But Cleveland had been too good a business man for that, just as she had been too good a business woman to invest her own money. He had been willing to give her houses, horses, yachts, the world; but he wouldn't put money into a bad business proposition; it would have been against his principles, and he had probably just figured, with sound business judgment, that she could not act.

Her life with Variogli had been a play in itself, with the title and all that; and also Variogli had made some pretenses of being a poetic dramatist, a second D'Annunzio, and maybe she had hoped for something in that. Even that old fellow out in the east that she had married the last time had probably tried to write plays for her. Though the life itself, like that with Variogli, had been something of a play, with her name in the papers, for a little while, anyway, and always the tinge of glamor.

Always wanting to get back there to be golden Nina. And yet she simply couldn't act, she had never been able to act; that was all there was to it. Yes, he knew her, and she knew he knew her, and she had hated him.

But, she was beautiful. And he would never love another woman. He would always love her, golden Nina. The beauty in her face that he could not forget, though he had not wanted to see it, because of the cold mean soul it had masked.

Where was she now, anyway? Better for him not to know. . . .

With black eyes bent under craggy brows, King Glore piled up the matches one by one, beside his untasted drink, in a tower which might collapse in no more than a hundred matches, but which a man could try still to make reach the stars.

CLAUDE BICKS FELT a sweat beneath his armpits, watching that fellow Jodkins. It was enough to make anybody sweat. A dumb fellow, but so danged nasty.

Saying he stank. Why, you couldn't say that to a Bicks hog down in Carger County, without having your head blown clean off, mister. He, Claude Bicks, didn't go in for guns himself; they scared the wits out of him ever since he had blown his finger off. But he would sure like to have that big dumb fellow out in a back lot with a meat-cleaver.

The dumb fellow didn't know him, anyway. When he had said that jaw-dropping thing about going home, it

had been just his nasty way of saying to go to the bad place. Nice way to talk. Sure was a nice fellow. Yes, sir, a danged nice nasty fellow.

To the bad place with him, himself, drat him, if he was going to talk like that. How dast he talk like that to a man who lived out in Woodmont and had an elegant whitewashed brick house with brass plumbing and copper gutters and a slate roof. To a man with neighbors like Mr. Slemp, the big shoe man, and Colonel Ryder. To a man that had spoken to Congressman Whackenberry, and the congressman had taken his cigar out of his mouth and had called him neighbor. A nice, quiet inoffensive fellow that was awful fond of his wife, too, and that hadn't ever left his wife before this evening, only tonight those ex-husbands of hers had come in, and anybody that was a gentleman would have left to give her a chance to visit with them. . . .

Oh, the play was perfect! It was absolutely perfect. He had thought it all out for months. He had worked out every detail. It had been just a general idea at first, of course, when it had first come to him, as he sat with her there in the cafeteria, seeing all the rings on her hands and figuring quick that she had a lot of dough; and seeing, too, that she had begun to fall for the indefinable something he had in him. Right there —*click*—it had come to him. Marry her, if he could, and have himself a luscious babe like that big flashing-eyed Wave ensign, on the sidelines. And have some dark shadowy burglar like that Air Force captain who would come in some night, maybe a year or so after they were married, while he had been away from home himself, and kill her.

That had been the general idea of the play, and he had worked out all the details on that basis. But those three fellows, popping up from the lid of hell tonight, had been a lot better than any shadowy burglar.

It was perfect. And even if anybody did suspect a little—they always did with husbands, it being a kind of commonplace thing for a husband to kill his wife if she was rich and older than him like Nina—why, let them suspect a little. There wouldn't ever be a way to prove it. Let them suspect all they wanted to, as maybe they might even more when he married Carlotta and she was living with him there in Woodmont. But he would be living there in Woodmont with Carlotta, and after a while they would stop saying any mean things in their minds, and would forget.

To the bad place with you, Mr. Jodkins! Why didn't the durned fellow drink the drink he had brought with him to his table, knock down his pile of matches, and get out?

Colonel Ryder came striding in the door, and up to the bar, with his bright, birdlike little eyes bright in his face.

"A spot of the old whiffenpoof, Mr. Jiggs," he said to the fat-faced barman, and took the bottle which the barman set before him, pouring himself a jigger.

Claude arose, with his coke in his hand that he had been sipping in droplets. The big nasty fellow was looking at the matches he was piling up; but maybe he was kind of looking at him,

too, beneath his eyebrows. Claude put a nickel in the juke-box, just to show it wasn't the colonel he had been waiting for and nothing else, and came up to the colonel at the bar just kind of casually.

"Evening, Colonel."

"Good evening, Mr. Bicks! This is an extreme pleasure! You will allow me to join you and Mrs. Bicks, I trust? I was hoping I should see her—you. She is—ahm—here with you, isn't she?"

Now for just the last couple of little items in the great play. To transmit the information that he had been downtown here in the movies for the past three hours, that when he had left her at home those three fellows had been with her, so that thoughts would turn to them first, not to him, as having been the last who had been with her. To establish the fact that he was still downtown here and—before he and the colonel should have left the bar—that she, out there, was dead.

WITH a dry apologetic smile on his wide mouth, Claude told the colonel about how he had happened to come out without Mrs. Bicks this evening, the first evening that he had ever been away without her. About those fellows that Mrs. Bicks had used to be married to coming out, and she had been enjoying visiting with them, and it had kind of seemed to him the nice gentlemanly thing to step out, if maybe they had some things to talk about with her that weren't any of his business.

"I'll call her up when I've finished my drink," he said, "and see if the coast is clear now to come home. Thought I might ride out with you, Colonel, if it is—if you've got your own car down, that is. I'd like to leave my car in the garage tonight, and let them give it a wash."

"Glad to give you a lift, Mr. Bicks," the colonel said. "As soon as I have finished my drink and the hair-of-the-dog, if agreeable to you. It's pleasanter with company."

"Yes," Claude said. "Sure is. No hurry. Whenever you happen to be ready to be going, Colonel."

He finished his coke in a long slow draft, and set his glass down.

"I think I'll call up Mrs. Bicks now," he said.

He went into the phone-booth in a corner of the little bar. The door of the booth was turned away from the bar and the tables, and no one could see him inside, or hear him. Still he turned the dial to WO-4641 carefully, anyway, with a click! and click! and click! and . . . He held the dead phone to his ear, looking at his wrist watch.

He waited till the second hand had gone around its little dial one and one half times. He hung the receiver up and came out again, rejoining the colonel at the bar.

"Coast clear at home, Mr. Bicks?" said the colonel negligently.

"She doesn't answer," Claude said, just casually. "I don't quite get it."

"Chaps must have left, anyway. Maybe she's gone to bed."

"She wouldn't go to bed till I had come home from the movies," Claude said. "She's always a late stayer-up. Maybe she went out with them some place. But I don't see why she should. It's

kind of funny that she doesn't answer."

"Perhaps she ran over to see Mrs. Ryder for a moment about something," said the colonel. "Two lonely widows, while we boys play." He chuckled, feeling the warmth of his drink a little. "I'll ask Mrs. Ryder when I call her up."

"Kind of wish you would, Colonel," said Claude—a little serious, but not too worried yet. "Maybe Mrs. Ryder could kind of look over and see if there are any lights on in the house, if she isn't there. Or—or something."

He put a dime down on the counter. "I don't want a drink," he told the fat-faced barman. "Couple of nickels for the juke-box, if you don't mind."

He sauntered over to the juke-box, with his pale eyes turned to the man with the craggy face and the shaggy iron-grey hair who was sitting at the little table close to the bar building up his tower of matches. . . .

He had been watching that fellow all the time, out of the corner of his eye, while he had been building it up with Colonel Ryder. Except when he had been in the phone booth, of course, where he couldn't see the fellow, or vice versa. The big fellow had been piling up matches carefully all the time, not paying any attention, maybe, to him talking with the colonel. Still, you couldn't quite figure him out.

He would have to admit it. He could figure out just about everybody. But he couldn't quite figure that fellow out. Maybe just too dumb to figure.

The big dumb fellow looked up now, as Claude paused at the juke-box, looking at him. There was a kind of nasty smile on his face, like he was a little bored with something, with some play that he was watching. But what of it? There were fellows who would suspect you of something if you were kneeling at your prayers in church, like the danged McCords that had come in and grabbed Grandpappy Bicks that way, and hauled him up off his knees, and found the gun he had been kneeling on that he had killed the McCord girl with down in the hollow on her way to Sunday school, and had taken him out and strung him to a limb, and filled him full of buckshot, poor old man, white whiskers and all.

Nasty fellows that can suspect anybody of anything. But what of it? He didn't have anything on him that could be proved on him, and he was way downtown here. And even if the whole world suspected—which it would not, not after they had got Cleveland and Barry and that Italian fellow—why, they couldn't ever prove it.

Maybe he was just imagining that the big dumb fellow was kind of nastily smiling, anyway, like at a play he had seen already. It was a brand new play, and nobody had ever thought of it before. Not anyone, of anything ever like it. After all, he was Claude Bicks, and he was smart as an adder, smart as they come. That fellow didn't suspect anything. He had just meant to go to the bad place, just speaking nastily, when he had said that terrible thing, telling Claude to go home.

And if he did suspect anything, not he nor anybody else could ever prove it.

Big dumb fellow, sitting there piling up matches like a half-wit. Reaching

for his drink on the table in front of him now, as he looked at Claude.

Chapter 8

"SHE'S DEAD—IT'S ALL RIGHT. . . ."

IT WAS INCREDIBLE, thought King Glore. It was perfectly incredible.

He had been sitting building up his tower of matches, thinking over Nina. He had two hundred of them now, placed carefully. Still that insufferable fool before his eyes annoyed him. Why did the fellow have to haunt him? That damned asinine movie alibi, so emphasized, in the beginning. He had had an idea for the moment that the fellow had just been clowning, and he had clowned back, mimicking him. But the fellow had been too dumb to realize it, and had stuck to the alibi, piling it on thicker.

It simply couldn't be proved or disproved that a man had been in a big crowded movie house all during a three-hour period. The freckled fellow had not been at the *Springtime Joy* show all the time, of course. But it could not be proved he hadn't.

Now that business of meeting his friend, the unimpeachable colonel, here, to establish the fact that he was here. Now this business of the talk about his wife, Mrs. Bicks, and how he had never left her before in the evening. This business of the old flame that he had left her with—it had been only one old flame in *Tears in Darkness,* but this freckled man had three ex-husbands. Now the business of the phone call home to his wife.

Grimly, placing his matches with bent eyes, King Glore watched the freckled man go into the booth, and then come out again, with that mildly baffled look, after a proper interval, go back to his unimpeachable friend at the bar. . . . No answer. She doesn't answer. It's kind of funny. Of course, I'm not really worried, or I'd be rushing right out there. But it's kind of funny, though. . . .

Oh, for God's sake! It was incredible. But it was—it must be—*Tears,* the perfect crime. And that halfwit was playing it out before his eyes.

King Glore felt a coldness in his spine. *Tears!* Oh, she had been beautiful in that. He had breathed life into her marble soul. There had been a genius in him. Only *The Stopped Clock,* of all that he had done in the days of his great genius, had ever been a greater play than that.

Tears in Darkness now before his eyes. Somewhere—at that fellow's home, wherever it was—there was a woman lying dead. His wife, Mrs. Bicks, heaven help her. And he was being away while it had happened. He didn't know a thing about it. . . . He would doubtless get away with it, too. He had planted all the suspicion on someone else, the old flame—in his case—the three ex-husbands. That banana-faced half-wit, acting out *Tears.* And he would get away with it, too.

Grimly as he built his matches King Glore had watched and listened to the play. . . . *She doesn't answer, Colonel—funny!* He watched him lay a coin down at the bar. Going to celebrate with another ten-cent coke now, that he had put it over. No—asking for a

couple of nickels for the juke-box. And going over to it and starting the music up. Funeral music. That pale-eyed perfect murderer.

The fellow was looking at him, with his faded eyes. That "Go home" he had said, trying to get rid of him, had belted the fellow in the liver. King Glore held the match stick he had been about to place in his hand. He looked back with his black eyes at the pale-eyed murderer. He reached for his glass upon the table. He drank the zombie.

The fellow stepped back to his little military friend at the bar.

"Like to have a little music," he said. "Makes me feel kind of gay!"

"Quite a surprise to me to learn that Mrs. Bicks had been married before," said the little military man, drinking the rest of his drink. "Of course, she would have been. Quite too lovely—I mean, you wouldn't have been in such luck as to have had her all the time. Who were any of the chaps that she was married to before, or is that out of line? I mean, her face haunts me a little. I wondered if I had ever seen her before."

"Fellow named Wade Cleveland was one of them. Marine officer . . . a kind of big hard-looking guy—"

King Glore broke the match-stick in his hand. Wade Cleveland! To whom else had Wade Cleveland ever been married besides Nina? He couldn't think of anyone. Perhaps, though, some chorus-girl, when he had been a college boy, whom this Bicks had now married, in her blowsy middle forties. . . .

"Fellow named Variogli, an Italian, kind of a prince—"

That combination of names! Oh, God!

"Old movie actor was another, named Tito Barry. He brought her out a deed to her grave lot—"

King Glore knocked down his tower of matches, which would never reach the stars. He got up and went blindly out.

CLAUDE BICKS saw the fellow drink his zombie, looking straight at him, with his bent mouth, in a nasty grin, then—when he had stepped back to the bar again to resume his conversation with the colonel—knock down his tower of matches with a sweep, and get up and stumble out.

Drunk. Drunk as a looney. Drunk as a coot. He was gone now, anyway. Good riddance.

Now for the next little item in the play.

"I think I'll have a second one, the hair of the dog, after I call up Mrs. Ryder, if you don't mind waiting, Mr. Bicks," the colonel said in much the same fashion as he had said two nights ago. "Will you have one last one with me?"

"Sure," Claude said. "I guess everything's all right at home. Say—" he added with an awkward laugh, as the colonel turned towards the booth. "I haven't been married quite so long as you have, Colonel, and I guess I kind of do worry like an old wet hen. Would you mind just asking Mrs. Ryder if she would kind of take a look over at the house and see if Mrs. Bicks is all right? That is, if she isn't at your house, of course."

That was it. To establish that she was dead while he was still here.

"If the lights should be out, or she didn't answer the doorbell—" said Claude. "You know, I told you where the key is, and the light switch."

"Why, yes," said Colonel Ryder. "The dwarf yew-box. A very clever place for it. I keep mine there myself, after you told me about it. Mrs. Ryder can just look in, if Mrs. Bicks doesn't answer, and the house is dark, of course. But I imagine she's asleep."

"Yes, I imagine so, too," said Claude. "But I do just kind of worry."

But not too much.

Little Colonel Ryder went into the phone booth. Claude said to the barman, "The colonel wants another whiffenpoof. Another coke for me. This is on me. I'm paying for it." He pulled out a dollar from his purse, and the barman gave him change.

Colonel Ryder came back from the booth and up to the bar again.

"Mrs. Ryder looked out and said the house was dark," he said. "Mrs. Bicks probably has gone to bed. But Mrs. Ryder will just step over and see and call me back. Or have Mrs. Bicks call you."

"Thanks," said Claude. "I paid for the drink for you. Oh, that's all right, Colonel. What in the bad place is sixty cents? Someday maybe I can do something for Mrs. Ryder. I'll tell you. Mrs. Bicks has some extra chrysanthemum plants she was going to dig up for Mrs. Ryder. I'll dig them up myself and bring them over to her tomorrow."

"That would be nice of you," said Colonel Ryder absently, pouring himself his drink and mixing it. "Mrs. Ryder is very fond of flowers."

"So is Mrs. Bicks," said Claude. "I aim to buy some for her tomorrow."

He drank his drink slowly.

The phone in the booth rang.

"There's Mrs. Ryder now, probably," said the colonel, "Reporting back. Do you want to take it?"

"Sure," said Claude.

Mrs. Ryder was probably having hysterics by now herself. It might be some other neighbor that she had hollered to, or the police that had been phoned to. He picked the instrument up.

"This is Mr. Bicks, at the Blue Bar, down town."

"Oh, Mr. Bicks!"

It was Mrs. Ryder's voice. A little hysterical, all right. But not so hysterical as he had expected. But that came from being an army officer's wife.

"Yes, ma'am, Mrs. Ryder?" he said, with a kind of laugh.

"Oh, Mr. Bicks!" she said, breathlessly gasping. "I went over there, and the house was dark, and I rang the door chimes three times, but no one answered. Then I got the key out of the yew box and opened the front door and —and—"

"Yeah?" said Claude, with a kind of laugh. "You turned on the lights in the front hall and went into the living room and found Nina asleep on the couch, I reckon. Or did you have to go upstairs?"

For he had left her upstairs, of course, in her bedroom.

"No, Mr. Bicks! The front door was chained on the inside! I could open it only a few inches! But, oh, Mr. Bicks, when I opened it I heard—"

Oh, God! thought Claude. Oh, devils down in the bad place! She was still alive! She had locked the doors against him! She had called out to Mrs. Ryder!

"A man's voice!" gasped Mrs. Ryder. 'I am the Zombie!' he said, or something like that! And he gave the most horrible laugh! I closed the door and ran back home here as quick as I could! Do you want me to call the police?"

Oh, devils deep in the bad place! She was still alive! She had crawled downstairs and had turned on the radio somehow, maybe trying to reach a light switch or the phone, after bolting the doors against him!

He had just strength enough to say, "No, I don't think we ought to do that, Mrs. Ryder. She had some of her ex-husbands visiting her tonight. Maybe one of them is just there with her. You know how those things are. I wouldn't like to have the police come busting in, Mrs. Ryder. I'll just come out myself. Thanks, thanks, Mrs. Ryder."

The colonel was standing at the phone booth door beside him as he hung up. He hadn't closed the door. He had wanted anybody in the bar who might be watching to notice his horror and surprise.

It sure was a horror and surprise.

"Trouble at home, Mr. Bicks?" said Colonel Ryder anxiously. "I trust that Mrs. Bicks—"

"I got to get out there!" Claude said. "There's some man in the house with her, and it's all dark! But I don't think I'll call the police."

Oh, God! God of the bad place! He'd have to kill her again, and quick. He was glad that he was such a quick thinker, with a mind that could figure out a play quick as a shot.

She was still alive! She would tell on him, if someone found her first. How horrible! How awful!

He had botched it, somehow.

He had slipped out of the theater at a quarter to eleven, along with some more people going out, and had gone and got the colonel's car at its little dark parking place on the side street a couple of blocks away, using the duplicate key which he had made that afternoon three months ago when he had taken the colonel's keys before returning them to the guard at the colonel's building. He had gone shooting out to Terrace Drive in fourteen minutes.

He had figured that all those fellows would be gone by then. Cleveland had only an hour that he could stay, and even if the other two had outstayed him, and had tried to outstay each other, or had come back, Nina would have got rid of the last of them for good, by now. She hadn't wanted to see them. She had wanted them to go, so he would come back to her.

Well, he had. They had gone when he had come in by the back door, using Carlotta's key, with his shoes off, very quietly. The colonel's car he had left in front of the colonel's place next door, with its lights out. He had found Nina sitting on the couch still, helpless with her arthritis, glancing over a picture magazine while she waited for him beneath the lamp. When she had looked up, he was there.

With her own loose earth-stained cotton gardening gloves on his hands, that he had picked up from the place where

she had left them on a kitchen shelf. With—well, with other things from the kitchen. But the rolling pin alone was enough to knock her out.

She had known, just in that instant, as she looked up and saw him. Maybe she had kind of known before. Talking about a play she was going through that she kind of remembered—it was all a fresh new play, and nobody had ever seen anything like it before, only she was too dumb to know it. But talking about a play that way. And kind of talking around about Carlotta. And the way she had always been scared to have him leave her alone. . . . Maybe for months, way down at bottom, she had kind of known. But she hadn't believed it. She had loved him so. She never had liked to look at things straight.

And so she had sat there helpless, in the instant, looking up at him.

"Claude!" her mouth had started to open.

But that was all.

He had knocked her out, and then he had hauled her upstairs to her bedroom and then the rest of it. Some things that Wade Cleveland might have done to her. Some that might have been in an Italian's style. He hadn't figured any particular type for Barry. But the old painted corpse might have done it all, with superhuman crazy strength, and so there didn't need to be any particular style for him. There was that note that Nina had handed him as he left, telling him to come back, that he had planted in Barry's coat in the clothes closet in the hall. So that took care of Barry, if the main suspicion turned his way.

He had had to do it quick, to get the colonel's car back and to get back to the Odeon before *Springtime Joy* was over. But he had sure thought he had done it—he thought that he had killed her three times over. He had left her there in her bedroom that way, turning out the lights, and had gone downstairs, and had killed her miserable, sickly, flea-bitten little mutt. He didn't like the mutt much anyway. And it might be something else that would add up to Cleveland.

But he must have been in a little too much of a hurry, and he had botched it. She had crawled downstairs somehow, had chained the front door, anyway, and had got the radio turned on, trying to find a light switch. It was a lucky thing that she hadn't reached the phone.

He would have to finish it now.

THE RIDE OUT had been kind of horrible. Thinking that maybe she might reach the phone yet. Thinking of her being all horrible and alive, instead of dead. Thinking of her lying with the tears oozing out of her eyes in the darkness. She had a kind of soft weazley way of crying that kind of bothered you.

Once ought to be enough for anybody.

"Drive into my driveway, please, Colonel," he said. "The front door's bolted on me. Maybe the back door, too. I'll get in through the game room from the garage."

He was out of the car as the colonel brought it to a stop in front of his

garage door, with a flat-footed, cat-footed rush. He had left the garage patent overhead door swung up, open. Jerking his keys out of his pocket, he went rushing through the garage to the game room door. He unlocked the door, and opened it to the darkness. She had not got down here to bolt the door.

"She's dead, Mike. . . ."

It gave him a kind of awful jolt to hear the murmured words, as he came in over the threshold. Coming through the floor from the living room above. Little Colonel Ryder was at his heels, and clutched his elbow. In the blackness Claude reached a long beanpole arm out to the game room wall just inside the door, where the electric meter-box was fastened to the brick wall, back of the gas furnace. He pulled the switch down.

"Great heavens!" whispered Colonel Ryder, behind him. "Did you hear that, Bicks?"

For a second or two after he had pulled the switch, the radio above still went on.

"Great God! We'd better call the police! I'd better get a gun, Bicks!"

"Stay here, if they come down, Colonel," Claude Bicks said, with deadly quiet. "I'm going up and find her."

He had to. Find her and kill her again, without the colonel. He went rushing through the game room, up the basement stairs. "Nina!" he called softly. "Nina!"

Oh, God, here she was! On the floor behind the couch, beside the table with the phone on it. He bent over her in the darkness, with his terrible hands. But there was no life or feeling in her any more. She was dead. Perhaps half an hour or more ago. A doctor could tell about that.

"She's dead, Colonel!" he cried, with a great sobbing shout, with an anguished emotion of release. She's dead! She's dead now! It's all right, Colonel!"

For God's sake, what was he saying? He stepped swiftly to the chair-side radio, and snapped off the switch. He rushed back to the kitchen. He unlatched a window catch, and threw the window up swiftly.

There was no screen on the outside of the window—he had taken them out only three days ago, in the chilling October weather. A brick pavement was outside, six feet below. That would show no footprints.

"She's dead, Colonel! Come up and see! She's dead, and almost cold. They got away someway! By the kitchen window, looks like! Must have heard us coming in!"

"Lights! Lights! Where are the lights, Bicks?" the colonel called.

"Don't seem to be any!" Claude shouted, with a dry, silent, inward laugh. "Been trying all of them! Can't get any of 'em to go on. Don't know what's happened to 'em."

The colonel would know, of course. But let the colonel tell him. That radio voice as they came in had been just perfect. He had thought quick to throw the master switch.

"Master switch off, that means," called up the colonel. "They probably pulled it off when they came in, before they killed her."

His voice receded for a moment. Lights flashed on down in the game

room. He had found it. Light in the kitchen, where Claude had snapped on the wall switch. The colonel came up the basement stairs.

"By God, Bicks, she's dead? That beautiful woman?"

"Dead!" said Claude Bicks, with almost a sob. "Dead before we came! Any doctor could tell that."

They stood a moment looking down at her, where she lay on the living room floor, beside the table with the phone still on it, which she had failed to reach. Looking down at the name traced in wavering letters of blood.

King.

"Must have been calling her little dog," Claude Bicks said. "It's name in her mind, and so she kind of drew it on the floor. Poor little fellow. Dead hisself, out in the kitchen, too. What horrible fellow could have done it?"

He gave a sickly laugh, as the colonel picked up the phone and called the police. Suppose she had written his name; he had a terrible clammy thought. He kind of wished he had thought of doing something to implicate that first one she had been married to, that playwright fellow, along with the other three. There was Wade Cleveland's silver oak leaf up on her bed, and the ring that he had stuck in Variogli's pocket (it was kind of a little one, the stones in it not worth much), and there was the note in that grey goon's pocket, saying to come back. But he just hadn't ever thought of King Glore. Kind of wished he had.

"Kind of touching," Claude said. "Writing the name of her dog. I kind of wish she had written Claude, though. She was always fonder of me."

The front door bell chimed.

"They got here quick," he said.

The colonel was only just setting down the phone. They had got here quick—they sure had. But in every way the play had been perfect. And it was finished.

Chapter 9

WORSE THAN THE FACE OF HELL

KING GLORE HAD walked blindly out upon the street from the Blue Bar. It couldn't be—Nina, and a man like that!

An ignorant low-witted, vain and shallow man—uncouth, preposterous, a clown in looks, a man with a perfectly commonplace mind. With perfectly commonplace ambitions. A man whom any average bright stenographer, salesgirl, or factory-worker would laugh at. A man who just incidentally, and by a quirk, happened also to be a perfectly cold-blooded murderous type. A quite horrible, but by no means unique man, even in that—certainly not from a mold forever broken.

It couldn't be. It couldn't possibly be. But it just was, of course. It was Nina—that ghastly animal's wife, whose murder he had been alibing himself out of with that replaying of the perfect crime.

Oh, God, suppose she were still alive, though, while that hyena was playing out his game! Perhaps he had bungled it—had botched even the killing of her. She might not be dead yet, but dying in her home, all too conscious and too terribly aware, knowing that he, her husband and murderer, must come back to

the house he lived in, and find her, and kill her again.

And if, by chance, her death wasn't thoroughly done, she must know that he will come back still and finish her. A vampire sucks its blood and flies away. A tiger does not return to the scent of its kill. Even a rattlesnake shuns the place where its victim lies. But a husband always comes home.

King Glore was at a door then, that he had been heading to, as he walked blindly. A door where no one slept all night, and where he was known. He had been in Washington last April, working with them here, getting material for his series of crime radio plays which were now on the air, at about the time that fellow must have met her —he had said they had been married five months.

"A woman named Mrs. Claude Bicks," he said, "has been murdered by her husband."

But they didn't reach the little white-washed house up on the terrace before Claude Bicks had.

There was a car parked in front of the open door of the basement garage, its headlights glaring in.

King Glore and the man with him, with the shield—piled out in front, and ran up the front steps. They pressed the door chimes pusher, but there was no sound.

"Current's been cut off, King."

There was a voice on the inside shouting, "She's dead, Colonel! Oh, thank God, she's dead." There was a voice in the basement shouting "Lights!"

Then lights were on, inside. They pressed the door chimes again.

A chain was taken off the door inside. The door was opened. Claude Bicks stood there.

"You sure got here quick, gentlemen! Colonel Ryder was only just setting down the phone. For gosh sake—why, for gosh sake, if it isn't you, Mr. Jodkins! You remember we were coming out of the movies together, way downtown at the Odeon, where we had both seen the show. . . . She must have been dead then—I didn't know—"

"Oh, go home!" said King Glore.

He walked in, the man with the shield behind him. He looked down at her a moment, with his craggy face, where she lay on the floor, with his name written beside her dead hand.

"Her dog," he said. "How she must have hated me! All these years. Too bad you didn't know she was going to write it, wasn't it Bicks? You might have planned something beautiful for me. What did you plant to point to the other men who had loved her?"

"What do you mean, Mr. Jodkins?"

"The name is Glore."

"Gl—what do you mean, Mr. Glore?"

"You stink," said King Glore. "Well, Colonel?"

"I am Colonel Ryder, living next door, and I drove Mr. Bicks out from downtown when he became alarmed," said the little military man. "We heard a man's voice as we came in the basement door. It was upstairs here, and it said something like, 'She's dead, Mike!' Then in that instant they must have heard us, for he stopped, with a kind of murmur. Mr. Bicks went charging up without bothering to find the lights —the men must have turned off the mas-

ter switch when they first came in, before killing her, as I discovered—to catch them, regardless. I have been in battle, gentlemen. I am not a coward myself. But I never saw a man so brave as that. Rushing up empty-handed in the dark, to face unknown men, quite possibly armed with guns. They had escaped, however, by the rear kitchen window, when he got up."

King Glore went over to the radio and pulled off the back of it. He felt the tubes, still warm.

"Incident from *The White Orchid,*" he said. "I used it in *Beauty,* too. Someone turned the switch off before they killed her, Bicks?"

King Glore looked at his watch. He nodded at the little electric clock upon the mantelpiece. It had stopped four minutes ago.

"The Stopped Clock," he said. "No one could say at what moment she died, as she lies here. She was dying a long time. But that clock stopped when the switch went off—and that was before she died, you've said it."

"Now, look-a-yere, Mr. Jodkins—Mr. Glore—if you are going to accuse me of murdering Nina—I know some fellows with nasty minds is always going to think first thing of a husband when his wife's been killed, and that's why I—that's why I'm kind of agitated. But you can't say I did it. You can't prove it. I was downtown there at the Odeon, as you saw me with your own eyes, and then at the bar. Two dozen must have seen me. I didn't know nothing about Nina—"

"You stink!" said King Glore. "You smell to heaven."

"You got three nickels change from the barman to phone your wife," he said. "You put three in the juke-box before you went in to phone. You came out again—she hadn't answered. You might have had another nickel, of course. But you hadn't, for you went to the bar right away and changed a dime to get a nickel for the juke-box. You hadn't a nickel to phone with when you went in that booth. You knew that she was dead—or thought you did. I think that some of the two dozen who saw you in the bar will remember, if recalled to their attention.

Claude Bicks swung, with his big freckled hands. King Glore's craggy shoulders wrapped around him, as he fought and wrestled like a catamount. The man with the shield had his bracelets out, and he got them around one wrist, jerking. Claude Bicks was jerked back down upon the couch.

"The old hag!" he panted, sobbing. "I hate scrawny blonde washed-out women! She was old enough to be my mother, too! I'm only a boy of twenty-eight, and she was almost thirty-nine! Tied down to an old hag like that! And Carlotta was going to—Nina might have kicked me out. I had to do it."

He started to get up again, and fight. But the bracelet had him. . . .

"Why was the house dark, King?" said the man with the shield. "He must have killed her with lights on, in the first place."

"He was thinking about the electricity bill," said King Glore tiredly. "The darkness in itself was a tip-off to him, and why he had willed her death in his damned soul. ■ ■ ■

When you've just made the most popular corpse in town, you automatically make Daniel Winters' list of "my favorite people to write about." There's very little we can tell you about Who Dies There? *beyond promising that it is entrancingly different. It is a little story, in contrast to Mr. Winters, who is large enough to be several. It's a human story, which off-handedly proves that the killer is always right . . . But hadn't you better take it from there?*

Who Dies There?

by DANIEL WINTERS

THE PRECINCT HOUSE was unimposing—brownstone facade with a green-shaded light on each side of the entrance. The three men went through a waiting room, and stopped before a high and ponderous desk behind which sat a uniformed lieutenant. The smaller of Pete's companions said, "This is Westford, Lieutenant."

A large-jowled man looked down at him and nodded in a friendly fashion. "No trouble?"

"No trouble," the smaller detective said. "Like a lamb."

The lieutenant nodded. "Good. They should all be so nice." He looked down at Pete. "Got to ask you a few questions, son."

Pete answered them. Age, thirty-three . . . address, one-o-six Lance Lane, Los Angeles . . . occupation, actors' agent . . . single . . . height, six-two . . . weight, one-seventy.

"Ought to put a little meat on," the lieutenant observed. "Kinda thin." Then he looked down at Pete. "Don't think you'll be here long, son. That L.A. crowd is a busy bunch. Had the California governor sign extradition papers, then flew a man East with them last night. Went right up to Albany to get the signature there. Ought to be around soon. Nice fella. You'll like him."

"I know I'll be crazy about him," Pete said. The whole thing was unbelievable, fantastic. He said, "Look, I came to New York on business. Couldn't I get a lawyer, or something?"

The lieutenant shook his head. "In California, son, you can get all the law-

yers you want. You don't have any need of them here." He picked his teeth silently for a moment, then leaned forward on the desk. "Son, just why did you kill Ralph Custer?"

Pete looked at him. "I saw a preview of his last picture."

The lieutenant nodded soberly. "As good a reason as any." He looked at the two detectives. "Put him in the icebox, boys."

At that moment a large, middle-aged man came into the room. The lieutenant looked at him and smiled. "Hello, Stevens. Just about to put your package in the cooler. Everything all set?"

The big man nodded, pushing his hat to the back of his balding head. His demeanor was quiet, his eyes observant and wise. He put some papers on the desk and, while the lieutenant examined them, he looked Pete over. His scrutiny was minute, taking in everything from shoelaces to hatband.

Nodding, he said, "Hello, Westford. Name's Stevens. Guess we'll be goin' back to the Coast together."

"Everyone has plans for me," Pete said. "You're all so considerate I can't imagine how to thank you."

"No trouble at all," Stevens said.

The desk lieutenant handed back the papers. "Everything seems to be okay. You can have him." He leaned his chin on a beefy hand. "Wish I was goin' with you. It'll be a nice trip."

"A lovely trip," Pete said. "Why don't you go with Stevens, Lieutenant, and I'll stay here. Everyone seems to want to go to the Coast but me."

Stevens took a pair of manacles from his pocket. Before Pete had divined his intention, one half had been snapped over his right wrist. Stevens solemnly anchored the other half to his own left wrist.

Pete said, "No! It looks like a lousy 'B' picture. You don't mean to tell me that all the way to the Coast I'll. . . ."

"Just standard procedure," Stevens said. "I'd look awful funny going back there alone, wouldn't I? Let's go, Westford."

They left. Pete waved. "Good-by, all! See you soon."

Out on the street, Pete said, "Now what?"

"A plane," Stevens said. "I've got transportation for two, and I'm almost certain of reservations on a midnight trip. No use wasting any time."

"How about my hotel, my baggage?" Pete said.

"It'll all be taken care of," Stevens assured him. "Don't worry about it."

Pete said, "Well, how about a cab to the airport? On me."

Stevens looked at him. "It's your money."

"I might as well spend it now."

In the cab, Pete asked, "What is all this? A couple of detectives come into my room, haul me to the gow and tell me I'm wanted for killing that slob Ralph Custer. What did I do to that cupcake, beat him to death with a toothbrush?"

"Custer was shot. Twice."

"Whoever did it wasted one. Custer would have collapsed if someone had fired a blank at him. Where did all this happen?"

"Right on your doorstep, Westford. Just like the milkman left him."

"When? This is silly. I left the Coast on Wednesday night, got into New York yesterday morning."

Stevens said, "He was killed the same night you left Los Angeles."

Pete thought about that. It had been quite a night. "They gave me a party that night . . . Rusty Mellon, Sam Keeley and some of the crowd."

"Sure. We know all about that. Fog delayed your flight for four hours. You got yourself loaded."

It was near enough to the truth. It had been a fine big evening and Pete didn't even remember boarding the plane. "So I had a few drinks."

"You even disappeared for an hour or so during the middle of the binge. The rest of the crowd couldn't find you."

Pete had a vague recollection of a blissful nap in a laundry closet when things had started to pile up on him.

He said, "Yeah, I know. I—"

"In an hour," his escort said, "you could have driven to your own place, potted Custer, and then come back to Mason's."

"But why?" Pete insisted. "Why should I shoot that bum? I wouldn't even work with him. I used to handle him a couple of years ago, but he got a little too ripe for me."

"From what we've been able to find out, you didn't like him."

"I was one of an army. Custer was a punk." He thought of the dead man with distaste. Loud, phony, a welching gambler, a mean man with women and a rumored blackmailer, Custer had been practically everything unsavory and yet he had somehow retained a certain popularity with the movie-going public.

"About two weeks ago," Stevens said, "you were heard to tell him that you'd beat his brains out."

He remembered the incident. Custer had been annoying a nice girl. He mentioned the circumstance to Stevens.

The man nodded. "We know all about him. He was a heel, but that doesn't give anyone a license to shoot him. And what was he doing at your house? On your doorstep?"

Pete knew the answer to that. "Things haven't been going too well for him, lately. For the last month he's been pestering me to handle him. Phone calls every day, visits to the house. I wouldn't have anything to do with him. He was just making another try."

"His last," Stevens said. "You must have been very annoyed with him."

Pete shook his head. "He meant nothing but trouble to me when he was alive, and now that someone gets disgusted enough to burn him down, the bum has to make his last stand on my porch. There should be a law."

"There is," Stevens said dryly.

AT THE AIRPORT, Stevens maneuvered things so that a minimum of attention would be directed to them. He produced his tickets, but the clerk shook his head. "I'm afraid we won't be able to handle you before tomorrow. All the day flights were canceled, and we have a passenger list eight miles long. You might hang around to see if anything breaks, but I wouldn't advise it."

Pete could see that Stevens was more than ordinarily disturbed. He said, "Don't be in such a rush to get me in the clink. What difference does a day make?"

Stevens looked at him. "To you it makes no difference. If we don't get a plane tonight, you spend your time in a cell anyhow. Me, I want to get home. Tomorrow is my son's twenty-first birthday. We had a big party planned. That was why I tied this thing up so fast. Now it looks as if I won't make it."

"Console yourself by thinking of me. The way things are running, I won't have any thirty-fourth birthday. I refuse to worry about you and your parties."

They moped about the offices for an hour. Every flight going out, hours behind schedule, was completely booked. The place was crowded with people as anxious as themselves.

Pete was the first to see the commotion on the other side of the big waiting room. The initial stir became a small stampede, and in a few minutes, photographers' bulbs started banging away. He and Stevens drifted in that direction and in a moment Pete saw the cause of the uproar.

She was a tall slim blonde. Her face was startling in its beauty, and her lovely mouth was smiling. A ridiculous hat clung somehow to her head, and her beautiful body was encased in a multitude of defunct mink.

Pete turned away.

Stevens jerked at his arm. "What's the rush? That's Wanda Fairlee."

Pete said, "Okay, so it's Wanda Fairlee. What'll I do, kneel?"

Stevens looked at him for a moment. "Westford, I was beginning to like you, but an attitude like that will never predjudice me in your favor. Probably the most beautiful woman in the world, and you don't want to look at her?"

"I've seen her," Pete said. "Frequently. Just another big dumb blonde. They're a dime a dozen in Hollywood. You should know that."

Stevens shook his head. "That is not the dime-a-dozen department."

"All right. She's all the big dumb blondes in the world rolled into one. She has just a little bit more of whatever it is that the others have. The prototype."

Stevens looked at him carefully. "You act as if she doesn't like you, Westford. You know the lady?"

Pete nodded. "Tried to work with me, but it isn't my style. I like women who are something more than just decorative. Wouldn't have her on my club. A waste of time."

"You talk like a man with feathers in his ears," Stevens said. "Nobody—nobody—reacts to Wanda Fairlee like that."

"I do," Pete said. "I've seen all the beautiful women in the world. I'm in the business. It gets to be like a kid with a job in the soda store. After awhile, he just doesn't want any more ice cream."

"You probably made a play for her and got nowhere," Stevens said.

Pete shook his head. "The useless type just isn't for Mrs. Westford's little boy. I want something that's more than a camera target."

And suddenly a throaty, husky voice

cut through the hubbub. The voice cried, "Pete! Petey Westford!"

The crowd parted slowly and with reluctance. The vision in mink approached them on a run. Pete shuddered. He said, "Quick! Let's get to that cell you were talking about, Stevens."

But it was too late. Wanda Fairlee was upon them, or rather, upon Pete. Her arms were about his neck, her lipstick was on his cheek. She finally held him at arm's length and said. "Pete Westford! I haven't seen you in ages!"

"Two weeks," Pete said sourly. "At Joe Hanson's. That is not ages."

Stevens jerked his arm, and Pete looked at him. He got the sign and said, "Oh, yeah. Wanda, I'd like to present a very close frieend of mine. Mr. Stevens, Miss Fairlee."

The blonde threw a big smile at Stevens, then her amazingly blue eyes turned again to Pete. She said, "What are you doing here? I read that you just got into New York." She smiled, and there were a hundred audible sighs. "It couldn't be that you're headed back for the Coast already?" The prospect seemed to delight her.

"Mr. Stevens and I are spending the night in town. There are matters we must discuss. Besides, all the flights are sold out."

It was then she noticed the handcuffs. She pointed to them and said, "Pete! What in the world . . . !"

"I killed Ralph Custer," Pete said. "I stabbed him or shot him or something. Stevens is the arm of the law."

She had a healthy reaction to the news. "Oh, how wonderful, Pete! He certainly had it coming to him. I wondered who would have nerve enough to do it. I'm so glad it was you! They'll acquit you, of course."

Pete held up his free hand. "Don't take my every remark so literally. I didn't kill Custer. It's just that some people think I did."

"Well, I hope they're right," the blonde vision said. "It would have been a lovely thing to do."

Pete turned to Stevens. "You see what I mean?"

But the big man wasn't listening to him. He was staring at the girl. His face was the color of tomato soup, and he was trying to swallow.

Wanda Fairlee was one lovely smile. "Well, you don't have to worry about being booked into a flight, because you can come right along with me. They have to make some retakes on *The Parted Bow,* and you know how Murtaugh is. Simply furious if there's any delay. So he sent a plane to get me. Says it's much cheaper in the long run. You can come back with me, Petey. You and your friend."

Pete shook his head. "No, thanks. We'll wait our turn with the rest. After all, I'm in no flaming hurry to have them slip that noose around my neck."

She waved a hand at him and laughed, and it was the sound of muted bells. "You're so silly. They won't hang you, Pete Westford. Probably erect a statue to you, or something. Every girl in Hollywood will be glad to contribute. Now you just come along with me. They're getting the plane ready, and someone said we'll take off in five minutes. Isn't this fortunate?"

"Anything but that. And I'm sure

Mr. Stevens will object. It must be against the law to . . ."

"A wonderful break," Stevens said. He couldn't take his eyes off the girl.

"Your wife will hear of this," Pete said bitterly. "You can depend on that, Stevens. From the very gallows I will . . ."

THE PLANE WAS huge and luxurious. Pete and his custodian sat in adjoining seats. The girl was superintending the disposal of her considerable luggage.

The detective looked at Pete. "Westford, you must be out of your mind. That girl is crazy about you."

"That girl is crazy, period. What would I do with a dizzy bundle of skirts like that? One of the world's worst actresses."

"Boy, when a woman looks like that, it's a rare talent. She doesn't have to be a great actress."

Wanda Fairlee came in, then, with a radiant smile, and the pilot appeared from his compartment. He was a tall, handsome boy named Berg. "There's a lot of weather to the south, so we'll head for Chicago, refuel, and go out that way. Better fasten your belts. We'll get going as soon as we have an okay from the tower." He returned to the forward compartment.

In three minutes, they wheeled out onto the field, taxiing swiftly to the end of one of the runways. Pete listened to the sweet roar of the engines as they were revved up. Then suddenly the night was moving swiftly alongside the windows. In a few moments the girl said, "We're off the ground," and it was evident in the sudden smoothness. The rain beat against the windows.

They had been airborne for five minutes when the girl moved from her seat and came across the aisle to them. She knelt in the seat, facing them.

"Mr. Stevens, do you think those handcuffs are necessary in the plane? I don't think Pete will jump, and if you took them off, he and I could sit over there and . . ."

Stevens shook his head. "I'm afraid not, Miss Fairlee. If he took a notion to hit me over the head with a shoe, I'd look mighty foolish."

Pete said, "Good man, Stevens. Always be on your guard. Remember how I handled Custer."

The girl looked annoyed in a beautiful manner.

At Chicago there was rain, but Pete and Stevens walked for a bit while the girl went off to send a wire. Pete shook the handcuffs. "Stevens, I'm getting awful fond of you. Like having a shadow with meat on it."

"Before we met the girl," Stevens said, "I was getting to like you. But not now. They'd be doing you a favor if they put you out of your misery. Why, every other man in America over the age of nine would give his left arm if Wanda Fairlee . . ."

"Willy May Brostenberger," corrected Pete.

"It would make no difference if her name were Fido," Stevens growled. "Any man with an ounce of blood in his veins . . ."

Pete tapped his forehead. "That lovely noggin of hers is filled with sawdust.

As useless as a parasol in a hurricane."

Back aboard the plane, the girl said to Stevens, "You haven't changed your mind about the handcuffs? Between here and Los Angeles I'll bet I could do myself some good."

Stevens shook his head. "I'm afraid not. And it would all be wasted on him, anyhow. I hope they set an early date for his execution."

Pete grinned, content in his security, then napped.

Five or six hours out of Chicago, the weather became really bad. Snow beat against the windows and the big plane lurched crazily in the tumultuous air. Pete was fully awake, now. Outside the windows dawn was beginning to touch the sky in back of them. A mixture of snow and sleet filled the air and he sensed the effort of the plane to rise, felt the straining of the motors. He saw the ice forming on the wings, watched it shake loose as the de-icers went to work. He knew they were over mountainous country for the plane rose and fell sickeningly in the strong vertical currents.

The co-pilot, a kid named Kehoe, came back into the cabin. He could not entirely erase the anxiety from his voice. "Better put those belts on. Skipper is going to set her down someplace if he can." He disappeared into the forward compartment.

Pete looked at Stevens, and the big man nodded. He fished a key out of a pocket and unlocked the cuffs without a word.

He could feel it coming. The ship was suddenly heavier, like an injured bird accutely conscious of its efforts at flight. It seemed to sag, and for one horrible instant the cadence of the motors faltered, picked up momentarily, then stuttered again. One of them, Pete knew, was failing.

Then there was a vast silence, impossible and unbearable, and Pete knew all four motors had been cut out. A moment later came the crash, a splintering, roaring, shattering thing, and Pete instinctively wrapped his arms around his head. The terrible noise seemed to go on forever. Then there was a punishing silence.

Pete gathered his wits instantly. Unsnapping his belt, he crawled and scrambled down the aisle to where the girl had been seated. Her belt had broken, and she lay on the floor, her eyes open and staring. Pete said, "Wanda! Are you hurt?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. I don't think so." She sat up, then got to her feet. "I'm all right." She was very white.

He pointed to the door, sprung open by the impact. "Get out. Fast." He was thinking of fire. He went back to Stevens.

The man was half in his seat, half out. He was unconscious. Blood streamed from a deep cut on his forehead and one leg was twisted at a crazy angle. Pete dragged him to the doorway by his coat and slid him out the opening.

He went into the forward compartment, fighting open the twisted door. Berg was wedged behind his controls, cursing impotently, and Kehoe was on the floor, bleeding badly from the face. Pete somehow got both of them through the broken windows. then followed im-

mediately. He dropped into three feet of snow.

IT WAS FULL light, now, or as light as it would get. The snow fell in a solid blanket, whipped by a wind that had its source somewhere at the top of the world.

The plane was lying almost on its side, nosing up an incline of almost twenty degrees. Berg had set her down in the only available spot, a narrow rising meadow edged heavily by trees which had stripped off the wings and motors as the ship had come in. There was no sign of fire, for which Berg and Kehoe were to be thanked. They'd cut the motors in some miraculous split second before the crash. The plane itself was a mess, twisted and misshapen but still in one piece. Pete marvelled that any of them were still alive.

He became aware of the cold, then. It was a live, piercing thing that ate into him hungrily. He looked at the dark patches on the snow and knew they would have to be moved immediately. He went to work.

The girl was shaken but unhurt. "How are the others?"

Pete shrugged. "Banged up. We've got to get them back into the plane. We'll freeze to death, out here. You smell any gas?"

In a moment she shook her head, and Pete said, "I guess it'll be safe enough. You get in the plane and help me."

He had never worked so hard. It took him almost an hour to get Stevens, Berg and Kehoe into the plane, with Pete boosting, Wanda hauling. Stevens and Berg were conscious and tried to be helpful.

They made Berg as comfortable as possible. "Ribs all busted," he said, "but I guess they didn't dig in. I'll be all right, but I won't be able to run any errands."

They went to work on Stevens' leg. "It's going to hurt like hell, but it'll have to be done," Pete said. Berg had directed them to a beautifully equipped first aid kit.

Stevens said, "Don't mind me," and fainted dead away as soon as Pete touched the leg.

They worked silently, Pete fumblingly, the girl with a surprising adeptness. The leg was straightened and protective splinting applied and lashed into place.

Kehoe was still out. They bathed and cleansed his battered face, set an arm and leg. They taped Berg's ribs as well as they could, then rested.

Pete looked at the girl. She was drawn and pale from the shock but she tried a smile. Pete grinned at her. "You're a good girl. Maybe not the smartest one in the world, but you've got a lot of stuff."

Her eyes were moist with gratitude. She said, "Now what?"

"A fire outside," Pete said, "and we'll pray that someone sees it. You might see if you can patch up some of the windows. Our big problem is the cold."

"All right, Pete," she said.

There was a good axe in an emergency kit above the door, and Pete floundered out into the deep snow. Wood was his for the handling, for the plane had made kindling of a large area

of dry, dead trunks. In half an hour he had a roaring blaze and enough wood to last through a day and night. The storm had not slackened, and he knew the idea of a fire was ridiculous, but he couldn't afford to pass up the slightest chance. He fed the blaze until it reached mammoth proportions, then fought his way back to the plane.

The girl had been busy. With material from the seat covers she had made acceptable patches for the broken windows. She had a list of the stores on board; several cooked chickens, some cold meat, a dozen cans of soup, bread. It would hold them for a little while, anyway.

Pete said to Stevens, "You'll miss the kid's party."

Stevens managed a grin. "Just you see that I don't miss the next one."

Somewhere the girl had found a pile of blankets. Berg, Kehoe and Stevens were all wrapped securely against the cold. Pete knew they must have a fire in the plane, soon, and he asked Berg about it. The pilot said, "Tomorrow it should be safe enough. Any fumes will have blown away by then."

With a section of torn wing, Pete fashioned a stove he hoped would be servicable. They could do little now but wait.

At Berg's request, Pete got several navigational charts from the cabin. The pilot pointed out their approximate position. They were high in the Wasatch Range, the nearest town some forty miles away. He said in apology, "We would have been all right if the de-icers hadn't loused up."

"Forget about it," Pete told him. "You did a hell of a job getting us down at all."

In the afternoon the storm abated somewhat but a bitter reign of cold set in. The clouds were heavy, low, and full of threat. The night was hell in a wind tunnel. The gale roared about them and Pete wrapped himself in a blanket, shivered, and cursed Ralph Custer. With the first light of dawn he was busy.

By mid-morning he had fashioned an ugly pair of snowshoes out of metal frames and the seat-covering. He tried them out, and they supported him. He built up the fire again and looked hopelessly at the snow-filled sky. If it would only stop snowing, if the weather would lift a bit, they had a chance. He knew planes would be out looking for them, but not in weather like this.

At noon he tried a fire in the stove he'd fashioned. There was an anxious moment when they lit it, but it flared up without incident and heat spread throughout the cabin. He couldn't supress a shout as he scrambled out into the snow for more wood.

The girl was remarkable. She spent her hours trying to make the three injured men more comfortable, uttering not a word of complaint. It seemed to Pete that the crash and the storm had replaced one personality with another. He would have been lost without her.

The pitiful supply of food was almost gone. That night Pete dug back into his memory and made the snares. He hacked some wiring out of the control room, and in the light of the cabin fire, went to work. His labors were intense and inept, and the girl made several suggestions.

He looked at her. "You know what I'm making?"

She grinned at him, and it was more beautiful than the famous Fairlee smile. "I was raised on a farm. I had four brothers. I've seen rabbit snares, Pete."

He grinned back. "Well, I was raised in the Bronx, and the only convenient rabbits were in a cage in the zoo. But I remember seeing something like this in the Boy Scout Manual. If I catch anything more than a cold, I'll be surprised."

He set the snares the next morning at a point where he'd seen rabbit tracks in the snow. The sky was overcast, and the smoke did not rise to any considerable height before it became part of the cloudbank. There would be no planes out in this weather. Visibility was limited to a few miles.

In the plane, the girl said, "Those had better be good snares, Pete. We're going to be awfully hungry tomorrow." There was tea and a small cup of soup for dinner that night.

The girl was wonderful. She entertained them, and Pete discovered that she was a gifted mimic. Berg finally said, "Cut it out. My ribs." So she sang, in a low sweet voice that delivered them out of the cold and out of pain and somehow quieted the howling gale that roared about the wrecked plane. She was asleep when Pete fed the fire for the last time. Her face was even lovelier in complete repose. Pete slept fitfully.

PETE HAD DONE many things in his time that had given him pleasure. He had made a great deal of money, had arranged deals worthy of a Richelieu. But never, in all his life, had he known such satisfaction as when, the next morning, he discovered that two of his snares held fine fat rabbits. He went back to the plane singing at the top of his lungs.

While the girl cooked the rabbits, Stevens said to Pete, "Westford, if they ever let you out of jail and you fail to marry this woman, I will personally shoot you in the head."

But the next day there were no rabbits in the snares, nor were there on the following morning. The girl had used the meat sparingly and wisely, but there were only scraps left. Pete refused his share on the second night.

The weather, bitter cold and with intermittent snow, made a joke of their signal fire. Up here they were a part of the clouds, hemmed in by a pitifully limited horizon, all alone in a gale-swept world of their own. He wondered how long they could last.

On the fourth day after snaring the rabbits, Pete considered setting out down the mountain to look for help. He knew he couldn't get far, but it might be better than merely sitting here and letting the five of them starve. He crept out of the plane just as dawn was reaching across the sky. His descent to the snow was silent. When he turned, he almost shouted out.

There, not twenty yards away, was a shape profiled against the sky. A buck elk was sniffing the wind.

Pete went into the plane as silently as he had emerged. He crawled to Stevens and whispered, "The gun!"

The man did not question the urgency of his voice and took a .38 from a belt holster and handed it to him. Pete crawled to the door again, aware of some slight movement in the plane behind him. He lowered himself silently into the snow. The elk had not moved.

He raised the gun slowly. The target was perfect, silhouetted against the newly lighted sky. He aimed at the middle of the enormous beast and jerked the trigger.

The report was much louder than he'd expected. The gun jumped in his hand and the elk was moving with the sound. Almost absently, he saw snow fall from a tree branch, fully eight feet above the spot he'd aimed at.

Then he heard a fierce exclamation in his ear and the gun was jerked from his hand. He turned a startled face. The girl was holding the pistol at arm's length. It banged once, then again. He saw the elk falter, stumble, get to its feet again. The fourth shot rang out and the elk was down, kicking. The girl was gone from him, floundering through the snow.

When she was ten yards away the elk raised its head, made one volcanic effort to get to its feet. She did not shoot. She stumbled on until Pete shouted in alarm. She was not three feet from the animal when she took careful aim, and shot it twice again.

When Pete reached her she was trembling. "I was lucky. I must have hit bone with one of those first three, or he would never have stayed down." Then anger clouded her face. "And where did you learn to shoot?"

Pete shook his head. 'I've never had a gun in my hand before. How about you?"

"My father was a cop, a sheriff. He taught me all there is to know about a hand gun before I was ten."

Pete gazed at her. "Wonders will never cease."

"You disappoint me," she said. "You never shot Ralph Custer. You couldn't have hit him with a shotgun from ten feet. A girl is constantly being let down." Then she pointed to the sky and shouted. "Pete! Pete!"

He raised his head and could scarcely believe his eyes. There was a long, clean break in the clouded sky, a wedge of blue that widened as they watched.

The girl said, "Pete, how's about some more wood on our fire."

He looked at her and was almost loath to do it. "Can't get me into a cell fast enough, can you? Now that we have a nice fat elk to eat, you're suddenly in a hurry."

She came close to him. "You won't be in prison long, darling, and I'll bring you nice things to eat every day." Her arms were around his neck and her mouth was on his own. How long it lasted Pete did not know, but he was positive nothing like it had ever happened to him before. In a little while he said, "The fire," and wandered to it in a daze and piled wood upon it.

The planes came over in two hours, and Pete and the girl waved and shouted, and the supply containers thudded into the snow near them.

BUT THEY HAD broth and elk steak that night.

Stevens flicked his hand against the newspapers. "And I wasted all this time." The screaming headlines said, JEALOUS HUSBAND CONFESSES HE SHOT MOVIE STAR. Stevens said, "I was sure of it, anyway, since I saw you shoot at that damned elk. Twenty feet, and you couldn't hit something the size of a barn door. How could you hit Custer? Hell, they would have laughed you out of court."

"I would have enjoyed that," Pete said. He was looking at the girl, and a wonderful tenderness flooded his heart.

"Another thing," Stevens said. "You made me miss a fine party. I expect there'll be no nonsense about getting an invitation to the wedding."

Pete looked at the girl and felt a little dizzy. He said, "I'm perfectly willing. If I ever find it impossible to work, I will be secure in the knowledge that my wife can drive a truck, get a job as a cook or in a hospital. If things really get tight, she can always go out and shoot an elk."

The girl said, "Yes, darling," and smiled at him. The effect was almost paralyzing.

Pete loved her with his eyes. Pack trains would be up for them in the morning to spoil this idyl, but somehow he knew things would be just as wonderful in the future. He said, "I am very happy. All my life I have wanted to be known as just plain Mr. Willy May Brostenberger." He chewed happily on his steak.

Let's Make A Killing

■ The greatest train robbery in U. S. history was the work of a nationally famous detective, then on the Federal pay roll!

In June, 1924, bandits held up a Milwaukee and St. Paul train, took more than three million dollars in cash, bonds, and jewelry. So carefully had the crime been planned that Postal Inspector William Fahy, placed in charge of the investigation, confessed himself bewildered.

But sixty days later, acting on a tip from a stool pigeon, some of Fahy's men made the arrest—their own chief. Most of the loot was recovered, and the former detective chief drew twenty-five years in Federal prison.

■ In 1871, two bearded prospectors rented a safe deposit box in the Bank of California, in San Francisco. They casually showed a bagful of diamonds, emeralds, rubies, and sapphires. But they appeared to be ignorant of the value of the gems.

Offered half a million dollars for their holdings, the fellows seemed to be dumbfounded. But they shrewdly held out for $700,000.

The president of the bank formed a corporation and sold shares to many of the country's greatest financiers. Dreaming of vast profits from the simple-mindedness of the prospectors, the investors issued stock to the amount of ten million dollars.

Then, and only then, they called in geologists, and gem experts—who revealed the mine had been "salted" and the bag of precious stones bought from the prospectors to be worth less than $20,000.

By Robin Malone

Among the subtle ironies of death, surely there's no instance more striking than this—where the victim of a murderer dies for his crime . . . and the murderer, strangely, is guiltless. . . .

The Knot

by HENRY L. McCANDLESS

THE CUSTOMER SAID, "That's an unusual knot you tied there, Mr. Blood."

Elmer Blood looked down at the package, at the intricate weaving of string in the knot. He spread his round, red cheeks in a mechanical smile. Summer people always expected you to smile, even if they only spent five cents. Elmer Blood smiled.

He said, "Yes, sir. An unusual knot. Always tie 'em that way. Kind of a trade mark of mine."

The customer scooped the change from the worn wood of the counter and put it into his pants without counting it. Elmer Blood smiled again.

The customer picked up his package and turned his back. Elmer Blood went on smiling. He said to himself, inside himself, *An unusual knot. I've got to remember that knot. Suppose I forgot it? Suppose I forgot and tied it when the time came to tie the rope around her where the rope's got to be tied.*

"An unusual knot," said the customer, turning back. "I'd like to have you show me how to make that knot some time, Mr. Blood. It would be interesting to know."

"Maybe," said Elmer Blood, fingering the grey bristle which was always on his pink jowls. "Maybe. Tried to teach every last man, woman and child in the village to tie that knot, mister. Tried, but none of 'em can learn. Even she can't learn."

"She?" said the customer.

"She," said Elmer Blood. "She knows everything. Ain't a thing she don't know. Ain't a thing she can't do—cook, wash, sew, sweep, plow, plant, cultivate, milk cows, paint houses, tend store, sort mail, figger accounts, and tame a bull. That's her."

"Oh," said the customer, with a little smile, "you mean your—ah—that is, you mean Miss Cutts?"

"Cutts," said Elmer Blood. "Vira Cutts. Keeps house for me. Kept house for me nigh on twenty years. Ain't nothin' she can't do. Ain't nothin' she can't boast on doin'. But she can't tie that knot, mister. She can't tie that knot of mine."

Elmer Blood waited until he was sure the customer was down the store's front porch without stumbling over that hole in the third step. Then he sat down.

He sat down slowly, letting his short body collapse in folds of fat. He leaned the old kitchen chair back until it rested precariously against the black chunk stove, now cold. He folded his plump hands over his stomach and let his short, plump feet dangle a few inches above the wide, bare boards of the floor.

His small, washed blue eyes wandered over the combined post office and general store which was his—his and hers, of course. Everything that was his was hers. She'd made it so. Everything he had, everything he did, everything he said, everything he thought—no, not everything he thought.

His big cheeks spread stiffly, as they had spread for the customer, but there was something secret lurking about his small, stretched mouth. *Not everything,* he thought. *Most things,* he thought, *but not everything.*

She couldn't get her long fingers, haired like a man's, down that deep in his brain. She couldn't stick her big beak that far into his thoughts.

She couldn't do things with her brain, either, the way he could. She couldn't do things with her head, dark, secret things, violent, final things that were as good as done once they had happened in the black core of a man's skull. She couldn't do that, no more than she could tie the knot.

Of course, he wasn't going to tie that knot. He'd figgered that knot. He knew about that knot. The knot he was going to tie, of course, would have to be a slip knot, too, but not the knot that was his trademark. Another knot it would be, another slip knot, that would slide down, slide tight, as the weight drew on it and pulled on the rope.

THE DAY WORE on. The sun beat down into the deep cup of the green valley, beat down on the gray boards of the general store and the house which leaned against the store's side and the line of farm buildings and sheds which leaned against the side wall of the house.

The sun was hot and white on the rain-washed boards of the store's porch; golden yellow shining through the store's wide window, falling in little, moving pools over the counter behind the post office window; stealing in little shafts into the tiers of small post office boxes.

Customers drifted in, summer people in clean, crisp clothes, regular people with sibilant whispers of village gossip to tell. Elmer Blood waited on the customers, taking his time, smiling for the summer people, listening to the regular people, sitting down between customers in the tilted chair.

Four times, the door in the wall which led to the house opened with a bang. Four times smells of cooking, baked beans, doughnuts, some other smell not

recognizable, floated out from behind the wooden structure of post office boxes which screened the door to the house. Four times, her voice rasped through the hot, drowsy air of the store, running a file down a man's spine, asking, demanding, compelling an answer.

"Who was that just left, Elmer! What she buy? What she say? You tell me, Elmer Blood. Can't see you, but know right well you're lazin' in that chair. Elmer Blood, you got the post office receipts checked yet? Time you was gettin' 'em checked, Elmer."

Women! Funny how the critters changed. Soft and kind of sugary first off, and kind of—well, kind of yielding. Then, hard. Hard and sharp, with hard, sharp eyes to look through a man and leave him naked, and hard, sharp fingers to take everything a man had and leave him nothing. . . .

Supper time came. Six o'clock. After supper, the mail bus would come, and the letters to be sorted, and the lamps to be lit over the post office counter, because dusk came early in the deep valley, even in summer.

Supper time. Elmer Blood opened the connecting door between the leaning store and the leaning house. He stepped straight into the kitchen. Baked beans —doughnuts—the other smell was brown bread.

Brown bread! He hadn't had brown bread in years. He had asked for brown bread and then he had stopped asking because, as long as she knew he wanted it, he'd get no brown bread. Brown bread. Now! To-night! Why had she made brown bread, at last, to-night—to-night of all nights.

She said, "Set. Set now, Elmer. See the brown bread."

"Huh? Oh, yes. See it. Smell it, too. Smells good."

She sat opposite. She dished the beans. She dished them the way she did everything else, with a strength far beyond what the job needed, with a sort of restrained fury of strength that no woman had a right to have. She looked at him, too, the way no woman had a right to look, with sharp, hard eyes that bored into him like two shiny gimlets and turned in him, around and around.

"Elmer? Elmer Blood, what you starin' at?"

"Huh? Wasn't starin'. Thinkin', I was."

"You was starin'. You was, too. Starin' at the third drawer of the old dresser. Starin' and starin'. You got something in that drawer, Elmer, you don't want I should see?"

"Wasn't starin'. I was thinkin'."

Yes, he was thinking! He was thinking of the things hidden in that drawer. Maybe had been staring, too. Maybe that was bad. But the drawer was locked, and the key was in his pants, and there was no other key, and she would never spoil a dresser by prying open a drawer that had no key.

"Elmer. Keep your eyes on your victuals, Elmer, now. Don't you want I should tell you what happened this forenoon in town?"

"Huh?"

"Elmer, what ails you? You're actin' right queer. Listen to me, Elmer Blood. I went down street this forenoon. I went to see Dr. Meade. Elmer, don't you want I should tell?"

"Tell, if you got to. The mail bus is due. I got things to do tonight—things."

"Things! You ain't got no more things to do tonight than you do any other night, Elmer Blood, and I'll be helping you with those things, just like I always help you, because a poor, piddlin' slow man needs help, land knows. Elmer, you listen to me. I want you to know what the doctor . . ."

"Pass the brown bread. I hear the mail bus comin' down the hill."

She was so big and so strong. Her bones were so raw, her flesh so like iron. Was he going to be able to do the things he had to do? Was he going to be able to do them tonight?

She would stack the dishes, slam them into the sink. She wouldn't be long. She'd work in a rush, because she would want to come through into the post office section, as she always came through. She would want to be there to stick her sharp chin on his shoulder and her sharp, thrusting nose close to the letters as he lifted them from the bag, one by one.

She would hurry. He would hurry, too. First, he would hurry out and take the bag. Then he would hurry with it up the porch into the store. He would hurry, but he would not hurry too much. There would be folks there, summer people and regular people, hanging around the porch, waiting for him to sort the mail.

He would be quick, but not too quick, until he had shut the door of the store and locked it and dumped the mail bag in the narrow aisle between the post office boxes and the door which led to the kitchen. He would light the two lamps—they were filled, ready. He would pull the shade down over the wide window, the way he always pulled it down.

Then—then he would hurry, then he would be quick, so quick that she would still be bent over the sink in the kitchen, with her back to him as he came through the door and up to the sink and lifted the wrench. . . .

He must hurry and he would hurry. He had done all the things he had to do so many times in his mind. They were as good as done, those things. It only remained to do them tonight with his body, for tonight was the night and it must be the night or there would be no night. The last night, her last night.

ELMER BLOOD STEPPED through the connecting door into the store. There was no one there. There were voices outside on the porch and the steps.

He lifted the peaked cap from its hook, the peaked cap he always wore when he sorted the mail. He put the cap on his head. He glanced at the chair placed behind the mail counter, near the window. He stooped, grunting, and peered at the big bag of flour placed near that chair, under the mail counter, hidden there. He walked quickly to the front door, made sure the key was in its lock, ready. He stepped out, pushed through the group on the porch, pushed past the group on the steps.

The mail bus swerved around the curve in the road, screeched to a stop. The leather mail bag plumped at Elmer Blood's feet. He stooped, lifted it,

walked quickly back to the porch, but not too quickly. He pushed up the steps, across the porch, got the door shut, turned the key in the lock, tested the door to make sure it was fast, crossed to the aisle behind the mail boxes, dropped the bag, lifted the chimney from the first lamp, struck a match on the seat of his pants. . . .

Why did his hand shake? Could they see his hand shake from outside?

The wick flared in the lamp. The chimney toppled as he set it. He caught it in time. There was still the second lamp, then the shade. . . .

Why was it so silent? Why was there no sound? Why was there no sound from the porch outside, no sound from the other side of the kitchen door?

He lit the second lamp. He glanced out through the wide window, saw faces, saw eyes, idly watching. He pulled down the shade.

Then, quickly, swiftly, with the sweeping, flying, unconquerable quickness he had known he would have, he did the things he had to do, and he opened the door to the kitchen where she would be.

She wasn't there. She wasn't at the sink. She wasn't anywhere. The room was as silent and as empty as the eyes of the dead.

He tore his own eyes from the place where she should have been standing, standing with her broad back bent to him, her strong, weather-beaten neck bent for the blow.

He fixed his eyes on the old dresser. The third drawer was still closed. There was no sign that it had been opened. How could it have been opened? He had the one key. There was no other key.

Slowly, with the exaggerated slowness and caution of a dream, he laid down the wrench in his right hand and moved toward the old dresser and laid his two hands on the knobs of the third drawer and pulled.

The drawer came open. It was empty. The inside of it was as pale and as bare as a pinewood box.

The note was gone, the note he had spent hours composing in the secret places of his mind, the note he had spent hours writing in the secret spaces of the night.

He could see it plain, against the backs of his eyelids, see every letter of it, written as her hand would have written it. But it was not in the drawer.

He could see it and he could remember the very moment when he first knew that it would be written, the moment years ago. It was winter. The lamps were lit in the store. The chunk stove was red. The wild wind blew snow dust against the window. The icy air breathed up through cracks in the floor. He was on one side of the counter, a bundle before him, a string in his hand. A customer stood on the other side, Liddy Cole, from up the hill, her bare, red hand sticking out of her coat, ready to pay.

She came out from the kitchen into the store. Her voice blotted out the sound of the wind and the sound of the snow on the glass. She pushed him aside. She leaned over the counter. She said, "Liddy, I got a pain here," and she pointed to the left side of her hard bosom where the heart should be.

That was the moment. That was the moment when he knew that she, too, the inflexible, the invincible, the implacable woman, would some day yield to death. That was the moment when he bent over the bundle on the counter and tied the knot.

And now, suddenly, breaking in on the tranced silence which held him above the empty drawer, came noise, the unearthly noise of a woman's shriek, the crashing noises of voices shouting together, the thudding noise of running feet.

He turned. He stood with his back to the old dresser, pushing his stocky, quivering legs against the open drawer. The running feet were thudding through the passage that connected the barn with the house, thudding into the house, thudding toward him.

He looked at the wrench he had laid on the floor. He must pick up that wrench, hide it. He must go through the connecting door into the store. He must take from the chair behind the store's shaded window, the fat flour sack and the cap which perched on top of the flour sack. He must hide the fat flour sack. He must put the cap once more on his own head. He must do all this quickly, very quickly, before the feet running toward the kitchen should reach the kitchen. And he could not move.

He could not move and the feet were already in the kitchen, running still, running at him, and the feet belonged to Liddy Cole and the white, ghastly face pressing close to his belonged to Liddy Cole. What was her voice saying, over and over?

"Elmer! Elmer Blood! She's—she's in the barn—I found her—Elmer, I know you hated her for years, Elmer, but now—now she's dead, Elmer, she's—"

Somebody was banging and crashing against the locked door of the store. Somebody was shouting out there. The white, ghastly face moved away from his eyes. Liddy Cole was running again, running across the kitchen, past the wrench, running through the connecting door, running into the store.

Too late now! Too late to take away the fat flour bag and the peaked cap that had made the shadow of Elmer Blood on the window shade. Too late to take away the wrench. Too late to do anything.

A FLOOD of voices broke into the store, swirled toward him through the connecting door.

"Elmer, she's—hey, Elmer, Vira Cutts is—"

They closed in on him. They carried him in their midst through the house, through the connecting passage to the barn.

A lantern light sprang up somewhere in the darkness of the barn, and then another. The small lights played over the high rafters, over the spilling hay. They played over the black rope which stretched taut and tight, from above.

"Elmer, poor Elmer—Vira, poor Vira Cutts—"

Elmer Blood looked. The voices around him were in his ears, whirring into his head. He looked and he saw the potato barrel. It was the strong barrel, the one he had chosen because it was

strong; the same barrel. It lay on its round side, as he had planned. It lay in the spot he had picked in his mind, the same spot.

He lifted his eyes quickly, past the thing which hung between the overturned barrel and the rafter above. He looked at the rope. It was the rope he had selected, the same rope. It hung from the rafter as he had planned, the same rafter, the same rope.

The bodies pressing in around him moved away, the voices grew low. He was alone. They were taking her down. They were laying her on the floor. They were taking something out of her hand, a piece of paper. They were saying words at him again.

"A note—Elmer, she wrote a note—it's her writing—a note to you—Elmer, it tells why she done it—Elmer."

They crowded back on him. They held the note under his nose. It was the note he had spent stolen hours to write, the same note. They had taken it out of her right hand, the hand he had planned to put it into, the same hand.

He looked at the note. He said slowly, with a long breath between every word, "She . . . done . . . it."

"'Course she done it," said the voices, the comforting, warming voices. "'Course! Poor Vira—poor Elmer. Of course, she killed herself. Did you think somebody came in here while you was sortin' the mail? Did you think somebody came in here and done murder then?"

"She done it," said Elmer softly, "herself!"

"Elmer—poor Elmer—Here, somebody hold on to him. Get water somebody. Get liquor. Who'd thought Elmer Blood would care she was gone? Who'd thought? Elmer, buck up. She's gone. The note, Elmer—the note says she wanted to go—The pain, Elmer, the note says she couldn't stand the pain—She killed herself, Elmer, because she couldn't—"

The voices, the loud, reassuring voices, broke off. A new voice, shrill like a winter wind, came from the darkness about the door that led from the barn to the house, a voice he knew dimly was Liddy Cole's.

"She did not kill herself. She did not. There's something in the post office, setting beside the window, making a shadow on the window shade. Why did he put it there, made out of a flour bag, with his own cap on its head? He put it there to make a shadow of himself, sorting the mail. He put it there to stay, while he. . . . Why did he hide half the letters that came tonight in an empty box? He hid them so he'd have time to sort what was left when he came back, back from—"

"No!" shouted Elmer Blood. "I never did—"

"He killed her!" shrilled Liddy Cole and came out of the darkness and stood over him, so that he saw the spittle trickling from her open mouth. "There's a wrench on the kitchen floor. What right has a wrench on Vira Cutts' clean kitchen floor? He used that wrench, he dragged her here, he put the barrel under the rafter, he lifted her up. . . ."

"No!" screamed Elmer Blood. "I never—I did not! The note, the note in her hand—The note proves. . . ."

They pressed in around him. They

dragged Liddy Cole back. They said words in his ears, safe, comfortable words.

"Liddy," they said to the woman, "you're daft. Liddy, there's a note, a note in her own handwriting. Elmer wouldn't—Elmer couldn't—She couldn't stand the pain, Liddy, the note says she couldn't stand the pain. We never knew — Poor Vira — Poor Elmer — Liddy, you're daft."

"Daft!" yelled the Cole woman. "Daft! He hated her for years. He copied her handwriting. He made up the right words."

"The note!" said the voices, going away from him, leaving him alone. "Let's see the note. Let's look." Liddy Cole saying—"Look! The letters look shaky. Nobody ever heard Vira Cutts complain of a pain—the letters look queer—here's one's been gone over."

The wide front doors of the barn swung in, letting in air, air which seemed cold on the clenched fat fingers and the white clenched lips of Elmer Blood.

A powerful flashlight swept over the crowd, over Liddy Cole, over Elmer Blood, over the body which lay apart from the rest. The little man behind the big flash walked into the barn, set his black bag down. He said, "What's this? What's this?" and bent over the body. "Um. I was afraid. Suicide, of course. They so often do. Mr. Blood here? Elmer Blood? I was on my way out here to tell you tonight. I thought you should know. I told this woman today at the office that she had two months to live."

The wind from the wide doors was warm now, warm on Elmer Blood's fists and his lips. He moved forward. He knelt down beside her. He said, "They're sayin' I done it, Doc. Oh, Doc, they're sayin' I done it."

"Ridiculous," said the doctor, crisply. "Ridiculous. Plain suicide. The woman knew she was going to die. She hadn't the courage, poor soul, to wait for the natural end."

"Wait!" said Elmer Blood, "that's the word! Why wouldn't I have waited if I'd wanted her dead? Two months, that wouldn't be long. I knew she was going. She told me tonight. She did tell me tonight. She told me tonight at the supper table. At the supper table, she told . . ."

Elmer Blood's little eyes clung to the doctor across the body. He did not see the doctor. He saw the supper table as it had been. He saw her, and her hard mouth working a little as she tried to tell him what the doctor had said. He saw the brown bread, the brown bread she had baked after all those years, on that night, that night of all nights, her last night.

"Take him away," said the doctor. "Take him away from his ghastly thing. Take him to a bed and give him a drink. This is plain suicide. You're all fools."

The doctor bent over as he spoke. He took something from the hand of the corpse. He held it up. It was a key, a key which matched the key to the third drawer of the old dresser. Elmer Blood looked at the key but he was not frightened or amazed, because he had known somehow that it would be there, because he had known somehow that there could never be anything of his that she

would not have. Twenty years had taught him that.

THE VOICES WERE hushed now, whispering around him, as they led him away. Strong arms were around him, too, warming him, supporting him. He was safe. He hadn't done it, not with his hands, only with his mind. And she—she had seen into his mind and taken the rope and the note into her own hands. He hadn't done it.

A voice rose up behind him.

"Daft am I? Maybe I am. You look at that rope, doctor. You look at it close. I'm Liddy Cole, and I say murder, that's what. You look at that rope and see how it's tied. If it's tied like I say it's tied, doctor, any man, woman or child will know the knot."

"The knot!" He screamed it. They could not hold him back. He lunged toward the circle of light where she lay, where she lay now on her stomach, with the rope on her neck hidden by straggling hair.

He bent over her as the doctor and Liddy Cole bent over her and he looked. There was silence, except for the sound of the heavy breaths of the crowd. He bent, and his mouth spread in a stiff smile, with something secret lurking in it, something triumphant. And he himself, Elmer Blood, pushed away the hair and exposed the knot.

They seized him. They pulled him. They shrieked in his ears. He reached out from their grasping hands. He laid hold of her. He turned her over and looked into her dead face. He saw there what he had known he would see. He saw the malignant hatred which had triumphed over death.

She had him again. There was nothing she hadn't known. She had known how to bring him swiftly, surely and inevitably to the place where she had gone. She had known how to tie the knot. ■ ■ ■

As Crime Goes By

■ Throughout the Middle Ages, it was commonly believed that treason, murder, sexual crimes, and theft of church property influenced the weather. So crop failures were thought to be due to crime waves!

■ Early Greek murder trials were invariably conducted in open air—so that officials and spectators might not be polluted by being under the same roof as an accused killer.

■ Few nations have been so concerned about civil liberties as England. The use of detectives was bitterly opposed for decades, on the ground that privacy might be invaded. Not until 1842 were any plain clothes agents used in Britain—and then only 12 for the entire nation!

■ Very few American lawyers have defended as many as 100 persons on trial for homicide. Among the record breakers are: William J. Fallon, who defended 126; Samuel Leibowitz, 141; Moman Pruiett, 343. The all-time record was established by William F. Howe, who personally defended 689 persons in homicide cases!

By Eric Wise

You won't like Paul Whittaker. He doesn't, himself. He's got murder on his soul—a soul as calloused as the bottom of his feet. But follow him across the yellow desert to the shack where a half a million in gold lies buried, and hear his story. Then make up your mind about this man, whose blood was the right color for a corpse—in the biggest killing you ever heard about!

If I Should Die

by WILLIAM HOPSON

I SADDLED UP the two horses for Mr. and Mrs. Jordan about ten that morning and then went on up to the big ranch house to bum a cup of coffee off Max, the chef, and wait for their lunches. The sun was bright white and quite warm, as it always is on a summer morning in the California desert. Half a dozen of the dude guests were already in shorts, lounging around the edge of the big swimming pool, all wearing dark glasses. Among them was that Mildred Durant woman. Nearby was the big guy who had come with her, her brother.

She had a pair of long, sleek legs and the kind of copper tan that only a blonde lounging around a swimming pool can get. Even when you don't go much for such things you still couldn't help noticing.

Personally, I wasn't interested despite the plays she'd been making my way. I figured she was bored because there wasn't anything else around in the way of male material. I show up my half Mexican blood pretty much, being out in the sun a lot, and unless she was a divorcee with no brains and not too particular, I didn't figure her for being on the make.

I started by the pool on the way to the kitchen when I heard her voice. "Hey, Cowboy."

I walked over to within a few feet of her. She was looking at my Stetson, red shirt, and levis.

"Well?" she inquired as I waited. "Can't you speak?"

"I'm listening," I said.

"You appear to be good at it. Also at being rude and independent. I'd like to

go riding this afternoon when it cools a bit and learn a few things about this desert. I want you to go with me."

"I've got a truck motor to work on," I said. "Get somebody else."

"I'm paying for it," she reminded me a bit coldly.

"My job don't include that part of it," I told her. "We have another joe here for that. Get him when he comes back from town."

I went on toward the corner of the kitchen and caught the tail end of her amused laugh. Her brother's voice came in a lazy, sophisticated drawl. "No luck again, eh, Mil? Seems to me you're slipping badly. Why don't you give up?"

I went into the kitchen. The Jordans were there, waiting for their lunches—two clean-cut college kids on a honeymoon. I poured myself a cup of coffee and waited for Max to finish with the lunches. Afterward I went down with them, put the lunches into the saddle bags and fastened the dripping canteens to the pommels. I'd already told them about watering at the east windmill and, during lunch, to loosen the saddle cinches. They pulled out and I went back to work under the shed.

It must have been about a half hour later when I heard the car roll down the incline from the ranch house and pull to a stop. A well-dressed man about thirty-five got out of it. He was big, with a heavy, clean shaven face. He came over and his eyes were shrewd.

"Morning," he greeted. "Are you Paul Whittacker? They said up at the house that—"

"That's me," I said, still working with the socket wrench.

"I'm Korman, private detective from Los Angeles. I'd like to talk with you."

"You are," I told him.

"It's about your father, Paul. I had him brought up from Los Angeles this morning in an ambulance to the private sanitarium here. Had to come fast because he's dying and wants to see you."

"You've got the wrong rooster, mac. I haven't got a father."

"He said that would be about the way you'd react. He'll go almost any hour—a bad heart. Doesn't that cut any ice?"

"Not in the least. Tell him just to go right ahead and kick off."

He took out a white handkerchief, removed his Panama hat, and wiped at the inside band. Like the blonde's up beside the swimming pool, his eyes were probing at my worn levis, boots, red shirt, and sweat stained hat. He put the Panama back on his head and the handkerchief disappeared.

"He said you were just mean enough to come in and watch him die," Korman replied.

I straightened and laid the socket wrench down on a fender and looked at him while wiping my hands with a piece of waste cloth. The same slight, tight chill was coming into my belly that I've always felt when I distrust a man.

"Look, buster," I told him. "For the past ten or fifteen years my old man has been an alcoholic on Main Street in LA—a wino living in flop houses and missions, and panhandling dough to get more wine. Then about the time he's ready to kick off, you pick him up and bring him a hundred and seventy-five miles in an ambulance and put him in a

private sanitarium. I think I know what you're selling, but I'm not buying any of it."

I picked up the wrench and bent over the fender again. He walked around to the front and placed a foot on the bumper. The springs sagged a little. He said patiently, "I think you might change your mind, after I explain. Do you know much about his former life?"

"Too much," I said and almost twisted off a stud bolt. I was getting hit in the one place I've never been able to take it. "I know that he married my Mexican mother across the line in Sonora and left her a few days later with me on the way. I know that I couldn't speak a word of English except, 'Shine, meester?' until my mother died and a church-going aunt brought me to Tombstone for schooling. I know that he served time in the penitentiary long before I was born."

I was still wrenching savagely at the nuts holding down the motor head. I don't let go often. All my life I've gone it alone, even in the Army. You get that way with my kind of blood in you—a man whose father was a tough convict. That's one reason I've always hated dames, especially those who went in for the "romantic" Latin type. It does something inside of you when the only way you can have a girl friend is to find some stupid female who thinks you're wonderful because you're dark skinned.

I'M TELLING YOU this, writing it fast, getting it out of my system because I'm hemmed in, and there's going to be a fight that I might not get out of alive.

Anyhow, this guy had made me sore, bringing up something I wanted to forget. He shifted his foot on the truck bumper.

He said, "Now we're getting some place, Paul. That business about your father doing time before you were born . . . I'm going to give you the facts, because I need your help and I can help you. You can also aid the government."

I sneered at him. "I'm the guy who killed twenty-seven Japs in combat and then got a dishonorable discharge for smacking a major who had it coming. I'd love to help them."

"I know how you feel," he said. "But I'll still give you the facts. Some thirty-five years ago, along about nineteen-fifteen, your father and three other men pulled one of the greatest mail train robberies of all time, southeast of Tucson. They stopped the train on a rainy night, blew open the express car, and got away with two mail sacks containing a little over a quarter of a million dollars in cash but mostly negotiable securities."

"I'm listening," I said boredly.

"One of the robbers was killed on the spot. A second was badly wounded and taken. A third man named Ferguson had his horse shot from under him and didn't get very far either. Your father was the only one who escaped that rainy night, and he was carrying the two mail sacks, heading for the Border, presumably.

"But he slipped back within a few weeks and was captured by postal inspectors. He and Ferguson and the wounded man, Smith, received long prison terms, but your father never revealed where he hid the proceeds. He

absolutely refused to tell. Smith soon died in prison from the effects of his wounds and Ferguson was left to serve many more years. But not your father. He was soon paroled in the hopes that he would lead postal inspectors to that loot."

He paused and took a pack of cigarettes and extended it. I said, "I don't smoke," and dropped another greasy nut into the pan.

He inhaled and went on, "But your father was intelligent enough to know they would be trailing him for years and he never made any attempt to recover the money, preferring his freedom. He was picked up now and then for more questioning, but I guess the inspectors who shadowed him for so long finally gave it up as a bad job when the old fellow wound up as a derelict on Main Street. They probably figured he either had forgotten where he hid it or was too —er—sodden to go after it. At any rate, a few months ago, our people were asked by the bank and insurance people to make a final effort to wring the information from your father. I was given the job of locating him and easily did. I told him exactly what I wanted, that there is a fifty thousand dollar fee in it. He was down sick and filthy and wine sodden in a flop house when I offered him half of the fifty thousand."

Again he paused and pulled on the cigarette. Maybe he was working on me, giving the stuff plenty of time to sink in. I admit I was getting kind of interested, at least in the yarn.

I said sarcastically, "And on his death bed, his conscience got the best of him and he wants his beloved son to have his share and clear his name in the end. Why don't you try selling it to Hollywood?"

"I don't know about his conscience," Korman said. "But I do know he said he'd talk only to you and nobody else. And I located you by playing a simple hunch—I went to the police department. You were given a citation for driving a souped-up car and gave this ranch as your address. A call to the sheriff here verified that you were still working at this guest ranch. So I hurried him here in an ambulance. I'll split with you one half of a fifty thousand dollar fee to recover the loot from that mail train robbery of thirty-five years ago."

I was wiping my hands on the rag again, thinking it over. I had three thousand in the bank. I was shooting for three thousand more to go back to the land of my mother and buy a small ranch to live where my Mexican blood wasn't two strikes against me. At least I wouldn't be turned down in the restaurants because they thought I was a bracero cotton picker brought across the border to help gather crops.

But if this guy was on the level about that twenty-five thousand. . . .

"You go on back to town and stick around," I said. "I'll go see the old—the old man," I added, almost forgetting myself. "But remember one thing, buster, I'm promising nothing."

"That's fair enough, Paul. I think you're on the level. But I believe I'll stay out here. I followed the ambulance in my car and have my bags in the back seat."

"Okay, but no talking," I told him.

"Of course not."

I told him to tell the housekeeper that I had to run into town, and then went over to the other end of the shed to my Ford. It wasn't much to look at, a 1932, but I'd taken the money a later model would have cost and put it under the hood. It was eight miles into town and I made it in six minutes flat on the broad highway below the ranch. I've always figured that when you start some place there's no use wasting time getting there.

I drove in among some trees, parked and walked over to the entrance. A low, flat-topped building of white stucco; the kind where you pay thirty-five dollars a day to rest your ulcers. A grey-haired nurse finally appeared from somewhere, gave me the kind of look she'd have given a stray horse that had wandered into the place, and nodded for me to follow. The hallway floor was more like polished glass, there was the whirr of air-conditioning, and there wasn't any medicine smell like we had in the Army wards.

I thought of my old man—a tough border cow-puncher turned mail robber, an ex-convict, and now a bum—being waited on by the grey-headed ramrod in front of me, and it was a little too much to hold. At my sardonic laughter her clean, cool look turned into a cold dirty one as she indicated a door.

"In there," she said icily. "He's dying," she added.

"Good," I said. "That undoubtedly will be a big relief to you, too."

I went into a room that looked more like a wedding suite. There was a big guy in white standing at the foot of the bed, a stethoscope around his neck, studying the chart that hung at the foot of the bed. The old man was just a little older than the stumble bum I had looked up while I was being inducted in 1942. I hadn't bothered to look him up again after I got back.

He was propped up among big pillows, toothless and unshaven, just another rum-dum, peering at me out of a pair of bloodshot eyes.

The guy in white had turned, dropping the chart. His hair was kind of blond and he was bald in front.

"If you're Paul Whittacker, I'll talk to you later. I'm Doctor Marcus. Don't stay too long."

"Don't worry," I said. "I won't take up much of his time."

Chapter 2

TO HELL AND BACK

THE BLOODSHOT EYES were still staring at me. When he spoke from the pillows his voice still carried a trace of a Texas drawl.

"Well, well, by gaddies, if it ain't Paul! You've sure growed up some since I seen you eight year ago. I was bein' hauled up to see you but my ticker got me while I was in the ambulance. Fust time."

"Well, what do you want?" I said.

"Shucks, you ain't got no call to talk to your pore old pappy like that," he said half whiningly. "I'm gettin' ready to die."

I said, "Nobody's stopping you. Go ahead and kick off."

He grinned at that one and then cackled. "Chip off the old block, all

right. Just like his pappy, with a little Mexican added to give him more guts. I allus was kind of proud of you."

"Yeah, I remember," I sneered at him. "My mother would have been glad to know that. If it hadn't been for Aunt Ellen adopting me when she died I'd probably be over here right now picking cotton or fruit. That ham-faced gumshoe says you want to see me. I'll listen and promise nothing."

He stirred amid the pillows and grunted a little. "Yeah it's about that train we robbed. When they paroled me I never went back to where I hid them two mail sacks. I knowed they'd pick me right up and put me back in the pen. I just let it go by as water under the bridge. But them postal inspectors never gave up. Even down on Main Street they dressed up like bums and bought me likker." He broke off and cackled. "I bet I cost them more money in likker than in salaries. I'd say, 'Shore, shore, I got all that money hid away but I ain't a-tellin'.' Finally when I got to figgerin' a few years ago that they was liable to pick me up and take me back to the pen anyhow I fooled 'em again." A cunning light came into his sunken old eyes. "I began to tell everybody about it, talked about it all the time to all the bums and barkeeps till it got to be a joke. After that—" and he leered at me—"the PI's just figgered I was so old an' gone to hell that my brain was addled and that I couldn't find it if I tried. So they give up and let me alone."

"Well, what am I supposed to do about it?" I asked him impatiently. I already wanted to leave. "Break down and cry?"

"You git me something to drink and I'll tell you where it is, Paul," he said, the cunning leer on his sunken, unshaved face coming back. "They won't give me nothin' except a damned bath. Say my ticker went bad on the trip up."

I grunted and reached inside the red shirt and brought out a pint bottle of whiskey about three-fourths full that I'd bought a month before and kept hidden on a rafter above the car. That's how much I drink. He gurgled at it like a dying prospector clutching at a cool canteen. I sat there trying to figure things out.

Suppose this gumshoe out there at the ranch was on the level? I could find out where the loot was, help him turn it in, take my twenty-five grand and blow into Mexico to become a respected rancher and still keep my American citizenship. But suppose this bird tried to pull a double-cross and get the fifty for himself? Why shouldn't I figure that angle and double-cross him and get the fifty for myself?

I've always had strong hunches about things and played them. I had a hunch now that I'd better forget this deal and go on saving my dough for another three years. But the old man had taken another slug at the bottle and was sitting there propped up among the pillows, a claw-like hand with knuckles as big as pecans gripping it. He had a contented expression on his face. I knew he couldn't last much longer and then the information would be forever lost.

I took the bottle from him. He let out a grunt of protest.

I said, "You can tell me where it is, but I'm liable not to do anything about

it. And just to play it safe you'd better whisper it in my ear. There might be a mike hidden in this room."

Later I left the hospital and went out. The doc hadn't said too much—though I could figure what he would say when he found the old man loaded and an empty bottle on the floor. He'd pulled the usual corn about hoping for the best and good care and food. And about the bill . . . which I'd told him to give to the big boy out at the ranch.

There was a tall guy of about sixty coming up the steps as I left the place. He didn't look prosperous enough to have a wife in the joint, and he gave me a sharp look as we passed. Maybe, I thought, I'd been right about having the old man whisper in my ear. There might have been a mike in the room.

"Hell," I said, half out loud. "Maybe that gumshoe is a postal inspector himself and this whole deal is a trick frame!"

That thought accompanied me during the drive back to the ranch. I made it in eight minutes flat. By the time I got there the telephone already had rung.

My old man had kicked the bucket. Out with a bottle in one hand.

It was Korman himself who brought the news. I'd hardly got the car parked under the shed and was back at work on the pickup truck's motor when he came down the slope and was beside me.

"Paul, I've got bad news for you," he said. "The call just came from the sanitarium not two minutes ago. Your father died."

I said, "He had to die sometime and he was thirty or forty years overdue."

"Did he tell you?" he asked.

"Nothing but some vague mumbling," I told Korman.

"But couldn't he have said something? Some clue? Man, don't you realize that any little thing he might have said may clear up a case that has had the government baffled for thirty-five years?"

"He was telling me about the robbery and how they planned it and how he got away," I lied. "Then he started mumbling stuff and went to sleep. That was not more than twelve or thirteen minutes ago. I made it back in eight minutes. Now you tell me he's kicked the bucket."

Some kind of a sigh went out of him. I guess I didn't help things when I said, "I told the doc you brought him there and would stand good for the bills. Count me out."

He turned around and walked back up the gentle incline. It was more than the noon day heat that made him sweat. He'd just seen twenty-five grand go glimmering out through the heat waves.

WHEN NOBODY WAS around I gassed up the Ford from the tractor beside it and tossed in a couple of cans of extra oil. Something kept singing inside me that I was going back to the land where I was born, back along the border where my birth wouldn't matter, back with the instinct of a homing pigeon.

And I knew where to find that loot. I could go straight to it, straight as a crow flies. There would be no worn and faded map to follow, no former landmarks now gone to try and trace out.

I knew within three feet where the

old man had buried it on his flight into Mexico the night they robbed the mail train.

This was one treasure hunt that wouldn't turn out a bust.

I had it all figured out cold and clear and simple. The boss owed me but two days pay and that I wouldn't wait to collect. I'd pack my stuff, including my prized guns, and barrel straight through toward Yuma, rolling all night long. First thing in the morning, I'd hit for the post office and ask to see an inspector right away. I'd tell him the whole story and then take officials straight to the spot where my father had buried the loot.

Then I'd collect my fifty gees, pay Uncle Sam his income tax cut, and roll on back to the land where I, and my mother before me, had been born. Paul Whittacker was on his way home.

That was the way I had things shaped but that afternoon while I worked on the motor of the pickup truck. Korman came back twice, a very disappointed man. He called in town twice. I found out later that he talked to the man I'd seen entering the sanitarium just as I left it. The big fellow with the Durand woman—Anthony, he said his name was—strolled by and got friendly.

And that was what convinced me that I was right. Too many people were getting interested in me. There was Korman, there was Anthony of whom I was now suddenly suspicious. There was this bird who had shot me such a queer look as I left the hospital.

So I had things pretty well lined out that afternoon when I looked up and saw Mildred Durand standing there beside me. By now I had the heads and pan off, the cylinders out, and was going after the valves.

She still wore those shorts and that well-filled halter and her golden hair was coiled around her head and covered over with some kind of a bright colored thing that wasn't a hat and wasn't a plain piece of cloth. She was smiling a red-lipped smile with a lot of white teeth back of it.

"Why do you hate me, Paul?" she asked, using my name for the first time. During their stay there she'd always just called me Cowboy.

I've got to write this thing fast. I haven't much time left. In a few more minutes I'll either be a dead man or on my way to the nearest thing to happiness that a guy like me can hope to find.

"I don't hate you," I said, snapping out a valve spring. I was all greasy to the elbows.

"No, I guess you don't. But for some strange reason you resent the sight of me."

I've already put it down before but I'll mention it again—that business about my Mexican blood and dark skin. It was in me now as she stood there within inches of me, tall and blonde and copper-tanned and very beautiful.

So I straightened up and let her have it right from the shoulder. "Look, lady," I said. "All my life I've been reminded that my mother was a Mexican and that my father was a gringo. Down along the border that don't matter. Where you and your kind come from it does. And all my life it's been you and your kind who have reminded me of it. That's why I avoid all of you."

"Perhaps there are some of us who are different, Paul," she said, leaning down over the fender beside me to look at the motor. "Perhaps I saw you for what you really are—somebody who has been hurt and has encased himself in a hard shell. I found out from my brother and the man Korman that your father died this afternoon—and now you're out here working on a truck motor. That's what I mean about the hard shell. You refuse to let yourself soften a bit. I watched you all afternoon. I saw you gas up your car and put extra oil in the back seat. I saw you go to your cabin to get a drink of water and do some packing while you were there. You're leaving tonight."

"Well, what about it?" I asked her. "It's still a free country. I've got my money hid away, I don't owe anybody anything, my car is paid for. So I'm pulling out. I'm bored," I added sarcastically.

She gave me a level-eyed look and she wasn't smiling now. "Don't you think that people like me ever get bored too, Paul?" she asked.

Something about those lovely eyes did it. It told me. I began to get that chill, only this time it wasn't because I mistrusted somebody.

I let her have it straight from the shoulder again.

"If that's a suggestion, I'm traveling long and hard and fast. I'll be leaving when the lights are out. Yuma first stop. Then Tucson and Bensen."

"Just don't forget to wait until the lights are out, Paul," Mildred Durand said, and I watched her tanned figure as she walked slowly upward toward the ranch house on the knoll. I was still rubbing my forearms with the waste rags.

I ate supper with Max in the kitchen about sundown and told him that I was going in town later on to arrange for the old man's funeral. That gave me a chance to drive the Ford up and park it close in front of my cabin. When it was dark I threw in my bedroll. In it was a Jap Nambu luger, a .25 caliber Arisaki Jap rifle, a German P-38 pistol, a .45 Colt automatic, and a .30 caliber '03 Army rifle I'd converted into a sporter, and mounted telescopic sights. My father's old six-shooter I stuck into a side pocket of the car next to the wheel.

It was about then that she showed up in a pair of blue slacks and halter, carrying two suit cases. She said, "My brother and your friend Korman and some others are playing penny ante poker. I told Andy I was riding into town with you but he just grinned. He's been kidding me about you. Says I'm slipping."

"Not any more, you're not," I said. "You're rolling now. But there's no end in sight for us—not yet. Remember that."

"We'll cross that bridge when we get to it."

I put her bags into the back seat along with my stuff and slid under the wheel. She slid those long legs in beside me and then we were rolling down the slope to the highway a quarter of a mile away. I turned the hot shot toward the east and began to lay on with a heavy foot.

We crossed through the inspection station at Yuma and stopped off for a cup of coffee.

"We're staying here tonight," I told

her. "I've got to find a postal inspector first thing in the morning," and told her about my old man and the mail sacks he'd hidden.

She looked at me over the cup. The restaurant cooler was whizzing noisily. "Why waste time, Paul? It's cool driving at night and you can get one in Bensen in the morning. And we can save that long hot drive across the desert tomorrow."

"Why not?" I said. "Finish your coffee and let's roll."

IT'S TWO HUNDRED and forty miles eastward from Yuma to Tucson and some of the road is pretty straight and wide. Night driving tourists, escaping the desert sun, were cluttering up the highway with a lot of bright lights and cut down my time, but we got there about two in the morning. Because of the long summer days the sun hadn't gone down until around eight o'clock and we didn't get started until past nine. We ate, got some gas, and pulled out for Bensen. We hit it at daylight.

I got out. We had come a long way but the impatience was still gripping me. Every mile we'd come had brought me one mile nearer to the country where I belonged. It was here in Bensen that my old man and the other guys had worked out the details of the mail robbery that they had pulled at Fairbanks.

I found her standing there beside me in the cool morning air, her arm hooked through mine. She looked up and was smiling.

"You look different, Paul. There's something new in you. Is it because of the money now so close?"

"It's because I'm getting back among the kind of people I never should have left. Maybe I made a mistake in getting homesick so quick. Maybe I should have waited and played it with Korman. He might have been a postal inspector after all."

"He's not," she said positively and squeezed my arm. "Postal inspectors, even working under cover, don't try to get next to a woman as fast as he tried to give me the rush act."

"Just gumshoe, I guess," I grunted, and again the impatience was like a rising swell on a beach somewhere inside of me. It would be hours before the post office opened and Fairbanks, where the holdup had taken place, wasn't too far away—right down among the cottonwoods on the edge of the river. I told her about it. We'd have to take horses from there.

She said, "It should be nice and cool down there, and maybe I could try my hand at some camp cooking while you made arrangements about the horses."

I guess that was what did it—that and the thought of getting still closer to home, and the idea that within a few hours we'd be heading straight toward the Mexican border like my old man had done when he crossed the river and drove straight south with a quarter of a million dollars.

"Let's get rolling," I said.

"You can call the postoffice from there. It will take time for them to get there anyhow and get horses."

We hit the road again with the hot

shot rolling fast and the big tires singing on the pavement. A couple of planes flew overhead kind of low but I didn't think anything about it at the moment. My eyes were on the road and the familiar terrain about it. Three miles from Tombstone I turned off south on the Fort Huachuca-Nogales road. Maybe I should have gone on in and seen my aunt and told her about the old man. Maybe if I had I wouldn't be in this mess now, hemmed in like I am with slugs drumming off the rock walls.

They're waiting for night.

I turned off and drove down to Fairbanks and pulled out about a quarter mile, down river. I got out under the big cottonwoods that threw solid shade all over the sand and yanked out the bedroll and spread it under a tree. Her eyes kind of widened at sight of the arsenal. I told her it was just a hobby and nothing else. A plane was circling again but I didn't pay much attention now. I felt so good I just pulled her up close and gave her a long slow one that lasted about a half minute. She was laughing when she stepped back.

"Whew! What a change in twenty-four hours. You'd better go after those horses and let me go to the store for something to cook. By the way, Paul, how far is it? I ride, you know, but never across hot deserts."

"Not more than twenty miles. You phone Tombstone and tell the postmaster we're going after the loot and will bring it in tomorrow."

I took off on foot down the river past the section houses. In less than three hours I was back with two saddled horses and another loaded with a light pack. I figured that Mildred and I would loaf around until mid-afternoon and then make the twenty mile ride by dark. We'd stay there all night and bring back the stuff the next day and get the mess straightened out. And after that. . . . For one of the few times in my life, I did a little daydreaming.

I was still at it when I got back to the car.

She had a fire going and nearby was a sack of groceries. I tied the horses in the shade and came over. I guess I was still full of day dreams because I kissed her again.

"You're improving very much, Paul." She laughed at me. "Maybe it's the country."

"Could be," I said. "It's home, here and across the border."

"You know it so well then? I'm so glad. Frankly, I was not sure—though that certainly wasn't why I came with you, Paul, and left Andy to have a fit. It's just that you've had two strikes against you all your life. Maybe that's another reason I came along—to see if I could help to prevent a third. But in all the movies I've seen and the books I've read something always happened to the treasure they were seeking. Somebody else already had been there and got it or the map was wrong or the terrain had changed. But it won't matter if you don't find it. I've got enough to help with the ranch without it."

"I'll find it," I said and laughed. "Nothing to it. About twenty miles south of here there's an old cabin that was built in the seventies by a prospec-

tor called Hardrock Shorty. Its walls have been a landmark for years. Out back there's a wooden barrel sunk in the ground. That was how he kept his water cool. When the old man hit south that night after the robbery, he made a run for the ruins of the cabin and buried the mail sacks there and covered them with stones and dirt. Then he barreled right on through, across the line into Mexico. Of course they couldn't trail him by night in the rain and the next morning there was no sign of a trail. It's there, and by this time tomorrow it'll be in the hands of the post office inspectors."

I looked over at the fire. "You better fix up a bite of lunch. I'm going down to the store and get a half dozen new canteens."

The store is the only building now left in Fairbanks. It sits beside the highway where the bridge crosses. I'd made about two hundred yards when he stepped out from back of some brush—the tall, well dressed guy I'd met coming out of the sanitarium. He had a gun in one hand, a short barreled .38 Police Special.

"You won't need it," I said, walking closer. "I had a hunch who you were when I left my old man there in the hospital."

"Who?"

"PI, who else?"

"Just turn around and walk back down to where the girl is."

I said harshly, "She had nothing to do with it, and neither did I. She's already phoned the post office in Tombstone to get somebody official down here while we pick up the loot."

She was standing there waiting when we got back. He still had the gun on me. He looked over at her. "Did you put in a phone call from the store—to Tombstone?"

"Of course not, Fergie!" she laughed. "I just went and got some groceries, like he said. Where's Andy and your son?"

"Out of sight with the horses we had arranged for. We got here by plane last night. Andy is still plenty sore that you insisted on going with him. He was kind of afraid things might happen."

"I'm glad you got here," she almost shuddered. "He drives like he talks and thinks. Hard and fast. But I had to risk it to make sure he didn't give us the slip and get the stuff to the authorities."

Chapter 3

CORPSE IN THE MAKING

I STOOD THERE looking at that lovely face, the daydreams something childish and shocking now. The icy chills were running down my spine and then up, to freeze the inside of my belly. It wasn't because of the gun either. It was something else—the sympathy and understanding she had shown—the kind every guy like me dreams of getting from a woman like I thought she was.

She must have read my thoughts. She said, "I wouldn't give a sharper like Andy for a dozen like you with your treasures."

"Who's your friend with the toy?" I asked.

He stepped around a little farther in front of me, the gun in line with my still chilled belly.

"I'm Ferguson, son," he said mildly, with a trace of the drawl I hadn't noticed at first. "I'm your father's old pardner. It was right on this spot thirty-five years ago that we busted the express car and took a bank shipment of fifty thousand in cash bills and two hundred thousand in securities."

He flicked his eyes toward her, but not his head. "Go down and tell the boys I got him. They're down there in the brush right where old Jim Whittacker crossed that night when he got away and the others of us got killed and caught. By the way, did he tell you where it's hidden?"

She told him and Ferguson burst out laughing, surprise on his face.

"Well, I'll be damned! Old Hard-rock Shorty's place, eh? In the old water barrel? I camped there many a time at them old rock walls. I could go there in the dark with my eyes shut. I was hopin' he'd tell a good looker like you, Mildred. When I took a final chance that the officers weren't trailing me and saw old Jim in the hospital, he was too far gone on liquor. Just laughed at me and wouldn't say nothing except it was water under the bridge. But I knowed deep down inside he told this feller here. You look a whole lot like old Jim looked in his day except for that dark skin."

She was disappearing into the brush. I said, "I've been told part of that for a long time. So this gumshoe Korman is your own son?"

"Yep. Korman Ferguson. He was a tyke when I went in. But when he growed up I smuggled letters to him. He worked on this deal for years off and on. I got out of prison and spent a few months shaking the law off my tail, just in case they figured I might try for the loot. An old cowpoke can learn a lot of things in prison during a thirty-four year stretch. We're in the clear on this one. Andy and his girl have connections to get rid of them securities and he even thinks he can do something about that old style currency they don't use any more. It's a cinch."

He eyed the arsenal comprising my private gun collection and grinned. The guns lay on the spread-out bed roll, along with plenty of ammunition. I've always liked to shoot but not to kill anything—nothing except the Japs we were fighting.

The three of them came back through the brush after a bit. The sun was higher and the birds were twittering among the green leaves. Korman and Andy were grinning at me when they came up. She was grinning a bit too as she walked between them with her arms hooked in theirs.

Korman said, "Nice going, fella. I had you pegged right. I figured the old man really did tell you. Must have been a nice romantic trip, soft guy!" He turned to Ferguson. "What next, pap? We can't stick around here."

"Keep old Jim's boy covered while I go to the store for canteens," the older man said. "We're going through and get that stuff and get out of here."

I went over and sat down on the running board of the Ford and wanted to smoke. The two of them were look-

ing over my guns but keeping an eye on me. I thought of that six-shooter in the side pocket of the car, but when I said I wanted to get at a canteen they stopped me cold. She—that's all I can call her now while I think back and the slugs are drumming around—was fixing up some sandwiches.

I was still sitting there trying to figure out my next move when Ferguson came back, walking with another guy a little ahead of him—a big guy in a plain grey suit.

He wasn't in white like he'd been in the sanitarium and there wasn't any stethoscope around his neck either. Old man Ferguson, hand in his coat pocket, nodded for him to come over and sit down beside me on the running board. Old Ferguson had the canteens, too.

"Look what I got," he grinned. "Found him outside drinking a coke from the machine. Just asked him to come along."

I overlooked the startled stare on Korman Ferguson's face as the "doctor" sat down beside me and removed his gray fedora. The bald spot right in front was sweaty.

"Brother, you Feds sure get around, don't you?" I said. "No wonder you can't be beat. But how'd you make it into that hospital?"

He mopped at his bald spot with a white handkerchief. "Pretty simple. We had your father under surveillance for years without tangible results. When the younger Ferguson came on the scene and looked up the old fellow, we had his phone tapped. When he called for an ambulance I came along as attending physician, after arrangements with the physician at the sanitarium, of course."

I thought of that nurse with the ramrod back and somehow had to grin. I wondered if she was in on the know.

"Were you listening against the wall with that stethoscope while I was in the room or did you have some mikes rigged?" I asked.

"Mikes. In his pillows," he admitted. "I got enough to work on."

"You got yourself in a tough spot right alongside of me," I said.

The three over by my bedroll were having some kind of a low voiced argument and there was worry in the words. I heard old man Ferguson saying, "I've waited half a lifetime to get back here and get my share. If we knock the two of them off and bury them here, his pals will still take up the trail from here. But if we gamble everything, go after the loot, and hit right on for the Mexican border, we can get away like old Jim did. If we turn back now we're done."

There was some more of it and then pretty soon old man Ferguson rolled up my arsenal. Next he proved he hadn't forgot his early days as a cowpuncher—it didn't take him long to do an expert job of repacking the horse I'd got from Johnny Thomas. Meantime, Andy had gone to the creek that was a river only when it rained, and filled the canteens.

In a matter of minutes, we were all mounted—all except the girl. She stood there in the sand and looked up.

"But what am I going to do?" she asked, and there wasn't any of that mocking laughter in her voice now. She was scared.

pap and Andy dig around out there in the hot sun. I'll take mine in the shade."

We went in through the doorway, into a litter of refuse, and Korman Ferguson soon came in carrying the packs. I looked at the one that had my guns in it and nudged the Doc. I said, "We've got to jump him before they get in here," right in his ear.

He kind of nodded but his eyes were on the windowless opening, watching the two men. Old man Ferguson had a short handled shovel he'd taken from the big tool box I'd welded on the back end of the Ford. I could pretty well figure what was in Doc's mind. A thirty-five year search was ending . . . and he was ending with it.

Korman was taking a swig of water from a canteen. He had a gun in his hand and I knew then that our chances were gone for the moment. Then we heard old man Ferguson yell. I stood there, watching him dig at the rim of the rotted wooden barrel, while I tried to picture in my mind how my old man must have looked that night he was cleaning out the trash and burying that stuff.

I looked around at Korman, hoping. But the gun was still on us and he grinned as he read what must have been in my eyes. "Not a chance, fella, not a chance," he said softly.

Andy, who was digging and scooping now, reached down and began to tug. He scooped out some more dirt and then tugged some more. A rotted old canvas mail sack came into view and then another. The two of them just stood there while Andy panted and old man Ferguson smoked his pipe.

"Take 'em inside," he began and it was then that we all saw movement out there in the desert.

Tiny figures moved into view from points all around and old man Ferguson let out a yell as Andy grabbed up both sacks. They made a dash for the cabin. I understood then why Doc had been so calm. All that preparation in Los Angeles to come up with my old man in the ambulance—a dozen Feds on the job, teletype, wireless, telephones, state police, immigration officers waiting in case the gang tried to cross the border.

I remembered Mildred who had thought *What am I going to do?* I knew what she was going to do—about five years.

But that didn't help me or Doc as the three cursing men unrolled my bedroll and brought out the arsenal.

"Doc," I said, "you picked a good racket but you got yourself in the wrong situation. We're going under no matter what happens."

We were standing alone in a corner and, as usual, he didn't reply. I guess the Feds are trained not to do much talking. Andy had flung my bedroll over beside us, empty of my prized guns. In it were the pen and paper I've been using so furiously to get these things down, to get it out of my system.

Those men out there didn't open up on us as you'd expect. They didn't seem to be in any hurry at all.

"Water," old man Ferguson said. "We ain't got much water and they know it. They can afford to wait. But I ain't going back to that damned prison. I'm staying right here till they pack me out."

Andy said, "Take that Ford and drive it until you can ditch it, honey. Then wait for the three of us in Mexico City. We'll be there in time."

For some strange reason she looked up and her eyes met mine. Maybe at the last moment she was a little sorry. I'll never know.

I said, "That one I gave you while we were standing here under the trees was on the level. The only one that ever was. What you'd better do is to start rolling and keep rolling. The post office never quits on a mail robbery—or murder."

We splashed through the shallow waters and climbed into the desert. I looked back and saw Mildred Durand still standing there in the shade of those big cottonwoods.

Something about her seemed to be saying, *What am I going to do?*

WHEN OLD MAN Ferguson had said that he could find Hardrock Shorty's place in the darkness with his eyes shut he wasn't bragging a bit. I'd camped at the place a couple of times in later years—unaware that the loot was within a few feet of my fire—but after thirty-five years. . . .

We topped a ridge early in the afternoon after a long, burning ride across the desert that had the Fed about all in. The desert sloped down for about a quarter of a mile and then went sharply upward again to a knoll. And right there on the knoll was the old place.

"There she is!" chortled the older of the two Fergusons and twisted in the saddle.

I said to the man I now called Doc, who was riding in front of the others with me, "Take a good look at it, Doc. That's our graveyard unless we get the breaks. The way I figure it, we got about one hour to live."

He didn't say anything, just rocked along on the horse, and I began to get an idea of just what caliber of men they have in government service. He had a face as expressionless as old Hardrock Shorty's gold pan must have been. Maybe, I thought, he's consoling himself, knowing these guys will have more men on their trail when he comes up missing from his last job.

That's about all I could think of as we climbed the slight incline to the knoll. I knew there would be nobody looking for me.

I had expected that when we got there, Ferguson and his son Andy would start a mad rush to find the stuff, like they do in the movies. But nothing like that happened. We rode right up to the front. The old rock walls had fallen away to about three feet above the ground, but sometime during the past decades someone had built up the walls again with adobe and put a brush roof over it. Ferguson sat his saddle. He was calmly smoking a pipe and grinning.

"Dump the packs inside and put the two prisoners in with them," he ordered his son. "It'll take me maybe a couple minutes to find the barrel but don't worry, I'll find it."

"I hope so," grunted Korman. His weight had been hard on the horse and hard on him too. He said to me and the Doc, "Get down and go on inside. Let

"We might as well, pap," Korman said and looked to where Doc and me now sat in a corner. "But we take them two with us before we go. Well, what are you writing?" he almost snarled at me.

I said, "A love letter to Mildred. They'll forward it to her in prison. I want to tell her how I didn't get a chance to kill all three of you and rescue Doc and become a hero with a twenty-five grand reward to boot."

He sneered at that one. "There never was any reward, fella. The only one you're gonna get is the privilege of dying before they take us."

He just grunted and went back to his post at an opening beneath one of the crude window sills. It made a perfect port hole; he had my sporting '03 with the telescopic sight, and I had the sickening feeling that the gun I'd been so proud of was going to take the life of men who didn't deserve to die.

Right beside me where the adobe wall had been built on top of the old rock one, there was a long crack. Through it, I could see the bright sky and what I thought was a buzzard until I heard the faint drone of the puddle jumper's little motor. I caught one glimpse of a state trooper's hat, and Korman must have too, for the '03 crashed hard inside the cabin.

He flicked out the shell and reached for a pile on the floor beside him. "If I didn't hit him I sure gave him a hell of a close shave," he said.

I looked up from this scribbling and at Doc. "What's the score Doc? How come they haven't opened up? Afraid of hitting you or getting you killed?

"Loudspeaker," he said almost laconically, and I thought in that moment that he still looked more like a medico than a Fed. "They'll run it into an arroyo with a jeep and try for a surrender."

He pegged it just right. They brought one in under cover and shoved it into view about two hundred yards away. Some guy went to work with a portable mike.

"All right, Ferguson, you and the others. Come out of there with your hands up. You're surrounded. You can't get away—"

Korman had better luck with the telescopic sights this time. At a distance of two hundred yards he shot that speaker squarely through the center and shut it off. I guess it served notice on them what the score was, because there was no more of it.

We waited all that long afternoon there in the cabin and except for the drone of the two little planes spelling each other off and working a radio, there was no activity.

Doc and I had our feet tied together now and one of the three was always watching us. They were talking now about slipping out separately during the night and taking their chances. I thought of those Border Patrol men who had picked up nearly sixty thousand alien Mexicans last year and could trail a field mouse across lava rock; and of the spotting planes from above. Let 'em dream. They were headed for the penitentiary or hell and it looked as though Doc and I might be going along for the ride.

"Doc," I said just before sundown, "if you get out of this by any chance,

I wish you'd square me with the others, will you?"

"It's all in my notebook, just in case I don't," he said kind of casually but friendly-like.

"I'm glad," I said. "I've been thinking while I've been writing this stuff that maybe I'm a lot like my old man was and maybe I made my own bad breaks. You know how it is with a guy like me with my bad war record—"

He smiled for the first time since I'd met him. "I have it in my brief case. I was of the opinion that some of it was pretty good."

"Twenty-seven Japs, you mean? Better make it fifteen, Doc. I got those other twelve with a Tom gun when I took them from the prisoner stockade down to bathe. Just nerves, I guess—maybe I thought one of 'em was making a break. Mostly in a case like that the officer in charge just said okay, but this new Major didn't. I got him with the Tom, too, when he got tough—right across the jaw with the barrel. I did my time, meaning I'm an ex-convict like my old man was, so maybe I'm not out of place here where he buried the loot thirty-five years ago."

The loot still lay there on the floor in the two old mail sacks. The three men in the cabin with us seemed to have lost interest.

It was about then that Korman Ferguson killed a border patrol man with my sporting '03 at a distance of four hundred yards. And I guess they had some pretty good boys out there because somebody opened up through the open doorway with a long range angle shot and caught Durand through the small of his back. He let out a scream and went down and rolled over, kicking. He rolled into plain view in the doorway, and whoever was out there proved he could do it again. That second one stopped the noise and the kicking and the breathing.

The sun was almost down now and Doc and I got the idea about the same time. Untying our feet, while that ring of men kept spanging them off the rock walls and used the cover fire to close in, we waited our one and only chance.

We got our feet loose now and Doc says, "Old man Ferguson is hit. Here we go—"

THEY LEAPED FORWARD and the man called Doc struck Korman Ferguson across the side of the neck with a hard blow that put him down, and then snapped on the handcuffs.

He turned and started to speak and then didn't. Paul hadn't quite made it across the opening. He lay sprawled face down with arms outflung, crimson from his body beginning to trickle on top of his father's old mail sacks. The man called Doc thought, *His father put two strikes on him when Paul was born, and now these mail sacks have made it a strike out.*

The Federal agent stood for a minute with head slightly bowed.

He took out his handkerchief and, hugging the wall, began to wave it from the doorway.

Over in a corner were a cheap ball point pen and a cluster of scattered white sheets of paper. ■ ■ ■

If you can figure out the following: "Go pls., mk. gd. mny., imb. at the fnt. of advt.", Flossie, the heroine of Mr. Church's most private exposé of the most private detective agency out of business, is your baby. Wine her and dine her and have the crime of your life! But don't blame her if it costs your limbs, liberty and happiness, for all she ever promised you was that there's. . . .

No Case Too Difficult

by HENRY F. CHURCH

Heist Detective Agency,
Blosk Building,
Chicago, Ill.

General Delivery,
Albany Ave., P. O., City
July 4, 1937 (Hurrah!)

Gentlemen:

After decoding your ad in the Tribune of even date, I feel qualified to "Learn to be a Detective!" If the symbols, "Go pls., mk gd. mny., imb. at the fnt. of advt." mean "Go places, make good money, imbibe at the fount of adventure," then I'm the one you're looking for. Your age limit—"17 to 70"—just lets me in, as does your rate of $5.00 for the course.

Enclosed find the west half of a five-spot. If the mails bring me anything in exchange for my confidence, I'll send in the east half.

Cordially,
Florence Winnington

No case too difficult—No client too small
HEIST DETECTIVE AGENCY
MAX HEIST, Chief Investigator

July 6, 1937

Florence Winnington,
c/o General Delivery,
Albany Avenue P. O.,
Chicago, Ill.

Dear Winnington:

Yours of the 4th has reached my busy desk, and I am impressed with your outstanding ability. The ten lessons of the course, printed in pamphlet form (so they won't get lost) have gone forward.

To avoid the rush at graduation, you may secure, in advance, your diploma for $3.00 and your badge for $1.75. This offer is made for your convenience. We trust that you make the necessary grades.

However, a person of your ability shouldn't stop at the mere correspondence end of the business, but should take the post-graduate training in this office. This consists of four weeks coaching, and is offered to our graduates at a training fee of only $5.00 per week, or twenty dollars per the month if paid in advance. In the course you read how it is done; in the office you do it. That's the difference.

Yours for the detection of crime,
Max Heist,
Chief Investigator,
Per Sergt. Geo. B. Sweet, Sec.

P.S. Although you specified no sex, I deduct, from the name Florence, that you're a girl. Drop in any lunch hour and I may be able to advantageously proposition you.

G. B. S. (The Little Sarge.)

(DIARY OF FLORENCE WINNINGTON)

July 7, 1937—*Now, I suppose, I'm a dick. Ho hum, a girl has got to do something between races, so I'm playing this Heist on the nose for five bucks. The Little Sarge sounds interesting. I'll ankle down and see what's what. This, at least, should be tepid.*

HEIST DETECTIVE AGENCY
Intra-office Memorandum

July 7, 1937.
TO: Chief Inspector Heist.

Miss Winnington dropped in while you were out, and I took her out to talk things over. I don't mind an assignment like this when the good of the office is

concerned. We ought to be fair with this little hick, as she has plenty sense, and dusky good looks, so I lent her a badge and a diploma, and told her that, maybe, you'd waive the office training fee.

Sweet, Sec.

HEIST DETECTIVE AGENCY
Intra-office Memorandum

July 8, 1937.
TO: Sweet.

Tell Miss Winnington to see me immediately. I'll do the deciding around here.

M. Heist, C. I.

HEIST DETECTIVE AGENCY
Intra-office Memorandum

July 8, 1937
TO: Sweet.

For once you're right. Waive training fee, and return torn half of five-spot to Florence.

M. Heist, C. I.

(DIARY OF FLORENCE WINNINGTON)

July 9, 1937—Dear Diary: I've made two landings at the H. D. A., and have the situation well in hand. Sweet is a blue-eyed little man, about up to my eye-brows, with a good line. He feeds well. Heist is a different type. Six-feet plus; dark; and not bad looking—if that's your idea of looks. A small-time crook in a big package. Dresses well, but feeds sparingly. Neither could detect limburger cheese on a free-lunch counter.

The agency has a good graft. For "protecting" the Blosk Building, they get free office space. The training fees from the "investigators," the sale of courses, badges, and diplomas, are gravy. To date, so George tells me, they have handled a few cheap divorce cases, and found some lost pets. At my suggestion, they are running a business card, other than their come-on bait, in the newspapers.

THE HILLY-CREST APARTMENTS
Chicago, Ill.

In deepest confidence,
Heist Detective Agency,
Blosk Building,
Chicago, Ill.
Gentlemen:

May I have an appointment at an early date? I have reason to believe that my domestic felicity is threatened.

Very truly,
Agnes V. Whippley.

HEIST DETECTIVE AGENCY
Intra-office Memorandum

July 13, 1937.
TO: Florence.

Report immediately to Mrs. Agnes V. Whippley, of the Hilly-Crest Apartments. She wants the bee put on her husband, who she thinks is two-timing her, but what I figure, after the interview, is that she hopes he's putting on the double mittens. Hold confidential to all.

M. Heist, C. I.

WHIPPLEY, WHIPPLEY, AND WHIPPLEY
STOCKS AND BONDS
Whippley Building, Chicago, Illinois

Strictly confidential. July 13, 1937.
Heist Detective Agency,
Blosk Building,
Chicago, Ill.

Please arrange an immediate interview at my office, relative to a domestic situation with which I am confronted.

Very truly,
Barnabas G. Whippley.

HEIST DETECTIVE AGENCY
Intra-office Memorandum

July 14, 1937.
TO: Sweet.

I have interviewed Barnabas G. Whippley, in the Whippley Building, and he suspects that his wife is two-timing him, and, since Miss Winngton is handling a private matter for me, it is up to you to hop on this case. In a measure this serves you right. If you'd paid more attention to the course end of this business, and less to the investigator referred to, we might have some trainee on tap we could shoot out on this. Don't spill this, in or out of the office.

M. Heist, C. I.

HEIST DETECTIVE AGENCY
Blosk Building
Chicago, Illinois
MAX HEIST, Chief Investigator

Mrs. Agnes V. Whippley, July 14, 1937.
Hilly-Crest Apartments,
Chicago, Ill.
Dear Madam:

So extra-confidential do I hold your case that I am inscribing this with my own hand, and only Miss Winnington, my most trusted investigator, who has

reported to you, is in on the know. With the preliminary facts in hand, I expect prompt and satisfactory developments, which will be expedited upon receipt of your check for $500.00 drawn to me personally, and to none other, for retainer and initial fees.

Sympathetically,
Max Heist,
Chief Investigator.

HEIST DETECTIVE AGENCY
Blosk Building
Chicago, Illinois
MAX HEIST, Chief Investigator

Mr. Barnabas G. Whippley, July 15, 1937.
Whippley Building,
Chicago, Ill.
Dear Sir:

So extra-confidential do I hold your case that I am inscribing this with my own hand, and only Sergeant Sweet, my most trusted investigator, who has reported to you, is in on the know. With the preliminary facts in hand, I expect prompt and satisfactory developments, which will be expedited upon receipt of your check for $500.00 drawn to me personally, and none other, for retainer and initial fees.

Sympathetically,
Max Heist,
Chief Investigator.

INVESTIGATOR'S REPORT
Heist Detective Agency

CASE: Whippley vs. Whippley.
DATE: July 17, 1937.
INVESTIGATOR: Sweet.

Client fears wife isn't false to him. Deduct he has other fish to fry. Sounded him out and he came back with proposition that made me very indignant. Had the brass to suggest that I, a member of the H. D. A., frame his wife, even to the extent of acting as correspondent! I told him, "Sure!" Awaiting further orders.

HEIST DETECTIVE AGENCY
Intra-office Memorandum

July 17, 1937.
TO: Sweet.

Your rash promise has put me in an embarrassing position in which I may have to comply in order to back up the promise which you made. In fact, if I don't comply, you, as my agent, may have laid me liable to breach of contract. Against my better judgment, go ahead.

M. Heist, C. I.

HEIST DETECTIVE AGENCY
Blosk Building
Chicago, Illinois
MAX HEIST, Chief Investigator

Mr. Barnabas G. Whippley, July 17, 1937.
Whippley Building,
Chicago, Ill.
Esteemed Client:

Sergeant Sweet has reported. Except for our great desire to help you obtain justice, this unusual call upon us would be ignored. However, since it is your idea and not ours, this extra hazardous duty can be assumed upon payment of an additional $500.00 to meet potential indemnity and bonus claims of said investigator. Draw check to me personally, and none other.

Max Heist,
Chief Investigator.

INVESTIGATOR'S REPORT
Heist Detective Agency

CASE: Whippley et al.
DATE: July 17, 1937.
INVESTIGATOR: Winnington

Did you miss me boss? I've been going places. Mrs. W. is a woman of action. She suspects that Barnabas is on the loose, and has asked me, personally, to test him out. Honestly, Chief, had I known that I was expected to handle work like this I never would have considered this calling. My woman's instinct told me that she was right, so we cried on each other's shoulder, and, before I knew it, I had promised to make a play for him. Am I wrong, Chief?

HEIST DETECTIVE AGENCY
Intra-office Memorandum

July 17, 1937.
TO: Winnington.

Certainly you're wrong! Through your inexperience you have put me in an embarrassing position, and I suppose I am legally committed to back up your action as my agent. Against my better judgment, go ahead.

M. Heist, C. I.

HEIST DETECTIVE AGENCY
Blosk Building
Chicago, Illinois
MAX HEIST, Chief Investigator

Mrs. Agnes V. Whippley, July 17, 1937.
Hilly-Crest Apartments,
Chicago, Ill.
Esteemed Clientess:

Investigator Winnington has reported. Except that the cardinal rule of this

HEIST DETECTIVE AGENCY
Intra-office Memorandum

July 23, 1937.
TO: Sweet.

Pete Jellup, the commercial photographer, will be at Suite 3, the Wobbley Arms, Armitage Ave., at 8:30 tomorrow night. There will be a table set for two, with a bottle of champagne in a bucket. Get your amorita there and into an affectionate embrace, so Pete can flash you. This may sound like the old badger game, but it isn't. It's only a trick of the trade.

Don't drink any of that champagne. I want it for another case, at 9:30 P.M. Be sure to be out of there by then, as I'm renting said suite for a few hours only, and things must move per schedule.

Max Heist, C. I.

HEIST DETECTIVE AGENCY
Intra-office Memorandum

July 23, 1937.
TO: Winnington

I've arranged for Pete Jellup, the commercial photographer, to take certain pictures at Suite 3, the Wobbley Arms, Armitage Ave., at 9:30 tomorrow night. For the purpose in mind, it's supposed to be your apartment, so get your sugar-daddy there and in a clinch, and Pete will do the rest. This may sound like the old badger game, but it isn't. It's only a subterfuge of the profession.

The stage will be set like a dinner for two, and there should be a bottle of champagne in a bucket. Lay off that last item, get rid of your date when Pete has functioned, and then stick around. Me and you will lap up that bubble-water, ourselves. That's a date, baby!

Anticipatingly,
Max.

HEIST DETECTIVE AGENCY
Blosk Building
Chicago, Illinois
MAX HEIST, Chief Investigator

Attorney Josiah Clincky
Art-Legal Building,
Chicago, Ill.

July 23, 1937

Dear Joe:

I'll soon have some photographs that won't help, in any way, the reputations of a certain big business man and his wife, who are two-timing each other. This is far from being badger business; it is the straight stuff secured by my competent technical staff.

To turn over these pictures as evidence to these parties, showing what each has

agency is to help a lady in distress, your unusual call upon us would be ignored. However, since it is your idea and not ours, this extra hazardous duty can be assumed on receipt of your check for $500.00 extra, drawn to me personally, and none other, to meet possible indemnity of the investigator involved.

Max Heist,
Chief Investigator.

(DIARY OF FLORENCE WINNINGTON)

July 22, 1937—Barnabas is really an old dear—not so old at that. Only 50. Girls of my age have married older guys. Here's a fine howdy-do! I've found out that Mrs. W. has a sweetie of her own, and was I surprised? No other than the Little Sarge, himself! The double-crossing little—! Will Heist fold up when I report that? I don't think I ought to report that. Sweet isn't really a bad egg. He's only half-curdled. I wish he was in the same financial stratum as Barnabas. I could fall for him.

His Honor, the Warden,
Industrial Reformatory for Men,
Chillicothe, Ohio.

Blosk Building,
Chicago, Ill.
July 22, 1937.

Dear Warden:

Little did you dream, I wot, when you told me to call on you whenever I needed advice, that I'd pin a dorothy dix on you and ask for advice to the love-lorn.

Warden, I'm torn between two loves. One for a smooth brunette number who dicks along with me, in a so-called detective agency; the other for a blond mama who could appeal to my filial devotion and no questions asked. What to do? The dark dream has youth, charm, brains, and no money; the blond hot-cha-cha has money and no further comment.

I met the blonde about a week ago, and she is willing to go to Reno, on the slightest provocation; on the other hand, I've known the brunette charmer since way back on July 7, around one-thirty P.M., but didn't know how well she stacks with me until I saw her out with a bloated capitalist for whom I'm supposed to be tailing.

I wouldn't trouble you, Warden, if it were the mere problem of whether to blow a safe, or drill it; to stick up a guy, or sell him stock—those are decisions of the head, while this is a problem of the heart. I repeat, what to do?

Fraternally,
George B. Sweet.
Ex-333-465.

P.S. Just as a matter of sentimental inquiry, who is occupying my old stall?

GBS.

got on the other, would result only in breaking up another American home, so it would seem to be the nobler thing to do, in the interest of Society, to turn over their own photographs to each, and let them forget it.

Naurally there should be some substantial recompense made, by each, for the time, trouble, and risk assumed by my organization, but a direct approach on my part might be misconstrued as blackmail, and not redound to the fair credit of my firm. However, if you would volunteer your legal services to recover those pictures for the certain parties involved, there is no reason why a substantial legal fee of say two grand each, couldn't be collected for your services. How does a fifty-fifty split strike you?

Max.

(DIARY OF FLORENCE WINNINGTON)

July 24 or 25. 1937—I would get the time mixed and get Barnabas there ahead of schedule! As per instructions I went into my act, but what I thought was Jellup arriving, was Mrs. W. and George! After the battle-royal there were mutual explanations, and the Whippleys went into a clinch of their own. Just then Jellup arrived and the five of us killed the champagne while calling each other by our given names.

Barnabas had come in a taxi, so George took him and Agnes back in his car, while Pete and I stuck around to wait for Heist. Soon the Chief barged in, picked up the champagne bottle, and got sore when he found it empty. He wanted to know if everything went off on schedule, and Pete said, "Sure. Show him, Baby, that special clinch you put on old funny-puss," and I did. Heist reacted quickly, and nearly cracked my ribs, so I jarred him loose, made a dignified exit, and Pete took me home.

It's two o'clock, Dairy, and I can't sleep for thinking of George. He called me up later, and told me all, and I confessed some myself. I don't care if he did do a stretch. He's straight, now, and I love him!

THE HILLY-CREST APARTMENTS
Chicago, Ill.

His Honor, the Warden, July 25, 1937.
Industrial Reformatory for Men,
Chillicothe, Ohio.
Dear Warden:

Disregard mine of the 22nd. I married the brunette, and we're leaving today for Hawaii to spend a joint honeymoon with, and as the guests of our old friends, the Barnabas G. Whippleys.

Upon our return Florence (the Missus) will take up secretarial duties for

Agnes (Mrs. W.), and I'll wrangle that sixteen cylinder Hispano that Barney quaintly calls the town car.

Respectfully,
George B. Sweet,
Chauffeur de luxe.

JOSIAH CLINCKY
Attorney-at-Law
Art-Legal Building
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

Max Heist, C. I.
Heist Detective Agency,
Blosk Building,
Chicago, Ill.

July 25, 1937.

Dear Max:

Since I know only one photographer low enough to resort to frame-up work, I loked up this Pete Jellup and found that he had exactly nothing on those certain parties referred to, but he does have something hot on you and that good-looking dame who works in your office.

My argument that, noturally, nothing could hurt your reputation, left him cold; for he is stubborn and shrewd, having been my law partner before he was disbarred by the State Bar Association, and he showed me the law where you could be got on several things, sobeit those pictures should fall into the hands of the District Attorney, such as assaulting a lady with an empy champagne bottle, and what looks like an attempt to bite her on the neck, vampire fashion. He thinks that he should turn the pictures over to the D.A., anyhow, on general principles, jus to show what kind of badger game work you were trying to ring him in on. Besides, Jellup rented that suite in his own name, and, when you barged in, the lock fell off the door, which, technically, could be construed as breaking and entering the premises of said Jellup.

Now, Max, this Jellup is too slick to try blackmail, but he feels that he is entitled to substantial recompense for the time, trouble, and risk assumed by him in securing these incriminating pictures against you, and he has appointed me as his attorney to collect this just debt.

I tried to hold him down to a thousand smackers, but he insisted on two thousand, so kindly make out to me personally your check in that amount, plus the meager five hundred that I am charging you for recovering these incriminating pictures which, if they got in the hands of the D. A., would be just too bad.

With kindest personal regards,
Josiah Clincky,
Attorney-at-Law.

SOLVING CIPHER SECRETS

By M. E. OHAVER

Founded in 1924

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. 5379—Toughening Treatment. By E. D. H. Beginners, try singleton C as "a," and high-frequency O (used 14 times) as "e." Substituting, GOFOCD (-e-ea-) might be "reveal"; etc.

STUCK ZDNNX NKYO LOUHOGOX *XCUCBYTB BLOOD! CYYNTKLB GOFOCD LOUHOGVKP C BENGX LN GOXKOBB ZA HDTKPVKP VL LSGNTPS LSO ZNXA NR C DVFVKP BDCFO.

No. 5380—Natural Reactions. By Becky. Identify U and phrase UKZ U, for a starter. Then turn to pattern word ULLSLGUKXY, using SK and SGL as check words. Then note last word.

XAKTFAKGYZ PSGR U LBZZYK ZUKEYF, U XRSDZ PSDD GBFK SKLGSKXGSOYDN TAF ULLSLGUKXY, U HBHHN PSDD EFAOYD SK UVCYXG LBVQSLLSAK, UKZ U JSGGYK PSDD VFUXY SGL GSKN VAZN TAF TFUKGSX FYLSLGUKXY.

No. 5381—Korean Report. By Capt. Kidd. Compare short words PT and UP, and endings -KTN and -UKPT. Next, complete ATUKYA, FPDKUKPT; and so on.

*YAV XPQQRTKERA: OZLA SPA PT YRT (XOZDKTN RD) ZHPTN ATUKYA HKTA. GKHH SPYQ TAG FPDKUKPT GOAT UOAB VYPF SYPQ ACOZRDUKPT. DZQA UZXUKXD RTUKH GA XPQFHAUAHB YPRU(A) ATAQB PLAY UP PRY DKVA.

No. 5382—Xanthous Zeal. By *Alphamega. HVN, HVNOD, and HP, tried as certain common short words, will unlock long words BHHDBUHNF and FOZZNDNIH.

ANNK BDN BHHDBUHNF HP ZRPXNDK GDOSBDORT AT HVNOD PFPD. AYH OZ ZRPXNDK PZ FOZZNDNIH UPRPDK KSNRR BROWN,

ANNK XORR UVPPKN HVN TNRRPX PINK.

No. 5383—Historical Note. By †Jim. Identify phrase PL ST PVT, for quick entry. Next, complete *SNFPFKV, duly noting FK and *KFN, which will act as check words.

*ULNP *KHX *GLNTXOL, *BHXHG *OLXT, SQFGP FX *UFUPTTX-*KTZTXPD-*UFZT, GHPTN PHCTX SD *KFN *VTXND *RLNAHX, *SNFPFKV SQBBHXTTN, FK KHFE PL ST PVT LGETKP ULNP QXETN PVT *HRTNFBHX UGHA.

No. 5384—Silence, Please! By †Sourdough. Affixes OY- and -OYN provide entry. Substitute in OYFZ, EONY, and PZYFUYFE, and fill in missing letters.

EONY-BSOYFUD GBZY EPSLLZVA, ODRUA TK PDOFOPSV DUXSDRE ZL TKEFSYAUD, ZHUDFGDYE TGPRUF, EBOVVOYN UYFODU PZYFUYFE OYFZ GBFGDYUA LSPU ZL FZDXUYFZD!

No. 5385—Useful Tools. By †Helcrypt. Endings -VTJ and -PVNT will unlock ZPPZVT. Follow up with YNNT and the phrase PFHYH PFUHH; etc.

ZYXVUVTJ SURXPZTZORYPY YNNT ZPPZVT YKSSHYY GFHT XNYYHYYVTJ PFHYH PFUHH HYYHTPVZOY PNGZUE SVXFHU YNOKPVNT: XHTSVOY, XZPVHTSH, XHUYHDHUZTSH.

No. 5386—Timely Retreat. By †Harold R. Smith. Identify endings -SU and -BSSU, noting U (freq. 4) used only as final, and apostrophized -G', as helps to ASRRG.

ABDEFEG *AHBKNPR ASPTTBKDSU ASBEKDG ASFVRHU ASFEKNRG, ABKNPRG *AHBKNPG, *AHBKNRG' APKPNBS APBKNR. ASPHDBDPFK ABPSG, AFXRKDG ARXBSR AHBU. AEH ASPRG! AHFSPNGFXR ASPHDRH APKBSSU ASRRG.

No. 5387—Attractive Patterns. By †C. Retherford. Can you guess TYED, duly noting its use in the word-series? Compare with DETTOAYODD, and fill in.

GRAND HOME: BOGBUG, HEDOEH, FUVUUA, SMKXSSMUXS, HKHKXAP, GKZLLRYN, TUQUHUD, AUAOA, CRRYTARRC, DETTOAYODD, AKMBKMB, *LUFUSSES, TYED UYCUYCU.

No. 5388—Suburban Steal! By Blackbird. Find your own clues, cryptofans, in this last cipher! Asterisks prefixed to cipher groups indicate capitalization.

JET ALSO: AVLSS JLTV, EZO NYD LHBOT, TLVABLHISO NRYSXYZDA, JLSSOZ JOZHOA, UBETZ UTOO, KEYAEZ YPG, VRXXG HTOOI, RZRARLS XLVZ AYDBU, OCUTL DEEX-NGO, HLZ'U SLAU, FLYSOX EQZOT GOSSA "HOSS!"

OUR list of NDM cryptographers who qualified during 1950 for membership in special solvers' groups, as published in this issue, is the largest we have had for five five years! Roster numbers, names or cryptonyms, and qualifying dates and scores appear in the accompanying tabulation. Five solvers acquired the star, symbol of the **Five-Hundre' Club*, by scoring 500 answers to our ciphers. And six cryptofans with 100 answers each, won their daggers and membership in the †*Hundred Club*. To all of these new members we extend our heartiest congratulations! Cumulative scores of all solvers are regularly listed in the magazine. All indications point to even heavier additions to these special groups during the current year.

**Five Hundred Club*

No. 490.	*Evie	Jan.	505
No. 491.	*Gyrene	July	511
No. 492.	*J. E. L.	July	504
No. 493.	*Rush	Nov.	509
No. 494.	*Mrs. Hugh Boyd	Nov.	508

†*Hundred Club*

No. 1215.	†Jim	Jan.	100
No. 1216.	†Mrs. I. M. Watts	Mar.	104
No. 1217.	†M. J. Martinson	May	106
No. 1218.	†Helcrypt	July	109
No. 1219.	†Alchemurg	Sept.	110
No. 1220.	†Harold R. Smith	Nov.	104

Scorpio's No. X-5390 features ten 10-letter pattern words, each enciphered in a different alphabet. These alphabets, however, are related, being formed from the same simple series, shifted to different positions under the plain-text alphabet, as in a cipher disk or slide rule. Further, a certain plain-text letter occurs one or more times in each of the ten words, the cipher keys being so selected that the *symbols* for that certain letter, taken in order, spell an eleventh 10-letter word, thus forming a species of cipher acrostic. Fans sending in this "eleventh word" will be accredited with the full solution, though all eleven words may of course be sent in if desired. Answer will appear in next issue. Vedette's No. X-5378, last issue, used the keyphrase UNSAFE LOCK, numbered *012345 6789*. Did you get it?

No. X-5390. The Eleventh Word. By Scorpio.

TZZKXLLBOX XWDDGOKZAH
EDOOLVWLFV BPDGGJODIZ
INOTINORRG DELLKZNKIA
XCZZYLYHWY RUUDVRWJCN
GNNKRVKECN TENSMSKVVI

New cryptofans, sending in answers for the first time, and former fans, again becoming active, continue to swell the ranks of our regulars. Newcomers are Mrs. Harry J. Alverson, Becky, and Phil Baker who incidentally operates radio station W3NMM. Two veteran cryptographers are returning after nine years absence: °Jayem, whose last score was 3174 in May, 1942; and †John T. Moylan, with 384 in Feb., 1942. *F. Llewra, absent seven years, takes up again with his score of 642, of Nov., 1944. Edward Nickerson, total 15 in May, 1946, again writes in. Mr. E., score 66 in Nov., 1947, is trying for his "dagger" this year. And these five fans, all away since 1949, responded anew to the subtle challenge of ciphers: *Marguerite Gleason, 624; *Invictus, 539; *Statist(ician), 530; †Virsat, 167; and George Hein, 40. Welcome, fans, one and all! Keep up the good work, everyone! Watch for answers to current puzzles in next issue!

No. 5389—Cryptic Division. By †Mrs. I. M. Watts. For E, note 2nd multiplication; for B, last two subtractions. The key-phrase is numbered: *012345 6789*.

```
E B E H ) P A P P Y S ( P E T
          P E Y U
          ---------
            E T S Y
            E B E H
            -------
              T T O S
              T B S O
              -------
                T E O
```

ANSWERS FOR LAST ISSUE

5367—"Penitentiaries," literally "places for the penitent," by flocking together birds of a feather, often become "colleges for crooks."

5368—An unusual fact about this crypt, that you will find upon solving it, is that fifth symbol "E" shows up only six times, whilst according to charts it should appear about sixteen times!

5369—Father to son: "You like me to like to have you have things you like to have, instead of those I like you to like me to like to have you have!"

5370—"The peeping moon illumed the mighty mine-shaft chasm. Desolate crags, like writhing monsters, flashed fiery eyes, shot forth glowing claws to clutch the race of mortals."—*Hoffmann.

5371—Because of his recklessness and impetuosity, Charles XII, seventeenth-century Swedish king, was called "The Brilliant Madman."

5372—Neon (new), helium (sun), xenon

(the stranger), krypton (hidden one), argon (lazy), plus niton (to shine), six hermits of the chemical world, will not combine with any known elements.

5373—Careless writers frequently employ expressions exemplifying tautological redundancy. Examples: green verdure, close proximity, shallow shoals.

5374—Housewife espies ugly gunman upon porch, calls cruiser. Police find small boy wearing false moustache, protruding teeth, large artificial nose, spectacle set. Weapon? Water pistol!

5375—Big bully buys beer, breaks bottles, bespatters bar, biffs bewildered barflies, battles barman. Banged bell brings barroom bouncer. Bravo!

5376—Dice-throw begins ancient Chinese game, Mah Jongg, breaks wall joined from colorful tiles showing bamboo, character, dot, honor suits, latter with winds, dragons, flowers, seasons.

5377—Key: 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
W E I R D P L O T S

Address: M. E. Ohaver, *New Detective Magazine*, Fictioneers, Inc., 205 E. 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y.

Cipher Solver's Club for March, 1950

Current Grand Total: 910,357 Answers

Eleven Answers—°Aachen, 3422; °Case Ace, 1311; Alchemurg, 87; *Alphamega, 589; *Amoroj, 602; †Anidem, 449; Carl Ardra, 24; *Attempt, 903; †Mrs. H. H. Bailey, 317; °See Bee Bee, 2849; °S. H. Berwald, 1105; °Alpha Bet, 1919; *Florence B. Boulton, 597; °Gold Bug, 1787; °Mrs. C. G. Burroughs, 4073; °Carso, 2051; *Bessie Casey, 747; °Ciphermit, 3718; *R. C. C., 705; °Floyd E. Coss, 1803; *M. E. Cutcomb, 629; *Kay Dee, 802; †Honey Dew, 215; *Gunga Din, 878; °Drol, 2261; °M. E., 3908; °Eve Eden, 1441; °Arty Ess, 4064; °Estece, 1967; *Evie, 516; *Femo, 855; †Diana Forrest, 174; †Gus, 253; †Gyrene, 487; °Henry J. Haewecker, 2048; *S. R. Hart, 895; Mrs. J. David Hawkins, 52; °T. Hegarty, 3634; °Hayrake, 1542; †Ian, 397; °Henty, 1128; °Jack-Hi, 1250; °H. H., 2129; °Jaybee, 1472; °Jayell, 4183; †Jayemen, 326; †Jim, 111; *June, 643; °Kate, 3020; *Betty Kelly, 687; *S. A. L., 577; †J. E. L., 484; °Marcia, 1276; Mrs. J. E. Michell, 12; Mad Midget, 12; °Lee A. Miller, 1979; †Gum Miner, 138; *Frank Morris, 649; °Mossback, 2634; Walter K. Newman, 35; †Pablo, 323; °W. F. P., 3197; †H. F. Pool, 315; °B. E. R., 1320; †Rebbina, 125; °Ray F. Richer, 1578; °Wm. G. Ringer, 1575; °Alice Routh, 3991; †Rush, 462; °Mrs. H. A. Seals, 3158; °Kay Vee See, 1792; °R. B. Shrewsbury, 1731; †L. Silverman, 277; Harold R. Smith, 57; †Sourdough, 325; °Sam Spiegel, 2845; °M. G. S., 1983; °Jack-Stay, 3897; *N. Dak. Ump, 792; °Valkyrie, 1298; †Airline F. Vaughn, 345; °Volund, 2050; †Leona Watts, 104; *Arthur Whitfield, 523; "Bret Harte Whitman, Jr., 545; *James H. Williams, 947; °Ike N. Wynne, 3616; °Doctor X, 5009; °Yarbic, 1129; †Ziryab, 232; *Zizi, 637.

Ten Answers—Aralc, 50; †Mrs. Hugh Boyd, 468; A. E. Cusick, 60; °Engineer III, 1942; Helcrypt, 86; °Lucille E. Little, 2212; °Theodore W. Midlam, 3423; †C. Retherford, 286; *U Solv'm, 542; °Nick Spar, 3382; A. D. Walters, 20; †Wes, 213.

Nine Answers—M. J. Martinson, 96.
Eight Answers—†Ray Boyd.
Five Answers—Jaybor, 19.
Two Answers—N. H.

Corrections—Alchemurgg, °T. Hegarty, and †Pablo, 11 answers each for Jan., 1950, not previously credited.

Cipher Solver's Club for May, 1950

Current Grand Total: 911,511 Answers

Eleven Answers—°Aachen, 3433; °Case Ace, 1322; *Alphamega, 601; †Anidem, 461; Carl Ardra, 36; *Attempt, 915; °See Bee Bee, 2860; °S. H. Berwald, 1116; °Alpha Bet, 1931; *Florence B. Boulton, 609; °Mrs. C. G. Burroughs, 4085; °Carso, 2063; *Bessie Casey, 759; °Ciphermit, 3730; °Floyd E. Coss, 1814; *M. E. Cutcomb, 641; *Kay Dee, 814; *Gunga Din, 890; °Drol, 2273; °M. E., 3919; °Eve Eden, 1453; Edillon, 11; °Engineer III, 1954; °Arty Ess, 4075; °Estece, 1978; *Evie, 527; °LeRoy A. Guidry, 1040; †Gyrene, 499; Henry J. Haewecker, 2059; °Hayrake, 1554; °T. Hegarty, 3646; Helcrypt, 97; °Henty, 1140; °Jack-Hi, 1262; °Jaybee, 1484; †Jim, 122; *June, 655; °Kate, 3032; *S. A. L., 599; †Florence Mack, 386; °Marcia, 1288; °Lee A. Miller, 1991; †Gum Miner, 150; *Frank Morris, 661; °Mossback, 2646; °W. F. P., 3209; †H. F. Pool, 327; °B. E. R., 1332; †Rebbina, 137; °Ray F. Richer, 1590; °Wm. G. Ringer, 1587; °Alice Routh, 4003; †Rush, 474; †Pablo, 334; °Mrs. H. A. Seals, 3170; °Kay Vee See, 1804; Harold R. Smith, 69; †Sourdough, 336; °M. G. S., 1995; °Jack-Stay, 3909; †Arline F. Vaughn, 357; †Leona Watts, 116; *Bret Harte Whitman, Jr., 557; *James H. Williams, 958; °Doctor X, 4120; *Zizi, 649.

Ten Answers—*Amomroj, 613; Aralc, 60; †Mrs. H. H. Bailey, 328; †Mrs. Hugh Boyd, 478; °Gold Bug, 1797; †Canco, 173; °Honey Dew, 225; *Femo, 866; †Diana Forrest, 185; †Jay-em-en, 337; *Betty Kelly, 698; †J. E. L., 494; †M. J. Martinson, 106; °Theodore W. Midlam, 3434; °R. B. Shrewsbury, 1742; †L. Silverman, 288; °Nick Spar, 3392; °Sam Spiegel, 2856; *N. Dak. Ump, 802; °Valkyrie, 1309; °Volund, 2061; A. D. Walters, 30; †Wes, 224; *Arthur Whitfield, 534; °Ike N. Wynne, 3626.

Nine Answers—Contortion, 34; †Gus, 262; Mrs. J. David Hawkins, 62; °Lucille E. Little, 2221; †C. Retherford, 295; *U. Solv'm, 551.

Seven Answers—*Legerdemainist, 700.
Six Answers—Jaybar, 25; Lee Tolen, 6.
Five Answers—†Ray Boyd, 206.

Corrections—°LeRoy A. Guidry, and †Florence Mack, 11 answers each for Mar., 1950; and *Legerdemainist, 10 answers for March, 1950, not previously credited.

Benny had a killing for the cops, and the cops had a drink for Benny—a drink on the House known as Big. . . . D. L. Champion has possibly thought up more wrinkles to mayhem than any other nationally known author. We are proud to present Benny—as honest as he is deadly, who wanted the world to know his crime—but left it for the police to break his perfect alibi!

A Bier On the House

by D. L. CHAMPION

GREYSON PARKED the squad car at the curb, stepped out on the icy pavement. He opened the wrought iron gates and walked slowly up the gravel path which ended at the portico of the colonial house standing, ancient and dispirited, before him.

As a child, this house, these grounds had awed him. The remote dignity, the wealth of the Chessler family had awed and dominated the entire town. Ronald, the only Chessler child, had been three years ahead of Greyson in high school. Socially, however, the gap between them had been wider than that.

Paint was peeling from the porch as Greyson tugged at the old-fashioned pull bell. A moment later he heard uncertain footsteps from within. The door creaked open.

Ronald Chessler, with a breath engendered of a Louisville distillery, said, "Oh, Greyson. Come in."

Greyson followed his host through a huge and empty hall. The house was cold—cold with a clammy chill that penetrated to the bones. Chessler led the way into a vast drawing room whose furniture was chipped and upholstered in faded splendor.

Chessler seated himself in a creaking armchair by a taboret and placed his feet over an iron register through which came faint waves of warmth. On the taboret was one empty bottle bearing the label of a well-known bourbon, and another half filled.

Greyson declined a drink. Chessler poured liberally for himself and drained the glass. Greyson watched him drink with wonder and pity in his heart.

Chessler was perhaps five years older. He looked fifteen. His face was red and flabby, his eyes dull and rheumy. All that remained of the lad Greyson had known at school was his air of patrician elegance. Chessler wore the mantle of a gentleman as if it had been tailored for him—which, as a matter of fact, it had.

Orphaned in his late teens to find that his family's fortune had been dissipated, Chessler had lived alone, devoting the little remnant of his inheritance to alcohol. He was a solitary, melancholy drinker, dwelling alone in the vast, bleak mansion.

As a child his riches had cut him off from normal companionship. Now, it seemed, he cut himself off of his own volition.

He set the glass down on the table and turned to Greyson, a mocking half-smile on his colorless lips.

"I called you," he announced, "because I expect a visit. An old schoolmate."

Greyson was suddenly alert. He said, without surprise, "Benny Maxon."

Chessler nodded. "Benny Maxon, indeed. I thought it advisable to have you present."

He half filled his glass again, and emptied it. Greyson nodded. "I'm glad you called me," he said. "Maxon, of course, will try to shut you up."

Chessler lifted his eyebrows. "By what method? Force, perhaps? Bribery?"

Greyson shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know." He glanced anxiously at the other. "We can count on you, can't we?"

Chessler looked annoyed and superior. "Count on me?" he said as if he didn't like the phrase. "Let us understand each other. I have not a very high opinion of policemen. I have an even lower one of such underworld scum as Benny Maxon.

"I have seen a man murdered by Maxon's partner. I consider it my duty to take the witness stand and tell what I know. This is no favor to the police. I do this because it is my duty. No one shall make me keep my mouth shut, as you put it."

There was arrogance and contempt in Chessler's tone. Even if he was broke, and afflicted with a deadly dipsomania, he retained this kingly opinion of himself. To a Chessler, Greyson and Benny Maxon were from the other side of the tracks.

A footstep sounded on the porch. A bell tinkled faintly from the rear of the house. Chessler rose and left the room. He returned a moment later, followed by a squat, glittering-eyed man with a saturnine face, suspicion stamped on it as if with a die.

Chessler resumed his seat, poured another drink and bowed with ironic formality at his visitor.

"You will excuse the condition of my house," he said. "I no longer can afford servants. The temperature is low, too. I have barely enough coal for the winter. Now, Maxon, what is it?"

Benny Maxon, his glance never leaving Greyson's face, said "I want to speak to you. Alone."

Greyson said, "I have an idea of what you want to say, Benny. I'm here to protect the state's witness."

Maxon's eyes were suddenly shrewd. "I didn't come here to hurt him. But what I have to say is private."

There was a silence.

Greyson glanced at Chessler who shrugged slightly. "Suppose you take his gun, Greyson, and wait out in the hall. If I need you, I'll call."

"Sure," said Maxon eagerly. "That's fair enough. Here, take the rod. I can't do nothing unarmed with a detective sergeant right outside."

WITH FAINT RELUCTANCE, Greyson stood up and took the proffered .38 from Maxon's hands. The detective knew quite well that Benny had the permit to carry it stowed away in his wallet. In this town the hands of the underworld reached into high places.

Greyson walked out into the chilled hall. He closed the door of the drawing room behind him.

Now Greyson knew clearly what Benny Maxon was about to say. Since he obviously would not try violence nor threat with the detective in the hall, the only other proposition he could make would be financial. Greyson was not worried about the state losing its witness.

He knew Chessler better than that. True, the man had become a psychopathic drunkard—a bum, in simpler phraseology. But he had never lost his strong sense of superiority. Chessler could not be bribed. Above all by Benny Maxon. Chessler would starve before he would accept cash from a gutter-bred canaille like Benny.

Greyson shivered in the hall. The friendship between a ruthless gangster like Benny and Weldon, who was locked in the county jail, was an odd thing. Even in school they had been bosom companions. Benny supplied the evil ideas and strong-arm Weldon carried them to execution. So had it happened this time. Only Chessler had been an accidental witness to the killing Benny had ordered his henchman to perform.

All of a sudden, Greyson heard Benny's voice raised and beating violently through the panels of the heavy door into his ears. Greyson spun around swiftly and reentered the room.

Chessler, more mocking and insufferable than ever, casually sipped another drink. Benny's dark face was flushed and his glittering eyes cracked with anger. Chessler's refusal of Benny's cash offer must have been well larded with insult.

Maxon paid no attention to Greyson's entrance. He stood, legs apart and arms folded, glaring at Chessler. He said, with hot, unhastened bitterness, "Chessler, if Weldon burns, you'll die. I shall see to it personally. With my own hands. I—"

"Shut up," snapped Greyson. "That's a threat, Benny. I can take him in for that, Chessler."

Chessler's eyes were contemptuous above the rim of his glass. "Don't bother," he said. "Get out of here. Both of you."

Greyson herded Maxon from the room. As he left the house he heard the gurgling sound of bourbon spilling into Chessler's tumbler.

As they walked down the gravel path, Benny Maxon exploded.

"Imagine that guy? Who the hell does he think he is? The dirty drunken swine. I got more dough than he'll ever see again. I can buy and sell him ten times—"

"You didn't, though, did you?" said Greyson quietly.

Maxon bit his lip and cursed. "Give me my gun," he said. "I got a permit. I got—"

Greyson thrust the .38 in his hands. He climbed wearily into the squad car. He drove back to headquarters considering his schoolmates. One was a drunkard, one a racketeer, one sat in a cold cell waiting for a jury of his peers to condemn him to death.

THREE OF THEM came out of the courtroom together. The fourth would never emerge, save from the side door which led to the cells. Chessler strode with a slight weave. His breath was like a breeze across an open barrel. He carried his head high and glanced neither to the right nor left as he walked.

Benny Maxon strode along at his side. Benny's face was dark and his lips contorted. Greyson, a pace ahead of them, turned his head, and watched Maxon carefully.

"I told you what would happen," said Maxon in a venomous whisper. "I'll take care of you personally, Chessler. Weldon's going to burn. I warned you what would happen. I—"

Greyson shouldered Maxon aside. "Shut up and beat it," he ordered. "Get going Benny."

Benny shuffled away, his hot little eyes still fixed on Chessler. Chessler gave no indication that anything had been said.

"We could send a man up to your place," suggested Greyson. "Station a cop there to see that Benny doesn't try anything—"

"Benny's a fool," said Chessler. "A fool and a coward. Why don't you leave me alone."

He walked out into the cold street, marched away regally into the lowering twilight. Greyson watched him go. He was aware of an unreasonable apprehension at the pit of his stomach as he stood there.

RONALD CHESSLER dressed, slowly and shiveringly. A wracking ache assailed his temples. The dry bitterness which came each morning to his mouth was there again. He made his way downstairs. He took a whiskey bottle from the kitchen closet. He did not concern himself with the formality of a glass.

In a few moments the alcohol brought warmth and circulation to his taxed body. He sighed heavily, made his way to the drawing room, where he placed the bottle on the table at the side of his creaking armchair, and sat down.

He planted his feet firmly on the register whence came a little wisp of heat from the sparsely fed furnace below.

The bottle was half empty when Chessler started suddenly. He heard a door close stealthily, a furtive footfall from the rear of the house. He sat up-

right, alert and with narrowed eyes. The feet shuffled and advanced along the immense hallway. Then, miraculously, Benny Maxon, .38 in hand, was framed in the doorway.

Chessler calmly finished his drink before he spoke. He set the glass down and said contemptuously, "Benny, you're a fool."

"Maybe," said Benny Maxon. "I'd rather be a fool than a corpse."

"You'll be that, too, if you kill me. Twice you've threatened me before Greyson. Whom do you think he'll look for when they find my body?"

Benny Maxon grinned. It wasn't a pleasant grin. "When you're in hell," said Benny Maxon, "maybe you'll find out I'm not such a fool after all. But let's not waste time. First, I want you to come down in the cellar with me."

Chessler shrugged. He poured another drink and made no move to get out of his chair. Maxon's face became red with anger. He crossed the room in three long strides. He thrust the muzble of his gun against Chessler's chest.

"Damn you!" he shouted. "I'll knock that cursed superiority out of you. Get up, dog. Lead the way to the cellar."

GREYSON WAS WORKING the late afternoon shift. It was a few minutes after four when he arrived at headquarters. He was greeted glumly by Kelly, his chief.

"We got a murder," said Kelly. "Guy named Waverly. Photographer on the *Daily Blade*. That means the newspapers will raise hell with us."

Greyson seated himself on the edge of the desk.

"Any details?"

"Not many. Holdup, apparently. His wallet was gone, and his watch. Stuck up in his own home late last night. Body was just found by a friend of his. You think it was Benny Maxon's mob?"

Greyson shook his head. "Not enough dough in it. Sounds like an amateur. Maxon's not crazy enough to commit murder for a few bucks. He doesn't fool around with—"

Greyson broke off as he noted Kelly's gaze travel beyond him and register astonishment. He turned his head around, slid off the desk, sharing Kelly's surprise.

For walking past the desk sergeant toward them was a grinning and bowing Benny Maxon. Maxon's presence in a police station was at once an amazing and unprecedented occurrence. Since he had been thirteen years old Benny Maxon's chief purpose in life had been to avoid anyone remotely connected with the forces of law and order.

"Well," said Kelly heavily as Maxon approached his desk. "Have you come to give yourself up?"

Benny Maxon threw back his head and laughed as if nothing humorous that had ever been written, nothing that had ever been said could equal this delicious drollery of Kelly's.

"Boy," he said, between spasms of the phoniest laughter Greyson had ever heard, "that's a good one. That's a pip, chief. It really is."

The suspicion in Kelly's eyes was equaled only by that in Greyson's. Kelly rubbed his chin.

"Greyson," he said. "I smell a rat."

Greyson looked steadily at Maxon. "I

smell one," he announced, "and I see one. Get to the point, Benny. What are you here for?"

Maxon spread his palms in a gesture, half deprecatory, half appealing.

"You fellows have got me all wrong," he said. "You always want to pin everything that happens on me or my boys. Now just because I happen to own a couple of pool rooms, a couple of saloons, doesn't mean I'm in with the gunsels in this town. I figured I'd do myself a favor by putting you guys straight and do you guys one by helping you out from time to time."

"Keep talking," said Greyson, sharply, suspiciously.

"Of course," went on Maxon, "I ain't in these rackets myself. But what with the pool rooms and the bars I run, I hear a lot of things. Naturally, it would help you guys to know of these things I hear. I figured I'd get in touch with you from time to time and tip you off."

"You want to turn stoolie, eh?" said Greyson. "What's your price?"

"Price?" said Benny Maxon, like a nobleman who had been offered a tip. "Price? I don't want nothing. I'll do it free. It's my duty as a citizen. It's my duty as—"

The telephone on Kelly's desk burst into sound. As he spoke rapidly into the receiver, Greyson stared at Maxon, looked deeply into his eyes, as if he could read the angle there.

Kelly hooked the receiver. He stared first at Benny and a slow flush crawled into his Irish countenance. Benny returned his gaze blandly. Mockery danced in his eyes.

"Ronald Chessler has just been killed," Kelly said to Greyson. "Maynard, the beat copper, saw two gunsels drive up to the house and blast him through the window. The car got away. Maynard entered the house. Chessler was dead. Two bullet holes in his head."

The suspicion which had filled Greyson ever since Benny Maxon's entrance crystallized to definite apprehension.

"When?" he said. "When did this happen?"

"Just now, Maynard was at the call box on the opposite side of the street from Chessler's, making his four o'clock call, when he saw the car drive up to the house through the side gate, blast, and drive like hell out again."

The malicious mockery in Maxon's face was as obvious as a searchlight. He jammed his hat on his head and his ingratiating air dropped from him. He looked elaborately down at his wrist watch.

"Four twenty," he said to no one in particular. "Well, I guess I'll be getting along."

Greyson stared after him, baffled anger in his eyes, and suspicion which welled like lava in his heart. Kelly took his gaze from Maxon's back and gave it to Greyson.

"Well,' he said, "what the hell do you make of it?"

"He's played us for suckers," said Greyson bitterly. "Don't you see it? We are his alibi. He was standing right here in the detectives' room at headquarters when Chessler was killed."

KELLY FROWNED AND mulled it over. He shook his head slowly. "I

get it," he said. "He hired a couple of gunsels from out of town. He had them knock over Chessler while he stood right here. We'll never catch up with the gunsels and Benny's clean as an Army kitchen. We'll have to testify for him."

Greyson lighted a cigarette. He paced the length of the room. He came to a halt before Kelly's desk. He said, stubbornly, "Benny killed Chessler. He didn't hire any gunmen."

Kelly blinked up at him. "For Pete's sake, he was standing right here when the call came in. How could he have killed Chessler?"

"I don't know how. But I know Benny Maxon. I've known him all my life. He's a vindictive rat. All the pleasure he could get from Chessler's death would be wasted if he didn't do it himself. No, Benny said he'd murder Chessler personally. I'm sure he did it."

"I'd like to believe you," said Kelly. "I'd even help you frame him, if it comes to that. But it's as I said. He hired the killers. Planted himself here to keep clean."

"I don't believe it," snapped Greyson. "I'm going up to the Chessler house and look around."

As he drove uptown, Greyson's brain was taut with the effort of thinking. He knew quite well that every copper on the force was going to agree with Kelly, that they would believe it was utterly futile to try to catch up with Chessler's hired killers. They would know that Maxon had a hand in the killing, but such a well-gloved hand that it was impossible to reveal the blood upon it to a grand jury.

But every instinct and every brain cell insisted to Greyson that Benny had slain Chessler himself. He recalled the vehemence with which he had threatened the drunkard. He recalled the wicked mockery he had seen in Benny's eyes as the news of the murder came across the telephone wire.

He brought the car to a grating halt and raced up the gravel path to the Chessler house.

The Homicide men had already arrived along with the photographer and fingerprint man. Maynard, the beat copper, stood by a smashed window mopping his brow. In the armchair, its faded upholstery brightened by blood, slumped Chessler, two blackening holes in his head.

The taboret still stood beside the chair. Greyson noted with mild surprise that its top was empty.

Maynard said vacuously, "It's hot in here."

Greyson nodded, abstractedly. It was hot, even over here by the shattered window. Something clicked in the back of his head.

"Was it as hot as this when you first came in?" he asked.

"Hotter," said Maynard. "I'll bet it was over ninety."

Greyson ran his fingers through his hair. Something was hammering away at the prison of his subconscious, desperately striving to come up into the upper part of his brain.

"What about the killers? Got away?"

Maynard nodded. "What could I do? I was at my call box when I heard the shots. Saw the car with the guns held out the window. It raced out the side gate."

"License number?" asked Greyson without hope.

"Couldn't read it. Illinois plate, though."

Greyson shook his head. A foreign license plate seemed to corroborate Kelly's theory of the hired assassins.

The medical examiner straightened up from his cursory examination of Chessler's corpse.

"Well," he said, "it's obvious enough. Two bullets in the head. Death was instantaneous."

Greyson asked thoughtfully, "How long has he been dead?"

"Less than half an hour."

"That's right," said Maynard. "It was about twenty-five minutes ago them guys drove up. They—"

A tiny shaft of clear white light filtered into Greyson's head. He said swiftly to the doctor, "How about an autopsy?"

"Autopsy? With two bullets in his brain? What do you think he died of? Rickets?"

"I'll speak to the chief," said Greyson. "We want an autopsy."

CHIEF OF DETECTIVES Kelly said querulously, "I don't see why you're so damned mysterious. Anyway, there's nothing to be mysterious about. It's obvious Benny hired two foreign gunsels. They're drinking back in Chi by now."

Greyson didn't answer. There was a tingling excitement within him. He had an answer in his head. In a moment the telephone should tell him whether or not it was the right answer. He snatched the instrument off Kelly's desk the instant it rang.

He listened with fast-beating heart to the puzzled voice of the doctor. Then, triumphant, he hung up.

"All right," he said to Kelly, "let's go to Benny Maxon's saloon."

Kelly's register was that of a patient man who is being tried too far.

"For what?" he demanded. "You can't touch Maxon on this killing. He hired a—"

"A couple of foreign gunsels. Sure, I know. Well, let me tell you something. I've got enough right now to bring Benny to trial for first degree murder. But it's largely circumstantial. They might acquit. I'd like a confession to go along with it."

Kelly accompanied Greyson outside to the squad car with the air of a sanitarium superintendent humoring his weirdest case.

Benny Maxon's reaction as the two detectives entered his Melody Club was precisely that of the latter when Benny had entered headquarters. His eyes goggled in surprise. Then he forced a smile of welcome to his lips.

They followed him through the smoke and jazz-filled atmosphere and came to a small, square room, furnished with a table and several chairs. Maxon gestured an invitation and they sat down.

"Benny," said Greyson, "you're a shrewd, smart operator."

Maxon did not reply. His face remained expressionless. He sat upright and alert on the edge of his chair.

"This Chessler business," went on Greyson. "You swore you'd kill him

personally, Benny. I believe you did."

"I've got a wonderful alibi," said Benny softly.

Greyson nodded. "I know you have. That's what makes it so damned difficult to pin a rap on you, Benny. That's why we've come here. To watch you drink a toast to your own brilliance."

Maxon stared at the other searchingly for a long moment. Then he grinned, reached back and pressed a button on the wall. A waiter knocked discreetly, and entered.

"Bring a glass," said Greyson. "One glass."

"That doesn't make sense," said Maxon. "Three of the house specials, Joe."

"No," said Greyson with finality. "One glass, Joe. That's all."

"How can we drink without liquor?" said Maxon.

"I thought of that," said Greyson. "I brought my own."

He took a pint bottle from his hip pocket and laid it on the table. The bottle bore no label. It held an amber fluid which looked like whiskey.

"What is it?"

"Bourbon," said Greyson quietly. "Good bourbon. The same brand Chessler used to drink."

He poured a stiff slug into the glass. He held it out to Maxon. "As a matter of fact, Benny, it's exactly the same as he drank. Exactly the same as the last drink he ever took."

Benny Maxon's hard face was suddenly grey. He blinked his little eyes rapidly, pushed back his chair and stood up. His voice was hoarse and held a hint of panic.

"What are you trying to pull, Greyson? What are you trying to get away with?"

Greyson lifted the glass and stared at its amber contents. "I know, Benny, and you know, that you killed Chessler, personally, as you promised to do. Unfortunately, it'll be damned hard to convict you of it. The law won't punish you formally. But I believe you should be punished. So here, Benny, drink this toast to your own cleverness. As I told you, it's good bourbon. The same that Chessler drank."

Benny Maxon pressed his body against the wall as if he hoped it would open suddenly and permit him to disappear. Greyson stood up, holding the glass before him.

"Kelly," he said, "grab him. Fasten his arms from behind."

Kelly, who by now had given up trying to arrive at the answers, stood up. He seized Maxon, spun him around and held him helpless.

"No!" yelled Maxon. "No, I won't drink it. You can't make me. You—"

"I can hold your nose," said Greyson, proceeding to do so. "Eventually, you will open your mouth to breathe. It won't take much, Benny—you know that."

Benny Maxon, choking for air, opened his mouth. Greyson tilted the glass slightly.

"I'll talk," shrieked Benny Maxon. "I killed him. I'll tell you all about it. For God's sake, let me go!"

IN RESPONSE TO Greyson's nod, Kelly let him go. They sat down at the

table again. Kelly's expression might be that of a cretin, it was so blank.

"You're both crazy," he said. "How could Benny kill him personally? He hired a couple of gunsels—"

"Sure," said Greyson, "from Chicago. He hired them to fire two bullets into a corpse. Didn't you, Benny?"

Benny Maxon glowered at him. Greyson lifted the glass again. Benny nodded.

"Maybe I'm a dumb Irishman," said Kelly, "but Benny was in my office. Maynard saw the shooting and the doc said Chessler had been dead less than a half hour when you got there."

"The doc was wrong," said Greyson. "First, Chessler was frugal with coal. Yet on the day of the killing, Maynard said that the temperature of the house was at least ninety degrees. Well, it was even hotter than that. It was ninety-eight degrees. Wasn't it Benny?"

Maxon swallowed something in his throat, shuddered.

"Sure," said Greyson. "Body heat. Now do you get it?"

Kelly shook his head wearily.

"Another thing," continued Greyson, "was the fact that there was no whiskey bottle at Chessler's side when they found the body. Chessler hasn't been two feet away from his bourbon for eight years. Then, I recalled that photographer on the *Blade* who'd been stuck up, so I asked for an autopsy. Of course, the doc's findings clinched it."

Kelly still looked puzzled.

Greyson grinned. "I'll simplify it. Benny decides to kill Chessler, personally. He goes and kills that photographer first. He rolls him for his wallet to make it look like a plain holdup. Actually, he stole the cyanide from his developing room.

"With the poison, Benny goes to Chessler's. He stokes up the furnace so that the temperature is about ninety eight. He pours a slug of the poison into Chessler's glass. Chessler dies.

"I get it," said Kelly. "The hot furnace would keep the body at normal temperature, making it look as if he'd just died."

"Right. Benny probably killed him about three hours before those bullets cracked into his skull. As soon as the doc told me there was cyanide in the stomach after the autopsy, I knew the answers."

"You admit all this, Benny, or—" He glanced significantly at the glass on the table.

Benny Maxon shuddered again. "I admit it," he said. "But I want to see my lawyer. I want—"

"We'll call him from headquarters," said Greyson. "Let's get going."

It was a half hour later, back in Kelly's office when Greyson took the pint flask from his pocket and poured four fingers into a glass.

"Oh," said Kelly, "I meant to ask you about that. Of course, you didn't really put cyanide in that bottle?"

Greyson grinned and shook his head. "No," he said, "I lied to Benny. But I figured it would work, all right. Hell, this hasn't any poison in it. It isn't even bourbon."

He lifted the glass and drained it.

"For Pete's sake," said Kelly, "what is it?"

"Rye," said Greyson. He filled the glass again. ♣ ♣ ♣

Fiction of Quality in a Quality Presentation

DETECTIVE TALES
.44 WESTERN
FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES
WALT COBURN'S WESTERN
ROMANCE
MAX BRAND'S WESTERN
BLACK MASK
ROMANCE WESTERN ROUNDUP
DETECTIVE FICTION
LOVE SHORT STORIES
NEW DETECTIVE
ADVENTURE
WESTERN STORY ROUNDUP

POPULAR PUBLICATIONS INC.,
205 EAST 42nd STREET,
NEW YORK 17, NEW YORK

POPULAR PUBLICATIONS
INCORPORATED