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YAAAAAY WILSON WINS!

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IT'S A SWELL STORY. ANY OTHER DETAILS?

YES. ADD THAT MR. WILSON WILL BE MY HOUSE GUEST WHILE IN TOWN. YOU WILL, WON'T YOU?



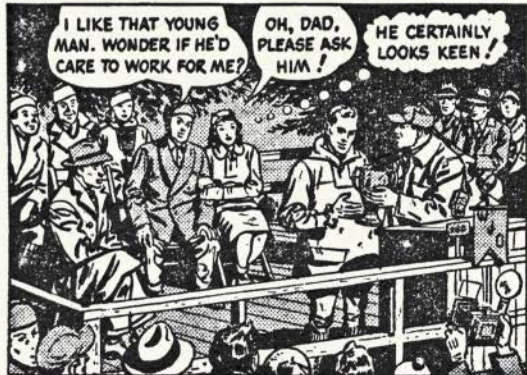
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MAGAZINE

Vol. 9

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THE WITNESS CHAIR

THE following story of an epic vengeance comes to us from the crime files of the past century—we give it nearly verbatim from the ancient records. One night James Gray, a Scot, put up at the Rising Sun Inn, York, England. . . .

He had a modest meal without wine, and went to bed sober. Next morning Morgan (the inn's waiter) carried hot shaving water to his bedroom. He went in quietly, set down the water and pulled up the shades. He turned to awaken the guest, but a glance told him there would be no awakening for Mr. Gray.

Morgan stole softly away to consult with Sally, a servant at the inn.

"Dead as a door nail, he is. Now if we puts this crime on Master Harris (the inn's owner), they'll hang him, and then we can dig up his gold. You keep your mouth shut, my lass, and leave it all to me. I'll set Master Harris bebind bars, I will, where he won't go striking an honest man. Mind the time he beat me?"

Police and a doctor were soon back with him. Morgan's first act was to point to Harris.

"That's the one that did it, that's him, killed the poor gentleman. Just before daybreak I heard something that waked me, strange sounds and choking noises coming from Mr. Gray's room. I stole to the door without making a noise, and peered in, and there I saw the master, yes, him there, strangling Mr. Gray."

What was Morgan's amazement to hear Harris reply with a story that all but confirmed the wholly false one he had invented with the aid of Sally.

"Yes," said Harris, "Morgan is right. I did go to Mr. Gray's room, but before God I did not kill him. I heard sounds in the night from his room as though he were in agony and I rose and went to see what was the matter. I saw at once he was having some sort of a fit, writhing on the bed, clawing at his neck, and black in the face. I spoke to him but got no answer. I bent over him to pull his hands away, and as I did so he gave up his last breath. I saw there was nothing to be done till morn and went back to my bed."

Harris was hanged for the murder of Gray.

Morgan married Sally and the couple moved to a neighboring town. They were, however, not fated to live happily ever after. Morgan began to run after a younger woman and there were bitter quarrels in the home. Finally when Morgan took to beating Sally, she went to the police.

"We knew Mr. Harris was burying money in the garden. Morgan and me had seen him, long before Mr. Gray came to the inn that night. We had a look at it on the quiet then put it back. Morgan said, 'No use taking of it now. Let it grow to a tidy sum, and then one fine night we'll be on our way to London town.'"

Morgan was arrested, but so was Sally. Further investigation showed that Gray's death was natural.

Before Morgan and his wife could be brought to pay the penalty of the crime of swearing away an innocent man's life, an epidemic of jail fever broke out in their prison, where they died.

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 —HON. JOSEPH G. NAUMAN, Oregon Judge.

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CHAPTER ONE

Half-Baked Kill

DEWAYNE BRITT stood for a long time at the cell door, looking at the man on the metal bunk. There was no expression on his face, but distaste lay like a shadow in his eyes.

"You worked him plenty," he said finally. Baggart shrugged. "He fell down a flight of stairs," he said evenly. "He'll be all right." "Sure!" Britt nodded and turned away. "Being the governor's strong-arm man is going to backfire some day. You'll kill a suspect, and there'll be hell to pay."

"Nuts!" Baggart cleaned his thumbnail with a toothpick. "I give you a killer on a silver platter, and you squawk." He needed a shave, and there was no friendliness in his eyes.

"I'm not squawking. I'm explaining—and warning," Britt said.

He went back down the corridor, trying to forget the ugly bruises on the killer's face. He had seen things like them before, but always he had been able to take it. Now he was just disgusted and a bit sick of the whole business.

"You want to question him?" Baggart asked.

"When he comes to," Britt said shortly.

Baggart grinned and rubbed the knuckles of his right hand into his left palm. The cell block lights picked out shadows on his face and made his stiff hair more bristly than ever.

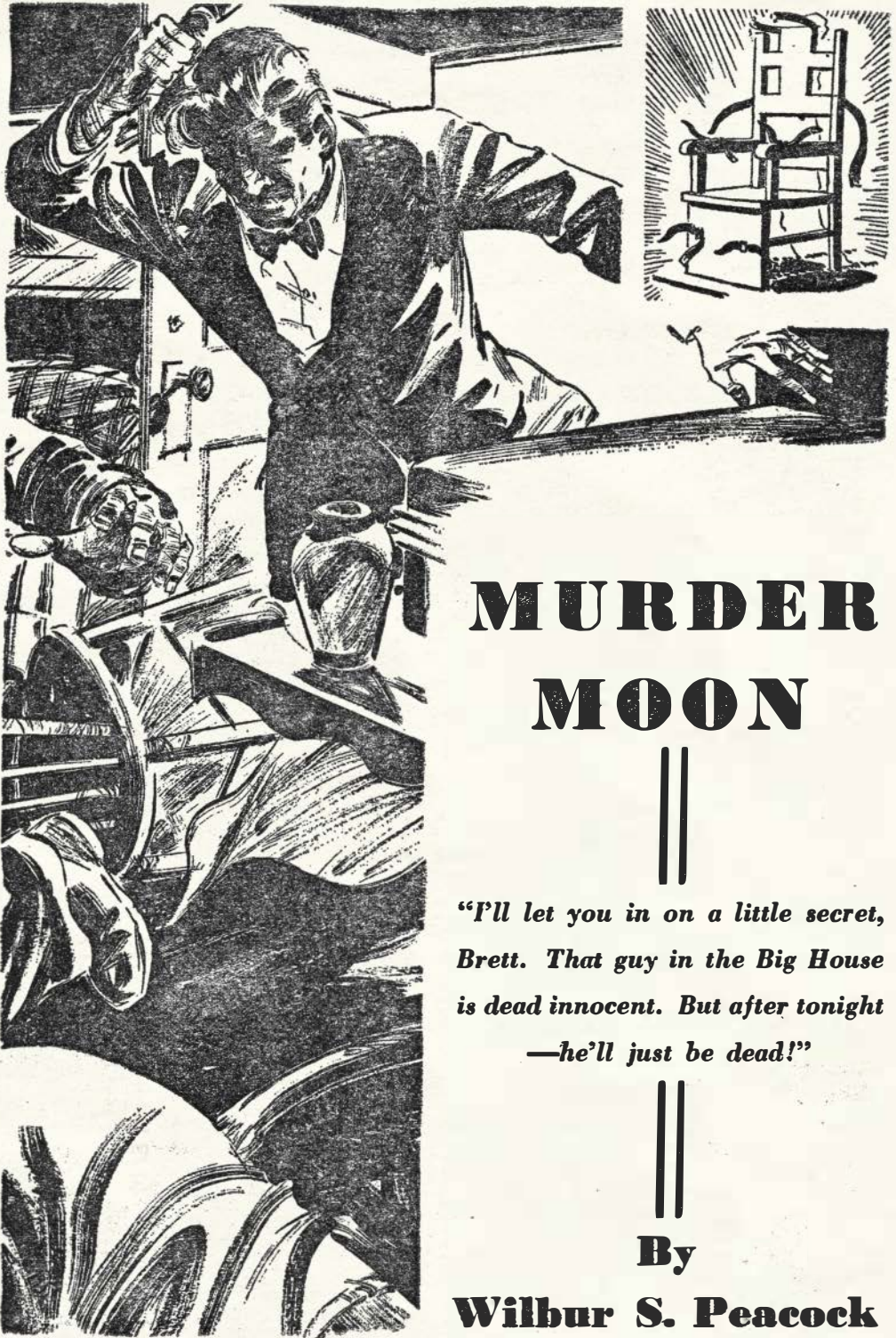
"I'll bring him to," he agreed.

"All right," Dewayne Britt answered. "Now let's have a look at his confession."

The turnkey opened the door, and they went along the tunnel and up the stairs to the private offices of the chief's staff. Pettibone was there, just hanging up the phone.

He heard the step and tried to turn. Somebody grunted with effort. . . .





MURDER MOON



*"I'll let you in on a little secret,
Brett. That guy in the Big House
is dead innocent. But after tonight
—he'll just be dead!"*



By

Wilbur S. Peacock

"*Tribune*," he explained. "They want to know what we've got." He grinned. "I didn't tell them a damned thing."

"Good," Britt said and sank into a heavy chair. The light caught the grey at his temples and aged him ten years.

Pettibone looked at Baggart, and the agent shrugged. Britt caught the byplay, but paid no attention. He spread long legs comfortably and wished the headache would ease for just a time.

"We're playing ball," Chief Pettibone said at last. "It's your baby now."

Baggart scratched his unshaven jaw. "Politics!" he said to no one. "To think a crummy little killer like him would put a man back in the governor's chair."

Dewayne Britt scowled. "Look," he said, "I don't give a damn what you're thinking. The point is to swing the killer. If the press is good, then that's okay—but the main thing was to stop the knife play."

"Oh, sure, sure," Pettibone agreed.

His hands scrambled through papers on the desk, and then pushed several sheets forward. There was a smudge on the last one which could have been blood, or, for that matter, dirt. Anyway, it didn't matter, not now, for the murderer had signed in a sprawling line of letters.

"Giovanni, eh!" Britt said, reading.

Baggart nodded. "A wop," he said. "The papers'll eat it up—maybe we can even tie in a fascist angle."

Britt glanced up. "We're tying in nothing," he said. "My job's to prosecute, not propagandize. The facts will speak plenty."

"It's your party," Baggart said, but his mouth went ugly.

"Thanks!" Britt said dryly and went on reading. After a bit he swung the first page back. "There's not too much here," he commented. "Details are lacking."

Baggart flushed. "What the hell do you want?" he said. "In twenty-four hours, the killer's caught and signs a confession. Details can come later."

Chief Pettibone leaned forward. "Those others are depositions and statements of the witnesses; they'll hang Giovanni higher'n a kite." His thumb and forefinger rubbed thoughtfully. "Don't forget, we were glad to cooperate," he finished.

Dewayne Britt nodded in brief irritation. "You said that before," he said. He folded the yellow sheets. "I'll look over these later, and then return them."

He came slowly to his feet, stuffing the papers into his inner coat pocket. With the light slanting upward, he looked younger, less tired.

"Better patch Giovanni up," he said to Baggart. "Juries are funny about defendants who

look as though they've been slugged around."

"Sure," Baggart said. "Where you going now?"

"Back to the hotel. I've got to call the governor."

"Call us back when you hear, huh?"

Chief Pettibone leaned forward. "Don't forget—" he began.

"I know—you cooperated," Britt said, and opened the door. He stood for a long second, looking back, and then went out, closing the door softly behind him.

HE WENT slowly down the stairs and out into the street. The pale rind of moon barely lighted the night, and the streetlights were balls of frozen flame in the light mist. Cops went by, into the station, some staring, for his features had appeared in many papers, always close by the governor. *The Governor's Crutch*, he had been tagged, and deservedly, for his work had helped put the man high in politics.

"The hotel, Bill," he said to the chauffeur, and leaned back in the rear seat of the state car. It was good to get out of the stink of the station.

He felt the rustling of the papers in his coat and shivered. Another man's death sentence, and he was the legal executor, forcing the other step by step up the gallows with legal phrases and courtroom technique.

"They caught him, huh?" the chauffeur asked, and Britt nodded.

"Yes," he answered. "An Italian named Giovanni."

"Wop, huh!" Bill said cheerfully. "The papers'll love it."

Anger swept Dewayne Britt then, and he realized he was leaning forward. "Why in hell should they love it?" he snapped. "What makes an Italian killer such red-hot copy?"

"Huh?" Bill jerked his head around for a second, and then swiveled back to his driving. "I dunno. Mr. Britt," he said defensively. "I didn't mean nothing."

"Forget it," the prosecutor said wearily.

"Yes, sir," the chauffeur agreed. He sent the limousine faster through the thin traffic.

At the hotel, Britt took a couple of aspirins and then put through a call to the state house. There was a fifteen minute wait and he lay on the bed, smoking, watching the smoke climb uneasily toward the ceiling. When the phone rang he stretched out a long arm and lifted the receiver.

"This is Britt," he said. "The thing's on ice."

Hearing the soft chuckle of the governor, he winced. For twelve years now he had heard that soft laugh, and each year it had grated more on his nerves.

"Good!" the governor said. "Start pro-

ceedings at once. Build it up, talk plenty to the reporters. The opinion polls don't talk so well for the party." His voice softened confidentially. "This is our chance to go higher, Britt; play it smart, and you'll be in velvet."

"Yeah, sure," Britt said, and watched a fly trapped by the window screen. The fly was green, with a black head, and buzzed impotently to escape.

"Wallace was a good party man," the governor continued, "and his murder must be avenged. Don't miss that angle. By the way, who killed him?"

"A little jerk named Giovanni."

"Nobody important, huh? Oh, well, do the best you can. I suppose it was robbery?"

"Yes."

"Has he confessed?"

"I've got the confession here, along with a bunch of statements from witnesses."

"Oh!" There was silence for a long moment. The wire hummed, and Dewayne Britt studied the ash on his cigarette. Almost could he map the workings of the governor's mind. "Now look, Britt," the governor finished, "just forget the confession for a time. Let the public think you're sweating hell out of the guy, make them think you're working like a dog. Give out progress statements. In other words, build the thing up as much as possible there, and I'll issue a few statements here. Okay?"

The prosecutor ran his tongue over dry lips, "Okay," he said. "But I don't like it."

The governor sucked in his breath, and anger lifted the tone of his voice. "You're not asked to like it, Britt," he said coldly. "You do as you're told. And tell Baggart to call me the first chance he gets. The—er—contributions Wallace was to collect haven't arrived here. I want a check to see if he received them."

"I'll tell him," Britt said shortly. "Is that all?"

"Isn't that enough?"

"It's too damned much, but I'll do it."

"Good, I thought you would. And by the way, Britt—" the governor's tone was oily now—"we were talking over bonuses today. If you do your part down there, I think I can swing a big one your way."

"Thanks!" Britt said, and pronged the receiver.

He lay for a long moment on the bed, nipping the butt of his cigarette between thumb and forefinger, and then crushed it out in the tray. Futility pushed at him then, and he could feel anger knotting the muscles of his flat belly.

He knew he'd do what the governor ordered; he had no choice. Twelve years of working for the man had given him an insight into the other's mind. One word from the governor and one public airing of the papers in some

hidden safety box would disbar him forever. He was caught more surely than even Giovanni; at least the Italian had a fighting chance for his life.

He swung his feet from the bed, standing and adjusting his tie. The night was still young and he needed a drink. He saw that the fly now had discovered escape was impossible through the screen and was buzzing over the cold cup of coffee on the night-stand top. He clicked off the lights and left the room.

The lobby bar was crowded, and he sought a dim corner where he could sit unnoticed. A sailor and his girl friend giggled beside him, and he moved farther away, not amused.

"Double bourbon, water on the side," he told the waiter.

A newspaper had slid down the edge of the seat to the floor, and he retrieved it automatically. The headlines blared at him, and he scowled, studying the pictures.

Wallace had been a good-looking man, full-faced and heavy of body; and his picture smiled genially from the double column spread. With his white hair and laughter-wrinkled eyes, he looked like a beardless Santa.

The waiter brought Britt's drink, and he sipped it absently, running his gaze down the story.

The killer of Lawrence Wallace is still at large tonight, but Chief Pettibone declares that an arrest will be made within hours. Several suspects are being held.

A further development in the case is that Dewayne Britt, brilliant prosecutor for the governor, is now in. . . .

Dewayne Britt dropped the paper to the seat at his side, and moodily nursed his drink. "Brilliant prosecutor!" he whispered mockingly to himself. "Brilliant stooge!" he finished savagely.

He finished the drink and ordered a second. There was nothing for him to do as yet. The reporters wouldn't gather until they had read the governor's statement; and he knew no one in the city who interested him enough to make leaving the comfortable bar a necessity.

He twisted the glass in lean finger, marking the table top. The music was soft and soothing, yet it grated on his taut nerves. Why, he did not know. He had no real complaint to make about anything. The money was good, and the work not too arduous. He had quite a bit of prestige and, as the governor's right-hand man, he swung quite a bit of political weight.

He frowned, trying to reason out an answer, and came up against a blank wall of thought. Maybe it was just that it was in this city he had graduated from law school with such high hopes. Maybe it was because he was

back again, for the first time in years, not as a free agent, but as a stooge for a greedy, brutal politician. Not that it mattered particularly; except for the buildup, the case would not take long to handle, and then he could return to the capitol.

He leaned against the padded wall, trying to relax. The girl chattered inanely to her sailor and, farther down the wall, a drunk began to get argumentative. The room was filling, yet he felt alone.

HIS waiter coughed apologetically. "There's a young lady in the lobby to see you, sir," he said.

"Young lady!" Britt said. "Who?"

"She didn't say, sir; just asked for Mr. Britt."

"Oh!" Britt finished his drink. "Think I should see her?"

The waiter flushed. "I wouldn't know, sir."

Dewayne smiled suddenly, and his lean face was young and vital. "Thanks," he said, and laid a bill on the table.

He pushed from the seat, and went through the tables toward the door. The waiter hovered at his side, pointing unobtrusively.

"That's her," he said.

Britt nodded, and left the bar. Not looking at the girl, he bought cigarettes at the newsstand, opening them slowly. She was nobody he knew; not that it mattered. Probably Pettibone's secretary.

He lit a cigarette before crossing the rug and bowing a bit stiffly. "I'm Britt," he said. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes, Mr. Britt," the girl said. "I wanted to ask you something."

He felt her tension, rather than saw it. She had good hands, smooth and slender, but now they gripped her purse until the leather was wrinkled from pressure. She wasn't beautiful; her mouth was too large for that. But her eyes were nice, and only a shade more brown than her hair.

"Well?" Britt said impatiently.

He sat beside her at her voiceless invitation. She smiled, but the strain was in her lips, and her eyes showed no friendliness.

"My name is Ruth," the girl said evenly, "Ruth Giovanni."

"Uh-huh!" Britt said. "And so?"

The girl flushed. "Doesn't the name mean anything?"

"Well, yes and no. Now what's on your mind?" Britt's face didn't change expression.

"I just saw my father; he's been charged with Mr. Wallace's murder."

"Yes, I know." Dewayne Britt flipped his cigarette into a sand jar. "I suppose you're going to tell me he isn't guilty."

Tears came to the girl's eyes, but pride kept her head erect. "No," she said, "I'm not.

I don't know. That's what I want to ask you."

"Me!" Dewayne Britt studied the girl's face. "Why ask me?"

"Because the police won't tell me anything, and my father doesn't know. I've read about you, and I know you're honest."

Dewayne Britt almost laughed; at any other time, he would have. But now, seeing the question in the girl's eyes and sensing the strain which was hers, he shivered slightly and forced his tone to remain even and unhurried.

"What do you mean, your father doesn't know?" he countered.

"He doesn't. He was injured in a fall a few years ago, and, well—look, Mr. Britt, did he kill him?"

Britt sighed. "I'm afraid so, Miss Giovanni," he said slowly. "He has signed a confession and the knife was found in his pocket. Witnesses have identified him and he has—well, I'm afraid he did it."

She cried then, softly, using a small square of handkerchief, and Britt felt sour and brutal because of his words. His gaze went challengingly about the room, but no one was paying any heed; and he looked back at the girl, wondering what to do. He felt a surge of sympathy, when he saw that already she had regained control.

"I'm sorry I had to tell you," he said.

"It's all right." Ruth Giovanni tucked the handkerchief away in her purse. "I suppose you're prosecuting?"

Britt nodded. Strangely he liked the girl. She looked decent and her clothes, while not the best, were in good taste. She was taking it better than most women would and, Lord knew, he had seen plenty of such scenes.

"What can I do?" the girl asked. "I've never had anything like this happen before."

"Get a good lawyer tomorrow," Britt said.

He laughed softly to himself, wondering what the machine would say if they knew he was giving advice to the opposition. The situation was a trifle ironic, and he derived a brief bitter satisfaction from it.

"Thank you, Mr. Britt," the girl said and stood. Then she was going across the lobby to the outer doors. Almost absently he admired the slender straightness of her legs, and then he saw that Baggart stood at the doorway of the bar.

He went that way, grunting an answer to the agent's greeting. They made their way to the bar and ordered drinks. The two double bourbons were hot in Britt's stomach, and he could feel a fuzziness coming to his thinking, but he gave no heed, not caring.

"That was Ruth Giovanni, wasn't it?" Baggart said after a time, and Britt nodded.

"Yes. She wanted to know about her father."

"What'd you tell her?"

CHAPTER TWO

Confession

"What could I tell her? I said he'd confessed."

Baggart sipped at his drink, eyes cold and brooding. "The governor won't like your spilling the news ahead of time."

"Look, shamus," Britt said, setting his glass down. "Right now, I don't give a damn what the governor or anybody else thinks."

"Like that, huh?"

"Like that."

Baggart shrugged. "Getting a bit big for your pants, aren't you, Britt?" he asked. "Guys in your position don't give orders; they take them."

He pulled a roll of bills from his pocket and dropped one before the bartender.

"Sorry, Mr. Baggart, I can't change that right now," the man said apologetically.

"Hell, it's only a twenty!"

"Yes, sir, I know. But the change for the late shift hasn't come down yet." The bartender's face was red with embarrassment.

"Here, I'll pay," Britt said.

Baggart shook his head. "I buy my own drinks."

Dewayne Britt shrugged. "Okay, I'll break the bill for you."

He made change with a ten and two fives from his billfold and thrust the twenty out of sight, and then returned the fold to his pocket.

"To crime," he said, and killed his drink.

Baggart nodded, crumpling the change and placing it in his pocket. The bartender took a five and brought back two dollar bills and some silver.

"I talked to the governor," Britt said. "He wants you to call."

"Yeah!" Baggart said. "He usually does." He scowled at his drink. "Now about this Giovanni."

"What about him?"

"Since you were so generous with information, you'd better start the legal ball rolling."

"Look, you run your job, and I'll run mine." Britt felt nasty then, and his words plainly showed his attitude.

"Britt," Baggart said heavily, "maybe you're going to be cut down to size sooner than you expect."

"By you!" Britt laughed aloud. "All your brains are in your back."

Baggart flushed, his heavy shoulders hunching angrily. "I've got a few persuaders," he said grimly. "Like maybe a confession from a bribed juror. Want to match your brains with that?"

"You win," Britt said, and felt sickness touch his mind. "I'll start proceedings first thing in the morning."

"That's better," Baggart agreed smugly.

"I thought you'd like it," Britt said, and stalked away from the bar. His back was cold and he could feel the anger driving him.

HE WENT out on the sidewalk and stood for seconds, wondering what to do.

He had no desire to go back to his room and the night club circuit held no interest for him. The sound of Baggart's threat still lingered in his mind, and he shivered, realizing what the man could do to his career.

The hell of it was that there had been a bribed juror years before. He hadn't bribed the man, but his client had; and when the case was won and forgotten for half a year, Baggart had brought photostatic copies of the evidence to him. "You're working for me now, Britt," Baggart had said. "Either that or take a prison rap."

That had been the start—not that he was spineless. It was just that Baggart, and later the man who became the governor, had dangled the papers before him as the price of his talents. Always, he was to have them returned to him; but always they were held for just another job which had to be done. And the years had fled by with incredible speed, until now he knew there was no going back to those days in the past.

He stood now on the walk before the hotel and remembered all that had gone before. He felt old and worn, and he didn't give a damn about anything. There was a job to be done though; and to do it badly would be as bad as refusing to do it entirely.

A drug store was half a block down the street, and he went that way, finding an empty stool at the soda fountain and ordering coffee. He took the statements from his pocket, spreading them on the counter.

I was drinking (Antonio Giovanni's confession read) and I thought of the money I saw Mr. Wallace have in his reading room. I cut the screen with my knife and opened the window and climbed through. I pried open the desk drawers, and was just looking, when Mr. Wallace came in. He started to fight, grabbing me by the shoulder. I got mad and hit him with the knife. He groaned and fell down, and I got away by the window. I run home and washed the blood off my hands and the knife. Nobody had seen me, so I knew I was safe. I had a couple of drinks and went to sleep. Then the police arrested me. That's about all, I guess.

There were questions, of course, the clever, sharp questions, such as a man like Baggart would ask, but they all added up to the same thing. Giovanni had killed Wallace, while committing a burglary. The case was just like a thousand others—a drunk using a knife.

Britt drew his mouth up sourly, and drank his coffee. This was a hell of a case to build

into something brilliant in detective and legal work. The governor could use good publicity at the moment, but he would play hell getting much out of this affair.

Dewayne Britt thought of the girl then, and felt sorry for the kid. She couldn't be much more than twenty-five and he had a hunch she was taking it pretty hard. Not that there was anything he could do; he had his orders.

He checked the first statement. It placed Giovanni at the scene of the crime. Some bar waitress named Billie Sutherland had seen the Italian outside the saloon at exactly ten o'clock, when she had come on duty.

Sure, I seen this Giovanni (her statement read). I've served him and couldn't mistake his face. He was just outside the front window at ten o'clock. He was wearing a brown suit and blue skirt and a red-striped necktie. He looked half drunk, the way he was leaning against the glass. He went away then, and I started to work.

And here again, Baggart's questions fitted the murder noose tighter about Giovanni's throat. The identification was positive, almost belligerent, and Britt knew he'd have a perfect witness for the prosecution.

He checked the address. He had learned the hard way a long time back not to leave things to chance. He had to talk to this witness, perhaps coach her a bit, but at least hear her story first hand, so that the defense might not find any loopholes.

He paid for the coffee and walked to the street. A taxi pulled in at his imperative gesture, and he gave the address of the bar where the woman worked. He thought of the limousine, and then shrugged; it would be good to get away from the chauffeur's watchful eyes for a time.

Traffic whirled past, but he ignored it, feeling the coffee fighting with the whiskey he had drunk, and wondering if he were going to be ill. He wasn't a drinking man as a rule; it was just that the dumps had caught up with him two days before, and he hadn't succeeded in getting rid of them as yet.

He leaned back against the seat, and saw that the taxi was out of the business district now, huge apartment houses lining the street. He grinned wryly. His brain had figured out the contracts for a lot of those buildings, his brain had figured out the innocent clauses which permitted the flood of building graft to flow back into the party's hands. And the fact that he had been blackmailed into doing the task didn't make him any better than the others. He was as crooked as they, and his bank account had fattened perceptibly.

Britt lit a cigarette, flipping the match to the floor. Ahead glimmered the lights of a community shopping district, and if his mem-

ory was right, Wallace's home was somewhere close by. The driver pulled the cab to the curb before a building squatting between vacant lots.

"This is it, mac," he said. "Want I should wait?"

"No," Britt said shortly, and laid a bill in the driver's hand. "Keep the change."

He stood on the walk a moment, watching the cab U-turn in the street, and then swung back to the saloon. ELITE BAR AND GRILL, said the huge red neon sign in the window; but the place looked seedy and run-down. Britt flipped his cigarette away and pushed through the door.

The air was heavy with the stale odor of tobacco smoke and the fumes of alcohol. Two men stood at the bar, dressed in overalls, and then turned away. A juke box hammered away at some unrecognizable melody at the rear, and two girls danced together on the postage-stamp floor.

"What'll it be, mister?" the bartender asked, swabbing the bar with a dirty cloth.

"Beer."

"Okay."

Suds bulged over the top of the glass, and the bartender scooped them away with a beer-stick. The glass was cold in Britt's hand, and he drank appreciatively before asking his question.

"Where's Billie Sutherland?" he said.

"Why?" Suspicion thinned the bartender's eyes.

"Look," Britt said, "I don't want an argument. I'm the law. Now, where's Billie Sutherland?"

"Law, huh. Well, she's over in the back booth." The man leaned forward. "Listen, mister, if she's in trouble, don't swing on me. I just hire her, that's all."

"Sure," Britt said, and took his beer to the back booth.

The dancers watched him for a second, then concentrated on an intricate step. One was good-looking, high-waisted and curved in the right places. She looked as if she liked to laugh, and she laughed at him.

THE blonde in the booth didn't. From her bleached hair to her open-toed shoes, she looked drab. Her eyes were bleary behind too much mascara, and the ratty fur neckpiece made her bargain basement dress look even cheaper.

"Hello, copper," she said indifferently. "Sit down."

"Thanks." Britt edged into the booth across from the woman. He felt her eyes studying him, but he gave no heed, sipping at his beer. "I'm no cop, though, you know," he finished.

"The same as," Billie Sutherland said, and blinked owlishly. "You're Britt, and that's the same as."

"You know me?" the prosecutor asked.

"Baggart described you, said you'd be sticking your nose in." She hiccoughed gravely. "Well, come on and ask your questions."

"You expect questions?"

"Look, big shot," Billie said and leaned forward, "let's stop playing games. I saw the wop last night at ten o'clock, and I'll swear to it on a stack of Bibles half a mile high."

"Good. That's fine."

"Okay, if you're satisfied, let's have a drink. Rusty, Rusty!" She pounded on the table with her empty glass.

"Shuddup, Billie!" The bartender appeared almost soundlessly. "You want this guy to think this is a dump?"

"It is a dump, and you damned well know it," the blonde said. "Give us another drink."

"Look, Billie—"

"Look, hell. Give us another drink."

"Make it two," Britt said wearily, and watched the bartender go back to his bottles.

"I'll buy this place and fire him," Billie said balefully. "So help me, I will." She caught Britt's glance. "Don't laugh, big shot," she finished. "When I get my estate, I'll have plenty. Plenty!"

"Estate?" Britt said, watching the dancers.

"Sure!" The blonde grew confidential. "My poor old uncle kicked off, and I'm the only heir—heiress."

"That's good."

Rusty placed fresh glasses on the table, and wandered back to the bar, watching Britt worriedly. Britt scowled; the man was worried about a two-bit license. He had bigger fish to fry than a tavern-keeper.

He sucked at the fresh beer, wondering why he bothered with all this. Baggart was a good man; he missed nothing. The guy was a louse, but he knew evidence.

"See you around, big shot," the blonde said suddenly, and left the booth. She swayed, propped herself erect with a hand against a booth, and deliberately thumbed her nose at the bartender as she went out the front door.

Dewayne Britt sighed and got to his feet. Rusty was at the bar, hands spread ingratiatingly. "On the house," he said. "Any time. And as for Billie, mister, like I said—"

A woman screamed outside, and car brakes squealed. Then a motor gunned, and there was the sound of tires sliding. After that there was silence.

Dewayne Britt spun toward the front door. The two customers were ahead of him, and he got outside just in time to see the tail lights of a car disappearing around a far corner.

"What happened—" he began, and felt sickness crowd at his stomach.

The blonde was dead now, horribly crumpled against the curb. The radiance from the neon sign reached out and spread over her, height-

ening the brightness of her hair and dulling into a colorless dark streak the blood which flowed from her open mouth.

The car had caught her squarely, flipping her aside; and Britt could see from where he stood that her neck was broken.

"Who'da thunk Billie—" one of the customers said faintly.

"Either of you see that car?" Britt snapped, and heads shook dazedly at him for a moment before swinging morbidly back to where the victim lay.

"Call the police," Britt said to Rusty. "Tell them to look for a car with a dented front. Hit-and-runner."

"Yes, sir," the bartender said, and vanished into the saloon.

Britt lit a cigarette; he needed it. He smoked, leaning against the window. A car stopped, and then another; and within minutes traffic was tied for a block either way.

Then two squad cars sirened up, and the officers began dispersing the crowd. They were efficient, and within seconds the traffic was normal again.

"Dewayne Britt," Britt told the officer doing the questioning. "I work out of the governor's office." He extended credentials. "I heard the woman scream, and came out just in time to see the car swing around the corner."

"That's right," one of the customers said in corroboration. "We all came running, and she was dead, just like she is now."

"Who is she?" the cop asked, and Rusty pushed forward.

"She worked for me, in there." He pushed a thumb toward the bar. "Her name's Sutherland, Billie Sutherland. She lived on Dayton Street."

"She was almost blind drunk," Britt offered.

A white ambulance clanged down the street, and a bored interne gave the body an impersonal examination. "D.O.A." he said. "Nothing we can do."

"Take her away," the questioning cop told him.

There were more questions, but Dewayne Britt gave little heed. He stared at the blood on the curb, and then looked away, almost ill. Professionally, he was glad that the woman had made a sworn and attested statement to help his case; but the sudden snapping of her life thread was ugly to contemplate.

The cops were quartering the scene, picking up splinters of glass; and one was using a flash camera. After a bit they left, and the people wandered away, looking back, talking. Britt watched them go, and then moved slowly down the street. He looked back, and the scene was normal, traffic whirling past the Elite—everything as it was when he had first arrived.

HE STOPPED at a cigar store and thumbed through a telephone directory. Wallace's address was close by, and he went that way, feeling the chilliness of the night soaking into his body.

The neighborhood was better than most, wide lawns carefully tended, and no apartment houses. Wallace's home was imposing, a two story Georgian structure, fenced in by a chest-high hedge.

Britt remembered the place now. He had been there once, while studying law. Wallace and he had had quite a long talk; and unless Britt's reasoning was wrong, Wallace had been the man to first see Britt's capabilities, for it was only shortly after that, after graduation, that Britt had walked blindly into the frame which had set the pattern of his life.

He went up the walk, remembering that, and felt no regret that Wallace was dead. The man had been a slick crook, his fat fingers in every bit of graft the city had. Ostensibly retired, a generous host and good newspaper copy because of his charities, he had ruled the city like a despot, brooking no argument, utterly ruthless.

But the average person didn't know that. They remembered him for other things, like the children's playground, which, incidentally, had unfortunately cost twice as much as the estimates. He had worked perfectly with the party, protecting and protected.

And now he was dead. Stabbed by a drunken handyman. Dewayne Britt smiled wryly.

He knocked on the door. "I'm Britt, from the governor's office," he told the uniformed officer who cautiously opened the door. "I want to look around."

"Sure, sir," the cop said. "Right down the hall and the second door to the right is where Wallace was killed."

"Thanks." Britt went ahead, still wearing his hat.

The hall was dim, light spilling from the indicated door. He stopped on the threshold, looking around. The cop came up to his back, peering over his shoulder, eager to help.

"The body was there," he said, pointing to a chalked outline on the rug. "The killer must have been going through the desk, and after the killing, got away through the window."

"Yes, I know," Britt said.

He went ahead, bending over the chalked outline for a moment, picturing the scene in his mind, then crossed to the window and studied the cut screen outside the open window. He ran his finger through the hole, pulling inward the cut, bent screen. The metal strands were bright against the weathered paint.

The moonlight wasn't strong enough to permit his seeing the ground, but he had Baggart's story that Giovanni's footprints were there.

He lit a cigarette, thinking that any law

graduate could swing the Italian on evidence like this. Giovanni didn't have a chance.

He went back to the desk, knowing the cop was watching, and methodically went through the drawers. He knew Baggart had been there first; but it was something to do, and he had to go through the motions, if for no other reason than to make his report to the governor sound good.

Papers and correspondence and a few household ledgers were in the drawers, nothing else. He shut them, and heard the scrape of paper on wood in the bottom of the right-hand drawer. He opened the drawer again, and a fold of paper fell through to the floor.

Bending, he retrieved it from under the desk, turning it over in his hands. It was a strip, the ends glued together, and bearing the notation: First National Bank. \$1000.00.

"Find something, Mr. Britt?" the cop asked, moving forward.

"Nothing important," Britt said and exhibited the bank's slip. "Just a binder for a packet of bills."

"Oh!" The cop scratched his chin. "Maybe Baggart had better see it."

Dewayne Britt nodded. "Give it to him when he comes around," he said, and came lithely from his chair. He snubbed out the butt of his cigarette.

The cop took the slip of paper and fitted it into his side pocket. He was very young and very earnest, and conscious of his task of being a cop.

"You got any ideas who did it, Mr. Britt?" he asked.

"Not a one," Britt said wearily, and then remembered his orders. "But we've rounded up a few suspects. Something should break by morning."

"Well, luck," the cop said, and then colored faintly. "My name's Harris, if you need any special help."

"Thanks," Britt said, and went toward the door. Then he was sorry he had been so abrupt. "I'll remember," he finished. "Good night, Harris."

Outside, he went around the house, pulling his coat collar up against the cold mist, and bent over the footprints below the window of Wallace's study. Baggart had been thorough; Britt could see that casts had been made of the markings in the ground. The prints showed that the killer had approached the house, dug in his toes to lever himself through the window, and others showed he had jumped and stumbled away after the murder.

Looking through the window, he could see that Harris was using the phone, probably calling Baggart, for he turned the money binder over and over in his fingers as he talked. Britt had no illusions about the slip of paper; it had undoubtedly bound together

some of the graft Wallace regularly collected under the ambiguous term of "contributions."

A car went by in the street, its tires humming softly, and next door, through a brightly-lighted window, he could see half a dozen boys and girls dancing. He watched for a minute, trying to remember what it was like to be young.

He gave up in quick disgust, failing, and strode down the walk to the street. He went back the way he had come, walking faster now, wanting to finish everything and return to the hotel.

A SHADOW detached itself from the hedge and blocked his path. Instinctively, he halted, and then went forward, seeing the person was a woman. Her back was at the street light, and he could make out no details.

"Mr. Britt?" the woman said, and he recognized Ruth Giovanni.

"Hello!" he said. "What are you doing out here?"

"Following you."

"Why?" He kept his face immobile, knowing she could see it in the light, while her own features were invisible.

"I don't know, exactly. I just thought maybe you'd find out something new, something which would prove my father not guilty."

"Oh!" He could find no words for a minute, and covered up by lighting a cigarette. The glow danced out and touched the girl's face, showing its tension, giving her a fleeting beauty.

"Did you find anything?" she persisted.

"Nothing new," Britt admitted, and sympathy caused him to touch her arm and draw her along the street. "Let's get some coffee," he suggested.

She went willingly, without comment, and after a few steps he dropped his hand and strode long-legged at her side, shortening his pace to hers. Some of the apathy and sense of futility had disappeared, and he no longer felt the bite of the whiskey he had drunk.

They waited for a cross-light, and he studied her profile covertly. Her chin was good, and he liked the way she carried it, proudly and with determination.

"How about there?" he asked, and pointed to a Pullman diner.

"All right," she agreed.

They crossed the street. Far down, the Elite's crimson sign glowed dully in the night. Traffic drifted smoothly along the street, but there were few pedestrians. The diner, when Britt opened the door, was empty, except for the cook who glanced boredly up from where he listened to a file-voiced comedian on the radio.

"Two coffees," Britt ordered, when they

were seated. He lit a fresh cigarette from the stub of the old, putting the pack away at her silent gesture of refusal.

The cook set cups and silver on the counter, and then drifted back to his radio. The girl drank her coffee black, but Britt stirred cream and sugar in his deliberately, waiting for her to speak.

But she sat silently, preoccupied, and at last he said, "Did you hire a lawyer?"

"No."

"But you will have to retain one," Britt argued. "I can give you some names, if you don't know any reliable men."

"Are they as good as you?" It was a flat question, no intonation in her voice.

Dewayne Britt flushed, and felt a brief unreasonable anger stir in his mind.

"They are good men," he said.

The girl's calm annoyed him. It was unnatural for a daughter to be so matter-of-fact about her parent's arrest on a murder charge. She was silent, and she had cried, but further than that, she had complete control of her emotions.

"Tell me something," Ruth Giovanni said suddenly, "does my father have a chance?" She saw the instant caution flood his lean face, and her voice thinned. "Oh—maybe I shouldn't ask?"

"Every person accused of a crime has a chance," Dewayne Britt said, and mentally cursed the sententiousness of his words. "It looks pretty bad right now," he finished, "but a good lawyer might help."

She cried then, softly, without changing expression, and a second later whirled from the stool and left the diner. The cook looked up momentarily, then drooped over the radio again. Britt cursed silently and laid a dime on the counter. He swung after the girl, but when he reached the street, she was just stepping into a bus. He watched it move past, and then went toward a hack stand a block away, scowling.

He felt sorry for the girl, of course; yet it was none of his damned business that she was being hurt. That was just her tough luck, the same kind that hit a lot of people. Anyway, he had a job to do. Yet he couldn't help but be sympathetic. Fate was just being unnaturally dirty, making him the fall guy in this bit of drama.

He was half a block from the hack stand when Baggart's car drew into the curb, and the agent swung the door open.

"Hey, Britt!" he yelled, and the prosecutor squinted a bit in the darkness to make out who he was.

"What's on your mind, Baggart?" Britt said, not really giving a damn, but playing politics as he had done for so long a time. Bending, he could see two more men in the

car—Chief Pettibone and the manacled Giovanni.

"Climb in; we're on our way back downtown. We've just been up to Wallace's house. Harris said you were there."

Britt slid into the seat and shut the door. Gears grated beneath Baggart's hand, and the car surged forward. The prosecutor turned in his seat to glance at Giovanni, and Pettibone waved a limp hand.

"Why?" Baggart said suddenly.

"Why what?" Britt said.

"Why show up at Wallace's? I went over the place."

Instant antagonism flooded Britt, as it always did when Baggart was around. He came back to face the front, and his voice was hard.

"Why?" he said. "To get a drink, to visit the john, to rob the place! What the hell do you think? I went there to get the lay of everything in my mind. Maybe you forget I'm the guy who takes this thing to trial."

"Please, mister—" the prisoner said suddenly.

"Shuddup!" Pettibone snapped, and his hand cracked against the other's face.

"Let him talk," Britt said sharply. "Hell, he's in too deep now to get out."

"Thanks, mister," Giovanni said.

Britt fumbled for his cigarettes. "I suppose you aren't guilty," he said conversationally, and was surprised at how calloused his words sounded. Twelve years of doing dirty work for the governor had blunted his instincts and feelings.

"Oh, I killed him, the pig," Giovanni admitted. "I got him good. I sneaked up behind—"

"You played hell!" Baggart snapped. "He caught you rifling his desk, and you cut your way out."

"Yes, that's the way it was, mister," Giovanni said slowly. "I cut my way out."

"He's a little bit off his trolley," Baggart said. "You gotta watch him."

"That's fine," Britt said sarcastically. "His lawyer may get an insanity plea upheld."

"He'll talk okay," Baggart said grimly.

"My head hurts," Giovanni said. "You shouldn't have hit me."

"Shuddup," Pettibone said coldly.

Baggart tooted the car down a side street, and except for the whine of the tires on the damp street, there was silence. Dewayne Britt smoked slowly, peering blindly ahead. Giovanni breathed noisily, like a trapped animal, Britt thought.

"Billie Sutherland's dead," he said suddenly, and braced himself, as the car swerved.

"Dead?" Baggart looked around. "You're crazy! I saw her earlier this evening, and she was all right."

"Well, she's dead now, a hit and run driver broke her neck." Britt was coldly analytical. "It may mean trouble, but I think I can have her evidence admitted."

"Where'd it happen?" Pettibone asked sharply.

Britt twisted around, looking back. "Where she worked," he said. "She was drunk, and must have just walked blindly out into the street."

"They catch the driver?" Baggart asked.

Britt shrugged, "I wouldn't know," he answered.

"Of all the stupid luck!" Baggart said, rocking his head. "Damn it, Pettibone, I told you she should be locked up as a witness."

"You can't just lock up anybody," Pettibone argued. "How was I to know—"

"Shut up!"

Britt watched hate and fear fight each other in Chief Pettibone's face, and then turned back into a comfortable position again. He derived a wry satisfaction from the scene—why, he did not know.

"Let me out at the hotel," he said. "I can use some sleep."

"Okay!" Baggart agreed. "I'll pick you up early in the morning."

"Don't put yourself out," Britt said shortly. "I get around pretty well by myself."

"Yeah, I know," Baggart said.

He tooted the car into the curb at the side entrance of the hotel. Britt opened the door and climbed out, then slammed the door.

"Good night," he said.

Baggart gunned the car, catching the green light; and Britt's last impression was of the white blur of Giovanni's face at the rear window. His features were strangely like Ruth Giovanni's had been in the bus. He shivered, thinking of the further hurt he would give the girl tomorrow. Then he frowned, forcing sentimentality from his mind, and turned to enter the hotel.

CHAPTER THREE

Light on Murder

"THE governor took your key, sir," the desk clerk said. "He's waiting in your room now."

"The governor!" Britt said.

"Yes, sir. He said not to let anybody but you know, though."

"Thanks," Britt said shortly, and went toward the elevators.

Now that he stopped to think of it, he wasn't particularly surprised. The governor's plane was fast, and he had the habit of flying about the state at will, checking the party lines and keeping his thumb on the pulse of opinion. It was just that the thing seemed like everything

else, a sort of checkup on every move Britt made, as though he were a wet-nosed kid who needed herding about.

He entered the elevator, ignoring the other passengers. "Fourteen," he told the operator.

His was the sixth stop, and he stepped onto the thick hall rug, conscious that two passengers had identified him and were whispering as the door closed. For once, he received no thrill from recognition.

Fourteen-thirty-five was down the hall, and he opened the door without knocking. The governor nodded from the easy chair, carefully nursing a drink he had mixed from Britt's liquor. Small, his face wizened from the bridled ambition which drove him, he appeared meek and inoffensive, dwarfed in the huge chair.

"Hello, Britt," he said. "I've been waiting."

Dewayne Britt scaled his hat to the bed and poured a short drink in a water tumbler. Any friendship he had ever felt for this man had long since vanished.

"Look," he said, "I don't need a guardian."

The governor smiled, and his face came alive, the eyes friendly and magnetic. Britt had seen the phenomenon before, particularly before voters, and felt no inclination to return the smile.

"I'm not checking, necessarily," the governor said. "I just wanted to get the lay of the land. How big is this thing, anyway? Can it be built up?"

Dewayne Britt shrugged. "It's no world beater," he admitted. "But it can be built up, I guess."

"You don't sound particularly hopeful—or cheerful about it."

Britt killed his drink. "It's practically open and shut," he admitted, "but I've seen Giovanni. He's a half-witted old man; why crucify him?"

The governor shrugged, and his chuckle held no mirth. "Why not?" he said in rebuttal. "Wallace was a big man, a party man; this case is tailor-made for the papers."

"And voters," Britt said cynically.

The governor poured another drink, his small wise eyes flicking to the prosecutor. His thin lips pursed thoughtfully.

"You sound tired, Britt," he said. "Tell you what; handle the thing right, and then take a month off for some fishing. How does that sound?"

"Okay, I guess," Britt said, not caring.

"Good! The governor rubbed his hands. "Now, what's the setup?"

"I haven't seen it all yet, but it looks airtight. Giovanni got drunk and tried to rob Wallace. Wallace walked in, and the Italian used a knife. Several witnesses place him at the scene, and he's signed a confession."

"Good!" The governor sipped at his drink.

"Now, carry the thing for at least two days before making the official arrest. I've got the publicity lined up, and I'll make some speeches. Wallace can stand being made the helpless victim of a crazed killer, and since this Giovanni will get the chair anyway, it won't matter what he thinks."

"That's pretty raw."

"To hell with that, Britt; I've seen you do worse. It isn't as though the man wasn't guilty."

"Look," Britt argued, "he's got a daughter; it will hit her pretty hard."

The governor shrugged. "Somebody always gets hurt."

"All right!" Dewayne Britt was past caring about the machinations behind his work. He was a stooge, and he danced a tune when the party played. "There may be one difficulty, though. One witness was killed tonight in an accident; but I think I can get her testimony through."

"Who was it?"

"Some woman who worked in a bar where Giovanni did his drinking."

"Too bad, but not important, if her testimony holds up." The governor smiled at the tall dark man. "I guess you'll make it hold up."

Dewayne Britt shivered involuntarily. "I've been working for you a long time now," he said. "Let's make this the last deal. Turn that evidence over to me, when this thing is finished."

The governor set his glass carefully on the side table. There was no affability on his face now, and his voice was consciously hard.

"We'll talk about that later, Britt," he said slowly.

"All right!" Dewayne Britt recovered his hat. "You're calling the turns now, Governor; but I think you're smart enough to know a man can take only so much pressure."

"Britt," the governor said flatly, "you're smart and a damned good prosecutor. I need you, and a smart man uses the man he needs. Play ball with me, and you'll have money and position. We're going up, high, plenty high, maybe the White House. Be smart."

Britt laughed softly, mockingly, and went toward the door. "You be smart," he said abruptly.

The little man watched Britt's hand turn the knob.

"Where are you going now?" he asked.

"To check those final statements," Britt said.

"I'll go along."

"All right." Britt used the phone at the side of the door. "This is Dewayne Britt," he said. "Tell my chauffeur to get the car out." He listened. "No, I'll come down to the garage."

HE STOOD aside to let the governor pass into the hall, and then closed the door, twisting the key and dropping it into his side pocket. They went down the hall to the bank of elevators, where Britt thumbed a button.

"What did you find out about the money Wallace was supposed to have collected?" the governor asked.

Britt shrugged. "Nothing. Anyway, that's Baggart's job."

"Yes, I suppose so," the little man agreed.

The elevator door swung back in its sheath, and they entered. "Garage," Britt said.

Passengers got on at several floors and debouched in the lobby. The governor stayed behind the big figure of his prosecutor, not wanting to be recognized. At the garage level, the operator pulled the door open.

They heard the crash, and the excited yells brought their gazes rushing to where a heavy motor strained with intolerable pressure. Men in coveralls were converging on the car lift, and the rending sound of crushing metal and breaking glass was a nerve-shattering cacophony.

"What the hell!" Britt said, and began to run.

He felt dismay touch his mind, and then a burning anger flooded him. He recognized the car now, pinned as it was between the huge elevator and the solid ceiling. It was his limousine, radiator, hood, front fenders and bumper crushed beyond repair.

"What happened?" he snapped, catching a mechanic's arm, and the man answered without looking around.

"The crate rolled and got pinned, that's what."

"Cut it!" somebody yelled, and the motor eased its strain. Then it roared again, and the elevator began to drop slowly. The front of the limousine looked as though it had run into a wall at seventy an hour.

So fast had the accident occurred, Bill, the chauffeur, was only now opening the door. He stood on the elevator, staring at the ruined car and his eyes were sullenly frightened. As the elevator came to a stop he saw Britt.

"It was an accident, sir," he said. "The car rolled before I could stop her."

"Of all the stupid, clumsy—" Dewayne Britt felt his control slipping.

"Forget it, Britt," the governor said grimly. "What's done is done. Bill," he stared at the chauffeur, "the state pays good money for its cars; this may cost you your job."

The chauffeur flushed, looking about. Mechanics watched, and he shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot.

"Look, like I said—"

"We'll take a taxi," the governor said to Britt. "See what can be done," he finished to

the chauffeur, "and then report to Baggart." "Yes, sir," Bill said sullenly, and scowled at the car.

The governor urged Britt along the stained concrete floor. His stubby legs took two steps for the prosecutor's one; almost did he seem to run. They went up the sloping ramp to the street floor, into the delivery space of the hotel. Guests were waiting patiently for the elevator to be cleared so that their cars could be brought up from the basement. The manager hurried to Dewayne Britt's side, making futile apologies, and he nodded irritably.

"Just get me a taxi," he said.

"Of course, sir," the manager said, and hurried away, blowing frantically on a small silver whistle.

Five minutes later, the annoyance fading from his mind, Dewayne Britt relaxed on the rear seat of a taxi and studied the sheets of paper in his hand. The tiny side lights glowed yellowly, and the governor watched silently from his side.

"Is it good enough?" the governor asked.

Britt nodded, folding the papers and thrusting them back into an inner pocket. "They'll do," he said evenly. "Typical witness reaction. I'll talk to them and set them straight on a point or two."

He lit a cigarette, pondering, and then switched off the reading lights. Darkness swirled into the cab. Traffic was heavy, but the clamor of it was dulled and monotonous through the closed windows. The governor smoked contentedly at a cigar, satisfied in his cold impersonal mind that Britt was doing the job for which he was being paid. At Columbus and Bleeker Streets, the cabbie swung into Bleeker, going slower, checking house numbers, finally stopping before a seedy apartment building.

"This is it," he said unnecessarily.

The governor opened the door and climbed from the car, Britt following. The prosecutor paid with a single bill, and turned, looking at the apartment house. Five stories, the brick facing blurred with sooty dirt, its window eyes stared blank and weirdly menacing at the two men.

"Five-K is the apartment," Britt said.

The taxi pulled away, the stench of its exhaust staining the air. The two men mounted the short flight of steps, and Britt touched the call button. A second later, the door buzzer clicked brittly.

The governor palmed the door open and led the way. An ancient self-service elevator creaked beneath their weight, and then strained aloft, cables slatting overhead. Britt crushed out his cigarette on the dirty flooring, and then pushed open the door to the fifth floor hall.

"Who is it?" a man asked from the left.

"I'm Dewayne Britt, special prosecutor for the state," Britt said. "I want to talk to you about the Wallace case." He gestured. "This is the governor."

"Come in, come in. I'm Guy Fredericks."

He stood aside, and the two men entered. The stale odor of cooking thrust at them, and dust gritted beneath their shoes on the uncarpeted floor. Fredericks followed, nodding at a side door.

"My wife's opening some beer—care for a cold bottle?"

"Not now," Britt said, and dropped to a straight chair.

"I'll have one," the governor said, still standing, looking about the room.

"Just a minute." Fredericks entered the second room, and reappeared a moment later, carrying three bottles, and followed by his wife.

"This is Mame, my wife. Mr. Britt and the governor."

"Hello," the woman said indifferently, and sat carelessly on the couch.

SHE wore a shapeless housecoat and her hair was stringy, its yellowness edging into black at the roots, and her makeup was smeared and careless. She drank from the beer bottle, making sucking sounds.

Dewayne Britt slid his eyes past her and looked at her husband. He was only slightly better, wearing dark trousers and a dark shirt, sweat-stained moons at the armpits. He needed a shave. He handed a bottle to the governor, and set a second on the table before drinking from the third.

"Mr. Baggart said you'd probably be by," he said. "Want to check on what I wrote?"

"That's right," the prosecutor said. "I have your deposition; I just want a double check."

Fredericks leaned against the wall, the light from a table lamp spilling into his face. His eyes stared at Britt, and then swung to the governor.

"Well, it's like this," he said. "Me and Mame work for the Thompkins, right next door to Wallace. She's the cook, and I do yard work mostly. We was just knocking off last night, and we seen this Giovanni coming up the walk. I said to Mame, 'Boy, has he got a load on!' and she—"

"I told you to mind your own business, that's what I said," the woman snapped.

"Shut up!" Fredericks said almost casually. "Well, like I was saying, this wop comes along the walk. We pass each other, and I can hear him muttering to himself about how he ain't gonna stand for it no more. I can see his face in the moonlight, and his eyes are glassy. I know he's a loony from that accident of his; but I can also see he's plenty drunk. He don't even recognize us, when we pass. I

look back, as we go down the street, and I see him circling the Wallace house. Of course, I think it's all right, seeing as how he works for Wallace part time. That's about all I know."

"That's enough," the governor said, and set his beer bottle down. "Satisfied, Britt?"

"Maybe," the prosecutor acknowledged. "Do you have a record, Fredericks?"

Guy Fredericks flushed. "Yeah," he admitted. "It was a bum rap, but it hung a one to five on me. I got out about six months ago. Anyway, what does it matter? I've been going straight; even Mr. Thompkins will say that for me."

"Is that bad, Britt?" the governor asked suddenly.

"It could be." Dewayne Britt nodded. "The defense will challenge the veracity of this man."

"Look," Fredericks said, "maybe I did a rap, but that don't change nothing I say. I seen this wop there, and so did Mame."

"We seen him," Mame said.

"Are you on parole?" Britt asked.

"Sure, but that don't change what I saw."

The governor leaned forward, his hand on Britt's shoulder. "Will his testimony stand up, Britt?" he asked. "I don't want any slip-ups."

"I can make it stand," the prosecutor said. "Fredericks," he finished, "you memorize that story, and don't change it in the least. The defense will work on you; and if you break, they'll get you for perjury."

Perspiration lay in oily drops on the man's face. "I won't forget a thing," he promised.

"Me and Mame will swear to what we saw."

"Good!" Britt came lithely to his feet. "Don't talk to anybody until you hear from me."

"No, sir."

Britt went toward the door, the governor following. Fredericks brushed past, opening the door, and standing in sight until the elevator door swung shut. The motor wheezed overhead, and the cables vibrated viciously.

"He'll make a bad witness, if he gets rattled," the governor said thoughtfully. "You had better plan to work through other testimony, if possible."

The elevator stopped and Britt opened the door. Their feet echoed dully in the dim hall, and then fresh air touched them, and they stood outside in the night.

"I'm going back to the hotel," the governor said. "I want to see Baggart, and then start back to the capital as soon as possible." He squinted through the darkness. "We should have kept that cab."

A car rolled along the street, but until the glare of the street light struck it, they could not recognize it for a private car or a hack.

It was a private and rolled by, the sound of its radio muted and distant.

They began walking, going toward Columbus, saying nothing, each intent on hidden thoughts. At the corner, Britt flagged a taxi, and the governor climbed in. His face peered back from the door.

"Coming?" the governor asked.

Dewayne Britt shook his head. "I'm going farther uptown," he said. "I'll see you later."

He watched the taxi pull away from the curb, staring blindly for a moment at the tail light gleaming on a dented fender. Link clamped to link in his mind, thoughts forming an unbidden pattern in his brain. He stood silently on the curb, trying to put his finger on the original thought which had claimed his mind for a second.

A faint thrill touched his heart, and he sensed he had a grasp on something, but what that something was, he didn't know. He was thinking of the coming trial and of the testimony which would have to be given. And that same thought called to mind Billie, the bar girl, and her death. A car had struck her down, and then raced into the night.

And by sheer coincidence, Britt's car had suffered a wrecked front end this same night.

It added up, added to accidental murder by Bill, his chauffeur.

It made sense, it had honesty; and Britt felt his stomach tighten at memory of the girl's dead face in the red glow of the neon sign. Bill had followed Britt, that was obvious, probably under Baggart's orders; and then had wrecked the limousine under circumstances which would destroy any evidence the car had struck down a woman in the street.

Britt swore. But why? The girl's testimony would help the case against Giovanni. And then Britt chuckled heavily; hell, he was trying to make a murder case out of a tragic accident.

Then the smile faded, leaving his face white and strained—for this was murder! The chauffeur had murdered Billie Sutherland, slain her brutally. He had used a car as a weapon, and death had been the answer.

It was as simple as that. And suddenly Dewayne Britt knew where the line of reasoning had begun. The arc light crackled softly over his head, and its glaring illumination turned his hands an unhealthy hue, his coat another color value.

Billie Sutherland had lied. She had perjured herself, and he had the proof in his pocket. She had claimed Giovanni had been outside the saloon window at a certain time, and she had described the clothes he had worn, giving colors for everything. And that had been the genesis of his reasoning.

For the neon light had been crimson, and under its glow, all colors would be changed.

Dewayne Britt flagged a cruising taxi. Springs creaked beneath his weight, and he consulted the papers in his pocket before giving an address.

"Fourteen sixteen Crescent," he said at last, and leaned back in the seat.

He had a lead, a good lead, and there was no course to follow but the one he had chosen.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Frame to Hang In

RUTH GIOVANNI lived in the third of a series of brownstones, relics of days when the neighborhood had been fashionable and opulent. Stepping blocks were still at the curbs, and the stonework, dingy and worn with time, was still beautiful on the house fronts. Ordinarily, children must have played in the streets, for their ball diamonds and hop-scotch courts were chalked on the cement; but now it was late, and only a few youths beneath a far street light were in sight.

Dewayne Britt hesitated at the flight of steps leading to the third brownstone. Thoughts churned chaotically in his mind. First, he had thought only to ask the girl some questions, but now, he realized, the situation was different. Fifteen minutes of riding in the taxi had given his thoughts time enough to arrive at several conclusions.

Since Ruth Giovanni had followed him earlier in the evening, she had undoubtedly seen the accident outside the saloon when Billie Sutherland had died. That she had not spoken of it was understandable, for she had no way of knowing the girl was a witness against her father, and, too, she had not known the limousine was Britt's.

Now, if she had actually seen the murder, if it was murder, her testimony would pin the thing squarely on the chauffeur.

And if the crime had been premeditated, then Britt would have the opportunity to discover why.

Billie Sutherland could have been honestly mistaken, or she could have lied deliberately. If she lied, then Britt wanted to know why, and who had coached her.

That lead, of course, swung right back to Baggart. And there it struck a dead end. Zealous and crooked as the man was, it was hard for Britt to conceive his having set so phony a murder frame just to pin it on Giovanni, when in all probability the police would find Wallace's killer in due course.

And that, of course, brought up the testimony of Guy Fredericks and his slattern wife. Their story had the ring of truth in it. They had seen Giovanni at the Wallace home, and testified to the fact. They had seen him in the moonlight, and . . .

Dewayne Britt cursed his stupidity.

There had been no moonlight; at least, not enough to identify anyone or trace his movements.

He went up the steps. Name cards were in a row of slots, and he found the girl's name near the bottom. The door was unlatched, and he went through, climbing the steps eagerly, wanting an answer to the questions in his mind.

The situation was a little too involved for quick thinking; it demanded study, and he had no time for that now.

He must bull ahead, finding out what he could as he went along.

His feet drew echoes from the second flight of steps, and he heard the sound of a radio from a room on the second floor. Dim bulbs glowed at the third floor, and he went along the hall, checking the doors. "GIOVANNI" was on the fourth, and he hesitated briefly before knocking, listening. He heard soft movement. His knuckles made a brisk tattoo on the panel.

The door was unlatched and swung uncannily open. Britt twisted his head, looking, and then went forward instinctively, seeing the girl lying on the floor. A radio played, and the curtain swayed at the window; but his attention was only on the slim girl lying so deathly still.

He heard the step and tried to turn. Somebody grunted from effort, and then the roof came slamming down on Britt's head, driving him to the floor and pinning him there. Blackness crowded his senses, and he pushed impotently at the rug, trying to come erect.

Something incredibly hard slammed at his head again, and he fell forward into a cocoon of blackness without bottom or dimensions. He had no thoughts then; his mind was a blank of nothingness. He blacked out, still trying to see his attacker.

Morning sunlight lay warm and thick across Dewayne Britt's face when he awoke. His hands made little pushing movements, and he turned a bit, trying to remember a vagrant thought. Pain pulsed rhythmically at the base of his skull, and nausea cramped at his belly. He sat, dimness still in his mind, and looked around.

The room was cheerful with gay color, and a sparrow hopped perkily on the window sill. He put up his hand, and found a clot of stiff bloody hair at the back of his head. Memory came back with a rush, and he came to his feet, staggering blindly against the wall for support.

"Whew!" he said, and swallowed against the pull of vertigo.

He blinked against the pain of his bruised head, and then went toward a side door. It led to a bedroom, and to one side he saw the

open door of a bathroom. He ran water in the lavatory, using a wash cloth to rinse his head with cold water. With the clotted blood washed away, he discovered the cut in the flesh was small. He dried his head, then bathed the cut with an antiseptic from the medicine chest.

Refreshed, a cigarette canted in his mouth, he prowled the four room apartment, not knowing what he would find. Ruth Giovanni was gone.

He sat on the couch, trying to think. His head throbbed agonizingly, and the cigarette tasted terrible. He ground out the stub in the ashtray.

There had to be an answer, an obvious answer, to what had happened. It was either kidnaping or a robbery. His hand sought his billfold and came away empty. He scowled, seeing the fold lying on a side table.

It was empty of the money it had held. He went through his pockets; and felt surprise. A small roll of bills were in his side pocket, along with change. His diamond was still on his finger.

A thought nagged his mind. He prodded at it, forcing it into the light. Knowledge came with it. He reached for the phone, pulling it close, and found the telephone directory in the magazine rack.

"Hello, Roberts," he said, when his connection was made. "This is Dewayne Britt of the governor's staff. . . . Fine, thanks. . . . Look, do you keep any record of the bills you give out in large amounts? Good. Do you think you could find out who drew out quite a large sum in the last couple of days, bundled in thousand dollar packets?" Britt smiled. "Thanks. I'll call back."

He cradled the receiver and came to his feet. The headache was lessening by the moment, and steadiness had come back to his rangy body. A light was beginning to shimmer through his thoughts and he went purposefully toward the door.

ON THE street he looked around, blinking against the sunlight. A drug store was on the corner, and there he bought aspirin and coffee, huddling over the cup for five minutes. Satisfied with his line of reasoning, he entered a phone booth and put through a call to headquarters.

"Harris?" he said. "Glad to catch you. This is Dewayne Britt. Listen, a woman met me last night outside the Wallace home. Did you see her? You did, fine. Now, who did you tell about that?" Britt listened intently. "Good. And that was later; you forgot it when Baggart was there with Chief Pettibone and the suspect? Okay, thanks."

Britt pronged the receiver and stepped from

the booth. He had a pattern now, and it was ugly.

He left the drug store, walking to the hack stand, and took a taxi for his hotel. Morning traffic was light, and the hackie made good time. Britt huddled in the back seat, correlating facts and guesses and coming up with surprising answers.

The taxi pulled in at the side entrance of the hotel, and Britt walked around to the back. Two chauffeurs leaned against the wall, smoking and waiting. They gave little heed to the prosecutor. Britt went through the double doorway, into the building and along the wide hall. He stopped before 35, touching the knob lightly. It refused to turn. He knocked lightly, imperatively.

"Who is it?" Bill's voice said cautiously.

"Me, Baggart," Britt said, and felt the tension sliding into his shoulders.

The chauffeur opened the door, and Britt went through, shoving his weight, throwing Bill far back in the room. The chauffeur's face went tight with surprise and then all emotion stilled—and he was only watchful.

"What's the idea, Mr. Britt?" he said.

"Where's Ruth Giovanni?" Britt said flatly.

The chauffeur scowled. "Who the hell is Ruth Giovanni?" he asked, and his eyes betrayed him. They flicked to a side door; and Britt went that way.

He had the door open and had seen the girl lying on the bed, before the chauffeur could move. The girl's eyes swung to Britt and she made moaning sounds behind the tape. Her hands and feet were tied tightly with strips of sheeting.

"This is kidnaping," Britt said.

Bill said nothing; he was circling, coming between the prosecutor and the hall door. Perspiration beaded his forehead, and his mouth worked soundlessly.

"You should have taken everything valuable on me," Britt said softly.

He stared at the gun, nerves tightening in his belly. It had seemed just to appear in the chauffeur's hand out of nowhere.

"You're too smart," Bill said briefly. "Get in the room with the woman."

Britt shook his head, feeling no courage, but knowing the bedroom would be like a box trap to him. He backed a step, his hand closing on the back of a straight chair beside the door.

"I'll give you an out, Bill," he said. "Take it."

The chauffeur grinned, and his dark eyes didn't change expression.

"One last chance," he said.

Britt threw the chair, bending and twisting to one side, and the roar of the automatic slammed at his senses. The slug slashed at his side like a red-hot knife blade, and he

gasped, thinking the other couldn't miss a second time.

He went forward, trying to get below the line of fire, and knew he could never escape. Muscles locked in his back against the shock of the bullet, and he held his breath, hands outstretched to catch the man.

A gun bellowed, and then hammered again.

Britt caught the chauffeur, grasping with clawlike fingers and jerking with titanic strength. A wonder touched his mind fleetingly that he had not been hit, and then he was twisting the man from his feet.

The chauffeur came without resistance, crumpling, and crimson flooded from his shattered throat over Dewayne Britt's arm. Then the two were together on the floor, and Britt was coming free.

He was on hands and knees before he saw Baggart at the door. A gun bulked heavily in Baggart's hand, and the planes of his face were heavy and brutal.

"For hell's sake, Britt, what's going on?" Baggart said.

Britt came slowly to his feet and used his handkerchief to mop away the blood which stained his sleeve. Breath rasped in his throat, and the blind terror of the past minute stilled his voice.

Then men were crowding at the door, talking, staring; and only the small body of the governor kept them out.

"I'll explain in a moment," Britt said, and went into the bedroom.

Callously, he ripped away the tape gag, and untied the knots in the sheeting as swiftly as he could. The girl sobbed in deep relief, working life back into her numbed hands and ankles. With Britt's support, she walked into the room where her kidnaper lay in death.

"Ruth Giovanni!" Baggart said in surprise. "What the hell is she doing here?"

"Let's go up to my room," Britt said, and there was a great weariness in his voice. "We can talk better there."

A uniformed patrolman was at the door then, and only the governor's authority permitted the small group to leave the scene. They went directly to the elevator, saying nothing now, the girl's eyes watching the men, and they standing in uncomfortable silence.

In Britt's room, the prosecutor guided the girl to a chair and poured a small glass of whiskey for her. She drank, thanking him with her eyes, and color came back into her face.

"All right, Britt," the governor said, "let's hear the story. Where have you been all night, and what brought about the fight with your chauffeur?" His gaze swung to Baggart. "You're too handy with that gun," he finished.

Baggart flushed. "What the hell was I supposed to do, let Britt be shot to death?"

"Let me talk," Britt said. "Bill was the hit-and-run driver who killed Miss Sutherland, the witness, last night. He tried to cover up by rolling the limousine forward in the car lift and permitting the front to be crushed. Miss Giovanni, here, saw the accident; and when Bill found out she might be able to describe the car, he kidnaped her and brought her here. Is that right, Miss Giovanni?"

The girl nodded, without speaking. Red marked her skin where the tape had pulled free, the lines of strain were about her eyes.

"I figured that out last night, and got to Miss Giovanni's apartment just in time to get a crack on the head which laid me out the rest of the night. When I came to this morning, my wallet had been cleaned, and Miss Giovanni was gone. I did a bit more figuring, and then came back to the hotel. I found the girl in the chauffeur's rooms. He pulled a gun, and I jumped him. Then Baggart saved my life."

"Forget it, Britt," Baggart said.

"No!" Dewayne Britt said. "I don't think I'll forget it. And I'll tell you why."

The governor reached for the whiskey bottle. He was smiling genially, but concern swirled deep in his eyes. His glance was puzzled as it touched the two men.

"Something's going on here," he said. "What is it?"

"I'll tell you in a minute," Britt said, and reached for the phone.

He talked for several minutes, his eyes flickering from Baggart to the governor. He saw knowledge whip into one man's eyes, and a chuckle touched his throat. Then he cradled the receiver, and fumbled out a cigarette.

"It's pretty crude," he said evenly, "so crude I can't really give you credit for it, Baggart."

"What the hell you talking about?" Baggart said hoarsely.

"What's going on here?" the governor said puzzledly.

"Murder!" Britt said, and heard Ruth Giovanni's small cry.

The governor spread his hands. "We know it's murder," he said. "Why get worked up about it? Wallace just had a bad break. And as for Bill, well, he had a bad break, too, both in the accident, and in trying to solve his problem with a kidnaping and a gun."

Dewayne Britt caught a deep breath. "I mean the coming murder," he said.

"Are you nuts!" Baggart's hands were clenched in his pockets.

"Giovanni's!" Britt said flatly.

"Damn it!" the governor said. "Stop playing with words. What do you mean, Britt?"

"Nothing much, except," Dewayne Britt moved toward the girl, "that Giovanni didn't kill Wallace."

"No!" Baggart snorted his disgust. "Then who did, master mind?"

"You," Britt said flatly—and knew that death had entered the room.

"YOU'RE crazy!" Baggart snarled.

But Britt had no time for him then. Ruth Giovanni was crying, deeply now, like a kid who's seen her puppy killed. She had heard the truth in Britt's voice, and the touch of his hand on her shoulder had confirmed it. He soothed her clumsily; and only when she had quieted, did he glance up.

"It was raw, plenty raw, Baggart," he said. "How in hell you expected to get away with it, I'll never know. Good Lord, any defense lawyer would have torn those witnesses to pieces."

The governor placed his glass precisely in the center of the table and turned slowly to face Britt. He was little and shrewd and venomous as a snake then.

"Tell your story, Britt," he said. "Don't miss a thing."

Baggart said sullenly, anger coiled bright in his eyes, "Britt is off his nut."

"Get on with it," the governor said.

"Okay, here it is," Britt said. "Baggart killed Wallace, knifed him for the money he had collected to be sent to the capitol. It happened fast, and Baggart had no time to make preparations. But he's a cold devil, and he worked fast from then on. He set the stage. Giovanni was working late that night, and Baggart decided to make him the fall guy.

"I'll have to guess for a minute here. Baggart got Giovanni's knife and used it on Wallace's body, first punching a hole in the screen to make it appear Giovanni had forced his way in. Then, somehow, he got Giovanni to climb in the window and jump back out, thus making prints in the earth. Giovanni was so drunk he remembered nothing, and his mind is so hazy, he believed the story Baggart gave him of his actions."

Baggart moved slightly, shifting, and Britt went cold, knowing the gun in Baggart's pocket was pointed his way. But he couldn't stop now; he had to go ahead.

"Baggart fixed the murder pattern through bribery and blackmail. Billie Sutherland was probably both bribed and blackmailed. Guy Fredericks and his wife were only blackmailed, on the threat of throwing the man back into prison on a fake parole violation. They figured out stories to tell, but failed to take into account several things.

"First, Billie Sutherland described the clothes she said Giovanni wore when standing

outside the saloon window. The story might have held, except for the fact that the neon light was red, and so she could not have identified colors. Baggart must have realized that and sent my chauffeur to stop her mouth. He did it with the limousine.

"Baggart had already made another mistake. He had permitted me to gain one of the bills used in the party payoff. A check would show that it was part of money given a party member and paid to Wallace. I just got confirmation of serial numbers on the bills given out at the bank; and a check of the money Baggart has should show it to be part of the money Wallace had."

The governor turned hot eyes on Baggart. "I don't like double-crossers," he said thinly.

"Fredericks' story slipped up when he claimed to have seen Giovanni in the moonlight," Britt broke in. "There wasn't enough moonlight to recognize anybody. There's your setup. Wallace was killed because of the money. Baggart framed Giovanni. I caught the frame eventually, as Baggart must have expected, for Billie Sutherland was killed.

"Officer Harris, at the Wallace home, reported to Baggart that I had met a woman outside the house. Baggart figured it for Ruth Giovanni. And figuring further that she might have seen the murder of Billie Sutherland, he sent my chauffeur out to bring her in. I walked in just in time to get knocked cold. While unconscious, I was robbed of the twenty dollar bill Baggart had realized was evidence against him.

"I came back to the hotel, got in a fight with Bill, and Baggart killed him, not to save my life, but to shut his mouth."

Dewayne Britt studied Baggart, not liking him, wondering if he would have a chance. Baggart could go only so far, unless he wanted to kill the three people in the room with him.

"For a smart guy, you played it dumb as hell," he said. "First, the cops have evidence about the murder car which will match up with the front of the limousine, even if the elevator did almost wreck it. The evidence you concocted won't hold up in court against Giovanni. You cut the screen to manufacture evidence, and cut from the inside, pushing the bent ends of wire outward, which would be impossible to do if Giovanni worked from outside. And lastly, the money can be traced back from you to Wallace to the party members and to the bank. Hell, it fits you like a glove."

Ruth Giovanni caught Dewayne Britt's hand. "You mean my father will go free?" she asked.

"How about it, Governor?" Britt asked.

The governor poured a fresh drink. "It adds up, Baggart," he said. "Like Britt says,

it fits you like a glove. Where's the money?"

"I haven't got it," Baggart said defiantly.

"Baggart," the governor said gently. "I'm through playing. Where is that money?"

Baggart glared, then wilted before the little man's cold stare. "I got it hidden," he said, and then defiance came again. "But I'm keeping it! I've sweated enough for you, while you get the gravy. I'm keeping it, this time, and there isn't a damned thing you can do about it."

"What about Giovanni?" Dewayne Britt said, feeling the pressure of the girl's hand.

"Shut up, Britt," the governor said. "Look, Baggart," he finished, "don't get tough; I swing a bigger stick than you." He shrugged. "All right," he finished, "Keep a fair share and turn the rest over to me."

Baggart moved nervously from foot to foot. "What about Britt?"

The governor smiled. "He'll roll over when I tell him," he said.

"Okay, it's a deal. But try anything funny and there'll be trouble."

"For the last time," Britt said, "what about Giovanni?"

THE governor looked around, heeding the question for the first time. Surprise was in his tone.

"He goes up for trial for murdering Wallace, of course," he said. "We'll just make certain the evidence can't be tripped this time."

"No!" The girl plunged to her feet, incredulous unbelief in his face. "No, you *can't* do that!"

"Look," Dewayne Britt said, and felt the skin crawl on his back, as though he faced some crawling snake, "what kind of a deal is this? You can't expect to frame Giovanni."

He held the girl, held her close, while she cried against his chest. For the first time in years he felt the stirring of his pride.

"I've done your dirty work for years," he said, "but always there was some justification. But if you think I'm going to railroad a poor feeble-minded man into death row, you're crazy."

"Tell him, Baggart," the governor said.

"You'll dance to our tune, Britt," Baggart said savagely. "You open your mouth, and I'll see that bribery evidence is planted in the best place for bad publicity."

Dewayne Britt hesitated. Cold fear settled on him then, and he fully realized how deeply he was entangled. They could break him, break him completely. The statute of limitations took care of the bribery case; but he could be disbarred. And, too, when it came to a showdown, if the governor and Baggart toppled, he would fall, along with them.

"Now look," he began.

"You look," the governor said. "You're going right ahead as planned. Pettibone will find a hole for the girl; and we can not only deny anything she's overheard, but we can prove our stories, after she is released when Giovanni is taken care of." His tone softened. "There's dough in it, Britt, big money in the future. Be smart, play it smart."

"Well," Britt said, and felt the sheen of perspiration on his face.

And then the girl stirred in his arms and came free, and he could see the loathing in her eyes. He saw himself then, clearly, for the first time in years. Always had there been some excuse for what he did; but now he felt dirty and rotten before her eyes.

"Please?" Ruth said.

Britt hit Baggart then, swung and struck with coiled strength, before the other could reach his gun. He bulled him back to the wall, held him there through sheer weight, and drove his blows with crushing force.

He felt hot breath gush against his face, felt pain rip at his groin from a merciless knee, and was going back. Then he stopped, throwing his entire weight into a right hand blow. His knuckles slammed against Baggart's face, tilting his head sideways, and Britt's left crossed beautifully. Baggart broke at the middle, bending and falling on his face.

Britt stepped back, breathing hard. The governor watched, shrinking back in his chair. Britt took two steps, facing him.

"I warned you about putting too much pressure on a man," he said, and his open hands slashed twice across the governor's face.

The little man pressed farther away, finger

marks clouding redly on his white face. He said nothing, only watched.

"Come on, kid," Dewayne Britt said, and reached for the girl's hand.

"Britt!" The governor's voice came harshly. "Don't be a fool, man! You're blowing your career to pieces; if you talk, you may get a prison sentence. Listen to reason!"

The little man was standing now; and Britt almost laughed, so much was the other like a trapped killer rodent.

"I'll double your pay, Britt; I'll turn over the evidence I hold. Only don't be a fool."

Dewayne Britt laughed aloud then, laughed in the full recklessness of his freedom. For the first time in years he felt no fear.

He said, "To hell with you!"

Ruth Giovanni caught his hand, and somehow in that moment she was beautiful. Her eyes touched his, and tears sparkled brightly.

"You're sure?" she asked.

"Sure?" Britt smiled, and his face was young again. "I've never been so sure of anything in my life."

He thought then of what he could have in the future, of the life which could be his, and laughter touched his heart. This other way wouldn't be pleasant; it would probably be ugly and yet the prospect held no fears.

"Come on," he said, "we've got stories to tell the papers and your dad to release."

One glimpse he had of the wizened governor standing over Baggart's body, and then the door was closed, and he was walking down the hall at Ruth Giovanni's side.

"Hurry—oh, please let's hurry," she said.

And Dewayne Britt laughed freely and matched her pace.



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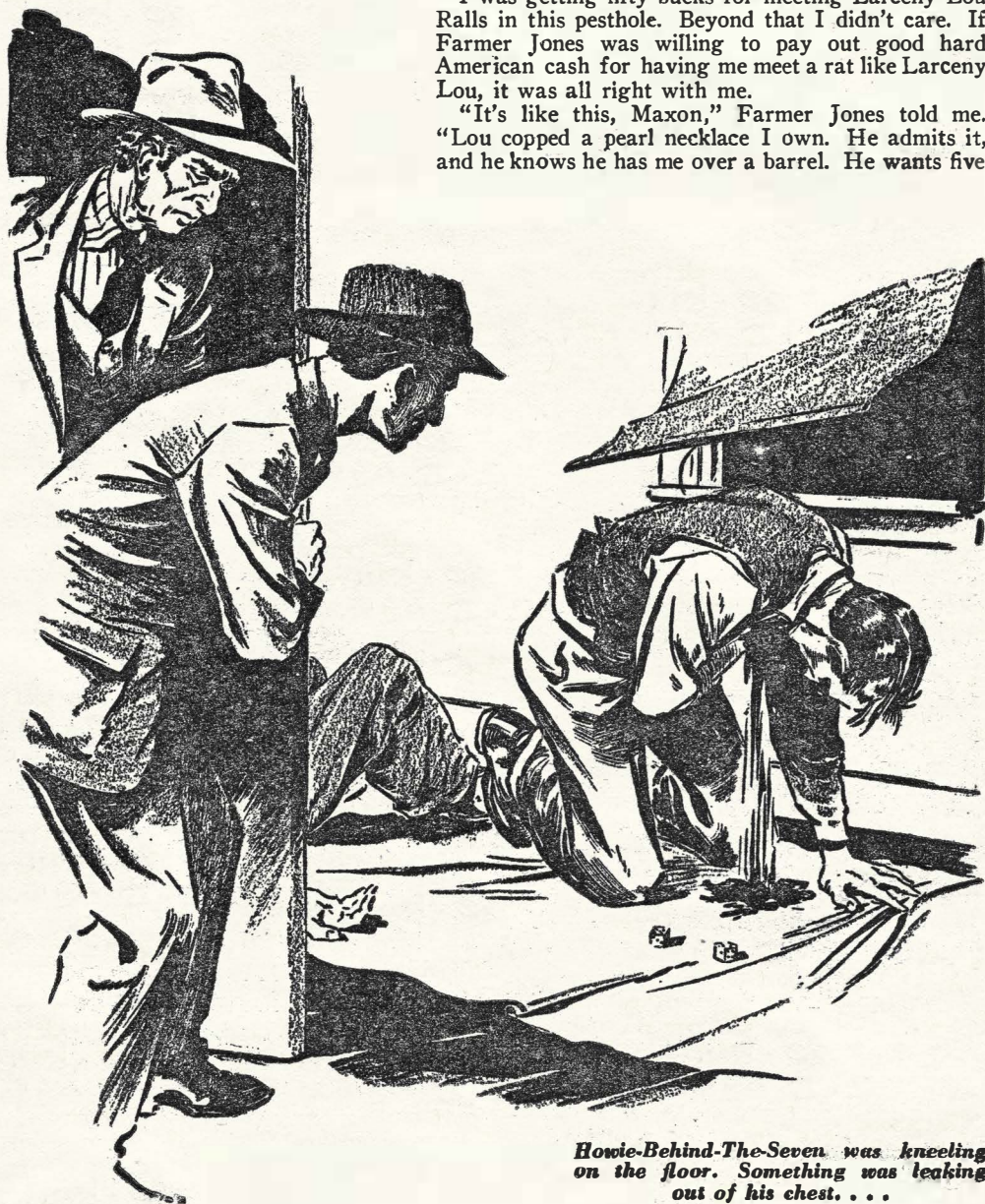
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THE QUICK AND

HOGAN'S ALLEY was a rats' nest. It was a narrow, stinking dead-end trap between tottering, termite-ridden rooming houses. Fog swirled up from the Puget City waterfront. The night was darker than the inside of a bishop's hat.

I was getting fifty bucks for meeting Larceny Lou Ralls in this pesthole. Beyond that I didn't care. If Farmer Jones was willing to pay out good hard American cash for having me meet a rat like Larceny Lou, it was all right with me.

"It's like this, Maxon," Farmer Jones told me. "Lou copped a pearl necklace I own. He admits it, and he knows he has me over a barrel. He wants five



Howie-Behind-The-Seven was kneeling on the floor. Something was leaking out of his chest. . . .

THE DEAD

Hogan's alley was a rat's nest, and that was okay with me—for twenty-five grand's worth of cheese and a chance to tell the guy who had bumped Howie-Behind-The-Seven, "when you fry, remember me!"

By
**Wallace
Umphrey**

grand for it and I've got to play ball with him."

"Why not see Johnny Ralls?"

For a long time Johnny Ralls had been trying to keep his kid brother out of jail. Johnny Ralls was respectable now. He owned a swank night club and gambling casino just north of the city limits. He was in the chips and that gave him respectability.

Farmer Jones shook his head. "Johnny and I don't get along. He knows I won't call copper. So he'd tell me to laugh up a stump."

"Why not go to the cops?"

"You ought to know why." He looked pained. "I like jewelry, but I don't care about the background of the stuff I buy. This necklace was a part of the Carmichael heist three years ago. You think I want to take that to the cops?"

Farmer Jones was a gambler. He was tall and thin, about fifty, with pale naive eyes and sandy hair. His suits were always unpressed—*one-hundred-and-fifty* dollar suits. He looked like a rube, a farmer in town for the weekend. A sucker ripe for the plucking.

Only he wasn't. His appearance was a carefully cultivated stock in trade.

"Why don't you meet Larceny Lou yourself?" I asked.

"Howie-Behind-The-Seven is running a floating crap game tonight up at the Rainier Hotel. It'll be a good game—with Wooden Joe, Johnny Ralls, Harry The Horse, and Smith Frane sitting in. I've had a long streak of bad luck, but I'm hot now. I don't want to miss it."

"I thought Howie-Behind-The-Seven left town," I said.

Farmer Jones nodded. "He did. When Betsy Clair threw him over and began banking roulette for Johnny Ralls, he pulled out. But you get over those things. A blonde is a blonde, whether it's here or Memphis. He's back now. We'll have some tough games again."

"I don't like it," I said.

"Isn't my money as good as the next?"

"How do you know you'll be hot tonight?"

"If you were a gambler you wouldn't have to ask."

"Okay," I said.

He handed me a thick bundle of bills, mostly tens and twenties. I counted the bills, and there was an even five grand. I tucked the bills away in a manila envelope. He handed me the fifty-buck fee we had agreed upon, and then went out.

Sara Plummer—she's my office secretary—poked her dark head through the doorway and said, "Johnny-boy, the next thing you'll be handling divorce cases."

All this was about the middle of the afternoon.

Now it was eleven at night and Hogan's Alley was like a black cave in which bears had been hibernating for the winter. It smelled that bad. I turned in from the street, stumbled over some garbage, took a few steps and paused. The alley was as quiet as a cave in which bears were hibernating.

"Larceny?" I called out.

There was a sudden sound, like the squashing of ripe fruit, a choked-off cry. It wasn't far away. I went for my .380 Beretta. A shadowy figure leaped toward me. Before I had my little gun cleared from its holster something smashed down at me.

I was maced properly.

NOT so badly as Larceny Lou Ralls, though. Maybe my head was harder.

I awoke in a couple of minutes probably, with the taste of dirty alley garbage in my mouth. Staggering forward, I stumbled over a body. It was Larceny Lou. He was as dead as you can get.

His pockets were clean.

There was also a lot of blood on the front of his suit.

It took me four matches to find my gun where it had been dropped. It had been fired once.

A siren got louder and louder. Somebody had heard the shot and called the cops.

I didn't have the five grand Farmer Jones had given me.

They let me go in an hour. Lieutenant Nick Tucci got a bit rough, but he couldn't hold me. An M.E. established the fact that

Larceny Lou Ralls had died from the macing and not from the slug. Using my gun looked like an afterthought. To back up my own story I carried a nice dent in my skull.

On the street outside headquarters I discovered that the fifty bucks Farmer Jones had paid me was also gone. That meant I'd taken both a macing and an inquisition, all for free.

I started to climb into my car. From the seat a voice said, "Keep coming, Maxon. This is a gun I got."

It was a big balding guy named Tom Smart. He worked for Johnny Ralls. He relieved me of my Beretta.

"Where to?" I asked.

"Your office is as good as any place."

I drove without argument. In the rear-view mirror I could see another car following. I figured it was Johnny Ralls, and that turned out to be right.

All the offices on the floor were dark. We went into my office and I switched on the lights. That is, we were in the front reception office. My own private office has new furniture and I wanted to keep it looking that way.

Tom Smart kept me covered while Johnny Ralls shut the door.

Johnny Ralls was a small, hefty redhead with a pleasant face and grey eyes. He was unarmed. He didn't carry a gun now—it wasn't respectable.

Tom Smart backed up against the wall and began picking his teeth with a broken match, but he held the gun right, his thumb horizontal along the frame.

I said to Johnny Ralls, "I thought you were in a crap game Howie-Behind-The-Seven is floating."

He cursed, examining his thumbnail. "They cleaned me."

"Before eleven?"

"I quit in time to hear about Lou."

"Yeah," I said. "Tough."

He looked up quickly. "I hear you been trying to bust him with a rap, Maxon."

"You've been hearing wrong."

"I heard it." He began shaking his head. "You could have maced him, shot him, then maced yourself."

"The cops don't think so."

"I don't care what the cops think. I got a friend down there and I heard about it." He looked down, then quickly up. "You know how it is, Maxon. Lou was a rat. He was born with larceny in his soul. But he was my kid brother." His face twisted. "If you had a beef with him, I would have squared it. I'd square him with the devil himself. You understand that, Maxon?"

The back of my neck was wet. "Yeah," I said.

One of his nimble hands dipped into his coat pocket. It came out with brass knuckles. Quietly he slipped them over his right fist.

"If I was sure, Maxon, I'd gut-shoot you right here," he said. "I'm not sure, but I'm taking no chances."

He glanced at Tom Smart. He nodded to himself. Then he hit me three times very fast over my left kidney.

A rosy, ecstatic haze seared up my body to my brain. He hit me on the mouth, on the nose. I staggered back and hit the wall, started to slide along it toward the door. The pain wasn't ecstatic any longer. He hit me on the cheek, and I fell down on my hands and knees. I shook my head like a puppy. I made puppy sounds. I began crawling toward the door.

Tom Smart came up behind me, grabbed my left arm and yanked it up behind my back. Something sort of creaked. He jerked me to my feet. Johnny Ralls hit me three more times. After that I lost track.

THE Rainier Hotel was built of dull brick worn smooth by the weather. It was a nice quiet genteel place to live. A house dick named Tom Hennessey kept it that way. He was an ex-patrolman off the Puget City force, a grizzled, middle-aged man with flat feet, a heavy jaw and heavy black eyebrows.

"What happened to you, Jimmy-boy?"

"A truck," I said.

It was about three in the morning. My left arm was in a sling and my face was held together with adhesive tape. One eye was already swollen shut. It had taken a doctor the better part of an hour to get me patched up. Without the tape my face would have fallen off on the floor. Tom Smart had left my gun lying on Sara Plummer's typing desk.

We went around the desk, where the night clerk and a bellhop were dozing, and into Hennessey's small airless office. He left the door open so that he could watch-dog the lobby.

"You ought to have an easy life like me," he said. "I should walk into bullets for the city at twenty-four hundred a year." His voice was bitter—he had been a good man and city politics had kept him down. He yanked open a drawer of his desk. "Drink?"

I nodded. In the drawer were a bottle, two glasses, maybe four dozen new decks of playing cards, a couple of dozen new dice. The hotel saw a lot of floating crap and poker games.

"This is good," Hennessey said, pouring. "It was a little present from Howie-Behind-The-Seven."

We drank to crime. "How'd he get his name?" I asked.

"Once he made thirteen straight passes."

"How's his floating crap game going?"

Hennessey looked pained. "Is this more than a social call, Jimmy-boy?"

I shook my head. "I have to see Farmer Jones."

"Want me to ring him?"

"I'll wait. The game ought to bust up soon."

He nodded his grizzled head and put his flat feet on the desk. "This is a respectable joint, Jimmy-boy. No noise or rough stuff. If the boys want a little innocent amusement once in a while, far be it from me to stop them."

The bellhop on duty strolled past for a drink of water. He was a little guy with a young-old face.

"Where's Sleeper Morris?" I asked.

"Sick tonight. This new guy is taking his place. A guy named Tedro."

The bellhop walked back.

"Is Sleeper here?" I asked.

Hennessey shook his head. "He's over at his sister's on Eastview drive."

We had another drink. I reached into the drawer and pulled out a couple of dice. "Roll you for five," I said.

"You know I don't gamble, Jimmy-boy."

"I don't either."

He picked up the dice from the top of the desk and put them back in the drawer. He picked up the glasses, wiped them out with a paper towel, then put them and the whiskey back into the drawer and slammed it shut.

"You know the boys sometimes want a new deck or something," he said. "All the drug-stores will be closed. I keep this stuff on hand as a convenience."

"At about ten times the normal price."

He grinned. "A guy has to live."

The elevator came down, and there was the sound of feet in the lobby. Smith Frane, Wooden Joe and a guy I didn't know walked past. The elevator went back up.

"Game's over," Hennessey said. He offered me a cigar, which I refused. He lit up. "Good cigars, Jimmy-boy. Farmer passed 'em out."

Hennessey did all right for himself. I was glad of that.

The elevator returned. Harry The Horse and Farmer Jones got out. Farmer Jones saw me, said something to Harry The Horse, who went on. Farmer Jones waited in the lobby for me. He still looked like a farmer. His face was expressionless.

"Did you get it?" he asked.

I told him I'd got it all right, but not what he meant. He showed faint curiosity as he glanced at my face. He didn't ask, but I told him what had happened.

His face didn't change. "That was five grand, Maxon."

I watched him. "Yeah."

"Five grand is a lot of dough."

"It would be to me."

He looked at a place on the wall a foot above my head. "Who did it?"

"Would I be here if I knew?" I asked.

His eyes came down to look at me. "You could have rigged it yourself, Maxon."

I've never been a good poker player. My eyes give me away. He back-pedaled as my right shot toward him. It hit him on the shoulder, spun him around, but he didn't fall.

"Forget it," he said.

The telephone in Hennessey's office rang. A moment later Hennessey steamed out, looking neither right nor left, his cigar stuck at an angle in his mouth, his black brows knotted and his flat feet hitting the rug with little positive puffs of sound.

He steamed toward the elevator, then back-tracked.

"Is Howie-Behind-The-Seven alone?" he asked.

Farmer Jones nodded.

"He's got a beef." Hennessey's face was red. "What kind of a beef could he have now?" He headed for the elevator again and disappeared.

Farmer Jones swore suddenly. "Five grand and the necklace."

"It might play like this," I told him. "I



TOPS FOR QUALITY

BIGGER AND BETTER



don't know, but whoever copped the necklace from Larceny Lou might approach you later. This guy will have both the necklace and the five grand. Let me know if you hear anything. We'll shake him down. I want my fifty bucks back."

"What time was Larceny Lou killed?"

"Eleven."

Farmer Jones said, "Johnny Ralls pulled out at ten-thirty."

"How'd you make out tonight?" I asked.

His face didn't change. "About twenty-six grand." He meant that was what he'd won, but his voice sounded as if he had just stumbled over a dime in the gutter.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," he said. "You come down to Johnny Ralls' place with me now, and I'll give you another fifty for your trouble."

"I thought he was sore at you."

"He is. That's why I want you along. I hocked a pearl necklace with him a month ago and I haven't been able to pick it up. Now I've got the dough."

"Why should he be sore about that?"

Farmer Jones shrugged. "You know how Johnny is."

The desk phone rang, and the night clerk reached sleepily for it. A high-pitched voice tumbled over the wire. The clerk looked shocked. He ran toward us.

"Shots," he said blankly. "Shots in five-oh-nine."

"That's Howie-Behind-The-Seven's room," Farmer Jones said.

IT WASN'T pretty. Howie-Behind-The-Seven, a pale little guy, was kneeling on the floor in an Islamic attitude of prayer. Something was leaking out of his chest. It wasn't red ink.

Tom Hennessey lay flat on his back, his eyes wide open. He had been shot twice in the head.

The window was open, the blind flapping. Outside was a fire escape. It looked as if Howie-Behind-The-Seven was just cleaning up the mess left from his crap game when he'd got it. He was unarmed. Hennessey had managed to drag out his gun but he hadn't had a chance to use it. I went over and closed his eyes for him.

"Call the police," I told the night clerk. He darted away like a scared rabbit.

Farmer Jones said quietly, "I can't take this." He went into the bathroom.

I looked at the body of Howie-Behind-The-Seven. It was supported on knees and forehead. Slowly it tilted over so that it lay doubled-up on its side. My hair raised slightly.

One of the hands was clenched in a small tight fist. I pried open the fingers. One of a pair of dice rolled to the rug. I rolled it a

couple of times and slipped it into my pocket.

Farmer Jones came back. His face was paler than normal.

"You still want to see Johnny Ralls?" I asked.

He nodded, his face wet.

I said, "Let's blow before the cops get here."

We went down. It was after four now and the bellhops had changed shifts. We walked around the corner to the Rainier Garage, where we'd both left our cars. It was a low one-story annex attached to the hotel. The fire escape at Howie-Behind-The-Seven's room led downward to the roof.

Only one attendant was on duty, a young colored guy with a smooth, black, shiny, intelligent face. He was dressed in spotless white coveralls. He brought up my car.

"Thanks," I said. "I don't suppose you saw a guy come down the fire escape a while ago?"

He nodded. "As a matter of fact, sir, I did."

"Did you see him plainly?"

Again he nodded.

"What did he look like?"

"Well, sir, that's hard to say. I've seen him before. You show him to me and I'll tell you if he's the right gentleman." There was a brief pause. "Trouble, sir?"

"Are you on the same shift all the time?" I asked.

He nodded. "I go to school, days." He looked at me and then added, "Law school." He went away to get Farmer Jones' car.

"I'll meet you at Johnny Ralls' place," Farmer Jones said to me.

"The killer went up the fire escape," I said. "He held a gun on Howie-Behind-The-Seven and made him call Hennessey. When Tom Hennessey showed, the killer cooled them both."

Farmer Jones was silent.

"Aren't you interested in the reason?" I asked.

He shook his head. "The cops will find out; then I'll know."

"I kind of liked Hennessey, Farmer." My mouth was dry. "I liked Hennessey a hell of a lot."

I drove toward Johnny Ralls' place. East-view Drive, where Sleeper Morris' sister lived, was on the way. It was a small white bungalow with a nice yard. There was a light at the back. It was the only house on the block that had a light on.

I walked around to the back porch, climbed the steps and knocked on the kitchen door. There was a shuffling of feet inside, a few whispered words. The back door was pulled open a crack. I got my knee and my good shoulder against it and heaved it open.

Sleeper Morris stumbled across the lin-

oleum, looking white and scared. But he didn't look sick.

Tedro, the bellhop who had just come off duty, was a tough little monkey whose young eyes looked older than sin.

I gave them both a free look down the barrel of my Beretta.

"What's the idea, Maxon?" Sleeper Morris asked.

"It's the payoff." I got them both lined up in front of me. Both looked scared now. My mouth was still dry, and I felt pretty tired. "A guy I liked got cooled tonight. You both know him. Tom Hennessey."

Sleeper Morris gulped. Tedro watched me narrowly. "Not so loud, Maxon," said Sleeper Morris. "My sister and her kid are asleep in there." He gestured vaguely.

I lowered my voice. "You guys cooled Hennessey just the same as if you pulled the trigger." I felt as if I were trying to talk myself out of something. "You rang in crooked dice for Howie-Behind-The-Seven. How much were you paid, Sleeper?"

"F-fifty bucks to be sick."

I turned to Tedro. "You were carrying some crooked dice," I told him. "Somebody called for a fresh pair. Instead of getting 'em from Hennessey, you palmed off the crooked dice in your pocket. Hennessey was blamed, and both he and Howie-Behind-The-Seven got cooled for the caper. How much did you get out of it?"

He snarled at me. "What the hell are you talking about?"

I got my right hand around his throat. I hoisted him off his feet, so that his back was pushed flat against the wall. I held him there by his throat.

He flailed at me with his arms, but I had the reach on him. His eyes began to bug out.

"Search his pockets, Sleeper," I said.

Sleeper Morris pulled out a pair of dice with shaking hands. I loosened my grip and Tedro slumped to the floor. The pair of dice matched the one I had pried out of Howie-Behind-The-Seven's death grip.

"Who paid you?" I asked Tedro.

The fight was gone out of him. He was through being tough. He scrambled to his feet. He whimpered: "Howie-Behind-The-Seven gimme two hundred bucks. I gave Sleeper fifty."

I put my gun away. "I ought to toss both of you to the wolves," I felt tired as hell, and kind of useless. "I'm too soft-hearted for a guy in my racket. Both of you better get out of town. Tom Hennessey was liked. Both of you better hop the first train out and buy a ticket as long as your dough. Both of you better hop before I change my mind."

Sleeper Morris said, "But I d-didn't know—"

"I don't care," I said. "Tom Hennessey is dead. Both of you better hop."

They both began nodding their heads. I went out and climbed into my car again.

JOHNNY RALLS' Royce Club was just north of town. It was a big, low, wooden building set in the middle of about two acres of graveled parking lot. It was about a hundred feet down a steep road from the highway. The parking lot was empty and forlorn. I drove down to it and stopped.

Farmer Jones had been parked on the highway a few hundred feet away. He picked up my car and trailed me down.

"It took you long enough," he said.

"It's the fog," I said. "When I'm in the fog I take it easy."

There were some lights at the back. Most of the fog had lifted, and it was beginning to shower. I banged on the front door. I waited a while and banged louder. Farmer Jones just waited, standing patiently beside me. My face was hurting.

From behind us a voice said, "You guys want something?"

"Johnny," Farmer said.

"It can wait."

"To hell with you, Tom," Farmer Jones said. "Now."

Tom Smart scratched his chin thoughtfully with the muzzle of his gun. He thought about it for a time. He finally said to me, "No hard feelings, Maxon? Johnny hadda do it."

"I never hold a grudge," I said.

He shrugged. "Okay."

We went around to the back, through a dark kitchen, up some stairs to Johnny Ralls' apartment. Tom Smart walked close behind us.

The apartment was very modern. Firelight gleamed on blond maple furniture, on the chrome and crystal. The rug felt like clipped grass underfoot.

Johnny Ralls and Smith Frane were standing in the middle of the room when we went in. Betsy Clair, who banked roulette for Johnny Ralls, was sitting in a deep chair. She was tall, blonde and willowy. I couldn't blame Howie-Behind-The-Seven for feeling badly when she left him.

She had nice legs. She had a pearl necklace around her throat.

Nobody said anything for a minute.

Farmer Jones spoke suddenly. He spoke to Betsy Clair. He looked angry and he said, "Kindly get my necklace from around your neck."

Johnny Ralls began to scowl. Tom Smart decided he might need his gun, and he held it level. Smith Frane moved with long legs to one corner of the room. Betsy Clair looked surprised.

"Don't get tough," said Johnny Ralls tight-

ly. He stood tense, his nimble hands loose at his side. "She wanted to try it on."

"I'm particular who wears my jewelry," Farmer Jones said. His face was without expression, but his voice was harsh. "I'm buying it back now."

He reached into his pocket, slowly counted out twenty-five grand and placed it on a low glass-topped coffee table. Johnny Ralls looked at it, then away. He didn't pick up the money.

Betsy Clair stood up slowly, her slender figure stiff with anger. Her face was flushed. She tore the necklace from her throat, breaking the clasp, and threw it on the rug at her feet. The pearls were iridescent in the light.

She slipped away, to stand beside Smith Frane in one corner of the room. There was a red welt on the back of her neck where she had torn the necklace loose.

Johnny Ralls touched the necklace with the toe of his shoe. He had small feet. He stepped back two paces.

"Maybe they look better on you than they do on her," he said thinly.

Calmly Farmer Jones picked up the necklace and slid it into his coat pocket. He didn't examine it.

"Let's go, Maxon."

I nodded. "I guess we're not among friends."

"Not now," said Johnny Ralls. He shook his head. "I don't get it. Why does Farmer come in here throwing his weight around?" His grey eyes were puzzled.

Farmer Jones turned at the door. "Coming, Maxon?"

"Wait a minute," I said. "Larceny Lou Ralls was killed tonight. I took a beating because of it. Let's talk about that a while."

Tom Smart flicked his gun at me. "On your way. You know how it was. Johnny hadda do it."

"To hell with it," I said, and walked toward the door. I walked close to Tom Smart. He wasn't expecting it. I got a foot hooked around his ankle and slammed my fist into his jaw.

His eyes crossed and he stumbled backward over my foot. His gun flew out of his hand, landing on the rug close to the door. Farmer Jones stooped to pick it up. While he was still bent over, I got out my .380 Beretta.

"Careful with that gun, Farmer," I said.

He straightened slowly. He was holding the gun loosely at his side. I watched him, but I spoke to Johnny Ralls.

"Maybe you'd like to know why Lou was killed, Johnny."

I could hear him take a breath. "I'm listening."

"Have Tom search Farmer," I said.

Farmer Jones' face was still expressionless—all except his eyes. Little worms of fear be-

gan crawling in them. He swallowed carefully. The knuckles of his hand were white on the gun butt. But he kept the gun pointed at the floor.

"You heard Maxon, Tom," Johnny Ralls said tonelessly.

The bald-headed man stepped toward Farmer Jones. He patted the pockets of Farmer Jones' coat. His hand disappeared in a pocket, came out. He was holding two pearl necklaces.

Johnny Ralls stepped quickly forward, took them, stepped back. He looked down at the twin necklaces. Then he looked up at me. He said, "They look the same."

"One is real—one is phoney." I was guessing carefully. "Valuable necklaces always come that way. The phoney is made of Bohemian glass. It's worth a couple of hundred bucks."

Johnny Ralls still watched me. "Which is which?" he asked softly.

This was the way it had to be. "The phoney has a broken clasp," I told him.

He let both necklaces slide to the rug at his feet. His eyes were hot. "You—" he said to Farmer Jones. "You hocked a phoney necklace with me for twenty-five grand!"

EVERYONE watched Farmer Jones. His face was wet and getting wetter all the time. He swallowed again.

"What do you care now?" he asked Johnny Ralls. "You got your money back."

Johnny Ralls licked his lips. "That still makes you a louse." He nodded uncertainly, his nimble fingers toying with a button on his coat. He looked down at the floor, then turned his grey eyes on me.

"That's why Lou was killed," I said. "After Farmer had hocked the phoney with you, Lou swiped the real necklace. That put Farmer on a spot. He couldn't come to you to square the beef, and he couldn't go to the cops. So he came to me."

"Are you saying he killed Lou?" asked Johnny Ralls.

I said, "Yeah."

Johnny Ralls slowly shook his head. His fingers still tied with the button on his coat. "I don't know." His voice was low. "I was out of the game at ten-thirty."

Smith Frane spoke from the corner of the room. His white hair looked damp.

"Johnny, he went out of the game just after you did. He lost a thousand—remember? He went out to borrow money from Hymie Capp. A little later he came back with a bit over five grand. He got hot and took away the twenty grand Howie-Behind-The-Seven took away from you."

"What time was that?" asked Johnny Ralls.

"I'd say he left about quarter to eleven and got back half an hour later."

"Plenty of time to go down to Hogan's Alley and back," I said.

Farmer Jones said, "No!"

"Search his car," I said. "Maybe you'll find the tire iron he used. Get Hymie Capp on the phone."

The two guns sounded almost together. Johnny Ralls had twitched his coat open and got his gun out and shot an instant after Farmer Jones.

Farmer Jones gargled something and fell forward on his face in front of the door. Johnny Ralls sat down suddenly, his knee-cap shattered. Pain made his face look pinched and old.

Tom Smart snaked forward for the gun, but I stopped him. He licked his lips and retreated. I picked up the gun and put it into my pocket.

I rolled Farmer Jones over. Blood pumped out of his chest. "Howie-Behind-The-Seven rigged—the other," he said. "I—" His body went stiff. There was a faint smile on his face.

Johnny Ralls said through his teeth, "It was self-defense, Maxon. Frane saw it too."

I looked at Betsy Clair. "You used to kind of like Howie, I hear, before you took up with Johnny."

She said, "You—"

"Howie-Behind-The-Seven wanted to get even with Johnny," I said. "So he took Johnny for twenty grand with loaded dice."

I took the dice out of my pocket and rolled them on the rug. I turned to Johnny Ralls.

"You shot him, Johnny. I don't care about

that. But you shot Tom Hennessey too. And I do care about that, because Hennessey wasn't in on the caper. Just Howie-Behind-The-Seven and a couple of smart kids."

Johnny Ralls' face was white. "You can't prove it."

"You just shot Farmer Jones."

"The slugs won't match." He even grinned a little through his pain. "I don't mind telling you now."

"A garage attendant saw you coming down the fire escape."

He shook his red head. "I've got a lawyer who can tangle that guy up until he won't know his own name."

"Not this boy," I said. "He'll hang you. He wants to be a lawyer himself."

Johnny Ralls said thoughtfully, "You know, I think maybe you're right."

He moved fast, bringing up his gun. I drilled him twice in the shoulder before he could fire. He dropped the gun and I scooped it up. I didn't think there were any more guns in the place.

I called the cops. Nobody moved all the time I was at the telephone.

"When you fry, think of my face," I told Johnny Ralls. "Oh, to hell with it. I'm not vindictive—much. You'd better think about Tom Hennessey."

I picked up the two necklaces from the floor and put them in my pocket. Stolen goods can be the property of nobody except the rightful owner. Legally they had never belonged to Farmer Jones.

The insurance company would pay me a fat ten per cent for the return of the Carmichael necklace.

DEAD ON ARRIVAL

Well, look who's back . . . it's MERLE CONSTINER'S super-sleuth, Luther McGavock, as skillful and silent and slick on the trigger as ever. But he's got troubles. It seems everybody else in town is on the prowl too—the mayor, the marshal, all the first citizens—it got so you couldn't even uncover a corpse without someone looking over your shoulder. And just when McGavock was ready to crack the case wide-open, one of the amateur shamuses turned pro, took up his pistol and started sending poor Luther a few business cards—of the .38-caliber variety!

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*I couldn't stand this. I said, aloud,
"I want it over with. . . ."*



**By
James
A.
Kirch**

THIS SIDE OF HADES

*I didn't mind Elaine's killing the
guy—I just didn't want her caught
this side of the hell he went to!*

I TOOK one look at the corner of my living room, then shifted my eyes, fast. "Never saw him before in my life," I lied.

The one who was holding my arm, Lieutenant Shadrack, dug his fingers into the flesh. "Take another look, Mr. Nelson. A good one. We want to be sure."

I turned back slowly. He was sprawled out on the rug, one thin hand touching a leg of the butterfly table. He was about thirty-two, but he looked ten years older. The two holes in his chest, half an inch apart, were like the fang marks of a snake. I went over and looked down at his pinched white face, keeping my right hand pressed hard against my stomach muscles. I studied him for a full minute before I looked up at Shadrack.

"No," I said, steadily. "I never saw him before."

Shadrack said, "All right, Mr. Nelson." He motioned me to sit down and I took the big chair by the window. Elaine's picture smiled at me from the table, and I shifted the chair a little. I kept my eyes on Shadrack.

He was nice about it. He may have had a wife himself and was trying to make it easy for me. They knew I'd been at Allied Pharmaceutical all day and couldn't have had a part in the killing.

"Here's how it was, Mr. Nelson. We got a call from a neighbor who heard the shots. The officer who answered it found this fellow stretched out like that—and this." He picked a package off the side table and unwrapped it. "Recognize it?"

It was Elaine's, all right. I'd bought it for her myself. An imitation pearl-handled twenty-two. She'd said it made her feel safer when I worked late. Safer—that was a hot one.

I said carefully, "My wife was at the hairdresser's all afternoon. She had an appointment for a permanent." I looked at my watch. "She may still be there. Those things take time." I gave them the name. "You can check that."

Shadrack nodded to his assistant and the man lumbered to his feet and went into the hall. I heard him dialing the phone.

"We checked the prints, Mr. Nelson, with the old civilian defense files. They're Mrs. Nelson's."

"Sure," I said. "She handled the gun. It was hers. But she didn't use it to shoot anybody. She wasn't here."

"The man's name," Shadrack was saying, "was Targani. Joseph Targani. That mean anything?"

I shook my head. "Never heard it," I said. My glance hit the table with Elaine's picture. I'd taken it myself, right after the wedding, five years ago. She'd been smiling the way she always smiled, as if she got a kick out of just being alive. I shifted in my chair. "Look, Lieutenant," I said, "Elaine couldn't have been here."

The cop who'd been phoning spoke from the doorway.

"Mrs. Nelson broke her appointment. The beauty parlor put somebody else in her place."

I came halfway out of my chair. "You're crazy," I said. "I phoned and left a message. They said she was having a permanent."

The cop nodded. "That's right," he admitted. "Only the girl hadn't bothered changing the book. The girl who talked to you thought it was Mrs. Nelson having her hair done. When she went to deliver the message, she found out different."

I couldn't believe it, at first. I'd been so sure, so dead sure, she was out of it.

Shadrack said, "We'll check on that girl. Could be Mrs. Nelson had tipped her to tell you she was there, knowing you'd call."

"No," I said. "You're on the wrong track, Lieutenant. My wife didn't play around. She didn't know any other men. She must have caught this fellow robbing the apartment, shot him, and then lost her head." He didn't believe me. I'd known he wouldn't believe me when I said it, but I had to say it. He'd figure it was just dumb loyalty. "You'd better find her," I finished.

"We're trying to," he said, patiently, and then the door to the bedroom opened and Cliff Hunter stood in the entrance.

I said, "Cliff!" but he just stood there, his dark eyes studying me broodingly. His mouth was a thin, tight line, and he held himself stiffly, as if he were afraid of falling apart. So he hadn't gotten over her, even in five years. He'd been also-ran at the wedding, and then dropped out of our lives. But he was with the F.B.I.—he didn't fit in a murder case. I said that.

Lieutenant Shadrack answered for him. "Mr. Hunter was at headquarters when the call came for us. He recognized the name."

Cliff said from the doorway, "We found some money, Sam. Two thousand dollars, hidden in the light fixture in the bedroom. The cone had been taken off, the money stuck inside and the fixture replaced. Is it yours?"

I didn't know what to say. Two thousand is a lot of money. "No," I said cautiously. "Unless Elaine had saved it. She might have done that."

Cliff's eyes widened. "Saved it?" he repeated. He shook his head.

Shadrack said, "This man Targani had a key to your apartment, Mr. Nelson. Fairly new. Your wife must have known him pretty well for that."

He had that on the brain. That Elaine had been playing around with this guy. He'd learn different when they found her. "You'd better find her," I said suddenly. My voice was a little wild, a shade too high. I tried to keep it down. "She's probably hiding someplace, scared stiff. She's lost her head. You'd better find her and let her explain this."

"We'd better find her," Cliff agreed. He crossed the room and picked up Elaine's picture. "Fast," he added. He put the picture back on the table, looking at me. His eyes were haggard. "This fellow Targani probably had friends," he said, slowly. "They'll be looking, too. We have to find her first." He looked at the picture again. "You could find her, Sam," he said, flatly.

"Me?"

"You," he repeated. "You know her. You know what she'd do. You can figure where she'd go, how she'd react. Anyone who knew

her as well as you did could find her." He stood there a minute, staring at me, and then he tugged the brim of his grey hat down over his eyes and went out.

I kept hearing his words after the others had left. . . . *We'd better find her, fast. . . . This fellow Targani had friends. . . .* I sat still for a while, feeling the words needling my brain. Then I shook my head and pushed to my feet. I knew what I had to do, all right. I had to find her myself.

CLIFF had been right about how well I knew her. I'd always, even before we were married, understood Elaine. It wasn't sixth sense, or anything like that. It just happened that she was one person I knew thoroughly. I could always be sure what she'd do in a given situation. I'd never pictured her in a situation like this, but I started to now.

She'd try to drop out of sight. She'd think she could lose herself by becoming a room number. That meant she'd go to a cheap hotel. That could have been wrong, of course, but it fitted Elaine. It was the way her mind would work.

It wasn't wrong. The fourth desk I hit, I placed her writing. A shaky, nervous Joan Black. The kid was trying to be smart.

I drew out my wallet, flipped it open and snapped it shut, fast. "Room Seven Thirty-Two," I said to the room clerk. "I'm going through it." He hadn't even looked at the wallet. He was a half-witted young kid, who would never get to know the score. But he was a little doubtful. He couldn't make up what mind he had. I made it up for him. "You can send a bellhop along," I told him. "We think Miss Black is someone we're looking for. I'll just check the room."

"We?" He made a question of the word.

"Missing persons," I told him.

He said, "We don't have a boy, officer." He took a key from below the register and came out from behind the desk. He stayed with me, all the way, right on my heels. But it didn't matter. The minute we stepped inside, I knew Elaine had gone. The room key lay in the middle of the bed. That was a habit of hers, even when she checked out.

So she was gone. But she'd been there. It was in the air, filling the room. The scent of gardenias—her perfume.

I found the ribbon string in the wastebasket in the first five minutes. That's all I found, at first. I almost missed the big thing. The ribbon said Swap Shop, with an address printed in gilt. She'd bought something at the Swap Shop, unwrapped it, and then maybe wrapped it again. Or used it, maybe, and wrapped something else. She never could be bothered tying packages. I dropped the string in my pocket and started for the door.

That's when I noticed the rest of it. A white slip of paper, crumpled up, near the door, with a piece of Kraft paper near it. A receipt, the kind some storekeepers still give.

One knife—forty cents.

I could see her doing it. I could see her in some dingy shop, picking it out, while cold shivers ran down her back. I could see her throwing the money on the counter and scurrying like a scared rabbit back to her room. I could see her ripping the paper from the knife and staring at the blade in horror, before she jammed it deep in her handbag. I could see that, and figure that, but I couldn't figure the rest of it. I could only stand there and sweat.

I couldn't figure at all whether she'd use it. . . .

The Swap Shop was a dive—a crummy little joint that sold second hand clothing, run by a man with a worn-out face and nervous, quick-moving hands. "A young lady," he repeated. "A blonde girl, with a grey coat and green hat." He nodded slowly. "So maybe she did buy some clothes."

I laid a dollar bill on the counter and waited. The bill stuck to my damp fingers and I shook it off nervously. I wanted to be moving, to follow this thing through. The knife had me worried.

The clerk's eyes flickered and he pointed his face toward the flyspecked ceiling, thinking. "A navy blue coat. A dark red dress. A red hat. That's all she bought." His hand was still rubbing the dollar like velvet when I left.

It took someone who knew her. She'd changed in the hotel. That meant she'd slip out the back way in her new outfit. I cut through the hotel lobby, out the rear entrance. The alley flowed into a broad, well-lighted street, with a hack stand on the corner. Elaine was accustomed to cabs. If she felt safe enough, she'd hired one.

I tackled the cabbies.

The third one made her. "A blonde kid in a red and blue outfit. Sure, I remember. A nifty number."

I climbed in his taxi. "Double fare," I told him. "Drop me at the same place."

It was too slow. The whole thing was too slow, like a methodical balancing of books. Books for the dead. I sat back in the cab, pressing my hands to my head. That hot, pricking pain was crawling under my scalp again. When I thought of someone else finding her first, it burned like hot needles. I sat there, pressing my hand to my head, trying to cool it, until the cabbie said, "This is it, mac." I jerked myself out to the sidewalk.

The place was too swanky. She'd never have gone in, the way she was dressed. She was outfitted for a dive. I looked down the block and found what I wanted—a fourth rate

hotel. Rooms a dollar a night. A hole for a rabbit.

Even if I hadn't known the shaky, scrawled handwriting, I'd have placed her by the name—Clara White. That would be Elaine, still trying to be smart. She'd used Black the last time. She was trying so hard. But she'd never known how.

This room clerk was no half-witted kid. He had a sharp, thin face, like a tired weasel. I drew a bill out of my wallet. "Miss White asked me to wait in her room." I tried to say it casually, but the words clawed at my throat.

His eyes stirred. "That's out of order," he said. "A thing like that is against the rules."

That was a laugh. In a hotel like his it was probably a habit. I laid the five dollar bill on the desk and stood there, waiting for the key.

I got it. And I was too late.

The room was still sweet with the needling scent of gardenias. But the key was in the middle of the bed. Elaine had cleared out. I'd missed her.

My hands were cold. My hands were cold and these hot needles pricked at my brain. The key laughed at me from the middle of the bed. She was gone.

She still had the knife. She still had the knife, and she was scared, too scared. She was worse than a rabbit. She couldn't even stay in the hole. She had to keep moving. She was bound to run into a trap.

I looked out the window into the street, resting one hand on the side. My wet palm hit something cold. A sashweight. A lead sashweight they used in old windows. I unhooked it, fondling it in my hands. I hefted it once, and then dropped it in my pocket. It stuck out at the edge. I shifted my wallet to my hip and put the weight in my inside pocket. I could feel my heart pounding my ribs against it.

A sashweight and a knife. Two scared rabbits. But I'd find her—I had to find her. And then it would be all right.

When I left I opened the window, to let the fresh air wash out the gardenias.

The room clerk stopped me on the way past the desk. "You gave it up, too?" he asked.

Too. He said *too.* That meant there'd been someone else. My heart pounded the sashweight. "Somebody else," I said. "Somebody else was waiting?"

His weasel mouth grinned. He didn't say anything; just twisted his mouth to a grin.

I brought out a bill. "What did he look like?" I asked. I tried to keep my voice quiet. It was hard, but I tried. I couldn't let myself go.

His eyes went blank. "I wouldn't know," he said. "Maybe like you; maybe like me. I got a bad memory for faces." He meant it. He wasn't going to talk.

It was close. He never even knew it, but it was close. I had my hand on the sashweight before the needles stopped pricking my brain, and I remembered.

I couldn't get jammed now. If they were close to her trail, I couldn't jam myself. I had to find Elaine. I left the bill on the desk and spoke slowly, so I wouldn't choke on the words. "Did you notice her? Did you notice anything she did before she went out?"

His eyes hit the bill, then came back to mine. He jerked his head toward the rear. "Telephone," he said, shortly. "She went back to telephone."

That didn't make sense. There wasn't anyone she'd call. As scared as she was, she wouldn't dare call. I said, "Telephone?" and then it hit me. She was hunting a new hole. With the pack in full cry behind her.

Habit. That's how you catch people. That's what Cliff Hunter had meant.

She always broke bindings. Whenever Elaine opened a book, she bent it back, snapping the binding. When I picked up the *Red-book*, it fell open right where I wanted it.

Furnished rooms.

She'd marked it. Habit, again. She'd run her nail under the address, like she always did, leaving a crease, so she could copy it. Mrs. Murphy's—Rooms by The Week.


I could see her mind working. Miss Jones,

BRIGHT STAR










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in a furnished room. A little girl from the country, job hunting in the big city. She'd think that was a perfect disguise. I snapped the book shut and left the hotel.

The sashweight was like a live bomb in my pocket.

Mrs. Murphy's looked like the ad had sounded. A dirty brownstone building, with dirty stone steps leading to the door. The card I wanted said, Miss Smith, 3rd Floor Front. I could picture her arguing with the landlady, saying she didn't want her name on the door. Mrs. Murphy must have eyed her mistrustfully, and she weakened, letting the landlady write the card for her. She'd have been praying that, in a strange handwriting, it couldn't make any difference. But Miss Smith! She'd pick one like that. And it was the only new, clean card in the doorway.

I didn't ring for the landlady. I went up the stairs slowly and carefully, bracing myself on the bannister. I had to be quiet. If this thing went wrong, I had to be quiet. If she was out, I could sit down and wait. But I didn't want to wait. I wanted it over. The needles were burning my brain.

I didn't have to wait.

SHE was crouched at the head of the bed, her blond hair spilling out over her shoulders. Her purse was near her left hand, under the cheap red hat.

"Sam," she said. "Sam." Her voice was a whisper.

It was all right. I'd found her. The uncertainty and fear that had been hounding me were gone. I'd found her. Everything was all right. The hot, searing pain still crawled under my scalp, but I was calm now and sure of myself.

I smiled at her. "You shouldn't have run," I said, softly. "Running was foolish. There's no sense, running, ever."

She crouched further back on the bed. "Sam," she said. "Sam." Her hand moved toward the purse.

That's when I remembered the knife.

I took a step forward, kicking the door closed behind me. I raised my left hand, sliding it under my coat. The sashweight was like a hot coal.

"It's all right, Elaine," I said, softly.

Her hand clawed at the bag, tearing it open. I had to be careful.

"Where are they, Elaine?" I asked her. "He didn't have them on him. The police would have known. So you must have them. Give them to me, Elaine. I want them."

She threw the purse, with a helpless, jerky motion. It struck the iron bedstead, then thudded to the floor. The little white packages spilled out over the rug. One of them burst, and some of the powder was lost. She shouldn't

have done that. I told her she shouldn't have done that. "You should have stayed out of it, anyhow," I told her. "You were supposed to be at the hairdresser's."

Her voice was funny. I guess she was close to the edge and having trouble with her thoughts.

She said, "He thought I was in with you. He thought I knew all about it. He just walked in and unscrewed the light fixture and took those things out and stuck something inside. He did that, while I stood there watching him, trying to stop him. He acted sort of strange, as though we were old friends, as though this was something we'd planned together. And he was half-crazy. It was awful. When I got the gun and told him he'd have to put everything back, he screamed at me."

"You should have left him alone," I told her. "He'd have been all right, if you'd left him alone." I moved forward a little, keeping my eyes on the floor, as though I were going to pick up the papers. It took me nearer the bed.

"He grabbed the fireplace poker and came at me," she said. Her voice still had that unbelieving, sing-song tone to it. "His eyes were wild and he had the poker raised. I pulled the trigger twice before he stopped coming. I had to stop him. That wasn't murder."

Murder. She was worried about murder. She didn't have to worry about that. She didn't have to worry about anything. Now that I'd found her, she could stop worrying. Everything was over.

"Dope," she said. "Oh, Sam—*dope!*" She said it as though it were a terrible word.

"What do you know about it?" I said. "Maybe he needed it. Maybe a lot of guys need it. And I can get it from the company. So what do you know about it? Do you know what it's like when you need it?" I looked up at her. She moved her right hand a little and I saw the knife. It must have been in the bag, and she'd held onto it when she'd thrown the purse at me.

So she had a knife. Just like I'd thought, a knife and a sashweight. And the sashweight would break her arm and keep on going, and that would be all of it. I wanted it over. I wanted to be done with it. The sashweight was burning my hand and my breath came in short, quick gasps. I couldn't stand this. I couldn't have it this way. I said, aloud, "I want it over with." My hand came out of my pocket. Her lips trembled and her mouth opened wide, but no sound came out. Her fingers tensed on the knife and then the terror caught up with her and her eyes went wild and her body stiffened. Her hands went up in front of her face, shielding it, and the knife fell to the floor. I took a step forward, raising my arm. This was the end.

The hoarse voice behind me said, "Sam!" I didn't move. I didn't even turn. I knew who it was. But it couldn't be. He couldn't have found her. He could never have found her.

Cliff Hunter said, "Sam, you were careless. You've always been careless. Telling me Elaine hid money in the light fixture—if I hadn't known her, I might have believed it. But she won't even change a bulb. She's afraid of a shock."

I didn't say a word. I had the sashweight raised, ready to use, but I didn't make a move. My arms were like icicles.

"And the key, Sam," he said. "The one you mailed Targani. We found out where you had it made. It was as simple as that."

I couldn't think. That was the trouble. Something was wrong. It was Cliff Hunter behind me, but he couldn't have found her. I heard my voice make words of it. "You couldn't have found her," I said.

He laughed. He could laugh, after what had happened. Everything had gone wrong, and he could stand behind me and laugh.

"You found her, Sam. You always did know her better than I did. You were always

able to figure what she'd do next, or what she'd like. You knew Elaine, Sam. And I knew you. You left a trail all over town. At the last place, I even had the clerk say I'd been there first, so you wouldn't know we were following you. I wanted you to find her, Sam, because we didn't know who else might be in it, and I had to be sure she was safe before we made an arrest. So I let you find her, Sam."

That's when I turned. Right when he was talking, just as he finished a word, I turned, heaving the sashweight.

I don't know where it landed. I felt a sledgehammer pound into my shoulder before I heard the report of the gun, and it was over. It was the end.

Only, I don't know. It doesn't seem to be over. I have to keep trying to think, and this black pain keeps hitting me when I try. And I have to think. My lawyer wants me to make a decision. He wants me to plead insanity. And I don't know. I'm smart, all right, but so are the doctors. They might see through it. I might not be able to fool them. It's hard to figure, but it's something I have to decide. And I don't know at all. I just don't know.

MAIL ORDER MURDER

DR. TOURNATOIRE, physician in a town in the south of France one day received a hamper of game. There was no sender's name attached but he presumed some grateful patient had remembered him. The game was cooked for lunch next day. The doctor was out on a case, but his wife and the cook had some of the game. The result was strange. Both women suffered pains, partial blindness, felt mad rage. Dr. Tournatoire, summoned, gave remedies which saved lives of both. He analysed and found the game impregnated with a vegetable poison.

His suspicions at once fell on another physician Dr. Eustachy, and the subsequent investigation confirmed them.

The game had been a prize Dr. Eustachy had won in a lottery. The atropine paste used had been obtained from the local druggist. Charged with the attempt at murder Eustachy finally acknowledged it. Only, he said, it had been meant as a practical joke. This grim jester was set to trial and given eight years in prison.

Quite a few other methods of Mail order

Murder have been employed. In 1904, Mademoiselle Leoine de Vinol, a well known vaudeville actress in Paris received a valentine. This was a most fancy box tied up with satin ribbon. She anticipated that it contained bonbons and perhaps a piece of jewelry from one of her admirers, and gaily opened it. But as she did so a deadly puff adder reared its head and struck at her neck. Startled she dodged and in her terror leapt out of the window, injuring herself so severely that for a year she could not appear on the stage. It was discovered that a jealous wife was back of the attempted crime.

Not long ago in India, post office officials held up a package in which something was moving and notified the sender that live animals could not be sent through the mails. The sender did not appear, so the package was opened. It contained two lively cobras. Police went after the sender, and he naively admitted that he was one of several heirs to a piece of land—and had already disposed of one of the other heirs by a cobra package, and had hoped to get as good results with the one held up!

Robert W. Sneddon



Alive, Sammy Yale was my business—and I wanted to keep him that way, which was tough enough even before his pet canary cold-shouldered me into murderer's row!



CHAPTER ONE

Minus One

THE desert city of Nero—population 73,301—is a town where every other store on the main drag is a gambling joint, every other dame is getting a divorce, and there are more apparently unemployed ladies to the square block than anywhere I've been—and that includes Naples and the American sector of Berlin. And it's all legal.

I had Nero right up to here when I got off the plane at Burbank. For a lot of reasons, but mostly because that pop. 73,301 was

Death LIVES HERE!



By
**Andrew
Holt**

now pop. 73,300 and no detective likes to see a pal get it and not be able to even the score.

On my own, I had been checking into the unsolved shooting of my friend, Ira Reuben, when the agency called me back to Los Angeles and a new client named Thaddeus Browning. In L. A., when I got back to the enlarged closet I whimsically call my apartment, there was a message from the agency to contact Mr. Browning immediately at a firm called Developments, Ltd.

We always make it a practice to check backgrounds of new clients, so I dialed the

The man who lay across the bed was the man who had stepped on my toe in the bar. . . .



agency and listened while our research girl filled in for me.

Browning's company, it turned out, was an outfit that would buy a mountain top or a lake outside a big city, tie up with a newspaper, throw in sewers and jerry-built houses and keep promoting, until every poor slob who wanted to get away from his neighbor in the city was living next to the same guy on the mountain top. In eighteen years, Browning's net has been just under fifteen million. Well, it was a living.

Browning proved to be a clotheshorse in his early fifties with a Hoover collar, Sulka tie and the warmth and humanity of a bank entrance. He wore the cleanest pair of black shoes I had ever seen and when I walked in he was shining them with a spotless white flannel rag. He kept on shining them as we talked.

"I understand you've just flown down from Nero?"

I nodded.

"Did you find out who killed Ira Reuben?" he asked.

It threw me and I didn't try to hide it from him. Nobody, not even the agency, knew I had been spending my vacation looking for the guy who had plugged Ira.

Browning started to smile at the surprised look on my face and then noticed my shoes. They weren't dirty but they weren't clean either. His face stiffened. He pushed a buzzer and an old Italian popped in carrying a shoe-shine box. Browning pointed at my feet.

"You don't mind, Mr. Reed? It's a fetish of mine."

I shrugged. Pontius Pilate washed his hands; this baby polished his boots, probably to get rid of the mud from the marshes he'd palmed off as homesites.

I asked him how he knew I'd been digging into the Reuben case. He parried with a question. Had I any idea of the gambling take at Nero? I had but I let him tell me.

"Two million net a year," he confided. "Two cents on every dollar that drops into a wheel or crosses a crap table." He brought his hand down on the table so hard that the fountain pens jumped. "Do you know who gets that money?"

"Sure," I said. "Sammy Yale."

The shine man tapped my foot. I gave him the other one. Browning pointed a finger at me.

"Sammy Yale is the biggest racketeer in the United States today. He makes Capone at his best look like a second story man. He has Nero and the whole state sewed up right to the governor."

He lit the cigar I had declined. His next words floated out on his first draw.

"I have a plan for Nero, Mr. Reed. I want to make it the garden spot of the West. Irrigation laid in on a scale no one has ever dreamed of. An inland city the size of Los Angeles in the desert—the air capital of the world. A home for new Americans—the Americans of the second half of the twentieth century. A land flowing with milk and honey—"

I grinned. "And gambling?"

He stared at me. "Try to get some perspective into your thinking, Mr. Reed. Gambling is a crook's racket. This is real estate development—not a crooked two cents on every dollar, but an honest fifty cents."

"Sorry," I apologized. "As a kid, I guess, I used to shoot pool when I should have been at the Chamber of Commerce meetings."

The shine man finished with me and went to work on Browning's shoes.

"The point is, Mr. Reed, that I sent Ira Reuben up there to do an article that would blow the lid off Nero."

Surprise number two. I hadn't known what Ira was doing in Nero. This one I didn't let him see. I looked wise.

"And something blew the lid off Ira. Did he know the whole set-up?"

"Of course," Browning answered. "He was the type of reporter who could see the grandeur of an advanced social plan like this. That's why I picked him."

I stood up.

"Well, I'll tell you, Mr. Browning. I liked Ira. Ira was what the trade calls a liberal—he was always looking for an advanced social

plan and always buying the first graft anybody who talked in five syllable words would offer him." I bowed slightly. "Present company excepted, of course."

Browning stood up, too.

"Let's stop beating around the bush. Sammy Yale knows he's through if Developments, Limited, gets a wedge into Nero. He killed Ira, or had him killed as a warning to me. How much would it take for you to go back to Nero and prove that?"

I told him. It was three times what we generally asked. He agreed. The shine man picked up his box and left. Browning leaned forward.

"Now that I'm your client can you tell me what you've found out so far?"

I took the slug they'd dug out of Ira's brain and rolled it across the desk. For such a small piece of lead, it had a surprising effect on Browning. He stared at it for fully a minute. Finally he picked it up.

"Where did you get this? I thought the police were part of Yale's—"

"They are," I interrupted. "But you can buy anything in Nero."

He saw me to the door.

"Buy me Sammy Yale's neck in a noose. If you do, I'll sign a check and you can fill in the amount."

After the door had closed, I pretended to the secretary outside that I'd forgotten something and opened it a crack. He was rubbing furiously at his newly-shined shoes.

NERO was still hotter than Los Angeles at noon when I got back. Hotter and more crowded. I couldn't find a room anyplace so I looked for a drink.

At the bar of the last hostelry I tackled there was a bathtub-size Tom Collins. Sipping it wearily, I could see Nero petering out into the desert on my left, and on my right, a blonde. The only thought that came to me about the desert was how I was going to feel sleeping in it if I didn't find a room, so I turned to the blonde.

She wore it long like Veronica Lake used to wear it, only without the English sheepdog effect over the eyes. On the bar, she had one of those handbag radios playing jazz—not a slick arrangement rehearsed to sound like the boys jamming, but real, honest-to-goodness, Eddie Condon type jazz. She tapped the bakelite case with a long fingernail.

"You like that, Rabbit?"

Well, I wasn't *that* weary. I said, "I like it, but what is it doing off Fifty-Second Street?"

I seemed to be a great disappointment to her.

"Bunny, that's Dickie Thompson. Didn't you know he was here?"

I had to admit I didn't. She took my arm. "Why, Bunny, we'll just have to go right downtown and hear him."

I shook my head.

"A, I wouldn't go with you to hear Gabriel blow the final note until I find out where I'm going to sleep tonight, and, B, you'd better call me Lynn until I find out whether this rabbit business is whimsy or clairvoyance."

She grinned mischievously. "I was thinking of your ears."

My hand instinctively went to my head. Come to think of it, they are kind of big. I pointed at her drink.

"You holding a lot of that?"

She shook her head. "No. I'm just miserable and you look like home folks. You do come from New York, don't you?"

I come from L. A. but I said yes, anyway. She sighed.

"After you leave New York, every other town looks like Bridgeport, Connecticut."

She stuck out her hand and shook mine in a way that told me that, in spite of the way she sounded, she was going to be a sister to me.

"My name is Virginia Stoddard, Rabbit, and—"

She didn't finish the rest of it because somebody walking by stepped hard on my toe and I let out a yelp. The man had big feet, big black and white shoes, and a head shaped more like a cantaloupe than seemed possible.

At the end of the bar, he turned to face me.

"Don't you say excuse me," I suggested. "Or was that deliberate?"

"Drop dead," he told me, staring at me levelly.

We met halfway down the bar, I feeling childish, the way you always feel when something like this starts, but fruithead just getting belligerent. For some insane reason, I wanted to put a swizzle stick on my shoulder and dare him to knock it off. Instead I came close to him, watching his hands.

"Well, do I get an apology?"

He laughed in my face. The bartender stuck his two cents in.

"If you two guys want to do any slugging, do it outside. We don't want no trouble."

Fruithead let one go at my stomach while he thought I was watching the bartender. I wasn't. I caught his wrist, gave it all I had and wrenched it up between his shoulder blades. I was pushing him toward the side door at the end of the bar when the blonde grabbed me.

"Don't go out there!" She was very pale.

I nodded over my shoulder at the other barflies staring at us.

"You don't want me to scatter him around in here, do you?"

Fruithead cursed, not very fluently, and

tried to break away. A little pressure slowed him down.

"Please don't go outside," she said and hung onto my arm.

That was all it needed. One of his big feet caught my shin and I lost track of his arm until I saw it sticking into my stomach.

I gave him the elbow and knee treatment which is a nice trick when you don't have any breath left. Fortunately, it took. He slept like a baby with the back of his head resting on the bar rail. The bartender surveyed the scene.

"Beautiful," he commented. "Beautiful."

I looked past him into the mirror and saw that the girl wasn't there.

"Who was the blonde?"

"Never saw her before in my life," he lied.

Two bar boys came around and pulled Fruithead to his feet. He groaned. Well, he was alive, anyway.

Almost into the lobby, I suddenly decided I was either going to have to eat or be sick to my stomach. Eating is more fun, although not much these days, so I walked into the dining room.

ONE of Thaddeus Browning's five dollar bills promoted me past the inevitable line to a captain, who led me to a table for three. When he brought the menu, it was, "Do you mind, sir, if another single diner shares your table?"

I wanted to say that for five bucks I should at least get privacy, but didn't.

The guy he had in tow was one of those solid citizens you see behind the wheel in the low-priced car ads, or in his shirt sleeves on a Sunday night, smacking his lips on a beer poster. He wore a Masonic pin.

"My line's drugs, neighbor. Wendell's the name. Tom Wendell." He plumped into his seat. "Mighty white of you, Mister—"

"Reed," I said.

I couldn't very well tell him that my line was plain and fancy crime and currently homicide, so I stopped there.

"Mighty white of you, Mr. Reed, to give me a seat."

I nodded. I have diligently listened to parlor car conversation for years, trying to find out what to say to people like Mr. Wendell but never with any luck. Fortunately he did all the talking.

"Now, if these people in Washington would only realize—" Or, "The little woman often says to me, Tom, she says—" Or again, "Don't get me wrong. I believe the working man has his rights, but—"

By the time we got to the varnished apple pie indigenous to the West, we were on the subject of housing.

"Well, why didn't you say so?" he bel-

lowed jovially when I told him my troubles. "I'll just go and tell the desk clerk you're a friend of mine."

In the lobby, he nudged me as we waited for the clerk.

"I've been traveling this territory for years. Do anything for me."

Apparently they would, because I got a key and a bellboy and then, miraculously, a room—or rather, an apartment. It was two rooms and a kitchen with a separate service entrance and it cost twenty-five dollars a day, but I was willing to call it home.

The bellboy got me ice. I fixed a drink with some Black Label I had managed to swindle in L. A. and I was just getting out of the shower when the bell rang. It was Wendell at the service entrance.

"Some of the boys are getting up a poker game in my place down the hall and I wondered—"

He'd been so nice I hated to refuse him, but I was really bushed and it looked like a long, hard winter.

"I was just going to bed," I apologized. "Why don't you come in and have a drink instead?"

No, he couldn't do that. They were waiting for him, but he wished I'd reconsider. One of his friends was in lingerie and another handled dry goods and notions and none of them had ever met a detective before.

That softened me up, so I pulled my coat off the chair in the living room, combed my hair and knocked on the door of his room. It opened and the two other salesmen rose to their feet.

I was busy acknowledging introductions when it suddenly occurred to me that I had deliberately not told Wendell I was a detective. I couldn't imagine how he knew and, remembering how Ira Reuben had looked on the slab, I wasn't going to hang around waiting to find out.

"Excuse me," I said. "I forgot my glasses."

The lingerie salesman looked questioningly at Mr. Wendell. The question might have been, *Have we got any clean cards?* Or then again it might have been, *Shall I let him have it now, before he gets away?*

In either case the answer seemed to be negative because the notion man started to shuffle a dirty deck and I found myself outside in the hall.

I had loosed the .380 automatic I carry nose-down in a chamois built into my jacket, and taken a dozen steps toward my room when I heard, "Bunny!" from the end of the corridor. She seized my hand.

"Did they hurt you?"

"No," I said. "I couldn't play cards without my glasses and they let me go."

She looked wide-eyed at me.

"They wanted to play cards? Outside? In the alley? But they were going to beat you up."

My eyes wandered to Mr. Wendell's room and then back to her. She misunderstood my confusion.

"Look," she said, "I tried to stop you from going outside when it really came to the point. I'm not a very nice girl but I couldn't finger you like that."

"Who wanted you to finger me?"

She smiled. "I've done my good turn for today. Sorry."

I took her arm. "I'm down the hall. We'll have a drink and I'll work on your better nature."

She laughed. "That isn't what I saved you for. Besides, I think it would be smart to check out of here."

I looked at Wendell's door and decided she was right. She pulled me toward the elevator.

"Come on, Rabbit. The car's right in front of the entrance and where I'm taking you there are about two thousand people. You'll be safe."

I went with her. You think that was foolish? Well, if I had any brains, I'd be in lingerie or notions instead of being a cop.

Besides, I'd started to figure maybe she didn't have to be my sister, after all.

CHAPTER TWO

Picture—With Frame

DESERTLAND had been the main hangar of the Nero Army Air Base during the war. It was now a ballroom of a size that made Roseland in New York or Meadowbrook in Culver City look like night club dance floors. There were two thousand people in it, all right, but I still didn't feel safe. I told her that as we slipped on to the dance floor. She laughed.

"Relax. Live for the moment."

I never liked the juxtaposition of the words live and moment in that phrase. I like to think of living in terms of years. I told her that, too.

She answered by pointing at the bandstand. "Dickie Thompson. Listen to that horn."

I nodded at Dickie over her shoulder—he had done the agency a lot of favors on Central Avenue and in Harlem. He waved; it made him cut a note short. He was so good that even his fluffs had authority. We were past the bandstand now and she had her cheek against mine.

"Virginia," I said, with my lips against her ear, "let's stop playing games. Tell me what gives."

She put her lips to my ear.

"Nothing gives. I was supposed to finger

you and I didn't because you were too pretty. We'll knock about for a few hours and then you'll blow town."

I suppose to anybody who was watching it looked like a lovers' conversation.

"In a pig's eye I will," I said romantically.

"We'll talk about it later," she sighed. "Just hold me closer."

"If I was any closer," I cracked, "I'd be behind you."

She put her head on my shoulder and did not see the colored boy who came up in back of her and slipped a note into my hand. I put both arms around her and danced on a dime so I could read it. It said:

Lynn, just in case you don't know it, that's Sammy Yale's girl. You might as well be dancing with a hand greade.

I crumpled the note in my hand and nodded at Dickie Thompson. From here on the play would be pretty obvious. We'd drive to her house and then she'd say, "Come on upstairs for a nightcap."

I'd say, "Don't mind if I do," or something equally bright and, leading with my libido, I'd walk right into it. And before you could say Sammy Yale, I'd be asking Ira Reuben how it happened—personally.

I grinned. After I gave her the brush, she was going to feel like the sirens must have felt when Ulysses rowed past the rocks.

Of course, the best plans of mice and men are liable to get fouled up or whatever the saying is. I drove up to her Spanish-looking hotel. She seemed bored, said something vague about having a nice time, pecked at my cheek like a Sigma Phi girl on her first date and blew.

No nightcap. No, *Come upstairs, I'll give you candy*. . . . And no guns. I felt like Ulysses would have felt if the sirens had stopped singing and looked the other way.

I GOT over it five seconds after I switched on the light in my room. The sirens had been singing all right, but I'd never known when I hit the rocks.

The man who lay across the bed was the man who had stepped on my toe in the bar. I recognized the blue gabardine suit and the black and white shoes.

He was also dead. There was a single hole in the center of his chest and a lot of blood.

I had my hand on the phone, because I've seen too many movies about what happens to private detectives who neglect to inform the police about a small murder in the boudoir—I had my hand on the phone when all the cops in the world came through both doors, brandishing artillery.

Their leader—he was obviously their leader because he came in behind them—pulled back his white linen jacket and glinted a badge at me. I reached forward, lifted it, and looked at the name engraved on the back.

"Lieutenant Brady," I said, jerking my head toward the bed, "there must be some law against people leaving their old corpses lying around."

He laughed with the warm spontaneity of a salesman laughing at a buyer's joke and stuck out a well-padded hand.

"Just what we have in mind, Reed. Let's see your gun."

Six trigger fingers tightened dramatically on six Police Specials and I handed him the Colt, butt first.

I was going to make sure he knew it wasn't going to be easy as it looked.

"What do you do in this town," I asked, indicating the cops, "Hire them off the street whenever you have to make a pinch?"

He reached forward and gave me the back of his big fingers. I saw it coming and rolled back but I took enough of it to make me remember him. He sniffed at the gun.

"When did you fire this last?"

"Three months ago—at a guy who was too free with his hands."

He smiled slowly for the first time. "Funny thing. It still smells."

"Cordite," I minced. "The Chanel of gun-powders. It lingers."

He charged it, picked up the shell that jumped out and looked down the barrel.

"There's no oil left in the barrel," he said dryly.

I shrugged. "I was always a careless boy. Never put away my dirty shirts, always leaving my old socks—"

I stopped because he had noticed something showing under the bed and had picked it up. It was an ejected .380 cartridge, and he had a smug look I didn't like.

"Don't get any ideas. That got under the bed the same way the stiff got on top of it."

He pulled his lips back from his yellow teeth again. "Nervous?"

My .380 was held carelessly in his left hand. I heard the shot before I realized he'd fired deliberately into the bedding and I jumped the way any sane man jumps at an unexpected shot. The cops hadn't expected it either—they fell all over themselves looking casual. He raised his eyebrows.

"Not nervous, eh?"

The cartridge had kicked across the room. He found it and held it to the light in his big mitt, comparing it with the first one.

I wasn't worried—matching hammer marks are as rare between guns as matching ignition keys are between cars. He got on the phone.

"Devers? I'm sending a Colt automatic in to you and a stiff. More than likely the slug in him will match the barrel."

He tossed the gun to one of the cops. I felt relieved. The barrel test would be on the level. Devers was practically honest—he hadn't shaken me down for too much when he sold me the slug that had killed Ira Reuben.

The cop who held my gun opened the door.

"Let's go," Brady said.

"Listen," I told him. "If you want me to go any place, you're going to have to carry me. I can go along with a gag just so far."

So they carried me.

THE detention cell in the Nero City jail was less primitive than its police methods. Three tiers of green metal bunks with the conventional grey blankets and a naked-looking washbowl in the center of the concrete floor.

There was a crap game going on next door and it must have been honest because a sepia colored hand kept rolling for me and passing me bills around the cage. I couldn't see the rest of him and I wished I had, because the way he played must have been a thing of beauty and a joy forever.

I wasn't too worried. Sammy Yale had sent a girl after me to get my teeth kicked in. She'd gone soft and I still had my teeth. Then parties unknown had planted a goon I'd beefed with in a public place in my room and had been stupid enough to suppose that would tag me.

Almost certainly the goon had been bumped for some irrelevant reason and giving him to me had been an afterthought. If not, and he'd been drilled especially for this occasion, they were crazy enough to do anything and the smartest thing for me to do would be to stay in my cell indefinitely, shoot craps, and forget about Ira Reuben and Thaddeus Browning.

Still it was funny. Nobody gets to be as big as Sammy Yale if they're that crazy.

Towards morning a screw opened the cage and took me out of the jail and next door to the municipal building. An Assistant D.A. was in Lieutenant Brady's office—a small, bug-eyed man who gave the impression of being humpbacked, but wasn't—and the lieutenant himself.

My gun was on his desk with a tag on it and two glossies, one of the barrel and one of the slug they'd dug out of the goon—at least, that's what the labels said.

I picked them up and danced my eyes between the riflings and scratches in the barrel and the marks on the slugs. They matched and, unless the Nero police department was giving me a really fancy one, that meant that the goon had been bumped with my gun. Which was impossible.

Brady took the pictures back with a commendable lack of gloating at the unhappy look on my face.

"Let's get it over, Reed. He wasn't exactly a Phi Beta Kappa man. You can plead self-defense. There's a mike on the desk."

I picked up the ball mike he shoved at me, looked at it carefully and then looked at the D.A.

"You know," I said, "you don't see enough movies. Your line at this point should be 'It's my duty and so forth to tell you that anything you say may be used and et cetera.'"

I was thinking a lot faster than I was talking. If I could buy a slug from Dever's crim lab, there was no reason why he wouldn't fake evidence for his bosses. It couldn't have been done any other way, unless whoever shot the goon had switched barrels on me and the barrel the lieutenant had taken from my gun was, therefore, actually the murder barrel.

But that was impossible, because I'd worn my gun or had my eye on it all the time, except for the minutes I'd spent talking to the drug salesman at the door of my room.

I stopped talking to the D.A. in the middle of a sentence because I suddenly had a picture of a guy sneaking into the room through the front door and switching barrels on me while Wendell kept me busy at the service door. It was crazy and I'd never seen it done before, but it was just crazy enough to work.

Brady prodded me. "You want to make a statement or don't you? The self-defense angle will sound a lot better in court if we don't have to sweat it out of you."

My hand slipped down to the wire that held the mike and I swung it gently back and forth. The sinking sensation in my chest told me I was in this as deep as a guy can get.

I'd beefed with the goon in the bar and the slug in him matched my gun. Motive and murder weapon. I was right where Sammy Yale wanted me to be.

I started to talk into the mike—dates, times, and circumstances. Nothing incriminating. The little D.A. looked impatient, Brady bored. Across the room, the screw watched respectfully. I moved the mike into my left hand and slid my right down the wire.

"... so, after I left the bar, I went upstairs to my room and got under the shower—"

I snapped the wire sharply and twirled it. The mike arched and then smashed heavily against Brady's temple. He sagged. Under his armpits, my hands ripped at his coat.

The screw was slow or maybe just smart. By the time he had his gun out, he was covered by the one I'd pulled from Brady's shoulder holster. The D.A. stepped calmly out of the way and stood next to the desk.

"Don't be a fool," he said. "Where do you

think you're going after you're out of here. In-to the desert?"

I sat back on the desk, so that Brady lolled lovingly against me. The screw looked undecided but he hadn't let go of his gun.

"Don't," I said, "unless you want the slug to go through your boss first."

The screw lowered his gun.

"Put it back," I barked. "In the holster. And let's see your manacles."

As he went for them, the corner of my eye caught the D.A.'s hand sliding into the desk drawer. When it was well inside, I used my foot and the drawer closed on his wrist. He gasped and his pinched little face whitened.

Brady slipped to the floor as I made the D.A. my shield. The screw, like a smart boy, pretended to be busy with his manacles. The D.A. looked venomously at him. I pointed with the gun.

"On the left one, sonny."

He clicked a cuff shut on his own left wrist. I walked across the room to him with the D.A.'s feet clean off the floor and his bald head bobbing under my chin. When I had the screw's other cuff in my hand, I tapped the D.A.'s head with my gun—but gently because he was such a little man. On the way out, I scooped up the glossies from the desk.

"Now," I told the screw, "out to the street. I'm your prisoner if we meet anyone."

I put Brady's revolver in my right jacket pocket and held onto it.

"And remember—I don't have any reason not to plug you, if I have to."

"Don't worry," the screw replied. "For nineteen-fifty a year I ain't being a hero."

It was nearly three A.M. and the municipal building was empty. We met no one, except an old woman who was washing the marble steps that led into the big lobby. She didn't look up.

In front of the building a black and white police car stood next to a lamp post. Panicked, I pulled hard in the opposite direction, hoping the screw wouldn't get up his courage and resist.

He came readily. A backward glance told me why. The car was empty. I turned and jerked him toward it.

"You might beat a murder rap in this town," he said, "but they'll be sore as hell if you steal a prowl car."

"Go on," I replied. "You're just saying that because it's true."

I stuck my head in the window and saw that the ignition key was in and heard the radio. The screw protested when I made him put his arms around the lamp post and locked the cuffs.

"Aw, come on, now. This is going to make me look silly."

I poked him with Brady's revolver.

"You'd look a lot sillier with your mouth open and flies in it."

He looked very forlorn hugging the post as I drove away. I hated to think what Brady would say to him when he woke up.

CHAPTER THREE

A Whammy on Sammy

THE airport was about four miles out of town. I figured I could pick up one of the plane taxis that shuttle the movie people between Nero and L. A. and, once I was safe in L. A., get the agency to turn on the heat. If that didn't work, by the time they could extradite me, we could have dug something up on the frame.

I had the gas down to the floor and the prowl car bouncing nicely through the empty streets when the radio spoiled everything. The alarm came over just as I hurtled into the little plaza fronting the railroad station.

"All cars attention. On assault and break, Lynn Reed, Caucasian, age thirty-nine, murder suspect. Driving Police car fourteen. All cars in West Nero block U. S. 93, proceeding west. Cars twenty-seven and thirty to airport. Cars at transfer points proceed to roadblock on U. S. 93, going east. Extreme caution—"

I switched it off. That was it. U. S. 93 was the only road out of town. Desertland stood a few blocks away, beyond the rail yards. If I could make it and get hold of Dickie Thompson, he might hide me out, but any place I ditched the car would crawl with cops.

I had slowed down, thinking about it. In the distance a siren starting low made me pick up speed.

There was a high concrete wall around the rail yards, broken by a truck road. I cut my lights and shot through it. The yards were empty except for a few produce trailers at the box car platform and, farther down, three new Studebakers lined up next to a ramp leading from a freight car.

I couldn't restrain a grin as I shot up the ramp and into the car. The one Studebaker inside had a big tag that said it was consigned to Carson City, Nevada.

As I stuck my head out the siren howled by the yards. I closed the sliding door and stepped down onto the ramp. It was too bad I wouldn't be around when the freight master in Carson City found the prowl car.

In the station waiting room a drunk and a soldier slept peacefully. There were no other signs of life. I got on the toll phone, woke up the twenty-four hour man at the agency and gave it to him in shorthand.

"You'd better tell Thaddeus Browning what's happened," I concluded. "Tell him

I've got enough trouble without worrying about the Reuben case. And get our lawyers started. If I don't crack this in the next few hours, I'll have to turn myself in."

That was all, except that he agreed to phone the Nero police and tell them he was a rancher along U. S. 93, fifty miles out of Nero, and he'd spotted the prowler car traveling east at high speed. I was sure they'd have it on the networks by now and the call and another one a few minutes later would cross them up, but good.

It was that strange period between night and dawn now, when everything is super-quiet—as though the earth were making up its mind whether to try a new day or give the whole thing up.

By cutting across five blocks of back yards and patios, I managed to get to Desertland with only a few seconds of exposure on each cross street.

A few tired dancers were piling into their cars as I sneaked through the stage entrance and ducked behind the bandstand. After the last wilted musician had dragged past me, Dickie Thompson came out, his horn dwarfed against his big chest. Dickie, in addition to being one of the biggest names in hot jazz, is generally considered to be the foremost American authority on Fifteenth Century paintings, which he collects, but for some reason he enjoys addressing me like a comedy southern ducky.

"Boss man," he said, "what you-all do' here?"

"Hello," I said, embarrassed because I don't like being reminded that I'm a member of a race that treats his race like we treat his race. He saw it in my face.

"Any trouble? Did you ditch that dame?"

"Well," I said, "it's a long story."

I told it to him. He whistled softly through his teeth.

"You figure you can shake something out of the salesman or the girl?"

I nodded. "I'm sure Wendell is in on the frame—and I'm a pretty good little shaker. I know it's aiding and abetting if you get picked up chauffeuring me around," I continued, "but I don't have anyone else to turn to."

He shrugged. "I can always say you stuck a gun in me."

"Sure," I agreed, knowing he never would.

IT TOOK us ten minutes to get to the hotel in Dickie's new Cadillac. I lay on the floor in the back and went in through the service entrance.

Upstairs, I pulled the hammer back on the lieutenant's gut gun and rapped on Wendell's door. No answer. It swung open at the bare turn of the knob. I jabbed at the wall with

my free hand and snapped the light switch.

What lay on the bed wasn't pretty. Wendell was naked except for his shoes and socks and an ice pick which he wore casually between the third and fourth ribs.

I doused the light quickly and sucked in an extra lungful of air. Apparently it was just as dangerous to work for Sammy Yale as against him.

I'd taken three steps down the hall when another thought broke water and this one wasn't nice either. It came in one word: *Virginia*. I shook it off—she was Sammy's girl and, besides, unless the line she'd handed me about going soft was the number one song and dance of all time, her part of it had stopped in the bar.

And besides all this, I was thinking as I ran down the fire stairs, *Why? Why?* Because Sammy had engineered Ira's killing and was worried I'd spot him for it, in spite of the police whitewash? Because he might have guessed I was being paid by Browning to tag him? Sammy had enough motive to get me, I decided, but he was doing it too elaborately. The wheels were really going around in my head now and I was dog tired.

Inside the service entrance, near the time clock, there was a phone booth. The operator got me the agency and I reversed the charges. It was nearly five now and the twenty-four hour man would be fast asleep. He wasn't.

"Listen," I told him, "I had two pigeons left and I just found one of them with his wings clipped. You'd better get a couple of high-type shysters up here on the first plane."

"Will do," he said. "A guy up there named Devers called in. Says he has something to sell you. Wants you to call him at Nero three-seven-four. I wouldn't do it," he added. "Might be a phone trap."

"No," I answered, "not with Devers. He's the honestest official I ever bribed."

I hung up and dialed the number.

"Something interesting, very interesting," Devers replied to my question.

"Not over the ceiling price, I hope. I've only got two bills on me."

"That's enough. Where are you?"

"Take a cab to the railroad station. Go in and then walk out. Get in a Cadillac outside."

We spent the next fifteen minutes parked outside Desertland, giving Devers time to get to the station. Dickie got an all-night disc jockey on the car radio and we were listening to that when a squad car rolled down the street behind us.

They stopped next to us and Dickie said, "Evening," with the proper, anxious-to-please quality in his voice.

One of the cops said, "Evenin', Sam," and then they drove on.

I let my stomach drop back where it be-

longed and Dickie nodded at the radio and said casually, "It's funny how they all try to sound like Billie Halliday."

The night was bleeding itself out now and there were a few signs of life stirring on the streets. Devers stood next to a couple of men loading a mail truck in front of the station. Dickie nodded toward the back of the car and Devers jumped in.

"On the floor," I said.

He dropped down beside me with only a faint raising of the wispy blond eyebrows into his domed forehead. He dug into the grey alpaca jacket he wore around the police lab and everywhere else and pulled out a photograph.

It was a shot of a gun barrel—as if I didn't have enough trouble already.

He gave it to me, saying reproachfully, "You know the D.A. has planes out over the desert trying to spot you in that squad car."

I said, "Tsk, tsk."

Devers got down to business right away in that mock professorial way of his. He tapped the photo with a pencil.

"This is a photograph of the barrel of an automatic belonging to one Sammy Yale, taken in a routine artillery check a couple of months ago."

"Go on. Give me both bills' worth."

Devers prodded at my breast pocket. "Just for the fun of it, check it against the barrel Brady found in your gun."

I unrolled the photograph I'd lifted from the district attorney's desk and made the check. There wasn't any doubt about it. The barrels were identical. The bullet that killed the goon had been shot out of a barrel that belonged to Sammy Yale. I handed Devers the bills.

"I don't know why it's worth two hundred dollars to find out what I knew all along, but here it is."

Devers slipped out at the next corner. We were a block from Desertland.

"If I were you," Dickie said, "I'd send those prints registered mail to my lawyers and give myself up."

I nodded absently. Dickie made sense and the kind of hunch I'd just had didn't, but being sensible was never one of my strong points.

"You know where Yale lives, Dickie?"

Dickie gasped. "You're not going to—"

"Sure," I said. "Why not?"

"Because you ought to be satisfied with the normal complement of holes in your head, your ears, your mouth, your nose and your eyes."

"I know. But take me there anyway."

He made a U-turn.

"All right. He lives in the same hotel as Virginia Stoddard."

IT WAS five-thirty when we pulled up before the Spanish-looking joint where I'd dropped Virginia a thousand years ago.

There was no one in the lobby except a clerk. He shook his head when I shoved a ten dollar bill across the desk and asked him to ring up Yale.

"Nothing doing. He gets mad easy, and I like my job."

"You'd be surprised how mad I can get," I told him succinctly. I unleashed the gut gun. "You can always tell him I pointed this at you."

He sighed fastidiously, jammed the plug in the switch board and depressed a key. In the quiet, I could hear the bell ringing, mutedly, somewhere in the house. When it stopped, I picked up the phone on the desk.

"Keep your shirt on," I told the sleepy, hoarse voice. "Wake your boss up and tell him Lynn Reed is on his way upstairs."

I hung up and got his room number and Virginia's from the clerk, gave him an extra five and went upstairs.

Sammy Yale, in a white Yamanaka dressing gown, stood next to the man with the gun as the door opened.

"Stop the kid stuff," I said. "I got nothing on me except a thirty-eight I stole from the police department and an olive branch."

Sammy motioned me in. He sat on a low couch near the window behind a coffee table and I took a high-backed chair opposite him. The man with the gun sat at the other end of the couch, facing me. Sammy dabbed at his thin nose with a handkerchief.

"This better be good, Reed. I got sinus trouble and I like to get all the sleep I can."

"So do I, Sammy. That's why it gripes me to run around the empty streets all night with cops on my tail."

He spread his delicate hands. "If you will insist on bumping the people I send around just to muss you up a little—"

"Boss," the hood interrupted, "are you gonna let this guy get away with—"

"Shut up," Sammy told him. "See what the man has to say first."

The hood subsided.

"What have you got against me?" I asked.

He caught the cigarette I threw him and the hood flicked the onyx lighter on the coffee table for him.

"The cops cleared me of the Reuben killing," he replied. "Then you have to come around stirring it up. I wasn't so clear I could let you do that—or bump off a boy I sent to tell you about it."

He said it matter-of-factly, not viciously, or even with the inverted lack of viciousness which is more fashionable in the underworld these days. I was beginning to feel that my hunch had been solid.

The hood stiffened as I reached into my breast pocket for the photographs. I told him what they were.

"I've sent prints to my lawyers in L. A.," I lied. "I don't think that even a Nero court will convict me when I can prove the slug I'm supposed to have pumped into Sammy Yale's boy came from Sammy Yale's gun barrel."

He laughed scornfully.

"Look at me, Reed, carefully."

I looked at him, the pale, youngish face, the incredibly cold blue eyes, the thin straight hair, the round shoulders and small ugly bones of a slum child.

"Do I look like the kind of a stupe who plants his own barrel on a guy when he's framing him?"

"No," I said, "you don't. If you did, I wouldn't have come up here."

"I'll tell you something else you don't know," he continued. "When Reuben's body was found, the cops started checking around. I let them give me the once-over because it's good for business to look as clean as possible. Then they thought the slug that came out of Reuben came from my gun. It had, but luckily they had a picture of the barrel—the same one you have here. I don't think they believed it had been lifted from me and the barrel that had been used on Reuben substituted any more than they believed you—except I'm big in this town and you're not." He stood up. "Now that the barrel that disappeared has turned up in your gun, the only conclusion is that the same guy who bumped Reuben bumped my boy tonight and tried to frame you the same way he tried to frame me."

"I'll buy that," I said, "but that doesn't end it. I want Ira's killer and I don't think a guy in your position can afford to let anyone get away with framing him and bumping one of his boys."

I was talking fast now and the hood's head had been turning back and forth between us like a guy watching a ping-pong game.

"Boss," he protested, "I don't get—"

"Shut up," Sammy repeated. "I do. Go on."

"Now I'll level with you," I continued, "right down to bedrock. My client in this case is Thaddeus Browning. He hired me because he knew I was working on the Reuben killing and he'd like nothing better than to see it pinned on you. But I'm not in the least interested in the fight between you two, so I'm prepared to tell Browning you're clean and quit him, providing you'll get me out of my jam here and help me tag whoever really killed Ira."

He stared at me thoughtfully for a moment, then stuck out his hand.

"You're on. But don't discount my reputation for toughness too much. I've killed three times in my life and it's always been over a double-cross."

I took his hand and we stood there for an instant, eying each other.

The next thing I heard was three sharp, unreal cracks from the open window and a little moan from Sammy. I went down as fast as he did and I had my gun out, firing blindly at the window, before I hit the floor.

The hood fired, too, but he did it standing up and then fell heavily on top of me. When I pushed him off, I saw that he was dead.

I aimed carefully and sent a bullet into the light switch on the wall. Blue flames arched from it and the room lights went out.

I got to the window just in time to see somebody drop from the fire escape below Sammy's to the street. He was gone around the corner and a motor raced before I got farther than the first rung of the fire ladder.

Sammy went limp just as I got to him. Only one of the slugs had touched him but that had severed his windpipe. He died as I held him.

IN THE corridor, people started screaming and closing doors as I ran toward the head of the stairs, the gun still in my hand.

Just as I turned into the stairwell, the door opposite it sprang open and Virginia Stoddard came out, struggling into her negligee. Then she was in my arms and I had no idea how she had got there, or why I held on to her.

We were still standing like that when Dickie Thompson came tearing up the stairs, the clerk close behind him. The clerk kept mumbling incoherently until I gave him a shove.

"Get downstairs and phone the police," I told him. "Dickie, you get going. I don't want you mixed up in this."

Dickie grinned and backed away.

"Sure, Lynn, sure. Only, I'll be in the car when you want me."

"Dickie!" I yelled after him, "don't be a—"

Well, he was going to be one—I could see that and I was grateful to him. I pushed Virginia back into her room.

"I heard shooting," she said, "what happened? Did Sam—"

There was no point in holding it back from her.

"Sam's dead."

She looked shocked but not petrified. She stared at me.

"You?"

I shook my head. "No. Somebody outside,

on the fire escape. I don't know who or why. I'm sorry—he turned out to be a pretty decent guy."

She sighed. "He was the best boss I ever had."

"Boss?"

"I just worked for him." She got up. "Drink?"

"Uh-huh."

She came out of the kitchen with a bottle and two glasses.

"You know what I found in my room after I left you tonight?" I asked.

She sipped her drink. "I heard it over the radio. But I know Sam had nothing to do with that."

"I know. He'd just promised to get me out of it and help me with the Reuben case when he got it."

"Poor Ira," she sighed. "He just wasn't the type to work for Sam."

"For Sam!" I yelled, jumping to my feet.

"Of course. Ira was on the payroll, doing public relations, trying to counteract Browning's propaganda about gambling ruining the town."

I swallowed hard. That could change everything. That could mean. . . . I helped myself to another drink and poured for her.

Then I told her what I knew.

"I heard Browning wanted Nero for a big real estate scheme and knew it wouldn't work in a wide open town. Was there any more to it than that?"

She laughed bitterly. "Browning bank-rolled Sam here. Sam kept his part of the agreement and did all the dirty work that goes with gambling, for a cut in the gross. Then, when Browning found there was more money in Nero as a development, he tried to dump Sam. That's all."

While she was talking, a couple of scenes had flopped over in my mind. Thaddeus Browning polishing his shoes furiously after I'd gone out the door of his office. Browning smiling with satisfaction as the old Italian shined my shoes. The high polish on the black part of the black and white shoes the goon had worn as he lay across my bed. And later Wendell the salesman, or whatever his real name was, dead and naked, except for his neatly shined shoes.

"That's enough," I said, "more than enough."

There was something between us that had to be resolved now, regardless of the place and the time. She stood close to me, both of us stopped by it, our drinks still untasted in our hands.

I felt like I hadn't felt since I was seventeen years old. I took the world in my hand and slammed myself over the head with it—twice.

THE room door opened. I expected Brady and a lot of bluecoats. Instead, I saw oxford grey, ending in gleaming black leather. Browning held a pearl-handled, shiny .32.

"Efficiency," he said, closing the door, "is

*I waited until
his hand was
well inside the
drawer*



a much overrated virtue. If you hadn't obtained the bullet they took out of Ira Reuben—"

I still held Virginia in my arms. The drink was in my right hand and my left was a long way from my gun.

He came toward us.

"Listen," I said, "you've killed too much. The police are on their way here. You'll never get away with it. Stay here and give yourself up. You can plead insanity."

He was inches from Virginia's back now. I couldn't move because I knew he'd shoot.

He spoke again, the true paranoid, his eyes flashing into mine.

"I'll win. I'll always win."

His eyes bored into mine, enjoying it and the trembling rigidity of the girl. The muscles of his hands nerved themselves on the gun.

I spilled the drink on his shoes. He gave the scream of an animal in torment and clawed at his feet. I swept Virginia aside and used my knee and then my hands on him.

His madness seemed to be infectious. She was pulling me off him when the door opened again and Brady and five cops piled in. . . .

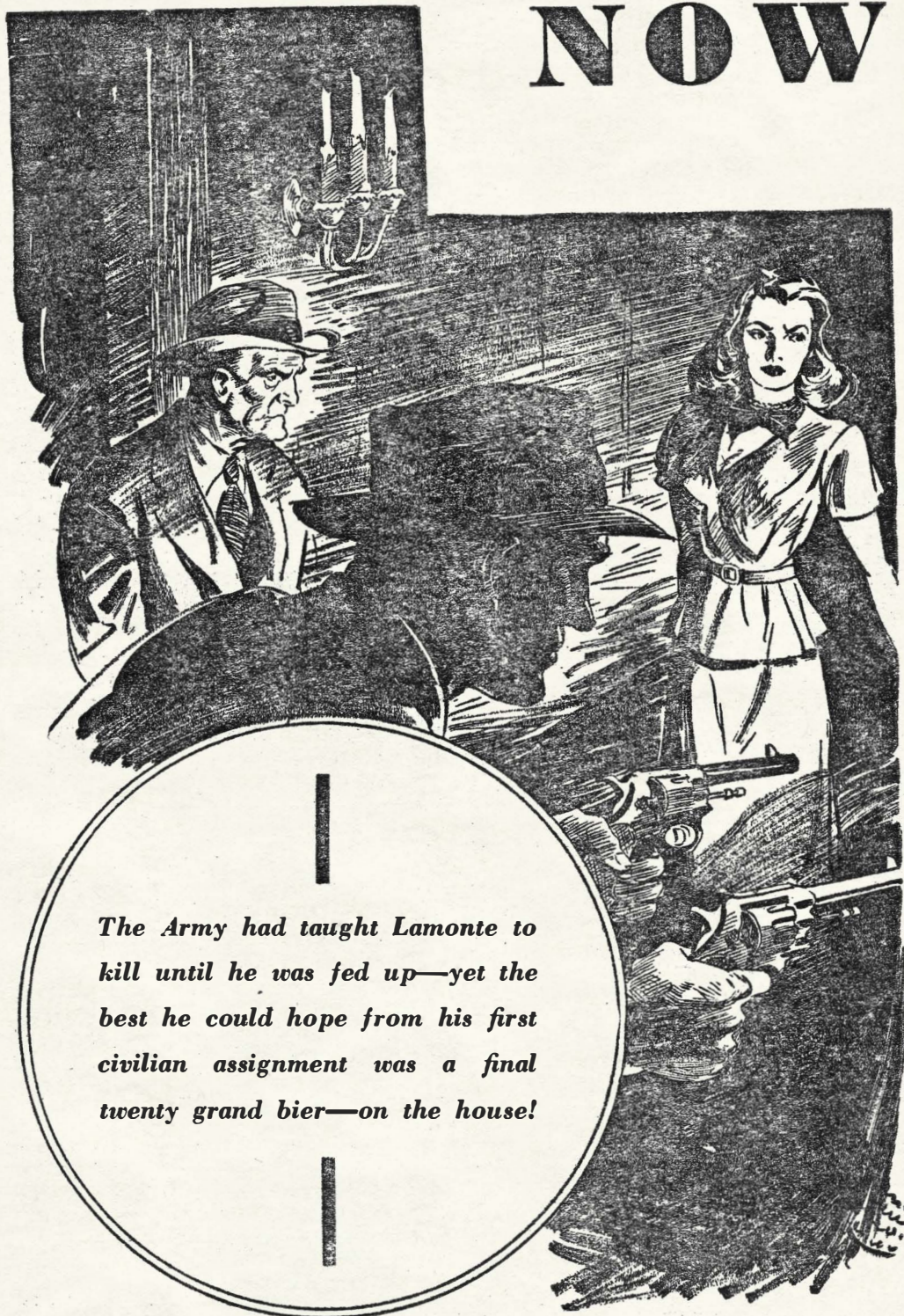
Later, when the lawyers the agency had flown up from Los Angeles had explained legally, and Devers had explained ballistically, and Dickie Thompson had substantiated, and I had explained until I was blue in the face, I found her waiting for me in front of the City Hall.

We were walking up the street when Brady overtook us.

"What," he bawled, "did you do with that squad car?"

They're still looking for it.

NOW



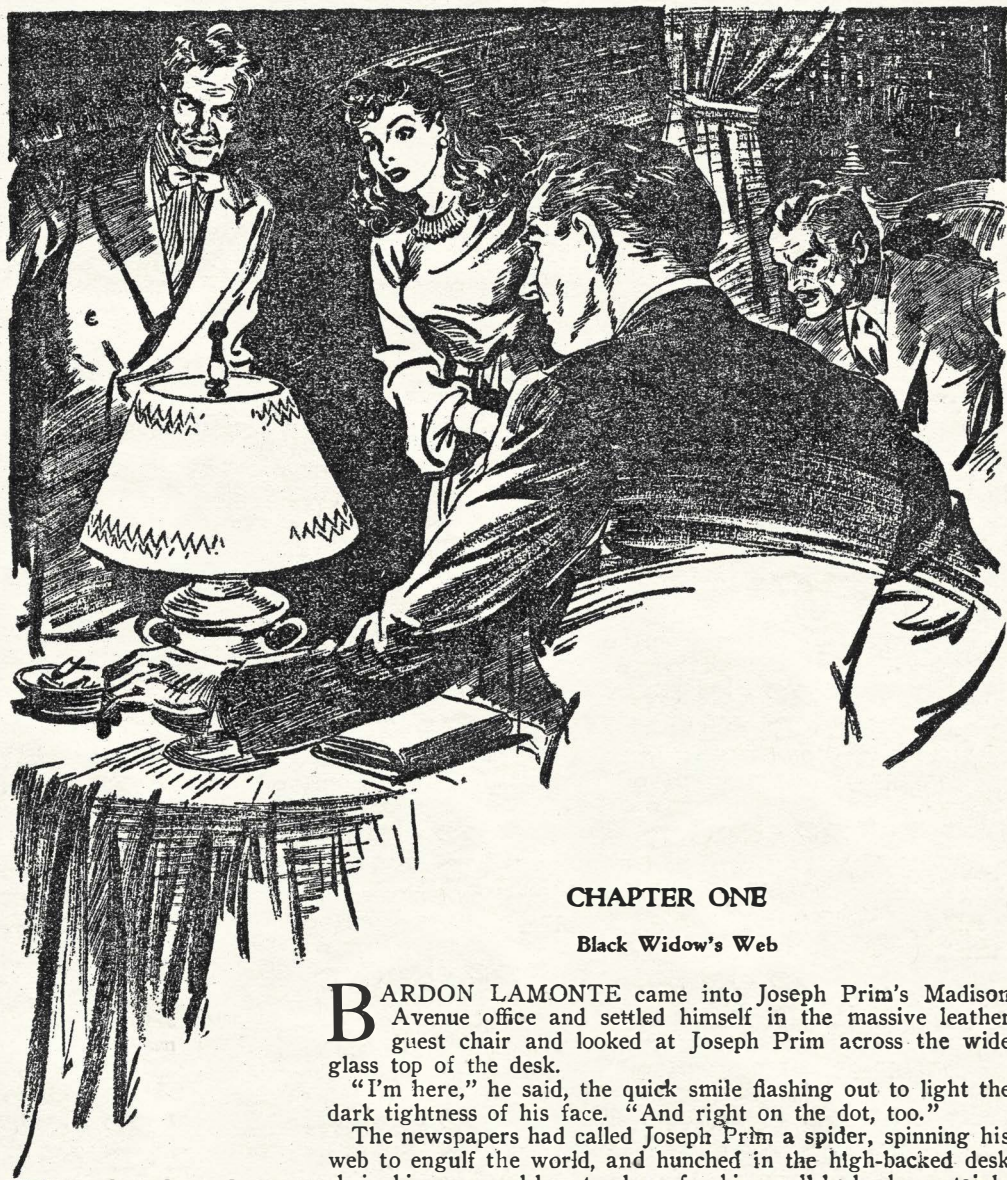
I

The Army had taught Lamonte to kill until he was fed up—yet the best he could hope from his first civilian assignment was a final twenty grand bier—on the house!

I

I SLAY ME

By Todhunter Ballard



CHAPTER ONE

Black Widow's Web

BARDON LAMONTE came into Joseph Prim's Madison Avenue office and settled himself in the massive leather guest chair and looked at Joseph Prim across the wide glass top of the desk.

"I'm here," he said, the quick smile flashing out to light the dark tightness of his face. "And right on the dot, too."

The newspapers had called Joseph Prim a spider, spinning his web to engulf the world, and hunched in the high-backed desk chair, his arms and legs too long for his small body, he certainly resembled a member of the arachnida family. His head was small and very bald. His suit was black, his shirt a light grey, his necktie red.

Prim said, with all the violence in him, "Another word and I'll order Marchmont to shoot. . . ."

A black widow, thought Lamonte, ready to strike from its encircling web.

Prim seldom smiled. When he did you realized for the first time that he was entirely toothless. "You were always prompt, Colonel." His voice was too deep for his small body. It made you jump.

Bardon Lamonte waved his hand in a slightly negative gesture. "We'll skip the colonel part." He looked down at his neat grey tweeds. *I'll never wear brown again*, he thought. *I hate brown.* "I'm out of the Army, you know."

Prim's long fingers laced themselves about a glass paperweight. He played with it as a child might play with a marble. "But you still fly," he said. "Even as a civilian you will still fly?"

Lamonte's handsome, sun-darkened face was expressionless. "Perhaps. I haven't made up my mind." He sat in his chair, pretending to stare at the window. Actually he studied Prim. He'd met the man first in 'forty-two when he'd been sent by the Army to take over the DC-3s that Prim Air had used to carry their cargoes about Latin America. He hadn't liked Prim then, and he wasn't liking him too much now. He wondered if Prim had called him to offer a pilot's job. He wondered if he would take it. He didn't think he would.

Joseph Prim's deep voice sliced through his thoughts. "You built a lot of the Army air bases in South America I understand?"

Lamonte thought, *He knows I did. He knows more about the air lines, the bases and the business in Latin America than anyone in the United States.*

Aloud he said, "I helped. It takes a lot of men and planning to build bases."

"Always modest." Prim gave him his toothless smile. "That's one of the reasons I sent for you. The second is your reputation for getting things done, no matter what the odds, your refusal to let anything, *anything*—" he stressed the word by banging the desk top with the paperweight—"stand in your way."

Lamonte made no answer. It was Prim's turn to talk. He was a good listener.

The man behind the desk went on, his voice changing, sharpening. "You were in San Jose. You built the base there. You know the government officials and the business men, not to mention the police."

Lamonte inclined his head. He had spent nine long months in San Jose.

"Good," said Joseph Prim. He dropped the paperweight and rubbed his thin hands together. "As you know, those bases that the Army built are being turned back to the countries in which they are located and there's a scramble for air rights."

Lamonte nodded.

"We need a man," said Prim, "Who knows the country, who speaks the language, who knows aviation both from the flying and maintenance ends. A man who knows what he's supposed to do and will let nothing stop him. Are you that man?"

Lamonte was cautious. "That depends."

PRIM indulged in another toothless smile. "You never buy a pig in a poke," he commented. "By like token, I think you can keep quiet about what you hear. Well, I'll give you the full story. There are three air lines trying to come into San Jose. It's the capital, of course, and while the country isn't large, it's rich in raw materials and short on transportation. Also, because of its location, it makes a good staging point for the rest of Central America. We had what business there was before the war and we don't like to be crowded out, but there's a British concern trying to come in, Empire Air. They aren't getting too far and they don't worry us. . . . Do you know John Farquer?"

Lamonte nodded. Farquer had been the head of a small Midwestern air line before the war; now he was vice president and general manager of a new concern, Air Americus. "I've met him," he said.

"He's the man you have to watch," said Joseph Prim, and for an instant his eyes were almost red with hate. "Farquer's smart. He's got millions behind him. They're out to control the sky—oh, smile if you choose, but you don't know him as I do. You'd kill a rattler if it lay in your path. Well, John Farquer is worse than a rattler. He'd stop at nothing."

As he spoke, his voice had risen until its volume filled the office; his thin hands clenched. Suddenly he seemed to recall what he was showing, for his words broke off short and when he spoke again it was in a normal tone.

"Sorry, but I hate Farquer. I'd kill him if I could, without dying for it. He's not worth that. But to go back to business, it's this way. Air Americus has the inside track at San Jose. We're still flying in there—illegally. They haven't stopped us entirely, but our planes can't use the regular field, the one you built. We land in a swamp, our passengers have to climb fences, carry their luggage. Our pilots go armed, they load freight by hand and our shippers are intimidated. It's war, Colonel, any way you look at it."

Lamonte shrugged. "And what is one man supposed to do about all that?"

Joseph Prim's spider hand came out to draw aimless patterns on his desk. "We have one chance," he said. "Before the war the govern-

ment in San Jose granted a franchise to a John Trent, an American who had lived down there for years. Under the franchise he could operate, or lease the right to operate all air traffic in the country for thirty years. We paid him a reasonable sum for the privilege of flying in. Well, he died last year. He left two children, but the boy was killed almost at once. He was flying with our Army. The girl has disappeared."

Lamonte was startled. "Disappeared?"

Prim nodded." She was sent up to this country to school when her mother died several years ago. When she graduated her father wanted her to return to San Jose, but she had other ideas. A career was one of them. They quarreled. Apparently she changed her name and her father lost all contact with her, but his will left everything to the son with the injunction that he should care for his sister, or, if he died without issue, everything went to her.

"Well, you can imagine the scramble to find her, but she didn't turn up, and then John Farquer of Air Americus pulled a fast one. He had the court in San Jose declare her dead and set up a Juan del Torro, a cousin, as her sole heir. This del Torro is a local play-boy. Of course he turned his franchise over to Air Americus. We got an injunction to keep from being thrown out of the country entirely, but we can't use the airport, and the hearing on the injunction comes up in thirty days."

Lamonte grinned. "Farquer thinks fast, and the way it looks, you don't need me—you need a miracle."

"I have one," said Joseph Prim. "I've found the girl."

Lamonte started. "You mean she's alive?"

"Of course she's alive. Just the fact that court in San Jose declared her dead doesn't mean a thing, except legally of course. Now our job is to get her down there, have the court decision set aside. Then, as her brother's heir, she'll hold the franchise."

"And of course make it over to you."

Prim chuckled. "That," he admitted. "Is the general idea. And that's the job I'm offering you. Take her down there. See she gets her rights. Protect her."

"What do you mean, protect her?"

Prim's eyes were almost closed as he said, softly, "Do you think John Farquer and Air Americus are going to sit back, let you throw them out of the country, and do nothing? If they get wind of this, which I pray they don't, they'll try and see that the girl never gets her day in court. Something nasty will happen to the little lady."

Lamonte thought it over coolly. "And what does the job mean to me?"

"You'll be on your own," said Joseph Prim.

"I'm going down there. This, frankly, is too important for us to miff, but there will be no connection between us. You won't be on the payroll and if your acts get you into trouble, we won't be able to help.

"You know what the job is—if you take it, I'll hand you ten thousand in cash this afternoon. If you pull it off, we'll pay ten more when the franchise is in our hands, and make you field manager of all our South American lines. The salary is twenty-five thousand a year. Not a bad setup for a young man, Colonel. Not a bad setup at all."

BARDON LAMONTE was used to making decisions. He'd made them all over the world, decisions affecting not only his own safety but the safety of many others. "I'll take it," he said. "I've always wanted to play nursemaid to a deserving heiress."

"You're abrupt," said Joseph Prim.

Lamonte smiled inwardly. *He wants me to go, he thought. For some reason he wants me badly, and he expected to have to argue. He might even have raised the ante. I'm not a good trader.*

When he spoke aloud, none of his hesitation showed in his voice, "A deal is a deal. When do I start?"

"At once," said Joseph Prim and pressed a button on his desk. "Ask Miss Trent to step in please." He was speaking into the office phone.

She was tall, five eight or more, her features perfect as if some sculptor had fashioned them with painstaking minuteness. Bardon Lamonte looked away; he did not want to seem to stare, but instantly there was a picture etched in his mind. Her hair and eyes were dark and very soft. The mouth was firm, too firm if anything, a mouth which indicated resolution.

Prim was standing, bowing a little, slightly uncomfortable, as if the girl's beauty had pierced the armor with which he shielded himself. It was a side of the little man which Lamonte had not suspected. *Why, he's almost human, ran the thought. Look, he's trying to blush.*

"My dear," said Prim, and his tone had none of its usual harshness. "This is Colonel Bardon Lamonte. I've told you about him and he has agreed to accompany you to San Jose, to help you secure your just rights."

The girl's smile was a slow thing. It warmed her face, lighting up the dark eyes. She was a natural coquette, Lamonte noted. *She's giving Prim the business, and in a minute she's going to turn and give it to you and you'll like it, son. I promise that you'll like it.*

He wasn't disappointed. "I'm certain I can depend on the Colonel. I already depend on

him greatly." Her voice was a warm contralto. The hand she gave Lamonte was firm and resolute.

He smiled and said, "This is an unexpected pleasure. I always understood that missing heiresses had freckles and wore horn-rimmed glasses. I'm beginning to like this job."

"Colonel Lamonte sounds like a wolf." There was something in Joseph Prim's voice which made Lamonte turn to look at him.

Dammit! he thought with some surprise. *The little man is jealous. He's interested in her himself. Who'd have thought that there was emotion of any kind in that withered hide?* His eyes caught those of the girl and held for an instant. Amusement glittered and was gone. She, too, was conscious of Joseph Prim's interest and she did not seem displeased.

"I suppose," he said, "that you have proofs of your indentivity, that a number of people in San Jose will remember you?"

"I have proofs," she nodded, "but I suspect that there will be few people who remember me. I left the country when I was twelve. One changes somewhat with the years. I doubt if I'll recall anyone with exception of my cousin, Juan del Torro."

Lamonte frowned. "And del Torro will be on the other side. This makes it interesting, very interesting indeed."

CHAPTER TWO

Bright Young Body

SERGEANT AL TRASK, late of the Air Force, listened with knit-browed attention as Lamonte told him what had happened in Joseph Prim's office. He was a tall man, thin and hungry-looking. His big, hawk nose made his face look thinner than it really was.

"I don't like it," he said. "It sounds snafu to me, and I don't trust that Prim. For my dough he's a buzzard. There are plenty of spots for you, Colonel, without grabbing a deal like this. I thought you were fed up with banana land."

"Why, so I am," Lamonte admitted. "At least I thought I was. Now I'm itching to get back, and if I pull this off, the operating job down there will be something. But you don't have to go. United would take you back in a minute. The Cheyenne shops need men like you. There isn't an airline in the country who wouldn't grab you."

The sergeant's bony face got the look of a hurt, misunderstood child. "What, and let you go down there alone? I wouldn't sleep, Colonel. If you'll pardon me saying so sir—"

"We'll cut the sir. We're civilians, Al."

Trask's face creased as he smiled. "Okay,

pal. I should let you go down there alone, stubbing your toe and arguing with them spicks. Remember that Cesar Martins. There's one tough cop I'd like another swing at."

Lamonte grinned. "You're a phoney," he accused. "You intended to go all along. You'd be sore as the devil if I ran off and left you."

Trask grunted. "You said it," he admitted. "But let me give you a word of advice, Joe. Don't go getting mixed up with this dame. From what you say, Prim's got his claws stretched out to take her in, and I don't want you tangling with the big brass right as soon as we start on a new job. You always was one to forget channels and try to go right to the top."

"I'll remember," Lamonte promised. "Hop along and see that our duffle is ready. We leave in a couple of hours."

They flew from Miami by Prim Air and instantly saw the pressure which was being brought to bear to drive Prim and his flyers from the country. They didn't land at the air base but at a hastily cleared adjoining field. The runways were poor and short.

Across the high wire fence they could see the former Army base, the field Lamonte had built with its concrete runways, its control tower, its shops and hangars.

They slopped out along the fence, carrying their own baggage since there were no *mozos* about, and his anger rose as a sleek silver ship slid down the runways of the adjoining field. He stopped to watch. The plane carried the flying bird insignia of Air Americus on its glistening side, a beautiful plane, patterned on the C-54, a transport anyone should be proud of.

He saw the ground crew running, the steps wheeled out, the baggage unloaded and carried to the waiting cabs. There were no cabs for the passengers of Prim Air, only an old bus operated by the company. Lamonte's one pleasure was in watching Joseph Prim's small figure slouching along ahead of them toward the bus. He could only guess at Prim's anger, for although they'd traveled by the same plane no word of recognition had passed between them since leaving New York.

Slopping along, carrying the girl's luggage, Al Trask muttered. "Rum deal, Colonel. Never thought when we were cleaning up that swamp next door that we'd be barred from using it. Prim Air don't seem to rate in this corner of the world."

Joseph Prim must have heard the sergeant's words, but he gave no sign, and he left the bus as soon as they reached the Plaza, not going to the hotel.

At the hotel the doorman refused them admittance until Lamonte spoke to him sharply in Spanish. Then the old man was full of

apologies. "I did not know you, Colonel, and that bus you ride, we do not receive its passengers."

Lamonte's tone was sharp. "What's wrong with Prim Air?"

The man's Indian face was filled with confusion. "I do not know, my Colonel. It is so ordered—"

Lamonte wasted no further time. The clerk, a stranger, was as bad. He was sorry, there were no reservations.

"It looks," Lamonte told Trask and the girl, "like we aren't exactly the most popular people in San Jose. Wait here." He left the lobby and went back along the hall which led to the manager's office.

Roberto Gonzales had been educated at Columbia, where he learned to speak English and play baseball almost well enough for the major leagues.

He jumped up as Lamonte came in and rushed around the desk, both hands extended, "Colonel, a pleasure. This is a surprise."

"It shouldn't be," said Lamonte, not in a pleasant mood. "I thought I had reservations."

Gonzales' face assumed the mask characteristic to hotel managers the world over. "But impossible. I would have seen, would have known—" he turned and rifled through a pile of papers. Slowly his expression altered to chagrin, and he stared at a yellow slip reproachfully as if it had betrayed him.

"You did not use your military title. You came by Prim Air. We did not guess it was you."

"I'm out of the Army," said Lamonte. "And what's the matter with Prim Air?"

Gonzales spread hands which were beginning to show fat. "One does not travel by Prim Air and receive accommodations in San Jose." His tone was cautious.

"And who gave such orders?" Lamonte was still angry, though he masked it well.

Gonzales hesitated. "Did I say orders? I—well—I do not know, my friend. As they say in North America, Prim Air is getting the business. But what does it matter to us? Come, a drink with an old friend." He found a bottle of brandy and glasses. "And what happened to baseball now that the war is done? And what really happened to Williams in the series?"

Lamonte had his drink. He and Trask were assigned to his old room. The Trent girl had a suite on the floor above. It paid, he thought, to know the right people.

TRASK finished the unpacking and lit a cigarette. "If we have as much trouble with the officials as we've had getting into this joint, we'll never get the girl within a mile of the court room."

"We won't," said Lamonte. "We—" he stopped as a knock sounded at the door. Trask looked at him and Lamonte nodded. The tall sergeant crossed the room and pulled the door open. There was a man outside, dressed in funeral black. He was as tall as Trask, as thin, and he could have played the role of an undertaker without makeup.

"Señor Colonel Lamonte?" He looked at Trask. His English was flawless.

Trask jerked his head and stood aside for the man to pass. Lamonte got up slowly. "I'm Bardon Lamonte," he said.

The man bowed a little from the waist, his back stiff as if he wore a brace beneath his somber coat. Lamonte bowed in return. For some reason he found the man amusing. Trask winked behind the visitor's back.

The tall man glanced around with the air of a Shakespearian plotter. "If I might speak to you alone, sir. My name is Miguel MacTosh Beureon. I am an attorney."

Lamonte was not startled at the name. Latin America has had immigration from all parts of the world. "Never mind Trask," he said, nodding toward the tall sergeant. "He's my better self."

The look that Miguel MacTosh Beureon bestowed upon Al Trask expressed his doubt. For a long moment he hesitated. Then, as if he realized that the man would stay despite his protests, he said, "I come from Joseph Prim." He glanced around again, then continued in an uneven voice. "I must needs be careful, Colonel. These are dark days for my unhappy country, dark days indeed. Here am I, a respected attorney, a man of tried integrity, hounded, driven from pillar to post because I remain loyal, because I refuse to desert Señor Prim."

"I'm sure he appreciates it." Bardon Lamonte was not at all certain.

"He does," said the lawyer wetting his thin lips nervously. "He does indeed. He knows I can be trusted, and he trusts you, sir, he trusts you highly. He radioed me of your coming. I should have been at the airport, but it did not seem wise to show myself."

"I can understand that," Lamonte's tone was dry.

"Ah, I see you have had difficulties already. But from now on your path is smooth. Miguel MacTosh Beureon is here. I take charge, arrange everything. I am an old friend, a trusted friend of the poor girl's father."

"That's nice," said Lamonte. "No doubt she'll remember you."

"I'm certain of it. And now we must move fast, young sir. The judge who sits at the moment is a friend. If you will give me her papers of identity, I will see him, not at the office but at his *hacienda* where I am a welcome guest. It will be done quietly—so quiet-

ly that neither del Torro nor the Air Americus will suspect. Then, I can take the girl into open court and—"

"A good idea," said Lamonte. "Only one trouble with that, *señor*. I haven't the papers."

"You have not the papers?" Beureon's long, yellow face expressed disbelief. "But surely, Colonel, Joseph Prim would not have sent you on such an errand without the papers. The girl, she has them? You will get them from her?"

"I didn't say that," Lamonte told him. "I said merely that I have not the papers. I cannot get them for you now. If you will leave your card, I'll try and arrange it for tomorrow."

Beureon hesitated. It was evident that he did not know quite what to do. "It would be better if I got in touch with you, *señor*. It would do great disservice to both of us if our connection were known in certain quarters."

"All right," said Lamonte. "Get in touch with me tomorrow at noon. I may have news for you then." He waited until Al Trask had closed the door behind the departing lawyer, then asked, "What do you think?"

"A phoney," said Trask.

"I'll find out," Lamonte admitted and reached for the phone. He called a number and after a moment was speaking to Marchmont, the man whose job it was to guard Joseph Prim.

"Prim trusts me," he said to Trask, hanging up. "He won't even tell me where he's staying. I have to meet him at an obscure wine shop. But as I thought, Beureon's a phoney. Marchmont never heard of him."

Trask shrugged. Lamonte got up and stretched. "Still got your gun?"

Al Trask grinned. "Do I look undressed?"

"Keep your eye on Miss Trent," Lamonte said, turning toward the door. "I'll be back in an hour."

THE wine shop was housed in a poor-looking building beyond the small railroad station. Lamonte took a look at the street before turning in. He was beginning to feel like a conspirator.

Lie down with dogs, he thought, and you get fleas. Play with crooks and you start worrying about being followed. . . . He passed Marchmont just inside the shop's mean door. They exchanged no words, but the big man who doubled as Prim's valet and bodyguard jerked his head toward the entrance of a small private room.

Lamonte looked at him as he passed. Marchmont was big, with yellow hair and wide, odd colored blue eyes. He might have been anything from twenty-five to forty.

Lamonte pushed aside the dirty green curtain and saw Joseph Prim at the room's single table. There was no drink on the table, nothing save a sputtering candle, held by its own grease in the neck of an empty wine bottle.

Prim voiced no greeting. Instead he said, "The man Beureon is not one of us."

"I judged not," said Lamonte.

"You got accommodations? Miss Trent is comfortable?"

"I presume so. I haven't seen her since we arrived at the hotel."

Something like relief showed in Joseph Prim's face. He said, "All right. That's settled then. Now, we'll have to sit and wait. I want to be certain that the right judge is sitting before she presents herself."

"I'm not good at waiting," said Lamonte.

Prim's smile was thin. "Life is made up of waiting," he said and turned the discussion to other subjects, asking Lamonte's opinion of various government officials, of the best routes for air travel, of where shops should be located.

Lamonte left the wine shop with a dissatisfied feeling. All the way up the block he felt that Marchmont's blue eyes were watching from behind the shelter of the wine shop curtains. The idea made the short hairs at the back of his neck crawl.

He turned into the hotel lobby, still engrossed in his own thoughts, and was surprised to hear someone call his name. He turned to face a tall, assured man with greying hair and a carefully trimmed mustache. "You don't remember me, Colonel?"

He remembered him very well. This was John Farquer of Air Americus, the man Joseph Prim hated, the man he'd been warned against, the man he'd been sent down here to fight.

He said, "I pride myself on memory, Mr. Farquer." They made no effort to shake hands.

Farquer was about fifty. He'd been a flyer once; now he looked prosperous and well tailored and confident. "I'd like to buy you a drink. There are things which we might discuss."

Silently Lamonte followed him into the small bar. The rum and lime felt cool and clean against his teeth when the drinks came. Farquer did not speak until the waiter had gone away; then he wasted little time.

"You and I are a great deal alike," he said. "I've had you looked up. We can always use bright young men."

"Meaning Air Americus can."

"Dammit," said John Farquer. "Stop wasting time. Of course I mean Air Americus. We can use you—or step on you, whichever seems more expedient. There's an old saying,

Lamonte. 'If you can't beat them, join them.' You'll never lick us. I'm offering you a chance to join."

Lamonte made a wet ring on the table by twisting his empty glass. "And what would joining you involve?"

"Nothing," said John Farquer and smiled. He could be very winning when he smiled. "We know as well as you do that the girl you have with you is not Marie Trent. We also know that Joseph Prim supplied her with forged documents to establish her identity."

"But without you, she wouldn't stand a chance; they wouldn't give her a hearing. You see, I'm being frank. I recognize your importance down here and am willing to pay."

Lamonte did not look up from his empty glass. "You're wrong on two counts," he said. "First, the girl is John Trent's daughter. Second, I'm not important. Why should my presence make any difference in a San Jose court?"

Farquer pretended amusement. "Come, come, Colonel. We aren't children, you know, and we pride ourselves on being almost as smart as Joseph Prim. He realized that as far as most of the officials down here are concerned, you are the United States Air Force. Oh, I know—" he waved a hand for silence as Lamonte started to speak—"you're no longer in the Army. But don't forget, for nine months, while you were building this base, you were the man with authority. It's past their comprehension that merely because you are not still in uniform you have lost all authority and power. When you go into court with this girl, it will be as if Washington itself were sponsoring her. Surely you realized that when Prim hired you?"

Lamonte swore under his breath. *I'm getting soft*, he thought. *When I took off my uniform I seem to have left my brains with it. He's right, of course. Marchmont is better at shooting than I am. It seems Prim and I will have to have a talk.*

He said, "And if I sell out to you, what happens to Miss Trent?"

"She isn't Miss Trent."

Lamonte let that pass. Of course Farquer would deny the girl's identity; Juan del Torro was their man. If he lost the franchise, so would they.

He shook his head. "I'm afraid you've picked the wrong man." He stood up.

John Farquer said, "You haven't heard the price."

"I'd rather not," said Lamonte.

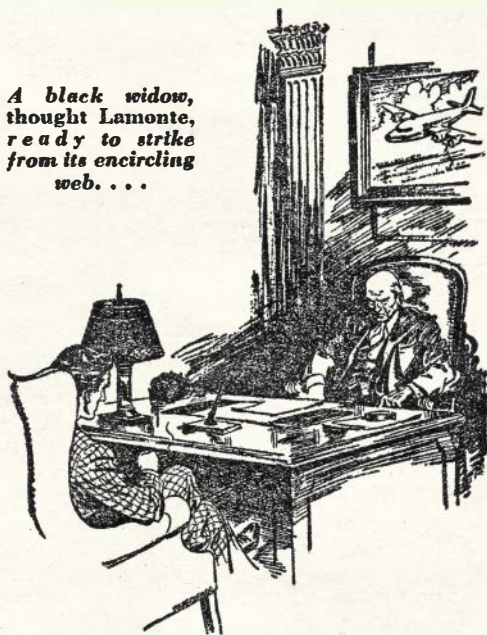
"Joseph Prim won't respect loyalty when you fail," Farquer warned. "And we'll beat you, never fear about that, Colonel. We'll beat you hands down."

Lamonte smiled, although he did not feel

like smiling, and, turning on his heel, walked into the lobby. The place was filled. The siesta hour was past and official San Jose stirred.

Several men spoke to him with surprise and pleasure. Was he sent back in command of the air base? Would he be stationed here long? Surprise followed his repeated announcement that he was no longer in the

A black widow, thought Lamonte, ready to strike from its encircling web. . . .



Army. John Farquer had been very right. It seemed he held a semi-official position in local society.

He refused several invitations to drink and was about to go upstairs when he saw the girl in the red dress. He did not know what caused him to look at her first; perhaps accident, perhaps because she was staring at him across the heads of the crowd.

Nor did she look away when his eyes met hers. How long their eyes held he did not know. He felt a haunting sense of something familiar about her, as if they were past friends, and yet he was certain they had never met before. Still puzzled, he would have moved toward the stairs had he not seen Roberto Gonzales behind the marble desk.

"Ah, Colonel," he said as Lamonte approached. "Everything is now okay, I hope?"

Lamonte nodded. "Everything's fine. Do you happen to know who the woman in red is, the one by the far post, talking to the good-looking man with the scar on his cheek?"

Gonzales turned to look. "Ah," it was a pleased note. "That is Carmen. Is she not beautiful—is she not the berries?"

"Carmen who?" Lamonte raised his eyes so he could keep an eye on the girl in the mirror.

Gonzales shrugged. "Carmen, it is enough. Every night she sings with the orchestra. It is good, that orchestra. They are called Katt's Wildcats. They should be good. They come from the Bronx."

"But where's she from?" Lamonte saw that the girl was still watching him.

Gonzales spread his hands. "She does not tell me and it is unhealthy that one should ask questions. Her friend, he resents them."

"Her friend?"

"Juan del Torro, the man to whom she talks. He has a bad temper, that one."

Lamonte whistled softly to himself. So the man with the scarred cheek was del Torro, Marie Trent's cousin. He turned to stare again at the girl, and del Torro, noting that he did not hold her full attention turned also. Their eyes met and locked across the lobby's width. Something perverse made Lamonte refuse to look away. He saw color come up into the man's olive cheeks, saw him mutter something to the girl in red and then stride rapidly forward.

Men got out of his way. The lobby sensed something out of the ordinary and the conversation shrank to a low murmur. If del Torro noted the interest he gave no sign. He came on, never taking his eyes from the colonel, and Lamonte was reminded of a Western picture he'd seen, of a gunman striding down a street to face an enemy. There was menace in each step.

Del Torro did not pause until he was directly in front of the colonel. Lamonte had expected him to shout, but his tone was soft, hardly more than a whisper. "Perhaps there is something in my appearance which the Colonel finds to his distaste?"

He knows me, thought Lamonte. This is deliberate on his part. He's trying to make a scene. I'm a damn fool ever to have gotten into this.

"You mistake, señor," he said. "I know nothing about your appearance since I was not looking at you." He knew that his voice carried and he did not care. "My entire attention was attracted by the señorita whom I think is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen." Then he turned flatly on his heel and walked toward the stairs, half expecting del Torro to stop him.

Behind him he heard the man swear, but that was all. Del Torro did not move. Perhaps surprise held him. Lamonte turned once but his eyes went to the girl, not the man. He was amazed to see that she was laughing.

I made a fool of myself, he thought as he climbed to his floor. She's laughing at me. It's exactly what I deserve.

CHAPTER THREE

A Bier Below the Border

HIS FIRST surprise was in not finding Al Trask in their room. His second was that the light was burning. He stood in the doorway, his eyes picking out remembered details; then he went forward to study the drawers. When he straightened he was certain of one thing. The room had been searched.

For one fleeting instant the fact surprised him and his mouth tightened a little. Then he wondered at his own surprise. Of course the room would have been searched. Air Americus wanted the girl's papers. They would suspect that he was carrying them. But where was Al Trask, and why had they searched this room rather than Marie Trent's own suite? The thought sent him along the hall and up the stairs to the floor above. He reached her door and without pausing to knock thrust it inward.

The first person he saw was Miguel Mac-Tosh Beureon. The attorney lay on his back, his somber clothes twisted as if from a struggle, the hilt of a knife standing straight up from his left chest, pointing an accusing finger at the ceiling.

That much Lamonte saw, then the small table hit him on the crown of the head and he went down in a confusion of shifting shadows.

He wasn't entirely out. The blow had been a glancing one. He stayed on his knees, trying to steady himself, trying to keep the room from swaying. Then he was being helped to his feet and Al Trask was saying in a voice filled with horror, "I didn't mean to, chief. I didn't know who it was. I tried to stop when I saw it was you."

The girl had brought a damp cloth from the bathroom. It felt cool and good across Lamonte's eyes. His world was steadying.

Marie Trent cooed, "My poor, brave Colonel!" He got a touch of the heavy, sultry perfume she wore, felt his cheek brushed by her fingers as she lifted the cloth.

Trask was shame-faced, like a boy caught out of school. The girl's oval face was very white, her eyes dark pools, thoughtful and remote. Lamonte brushed aside her help and managed to gain his feet.

"What the devil happened here?"

Trask said, "We don't know."

"You don't know?" Lamonte looked from one to the other. He felt as if the walls were closing in. "First I found our room searched, then this," he indicated the dead man. "And you don't know what happened. I thought I left you to watch?"

Trask found words difficult. "I'm sorry chief. I'm a fool, I guess, but you hadn't

been gone ten minutes when one of them bellhops shows up. He's all excited. He says you're in trouble over at some groggery. I'm to hurry, so I go along and he shows me the place. When I get inside, there ain't any trouble at all."

Lamonte turned to the girl. "And you? Were you here when our lawyer friend got knifed?"

Her eyes turned indignant. "I wasn't, Colonel. I had the same experience as the sergeant. A bellboy came and said he was from you. I was to go to your room and wait. I did so."

Trask nodded. "I found her there when I got back. We compared notes and decided that for some reason someone wanted her away from here, so I left her downstairs and came up to have a look. I found our mouth-piece friend on the carpet. She came up a minute later and then you. I thought you were the killer, coming back." Trask still looked sheepish. "I guess I'm getting nerves."

Lamonte didn't have to guess at least.

"But what were they looking for?" Trask was puzzled.

"Her papers," said Lamonte. "Do you still have them?"

Marie Trent nodded.

"But who killed him?" Trask was pointing at the attorney.

"I wish I knew," Lamonte's voice was fervent. "Sure you didn't walk in on him, Al and—"

Trask shook his head. "Would I lie to you, chief?"

Lamonte wasn't certain. No man liked to be accused of murder. "And you—" he looked at the girl—"sure he didn't show up before you came to my room?"

Her eyes got smoky, but he wasn't certain she was angry. "Quite sure, Colonel."

He sighed. "This makes it tougher. I hope the police believe us. I hope—" A knock interrupted his words.

The girl gave a little cry. Panic seemed to grip her. She took a step and would have fallen had not Lamonte caught her. Her body was warm against his. Her arms crept up around his neck as if for added support. The smell of perfume was stronger. They were standing thus when the police came in.

A H!" SAID Lieutenant Cesar Martins of the San Jose police, his quick, dark eyes taking in every detail of the room. "It seems we meet again, my Colonel."

Marie Trent seemed to gain a certain amount of composure at the sound of his voice and stepped quickly away, her hands going up instinctively to her dark hair.

Martins was small and he walked a little mincingly, yet Lamonte knew that the smooth,

almost baby-like face masked a brain that could be quick and sharp and vindictive. But whatever Martins' faults, he was honest and the trouble they had had in the past had come from his overuse of authority.

He walked into the room, trailed by two men and paused when he saw Trask. "Another old friend." He almost purred the words. "I had heard that both of you had returned. I had meant to call and pay my respects, but I did not expect this." His eyes left the dead man after a moment and moved to the girl.

Lamonte said, "This is Miss Trent. I suppose you already know that."

"It is my business to know things," said Martins. He bowed to the girl, then said to Trask, "A sorry welcome, Sergeant. I thought at the war's end that my troubles with you were finished, it seems they had not yet begun."

Trask grunted. He had the G. I. point of view as far as police were concerned and he'd spent more than one night rescuing men from the San Jose jail.

Lamonte said sharply, "I don't understand your last words, Lieutenant."

Martins' white teeth smiled in an expression that was childlike. "It is so simple," he said. "A man is dead, knifed. I assume the sergeant guilty, unless you wish to confess, my dear Colonel, or do you men intend to put the blame onto this so lovely lady?"

The girl gave a little protesting gasp. Lamonte silenced her with a look. "Your position is entirely wrong," he said, sharply. "This man was working for us; he was our lawyer."

Martins laughed silently. "My dear Colonel. Your story will have to be better than that, for everyone in San Jose knows that Beureon was the jackal of Air Americus, and almost everyone knows that you are in the employ of Joseph Prim. We are not blind and deaf. This girl is here to upset the franchise under which Air Americus operates."

Lamonte controlled himself. "All right, but why in the world should Trask be interested in killing that fool—why should I?"

Martins' eyes narrowed. "Perhaps the Señor Beureon had succeeded in learning something; perhaps he had learned that this beautiful lady is not what she seems, that in fact she is an impostor. Would not that be cause for killing, to shut Beureon's mouth before he could tell his employers? I think so, yes. I think we should arrest you all—no, wait. I leave you free, Colonel, you and the girl. It will be interesting to watch what you do. We will take the good sergeant. We do not accuse him of murder—no, not yet. He hold him as a hostage, shall we say, for I know you, my Colonel. You are a gentleman. You would not run away, even if your life

depended upon it, not while one of your men is in danger." He chuckled.

The whole idea seemed to amuse him greatly.

"THIS is terrible," said the girl. "I'm worried. I can't even eat."

Lamonte was more worried than he cared to admit. They were seated in the hotel dining room and it was two hours since the police had led Al Trask away. "I've tried to reach Prim," he said in a low tone, his words buried by the blare of Katt's Wildcats from the bandstand at the far end of the big room. "But I don't expect help from Prim. He warned me at the first that if there was trouble I could expect no aid. How did Martins happen to come to your room? Someone gave him a tip?"

"He's a fool" she decided, her eyes looking around the crowded tables.

"Anything but a fool," Lamonte corrected her. "He could have arrested all of us, but he chose to leave you and me free, giving us a chance to make a slip, to perhaps convict ourselves."

She turned back, startled. "You mean he seriously believes that we had something to do with Beureon's death?"

Lamonte nodded. "I'm sorry for Trask. The jail is in an old Spanish fort. Some of the dungeons are wet and very dirty. Men have been forgotten and remained there for years."

"But—"

He said, "I don't want to make an issue of it. I don't want to go to the consul. We'll have to sit tight and wait."

"For what?" she made a little gesture of impatience.

"For Joseph Prim." He leaned forward. "Tell me, are you Marie Trent?"

"Why—why, of course." Her startled eyes met his. For an instant they were smoky; then they smiled and, reaching out, she patted the back of his hand. "My poor Colonel. You've had a hard day—you're even beginning to doubt me."

He gave her an answering smile. It was very hard to doubt her, sitting here, looking into her eyes. "I was just thinking," he said. "That if you aren't Marie Trent, Martins' idea of a motive for Beureon's murder might make some sense in court. Your papers, they are safe?"

"Here," she touched the bag in her lap. "Don't worry." Again she patted his hand and now her smile was warm and intimate, shutting out the room around them. "You're nice. I feel so safe with you around—nothing can happen to us, my friend. Together we can fight the world."

He had the impulse to take her hand—and

the thought that he was glad she was on his side—but something in her face stopped him. Her expression had altered. Suddenly she was cool and remote and careful, staring above his head, but she was breathing deeply, as if the air were too thin.

"That girl, on the bandstand," she said finally. "Do you know her?"

Lamonte twisted to see. It was Carmen, still wearing the red dress, just stepping up to the microphone.

"I've seen her," he said. "In the lobby—this afternoon."

"I've seen her too," it was as if Marie Trent had forgotten his presence, as if she were talking to herself. "Where was it I've seen her? She knows me, she must; she keeps staring at this table."

Lamonte glanced at her. "What difference does it make?"

His words recalled the girl's thoughts and she managed a weak smile. "None at all, of course. How silly of me to forget. I hate to forget. I pride myself on remembering people."

Lamonte had an idea. He drew a card from his pocket and scribbled:

"The girl with me knows you. Won't you join us and renew the acquaintance?"

He signaled a waiter.

"What are you doing?" Marie Trent's voice was sharp with worry.

He smiled. "Nothing, merely asking her to join us. The easiest way to find out whether you two really have met or whether it's a chance resemblance."

The waiter came up and he put the card and a peso into the man's hand. Marie Trent started to protest, changed her mind and settled back in her seat.

"She's getting the note," she said, her eyes on the distant bandstand. "She's reading it. She's looking this way. She's coming—" her voice sounded almost like a gasp—"she's coming to this table."

Lamonte felt a sudden, unexpected glow of excitement. He turned to watch the girl's progress across the crowded dining room. She was smaller than he had thought, and more beautiful. Then he was standing, motioning for an extra chair, helping her into it.

"Miss Carmen—Miss Trent. I believe you know each other."

The girl in red smiled. "Really, Colonel. Does Miss Trent think she knows me, or was that a new method of approach?"

He found that he was blushing. It made him angry. He hadn't blushed in years. Her eyes were as dark as Marie Trent's, but there was difference. They seemed to hold a hidden amusement, as if their owner shared a secret joke only with herself.

Marie Trent had noted the blush and her eyes narrowed. "It's my fault," she said, leaning forward. "I was certain that we'd met somewhere, but I can't recall where."

The amused glint never left Carmen's eyes as she watched the other girl. "I'm afraid you're mistaken," she said, and her voice was low and even. "I'm certain we've never met."

"But you're from the States?" Marie Trent was insistent, as if trying to prove something to herself. "You aren't native here?"

Carmen laughed. "One can fool men, but never women. Yes I'm from New York. I've had a small part in a Broadway show, a little radio work, several bits in Hollywood, besides singing with three second rate bands. I came down here with Freddie Katts and the boys. It looked like a chance to travel. So, you see, Miss Trent, we might well have met, on Forty-second Street or in Gimbel's basement."

There was relief in Marie Trent's face as she settled back. Lamonte did not understand the expression. Had she been afraid that Carmen would recognize her? But why—aloud he said, "If you two girls have decided that you don't know each other, can't we make an evening of it? The Casino should prove interesting." He didn't add that he hoped to see Joseph Prim at the gambling place; that he had no other purpose in going there.

"I'm afraid," said Carmen, "that I can't join you. A working girl is not a free agent."

He looked at her and sensed regret. He'd hoped that she would come. And what did she mean? Was her obligation to the band, still playing loudly from the platform, or to Juan del Torro? He turned to hide the feeling which he knew showed on his face and thus was probably the first person in the crowded room to see the bandits.

THEY were in the doorway, their faces veiled by handkerchiefs, and there was no commotion as yet. For an instant the fact that they were masked made less impression on Lamonte than that they were wearing the conical straw hats which the peons affected. He thought it strange that three hotel guests should appear in such hats, and then he saw the machine gun and his mind clicked into place.

"Holdup," he said in a low voice. "Here comes trouble."

Both girls looked at him, then at the door. A high nasal voice called above the music. "Don't move—anyone. Keep your seats, your hands in sight on the tables. No one will be hurt if you behave yourselves."

Marie Trent uttered a half gasp. "My papers?"

Lamonte had already thought of them and

was looking around for a safe hiding place.

Carmen said quickly, "Give them to me. Your dress, it is low. It conceals nothing. Mine has a high neck."

For an instant Marie Trent hesitated, but there was little time. Under the shifting confusion in the room, she slipped the papers to the other girl. They vanished almost at once.

Lamonte thought with a glow of pride. *She's a cool one, this Carmen, and she has a head on her shoulders.* . . . He was relieved, without knowing whether he had a right to be.

The men in the conical straw hats knew their business. The machine gunner remained in the doorway, his back to the checkroom, so he could watch both the diners and the hall. His companions lined the guests against the far wall and crowded the waiters and bandsmen into a corner.

Carmen was no longer at Lamonte's side. As the crowd moved she shifted until she stood close to the band leader.

Lamonte smiled to himself and turned his attention to the girl at his side. She was nervous, watching the masked men as they moved along the line of guests. One carried a small bag, pausing before each victim. The second stood a few feet behind his companion, two guns ready, his restless eyes beady and quick and dangerous above the edge of his handkerchief mask.

The man with the bag reached Lamonte and paused, his eyes glittering with some recognition.

"Ah, a rich one," he muttered in Spanish. "Shell out, my pigeon, and you will not be so fine-feathered." He watched closely, as if expecting Lamonte to offer some kind of resistance.

Lamonte had to restrain himself. His impulse was to laugh, until he recalled that the balance of the ten thousand which Joseph Prim had paid him was in his wallet. Reluctantly he produced the billfold and added it to the pile of loot in the bandit's bag. But the man was not satisfied. He forced Lamonte to face the wall and went through his pockets thoroughly, grunting his disappointment at his failure to find the papers.

Next he turned his attention to the dark-haired girl. He emptied her purse on the floor and stirred the contents with a dirty finger. Again disappointment showed and he looked at her dress calculatingly. "Turn around, *señorita*."

"What's he going to do?" her tone was stifled.

"He wants you to turn, to be searched." Color flamed into her cheeks. "He wouldn't dare."

"I assure you he would." Lamonte was impatient. This was no time for modesty or

heroics. "Better turn; he's quite capable of tearing the dress from your shoulders."

She gave him an accusing look as if in some remote way she blamed him for the whole situation; then she turned, standing stiffly until the bandit stepped back.

It was plain that he did not know how to proceed. Again Lamonte had the impulse to laugh. Finally the man moved on.

Marie Trent's whisper was sultry with suppressed anger. "You might have done something. I'm not used to being pawed."

"And get a bullet in the stomach?" He was no longer amused.

"I'm sorry." Her voice was quickly contrite. "I'm not usually such a heel—I'm upset, and worried. Do you suppose they'll search Car—"

He silenced her with a look; then his eyes went along the line of victims. The holdup men were working quickly, carelessly, now, as if they had lost interest in the whole business. They almost ignored the waiters and bandsmen and they gave Carmen no more than a careless glance.

When they were finished the man with the bag said harshly, "Everyone face the wall. You will stand so for five minutes. You will not cry out." Even as he spoke they were backing toward the entrance. A moment later they were gone.

No one in the crowd obeyed instructions. A woman screamed and the sound released the crowd. People began to mill about and Marie Trent said sharply, "We must find the singer. We must get the papers." She turned and hurried toward the bandstand with Lamonte at her heels.

He said in a sharp understone, "Don't make it too noticeable," for he had seen John Farquer across the room and he sensed that the head of Air Americus was watching them.

Either the girl failed to hear or she chose to ignore his words, for she did not stop. The band was uncertainly returning to their places. The diners were still on their feet. Roberto Gonzales appeared from the lobby, his fat face shaking with excitement.

"Please. Everyone will remain quiet. The police, they come. Your valuables will be found."

Marie Trent had paused at the edge of the bandstand, looking about wildly. "Where is she? I don't see her?"

Lamonte, who had stopped to watch Gonzales, turned, his eyes sweeping the crowd in search of Carmen's red dress. He failed to see it.

"The powder room," he suggested. "Probably she went there to recover the papers."

Marie Trent moved away without waiting for him to finish. She was back almost at

once, her face tight and frowning. "There's no one there, not even the maid."

A tinge of doubt tugged at Lamonte's mind. He turned and walked over to where Sammy Katts was trying to reorganize his band. The man did not know or would not say where Carmen had gone; neither could the two bellhops whom Lamonte sent to search the hotel. Carmen seemed to have disappeared.

CHAPTER FOUR

Double Trouble

LIEUTENANT MARTINS touched his carefully trimmed mustache with the knuckle of his right forefinger. "I'm certain, *señorita*, that you will be delighted to hear that all the valuables are recovered. The robbers were frightened as they ran for their car. They dropped the bag of loot on the sidewalk." He was speaking to Marie Trent, who failed to return his smile.

Thinking of his well-filled wallet, Lamonte said, "What considerate bandits—but then, this country is always polite."

Martins' smile was a little thin. "The bag was dropped by accident, or purposely. We don't know which, but we suspect the whole holdup was a show." He watched his listeners closely.

"And you're going to blame us?" said Lamonte. "As you did with Beureon's murder."

Martins ignored the words. They were in a small writing room off the lobby. Outside Roberto Gonzales was happily sorting the contents of the bandits' bag, returning property to its rightful owners.

Martins said, "Nothing like this holdup has ever happened in San Jose before. Our robbers are poor. They aren't like your holdup men, with cars and machine guns."

"They had them tonight," said Lamonte dryly.

"Exactly," Martins pounced on his words. "Therefore I suspect outside influence. Now, there is no trouble before you and this young lady arrive. She comes, claiming to be John Trent's daughter, claiming the franchise which Juan del Torro holds, and it is certain that if she wins, that franchise will be delivered to Joseph Prim and Air Americus will lose their airport, perhaps the right to fly into San Jose at all. That is correct?"

Lamonte nodded.

"So," said Martins. "Point one, Beureon is found dead in the lady's room, point two, we have a holdup; yet the robbers are careless and drop the spoils. Therefore I think that they search for something besides money, perhaps—something like Miss Trent's papers."

Neither of his hearers spok and he sighed. "You can help me," he told them. "You can show me the papers. You can assure me that the bandits did not get that for which they sought."

"They did not get them," said Lamonte.

Martins sighed. "Then there will be further trouble," he said. "Unless you would like to turn them over to me for safe-keeping."

Neither of his listeners spoke and he sighed again. Then his voice hardened. "I am having Mr. Farquer watched," he said. "This air franchise is nothing to me. That is a matter of politics and I am a plain policeman with a job to do. But murder is my business, and this holdup is my business and I will not continue to let a private quarrel between Joseph Prim and Air Americus endanger the lives of our citizens, even if I have to lock you all up, or order you from the country."

Lamonte said soothingly, "A commendable attitude, but I'd like to ask your opinion on one thing. Assuming that you are right, that all this shooting is only a blind to secure Miss Trent's papers, what can they hope to gain by that? After all, she could still probably establish her identity."

Cesar Martins' black eyes were almost closed. He said softly. "I am but guessing, *señor*, but I would say that your enemies are not certain that the so charming *señorita* is indeed Marie Trent as she claims. They wish to see the papers to assure themselves."

"And if they get the papers?" Lamonte asked. "If they become convinced that she is indeed Miss Trent, what then?"

"Then," said Martins, "she will, I fear, become my business, for I am certain that something will happen to her, something very unpleasant indeed."

"COME in," said Joseph Prim. He was sitting in the big chair beside the window. Marchmont stood against the far wall, not moving, both hands out of sight in the side pockets of his double-breasted coat.

The girl had stopped in the doorway when she realized that her rooms were already occupied. Now she said in relief, "You frightened me. After all that's happened I'm as jumpy at a cat."

Joseph Prim smiled. He looked more like a spider than ever.

Lamonte followed the girl in and closed the door. "This is a surprise," he said, his eyes on Marchmont, rather than on Prim.

The big yellow-haired man gave no sign that he was conscious of Lamonte's attention. He was motionless, staring at nothing.

The girl said, "I phoned Mr. Prim. I thought he should know that the papers have vanished."

Not by the flicker of an eyelid did Lamonte show his surprise. *She had his phone number*, he thought. *I was right—there's more between these two than meets the eye.*

Aloud he said, "I'm glad you did. You saved me the trouble. I was going to phone him later."

Prim waved this aside. "This Carmen—" he came directly to the point—"who is she? What do you know about her?"

"Nothing," said Bardon Lamonte. He found it displeasing that Prim knew about Carmen. He didn't stop to analyze why.

Prim's voice was accusing. "Then why did you give her the papers?"

There was an edge to Lamonte's voice. "It was that or lose them entirely. It was a choice I had to make."

"Where is she?"

"I don't know yet." Lamonte was liking the spider man less and less.

"I understand," said Joseph Prim precisely, "that she's a very good friend of Juan del Torro?"

"So I've heard." Lamonte's tone was expressionless.

The girl turned to him angrily. "You didn't tell me that!"

He didn't answer. Prim's voice was like a knife. "It seems, Colonel, that I was mistaken in you, vastly mistaken. If I may say so, you have made a perfect muddle of everything. A man murdered, your sergeant under arrest and, to put it mildly, you and Miss Trent under suspicion. And now, her papers are gone. I'll have to take steps to rectify your errors at once."

Lamonte said coldly, "I'll take care of Carmen. You'll get the papers back." He was furious, but it went deeper than that. He didn't want Prim taking steps where the girl was concerned. No matter who she was or where she came from, he did not want Marchmont on her trail.

"And just how," said Joseph Prim, "do you intend to proceed?"

"That's my business." Lamonte could not recall when he had been so thoroughly angry. He swung about and pulled the door open. Prim called his name but he paid no attention. He slammed the door and went stalking toward the stairs.

HE FOUND the bell captain and talked to him for a long time. Then he talked to the bellhops, getting no satisfaction. Finally he went to the hotel office, finding Gonzales not completely recovered from the shock of the holdup.

Gonzales' face expressed his deep chagrin when Lamonte made his request of the singer's address. "That I cannot give you since I do not know. She tells no one."

"Perhaps the band leader?"

Gonzales' shrugged was expressive. "You can try. He lives at the hotel, but I must add one small warning. I would not like to see you tangle with del Torro. That is a bad one. He has killed men and he considers that the girl belongs to him. You had better seek your romance elsewhere, on safer ground."

Lamonte almost disclaimed any romantic interest in the singer, then changed his mind. What matter if Gonzales thought him in love; if the others made the same error it would be a simple way of explaining why he sought her address.

He found the band leader and several of his men in a room at the rear of the hotel, having a quite jam session. Seeing him enter and recognizing a fellow American, Katts waved toward a seat.

"Pull up a rock and squat. If this doesn't send you, nothing will."

Lamonte had never been a music lover, and the resulting sounds made the short hairs at the base of his neck crawl in protest. However, he listened patiently and his expression of resignation was taken by the devotees as one of sublime rapture.

When the crescendo of sound had died, he managed to say, "Swell," in a convincing tone. "Look, Katts, I'd like nothing better than to sit around and listen all night, but I'm hunting Carmen."

Katts was coming out of the fog slowly, like a drug addict forsaking his rose-colored dreams. Lamonte's words snapped him awake and he began to laugh.

"Another sucker."

Disconcerted, Lamonte said, "Meaning?"

"Look, Joe," Katts was confidential. "We've all been there, see. That dame has something. She sends you. It's like walking on queer street just to take a gander at her. But it buys nothing. We all made a play and got nowhere. She's interested in the rich spick and he's dynamite without a sense of humor."

"I'll take my chances," Lamonte said.

Katts considered. "I'm doing you no favor, pal, and none of us is supposed to know where she hides out. Shall I tell him, Tommy?" He turned to look at the curly-headed drummer.

The drummer shrugged. "Why. not? It bought me nothing."

"Tommy," said Katts, "trailed her one night. And for his pains he gets the door slammed right in his puss. Here's the address. It's in the old part of town."

Lamonte accepted the paper eagerly. He told himself that the eagerness was occasioned by his need of finding Marie Trent's papers, but he knew that wasn't entirely true. He wanted to see Carmen again. It was stupid, of

course. She belonged to del Torro, but he couldn't help it. He wanted to see her.

The hotel lobby looked curiously empty now that all the holdup victims had departed. Two of Cesar Martins' men lingered, however, and Lamonte noticed that policemen in plain clothes looked pretty much the same the world over. These men might have been working out of one of the precinct stations in the Bronx. He started for the entrance, wondering if they would follow, but halted as a man rose from the deep-seated chairs.

"Might I have a moment of your time, Colonel?"

Lamonte paused, turning. The man was small, well dressed, sandy-haired. His nose was the only large thing about him. It jutted out like a ship's prow between eyes which were very blue.

"I'm in a rush," said Lamonte, certain he'd never seen the man before. "Some other time."

"This won't wait," said the sandy man. "I'm Clyde Stacy-Smith of British Empire Air."

Lamonte stopped and turned slowly back. Mechanically he took the hand which the sandy man offered. Stacy-Smith said, "I don't think I need explain what I want to talk to you about. Shall we go into one of the writing rooms?"

Lamonte followed the Englishman into the writing room and shut the door. "I'm at a loss," he said. "You seem to assume that I know something which I don't."

Stacy-Smith frowned. "But aren't you Miss Trent's representative? I understood that you were."

Lamonte nodded. "In a way, yes." His tone was cautious.

"Then you must recognize my name. Frankly I'm at a loss, Colonel, to understand your attitude, unless there is double-dealing of some kind."

Lamonte did not like the man's tone, and said so plainly. "There's something wrong here," he agreed, brusquely, "but I think it's you who are making the mistake, for I certainly never heard of you in my life."

Color flushed up under Stacy-Smith's cheeks and he reached into his pocket, finding an envelope. "I have here," he said tartly, "a letter from a firm of attorneys in New York—Caster and Caster, who purport to represent Miss Trent. In the letter they state that Miss Trent will meet me in San Jose tomorrow to discuss the leasing of the franchise to my company."

"May I see it?" Lamonte's anger was gone. In its place caution came, to make him hesitant.

Silently the Englishman handed over the letter. Lamonte read it twice. There could

be no mistake. He passed it back slowly. "I don't understand this," he said, speaking half to himself, "Frankly, I never heard of you, or this law firm either."

Stacy-Smith's face was incredulous. "But you do represent Miss Trent?"

"I thought so," Lamonte admitted, his mind busy with the new problem. Was the Trent girl pulling a fast one? Was she getting ready to sell out, to leave Joseph Prim high and dry and do business with the British company.

"I'll have to talk to Miss Trent," he said. "I'll have to find out what this is all about."

The Englishman was not satisfied. "Perhaps I had better talk with her myself."

Lamonte recalled that Joseph Prim was still above stairs. "I don't think it would be wise at the moment." He almost did not say it. He'd have liked to see Prim's expression when he learned that the girl he'd found and sponsored was dealing with another air line. "You better let me talk to her. If you'll let me have your address I'll get in touch with you in the morning."

Stacy-Smith still wasn't satisfied. Lamonte knew that the man regarded him with a certain amount of suspicion. He didn't blame him. Had the positions been reversed he'd have been suspicious himself.

"I'm staying at the hotel," the sandy man said. "Room four-ten. I'll expect to hear from you. I'll expect to hear from you without fail."

BARDON LAMONTE was certain he was being followed. He twisted and turned, taking back streets, pausing in doorways, trying to locate his pursuer. But try as he might, he had no luck.

It was instinct rather than knowledge that made him so certain. He tried to laugh it off and failed. He wondered if it were one of Cesar Martins' men or someone else, someone from John Farquer or perhaps del Torro. The thought made him shiver a little, not for himself, but for Carmen. He hated to lead them to Carmen, and yet he had to find the girl, the sooner the better, since she would have had less time to dispose of the papers she had stolen from Marie Trent.

He watched the dark street along which he had come a few minutes before. There were people on it, natives, going their own ways. Not one did anything to arouse his suspicions.

I'm getting old, he thought, and jumpy. I belong in a home somewhere, in a wheel chair. I'm imagining things. There's no one following.

He went on, reaching the address which Katts had given him. It was an old house, its wall directly on the sidewalk, broken

only by an iron grilled door. He judged that all the rooms must face a patio since there were no windows on the road.

He knocked, waiting in the shadows, again looking back at the deserted street. The door was thick. He could hear nothing from the inside until the door opened suddenly and he saw Carmen framed in the oblong of light.

He didn't know whom she had expected. Certainly not him, for her surprise was obvious, both in her voice and face.

"Why, Colonel!"

He was almost rude as he stepped in quickly, pushing her out of the way and closing the door. "Sorry to be abrupt, but I've had the feeling I was followed and I didn't want the open door to advertise the house. They might miss me in the darkness."

She was nervous although she concealed it well. "They?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. It might be men from Air Americus, or it might be the police."

Her eyes widened at that. "The police, why should they follow you? This is not their affair."

"Isn't it?" Lamonte asked, watching her closely. "A man was murdered tonight and my best friend is under arrest. That gives the police some interest in my movements."

"Oh, in your movements." She seemed relieved. They were still standing in the hallway.

He said, "Shall we go inside, where it must be more comfortable? We have several things to discuss."

She met his eyes directly. "I know of nothing that I have to discuss with you, Colonel."

His voice roughened with anger. "You're making a mistake," he warned, "if you think we'll sit quietly by and let you sell the papers you stole to Air Americus, or to del Torro."

Her lips curved a little, as if she found him amusing. "And just how do you propose to recover those papers, Colonel?"

He shrugged. "I'm not the heroic type," he admitted. "I don't go rushing into lady's homes, tearing up the furniture and stripping off their clothes in a wild search. But I do work for Joseph Prim. I haven't told him yet what has happened, but Miss Trent did and, believe me, he is capable of going to any lengths to recover those identity papers."

"I'm not afraid of Mr. Prim," she said, "nor of you, nor of the girl who calls herself Miss Trent."

"Who is Miss Trent," he corrected.

She shook her head. "Colonel, I'm disappointed in you. Despite the people with whom you're associated, I thought you fairly decent and fairly smart. I find you neither. You insist in this absurd fraud even when it is obvious the game is played out."

Something in her words shook his assurance a little. "I don't understand," he said. "Are you trying to tell me that the girl I know as Marie Trent isn't Marie Trent at all? If so, how do you know? How can you be sure? Of course del Torro would deny her. He stands to lose everything if she establishes her identity. If he told you—"

"Poor Juan," she said, and her smile went through him as he thought, *She loves the guy—no matter what he is, she is still in love with him.*

"It wasn't Juan who told me," she went on. "He told me nothing, but I'm certain, Colonel, nonetheless. You see, I am Marie Trent."

CHAPTER FIVE

A Busted Flash

BARDON LAMONTE prided himself on never showing surprise, but he showed it now. He stared at the girl in the red dress and suddenly he began to laugh. She hadn't expected laughter. She looked startled, then angry.

"You don't believe me?"

The strange part was that he did believe her. He realized that it was because he wanted to. He hadn't liked the thought of her being del Torro's woman. It was much better that she was the scar-faced man's cousin. It was funny. "I believe you," he said. "I'm glad to believe you."

She still did not understand. He made no effort to enlighten her; instead he said, "Shall we go in and talk this over. I still think we have several things to straighten out."

For a moment she hesitated, then smiled. "You're the darn'dest person, Colonel. You're on the other side of the fence, fighting me. Even now I realize that I probably made a mistake, telling you who I am."

"Perhaps," he said. "Perhaps not."

She looked at him for an instant longer, then turned and led the way down a long passage and into an old-fashioned room. He paused, surprise again showing on his face and she said, "My father's house. It's been empty since his death. My attorneys leased it from del Torro."

"Then he doesn't know who you are?"

Her mouth quirked. "He doesn't. He thinks I'm an American singer who's fallen captive to his charms. A fast worker, my cousin. He came around the second night after I'd moved in. He pretended interest as my landlord, but it was easy to see that he hoped for more personal favors."

Lamonte grinned and seated himself in one of the old brocaded chairs. "Del Torro is going to feel a little sold when he finds out who you are."

She grinned in return. "You don't know the half of it," she told him, "and besides, it's going to be very inconvenient to Juan for me to turn up alive. He has no money of his own. He might even be forced to go to work."

Lamonte leaned forward. It was good to talk to this girl. He felt more at home than he had since arriving in San Jose. "But what is the idea of playing dead? Wouldn't it have been much simpler to merely come forward, announce your identity and let matters take their course than go into this disguise?" He was looking at the red dress which had served as her costume for her number with the band.

"It isn't a disguise," her voice was indignant. "I am a singer, and everything I told your Miss Trent is the truth. I've worked on radio, in pictures and in Broadway shows."

"But the name Carmen?"

"Is my stage name. You see Colonel, while I was in college our dramatics teacher noticed my voice. I wanted to go on and study singing, but my father wouldn't hear of it. He said that he didn't want his name dragged into all the cheap theaters. He ordered me to come home. I refused, but I also refused to use his name. I called myself Carmen and no one but my attorneys knew where I was, and they had strict orders to answer all inquiries with the statement that I was dead. I meant merely that I was dead as far as my father and brother were concerned. It never entered my head that anyone else would ever have any interest in locating me."

"But didn't you know of your father's death, of your brother's?"

"My father, yes, but my brother was in service at the time. He didn't write to me. He'd never forgiven me, either, so I made no effort to communicate with him. I didn't know that he had been killed or that the court had declared me legally dead until a few days ago."

He stared at her. It seemed almost incredible; yet under the circumstances it was easy to understand. "How did you finally find out?"

"My attorneys got suspicious," she said. "Three different private detective agencies had been making inquiries about me. My lawyers in turn made some inquiries about them and found that they were working for three separate airlines."

"They communicated with me, and I remembered the franchise, but I thought my brother was still alive. However, I ordered them to check up quietly, still without admitting I was alive or that they represented me. They did so and found that Air Americus had gone into court down here, that I was declared legally dead."

"That angered me and I told them to investigate the other two interested companies with the idea of doing business with them. We were about to approach Joseph Prim, when our detective reported that Prim was introducing a girl as Marie Trent and that he was sending her to San Jose to claim the franchise. You can imagine how I felt then. I decided to come down here myself and look the ground over. I had my agent find out if any American band was playing in San Jose. Katts and the boys were and I got a three week booking with them. It helped pay expenses and it allowed me to come down here and look around without anyone's getting suspicious."

"And in the meanwhile," Lamonte said. "Your lawyers wrote to Empire Air and made a date for you to meet the representative here. Isn't that right?"

The girl looked startled. "How'd you know that?"

He almost said, *I'm a gremlin*, then didn't. "Stacy-Smith, their representative mistook my Miss Trent for you. He was quite put out at what he thought was a run-around on our part. So you're going to do business with the English?"

She shrugged. "Perhaps. My lawyers pointed out that both Air Americus and Joseph Prim had a large stake in the game, that they had unlimited funds behind them, and that their scruples might not be of the highest." She stopped, flushing, as if she had only realized that she was talking to Prim's representative.

Lamonte grinned, reading her mind. "Keep going, kid. I agree with you entirely."

Again surprise registered in her dark eyes. She said slowly, "My lawyers suggested that since I didn't have the money myself it might be wise to ally myself with the English firm so that I'd have support. I—Colonel, will you answer a question?"

"If I can," he said.

"I don't understand you." She was speaking slowly, feeling for words. "I—well, you're on the other side of the fence. I'm here to upset your game, and you don't act angry at all. Either you're a very clever man, or a fool, or—"

"Or?" He was watching her, thinking how like a little girl she looked.

"Or honest."

He grinned. "Is it so hard to believe that I might be honest?"

She regarded him candidly.

"Working for Joseph Prim, yes. It certainly wasn't honest to bring that girl down here and pretend that she was me."

"Perhaps I thought she was Marie Trent," he said. "After all, there wasn't any reason I should doubt her."

Evidently that possibility had not occurred to the girl in red. "But you didn't—you couldn't have—"

He was patient now. "I never heard of Marie Trent, or the franchise until I walked into Prim's office. I'm a hired man only, and it seems that Prim played me for a fool—no," he corrected himself. "I'm not certain that he did, or that he even meant to go into court and establish his bogus heir. I'm beginning to think that perhaps he was playing a little poker with John Farquer and this Air Americus crowd. I think he was hoping for a settlement with them which would have allowed him to share the airport and the traffic. He must have realized that even though he established this girl as the heir, there would always be danger of an exposure. He was playing to frighten Farquer with her and with me, since Farquer would guess that my presence still would carry weight down here."

Marie Trent was incredulous. "You mean he sent this girl down here, hired you, and made certain Air Americus knew all about it, hoping to scare them into a trade? But why should they trade?"

"Why not?" Lamonte pointed out. "They weren't in any too good a position themselves. They'd had you declared dead, but they weren't at all certain you were. The more trouble, the more publicity, the more likelihood that they'd lose. They weren't even certain that the girl Prim hired wasn't you although I realize that they suspected she was a phoney."

"But now, if you lose, you won't get paid anything?"

He shrugged and suddenly he realized he did not care, that the immediate exigencies had taken over the whole situation, and that this girl was a part of them. He told her about the murdered Beureon, about Lieutenant Martin's suspicions, about the arrest of Trask.

She listened exactly as if she weren't, as she had earlier put it, on the other side, and then said, "But Mr. Prim will help you. He has power, he—"

"Depending on Joseph Prim," Lamonte told her, "is like betting a busted flush in a poker game. It isn't even a good bluff. He'd let me roast in oil rather than turn his hand. In fact I suspect he'd even add some coal to the fire." He grinned. "But there's nothing for you to worry about in that—you've got troubles of your own. My counsel would be to somehow arrange to meet Prim, Farquer, and the English Johnny. Have a couple of good local attorneys present. Tell them who you are, and let them squabble among themselves. Either Prim or Farquer might try and fight you alone, but with them all there, they won't do anything to jeopardize their

chances of flying into San Jose. They'll eat out of your hand."

"But you?" she demanded, rising also. "What about you?"

"I'm going out to think," he said. "I'm all washed up on this deal. I want no more part of it. From now on, I'll try and figure a way to get Al free. In a pinch I can go to the consul and—" he stopped as the knocker sounded, making a dull, thugging sound throughout the house.

THEY looked at each other in strained silence for a moment. Then Lamonte said in a low tone, "Expecting visitors?"

She shook her head. Her eyes were dark pools, deep and worried. "No one would come here."

"Del Torro?"

"I told him never to come here."

Lamonte remembered his earlier sensation, the feeling that he was being followed. "Let me answer it. Have you a gun in the house?"

She shook her head and he wished he had not asked the question. The fear in the dark eyes was more pronounced. "What is it?"

He didn't tell her. There was no use in building up that fear. "Probably nothing," he assured her. "Someone with the wrong house number, perhaps. You stay here. I'll go." The knock came again, insistent and prolonged.

She started to protest but he gave her no chance, turning into the hall and moving quickly to the door. He listened for an instant and heard an indistinct murmur. Evidently there were more than one. He pulled the small bar as quietly as he could, then jerked the door open, depending on surprise, meaning to try and reshut the door if necessary.

Juan del Torro almost fell into his arms. The man must have been leaning against the panel. Lamonte caught him instinctively and held him, looking across the dark head into the startled eyes of John Farquer.

For a full moment nothing was said. Surprise held them in silence; then del Torro, who was a little drunk wrenched himself free and stepped back furiously. "The American who stares. What are you doing here?"

For once in his life John Farquer was embarrassed. "I say, del Torro, perhaps we should—"

The scar-faced man cut him short angrily. "I'm going to find out what goes on here." He tried to push past Lamonte without success. He found himself heaved back into John Farquer's arms.

Lamonte put all his dislike of the man into the shove. Del Torro stumbled, righted himself and grabbed for his pocket. John Farquer

sounded scared. "Watch out. He's got a gun."

Bardon Lamonte put all he had into the blow. His fist struck the side of del Torro's jaw and pain shot up his forearm.

Del Torro's head snapped back, and he would have fallen had it not been for Farquer, who held him upright in the entrance. Lamonte used the second to wrench the gun from the semiconscious man's pocket.

From behind him the girl said sharply. "Who is it? What's the matter?" She had pressed out into the hall. Then she saw her cousin's white face. "Juan, what are you doing here?"

"Juan's out," Lamonte told her. "I'm afraid his jaw ran into my fist."

For an instant surprise held her. Then she said, "Get him inside. Do you want to attract the police with a ruckus on my doorstep?"

Lamonte had forgotten the police. He glanced at John Farquer. The head of Air Americus looked startled, then concerned. "That would be bad," he muttered. "Very bad."

Without words Lamonte stooped, caught del Torro around the knees and carried him back into the living room, the girl and Farquer following. He heard Farquer's apologies.

"We—I didn't mean to barge in. Del Torro said he wanted me to meet a friend. I didn't know, Miss—"

They had reached the old room. Lamonte deposited his still unconscious burden on a chair and turned around.

"Miss Trent," he said. "Miss Marie Trent, I'd like you to meet John Farquer." He watched the man's face.

For an instant Farquer didn't get it; then he did a perfect double take. "Miss Marie—not the Marie Trent?"

Lamonte found he was enjoying himself. "A ghost," he told the Air Americus man, a ghost that you created in court."

Farquer's eyelids had dropped so that they were hoods. "But this isn't the girl who dined with you at the hotel."

"Did I ever tell you she was Marie Trent?" Lamonte asked.

"But it was understood at the hotel—"

"By your spies," Lamonte grinned. "Yes, Joseph Prim had some idea of establishing her as Marie Trent."

Farquer was looking at the girl. Everyone in the room had forgotten del Torro. He called attention to himself by groaning.

"Poor Juan. I'll get some water, a cloth." The girl was gone.

Farquer looked at the semiconscious man and there was no liking in his face. "Did he know who she was?"

Lamonte shook his head. "I fear del Torro is in for an unpleasant surprise."

"No doubt." Farquer's mouth was a tight line beneath his clipped mustache. "I find it a little disconcerting myself." He broke off as Marie Trent returned to the room with a basin of water. She placed it on the floor and laid the damp cloth across del Torro's eyes. He stirred, moaning softly.

Farquer said, not too kindly, "Snap out of it, Juan. Your neck isn't broken—yet."

The girl changed the cloth. Then she brought some wine, appealing to Lamonte. "Help me."

He held up del Torro's head while she poured the wine between his lips. He spluttered, gagged once and his eyes came open. At first they were vacant; then reason and anger returned at the same time and he said to Lamonte, weakly, "You shall pay for this."

Farquer said sharply, "Save your heroics."

Del Torro struggled from the chair. "I will not be talked to thus. I will revoke the lease. I will—"

Farquer said. "Maybe you don't understand. This girl you were so interested in, this girl you insisted that I meet, is your cousin, Marie Trent."

For a long moment the words did not seem to register on del Torro's slow brain. Then his dark eyes widened, his mouth went slack and he sank back slowly into his chair.

After a minute he muttered. "She's lying—Marie is dead." The court said so."

Farquer shrugged, looking at Lamonte. "People often refuse to realize when they're whipped." He turned to the girl. "Air Americas isn't that way. I presume you can establish your identity?"

She nodded.

"Then you're the one we want to do business with. We'll be glad to lease from you under the same terms which we've been paying your cousin. In fact, since I doubt whether you can ever recover what he has already collected, we'll be glad to make up that sum as a kind of penance for what we've done."

CHAPTER SIX

Death Is My Business

"NO, YOU don't," said Joseph Prim, and pushed his way in from the hall. He was followed a moment later by the dark-haired girl who had accompanied Lamonte to San Jose. "You deal with him—" the spider man was as near excitement at Lamonte had ever seen him—"and you will lose everything. He is a thief, and a scoundrel to boot."

He stopped in the center of the room, glaring at Farquer with unconcealed hate.

Lamonte caught his arm. "Take it easy,

Prim. Where'd you come from? How'd you get in here?"

"Marchmont took care of the lock. He's used to such things." Prim pulled his arm free and stared at Lamonte with contempt. "We followed you, Colonel. We didn't trust you, you see, and it's fortunate we didn't. We knew we were being double-crossed when we saw del Torro and John Farquer. We came in—we heard. How long have you known that she—" he pointed a skinny finger at the startled Carmen—"was Marie Trent?"

"Less than an hour."

"You lie," said Joseph Prim. "You were playing a double game, Colonel. You've sold out to John Farquer. You've—"

Lamonte wondered why he wasn't angry. Had someone else called him a liar he'd have tossed him through the window. Prim he found amusing. The man's rage was so obvious, and he seemed so helpless in the face of what had happened. But he wasn't helpless, Lamonte knew. He had Marchmont. Marchmont was standing behind the girl, just inside the doorway. Marchmont looked anything but helpless. He was as dangerous as an atomic bomb.

Farquer said, "Look here, Prim—" There was dislike in his eyes, but he had himself under control. "This won't do. Name calling isn't going to get you anywhere and I assure you that Colonel Lamonte had nothing to do with us. It was an—"

"Save your breath," said Prim shortly. "I know a double-cross when I see one."

"You should," John Farquer told him. "You've indulged in it often enough, but calling names still isn't going to help you now. This is a straight business proposition. Make your bid to Miss Trent and I assure you that we will double it. We're in San Jose to stay and Prim Air is out."

They eyed each other like two strange dogs, wary, waiting for the other's next move. Lamonte thought, *This isn't getting anyone anywhere, and it certainly isn't helping me, or Trask. . . .*

He looked at them and at the other girl—the one who had called herself Marie Trent, and of whom he had just become aware in the shadows beyond Marchmont. Her face had a white, set look. She was, he knew, out of it. No longer did she play any part in this game. He looked at her mouth, straight and hard—still that of a girl used to getting what she went after, but she hadn't gotten it in this instance. He wondered what her name really was. It didn't matter, of course. Names weren't important, but something else was of the utmost importance and he didn't mean to lose sight of it in the struggle for control of the San Jose Airport.

"Now that we're here together," he said,

"There's one small thing that I'd like to bring up."

They turned to look at him. There was something compelling in his tone which demanded their attention. It was John Farquer who said, "And what's that, Lamonte?"

He found that he was liking Farquer better. The man might be ruthless, perhaps without scruples, but he faced facts. He didn't twist and dodge as Joseph Prim did. "Murder," Lamonte said. "A man was killed at the hotel." He looked at the girl, standing behind Prim. "Killed in your room."

"What's that to me?" Farquer was bored, or sounded bored.

"Or me," said Joseph Prim. "I warned you when you took the job that if you got in trouble it was your funeral, not ours. Certainly you don't expect us to come to your rescue now, after what has happened here."

"I wasn't aware," said Bardon Lamonte, "that I needed rescuing. I was thinking of Miss—what is your name, now that it has ceased to be Trent?"

For a moment he thought that she did not mean to answer him. Her mouth tightened a little, her eyes got narrower and her face was a mask. But she was nervous. He knew she was nervous and the knowledge heartened him.

Then she smiled. It wasn't a very good smile and it had cost her effort, but her tone was light. "Shall we say Smith, Colonel, or Brown, or Green. But you won't find my phone number listed under any of those, if that's what you're interested in."

He gave her a smile in return, and he sensed that it was as unreal as her own. "I actually wasn't thinking of your phone number, Miss Smith. Unless I miss my guess greatly, you can be reached at the Fort from now on, unless this murder is cleared up. Our friend, the good police Lieutenant Cesar Martins, is not one to let foreigners leave the country when he has an unsolved murder on his hands. There will be questions, many questions. This whole miserable story of deceit and deception will come out."

She was still smiling. "But that does not involve me in murder, my friend. It involves me in nothing, since nowhere in public did I ever claim that I was Marie Trent, and you know that I could have had nothing to do with the death of that poor unfortunate man. I was in your room at the time."

"Were you?" said Lamonte. He had the sensation of talking against a blank wall, of struggling without aid, without anyone caring save himself—yes, and Al Trask, of course. "You told me you were in my room, but telling me that and proving it are not the same thing."

The girl's face hardened. Her mouth was an

ugly line and he wondered how he could ever have thought of her as beautiful.

"Prove that I wasn't," she said. "Just because you and that sergeant friend of yours are in a jam, you can't drag me in. I won't let you drag me in."

"I'm not dragging you in," he said, and turned to John Farquer. "Isn't it true that Beureon, the lawyer who was killed, worked for Air Americus?"

Farquer was cautious. "We may have employed him at one time or another but—"

"You can save the arguments for Lieutenant Martins," Lamonte warned. "He knows that Beureon was your spy, and he suspects that Beureon was searching Miss—Smith's and my room for information to sell to you."

"But not on my orders."

"I don't care on whose orders," Lamonte said brusquely. "He saw me leave the hotel and sent a bellhop to decoy Al Trask from my room, so that he could search it. Next he moved to the girl's. It might have been empty—he had to find out."

"It was," she said. "Don't you remember? I told you a bellhop came and told me to come to your room."

He looked at her. "I'm sorry," he said. "I checked with the bell captain. He questioned the boys. One recalls being sent to my room with a message from a man who answers Beureon's description, but I could find none that went to your room."

"But you're wrong." She sounded nervous for the first time. "You just haven't found the right boy, for one did come to my room. I swear that he did. I left at once. I went to your room. I waited and Sergeant Trask found me there. He went to my room and found the dead man."

Lamonte nodded. "That's what Trask said," he admitted, "but there's one small thing about your story. How do we know that the man wasn't already dead in your room before you left it?"

"He wasn't, he—" she fumbled and Lamonte felt a surge of exultation.

He hadn't actually expected to turn up anything when he started this questioning. It was a last desperate effort on his part. And she'd slipped. He could tell by the expression on her face that she had slipped and that she realized it. But he was more interested in Joseph Prim, for the spider man had jumped at the girl's words; just a slight movement, but now he was glaring at her. It gave Lamonte an idea and he went back to the attack.

"SO BEUREON was all right when you left the room, but he was there, wasn't he, and he wasn't alone."

"You're wrong," she said. "He wasn't

there. I didn't mean that. I meant the room was empty. I saw no one save the bellhop."

"Whom we haven't been able to find. Since you won't tell the story, perhaps I should. Perhaps it happened this way. Perhaps our friend, Joseph Prim, after talking to me at the wine shop, became worried. Perhaps he slipped up to your room and was there, talking—perhaps you and he were indiscrete in your conversation, admitting that you were not Marie Trent.

"Beureon arrived outside your door, heard voices and listened, and the good Marchmont, watching as usual, maybe from the end of the hall, closed in, capturing the eavesdropper and shoving him into the room." He was watching her as he spoke and he knew by her play of expression that his guess was correct. She looked astonished, and then stubborn.

"Beureon blustered," he went on. "He probably tried to blackmail Prim with his knowledge, so he sent you away, sent you down to my room, so that if I should return, you could hold me there, make certain that I didn't interfere. But Al Trask came back instead with his story of the bellhop. He was worried, and you had to explain your presence in my room. You said that a bellhop had summoned you, too.

"That was the wrong thing to say. You didn't know Al Trask. Nothing would keep him from going to your room. You tried to stall him, but he wouldn't listen. He went, and you began to worry. Finally you followed him and I found you both there."

She said with dry, stiff lips, "You're wrong, Colonel, all wrong."

But he wasn't through yet. He went on. "Probably Prim and Marchmont meant to wait until dark and then move the body. Certainly they couldn't afford to have it found there and implicate you. But they saw Trask go into the room and the fat was in the fire. It was a question then of what to do. Could they throw the blame on Trask and perhaps me? That seemed the easiest, so they phoned the police with the result that Martins and his merry men arrived."

She didn't answer. Prim gave a cackling laugh. "What an imagination, Colonel, and not one shred of proof—not one little iota."

Lamonte looked at him. He had the impulse to cross the room and step on the man as one would step on a spider.

Instead he said, "My dear Prim, you overlook one thing. You are not in the States where a clever lawyer can twist and turn and handle almost anything. This is San Jose, and Cesar Martins is the law, and our friend Martins has ways of his own that I assure you are quite effective. And you forget your own reason for bringing me here—Martin will listen to me."

"He wouldn't dare. The consul—" the girl's face had lost all color.

Lamonte smiled. "Oh, he'd do nothing crude, nothing that the consul or anyone else could protest. He'd merely hold you as a witness, or an accessory. He'd hold you in a cell which is two hundred years old and was constructed to house pirates before they were sent to the block. The cells are very damp. I've seen them. Moisture trickles down the old stone walls and rats—"

"Stop it," there was a note of hysteria in the girl's voice. "Stop it, I tell you. I—"

Joseph Prim said, "Enough of this." There was decision in his voice. "Marchmont."

The big fair-haired man straightened a little. Lamonte had del Torro's gun in his pocket but he made no effort to touch it. He knew Marchmont could shoot out both his eyes before his fingers ever closed on the grip.

"Wise guy," said Marchmont, uttering one of the few words that Lamonte had ever heard him utter. "You asked for it." There was no expression on his round, full face, but there was a gun in each hand.

Prim glowered. John Farquer said, "You know, you can't get away with anything like this. It isn't done."

Prim turned on him and all the violence of his repressed nature flowed to the surface. "Be still. I hate you." He said it slowly, and distinctly as another man might have cursed. "I hate you, do you hear? It would give me the greatest pleasure to see you dead. Another word and I'll order Marchmont to shoot. You're to blame for this, for all of this. If you hadn't come into San Jose none of it would have been necessary."

"Even the murder?" Lamonte speculated.

Prim glared at him. Del Torro said, somewhat weakly, "I won't stand—" and ceased to speak as Marchmont swung a gun in his direction.

Prim eyed them, and his anger was again under control. Lamonte saw the cool mask slip back into place and he thought, *The spider's up to something. He's had an idea. He's going to try to turn even this situation to his own advantage.*

Prim said, as if in answer to the thought, "Marchmont uses light guns. He likes them, and when you are as good a marksman as he is, a thirty-two is large enough. But it makes little noise, and these walls are thick. We could kill you all, and be gone before it was discovered, long before.

"But I am not a murderer. Beureon was an accident, a silly fool who insisted too long. Marchmont's knife silenced him. Does anyone else wish the same treatment?"

No one spoke, the silence in the room was heavy, intense; it bore in upon them, leaving

each with his own thoughts. Lamonte smiled to himself. *He's up to something*, he thought. *I was right. The man dreads violence. He'd rather make a deal. It was a chance I took; a chance I had to take.*

Prim waited a full minute, then went on. "I see by your faces, that you do not. All right, then. I have an alternative to offer. Miss Trent," he looked at the girl in red. "You hold a franchise for the operation of aircraft in and through the skies over this country. I will pay you a yearly rental, the same that Air Americus has been paying to your cousin. You will convey all rights to me and in return, I will lock you people in. All we need is an hour. A plane is waiting for us. Once we're outside this country they can search for Marchmont. For myself—" he smiled thinly—"I hardly think they would extradite me. After all, at best I am but an accessory."

Farquer started to protest, then was silent, his eyes on the quiet gunman.

The girl looked at Lamonte. "What shall I do?"

He shrugged. "You won't lose anything by signing," he said. "You have to sign with someone, since you own no air line of your own, and you will rescue several very unimportant people by so doing."

She hesitated for a moment. "I hate to be coerced into signing."

"You need not be *señorita*," said Cesar Martins, stepping into the doorway.

THERE was one shot as Marchmont tried to swing around and the man went down, his guns dropping unfired to the carpet.

Lamonte stooped, picked them up and straightened. Cesar Martins gave him a white-toothed smile as he returned his automatic to his pocket. "That is a bad one." He indicated the quiet Marchmont with a jerk of his head. "Ever since he arrived we expected trouble."

Lamonte nodded. "I hope you heard enough to let Al Trask go."

"But certainly," Martins told him, motioning the men who had followed him toward Joseph Prim. "And the girl," he told them. "She is a witness. Take her, but I don't think it necessary she is placed in the damp cell which the Colonel described so well. I think she will talk rather than that, won't you, *señorita*?"

She passed them with head high, silent. Martins sighed. "And so beautiful." He smiled. "It is lucky that my men follow Prim. When he came after you, Colonel, they came after him. A chase you call it, I think." He bowed and was gone.

Del Torro stirred.

"My darling cousin. I am overwhelmed with happiness to find that the stupid court was wrong, that you live."

"I'll bet," she said, and winked at Lamonte. "But I am!" He sounded injured. "Even when I failed to recognize you, I loved you. Now that I know who you are, that love—"

"Skip it," said John Farquer. "Can't you see the little lady has had more than enough of you?" He turned to the girl. "That offer I made still holds. All the money we've paid del Torro and the same monthly amount."

"I don't know." She sank down into a chair, looking very small and very tired. "I will discuss it with you in the morning. I don't want to think now."

He murmured apologies and turned toward the door. "Coming, del Torro?"

The man hesitated, glancing at Lamonte. The girl said, "Colonel Lamonte is remaining. I have several things to discuss with him. If you will be good enough to show them out, Colonel—"

He conducted them along the hall, feeling much as if he were a butler. When he returned Marie Trent was still sitting where he'd left her. She motioned him to a seat.

"I've no right to ask you," she said, "but you know much more about it than I do. Whom should I sign with? Who should hold the franchise?"

He said, "I'm a strange one to ask. After all, technically I suppose I'm still in the employ of Prim Air."

She waved this aside. "You know more about aviation than I do, than my attorneys do. If you held that franchise whom would you sign with?"

"No one," he said. "The way I feel about it the air should be free and open to everyone. Keep your airport, rent facilities to anyone who wants to come in. It will be doing this country a service—all of South America a service. You will make as much from the rental, from hangars and so forth, as you would if you gave someone an exclusive lease."

She smiled. "That's what I wanted to hear. Would you run it for me, Colonel?"

He said, "You're offering me a job? Is that it?"

"Taking care of Marie Trent's interests," she smiled. "Isn't that why you came down here in the first place? Of course I realize that the Marie Trent you came with was more attractive—"

"I like this one," he said. "If I had to pick a boss I'd pick—"

He reached for her hand and she came to him without further need for words. This was right, Lamonte thought. He'd known it would be right from the first moment he'd seen her in the lobby.



PERIL'S

Lorgan's body jerked to the impact of the bullet. . . .

PAYOFF

Lucky Tabor had it all figured out—a stiff in time saves any number of payoffs—but he had to go out of this world to find his alibi!

By

Lance Kermit

THE windshield swipes fought a vigorous battle against the rain. *Click-clack, click-clack, click-clack*—like a metronome set for a fast march. A march to the morgue; every beat brought Lucky Tabor nearer to murder.

But his grip on the wheel was comfortable, relaxed. Murder was like anything else. You went into it with your eyes open, your brain alert—not tied up in a mental knot of terror because of the risks of the game. You were ready to take advantage of whatever breaks came your way. And, inevitably, they came. That was why those who moved furtively

through the city's night called you "Lucky" Tabor. . . .

Abruptly, his foot left the throttle, touched the brake. The sleek convertible slowed, stopped beside the man who walked, huddled against the storm, beside the road.

Lucky Tabor opened the door. "Ride, mister?" he said.

Gratefully, the man got in. He was about fifty, with the look of a substantial small-town citizen—the sort who lived a rigidly quiet life in a place like Mountain View, but came once in a while to the city to blow off steam. And lost plenty to Tabor across the green tables of his Fortune Club. This man had a well-fed look, but, somehow, his eyes wavered timidly.

"Bad night for driving," he said.

Tabor nodded. "Worse for walking."

His passenger agreed. "Guess that's right. But I don't mind. Had to deliver a car to a customer. The boys finished up a ring job late and Mrs. Grimes needed the car. I've got the Master Garage in town. Here's my card."

Tabor smiled a little at the man's obvious pride, took the card and glanced at it.

"Mr. R. G. Huntley, Owner and Manager," he read. But his mind was racing. He hadn't picked the man up out of any kindness; this was one of his breaks.

That was the difference between Lucky Tabor and those who were not so lucky.

But his passenger was speaking again. "Yes sir, best little garage in the state. Got some mighty good men working for me. Say, mister, your motor's a little rough. These high-lift cam jobs are hard on valves—if you're going to be in Mountain View a day or so, why not let the boys smooth it up for you?"

"I might do that," Tabor said. "Got a lot of business these days, I suppose?"

"Well—not too much in a place as small as Mountain View. I've been hoping I could move to the city, open a big garage. But that takes a lot of money."

Tabor exulted inwardly. The breaks—it was uncanny, the way they played into the hands of a man alert enough to recognize them!

He gave his passenger a confiding smile. "How'd you like to make a couple of hundred without lifting a hand?" he asked.

Huntley looked startled for a moment. "Well—" he said slowly, "I'm in business to make money—"

Tabor permitted a smirk to tug at the corner of his mouth.

"I'm having a little wife trouble—you know how it is. I'm going to put my car in your garage tonight. You're going to do a little rush job on it, keep it overnight. Give me a receipted bill in the morning. Only the car won't be in your garage."

"What's that? It won't be—"

Nodding while the idea soaked into the garageman's head, Tabor pulled out a roll of bills, thumbed off two hundreds.

Huntley's eyes wavered to the money, then didn't waver any more. He reached for the bills.

Tabor smiled in satisfaction. These small-townners were like anybody else—flash some money under their noses, and their consciences curled up and got in out of the rain.

A little money. But it had taken a lot to keep Frank Lorgan in line. Too much. And now Lorgan was yelling for more.

Well, the alibi was set—and tonight Tabor was paying off for the last time. He pressed his left arm down against the little automatic that nestled in his shoulder holster, just to make sure of its presence.

THE convertible purred through the wetness. Down a long hill, past a big building with rows of lighted windows.

Alert to everything, Tabor asked, "What's that building, Huntley?"

"Hah! They call that the State Hospital. But in Mountain View we call it the Squirrel Cage."

"Asylum?"

Huntley nodded. "They've got quite a collection up there. Poor devils that are all crossed up. One old gent does everything three times. Another one thinks he's the inventor of television, sends long letters to the newspapers telling people how to stick millions of phonograph needles into radio cabinets and see a television picture of the genius inventor—the letters never get printed, of course. Another thinks he's an undertaker. Every time he catches someone asleep he starts fixing him up for burial."

"The word gets around, in a small town," Tabor said.

"Oh, we see 'em in town all the time—the non-violent ones. They're harmless, long as you let them go ahead and do whatever fool thing they want. Folks in town have been tipped off to humor them, help them along. Funny how they can be perfectly all right on everything except their one quirk. The doctors let them have a lot of freedom—some new kind of treatment. They call it some therapy."

Tabor shuddered a little, stepped on the throttle.

The convertible swung into the street of Mountain View, stopped. Huntley started to get out, but Tabor said, "One thing more."

"Yes?"

"I've got some friends in the city. Some of them are pretty rough characters. If they thought someone took my money and then

didn't carry through his end of the bargain, they might come up here. So no matter what happens, my car was in your garage tonight. Got that?"

"Y-yes. Yes, of course! You can depend on me!"

Huntley's eyes wavered; his hand shook as he reached for the door handle.

Tabor grinned as he watched Huntley hurry along the sidewalk. Handling folks was easy—just throw a scare into them. Most men had their price, and he had yet to meet one who couldn't be made to worry.

He swung the convertible around a corner, parked it on a dark, unpaved street, got his bag out of the rumble and walked to the town's only hotel.

"I want a single—a quiet one," he told the sleepy-eyed kid behind the desk. "My car let me down. Had to have the Master Garage send out a tow-car for me. While it's being fixed I'm going to catch up on sleep, so I don't want anybody disturbing me. Got that?"

The young clerk was well trained—he lifted his eyebrows a little, but nodded. "Yes, sir."

In his room, Tabor smoked a cigarette, slowly. Then he eased out into the hall, locked the door behind him, moved silently and unseen down the rear stairs and out through a fire exit.

Minutes later he was in the convertible again, streaking up the road that led to Coffin Lake.

Everything was set. With the breaks coming his way, he had an alibi on ice, just in case he needed it. Every angle was covered.

LORGAN met him at the door of the rustic cabin. There was a fire in the huge, rough-stone fireplace; a tall drink beside the D.A.'s easy chair. Lorgan was a big man with a shock of snow-white hair. An imposing figure of a man, with a voice that could hypnotize the voters—you had to get close to him to see the cold ruthlessness of his eyes, the solid greed that was the mainspring of him.

No one in the city—except those upon whom he preyed—knew that he owned this cabin. He came here alone, and only on those weekends when the payoffs were due.

"Well, Tabor," he boomed, stepping back to admit the gambler. "Decided to pay me a visit after all, eh? Been doing some thinking, have you?"

"Sure," Lucky Tabor retorted. "I've been thinking that you've bled me white, Lorgan. You've taken every cent of my profit for the last six months! Now you want to gouge deeper."

Lorgan shrugged. "You're not a dumb one, Tabor. Figure it out for yourself. It's worth something to you to stay in business. And if

you don't play ball I'll have the boys raiding your place every night for a month! I'll slap injunctions all over your door. I'll raise a howl of righteousness that'll splash across every front page in town—nice touch, that, with an election coming up. People will say the D. A.'s on the job! So in lieu of the benefit I'd get from that, you can make a little extra contribution to my campaign fund, eh?"

Tabor hoped that his chill fury didn't show in his eyes. Damn this pompous, grasping son-of-a-bitch, riding a perfect setup for every cent it would pay!

Tabor said, "All right. Here goes another payoff, then. But I didn't get to the bank in time—haven't got the cash. Got a pen?"

Lorgan turned toward a desk.

Tabor whipped out his gun, fired. Once.

Frank Lorgan's body jerked to the impact of the bullet, bowed back, like a spring drawn suddenly to the breaking point. Then, as a gurgling scream of agony ripped from his lips he swung slowly around to face his killer.

Lorgan's eyes, for that brief and terrible instant, held a turmoil of pain, rage, despair. "You dirty little—" he gasped out. Then his eyes rolled crazily upward, and his big body sagged, struck the desk and upset it, went down with a crash.

Tabor, more shaken than he would have thought possible, dug for a handkerchief with trembling fingers. He wiped the gun, carefully, to remove all fingerprints.

Then he tossed the weapon into a corner. Let them find it. The D. A. had many enemies—and that rod was registered in the name of one of them. A snarling little small-time sports promoter, the brother of a man the D. A. had sent to the death house.

The sports promoter would have no alibi for tonight; one of Tabor's sleek hostesses was seeing to that.

Tabor took one last, swift look around, and got out of there. All he had to do, now, was keep that garageman in line. Easy!

He crossed the rustic porch. Coffin Lake, under a wan moon, was still. Calm as a grave, with an aura of death in its darkly-timbered shores.

Tabor shuddered, hurried to his car.

THEY were waiting for him, next morning, in the hotel lobby—a towering, slow-moving state trooper, a wizened little local constable. When he came down the stairs they got up and came over to block his path to the door.

"Mr. Tabor?" the trooper inquired. "I'm Joel Bardeen. This is Mr. Sny, the constable here."

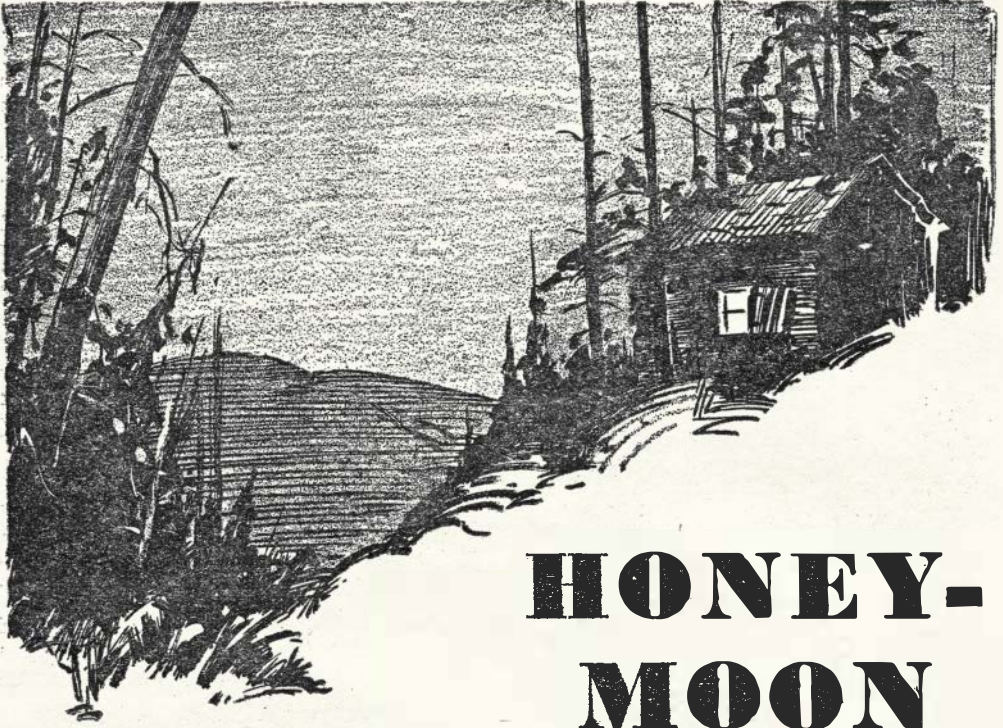
(Continued on page 123)

In her Honeymoon House at Road's End, Jean learned what every young bride should never know, namely, that where two's company—three's a corpse!

By
Wyatt
Blassingame



*Now she was afraid
to go forward, and
afraid not to. . . .*



CHAPTER ONE

Road's End

THE moonlight was very bright but the shadows were dark under the magnolia tree. Andy and Jean had been sitting there in the parked car for a long while and neither of them knew just what time it was, and neither wanted to know. Andy had been talking about the agency which he and Tom Lynn were starting. "If we get the breaks, and we ought to know in the next month or two, we'll make money," he said. "Maybe big money."

Jean's hair was pale on his shoulder. "That's fine," she said.

"And without the breaks we ought to make a living." He looked down at her. "I know where there's a cottage. Not quite as big as the Claymore Jones' shack here." From where they were parked they could see across moon-washed lawns to the huge, white mansion. "But it's got a kitchen, bedroom, and bath," Andy said. "It's even got a living room, just small enough to discourage guests from coming in large numbers."

She had known what he was going to say and she waited, the happiness warm inside her. And then he said, "Well I'll be damned."

She sat upright. "What?"

"Don Juan with red hair. Ken Reaves,

HONEY- MOON IN HELL



easing out the side door of Mrs. Claymore Jones' at this hour of the morning."

"Oh—that's been an open scandal for weeks. Only I thought Mr. Jones had taken her off to South America."

"Probably they are leaving tomorrow and Ken has been over telling her good night." They watched the big man go swiftly across the lawn and out of view. Andy shook his head and sighed. "Just as I was going to ask you to marry me, too."

She said, "Why don't you?"

"Well, I've always rather liked Ken Reaves. But if it was my wife he was after, instead of someone else's—"

"Oh, I like jealous husbands!" Jean said.

Andy said, "Well, since you are accepting my proposal, why don't we discuss a date? Say, about tomorrow."

And that was the way it had been, because they had both known a long while that once Andy was earning a living they would be married. That had been in the spring, and she was remembering it now, walking through an autumn night toward the little cottage which Tom Lynn, Andy's partner, had found for them. The cottage sat back from the lane with a hedge and with trees in the yard, so that she could not tell yet whether the lights were on. Honeymoon House, Andy had called it, which was a very sentimental name, she thought, smiling a little. But what was wrong with sentiment? Weren't you supposed to be young, in love, and sentimental—once?

She went up the small, flagged walk and she could see now that the lights were on. That meant Andy was home. Pleasure touched her with a feel like that of sunshine on bare skin. It was a good thing to be in love with your husband, she thought. She whistled the clear three-noted call that she and Andy used, and pushed open the door.

Andy was asleep on the sofa in the living room. She said, "Wake up, sleeping beauty. You can't stay there all night."

He didn't move, or open his eyes. Jean took off her coat and hat, ran her fingers through her blonde hair. She said, "Wake up, Andy," and went over and put her hand on his shoulder to shake him.

And then it seemed to her that her hand grew slowly cold and heavy. The coldness moved out of her hand and through her body, as if her heart had stopped beating and the blood stopped flowing in her veins, grown cold and thick. Her lips were parted, but without sound now. She stood there and watched the drop of blood move slowly out of the corner of Andy's mouth and onto the already dark splotch on the sofa.

"Andy!" she said. She went on her knees beside him, her face close to his. "Andy, darling!"

His eyes opened and he looked at her, but it was as if he were looking through a mist and could not see her. Then his lips parted and a little stream of blood spilled out across his cheek. "Jean!" The word was thick with blood.

He tried to sit up. He raised his head several inches; then it fell back. He tried again and the strain, the tremendous effort that he made was visible in his face and in the sound of his breathing. She watched him as though she were frozen, wanting to help but unable to move.

"You—" Andy said. The mist was clearing from his eyes and there was a look of frantic

desperation in them. "You—he'll kill—you! Jean—" His head fell back on the sofa. His breathing was almost like a scream, like a grown man screaming in agony.

She put her arms around him. She said, "Be still, darling. Be quiet. I'll call a doctor. You've been hurt. Be quiet, darling."

"No!" He was trying to raise his head again. He was clinging to her, pulling against her. He got his head inches off the sofa and the blood from his mouth trickled downward now across his chin. "Tom Lynn," he said. He said it quite clearly. Then the blood was in his mouth again and for a moment the things he said were unintelligible. Then, "You saw. You saw him. He'll kill—you!" His head fell back. His hands which had been clinging to her shoulders grew lax and slid away.

SHE was never able to recall the hours that followed. She was in a state of hysteria, but it was an immobile, frozen hysteria that could find no relief in tears. There were police present and she must have called them, although she had no memory of doing so. She sat in a chair, holding to its arms, her face blank and rigid. She answered police questions, though sometimes they had to repeat the questions over and over to make her hear, sitting there staring at a bare wall and through it into some vast darkness.

"Jean Clark. Mrs. Jean Clark. He is—he was—my husband."

"I went to a picture show. He was working late."

"He had no enemies. Why should he? Why should anyone hate Andy?"

The policeman said, "Then you have no idea of who might have done this?" She did not answer, but the police were accustomed to that now. The tall, balding man with the sad face repeated his question.

She said, "Tom Lynn killed him."

There were more questions, carefully put, the police watching her, waiting, asking again and again.

"They were friends. They were in business together. I don't know why Tom would kill him."

They were quiet, grouped close around her. The bald man put his questions slowly, but she did not look at him. She did not look at any of them, only the blank wall and whatever it was she could see beyond.

"Tom Lynn killed him. Andy told me. Yes, he said it quite clearly. He said Tom would kill me too."

They did not leave her in the cottage, and later she was grateful for that. She realized quite vaguely that it was a hotel room to which they had taken her. No, she did not want them to call a friend to stay with her. She had rather be alone.

"There will be a policeman in the hall outside," the tall man said. "You'll be quite safe."

She gave no sign that she heard him, standing in the center of the room, her face bloodless, her eyes too wide and dark and sightless. "We don't have any regular policewomen," the tall man said. "I could get my wife to stay with you. It might be good if you had someone to talk to."

"No, thank you."

He felt sorry for her, and there wasn't anything he could do. He turned away. As he opened the door she said, "How did it happen?"

"M'am?"

"How was he killed?"

It took him a moment to understand what she meant, to realize that her husband had died in her arms without her knowing the cause of his death. And now he did not want to be the one to tell her and there was no way out.

"He was stabbed in the back with an icepick."

He had been stabbed several times and the icepick left in the kitchen sink, its steel damp with blood, but the policeman did not add this. He could not tell if she had heard him, for she made no move and her face did not change.

After a moment he went out, closing the door behind him.

Gradually, in the days that followed, the shocked numbness wore away. Her sense of loss was more acute then, her grief more painful than in the early hours when she had been too dazed to feel. And with this increasing pain and grief came a hatred for Tom Lynn and a fierce desire to see him charged and convicted of the murder. At times she would even visualize the scene in the death house, see it all as though she were actually standing there against the short brass rail watching Tom be fastened to the electric chair.

But days passed and there was no formal charge. Once he even had the effrontery to telephone her. "Hello—Jean? This is Tom. I—" She had almost fallen. The phone had slipped from her hand, and later, when she recovered and picked it up there was only the empty hum of the wire.

Of the police who talked to her day after day there was only one who stood clear in her mind. His name was Sam Murray, the tall, balding man, fiftyish, with a face as sad as that of a St. Bernard dog. She told him about the phone call. "When are you going to convict him?" she asked. "When will you convict him for murdering my husband?"

He rubbed at the wrinkles in his face with a big, slightly dirty hand. "There's no proof, Mrs. Clark. Mr. Lynn claims he had been in Birmingham that day—which is true. He says he was driving home at the time when—when

it happened. So far we can't prove he was, or wasn't."

"But he gets the agency that he and Andy started together, just when it was beginning to make money. Andy had such high hopes for it."

"Yes ma'am. Mr. Lynn admits the business is going to make money, and on their partnership deal the whole thing is his now. Also, they were insured in one another's favor."

"Well isn't that motive enough?"

"Maybe." The wrinkles in his face ran in arcs from nose to chin and he traced one of them with his finger. "But the insurance was only five thousand dollars. Your husband left you more than that."

"Me?" She stared at him. She had not even thought of the insurance before. "You don't believe that I—"

"No'm. I'm just saying that we've got to have more proof than we do have to convict Mr. Lynn."

"But I know!" she said. "Andy told me."

"That'll help, but it's not enough. Nobody heard your husband except you. A defense lawyer could say you misunderstood. Or made it up."

"Then what kind of proof do you need?"

"Knowledge that he had been to your home that night. Or at least that he was in Montgomery and could have been there. Proof of a disagreement between him and your husband. Something like that."

"And how are you going to get that proof?"

He looked at her sadly. "I don't know," he said.

The next day she moved back to the cottage at Road's End. Her friends had opposed the move; some of them had tried to persuade her to come and stay with them. But she had wanted to go back to the cottage that Andy had called "Honeymoon House." There was a great restlessness upon her now. The numbness of those first days was gone and grief bred an increasing bitterness. Andy had been taken from her and she could never get him back, and now she wanted revenge. She wanted to see the man who had killed Andy killed in turn by the state. An eye for an eye! She was surprised by the savageness of her wish and in some strange way it seemed that she came nearer to its fulfillment by living in the house where Andy had died.

It was the second night back at the house and she was alone in the small living room when the bell jangled. For a moment she thought of refusing to answer; there had been too many callers, some of them motivated by friendship, some by curiosity. She wanted to see no one else tonight. And then, realizing that whoever stood at the door must be able to see her, she went to the door and opened it.

Tom Lynn stood there.

CHAPTER TWO

Let Murder Wait

HER first reaction was surprise, disbelief almost—the next was rage. And then, slowly, starting somewhere in her stomach and working upward toward heart and brain, there was fear. *He'll kill—you!* She had almost forgotten Andy's saying that, but now lone and face to face with him, the fear rose black inside her.

She tried to slam the door shut. He caught it with his left hand, pushed it open, pushing her back with it, and stepped inside. He closed the door and stood with his back to it, a slender man with almost theatrical good looks and black hair. He said, "I want to talk to you, Jean."

"Go away!" The words caught in her throat. She had backed across the room from him.

"The police say you think I killed Andy."

She only stared at him. He said, "Why do you think that?"

"He told me."

"What did he say? Did he say, 'Tom Lynn murdered me?'"

"He told me you killed him."

"What were his words?"

"I can't remember his words. Just your name. I—"

He moved toward her, slowly, his face drawn and hard. "What did he say? Exactly what did he say?"

"I don't—I can't—" From the table beside her she caught up a bronze book end and held it above her head. "Keep away from me!"

He did not stop, moving slowly, his eyes on hers.

The doorbell rang.

Tom Lynn swung around. With a sob Jean ran past him, flung open the door. The man who stood there was big and red haired, with a face half homely, half handsome. He said, "Hello, Jean. I—"

"Come in!" She caught him by the hand, pulling him into the room. She whirled to face Tom Lynn again. "Now will you go? Will you get out of here? Or I'll ask Ken to throw you out!"

The red-haired man looked surprised, slightly embarrassed, glancing from the girl to Lynn. Tom Lynn looked only at the girl, his dark, handsome face flushed.

"I'll go. But before I go there is one thing I want to say. I didn't kill Andy. I liked him—both of you." At the door he said, "Maybe we'll get that straightened out, one of these days." Then, "Good night, Ken." And he was gone.

She had to fight against hysteria. She sat in a chair, holding tight to her nerves, trembling,

and Ken Reaves made a drink in the kitchen and brought it to her. "He came to kill me!" she said. "He wanted to kill me!"

"But why?"

"I don't know why. Why did he kill Andy?"

"There could be reasons for that," Reaves said. "That agency is going to make money, a lot of it. But it's Tom's now. What profit could he get out of another murder?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. I only know what Andy said."

"What did he say, as exactly as you can remember?"

Reaves listened, pushing his fingers through his red hair, frowning. "It doesn't make sense," he said when she had finished. "And yet—Andy was warning you. There's no doubt of that." He walked thoughtfully back and forth across the room. After a moment he stopped, said, "Who is the man outside watching this place?"

"What man? I don't know of anyone."

"I passed twice and he was there both times. Across the street, watching this house."

"It must be a policeman. Mr. Murray, the detective, told me they would look after me."

"That must be who it is," Reaves said. But he was still frowning. "If it is a policeman, why did he let Tom in here—knowing what you have told the police—and do nothing to make sure you were safe?"

She felt the touch of fear again. "Who else could it be?"

"I don't know. And that seems to be the only answer we have to all these questions. But—" he smiled then, and when he smiled it was obvious why women found him attractive—"if the man is still there, I'll learn one answer."

He went out, big and silent, moving easily despite his size. At the hedge he paused until he located the figure across the street and part way down the block. Then he stepped out of the shadows and went straight toward the other man.

When he came up the man said, "I reckon you want to borrow a match, bud."

"No. I wanted to know why you were watching Mrs. Clark's house."

"What's it to you?"

"She's a friend of mine and she wants to know. You're no policeman."

"So what?"

THE man was somewhere in his thirties, Reaves thought, and a little on the seedy side, as well as he could tell in that light. Also, he had a vague memory of having seen the fellow somewhere before, although he couldn't place him.

Reaves said, "Let's go back and let Mrs. Clark have a look at you, since you're so interested in watching her place."

The man seemed to consider this. He had a curious air of being completely self possessed, Reaves thought, as though what was done here was up to him. But after a moment he said, "Why not?" and they went together back to the house.

The man pushed open the door, went in without waiting for Reaves. He said, "Hello, Jean. Your friend here wanted me to come in with him."

She stared at him, a short, thick-chested man in a brown suit that was too old to keep a crease. His face was broad and the flesh looked soft upon it. His nose had been broken at some point in his past. He looked older than he really was, she thought, and wondered why; then she knew it was his eyes; there was all the age of sin and evil in his eyes and in the way he looked at her.

Ken Reaves said, "Do you know him, Jean?"

"I used to know her husband," the man said.

"Oh—" she was trying to remember, sure she had seen him somewhere—"your name's—"

"Dave Kyle."

She remembered then. Andy had wanted some bottles of good whiskey for their wedding party and the only thing available in the state liquor stores at that time had been blends. He had got four bottles of scotch from Dave Kyle and she could remember now what Andy had said at the time. "*A private detective has to make a living somehow, I expect. And Dave has seen better times. . .*" She had asked how Andy happened to know him, but Andy had only smiled and said it would be good scotch and a pleasure to have a drink of it once more.

She said, "Are you trying to learn who—who killed Andy?"

Dave Kyle grinned at her as though between them there was some vast knowledge of evil. "I'm trying to get proof."

It gave her the creeps, the way he looked at her and the sound of his voice. "Who are you working for?" she asked.

"Myself. It don't matter who pays me, I work for myself."

"If you can get proof, I would pay you."

"I'll bet you would." He grinned at her again, and then, still grinning, he turned to Ken Reaves. "Well, bud?"

Reaves said, "Is there anything else you want to ask him, Jean?"

"No."

When Kyle was gone she sank in a chair and put her face in her hands. "He made me feel—unclean," she said, half whispering.

Reaves said, "Who is he?"

She told him what little she knew of Dave Kyle. "It was the way he looked at me," she

added. "As though we shared some awful secret—as though I had killed Andy!"

"I noticed." Reaves began to pace the room again. "Only perhaps that isn't what he meant."

She looked up at him, the fear and grief in her eyes, her face almost haggard now. And he came and stood in front of her. He put out a hand as though to touch her shoulder, and stopped. "Why don't you go away, Jean, until this is all over? Go where no one knows you and where you'll be safe and can rest. Andy tried to warn you. He would want you to go away, Jean, until this is all over—until the police have their man."

It was a good thought. It brought comfort to her, thinking of being somewhere far off, safe, not worrying any more, not even remembering. Just rest—and peace.

"I have some friends in Hawaii," Reaves said. "They could find you a place to stay there."

She thought of the beaches, of the sun, and the rainbows over the mountains. And then suddenly she was thinking of Andy, who would never feel the sunshine again. She couldn't do it.

"No!" she said. She stood up, breathing as though she had been running. "I can't go away yet. The police told me they needed proof that Tom Lyna killed my husband. Well, I'm going to get that proof!"

"Jean!"

"Tom always thought I was pretty." She was talking to herself now. "Maybe he still does. And—oh, Andy—I hope you understand, darling!"

IT WOULD be dangerous. She knew that, but once she had decided what to do she wasted little time. At eleven the next morning she walked into the Clark and Lynn Agency, said hello to a startled secretary and went on into what had been Andy's office. There she began going through his papers, but she scarcely saw them. She was not thinking of what she read, but was waiting, with the tension mounting higher and higher inside her breast.

The door behind her opened. She wanted to turn, to cry out, but she pretended to be absorbed in what she read. The door closed again, and though she had not looked up she knew she was alone with Tom Lynn.

But there was no immediate danger, she told herself. The secretary had seen her come here. He couldn't do anything to her here, now.

"Jean—"

She looked around, pretending surprise. "Hello, Tom."

He stood with his back against the door.

His face was drawn, and just a little too handsome, she thought. "I'm going to take to you," he said.

She had to look away from him to answer, because if she had looked at him her voice might have trembled, he might have seen the hate in her eyes. "That's really why I came here, Tom. Last night, after you left, I kept thinking—"

He stared at her. "You don't believe any more that I killed him?"

"Ken Reaves helped me to understand. Andy didn't really say that you—you—" Her throat closed and she could not finish her sentence. "Perhaps he was saying that I should get you to help me."

"I will help you. I'm doing all I can to learn what really happened that night."

She looked at him, still posed against the door, and she wondered if there had been the hint of a smile in his eyes as he spoke. He came over then and sat with one leg across the edge of the desk and told her very seriously that nothing had shocked him so badly as Andy's death, except learning that she suspected him. "Because we were friends, Jean. You know that."

"Yes." She looked down at her hands, clenched in her lap. "But I was shocked too, almost hysterical. I couldn't think."

He put a hand on her shoulder, and she felt her flesh cringe but made herself hold steady. "It must have been awful for you, Jean. That's why I wanted to help you. Then when I found that you thought I—"

"I've caused you trouble and worry with the police."

"A little trouble. But no worry, because they didn't have anything to go on. I could prove I was in Birmingham so late that I couldn't have got down here in time without an airplane."

She almost jumped and her nails cut her palms, because Tom and Andy had been in the same squadron during the war—they had both been pilots! But he wouldn't be telling her this if it was going to be easy to prove he had got a plane. Or was he laughing at her, sure of himself?

"Will you have lunch with me, Jean? Just to prove there is no more doubt on your part."

She made her hands quit trembling, made her fingers grow lax. "Of course, Tom." And when she raised her head she was smiling at him.

At first she kept remembering that she was sitting across the table from the man who had murdered her husband—and trying to keep that knowledge from showing on her face. She kept trying to smile at him, to make him think she no longer believed him a killer. And by the end of the lunch it was almost easy to smile, because he himself was

apparently relaxed, as pleasant as he had been in the old days when she had liked him and had been glad to have him in business with Andy.

He drove her home. They were a block from the house when she saw the man sitting on the curb and eating an apple. "Tom! That man—see him?"

He looked where she pointed and when he glanced back at Jean his grin was a little crooked. "His name is Dave Kyle. I know him."

"He keeps hanging around here, watching my house! I'm afraid of him."

"Afraid?"

"He knew Andy. I don't know how, but he did. Do you think that he—"

"Why, no," Tom Lynn said. "I don't think that's possible." He reached over and patted her hand. "Kyle is a private detective. I hired him to make sure that nothing happened to you."

She stared at him. "You?"

"Andy warned you against someone. I wanted you watched."

"Oh."

He wanted her watched, wanted to know where she was all the time. But that information could be useful for more than being safe. Fear moved along her spine like a spider, and when she saw there was a police car standing in front of her house she almost cried out with relief.

Tom Lynn looked at the police car, at the man with the long, unhappy face who slouched back of the wheel. "You ought to be safe enough now," he said. "So, I'll go back to the office."

SAM MURRAY climbed out of the police car, mopping at his forehead. "Hot today, ain't it? I been waiting to see you, Mrs. Clark."

"Come into the house."

They went inside. Sam Murray said, "You've sort of had a change of heart, haven't you, Mrs. Clark? Riding around with Tom Lynn, having lunch with him?"

"I've had no change of heart." Her face was almost ugly now, the soft sweet lines of it gone hard. "I'll never change. But if I can make him think I have, I may get the proof you need."

"That's sort of dangerous, ain't it?"

"I don't care. You haven't got any proof."

"No'm." He seemed to think about that a while. Then: "What did Mr. Lynn say when he called last night?"

"He just said he wanted to talk. I—" she paused—"how did you know he was here?"

"We keep a pretty good lookout for you. We don't have enough men to make it complete, like they might in some of the bigger

cities—though maybe police ain't never got all the men they need. But we try. A Mr. Ken Reaves called on you last night, too. Who's he?"

"Both Andy and I have known him for years. But only as an acquaintance."

"He was never in business with your husband?"

She smiled. "I don't think Ken has ever been in business at all. He has a small income, I think. He's never been anything but a casual friend of ours."

"And Dave Kyle?"

She felt a queer shudder at the thought of the man. "Tom Lynn told me he had hired that man to watch me—to be sure I was safe, he said! And I'm afraid of that man, Mr. Murray!"

"Yes'm. I can understand that." He rubbed at the deep wrinkles of his face. "Dave used to be on the force, but they had to let him go. He's smart enough—just too fond of money; or maybe he ain't fond of it either, because when he gets it, it goes on liquor and women and horses and he's broke again in a week."

He stood up to leave, stood frowning at the hot sunshine beyond the door. "Like I said, Mrs. Clark, we try to keep a watch on you, but it ain't one hundred per cent. So you be careful when and how you see Mr. Lynn. You make sure that somebody knows when you're with him, and that he knows they do." He turned to look straight at her. "You wouldn't give up this plan of yours, would you?"

"No," Jean said.

"Yeah, I didn't think you would. But be careful."

He left and there was nothing for her to do but to sit and think and make plans. When could she see Tom Lynn again? If he didn't call, could she go by the office again tomorrow? She didn't want to overdo it and make him suspicious of her but she felt a need for haste. And what could she say when she saw him? What turns could she give the conversation that might bring out the things she wanted?

Her thoughts went around and around until they were blurred. *I'll go crazy just sitting here like this, thinking. . .* She got up and moved about the house, seeing that it was in order. She had planned to go out for dinner but now she changed her mind; she would cook at home because it would give her something to do. She ordered groceries delivered and the afternoon paper had come by then and she read it. More war contracts were being investigated with the smell of them getting worse all the time. The cost of living was getting higher. The Russians weren't any more cooperative than they had ever



been. Li'l Abner and Terry and the Pirates were both in horrible predicaments. A Miss Smith was marrying a Mr. Smith, the Claymore Joneses were returning from South America, and little Mary Paddleford had three candles on her birthday cake.

She threw the paper away and started getting dinner. Outside the thick purple twilight of autumn was fading into night. From the kitchen window she could see the street which ran along this side of the house, the few cars that passed—there weren't many along this street.

It was dark now. Glancing out the window she saw the lights of a slow moving automobile. The lights came forward so slowly that she particularly noticed them and in a moment she knew the car was going to stop directly in line with her window.

It was an instinctive action, not planned—and yet it seemed to her there was a touch of fear in her even at that moment. She stepped over and pulled the shade down. The wall light, directly behind her and on the far side of the room, threw her shadow darkly upon the shade. She stepped back, her face still turned toward the window.

She saw the shade twitch in toward her. There was a wasp whine at her ear, the sound drowned in the explosion of the light bulb behind her. Darkness struck like a blow. From outside came the clear crack of a gun!

She was reeling backward through the darkness. Her foot hit a chair and she went over, throwing out her arms in a futile effort to clutch something, to hold herself erect. She was falling through the darkness, and her head struck the edge of the stove.

CHAPTER THREE

Come Up and Slay Me, Sometime

SHE was struggling up through the impenetrable night. She had been unconscious, but whether it was for seconds or for hours she did not know. At first the dark-

ness of the room was like blindness and she was on her hands and knees with no idea of direction. Her head hurt, but it was a distant sensation, because she was afraid and the panic dulled other emotions.

Turning her head she saw the dim rectangle of the door leading into the living room. She struggled erect, found the door with outstretched hands and went through it. She found her way blindly, knowing this small house so well, so she did not bother with lights. She went straight to the phone. She must call for help, call someone! Call Tom Lynn and—even as the thought occurred to her she recoiled from it in horror. She had thought of Tom because in her confusion she had reverted to the old days when she and Andy had believed Tom to be their friend—because that very afternoon she had been with him, pretending to be friends. She must call the policeman, Murray.

Her hands found the telephone, cool and smooth.

Behind her she heard the click of the front door latch. There had been no sound of steps, just the click of the latch without warning, the faint moan of the door opening. A breeze came in and touched the nape of her neck like a ghost.

She could not move. She tried to lift the receiver of the phone and her hand seemed frozen. If she had tried to dial, the sound would have been loud as gunfire in the room.

She heard the door close again, a plank squeak, the soft, heavy sound of a man's step inside the room.

In sheer panic she reached up and caught the light above the phone, snapped it on. She spun around and saw Dave Kyle standing near the door.

It seemed to her that they stood looking at one another forever. Her back was against the wall, her face bloodless. Then he grinned at her, his eyes evil and intimate.

"So this is it," he said. "I didn't think I'd find any corpse."

"Someone shot—" She pointed toward the kitchen, but her eyes never left his face.

"I know," he said. "And I thought maybe—just maybe—that I'd find you stretched out dead. But here you are, healthy as ever, and so pretty, too."

"What are you—"

He answered with that leer which said they both knew a secret and strolled to the kitchen door. He tried to turn on the light, found it was broken, and took a flashlight from his pocket.

There were steps on the porch. The doorbell rang.

Dave Kyle turned swiftly, stepping into the kitchen so that he was sheltered by the doorway, his right hand inside his coat.

Then the door opened and Sam Murray said, "Hello, Mrs. Clark." Toward the apparently empty kitchen doorway he said, "Come on out, Dave."

The breath went out of Jean Clark with a long sigh, and with it her strength. She would have fallen if Murray had not caught her, moving fast for a man of his age and size. He helped her to a chair. "Were you hit, Mrs. Clark? Are you hurt?"

"No. Just—"

Dave Kyle stood there with a glass of water in his hand. He said, "Drink it, babe."

She was afraid to touch it. But Sam Murray took it from Kyle and gave it to her. It seemed to relax some of the tension in her throat, which had made breathing difficult. A little color came back to her cheeks.

"Feeling better?" Murray asked.

"Yes."

"Can you tell me what happened?"

She told him and he listened, rubbing at his chin. "I don't know how long I was unconscious," she said. "When I could walk again I came out to phone you. Just as I touched the phone I heard the door open. It was—Mr. Kyle."

"And that was how long ago?"

"About three minutes," Dave Kyle said. "Maybe four."

Jean nodded. Murray said, "You must have been out about ten minutes then. We had a patrol car nearby. It chased the shooter, but let him get away."

"That's too bad," Kyle said.

Murray looked at him, his eyes sad and thoughtful. "What's your angle, Dave?"

"My client thought somebody might try to hurt this babe, so I was keeping an eye on her."

"It was your client that tried to kill her."

"Yeah?"

"We got the license and checked it. It was Tom Lynn's."

"Did they see him driving it?"

"You can't see the driver of a car at night."

"You know how it is," Kyle said. "A lot of folks can drive one automobile. You picked him up yet?"

"Jones and Bayfield are after him now." His eyes had never left Kyle's face, but there was no look in them except a rather thoughtful sorrow. "Where were you when the shot was fired?"

"About half down that block." He jerked a thumb toward the kitchen.

"Then you saw the car too."

"Sure, but I didn't notice it. Color, license, nothing. Why should I? It was just a car until after the shot; then it was gone."

"You were being paid to protect Mrs. Clark."

"I hadn't thought she was in danger."

"And it took you ten minutes to get here?"

"I was looking around outside."

"Find anything?"

"Not a thing."

Sam Murray traced the wrinkles along his cheek. There was a stubble of grey-tipped beard on his face. He said, "It won't do any good to warn you, Dave. But I'll do it."

"Warn me of what?" Kyle said. "You don't think I killed Andy Clark?"

"You could have." He shook his head. "So far I ain't been able to find a reason. But I'm still looking, Dave."

Kyle laughed. "Maybe it's the babe I'm after." He turned on his heel and went out.

When he had gone Jean turned to Murray. "What did you mean, that he might have killed Andy?"

"I meant he's capable of it. We don't have anything that points toward him. Everything we can learn indicates you've been right from the first."

"And witnesses saw Tom's car when he shot at me. Certainly that ought to be enough to convict him."

"It ought," Sam Murray said, "and maybe will be."

"Why maybe?"

"The law," Sam Murray said, "would get along a lot better without lawyers. If you read the papers you see what they do with evidence. Like Dave said, more than one person can drive a car."

THE phone rang and it was for Murray. He listened, frowning. When he hung up he said, "Lynn's got away—for a while. He must have driven straight home after the shooting, planning to brave it out, I guess, because otherwise, why go home? But somebody must have tipped him the car had been spotted. He went out the back as Jones and Bayfield came in the front."

"Who could have tipped him?"

His face did not change at all and he spoke more to himself than to her. "Dave plays all the angles." Then to Jean, "I've got work to do, Mrs. Clark. And right now I don't have anybody to send here. Do you have a friend, someone who could come stay with you for an hour or so?"

She felt the fear tighten at her heart again. "You think that Tom—"

"No'm. I just don't want to take any chances."

"There's Ken Reaves, if he's home."

"Phone him."

Ken said certainly he would come, and ten minutes later he was there, and Murray gone. Ken walked, as she remembered him doing before, back and forth across the room in that big easy way, while she told

him what had happened. "You've had it tough, Jean. These last few weeks have been enough to break most women."

There was so much sympathy in his voice that she could feel her nerves slipping. She had held herself in too long, she thought. A few more days of this constant strain and terror and she would break; she would lose her mind.

"I asked you before," Ken said. "Why don't you go away, far off where you would hear nothing about this for a long time?"

"I can't. I can't go away now."

"I could help you. I could keep you informed about what happens here, all that you'd need to know."

It was like the offer of an opiate, an end to pain, and for a moment she held it close. Then, "I'm going to see him convicted, Ken."

He turned away from her, across the room, back again. "Jean—"

"Yes?"

"This isn't the time to talk about it. I wouldn't under any other circumstances. But you will drive yourself crazy under this strain, darling. And—will you go away with me, Jean?"

She could only look at him, and after a moment he said, "All right, Jean. I shouldn't have mentioned it. I won't again, for months. Not until you're rested and well and yourself again. Until then, pretend I didn't say anything."

He picked up the paper and glanced through it, making comments that she found diverting, amusing, impersonal. Turning the society page he said, "I see the Claymore Joneses are due home in another couple of days."

She said, "You wouldn't need the newspaper to learn that, would you, Ken?"

"How else?"

"Doesn't she write?"

He laughed. "Why, I scarcely know the lady. And anyway, I haven't seen her since she left here on the first day of May."

"The second of May, it must have been."

"I'm sure it was the first."

"Andy and I were engaged on the night of the second, and married the next day. And it was the night of the second we saw you sort of slipping away from the Jones house. You hadn't been calling on an empty building, I'm sure."

He grinned wryly, shaking his head. "Some folks have the damndest memories. It's inconvenient."

Later she was to remember this moment, time and time again—remember how he sat there looking at her, boyish and a little wistful, as though he had been trapped in some small escapade and would have to take action he didn't like. And she would wonder how she could have sat there, so close to him,

and not have felt the cold fingers of Death upon her throat.

SHE remembered that she hadn't eaten and Ken heated her a bowl of soup. Ken said he was a good cook at heating canned soup. He made himself a drink and sipped it while she ate the soup.

A uniformed policeman reported and said he had been assigned to watch the house. He would be outside if Mrs. Clark wanted to call him.

When the policeman had gone Ken put down his drink and looked at Jean. He said slowly, "Would you like to find Tom, with all the proof—written, conclusive proof—that the police will need? Would you like to take a chance to get this all over with?"

She stopped the spoon part way to her mouth. "What do you mean? How could we?"

He stood up, brushing back his red hair with a restless movement. "I think I know where he is. And if I'm right—if he's there—the proof will be there too."

"I'll call Mr. Murray!"

"No. The police couldn't catch him there. He'll have to think we're friends coming to help him. If he's where I think he is, he'll be able to see anybody approaching in time to get away. But if he thought we were friends—"

"But wouldn't he—try to kill me?"

"I'll be there and he'll want to know why we've come. Then there's this—" Ken Reaves reached inside his coat and took out a small automatic.

All at once he shook his head, slid the automatic back under his coat. "No. I won't let you try it. You would have to slip away from here, because otherwise the police would follow you and there wouldn't be a chance. It would be risky, a little. And—I don't want you taking any chances, Jean."

She said slowly, trying to think, "But if I just stay here, waiting for him to come and try again to kill me, that's taking chances too."

And so she remembered later that it had been she who argued that they should go. Ken had been apparently reluctant to consent, but he had agreed at last. He had left the house, saying good night to the policeman on watch, and Jean had slipped out of the back and joined him two blocks away. They drove through the cool autumn night, out of the city, on to a country road.

It was very dark, with no moon and only a stray star or two showing. Where the road ran straight for a mile or more Ken kept looking back to make sure no one was following. "We leave the highway," he said, and swung off the pavement onto a dirt road that wound among the pines.

"Where are we going?"

He glanced at her. She could just see the gleam of his eyes by the dash. "You've never been here?"

"No. It—it's rather scary."

"Andy and Tom used to come out here when they were kids—boy scouts. I didn't go around with them much in those days, but I came here once."

"What kind of proof will we find, Ken? I still can't really understand why Tom should do these things."

Again his eyes turned toward her, the whites gleaming for a moment in the dash-light. Then he was looking at the road again. "I don't really know how Tom got involved in it. Just a bad break."

"What do you mean?"

"It will all be obvious to you before much longer."

"But—"

"Wait. You'll know soon enough. Too soon."

She was aware of the fear again, the cold thick fear in her heart. And the feeling grew on her as though she were standing exposed on a winter night, the cold increasing, eating into her bones. She looked at Ken Reaves and now, in this dim light, he looked like a stranger. Why had she consented to come out here? And for the first time it occurred to her there had been no need for her to come. Ken could have come alone, if he wished.

She tried to shake off her fear. Nothing had happened on the ride to make her afraid; it was just the dark and the loneliness.

"Do you know Claymore Jones' brother?" Reaves asked.

She thought it was a strange question under the circumstances. "No. I've heard he was spending the summer in the Jones' home."

"And you don't know him. It's odd how fate can turn on such small things."

"I don't understand," she said. "Should I know him?"

For an answer he stopped the car. "We walk from here." He switched off the lights and got out.

The darkness was almost tangible underneath the pines. "It's up the hill," Ken said. He was whispering now. He found her hand and began to draw her along. The path was rough underfoot, climbing steeply.

"Ken, let's go back. I'm—"

"Come on!"

His hand was cold on hers, his grip hard on her fingers. "I'm afraid, Ken."

"Come on."

She stumbled and almost fell, but he was holding to her hand, pulling her after him, not looking around. "Ken!" The words were tight in her throat. "Ken, let me go. I—"

"Be quiet!"

It was a command, with something breathless and triumphant about it. And looking up she saw, ahead and above them, a tiny spot of light. "He's here!" Ken Reaves said in that breathless, triumphant whisper. "He's here! I didn't think there was one chance in a hundred!"

"But you said you knew—"

"Be quiet!"

And now she was afraid to go forward, and afraid not to. She wanted to get away but Reaves was holding hard to her hand, hurting it. She wanted to cry out, and she was afraid to make any sound at all. The fear swirled black around her. It was in her brain and in her blood.

THERE was a small cabin ahead, a shack, really. Light showed through cracks in the wall. Ken Reaves lifted Jean with one arm. She tried to strike at him and there was no effect from her blows. Then, with his shoulder, he knocked open the door of the shack. He swung Jean inside and was standing back of her with his pistol in his right hand.

He said, "Hello, Tom."

Tom Lynn had sprung to his feet as the door crashed open. He stood half crouched. On the table beside him a kerosene lantern burned dimly.

Ken Reaves said, "It's luck, good for me and bad for you, Tom. I hadn't really thought you would be here. I was trying to think of a place to take Jean, and this occurred to me."

Tom Lynn was looking from Jean to the gun in Reaves' hand. Reaves said, "It must have occurred to you in the same way. You had to find some place to hide, and this place where you used to play outlaw as a kid popped into your mind."

"Yes," Lynn said. His eyes came back to Jean. "So you came here after me. You still think I killed Andy."

"No—"

Reaves said, "I think that by now she knows I killed Andy. But she still doesn't know why. Do you, Jean?"

She was staring at him, her eyes too large for her face, her lips parted. She tried to speak and there was no sound.

"You deserve that much. You too, Tom."

He stood with his back to the doorway. The gun in his hand did not point at either of them yet, but his finger was curled around the trigger. He said, "The Claymore Joneses are very wealthy, and Claymore always spends a lot on his wife. Betty had jewels worth at least a hundred thousand dollars. When she went to South America she left about half of these at home, in a wall safe—a safe I had

watched her open on several occasions, often enough to learn the combination anyway."

Jean said, "That night—you were—"

"Yes. The Claymore Joneses left the city on the morning of the second of May. That night I paid the house and the safe a visit. But when I was leaving, Andy and Jean saw me. It was the night before they got married, and so the date stuck in their minds—which was too bad for both of you, my dear."

"But why?" Tom Lynn said. "Why does the exact date matter so much?"

"Because Claymore Jones' brother moved in the house the next day. I had thought there would be ample time to get rid of the jewels, get them completely out of the section. But when Horace Jones moved in the house I expected the theft to be discovered."

"I hadn't heard of it," Tom Lynn said.

"Nobody did, and I began to wonder. So I cultivated Horace. I had hopes he was not using the wall safe, didn't know how to open it. But I learned he did. Horace had put some bonds in there on his arrival in the house, and the safe was empty when he put the bonds in. Do you see?"

"No."

"Horace didn't know the jewels were supposed to be there, so he thought nothing about it. But Claymore and Betty are due back tomorrow. They will know the jewels were there on the morning of the second of May, and Horace will know they were not there on the third. That means they were taken on the second—on the night Andy and Jean saw me slipping away from the house."

"In a city this size," Tom Lynn said, "the papers would have made a big play of the story. They would have mentioned the date the jewels were stolen—a date on which the Claymore Joneses were already gone."

"Yes," Reaves said. "So Andy and Jean would have known who took them. And Andy would have given that information to the police—I knew Andy. Then the police would have needed to find only one of the jewels, just one, anywhere, any time—and jewels always turn up somewhere. All they'd have to do then would be track it back to the hockshop or fence it came from. Then the cops would drag me over, knowing I was guilty, and get me identified."

"And Andy?" Jean whispered.

"That night I'd been drinking in a bar near his office. I happened to meet him as he started home, and came home with him to get another drink. He mentioned seeing me leave the Jones house, just as you did tonight, said the two of you had seen me. He meant nothing by it at the time, but he was so certain of the date that I got terrified. And I'd been drinking, remember. It must have shown on

(Continued on page 124)

STRANGE TRAILS



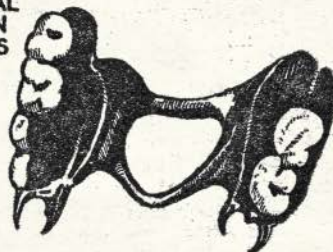
LADY of the LAKE

ACCORDING TO TRADITION HANDED DOWN FROM INDIAN TIMES, CRYSTAL-CLEAR 600-FOOT-DEEP CRESCENT LAKE IN THE OLYMPIC MOUNTAINS OF WASHINGTON NEVER GIVES UP ITS DEAD.

SO A FISHERMAN, ROWING ACROSS A HIGHWAY-SKIRTED COVE ON JULY 6, 1940, WAS AMAZED TO SEE A PALLID, WAXY HAND RISE TO THE SURFACE. BENEATH FLOATED THE BODY OF AN AUBURN-HAIRED WOMAN OF ABOUT 35, WRAPPED IN BLANKETS BOUND WITH A ROPE WHOSE ROTTED ENDS INDICATED IT HAD BEEN ATTACHED TO A WEIGHT.

MEDICAL EXAMINATION REVEALED DEATH DUE TO STRANGULATION FOLLOWING A BEATING, AND THAT THE BODY HAD BEEN IN THE WATER A LONG TIME, MIRACULOUSLY PRESERVED--EXCEPT FOR THE FACE--BY SAPONIFICATION.

AUTHORITIES AT NEARBY PORT ANGELES INSERTED PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE MYSTERIOUS "LADY OF THE LAKE'S" PARTIAL DENTAL PLATE IN DENTAL MAGAZINES AND QUERIED UNIONS ABOUT YOUNG WOMEN WHO HAD SUDDENLY CEASED PAYING DUES.

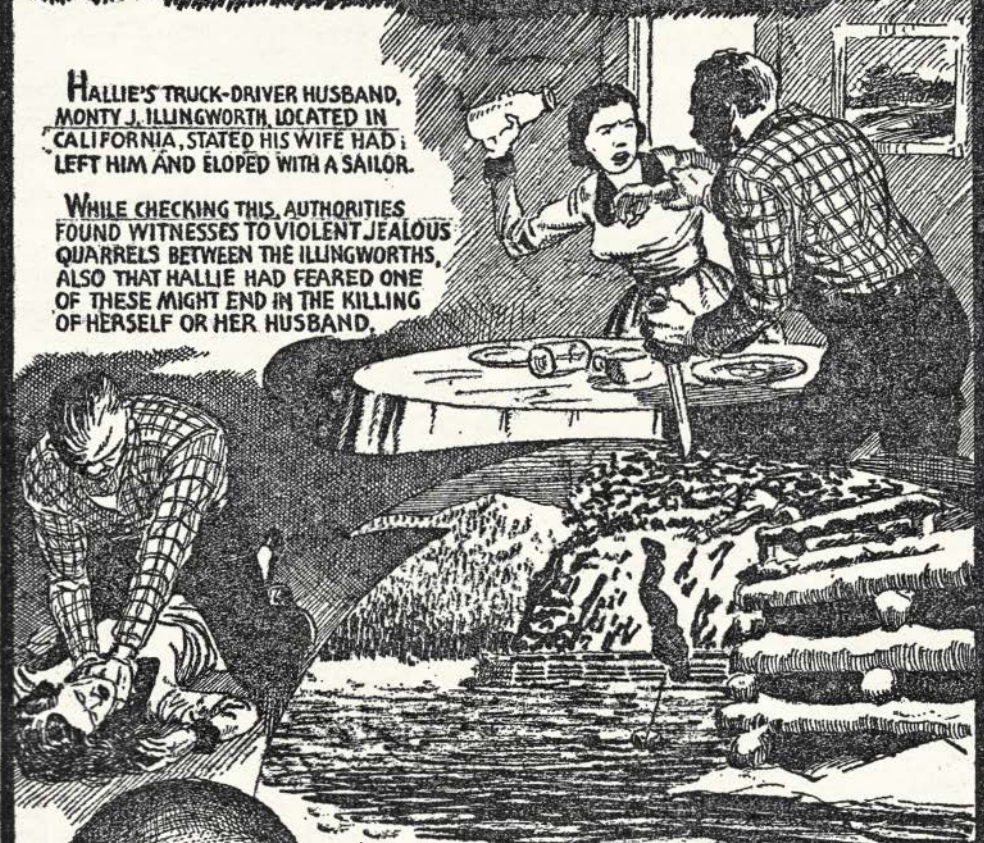


OVER A YEAR WENT BY. THEN A WAITRESSES' UNION WROTE THE DESCRIPTION FITTED HALLIE ILLINGWORTH, LAST HEARD FROM WHILE WORKING IN PORT ANGELES IN 1937. FRIENDS CONFIRMED HALLIE'S DISAPPEARANCE & NAMED A MIDWEST DENTIST WHO IDENTIFIED THE PLATE AS ONE HE MADE HER.

... to MURDER by LEE

HALLIE'S TRUCK-DRIVER HUSBAND, MONTY J. ILLINGWORTH, LOCATED IN CALIFORNIA, STATED HIS WIFE HAD LEFT HIM AND ELOPED WITH A SAILOR.

WHILE CHECKING THIS, AUTHORITIES FOUND WITNESSES TO VIOLENT JEALOUS QUARRELS BETWEEN THE ILLINGWORTHS, ALSO THAT HALLIE HAD FEARED ONE OF THESE MIGHT END IN THE KILLING OF HERSELF OR HER HUSBAND.



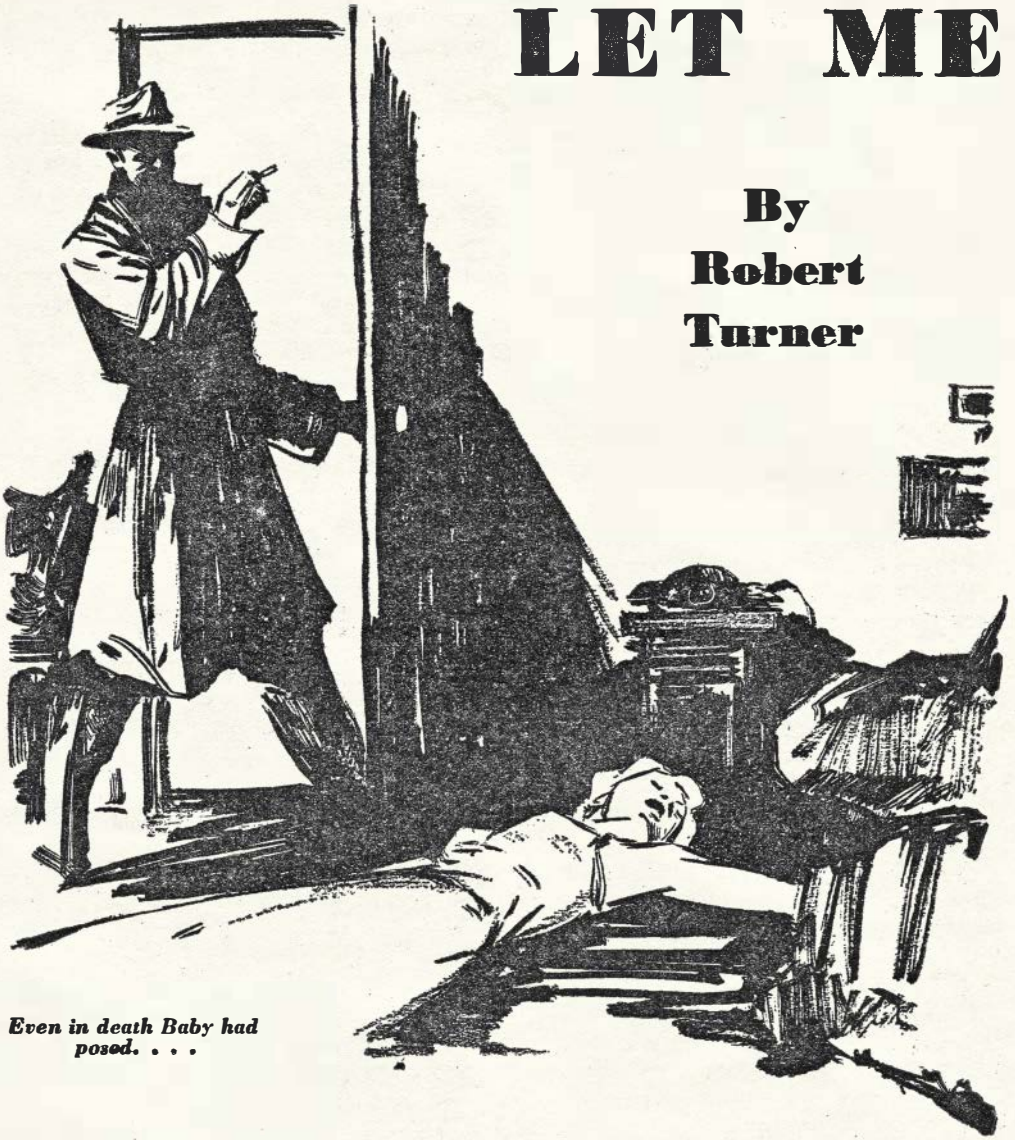
AT THE TRIAL, IN FEBRUARY, 1942, THE PROSECUTOR CONTENDED MONTY, IN LOVE WITH ANOTHER WOMAN, CHOKED HALLIE TO DEATH EARLY ON DEC. 22, 1937, TIED HER IN BLANKETS, ATTACHED A WEIGHT, DROVE TO CRESCENT LAKE AND TOSSED HER IN. INSTEAD OF DECAYING, THE BODY, REFRIGERATED IN THE ICY WATER AT THE BOTTOM, BY A CHEMICAL PROCESS SLOWLY TURNED TO SOAP; THE ROPE JOINED TO THE WEIGHT ROTTED THROUGH AND THE BODY ROSE.

MONTY ILLINGWORTH WAS CONVICTED OF SECOND DEGREE MURDER, HIS TERM LATER SET AT 15 YEARS-- BECAUSE, THROUGH A CHEMICAL MIRACLE, CRESCENT LAKE FOR ONCE *DID* GIVE UP ITS DEAD.

19-100

LET ME

By
**Robert
Turner**



Even in death Baby had posed. . . .

NEW Year's Eve, and from plush Park Avenue to the Bowery beer halls, every place was jammed. Everybody was drunk. Everybody was making noise and had friends and was happy. But not Jake Hammond. Jake wasn't drunk; he couldn't seem to get that way. Jake wasn't making any noise and he had no friends and he wasn't happy.

Jake walked in the park, Washington Square Park, all by his lonesome. He drained the dregs from a pint bottle of Southern Best and tossed the empty glassware into some bushes. He sat on a bench, next to a drunk

huddled at one end under a blanket of newspapers, and put his chin in his hands.

From apartments around the edge of the park, party noises sounded far away and unread. Every once in a while, somewhere, a horn blew or a bell clanged. Cold night mists drifted around Jake and cloaked his long, awkward looking figure in their chill folds. Jake shivered.

To hell with everyone, Jake thought dimly. What's New Year's Eve? Just the thirty-first of December. To hell with it. And to hell with Baby Wilson, I say. So she's dead. Somebody killed her. What do I care who it

KILL YOU, SWEETHEART

It was New Year's and Baby was gone and tough Jake Hammond felt lonely. Yet it wasn't only a question of following her—it was over whose dead body!

was? My nose is clean. So blue-eyed models are ten cents for twelve and Auld Lang Syne is just another silly ballad. . . .

Jake took off his hat. It wasn't a bad hat. It was an off shade of brown and could have used some blocking but it was all right, dented in conservatively on the sides and with the brim dipped in front. Luke banged the top in with his fist, pushed up the front of the brim and the back and put it back on his head.

Now I'm a newspaperman, he thought. I got my hat turned up in front. All I do now is call Mike Fowler and tell him I got a scoop and I want my job back and I want a byline and a five hundred dollar bonus. I call him old sourpuss and I yell, "Stop the presses, Mike, I got a scoop" and

His voice trailed off. It wasn't any good. He wasn't a newspaperman, but just a reporter, and he had no scoop. Mike Fowler wasn't a sourpuss but just a tired, harrassed city editor with ulcers, fantastically bad luck with cards and a too-young wife who stepped out on him.

Jake took his hat off again and put it back into its original form and turned up his coat collar. He hunched his shoulders against the night fog and the chill, jammed his hands into his pockets. Maybe he was a little drunk, at that, but not enough. He'd taken plenty. But it was one of those times and not much of it had hit bottom. He was just sharp-minded and too aware of everything and none of it very nice to be aware of.

The rumdum had pushed off his blanket of newspapers and was sitting up, swaying toward Jake, peering at him through bleared eyes. His face was slack-jawed and puffy and beard-stubbled.

He said, thickly, "What're you doin' here, huh? This's my bench."

Jake didn't look at him. He stared off through the mists of the blur of street lights at the edge of the little park, at the building where Baby lived. Where she had lived. Where she'd died, tonight.

"I won't keep your bench," Jake told the smoky. "I just want to borrow it a few minutes. My legs're tired. I've been working hard all day. In the laundry, you know."

"Y'think I'm a bum?" the bum said. "Lemme tell you. I speak seven languages."

"All at once?" Jake wanted to know.

The drunk lurched back as though he'd been struck. He sat up stiffly, tottering on the bottom of his spine, tried to look indignant. "Never min' that alla' once stuff," he said haughtily. "C'n you speak seven lang'ges?"

"No," Jake admitted reluctantly. He gave it a little thought. "But I have a cousin who speaks English like a native."

The bo bobbed his head triumphantly, leered. "That's on'y one language!"

A GIRL came through the swirls of fog. She made no sound as she walked. There was no clicking of high heels, because she was wearing some kind of flat-soled shoes. She was walking slowly, aimlessly. She was wearing a sport coat of some kind and she had her hands in the pockets. A slouch felt hat kept her face in shadows but she was trim in the coat and her legs weren't too horrible, which was the best you could say for a girl in flat heeled shoes.

Jake watched her walk past. He said, "Happy New Year, kid. Come back and sit down and we'll make some resolutions together."

She didn't turn. She kept on walking, not even changing pace. She fascinated Jake. She shouldn't be walking alone in the park on New Year's Eve. That was only for guys like himself and the rumdum. He got up and followed the girl.

Alongside of her, he said, "Happy forty-seven, come eleven. May it be your best year yet. Let the kid in the diapers kick out the old man with the beard—what do we care as long as we've got each other. You know what I mean?"

He didn't know why he was talking like

that. He sounded like a drugstore corner wolf and he knew it, but he couldn't help it. He wasn't himself tonight. A guy's best girl gets murdered on New Year's Eve and the guy just isn't himself.

The girl in the sport coat told him, "Would you mind going to hell?" She didn't look at him.

"Yes," he said. "I'd mind. Someone just went there I don't want to see. Cute little trick, name of Baby. Blonde as all hell. Built, too. I—"

"Please!" she cut him off. She stopped as suddenly as if someone had nailed her shoes to the pavement. "Stop it. Leave me alone. I—I'm sick. Go away."

He stayed there beside her. He pulled a cigarette from his pocket and lit it. Over the match flame he looked at the girl. She was standing there, swaying a little, not looking at him, just staring straight ahead. She had a thin, high-cheeked face, a rather broad, deep-lipped mouth and enormous grey eyes, with long, tangled lashes shadowing them. She should have been pretty but there was the stiff, frozen look of shock on her face.

"Sick is right," Jake said. "Sicker'n six poisoned pups. Honey, you look *bad*. Maybe you'd better sit down for a while or let me put you in a cab and go home. What was it, too much party—too much New Year's Eve?"

"Leave me alone," she repeated. She talked in a flat monotone. "I aid, go away, will you?"

Without any warning, she gave a little gasp. Her legs gave way and she started to cave. Her hands clutched at Jake and he caught her just before she fell. He stooped and threw an arm behind her knees, picked her up and carried her to a bench, sat her down there. He forced her head down between her knees and in a few moments she jerked erect again, dazed but conscious. She sat there, leaning elbows on knees, her head in her hands.

Jake said, "What is it, kid, an attack of some kind? Do you want me to get you to a doctor, or a hospital?"

She pulled her head up out of her hands and turned toward him. The big grey eyes were widely set and in spite of their haunted, unhappy look, they were very lovely.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "What do you want with me? Why don't you leave me alone like I asked?"

"Look," Jake told her. He took a deep drag on his cigarette and the glow from its coal showed his lean, hungry face, with the deep, bitter lines around the mouth and the deep-set, cynical brown eyes. "I just kept you from falling on your face. I thought you needed help, but I guess you don't. I didn't mean to bother you, but I'm a little slap-happy, tonight. Not from liquor, either. From being scared

stiff. You know, like kids whistling silly in the dark to keep their courage up."

She looked at him, hard, unblinking. "Scared?" she said. "You, too? I know what you mean. What do you do when you're that way? I don't know what to do."

He sent the cigarette arching through the darkness. "All right," he said. "We've both got troubles. I'll tell you mine. My name's Jake Hammond and I'm a broken-down newspaperman. I had a girl, see, and I thought she was okay. I was pretty nuts about her. Then I found out a week ago that she wasn't okay at all—she was a small-time gold-digger who thought it might be fun to kid around with a nice dumb, penniless, harmless reporter in her spare time. I had a few good publicity contacts for her, too."

He turned away from this strange woman's staring eyes for a moment, looked off into the dark and the fog and listened to the distant sounds of new year's merriment and thought about Baby Wilson. He thought about how there had been plenty of girls in his life, but he'd never let himself go sappy over one before. But Baby was a blonde, blue-eyed devil and he couldn't help himself. She'd jobbed him, wrapped him up all in a package and then stored him away. He thought about how he'd begged and borrowed dough to take her out to places he couldn't afford, because she was meant for nice places, with those beautiful clothes of hers and that dream figure and that long, blonde hair like freshly poured gold. He thought about the things he'd said to her nights, after bringing her home, standing in the vestibule of her apartment, kissing her good night. Sweet, sappy things, mushy things that he'd have laughed at to hear somebody else say them. Hardboiled Jake, tough guy Jake, who'd been around and knew all the answers, who would never be taken.

He had to stop thinking about that. He laughed, turned back to the girl on the bench beside him. "It was funny," he said. "It was a sketch—while it lasted. And now Baby's dead."

The girl next to him got up off the bench. The deep mouth was turned into a tight red line. The long lashes had lowered over her eyes, narrowing them. She said, "You—you're Jake. Jake Hammond. Baby told me about you. But how did you find out she was—you were up there, tonight, too?"

HE STARED up at her. This was ridiculous. New Year's Eve and he'd found Baby Wilson murdered. He'd gone wandering through the park right afterward, where the fog hung undisturbed by the sweep of traffic and he could be alone and try to think what to do, to get used to the idea.

He'd picked up a strange, lonesome girl, sick on her feet. And now the girl knew him, knew who he was and that Baby was dead. It was a put up job. It couldn't be.

"Wait a minute," he said. "Let's do a retake on that one. I worked in Hollywood once, for nine weeks. I know how these things go. But the script's whacky. What's the right angle? How the hell do you know who I am, about me and Baby Wilson?"

Before she could tell him, he got it. He remembered. Baby had a sister. Doll—for Dolly—she was called. Their mother had had a penchant for childish names. Baby would have changed hers but the model agency she worked for wouldn't let her. It was different, they said. It would be remembered. This was Doll. It had to be that way.

"You're Doll," he said. "The one who stayed back home in Prairie du Sac, to marry the young furniture store clerk and have babies." He took her hand. "What are you doing here? I mean, what do you know about Baby getting—you know—"

Her eyes were closed. Her hand felt icy in his. She said flatly, "Only one baby. The furniture store clerk got killed in the Philippines. That's why I'm here. Young Joey, he's got to have an operation within a week, the doc said. It's going to take some money. I wrote to my sister. I wired her, phoned her. She said she couldn't do anything for me. She was broke, she said. So I got on a train and came here, desperate. I thought maybe she could help me, anyhow, if I came. She was making big money. She could have—"

Doll Wilson's eyes opened and tears stood in them.

"Take it easy," Jake told her. "I want to get this thing straight. You've got to tell me about it. You went up there and talked to Baby. Was she drunk? Did she get ugly about it?"

Doll shook her head and the tears moved out of her great grey eyes and down her cheeks, slowly, crookedly. "I—didn't get to talk to her. She was dead, when I—got there. She was dead."

Yeah, he remembered how she'd looked, lying there. Even in death, Baby Wilson had posed. She looked like something in a movie still, her arms and legs flung gracefully, her long, golden hair spread out as though it had been arranged. He'd thought how beautiful her hands were, how relaxed. Her ripe lips had been only slightly parted and her tangled eyes had been closed as though she were lying there, resting, on the soft, deep-piled rug. The blood was like a bright corsage against the black velvet of her evening gown. He'd thought of what a field day the tabloid pic men would have with a murder like this.

"There was a woman's purse on the love

seat, up there," he said. "It wasn't Baby's. It was brown and kind of old and scarred. It—"

He broke off, his eyes taking Doll in. She was wearing brown and tan from head to feet. She wasn't carrying a purse, but the purse he'd seen up there in the murder flat was the kind she would have. Cheap, to begin with, small-town, well worn.

"I—I thought she'd just fainted, at first," Doll said. "I threw my purse on the love seat and knelt down beside Baby. Then I realized it was blood and she was—that she'd been killed. I got scared and ran out and away from there. I crossed over into the park and I've been walking around and around, up one path and down another, not knowing what to do, wanting to call the police, but not knowing what that meant."

He listened and saw now that it wasn't so crazy. The script was all right. Baby's apartment was right at the edge of the park. It was dark and foggy and lonely in the park. If you wanted to run away from murder and didn't know how, the park just sort of pulled you into its dark embrace. It was a small park, too, and they'd been almost bound to run into each other.

"You knew she was dead," Doll said. "You must've been up there. Do you know who killed her? What will the police find out?"

He shrugged and looked down, saw that he was still holding Doll's hand, trying to rub warmth into it. He felt silly. He didn't know why he'd even taken her hand to begin with, unless it was because of a sudden warmth at finding out who she was, that here was someone else who should have been near and dear to Baby—though she'd gotten the usual raw deal from her.

"I'd been drinking," he said. "I got the urge to tell Baby off. I'd been thinking about her and crying in my beer and carrying a torch like a lovesick high school kid. I figured if I could see her tonight and tell her a few things, get 'em off my chest, I'd feel better. I knew she'd be at a party at Harrison Smith's, in her building. But just as I was approaching the building, I saw that there was a light on in her place and went straight there. The door was ajar and I pushed right in. I was hoping I could catch her by surprise, that there would be someone there with her, or something, I dunno. I caught her by surprise all right. But there was nobody else there that I could see. She was lying there, dead."

Doll was shaking her head. "The same with me," she told him. "What am I—what are we going to do, now?"

He eyed her hard for a moment, wondering if this might not all be some kind of an act. He said harshly, "How do I know you didn't do it?" His eyes held hers. She didn't flinch.

She only shook her head slowly from side to side. She didn't even say anything. Her eyes got blurred with moisture again and the things this girl had been through, her husband getting killed, her kid being dangerously ill, were mirrored there. He had to turn his eyes away from her face.

"All right," he said and led her by the arm toward a path leading out of the park onto the street. "Let's take a look and see if there's any signs of the police being there yet. If nobody else has barged in there, we might make it. Maybe we can get that damned bag out of there."

WALKING through the dank, swirling puffs of mist with her, he knew that this was a fool thing he was doing. He should have called the police right away, right after he'd discovered Baby's dead body. He should have called his paper. But reason had left him when he'd seen her dead like that, when he'd realized what had happened. He'd suddenly wanted no part of it, only to get away from there.

It still wasn't too late, he reasoned. But he knew what the police could do with circumstantial evidence—and if it wasn't he, it would be Doll. And there was the kid, what was his name—Joey—needing that operation in a week, the doc said. He didn't know just why that should have mattered so much—except that it had been Baby's kid and his—he had to have some justification for having felt about Baby the way he did. Sappy.

Just as they left the park, they passed a beat cop whose face was flushed and happy. The cop grinned and gave them the season's greetings and Jake told himself the hell with it and mumbled something back at the cop and kept going with Doll.

They came to number 20 Washington Square, an ancient three story dwelling that had been dressed up at the entrance and made over into a quietly smart and expensive apartment building. There were no police cars parked out in front, no reporters hanging around, no little gathering of curious onlookers.

"It looks like we made it in time." Jake said and Doll nodded.

They went up three steps and into the little vestibule. There was no elevator. They started up the inside stairway. Harrison Smith's apartment was on the second floor and they heard the sounds of revelry from the party going on there. There was the loud blare of radio music, the babble of talk and laughter. A woman was trying to sing with the radio in a drunken, off-pitch key. As they reached the second floor landing, the door of the Smith apartment opened and the party sounds swelled louder for a moment, until the door shut again, as

like turning the volume of a radio up and down suddenly.

A young man and woman passed them, started down the stairs. They were dressed for the street. As they passed, the woman said, "Who'sh Smitty think he ish— leaving his own party with that Wilson dame—"

The young man said, laughing a little, "You know how Baby is about him. She prob'ly put a gun in his ribs and shanghai'd him off somewhere to get married. Now tha's 'n idea—"

That was all they heard. Jake stopped. "Smitty," he said. "That's Harrison Smith. He left the party with Baby. Only it wasn't Baby who put the gun in his ribs. It was—" He left it unfinished, because there was nothing they could do about that now, anyway. It was police business, but for Jake it cleared Doll, and they had an immediate objective.

They reached the next floor and found the door of Baby Wilson's apartment still ajar. The jamb was warped and the door didn't shut properly unless it was slammed hard. Doll stood back. She said, "You—you go first, Jake. I'm scared. I don't want to go in there first."

He looked at her. It was the first time he'd taken a good look in the light. Except that her features were tight with fear and anxiety, she was even prettier than she'd looked in the foggy park. He took a deep breath.

"Okay, Doll," he said. "Here we go."

He pushed open the door of the flat and stepped inside. He walked down a short hall, toward the soft glow of light from Baby's living room. He could hear Doll's soft tip-toeing behind him and the hoarse sound of her strained breathing. A chill that wasn't entirely from the January dampness and cold outside set into his bones and he shivered.

Jake came to the doorway of the living room and stopped, leaning his shoulder against the jamb. Doll came up behind him. His eyes moved to the place on the rug where he had seen Baby lying dead in her blood-stained evening gown. He blinked. He shook his head hard and looked again but it didn't do any good. There was nobody lying on the floor. Not Baby Wilson, not anybody. There was nobody in the living room at all. There was no brown purse on the love seat.

Jake started to whirl around, but he never made it. Somebody came out of the doorway across the living room from him. A gun pointed squarely at him, a shiny, nickle-plated, small calibered pistol.

The girl holding the gun was a little better than medium height. Her hair was like golden wheat, shimmering in the sun. Her face was heart-shaped and as perfectly beautiful as a cameo. As cold looking, right now, too, and pale. Her lovely eyes were the chilled blue

of lake ice. Under a clinging aqua colored cocktail gown, Baby Wilson's figure was like a calender girl's. She smiled, only it was just a quirk of the lips and a brief flash of tiny white teeth. The rest of her face stayed immobile.

"Happy New Year, Jake," she said. Her voice had a slaty hardness to it. "That's what I like about this season. All your old friends come to see you—it took you long enough to bring him back, Doll. What happened?"

JAKE took two steps into the living room, his legs faltering, his eyes going back and forth from the spot on the rug where he had seen Baby before, to where she now stood in the doorway of the other room.

"Baby!" He surprised himself. "You were dead. Baby, I saw you lying there. There was blood on your gown. You—" He couldn't finish it. It was silly.

Baby said, "Don't come any closer." She pushed the shiny pistol toward him.

He turned slowly and looked at Doll, who had moved into the room behind him and was leaning against the wall, her hands at her sides, pushing back against the wall.

Doll looked up from the floor where she had been staring. She turned her head slowly toward her sister and the expression on her face, Jake had seen once before. He'd seen it on the face of a beaten kid, back in the days when he'd been doing sob stories for the *Courier* and made front page with them.

"I wasn't so long," Doll said softly. "I couldn't just run out and grab him and drag him back, Baby. I had to—I had to tell him something."

"Jake got a part of it then. Somehow he grinned at Baby Wilson. "You did all right. It was a good gag. A marvelous actress, your sister Doll. You ought to get her some work. Broadway could use her—so could a couple of other guys. What's this about, Baby? I'd like to know my part. I can't ad lib all the way through."

Doll Wilson started away from the wall, toward him. "It wasn't all a lie," she told him. "I'm—I'm sorry, Jake. The part about young Joey and why I'd come here, that was all true."

"Stay back out of the way, you damned fool!" Baby snapped. Doll halted in her tracks. Baby turned her attention to Jake again. She laughed bitterly. "It was me you saw lying on the floor, all right, Jake. That was blood on my gown, too." She winced a little, telling him that, then gestured with the gun. "Walk ahead of me, into the kitchen. There's a wall switch. Flick on the light in there."

He did that and this time, there was no mistake about it. There was a body on the kitchen floor and it was dead, all right. It was

a man, a heavy-set, florid-faced man, with sleek grey hair and rather heavy, handsome features. The handle of a kitchen carving knife stuck out of the starched bosom of his dress shirt. One leg was folded under him. His mouth and his pouched-under eyes were wide open in a hideous, perpetual stare. Harrison Smith, dead, was not a pretty thing to see.

Somehow, he got words past the lump in his throat. "So you killed Harrison, Baby. What was the matter, Baby—I don't get it. It should have been the other way around. He should have murdered you. You were so ripe for it, Baby."

He heard her a few feet behind him but he didn't turn around. He couldn't take his eyes away from Harrison Smith's body. He had a strange, eerie feeling that it, like Baby's before, might disappear on him.

Baby said, "He was a stubborn, stupid jackass, Jake. He wouldn't marry me. He'd promise and then he'd back out. He—he was pretty tight tonight, Jake. He insulted me and laughed fit to die, said he wouldn't marry me if I—if I—" She had to stop and get control of herself. She made it. She tossed her head, proudly, her ice-blue eyes glittering.

"I see," Jake said. "And I'm going to be the goat. Is that it? Everybody knew I was carrying a torch for you after you threw me over for Smith. They'll think this New Year's Eve business knocked me off my trolley and I came up here tonight and killed Smith. Is that it?"

"That's it," she admitted. Her red lips came apart over her teeth. "I guess I lost my head. You weren't in it at first, but you had to walk in. I didn't even know it was you—I thought it was some people from the party, so I played faint, meaning to claim self-defense. Then you came and you left, and I sent Doll out to see where you'd go and bring you back. Then I had this idea."

"And you think I'm going to take the rap for you?" Jake asked her. "I'm supposed to stand here like one of those poor, dopey, nice guys you were talking about and let you shoot me? The hell you say, Baby?"

He started to go after her. He wouldn't have had a chance and he knew it. But there was nothing else to do. He was going to get it, anyhow. But at the last minute, he held his move. Over Baby's shoulder, he saw Doll Wilson creeping across the room. There was a queer, desperate look in her eyes. When she moved on Baby, he moved too.

He stepped forward and knocked the gun from Baby's hand. He picked it up just as Baby flung Doll furiously away from her. Baby started toward him, then saw the gun in his hand and the hard, bleak look in his eyes and stopped. Her face twisted and

writhed. Tears ran out of her eyes and the beautiful thing that had been her face became a gargyle's mask. Sewer language flowed from her mouth, thickly.

Jake said, wondering at himself, "Go downstairs to the party, Doll. Tell them to call the police. Hurry."

Doll started to the door, but just before she went out her sister screamed. Jake stood there, watched Baby run shrieking, on short, stumbling steps toward a window.

There was the crash of breaking glass and Baby Wilson's scream rose shrilly and then cut off. The sudden silence afterward was aching in his ears.

IT WAS broad, staring daylight when Jake and Doll left the homicide bureau. They were both drawn and tired. They didn't talk much. There wasn't anything to say, really. They had some breakfast together in a drug-store in the *Courier* building and he left her there for a moment and went upstairs and hammered at Mike Fowler, his city editor, until it was too much for Mike's New Year's morning hangover and Mike gave him a personal check for \$500, as a bonus for his eye-witness story of Baby's murder and suicide. Then Jake went out among the holiday skeleton staff and put the bite on them, picking up another hundred bucks.

Downstairs he sat down in the drug store

booth with Doll, again, ordered another cup of coffee. He took her hand and put the cash and the check in it. He said: "That ought to take care of initial expenses for the boy's operation. You wire it out there. It'll hold things until headquarters get through with you as a witness and you can go back home. You can get things started with that, can't you?"

She didn't look at the money. She kept looking at him, the hugeness of her grey eyes practically talking. Finally she said, "I didn't know why she wanted you, honest," and he stood up and took her hand.

He was a little surprised at himself. Christmas was over and so was New Year's, and he should have known by now there was no St. Nick. "I'm glad," he said. "Well, so long, kid. Luck."

He started to move out of the booth, but she held his hand. She said, "You've done so much—I—well—I'd like to have you know young Joey, someday."

He kept looking into her eyes for a long time. He kept thinking a lot of things. Baby was gone, now, with the tired part of him, the unbelieving part, and suddenly he thought about his own boyhood and how, in those days, after the broken toys, Christmas and New Year's always came again.

For a long time, Jake stood there and then he turned his fingers loose from Doll's grip. He sat down in the booth with her again.

DEATH WITHOUT TRACE!

THE story of subtle poisons leaving no trace did not die with the Borgias. In March of 1881, Franz Joseph, Emperor of Austria received a gift of two bouquets of flowers sealed in glass containers. His chamberlain opened the containers and keeled over, overcome by poison fumes. He subsequently recovered, but the nature of the near-fatal assassination attempt was never solved.

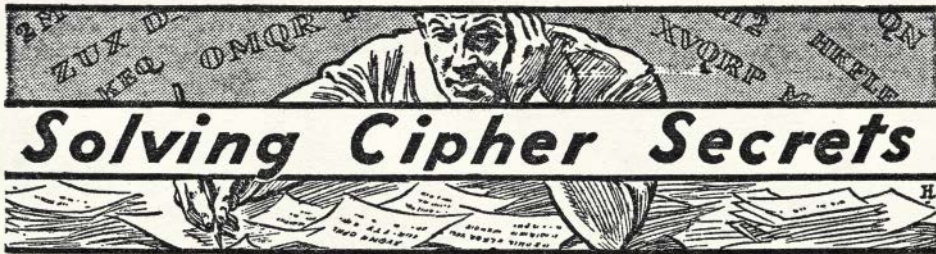
Not so fortunate was another victim, whose death led to a famous trial in Spain. Senora Catalina Y Viariza, widow of a chemist, fell in love with a handsome young man Pedro Balboa. His attentions were centered on a cousin, Señorita Nieves, and he went ahead with his wooing in spite of the threat of the widow that if he married, his bride would not leave the altar alive.

On the day of the wedding the church was well guarded. All was ready for the ceremony. The bridesmaids gathered around, and three of them presented a magnificent bouquet to the bride. She took it with a smile and raised

it to her face. Suddenly she toppled over, dead, before anything could be done. The frantic bridegroom assailed the bridesmaids. They said just as they entered the church a veiled woman gave them the bouquet to give to the bride. One of them said the woman was the widow, Catalina Y Viariza. Brought to trial she admitted her guilt readily and was condemned to death.

January 10, 1868, in Lima Peru, a revolution had just displaced President Prado. A well-known society lady came home that day to find a letter delivered in her absence. She did not look at the address but assumed it was addressed to her and opened it. She was found dead a few minutes later. Investigation showed that the envelope had been addressed to General La Puerta who had helped to depose Prada. The letter bore the words "Viva Prada," it had been impregnated with poison—intended to kill La Puerta who lived in the same house as the dead woman.

David Crewe



Founded in 1924

Article No. 830

M. E. Ohaver

A CIPHER is a secret writing. The way to solve ciphers is to experiment with substitute letters until real words begin to appear. In solving, notice the frequency of certain letters. For instance, the letters e, t, a, o, n, i, are the most used in our language. So if the puzzle maker has used X to represent e, X will probably appear very frequently. Combinations of letters will also give you clues. Thus, the affixes -ing, -ion, -ally are frequent. Helpful hints appear in this department each month. Study them carefully.

CRYPTOGRAMS

No. 5080—Receptive Surfaces. By Waggoner. Note one-letter word G in connection with pattern SOGS and short words SOT, SOUL, and UL, using LOTTs as a check word.

“SOT KUPI UL HURT G LOTTs BY JOUST AGATE UP SOUL,
SOGs SOT UKAETLLUBPL US ETNTUFTL SOT BYSTPTLS,
GPI ETSGUPL SOT HBPXTLS, GET VHGNR BPTL.”—*OGET.

No. 5081—Amazing Material. By †Azoimide. Plenty of short words here for comparison! Thus: UG, UN, and GUN; PU and UP; LBEF and ELF; EP, prefix EP-, and suffix -EPH; etc.

PU DUCKSOLO FAXFLELALO GUN CEDI, GENFL CEPONIS
CEPOQ UP UAN DUPEPOPL, DIKIXSO UG “QUAXSEPH”
GUN LBEF KNUQADL EP ISS ELF NUSOF, BIF IF TOL
XOOP QEFDURONOQ UN EPROPLOQ.

No. 5082—Slumber’s Lumber. By †Sara. Find the right words to fit ERNE, ERO, and EU. Then fill in UEROPA. You will thus have all but one letter in EROUPYOA.

AUTO EROUPYOA RUSH ERNE HPONTA PODPOAOKE
ALVGUKAGYULA HOAYPOA; UEROPA, ERNE EROX POALSE
ZPUT ERO TOKENS POADUKAO EU DPOAAYKF DPUVSOTA.

No. 5083—They Look Alike. By *Horseshoes. Single-letter word D, taken with the right guess for the final EDBS, will suggest endings -KBS and -KBSL.

OKZLX HFNUZ LRDZN UYHPDKBL RFPKGKBSL, XRTL:
“XVF LADPP HDKZL.” FHHFBUBX SPFDXL, LRFVKBS
XZKHPUX. ETX EFXR “LADPP HDKZL” HZFCU XF
EU GUTMUL—OFTZ FO D NKBG. EDBS! EDBS!

No. 5084—Prodigious Appetite. By *Acahti. Compare US with affixes US- and -USZ. Next, substitute in IUZPH and IEHUSZ, and supply the missing letters.

IEHUSZ LAKWEBEJRN XUHP SIX-PEHLPIT WARNWPIKYD
LEHIBWURREB, HIS-WAYST PYKES USMESH XAYRT TICAYB
IUZPH PYSTBIT DUOHN PERM-HAS LAXD US HXA TEND!

No. 5085—Emergency Exit. By *P. R. N. Five-letter word YEGUP, connecting repeated word HNPXUF, if correctly guessed, will supply all but one letter in UYAUP.

ZYXVUT SYVR, QUPONUV QPUOYPXLKHSR QQLT ONYXP, UZXGH
HNPXUF YEGUP HNPXUF, DNXSU CYCR ZLKHU VYHNUH ZYVSR
GLDYPVH HZYSS NLSU XT CYOF QLPON VLLP, NLQXTA GKNH
GL UBYVU UYAUP GXAUP OYG.

No. 5086—Classroom Coincidence. By †Two-Gun Tompkins. Try a common three-letter word for LTT. Check your assumption by substituting in LYRTLREA. Next, YRYMT.

"EUPA LOX *POSTMAN HUGE ZUOBLMO LTT BNP KUHPTA?"
VRPGMPA YPEISUSRP. "ROVRPABMUOLDTX," PKLEPA YRFFTPE
YRYMT. "ZUGGPZB!" LYRTLREA BPLZNP.

No. 5087—Noose Now Next. By †Ifac. Here is an alliterative message using three different initial letters. Try for SVVKKF, noting the two successive doubles.

EZBXVNR EZVHDFPZ SKNORTKF SKLRHR SLEEVE. SKZBY
SKNPSDZR SKZLXZB, SKVNPR KVNP, SKZLXTEA SVEY.
SVEUZGZBLPZ SVVKKF HKNAR HKNSYF SVNEPZBOLE, SVKCLBR
SLRD. SKNZR SKTESD SLRZ. SBVVYR SLNADP!

No. 5088—Color Blindness. By †Jack II. Note that symbol F, twice-used altogether, occurs as final in 9th word. Try your assumption in NFTAV, and supply a fitting suffix for -TAV.

BELBPR, BTAM, YPER, YRTVR, HKVRAGK, HKENR, SERD OXEAZ
UXADRUEGTNRPF, YKHYXXCPR KLZRAG UTBSRL OKA NFTAV
KHXA V YLXGSRL DXPNRLD. *QKGRLPXX!

No. 5089—Cavorting Cavalier. By Lapwing. This final cipher, cryptofans, features some intriguing patterns! But spot your own clues! Asterisks in crypts indicate capitalization.

DLHRXRBO DOLEH ULTTLEY FWGXHF MTLA ULJ-YSBOO,
ZLHY STXDP FCFNOBYFY, ZLEHY YSXTTGV-DGVY, KLXHY
*ABTZX NTBY SQT LHN. HBNY YLLH BYYGAF IFUTB-OXP
YSTXVfy. ZLGUOF RXYXLH AGOSXVOXFY VOFBYGTF.

HERE are twelve more cryptic masterpieces for you to tussle with, fans,—ten crypts, a division problem, and a new special cipher by Rebbina! Also herewith is the promised explanation of Mrs. Captain Kidd's intriguing cipher of typographical signs, published in the last issue! First, though, let's look into Rebbina's No. X-5091, a cipher of the famous key-phrase type, presenting a message of exceptional interest.

No. X-5091. Mystical Term. By Rebbina.

MSAUSENAE MSOELMAM
 MENTR "MELMO." MEAMTIE
 WEAT WOUSO SNDDLET
 EAMTMLMEEAM, ESSNAUTI
 RAETNETELR UT *SMMLDM,
 EOAUSE UT *OMYMOONO,
 MTT SEDDETLR SETMEANET
 MM DEMTUTI "MULETSE."

In this variety of cipher writing, a 26-letter phrase or sentence provides the alphabetic key, the first letter of the key-phrase signifying "a" in plain-text, the second representing "b," etc. In such an alphabet a letter may act as its own cipher symbol, or a given symbol may stand for any one of several different letters.

abcdefghijklmnop ghijklmno opqrstuv wxyz
 BORDER TO BORDER, COAST TO COAST

In the key "BORDER TO BORDER, COAST TO COAST," shown herewith, for example, symbol E stands for letter "e" as well as for "m." And R may signify "c," "f," "k," or "n." The word "up" would thus be written 00 in cipher, while "meets" would become EEETT; etc. But No. X-5091 is not too difficult, and may be solved almost by straight substitution methods. Note pattern WOUSO, and UT in connection with ending -UTI. Full translation and key of No. X-5091 will appear in the next issue.

No. X-5079. William Kidd, a British sailor, who became the notorious Captain Kidd, and was hanged at Execution Dock, London, was a merchant of New York before coming a pirate.

Message: W I L L I A M K I D D etc.
Cipher: 7 6 0 0 6 5 9 , 6 ! ! etc.

Concerning her No. X-5079, Mrs. Captain Kidd writes: "The enclosed cryptogram is a direct steal from Edgar Allan Poe, but please publish it, and see what reactions occur among your many fans. This very code by Poe aroused my interest in cryptograms twenty years ago, and I still love them! Keep up your good work!" As some of our readers may have observed, Mrs. Kidd utilized the key employed by Poe in his celebrated tale "The Gold Bug," with a few changes.

The alphabet was of the simple substitution type, using typographical signs, figure 5 for "a," figure 2 for "b," a hyphen for "c," etc. And the cipher was written, as in the Poe counterpart, without spaces between words. The translation and a short example of encipherment are given herewith. Answers to all of the current ciphers will appear in the next issue. Keep your ciphers and solutions coming, fans!

No. 5090—Cryptic Division. By †Jayemen. Find value of Q, duly noting subtractions. T minus A and T minus I. The key is numbered: 012345 6789.

A T O) B E R E T (I N E
 O O U
 U A T E
 U Q A B
 A I U T
 A I U I
 A

ANSWERS FOR LAST ISSUE

5068—"We reached the South Seas without meeting anything worth speaking of, except a few pairs of flying-men and women playing at leap-frog and dancing minuets in the air."—Mun-chausen.

5069—Purpled (embroidered with gold thread) is one of the words that I admire. And so are cypress and cypruss-lawn, and starry, chaplet, bediamonded.

5070—All but two of our thirty-two presidents, Hoover and Truman, were born east of the Mississippi, and so far only one, Harding, died west of it.

5071—Yggdrasil, sacred tree of Norse mythology, legend relates, was rooted in the nether world, with topmost branches surmounting the heavens. Some name this as origin of the Christmas tree.

5072—When solving divisions, my custom is to write them anew, using "B" for "A," "C" for "B," "W" for "V," etc. Thus hunches do not aid solution.

5073—Brides and beginners, hopefully clutching cookbook, often find that this helpful friend has sabotaged them with highfalutin words!

5074—Well-dressed woman stumbles over banana peel, carelessly tossed upon pavement. Suffers fractured ankle, concussions. First words after regaining consciousness: "My only nylons ruined!"

5075—Angry Peter Prangle, the prickly prangly pear picker, picked three pecks of prickly prangly pears from the prickly prangly pear tree.

5076—Triple-rhymed, natural-dactylic lines, existing proportionally, also equally: "Virginal Lilian, rigidly, humbliv dutiful; saintlily, lowlily, thrillingly, holly beautiful!"—Edgar A. Poe.

5077—Scotch winter evening: black clouds rolling heavily before boisterous winds; shadow-filled ravines between mountains, marshes; gloomy stream-beds, dark, terrible, like dreadful gulfs.

5078—Key: 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
 G R A N D H O T E L

All answers to current ciphers will be duly credited in our *Cipher Solvers' Club*. Address: M. E. Ohaver, *New Detective Magazine*, Fictioneers, Inc., 205 E. 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y.

By
15646

*Check writing is an art
and a paying hobby—
I tell myself. . . .*



HOBBIES are a means of escape, so the psychologists say, but my hobby continually puts me where I *can't* escape. The walls are too high, the guards too grim; and a machine gun is a powerful deterrent to wandering feet.

You remember me. I have talked with you across the bridge table, sat beside you in churches, and amused you as a drinking companion. I'm a very obliging chap when it is expedient—and you have money.

Money is important. It is an absolute neces-

sity for the financing of my hobby, because I am a check artist. The police, unfamiliar with the idiosyncrasies of the eager, enthusiastic hobbyist, have impolitely referred to my hobby as "forgery". Other uncouth persons have called it "check-kiting" or "paper-hanging." However, as long as you accept my checks, I have no complaint—I have the money!

Check writing is an art and a paying hobby. It has two drawbacks. The hobbyist must be continually on the move, and he often pays

It's the larceny in your own heart that makes you an easy prey for this gentleman, who is currently occupying a steam-heated suite at the public's expense at the request of a judge, and who sends you this word—

I'LL BE SEEING YOU, SUCKER!

a rather high price for the practice of his skill—say a term of years in prison. I'm probably cutting my own throat—and my revenue—by telling you how a check writer works, but since this verbal tyranny called rehabilitation is working its leaven within my mind, you may as well learn how to protect your hard-earned cash against the carefully planned schemes of the courteous gent who is quick to take advantage of your gullibility.

If you are a business man, filling station operator, merchant or banker you are usually skeptical of the stranger who asks you to cash a check for him. Brother, you don't have a chance with me. I never ask. I let you make the offer. Then, because you are so eager to please me, I'm only too glad to give you a check. For example. . . .

I arrived in the small city Friday night and stopped the car before the entrance of a large hotel. The doorman stepped forward and opened the door of the big convertible. The bellhop seized my luggage and trailed me into the hotel.

The smile on the manager's face indicated that the bellhop had given him the standard signal meaning: *Rich. Big car. Soak him.* After I have registered and am settled in my room, the doorman will make his report. The manager, knowing I am driving an expensive car and have a large amount of luggage, makes a small mark upon the registration card; a little mark that will cost him several hundred dollars before I leave, for it means that my credit is good! This is the first step toward pursuing my hobby.

Saturday morning I saunter into the bank and seek out one of its officers. With my card lying upon the desk before him, the bank official listens courteously to my explanation that I am a field manager for a large corporation and am in his city for the purpose of opening a branch office. The bank official is very cooperative and friendly, because my "firm" means business for the bank. We talk

for nearly an hour about rents, office space, prospective employees and the possibility of leasing an apartment.

When the atmosphere has become one of trust and friendliness I pull out my checkbook, write out a check in the form of a draft and open an account with the bank. After signing the usual signature card and placing the deposit slip in a well-stuffed billfold I wait for the banker to make the usual mistake. They always do! He hands me a checkbook and cautions me not to draw against my account until the draft has been collected. Banks do not give checkbooks to new depositors when the account has been opened with an out-of-town draft, but a little judicious contact has already been arranged between the hotel and the bank, and this has promoted my standing. Thus he makes the slip which will cost his fellow business men hundreds of dollars. That checkbook is my entree to the local cash registers.

Walking back to the hotel, I unconsciously note the locations of various shops, and small



businesses where I might find people interested in my hobby. Arriving at the hotel I engage the manager in conversation, mentioning that I have just opened an account at the bank and let him catch a brief glimpse of the deposit slip and checkbook. We have quite a chat, talking over business trends, politics and personalities. When I leave the desk and go up to my room, another sucker has been prepared for initiation into my noble art.

I shall be busy for the next few hours, leafing through the classified section of the telephone book and noting the addresses of small, exclusive men's shops, jewelry stores and sporting goods stores. Then out with the road maps and to plan the route which will take me to my next stop, nearly a thousand miles away. The foundation for my hobby is laid. It is now three o'clock and the banks are closed. Now—I can go to work.

I PHONED the desk for my car and drove directly to the first address on my list. The manager in the small clothing store was extremely glad to see me, especially after I had bought several hundred dollars worth of clothing and accessories. We enjoyed an hour of interesting conversation, the manager, while talking, trying to sell me everything he could lay his hands on. When he walked over to the cashier's desk with me he knew I was a new resident of his city, was opening an office—and, most important, that I had a large account in the nearby bank. Thus when I pulled out my checkbook and paid for my purchases by check, the manager did not question the check's validity.

While one of the clerks carried my merchandise out to the car I suddenly remembered—audibly—that I had forgot to go to the bank that morning and would be pressed for cash over the week-end. The store manager immediately volunteered to accept my check for cash. Another hundred dollars out of his pocket!

From the clothing store to the jewelry shop was a short, but lucrative step. I repeated my conversational approach in the jewelry shop, walking out with a Patek Philippe watch (\$450), a birthday present for my wife (dinner ring—\$375), and several minor gifts which brought the total to nearly \$1,000. The unsuspecting jeweler was very co-operative since my car was standing before his store and he had watched me supervise the clothing store clerk while he placed my purchases in the luggage compartment. The fact that people couple large automobiles with wealth is one that costs them dearly.

Several other stores received my personal attention that afternoon. One clerk questioned my identity and became very profuse with his apologies when I shoved various creden-

tials into his hands, berating him meanwhile upon questioning my check. The mind of the business man is strangely variant—he will accept a social security card as valid identification, yet anyone can obtain these cards by the dozen, in various ways in different cities, and by legitimate means. He will accept a driver's license as identification when its only value is that of giving one's physical characteristics.

I carried a Western Union Card, credit cards of various organizations, lodge cards, business cards, letterheads, checks imprinted with the name of my "corporation" and several other standard items of identification; all of which had been printed for me some months before.

Saturday night found me back in my hotel room, richer by several thousand dollars in merchandise and over a thousand dollars in cash. Later Saturday evening I made the rounds of the local night clubs with a local girl. She was anxious to impress her friends with the fact that I was a member of the community and her endorsement of me meant that the night club proprietors would discover my checks in their tills Sunday morning.

Sunday morning was also getaway time for me. I informed the hotel manager that I had found a likely apartment and had my luggage brought down to the car. During our conversation I discovered that I spent so much Saturday night that I did not have enough money to carry me over Sunday—a shame, too—I was planning a large party Sunday night. The manager was very sympathetic and succeeded in forcing cash upon me in exchange for one of my checks—another hundred in the kitty!

Now, except for one step, I was ready to leave. That step was the crowning achievement of my entire plan; the perfect exit for the check-artist. Leaving the hotel, I drove straight to the home of the bank official whom I met Saturday morning in the bank and who opened my account. He was very surprised to find me standing on his front porch early Sunday morning and was amused at my description of the night clubs—and how fast they cleaned me. He cashed my check.

All but two of the bank officials who've cooperated so agreeably with me in the past, cashed post-dated checks for me, drawn upon their own banks—and Barnum said there was one born every minute! Didn't he mean seconds?

Twenty minutes after the last check had been cashed, my car and I were traveling at high speed over a route I'd previously marked on my road map. The highway was in good condition. My car was a large, heavy make and a good driver can cover a lot of territory between Sunday and 9 o'clock Monday morn-

ing, when the bank would open. While the merchants, hotel manager and other folks would be calling the police, gulping bromo seltzers and aspirin, gazing sadly at the worthless checks, I would be a thousand miles away, sleeping comfortably in another hotel.

I was not worried about the police, because of the distance between us. I had also changed the license plates on my car. It is not necessary to "steal" license plates. After one has passed through several states, stopping in each one and buying a set of plates through regular channels, one accumulates a valuable collection—and they come in quite handy at various times.

Tuesday or Wednesday, I made the rounds of the jewelry stores in my new "home-town," and went to the bank, and obtained a loan upon the watch and dinner ring. These items generally bring about 60% of their value. I also inserted an ad in the local paper describing the merchandise I bought in the other town, and selling it to the first people answering the ad. My income was thus supplemented by several hundred dollars.

After disposing of this excess merchandise I drive another thousand miles, check in another hotel on a Friday night and the following day repeat the procedure which is necessary for the practice of my hobby.

Extensive check writing three months out of the year enabled me to live in ease and comfort the remaining nine months. I possessed all the mundane comforts of this modern world—bought with your money. Of course I am not enjoying the bright sunlight and lazy nights at Palm Beach with my wife just at present because I failed to move fast enough a few months ago. But there are many like me—and enough of you, who will continue to cash worthless checks.

Probably every merchant or businessman has accepted a bad check at one time or another and they will continue to accept them if approached in the proper manner. Bankers are not immune. I have walked into a bank

with no identification other than my "front" and talked a bank officer into cashing an out-of-town check. A week later he realized that he had accepted a worthless draft, but he isn't cured. Another check artist will come along with a different approach and hook him again!

You can protect yourself against the devious scheme of the check artist by following a few simple suggestions.

Don't cash a stranger's check unless it is on local bank and you can quickly verify his account.

Don't accept a check after the banks have closed for the day, unless you are personally acquainted with the drawee.

Don't accept social security cards, driver's licenses and draft registrations as valid identification.

Remember, although the stranger possesses his own checkbook and bank book and seems perfectly honest, you have no assurance that his account is still open or that it contains sufficient funds to meet the check.

Beware of glib strangers. Honest people seldom enter into intimate conversations with merchants or business men when they are on a shopping tour.

If you operate a garage, tourist court or roadside hostelry, you should know that most tourists carry cash or traveler's checks. If a customer finds it necessary to cash a personal check, be careful—or get out the red ink.

When you accept a check on Sunday look at the date on it. If the check is dated Sunday, you're hooked. If it is dated Monday you can cash it—providing you have followed all the foregoing suggestions. But some people simply won't learn that a contract signed on Sunday is worthless; and a check is a contract.

And if you want to be perfectly safe against the schemes of the check artist, don't cash the check unless the drawee is a personal friend of yours or a customer of long standing and you know they have the money in the bank!

In the meantime, keep the cash drawer full for—I'll be seeing you.

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of New Detective Magazine, published bi-monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1946. State of New York, county of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Harold S. Goldsmith, who having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of New Detective Magazine, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended, by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Fictioneers, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Managing Editor, none. Business Manager, Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. 2. That the owner is Fictioneers, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Shirley M. Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: none. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner, and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest, direct or indirect, in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. Harold S. Goldsmith, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 11th day of October 1946. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, New York County Clerk's No. 40, Register's No. 363-W-3. (My commission expires March 30, 1948.) [Seal]—Form 3526—Ed. 1933.

BUSY BODY



She tried to make a warning sound, but could only accomplish a mewling noise. . . .

THE GIRL moved quickly through the rain-washed night. Her heels made a subdued, yet hurried tattoo on the yacht club's gangplank as she descended to the float—then the lights cast reflections of her slim, halting legs on the wet surface of the walkway.

She drew a sharp breath, but did not stop, quite. She had seen the big, broad, somehow grimly patient figure of the man who waited there in the dark out at the end of the walkway. She steeled herself, went on.

She boarded the hundred-foot schooner, *Adventure III*. Moving with the sure-footed-

By
**Kenneth
L.
Sinclair**

A sucker for romance, Detective Sergeant Delson sat through the killer's show twice—before he found that a corpse can be wrong!

ness of one in familiar surroundings she crossed the deck, went down a companionway, knocked on the door of the main cabin.

The door opened after a moment. The man framed in the light wore a smoking jacket and had a drink in his hand. But his bronzed, almost harshly handsome face held an unnatural pallor.

"Clane!" the girl said. "It's—I came about Al. He's escaped!"

"I know." The man nodded toward the radio in the corner. "Come on in, Kay. Sit down and let me fix you a tall drink—you probably need it. I saw you hurrying along the float."

She perched on the arm of an ultra-modernistic chair.

"Clane, I'm scared stiff. Al may do something terrible!"

"Such as come here and try to kill me? I'm not worried. That book louse of yours has turned out to be quite a surprise to all of us. But we can discount that outburst he made in court, when he yelled that stuff about me being responsible for the fix he was in. Just nerves, Kay. He had time to think it over, now, to realize that I stood by him just as long as I could, that I didn't give that testimony about seeing him go scuttling off the *Adventure* until I was forced to do it."

The girl nodded slowly. She remembered Clane Trefford had been stubbornly reluctant about testifying against Al. Yet it couldn't possibly have been Al whom Trefford had seen that night, after the sound of the shot awakened him. Al had been with her—but her testimony on that had been put down to a fiancée's loyalty. And the thing that really dusted the hot seat for Al had been the fact that Rillon, before he died in the hospital, gave a statement.

In it he positively identified the man who had suddenly appeared in the doorway between the two cabins, shot him in the abdomen, and then disappeared—as Al Loring.

The dying man's statement had carried weight. Rillon had been Loring's boss, in the investment firm which had charge of Gloria Colville Trefford's assorted millions. Shortages were discovered in the Colville estate accounts—the accounts which Loring handled.

The jury was out forty minutes.

Ice made a chilly tinkle in the drink the man was making for her. "Al hasn't reached you since he escaped?" Trefford asked.

Kay shook her head. "No. But after what he said in court, I thought he'd come here—" She was about to tell him about the bulky shape waiting stolidly out there on the float, but something in his manner—the edged, probing look in his eyes—warned her then.

He asked, "Are you sure?"

Shaking her head mutely, she jumped up.

"Forget it," he said easily, handing her the drink with his left hand.

He struck her with his right, a short, savage blow that came from nowhere and exploded against the side of her chin.

She felt herself falling. But in that split second her mind was racing: She wished she hadn't come to the yacht tonight; she wished she'd never seen Clane Trefford. But she was the smart young gal with the radio program, and Trefford was the "world adventurer" who'd married Gloria Colville. Interesting people—her work, her world. Interesting . . .

The blackness welled up, blotted out all that.

SHE was tied rigidly to something. A chair—a straight-backed chair. And her mouth was stuffed full—a gag, of course, tied behind her head. Pain wrapped its shifting coils about her skull, and squeezed. She closed her eyes, trying to shut it out, but that did no good. She opened them again.

Clane Trefford was threading film into a small movie projector. He gave her his glamour-boy smile, slightly twisted.

"Sorry I had to get rough with you. You're a smooth little chick—why couldn't you've had a few million lying around, instead of that hell-cat Gloria? She ran out on me, and now, I'm afraid, you're going to get your shapely self right in the line of fire, baby. Loring's line of fire."

He was carefully aiming the projector toward the frosted-glass door that connected this cabin with the next.

"This is self-defense, baby. Your book-worm is coming here to kill me. I've got a perfect right to protect my hide—and incidentally, my slice of the Colville sugar. Rillon was digging up a technicality to keep me from collecting that. So Rillon got himself killed."

The girl regarded him with wide, horrified eyes.

"Getting the idea, huh?" he said. "A brass-bound cinch, with the dying man giving a statement that he saw Loring coming at him with a gun in his hand, saw the gun fire and kick in Loring's hand. It was easy enough to fix up those shortages in the accounts, then get Rillon down here on a pretense and sit him down in that next room, with the lights down mighty low. Remember that day we all went on the cruise? Very gay party. I took some movies—got one of Loring walking along the deck toward the camera, back-lighted and everything."

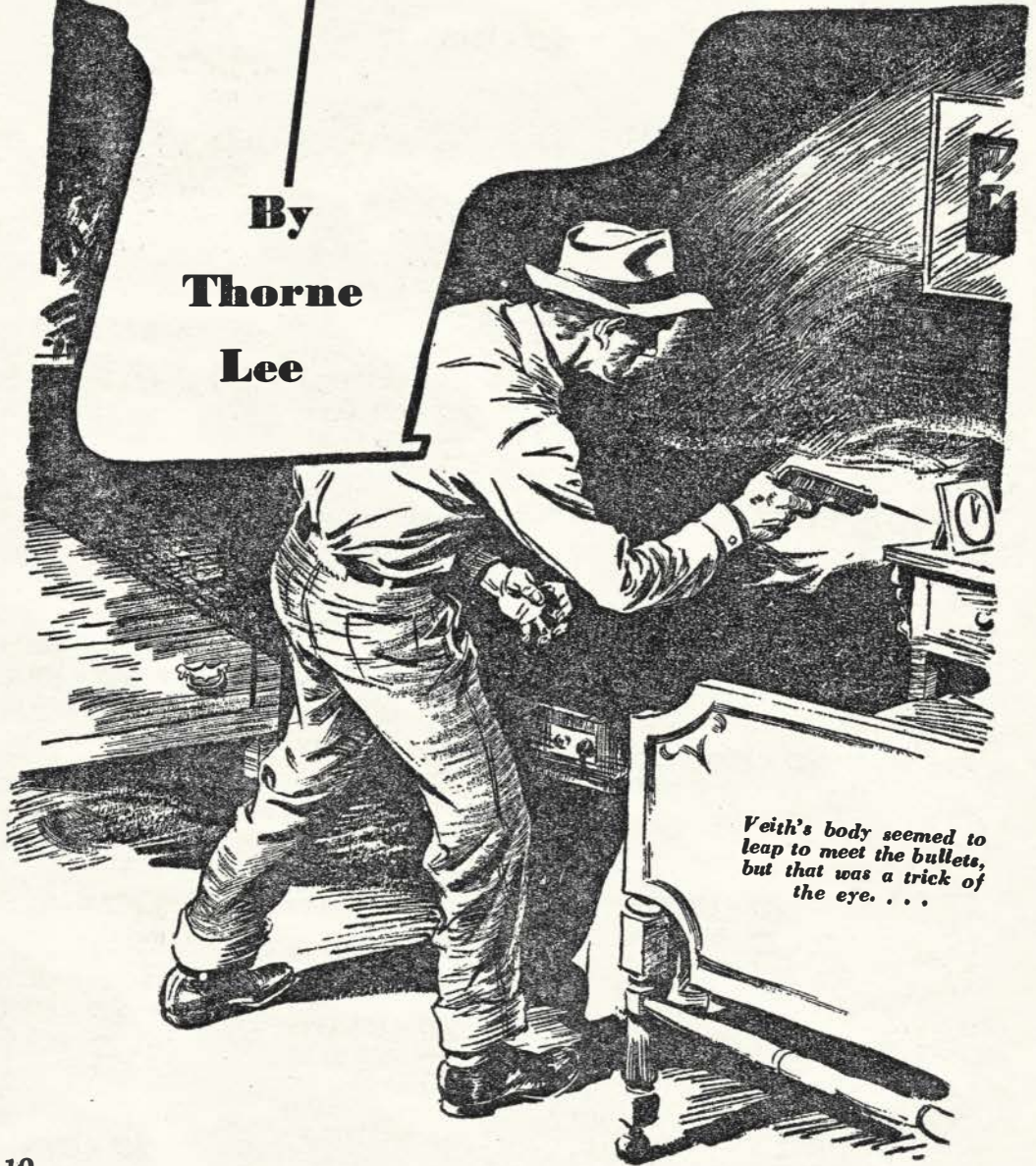
He saw her quick, puzzled frown then, and laughed.

"Wondering about that gun in his hand? I did a smooth job of dubbing that in by double exposure. Almost a professional job,

(Continued on page 121)

MURDER ON SHOULDERS

By
**Thorne
Lee**



*Veith's body seemed to
leap to meet the bullets,
but that was a trick of
the eye. . . .*

Sure Slay

MY

CLYDE VEITH lay, shot through the heart, in a churning pool of white bedclothes, head arched back inhumanly across the pillow, mouth gaping wide, like some monstrous fish being yanked bodily from its habitat.

Nat Roark's fingers worked the small automatic in a kind of delayed impulse. The action, kindled from the smoldering flame of his eyes, was blocked by some strange rebellion of the muscles. . . . *Shoot, Nat—fire away! This is the payoff on that four-year debt. This is for the Chadwicks, Sally and her father. . . .*

Motion broke through the sluggish barrier of his hesitation,



Anything for a pal, Nat Roark figured—what's a little murder among friends, even if you hang for it? But he just didn't know the ropes. . . .

pulsed along his arm, leaped into the lifeless gun steel, galvanizing it to splintered fire and roaring sound, and a thin, darting lizard of acrid smoke.

Veith's body actually seemed to leap up to meet the discharge, but that was only a trick of the eye. The mind was not quick enough to perceive the hammer-blow of bullet against chest. It could only see the reaction, the rebound of rubbery, dummy flesh.

Four more shots to go—use 'em all. Faster! Get it over with before the whole town wakes up. . . . Nat leaned forward on his toes, forcing the action. . . . *What have you got to lose—where does this put you? Just back where*

you were four years ago. No better, no worse. You were running away then. You'll be running away again. . . . The gun spoke. The body twisted under the impact. A limp arm slid off the bed, dangled to the floor.

Nat shut his eyes—well, that was over. The gun was empty. The body of Clyde Veith was loaded with death, six times dead, dead for sure! The dreamy nausea of the act passed swiftly now. It flowed in a thin sweat down his neck, along the arms. He tossed the gun on the bed with a shudder, strode to the window.

There was no one out on the street, but there would be. A single shot, the first one, might have passed off among the blurred sounds of the city night, but the five other shots, the five in rapid succession. . . . *Well, get going, Nat! Hit the road. . . .*

It occurred to him that he had not once thought of the escape. He was not really thinking of it now. His body simply flowed along an escape pattern it had learned long ago. Running away was a habit!

HE FLIPPED off the light in Clyde Veith's tiny flat, circled the bed to the rear window. The little shop on the first floor was dark. The alley down there was uniformly, solidly grey. He palmed the sash upward, smashed the screen with his fists and went out feet first. His hand on the sill briefly broke the rhythm of his descent and then he dropped, collapsing to take the shock of the pavement, toe to knee to hip to shoulder, folding, twisting, spilling finally on his back.

He gathered himself up and the bones were all there. With the lithe silence of a professional footpad he followed the alley to the far end, darted across a dim, deserted street and plunged into another alley.

Then began a long, loping race with himself. He was a good runner. He could keep his pace for miles.

As he ran, the plot of escape shaped easily and naturally in his mind. The old switch-back trick was still the best.

On the outskirts of town he cut along a dark street to the main highway, got his heaving breath down to normal, and stepped out into the late night traffic. His energetic thumb and friendly, boyish grin snared a ride from the fourth car that came along.

Nat talked enough to the couple in the front seat to find out that they lived in the next town south, and to let his own voice and manner register on their minds.

Five miles out another highway intersected this one. He got out there at the stop sign and gave the people a good look at his face before they drove away. Later they probably would report to police that a young hitchhiker had asked to be let off at the highway junction.

By all normal reasoning that would mean he had gone either east or west, but his plan was better than that. He was heading north, right back to the town he had just left.

He had to wait in the shadow of a tall oak for fifteen minutes. Then an empty farm truck rolled up from the south to the stop sign. He leaped out into the road and vaulted lightly into the rear of the truck as it roared off to the north. He hugged the jolting, slivery floor to keep himself unseen in the light of passing autos.

Back in the city again, he was able to leave the truck, unseen, at the first traffic light. He still had a good hour or so before dawn. That gave him time for the silent trek across town to the place he called home.

Chadwick Haven was the largest estate in this wealthy community. Nat was thankful for its open, rolling grounds, its dark evergreens. His key admitted him to the big garage. He groped along the cold heads of the three Chadwick automobiles, found the stairway to the loft. He trotted softly up to his room and surveyed it by the light of a pack of matches, carefully hoarding the charred stubs in his palm so there would be no sign of his return.

One thing he knew that no one else was likely to notice—there was a tiny trap door in the ceiling of the loft, leading to a dusty, airless cell under the steep roof. He decided to make a bed up in that gloomy attic with a few old boards from the garage and some odd clothing from his closet.

A dressing table directly under the trap door gave him a treacherous stairway to the attic. With his bed completed, he vanished into the choking darkness of his hideaway.

He had to have more air; so he pried loose a few shingles along the roof. Then he stretched out on his crude board couch for a rest—a long, dark, crouching animal, a hunted fox on a hidden limb.

THERE was no sleep for him that night. His mind was too much alive, leaping back across four years. Now it was as if those years had never happened. This, he thought, was the way he was meant to live.

It might have been better if Horace Chadwick had never gone to bat for him. Chadwick should have let the law send him back to reform school four years ago. That was where a no-good kid belonged—instead, the old man had remembered Nat's mother as an old friend, had taken the boy's future on his own solid shoulders, had given the wild orphan a taste of the dignity of living.

That was all it was, just a taste. You can't cure the wildness in a man in four years. Even Chadwick's daughter, Sally, could not cure it. She could only make it worse. It was nature, the way Nat felt about Sally, but it was not

nature to have to keep it all inside himself, never to speak a word.

Painfully he recalled every line and manner of the girl. She was not tall, but the supple, erect grace of her body seemed to go with tallness. She always complained that her light brown hair was ropy, but to him it was like fine cornsilk in the wind, long and free-blown. Her face was firm-boned, almost too rugged for a girl, but that was offset by the easy gentleness of her brown eyes.

He ground his long body against the rough boards of his bed in an agony of remorse at what he had lost—at what, in fact, he had never gained. There had been a certain brother-sister sort of friendship those first few years, but nothing more than that. Sally had never shown any feeling in her eyes for him, as she did for Clyde Veith, when the latter came along.

He searched back into his mind, recalling the changes in Sally from the time that Clyde had happened into their lives. It started the summer night that Nat drove Sally and Nora Wright to the Country Club dance. Nora was the new nurse for Sally's mother, who was a permanent invalid. Sally was just back from her third year in college, eager for excitement, and her father had sent the nurse along as a sort of chaperone.

Nat, who performed as a chauffeur for the family, sat outside in the car that night. He knew nothing of the meeting of Clyde Veith and Sally Chadwick inside the club, but he did see the solid-shouldered, dark-mustached chap in the white tuxedo who came away from the dance just ahead of Sally and Nora Wright. Five minutes later on the drive home Nat saw the same man in a frame of bright headlights flagging the Chadwick sedan to a halt.

Sally had spoken his name from the rear seat, and Nat had not missed the excitement in her voice.

The man only wanted a jack for a flat tire, but he refused to allow Nat to help him and promised to return the jack next day.

That was the wedge Clyde Veith used to get into Sally's life. It was Sally who met him at the front door when he returned the jack. Sally met him every night from then on.

Veith might have pulled it off, at that. His act was good. He had credentials. He was supposed to be an insurance salesman and doing pretty well at it, to judge from his clothes. The only flaw in Veith's plot was the fact that Nat finally recognized him.

Years ago—his first time in reform school—he had seen Clyde Veith doing time on a three-year sentence. Veith had changed a lot in the meantime. His hard, crusty manner had refined to an oily sort of elegance. On top of that he was just handsome enough. . . .

Sally had fallen plenty hard. There was not much hope that he could reason with her. He finally decided to go to her father with the whole story.

HE WOULD never forget the flaming, defensive anger in Sally's eyes. "I don't believe it!" she said. "And if I did, I wouldn't care!"

Horace Chadwick, a lawyer, was shrewd enough not to argue; Clyde Veith, at least in Sally's eyes, was entitled to as much benefit of the doubt as Nat himself. Sally had only looked at Nat, tight-lipped, as if to promise that she would never speak to him again.

There was no way of knowing whether Sally might have reasoned herself out of the situation, because another element came suddenly into the matter. A few days later Nora Wright, the nurse, accused Veith of making a pass at her. Chadwick called him in and, with Sally sitting stiffly in a screened alcove, listening, made his crisp proposition to the man.

"We think we're on to your scheme, Mr. Veith. We know you have a jail record. I don't suppose you have seen fit to inform my daughter of that record!"

Veith did not seem surprised. He smiled blandly. "Okay, so you know about me. I'll admit I didn't want Sally to know. I didn't want her to bring any doubts into our marriage—but a man should be able to live down his past, if he wants to!"

"I don't believe you want to!" the lawyer snapped. "I'll pay you ten thousand dollars to break the whole thing off right now, and that, I warn you, is the limit. If my daughter goes ahead and marries you I'll cut her off without a cent."

"Okay," Veith said thickly. "Cut her off if you like. That suits me better. Get this, Mr. Chadwick—it's your daughter I want, not her money. I'll tell Sally about my record. I'll tell her now, and if I'm not terribly mistaken, she's one person who will back me up!"

The upshot was that Veith became a martyr to Sally, who now flaunted openly her resentment of criticism. Possibly to punish Nat, she insisted on his chauffeuring herself and Veith around—and that was how he learned of their plan to elope.

It was the night when the years had began to roll back for Nat; when he'd again felt trapped and wild.

Midnight had found him haunting a sandwich counter across the street from Clyde Veith's little three-room flat above a small tailor shop. Just before the café closed up, Nat stepped to a front window and stared somberly at the dark pits of Veith's curtained windows. There was one way any man could be stopped. . . .

And then the thing had happened, as if it were beyond his control, a thing his whole life had been building up to. There was no going back on it now.

CHAPTER TWO

World in a Gun

ALMOST with a start he felt the bruising hardness of the boards. He could not tell day from night in his dark, cramped cell above the garage loft, but somewhere outside were the distant thuds and creaks of morning.

He wondered what Sally would be thinking; how would she take the shock of Clyde Veith's murder? When the full story came out—well, her feelings toward him were part of the deal.

A thin hustle down below announced that breakfast was under way. They would soon be noting his absence. How soon, then, would he be linked up with the murder of Clyde Veith?

He sweated it out and an hour or so later there was a commotion in the garage and the sound of heavy steps pounding up to his room in the loft. He pressed his ear close to a crack, let his body relax into utter silence.

The voice that spoke was harsh, male, unfamiliar. "Nobody up here. Bed's not been touched. Does he make a habit of staying away nights?"

"Never!" That was Horace Chadwick. His voice was hoarse with a kind of bottled alarm. "Not once in four years."

The first man muttered, "He wouldn't be shooting folks to death too often in that time, either. I'm pretty sure he's our man. You've already identified the gun. This lad had easy access to it in that guncase of yours. If you ask me, he's cleared out, hit the road."

"I can't believe it!" Old Chadwick sounded genuinely ill.

"I think it'll be clear enough when we check the fingerprints on that gun. We already have a witness placing him at the scene. He spent an hour before midnight at Willy Dean's sandwich stand across the street from Veith's apartment—"

Horace Chadwick was suddenly the defense lawyer, protesting: "That's your case, sheriff, but can you explain why Nat would let himself be seen so openly if he really planned to murder Veith? Surely he wouldn't be such a fool as that!"

"Murderers are always fools."

Chadwick's voice was choked with emotion. "I don't know how I can tell this to my daughter . . . and Nat Roark of all people! Why, he was almost like my own son!"

Nat Roark spent the rest of that day sleeping fitfully. The hunger that slowly began to

gnaw at him was almost a pleasure. A man could fight hunger—and, fighting it, forget other things.

Late in the afternoon he crawled down into his room in the loft. He lay on his bed until his dresser clock showed midnight in a flicker of match, then slipped down the garage stairs and out. Creeping along under the big evergreens, he circled the main house. There was a single dim light downstairs, but they always left that one on at night. He let himself into the pantry with the house key.

There would be plenty to eat in the big refrigerator. The cook was careless, not likely to miss any small scraps that might vanish in the night, and he had little worry about discovery. He was an old hand at house-breaking.

There was a slight clicking noise as he opened the refrigerator door, and he was suddenly bathed in a soft electric glow from the cool interior. He slipped off his shirt and spread it on the floor to make a lug-sack. Rapidly he gathered bits of meat, cheese, a few vegetables.

He had closed the box, stooped, and gathered up his loaded shirt when light burst over him with all the shock of an explosion. He stood up stiffly, saw the slim hand on the switch, the long, silken figure trailing that hand.

Sally Chadwick's teeth caught sharply at her lower lip, shutting off her exclamation. She slid along the wall, a lithe, quivering animal shape in sheer pajama silk and bare feet. Nat backed away from her, crouching. They were like two jungle cats meeting suddenly in a bright patch of sunlight.

Nat fumbled for something to say, came out with the ridiculously normal: "I got hungry!"

"You're here," she whispered. "You're still here!"

"It was the best place," he muttered.

She stiffened up slowly against the wall. Her voice was husky, accusing. "Nat, they say you killed him. *You killed Clyde Veith!*"

Well, this was it, the one thing he was afraid to face. His tongue trailed out thinly, the words flowing like harsh sand across it. "I guess they got reason to say that."

A white lump worked up and down the girl's throat. Her eyes and cheeks seemed shrunken. Her quivering teeth chewed at words but could not eject them, and he killed a treacherous impulse to leap at her, lock her in his arms, and bury his face in the straggling brown silk of her hair. That would be something to remember.

Instead he said evenly, "Did you hear me in the house, Sally? Is that why you came down?"

"No. I was just restless."

"What're you going to do about me, Sally?"

Her head pivoted stiffly from side to side. "I don't know. I don't know what to do now, Nat!"

"I guess I better get out of here."

"Where? Where will you go?" There was no sympathy in her voice. There was no feeling at all.

He shrugged. "I dunno. Don't make much difference, I guess. When you're on the lam, one place is like another."

A slim bare arm drifted out toward him. "I don't understand," she said. "It's all just numb inside me. Why did you do it, Nat?"

In the past twenty hours he had explained this to her a dozen times in his mind, but it was nothing his tongue could form into words. "I wasn't jealous!" he exploded. "That's what they'll say about me. 'Jealous!' Believe me, it wasn't that, Sally!"

"I don't know what to believe, Nat. It's all crazy. It's so crazy it makes me sick!"

"You'll be better off, Sally—" He actually tried to say that, but the words sounded foolish with the pain and shock written like scars across her face.

"I got to hike!" he said harshly. "Good-bye, Sally. Let me off as easy as you can."

He backed toward the door. The girl ran swiftly across the room, caught his wrist. "Where to, Nat? Where on earth can a man like you go?"

"There'll be places. I'll find them. Just go back to bed, Sally. Do that much for me!"

He broke from her grip, eased out on the porch. There was a dark screen between them now.

"Nat!" she panted. "Wait a minute! Wait for me! I'll take dad's car and drive you out of town. They're watching the roads—"

"Why?" Nat hissed. "Why should you do that?"

"I don't know," she mumbled. "I guess—I just can't think. You're not like that. You never were. It's all wrong, Nat—everything's wrong—"

He pressed his face against the screen, tried to find her eyes through the gloom. "Thanks, Sally. That's worth more than getting away. Just go back to bed on that, will ya?"

"No!" Her whisper was almost shrill. "I'll get dressed. I'll drive you out. Wait for me down at the gate, Nat—it's the only way you'll ever get through."

He couldn't help himself then. He was not thinking of escape, but of riding the last few miles beside her. "Okay. You can drive me to the edge of town. I'll be at the gate."

Ten minutes later Nat heard the big sedan rolling quietly down the drive. When it was hidden from the house by the trees, the lights came on. Nat stepped into the glare, his tall, sweating body framed sharply against a cement gatepost.

A hard male voice exploded like a gun in the deep vault of the night. "Hold it, Roark! Don't move!"

Nat crouched, swayed on his toes, searching the bodiless dark. The sedan braked its speed, wheeled straight toward him. He was trapped, pinioned by the stabbing light. The thought hit into him, numbing as any bullet—*Sally tricked me! Sally called the law!*

He wasn't going to take it like this, standing still. He swerved, dived out of the light shaft into the pool of outer darkness. A gun went off. He leaped a ditch, shot out into the road.

"Halt there, or I'll drop you!" The voice sounded like the sheriff's.

He hopped, weaved, crouched down the road. A bullet thudded into a pole at his left. That was up high. They weren't really trying to hit him—yet.

He heard the roar of a car in low gear, saw headlights swerving into the road. He slowed his pace, waited for the light tongues to lick across his heaving shoulders. Then he leaped the ditch, vaulted a fence, and vanished into a grove.

He saw the big Chadwick sedan gathering speed, racing downtown—probably to bring more men to the search. There were two persons in the front seat—Sally and the sheriff.

THE switchback trick was still the best, Nat decided. They had seen him cut into this grove and would expect him to make his break out of town right now; so the best plan was to go back to the Chadwicks.

He trotted back across the road to the big estate. His shirt, loaded with food, was still slung across his shoulder.

It would be a mistake to go back to the garage, so he made his way to the rear door, slipped cautiously into the kitchen. A night light was still glowing, but there was no sound. He recalled that there were two bedrooms which were rarely used, and he slipped off his shoes and slid noiselessly through the house. His breath was even now, his heart normal.

The night light was a tiny bracket lamp at the foot of the main stairway. Nat had to cross that pool of light to get up the stairs. He sucked in his breath and eased into it with silent lizard movements, like an underwater swimmer.

He felt the sudden, arresting shock before he heard the sound—like a giant hand slapping his shoulder, spinning him halfway around. The shot registered in his brain at the same instant that the hot red blood spurted out over his chest and arm. . . .

Upstairs! he thought, *A gun, upstairs. . . .* His knees were watery, trapping him there like a duck on a pond. A wild flash of realiza-

tion blazed through the sudden fog of dizziness! *Get out of the light, Nat, or you're dead! Jump!*

He levered himself forward, dived, rolled, as a second shot thudded harmlessly into the wall.

He kept rolling, down two short steps into the black pitch of the living room. The floor was slippery under his hands, where his own punctured shoulder dripped his life down on the boards. He squirmed along, found a dark groove behind a sofa, wrenched his body around in it to peer up the dim shaft of the stairway.

Whoever it was stayed out of sight. Hunter and hunted could not see each other. There was just that tiny patch, that No Man's Land of light between them.

Overhead the household was arousing. Voices sounded distantly, footsteps padding along a hall.

Nat fought against the nausea creeping up his throat, flowing like thick black ink into his mind.

Voices chattered vaguely at the head of the stairs. Then the gun itself emerged into the light, balanced in a steady, muscular hand.

"Stay where you are, Nat!" a man challenged. "You can't get away now!"

An arm in a sleek red robe followed the gun and beyond it loomed the touseled head of Horace Chadwick, eyes emerging sharply from the glaze of sleep. He stalked stiffly down the stairs. Beyond his shoulder appeared the blonde head of Nora Wright, the nurse, eyes wide with fear.

Nat swam against the tide of unconsciousness. *The old man, too! The old man is on the other side! There goes your world down the gun barrel, Nat Roark. . . .*

The light seemed to burst into a thousand pieces and Nat's mind shut itself into a darkness that no enemy could penetrate.

CHAPTER THREE

Assist on Death

HE COULDN'T place himself at first. He swam in a whirlpool of accusing faces. Sally, Horace, Nora. Cold eyes, hard lips, sharp teeth, stiff bodies, darting in and out, shouldering each other to leap at him, trample his chest.

He could feel the pain of their attack distantly. Mostly on the left side, near the heart. A solid lump of pain where they kicked his ribs, pummeled him with raging fists.

Their assault must be nearly finished now. They were fading back, withdrawing from the kill. His eyes struggled after them, lips quivered to articulate the death cry in his chest. . . .

The fever broke suddenly in a burst of sweat on his face. His eyes straightened, assorted the faces, and he came fully awake.

He strained to peer down the length of his body. He seemed to be in somebody's bed under a crisp white sheet. He was right about the faces. The anger was there in the eyes, even though it was not physically attacking him. The pain he had felt was a deep throbbing in the region of his shoulder.

Nora Wright, in her white nurse's uniform, came and laid a cool hand on his brow. She turned and nodded at a tall figure in the corner. "He'll be all right now. I think we can straighten him up enough to talk."

A pair of big, knotty hands came out of the corner and helped the nurse prop up his back with pillows. Sally Chadwick and her father remained far back against the wall. Nora stepped away.

The fourth person emerged into full view, dragging a chair, sat down beside the bed. His big shoulders strained the seams of a black leather jacket. Neck muscles writhed in and out of a tight collar. The hair and brows were shaggy, reddish-grey. The face was pouchy with excess flesh. The only small things about him were two dark brown eyes like twin kidney beans.

He had a big metal star on his chest. "I'm Sheriff Kirkeby," he said to Nat. "D'you follow what I'm saying? Feel up to a little chat?"

Nat wrenched a painful nod out of his head.

Kirkeby's smile was friendly enough. "Son, you sure have given us a chase! I never tracked an Indian trickier than you."

Nat produced a weak smile of his own.

The brown eyes squinted. "So you killed Clyde Veith, did you, son?"

Nat's throat worked tightly, producing a husky, strained whisper. "Guess you've got all the evidence, haven't you?"

"Sure," the sheriff agreed. "We got plenty evidence, so you might as well talk up, son. Did you kill Clyde Veith?"

Nat shot a swift glance at the taut faces of the Chadwicks. "I shot him!" he blurted, and his chest felt relieved of a great weight.

"Why, son? Why did you shoot him?"

Well, here it is, Nat thought. You hoped you'd never have to talk, but here it is!

"I guess Mr. Chadwick has told you what I thought about Veith," Nat mumbled.

"Yeah," the sheriff grunted. "What I've gathered is that you thought he might be fixing to ruin Sally Chadwick's life."

Nat nodded, evading Sally's eyes. "He sure would have ruined it!"

"What made you so sure Veith was not on the level?" Kirkeby snapped.

"I guess I know my own kind," Nat panted. "Some guys can get straightened out if they have a chance. Some can't! Some are born

with a corkscrew for a spine. Veith was like that!"

THE sheriff chewed thoughtfully at a big thumb. "Well, son, I can't personally see any good in your way of rescuing a gal from her fate, but let's get it all straight for the record. There are a few things about that murder we haven't been able to figure. How did you get into Veith's apartment that night?"

Nat fell back against the pillow, pawing at his eyes with his free hand. He had to be clear, keep the record straight. "The door was unlocked," he said feebly. "I just walked in."

"Where was Veith at the time?"

"He was in bed."

Nat fought the creeping nausea. *Wake up, Nat! Snap out of it! He's trapping you, trapping—you got to get this straight, get the story straight. . . .*

The sheriff was fumbling in a pocket. His palm came out bearing two identical keys. "We found one of these on Clyde Veith's key ring," he said. "The other one was lying loose on his dresser. There were no fingerprints on it. You didn't use that second key to get in, did you, Nat?"

"How would I get a key to Veith's door?"

Kirkeby shrugged. "I dunno. My first impression of this case was the the murder was done by someone who had a key and slipped in without rousing Veith. Doc Wismer says the guy was shot in his sleep."

"Some people don't lock their doors at night," Nat said lamely.

There was a hollow, uncomfortable pause. The sheriff leaped into it suddenly, head thrust forward, eyes pinning Nat tightly against the pillow. "Why did you leave the gun behind, Nat?"

Nat's teeth grated, chattering. "The—the gun? Why, I—I just dropped it, that's all. The job was done!"

The sheriff's loose lips had an odd, stinging twist, like the flick of a whip. "Murderers don't usually leave the gun, Nat, unless they want the murder to look like suicide—or unless they want to blame somebody else. That gun was very easily traced to Mr. Chadwick. Is that why you left it, Nat?"

Horror forced Nat's feverish eyes up. "I left it behind with my fingerprints on it. I was afraid Mr. Chadwick might be blamed. I didn't want that!"

The sheriff tapped him on the chest. "How many bullets did you shoot, Nat?"

Nat swallowed, worked the count with his lips. "Six, I guess, wasn't it? It was a six-gun, wasn't it?"

"I'm asking you, son."

"Yeah," Nat grunted. "It was six shots in the chest."

"You're absolutely sure of that!"

"Sure, I'm sure. I shot him, didn't I?"

The sheriff's head was cocked oddly on one side. "Yes, you shot him, Nat, but we have one witness who doesn't agree with your mathematics."

He was fading out again. Each new shock was like a jab in the face, sending him down for the count. *A witness?* There had been no witness.

"Five shots were heard, Nat. Only five in succession. You know that man, Willy Dean, who runs the sandwich counter across from Veith's place? You were there just before you went over to Veith's. Well, Willy closed up his place that night right after you left, and he had only gone two blocks toward home when he heard the shots. Clear as a hammer, he says, but Willy swears he only heard five."

Desperation burst out of Nat in a thin sweat. "The first one was fired sooner," he gasped. "Maybe Willy wasn't locked up yet. Maybe he missed the first one."

"You mean you shot and killed the guy and then sat around his room for a while before you worked up the guts to plug him five times more?"

"I guess I was scared." Nat breathed hoarsely. "Kinda wild."

"You must have been wild," Kirkeby mused. "Your whole story is wild—Willy Dean heard the first shot, too. Or something that sounded like a shot. He was still in his lunch counter when he heard it, but the funny thing is this—when Willy heard that first shot, you were standing only ten feet away from him, looking out the front window."

Nat's protest was thin, hard. "Willy's wrong. I remember that same sound. I heard it too. Must have been a blowout—"

"Blowout, my eye!" the sheriff yelled. His eyes scared Nat. "What did you see out of Willy's window that night, Nat? Who did you see going into Veith's apartment before you heard that first gunshot?"

The whole thing was falling apart—Nat couldn't hang on to the fragments. The room was breaking into bits like a jigsaw puzzle scattered by a rude hand—Sally Chadwick, her face twisted in amazement, half-eager, half-frightened; Horace Chadwick, looming tall and haggard, tall beyond his size, monstrously tall; Nora Wright, reaching out with a cool palm as if to halt the bursting fever in Nat's face; Sheriff Kirkeby, leaning over him now, blunt fingers gouging his ribs. . . .

"Whom did you see, Nat? Don't lie to me now, blast you! Who went up to Veith's room ahead of you with Horace Chadwick's gun? Whom are you trying to take the rap for, Nat Roark?"

Even Nat's own eyes had turned against
(Continued on page 125)

THE CASE OF THE LONESOME CORPSE

Monsieur Bessarabo's wife was a real cut-up, which is why he wanted to go away with another woman—but where he went, all men go alone!

By
**Zeta
Rothschild**

EARLY on the morning of August 2nd, 1920, a Paris taxi driver asked to see the *commissaire* of the local precinct.

"I'm worried about a customer of mine," said young Georges Croix. "He made an appointment with me but didn't keep it."

"Perhaps he changed his mind and couldn't get in touch with you," suggested the *commissaire*, surprised that the *chauffeur* should be troubled by such a casual matter.

But his interest was quickly aroused when the *chauffeur* supplied further details.

For more than a year he had had a regular morning assignment to call for a Monsieur Bessarabo who lived at No. 3, Square la Bruyere, to take him to his offices at 67 Rue de la Victoire. Every morning on arriving at his office Monsieur Bessarabo would tell him where to pick him up—and when—for the return trip.

On July 30th, Croix had deposited his fare at his home at eleven o'clock. As he took his change the latter had remarked, "Tomorrow will be a big day for me. Be here promptly at nine."

The next morning Croix had waited until ten o'clock before going upstairs to the Bessarabo apartment.

"My husband had to leave Paris early this morning," Mme. Bessarabo told him. "He will not be back before August second."

On the morning of the 2nd Croix had gone back to the Bessarabo apartment. This time Mme. Bessarabo had seemed rather angry. Monsieur was not at home. She did not know when he would be back. And she had told him to mind his own business.

"If you knew the lady, you would better understand why I am worried," said Croix. "Once monsieur intimated to me he was afraid of her. 'She will do to me what she did to the other one,' he once said."

It wouldn't hurt to investigate, concluded

Thiery. He decided to start with the missing man's offices. There Bessarabo's whereabouts were unknown, and Thiery learned the firm had missed out on a 600,000 franc deal because of his absence.

At the house where the Bessarabos lived the *concierge* was positive the head of the family had not gone out early on the 31st, as his wife claimed.

"I would have had to open the door for him which is locked at eleven," he explained. "And I did not."

The *concierge* had neither seen nor heard anything unusual. Mme. Bessarabo had gone out the morning of the 31st; had called a taxi, asked him to help the *chauffeur* load a large black trunk.

"It was very heavy," he finished, "and she gave me an extra tip for my trouble."

Mme. Bessarabo was resentful of the interest of the authorities. "What has my husband done that you want to know his whereabouts? Who has complained about him?"

Soothed, she was ready to talk.

"My husband received a telephone call about midnight of the thirtieth," she began "It upset him very much. Early the next morning he told me he was going away for a few days."

People he had known when he was living in Mexico had long been threatening him, the wife explained. And some of his business he had kept a secret even from his office.

"What of the trunk you took with you on the thirty-first?" interrupted Thiery.

"That trunk! I wish I knew what was in it. My husband spent the entire night packing it with books and papers. It was frightfully heavy," the lady exclaimed.

On leaving that morning he had asked her to be at the Gare du Nord, with the trunk, by eleven. While she and her daughter were waiting for Monsieur Bessarabo a taxi driver had come to her with a letter from her husband

She was observed throwing two objects into the lake at Montmorency. . . .



telling her to hand over the trunk to this man.

"It was my husband's writing, so I let the taxi driver take the trunk," the lady finished. What happened to the trunk afterwards, she did not know.

BACK at his precinct, Thiery gave quick orders to two of his staff. "See if you can locate a heavy black trunk, corded and sent out from Paris on the thirty-first."

A couple of hours later Inspector Morin returned. "That trunk was shipped from Paris to Nancy, to be held there until called for, according to the records at the Gare de L'Est," he said.

Another fifteen minutes and Thiery was talking to the baggage room at Nancy. Was an overweight trunk, sent from Paris on the thirty-first, still there?

It was, answered a grim voice. And giving

off such a frightful odor that he had sent for the police to open it.

"What did you find?" asked Thiery, considerably excited.

"The body of a man, heavy-set, his head smashed in, arms and legs crossed to make him fit into the trunk," was the answer. "All he had on was the top of a pajama suit."

Arrangements were quickly made to have the trunk and its gruesome contents returned immediately to Paris, along with the sender's label and the cord which had bound it. The *commissaire* would have bet a fair-sized sum that Mme. Besserabo would have no trouble identifying the corpse as that of her missing husband. Imagine his surprise, however, when the wife, holding a handkerchief to her nose, took a long look at the body and then shook her head.

"That is not my husband," she said with a sigh of relief. "He was much younger and better looking. I have never seen this poor man before."

But a little later Mlle. Nollet, a clerk at Besserabo's office, and the taxi driver, Croix, both identified the body as that of Jules Besserabo.

Another call on Mme. Besserabo found her willing to admit the corpse was that of her husband.

Mme. Besserabo had a theory. Her husband had gone out to meet the men who had phoned the night before. They had made him send for the trunk. When they got their hands on those books and papers, they had killed him, put the body in the trunk and shipped it to Nancy.

Thiery was not yet ready to argue. Mme. Besserabo was anxious to know when she could make arrangements for the funeral.

"As soon as the autopsy is completed," he assured her.

When Thiery arrived back at his office, the autopsy report was waiting. Besserabo had been killed by two bullets, one fired into his head, behind the right ear; the other a little lower down in the neck. There was only a little blood on the pajama tops.

A twenty-four hour watch on the widow was now in force, and the day after Besserabo's funeral she was followed to Montmorency, where the family had a summer home, and observed throwing two objects into the lake. With the help of the local police, both objects had been recovered. One was an empty wallet; the other, a revolver.

The revolver had belonged to Jules Besserabo, according to the records of its sale, and according to the laboratory's ballistics experts, the bullets that had brought death to its owner had been fired from it.

In the meantime handwriting analysis disclosed that the death trunk's tag had been filled

in by Paula Jacques, the seventeen-year-old stepdaughter of the murdered man, and that the cord binding it had never been untied until it reached the laboratory—it had been knotted only once. Consequently the body must have been in the trunk when Madame Besserabo brought it down from the apartment house on the 31st.

THE showdown with Mme. Besserabo was not the complete success Thiery had hoped for. The lady readily admitted her first story had not been wholly true. She had been afraid to tell all of it.

"I was awakened that night by loud voices from my husband's room," began the widow. "I hurried to the bedroom. There lay my poor husband, breathing his last, two masked men by his side. . . ."

These men had threatened her. It was they who had packed the body in the trunk and tied it securely. They had ordered her to bring it to the Gare de L'Est the next morning and watched, guns in their pockets, as Paula made out the label and attended to the shipping.

"Why did you throw this revolver into the lake at Montmorency?" asked Thiery, somewhat taken aback.

The widow denied she had. "Those men were trailing me," she argued. "I threw the wallet away because I had no further use for it. And they must have been watching me. And to throw suspicion on me in case it was recovered, they got rid of the revolver there, too."

But there was not an iota of proof to back up this story of the irate visitors and, although two years were to pass before Madame Besserabo and her daughter, Paula, were to go on trial for the murder of Jules Besserabo, in all that time the defense was not able to dig up any.

As for the motive—the wife had long fostered a dislike of her husband and had threatened him. He might have left her some time ago, but evidently she held him by threats of disclosing something that would have meant trouble for him.

So he maneuvered to outwit her. All his cash had gone into oil leases; he had already bought two tickets for Mexico, for himself and a young woman. The deal signed, the six hundred thousand pocketed, Besserabo was ready to leave the country. And with no extradition treaty between Mexico and France, there he would have been reasonably safe.

Somehow his wife had learned of his plans—and had shot him while he slept.

This was the case outlined by the prosecution. The jury was not convinced that her daughter had done more than obey her mother's orders and Paula Jacques was acquitted. Mme. Besserabo, still defiant, was given a sentence of twenty years.

Busy Body

(Continued from page 109)

and good enough to fool a man who's feeling bullets. But that's not the picture that Loring will see on the frosted glass tonight. This is a picture of me. With a gun. He'll blaze away at me—only I won't be there."

Trefford moved to one side, squatted down, removed a piece of teakwood carving from a panel. The opening revealed was just large enough for a gun to be sighted and fired through it.

The girl put up a violent little struggle to free herself and failed. Breathing hard, glaring at the smiling Trefford, her eyes were thinking desperately; she glanced at the door, then frantically about the room.

Trefford said, "If you're thinking of making a noise, baby, forget it. I anticipated you."

She stared hard again at the door. The man she had seen waiting outside seemed content—to wait. She became very still. She closed her eyes and just hoped fervently.

Trefford was shoving a clip of cartridges into a little automatic pistol now, and grinning at her with that half-handsome, half-deadly smile of his.

She glared at him.

He stiffened suddenly, listened. She saw a little muscle in his face twitch.

"He's coming!" Trefford said, through clenched teeth. "This is my night, baby—he's coming!" Trefford snapped off the lights, all but a very low-powered one on the radio. He poised, listening.

And he was right—someone was coming. The girl heard the furtive scrape of a shoe on the companionway, the creak of a board under a man's weight. She tried to make a sound again, but could accomplish only a mewling noise through her nose—and Trefford stopped that by lifting the gun in a quick arc, poisoning it to strike her temple.

There was a faint scratching sound at the door through which she had entered this cabin. A furtive click. Then quiet again.

"That one is locked and bolted," Trefford whispered. "He's going on to the next one—it's not locked. This is rough on you, babe. But you can charge it up to your own dumbness in falling for that punk!"

There were sounds in the next room, now—a faint noise of impact, as of a man ran into a chair in the dark; a muttered curse.

Trefford clicked a switch in the extension cord that led to the projector. He crouched at his firing-slot.

The picture was flung on the frosted glass. A picture of Clane Trefford, smiling, with a gun in his hand.

The girl writhed in her chair, made frantic sounds through her nose. Al Loring's shots,

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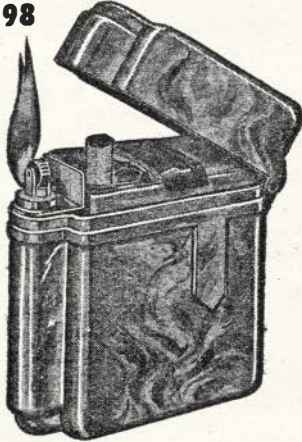
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New Detective Magazine

fired at that image of Trefford, would pass through her.

Trefford snarled at her. But no shots came. There was only silence in the next room.

CROUCHING, Trefford twisted alertly, gripping his automatic and peering into the next room, striving to locate the intruder. But he couldn't see all parts of the room through that little slot, only the middle portion of it.

There was an aching silence.

The film ran out. The projector flung a square of flickering white upon the glass.

Trefford swore hoarsely, switched it off. The girl saw him tremble, heard his teeth grate audibly.

Then he flung open the door. "Loring, damn you," he yelled, "I'll—"

There was the sharp crash of a gun. Trefford's body jerked sidewise against the open door. He dropped his gun. He teetered for a moment on his toes; then he pitched forward.

The man in the next room appeared in the doorway. It wasn't Al Loring. It was Detective Sergeant Delson.

"B'damn," he said softly. "So that's the way he did it, eh? Threw a picture of Loring on the glass, then fired through that little slit. A man wouldn't notice that slit—nor a dying man remember it if he had. Lucky for me, I was pasted against the wall in there, just as a matter of policy. Then when his film ran out, Trefford got rattled, opened the door—forgettin' that it swung into that room, an' that in opening it he'd tend to move his body through the opening."

Delson worked at Kay's gag, unfastening it. In response to the girl's questioning eyes, he said, "Sure, I figured I'd throw a scare into him, see what he'd do. This case was botherin' me—a little too smooth, too pat. An' that boy friend of yours, for no logical reason, had a mighty strong hunch about Trefford. A hunch that was right. The filthy murderin' parasite shot Rillon so he'd die slow, have plenty of time to make his statement—"

The gag was removed now. The girl, shaken, said:

"Where—where's Al?"

"Why, I'd say you'd better be gettin' downtown, to tell that man of yours he'll be out in the morning. We ain't in the habit of letting convicted murders escape. The only one who was takin' chances was me. Lady I could a lost my seniority, if not my badge—an' you gave me a bad few minutes, when I saw you come aboard this barge. That's what I get for bein' a sucker for romance. Now get along with you, girl!"

Peril's Payoff

(Continued from page 79)

Tabor came near retorting that was obvious, from the look of him and the big constable's badge that he wore. But Tabor didn't—he had spent a sleepless night and he was edgy. That put him on guard.

"Good morning, boys," he managed smoothly enough.

"Thought you'd like to know," the trooper said doggedly, speaking slowly and with an expression of patient despair at the dumbness of the human race, "that Frank Lorgan was murdered last night, in his lodge up at Coffin Lake."

"No!" Tabor exclaimed. "Why, Frank was a friend of mine. I was going up to his place this morning. My car broke down last night—had to have the Master Garage, here, do some work on it. When I told Mr. Huntley that it was a rush job, he agreed to work on it all night. I was just going over to see if it's ready."

"Your car's parked over on L Street," the constable said in a nasal drawl.

"Oh? Guess he finished with it, and—"

"Tabor," Bardeen broke in, "you're under arrest. I'll charge you with the murder of Frank Lorgan. We found that he'd been killed when we went up there on a tip from the hotel's night clerk. And the tracks in the yard of the lodge check with the treads on your tires."

Icy terror flooded through Tabor. Something was wrong—but nothing could possibly be wrong. That night clerk was a punk. . . .

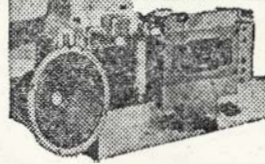
"You're kidding," he said lamely. "Lots of tires have the same treads."

Bardeen shook his head from side to side in measured rhythm.

"You think we're a bunch of dumb ones, up here in the sticks. But we've got a pretty good idea of what goes on. You've been up to Coffin Lake lots of times. You run a gambling joint in the city; Lorgan was district attorney. What happened? Did you get tired of paying off?"

He didn't say anything and Bardeen went on. "But there are a couple of things about Mountain View that you didn't know, mister. Some of the people from the State Hospital are allowed to come and go here, about as they please. It's odd about them—they realize that the others up there are cracked; they talk about the others and laugh about their quirks. But their own quirks are absolute reality to them. Every one of them thinks *he's* perfectly sane. And the Master Garage—you must have gotten hold of one of the cards Huntley had printed up—exists only in the mind of one of the inmates!"

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(Continued from page 91)

my face because Andy said, "What's bothering you? You hadn't been robbing the house, had you?" He still didn't mean anything. But it was enough to show me he would realize what had happened that night when he heard the rest of the story."

It was very still in the room, and quiet as death. The lantern smoked a little and the smoke went straight up into gloom. The lantern light lay soft along the barrel of the gun as Ken Reaves raised it, the muzzle pointing at Jean's breast. "Andy made it easy for me by saying Tom's name, whatever he meant by it," Reaves said. "Tonight I stole Tom's car and tried to put an end to it, but missed. It works out better this way. Murder and suicide."

Tom Lynn said hoarsely, "Wait! Wait, Ken! I—"

"No." The gun was steady.

The gun crashed. She swayed and went to her knees. The world swung through darkness and back again. The night tilted and rolled about her. Then her eyes were open and in the dim light of the lantern she saw Ken Reaves lying on his back. Beside his outstretched hand lay the gun.

Her gaze lifted, saw wrinkled, grey trousers, an unpressed coat; then the long sad face of Sam Murray looking down at Reaves.

There were moments in which she knew only that Tom Lynn was lifting her, that she was holding to him and crying. But she managed to stop the crying, to choke the sounds down in her throat. Lynn was saying, "Yes, it was Dave Kyle told me my automobile had been used in an attempt to kill Jean and the police were after me. He advised me to hide, and the only place I could think of was here."

"Lucky I got it out of him in time," Sam Murray said. "He thought Mrs. Clark and Reaves were in the thing together, that Mrs. Clark had killed her husband. He always did think the worst of everybody."

Later Tom helped her down the hill, through the darkness. He put her in Ken Reaves' car and drove back toward the city. "It's all right now," he said. "It's all over now. You'll be all right, Jean."

"I—I almost got you killed, too."

"It wasn't your fault. Andy had mentioned to me about seeing Ken leave the Jones' house that night, joking because it was an open scandal as you know. That's what he must have been trying to tell you—that the cause was something we both knew and that you should get me to help you."

"Instead—"

"Don't worry," Tom Lynn said. "There is a lot of time ahead for both of us."

Murder on My Shoulders

(Continued from page 117)

him. They flicked into one of the faces, and the thought behind them was: *You went to bat for me, gave me my chance four years ago. This was my turn—back to the old routine.* . . .

And then Nora Wright rescued him, shouldering off the sheriff, pressing his head down, down—down into a comfortable, seething gulf of whiteness.

"You'll have to wait, sheriff. The boy can't stand any more of this!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Blood Baubles

THE second fainting spell was short. In fact, it was not a blackout at all; it was like a gauze veil drawn over reality. He could see and hear; yet the sound and movement were not aware of him. He wondered if death would be like this—outside looking in. . . .

The sheriff still dominated the scene.

"That murder scene in Veith's bedroom was too perfect," he lectured. "It made so much sense that it didn't make sense at all! There was no good reason for the boy to pump so much lead into a single body. There was no reason to leave the gun behind. That could only have happened in a crime of blind passion, and I couldn't quite see all that passion in a boy like Nat Roark. What I mean is—he didn't stay in character. From the time he broke out of that room and began to hide his trail, he was cunning, as cunning a criminal as I've hit in ten years. Okay, then, why wasn't he equally cunning when he carried out his murder? I just can't see him exploding into an emotional murder scene and then pulling himself together for such a clever getaway. . . . So, y'see, there is only one other explanation—simply that Nat Roark wanted to be blamed for the murder, trusting to his own skill to escape the law—"

"I still don't follow you!" rasped Horace.

Kirkeby stopped, legs spread wide, hands on hips. "It was the old sacrifice play, Mr. Chadwick. Nat saw somebody going into Veith's apartment that night. He heard a gunshot. After the visitor had come out again, Nat went over and found Veith dead, murdered. He found your gun there, Chadwick, with one bullet missing. So what did Nat do? He picked up the gun, smeared it with his own fingerprints and emptied the five remaining shells into Veith's body. He took somebody else's murder plot on his own shoulders."

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New Detective Magazine

The lawyer suddenly answered himself with a ghastly slump of the face muscles. He turned, faced his daughter.

"There's not much choice, Mr. Chadwick," droned the sheriff. "I'd say it was one or the other of the only important people in Nat Roark's life. Yourself or your daughter."

Sally gave a short cry and her father caught her as she swayed.

He stood holding her, his eyes never leaving the sheriff's.

Nat's mind threshed wildly on the bed, willing his body into action. But nothing happened, and presently the sheriff's voice came again.

"There's just one little item that don't fit into the picture," the sheriff was saying. "I won't be making any accusations until I can check it up. We found a man's linen handkerchief in the pocket of Clyde Veith's suit. That handkerchief had lipstick stains on it, like a chap would wipe off his face after a spell of kissing—I suppose you and he did a mite of kissing, Miss Chadwick?"

Sally only shuddered in her father's arms.

"Well," the sheriff drawled, "I must admit I been doing some snooping around here and I can't find any of your lipsticks that match with Veith's handkerchief, Miss Sally. If you can show me all that kind of stuff you got, I can maybe clear up that item in a hurry—"

It was floating away again. The words were blurred insect sounds. The nurse came and touched Nat's head, then swiftly ushered the other three out of the room. "Quiet!" Her voice was like a whisper in a well. "We've got to keep him quiet!"

Nat let himself go. The thing was already out of his grasp; there were irrelevances, things he couldn't understand.

He dreamed for a while. There were two giant treadmills, rolling in opposite directions. On one was Clyde Veith, chased by Nat himself, racing, sweating, brandishing a gun, firing, firing. Wouldn't the man ever go down? How many bullets can a body hold? The sheriff was running too, leaping, ripping the gun from Nat's fingers, tossing it back to another man, it's rightful owner, who just stood there juggling the thing like a hot potato. . . . Nat forgot about the gun. He stopped to stare at the other treadmill, going the other way. Clyde Veith was over there on that one now, still running, but no longer the pursued. He was chasing someone else, a girl, Sally Chadwick. He couldn't quite catch her because of the third person, the one dragging on his sleeve, the one in pure white. He kept mopping something red from his face as he ran. Like blood, but not really blood. Lipstick. . . .

Murder on My Shoulders

HE WAS sitting up somehow. His eyes were wide open. How long had it been? How long is a dream?

He finally recognized that figure over there by the dresser, the one in white, with the pretty coils of blonde hair. She seemed to belong here. Maybe this was her room.

What was she doing? She had her back toward Nat, worked feverishly with a little handkerchief spread out on the dresser top. She darted into the bathroom and came out with a gleaming object which she dropped into the handkerchief along with two other similar baubles. Baubles.

A feeble laugh choked up in Nat's throat at the weird idea. This was a fine time to be cleaning trinkets. She was kneeling, searching deep into a drawer. She came up with another one—round, shining, bright gold.

She whipped around suddenly, saw Nat.

"Be quiet," she said gently, pressing a finger to her lips. "Lie quietly and you'll be all right."

Something was happening to Nat's legs.

He was out of bed now, standing, swaying. It was like a dream, in a way, because he and that woman in white seemed to be racing for the door. He lunged crazily, his hand caught the door, clawed down to the knob, held. The woman struck the loop of his arm, rebounded.

"Nat!" she said sternly. "Go back to bed. You mustn't be out like this. You'll kill yourself!"

The grin across his face was like a thin flame. "I—wouldn't—kill anybody."

She didn't answer, just backed away, red lips twitching, grey eyes hard as pebbles.

"I might fill a dead body full of bullets, but that's not killing!" Nat gloated. He fought the weakness of his knees, stiffened his back along the knife-edge of the door. "Maybe I went to bat for the wrong person," he panted weakly. "I thought it was old Chadwick in Veith's apartment that night. I saw Chad-

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New Detective Magazine

wick's car outside the place, found his gun on the bed. But maybe I got fooled. The sheriff says murderers don't leave their own guns behind. What've you got there in your handkerchief, Nora Wright? Lemme see what you got!"

She seemed to drift across the room toward him. The smile released the hardness of her face. Pretty, sympathetic, the perfect nurse. "You must get back in bed, Nat," she said gently.

He shook his head.

Her fingers gripped his shoulder, tugged lightly. He felt a lightning pain as if a knife had gone clean through the flesh, nailing him to the door.

She was squeezing the bullet wound. That was his weak spot and he felt the sickness swirling up around him, twisting, dragging him down in a green wave.

He tried to jerk away, but her hand bit more tightly, a torture screw. "Just go to bed, Nat. Get your senses back!"

His voice seemed to be far away, almost out of reach. "Got my senses now!" he gasped. "Got to keep my senses!"

He tossed a command down into the muscles of his good arm. The hand flopped around like a fish on the end of it. With a terrific effort he threw the arm up across the woman's shoulder, looped her neck.

She just stood there squeezing his shoulder, turning the screw. He couldn't stand much more of that . . . he felt his knees caving slowly, like rotten boards. He tightened the knot of his arm, dragging on her neck. It was a fantastic wrestling match. Nat's left arm was helpless and hers was occupied with preserving that handkerchief and its precious burden. It was a war of right arms. Sick man against healthy woman.

They floundered around the room like a pair of dancers in the last stages of drunkenness. If he could just hold her until the commotion aroused the others—the nurse's right hand dropped from Nat's shoulder long enough to whip out to the knob, wrench the door open. She twisted and lunged outward.

Nat's grip broke and she spilled away, sprawling flat across the hall. The force of her motion yanked Nat's body through the door, stumbling, slumping down to his knees.

She was up swiftly on her feet. Nat wrenched painfully around. He was kneeling between her and the head of the stairs. The hallway seemed to slant up dizzily from his eyes. She had only to dart around him, get past the weak defense of his arms.

Nat tried to shout, but the voice was only a flutter in his throat. She was moving now, feinting to his right, dancing back again.

Murder on My Shoulders

Nat threw all that remained of his strength into the whip of his right arm. It lashed around her knees, hauled her down.

Her weight spilled across his head and they went down the stairs, locked together, piling up at the bottom in a confusion of arms and legs. Flesh smacked solidly against hard wood.

A loose bare arm trailed out from the mass. The tight fist broke open and a white handkerchief drifted out of it, spilling its bundled contents, the four shiny baubles. One of the metal tubes burst with the impact, trailing a red streak across the cloth. Like blood, it seemed, but Nat's drifting mind rejected that vision for the true one. Not blood. Lipstick!

He heard a rush of footsteps. Dimly he saw three pairs of legs surrounding the scene like the bars of a jail cell.

WHEN he was ready to leave the county hospital, Sheriff Kirkeby dropped by to set him straight with the law. "It seems that Nora Wright had been Clyde Veith's partner-in-crime for several years," the sheriff explained. "She met the guy in a hospital while he was laid up with a broken leg. With her nursing experience, Nora found it easy to get established in wealthy homes. That way, she and Veith worked a variety of swindles between them. In the case of the Chadwick family their plot was to build up a romance between Sally and Veith, encouraged by Nora from the inside."

"Yeah," Nat agreed. "I remember now that it was Nora's idea to pay off Veith with ten thousand dollars cash. I thought that was pretty steep at the time."

Kirkeby nodded. "Ten thousand was the agreed price, but Veith double-crossed Nora at the last minute. He had fallen for Sally and decided to marry her, getting whatever he could of the Chadwick money along with her."

"But Veith made a mistake in thinking he



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New Detective Magazine

could throw over a woman like Nora Wright so easily. He'd dragged her into his kind of heel's life and for him to drop her flat with nothing to show for it was more than she could take! So the night before the elopement, while the Chadwicks were asleep, Nora stole one of Chadwick's guns and borrowed his car long enough to murder her two-timing partner."

"Did you have any evidence against Nora before I tangled with her?" Nat asked.

"Well, there was the matter of that extra key to Veith's apartment, lying there on his dresser, as if somebody had wiped off the fingerprints and tossed it aside. That suggested to me that there was somebody familiar enough with Veith to possess a duplicate of the guy's key. That would most likely be a woman. And then there were those red stains on his handkerchief; but I'm afraid we would never have traced the stains to Nora Wright if she had been able to hide her lipstick."

Nat was staring sheepishly at his long fingers. "Chadwick was the guy who gave me a decent way to live."

The sheriff laid a friendly hand on Nat's shoulder. "I think the law may have a loophole for you, son, as long as Veith was already shot dead before you emptied that gun into him. We'll see what we can do."

Nat got back to the Chadwick home that evening just as the sky seemed to sag down through the trees with the dead weight of night. Sally Chadwick herself was miraculously standing there, veiled by the dusky screen, when Nat's hand reached for the front door. He broke his stride stiffly and all the explanations for his conduct piled up in his throat, mumbling out in a low monotone.

His words struck against other words and fell back before them—swift, anxious words pouring shrilly from Sally's lips. "Nat, I didn't—didn't call the sheriff that night. I was going to help you get away. I just knew, somehow, that you couldn't be a murderer . . . it was Nora who heard us in the kitchen and phoned the sheriff—"

"Why sure, Sally," Nat said. "I guessed about that. And it was Nora who shot me from the stairway before your dad took the gun away from her. It was all mixed up that night, Sally, but it's straight now."

"Yes," she said. "It is straight now, isn't it, Nat?"

They stood there looking at each other through the screen, boy and girl, until a voice jarred their silence. It was the deep baritone of Horace Chadwick, striding along a hallway.

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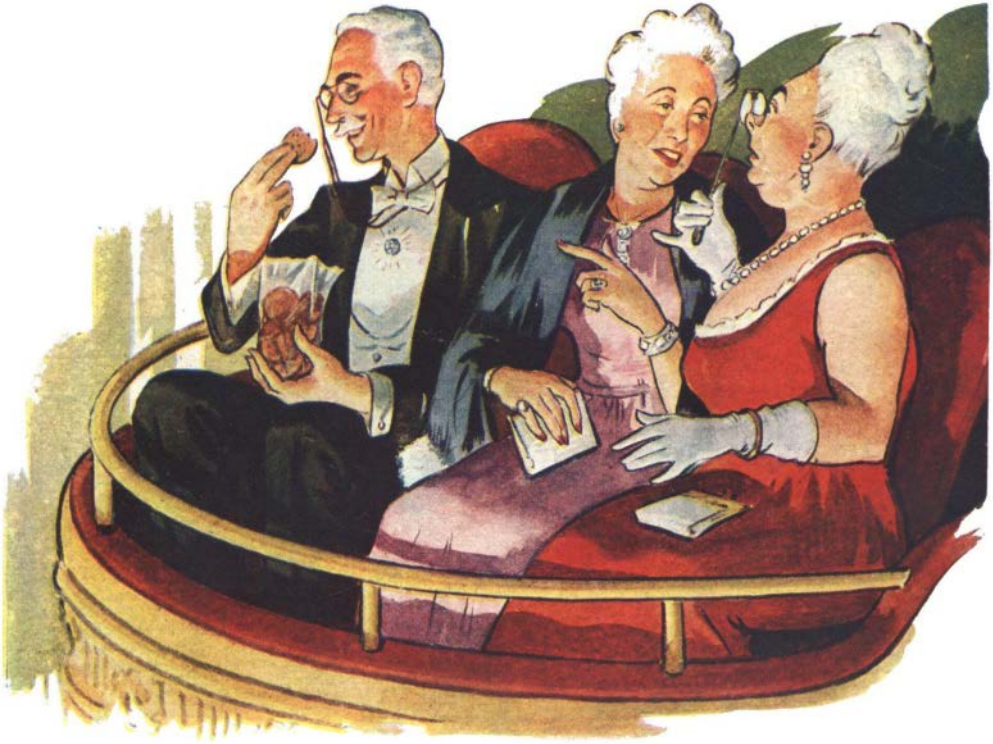
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