

NEW

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THE BEST IN CRIME FICTION

15¢
MARCH

DETECTIVE[®]

MAGAZINE

OUTSTANDING FICTION BY
WARD HAWKINS
DAY KEENE
AND MANY
OTHERS!



YOU'LL BE THE DEATH OF ME!
A NOVEL OF GRIPPING MYSTERY
by **W. T. BALLARD**
MURDER IN FAST COMPANY
by **WM. G. BOGART**

EASY WAY...

Tints Hair

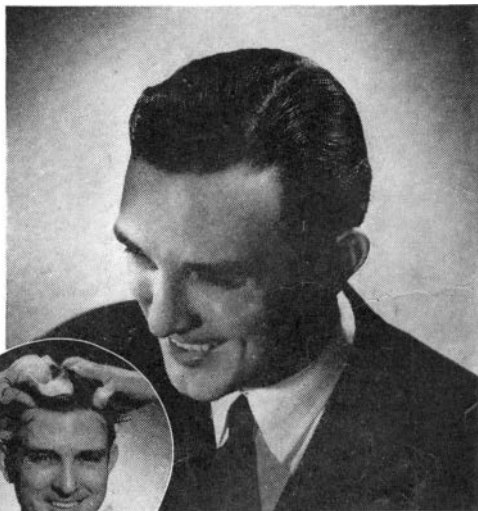
JET BLACK!

(ALSO 7 SHADES OF BLACK, BROWN, TITIAN AND BLONDE)

New Creme Shampoo instantly imparts lovely black color to hair that is

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LIGHT BROWN—AUBURN (TITIAN)—BLONDE**

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 Black Med. Warm Brown Light Brown Blonde

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TOM SAID "NO"
HE'S STILL WAITING FOR "LUCK"



BILL'S A SAP TO WASTE HIS TIME STUDYING RADIO AT HOME



SAME OLD GRIND -- SAME SKINNY PAY ENVELOPE -- I'M JUST WHERE I WAS FIVE YEARS AGO



GUESS I'M A FAILURE. LOOKS LIKE I'LL NEVER GET ANYWHERE

YOU'LL ALWAYS BE A FAILURE, TOM, UNLESS YOU DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT. WISHING AND WAITING WON'T GET YOU ANYWHERE



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NO REPRINTS

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Vol. 2

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TRUE CRIME STORY

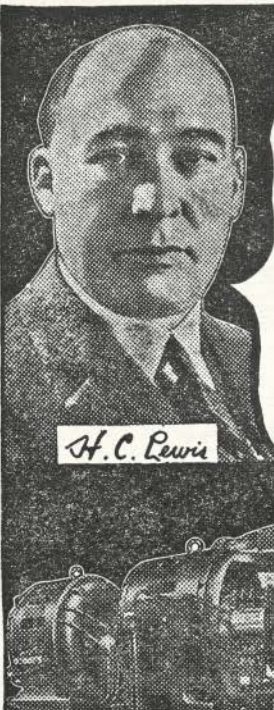
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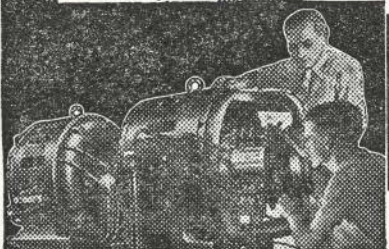
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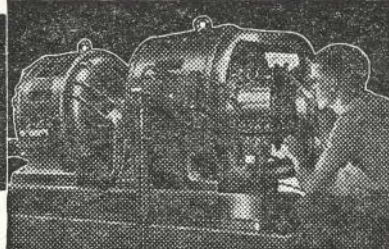


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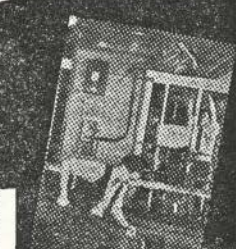
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THE WITNESS CHAIR

THE courtroom was blanketed in a thick and sudden silence as the judge called the accused man to the bar. The small, thin man in the sky-blue suit pushed his chair back with a scraping noise that rang loud in the stillness. He stood up and adjusted his tie, fingered the large jewel of his stick pin, looked down at his lawyer beside him and winked. The corner of his mouth twisted in a sardonic smile and he sauntered around the table and toward the bench. The leather heels of his extremely pointed shoes sounded loudly and distinctly against the floor.

In the center of the courtroom, in an aisle seat, a stout man with gray hair tongued dry lips nervously. His fingers drummed nervously against his thigh. The next few moments might be vitally important to him. What was going to happen? Down front, seated at a table on the other side of the courtroom from the accused, a dark-haired, deep-eyed young man rammed a sheaf of papers into a brief case in disgust. He knew what was going to happen.

The judge said, "Raney, if I let this case go to the jury, they would undoubtedly acquit you. There hasn't been a stitch of real evidence presented against you. Therefore I'm going to save the state both time and money by throwing this

case out of court on those grounds—in-sufficient evidence."

The smirk on Raney's face did not change. It was as though he had anticipated the judge's words. He swept an arm across his waist in a sweeping flourish, bowed mockingly, and said, "Thank you, your honor."

Neither the judge nor the crowd found humor in his words or gesture.

"Don't think I'm doing you a favor," the judge said slowly. "If you were acquitted here, you could never again be tried for this crime. By keeping this case from the jury I'm saving you for a jury that will be able to hang you. Go ahead and smirk, Raney. One day there'll be an alibi that won't hold water; one day there will be a witness who can't be bought or intimidated. Some day decent citizens will realize that there can be no security by knuckling under to law breakers, that there is as much risk in allowing criminals to go unpunished as there is in defying a gunman's intimidations. And when that day comes, Raney—watch out. . . . Case dismissed."

The crowd seemed to release its breath in a wave of excited murmuring. The stout, gray man dropped his head to his chest, and his hands folded briefly in front of him as though in prayer. A slight

(Continued on page 8)

BILL, YOU SURE HAVE A SWELL BUILD! DID YOU TRAIN FOR A LONG TIME?

ABSOLUTELY NOT! THE ATLAS DYNAMIC TENSION SYSTEM MAKES MUSCLES GROW FAST!

Here's the Kind of MEN I Build!

Charles Atlas

an actual, untouched photo of Charles Atlas, holder of the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."



J. G. O'BRIEN
Atlas Champion
Cup Winner
This is an ordinary snapshot of one of Charles Atlas' Californian pupils.

Will You Let Me PROVE I Can Make YOU a New Man?

MEN—Meet J. G. O'Brien, of California, one of my Silver Cup Winners! Look at that strong neck—those broad, handsome, perfectly proportioned shoulders—that muscled chest and stomach. Read what he says: "Look at me NOW! 'Dynamic Tension' WORKS! I'm proud of the natural, easy way you have made me an 'Atlas Champion'!"

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(Continued from page 6)

touch of color had come back to his cheek. He stood up to leave, and then seemed to cringe back into the row of seats. Joe Raney was sauntering up the aisle.

The gang leader paused just a second before the man, gave him a wordless, derisive stare and walked on.

The stout man mopped his brow with a handkerchief and stepped slowly into the aisle. Then he saw the dark-haired young man walking toward him and he quickened his pace. But the other caught up with him.

He said, "Satisfied, Cushing?"

The stout man bit his lip. "I—I'm sorry, Mr. White."

The other just shook his head sadly.

Then Cushing spoke words in a sudden rush. "I had to, Mr. White. You understand why. Ellen, my little girl—they were going to. . . I—I couldn't testify against him. I was going to—but when I was on the stand I—I could remember their words. I just couldn't. I just—"

White was speaking, yet his words seemed addressed to no one in particular.

"I'll get Joe Raney yet. I've still got another year as district attorney, and by heaven I'll see him hang before I'm through."

ALTHOUGH, for obvious reasons, the names of the characters in the above incident are fictitious, the story is the same as innumerable others repeated day after day in our courts.

The problem facing District Attorney White in the Raney case was by no means unique. In fact, in many ways it was typical of a situation existing throughout the nation. One of the most difficult obstacles law enforcement officers have to overcome is the fear that clamps shut the mouths of their ace witnesses. Those four words have become a familiar cry throughout the courts of our land—"Insufficient evidence—Case dismissed!" In courtroom after courtroom the prosecution will build its case around the testimony of a star witness—only to find that witness suddenly mute with terror when on the stand. Someone had gotten to him—just as someone had gotten to Cushing.

District Attorney White finally did make good his vow to get Raney. And

the story of how it happened is one of tragic irony.

Almost six months after his case had been thrown out of court, Raney was involved in a gun battle. Police had surprised a gang in the midst of a jewelry store hold-up. In the running battle that had ensued, several bystanders had been killed. One of them was the fifteen-year-old Ellen Cushing, daughter of the man who had enabled Raney to go free.

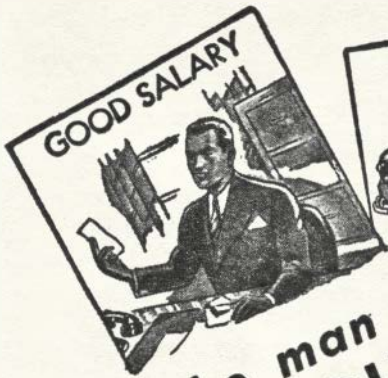
The bandits had been masked, and they made a successful getaway, and so the police were left without a clue as to their identity. But one of the clerks of the jewelry store came forward with the information that during the hold-up the mask on one of the men's faces had slipped. He was positive he could identify the man. In the rogue's gallery he pointed out the picture of Joe Raney.

Raney was brought to trial once again, and this time he was convicted. Yes, someone had gotten to the Jewelry clerk, but it made no difference. You see, Cushing had spoken to him also. If the witness was scared when he took the stand he did not let it affect his memory. Raney was executed, and with him died whatever threats he had made.

The story of Cushing is, of course, unusual. If it wasn't, it would never have been called to our attention. It would just have been another of the instances where honest citizens are intimidated by law breakers.

In their fear for either themselves or their dear ones, they forget two very important things. When they agree to testify, police will guarantee them protection until the killer, and those of his henchmen who might threaten them are brought to justice. And more important than that, they forget that they cannot divorce themselves from their community. By allowing a killer to go free, they jeopardize their own safety, for surely that killer will strike again. Cushing knew that, but he gambled on the law of chance which said that it would be someone other than his own daughter who would stop Raney's next bullet. But Cushing had failed to answer the question which every citizen in his position should face honestly.

In a community where killers roam the streets, what man is safe?



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Not a magic formula—not a get-rich-quick scheme—but something more substantial, more practical.

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An accountant's duties are interesting, varied and of real worth to his employers. He has *standing!*

Do you feel that such things aren't for you? Well, don't be too sure. Very possibly they *can* be!

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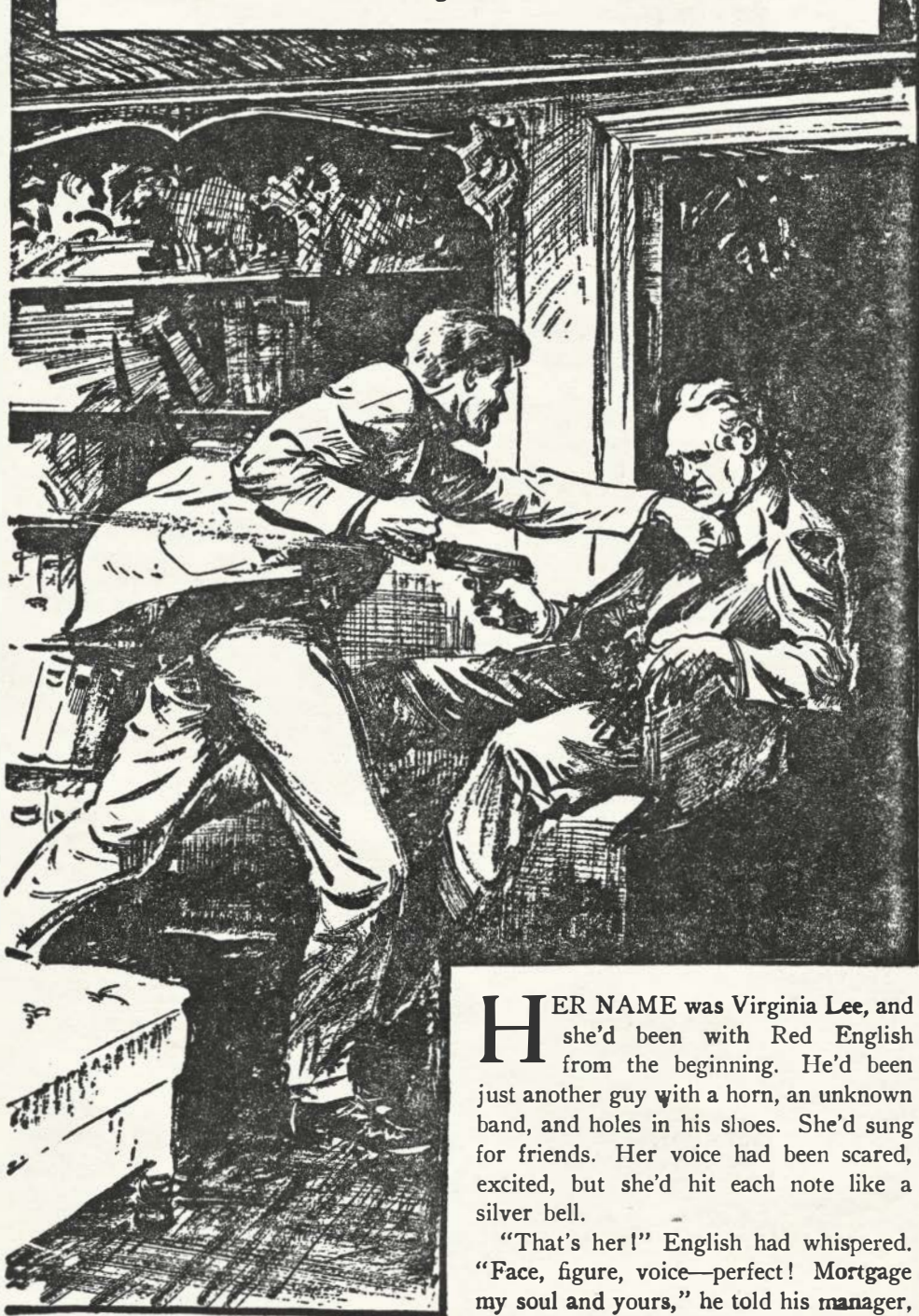
ENTER— the CORPSE!

By Ward Hawkins



Two hundred pounds of fury crashed into him!

Silent, unknowing, she awaited her cue to sing a number that could have but one ending—as Death rings down the curtain on a torch song that must end in murder!



HER NAME was Virginia Lee, and she'd been with Red English from the beginning. He'd been just another guy with a horn, an unknown band, and holes in his shoes. She'd sung for friends. Her voice had been scared, excited, but she'd hit each note like a silver bell.

"That's her!" English had whispered. "Face, figure, voice—perfect! Mortgage my soul and yours," he told his manager,

"but get her. Get her for the band. . ."

Three and a half years. . . They were on the road now, but it was super-super. Big money, big houses, big towns—big business. This was the Rialto. This was success, and Virginia Lee's home town. It should have been swell for her, but it wasn't. She'd picked this time and place to go sour. She was terrible!

"She's scared!" English suddenly decided. "And it's not stage-fright. It's something else."

He was sweating, and so was the band. When a thing like that happens to a girl like Virginia Lee, it's agony to hear and misery to watch. Her hands shook. Her face beneath glossy black hair was stiff and white. And her voice was uncertain, weak.

Red English took it away from her. It was the theme which closed his show. She was to have sung the chorus twice—once sweet, once hot—but English took the second chorus himself.

"Stick around," he whispered.

Applause thundered up as he wheeled to face the vast, darkened bowl of the theater. The golden voice of his trumpet lifted, full and rich, weaving smoky magic against rhythm that was solid and perfect. For the full chorus it was Red English all the way.

It was English, wide of shoulder, lean of face, standing alone in the white down-pour of the spotlight, playing that beautiful, unbelievable horn. English, and there were no holes in his shoes. English, riding *Stars In Your Eyes* right out of this world. . .

It was over at last, the encores, the curtain calls. Out front, the crowded theater emptied its people into the street. Mess-jacketed bandsmen moved in the dim cavern of the stage, casing instruments. Red English hurried after Virginia Lee. He caught her in the corridor outside her dressing room.

"Hey, there!" he said. "You sick, or

something? What's the trouble, Ginnie?"

"Red, please—"

Her hand was on the door of her dressing room. She faced him, half defiant, half afraid. English caught her chin, drawing it up. Her eyes met his and slid away.

English said, "What gives, Gin?"

She bit her lips. Then, raggedly, wanting to get away, she said, "Oh, bawl me out and let me go. I was terrible; I know it. Get it over, and then let me alone. I—I've got a headache—"

"Ginnie, I—"

Red English left it unfinished. Instead, he said. "Let's go in," and reached past her, twisting the key. She protested. She was still protesting when he settled himself on the settee and picked up a newspaper. It was an evening paper, and there were headlines, but he didn't read them. He was putting on an act.

"Red, I've got a headache—"

"Don't give me that!"

"But—"

"Phooey!"

He stood up. He was tall, and he had good shoulders and strong, capable hands. His chin was set. There was a business-like look in his blue eyes.

"Sweetheart," he said, "you've got trouble. You've got a bucketful of trouble, and I want in on it. Either I get in, or we stay here all night." He scowled. "And maybe that's an idea. You'd have to marry me then, and a guy gets in on his wife's troubles. . ."

"Please! Please! Go away!"

She twisted long, slender hands. This wasn't put on. It was anxiety, and the McCoy. Now, more than ever, English was determined to stay.

He set his jaw. "No soap!"

Behind him, a voice said, "Put 'em up, you!"

Virginia Lee's eyes lifted over English's shoulder, jerked wide.

"Ronnie, no!" She flung herself at

English, caught him around the neck, pushed him aside. Holding her, English swung around to face the voice.

The closet door was open. A man stood there holding a .25 Colt automatic. He wore a stained trench coat, a grey hat, shapeless trousers and worn shoes. He wasn't old; perhaps twenty three. But there was no youth in his face. It was white and colorless and cold. His eyes beneath his low-swept hat brim were intent, wary.

He said, "English, eh?" His lips let the words by without touching them. "Is he okay?" he asked Virginia. "Can he keep his mouth shut?"

English looked at the girl. Shadows lay in her cheeks; her voice was lifeless. "This is my brother," she said. "Ronald Lee."

"But why the gun? Why—"

"Don't you read the papers?" Ronald Lee asked.

Red English spun to the newspaper on the settee. Headlines, unnoticed before, leaped out of his eyes. There was a picture, full-face and profile. There was the story.

"Murderer Escapes!" English read. "Ronald Lee, serving life sentence for the murder of Henry Goodman, gained liberty today through the window of the prison hospital. Authorities believe—"

The paper crumpled in English's hand. "You dirty louse! Dragging your sister into a mess like—"

"Listen, you—!"

"Stop it! Stop it!" Virginia Lee pressed both hands to her temples. Then she turned on Red English, pleading. "He's not dragging me into it. I want to help him. He's innocent! He didn't kill Henry Goodman! The only way he could prove it was to escape and find the real murderer!"

"How do you know he's innocent?"

"Because he's my brother."

Ronald Lee said, "Look, guy. Would I

come here if I wasn't on the level? Hell, I'd catch a freight; I'd put miles between me and the stir—"

English dug fingers through his short, red hair, scowling, undecided.

Finally, he said. "Let's hear the story—from the beginning. . . ."

IN 1935, they told him, Ronald Lee had a job with a gambling syndicate in this city. Ronald Lee was a shill for a floating poker game. His stand was the corner of Fortieth and Stark. Nights, from evening till late, he'd be there, dressed in a near-white hat and a loud, checked suit. When people asked him where the game was, he'd tell them, "Crestwell Apartments, 5-A," or wherever Jim Simms was holding forth that night.

Jim Simms was half the "combine" which controlled the city's gambling. The other half was Helen Adams—money mad, and hard as brass, but very smooth for all of that. The combine had backing. The district attorney wondered who the backing was, and hired a private detective, one Henry Goodman, to find out.

And Henry Goodman was murdered.

The night of the killing, Ronald Lee got orders to drive to an address out of town. When he returned, the police were waiting with a charge of murder. Someone dressed exactly as Ronald Lee had gone to Goodman's apartment, had been inside the apartment when two shots were fired, and had left the apartment afterward. A witness had positively identified Ronald Lee as that someone.

"It was the clothes," Lee told English. "I wore that goofy outfit so people would know me. They sent me out of town on a fake errand, dressed the killer in an outfit like mine, and had him shoot Goodman."

"They?"

"Simms and that Adams woman. Who else?" Lee leaned forward, two spots of

feverish color in his cheeks. "They framed me and they're going to admit it. If they don't, I'll make the charge against me a hanging matter!"

A low whistle floated into the room.

The three inside jerked around like puppets on a string. The door was open about six inches. Two hands were there, holding a camera into the room. As they stared at it, the flashlight exploded and their picture was taken. The camera withdrew.

Ronald Lee was on his feet in an instant, lunging for the door. He tore at the knob. The door opened six inches, no more. Red English saw why—a rope was tied to the doorknob on the outside, and to a steam-pipe across the corridor. Ronald Lee's frantic efforts failed to break the rope. English shouldered him aside and set to work with his pen-knife. It was almost a minute before the rope was cut.

"Too late!" English said, "He's gone!"

Ronald Lee's face was paper-white. "Those dirty lice—" He shoved past English and ran down the corridor.

English was undecided for a moment. He thought Lee would get out of the theater as fast as he could. He slipped the rope from the doorknob and turned back into the room. The rope was fashioned in a hangman's knot.

"Nice," English muttered bitterly.

Virginia Lee was standing with her back to the wall, breathless, round-eyed, pale. English looked at her soberly.

She whispered, "Who—who was it?"

"It was a news camera—you guess who it was."

"A—a reporter?" she said faintly.

"Who else?" English's face was bleak. "What a story! 'English and singer entertain escaped murderer!' We ought to get the whole front page—"

"He's *not* a murderer!"

And the shot came then.

It came from somewhere out in the

theater—a big sound, and frightening, even muffled by the walls. But more frightening was the scream that followed. A man was hurt, terribly—the scream told that.

RED ENGLISH ran from the dressing room. He took the stairs leading stageward in long, desperate jumps. Virginia hurried after him. The curtain was up. There was not much light, only a few bulbs on the stage and red *Exit* signs at the tunnels in the balcony.

English saw a man stumbling along a cross-balcony aisle. The man rocked from side to side. His knees buckled. Each time he caught himself, only to slump again. He reached the center aisle, turned and came toward the stage.

For the first time he saw English and Virginia Lee. He reached out to them. His feet tangled, then, and he pitched down the steep incline, rolling, sliding, and went out of sight into the logs. A moment later, his hand appeared on the rail, and he dragged himself up.

Light reached him there. He was middle-aged, grey and heavy of body. His dress-shirt was not white, but red. He leaned against the rail, clutching his chest, trying to call to English. His voice was congested, unintelligible. He coughed. Red stained his chin, and then his voice rang clear.

"Lee!" he said. "Ronald Lee!"

The gun fired again, two shots, carefully spaced. The left balcony tunnel was a deep pocket of shadow, and the yellow flame of the gun was there. All English could see of the man was the outline of his head. His head was exactly between English's eye and the red *Exit* light. The man was hatless, but more than that English could not tell.

The man at the balcony rail convulsed. His head went back, jaws and neck straining. He screamed again. Fear and agony

moulded the rasping tones, flung them against the walls. Death cut them short. The man seemed to shrivel. He crumpled forward. The rail caught his hips, upended him. Like a loosely turning pin-wheel, he fell.

Virginia Lee whimpered once, and then fainted.

Red English left her lying on the stage. He sprinted forward, leaped the orchestra pit and raced down a side aisle. To gain the balcony, he had to climb two flights of stairs, cross a lounge. There was a street exit near the balcony tunnel the killer had used. Steel steps led down the side of the building. They were empty, glistening in the rain. The murderer had had plenty of time to gain the alley. English turned back into the building.

Excitement crackled through the house. Lights went up. Voices shouted questions, answers. English went into the balcony tunnel. He discovered that to shoot a man at the center aisle balcony rail, the killer had to stand in one particular spot. He stood there, and saw a brass cartridge case not far off. It was a .45 caliber. He found a second one, but not a third. There had been three shots in all. English went downstairs.

Martin Knight, the theater owner, had just collapsed in a rear seat. Fussing over him was the house press agent, Alexander Jones. Jones called excitedly to English, but the band leader was on his way to Virginia's side. He found a tall young man in an usher's uniform bending over her.

"I—I guess she's all right," the usher stuttered. He was dark and good-looking, and the word *Captain* was gold-lettered above his breast pocket. "Just fainted—"

"I'll take her," English clipped. "Find a maid . . . call a doctor . . . send for the police. . ."

Carrying Virginia toward her dressing room, English felt her arms creep up around his neck. Her voice was low,

broken. "Red—what are we going to do?"

"Keep our mouths shut; admit nothing!"

"It's so terrible! He was k—killed right before our eyes. He said Ronnie's name. Do you think—?"

"No, Ronnie didn't kill him. Ronnie was plenty scared when he left here. He's probably still running."

English put her on the settee and spread a blanket over her. "Pretend you're still unconscious. Take it hard when you come out of it. Weep. Carry on. They'll let you go sooner. I'll see you at the hotel."

The maid came, a bustling, excited colored woman. English gave her instructions and went out, to find Alexander Jones waiting in the corridor.

Jones was a tall man. He had a beaked nose, slate-grey eyes and a relish for dry whimsy. In a cynical way, he seemed to find something amusing in every situation. He was not much upset by the murder.

"She okay?" he asked.

"She's upset terribly," English said. "Virginia is a high-strung girl. A thing like this—"

Jones made a sympathetic sound and fell in step with English. Compared to the band leader's trim, broad-shouldered figure, the press agent looked like a ram-shackled fugitive from a corn field.

"It's a lousy break," he offered conversationally. "You're in for it—cops, reporters, inquests. When a guy like Jim Simms gets shot, it calls for a whoop-te-do, I'll tell you—"

"Did you say Jim Simms?"

"Yuh. Local big-shot. Ran a race track and a couple of gambling houses. Semi-respectable. Came up outa the booze-running Prohibition days. But this kill will be good for business. It'll bring 'em out. We'll pack the house."

"I'm a musician," said English, "not a freak!"

Jones' chuckle was dry. "My friend, you're news."

FOUR hours later, at three in the morning, the worst of it was over. Red English sat in the office of Martin Knight on the third floor of the theater building. English was very tired. He was having a Scotch-and-soda.

Martin Knight was at his desk. Fatigue had greyed his usually pink cheeks, had loosened the muscles there and let them sag. He was a little vexed at Jones, who had gotten himself a little tight. Jones' feet were on the window sill, his hat low over his eyes. He fiddled with the cord of the Venetian blind, stubbornly refusing to take anything or anybody seriously.

"Too long have I lived among thieves," he murmured, "to weep at the death of one of them."

Detective Sergeant Print Maddux, Homicide, made a derisive sound. Maddux was a bullish man, grey, but thick of neck and shoulder. He looked squarely at the world with round black eyes. He spoke bluntly, for his mind was like that, direct, blunt and without frills.

To English he said, "I've got a hunch Lee'll try to contact his sister. Suppose I put a couple of men watching her. Maybe a police woman for a maid—"

English said, "You will not! She's upset enough now. She's got to be able to sing, you know. I've got a contract to fill—"

"And I've got a murderer to catch!"

English's lips tightened. "Perhaps Lee didn't shoot Simms," he said. "Did that occur to you?"

"Yeah," the detective grunted. "And then I thought of this: Lee swore he'd shoot Simms when he got sent up. Lee escaped. Simms got killed. And Simms died yelling Lee's name." Maddux squinted at English. "But of course you didn't hear that—"

"I said not," replied English, "but I

was excited. He might have. If the usher said he did, then it's probably the truth."

"He did, all right," said the usher.

The usher's name was Joseph Shane. He was the nephew of Martin Knight, learning the business from the ground up. His uniform collar was unbuttoned. He sipped his drink, watching the others, his darkly handsome face intent on Jones, whom he seemed to dislike. "I was in the lobby and I heard him."

"Look," said English, standing up. "All I want is that the girl be left alone. Her brother's escape, this killing—it's been a terrible shock to her. Ronald must be caught, of course. He's an escaped convict. Virginia and I will do all we can. But don't make Virginia feel like bait in a trap set to catch her own brother. Keep your cops away. Okay?"

Maddux looked sour. "I'll think about it."

English turned to Knight. "You're dead set on a show tomorrow?"

"What can I do?" Knight lifted tired hands. "It isn't money I can throw away."

"But it's tainted."

That from Alexander Jones, who unfolded his slat-like body out of his chair. He went to the taboret and poured himself a drink.

English went to the window, pretending to look out, but a piece of the Venetian blind cord was gone when he turned away. Jones linked arms with English and made a droll face.

"Knight's got all the nicer instincts of a ghoul," he said. "Shall we go where the air is fresher?"

English was willing. Together they left the building. There was scarcely any traffic on the streets. The rain had stopped, leaving the air sweet and cold. English found an all-night restaurant, and took the lanky press agent there.

"Now," he said, over coffee, "you're goin' to tell me things."

Amused, Jones said. "What things?"
 "What was Simms doing in the theater a half-hour after the show was over?"

"What, indeed?" said Jones. "No one seems to know."

English regarded Jones thoughtfully. There was an easy smile on Jones' wide mouth, a looseness in his body. But the man was nonetheless on his guard.

"I understand you worked for Simms at one time."

"Uh-huh," said Jones. "Matter of fact, it was at the time Ronald Lee shot Goodman. But I can't offer any evidence that he didn't shoot him, if that's what you want."

"That's what I want." English pursed his lips. Then: "Maybe you're the murderer."

"It's a thought." Jones leaned forward, his voice low. "Confidentially, I think I am, myself. Look at the case against me! My family disowned me, but I've got a chance at the family fortune if I live right. But do I? No! I run up a huge gambling debt with Simms. I can't pay. Simms threatens to go back East and collect from the old man."

"Which would," English supplied, "scuttle your chances at the Jones' millions."

"Exactly!" said Jones. "So what did I do?" he leveled a finger at English and wiggled his thumb. "Bang! Bang! It solves everything." Then he sat back, grimacing disgustedly. "But Maddux ignores me—won't even listen to my story. Sometimes I think I'd best hang myself."

Soberly, English said, "You might have something there. . . ."

IT WAS four o'clock when English knocked on the door of Virginia Lee's room. The door opened at once. Virginia's nerves were almost as bad as English had said they were.

"I—I thought you'd never get here."

She wore a negligee and her black hair

swung loosely about her shoulders. Worry and nerves had put dark shadows under her eyes, in her cheeks. Her slender hands were never still.

"I waited for the papers," said English, throwing them on the bed. "No picture."

"What does that mean?"

"I wish I knew. A news photog would have the picture there. If it wasn't a news photographer, who was it? And why did he want the picture?"

"It might be blackmail."

"It might," said English tiredly.

Virginia's eyes caught the headlines. "They think Ronnie killed him!"

English nodded. "But I'll give you ten-to-one he didn't. When Ronnie was in your dressing room, he had a twenty-five automatic. The gun that killed Simms was a forty-five. Ronnie wouldn't carry two guns—a forty-five would be plenty."

"Thank heaven!" Virginia Lee said.

"But *somebody* killed Simms! If not Ronnie, who? And for what reason? And will he kill again?" English scowled. "We should turn Ronnie over to the police. Yet if we do, we'll be putting a noose around his neck. And if we don't, we'll be putting ourselves in prison for sheltering an escaped convict."

"We're not sheltering him," Virginia pointed out. "We don't even know where he is. But perhaps you'd best tell the police what you know, and—and leave it alone."

"What?" said English. "Walk away with the mystery still unsolved? My dear, that's contrary to form. The hero stays to the bloody end, you know." He grinned. "Or ain't I the hero of this story?"

Earnestly she said, "You're mine, anyway."

"HOW'S your memory?" Red English asked.

He was with Virginia Lee in a rented car, driving against the flow

of the noon traffic. The sky had cleared, but the city was drear-looking, for it was a late autumn sun and it had no warmth. Virginia's voice was tired.

"All right, I guess."

"What do you remember about the hands that held the camera last night?"

After a moment, she answered, "Nothing."

"Nor do I." English said. "They could have been slim or fat, with rings or without. Too bad—it would have been a good clue."

They turned onto a boulevard that led steeply into a residential district called "The Heights."

As he took the car around the many curves, English said, "I figure the murderer had wanted Simms dead for a long time. When Ronnie broke out, he had a ready-made 'goat.' He killed Simms and the police blamed it on Ronnie. But what was the motive? It must have been something connected with Simms' gambling business. And if it is, who would be most likely to know it?"

"Helen Adams."

"Right! His partner. The other half of the combine that Ronnie thinks framed him. So I called Alexander Jones—he worked for them, you know—and Jones made an appointment for us."

"Not for 'us'," said Virginia. "I'll wait in the car. That woman—well, I'd rather not meet her."

"Suit yourself."

English brought the car to a stop before what looked like an expensive upper-class home. But when the maid let English in, he saw a bar where the conservatory should have been, roulette tables toward the rear. Helen Adams was waiting in the second floor library.

She was a tall woman. As she took English's hand, he thought, *Expensive*, for she was too carefully groomed to look natural. She lacked warmth. She had very correct manners, but there were a

few traces of the "vulture"—sharp eyes and a thin mouth, a coarseness in the way she moved and spoke.

She gave English wine and a cigarette; she asked him why he'd come.

"It's about Ronald Lee—"

"That damned kid!" she rasped, with sudden violence.

"But—"

"Listen," she said, leaning forward. "I've been afraid of something like this ever since they sent him up. He swore he'd kill us both, swore Jim and I framed him. Well, they'll hang him this time." She sat back. "I only hope I'm alive to read about it."

Red English's blue eyes were narrow, speculative.

"A couple of people think he didn't kill Simms."

She stiffened. "Who?"

"Me," said English. "His sister."

She remained tense. "Go on; why?"

"It's not much," English admitted. "Call it faith in the boy. He still thinks you or Simms framed him—"

"I didn't!" Helen Adams cried. "I never framed a man in my life!"

"Simms might have without your knowledge."

She was a little mollified. "Well, maybe. There was that fellow Goodman, snooping around— But, no. No, the kid's saying that to get your sympathy."

"See here," said English. "Pretend Ronald Lee did not kill Simms—just for the moment. Isn't there someone else who might have killed Simms? Hasn't someone else a good motive? Mightn't this someone want to kill you for the same motive. It would be easy, you know. You wouldn't suspect him. The police would blame Ronnie. If somebody wanted you dead, this would be a swell time to kill you—"

"Say—!"

An uneasy light came to life in the woman's eyes. It was plain that her mind

was turning over the suggestion, finding it unpleasant, frightening. She reached forward, suddenly, stubbed out her cigarette and stood up.

"Wait here," she said. "I'll make a phone call, and then maybe I'll have something to tell you."

She went to the door, paused. "Help yourself to the wine," she said, and English did not see her transfer the key to the outside of the door. She went out, closing the door solidly behind her. English took a cigarette, lighted it, and sat there a few moments. . .

And then a gun exploded on the floor below.

Two shots, two thunderous blasts of a big-caliber gun, and the walls seemed to shake with it. English was out of his chair and across the room in one desperate lunge. He caught the door knob, twisted it, jerked. But the door was locked.

English rattled the knob, pounded the panel, shouted. It was a long moment before he realized what an idiotic waste of time that was. He spun and caught up a chair and swung it high. The chair disintegrated; the door remained undamaged. The screen on the front entrance slammed. Feet drummed across the porch. English ran to the front window.

He saw a man emerge onto the lawn, and start to sprint diagonally across it. And then Virginia Lee stepped out of the car. The man and the girl were no more than thirty feet apart. The man wore a grey felt hat and a stained trench coat.

The man turned in mid-stride, ran at Virginia. She seemed too startled to move. He caught her roughly and forced her into the car English had rented. The motor came to life. The man turned the car with quick savagery and took it down the street.

Red English's face was grey when he turned from the window. With a heavy chair he battered the door down.

Helen Adams was lying on the floor in the lower hallway. Her silk dress was drenched with blood. As English reached the bottom step, her head moved, lifting. She raised on one elbow. Blonde hair spilled into her face. Red trickled from each corner of her mouth. She looked at English with glazed, un-seeing eyes. She whimpered. Her fingers dug convulsively at the rug.

English's first thought was a doctor. He leaped across her to the telephone. But even as he spun the dial, he saw her suddenly stiffen. Her lifted head bowed, all the muscles of her body stretched to a trembling tautness. With a throaty sound she collapsed. She was dead.

English called the police. . . .

DETEKTIVE Sergeant Print Maddux reviewed the crime. "He left his car—a stolen car—on the side street and came up the alley, entering the house through the side entrance. The maid was in the pantry and thought it was the grocer's boy. He went into the hall and met Helen Adams face-to-face—"

"No," said the medical examiner. "He shot her in the back."

They were in the barroom. Maddux had the center of the floor, and grouped about him were reporters, photographers, the coroner's men, plainclothesmen, and the like.

Red English was on the edge of his chair, tension and impatience in every line of his face.

"All right," said Maddux. "He saw her back, then. So he let her have it, twice, with a forty-five. The maid came out of the pantry, saw what happened and fainted. The killer ran out the front door. His coat hooked up on the door catch and this button come off."

He held the button up—it was leather-covered, the type most commonly used on trench coats.

"He started for his car, but the girl got

out of English's, and she recognized him—they weren't no more than twenty feet apart. He couldn't leave her. So he pushed her into the car and drove away. And we got plenty of proof it was her brother, Ronald Lee."

"What proof?" a reporter asked.

"Her brother was seen last night," Maddux said, looking at English, "wearing a stained trench coat and a grey hat. That's what this killer wore. English seen it and so did the maid, and we got this button."

The same reporter asked, "Will he kill his sister?"

Maddux said, "My God, how should I know?"

It was late afternoon before English got away. Extras were on the streets. "English Recognizes Killer!" the newsboys cried. "Famous Band Leader says Murderer Is Brother of Songstress Virginia Lee!"

English had made a clean breast of it to Detective Maddux. The result was a perfect story from the newspaper point of view.

The clerk at English's hotel gave him his key and mail. There were three notes asking him to call Martin Knight, several letters and one large manila envelope. The large envelope was postmarked early that morning. English opened it in the elevator.

He opened it and swore. It contained the picture taken the night before in Virginia's dressing room! English, Virginia and Ronald Lee were each plain and easily recognizable. Across the bottom of the picture was scrawled the terse warning: *Stop playing Detective! Lay off, or this goes to the papers!*

English put it in his pocket.

HE HAD his key in the lock of his door, when something hard pressed against his backbone.

"Take it easy," a brittle voice said.

English went rigid. His face lost color and the muscles at the corners of his jaw bunched.

"In," the voice said, and English opened the door and moved into the room. He heard the door shut.

"Now turn around, you dirty louse!"

Ronald Lee had gotten rid of the trench coat and grey hat—the papers had made those dangerous now. He wore dark clothes. The flesh of his face was grey-white and it seemed too tightly stretched. There was fury in him, blazing out of the narrow slits that were his eyes.

"So you identified me!" he gritted.

"Well, you dirty scum, you're not gettin' away with it!"

English wet dry lips. "Where's Virginia—?"

"Never mind her!" Lee rasped. "We're talking about you, and what a dirty, double-crossing rat you are! I've got two murders on my hands! What's to stop me from making it three?"

"Ronnie, listen—"

"Listen, hell! You're gonna get a taste of what I'll get when the cops catch me. Hot lead!" His voice was hoarse, panting. "Say your prayers—!"

The gun came up, centered on English's chest; the finger whitened. Ronald Lee meant what he said. His colorless face was an ugly mask; it was hate and fear driven to the point of murder.

English looked past Ronnie, said, "Virginia! Don't!"

Ronnie did not turn—the trick was too old for that. But he was startled, even so. It took a moment for his mind to digest the words, to realize it was a ruse. A moment was enough. English slapped at the gun.

There was six feet of tense, geared-up muscle behind the blow, a mind that fully understood the risk. He hit hard, hammering the barrel down. The gun went off. A bullet slammed into the floor. The gun was torn from Lee's hand. English

kicked it across the room under the bed.

"Damn you—!" Lee snarled.

He lunged after the gun. English caught him, drove him against the wall with a solid shoulder, pinned him there. Lee turned into a fighting madman. His hands became claws, scratching, gouging. There were excited cries from adjoining rooms to lend him strength.

English fought with his fists, striving for a clean, solid blow to knock Lee out. Lee used any means, every means, and that swung the balance. He gave English a savage kick in the groin. Pain flamed through English's mid-section. The strength went out of him.

Lee pushed free of English's crumpling form. There was no time now to retrieve the gun from under the bed. He clawed at the door, dragged it open and lunged away. English could do nothing to stop him. He was on the floor, gasping, bent into a tight knot of agony.

The halls filled. Voices chattered out-

side the door. The first person to come through was Martin Knight. The theater owner's face blanched; his eyes popped. He dropped beside English.

"My God! He shot you—!"


English managed, after some moments, to convince Knight otherwise. He got Knight to go out and clear the halls, and then to stall the house detective.

Martin Knight wanted English at the show that night—he'd called three times, and finally he'd come after him. But English flatly refused. His face was the color of wet ashes. He was weak, shaky. But there was no doubting the stubborn will of the man.

"Sue me, and be damned!" he rasped. "I'm not going until I know that Virginia's safe!"

MARTIN KNIGHT was upset. He was a pathetic little figure, white-haired, anxious. "I wouldn't insist if I thought you could help her,"

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he said. "But what can you do? The police are—"

"The police are chasing wild geese!"

English got the pistol from under the bed and laid it on the end table.

"That's a twenty-five!" he rasped. "Jim Simms and Helen Adams were both killed with a forty-five. Ronald Lee wouldn't use two guns. If he had a forty-five, he'd use that all the time—it's bigger, more powerful."

He laid the picture beside the gun.

"That was taken last night," he said, and explained the exact circumstances. "Look at his coat. Look at the buttons. Are they leather-covered? No! Would Lee sew different buttons on his coat after this picture was taken and before he killed Helen Adams? Not by a damn' sight!"

"You—you mean—?"

"I'll show you," English snapped. "But first tell me—what do you know about Jones?"

"Why, not a great deal. Comes of a wealthy family, I understand. Got disowned for drinking and carousing. I believe there was some talk that he and his father were about to get together again."

"Did he owe Simms and Adams anything?"

Knight snapped his fingers. "He did! A gambling debt. Close to ten thousand, I believe. He mentioned it when he was drunk one night. Simms was pressing him for it. Getting very nasty about it, in fact."

"Just what Jones told me!" said English. "I thought he was kidding. He was really trying to appear innocent by pretending he had nothing to hide!"

"Surely, Jones didn't—"

"The man who took that picture—who tied the rope on the door of Virginia's dressing room—used the hangman's knot. It was the best knot possible, because when it's tight, it's hard to slip. Not many people can tie one. Can you? No, nor can I. But Jones can! Last night in

your office, he was fiddling with the cord of the Venetian blind. He tied a knot in it. I cut it off. Here it is."

He held up a piece of cord tied in a hangman's knot!

"Good heavens!" Knight gasped.

English said, "He saw Ronald Lee go into Virginia's dressing room. He took the picture. Then he went up on the balcony and shot Simms. Probably Simms had come to dun him. Early this morning, he sent this picture, because he was afraid of me. Then I called him about the appointment with Helen Adams."

"He was afraid she'd tell you something," Knight put in excitedly. "He decided to kill her. He had the picture to show him how Lee was dressed. He decided to masquerade as Lee. They're about the same size and build—"

"Exactly!" said English. "And unless I miss my guess, he had done the same thing once before. He dressed himself as Lee and shot Henry Goodman. But this time he slipped. He met Virginia Lee face-to-face. She recognized him, of course. So he had to take her with him."

"Then Lee came here, because he thought you had deliberately tried to frame him!"

"Yes. The poor devil is almost crazy—blamed for murders he didn't do, hunted like a mad dog. He saw the headlines, 'English Recognizes Killer!' and that was enough. He came to get revenge while he could."

"What are you going to do?"

"I—"

The telephone rang.

The voice on the wire was faint and thin, as if the speaker had very little strength.

"Lo, sweetheart," it said. "This's Jones."

"Jones!" English barked. "Where are you?"

"My, my, you sound excited. Still playing detective, I'll bet. Well, maybe

it's a good idea. Good publicity. How does this sound: 'English Rescues Beloved!' Or this: 'Intrepid Band Leader Solves Baffling Mystery!' What editor could resist it?"

"Damn you, Jones—!"

"Ah! Ah! Ah!" Jones chided faintly. "That's fightin' talk, pardner! If it's a fight you want, suh, saddle yore hoss! Come ovah to the Rialto—and come a foggin'! Buckety-buckety! They's an Injun behind every rock . . . Cain't hold out much longer. . . ."

His voice slurred off; the wire went dead.

"He was either drunk!" English explained in a taxi roaring across town, "or out of his head. Talked like a fool." He checked the clip of Ronald Lee's gun.

"I think it's a trap!" said Knight. "I think we ought to get the police!"

"No police!" English said grimly. "Not till I know Virginia's safe!" The cab took a corner on two wheels. "How come he's at the theater? Is it open?"

"No," said Knight. "I didn't want to open at all if you weren't going on. Better no show than a half a show. There probably aren't three people in the building. It's near supper time, you know."

The driver brought the cab to a grinding halt before the darkened marquee. English flung open the door and ran for the entrance. He had gone perhaps five steps when he jerked to a stop. There was an odd figure near the alley mouth. A familiar figure. . . .

IT WAS Virginia Lee! She was without coat or hat, leaning her shoulders drunkenly against the building. Her knees would scarcely hold her. Her hair hung loosely about her face. She stared stupidly at the sidewalk, oblivious to the curious stares that came her way. Red English caught her by the shoulders.

"Virginia! Please look at me! Great Scott—!"

He tipped her head up, holding her face to the light. She didn't recognize him, neither did she resist. Her mouth was slack, her eyes dull. She wavered, sagging heavily into English's hands.

"What the devil?" Knight panted. "She's drunk!"

"No!" English rasped. "Not drunk! It's—"

He caught her chin up again, looked sharply into her eyes. The pupils were shrunk to pin-points.

"Dope!" he gasped. "The poor kid's full of dope!"

"I'll take her!" Knight said excitedly. "I'll take her to my home. She'll be safe there. I'll get my doctor to tend to her. My God! It may be too late now! She may never come out of it—!"

English helped Knight carry the girl to the cab. He helped them inside, then closed the door.

"I'll stay!" he said. "I'll find Jones—he's got to pay for this!" To the driver: "Get going!"

The cab roared away, and English ran into the theater. "She'll be all right!" he told himself, as he raced through the lobby and up the stairs. "Knight will see that she gets proper care." He had Ronald Lee's automatic in his hand when he approached Knight's office.

The door was open. There was faint, yellow light spilling from a shaded desk-lamp. English came to an abrupt halt in the doorway. On the floor near the desk was a pair of feet. The heels were down, the toes turned slackly outward. English stepped to one side. He could see long legs, then hips. He went still further. Shoulders came into view. And, at last, the head. . . .

He'd been sure it would be Jones. The shock of finding it was not, left him breathless, unable to think. He had to look several times to identify the man. It was Joseph Shane, Martin Knight's nephew!

Looking at the limp body, English sensed something wrong, something out of focus. The corpse wore slacks and a sport shirt instead of the usher's uniform, but it wasn't that. It was something else. *Blood!* That was it! There wasn't any! Shane was dead—eyes wide, glazed—but there wasn't a drop of blood on him anywhere.

Then English saw the hypodermic syringe. He knew then. Shane had died of an overdose of some drug—morphine, beyond a doubt. Perhaps Shane had surprised Jones in the act of killing Virginia with morphine. Jones and Shane had fought. Virginia had escaped. And Shane had received a lethal dose. . .

English jerked erect, turning. His eyes caught sight of a garment in a corner. Though in a desperate hurry, he caught the garment up. A stained trench coat! The buttons were leather-covered. The grey felt hat was on the floor. English hadn't been wrong in thinking a double had killed Helen Adams!

Again English started for the door, and again he stopped without leaving the room.

A splinter had been knocked from the inside of the door frame. Only a bullet could do that. On the rug just outside the door was a dark stain. English touched it, and his fingers came away red. Shane hadn't been wounded, so it must have been Jones. Shane had shot Jones. And that explained Jones' weak voice on the telephone.

English looked into each of the offices on the floor in quick succession. He went down to the mezzanine and found it empty. He looked in the men's wash-room and found it empty. The theater was a big place. He decided to look in the likely spots first. . . .

The dressing rooms back-stage were empty. English looked in them all. His heels struck startling echoes from the corridor floor. He was at the foot of the

stairs that led stage-ward, when he heard a voice calling, "English. . . Oh, English. . . ."

The voice was faint. It came from out in the main theatre. Faint and distant though it was, English had no trouble recognizing it. It was Jones. English climbed to the stage level.

He paused at the bank of switches. Pulling several, he drew the curtain, turned the house lights on. The stage, for the most part, was left in darkness. Alexander Jones clapped unsteadily, applauding. His voice was thick, slurred.

"Curtain going up," he croaked. "Curtain going up! Take your sheats for the las' act—las' act!"

English felt his scalp crawl. Jones was mad as a hatter! But then he was right, too—this was the last act. English's hand was sweating on the butt of his gun, as he crept forward and found a peep-hole.

ALEXANDER JONES was in the balcony. And by a strange coincidence, he was standing in the mouth of the left exit tunnel—the same place in which he'd stood to shoot Jim Simms! He was leaning weakly against the tunnel wall. The right side of his face was dark; streaks of that same darkness cut across his face. Jones had a head wound; the streaks were blood. He was waving a forty-five. . . .

"Lights!" he croaked. "Music! Curtain! Villain's got the girl. . . hero enters. . . lef' center. . . buckety-buckety. . ."

Jones was badly hurt, staggering, delirious. Yet that gun was an efficient weapon; he had a madman's lust to kill. English thought it best to take no chances.

English lifted his automatic, took careful aim—but he did not shoot. He started to. His finger closed part way on the trigger, and then he stopped. A sudden thought had pounded its way into his consciousness. There was something wrong. English lowered his gun.

He stepped out of the wings. Jones saw him and applauded awkwardly, almost falling down. " 'Rah for the hero . . . ! " He didn't try to use his gun. He swayed drunkenly in the tunnel mouth. "Speech . . . speech . . . !"

"Jones!" English yelled. "Jones, listen! Can you see the center aisle balcony rail? Answer me! Can you see the spot where Simms was killed?"

Jones rocked forward a step. He lifted his gun and aimed at the center aisle balcony rail. "Yep . . . got a dead bead on 'er, pardner . . . !"

And English was standing in the exact spot where he'd been standing when Simms had died. He looked at the red *Exit* light behind Jones at the tunnel mouth.

When Simms had been shot, the killer's head had been exactly between English's eye and that light. But now, with Jones standing where the killer had stood, *the light was on a level with Jones' chest!*

English said, "Back up, Jones!"

Jones backed. As he went into the tunnel, down the incline, the light seemed to climb. When the light was level with Jones' head, English called to him to stop.

"Can you see the center aisle balcony rail?" he asked.

"Hell, no . . ." Jones answered weakly. "Can't see. . . ."

Jones collapsed out of sight.

But English had the truth, then—the grim, terrible truth! Simms had been shot by a very small man! Jones was tall. Ronald Lee was tall. Even Joseph Shane was tall. . . *Shane!* Shane could very well pass for Ronald Lee—same size, same age, same coloring. . . .

English's mind did a groggy about-face. He found himself confronted with a whole new line of thought, a complete new pattern. One brutal fact leaped out above the rest—he'd sent Virginia Lee to a certain death!

English vaulted the orchestra pit, raced up the stairs to Jones' side. The lanky press agent was slumped against the tunnel wall, rocking his head dizzily, mumbling.

"Jones! Where does Knight live? What's his address?"

Jones seemed not to hear. ". . . couldn't let that hop-head, Shane, kill 'er," Jones muttered. "O! Jonesy's louse . . . but don' go for killin' women . . . no, sir! Jonesy stuck 'im with 'is own needle, ha! . . . blooey! Curtains! Got shot . . . guess. . . Dad . . . you dirty rat . . . didn't tell me Mom was sick. . . . Where's girl? Gone . . . call English. . ."

He fell to his side and lay there, breathing heavily.

English cursed—a precious half-minute wasted! He lunged for the stairs. There was a telephone book in Knight's office. He got the address there, and turned to the stairs at a dead run.

Pedestrians scattered when he burst from the theater entrance. "Call the police!" he yelled. "Man killed!" and dived into a taxi.

THE driver started to protest, but he swallowed it when he saw English's gun, the blazing desperation in the white set of English's face. He kicked the motor to life, sent the cab careening into the late evening traffic.

English gave him the address. "You've got five minutes!" he snarled. "Five minutes to get me there, or get your head blown off!"

"Five minutes—!"

The driver made a strangled sound, and hunched over the wheel, pumping the accelerator. It was a cab gone berserk, a yellow demon, and the continuous blare of the horn shouldered the traffic aside like a giant arm. They scraped fenders; they left behind cursing, fuming drivers. Across the river. Into the quieter residential districts. Death waited at every

cross-street. The speedometer needle spun dizzily; English made a point of not watching it. Six minutes had gone by, before the driver brought the car to a stop, at last.

"B—best I could do—" he gulped.

English was already out of the cab and running up the walk. The house was white Colonial, set in a wide, green lawn. There was a light on the second floor, none on the first. English found the door unlocked. He jerked it open, lunged through.

Darkness, complete and unpenetrable, filled the hall. English had to wait for his eyes to adjust themselves. A moment, two . . . and then a gun jammed into his back.

"Hold it!" a sharp voice said.

That moment was almost English's last. He wanted to turn, wanted to so desperately that he almost did—despite the certainty of a bullet in his back. He held himself rigid, dropped his gun.

"Now, up the stairs," the voice said.

English obeyed. The man behind him said, "Glad you warned me—I could hear that cab coming five blocks away. Into the study. And watch yourself!"

English turned into a lighted doorway. The first thing that met his eyes was Virginia's limp body lying on a divan. On a coffee-table near her was a gleaming hypodermic syringe. English sucked in a quick breath, jerked around.

"Did you—"

"Not yet."

Martin Knight smiled thinly. His softness, his timidity had vanished. There was a hard look about him. His eyes were shiny, intent, but cool. There was a business-like efficiency in the way he held his gun.

"The girl has just fainted," he said. "You see, I had difficulty getting morphine, or she would have been taken care of before this. It had to be morphine, of course. The girl will die of an over-dose. People at the theater heard me say that

she might. No one will guess that it was *two* injections, instead of one."

"You're mad!" English rasped. "You can't get away with it. What about me? What about Jones? The police have Jones by this time. He'll talk!"

Knight's face whitened, but his gun remained steady.

"Maybe, and maybe not. Anyway, I have nothing to lose, everything to gain. They can only hang me once. In my position, even long odds are good. Every mouth I shut increases my chance of living. I must do what I can, and hope for the best."

English's throat was dry, aching. "You're the man behind the combine, eh?" he said. "You were Jim Simms' and Helen Adams, 'backing.' You've wanted to get rid of them. When Ronald Lee broke out, you saw a chance."

"This," said Knight, smiling, "comes under the heading of stalling-for-time, doesn't it? Hoping for a last minute break. Well, I'll humor you. Yes, I own the gambling in this city, the race track. Simms and Adams wanted to take over. I beat them to the punch."

"You and Shane," said English.

"Ah, yes. Shane is dead—he wouldn't have let Jones call otherwise." Regret came fleetingly to the small man's face. "He wasn't my nephew. But a nice boy, all the same. A very nice boy. . . ."

"Shane killed Helen Adams?"

Knight nodded. "I dressed him like Ronald Lee was dressed. Jones was a big help there, furnished us with the picture. You see, it was me he owed money to, not Simms. He played along to keep the news of his gambling from his family. But he balked at murder."

"And Shane killed Henry Goodman?"

Again Knight nodded. "In much the same manner—as you have already guessed. Ronald Lee makes an excellent goat. I think we'll use him again."

"How?" asked English.

"We'll blame him for your murder." Knight's eyes grew narrow, intense. "I shall make a good witness—tearful, hysterical, shocked. We'll pretend that Ronald Lee followed you here to finish the job he started at your hotel. What could be more logical?"

English said, "You can't get away with it—"

Knight was through talking. He seemed to realize, suddenly, that he'd talked too long. His gun came up. His round, little face was perfectly composed, his hand steady. Only his eyes showed emotion, oddly brilliant, shining. He was a coldly efficient instrument of death.

English's face became ribbed with muscle. He swayed forward on his toes, hands spread a little. He couldn't take a bullet meekly. If it was coming, he would meet it half way. He had to try. Not that he hoped to go on living; Knight was too expert for that. . . .

A bitter voice said, "Enter, the goat!"

IT WAS Ronald Lee, standing suddenly in the doorway, not far from Knight. English was moving when he saw him there, and the impetus carried him on in a slanting dive. Knight was distracted. Impulsively, probably without thought, he jerked his gun up and fired at Lee. That was a grave mistake.

For English had him then. English, two hundred pounds of red-headed fury,

crashed into his knees, hammered him to the floor. Anger, fed by despair, by the anxiety of the last few days, exploded in a flaming curtain that dimmed English's eyes, that flooded savage strength into his fingers. He caught Knight's gun-wrist; he bent it out, and the sound of bones breaking was good in his ears.

Knight's bubbling scream was cut short by the sudden pressure of English's fingers on his wind-pipe. English heaved him up. He held the fat killer above his head at arm's length. Deliberately, with all the fury a man can feel, he slammed him down. Knight did not move again. . .

"Once more," Ronald Lee whispered. "Once more, for me. After five years, I have to sit here and let somebody else have the fun. . . ."

Ronald Lee was on the floor by the door. His left coat sleeve was drenched crimson; blood trickled across his hand.

"Followed you from the Rialto," he said. "And what a ride that was! I didn't have a gun. Couldn't shoot the louse. Couldn't do anything. . . ."

"You saved my life," English said.

Ronald Lee's face was white, pleading. "Did I? Well, look, then. Does that square us? About that business in the hotel, I mean. Virginia would—well, damn it! If she knew I tried to—"

"Fella," English said, "I've got the world's lousiest memory when occasion demands—and this is a special occasion!"



Kill-and-Tell Kid

By
Francis K. Allan



His foot stopped in half-stride
and the gun came out.

*A kiss-and-tell girl—a kill-and-tell man . . . and a day when their
trails must cross for the last time.*

SHE was humming part of a song as she sat before the mirror. It was one of those once-popular songs that you remember on occasion.

*"And then, the world is gonna be mine,
This evening, about a quarter to
nine. . . ."*

She was smiling just a little as she smoothed a wave of her hair—black hair, with tiny lights of jade. She had a pert, short nose, and her lips had a laugh in the corners.

She wasn't very big, and her name was Nicki. Funny for a girl. . . .

She started the song all over; then she stopped. Not for a reason—for a feeling, inside. She listened, and the room turned very still. Then she heard it again—the tiny little tapping at the door, fingernails beating a little tattoo.

Carl! She knew it before she thought it—like a cut on your finger, when you wait for the first red of blood. You think, *In a second it's going to hurt.* . . .

The tapping came again. Her fingers left her hair. She stood up and shook the pleat from her skirt. Quickly she crossed the room and turned the key. The door edged an inch, then opened and closed again.

The key turned in the lock.

She couldn't stop looking at him—at his red hair and dancing brown eyes, at the thin line of his lips, and the little line in one jaw.

"Hello, Nicki," he was saying. His voice was still soft, lazy, taunting her ears.

"Where . . . where did you come from?"

"From where I've been." There it was again—the same old way; never an answer, just a laugh and a lie.

"You're glad to see me?"

She didn't answer. His eyes kept holding hers.

"You haven't kissed me," he reminded. He waited a moment; then his hand reached out. She woke, moved one step back, another.

The line down his jaw turned pink. One eyebrow lifted.

"Kind of cold, aren't you?"

"Why did you come back?" It stumbled past her lips.

"I came back for you." He waited a pointed second. "I came back because I heard the radio last Tuesday."

"Ohooo," she whispered.

"I think you're a little rat," he said softly. Then he grinned. "But you still look good to me. Too good for Bill

Webber. So. . . ." A coin rattled in his pocket. "I dropped by—to get you."

"Thanks!" Her voice was smoky, and a little blue storm was gathering behind her eyes. "There's just one thing wrong with that. I'm not going."

Deliberately she turned away, toward the dresser. She sifted a cigarette from the pack and tried to light it casually. But the first match broke in her fingers. In the corner of the mirror, she watched his feet behind her.

"Maybe—maybe you've changed a little . . ." he sing-songed.

"Yes, maybe I have." She turned around. "A lot of things can happen in four years."

"Like falling for the D. A. that kicked over the playhouse, huh? Or maybe he's got a better racket? The reform angle is always good for fifty grand a year, if you're on the right side of—"

"Shut up, Carl!" she blazed.

"So," he mused, "the radio snoop-hound was right. Little Nicki cuts herself a slice of big-time gravy! She's going to marry Bill Webber, the D. A.!" He stopped. His lips turned down in a snarl.

"But she's not," he announced softly.

"What do you mean?" she asked carefully.

"I mean, you're coming with me."

"I see," she said quietly. She butted the cigarette, then faced him squarely.

"Once upon a time I was something. Now I'm something else. There's not much about me Bill Webber doesn't know. And there's nothing I wouldn't tell him. He knows about you, and he doesn't care. You wouldn't understand that. . . ."

She took a deep breath.

"I'm not going with you, Carl. You can't frighten me any more. I knew you'd come back some day. I knew you'd be just the same. I knew what I would say. Just one word. Good-by."

"Just like that?" he snarled.

"Just like that."

He walked around the room. He did it slowly. He picked up a little vase, and turned it once around. He put it back. He flipped the page of a magazine. It rattled crisply in the stillness.

The breath was gone from her throat. It was one of those times when her eyes wouldn't blink; they simply stared until the room became two rooms, and the furniture blurred in a mist. It was like knowing she had lit a fuse, and now she couldn't stop it. She couldn't run. It was going to go off in her hands.

"Nice gloves," he said. "They would be his, I take it."

His words broke the mist in her eyes. He was standing by the table. In his hand was a pair of gray gloves.

"You let him come up now. Cozy."

"That's the only way you could think it!" Then the flood welled over. "Get out! I hate you—everything about you! I hate what you make me remember. I—Get out!"

"Okay." He said it too simply—too softly. The key grated in the lock. The door opened.

"I'll see you tomorrow. You'll be ready to leave."

"I won't!"

He spun a quarter in the air; then, with a little grin, he tossed it on the floor.

"That says you will, Nicki. . . ."

The door closed and he was gone.

IT WAS a quarter to nine. But she wasn't humming the song. A place felt dry in her throat. She kept remembering. She kept trying to forget.

Then the knock came at the door. Swiftly she crossed the room.

"Bill! Oh, Bill. . . ."

"Nicki!" He kissed her. She wanted to hold him close. *Strange*, she thought. *I was afraid that he wouldn't come, that something. . . .*

"What's the matter?" He looked at her closely. "You're shaking."

"Oh, I. . . . Nothing. Cold, a little, maybe." She smiled. "I'm ready! See my new dress?" She turned herself around.

"Like me?" she inquired.

"Uh-huh." He cocked an eyebrow. "Like me?"

"Uh-huh." A dimple turned in her cheek. "Love me?"

"Maybe. A little." Then he laughed. "A hell of a lot!" He kissed her again.

"Let's go," he said. "Oh, yes, I want my gloves, too."

"They're right here. I put them out so I wouldn't forget to—" She stopped. She was staring down at the table. The table was empty. A full minute ticked by.

"Come on. We've got to hurry," he urged.

"Yes, we. . . ." Her words wandered off. She could see Carl's hand again. His fingers, holding the gloves. . . .

"What's the matter? Can't you find them?"

She drew a slow breath.

"No. I—I can't remember, Bill." She was going to say something else.

"We'll get them tomorrow. Let's go."

She didn't say whatever it was. Not all that evening did she say it. She didn't know just why. She didn't say much at all that evening. A couple of times he asked her how she felt. Each time she smiled. She told him she felt fine. But then the smile slipped away. The spring in her stomach started coiling tighter. It was going to snap. Something was going to break. She knew it.

Because she knew Carl. He didn't take those gloves just because he liked them. . . .

At midnight, Bill took her home. She fixed him a drink upstairs. They talked a little while. Then he kissed her good-by.

"Bill. . . be careful."

He looked at her curiously. "Sure. I'm always careful. Why?"

"Nothing. I. . . ." She swallowed. "Just please be careful."

She read it in the morning paper. In the headline.

DISTRICT ATTORNEY ARRESTED IN
HIT-RUN DEATH

District Attorney William Webber was arrested at two o'clock this morning in connection with the hit-and-run death of Antonio Vitois, fruit vendor, who was killed as he trundled his cart homeward after a day of work.

Webber's car was found, abandoned, at the scene of the accident. At the time of his arrest, Webber alleges to have been searching for his car, which he contends was stolen. Thus far he has been unable to explain the presence of a glove, stained with the victim's blood, in the seat of the death car. Webber admitted the glove was his, but maintained he had lost it the previous day.

Police are today seeking an eye-witness, known to have been standing on the corner—

Gloves! Gray gloves, stained with blood. . . .

Gloves. . . . Over and over it pounded in her head. The pounding became a taunt. The taunt became a scream.

"God! God, I know who did it! Carl did it! He did it! He—"

Then she stopped. She listened. And there it was again—the fingernail tattoo on the door.

SHE felt her feet moving. She saw her fingers reaching to the knob. The door was opening. He was coming in.

"Hello, Nicki," he was saying in that soft voice.

He lit a cigarette. He wandered across the room, and paused at the little breakfast table.

"Too bad." She barely heard his voice. "They'll make it tough on Webber. He's made lots of people mad. They've just been waiting."

"Why did you do it?"

"Why did I what?"

"You know what I mean!" she threw out hotly. "You stole his car while he was up here. You had his gloves. You

knew they were his. You killed that man. You put the blood on Bill's gloves; then you left the car! I know you did! I know! I—" Her words tangled in her throat. She sobbed blindly.

"You know a lot, don't you?"

"I'm going to tell! I'll tell them where he was—here. I'll tell them you took the gloves. They'll believe—"

"Why, of course they will," he agreed mockingly. "You're in the gossip columns with him. You're sweet on him. You wouldn't be lying to save his hide, now would you?" He rocked on his heels.

"And it'll make a pretty spread in the papers . . . D. A. reform leader was in girl's room having drink! That's what the Waycroft bunch would love. Ever think of that?" He watched her.

Slowly the hot fire died in her eyes. She felt a little chill wave spreading down her spine. Now she was starting to see. She almost could see the end. She knew Carl so well.

"All right," she whispered wearily. "What have I got to do?"

He grinned. "Now you're getting smart. First of all, you're going to call him up. He's out on bail. You're going to want to see him—here, quick. He'll come."

"And then . . . ?"

"You're going to make a deal. You're going to ask him for those records he took from me when he busted up the racket. And you're going to get 'em. Then you're going to tell him good-by. You're going to laugh in his face for a sucker; you're going to tell him it was me all along. Tell him you never gave a damn about him. Tell him you're going with me. And then—" He paused and cocked an eyebrow—"you are coming with me. . . . If you want to save his skin."

"I won't do it! I'll never tell him good-by! I don't care what happens—whether the whole town believes he hit that—"

"Okay, Nicki," he interrupted softly. "That's your answer. And that's his neck. Remember when he's a bum." Nonchalantly he turned and wandered toward the door. The hinge creaked as it opened. It started to close behind him. The crack was almost gone. . . .

"Wait! Wait, Carl!" she called brokenly. "Come back."

He came back and stood there, waiting. For a long minute she didn't say anything. She looked at the window, and at the sun and the sky outside. At last she pulled her eyes home.

"And if I do all that, then . . . ?"

"That missing witness turns up. He says Webber ain't the guy that was driving that car. Then maybe you can turn up, and swear he was up here. It'll be a good alibi then, because by then you'll be married to me."

"I see," she whispered. "All figured out. Even the witness."

"And the getting married," he repeated.

"I heard that."

"So what's the answer this time?"

Time marched up in her throat and stood still. The room and Carl drained away. Even the window was gone, and the sun and sky outside. She was back, back to a hundred days she remembered. . . . The day when she first called him Bill; the day when first he kissed her; to a night when a drink felt warm; to another kiss, and another; to a laugh, and a moment of heaven. . . .

As time stood still, it all paraded through her head. And then the last of them faded away. The room was back again. And Carl was there—his brown eyes and hard-lined jaws. He was waiting.

"I'll call Bill." That was all she said.

"Tell him you're waiting."

"I'll always hate you," she promised quietly and softly. "You don't want me. You're just like you always were—selfish. I almost had what I wanted, and so you

came back and kicked it away. I. . . ." She closed her eyes. Her fingers twisted together. "I'll hate you till I die."

"Call Webber."

Her feet took her toward the telephone. She began to dial.

SHE knew how she had to say it. She knew it had to be good. She could feel Carl, behind the closed closet door. His hand was in his pocket. He would be listening. And his pocket wasn't empty.

"Come in," she called.

She looked at him as he closed the door. His cheeks were dark with beard, and his eyes were hollow. His tie was twisted in his rumpled collar. Then she closed her eyes.

She knew she couldn't say it if she saw him, touched him. . . .

"You heard about it?" he started quickly. "I wanted to call you, but somebody's been around all the time. I didn't want to drag you in if—"

"Sure, I know about it," she interrupted sharply. "In fact I. . . I could have told you."

He blinked. "Told me what?"

"There was going to be an accident. You see, Bill, I knew before it happened."

"I don't get it," he said uncertainly.

"Oh, don't be a sap!" She took a deep breath. Her nails cut against her palms. "Where were your gloves? I had them, remember? Then they were planted as evidence. Where was your car? Out in front of the apartment here. Then it was gone. It killed somebody. But who's going to say you were up here? Me?" She laughed—a quick, brittle little laugh that rattled in the room.

He stared at her. Then he moved until he stood before her. His hands reached out to touch her shoulders. One split-second she wavered; then she pushed them away.

"Don't!"

He didn't. Slowly his arms went down. She couldn't stand the silence.

"Can't you say something?" she broke out. "What are you staring at?"

"You," he said simply. He lit a cigarette. "Go on."

Another hard breath filled her throat.

"All right, I will! You're stuck for a hit-and-run death. It's going to ruin your career, isn't it? But if you could be cleared, it would be all right. . . . Yes?"

"You're talking, Nicki," he reminded.

"There's a witness. He can say you weren't driving the car. I can swear you were here at the time. I can swear your gloves had been lost. If—"

"Yes? If . . ."

"Remember when you broke up the protection business Carl Ramey ran? You took some records in a raid. You were going to use them against him, if you could bring him to trial." She paused and wet her lips. "I want those records."

"I see." A moment ticked by. "When did Ramey come back?"

"When . . . when I wanted him," she forced out slowly.

He stared at her steadily—at her face, at her eyes. It seemed that he would never stop looking. Her fingers tightened again. She felt a tiny pulse drum against her temple. Then he lit a cigarette and crossed to the ash tray. He wandered slowly on around the room. Near . . . nearer to the closet door he went.

She froze; her breath drained away.

"Bill . . ." she whispered stilly.

He looked up. "Yes?"

"I . . ." Then a deep sigh filled her chest. He was passing the closet. The frozen moment melted. "Nothing."

He walked over and stopped in front of her. He was very close.

"So you played me for a sucker! You looked good, and you talked good, and you got what you wanted maybe! You and your two-bit boy friend framed a nice charge against me, and I can't get out until I wash him clean! And little Nicki pulled it!" His eyes bit at her. "Am I telling it right?" he mocked.

She nodded with her eyes closed.

"It was a good day's work," he commented acidly. "Next time I'll remember! Next time I see a girl, I'll think about you! I'll—"

"Stop!" she sobbed.

"Yes," he said, "I'll stop now."

They stood there, not a foot apart, until the little clock on the table became a thunder in the stillness. And that was strange, she was thinking—because time was dead now.

Then Bill shrugged and crushed out his stub.

"When do you want the records?" he asked wearily.

"Today. Now."

"You sound like you're going somewhere."

NO! NO!



TRADE

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MARK

"Maybe I am." She kept on hearing the clock.

"All right," he said at last. "I'm not in the driver's seat. I'll be back in an hour—with the records."

Then he was gone. She just stood there. She could hear his steps on the stairs, and then she could hear them no more. He was gone. But she couldn't believe it. He had said yes, yet. . . . Somehow, some way she had hoped. . . . But he couldn't do anything else, she reminded herself stubbornly.

And now he hated her.

The closet door opened, and Carl stepped softly into the room.

"Nice going, baby," he grinned.

She began to cry.

HE stood in the bathroom door and watched him. Sheet by single sheet he ripped from the leather record book and pushed into the little fire he had made in the tub. The flames licked at the white edges, then bit in hungrily. The white turned brown, and then it curled into ashes.

The last sheet disappeared. Carl got up and dusted his hands. He turned on the tap, and the flood swirled the ashes away.

He looked at her and winked.

"All gone."

She didn't answer. Nothing seemed real any more. Her feet seemed far from the floor, and sounds only half reached her ears.

Carl passed her and took his coat from the bed.

"I'm going somewhere. I'll be back at ten o'clock tonight. I'll have the train tickets. You be ready."

The way he said it made her want to scream.

He shut the door behind him and went down the stairs. On the walk, he turned left. He walked eight blocks, then turned right. Halfway down the block, he turned

up a set of brownstone steps and went into a hall. Ahead, a stairway zigzagged upward toward the top. Carl began to climb. Past the first landing he went . . . past the second floor . . . the third. He stopped once to listen behind him. Then he pursed his lips. Softly he went on. He turned at the fifth floor hall. He went down the faded carpet to a door. He took out a key and turned the lock. He took a last glance back; then the door shut behind him. The lock twisted within.

He strode across the shade-darkened room to the closet. He unlocked that door. There lay a boy—hardly more than a kid. Eighteen maybe. His hands and legs were bound with wire. There was a gag in his mouth.

Carl hoisted him up and pulled him into the room. The boy's eyes, dark and frightened, never left Carl's face. He was trying to talk. He was begging with a silent, gagged shouting.

Carl laughed in his face. He cut the foot bonds. He loosened the hands.

"Okay. I'm taking it off," he said softly. "You're keeping your mouth shut, see?" The boy nodded dumbly. The gag came off.

The kid swallowed. He rubbed his lips. The rag had left red wrinkles and little veins of white.

Carl watched him with a strange intensity, a hungry delight. His leather cheeks twitched in a grin. His brown eyes took a rose caste, and narrowed into slits. His fingers curled open and shut against his legs. Then he backed softly, slowly away.

He stopped. Now his eyes were mere cracks, and the rose had turned to red. It blazed through the drooping lids.

The fingers now were calm.

"You was on the wrong corner last night, kid. You saw too much." Carl's whisper had a music of its own. He lingered on each word, putting it all alone on tiny stilts of ice.

The boy swallowed again. He wet his lips.

"Listen. . . Listen, mister, I was just going home. There ain't nothing wrong in just going—"

"There ain't nothing wrong," Carl mimicked. "There ain't never going to be nothing wrong. . . Look at the ceiling!" he cracked out.

Automatically the boy's eyes lifted. In that instant Carl's fingers moved with lazy, effortless speed. The gun was in his hand. He flipped the towel that had bound the boy's mouth. It wrapped itself in a spiral about the muzzle. The boy's eyes returned.

Then they saw. They widened. His jaw dropped. His lips raced after a scream. It never came.

Softly the gun barked within the towel—once . . . once again. Then the echo died through the walls, and the room was very still. The boy lay on the floor.

Carl unwrapped the towel and threw it down. His eyes were returning to brown now. They were hungry no more. Now they were fed.

Then he was still. Every muscle in him froze. He listened.

Step . . . Step . . . Step . . .

It was coming down the hall—steadily, slowly coming. . . .

Step. . . . It stopped!

It was outside the door. Then the knock came at the door. Hard! Imperative!

The gun inched up again in Carl's fingers. He let his tongue slip drily across his lips. His eyes roamed swiftly back to the boy on the floor. Then they traveled around the walls, to the window. Silently he strode across the room and moved the shade a fraction. Five flights below gaped the cement alley; he faced the backs of other buildings. He looked downward, his nose flattened against the pane. Then he saw it—a ledge beneath the window. It was perhaps six inches wide, and it ran

away to either side and disappeared past the window.

Carl straightened.

The knob was twisting furiously. The knock was a pounding now. The door was thin. . . .

HE SLIPPED the gun away in his pocket and touched the window.

It stuck a moment, then went up. Once more he studied the ledge, following it with his eyes around the far corner. A last time he glanced back at the door.

He slipped out the window. His toes found the concrete margin. His shoulders and head came outside. Slowly he straightened, and the right hand found the gun again. He did not look down. Very slowly his left hand relinquished its grip on the window. Inch by inch he began to sidle toward the far corner. His eyes never left the opening.

He heard the pounding on the door. It faded behind. Then a sharp splintering rasped in his ears. At that moment he reached the corner. He glanced around. Perhaps three feet away waited another window of another apartment. The lower sash was open.

He clutched the window and jerked. Up it came. He dropped inside a room.

A man started out of his chair. "What the hell are you—?" He never finished. Carl's gun smashed across his temple, leaving a slow-reddening welt. The man folded.

Carl crossed to the door. He listened. Softly he turned the knob and peered out. It was another hall, and at the far end were stairs. The door closed behind him. He hurried down the hall, down the stairs and to the main entrance. He glanced up and down the street, then put the gun away.

Down the brownstone steps he went, and turned. Halfway down the block, a shout raced to his ears.

"Stop! Ramey! Stop!" He wheeled.

His fingers jerked down. From the doorway, a man was coming. A squad car was unloading at the curb. He saw two cops. He saw them starting to draw. . . .

He ducked and plunged for the corner. One slug whistled over his head. The explosion came trailing behind. Then he made the turn. Down the next alley he dashed, raced across a side street and circled a bus. When the light changed, Carl was gone.

Somewhere a siren was wailing. Somewhere another answered. . . .

THE telephone rang. Nicki crossed the room and lifted the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Who's listening?" came the vibrant whisper.

"Carl . . . !"

There was a soft curse over the wire. "Don't say that name again." There was a moment's pause. "Is anybody with you?"

"No."

"Get this. . . . I'm in the bus station on Seventh. The phone booths upstairs. Get a cab. Ride around a while. Change cabs. Get a subway somewhere. Keep looking behind you. If somebody's there, shake 'em loose. Get down here. Find out when a bus leaves for Pittsburgh. Wait till just before time, then buy two tickets. Then send a porter up to the washroom with a message for Mr. Cantrell. I'll meet you on the bus." There was a little silence. "You got it?"

"I heard you," she started. She stopped. Her fingers tightened on the receiver. Then she said it:

"What have you done?"

"You do what I said!"

"Something's the matter! I know! I can tell, the way you're talking. You—" The breath tangled in her throat. "You've done something! Carl—"

"Shut your damn mouth!" came the brittle command. "You get them tickets,

and get 'em right. Or—" His voice softened to the slightest whisper—"Webber will be going to a funeral. His funeral."

"Oh. . . ."

"Are you coming?"

"I. . . ." She closed her eyes. "Yes, I'll come," she whispered.

SHE crossed the long room to the window.

"When does the next bus leave for Pittsburgh?"

"Eight minutes. It's loading outside now."

She swallowed. "Give me two tickets." She fumbled through her purse. The agent stamped out the checks. The money changed hands.

She turned away and stopped a porter.

"Will you take a message to the men's washroom, please? For Mr. Cantrell. Tell him the bus is ready. It leaves in eight minutes." She gave him a quarter.

"Sure."

Slowly, without feeling, she walked across the lobby and out the side door. There was the bus, with *Pittsburgh* on the front. People were already inside. The driver was at the door. Everything was ready.

Strange, she kept thinking. *Nothing at all is real. Nothing is real any more. After today, there isn't a thing in the world. I'm not dead. I'm just through living. . . .*

"Where is he, Nicki?" the soft voice spoke at her ear.

She spun.

"Bill!" she breathed. Then she remembered.

"No! No! You've got to get away!" Her hands were trying to push him, to make him leave. He didn't budge.

"Where is—?"

Then she saw his eyes change. He was looking past her shoulder. Something beneath his skin seemed to freeze, and one nerve jumped in his temple.

She knew before she turned. There

was Carl, coming through the door, swinging along with his lazy, panther grace. His glance played left and right. He came on. Then he saw. His foot stopped in half-stride.

Carl's fingers leaped down. The gun flashed up, making a gleam in the sun. His eyes were flaming red behind the shuttered lids. Nicki saw the finger twitch. And then she jumped as the blast rolled over her ears. A tiny, cold fire bit into her shoulder. Strangely, it didn't hurt at all.

There was another blast, in a different note. Then all sounds merged into one thunder. Bill's elbow kicked against her ribs as he tried to get her out of the way.

There was a sharp staccato—the beat of running feet. She opened her eyes. Across the drive, Carl was fleeing. He was going toward the street, into the crowd. He plunged through their midst and into the speeding traffic. There was a shriek of brakes. Tires screamed as they burned the pavement. A cry shrilled, then choked. A huge truck blotted out the space where Carl had been. Its wheels were locked as it slid on across. There was a still, dark bundle on the pavement when it passed.

Then she was hearing Bill's hot words. "You fool! You damned fool!" he was raging. "That gun was right in your face! You could have been—" Then he stopped. A slow white spread down his cheeks. He was seeing the little splotch of crimson at her shoulder.

"Nicki . . . !" She remembered that she started to smile. Then she went to sleep.

NOW she can laugh at it all. It seems a little bit silly, the way she worried so. She should have known she couldn't lie to Bill. She should have known that he'd catch on that day—the way she acted—especially when he passed the closet door. That moment, something told him. The rest the kid had told him. No, the kid didn't die.

"I must have thought you were awful dumb," she says now, sometimes.

"That wasn't the mistake," he grins. "But you were saying you hated me. You were telling me good-by, but there were tears in your eyes. . . ."

Then, perhaps, he kisses her shoulder. There's still a tiny, white scar there.

They never mention Carl.



Would You Recognize Murder. . .

. . . If you saw it? Probably you would. But suppose it occurred behind drawn blinds, with no unusual sounds to break the hush that comes just before dawn—and no corpse turned up to shriek, "Bloody murder!"

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**10 DIME
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YOU'LL BE THE DEATH OF ME!

By
W. T. Ballard



"All right, my sweet-smelling friend. Take it easy."

CHAPTER ONE

Appointment With Death

BERT CONRAD hadn't wanted to come to Las Vegas. He didn't like it, and he wasn't liking it any better as he turned into the Palomar Club and looked around the big gambling room.

Can you solve the red riddle of the perfumed killer of Suicide Street—and the girl whose kisses brought death?

Nevada always puzzled him. It was a country of long distances, of rolling, barren, scrubby land, of desert and mountain, of mines. But most of the people in the Palomar Club looked as if they'd come from Hollywood Boulevard. A lot of them had, and Betty Carlisle looked more Hollywoodish than anyone else in the place.

He'd been told to meet her at eleven, and the big electric clock on the wall behind the rear bar showed that it was just eleven-one.

She was standing at a roulette wheel, her small, rather white hand clutching a tall stack of orange counters. As he crossed to her side his eyes swept the whole room.

The floor boards were old and scuffed by the passage of many feet. The bar was old too, as was the gambling equipment. It might have been a spot in any desert town, catering to the miners, the cattlemen and the desert rats.

But this club wasn't owned by an old-timer of the desert. It was owned by a gambler from Los Angeles—a man who had operated gambling boats off the shore at Long Beach.

RAY GAMMON sat in his little office at the rear of the room, working at a big desk. The office was in reality nothing but a glass cage from which he could keep his dark watch over everything that went on at the Palomar. He must have seen Conrad come in through the front door, for he rose, left the office and moved leisurely through the crowd.

They were having some kind of a frontier celebration in Vegas, and Gammon wore a yellow shirt of heavy silk, a bright kerchief, its ends pulled through a carved bone ring. His dark hair grew down his cheeks in two long Mexican sideburns, and a big hat covered his dark head.

But in any dress, Ray Gammon looked

exactly what he was—a gambler, a wise boy, a tough boy. That thought flashed through Conrad's mind as he gripped Gammon's hand and saw the white flash of teeth beneath the mustached upper lip.

"Hello, Conrad. What're you doing in Vegas?"

Conrad shrugged. "Nothing. The same as the rest of these suckers. Just drove over to take a look at the burg and to lose a couple of dollars at your crap table."

Gammon's eyes were black and round and hard. They looked like marbles. The smile never left his tight-lipped mouth, but he shook his head.

"Why lie?" There was no offense in his tone. "You aren't a sucker, and you didn't drive over to see the dam. If you don't want to tell me why you're in Vegas . . ."

Conrad's smile matched Gammon's. "All right, I don't want to tell you why I'm in Vegas."

They grinned at each other, like two strange tigers meeting on the jungle path. Both knew that the other was dangerous; both knew that the other had no fear.

After an instant Gammon said, "Make yourself at home. Your drinks are on the house. I've got an apartment if you need a place to bunk. The hotels and auto courts are turning them away."

Conrad said, "Thanks," and moved over beside Betty Carlisle at the roulette wheel. He bought a stack of chips and spoke to the girl without appearing to.

"Good evening."

Her nod was so faint that he barely saw the motion of her head. "I was wondering if you'd be here."

He told her, "Your two hundred dollars said I'd be here. A Conrad never falls down on an assignment."

If he hadn't been talking to her he might have noticed the men who had strayed in through the front door. There were eight or ten coming in in a group. But Conrad's attention was on the girl.

He didn't know that anything had happened until a man jostled him to one side and grabbed Betty Carlisle's arm. He started forward then. He was her bodyguard, hired to see that nothing happened to her, hired that morning from his Los Angeles office.

But he took only half a step, for a gun poked hard into his short rib, and a voice which was not pleasant said, "Just take it easy, or you'll get hurt."

Conrad took it easy. Long training had schooled his muscles, his reactions. He stood and watched while the impossible was happening. The girl was being taken out of the crowded room without anyone's being the wiser. Not until they reached the door did anything mar their progress.

A cowpuncher was coming in—at least he looked like a cowpuncher. It was hard to tell, with the whole town dressed up for the frontier-day celebration. The puncher was drunk, and one of the men surrounding the girl pushed him out of the way.

The puncher didn't like it. He kept his feet and swung, but his blow was short, and someone clipped him neatly behind the ear with a blackjack. The puncher went down. The lookout at the first table yelled.

All sound in the room ceased. The man who had been pressing the gun against Conrad's side was gone, and Conrad leaped toward the door.

Other people had the same idea. Other people were in his way. Conrad was used to crowds. He used his shoulders and elbows freely. He managed to get through and burst out of the entrance just as two cops came running up the sidewalk, but he was too late.

The car was already pulling away from the curb. He jerked his gun free and sent a shot after it as it went swinging around the corner. He'd only had a glance at it. He couldn't even tell what kind of

a car it was, but his quick eye had seen something white flutter out of the rear window and land in the gutter.

He went forward to put his foot on the envelope, the gun still dangling from his fingers. The cop pounded up behind him.

"What happened? Did you get their license?" He seemed to realize for the first time that Conrad had a gun. "Say! What're you doing with that? Who are you? What the hell goes on?"

Conrad showed him his license and his police card from Los Angeles. The cop wasn't highly impressed. "A private dick," he said, and there was a world of disgust in his voice.

Conrad stooped and picked up the envelope. He stuffed it into his pocket. People were pouring out of the Palomar; people were pouring out of the other clubs up and down the street. It looked like a riot. There hadn't been so many people on the streets of Vegas since the opening of the dam.

CONRAD turned and walked slowly toward the club. Gammon was standing in the entrance talking to the chief of police through one corner of his mouth. He nodded and introduced Conrad. They went on talking, and Conrad retreated to one corner of the deserted bar.

He pulled the letter from his pocket, opened it and read:

Dear Betty: It's all set for tonight. The boys are all lined up. They'll kidnap you from the Palomar Club at eleven-thirty. We don't want to leave anything to chance, so have somebody with you—somebody who can tell the cops that you've been snatched.

It isn't smart to use one of your friends, so you'd better go down to the Coast Agency and hire Bert Conrad. Hire him to go over to Las Vegas as your bodyguard. One of the boys will stick a gun in Conrad's ribs. We'll try to get you out of the place without anyone's knowing there's trouble, but we want to be certain that Conrad knows you're gone, so he can tell your uncle. Your uncle should be ready to kick in with the ransom, especially since he

needs you before the stockholders' meeting next week to sign those proxies.

Nick.

Conrad read the letter twice. When he stuffed it back into his pocket his eyes were smoldering. As soon as he got back to Los Angeles, he meant to have a long heart-to-heart talk with Nick Bromeley. He had no doubt as to who had signed that letter. He'd known Nick Bromeley for several years, a mining promoter, cunning, smart, a good looking man of thirty-five. Yes, he'd have a talk with Nick, but at the moment his attention was diverted by the arrival of Gammon and the chief of police.

The chief was small and round, and inclined toward flesh. Conrad guessed that he was about sixty, a shrewd man, with deep sun-wrinkles at the corners of his gray eyes.

They came directly toward where Conrad was standing, and Gammon said without preamble, "Who was she, Bert? I saw you talking to her."

For the barest instant Conrad hesitated. He'd been made a sucker by Nick Bromeley and the dame. He'd been hired to broadcast their fake kidnaping, and he didn't like it. He almost pulled the letter

out of his pocket and showed it to the small police chief, but a natural dislike of the police kept him from it. He'd had a lot of trouble with cops in his day, ever since he'd opened his own agency. A dozen times they'd tried to put him out of business, and he hesitated now.

"She's Betty Carllyse," he said. "Martin Foster's niece."

The men exchanged glances. No one needed to tell them who Foster was. He'd operated mines all over the world. He was about the biggest thing in the mining business.

The police chief swore under his breath. "This is a nice thing! A swell advertisement for Vegas. The guys that pulled this must be crazy. They haven't got a chance. They can't get out of town even. These city crooks come over here and think we're easy pickings, but what they forget is that it's four hundred miles to Reno, three hundred to L. A. and farther to Salt Lake. The state police'll pick them up on the road some place. Don't worry about it, Conrad."

Conrad shook his head. "I'm not worried about it," he said. "Why should I?"

The police chief looked surprised. "Isn't she with you?"

BURR!

PURR!

HER!

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Conrad stalled. "Well—in a way. In a way she's with me, and in a way she's not. If you mean, did I drive her over from Los Angeles, the answer is no. I just happened to meet her here."

The cop looked uncertain. "Then who came with her? Where's she staying?"

"That," Conrad told him, "I don't know. My social standing isn't good enough to run around with Betty Carlyse. I just happened to know her. I just happened to meet her in the club."

He was lying, and he had the sudden sense that Ray Gammon knew he was lying. He saw the man's small round black eyes intent on his face. but he paid no attention.

He said to the chief, "I'm at the El Dorado auto court, cabin five. If there's anything I can do, let me know." He turned and walked away, knowing that they were watching him.

THERE was a cab parked down the street. He moved toward it, pulled the door open and climbed in. The driver looked at him expectantly. Conrad found a five-dollar bill, creased it the long way and slid it in the man's hand.

"I want to make a phone call," he said, "and I want to make it from some place where everyone in town won't know I'm doing it."

The driver looked at the bill, at Conrad, and then he grinned. "I've got a phone at my place." He was young and red-headed, with a liberal sprinkle of freckles across a red skin.

Conrad said, "Swell. Let's go."

The cab pulled out, turned right at the first corner, leaving the business district behind, and then turned in a dark residential street. The lights of a car turned into the street directly behind them. Some sixth sense warned Conrad.

Even as the big car ranged up at their side he jerked the letter from his pocket

and shoved it down into the space between the seat and side upholstery, but he was too late to get his gun out. The car nosed over, pinching off the cab between its black snout and the curb.

It had hardly stopped rolling before the rear door was jerked open. A big hand came in, caught the front of Conrad's coat and dragged him from the cab. He tried to swing at the other's face, but the man was too strong. His arms were smothered at his sides by his captor's grip, and he was pitched headlong onto the floor of the black car.

Someone put a foot on his neck, and a harsh voice told him to take it easy. Conrad lay perfectly still. The car whirred into motion. He judged that they had traveled a dozen blocks, then speed slackened. Someone bent forward, got his gun and ran quick hands over his pockets.

A disappointed voice said in the darkness. "The letter the girl dropped ain't here. You sure Conrad picked it up?"

The second voice answered, "I saw him pick it up. Where is it, Conrad?"

Conrad grunted, "If you mean that envelope I got from the gutter, I gave it to Gammon."

Someone sucked in breath sharply. "The hell you did!"

There was a muttered conference in the front seat.

Finally a voice asked, "Did you read what was in it?"

Conrad shook his head. "No."

The same voice asked, "What'd you tell the cops?"

Conrad shrugged. "Nothing much. What could I tell them? They told me. They said you guys didn't have a chance to get out of town. They said the state police would pick you up on the road, that it's a million miles across the desert to any place from this joint."

There was more conference in the front seat. Finally a voice said, "Listen, Conrad. We're going to take you to a phone.

You're going to call Gammon and tell him that you figured how to make some dough from that letter. You're going to tell him to meet you in the alley back of his place. Now make it sound good, and you won't get hurt. Otherwise, somebody'll pick you out from under a cactus, if the buzzards don't find you first."

The car turned into a driveway and pulled around behind the house. Somebody bent down and tied a handkerchief over Conrad's eyes. He was led across a stretch of grass, up three steps and into a room. From the smell of coffee, he judged that it was a kitchen. They set him on a stool, put a telephone receiver against his ear. He could hear the faint twirl as someone dialed a number. Then a voice answered, and he asked for Gammon.

The club owner was on the phone a couple of minutes later.

Conrad said, "Look, Ray. This is Conrad. You know that letter I handed you? I figured out how we can make some dough—some real dough—out of it. Meet me in the alley back of your place in ten minutes." He fumbled for the phone, hung up the receiver before Gammon had a chance to answer; then they led him back to the car.

GAMMON didn't show up in the alley. Conrad had half hoped he would show up with a couple of cops, but although they cruised around the block twice, there was no sign of the owner of the Palomar.

Then he said, "Maybe he didn't understand. Maybe if I call him again—There's a drug store over there."

They hesitated for a moment; then they pulled across and parked in front of the drug store. One of the men went in with him. He had a hand in each coat pocket, and Conrad knew that the hands weren't empty.

The man said, "Just don't try anything

funny, or you'll never walk out of that booth."

Conrad went in and made the call. The man stood with the booth door open, listening. He had a broken nose, and someone had pretty well scrambled his face. Conrad judged he was six-foot-two or three. He must have weighed two-fifteen, without fat.

The club answered and said that Gammon wasn't there. Conrad came out of the booth shaking his head.

"I don't get it," he said. "I know Ray Gammon. He never turned down a chance to make a dishonest nickel in his life." He was talking to the big man, but his eyes were ranging around the store looking for a means of escape.

There was a display of perfume bottles on the right. Conrad walked by them. With a sudden sweeping gesture he caught up a heavy glass bottle and hurled it directly into the man's ugly face. It broke with a resounding pop and the contents of the splintered glass blinded the gunman.

He let out a yell, clawing desperately at his burning eyes. Conrad didn't wait. He dashed toward the rear of the store, went through the prescription room, into the alley, across it, over a fence and through a littered yard.

He wondered how the gunman liked attar of roses. He hadn't had time to look at the bottle, but the smell was plain. Most of the contents had spilled all over him. The first thing was to find a phone and get in touch with Gammon. He called the club. Gammon wasn't there, and Conrad left a message.

The message was short. "If you like your neck, get out of town for a few days." Then he started out to find the cab.

He asked at the first service station where the cab garage was, and went over there.

The cab might have been so badly

wrecked that it had come in. But it wasn't in the garage, and he asked the man in charge, "Do you know a driver with red hair and a lot of freckles?"

The man nodded. "Sure. His name's Stoner. What's the matter? What's the beef?"

Conrad told him, "No beef. I just left something in his cab. Here's my address. If he comes in, tell him to get in touch with me."

He went down the street. Every cab he saw he stopped and asked the driver about Stoner. The third one he asked nodded.

"Yeah, I saw him. He's got a bent mud-guard in front. You're the second guy that's been asking about him."

Conrad started. "The second?"

The driver nodded. "Yeah. Some guy stopped me a few minutes ago. Just as we were talking, Stoner drove by. I flagged him down and this guy got into his cab. They drove off somewhere."

CONRAD turned away, walking directly toward the telephone office. He was a big man, heavy through the shoulders, flat at the flanks, with the oddly stiff-legged walk of a trained athlete. He had started out to be a lawyer, but the depression had turned him into a private detective. His usually sleepy expression, his mussed hair and his untidy clothes, gave him a stupid appearance. He wasn't, as a great many people had found out. But at the moment he was stumped.

His first reaction had been to get into his car and drive back to Los Angeles, but he decided not to. He didn't like this setup. It was perfectly obvious what was happening. He didn't need anyone to tell him. Gossip had told him that.

Betty Carlisle was worth ten million dollars—ten million when she reached her thirtieth birthday, but that was a good eight years away, and she wanted to marry Nick Bromeley and Nick was

broke. It was an old story, so utterly simple that there was no kick in it.

Foster, Betty's uncle, didn't like Bromeley, and there would be no dough for the kids if they married, no dough for eight years, and eight years was a long time. But if, with this fake snatch, they could get the old uncle to kick through with a hundred grand, that would last them a long time, even after they'd paid off the hoodlums they'd hired to make this snatch look real.

The more he thought about it the madder Conrad got. They'd put him in a hell of a spot. If he turned in a fake kidnaping for the real thing, the department of justice boys would never believe that he hadn't been in on the whole business. It would mean the loss of his license. It might even mean a jail term.

The smart thing would be to tell the cops all about it, but on the other hand he'd accepted two hundred bucks from the girl to act as her bodyguard. That made her his client, and you were supposed not to talk about your client's business. It was a nice question of ethics, and ethics bothered Conrad. He still had a conscience, even after years as a private agent.

He went into the phone office and put through a call for Bromeley at the latter's Beverly Hills home.

The man's voice didn't sound sleepy when he answered, and Conrad said angrily, "Betty's kidnaped, Nick. It worked."

Bromeley tried to sound surprised. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Conrad was savage. "Listen, pal. Phone wires have ears, and I'm not putting myself on the limb by talking out of turn, but I know one thing—you better get on a plane and get on one quick. And get over here, because if you're not here in about four hours, I'm going to start talking all over the place."

He hung up without giving Bromeley

a chance to answer, and he was raging when he turned away from the phone. But he was not so angry that the thought of sleep was entirely divorced from his mind.

He got his car and drove out to the auto court, walked into the cabin and went to bed. Let Nick Bromeley and the girl take care of things. After all, it was their party. They'd thought it up all by themselves.

CHAPTER TWO

Killer's Ransom

CONRAD hadn't been asleep more than two hours when someone pounded heavily on the door and a voice came hoarsely through the panel.

"Come on, Conrad! Open up! We know you're in there. Open the door."

Bert Conrad dragged himself out of bed. His eyes were still so sleep-heavy that it made him dizzy. He stumbled over a chair, just managed to save his balance, fumbled and found the light.

The police chief and two other cops were standing on the doorstep outside. They all came in. The men with the chief were big. They pretty well filled the room. The chief's gray eyes had lost their friendliness. They were hard now, cold as a sheet of cloudy ice.

He said, "Weren't you asking questions

about a cab driver named Stoner a couple of hours ago?"

Conrad nodded. "Yeah."

The chief said: "Then you found him?"

Conrad shook his head. "I didn't."

The cop's eyes didn't change, neither did his manner. His voice sounded like a dry wind blowing across desert leaves.

"You better be able to prove that, son. Stoner's dead."

Conrad swore under his breath. He wasn't exactly surprised, but in a way he was. After all, this kidnaping was a phony, and phony parties didn't call for murder. That was carrying the act a little too far.

The police chief said, "Why were you looking for Stoner?"

Conrad sighed. "All right, I'll talk. I should have told you before this, but I had a client. I wasn't in on the gag. The kidnaping was a fake. She and Nick Bromeley pulled it together. They hoped to get out of the club without any trouble, and then I was supposed to run to the cops screaming that there'd been a kidnaping, so that her uncle would kick through with a hundred thousand ransom. But it went sour. First that drunken cowboy balled their play up at the door, and then the kid dropped a letter which I picked up."

The little police chief's eyes glittered. "Was that the letter you called Gammon about?"

Conrad nodded. "Yeah. A couple of



these kidnap mugs grabbed me. All I had time to do was shove the letter down behind the seat of Stoner's cab. I told them Gammon had it. If you'll look down behind the seat of the cab, you'll find the letter."

The police chief nodded. "They already found it." He pulled the letter out of his pocket. "You're kinda in a spot, Conrad."

Bert Conrad stiffened. "What do you mean—I'm in a spot? I didn't have anything to do with this. Bromeley and the gal thought up the whole party."

The police chief said, "Where's Bromeley?"

Conrad said, "He's supposed to be flying in from L. A. He ought to be in now. Let's go out to the airport and see if he's landed."

The chief nodded, and Conrad climbed into his clothes.

THEY drove to the airport in silence, no one feeling much like talking. There was a small two-seater pulled up beside the hangar, a pilot in a leather jacket leaning against one of the wings.

He came forward as they drove in, and Conrad asked, "You don't happen to be from L. A.?"

The pilot nodded. "I'm not from any place else, brother."

Conrad said, "Did you fly a guy named Bromeley down here?"

The pilot nodded again. "Yeah. We got in twenty minutes ago."

Conrad looked around, and his irritation got the better of him. "Then where the hell is he?"

The pilot shrugged. "I don't know. He got a cab and rode uptown. I heard him tell the driver to take him to the El Dorado auto court."

Conrad turned back toward the police car. "We must have just missed him. The guy's probably waiting at my place."

The police chief didn't say anything,

and they got back into the car. There wasn't any light in cabin five when they pulled up before the court, and there was no sign of Bromeley.

Conrad sat down on the step and lit a cigarette. The match flared up, making a small finger of light in the darkness, and in the light he saw something which he hadn't seen before.

Shrubby made a dark clump before the cabin door, and out of that clump protruded a man's shoe. Conrad rose unhurriedly, cupping his hand to protect the flickering flame of the match, and took a couple of steps toward the shrubbery. Then he stopped.

There was a leg attached to that foot—a leg covered by dark cloth.

He parted the bushes, calling over his shoulder to the police chief, "Got a light?"

The man had a pencil-flash. He knifed the small beam into the dark shadow, the white glow picking up the whiter skin of Nick Bromeley's face. Blood came out of the hair above the temple to seep down the left side of the face in a drying stream of dark crimson.

The little police chief pushed Conrad out of the way and knelt beside the body, crowding in under the branches. When he straightened his face was grave.

"The man's dead," he said. "He's been dead for some time—maybe three-quarters of an hour."

Conrad was doing some figuring. The pilot had said that Bromeley had left the airport twenty minutes before they reached it. That would mean that the man had been killed almost as soon as he reached the auto court. He wet his dry lips.

"Well, Chief, this is one killing they can't hang onto me."

The police chief looked at him. "Maybe," he said. "It takes about ten minutes to drive each way from the airport to here. That pilot might have been wrong a few minutes in his guess. Maybe Brom-

they got here just before we did. You killed him and then put on the sleepy act when we arrived." His voice was cold, uncompromising.

Conrad started to say heatedly, "You're nuts," and then he stopped. There wasn't any use arguing. Instead he turned, unlocked his cabin door and walked in.

It was a small place—a bedroom, bath and kitchenette. There was a table at the end of the kitchenette. He walked in and turned on the light. He wanted a drink badly. There wasn't anything but water. He crossed to the sink; then he stopped.

From the corner of his eye he had seen something under the edge of the kitchen table. That something was a wooden potato masher, and one whole side of it was spattered with a dark-crust something which he knew must be blood. He turned and saw the police captain was also staring at the potato masher; then the man's eyes came up to meet those of Conrad.

"I think," he said, "that you and me got a date downtown."

THE office of the police chief was a crowded, smoky room whose walls threatened to bulge with the number of its occupants. There was an assistant district attorney, a man with iron-gray hair whose name was Lord, and a second gray-haired man whom Conrad recognized as Martin Foster, Betty Carlisle's uncle.

He didn't conceal his surprise. "Why, sir, where'd you come from?"

Foster's eyes were cold and blue and penetrating.

He said, "I was in Tonopah on business. I flew my own plane down as soon as my L. A. attorney wired me what had happened. I got here a few minutes ago."

There was no friendliness in his voice. "They tell me that this kidnaping was a fake and that you were in on it."

Conrad had a weak feeling at the pit of his stomach. He had no illusions about

Foster's power. This man could be most ruthless and terrible if he chose. The record of his life was a record of men broken in trying to oppose him.

Conrad forced his attention toward the police chief. "None of you will believe me." He sounded weary. He was weary. He'd left Los Angeles at noon on the preceding day. It had been a hundred and twenty-five at Baker. He'd only had time to take a shower and change clothes before going to the club to meet Betty Carlisle.

He said, "I'm not in this. I never was. The Carlisle girl came into my office yesterday morning. She said she had to go to Vegas to meet a man, that she wanted someone she knew in town in case of trouble. She didn't say what kind of trouble. I got the idea that maybe it was an elopement, that she was beginning to have doubts, that she thought perhaps she might change her mind when the time came for the marriage, and she wanted me there in case her prospective bridegroom got tough about it. That was just my own idea. She didn't say anything. She just gave me two hundred dollars to drive to Vegas and to meet her at the Club Palomar at eleven o'clock."

He realized that his words weren't making any impression on the listening men, that Foster's face was a mask, that the police chief was scowling, but he'd said all he could say. There wasn't any more to be said.

The police chief pulled the letter from his pocket and read it out loud. "Is that the letter you found in the gutter?"

Conrad nodded.

Foster said in his chipped, careful voice, "Has it occurred to you, Chief, that Conrad may be lying? We have only his word about this letter. Don't you think it might be a **real** kidnaping, that Conrad was in on it, that something misfired, that he wrote this letter or had it written to try to cover up? If that were true, it might

explain Bromeley's death, wouldn't it?

"Conrad would know that as soon as you could get in touch with Bromeley, Nick would deny writing that letter, therefore Conrad might have telephoned him and told him that my niece was missing. Naturally Nick would fly over here as fast as he could, since he was in love with her. It would have been a simple thing for Conrad to be crouched in the bushes with that potato masher, to kill Bromeley as he came up to the auto court. He probably intended to move the body, but you and your men arrived so soon that he had no chance."

The police chief nodded. "I thought of that myself, Mr. Foster. All right, Conrad, where's the girl?"

Conrad opened his mouth. Anger was burning up through him, deadening the tired feeling which had swept over him, burning it out, but there was nothing he could say in his own defense, and he clamped his mouth tight shut.

One of the cops grabbed him from behind and slapped him smartly across the nose. "Come on, Conrad. This isn't L. A. This is Vegas. We know how to handle tough guys."

Conrad's nose hurt like hell. He could feel something running from one nostril and knew it was bleeding. He threw a sharp short punch and knocked the man back across the desk. Two others grabbed him.

The police chief said, "Take him out and lock him up. If you're smart, Conrad, you'll talk. It'll be easier on you."

THEY opened the door to shove him through, but they didn't, for there were three men outside—three men, the lower part of whose faces were covered by tight-drawn handkerchiefs. In the festival regalia which they wore, they looked like old-time Western bad men. Each had two open holsters, but the holsters were empty. The guns were

in their owners' hands, covering the men in the room.

The leader said, "Okay, boss. What've they been doing—beatin' you up? We'll fix that."

Conrad eyed them narrowly. "Are you talking to me?"

One of the men laughed behind the handkerchief. "Sure. Stop stalling, Bert. These punks are onto you anyway. Come on, let's scam."

Conrad hesitated, his eyes ranging around the room, seeking help. One of the men had come up by his side, and he could feel the heavy pressure of the frontier model Colt against his ribs. His big body screened the gun from the men in the room.

"Let's go," his supposed friend said softly. "Tony, take the rest of these guys downstairs and lock them up in one of their own cells. Snap it up, Conrad. We haven't got all night."

Conrad stepped out into the hall. The black car was drawn up at the rear door of the jail. He got into it. The other men came running out a minute later, and the car started off into the night.

He wasn't certain which direction they took. Again he was lying on the floor of the car with a man's foot on his neck. He was very tired of that floor and even more tired of that foot. If he ever got a chance to take a crack at the man, he meant to make it a good one.

The road got rougher; the car bumped through chuckholes, went into second gear and ground up a washboard grade. After three-quarters of an hour it pulled to a stop. The foot was lifted from Conrad's neck. Someone jerked him to his feet and he found himself standing beside the car.

Off to the right, the bare outline of a mountain showed against the light from the eastern sky. A mill climbed up the hill in a succession of slanting roofs, and an ore dump was directly before him.

The minute he stepped into the house he smelled an almost overpowering odor of perfume, and he saw the broken-nosed man of the drug store seated in the chair.

Conrad couldn't resist smiling. "Hello, handsome. You certainly do smell nice."

The big man sneered. His face was scarred, had little reddish scratches, and his eyes were puffy.

"Don't be so smart. You'll get yours. Have any trouble taking him, boys?"

"No trouble." They grinned widely, and Broken-nose laughed, turning to Bert.

"How's it feel to be a big shot kidnaper?"

Conrad said, "I don't see your angle. What good does it do you?"

Broken-nose told him, "You don't have to understand. Take him back in the tunnel and tie him up."

The man called Tony said, "Why don't we just kill him now?"

Broken-nose shook his head. "You haven't got any brains, Tony. We don't kill the girl until maybe tomorrow night. If we should kill Conrad now, his body would be twenty-four hours old, and the cops would know that they hadn't killed each other."

CHAPTER THREE

Bill for Murder

TONY pushed his prisoner out through the door, and they crossed the rough ground toward the tunnel entrance.

Inside there was a light bulb every hundred feet, casting a white, unprotected glare on the rough rock walls and the timbered ceiling.

Moisture dripped in tiny rivulets from the timbers.

At the far end, near the heading, Betty Carlyse sat on a pile of blankets. Her ankles were bound securely and her wrists taped tight together. When she saw Conrad, her eyes lighted, then dulled as Tony came up behind him.

The man pushed Conrad down at her side and tossed a roll of tape into his lap. "Fasten your ankles, and make it good. . . . Now your wrists. Put a couple wraps around them, and then I'll finish the job."

Conrad obeyed in silence, and Tony finished the job expertly. Then he said, "You can yell your head off if you want



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to. Nobody but the devil can hear you back there."

He moved away, walking down the line of tracks which had been set for the ore cars. The girl and Conrad looked at each other in silence. He saw that she was scared, that she was fighting for control.

She told him, "I'm sorry you got mixed up in this, Conrad. Nick hired these men to kidnap me, so I came willingly. But after we reached the mine they tied me up."

He nodded. He'd been sore as the devil at her, but he wasn't mad any more. She was so small, so helpless looking, and right now she was in a very tough spot.

He said, "I figured out that it was a put-up job."

She said, "But we'll be all right. As soon as Nick Bromley finds out that something's gone wrong, he'll communicate with the police. He knows where these men are."

Conrad hated to have to tell her, but he figured that it was better to. She looked like the kind of a kid who could take it, even if she was scared.

He said, "Nick can't help, Betty. Nick's dead." Quickly he told her what had happened.

The shock of his words took all the remaining color out of her face. He'd been afraid she was going to cry. She didn't.

She said slowly, "I suppose they had to kill Nick if they were really going to hold me for ransom."

He didn't tell her what Broken-nose had said in the house—about her dying within twenty-four hours. There wasn't any use adding that to her worries. But he was thinking rapidly. Why, if they hoped to hold her for ransom, were they planning to kill her? It didn't make sense. And suddenly he wanted very much to talk to the man with the broken

nose. He knew he'd have to talk mighty fast.

HE raised his voice and shouted. His words echoed and re-echoed down the long drift. It seemed a hopeless thing. They were so deep in the side of the hill, he doubted if anyone could hear him. But he kept it up, and finally he was rewarded by the sound of feet shuffling along the tunnel floor.

Tony came into view and said angrily, "What the hell are you yelling about? Nobody can hear you but me, and I'm tired of the squawk. If you don't keep that mouth shut I'll put something in it."

Conrad told him, "I've got to talk to your broken-nosed friend quick. It's important."

Tony stared at him. "What do you mean—important?"

"If you don't call him," Conrad tried to put a lot of assurance into his voice, "he's going to kick the dickens out of you when he finds out."

The man hesitated, then he turned on his heel and disappeared down the mine tunnel. Conrad didn't know whether he'd deliver the message or not. He had no way of knowing, until Broken-nose appeared half an hour later.

The big man looked sore as he said, "This had better be good, or I'm going to knock some teeth down your throat."

Conrad told him, "It'll be good, all right. You're expecting to get a hundred thousand ransom for Betty, aren't you? Who do you think's going to pay it?"

The big man grunted. "That's easy. Foster'll pay it."

Conrad made himself grin sardonically. "And just where is Mr. Foster going to get a hundred grand?"

The man stared at him, suspicion written deeply into his eyes. "What the hell do you mean, where's he going to get it? He owns half the mining property in Nevada, to say nothing about what he's

got in California. He's got plenty."

Conrad nodded. "That's right. He owns some mining property, all right, but how many of his mines are working? Owning mining property and having money are two different things. I'm willing to bet you anything you name that tonight Foster couldn't raise a hundred grand if he wanted to. He didn't have any to give his niece here. She and Bromeley thought he was just playing tight, so they pulled this gag kidnaping. The reason he didn't give it was because he couldn't raise it. All mining property is good for is to pay taxes on, unless it's working."

Tony, who had come up behind Broken-nose, had been listening. "Say! Supposing the guy's right? Maybe that's why—" He caught himself as Broken-nose swore.

"Shut up and let me handle this." He swung back to face Conrad. "Why're you giving me this song-and-dance?"

Tony cut in, "Maybe it's because he don't want to die."

Conrad nodded. "That's it, Tony. I don't want to die, and the only chance I've got to live is to show you boys how you can make more money out of me alive than you can with me dead."

Broken-nose was not convinced, but he was wavering. "Keep talking," he said slowly. "You haven't showed me anything yet."

Conrad said, "I will in a minute. You can't collect from Foster if he doesn't have any dough, but there is one way you can collect. The people he's in business with wouldn't want it to get out that he's broke." He glanced at the big man, but saw that his words had no effect.

"Keep talking," Broken-nose told him.

Conrad nodded. "That's just what I intend to do. His associates don't want it known that Foster's broke. They're trying to sell a lot of the property, so if

I'd go to them or send them a letter and point out what would happen if the news got out, they'll kick through with the hundred grand you were promised. My only stipulation is that the girl and I go free."

The broken-nosed gangster hesitated. "Who would you send this letter to?"

Conrad was lying rapidly. "To Lester, Foster's attorney. He's heading a committee of the mine stockholders to pull the old man out of a jam."

Broken-nose turned this information over in his mind slowly. "All right," he said. "It won't hurt to write him a letter. Tell him we've got the girl. Tell him we want a hundred grand. We don't care where we get it, but if we don't get it from Foster, we're going to let the world know he hasn't got it, that he's broke."

HE fumbled through his pocket, found a fountain-pen and a piece of paper. The paper was slightly soiled, but he spread it out on the blanket in front of Conrad; then he reached out and pulled the tape from Conrad's wrists.

Bert flexed his fingers. "I've been tied up so long there's no circulation left in my arm. Here, rub it for me." He extended the hand, and the gunman began to rub it.

He was down on one knee, and the open holster with the heavy .45 was close to Conrad. As the man rubbed, Conrad yelled, "Rub harder, will you? That hurts like the devil. My hand's all full of needles."

The gunman grunted, and began to rub with both hands. Suddenly Conrad tore his wrist free of Broken-nose's grasp. He made a sweeping, clawing gesture, jerked the gun loose from the holster, and rammed the long barrel against Broken-nose's side.

"All right, my sweet-smelling friend. Take it very easy. You, Tony, drop that

gun. I'd love to put a bullet in your chest."

Tony obeyed. His heavy gun clattered to the stone of the tunnel floor, and Conrad took their extra guns and tossed them across to the pile of blankets. He backed them against the damp wall, turned them around and then walked backward to kneel at the girl's side.

Walking was torture. His ankles had been bound so long that his feet were numb.

With one hand he loosened her bonds, and told her, "Take it easy. Keep moving your legs. Your circulation will come back in a little while."

She managed to smile, but almost fell when she got to her feet.

He said, "Come on, kid. We haven't got time to fool. Tony, go over to that pile of blankets and lie face-down. Put your hands behind you."

The girl used the tape to fasten the man's wrists, then his ankles.

"You're next, Broken-nose," Conrad told him, and the big man swore.

The girl had one of the man's arms fastened when there was sudden sound in the tunnel.

Conrad, who had been watching her, swung around, and the broken-nosed man shouted, "Watch it, Charley! They're loose!"

For an instant there was silence in the tunnel, then the sound of running feet. Conrad swore to himself. He had no idea how many men Broken-nose had at the mine, but he knew that if they stayed there another moment, they were trapped. They didn't even have time to finish tying up the big man. He caught up the girl and started to run along the uneven floor of the tunnel.

As they reached the entrance, someone snapped a shot at them. Conrad used Broken-nose's gun to fire in return, and, seizing the girl's arm, ran down the tracks which curved around the mine

dump. But instead of following the tracks he turned, climbed the lower end of the dump and sank down for a moment to rest.

Their bodies were screened from the house. He could see men running toward the mine entrance; others were circling around the lower end of the dump.

The black car stood beside the house, apparently deserted. If they could only reach the car, get into it . . .

Cautiously he worked his way forward. Gray light was stealing out of the east as the sun crept up above the distant range of mountains. They had almost reached the car before they were seen; then one of the men turned at the mine entrance and let out a yell.

Conrad fired, and saw the bullet kick up dust at the man's feet. The girl did not need direction. She'd already leaped into the car and kicked the engine into life. It was moving by the time Conrad could swing onto the running board. They went bumping down the mine road at a dangerous speed.

THE girl could drive! It was lucky for them that she could, for the road had not been built for speeding. Apparently the black car was the only one at the mine, for there was no sign of pursuit, and after half an hour they reached the main highway and turned toward Vegas, driving directly toward the town's best hotel.

The night clerk was nearly asleep. He came awake with startled surprise when Conrad asked for Mr. Foster, and his mouth drooped open as he stared at the girl.

"Are you—"

Conrad said, "Never mind that. Take us up to Mr. Foster's suite. He's here, isn't he?"

The clerk nodded. "The manager gave him his own room. We were full when Mr. Foster arrived."

He turned and walked with them to the elevator. There was no night operator. The clerk took them up to the fifth floor and along the hall. After four minutes of knocking, Foster opened the door, a tall, gaunt figure in a silk robe.

For a moment he stared at them, then he caught the girl in his arms. "Betty! Where—How—" He took her arm and led her into the suite.

Conrad followed, and the desk clerk pushed in after them, driven by curiosity.

After awhile Foster looked at the detective. "What happened?"

Conrad said, "They had us tied up in an old mine tunnel in the hills. We managed to break free."

The girl said, "He was wonderful, Uncle Mac. He stood the whole bunch of them off by himself."

Conrad told her, "It wasn't anything. I had to. It was the only way I could prove to the cops that I wasn't a kidnap-er."

She said, "You, a kidnap-er? You mean that they thought you kidnaped me?" Her tone was incredulous. "You'll have to explain to them, Uncle Mac. He had nothing to do with the kidnaping. Why, he had nothing to do with any of it."

A voice from the doorway on her right said hoarsely, "Don't worry about that, lady. Your uncle knows all about the kidnaping."

The girl turned and cried out as she did so, for the broken-nosed man was standing in the doorway grinning at her, the gun in his hand pointed directly at Conrad's stomach.

"Take it easy, punk. Get his gun, Tony."

Tony walked around the broken-nosed man and took the gun from Conrad. The hotel desk clerk stared at the newcomers, his face as white as a sheet; then he slowly sank into a chair.

Foster's voice rasped at the broken-nosed man. "You shouldn't have come

here, you fool. What do you mean by implicating me?"

The broken-nosed man just stared at him. "What are you crabbing about? We took all the risk. Conrad says that you're broke, that you can't pay off the hundred grand you promised us."

Foster's voice was sharp. "He's crazy! Why, I've got plenty. I've got millions!"

Broken-nose was stubborn. "Then why do you want the girl killed?"

Betty Carlisle uttered a little cry. She was staring at her uncle with unbelieving eyes.

Conrad showed no surprise. He said, "I'll tell you why he wants her dead. There're two reasons. He's custodian of her trust fund. There's supposed to be ten million in it. He's got it so loaded down with gyp mining stock that it's not worth one-fourth that. Then he wants the insurance. Her life's insured for a million bucks, you know."

The big man was interested. "You mean, if she's dead he'll get a million bucks?"

Conrad realized that he'd said the wrong thing. He said quickly, "You don't have to kill her to get the money, my friend. She'll give you two hundred thousand if you don't."

Broken-nose said shrewdly, "But if this guy Foster has spent all her dough, where's she going to get two hundred grand to give me? Maybe we'd better go ahead with things as we planned. Maybe we'd better take them back to the mine and kill them so Foster can collect. Take that hotel clerk along too. We'll lose him down the old shaft."

The clerk tried to say something, but fear choked him. All he could do was babble.

"Wait—" Conrad was trying to stall for time, but Tony gave him no chance.

"Come on," he said, and shoved the heavy frontier Colt into the detective's ribs. "Move out of here."

They went along the hall to the elevator. Foster had the girl, one hand clamped across her mouth. The hotel clerk's legs had failed him and Broken-nose was forced to carry him.

They reached the lobby and crossed it, and Conrad turned the knob. There was a wind blowing outside and the door slammed toward him. He stepped into the entrance, letting the door go. It swung against Tony, hitting his gun arm, just as Conrad hoped it would.

He whirled, one hand clamping down on the big gun, grasping the hammer and holding it so that it couldn't be fired. His other fist cracked against Tony's jaw. He felt the man crumple under the force of the blow.

Foster was handicapped with the girl, and he had no gun. Broken-nose's arms were filled with the hotel clerk. He had a gun, but it was in his holster and he had no chance to get it. Foster dropped the girl. He turned blindly, driven by sudden, unreasonable fear, and ran directly into Broken-nose. The three of them went down together—Foster, the hotel clerk and the gangster.

Conrad raised Tony's gun and fired into the air, the report booming down the morning quiet of the street.

It was the easiest way to summon the police. It worked. The prowler car was there within three minutes.

LATER, as he and the girl started back to Los Angeles, she said, "I don't know how you ever figured it out."

He grinned at her, but it wasn't much of a grin. He was too tired to grin.

He said, "I didn't figure it all out. I let the cops think I did because they were so smart. But in reality I didn't know anything at first except that your phony kidnaping had gone sour; then I got to thinking.

"Your uncle got here pretty quick. It

almost looked as if he'd arranged to be in Tonopah last night so that he could be on hand when the thing broke. The tip-off came when the kidnapers tried to make the cops think I was the head of the snatch gang, and when they let it drop that you were to be killed.

"I remembered reading in the papers a year ago about your life being insured for a million dollars. I remembered hearing a mining man talk about Foster a few weeks back, saying that Foster was in some kind of a financial jam and that there'd be a crack-up one of these days."

He grinned. "That's what happened. My friend, Broken-nose, told the cops all about it when he finally started to talk. Nick Bromeley hired them to pull the fake kidnaping, but he offered them only a thousand apiece. Broken-nose used to work for Foster, so he figured that maybe Foster would pay him more money for telling what you and Bromeley planned, so he went to Foster.

"Foster told them to go ahead with the kidnaping, only instead of turning you free, to kill you. He offered them a hundred grand for the job. That meant they had to get rid of Bromeley. They had a man planted in the police station. The cops were watching all the phone calls through the main exchange. When I phoned Nick they knew all about it, so the gang planted a man at the airport who trailed Bromeley to my cabin and killed him. They also killed the taxi driver in trying to get the letter."

"Poor Nick," the girl said. "He was trying to help me. Neither one of us realized what we were starting. We intended to get the ransom, then he was to meet me at Vegas—" Her voice broke a little— "and marry me. It looked like life would be one great big party, but it didn't end that way."

Conrad said, "Parties seldom end the way you expect them to, especially when you hold them in Las Vegas."

The Case of the Hatless Rider

A True Crime Story

**By
Zeta Rothschild**

“THERE'S a pretty young lady to see you,” Detective W. L. McLeman told Captain W. O. Lyle, detective chief of Wichita, Kansas. “She says her parents are missing.”



A hat which shrieked murder, a finger that pointed to the gallows— Can you follow the clues that point the way to the smiling cowboy killer of Mystery Ranch?

"It's usually the other way around," commented Lyle, as he stacked a pile of papers on his desk. "Show her in, and we'll see what we can do."

Miss Charlene Pritchard, despite her woebegone expression and reddened eyelids, was an extremely attractive young woman. Nervously she plucked at the fingers of her gloves while Captain Lyle waited patiently for her to tell him her story.

At breakfast the morning of November 23rd, she told him, her mother and father had made plans to drive to Wellington in the afternoon. Her mother had called for her father at his store—the Pritchard Mercantile Company, on North Broadway—about eleven o'clock. That was the last the daughter knew of their movements. She had neither seen them nor heard from them since.

"What have you done to find them?" asked Lyle quietly.

"I expected them home that evening," answered the daughter, "but when they weren't home for dinner, I wasn't worried. When I got up the next morning, however, and saw their bedroom door open and the room empty, I knew something had happened."

Charlene Pritchard had phoned to the store and asked if anyone there had had word from her father. No one had. There had been calls to relatives and friends in Wichita, Wellington and other nearby towns. But again and again the daughter drew a blank. No one had seen or heard from her father and mother since November 23rd.

Nor had hospitals, both in and outside of Wichita, had any word of the missing Pritchards.

Captain Lyle, long before Charlene Pritchard had finished her story, had outlined his course.

"I'll send out circulars, asking information, to every sheriff in this part of Kansas, and in Oklahoma, too," he told Char-

lene Pritchard. "And Detective McLeman will see what he can pick up around town here."

Upon information supplied by the daughter, the circulars were quickly outlined. The description of the Pritchards concluded with details of the clothing they had worn when they disappeared. Mrs. Pritchard had worn a black caracul coat over a blue crepe print dress. Harry Pritchard was wearing a blue suit, brown shoes, dark overcoat and felt hat. Both her father and mother wore wrist watches and Mrs. Pritchard also had a ring with three diamonds.

Their car was a Buick sedan; the couple were known to have taken the road south from Wichita toward Wellington.

Within twenty-four hours after the circular went out, two telephone calls came through for Captain Lyle, one from Wellington, the other from Blackwell, Oklahoma.

A pair of men's gloves, worn, had been picked up on the highway outside of Wellington.

"Thought you might like to see them," explained Wellington's sheriff. "They're crusted with dried blood."

"Send them along," answered Lyle quickly. "And ask people riding in the same neighborhood to keep their eyes open, will you?"

The call from Blackwell was equally to the point. A man had noticed a good-looking light gray felt hat, rather large, just inside a fence. He thought he was pretty lucky since the hat was practically new. However, while turning it over he found fingerprints on the brim. Clearly outlined on the top of that pearly, satin-finished surface were the prints of four fingers, and on the underside the prints of a thumb, all in a dull, blackish-red—blood.

The gloves had been found on the 24th, the hat the 25th.

Both gloves and hat arrived in Wichita

the next day. Charlene Pritchard shook her head when shown the pearl-gray felt hat.

"Dad never wore that," she answered promptly. "He wasn't given to dolling up."

But when the young woman took the blood-stained gloves in her hands, her lips began to quiver and tears rolled down her cheeks.

"They're your father's?" Lyle asked quietly.

Charlene Pritchard nodded. "Here's where I mended a rip between the third and fourth fingers of the right glove," she answered, showing him the handiwork.

There was still a question as to whether the light gray felt was tied up with the disappearance of the Pritchards.

"Take the hat and see if you can trace it back to any store here in Wichita," Lyle ordered Detective Joe Maness. "It might be interesting to know how those blood-stained fingerprints got there."

Detective McLeman had, in the meantime, been trying to build up that last day of the Pritchards. Had there been a third party with them? Had Harry Pritchard planned to meet anyone?

"I have a hunch whoever is responsible for their disappearance is someone known to Pritchard," Lyle explained. "If it had been an ordinary hold-up, the man could have taken the car, their money, and left them stranded. We would have heard from them the same day."

But if they were dead—and the chances were that was the case—then there had been an ulterior motive. An enemy, perhaps, or even a supposed friend, for some reason not generally known, had turned on the man, and had then had to kill the wife because she knew too much.

Detective Maness brought back a report on the hat that somewhat supported this theory.

"I went to a jobber here who told me only one store bought this style," Maness

told Lyle. "And that store, believe it or not, was Pritchard's own store on North Broadway."

At the store Maness had talked with the clerk in charge of the hat department. Of the six hats the store had bought, only two of them had been sold. One had been bought by a well-known Wichita citizen who, called on the phone, said he still had his hat.

"The other was sold to a young man the clerk doesn't know," continued Maness. "But what will interest you is this—Pritchard himself brought this young fellow to the hat department and stood by while he tried on hats."

"Then," summed up Lyle, "we've tied up Pritchard with the wearer of that hat, assuming it's the one that was purchased in Wichita."

"Yep, we've got that much to go on," agreed Maness.

Still there was no word of the Pritchards themselves or even of their Buick sedan.

CHARLENE PRITCHARD, however, had given Detective McLeman the names of friends of her father, and of restaurants where he and her mother might have had lunch on that 23rd of the month.

A number of restaurants and cafes were visited without any results until McLeman tried the Pan-American Cafe. Harry Pritchard often had a meal here, the proprietor told the detective. Whether or not he'd been there on the 23rd he wasn't sure. But Pritchard always tried to get a certain table. The waiter might remember if he'd been there.

"He was here that day with Mrs. Pritchard," the waiter answered. "I remember it well because Mrs. Pritchard doesn't often come with him."

The two had had lunch alone, but on leaving, Pritchard had evidently suggested to his wife that she go out to the car and

wait for him, for she went directly to the door while he went across to the other side of the cafe and began talking to a young man.

The waiter didn't know the young man, didn't think he'd ever seen him before. But he was able to describe him casually.

"Young, I'd say, and right athletic-looking," he told the detective. "Was pretty sunburned too. Anyway his skin showed up pretty dark against that dudish, pearl-gray hat he wore."

That was a break.

"Know anybody who knows that young fellow?" asked Maness.

The waiter shook his head. "He came in alone and I don't think I'd ever seen him before," he answered.

The two men had talked together a few minutes; then the younger man had asked for his check and gone out with Pritchard.

Friends of the Pritchards failed to recognize the description of the sunburned young man. But one man did recall that at about two o'clock he had seen the Pritchard sedan parked outside of Pfeister's Pool Hall.

"Pritchard was honking the horn hard," said this friend. "I tried to catch his eye, but he seemed sort of angry; he was watching the door as though he was waiting for someone to come out."

In the pool hall, Pritchard was unknown. Maness thought he'd make a stab in the dark.

"How about a guy, sort of rangy, sunburned and wearing a light gray felt hat? See anything of him?" he asked the proprietor.

"His name Jack?" the proprietor asked in turn.

The detective was noncommittal. "Not sure," he finally answered. "Like to find him. Does he drop in here often? Know any of his friends?"

The fellow named Jack came in every now and then, the proprietor said. He'd said something about being a ranch hand,

somewhere in Meade County. Usually he had a big wad of bills, but not this last time. In fact, on that last visit, he had tried to borrow some money.

Jack, a ranch hand, from Meade County. Shouldn't be too hard to trace him, thought Lyle when Maness finished his report.

"Suppose you drive to Meade County, Maness," Lyle said. "Maybe you'll be able to get a line on the man. Especially if he's been flourishing that gray felt hat of his around there."

Still no word of the missing Pritchards, dead or alive, or even of their Buick sedan. Thanksgiving Day had come and gone, when the sheriff of Depew, in Creek County, Oklahoma, put in a telephone call to Captain Lyle in Wichita.

"We have your Buick sedan, I think," he said. "Nobody in it. The seats in the back of the car are crusted with dried blood. And a piece of the flooring in the front has been cut out."

"But the bodies?"

"Not a sign of them," answered Depew's sheriff. "I'll let you know if anything more turns up."

Now the hunt centered on northern Oklahoma. This section is sparsely inhabited, too large a territory for the sheriffs and their assistants to cover thoroughly. Volunteers were called for and on the following Sunday twenty thousand people turned out to scour the countryside, inching over the open territory. Hedgerows were curried. Culverts were searched. Every bit of wooded land was covered. Even beds of streams were invaded by men in high boots.

Back in Wichita, Captain Lyle held the reins of the investigation. Reports came through at intervals but they were unsatisfactory. Lyle handed them over to reporters of the *Wichita Beacon and Eagle*.

"Sorry, boys, I haven't more for you," he told them. "I'm obliged to you for continuing to ask people to get in touch

with me if they should find anything.”

NO WORD had yet come from Detective Maness, cruising through Meade County in search of the Jack with the pearl-gray hat. But on the last day of the month Maness found a trail that looked promising.

“Sounds like you’re talking of Jack Wisdom,” he was told. “There’s a lot of people looking for him,” the man added.

This Jack Wisdom had been working on the Leavitt Johnson ranch for about two years until the last October.

“He’s not there now?” asked the disappointed Maness.

“Go see for yourself,” was the answer. Another ranch hand, standing nearby, sauntered up to Maness in his car.

“Heard you mention the name of Jack Wisdom,” this second man explained. “Heard they found something over at the Johnson ranch yesterday. Didn’t hear much, but it had something to do with Jack.”

Wisdom seemed to have been on pretty good terms with the men in the neighborhood. He was a good worker. Wouldn’t have been kept at the ranch if he hadn’t been. He had left of his own accord. But there had been some gossip going the rounds that Wisdom had been making money on the side, selling cattle to rustlers.

“Did he have any fights about it?” asked Maness.

“No, it was just talk,” the first man answered. “He was showing too much money. He didn’t make it here. And those clothes—that pearl-gray hat you were asking about.”

An hour later Maness was having a talk with Mr. Johnson.

“Funny you should be here today,” Johnson commented. “The sheriff of Meade County wrote to Wichita asking the police to look out for this Jack Wisdom. That was October. And yesterday

something turned up that makes us even more anxious to see Jack again.”

The first week in October Emery Large, another ranch hand, had disappeared. There was money coming to him. He hadn’t had a fight with anyone, had simply walked out.

He hadn’t been missed for a couple of days. And during those days Jack Wisdom had come into the office and told Johnson he was quitting.

“Got a better job in sight?” Johnson had asked.

Wisdom admitted he hadn’t. “Just tired of staying in one place,” he explained.

After getting the money coming to him, Wisdom had started off.

The missing Emery Large and Jack Wisdom had been friends. It was first thought that Large had left with Wisdom, or was meeting him outside.

“He said good-by to me,” Wisdom announced. “Guess I’ll be running into him again.”

“And yesterday we got an answer,” continued Johnson, “or at least part of one.”

One corner of the ranch, seldom used, had a dry well at the west end. A new herd of cattle was to be kept in that section. Mr. Johnson had ordered two of his men to fill in the well, to prevent any cattle falling into it.

The morning of the 29th, the men had started to work. One of them had stretched himself flat on the earth to peer into the well. He wanted to see how deep it was.

“Lookit, what’s that blue sweater doing down there?” he called to his companion. “Think I’ll climb down and get it. Maybe I can wear it.”

Slowly he had clambered down a side of the well until he saw the blue sweater within a few inches of his feet. Then, to his horror, he saw that the sweater was partially covering the body of a man.

Another hour, and the already badly decomposed body of the man had been hauled to the surface. It had been resting on a suitcase, partially filled with clothing roughly tumbled in. Despite its condition, the body was quickly identified as that of Emery Large!

The corpse had already been taken to the undertaking establishment where an autopsy would be performed that day, Maness learned.

"And we're sending out another circular for this Jack Wisdom," the sheriff of Meade County told Maness. "If Large said good-by to him, as Wisdom said, then he was the last person to see him. We think he knows more than he's telling."

This suspicion was strengthened when the autopsy report came in. Large had been shot through the head with a .410 gauge gun.

"Jack Wisdom had such a gun," friends at the ranch reported.

"But what do they think the motive was?" asked Captain Lyle when Maness was making his report.

It was only a theory, with not much evidence to support it, but Large had probably been involved in the cattle rustling with Wisdom. It was Wisdom who had flourished the rolls of bills. Large had never seemed very flush.

And then the two men had been overheard quarreling about money one evening in the bunkhouse. They had stopped talking as a third man came in. Perhaps Wisdom had held out on Large when the latter demanded his share—and later, to cancel the debt, shot his former friend and deposited the body and suitcase in the dry well, thinking it would remain undiscovered.

All this news about Jack Wisdom was interesting, commented Lyle. But his concern was the fate of the Pritchards.

"Sunday there's going to be another big hunt down in Oklahoma," Lyle told

Maness. "Whoever hid the bodies certainly knows the country."

A MUCH wider section was covered on this second hunt on December third. The result was disappointing. The only find was a bundle of clothing in a culvert close to Blackwell, in Kay County, Oklahoma, off route 177. The bundle held a blue print crepe dress, its pattern splashed with streaks of dried blood, also a man's blue suit, brown shoes, and a topcoat with the label *Felix Clothing Company, Topeka, Kansas*.

The front of the coat was caked with dried blood.

"Yes, those garments were worn by the Pritchards the day they left Wichita," Captain Lyle told Blackwell's sheriff.

That first week in December brought in a variety of rumors and reports. A snapshot of Jack Wisdom, found at the ranch, had been published in Wichita, Wellington and Tulsa newspapers. Had any one seen this man since November 23rd, the papers asked.

A number of persons thought they had. He'd been hitch-hiking down in Garfield County; another thought he'd seen the fellow in a restaurant in Oklahoma City. Others placed him in Tulsa for dinner the Tuesday of the last week in November. An attendant at an oil station thought he had refueled the Buick sedan the next day, Wednesday, in Creek County.

But evidently by that time Wisdom was afraid the trail of the Buick sedan was getting hot. Both newspapers and the radio were reminding people daily of the car and its number, asking them to watch out for it.

And then Wisdom had abandoned the car at Depew, not so far from where the gas station attendant had noticed the lean, rangy, ranch hand.

But one development from this intensive search brought good results. Wis-

dom, while at the Leavitt Johnson ranch, had let slip that he'd been in many a jam in his early youth. It was a good tip. By examining the records of the reformatories of Kansas, Captain Lyle learned that Wisdom had been sentenced to a Hutchinson, Kansas, reformatory in 1924, for breaking into a drugstore.

The more of Jack Wisdom's background learned, the better their chances of catching up with him. That report from the Hutchinson reformatory had also given the names of Wisdom's brothers and sisters, some of them living in Kansas and Missouri. It would not be too difficult to track them down, even if they had moved since that day.

"And here's hopin our ranch hand is looking to one of them to help keep him under cover," summed up Captain Lyle.

The authorities were equally anxious to recover the bodies of the two victims. For without corpses, most states will not consider a murder charge. The American Legion Post at Winfield, Kansas, to which Harry Pritchard belonged, called on all its members to join the hunt the following Sunday. And the authorities of both Kansas and Oklahoma offered a twelve hundred dollar reward for the finding of the missing corpses.

Fourteen miles south of Enid, in Garfield County, C. C. Cooksey, a state highway employee who was combining a day's rabbit hunting with his search, saw his dog dive into a culvert. The animal came out at his whistling, but after this gesture of obedience, returned pronto to the culvert. Cooksey, curious, decided to follow him in.

Only far enough in to be out of sight of passers-by lay the partially-clothed body of a woman.

A telephone call was made to Wichita. Detective McLeman, arriving in Enid before noon, made the identification. Here were the remains of Mrs. Pritchard. Expecting, logically enough, to find the sec-

ond body nearby, all searchers that could be reached were instructed to concentrate on the territory close to this first culvert.

But even as this large crowd was currycombing the ground, a telegram arrived at Enid from Captain Lyle in Wichita.

"Have just had word second corpse found in culvert outside El Reno, Canadian County."

Still a third message was to reach Captain Lyle that December weekend. Local authorities had taken over the responsibility of keeping a lookout over the homes of Wisdom's relations. Over in Jay, in Delaware County, Oklahoma, Sheriff Curtis had been watching the ranch of Earl Rodeybush, to whom one of Wisdom's sisters was married.

"There's a young fellow living in a shack on the Rodeybush ranch," reported a neighbor. "He stays in all day—and from the glimpse I got at him at a window, he looks like that Wisdom fellow a lot."

Before dawn, on Sunday, four men surrounded the shack. Through the window they saw a man asleep on a cot, his back to them. The door was flimsy. One good heave and the lock snapped. Another minute, and the sleeper, barely awake, his arms stretched upward, had handcuffs snapped over his wrists.

A SILENT group sat in on that first talk with Jack Wisdom back at Wichita police headquarters.

"Sure, I know Harry Pritchard," admitted Wisdom, "but I had nothing to do with their deaths."

"How come your pearl-gray hat was found on the route on which they traveled on the 23rd?" Lyle asked.

Wisdom answered quietly, "That hat was stolen from me that day in Wichita. I don't know who took it. You can't pin a murder on me that way."

Of his contact with the Pritchards, Wisdom spoke apparently frankly. In October, when he bought the gray felt hat, he had paid with a check. Because his arithmetic wasn't so good, when the check was presented, the bank had had to return it, stamping *Insufficient Funds* on it.

"I didn't know anything about that until I ran into Mr. Pritchard on the 23rd at the restaurant. He came over and asked me to make good on the check."

"We went to Pfeister's Pool Hall where I thought I might find some friends who would lend me the money. But I didn't. Then I tried a couple of other people in Wichita. No go. And I finally got out of the Pritchard car at Lawrence and Douglas Streets."

Captain Lyle had been waiting for a couple of telephone calls. Detective McLeman walked in now with a slip of paper which he handed to Lyle.

"Wisdom, explain this away," began Lyle abruptly. "Your friend, Emery Large, was shot in the head by a bullet from a .410 gun. And I have here the reports on the autopsies performed on Mr. and Mrs. Pritchard. Both were shot in the head by bullets from a .410 gun. What do you know about that?"

"That still don't mean I killed the Pritchards, or Emery Large, either," snapped Wisdom. "I might as well tell you now; that there gun of mine was stolen from me. Maybe it was used to kill Large—I'm not saying it wasn't. But my fingers didn't pull the trigger.

"I'm not talking any more," he finally said. "You see if you can pin those two murders, those three, on me. Just try."

But this bluffing lost its force as the reports came filtering in to Captain Lyle's desk that December day.

Mrs. Clarence Green, of Coffeerville, Kansas, landlady of a rooming house, said Wisdom had spent the night of the 25th there. And the next morning he had

tried to sell her a black caracul coat, exactly like the one the circular said Mrs. Pritchard had worn that day.

But even more incriminating was the report from the laboratory where the bundle of clothing found in the culvert had been examined. Neither print dress nor felt hat had given up any prints.

"But those tan shoes Pritchard wore had been handled by the man who took them off those dead feet. And those prints are Jack Wisdom's," read the report from the laboratory.

Of his connection with the death of Emery Large, Jack Wisdom refused to talk. But twenty-four hours after his arrival in Wichita, he gave a statement to Eli Eubanks, assistant Sedgwick County attorney. It was a rather vague confession, but it smacked of the truth.

"I met up with the Pritchards in the Pan-American Cafe, and he got onto me for this here check and wanted the money right then. He insisted on having it at the time or sending me to jail. I got out and tried to get the money but failed.

"The only way I could think to keep from going to jail was to get rid of them, which I did on the road south of Wichita."

Wisdom had told Pritchard he had an uncle in Wellington who might lend him the money. So Wisdom had left town with them. He had sat in the rear seat, the Pritchards in front.

He had pushed the bodies in the bottom of the car in the back, travelled with them until nightfall. Then he had disrobed both corpses, depositing the clothing in one culvert, then the bodies, before dawn, in others.

On December 12th, 1933, Jack Wisdom pleaded guilty to the charge of the murder of Harry Pritchard before Judge Harry L. NeSmith.

Twenty minutes later the ex-ranch hand was sentenced to life imprisonment in the Kansas State Penitentiary.

Murder In Fast Company

By William G. Bogart

When a certain sort of copper breaks out on the trail of the man who has killed his buddy, there can be only one grim answer—bullets in the night—and a corpse to greet the dawn.

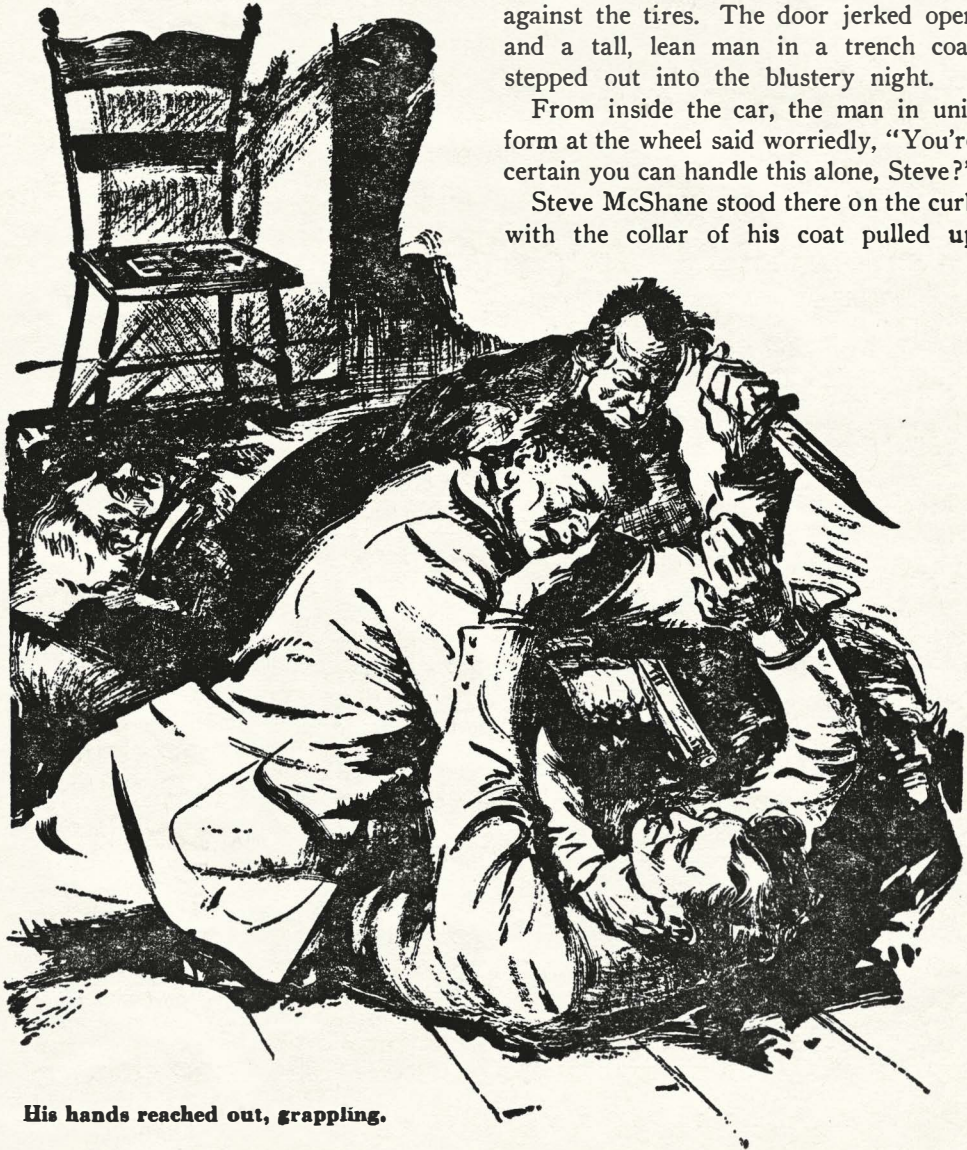
RAIN swept through the streets and hammered on car windshields, and in the gutters water rushed along in tiny streams, as though frantic-

ally seeking escape from something.

The white-colored Pennsylvania state police car cut into the curb and stopped. Water piled up in little foamy dams against the tires. The door jerked open and a tall, lean man in a trench coat stepped out into the blustery night.

From inside the car, the man in uniform at the wheel said worriedly, "You're certain you can handle this alone, Steve?"

Steve McShane stood there on the curb with the collar of his coat pulled up



His hands reached out, grappling.

against the lashing rain. His hard, gray features were a grim mask for his flickering dark eyes. He nodded.

"That's the way it's got to be, kid," he said flatly. "I've got to handle this alone."

"But if you got in a jam—You know, Steve, you're dealing with dynamite."

"I know." Steve McShane's square shoulders shrugged impatiently. "But if I bring anyone else in on this case, I'm afraid I'll scare the guy off. The report is that he's a small-time crook. And those guys scare easy."

His partner inside the police car sighed. "Okay, kid. Good luck, anyway."

Steve McShane closed the car door and moved off into the night. His fedora was pulled low over his angular features; rain soon soaked the hat and made it flop around the trooper's somber face. In civvies, he was positive that no one would recognize him on a night such as this.

He was glad it was raining. It was late, and the streets of downtown Harrisburg were practically deserted. Red neon lights of a hotel entrance cast splotchy crimson color across the sidewalk. The rain kept coming down.

McShane turned down the first side street, proceeded perhaps half a block, then abruptly turned into the lobby of a second-rate hotel.

It was here that he was to pick up the first message from Danny Nichols. That had been the arrangement. And there was a special reason for Steve McShane's making the contact while in plainclothes and off duty. He was a cop through and through. Any kind of a deal involving a character such as Danny Nichols made his skin crawl. Danny Nichols—underworld tipster, small-time crook, fink!

But that's the way it had to be. Because Danny Nichols knew about Walt Crosby, Steves' best friend. Walt, who had been the best copper in the depart-

ment, and later an ace operative for the F.B.I. And now Walt Crosby was dead. Murdered!

It had been shady little Danny Nichols who had said he could tell Steve McShane about it!

AT THE desk, a dull-eyed clerk stared at McShane and said, "You want a room, mister?"

McShane shook his head. "A man named Daniel Nichols was to leave a message here for me. I'm to pick it up. You got it?"

The skinny clerk studied McShane through blinking eyes. "Are you McShane?" he wanted to know.

"Correct."

The man reached into a drawer behind the desk and slid an envelope toward the trooper. "Well, here it is then."

McShane took the envelope and went back across the lobby. He noticed that the tile needed scrubbing, and there was a musty odor about the place that grated on his keen senses.

He ripped open the envelope, quickly scanned the contents of the brief note tucked inside. It read:

Don't think this is a runaround. I've got to be careful. Somebody might be following me. Go to the Greyhound bus terminal and ask for letter at ticket window. Be careful!

McShane swore with impatience, crammed the note into his trench coat pocket and hurried out into the night. He knew there was nothing he could do but follow instructions. It was quite evident that Danny Nichols knew something—and was covering his trail well.

McShane could understand that. Those who had murdered his pal, Walt Crosby, were killers who worked with vicious efficiency. And now Danny Nichols was taking no chances of getting them on his trail.

The walk to the bus station was a short one. McShane turned into a waiting room five minutes later. Rain dripped from the ends of his coat and left a trail behind him as he moved across the room. A few weary-looking people sat on benches and anxiously watched the clock.

At the ticket window, Steve McShane said quietly, "A friend was to leave a letter here for me." He gave his name. "You got anything?"

The clerk's eyes brightened. "Oh, yes, I remember. He was in here about half an hour ago."

McShane glanced around as the clerk reached toward a desk. His quick sharp eyes missed no detail, even took in the sidewalk outside the big windows. But as far as he could tell, no one was watching him, or even loitering nearby. He was certain no one was on his trail.

"Here you are, sir," said the clerk.

McShane nodded, took the envelope, stepped toward the washroom. The place was deserted. He glanced at the words Danny Nichols had hastily written.

I got a room at the Elite Hotel, just down the street. If you're sure you ain't being followed, then come up. Room 733. *Be sure you're alone.*

Well, this was it, McShane thought. The end of the cockeyed trail. In a few moments he hoped to hear the name of the person or persons responsible for Walt Crosby's death. And he was positive that little Danny Nichols was going to tell him. He was going to tell him for one very good reason.

Steve McShane wasn't the kind of cop that anybody ever tried to fool. He had a reputation. He was good. And he was tough.

THE Elite Hotel was a worse dump than the first hotel. There was a small lobby and a single rattletrap elevator that wheezed up and down be-

tween floors. The seventh floor hallway contained old red carpeting that was worn thin.

Steve McShane paused a moment, waiting to make sure that the elevator operator returned to the ground floor. When the floor indicator showed that he had, McShane started down the hall, moving quietly on lithe legs. He stopped before the door of 733. He knocked quietly.

There was no answer.

He grasped the doorknob of 733 and eased into the dark room. Instantly he was rigid with shock. Steve McShane knew, suddenly, that there was death here in this room!

He eased the door closed behind him, ran his right arm along the wall in a search of the light switch.

His fingers found a button and flicked it downward. A saffron-pale glow from a dirty electric bulb in the ceiling cast dismal rays around the room. McShane's eyes traveled to the limp, thin figure sprawled on its back across the bed. A tense, weary sigh escaped from his taut lips.

Little Danny Nichols wasn't going to tell him anything about his friend's murder, ever. Because Danny Nichols was dead!

Someone had gone to work on Danny with a knife. It wasn't a pleasant sight. His throat was slashed, and McShane could see that the small-time crook had been stabbed in the back first, probably the first attack as the killer had slipped into the room.

McShane's restless dark eyes swiftly took in details of the disordered room. A cheap dresser had been ransacked. The closet door hung open, and what few clothes Danny Nichols had owned were heaped on the floor. The murdered man's clothes were turned inside out—as though the killer were seeking something.

What?

McShane himself made a thorough

search of the hotel room. He realized that Danny Nichols must have carried important evidence concerning Walt Crosby's death. And the underworld informer would have been smart enough to hide that evidence well. But where was it now?

Steve McShane stood there near the bed, staring at the threadbare rug which he himself had upturned at the corners, at the uncovered pillows, at the dead man's shoes, which he had removed.

He stared at the dead man, and suddenly a thought occurred to him.

Gingerly he reached down and moved the dead man's head. In doing so, the mouth fell open. McShane shuddered. The task was not pleasant.

But he had what he wanted!

The scrap of paper had been wadded up inside the mouth. McShane spread it out on the dresser and tried to make out its contents. Words had become blurred by moisture, and only a few of them stood out now. The note must have been hastily scrawled in that last moment when someone had knocked at Danny Nichols' door. Nichols must have sensed that he was trapped.

McShane managed to make out the following: *Phyllis . . . frame . . . micra . . .*

That was all; the rest was an indistinct blur.

McShane straightened, his dark eyes narrowed. What could it mean? *Phyllis . . . frame . . . micra . . . ?*

Phyllis! There was something about that name . . .

And abruptly Steve McShane knew. Phyllis Wentworth had been Walt Crosby's girl!

But the rest? *Frame . . . micra . . .* What the hell!

Perhaps the girl was involved in this some way. McShane knew he could find her address. It was the only thing he had now. He'd see her now, tonight!

He stepped into the small, old-fashioned

bathroom and washed his hands. He tore up the message into small bits and flushed them down the bowl. What little help the contents of that message would be to him, he did not know—but at least he wanted no one else to see . . .

His lean, tall frame suddenly went taut.

Someone had quietly entered the bedroom behind him!

STEVE McSHANE spun, slid toward the adjoining doorway, his right hand streaking toward his shoulder holster. His trench coat was still buttoned, and the movement of his hand was naturally slowed.

But that of the big man moving across the room was not.

There was an upraised knife in the dark-skinned man's hand, and the deadly blade slashed downward in a vicious arc as the man leaped toward McShane.

The trooper sidestepped, felt steel rip through the outer edge of his coat sleeve and slap into the door frame behind him. McShane's left fist whipped up and caught the big man beneath the jaw. He was knocked backward. But the fellow clung to the knife, yanking it clear of the woodwork as he staggered backward.

He caught his balance, lunged again at the quick-moving McShane.

The trooper was ready. His right hand closed over the knifeman's wrist. With a deft movement McShane forced the arm upward, at the same time twisting his own body. The knife clattered to the floor. The man followed it—in a flying arc over McShane's bent body. He landed with a crash against the baseboards across the room. The trooper dived after him.

The big man wriggled across the floor after the knife. But McShane yanked him upward by the collar and let go with a steaming right hook. The blow sent the fellow jerking backward, to land across the corpse on the bed.

McShane noted, for the first time, the

old knife scar across the big man's cheek. It ran from the cheek bone to the jaw. The man had close-cropped black hair and glittering dark eyes.

He bounced up off the bed now, eyes dead. His right hand shot toward his shoulder. Another knife, was McShane's thought.

He slammed forward again.

Behind him, someone gave a hissed exclamation in the hallway—and immediately the room was plunged into darkness. Someone else was in the room. Orange-red flame licked out of the gloom, and the sound of the shot reverberated around the bare walls.

McShane flung himself downward and sideways. He felt another slug fan past his head. Someone was near him in the room. He bumped a fast-moving body. His hands reached out, grappling. An object slammed his head and he was driven face-down against the worn rug. His brain reeled, and he pressed his palms against the floor, trying to push up again, expecting at any instant that he would get a slug.

Then he realized the room was very silent, save for his own forced breathing.

McShane jerked to his feet, moved across the room, found the light switch and turned on the single light.

The room was deserted, except for himself and the corpse.

Steve McShane hurried out into the hallway. He leaped in the direction of the elevator. A man was there, punching frantically at the call button.

"There's a fight going on down the hall!" he cried, too excited to notice that McShane had come from that very direction.

A cool, damp breeze struck the trooper's grim features. He turned, saw another corridor that angled off to the right. He jumped that way.

And at the end of the corridor he saw the open window, with dirty curtains

whipped inward by the wind and the rain. He peered out.

Directly outside was a fire escape that led downward to a narrow alley. Even as McShane watched he saw two figures slither from the alley toward the street, their forms briefly revealed by the glow of a sign on the street beyond. Then they had disappeared.

McShane swore, hurried back along the hallway. He knew that by the time he reached the street the two men would be gone. Who they were, what connection they had with Danny Nichols' death—or perhaps even Walt Crosby's—he did not know. The only lead now was the girl, and the two words—*frame . . . micra . . .*

Back at the elevator he noted that the car was just ascending.

McShane said to the worried roomer, "Tell them—dead man back there in seven thirty-three. Call the police!"

As an expression of horror leaped across the man's features, McShane moved toward the stairs near the elevator shaft and went down the steps three at a time. He had no time now to wait around and make explanations.

He was thinking of the girl, Phyllis. Perhaps *her* life was in danger!

THE trooper rode a cab out to the suburbs, both he and the driver watching for the street corner that he remembered from a previous visit. They finally located it, and McShane said, "You can drop me right here." He remembered that the girl's house was only a block down the side street. She lived with her folks.

McShane was certain that he had not been trailed. But leaving the cab here at the corner of the tree-shaded side street was an added precaution. He paid off the driver and disappeared into the wet gloom.

It had almost stopped raining now, but water dripped down from the heavy

foliage of the low-hanging trees that lined the sidewalk. Occasionally a branch scraped his hat. The section was dismal, deserted at this hour of the night.

He remembered the house the moment he saw it—a small bungalow set back among old elms. He went up the path and climbed the steps to the darkened porch. Ringing anyone's bell at this hour of the night . . .

McShane shrugged and felt around for the button. This was no time to worry about formalities.

He heard a two-toned chime sound somewhere within the house. He waited. Finally a light came on in the hallway and he heard steps coming downstairs. The porch light flashed on.

The door opened carefully on a short chain and the girl's voice said, "Yes? What is it?"

McShane stepped close, so that she could see his face. He removed his soggy hat.

"It's Steve McShane—" he started to say.

"You!" the girl cried, and immediately released the chain and flung open the door. Then he was in the hallway, looking at her.

She was slender and dark-haired, with large deep eyes that were shadowed by the sorrow of Walt Crosby's death. She held a robe wrapped around her slender figure, and she looked up at Steve McShane and asked, "Your face—it's cut! What's happened, Steve?"

Briefly he told her about the scheduled meeting with the little informer named Danny Nichols, of the strange message that the man had left for him. "Someone else was after that information," he explained. "They ransacked the hotel room. They almost nailed me when they returned unexpectedly."

McShane frowned. "One thing puzzles me. How come Danny Nichols knew so much about what Walt was doing?"

Steve noticed that the girl's dark eyes were suddenly very bright.

"Didn't you know?" she said.

"Know what?"

"About Danny Nichols?"

Steve shrugged. "I only know that he was an underworld character, a small-time crook with—"

Phyllis Wentworth was shaking her head. "That's what everyone *thought* he was!" she told him. "He and Walter had been working together. Danny Nichols was so clever that no one ever suspected—"

Steve interrupted, "You said he was *working* with Walt?"

The girl nodded. "Danny Nichols was a member of the F.B.I."

McShane stared.

Phyllis Wentworth hurried on. "A few days before Walter was—murdered, he mailed a confidential report to Washington. I happen to know that there was information in that report concerning a spy group working throughout the Pennsylvania steel plants, spies who are causing trouble wherever plants are rushed with government defense work. That report never reached Washington. A mail box was ransacked the very night Walter sent it. And—two days later—he was killed!"

"But—"

"Danny Nichols had a copy of that report. He didn't mail it, but instead was waiting for someone to arrive here from Washington. He also had a lead on who Walter's killers were, but because he thought he was being trailed, he contacted you. He figured no one would know you so well."

Suddenly the two other words of the message held meaning for Steve McShane.

He said quickly, "Look, do you know about anything connected with micro—microfilm, perhaps?"

Surprisingly, she nodded.

Steve followed the girl from the hallway into the living room. She stepped directly to the mantel and reached for a photograph in a silver frame.

"It was Danny Nichols' idea," she said. "In case anything happened to him. I guess he was going to tell you about it. No one had arrived here from Washington yet, and so in case he was trailed in the meantime he had me hide the report in this frame—"

"The report?"

"Yes." The girl was taking the back out of the frame. Then she handed an almost transparent-thin sheet to McShane.

"It's all here," she said, "although you can't read it without its being enlarged with a light projector. It's on this microfilm."

McShane's eyes flickered as he stared at the thin piece of substance.

"You mean," he asked in amazement, "all that information is on this single sheet?"

The girl nodded. "Names and everything," she said. "Enough information to send an entire spy ring to prison." Her eyes were worried. "You keep it. I've been so afraid here alone—"

"I thought you lived with your folks?" McShane asked.

"I do. But they're in New York, and won't be back for two days yet—"

"Then it isn't safe for you to stay here," McShane put in swiftly. "You'd better get a room downtown. I'll get someone to stay with you, a woman I know. Sooner or later those crooks are going to find out that you knew Walt, and they'll trail you here."

Phyllis stepped back toward the hallway. "I'll get ready right now," she suggested. "After what's happened to Danny Nichols, I'd be too frightened to leave the house alone."

McShane nodded, sat down to wait while the girl got ready.

He smoked a cigarette, and he heard the girl moving around upstairs. He saw a writing desk across the room, got up and located envelopes, pen and ink on the desk. In a moment he had addressed an envelope to the F.B.I., Washington, D. C. He started to slip the sheet of microfilm inside the envelope. . .

Upstairs, the girl screamed.

THE sound of the high-pitched, frantic cry was still echoing through the house as Steve McShane's hard, lean legs shot him up the hall stairs. He reached the second-floor landing, heard a muffled cry from a room toward the front of the house. He spun down the hall.

There was a bedroom door open, revealing light from the room within, and there was the noise of someone struggling.

McShane flung himself into the room—and then drew up short, breath hissing through his taut lips.

The slender, dark-haired girl was on one side of the bed, the wiry, small man on the other. The fellow had beady, nervous eyes. There was a gun in his fist, and the gun was covering Phyllis Wentworth.

But McShane's .38 was in his hand also, and he held the man covered.

He snapped, "Okay, drop that gat, brother."

The little thin man's deadly, cold eyes veered toward the trooper. A twisted grin touched the corners of his mouth.

"Why?" he growled.

"Because—" McShane started to say.

And behind him, the gun muzzle poked his spine and the voice rapped, "Maybe *you'd* better drop *your* gun, sweetheart!"

McShane was trapped. But it was really the girl he was thinking about. One false move on his part now and she would get a slug.

Slowly, he lowered his right hand. The

man behind him reached out and grabbed the .38. McShane turned slowly.

He recognized the big fellow with the scarred face, the one who had been in the hotel room just half an hour ago.

The fellow held his own gun and McShane's in his big fists, and he ordered harshly, "All right, copper, raise your hands!"

There was nothing to do but comply with the order. Across the room, the girl stood frozen, eyes wide with terror.

McShane was frisked to see that he carried no other weapon. The small man stepped to the window drapes, unloosened a sash cord, returned and ordered the trooper to put his hands behind his back. While he was held covered by the man with the scar, McShane's wrists were tightly bound.

The girl was treated likewise.

Then the big fellow looked at his partner. "What are we gonna do with 'em?"

The cold-eyed, small man glared at the girl. "You know what we're here for, baby—that paper turned over to you by Danny Nichols. Where is it?"

The girl defiantly returned his glare. "I haven't got it," she said, chin held firmly.

"The hell you haven't!"

The small man stepped quickly forward, and his right hand cuffed the girl's delicate features. She fell back in horror.

McShane, with a peculiar sound deep in his throat, lunged forward. Immediately he was looking into the muzzle of his own service pistol, held in the scar-faced man's fist.

"That's better," said the big man.

The other man held a gun now, too, watching the girl.

He ordered, "We'll work them over, but not here. Somebody might hear. Take them downstairs!"

Closely guarded, McShane and the girl were led down to the front hall. The trooper noted that the big gunman still

carried some of the sash cord jammed in one pocket.

As they passed the living room doorway, the small man happened to spot the open picture frame on the living room table. He quickly stepped that way, returned with the opened frame. He looked coldly at the girl.

"So that's it?" he snarled. "You had it hidden in the frame!"

The girl said nothing.

On a sudden impulse, because he was thinking only of her safety, McShane said, "Sure, it was in the frame. She gave it to me. But you're too late, sweetheart. I stuck the paper in an envelope and mailed it to Washington just a little while ago. I gave it to a cab driver to drop in a downtown box."

The little dark-eyed man cursed.

He said, "So that makes it too bad for the both of you. We might have made a deal. But now—"

He jerked his head toward the doorway leading out to the porch. "Let's get going, Leo!"

MCSHANE and the girl were taken out to a driveway that bordered the side of the house. There was a big sedan drawn up beneath the rain-drenched trees, its lights turned off. The girl was ordered first into the rear compartment, told to lie down on the floor. Then her ankles were swiftly bound.

McShane was ordered in next. The rear section was roomy enough to accommodate both their cramped forms. McShane's ankles and wrists, bound, were yanked behind him tightly and tied together. A blanket was thrown over himself and the girl, and then the car started backing from the driveway. It stopped abruptly, and one of the two men opened the rear door. Adhesive tape was placed over their mouths.

As the car started up again, rolling swiftly through the night, Steve McShane

felt the girl's slender form trembling against him. With his mouth taped, there was nothing he could say to help her.

They were being taken for a ride, he knew. But there was one thing he was counting on. These two spies probably figured that either he or the girl knew something. They would try to force that information out of them before bumping them off.

Also, the car might proceed to the real hideout of the gang, where the men could work in safety. It would bring McShane closer to the spy ring.

Ordinarily, he would not have been too worried. He had been in tight spots before. But with the girl along . . .

He stopped thinking about that and started a methodical system of trying to loosen his hands and feet. One thing was in his favor. The night was muggy, and, with the blanket thrown over him, McShane had started to sweat. The moisture ran down his wrists. By carefully wiggling his hands he slowly worked the sash cord lower and lower. After long moments he was able to hook one finger beneath a strand of the cord.

At the same time, he heard the sound of cars moving through the night. Light flashed beneath a corner of the blanket. From the various sounds, McShane judged that they were passing through downtown Harrisburg.

He heard one of the men say, "Take Route Eleven across the bridge."

The words gave him a start. Route 11 led directly to the new Pennsylvania Turnpike, the super-highway that cut across the state for one hundred and sixty miles. Once on that express highway there was nothing at all, save mountains and wilderness—and a gas station every thirty miles! A car could streak across the highway at seventy miles an hour, and no one would question the fact!

McShane worked at his wrists.

Minutes passed; then the car abruptly slowed, stopped for a bare instant.

He heard someone say, "Keep this card until you leave the highway. Pay then."

They were on the Pennsylvania Turnpike! Twenty-five or thirty miles to the first gas station and rest stop—and nothing but wilderness in between! Anything could happen now.

One wrist slid free of the cords! Immediately McShane carefully touched the girl's shoulder, in front of him, and gave her a reassuring pat. Perhaps if she knew that he was not entirely helpless, she would have hope.

He ripped the tape off his mouth, and in a few moments he had his other hand and both ankles free. He quickly went to work on the girl's binding. He then leaned close to her ear and whispered, "We can't make a break yet, but if they stop, be ready—for anything!"

He felt the nod of her head. She clutched his arm.

McSHANE lay, tense, listening to the roar of the car in the wet night. Turns were so banked, and so long, that it was almost impossible to tell when they went into one. It was not even necessary for the driver to slacken speed. McShane judged that they were doing all of eighty—and on the Turnpike you could maintain such a speed for miles!

Occasionally a car passed them going in the opposite direction, on the one-way strip of wide concrete off to their left. There was just a mere blur of sound, then they were alone again in the night.

Suddenly the car began to slow. Scarface said, "We just passed the sign. The first gas station is two miles ahead. Say, I just remembered something! The copper couldn't have mailed that letter."

"Why not?"

"Remember I told you I trailed him to the house. He let that cab driver go at

the corner. So how in hell could he have given the letter to the cabbie to mail before he got the stuff from the girl?"

The small man swore. "You chump! Why didn't you think of that before?"

"I forgot, boss."

"That means the copper still has the letter on him! We gotta make a stop at this gas station to fill up. It's sixty miles yet to Midway, and that's where we turn off for the farm. So while the guy's busy putting in gas, you frisk that cop and get the letter. And be careful!"

"Sure, boss."

The car continued on at reduced speed, then finally swung into the long approach to the first rest station. It stopped.

McShane made no move. He heard the small man ordering gas. A few moments later, when the attendant was busy at the radiator, the rear door of the sedan opened and the scar-faced man leaned inside. His hand reached beneath the blanket and started searching for McShane's inside coat pocket.

Steve McShane straightened with blinding speed.

His right hand sank into the big fellow's collar, clung there as he straightened out with his powerful legs. He drove his hard wiry form outward through the open rear door, propelling the big fellow ahead of him. They both landed on the cement apron of the driveway.

Above them, the small dark man's voice snarled, "Okay, copper, on your feet. And make it fast!"

McShane rolled, bounced to his feet—and stood looking into the muzzle of the gun!

The small crook rapped orders to his assistant. "Okay, get that letter. Here!" His eyes still on the scar-faced man and McShane, he tossed a second gun to his henchman.

The big man caught it deftly, turned to cover the startled attendant.

"Hold it just like that, bud!"

He moved behind McShane and, using his left hand, frisked the trooper's inside pocket. His eyes flicked over the Washington, D.C. address on the envelope. "I got it, boss!" he said.

The girl had climbed out of the car. She stood beside McShane, eyes wide with amazement.

Both crooks started edging abruptly toward the car, at the same time keeping everyone covered with their guns. The little man slid behind the wheel, ordered, "Watch them now!" Then the car lurched suddenly forward in low gear.

McShane started to move. A shot screamed close to his head. He pulled the girl to the ground. There was a second shot—and then the car had roared away.

ROLLING leisurely into the station was one of the white-painted state police cars that patrol the long Turnpike. McShane leaped toward it, jumped on the running board, gave brief explanations. He did not know the trooper at the wheel, but he flashed his identification badge.

"We can catch them!" he rapped.

The girl was suddenly beside McShane. "I'm going too!" she announced, climbing in.

The car shot out onto the main road. Ahead lay darkness and the endless one-way ribbon of concrete. The car climbed up to seventy-five—eighty—eight-five.

The trooper at the wheel said, "There's no turn-off for twenty miles."

"Good!" said Steve McShane. He pressed forward, watching the road ahead. Suddenly he exclaimed, "There's the tail-light! Give it everything she's got!"

Slowly, inexorably, the police car bore down on the distant vague spot of red. Miles crashed past, and the high-speed motor roared.

The other car was a half-mile ahead now, a quarter-mile. They pressed closer. And then the large sign loomed up and

flashed by in the night: *Tunnel—One Mile Ahead.*

McShane said tensely, "If we could trap them there—"

Then there was the black opening of the tunnel itself, directly beneath the mountain ahead, and the first car plunged into the opening a bare hundred yards ahead of the police car.

Inside, blue-white overhead lights made the tunnel as bright as day. There were two lanes, with just small round knobs separating the individual lanes for two-way traffic. No cars were coming toward them.

McShane yelled. "The left-hand lane! Pass them!"

He turned, worried, to look at the girl. "Be ready to jump the moment we stop!"

Then the trooper at the wheel had slammed the police car up beside the escaping spy car. He edged ahead. A quarter-mile away was the tunnel exit, a black spot ahead of them. The terrific roar of the two hurtling cars filled the tunnel with shattering vibration.

McShane reached over, slipped his companion's pistol from its holster. The tunnel exit was just ahead now, and they were in front of the heavy sedan.

The trooper at the wheel started braking. Rubber screamed. McShane chanced one look back. The other car was weaving, as the driver frantically applied his brakes.

Then they hit the tunnel exit. The white police car slid on the wet pavement outside, turned sideways, screamed to a stop.

McShane was out of the car, jerking open the rear door. He yanked the girl clear and dashed toward the side of the road, his police partner behind him.

And not an instant too soon.

The man at the wheel of the sedan had not acted with the sure speed of the trooper. He could not stop. There was a shattering crash as the heavy sedan

piled head-on into the white police car. An explosion followed, and the bigger car burst into flames.

McSHANE dragged the girl with him as he moved toward the garage-like opening beside the tunnel entrance. A man came running out. Behind him, in the garage, was one of the fire trucks kept at every tunnel on the highway for just such emergencies.

The man hurried back to the truck, picked up a portable fire extinguisher, then leaped toward the flaming sedan. But he was driven back by the intense heat from burning gasoline.

He shook his head. "It's too late, anyway. Look at those guys!"

McShane had seen. The two heads had been pushed through the car windshield at force of the impact. It wasn't a pretty sight.

McShane put his arm around the girl, led her away to the edge of the road.

"I guess," he said, "there's nothing we can do." And he added, "They mentioned a farmhouse near Midway. That's the station and restaurant located half-way across the Turnpike. We'll be able to locate the hideout, and with the evidence we have on that microfilm—"

"The microfilm!" Phyllis said, as though remembering. She turned, stared back at the car. "But now that evidence is burned along with the car."

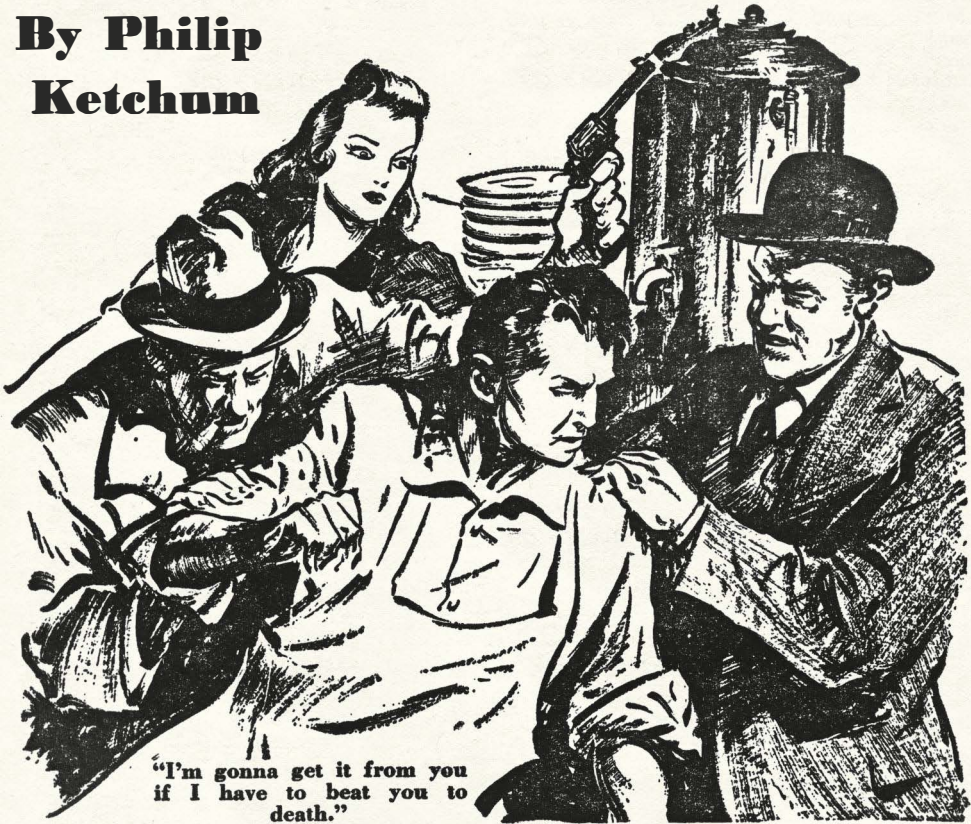
McShane was shaking his head. He reached down, pulled a white envelope from his sock. "I was figuring a way to stall them a little longer," he said. He passed the girl the unaddressed white envelope. "This contains the microfilm. What that scar-face got was the regular envelope with a sheet of blank paper inside. I made the switch after I got my hands loose in the car."

The girl stared at him. "You made—"

And then she clung to his arm, and said, "Oh, Steve!"

The Devil's Highway

By Philip
Ketchum



One fateful night they gave him—one night alone in a city of foes—to solve the strange riddle of the clue that was framing him to the chair—a watch whose hands pointed to murder!

CHAPTER ONE

Killer on the Loose

WHEN he turned away from the telephone after calling the police, Tuck's knees were so wobbly that he had to sit down, and at the same time he was aware of an almost overwhelming impulse to get away from here.

"Didn't you hear anything?" Jules asked. "Didn't you hear anything at all?"

Jules was the cook here in Henry Hull's diner on the corner of Foothill Boulevard

and Mountain Avenue. He was a huge, fat man with a round, red face. He usually wore a grin, but he wasn't grinning now. He looked a little sick.

"I didn't hear a thing," Tuck said slowly.

"You were right there at the tubs. The window's open," Jules pointed out.

Tuck stared down at his hands. They were soft and pink from much dishwashing. A moment before, when he had come in the back way after a short walk, they had been stained with blood. He had washed off the blood but he could still

see it on his hands and he could still see the crumpled figure of Henry Hull lying there in the yard behind the diner.

"He must have been killed while I was off on my walk," Tuck said slowly. "Didn't you hear anything, Jules?"

The cook shook his head. "I was busy at the stove."

Lucy Gano appeared at the order window. She said, "Hey, Jules. A couple deluxe and easy on the onions." Then she glanced at Tuck and added, "Cups up."

Jules turned to the gas plate and Tuck got to his feet. He crossed over to a tray of cups, picked it up, opened the narrow door into the front of the diner and carried the cups to a place under the counter, close to the coffee urn. There were only two customers in the diner. Both were big fellows in faded, gray coveralls. Truckers, Tuck guessed. A good many truckers stopped here.

Lucy was at the far end of the counter and she didn't even glance at Tuck as he came in with the cups. She was slender, young and attractive. Tuck liked to look at her. He liked the way she walked, the quick way she smiled, the smart way she handled the men who tried to get too familiar with her. He would have liked to have known her better but Lucy seemed hardly aware of his existence. Tuck didn't blame her for that. He had looked like a typical bum the day he had shown up here and asked for a job, and he didn't look much better now, even though he was shaved and a good deal cleaner.

Tuck straightened up and went back to the kitchen. He watched Jules put the hamburgers together and tried not to think of what lay just outside the back door. Then he heard the distant screaming of a siren, and a cold shiver ran over his body.

Jules carried the hamburgers to the order window, and Lucy took them. Then Jules turned around and said, "Listen here, kid. The coppers in this man's town

are plenty tough. If you met H. H. out back an' had a row with him an' killed him, you'd better get out of here in a hurry. The coppers will beat the truth out of you if they have to take you apart."

Tuck swallowed.

He said, "I'm not running, Jules. I didn't kill him."

Jules picked up a knife and looked at it. The siren was louder.

Jules said, "This is your last chance, kid."

"I'm not running," Tuck said flatly.

Jules sighed and put down his knife.

"All right, Tuck," he said slowly. "Maybe you didn't. I'll tell you this, though. If you had tried to run, you wouldn't have got far. H. H. was a mighty white guy."

A POLICE car screamed up outside, and in a moment the diner's door was thrust open and Tuck could hear the sound of heavy voices from the counter. Then footsteps approached the door to the kitchen and two men came in. They were big and broad-shouldered and scowling, and one of them had a white scar on the side of his jaw and the coldest eyes Tuck had ever seen.

"Which one of you guys called up the station?" he demanded.

Tuck said, "I did."

"Where's the fellow who was killed?"

"Just outside the back door."

"Who is he?"

"Henry Hull. The man who owns the diner."

The man with the scarred face looked around at the other officer. "You watch these guys, Dwyer. I'll take a look outside." Then he moved across the narrow kitchen and stepped through the door.

Dwyer was chewing on an unlighted cigar. He glanced from Jules to Tuck several times, then said abruptly, "Know who that officer is who just went outside?"

Neither Tuck nor Jules answered.

"His name's Sam Ballard," Dwyer went on. "He's the best damned detective this town ever saw and he's as hard as they come. I've seen him break a man's jaw with his fist. I saw him go up against Rudy Conn an' three other gunsels an' when that scrap was over the city ordered four coffins. You don't have nothin' to worry about at all as long as you tell the truth, but I'd hate like hell to be in your shoes if you tried lyin' to him. He hates a liar."

Tuck moistened his lips. He caught a glimpse of Lucy's face at the order window. She looked pale and frightened. He heard the screaming of another siren and heard the squeal of the brakes as it pulled up in front of the diner.

Sam Ballard came back into the kitchen, and the look on his face was ugly.

He nodded to Dwyer, and said, "Get the girl in here—and those two fellows at the counter. Another car just came up. Put one man at the door and send the others out back. I want everyone kept away from the body outside."

Dwyer nodded and left the kitchen, and in another moment Lucy and the two men who had been at the counter were ushered in. The truckers didn't like it any. They insisted that they had just dropped in for a hamburger and that their truck was parked just outside and that they had to get along. Ballard didn't even seem to listen to them.

"What's your name?" he barked at Tuck.

"Fred McSpadden," Tuck answered.

"Where do you live?"

Tuck gave his address. His room was only a block away.

"All right. Let's hear your story."

Tuck's story wasn't long. He told of how he had gone out for a walk and how he had found Henry Hull's body when he had returned. He wasn't sure whether or not the body had been lying there

when he left. It was to the side of the door where he would have seen it in the light from the window, walking up to the door, but not necessarily as he left.

When Tuck finished, Ballard said, "How long you been workin' here?"

"Just a week."

"Where are you from? Just who in the hell are you?"

Tuck answered that question as well as he could, but he knew that he wasn't making a good impression. He had no people and for over a year, now, he had been on the road, moving from place to place, finding only an occasional job.

"Just a bum, then," Ballard summed up.

Tuck wiped a hand over his face. He shook his head, but he knew that Ballard had already catalogued him.

The officer came forward. "Ever have any trouble with Henry Hull?"

"No."

"His pockets are turned inside out. You didn't hit him over the head and rob him, did you?"

"No."

Dwyer had come back into the kitchen, and Ballard said, "Search him, Dwyer."

Dwyer wasn't very gentle but he found nothing of importance in Tuck's pockets.

"You ever hear this guy have trouble with the boss?" Ballard asked Lucy.

The girl shook her head.

"How about you?" the officer said to Jules.

For a moment Jules hesitated, then he, too, shook his head.

A glint of satisfaction came into Ballard's eyes but he didn't say anything more to Tuck just then. Instead he turned to the truckers, questioned them for a moment and then let them go. After that he questioned Jules and then Lucy.

THE kitchen seemed awfully hot, and Tuck knew that he was perspiring. He heard a train roar by on the tracks which ran down Mountain

Avenue and across the boulevard, and he caught the impression that there were many cars outside and quite a crowd around the place. Through the kitchen windows he could see searchlights playing over the back yard and twice Ballard went to the door and said something to the men out there.

Then, and just as he had known would happen, Ballard turned back to him again.

"I guess this is the fellow we want, Dwyer," he said bluntly. "He's just a lousy bum. Hull took him in when he was starvin', fed him an' gave him a job, and the first chance he got, the bum slugged him over the head an' robbed him, then tried to play smart and called in the cops."

Tuck shook his head. He said, "No—no—that's a lie. I didn't kill him. I didn't—"

Ballard's hand slapped him across the cheek and the blow almost stunned him. A short, half stifled scream broke from Lucy's lips.

"You'd better come out with a straight story, McSpadden," Ballard grated. "I'm gonna get it from you if I have to beat you to death. It'll be a damned sight simpler just to talk up."

"I didn't do it," Tuck choked.

He thought that Ballard was going to hit him again but the man didn't.

He said, "Dwyer, run over to his room and see what you can find. Hull was robbed an' this guy was away long enough to have stopped at his room."

Dwyer ducked out and Ballard just stood there in the narrow kitchen, scowling at him. Jules was looking at him too. And Lucy. Yes, Lucy was finally looking at him, but the expression on her face was the kind of expression she might have worn when looking at something which had crawled out from under a rock.

"Think it over, McSpadden," Ballard breathed. "Think it over. You'd better talk."

Tuck mopped a hand across his face.

He tried to whip his thoughts into some kind of order, but he couldn't. He was frightened and he knew that his fright showed in his eyes and in his face. He wanted to stand up and stick out his jaw and tell Ballard where he could go, but he knew that he couldn't get by with it. He was thin and underweight and he didn't have the stubborn jaw of a hero.

"Better talk, McSpadden," Ballard said again.

It was very still there in the kitchen, and then suddenly Dwyer was back and he had a roll of bills in his hand.

"I found the mattress slit in the kid's room," Dwyer said grimly. "This money was stuffed inside. There was a watch there, too. I'll bet it's Hull's."

Dwyer pulled a watch from his pocket and held it out, and the minute that he saw it, Tuck knew that the watch was Henry Hull's. But that watch and the money couldn't have been found in his room. It was impossible. He tried to tell Ballard that but he couldn't get the words past a sudden lump in his throat.

Sam Ballard laughed, and the laugh was short and ugly. "Fine, Dwyer. That closes the case. Ready to talk, McSpadden?"

Tuck McSpadden shook his head. He couldn't talk. He couldn't even think straight, and he backed up against the wall when Ballard approached.

Ballard didn't hit him again, however. He only clenched his fist and lifted it and then laughed at the way Tuck must have looked.

"Take him out to the car, Dwyer. He'll break easy, but we'll finish the job downtown. Take him the back way and down the street. I'll meet you there. I want you to get him away before the reporters out front snap his picture. He's not gonna look so nice in about an hour."

Dwyer grabbed Tuck by the arm and marched him to the door and outside. Tuck's feet were like lead and there was

no strength in his legs. He had a confused impression of being taken to the alley and along it toward the street, and he could never in the world have explained what happened just before they got to the street. Perhaps it was fright that motivated him, or a hopeless desperation—or maybe a suddenly awakened anger, but certainly no thought proceeded what he did.

"Hey, I want to talk," he said abruptly.

Dwyer stopped and made a noise in his throat which might have been a chuckle. "I thought you would. Well, what is it, kid?"

"It's this!" And Tuck hit the man who was holding him. He brought his fist up from down at his side, twisting his body and getting all the weight and power behind it that he could.

The blow caught Dwyer full in the face and knocked him sprawling, and he let out a hoarse yell as he hit the ground.

That cry stabbed into Tuck's consciousness like a knife. He realized suddenly what he had done and that no one was holding him and he started to run. He heard a shot which sounded awfully close and then another and he knew that Dwyer was up and was shooting at him and that he would never get away.

He reached the street and turned up it and then ducked back across someone's yard. Behind him there was yelling and shouting and the honking of many auto horns. Blood was pounding in his temples and his breath was coming in gasps. There was still no feeling in his legs. He was running harder than he had ever run in his life, but he couldn't make any speed. And then a wire across someone's lawn tripped him and he went down and didn't have the strength to get up.

THE search was all around him. Men ran up the street, calling to one another, shouting descriptions of him. Car searchlights played across the lawns in the block, and people came out of

their houses and formed small groups on the sidewalk. A part of the crowd which had gathered at the diner had moved this way and gradually drifted on.

Tuck huddled close to the ground, scarcely moving. He lay against a hedge scarcely two feet high. The wire he had tripped on bordered the walk leading up to one of the houses, and he had rolled to the hedge in falling.

Half a dozen times he thought he had been discovered. Once a dog sniffed at him and then loped away when his master whistled. Once a searchlight from a police car passed just above him. On several occasions people gathered on the sidewalk, not six yards from the hedge. Tuck didn't see how it was possible that none of them saw him.

He heard about himself. He heard that he was desperate, and that was true. He heard that he was insane, that he carried a knife, that he had killed the policeman who had arrested him. And when the people who lived in this house before which he was lying went back inside, he heard them fasten the door and then make sure that the windows were locked.

The search moved on and the street grew quiet but still Tuck didn't move. It was cold on the ground and he was shivering, but he was beginning to be able to think again and he knew that he had to think fast. It was natural that he thought first of all of getting away, but he knew that the railroads would be watched and he didn't have a cent in his pocket. He was sure that he couldn't hitch a ride at night and that he wouldn't get far if he tried walking. And the more he considered it, the more he realized that to escape from here, at least at the present time, was impossible.

A hiding place was his next consideration and a dozen possible hiding places came to his mind, but most of them were places which would be no good at all in the daytime. As soon as he tried to get

away or to hide, the police would catch up with him. Every bit of reasoning power that he had told him that.

A voice from the past reached out over a half-dozen years and caught Tuck's attention. It was his father's voice and it seemed as clear to him tonight as though his father were kneeling at his side.

"It's no use running away, Tuck," his father had said. "You can't run forever. Sooner or later you've got to stop and fight the thing you're running from. And if you're too tired from running, you'll get whipped."

Tuck sat up, scowling. He had been running for a long time now. Running away from unpleasant jobs, running away from the monotony of work. He was really pretty close to being the bum that Sam Ballard thought him. If he was ever going to stop running away it would have to be pretty soon. In fact, it would have to be right now.

Jules! He thought of Jules. When he had left for his breath of fresh air, Jules had been alone in the diner's kitchen. The cook stood a lot at the back door and could have seen Henry Hull coming up to the place, could have stepped outside to talk to him and then could have slugged him over the head.

Tuck got to his feet. He knew where Jules lived—in the same hotel as Lucy.

A car rolled down the street, but Tuck paid hardly any attention to it. Without even considering that the search for him might still be going on, he started for Jules' hotel.

CHAPTER TWO

The Long Black Rope

TUCK came out on Foothill Boulevard two blocks from the small suburban business district in which the hotel was located. There was a good

deal of traffic on the street and it was well lighted. Tuck paused for a moment in the doorway of a feed store. A couple of men passed him with only a casual glance. Across the street a boy was hawking the morning paper.

Tuck looked down Foothill toward the railroad and toward the corner where Hull's diner was located.

He wondered if Jules had come home and if he should try the hotel or wait here for a while.

About a block away he caught sight of the figure of a woman and almost at once he knew that it was Lucy. He recognized her coat and the way she walked.

She was coming toward him, toward the hotel.

Apparently the police had just let her go home.

Tuck drew back into the doorway, and when Lucy was about to pass he stepped out and called her name and then caught her by the arm. He thought for an instant that Lucy was going to scream, and then he saw that she was too frightened. Her body had stiffened and her eyes were wide and startled.

"I'm not going to hurt you, Lucy. I only wanted to talk to you. That's all. Just talk to you."

The girl's lips moved. For a moment she didn't say anything; then she managed to gasp, "Wh—what do you want, Tuck?"

"I didn't kill him," Tuck said swiftly. "I wanted you to know that. It was Jules."

Lucy nodded. "Yes, Tuck. Of course it was Jules." She said it swiftly. "And now let me go. I'll not tell anyone I saw you. I promise I won't."

Tuck scowled. "You don't believe me. That's it. You think I'm crazy, that I killed him."

"No, Tuck."

"I'll make a bargain with you," said Tuck suddenly. "Listen to me for just a minute and then, if you wish, we'll walk

right on until we find the nearest policeman. I'm not crazy. I'm just in a spot. That's all."

Tuck released the girl's arm. He saw her eyes narrow, saw a look of doubt come into them.

"I can't prove that I didn't kill H. H.," Tuck said. "But I know that I didn't. I don't think that his body was lying there when I left. Jules was all alone in the kitchen. He stands a lot at the door. He must have seen the boss coming up. He must have stepped outside and had a row with him. He must have—"

And then quite suddenly Tuck stopped. For the first time since he had decided that Jules was the murderer, he remembered the money and the watch which had been found in his room. Jules couldn't have planted the money and the watch there. He wouldn't have dared to leave the kitchen that long.

Lucy had thought of that too. "What about the money and the watch which were found in your room, Tuck? How did they get there? Jules didn't leave the diner while you were away. Most of the time I stood at the order window and talked to him."

Tuck ran his fingers through hair which needed cutting. The whole case that he had built up had come tumbling down around him. He could feel Lucy's eyes on him, but he didn't look up.

"Maybe you didn't kill him, Tuck," Lucy said suddenly. "Maybe it was some tramp from the railroad. Maybe—"

"No tramp would have known his way to my room. No tramp would have left that much money there."

"Then it was someone else, someone who knew where you lived."

"Hardly anyone knows where I live. I've only been here a week."

"Someone who had planned it could have found out."

Tuck didn't know how it had happened, but he had the feeling that Lucy

had come over to his side—and that feeling lifted him out of his depression.

He said, "That's it, Lucy. Someone who knew where I lived. Someone who had followed me home."

A man who was passing just then glanced over at Tuck sharply, and when he had gone, Lucy said, under her breath, "We can't stand here, Tuck. The police are looking for you. Someone may guess who you are."

Tuck grinned. "I'll walk you on home."

"But where are you going?"

"I'm going hunting."

Without giving Lucy a chance to object, Tuck started on up Foothill with her. He didn't know it, but he stood a little straighter than he had been standing for months and there was almost a spring in his step.

THEY walked a block in silence. Then Lucy stopped him with her hand on his arm. "Tuck, who are you going to be hunting? What can you do?"

Tuck made no answer. He was looking ahead, up the street. A car had stopped near the doorway which led to the hotel where Lucy lived, and two men had gotten out. They were both large men and they looked very familiar.

"Tuck, what is it?" Lucy whispered.

"Those two men! Do you know them? The ones in front of your hotel."

Lucy stared toward the two men. "They look a little like the two who were in the diner when the police arrived."

"They are the two."

"But they're not dressed the same, Tuck. And those fellows who were in the diner were truckers. They're a hundred miles away from here by now."

Tuck shook his head stubbornly. "They're not a hundred miles away. They're not even a hundred yards away. Lucy, did you ever see those two fellows before?"

"I don't think so. I—Tuck, I've just remembered something."

Lucy's voice betrayed a sudden excitement. Her hand was still on Tuck's arm and her fingers were digging through his heavy, blue shirt.

"Do you remember when you brought in those cups tonight? Those two men were at the counter. They looked you over. After you left one of them asked who you were and I told him. He said you looked like a fellow who tried to hold him up one night. He wanted to go back and talk to you, but the man next to him wouldn't let him. That—that isn't much, but it might mean something."

It seemed to Tuck that his mind had never been clearer than it was just then. He looked toward the two men. One of them was going through the doorway into the hotel. The other leaned against the building.

"No, that wasn't much," Tuck said slowly. "But, Lucy, if those men killed H. H., they must have stopped in the diner just to plant that notion with you. And after Sam Ballard let them go, they could have hurried over to my room and left the money and the watch in the mattress of my bed. I told Ballard my address, and they heard it."

"Tuck, I'm going to find out."

"Find out what?"

"Find out if those are the two men who were in the diner tonight, dressed up as truckers."

"No, Lucy. I—"

Lucy started across the street, almost running.

Tuck caught her but she pulled away from him.

She said, "Don't be a fool, Tuck. Let me go."

There was hardly anyone in sight and Tuck noticed that the man waiting near the hotel door had straightened up and was looking toward them. Cars were parked pretty solidly along the curb, cars

belonging to people attending the show on the next corner, and Tuck didn't make another attempt to stop Lucy. Instead he moved between two of the parked cars to the street. He bent low then, and hurried forward, aware of the fact that he was attracting attention from the passing motorists, but sure that the man waiting at the hotel couldn't see him.

Near the place, Tuck straightened up. Through a car's windows he saw the man who had been waiting step up to Lucy. He didn't hear what the man said but he saw the fellow's hand dive into his pocket and come out with a gun, and he saw him motion with the gun toward the car in which he had arrived.

Lucy looked around once and then stepped over toward the car. She got in and the man stood near the open door, leaning over as though talking to the girl and waiting, Tuck knew, for the man who had gone into the hotel.

Tuck edged around to the sidewalk. He came up behind the man silently and swiftly. He touched him on the shoulder, and when the man straightened up, Tuck hit him. He hit him just like he had hit the detective there in the alley back of the diner. His whole body was twisting under the blow. Pain spread through his hand and ran up his arm, and he knew he had broken something. He heard the fellow cry out as he sagged against the car door, and then he heard Lucy calling to him. She had crawled out the other side of the car.

The car door the man had fallen against slammed shut, and the fellow keeled over and sprawled on the sidewalk. A man coming up the street stopped a dozen yards away, a foolish, frightened look on his face. Lucy hurried around the car and caught Tuck's arm.

She said, "Come on," and started him up the street, walking fast. They came to a parking lot beside a grocery store and turned across it, away from Foothill.

Back near the hotel somebody started

yelling. "Help! Help! Help!" There was something electrifying in the sound. Tuck wanted to run again. He urged Lucy along faster.

"Steady, Tuck. Steady! We'll not attract so much attention if we just walk."

Tuck swallowed the lump in his throat and forced himself to slow down. Lucy was right, he knew, but in spite of what she had said, her voice hadn't sounded very sure. And he could feel her arm trembling under his own.

THE garage had a dirt floor and hadn't been used for a long time. Lucy was sure that it was alive with black widow spiders. She shivered and didn't want to sit down on the blanket Tuck had stolen from someone's clothesline.

"Black widow spiders never stir during the night," Tuck declared. "It's only in daytime, when it's warm, that they move about."

"How do you know that?" Lucy asked.

Tuck didn't know it but it sounded reasonable. "I learned it in school."

"Where did you go to school, Tuck?"

"University of Nebraska."

"Honestly?"

Tuck nodded. "Majored in English and psychology. Three years on the football team but always a scrub."

"Why do people call you Tuck?"

"I don't know."

"There was a man named Tuck in the stories of Robin Hood."

"He was big and fat and was a friar."

"And he was a good fighter, too. Maybe that's why people call you Tuck."

The garage was back of a vacant house on a corner two blocks from Foothill Boulevard. Tuck had noticed the place several days before. He had noticed it because the house was marked for sale and because it was the kind of a house he wanted to own some day. He had wanted to **break** into the house tonight but it had

been securely locked up and he was afraid that a smashed window would attract attention the next morning.

Tuck lay down on the blanket. He had two more. One was wrapped around Lucy, who was still standing.

"It'll be all right to sit down, Lucy," Tuck said slowly. "I'll not bother you any. That is—"

Lucy sat down. "Tuck, why did that man want me to get in his car? He didn't tell me. He just said that he was taking me to see someone."

"You recognized him?"

"Yes. He *was* one of the truckers. He was the one who had asked about you."

Tuck nodded. "Those men killed H. H.," he said quietly. "They came in the diner just to drop that hint about me, hoping that when the murder was discovered, you would pass that hint on to the police and the police would have a good suspect. Then the police came, and I seemed so guilty that Sam Ballard paid hardly any attention to them. They got out, planted the money and watch in my room and then got to thinking. They remembered what they had said to you and were afraid that if you repeated the story to the police, the police might try to find them to check up on their story of my attempt to hold them up."

"Well?"

"Don't you see, Lucy? They don't want the police checking up on them. The police accepted the story that they were just truckers who had dropped in for a hamburger, and let them go. They were afraid if you talked to the police, the cops might try to find them. I—I don't think they would have hurt you. Maybe they would have just kept you out of circulation for a while. The police would have searched for you, of course, but would probably have thought you had just run away."

Lucy shivered again and drew the blanket closer around her. They talked **more—of the case and then of other things,**

and the long night slowly passed. Sometime toward morning, Lucy dropped off to sleep. And then Tuck did also, though he hadn't thought he would be able to close his eyes, because of the way his right hand ached.

THE morning was bright with sunshine, and at about nine o'clock Lucy insisted on going out for some food. She came back with several large bundles and proudly exhibited the things she had bought. There was a quart of milk, bread, cold meat, a pie, paper napkins and cups and oranges, also a razor and some blades, a tube of brushless shaving cream, cold cream and some Kleenex, a new shirt, sweater and hat, and a newspaper.

"I spent practically every cent that I had," she confessed. "But I think I did pretty well, Tuck. The only thing I'm not sure about is the size of the shirt and the hat."

Tuck tried on the hat. It came way down over his ears. He grinned at Lucy, and said, "A perfect fit."

Lucy was laughing at him. "You ought to see yourself, Tuck. You ought to see yourself."

Still grinning, Tuck took off the hat. He looked at the size of the shirt and said, "This is much better."

"I can exchange the hat," Lucy announced. "Suppose you shave, and then breakfast will be ready. I always insist that my men shave before breakfast."

Tuck set to work shaving. There was a small mirror in Lucy's purse and he borrowed it. Lucy watched him critically.

"In the movies," she mentioned, "women are supposed to love watching a man shave. I used to think I ought to be in the movies."

"Get my breakfast, woman," Tuck ordered.

He felt pretty good this morning as long as he could keep his thoughts off of what

lay ahead. He felt like a different man. He knew that he was head over heels in love with Lucy and that that was the reason for it. And he knew, too, that this thing couldn't go on.

Lucy turned to the paper and read what it had to say about Henry Hull's death and Tuck's escape. There wasn't any mention at all of the two truckers.

"But I'm in the paper," Lucy cried suddenly. "I—Tuck, I've disappeared. I'm supposed to have been in on it with you."

Tuck scowled. He had finished shaving, and now he wiped the rest of the lather off of his face. "What else is in the paper?"

"Nothing else about us. There was another accident at Foothill and Mountain last night. A fast freight hit a car with three people in it. They were all killed."

Tuck sat down.

He said, "Lucy, you've got to get out of this."

"How?"

"Haven't you got some people some place you can go to?"

The girl shook her head. "We've got to find those two truckers. Tuck, why do you suppose they killed H. H.? It wasn't for the money he had. They hid the money in your room."

"Maybe they only hid part of it."

"No. H. H. never carried much money."

"And you've never seen those men before?"

"Never."

Tuck started

"We could go to the police, of course," Lucy went on. "We could tell them about those two men, but we couldn't prove a thing."

Tuck looked up. "Do you know of anyone who hated Henry Hull?"

"No one. He was a—he was a wonderful man, Tuck. He was always doing something to help people. He never had much money. Sometimes he used to talk

about what he wanted to do when he got rich, when the overpass went through. There's always been talk of an overpass for the railroad at Foothill and Mountain. H. H. owned the property on both sides of the track. The railroad would have had to buy it—but nothing ever came of the plans."

Tuck's eyes narrowed. "Lucy, where does Mrs. Hull live?"

"Just a couple blocks from here. Why?"

Tuck stood up. "Let's go see her."

"But we might be seen. The police—"

"I've got a new shirt and sweater and hat. Besides, no one will be expecting us around here. Let's go."

"Why do you want to see Mrs. Hull?"

Tuck caught Lucy's arm. "Come on, woman. I've got ideas."

NO ONE seemed to pay any attention to them as they strolled down the street, though Tuck knew that Lucy was nervous. Suddenly she stopped him.

"That's the house up there," she said swiftly. "The yellow stucco. That's Mrs. Hull on the porch. The man with her is Jim Mundy."

Tuck stared up the street. A man and woman stood on the porch of the yellow stuccoed house. The woman was rather small and gray-haired. The man was tall and thin. He was well dressed. His car, parked at the curb in front of the house, was large and new.

"Who's Jim Mundy?"

"I don't know much about him, Tuck. He used to drop in to the diner sometimes to see H. H. I've heard he's a politician. He was always wanting to buy the diner, or at least he was always joking about it."

Tuck nodded. He was aware of a growing excitement. He watched Mundy turn from the porch, enter his car and drive away, but he still didn't move from where he was standing.

"Shall we go on, Tuck?" Lucy asked.

Tuck shook his head. "I think you can do this better than I can, Lucy. Doesn't Mrs. Hull like you?"

"I think she does."

"Then she'll never believe that you were mixed up with me, no matter what the papers say. She'd talk more freely to you than she would to me. I guess I wasn't thinking very straight when I decided to see her myself."

"Why do you want me to see her, Tuck?"

"I want you to find out if that man Mundy really wanted to buy the diner or if anyone wanted to buy it recently. I want you to find out why Mundy came to see her this morning."

"And that's all?"

Tuck nodded.

"You'll wait here?"

"No, I'll crawl back in my hole. And don't mention my name."

Lucy hesitated for just a moment, then moved on up the street. When Tuck saw her enter the house he turned and started back toward the garage.

Tuck's mind was still deep in consideration of this new angle to the case when he got back to the garage. The morning was quiet, and except for a couple of kids playing on the corner, no one was near the place. Just as though the garage belonged to him, Tuck opened the door and stepped inside—and then he came to an abrupt halt, every muscle in his body freezing. Two men were waiting for him in the garage, the two truckers who had been in the diner the night before. Each held a gun, and the looks the two men were wearing were twisted and ugly.

"Nice little place you have here," said one. "Come on in, McSpadden, an' sit down."

Tuck McSpadden swallowed. He couldn't imagine how these fellows had found his hide-out, and he didn't like the way they were looking at him. He had an impulse to call out, but he choked it back.

He didn't want the police just yet. He didn't want the police any more than these two men. And he knew what might happen if he yelled for help. He was already branded a murderer. It would be no crime to shoot him down.

"Come on in an' sit down," ordered the man again.

Tuck moved forward a little and sat down on the dirt floor. The blankets and the remains of the breakfast he and Lucy had enjoyed were piled against one of the walls. The food had been covered by the blankets when he and Lucy had left but Tuck noticed that the men had discovered it.

"I guess we've never met properly," said the man who had done all the talking since Tuck had come in. "My name's Max Golding. This other fellow's Lou Siegel. We've been sort of looking around for you. Especially Lou."

Lou was the man Tuck had hit the night before in front of Lucy's hotel. His jaw was swollen. He had a fleshy, red face, dark eyes and heavy brows. Golding was thinner, but still big.

"Well, where is she, McSpadden?" Golding snapped.

"Where's who?" Tuck asked.

"The girl. Who the hell did you think we meant?" Golding laughed. "You must have had a pretty nice time here last night."

A sudden flush of anger came into Tuck's face. He jerked to his feet and rushed at Golding, forgetting all about the man's gun: It flashed up and down, and the barrel caught Tuck across the temple. A thousand stars blinked in front of his eyes. The next thing that he knew he was on the ground and Golding was kicking him in the ribs.

"YOU'D better sit up and talk, McSpadden," Golding was saying. "I haven't even started on what I can do to you."

Tuck managed to sit up. There was a hammering pain in his head and his eyes wouldn't focus right. His stomach was churning up and down.

"Let me handle him, Max," Lou Siegel growled. "I'm the guy who found this place. I'm the guy who insisted on searchin' all the vacant buildings in this part of the town."

"You ought to have been a copper," Golding sneered. "But who let the girl get away in the first place?"

"She hasn't been here," Tuck muttered.

Golding laughed. "The hell she wasn't. We found cold cream and Kleenex in that pile of stuff against the wall. You would never have bought that. Only a woman would. I want to know where she is."

Tuck swallowed. "All right. I just put her on a train for Los Angeles where she's got folks."

"Another lie, McSpadden. She ain't got no folks. We learned that this morning. Where is she?"

"I don't know."

Golding's foot kicked out and caught Tuck in the jaw. He couldn't stifle the cry which came to his lips. He had the feeling that half of his head had been torn off. Something was suddenly slapped across his face, something that choked his breathing. Adhesive tape!

"He can't talk that way," Siegel objected.

"And he can't yell, either," said Golding. "We'll talk to him for a while, then rip off the tape an' give him one more chance."

"Maybe if we just wait here the girl will show up."

"Yeah, an' maybe the coppers will get the same idea we had. Maybe they'll show up."

Tuck had never felt worse in his life. His head was splitting with pain and he couldn't get enough air into his lungs. A hazy darkness swept over him but he

couldn't lose himself in it. He could still hear Golding and Siegel talking and he couldn't get out of his mind the realization that Lucy would soon be back. He knew that he had to get these men away before she returned and that no ordinary lie would satisfy them. He needed to be able to think now, and he couldn't think.

Something rough and tight was twisted around his throat, and he was pulled to his feet and held there. He fumbled at his neck and felt a rope.

"Listen here, McSpadden," Golding said sharply. "We mean business. We want that girl. It's her or you. Understand? And this is your last chance to talk straight. Feel above your head."

Tuck lifted his arms above his head and felt a rope. When he touched it he felt it pull against his neck. And he knew fear then—a deep and racking fear that made him want to scream.

"I reckon you've figured it out," Golding went on. "Lie to us again an' we'll string you up. We'll put a box near where you'll be hangin'. It'll look like suicide, McSpadden. The cops will never question it. What would be more natural than for a hunted man to hang himself, specially when he doesn't have a chance of gettin' away?"

Golding stepped forward and ripped the adhesive tape from Tuck's lips.

"Last chance, McSpadden. What you got to say?"

Tuck McSpadden drank in deep gulps of air. He glanced above his head and saw how the rope was fixed over one of the rafters. Lou Siegel, back by the door, held the other end. All he had to do was to pull on the rope to hoist Tuck's body into the air.

"Talk, damn you," Golding grated.

Something convincing—that was what he had to tell them! Something that would get them away from here before Lucy returned.

"The girl's—gone to see—Jim Mun-

dy," Tuck gasped. "She knows about—"

His voice choked up and he was afraid to look at Golding, afraid that his guess had been wrong.

Golding whistled.

"She's gone to see Mundy," he breathed. "How the hell did you figure him in on it?"

"She's gone to see Mundy," Tuck said again. "It's about the overpass. There's a lot of money involved in it. A lot of money."

Golding's eyes had narrowed. "A lot of money, huh? Maybe we're missin' out on somethin', Lou. Suppose you an' me go to see Mundy again. There's more to this than he told us."

"What about this guy?"

Golding's laugh was short and ugly. "String him up. He knows too much."

Tuck grabbed for the rope above his head.

"No," he screamed. "No! I—"

The rope jerked taut. It tightened around his throat, cutting off his cries. He felt himself pulled from his feet, and he tried and tried to suck air into his lungs but he couldn't. Darkness crowded over him.

CHAPTER THREE

The Devil's Overpass

LUCY was calling him. She was calling his name over and over and her voice seemed to be coming from some point far away, the front of the lunch counter, perhaps, and she must be short of cups or silver. Tuck made a desperate effort to get up and to get over to the tubs, and then his eyes opened and he saw that Lucy was bending over him and he recalled, all at once, what had happened.

He lifted his hands to his throat. Though loosened, the rope was still there. A part of it trailed over the rafter.

Lucy moistened her handkerchief and wiped his lips. She had been crying, and her face was very pale.

"I—I thought I was too late," she whispered. "I saw those men leaving the garage and I ducked back out of sight. When I got here I—I was afraid you were . . . dead. . . ."

Tuck sat up. He held his head in his hands and tried to fight off the dizziness which was sweeping over him. His throat was raw, and a pain was building up in his head. He felt Lucy's arm around his shoulder, holding him steady.

Lucy was flushed. Her breath was coming fast. "Tuck, we've got to get out of here. Those men may come back. They may—"

"They'll not be back," Tuck promised. "What did Mrs. Hull tell you?"

"She said that Jim Mundy wanted to buy her property on Mountain Avenue."

"Her property?"

"Yes. It's in her name, though of course it belonged to H. H."

"And H. H. didn't want to sell."

"No. He insisted on holding it. He thought they would some day make something out of it, that is, if the overpass was ever put through."

"What did Mundy want today?"

"He wanted Mrs. Hull to sign the papers. And she did. She said that with H. H. gone she wouldn't ever try to run the diner. She's going back east right after the funeral, anyhow."

Tuck nodded. "That's it, Lucy! Everything's perfectly clear now."

"What's perfectly clear?"

"Who killed H. H. and who ordered it done and why. It's like this. That overpass is going to be built. Mundy knew about it and wanted the property Hull owned. The property was in Mrs. Hull's name, but H. H. wouldn't let her sell out, so Mundy hired two men to kill him, then went to see Mrs. Hull and got her to sign over the property."

Lucy was staring at Tuck wide-eyed. "How do you know all that?"

"Nothing else adds up. I'm going to see Mundy."

"No!"

Tuck's lips tightened. "I've got to, Lucy. Don't you see, I can't prove a bit of what I told you, but I said enough to those two fellows who tried to hang me, to send them to see Mundy. Apparently Mundy hadn't told them the whole story. I've an idea they mean to hold him up. But here's the point. I've got to get out to see Jim Mundy before those two fellows leave. It's your job to go after the police."

"But—but what can you do, Tuck?"

"I can act as master of ceremonies. Mundy and those other two fellows would cover up if the police walked in. The police wouldn't believe our story, anyhow. It's got to be dragged out in the open and I'm the only one who can do that."

"They'll kill you, Tuck."

"Not if the police get there quick enough and listen outside while we're still talking."

He turned toward the door, but Lucy said, "Wait a minute, Tuck." And then she caught him in her arms and kissed him.

When she broke away, she said, "You've got a lot to learn, Tuck, but—but I've an idea you'll learn fast." Her voice was husky and there was a breathless quality about it which sent Tuck's blood pounding madly through his veins.

He said, "Let me try again. Come here, woman."

IT WAS Jim Mundy himself who answered Tuck's ring, and Tuck knew from the startled expression which spread across his face, that the man recognized him.

"Hate to bother you like this," said Tuck quietly. "But I hate to be pushed around, Mr. Mundy, and those two friends of yours who arrived here a little while

ago have been pushing me too hard."

Mundy stepped back from the door and Tuck entered the house.

Max Golding and Lou Siegel came in from another room where they had apparently been waiting. They stared at him, wide-eyed.

Tuck shook his head. "I'm not a ghost. The rope broke. That's all."

Siegel clawed out his gun. "It did like hell. It—"

Golding pushed Siegel's arm down. He said, "Take it easy, Lou. Take it easy."

"What do you want?" Mundy blurted.

"What do I want?" Tuck asked. "Why, I want money, of course."

Golding and Siegel looked at each other and nodded and then they both looked at Mundy. Tuck left the door ajar. He moved on deeper into the room.

"I thought you told me you had finished this fellow," Mundy said bluntly.

"I still can't figure out how he got here," Siegel declared. "That rope didn't break."

"Of course it didn't," Tuck grinned. "The girl came along and cut me down. She's waiting now for a telephone call from me."

"A telephone call?" Mundy repeated.

Tuck nodded. "If she doesn't get it she's going to the police with her story. It's a damned interesting story, too. Shall I tell it to you? It's all about an overpass for the railroad at Mountain and Foothill and about a man who was killed so that his wife wouldn't have any excuse not to sell out some valuable property."

Mundy sucked in a sharp breath. "You can't prove a thing."

"Can't I?"

"Not a damned thing."

"But it's an interesting story, isn't it?"

Mundy again glanced at the two gunmen. "Get rid of this fellow. There's nothing to his story at all."

Tuck leaned forward. "I've got to make my phone call in ten minutes. Would

you like to hear all that I can prove?"

Mundy jerked around to stare at him. "All right. Go ahead."

There were cigarettes on a table near where Tuck was sitting. He got up, lit one and went back to his chair. He made up a story about what he could prove and he dragged it out as long as he could. He leaned forward as he talked, and he listened above the sound of his voice for some sound from the front door. It was still slightly ajar. He had waited a while before coming here and he didn't think the police should be so far behind.

"All a pack of lies," Mundy cut in suddenly. "I'm not afraid of your story."

Tuck shrugged. "It'd be safer to buy me off than risk it."

"For how much?"

"Ten grand. Cash."

"You're crazy."

"Five then. And not a cent less."

Mundy looked over at Golding and Siegel. "I'll give you fellows the five grand. You take care of this man here."

Golding moistened his lips. He said, "Ten, Jim. Don't forget that girl can tell quite a story about us. We'll have to get out of here in a hurry."

Tuck thought that he heard a sound from outside the door. He started talking again, retelling his story, but Mundy wasn't listening to him. He was looking at Max Golding, and after a minute he nodded.

"All right, Max," he agreed. "Ten grand."

Golding grinned. "Go get him, Lou!"

A GLINT of satisfaction came into Lou Siegel's eyes. He started toward Tuck. He still held his gun in one hand and he was swinging it. Suddenly he sprang forward, slashing down with his gun in a vicious blow that numbed Tuck's shoulder as he tried to duck out of the way.

Tuck's right hand was still swollen, but

he stabbed out with it desperately. He felt the bones crunch as he connected, and pain swam in his eyes. He lurched forward, catching Siegel with his shoulder, and he reeled off of the man and into Max Golding who was charging toward him.

This was the end, Tuck knew, but he meant to make it a good end. He tore free of Golding, caught up a chair and hurled it at the man. He threw himself at Mundy, tripped and went down, and it was when he was on the floor, trying to get up, that he heard the voice from the door—a loud, heavy voice—the voice of Sam Ballard.

"Mind if I take a hand in this, too?"

Tuck got to his knees and then stood erect. Siegel, Golding and Mundy were all facing the door, and at the door, back of Ballard, were several other officers. One of them was Detective Dwyer.

Jim Mundy suddenly found his voice.

"I want this man arrested," he said sharply, pointing toward Tuck. "He broke in here and demanded money."

There was a tight, grim expression on Sam Ballard's face.

"I think I'm going to make several arrests," he said flatly. "Yeah, I think I'm going to make four. I heard a lot of interesting talk going on before I busted in here."

Mundy looked nervously around the room. He tried one more threat. "I'll break you, officer. I'll break you if it's the last thing I ever do. I've got lots of friends. I—"

"You'll need those friends," Ballard nodded. "Come along. All of you."

For an instant not a man in the room moved, then Mundy jerked around and fled toward a side door, and without a change in expression, Ballard lifted his gun and shot him. Then he stared down at the man.

"This changes things," he said, still in his flat monotone. "I reckon we'll stay here for a while and talk things over.

Dwyer, bring in the girl. One of you other fellows phone for the doctor. Maybe there's a chance to pull Mundy through."

TUCK felt a little different when he saw Sam Ballard in action this time. He could look at the thing more objectively. It wasn't a very long session. Siegel caved in and talked, and even Max Golding.

Then finally Sam Ballard came over to where Tuck and Lucy were sitting.

"I reckon you kids can go," he told them. "You've done a good job, but don't ever try it again. What I can't figure out is why you didn't come to me with your story any sooner."

"And what I can't figure out," said Tuck, "is why you didn't bust into this room a little sooner."

Ballard grinned. "I busted in as soon as I got here. I hadn't heard a thing from outside."

"But you said—"

"I had the whole story from your girl, McSpadden. She's a convincing talker. She almost pulled my hair out when I wouldn't believe her right away. Then I learned that it's true about the overpass and I rushed out here as quickly as I could."

"What about the deeds Mundy got from Mrs. Hull?"

"I'll see that she's protected."

"And we can go now?"

Ballard's grin broadened. "Sure. I'll give you a lift in one of the police cars."

Lucy started them to the door, and outside she whispered to Tuck, "Let's walk. I don't want to ride."

Tuck nodded and got rid of Dwyer. The sun was still up. It wasn't more than mid-afternoon but Tuck felt that a lifetime had passed since the evening before.

"You know, Lucy," he said suddenly. "Some day I'm going to buy that house in front of our garage."

"Let's do it," said Lucy. "Soon."

*A Novelette
of Relentless
Vengeance*

**By
Day
Keene**



“Surprise! Papa’s home!”

CHAPTER ONE

Killer Be Patient

DURING the night spring had crept north across the Arkansas border into Missouri. An almost summer sun beat down upon the

prison honor farm. It had not rained for weeks. Dust rose in choking red clouds from the drag points and the plodding hoofs of the two big, blue, Missouri mules that John Hanley followed warily.

It was his first day on the prison farm.

BIG SHOT



Out of the night he came on a mission of trackless vengeance—the dead man who had to pay a debt in blood before he could live again!

New York bred, it was the first time that he had ever been on any farm. He had played it smart. The honor farm was his reward for three years of perfect behavior on an indeterminate sentence of one to twenty years. He was alone in the field. The unguarded farm cottage was a full mile distant. Hanley glanced up at it

briefly, then scuffed on after his team.

“The suckers,” he grinned wryly. “They trust me. They think I got honor.”

An eighth of a mile away the highway wound, a white ribbon through the red clay of the hills. A solitary car roared down the road. Hanley followed it with

envious eyes until it disappeared. The half-smile faded from his lips. No dame, not even Rita—especially not Rita—was going to play him for a sucker. He was too wise for that.

He made a mental vow: "I'm walking out of this rube crib and killing her and that Swede who Benny says she's going around with if I have to burn in every state between here and Minnesota." He added, grimly certain, "And I don't think I'll burn."

Plodding through the heat and the red dust that sifted into his eyes, his nose, his mouth, he thought of his wife as he last had seen her. It had been through the wire mesh of the prisoner's visiting room in Jefferson City. She had been, as she always was, coolly beautiful.

"I've a surprise for you, John," he mimicked her voice to the swishing tails of the mules. "In fact I have two surprises. But I won't tell you now. I haven't told you all this time because you'd only worry. And I don't want you to worry, dear. I love you. Just be patient. We—I'm going to get you out of here. And then we'll forget all this—and just be happy."

Hanley flicked savagely with the reins at the backs of the sweating mules. "And like a damn sap, I believed her. I've believed her for three years. I'd still be believing her if Benny hadn't blown in."

The little dip's words pounded through his head: "Yeah. Sure. I'm tellin' you, Johnny. Rita's quit the night club business cold and she's going around with some big Swede named Olson who has a little fishing camp in Minnesota. Chuck seen her up there when he was hiding out after the Sioux City bank job."

Hanley barked his shins on the bar of the drag. He looked up to find that his team of mules had stopped at the solitary strand of barbed wire that separated the prison field from the highway. For a moment he was tempted to just

break and run. He glanced up at the farm cottage. There was no one to stop him. But he knew he wouldn't get very far. He shook his head. No. Only a punk would make a break like that. His other plan was better. He reviewed it quickly. It hadn't a flaw that he could see. His lips twisted in a crooked grin. He thought, *By this time tomorrow I'll be dead—legally dead. And the dead man will be roaring down the road to kill a two-timing blonde. "Be patient. I love you. Ha!"*

He swung his team around awkwardly and plodded back across the field. The .38 that had been smuggled in to him chafed against the soft flesh of his inner thigh, where it was strapped, until the skin was raw and bleeding. But John Hanley felt no pain. He had more important matters on his mind. He would, John Hanley decided, start the ball rolling just before lights-out.

JOHN HANLEY sat watching the five other men in his cottage with a twisted smile on his face. They were saps, suckers, all of them. They were actually grateful to the State of Missouri for the privileges of sweating all day behind a team of mules. Some of them were even planning on buying farms of their own when they had served their sentences, or the paroles for which they had applied had been granted. They really liked farm life. For himself, one day of it had been enough. He glanced at the clock. He was leaving—soon.

Mack Benton, once one of the best "soup" men in the business, looked up from the government pamphlet on furbearing animals that he was studying with a beatific smile on his face.

"Gee. Listen to this, boys. Are beavers smart! It says right here in this little book that—"

"Oh dry up!" John Hanley fired his opening gun. "Can't you guys talk about

anything but hick stuff? Ever since supper all that you've talked about is mules and cows and fertilizer and how much corn to an acre. So who cares? Who the hell wants to know anything about beavers?"

The big ex-safecracker laid the pamphlet down on the table and stood up. "I do," he said quietly. "I'm going to have a fur farm when I get out of here. Maybe muskrats. Maybe beavers. Maybe silver foxes. Maybe even skunks. So what's it to you, big-shot?"

"Steady, Mack," Tim Harris, the trusty in charge of the honor farm cottage, said quietly. "Don't let Hanley get your goat now. You know the rules about fighting. And there ain't none of us wants to give this up to go back to a cell."

John Hanley said, "Baloney!" He lit a cigarette and smoked for a moment.

Tim Harris laid his magazine upon the table and began to wind his watch. "Five minutes to lights-out, boys," he yawned.

The other men got up, stretched, and began slowly to undress. Hanley deliberately picked up a magazine and tilted his chair back against the wall.

"I said, five minutes to lights-out,

Johnny," Harris warned him quietly.

Hanley scowled over the top of his magazine. "To hell with lights-out!"

Tim Harris sat on the edge of his bunk, one heavy-soled shoe in his hand. "Careful now, Johnny," he said. "Don't you be after doing anything to dirty up our record out here."

Hanley grinned thinly. "To hell with your record. You saps can do what you like. Me, I'm taking the prison truck and I'm breaking out of here tonight."

FOR a moment no one spoke. Then Mack Benton said, "But you can't do that, Hanley. You'll get us all in wrong. We gave our word of honor to the warden."

Hanley hooted. "Your word of honor! Don't make me laugh." He tilted his chair forward and his sharp eyes searched the circle of disapproving faces. "Any of you guys want to break out with me?"

Pete Cherborn, doing twenty years to life for murder, shook his head. He spoke for all of them as Hanley had known that one of them would do. "No. There ain't none of us that wants to break out,

Let us take you to—

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Hanley. And you aren't breaking either."

"No?" Hanley pushed back his chair and stood up. "Who's going to stop me?"

"I will if I have to," Benton told him. "For the first time in my life somebody is treating me like a right guy. I mean the warden. We all give him our word of honor. And we ain't going to let him down."

"Baloney," Hanley sneered. He moved warily toward the door, and Benton thrust out his arm to stop him. Hanley slapped it away with his left hand and followed it with a right hook to the big man's jaw. Benton rocked back on his heels and Hanley kicked over the table. He wanted it to look good. It did. Four pairs of fists lashed out at him. One heavy fist found his jaw. The lights in the room flared up—and as suddenly went out.

It was the slosh of water in his face that brought John Hanley to. His first conscious thought was of his gun. He moved his right leg slightly. They hadn't frisked him. The gun was still strapped to his thigh.

Mack Benton's face bent over him. The big man was smiling. "What do you say we forget it, huh? It was just the heat and it being kinda strange out here that got you."

Hanley lashed up savagely at the jaw of the man above him.

"Okay, Mack," Tim Harris sighed. "There's only one thing we can do. There's no place out here to lock him up so I'll have to drive him in. One of you boys go get the truck."

Five minutes later, John Hanley was on the first leg of his nine-hundred-mile journey north to kill the woman who had begged him to be patient.

Tim Harris drove in silence. John Hanley sat working on the ropes with which they had tied his hands.

The ropes around his wrists were almost loose.

He broke the silence with a question. "Sure that you don't want to break out with me, Tim?"

The old trusty didn't even turn his head. "You aren't breaking out, Hanley. You'll be back in a cell by morning. You're not a big-shot. You're a sap. You're not half as smart as you think you are. You—" He stopped short as he felt the vicious prod of a gun barrel in his ribs. "Oh. A heater, eh?" was all he said.

"That's right," John Hanley agreed. "Now keep on driving until I tell you to stop. And open this crate up. Push down on that gas."

The other man did as he was told. It was all that he could do. They roared past several cars at sixty miles an hour. Hanley scanned them closely. Both of them held couples. Both were driving slowly. Ten miles up the road they passed a third car. It was a business coupe. The driver was alone. He was holding his car at fifty.

"A salesman," Hanley decided. "Pass him," he ordered, "then stop on the crest of the next hill, right in the middle of the road."

Harris swung around the other car but shook his head. "You won't get away with it, Johnny. And I won't—" The old trusty crumpled forward on the wheel as Hanley swung his gun barrel in a vicious, chopping arc.

THE truck swerved wildly to the right. Hanley fought the wheel across the trusty's body to bring it back into the road. He made it—just. He braked the light truck to a stop. Harris hadn't moved. Hanley laid him flat down on the seat, put the gun in his jumper pocket, and stepped out of the truck cab on the driver's side just as the lights of the coupe behind him swung up the hill and its driver braked it to a stop.

The driver of the coupe leaned out the window of his car. "Boy, were you lucky," he called. "When I saw you swerve I thought you were a goner. What was it, Bud? A blow-out?"

Hanley walked back towards the other car. "Yeah. A bad one. For you." He took the gun from his pocket, and the smile froze on the salesman's face. "Okay, sucker. Out of your car and peel off your clothes!"

The salesman said, "The hell I will!" He tried to duck back in his car. But Hanley's arm was faster. His gun swung in a second vicious arc that ended just above the friendly salesman's eye.

"Just a sucker," Hanley repeated. He dragged the limp form from the car.

He stripped the unconscious man to the skin and dressed him in his own dungarees, shirt and jumper. He worked fast but without lost motion. Another car might come along at any moment and he still had a lot to do. Dressed in the other man's clothes, he looked in his wallet. It contained eighty dollars and a gasoline credit card. The name was Brown.

"Not bad," Hanley admired.

He shouldered the salesman's still unconscious body and loaded it into the cab of the prison truck. He tied the wrists with the rope with which his own wrists had been tied. Then he cut the truck wheels sharply to the right—toward a drop of fifty feet. He released the brake, and shifted the gears to neutral. He yanked up the hood of the truck and remembered he had forgotten his ring. He pulled the signet ring from his finger and forced it on the salesman's finger. The unconscious man moaned once in pain.

"That's what you get for being a sucker and stopping on a lonely road at night," Hanley grinned. "This ought to wise you up." He slammed the truck door shut and began to fumble with the car-

buretor until it spurted gasoline. That he was about to commit a double murder didn't trouble him in the least. They weren't the first men he had killed.

The lights of another car swept up the road a mile away, then disappeared into a hollow. Hanley struck a match. It spluttered and went out. He struck a second and it held a steady flame. He stepped back and tossed it in the spreading pool of gasoline that dripped down into the oil pan. There was a "whoosh" and a sheet of flame shot skyward from the motor of the truck.

Hanley raced for the salesman's car. He meshed it into low and nudged the radiator grille up against the rear end of the truck. Already on a down-grade, the truck began to roll. Hanley switched off the lights of his stolen car and watched it.

A sheet of flame, the truck rolled over the bank. It rolled true for a moment. Then it toppled sideways and rolled end over end. There was an explosion when it struck the bottom of the cut. A billow of flame leaped skyward.

"And that," John Hanley said, "is that."

The whole affair had only taken a scant three minutes. He meshed his stolen car into second and moved off down the road, eager to be off before the growing headlights of the approaching car had seen him. He hoped it was one of the petting couples. They would testify that the truck had passed them going sixty miles an hour. Even if the dead Brown's body wasn't definitely identified as his own it would pass muster until morning! And by morning he would be five hundred miles away.

John Hanley shifted into high and stepped heavily on the gas. Even without lights the white road was plainly visible. Make a sucker out of him, would they? Well, Rita and the Swede had another guess coming. No one could pull

a fast one on John Hanley. He knew all the answers.

He chuckled without mirth. "Be patient. Trust me! Ha!"

IT wasn't much of a town. Hanley had almost driven through it before he realized that it was a town. The first-growth white pine, maple, and oak through which he had driven for hours ended suddenly at a mill pond and a grist mill. Beyond the mill was a single main street of scattered stores. There were two churches, three general stores, a frame hotel, a barber shop, and a small, square, brick bank. At the far end of the street there was a school. Beyond the school the secondary gravel road wound again through virgin forest.

Hanley could see no farms or houses. If there were any they were hidden in individual clearings in the woods. What a smart girl like Rita could ever want in such a place was beyond his understanding. It was a hideout. That was all it was. She had been afraid that he would find out about the Swede and make a break.

He parked his car, the third he had stolen since leaving the honor farm, in front of the hotel and registered as Bill Sayer.

"A drummer, Mr. Sayer?" the aged proprietor asked him.

"That's right," Hanley nodded.

He had timed himself to arrive just after dark. He wanted to ask about Olson and Rita, but he knew that it wouldn't be wise. There were other ways that a man who knew his way around could find out things. He rubbed his fingers over the stubble on his chin.

"I wonder if that barber shop is open?"

The old hotel man chuckled. "You must have forgot this is Saturday, Mister. This is Dave's big day, what with all the squirrels coming in for their weekly shave."

"Darned if I didn't forget it was Saturday," Hanley grinned. "I'll bet I'll have to wait an hour to get a shave." He lighted a cigarette and strolled back down the street toward the shop with the red and white pole.

Six of the barber shop's seven wooden chairs were filled. The air was filled with smoke and conversation. Hanley took off his coat with a cheerful, "Good evening, gentlemen," and sat down in the vacant chair. The buzz of conversation, which had stopped when he walked in, resumed. He picked up a newspaper and sat listening.

A big blond man was in the single barber chair, being shaved. He was the only man in the shop who hadn't answered Hanley's greeting. He couldn't. He had a hot towel on his face.

Rubes, Hanley thought, are a friendly bunch. They haven't got brains enough not to be.

He tried to follow the thread of the conversation. It didn't make sense to him. They were talking some nonsense about something called reciprocity and tariff. And whatever it was, they seemed to be in favor of it. The suckers even knew how their congressmen and senators had voted on it.

He turned to the farmer next to him and drove his opening wedge. "How has the fishing been up here this spring?"

"Not bad at all, stranger." His neighbor spat a wad of tobacco juice accurately at the cuspidor. "I ain't had time to wet a line but they say the boys is bringing in some nice catches."

"I suppose," Hanley said, "it all depends on knowing where to go."

"That's right, Mister," the farmer agreed. "If a man don't know the woods and lakes he'd best make inquiries of a local man who does."

"Unless," Hanley chuckled, "he's one of those rich sports who can afford to hire a guide." He grew purposely ad-

miring. "And you know, I've heard it said in Minneapolis that some of the best guides and fishing camps are right up here in this neck of the woods."

"Some of the best," the farmer enthused. "Why Jim Magnuson, and Tom Peters, and Ace Molgard, and Swen Olson, they're all local boys. They—"

"What was that last name?" Hanley asked.

"Swen Olson," the farmer repeated. "That's him, that big fellow up there in the barber chair now."

CHAPTER TWO

Two He Couldn't Kill

HANLEY glanced casually at the big man in the barber chair. So that was the Swede who was Rita's pal! A man in his middle thirties, Olson was at once the biggest, the blondest, and the most stupid-looking Swede whom Hanley had even seen.

What the hell can Rita see in a lug like that after being married to a guy like me? He said aloud, "So that's Swen Olson, eh? Is his camp far out of town?"

"Not far. Just about a mile back in the woods." The farmer dropped his voice confidentially. "But I hear he sold his camp this morning."

"No!"

"Yes. For six thousand dollars cash. Dave was telling us just before Swen came in that he heard that Swen and Rita is leaving these here parts for good tomorrow morning."

His blood pounding in his ears, Hanley forced himself to ask calmly, "Rita—?"

"Uh-huh." The farmer dropped his voice still lower. "Swen is so crazy about her that he'd do anything she told him to. But wait until Swen goes out and I'll tell you all about it. You see, he don't let no one talk about her."

Hanley raised his eyebrows.

"No siree," the farmer winked. He shielded his mouth with his hand. "She used to work in night clubs in New York, and Chicago, and St. Louis, and those towns until she got tied down the way she is."

"Tied down the way she is?"

The big Swede in the barber chair stood up and ran a red, hamlike hand around the back of an equally red neck while he studied his hair-cut in the mirror.

"You're pretty enough, Swen," the barber told him. "It's your natural beauty that attracts the girls."

Olson grinned good-naturedly but said nothing. The barber peered around his smoke-filled shop. "All right, Tom. You're next, I think. You come in before Sam did, didn't you?"

The bearded farmer to whom Hanley had been talking took off his hat and laid it on his chair. "Yes, I guess I did at that, Dave." He began to unbutton the collar of his shirt. "I'll tell you all about it in a minute," he whispered to Hanley. He pointed to a boxed item on the front page of the paper that Hanley was still holding. "That there is the fellow that she was married to. One of them public enemy fellows. A big-shot."

Hanley stared at the item in the paper. It read—

JEFFERSON CITY—(AP)—John Hanley, sentenced in St. Louis in 1936 to an indeterminate sentence of one to twenty years for bank robbery, and Timothy Harris, a trusty at the Ozark Honor Farm, were burned to death late last evening when the prison truck in which both men were riding plunged off a fifty-foot embankment and caught fire.

It is believed that Hanley, who was being returned to the penitentiary for discipline, attempted to gain control of the truck and in the ensuing struggle forced the truck off the road while it was traveling at an excessive rate of speed.

Identification of Hanley was made by a signet ring on the charred finger of one of the corpses.

"So I'm dumb, eh?" Hanley chuckled to himself. He looked over the top of his paper at Olson. The big man was putting on his coat. In the inside pocket of the coat was a thick, green sheaf of bank notes. Hanley thought, *Why wait? Why not trail the big Swede back to Rita and make a profit on the deal?*

The more he thought of the idea, the better he liked it. He had come just in time. Rita hadn't lost a bit of time in getting ready to shake the pine needles from her feet once she had read that he was dead. He could see her game now. She was just playing the big Swede for a sucker, that was all.

Hanley calculated quickly. A man could easily walk a mile in ten minutes. And the rube had said that Olson's place was a mile back in the woods. A walk out there and back would take less than half an hour. Add five minutes to that to shoot Rita and the Swede, plus another ten minutes to dispose of their bodies, and the whole affair could be transacted in thirty-five minutes—say three quarters of an hour at the most. And he could be back in the barber shop with six grand in his pocket and as sweet an alibi as any wise guy ever had.

The door slammed after Olson. Hanley got up from his chair and slipped his coat back on.

"Not walking out on us, are you, Mister?" the barber asked.

"Hell no," Hanley chuckled. He nudged the barber, to whom he had been talking, "But after reading the article you showed me about that guy Hanley burning up down in Missouri, I just happened to remember that I didn't lock my car. And boy, would my firm burn up if someone swiped it!"

There was a wave of mildly amused laughter.

Hanley took a handful of cigars from his pocket and distributed them to the men sitting in the chairs against the wall.

"You fellows watch my turn for me, will you?" he grinned. He tossed his hat on the chair on which he had been sitting.

OUTSIDE, Hanley smiled thinly in the dark. He actually felt sorry for the saps, they were so dumb. A couple of cheap stogies made him a great guy in their eyes.

He looked up the street in the direction that Olson had gone. The big man's broad shoulders were still visible in the moonlight. As Hanley watched him, Olson cut across the street and disappeared into the shadows. Hanley lit a cigarette, then followed slowly. If the affair took longer than he had estimated he would say that he had started for a stroll and gotten lost.

He reached the spot where he had last seen Olson, and found it was a path that led back toward the woods that crowded in upon the little village on both sides. He glanced at the luminous dial of the cheap watch that he had bought in Minneapolis. He would give Olson a two-minute start. The lug looked simple but he might be dangerous at close quarters. Besides, he wanted to confront the two of them together. His lips twisted in a crooked grin as he envisioned Rita's face.

"Be patient!" he snorted. "I love you. Ha!"

On the second of the expiration of the two minutes he started down the path. Two hundred feet from the main street of the little village the path was far from as smooth or as well defined as it had first looked in the moonlight. And once Hanley had reached the woods, the tall, whispering pines closed in over his head and there was no moon. There was no sound but the whispering of the trees and the soft scuff of his feet on the fallen needles. It was, Hanley decided, like walking on an inner spring mattress, but for an occasional root that reached out of the dark to trip him. He wet his lips and

drew his gun. Nobody but a sucker and a rube would live in such a place. He walked on, cautiously feeling his way between the trees.

In a small clearing where the moonlight trickled through, he paused for breath. A dark shadow padded silently across the path.

"Damn!" Hanley swore in superstitious awe. Then he breathed deeply in relief. It wasn't a black cat after all. It was a black and white cat with a broad white stripe that ran from the tip of its nose to the tip of its tail. Hanley kicked out at it. "Gwan, you alley rabbit. Scram!"

Out of range of his kick the animal padded on placidly. Hanley crossed the clearing. According to his calculation he must have come half way. He looked at his watch. He would have to make better time. It had taken him twelve minutes to walk half a mile.

He increased the length of his stride. Beyond the tiny clearing the path turned to parallel a narrow stream that gurgled through a boulder-littered bed. The moonlight was stronger here. The stream seemed to end in a large and placid pond. Beyond the pond Hanley thought he could see the lights of a cottage through the trees. He strode on boldly now, whipping his nerves into a killing frenzy.

"Run out on me, would she? Kid me along about surprises, would she? Well, we'll see how she likes my surprise. I'll — " Hanley whirled frantically, thumbing at the safety catch of his gun as an owl blasted the air above his head with a derisive, mournful hoot.

"Now what the hell was that?" he demanded of the darkness.

There was no answer but the whispering and the sighing of the wind in the tall pines. Hanley stood panting, cold sweat trickling down his spine until his sharp eyes ferreted out a pair of round and solemn yellow eyes glowing

on a tree branch high above his head. He chuckled in relief. But his self-confidence was gone. He strode on cautiously.

The pond into which the small stream emptied was much larger than he had imagined it to be. Hanley skirted the edge of it. He had to pick his way slowly through the stumps of saplings. He stepped on a dry branch. It cracked like a pistol shot underneath his weight. On the bank of the pond a dark shape slapped its flat tail suddenly against the water in the signal of alarm. A dozen glistening bodies dove into the water. Hanley watched them swimming through the moonlight-silvered water toward half a dozen mounds of sticks, and reeds, and mud that rose above the surface of the pond.

"Rats," he decided. "Big water rats of some kind. Maybe those *musk* rats like Mack was always reading about on the farm."

HE stared across the pond. The lights of a cottage were plainly visible through the trees. He even thought that he saw Rita pass a window. He continued to edge around the pond to where it seemed to narrow — and bridged across its lower end. It was dammed. Hanley walked cautiously across the dam top. He had to pick his way across interlaced branches of trees plastered with mud. It was a hell of a dam, he decided. He had seen much better ones made of concrete in the movies. He stepped across the narrow spillway over which a silver trickle of water fell in a miniature falls, to wind its interrupted way downhill past Swen Olson's cottage toward a dark and silent lake. Hanley was struck by sudden inspiration. He stopped and wrenched a long pole from the framework of the dam. He jabbed it down into the water by the spillway. The pole was a good fifteen feet in length. Yet he could not touch bottom.

"Perfect," Hanley grinned. His gun in his hand, he strode silently down the hill toward the lighted cottage.

The woman he had seen against a window had been Rita. She was as beautiful as ever. But she was a somehow different Rita from the glittering night club singer he had known. Her flaxen hair was wound in simple braids around her head. Her traveling suit was smart. But her brittleness was gone. There was a gentle sweetness in her face and in her once cold, blue eyes that Hanley had never seen before. As Hanley watched her through the window, Olson entered the room from an adjoining screened-in porch.

The big man loved her. It showed in every move and look, in every nerve and muscle in his face. Hanley could not hear what she was saying but he could see the girl's lips move. The big Swede nodded and patted the breast pocket where Hanley had seen the sheaf of bills. Rita put her arms around the big man's neck and kissed him.

Hanley wondered idly if it could really be that Rita loved the sucker. He shook his head. It didn't matter. Only saps went in for the love stuff. With him it was a matter of pride. No dame, not even Rita—especially not Rita—was going to make a sucker out of him. He raised his automatic and drew a bead on the heart of the big Swede. Then he slid up the window softly.

"Hello, honey," he called. "Surprise! Papa's home."

Both the girl and Olson turned slowly. The girl stared at the face framed in the window as if she were looking at a ghost. She thought she was. She stepped back out of Olson's arms and leaned against the wall.

"Johnny," she said softly. Then, "You're dead."

"No," Hanley shook his head. "But you are. 'Be patient. I love you.' Ha!"

The gun in his hand leaped into life as he deliberately triggered three times.

The girl's body twitched with each shot. A vacuous smile parted her lips. She stretched out a work-reddened hand as if in puzzled protest. Then, her other hand clasped to her riddled breast, she slid slowly down the wall to the floor.

A strangled, inarticulate cry of grief was torn from the big man's lips. He charged the window as Hanley had known that he would do. It was as simple as shooting the broad side of a barn. Hanley emptied the remaining bullets in his clip into Olson's chest. The fishing guide fell across the sill, his sightless eyes almost in Hanley's face.

"And that," Hanley smiled his twisted smile, "is that." He dropped his gun into his pocket and looked at his watch. Despite his slowness on the trail, the whole affair had only taken half an hour. He could still be back in the barber shop with the six grand in his pocket long before the barber called his turn. All that there remained to do was to dispose of the two bodies. Whistling softly, he walked around to the front door of the cottage. It all just went to show what a lad who knew his way around could do.

STILL whistling softly, Hanley riffled through the sheaf of bills that he had taken out of Olson's pocket. His whistling broke off sharply as his pursed lips straightened in a thin, hard line.

"What the hell?" He finished his rough count. "There's no six grand here. I make it an even five hundred." He felt cheated, robbed.

He counted it again. It still came out five hundred.

He put the sheaf of bills in his own pocket and tumbled Olson's body out of the window to the ground. If he dumped Rita's and Olson's bodies in the pond, they wouldn't be found for years, if ever. The locals would merely think that they had

gone away just as they had intended to.

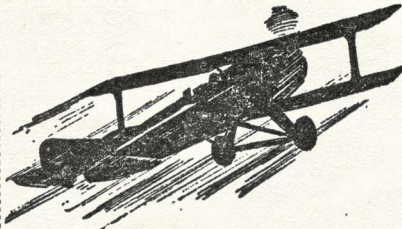
He tore a blanket from the bed and laid Rita's body on it, after noticing that she had bled some on the floor. After disposing of their bodies it might be best if he came back to the cottage and tidied up a bit. There was every possibility that, being the smart dame that she had been, Rita had the other five grand and a half hid away somewhere. He made certain that it wasn't on her body. To hell with his barber shop alibi. If there was no corpus delicti he would need no alibi. He would simply say that after locking his car he had gone for a breath of air and gotten lost. He shouldered Rita's body and tore a coil of rope off of the wall. At least he had accomplished what he had started out to do. Rita would have a long time to be patient. Two-time him, would she?

PANTING slightly from his exertions, John Hanley lighted a cigarette and examined his handiwork in the match flare. Rita and Olson lay side by side on the dam, bound with rope, and weighted down with heavy stones. He had done, he decided, a darn good job. Most fellows didn't allow for a body gen-

erating so much air. Their stiffs weren't weighted enough and popped up at embarrassing moments. He hadn't made that mistake. Rita and Olson would stay put. Using two heavy poles as a skid to keep the bodies from catching on the crude framework of the dam, he slid them into the water one after the other. They disappeared from sight with a satisfying gurgle.

Outside the cottage he paused and listened to the night. He had, he realized with a start of pride, committed two perfect murders. Four perfect murders, he corrected, his own included. He swaggered up the steps of the cottage, and after washing up the blood on the spot where Rita had lain, he began a methodical search of Rita's and Olson's personal effects.

That Olson had sold his fishing camp and the adjoining one hundred and sixty acres for six thousand dollars, Hanley discovered by searching Olson's desk. The rube in the barber shop had been right. The duplicate sales contract was dated that day. Hanley thumbed the five hundred dollars in his pocket as he stared around the room. The remaining five and



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a half thousand had to be hidden somewhere. But where? The cottage wasn't large. It contained a combination living room and kitchen, two bed rooms, and a screened-in sleeping porch. Hanley glanced out on the porch. It was dark. There seemed to be nothing out there but a double bed. He doubted the money was hidden there. It was more likely to be among Rita's silk underthings. Hanley recalled that Rita had always had a habit of hiding money in her dresser drawers. He yanked open several dresser drawers and scowled. There were no sheafs of money tucked away between them.

He saw her purse where it had fallen on the floor by the fireplace. He opened it. It contained forty-five dollars in small bills, and a folded, crumpled envelope, addressed to himself. He put the bills in his pants pocket and the letter to himself with the sheaf of bills in his breast pocket. He would read it for a laugh once he was safely out of town. She probably had written it before she had read that he was dead.

He spent the next ten minutes searching the combination living room and kitchen and both bedrooms. He was careful to wear his gloves and replace everything where he had found it. But the money was not to be found. He looked at his watch. He had been gone from town almost an hour. He wasn't being smart by staying where he was.

"To hell with the rest of the money," he repeated. He would go back to town up that infernal trail, avoid the barber shop entirely, climb in his stolen car, step on the gas and be in Minneapolis by morning. Hanley opened the screen door.

He took one step and stopped as a small voice in back of him asked, "Are you our daddy, Mister?"

HANLEY turned, his finger tightening on the trigger of his gun. Two sleepy-eyed, tow-headed

youngsters, hand in hand, regarded him gravely from the doorway of the screened-in sleeping porch. They were dressed alike in woolen sleeping garments. They looked like twins. They were. They were a boy and girl. As Hanley stared at them, the boy smiled up at him with an ingratiating smile. "Are you our daddy, Mister?" he repeated.

Hanley fought his panic. He asked, "And who the hell are you?"

The little girl shook her blonde curls disapprovingly. "'At's not a nice word, Mister. Mama says it's naughty."

"Who are you?" Hanley repeated.

The girl pointed at her well-rounded little stomach with a dimpled finger. "Me, I'm Wita."

"She means Rita," the boy informed him gravely. "I'm John. We're twins." He added with all the wistfulness of three. "I hope you are our daddy, Mister. Mama says he's coming soon."

Hanley dropped his gun into his pocket and leaned against the door jamb. Rita's face, through the wire mesh of the prisoner's visiting room in Jefferson City, leaped suddenly out at him until it blinded him and filled the room. He heard her say, "*I've a surprise for you, John. In fact I have two surprises. I haven't told you all this time because you'd only worry. And I don't want you to worry, dear. I love you. Just be patient. We—I'm going to get you out of here.*" And these were Rita's surprises. These were the reasons why she hadn't shown up during the last months just before his trial. She had said that she was sick. Hanley felt a surging wave of anger. Why hadn't the damn fool told him? What had she meant by having kids?

The twins, his twins, walked closer to him, still hand in hand. The little girl had suddenly realized that her mother wasn't there. Tears glistened in her eyes.

"Where's my mama?" she asked.

"She's gone for a walk," Hanley told

her curtly. He felt no pride of parenthood, only a mounting anger. Rita had had one hell of a lot of nerve taking his kids and coming up here in the sticks to live with another man. He was glad that he had killed her. She had shown no sense of decency at all. He fumbled in his pocket for the last letter she had written him and never mailed. He tore it open.

"I want a d'ink," the little girl said.

"Shut up!" Hanley told her.

The little girl began to cry, softly. The little boy shook his head.

"I don't think you are our papa," he informed Hanley gravely. "Our mama says he's nice."

Hanley skimmed through the letter. It was brief and blotched as if with tears. It read in part—

Dearest sweetheart:

. . . can't write much, I'm so happy
. . . wanted you to know . . . Governor
has promised me . . . says your record
has been perfect . . . next meeting of the
parole board . . . place all ready . . .
so quiet and peaceful . . . fresh start in
life . . . still won't tell you my surprise
. . . will explain—

Hanley crumpled the letter into a ball and dropped it back into his pocket. "She'd explain, would she?" he jeered. "Yeah. Sure she would. I suppose she'd have told me that Olson was her brother." He hooted derisively, then scowled down at the twins. "A sweet jam she's gotten me into. Why didn't she tell me that they were going to grant me a parole?"

He had a growing feeling that for once in his life John Hanley had outsmarted John Hanley. Now there was only one thing that he could do, the smart thing, the wise thing to do. That was to put as many miles between himself and the cottage in the woods as he possibly could by morning. No man, not even a hard-boiled egg like himself, could deliberately knock off his own kids. And even the rubes, as dumb as they were, would know that Rita

wouldn't deliberately run off and leave her children behind her. He opened the screen door.

"I want my mama. I want a d'ink of water," the miniature replica of Rita with the long yellow curls sobbed loudly.

"Okay, okay. Just shut up," Hanley hushed her. He scooped a dipper of water from a pail on the kitchen table and handed it to the infant. "Here's your drink of water. Now you two kids get back in bed and go to sleep. I told you that your mama had gone out for a walk."

The little girl drank noisily. The boy stood scowling at him.

"I don't like you," he told Hanley. "You are a bad man. You get out of here."

Hanley grinned despite his mounting impatience to be gone. "You're a spunky little devil, aren't you, son? A big-shot, eh? Just like your old man." Struck by a sudden thought, he walked out on the sleeping porch and searched the bed in which the children had been sleeping. The money wasn't there. The children followed him, wide-eyed. Hanley left them standing in the middle of the floor, the boy's arm around his sister.

"They're cute little devils at that," Hanley mused grimly as he followed the gurgling brook uphill to the dam across the pond. He put them out of his mind. "But to hell with them. Let one of the rubes bring them up. I'll never see them again."

He crossed the dam across the bottleneck of the pond without a glance at the placid water back of the spill-way. He knew what was under the water. On the opposite side of the dam he paused briefly and looked out over the silver sheet of reflected moonlight. Far out on the pond, on one of the heaped up mounds of sticks and mud, the big, flat-tailed "rats" were holding a conference. Hanley averted his eyes and strode on. He felt slightly sick to his stomach. He had committed two

perfect murders. But for the first time in his life John Hanley wished he hadn't been quite so smart. He was to wish it more than once before the night was over.

CHAPTER THREE

Death Gets His Due

IT WAS the black and white "cat" who began it. John Hanley had reached that section of the back trail where it turned sharply from the brook and wound through the towering masts of first-growth pine. His pace had increased, and his mood had grown steadily worse since leaving the pond. If only Rita had told him about the children. But she hadn't. And now she was dead. The silence of the night began to seep in through his pores and chill his blood. He walked still faster. He wanted lights, and music, and noise. And he meant to have them. There was nothing to stop him. He had five hundred dollars. He had a gun. He was legally dead. He was only half a mile from the little village in the long, narrow slash of clearing in the virgin timber. He would be in his car and on his trail.

"Oh, that same damn black cat again, eh?" John Hanley swore. He took two swift steps and kicked it. There was no outraged "meow." Instead, a spray of blinding, nauseating mist enveloped him. Hanley gagged and clawed at his burning eyes. For a moment he thought it was tear gas. He knew it wasn't by the smell. Blinded, he tripped to his knees, staggered to his feet, took a dozen fleeing steps and ran his head into a tree. Stars shot out of the darkness where there had been not stars before. Then all was dark again as a cloud bank drove across the moon.

The skunk padded contemptuously on her way across the undulating carpet of pine needles. Hanley lay where he had fallen for long minutes. With returning

consciousness his nose began to twitch. He retched subconsciously and sat up. His head ached vilely. His eyes were filmed by the same oily excretion that covered the entire front of his suit.

He fumbled frantically through his sullied clothes for his matches. He found that he had three. He struck one, and the night around him leaped briefly into bright reality only to fade back into a shapeless black void with the flickering of the match. Hanley got up slowly.

"Now what the hell am I going to do?" he puzzled. He decided that there was only one thing that he could do. That was to continue to the village and buy a change of clothes before he roared on out of town. He couldn't stand the smell of those that he was wearing much longer. He struck a second match to make certain of the trail. There was no trail.

He took several tentative steps and stopped. The tall masts of the trees seemed to form a solid wall. For a moment he fought panic. Then he grinned despite his nausea. Of course. He was just turned around, that was all. He retraced his steps. And still there was no trail, well defined or otherwise.

HIS receding panic returned. He had to find the trail. He struck his third, and only remaining match—in vain. There were only the tall trunks of trees that met in a high cathedral arch of green above his head. Hanley forced himself to think, and partially succeeded. From where he had stood on the trail when he had kicked the "cat" he could still hear the babbling of the brook that emptied into the pond. If he could find the brook, he could find the trail.

The night that had been silent was conversely full of sound. A wind had sprung up again. The tall pines whispered confidentially in the vaulted arch above his head. A screech owl began its low and mournful whistle. There was a crashing

and a thrashing in a pile of brush not far away.

Cold sweat stood out in beads on Hanley's forehead. One hand stretched gropingly before him, he walked in the opposite direction, casting furtive glances back into the night. He remembered that he had been listening for the sound of running water and forced himself to stop. There was no sound of running water.

"To hell with finding the trail," he swore. The village and his car were less than a mile away. All that he had to do was to walk through the woods in the right direction until he came out on the road. But which was the right direction? Hanley decided that it was straight ahead and slightly to his right. He groped his way forward cautiously.

At the end of an hour Hanley knew that he had been wrong. He was lost.

Hanley sat down on a fallen tree trunk, over which he had stumbled. He had never been so tired in all his life—nor so frightened. It was all Rita's fault, he decided. If she hadn't two-timed him to

come up and live in such a place, the whole thing would never have happened.

"I'll climb a tree," he thought, "and spot the lights of the village. I was dumb not to think of that before."

He got up from the log and, choosing a tree that seemed somewhat less in circumference than its fellows, he tried to climb it. Fifteen minutes later he was back upon the ground with his hands raw and bleeding and his clothes half torn from him. All he had seen was a glimpse of moonlight through an endless roof of green. He gave it up and walked on wearily. The woods couldn't last forever. He had to come out somewhere.

He did. It was just at dawn after a night of terror such as he had never known before.

Hanley stared at the vast expanse of blood-red water in the dawn, a meek and chastened big-shot. A rabbit could have kicked him. One shoe and his gun were gone. The shoe he had lost in a cedar bog through which he had floundered for hours. He didn't know where he had lost

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his gun. He imagined it had been in the briar patch that had torn the pocket right off his coat. And the rubes were wise to him. They had found out somehow that he had knocked off Rita and the Swede. Since midnight the woods had been full of gunfire. There would be three shots. And then a pause. Then the three shots would be repeated. A twisted smile pulled down the corners of Hanley's battered lips. But they hadn't gotten him yet. The rubes had just been firing blindly in the dark to try and scare him.

HE LIMPED along the shore of the lake. One of his eyes was black. He would have sworn that a bear had cuffed him with his paw. It wasn't a bear but a leaf on the end of a tree branch that had slipped out of Hanley's hand. The dawn was cold. Hanley pulled the lapels of his torn coat up around his neck and retched. The smell was as strong as ever. He rounded a curve in the lake shore, his eyes upon his feet. A whooping shout froze him in his tracks. His hand fumbled mechanically at the pocket where his gun had been. A tall, young farmer, well muffled in a sheepskin-collared leather jacket, was striding toward him, a double-barreled shotgun held lightly in the crook of his arm. Hanley recognized him as one of the rubes who had been talking about reciprocity and tariff in the barber shop on the night before. The young farmer raised his gun and emptied both barrels into the air.

"Here he is, fellows," he shouted. He strode a few steps closer and whooped with laughter. "An' by God if he ain't tangled with a pole cat."

Hanley considered flight while the other man's gun was empty and decided against it. He just couldn't take any more. A moment later he was glad of his decision.

The young farmer came striding toward him, shucking his jacket as he came. "Why you poor guy," he sympathized,

"you look like you've had a heck of a night." He wrapped his coat around Hanley's shoulders. "When you didn't come back we figured that you'd gone for a walk and gotten lost. Didn't you hear us shooting all night long? We've been looking for you since midnight."

Hanley said nothing. He couldn't. The suckers were still friendly. They didn't know about Rita and Olson. He had been a sap to think that they did. There was no way that they could know. When John Hanley sunk a body it stayed sunk. He tried to smile and succeeded wanly.

"Here." The young farmer handed him a flask. "Take a suck on that, Mister. I know 'bout how you feel."

One by one a dozen other farmers thrashed out of the fringe of brush that skirted the lake shore. Among them was Hanley's grizzled, bearded friend. He, too, carried a shotgun.

"Dawgone if you ain't had a tough time," he sympathized. And added as a sop to Hanley's pride, "It's so plague-taken easy to get lost up here if a fellow doesn't know the woods."

"We'd better get some hot coffee into him," one of the farmers suggested. "It won't take the pole cat smell away but it'll make him feel a lot better. He's so beat down now his teeth is chattering."

"I am cold," Hanley admitted. "And I don't smell like a rose. I kicked a black and white kitten in the nose and it back-fired."

They moved down the lake shore in a body. Hanley's self-confidence returned with every step he took. He was miles away from Olson's cottage. In another hour he could be fed, bathed, have a change of clothes and be on his way. It all just went to show that if a smart lad kept his head he could wiggle out of anything. He felt no gratitude toward the men who had found him. They were saps in his estimation. No one but rubes and suckers would spend a night thrashing

through the woods in search of a man whom they didn't even know.

They rounded a small point jutting out into the lake, and Hanley saw a cottage built back from the shore on the slope of a little hill.

“**T**HAT'S Swen Olson's place. You know, the fellow we were talking about in the barber shop,” Hanley's bearded acquaintance told him. “Swen's lived there for three years with his sister, her who was married to that big-shot gunman, John Hanley.” He dropped his voice confidentially. “I heard after you went out last night that the reason Swen sold his place was that his sister wanted the money to give Hanley a big-shot's funeral.”

“That's right, Tom.” The farmer on the other side of Hanley joined the conversation. “It seemed that Rita thought that this would be a good place for Hanley to get a fresh start in life. But when she read that he had burned up down there in Missouri she couldn't abide to stay. I was in the bank when Swen sent a draft for five thousand, five hundred dollars to the undertaker in St. Louis who has charge of Hanley's funeral.”

John Hanley said nothing. He was gagging—and it wasn't on essence of skunk. He had walked all night in a circle to learn that Olson was Rita's brother, and that the salesman whom he had murdered in Missouri was getting a five thousand, five hundred dollar funeral. Rita had loved him, had been true to him.

“A fine boy, Swen,” the bearded farmer nodded. “And mighty loyal to his sister and her children. Nice children, too,” he added. “Not that either Rita or Swen would ever give them up, but I'd like to have the pair of them to raise even if their father was a big-shot gunman.”

The young farmer who had first found Hanley cupped his hands and called, “Hey, in there! Wake up, Swen. We've

got a man out here who's been lost in the woods all night and needs some coffee.”

There was no answer from the cottage.

“That's funny,” Hanley's acquaintance puzzled. “Swen's usually up at crack of dawn. I wonder if him and Rita could have left to drive to Hanley's funeral.”

“Yeah. Sure,” Hanley agreed. “That's probably just what happened. They—” He stopped and ran his tongue over suddenly dry lips as the screen door of the cottage opened and the twins walked out on the steps. Even in the half-light of dawn there wasn't a farmer present who could not see that the infant's cheeks were grimy with dried tears.

The girl sat down on the top step rubbing at her red-rimmed eyes with dimpled, baby fists. The boy regarded the farmers gravely.

“Uncle Swen's not home,” he told them. “And neither is our mama. They have both been gone all night.”

“They have both been gone all night, John?” the grizzled farmer asked.

The boy saw Hanley. He pointed a chubby finger at him.

He said, “Yes, sir, Mister Ferris. Mama put Rita and me to sleep. An' 'en there was some noise an' shootin', an' we woke up. An' mama an' Uncle Swen were gone an' that there man was here.”

Hanley felt his heart miss a beat as he looked around the circle of unsmiling faces. He laughed, over-loudly. “The kid must be talking in his sleep. I never even saw this cottage before. I—I didn't see a living soul all night except that pole cat. And the pole cat saw me first.”

None of the farmers laughed with him. An awkward silence followed.

The little girl broke it with a sniff. She took her fists out of her eyes and stared at Hanley. “An' we think maybe he's our daddy.” She began to cry. “He told us that he wasn't. But mama said we'd see him soon an' he looks just like the picture in my wocket.”

"She means her locket," John explained.

The young farmer strode up to the steps and sat down beside the little girl. "Let me see the picture, will you, sis?" he smiled.

The infant fumbled at her tiny, heart-shaped locket hanging from the chain around her neck. The young farmer looked at the picture it contained and then at Hanley. He snapped it shut again and nodded at Ferris. "Take the kids inside the cottage for a few minutes, will you, Tom?"

THE twins allowed themselves to be led back into the cottage. The young farmer walked back to Hanley. He took his leather coat off the gunman's shoulders and tossed it on the ground. His lean, muscled face was working strangely.

"All right," he said. "Start talking, Hanley."

"I tell you the kid is mistaken," Hanley blustered. "And so are you if you think I'm Hanley. Hanley is dead. He was burned to death in Missouri."

The young farmer turned from Hanley to the circle of staring men. "Any of you boys know exactly how much money Swen was carrying when he left the barber shop last night?"

"Five hundred dollars in new twenty dollar bills," one of them told him. "I know. Swen showed them to me."

The young farmer thrust a muscular finger up against a rent in Hanley's coat. "Let's just see what that green is that's showing through that hole in your inside pocket, Mister." Before Hanley could step back, the young farmer pulled the sheaf of bills from his pocket and tossed it to one of men. "Count it and tell us how much is there, Jerry."

"Five hundred dollars," Jerry counted. "All of it in new twenty dollar bills."

Gray-faced with fear, Hanley fought

panic. He had been a fool to keep the money. But unless they found the bodies he still was in the clear. They couldn't pin one damn thing on him. Money knew no owner. He waited for someone to speak. No one said a thing. There was no sound but the gurgling of the brook that trickled downhill from the pond. And even that was magnified. To Hanley's screaming nerves the gurgle and the babble seemed to grow until it was a roaring stream.

"I," he broke the silence. "I—" He saw that none of them were looking at him. They were looking at the brook. It hadn't been his nerves. The roar was real. The brook, that a moment before had been a mere trickle of silver, had become a torrent of foaming white water carrying a crest of mud-plastered branches and debris. Hanley's eyes followed those of the farmers slowly uphill to the dam. Or rather, to where the dam had been. Broken in the middle at the spillway, it was washing away rapidly. Water poured through the enlarged spillway in a torrent, ate great mouthfuls out of either side. And in the exact center of the spillway, the target of the waters, the bodies of Rita and Swen Olson bobbed and twisted as if they were alive.

The young farmer's lean face twisted in a bitter smile. "You sap. You sucker," he told Hanley. "Didn't you know any better than to try and hide their bodies there? Didn't you know that beavers will never stand for any foreign substance in their ponds, that they will break their dam if they have to to try and wash it out?"

The circle of farmers closed in slowly. Their faces were no longer friendly. They held their guns like clubs. Hanley could read their intention in their eyes.

"You can't do this to me," he whined. "You can't do this to me. It's murder."

"No. You're already dead," the young farmer told him gravely. "You died down in Missouri."

PAY DAY PAY-OFF

By Daniel Winters

"You want your boy friend, copper? Go down that alley and pick up what you find. You've seen the last of Willy Nolan—alive!"



"Keep your hands where I can see 'em, or I'll—"

EDDIE BROWN reached for the phone which was ringing on his desk at headquarters. He said, "Detective Brown speaking."

A girl's voice answered him. He knew it well.

The girl said, "Pop didn't come home for supper, Eddie."

Eddie looked at his watch. He looked at the calendar on the wall. It was Friday and it was the fifteenth of the month. He couldn't be wrong about this. It had to be pay day.

He said, "Look, Mary, call up Quinn's. He's probably tied a bit of a bag on."

The girl said, "I've called Quinn's."

He isn't there. They haven't seen him."

Eddie nodded. "Call O'Rourke's."

The girl told him, "I've called O'Rourke's. He hasn't been at Quinn's or O'Rourke's or Mahoney's or Kelly's. I'm a little worried."

"He's had pay days before this," Eddie said. He knew the information was small comfort. "Sometimes he meets people."

The girl agreed. "Sometimes. But I feel differently about tonight. He's had me worried lately. All this union business. He and Willy Nolan."

Eddie looked at the watch again. He said, "Look. I'm off for the night. I'll go down and look in the joints around the docks and I'll find him and bring him home; then you and I will take in a show. All right?"

The girl said, "Yes, Eddie. Bring him home."

There was something in her voice he didn't like. He couldn't name it, but it was a tone that fear might inspire. He wanted to reassure her.

He said, "Listen, Mary—" But the line was dead. She had hung up.

He checked out and got the bus cross-town, and he cursed big Pat Ryan for spoiling the start of what had promised to be a nice evening. He and Mary had been going to a show, and if he had to spend half the night looking for Pat, it would kill things.

"You'd think a man would have more consideration for his lovely daughter," he said to himself, "than to spend half of his life in barrooms, drinking with Willy Nolan. And you'd think a smart young man like Eddie Brown would know better than to fall in love with big Pat Ryan's daughter."

He grinned in spite of himself. It wouldn't take long to find Pat. If he wasn't in any of the places Mary had called, he'd be in some place along the river, close by the docks he loved and

on which he had worked all his life. The docks which, Eddie knew, big Pat now virtually controlled through his influence in the union. Pat Ryan had brought the dockworkers' union into life practically by himself, and his voice in its business was strong. He was a benign tyrant, Eddie knew. He was as honest as a silver dollar, and he could smell a phony deal a mile away. His union was tough and had its occasional strikes, but it prospered and was a square outfit to deal with.

Eddie got off the bus at West Street and started his search. The street was lined with bars, and he missed not a one. It was easy to find Pat Ryan, for you merely opened the door and looked inside, and if Pat was there, you couldn't possibly miss that huge bulk at the bar.

But Eddie hit ten places without success and was beginning to be annoyed. He was halfway up Frobisher Street, and the bars ran out. He knew there was a spot on Knowle that Pat liked, and he started down Frobisher toward it; then he saw the alley that led to Knowle. It would save him some time. He went into the alley.

It was a narrow thing, devoid of light, filled with packing cases and huge crates from the markets. The glow from Frobisher faded behind him and he had to guide himself by the dim light from Knowle Street, ahead. The middle of the alley was clear of rubbish.

He was just about halfway through when he felt a light tug at his collar and heard the sound of the shot. He was falling when the second shot crashed out, but he was sure he felt the breeze of the slug on the left side of his face. He lit on hands and knees, his gun somehow in his hand, and scrambled silently to one side, waiting. There were no more shots.

He was sure they had come from the direction of Knowle, and clinging as closely as he could to one side of the

alley, he headed in that direction. He heard the pad of running feet from some place past the mouth of the alley, and got to his own and started to run. He cursed as he fell sprawling over a crate, but was on his feet again in a moment.

He heard the engine of a car roar into life, and he reached the sidewalk of Knowle Street just in time to see a dark sedan bullet up the block. He watched carefully for a moment as it went under a street light, and the license plate was illuminated for a second. That was all he needed. His brain automatically recorded the numbers on the plate. He held his fire. He might be mistaken about the car, but he didn't think so. He didn't want to go shooting at some motorist just driving fast through the block. He had the number, and it would tell a full story.

He looked up and down the street. There were people passing, but none of them looked at all interested in himself. He knew the two shots might easily have passed for the backfire of a car and caused no curiosity among the pedestrians. He slid his gun into the shoulder holster and went out on the sidewalk. He brushed his clothes quickly and let anger sweep over him in a fresh tide.

Who the hell would be shooting at him, seven o'clock of a Friday night, in an alley between Frobisher and Knowle? Who would know he was in the alley? Who would know he was in the neighborhood at all? There were a few people who might enjoy taking a shot at him if they thought they could get away with it, but most of them were in jail. He couldn't figure it out.

HE WENT to the spot he had in mind on Knowle and went right back to the phone booth. He called headquarters and got hold of Jimmy Booth.

He said, "Look, Jimmy. Do me a

favor. Get in touch with the license bureau and find out who owns a black sedan with a New York license plate. The number is 11-40-6R. I'll call you back in a few minutes."

He lit a cigarette, went to the bar and ordered a drink. He was nervous. It wasn't every day that someone took a potshot at him in an alley. And whoever it had been would be reminded of it in the near future, if he had anything to do with it. You couldn't let things like that go on. Someone was liable to get hurt.

And then he was reminded of his original business. He called the bartender and the man came down to his end of the wood.

Eddie said, "Have you seen Pat Ryan in here tonight? Pat and Willy Nolan, I suppose."

They had both been on the docks for thirty years. They were inseparable. They drank together and worked together and fought together. When Pat Ryan was drinking, Willy Nolan was not far away.

The moment he said, "Willy Nolan," Eddie caught a movement out of the corner of his eye. A nian down the bar jerked his head in Eddie's direction, then snapped it back again, facing front. It was almost an instinctive movement, like pulling your hand away from the flame of a match.

The bartender said, "They haven't been in all day, and it's a wonder, this being the end of the week."

The man next to Eddie said, grinning, "But they've been most other places, shouting their lungs out and drinking all the whiskey in the world. Quarreling they were, as usual."

Eddie nodded. That would be nothing new. And it didn't help him. But something else might. He had recognized the man at the bar who had whipped around at the mention of Nolan's name. Eddie started toward the door. He passed

in back of a little man and grabbed him by the shoulder.

His huge hand lifted the man off the stool and he said, "Winker, a word with you outside." The man came without protest.

Winker was the name Eddie knew him by, and it might be the only one he had. No one had any idea of how he made his living, how he managed to supply himself with the morphine and cocaine he had to have. Winker was an addict who resisted any attempt at a cure. Never had he been caught with drugs on his person.

In the street, Eddie hauled the man into a hallway. He pushed him against a wall and stared into the pale, waxlike face and blinking eyes.

He said, "Winker, where's Pat Ryan?"

The man shook his head. "I don't know."

"Where's Willy Nolan?"

Winker said again, "I don't know." But the lie was in his eyes.

Eddie said, "You know something, Winker."

The man shook his head protestingly, and Eddie insisted, "You know something I'd like to know."

"I don't know nothing," Winker said. "I don't even know you, except I can smell you're a copper."

Eddie pushed him against the wall. "You have a fine nose. Can it smell thirty days on the island without any snow? None at all? Not a flake of it?"

The man's face grew whiter. Eddie knew he had hit bottom. He could threaten a rat like this with anything on the books, and nothing would happen. But just to suggest the removal of all drugs would work wonders.

He said, "I'm not fooling, Winker." He saw the man knew he wasn't fooling. The man knew Eddie could send him away.

The snowbird looked at him with pale

eyes that were bottomless. He said, "What do you want to know?"

"Where's Pat Ryan?"

Winker shook his head.

Eddie said, "Where's Willy Nolan?"

The man was silent for a moment.

"I make a livin' goin' through junk they throw away along the docks. I'm looking in crates and packin' cases, and sometimes I find stuff they just forget. You ain't got no beef against me for that. It ain't larceny. An hour ago I'm siftin' through some stuff in a alley." He indicated with his head the alley Eddie had quitted a few minutes before. "I walk into trouble. You can find it yourself if you look. That's all I know—on the level."

Eddie stared at him a moment and knew it for the truth. What the man knew he had stated. He would say no more.

Eddie told him, "Get out of here."

The man got out. Eddie stood in the hallway and considered things. There was something unpleasant in that alley. It added up. He had been shot at in that alley. Someone had thrown a couple of slugs at him as he had gone through. It reminded him of something. He twisted his neck to look at the collar of his jacket. He pulled it into view with one hand. The cloth was furrowed lightly. It had been that close.

HE WENT back to the alley. There was nothing else to do. He could call for cars and a couple of the big lights, and if he found nothing he'd be a laughing stock for weeks. He had to take the chance. Besides, whoever had shot at him had left the alley before he himself had.

He went up the street and slipped into the alley fast, waited in the shadows. He could hear the beating of his heart, but that was the only sound in the place. He reached down, picked up a small box

silently and flung it from him. It landed on the other side of the alley. The sound drew no fire. He knew he was reasonably safe.

He went into the center of the alley, and now he used a small electric torch no larger than a heavy pencil. He didn't know what he was looking for, but it was in here some place.

The search didn't take him very long. The alley was filled with heavy crates, piled carelessly, one on the other, and most of them had been filled with vegetables. He examined fifteen or twenty before his light picked out the dark brown stain reaching from one box near the bottom of a pile. He didn't waste time looking any farther. Something chilled within him, and he hurriedly pushed a few crates off the one he wanted to look at. It took him only a moment; then he was lifting the cover of the bottom crate. He thrust the light inside and drew a deep breath. It was not a pleasant thing to see.

Willy Nolan was there, crowded carelessly into the wooden box, and old Willy was dead. His throat was slit from ear to ear, and there was a snarl on his battered lips. Willy had taken a going over before he died.

The lid of the crate slammed shut again, almost without Eddie's knowledge, and several other boxes fell into place. He hardly believed what he had seen. It was just another packing case, remarkable in no way—except that it contained the body of Willy Nolan, the bosom friend of big Pat Ryan. It was a nasty business.

A few wheels turned in Eddie's mind. Winker, the snowbird whom he had picked out of the bar, had been in this alley. Willy Nolan hadn't been dead very long, perhaps a little over an hour. Winker had come in here, prying about, probably immediately after the body had been placed here. And probably before who-

ever had placed Willy's body here had considered it a good idea to have someone watch the alley. Winker had not been seen, else he would never have been in the bar.

But Eddie himself had been seen coming into the alley. He'd been shot at. It all added up to something, but Eddie didn't know just what.

That Willy Nolan should be killed was a bad thing, but not unthinkable. Feeling ran bitter along the docks, as strong as the tides which tugged at the wharves. Knives had been used before and would be used again. If Willy had been killed in this alley, a packing case would make a nice receptacle for the body. That made some kind of morbid sense.

But why would anyone guard the alley against the body's discovery? It would be found eventually, probably in the morning. Why should it not be found this night?

It was a nasty puzzle, and Eddie didn't like it. He didn't like any of the factors in this business. He had been pegged at, and Willy Nolan had been stuck and sliced. Willy, who had been his friend since Eddie had been a boy in short pants. It was not a nice evening.

And Eddie knew that Pat Ryan was mixed up in this somewhere, for where there was Willy Nolan, there also was Pat Ryan.

Then Eddie thought of Mary's voice on the phone, tinged with a fear she had been trying to hide, to keep in check.

He had frightened someone out of the alley a few minutes before, but it was reasonable to suppose they would be back. And Pat Ryan was missing from his usual haunts. It added up to something Eddie was afraid to name.

This called for a drink. Eddie went out on the street and into the nearest bar. He would raise no cry about finding Willy's body. There was no hurry about that. It mattered no longer to Willy. It

might matter to someone else though.

HE HAD his drink, trying to put the pieces of this rotten thing together. The door opened and he looked in the bar mirror. It was Mary Ryan.

She was small and lovely, and there was worry written in large letters on her beautiful face. Eddie set his glass down and hurried to her. He took her arm and steered her outside.

He said, "What are you doing down here? I told you I'd bring Pat home."

She looked at him and asked simply, "Did you find him?"

He shook his head and managed a grin. "I just haven't covered enough territory. Pat is a tough man to catch once he has a start on you. You ought to know that. It's pay day, kid."

Mary nodded. "And Pop and Willy Nolan always do the town, or a small part of it, on pay day. I know. But I have a funny feeling, Eddie. Something I can't explain. This isn't the usual pay day splurge. It's different, somehow. I'd be the one to know."

He tried to make his words convincing. He knew one thing. Wherever Pat was, Willy Nolan wasn't around. Or was he?

"Uptown, they probably are, visiting some friends. The clock means nothing to that pair, once they get started."

"I had to come down here and look myself," she said, "when I didn't hear from you after awhile. I'm worried. Pop has been worried lately, too. Something about the union. I don't know just what it was. He's been on the phone a lot, recently. Some man is always calling. Packard, I think his name is. Pop has been doing a lot of shouting at him."

"Pat can't talk without shouting," Eddie reminded her. "He's always raising his voice above the sound of a boat whistle, even if there's no boat whistle."

She turned to him. "Have you looked

in most of the places he might be?"

Eddie nodded. Then he thought of calling Jimmy Booth, and asking for the car he had seen leaving the alley.

He said, "You wait here a moment, Mary. I have an idea."

He ducked into a phone booth and called headquarters again.

He got Jimmy, finally, and said, "How's about that license number, kid? You get anything on it?"

Jimmy told him, "Yeah. Number 11-40-6R. A black Universal sedan. It belongs to Thomas Lynch. I don't think I need give you his address. He's an old friend."

Eddie stiffened in the phone booth. Things were starting to make a little sense. Lynch was one of the more respectable hoods, a man with many talents, all of them larcenous. He had an important part of the puzzle on the board.

He went back to the street and took Mary's arm and walked along. She was talking, but the words sifted through his mind without meaning anything. He was trying to put Willy Nolan near Whip Lynch; somewhere near him.

And then something Mary said struck a nerve. He got the tail end of it. She was speaking "... and this man Packard. I don't know just who he is."

He turned to her swiftly. "Packard! It couldn't just possibly be Paco, could it? Think hard, kid. Packard and Paco could confuse a person."

She frowned silently for a moment in concentration. She shrugged. "I couldn't be sure. It does sound the same, doesn't it? He just gave me his name over the phone once, then I heard Pat speaking to him on one or two other occasions." She turned to him. "Does it make any difference?"

It made a terrible difference. If Sylvie Paco were involved in this thing, it made all the difference in the world. The car

(Continued on page 116)

DO WE HAVE TO DIE?

A strange man in Los Angeles, known as "The Voice of Two Worlds," reveals the story of a remarkable system that often leads to almost unbelievable improvement in power of mind, achievement of brilliant business and professional success and new happiness. Many report improvement in health. Others tell of increased bodily strength, magnetic personality, courage and poise.

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mind-power, when awakened, can make man capable of surprising accomplishments, from the prolonging of youth, to success in many fields. To that eternal question, "Do we have to die?" his answer is astounding.

The author states the time has come for this long-hidden system to be disclosed to the Western world, and offers to send his amazing 9,000-word treatise—which reveals many startling results—to sincere readers of this publication, free of cost or obligation. For your free copy, address the Institute of Mentalphysics, 213 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. 178E, Los Angeles, Calif. Readers are urged to write promptly, as only a limited number of the free treatises have been printed.

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(Continued from page 114)

he had seen belonged to Whip Lynch. Whip Lynch was fairly clean with the police. So was Sylvy Paco. They were both very smart gentlemen, and Eddie knew that Lynch worked for Sylvy.

But the big nugget was Sylvy. For Sylvy Paco was a gent who had graduated from the lower forms of thuggery to a point where he now indulged himself in unions. He was a labor man who had never labored, and his sphere had grown amazingly in the past few years. He was evidently wealthy without working, but he was smart enough to keep his income tax reports clean, and the larger part of his take came from salaries he received as officer of a surprising number of small unions. Lynch, Eddie remembered, was listed as a minor officer in many of these. Sylvy, it came to him, had first enfolded in his protective arms most of the tailoring and dry cleaning establishments in the lower part of the city. There had been born of this a union. Then several branches of the building industries had gone to him for guidance, and although before their amalgamation there had been some instances of violence, Sylvy had kept his hands clean as far as the police were able to determine.

And now he had been talking with Pat Ryan, whose voice, with Willy Nolan's, controlled the countless workers on the docks. That really would be a gold mine for a man with Sylvy's genius. Just a small boost in union dues, for a start. It would be improved upon in time.

And Eddie knew just how Pat would react to Sylvy's approach. He would be insulted to the soul of him that such a man even contemplated touching his union, a precious thing he had nurtured from its formation. He would sense the crookedness of Sylvy Paco and fight to a bitter end to prevent Sylvy from ever

(Continued on page 118)

Pay Day Pay-Off

whined off the floor beside his head. There was another report, from a different source, and Eddie turned, gun ready.

Mary's voice came out of the darkness. "Hold onto that thing, Mr. Brown."

She came into the room. She said, "I didn't feel like waiting down in the boat. Not after you started throwing bodies off the pier at me. I came up the ladder. There was a gentleman in the other room, in back of you, who started shooting as I came up the stairs. I think I killed him."

She fainted, and Eddie broke her fall with an outstretched arm. Big Pat Ryan looked at her. "She was always a delicate lass," he said.

Pat found some water and they brought her to. Eddie could stand on the bad leg and they went downstairs carefully. It seemed that there were no more people in the shed—live people. They went out the front and there was a car there.

Eddie said, "There's the buggy that went away from the alley."

Mary said, "You're sure? What was the number on the license?"

Eddie grinned. "Old Eagle-eye Brown. Never forget a car or a number. It's 11-40-6R."

She looked at the license plate, then at him. "It's 11-48-6R."

He stared at it. She was right. It wasn't Lynch's car. He had made a mistake. He had tied this whole thing together by a mistake. It was incredible.

He turned to Mary. "I was wrong. It's the right car, but I had the number wrong."

Pat said, in his great voice, "A good thing for me you can't read your numbers, Eddie Brown."

Eddie felt a little lost. He turned to Mary. She gave him some consolation.

She said, "At least they won't be putting you back on the bridges, watching for stolen cars. That would be a mistake."

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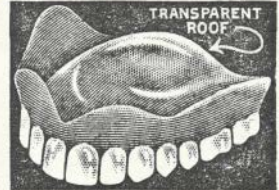
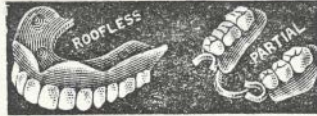
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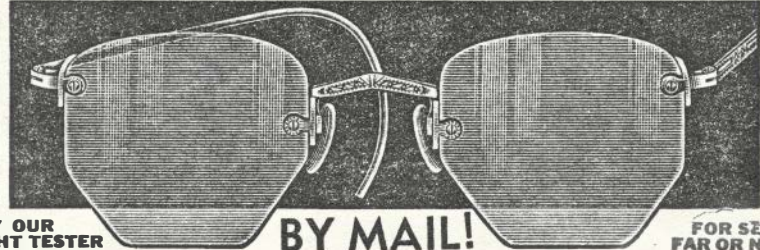
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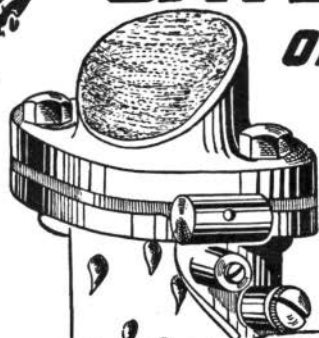
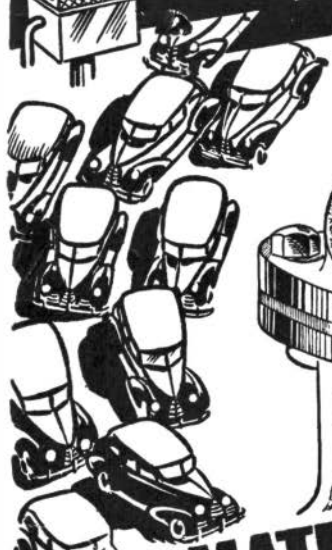
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