



THE NEWEST IN CRIME FICTION

AUG. 25¢

NEW DETECTIVE

MAGAZINE

DATELINE — DEATH

by **JOHN D. MACDONALD**

MANY OTHERS



BUD WENT TO THE RESCUE AND THEN...

HEY! WHAT'S THE BIG IDEA
OF BEANING ME!

HER SHOUTS DROWNED BY THE ROARING
WATER, KAY STEVENS THROWS A STONE
TO ATTRACT THE YOUNG FISHERMAN'S
ATTENTION, BUT THEN...

IT'S MY BROTHER!
HE'S HURT ON A
LITTLE ISLAND
UPSTREAM

LET'S GET
GOING! SUNSET'S
ONLY AN HOUR
OFF!

JUST A
SPRAIN, I
GUESS, BUT
I CAN'T
WALK

...AND I
CAN'T
CARRY
HIM

WE'D BETTER
GET ASHORE
FAST. IT'LL
BE DARK
SOON

WHEN! NOW IF YOU'LL
MAKE OUR PATIENT
COMFORTABLE, I'LL
HIKE DOWN AND
GET MY CAR

LET'S BUILD
A FIRE FIRST
TO GUIDE YOU
BACK

AN
HOUR
LATER

DOC PETERS IS
COMING AFTER
SUPPER. WON'T
YOU STAY AND
SHARE OUR
TROUT?

THANK YOU,
YES! BUT WITH
THIS BEARD
I MUST LOOK
LIKE A
TRAMP

USE MY
RAZOR
IF YOU'D
LIKE TO
SHAVE

THESE ARE
THE SLICKEST-
SHAVING BLADES
I'VE EVER RUN
ACROSS. MY FACE
FEELS GREAT!

SOLD ON THIN
GILLETTES,
EH? WELL,
THEY'RE
PLENTY
KEEN

PROBABLY JUST
A SPRAIN, BUT
WE'D BETTER
X-RAY IT
TOMORROW

I'LL BE
GLAD
TO DRIVE
YOU IN

COME EARLY
AND HAVE
BREAKFAST
WITH US

ISN'T HE
HANDSOME?

MEN, SHAVING'S A BREEZE... QUICK,
EASY AND REFRESHING... WITH **THIN
GILLETTES**. THEY OUT-PERFORM AND
OUT-LAST EVERY OTHER BLADE IN THE LOW-
PRICE FIELD. THIN GILLETTES NEVER NICK
OR SCRAPE BECAUSE THEY'RE **PRECISION-
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NEW TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES



NEW DETECTIVE

BEST IN CRIME FICTION 25c

MAGAZINE

Vol. 16

Contents for August, 1951

No. 3

THREE BIG NOVELETTES

- DATELINE—DEATH**.....**John D. MacDonald** 14
A night is never so silent as when it cries Murder. . . . A corpse is never so loud as when it sighs vengeance . . . and death came never so dear as when a cold-brained reporter bought it for himself—with the life of the woman he loved!
- SAVE ME A KILL**.....**Donald Barr Chideey** 46
When Death left his calling card at Blimpy Barnes' bower—he signed it with the name of the strangest avenger the underworld ever saw—a hangman who asked one thing only. . . .
- DESIGN FOR DYING**.....**Leigh Brackett** 88
"There'll come a day when you'll be wanting to die fast—and I'll be wanting you to take your time!"

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It was the final, twisted gesture of a laughing fate that gave Bordelan the assignment he had dodged for years but could turn from no more—the assignment to track down his own killer!
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THE WITNESS CHAIR

STUDENTS of crime are generally agreed that it does not pay, but that does not mean that the best entertainment in the world cannot be found in good fiction and fact yarns which take you through the very intricate whorls of the criminal brain, the even more amazing pattern of the legal mind, and the fast fierce drama of the encounter of the two even to the terrific violence of the final clash.

Among the stories which we here present, *Blood Money* is right up to the minute—maybe even a little ahead of it. We give you the victim—you find the crime. Just one warning: Look ahead!

And speaking of the poor results of iniquity, here is a letter about a true case which shows a miscreant disappointed in most grimly amusing fashion:

Dear Editor:

Every year, as required by law, the Onandaga County Bank in Syracuse publishes a list of dormant and unclaimed accounts, some of them running into the thousands. One of the largest unclaimed sums—its owner's name withheld here for obvious reasons—will probably never be called for, no matter how much the depositor needs that money.

There is a red rubber band around the account, to separate it from all others—and as soon as the claimant appears, tellers are under orders to summon police. The depositor is wanted for murder.

Well, maybe it's nice for him, knowing his money is safe.

Safer than he is.

Ellsworth Johnson,
Brooklyn, N. Y.

There are niceties in all things—even,

apparently, in crime procedure. A friend in Canada drops us a somewhat disturbing note—re mayhem cum laude. . . .

Dear Editor:

London justice, a few years ago, was startled to discover that a completely illegal agency had done more to prevent mayhem in town than all the courts and police in England had managed to do. When Leslie Moore, teen-age burglar, was arrested on a routine charge of robbing a factory, he revealed the existence of a hitherto-unknown college for crime, in one of the city's suburbs. Past masters, he said, had given him instruction in lock-picking, window-forcing, and swag-fencing. But since he had broken one of the school's cardinal rules in this last attempt, he deserved sentence and imprisonment.

For Leslie had been carrying a gun when

(Continued on page 8)

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(Continued from page 6)

arrested. And crooks with degrees from his school had been told never, never to carry firearms while at work. The courts, remembering the recent wave of bloodless holdups which had annoyed the city, weren't sure that the school was completely evil. Nevertheless, they gave Leslie five years—away from his lessons.

B. C. Budenz,
Ottawa, Canada

Dear Editor:

I enjoy the Witness Chair department and would like to contribute a choice bit I read.

When Enrico Giuduci was sent to prison for life, sixty years ago, it seems Italian authorities still weren't sure the community was safe against him. A notorious young bandit, Giuduci's reputation was such that they feared he might wreak havoc even in jail—so they kept him in practically solitary confinement for fifty-four years, cut off from knowledge of the world outside. Time passed, and Giuduci aged and survived. When he was seventy-four, and his crimes forgotten, a new set of authorities took pity and pardoned him.

Giuduci, quondam-killer and bandit, walked the streets of Milan—and then went to the police as fast as old legs could carry him. He demanded the arrest of all the women he saw on the streets—for indecent exposure. They showed their legs, he said, up to the calf.

Jane Whitcomb,
Chelsea, Mass.

Dear Editor:

There once was a judge, in a Pittsburgh police court, who talked the same language as the men who were brought before him. His name was John Sweeney—and legend has it he was the original of "Tell it to Sweeney." A drunk, hauled before Judge Sweeney, once alibied, "Not my fault. I met a good Irish friend of yours. He gave me the quart that got me in trouble."

"A lie!" cried his honor. "No good Irishman would give a quart away. He'd drink it himself. Thirty days."

Sweeney is dead now. But he never will be forgotten. Anyone who suggests you go tell it to Sweeney, is referring, whether he knows it or not, to Judge John Sweeney of Pittsburgh—the jurist who talked American on the bench, and became an Americanism himself.

Winant K. Binns,
Winchester, Kentucky

Dear Editor:

At the dawn of this country's history, before there was a federal mint, the State of New Jersey found itself so plagued by counterfeiters that drastic steps were decided on. A new slogan, the state treasury planned,

would be added to paper currency, to distinguish it from the bogus stuff. But somehow, word got out betimes, and the bad money had the new slogan on it faster than real money could catch up.

The unfortunate counterfeiters had outsmarted themselves. State agents now merely had to trace the money back to the slogan's illicit printers—and ask them if they really meant it! If they did . . . too bad. The slogan—" 'Tis death to counterfeit." The phoney engravers had endorsed their own fate.

Gene Stevens,
Billings, Montana

Dear Editor:

I've often wondered if poverty is the cause of crime? It seems sometimes that it isn't. In the case of noble—but penniless—Prince Michel Charles Murat of France, poverty was certainly a contributing factor. Convicted in Paris on a charge of forging checks, some thirty years ago, Prince Michel said he was driven to crime to support himself and his American-born wife, as he had no trade and no job.

Would wealth have kept the prince honest? The court, investigating, found that in ten years of marriage, Michel had managed to spend his heiress wife's whole inheritance . . . and decided that crooks are born, not made. The princess' wealth, had the couple never touched the principal, had originally yielded an interest of one hundred dollars a minute—six thousand dollars an hour—nights and Sundays included. That whole incredible security had been gambled and frittered away. They sent him to jail, let the taxpayers take over his support.

Robert E. Benson,
Muskegon, Mich.

Dear Editor:

I recently picked up a story about an ambulance intern and an expectant pop of the New York tenements. Called to a West Side apartment in an emergency, recently, they found a terrified young doctor, a mother and a new-born baby—and the head of the family, aiming a loaded gun at the doctor's heart. Without asking questions, they seized the gunman's arms, deflected his aim, and saved the doctor's life.

Seems the new father had pulled the weapon as soon as the doctor arrived, and warned him either to deliver a boy baby—or die.

The father went to jail. It was the doctor who passed out cigars—to police. In honor of the new baby girl!

James McDonald,
New York, N. Y.

This was an unusually fine crop of evidence from all you witnesses. Keep up the good work.

THE EDITORS.

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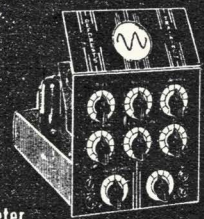
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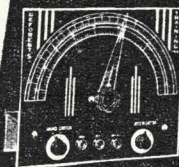
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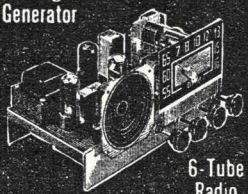
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ESCAPE ME NEVER

By
Joe Hammer

There was no rest for Arthur Wilson after he strangled the girl—awake, he ran . . . asleep, he fled in terror—one step ahead of a long dead voice!

WHAT makes a man kill? What dark, forgotten instinct, boiling up from the subconscious, can turn a civilized man at one stroke into a ravening beast? That was the question they were discussing in Henry DeBolt's living room: Henry himself, his lovely young wife, and Arthur Wilson. Wilson said, "I'm a chemist. I can tell you a few of the enzymes that are released when a man is angry enough to kill, but that won't make you any wiser. As to what it feels like to commit murder, what goes on in the killer's mind, I don't know."

But soon, he thought. But soon. . .

He was perfectly calm. He stood up with his old friend DeBolt a few minutes later, listened smilingly to Helen's half-serious complaint that they were fonder of baseball than of her, and waved her a

cheerful good-by as they drove away in Henry's car. He kept up a stream of talk with Henry on the way out to the ball park, the words coming automatically to his lips. He felt detached, frozen inside.

I'm going to do it, he told himself. My mind's made up; I've thrashed out all the pros and cons. Now all I have to do is—do it.

They found seats. Wilson looked around, saw a boy coming toward them with iced drinks. "How about some pop, Henry?" he said. He beckoned the boy over, bought two paper cups of lime soda. The tiny envelope was between his fingers. As he took the cups, his back to Henry, the powder dropped into one of them and dissolved instantly. It was just as he had planned it, quick and easy.

(Continued on page 12)

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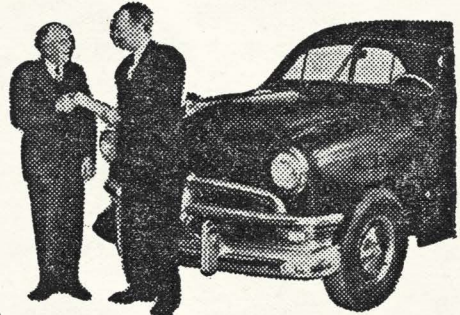
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- | | |
|---|---|
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ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ ZONE _____ STATE _____

(Continued from page 10)

DeBolt drank the liquid. Five minutes later, his face went gray and he clutched at his middle, gasping. Wilson bent over him with surprise, then alarm on his features. He stood up and called excitedly for a doctor. But there was nothing to be done, of course. In a moment it was all over.

Wilson told Helen the painful news. Heart disease, the doctor said. So sudden.

His manner was unaccustomedly gentle as he told her, and Helen melted weeping into his arms. Later, he helped her close up the house, bought her ticket to Florida. All the while she was there, his letters came regularly, sympathetic, kindly, full of warm affection. And when she came back at last, he looked into her eyes and saw what he wanted to see.

It was easy to make her happy, so happy that she would do anything for him. Out of DeBolt's \$5,000 insurance she bought him a car, because he had so often talked of traveling. Her joy in his pleasure was almost pathetic. They decided to go on a trip together. "To California," she said. Wilson didn't care; he only wanted to get away.

Forgetting had not been as easy as he had hoped. He seldom thought of DeBolt, or of the act itself, but a vague uneasiness was always with him. He wanted to get into the car with Helen—and the rest of the cash—and just keep moving, from anywhere to anywhere, attached to nowhere.

He thought about DeBolt more often, once they were away. It was as though he had been afraid before, afraid to let himself think what he dared not speak aloud. But now that was over: he was free, safe, and he had what he wanted. He smiled, remembering. . . .

What makes a man kill? Why, what's to stop him?

Murder was a simple thing, after all, for anyone but a blunderer. The man was

dead, and that was the end of it. In months or years, he would be forgotten. Wilson meant to go on living—and with no regrets.

It was a pity, of course, that he could tell no one about it. Not even Helen, though she trusted him so completely that sometimes it almost disgusted him. In only one thing she seemed to have a mind of her own: she refused to let him take charge of the money. She had it—it was the first large sum she had ever owned—and she meant to keep it.

After a while, that began to worry him. Wilson had to have money; he had always known that. Money was the only security. What if she should lose it, or take a notion to buy oil stock from some chiseler while he was away?

He began asking her for loans, "to settle personal affairs." At first she gave them freely, but later, as he increased the amounts, he was alarmed to find her growing more and more reluctant. He renewed his arguments that she should turn over the whole sum to him.

"Be reasonable, woman," he snapped at her finally. "You know you have no idea of how to handle money. Why won't you let me take care of it? It isn't as if I were going to abscond with it—you know perfectly well that you can trust me. And yet—"

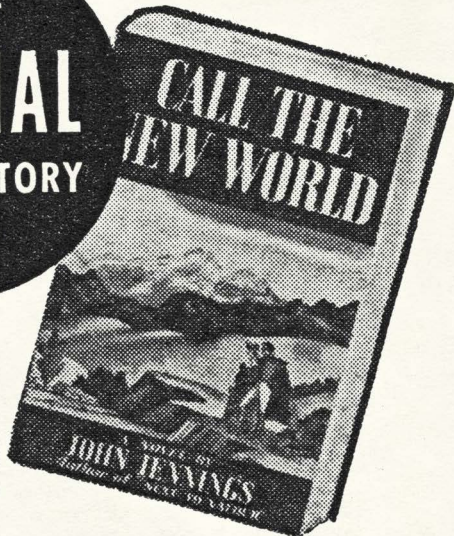
"I'm not so sure," Helen said. "I'm not so sure I should ever have trusted you at all."

Wilson felt a sudden chill strike at him through the heat of the Texas plain. He felt his hands grow rigid on the steering wheel. Stiffly, he turned his head to look at her. She frowned, then laughed nervously. "Oh, don't look that way, Art. Don't be so irritable about every little thing, Art!"

Laugh it off, Wilson told himself. It'll be easy. But he couldn't stop the coldness from spreading through his insides. It

(Continued on page 108)

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\$1.00

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TRAITOR'S MOUNTAIN by Showell Styles
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**By John D.
MacDonald**

DATELINE— DEATH

CHAPTER ONE

Pretty But Dead

I SAW Rudibaker squat on his hams beside her body and I still couldn't believe it. It had to be some gag for our column. That was it. A new angle. Written by Doris Deran. Murder investigation from the corpse's angle. In a minute she'd jump up, grinning, and adjust her saucy hat and start taking notes with that wide-eyed look that made any man tell her more than he had intended to.

She'd say, "That was nice, boys. I like your efficiency. Now here's the question. Who killed me?"

I shut my eyes and opened them again. She wasn't going to jump up. She wasn't going to shove that silly hat around on top of red-gold hair. The scene was frozen for a moment. The dingy hallway had a twenty-five watt bulb hanging from a bare



She was halfway down when

A night is never so silent as when it cries Murder. . . . A corpse is never so loud as when it sighs vengeance . . . and death came never so dear as when a cold-brained reporter bought it for himself— with the life of the woman he loved!



the orange pencils of flame lanced toward us. . . .

cord. From where I stood at the foot of the stairs, I could see the white sedan out by the curb. One of the lab men was on his knees dusting the doorknob. A police photographer held the camera poised, the silver circle of the reflector aimed at her. Reporters sat on the shaky porch railing, smoking and talking. One of them laughed. I wanted to kill him. I wanted to smash that laugh back down his throat.

Fat Rudibaker squatted by her body, his breath wheezing. The bulb popped and left swirling green spots in the backs of my eyes.

She lay on her face, her head angled to one side where it had hit the wall, both feet resting, toes in, on the bottom step.

Rudibaker turned and looked up the staircase as Sergeant Fine, at the landing, grunted. "What you got, George?"

"Cartridge case. Forty-five."

Outside a cop said in a pleading voice, "Keep back, willya? Come on, folks. Go back to bed. Nothing to see. Read all about it tomorrow."

Rudibaker straightened up with an effort. "So she was going down the stairs, walking if she didn't know, running if she did. And she got it in the back of the head. From ten feet anyway."

The deputy coroner waited at the door while the lab man said, "Hold it just a second, doc." He finished and said, "Nothing here, lieutenant."

The doctor came in, his face puffy with recent sleep. He set his bag down, picked up her wrist and flexed it, flexed the elbow. "Have to fix the time?" he asked.

"No," Rudibaker said. "Got a dozen people heard the shot. Eight after two."

"Instantaneous death. Gunshot wound." He turned her head gently, put it back the way it was. He coughed. "Not very pretty now. Get the slug?"

Rudibaker pointed at the hole Fine had dug in the plaster. "We got it. Smashed all to hell. Not enough left for the comparison microscope."

The doctor stood up. He yawned. "Who was she?"

"Doris Deran."

"My goodness!" the doctor said, jolted out of his calm for the first time. "That will make a stink, won't it? I read their column all the time."

Rudibaker jerked a thumb toward me. "This is the other half of the newspaper team."

The doctor gave me a sharp look. He stepped over, whipped a pencil light out of his pocket and thumbed up my eyelid. He blinded me with the light. "You'd better have a sedative, Mr. Blane."

"Give him something he can take later, Doc," Rudibaker said. "We want to ask him some questions."

"The man is in a state of emotional shock," the doctor said.

"I'll be all right," I said. My voice sounded as though it were a new device built to imitate human speech.

"You don't know who did it?" the doctor asked, as he opened his bag.

"Not yet," Rudibaker said absently.

The doctor gave me two capsules in a paper envelope with his name and office address on the outside. Rudibaker sent Fine out to call the ambulance men. I turned away when they lifted her into the metal basket and fastened the straps on the grey tarp. I heard them thump the basket against the doorframe, heard the steps creak as they went down.

"Move back," the distant policeman said. "Give 'em room, folks."

Rudibaker turned to George Fine. "Stay here and keep 'em back until the boys finish with the hall. I'm going up and take another look at that room. Want to come, Hy?" he asked me.

I nodded and followed him up. The room was at the end of the hall, on the right. The rest of the lab crew was working in there. Rudibaker filled the doorway. "Got anything?"

"Some of her prints. And not too many

of those," Partini, head of the lab, said. "One latent off the back edge of the bathroom medicine cabinet door. Pretty fuzzy. Maybe too old to be of any use."

Rudibaker turned to me. "From the marks on her wrists and her ankles and the corners of her mouth, we know she was held in this room for quite a while. Tied in that chair there, away from the windows. The way it looks, she had a guard. He was asleep. She managed to get herself free. She ran for it. He lost his head and gunned her when he caught her on the stairs. He kept right on going."

"Any description of him?" I asked.

"To fit a thousand guys. The woman who runs this rooming house works in the daytime. The room was rented four days ago. She thought just the one man was in here. She doesn't know when Miss Deran was brought in. She has a notebook for a register. He signed it Roger Smith. He said he'd clean up his own room. Only a couple of people saw him coming and going. Dark hair, stocky, dark suit, gray hat. No car. Paid a week in advance."

I LOOKED around the small room. The furniture was new, but of the cheapest possible kind. A grass rug. Tin venetian blinds. A bathroom added as an afterthought, where the closet had been. A cardboard wardrobe substituting for the closet.

Partini came over. He sighed. But his eyes were bright. Partini loves such situations. He said, "Got three black hairs. Two out of the bed, one out of the washstand. Got a blood spot on a towel. He could have cut himself shaving. Can get a perspiration analysis out of the pillow case. Enough so that if you line me up some suspects, I can pick the guy."

"Nothing else?" Rudibaker asked in a hurt tone.

"Smoked a lot. Cork tips. Right down to the tip every time and then let them burn out."

Doris' big leather purse was on the

bureau. It was in a big cellophane bag. Rudibaker said, "Soon as you finish with the purse, send it to my office, Partini."

We left the room and went down the hall and down the stairs. Saleberg from the *Express* buttonholed me as we went out the door. "Give me what you got, Hy, and I'll phone it in for you. Dave wants you to get in touch when you can."

"Nothing new," I said.

His lip twisted. "Okay. Play it smart. Save it for the column."

I hit him in the mouth. It was a reflex, without thought. They grabbed us and broke it up.

Salesberg wiped his mouth on his handkerchief and looked at the dabs of blood. "I'll see you around, Blane," he said.

In the sedan Rudibaker said, "That wasn't so smart, Hy."

"They're like that now," I said. "Jealous, I guess. Ever since we made the syndicate deal. He can't hurt me."

Rudibaker grunted. "Are you going to carry on alone?"

"I can't tell you right now. I don't know."

As the sedan purred softly through the night streets of Schuyler I wondered whether I could carry it on alone. Dave Maroff, the managing editor of the *Express*, had given us our chance two years ago.

AROUND AND ABOUT was the title of the column. We submitted a week of samples. He said okay, if we'd handle our regular assignments too. And after six months, when the column had put the *Express* a good forty thousand daily circulation over the *Schuyler Star*, he let us devote all our time to it. We split the take down the middle.

Syndication hadn't made much difference in the column. Just less weight on local stuff and more on the general. But syndication had made a big difference in the bankroll. For the last two months we'd been splitting nine hundred a week.

I wouldn't have to make up my mind

right away. We had ten columns in the safe. A vacation backlog. I could release those, one at a time.

The driver turned through the arch into the enclosed headquarters yard. We went through the side door and up to Rudibaker's office on the second floor. He lowered himself into the gray metal swivel chair behind the gray metal desk. The big fluorescent light was clamped to the desk edge. He swung it out of the way and took a cigarette and slid the pack over to me.

When I lit up, noting objectively that there wasn't the suggestion of a tremble in my fingers, he said, "I have to do this tonight instead of tomorrow, Hy. Sorry."

"It's all right. Go ahead."

"The best guess is that her death is tied in with what she was working on. And you're the only one who can enlighten us on that."

"But I can't."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You've got to understand how we worked, to know that. We were pretty competitive. Once in a while we'd unravel something together, like that series on local tax dodgers and what made them tick. But mostly we did our own digging and we didn't let each other in on it until it was on paper. In other words, we got a big charge out of scooping each other. So I haven't got the faintest idea of what she was working on. The last time I saw her was four days ago. I knew I'd see her tomorrow. She had to show, because we didn't have another column we'd both approved. If she hadn't come around tomorrow, I'd have done some hunting and then gotten worried. Probably reported it."

"When you saw her four days ago did she give you any hint?"

"She was bright-eyed. She said she was onto something that would curl my back hair. That's all she said. I didn't press her for more dope."

"What was there between the two of you? Personally."

"Is that any of your damn business?"

"Now, Hy," he said gently.

"Okay. I was in love with her. It wasn't reciprocal. I hoped some day it would be. I had a lot of big fancy dreams of a first book made up of our best work, and then a place in the country where we could both do some serious writing. I guess they were just dreams. She lived for excitement, Dan. The closer she got to getting her head bashed in when she worked on that numbers racket exposé, the better she liked it."

"The department spent a lot of time combing her out of its hair, Hy."

"She just sunk her teeth into something too big."

"And you have no idea what she was working on?"

"Not the faintest."

"What are your working methods?"

"I've got a big garage apartment on Sandusky, as you know. Our office and files are there. Four months ago we hired a stenographer. She works a full time week at the office."

"Give me her name and address. Deran might have confided in her."

"Alda Jamison. Lives with her family over on Croton some place. I'd have to look it up."

"We'll find her."

"And Doris had a small apartment in the Barry, that new place. She—"

"Where did Doris come from?"

"A little upstate town. Shedogan. Fifty miles up in the hills. Educated at the state university. Journalism major, believe it or not. Got a job on the *Express* as a copy girl four years ago. She'd have been twenty-six next Thursday. There's a kid sister and her mother, a widow. The mother is still in Shedogan and the kid sister is over at the university."

"Who did Doris date?"

"Nobody in particular. But quite a few. All the way from Dave Maroff to Reo Hammin."

"Little girls shouldn't play around with Reo. Didn't she know that?"

"She knew it."

He yawned mightily. He looked at his watch. "Dawn in twenty minutes, Hy. I'll have a car take you home. We'll be in touch." He walked me to the door, paused with a beefy hand on my shoulder. "One thing, Hy. Leave this to us. All of it."

I shrugged off the hand. "Not a chance, Dan."

"Amateurs can foul us up. Maybe you'll be helping Mr. Somebody get away with it. Would you like that?"

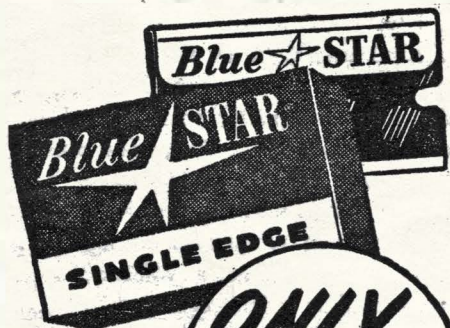
"Good night, Dan," I said. I had the driver take me through the big gates of Mrs. Parkson's house and around to the garages. I went upstairs and let myself in. It was odd to look at my bed and remember that I'd slept in it that same night, until the sedan had come for me at two-thirty. It seemed like some other night—weeks later.

I went into the kitchen and took the pills. I hoped they were strong. By then I didn't have to turn on any light to undress. Dawn came gray through my windows.

I had that kid feeling of tears just below the surface. They wanted to bust loose. I wanted to cry for her. For gray-green eyes and lips that I'd kissed and a jaunty walk. But I lay there like a statue somebody had brought in from the park and put to bed for a laugh. The pills swung me around and around in a descending spiral into a place where there was no dawn.

I CAME out of it at two on Friday afternoon with a head that felt like a puffball a yard across stuffed with dirty cotton. I lay there for a moment wondering why I had the feeling that my world had come to an end. And then I remembered Doris. The memory hit me like a club across the mouth. Grief is a funny

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thing. It works like a wave. It recedes and you become conscious of the mechanics of living—bathing, eating, combing your hair. Then the wave sweeps back with a bitter crest that smashes you flat.

I took the shower as hot as I could stand it and then as cold and then as hot again. It washed away the cotton. As the razor whispered down my cheek I looked at the stranger's face in the mirror. A stranger's homely face, with too much bone across the brow, too much jaw, too much mouth, spaniel eyes set too deep in the sockets. Dusty brown hair. The whole works atop a gangling, knobby body that I'd hurled off diving towers and down ski slopes without ever damaging it much.

I dressed with all the care of a guy going to a wedding, or a wake.

When I went out into the living room I stopped dead. Reo Hammin was sitting there, legs crossed, eyebrows gleaming white against his sun lamp tan. He stood up.

"I'm taking a liberty, I guess, Blane. The girl in your office let me wait in here."

He's a big man with a deceptive mincing way about him. In years past his boys reputedly filled the Schuyler River so full of corpses that the city fathers had to heighten the flood walls. Now he's quieter, and smarter.

"What do you want?"

"Our eager municipal friends have been hauling in suspects by the gross. A lot of my people are out of circulation for a few days."

"So?"

"So I want it made known to all and sundry, including you, Blane, that I'm going to make it my personal affair to see that Miss Deran's killer or killers are given special handling."

I sat down and stared at him. "I don't get it. Doris has been gunning for you ever since we started the column."

He smiled delicately. "She told me. Very amusing."

"What's your angle in coming here?" I asked.

"Doubtless you'll keep on with the column. You might mention my attitude."

"Now I get it. Public relations."

"You can call it that. And a personal interest, of course. Lovely girl."

Alda Jamison tapped on the connecting door and came in. She's a raw-boned red-head with shoulders like a stevedore. I could tell from her eyes that she'd been crying.

"Mr. Maroff on the phone, Mr. Blane."

"I'll take it right here." I sat on the couch and picked the phone up from the end table.

"Hy? Dave here. Look, boy. How much is the backlog. How many?"

"Thirteen columns, Dave."

"All ready for the syndicate?"

"All but the last three."

"Have your girl get them out, will you? I'll send a messenger for our copies. Rudi-baker had the commissioner step on the back of my neck to keep you off this case. But the commissioner never sold newspapers. 'Partner of dead columnist heads *Express* investigation of death. Blane announces he won't rest until criminals are brought to justice.' Unlimited expense account, boy."

My hand was tight on the phone. "Is that all it means to you, Dave?"

"You know me better than that. I do my crying on my own time. She was a sweet kid, and entirely aside from selling newspapers, boy, I'd like to do a little work with a rusty knife on whoever did it to her. Can anybody hear me where you are?"

"No, providing it isn't bellowed."

"Okay. You'll be a straw man. I'm bringing in an outside firm of investigators. We don't expect you to do anything constructive. But maybe they will. And when they do, we stick the credit label on you."

"Dandy," I said.

"Willing to stomp around and raise hell?"

"All right."

"There is a gun here for you and a license to carry it."

"Local color, I suppose."

"It won't hurt the story any, that's for sure. See you, boy."

I hung up the phone and looked over at Reo Hammin. He had a wise smile. "Going to play cowboys and Indians?"

"Something like that. Would you mind awfully if I start now? On you?"

His eyes widened. "How?"

"There's no witness here, Reo. You've got Schuyler in your nicely tailored tweed pocket. Horse rooms, the votes in the key wards, after-hour clubs, paving contracts, aldermen, plus a coverup string of gas stations and liquor stores. Something tells me Doris was onto something big. And I don't think anything big could operate here without your knowledge and/or consent. So what fancy operations do you know about that you aren't in on?"

The blue eyes under the white brows turned to expressionless glass. "Usually I'd tell you to go to hell, Blane. But, as you say, there are no witnesses. I have nothing to do with the snowbird trade, robbery or arson. My affairs are purely local. It would be unwise and unhealthy for me to even get curious about anything organized on a national basis."

"But you do know something?"

He smiled. It was like the edge of a knife. "I know that I am permitted to exist because I'm useful. Once or twice a year I get a request. Over the phone from an unknown party. Usually they want somebody released. I obey like a good little boy. I'm not paid for that service. I don't care to know who requests it or why. But you're on the wrong track, of course."

"Why do you say that?"

"Don't be naïve. The very last thing they'd do is stir a city up by killing a prominent figure." He stood up, shrugged his jacket into a better set on his shoulders. "Got to be running, Blane. If you should

need help, let me know. I employ some reliable people."

I let him go. I gave Jamison her orders for what was left of the day and went out to a three-thirty breakfast. Then I went to the *Express* offices and parked my car in the lot behind the building. Dave wasn't in, but he'd left the gun with his secretary. He'd done it right. A brand new snub-nosed .38, a box of shells and a shoulder holster that had the smell of raw leather. It took me about five minutes to figure out how to strap on the holster. I loaded the weapon, put it in the spring clip of the holster and put my coat back on, feeling like a character out of a comic strip. The card entitling me to carry it I put in my wallet.

I found a small, empty office and took in all the editions of the paper for the past four days. It seemed as good a starting point as any. In the newspaper business you learn that violence is bred by violence. I didn't know what I was looking for. A stolen car, armed robbery, unexplained assault—anything that didn't seem to have a clear and reasonable answer.

But everything had an answer. The young milkman who had killed himself had been fired three days before. They had caught the kids who had stolen two cars from a midtown lot. The Peeping Tom over on the West Side was a pretty common phenomenon in that area, and sooner or later he'd be caught.

I gave up in disgust. I phoned Rudi-baker. He'd just come on duty again after catching some sleep.

"Welcome to the profession," he said sourly.

"No objections?"

"Sure, but what can I do? Maroff sold the commissioner. The commissioner told me to cooperate with you."

"Anything new?"

"Nothing at all, Hy. Except that—well, skip it."

"Cooperate, Dan."

"You asked for it. The doc reports that she had been brutally beaten quite a few times over the period she was held in that room. He said it was a good trick for her to even get to the head of the stairs in her condition."

Nausea made its familiar acid in my throat.

I shut my eyes, opened them slowly.

"Why?" I asked. "Why?" My voice was faint and shallow.

"To me it makes it look like a psycho, Hy. Nothing connected with her job at all. Just some guy who took a strange fancy to her."

"Any luck on that print on the back of the cabinet door?"

"The landlady's," he said with vast disgust.

I hung up. The office was going gray with dusk. The phone rang. The switchboard girl said, "Mr. Blane? A young lady to see you."

"Send her in, please."

I wished, when she came in, that I'd turned on the lights first. It nearly broke my heart.

Then I saw that she was taller than Doris. And younger.

Her voice was pitched a bit lower. "Mr. Blane? I'm Betty Deran." I found the desk light switch with a fumbling hand. "I don't want to bother you, Mr. Blane."

"Sit down, please."

Her eyes were grave and very lovely. "I came to pack Doris' things and close up her apartment and make arrangements about—the body. Mother couldn't come. The shock."

"Of course."

"I saw Mr. Maroff. We talked. He hired me."

"What! You're still in the university, aren't you?"

"That isn't important, Mr. Blane. Not now. He wants me to work with you on the . . . killing."

CHAPTER TWO

X Marks the Spot

I STOOD up and walked angrily to the window and looked down at the homeward bound lines of traffic. I lit a cigarette to give myself time.

"Look, Betty. Dave wants to sell papers. He loves a cornball approach. I let him sell me on this special investigation business. If he can pin you onto the bandwagon too, it makes things all the more sensational. But you and I are babes in the wood. Don't let him use you."

"I realize all that, Mr. Blane. Maybe I'd just be in your way, but don't you see that I—I . . ."

I turned and looked at her. Her hands covered her eyes; her head was bowed. I went around and put my hand on her shoulder. "You mean it would be better for you to feel that you're doing something?"

She nodded without looking up.

I made it harsh. "It's no skin off my nose, kid. You won't be in the way because we won't be doing anything anyway. This is a job for the pros."

"Then it will be all right?"

"Yes, it will be all right. Where are you staying?"

"I thought I'd stay at her apartment in the Barry. The police are through there."

"Won't that bother you?"

She looked up at me, her eyes steady, the tears drying on her cheeks. "You might as well learn right off, Mr. Blane, that nothing in this world will bother me except not finding out who killed Doris."

"Let's go eat, Betty. And call me Hy."

Over dinner at the steak house in the cellar across the street from the *Express*, I told her of my feeble little theory, and how it hadn't panned out.

She said sweetly, "Maybe it didn't pan out, Hy, because you didn't give it a chance. Maybe you expected the answer to be all written out for you."

It sounded disturbingly like Doris.

"Isn't there a map of the city in the newspaper office?"

"Of course."

"Well, let's hurry, and we'll go up and I'll show you what I mean."

We went up and I tore the clippings out of the paper and then we got a map of the city and spread it across the desk and got a big red crayon.

"This is silly," I said.

"Now mark the house where she was killed, Hy."

"Right here. Eleven-ten Waller Avenue." I put a circle around it. I put another circle around the Barry and one around my place, and, for luck, one around the newspaper office. It didn't mean a thing.

I had to phone headquarters to find out where the two stolen cars were recovered. I marked the spot where they'd been stolen from the midtown lot and then put another two crosses at the points of recovery, over on the East Side.

Still nothing.

"Now the milkman," she said. In the account of his suicide it gave the address of his West Side rooming house. Two forty-one Hopper. A red X for the milkman. It gave no specific address for the Peeping Tom report. I had to call headquarters again. It took a long time to track it down. Finally the desk sergeant reported in a bored voice, "A Mrs. Pearl Wandaywitz at two forty-three Hopper, Hy."

I hung up the phone after thanking him, and we had two red Xs, side by side.

"See?" she said.

"See what? I don't see anything but a coincidence."

"In Applied Logic they taught us to be wary of coincidences. And there are two coincidences there, Hy."

"I only see one."

She sighed. "The second coincidence is the date of death, isn't it? Doris died at eight minutes after two this morning. And the milkman killed himself at one o'clock

this morning. And he was fired three days ago, wasn't he? And nobody has seen Doris for four days, or maybe three."

"So what do we do with all that? Make some more red marks?"

Her smile was sweet. "Don't you think it would be nice to see what route he was on before he was fired?"

That one took four phone calls. And at last we got the route manager. His name was Colby. We got him at his home.

I took it. "Mr. Colby? This is the *Express* calling. You had a milkman working for you who recently committed suicide. Robert Delaney. Could you tell me his route? Good. Give it to me slowly so that I can write it down. All right. He went from the distribution point along Central, starting at two forty-five A.M. Down to where? Oh, Cleveland. Then over Cleveland to Waller. And all the way down Waller to Richey and back over to Cleveland and down to Central. You use horses, don't you? Back to the barns at about seven-thirty. Thank you very much, Mr. Colby. Could you tell me why he was discharged? Oh. Thank you very much. No, I'd rather not tell you the reason for the inquiry just yet."

I hung up. We stared at the red line on the map, the red line that went right by the place where Doris had died.

"I'm frightened, Hy," Betty said. Her face was like chalk.

"You," I said, "are not alone. Know why he was fired? Because an order came down to Colby to fire him. No reason given."

"What do we do now, Hy?"

"We take you home because you look exhausted. And in the morning we go to work."

"But—"

"But nothing."

I took her up to the familiar apartment in the Barry. She was too tired to see ghosts. I left her there. I went back to my place and took the folded map out of my

pocket and looked at it again. It could still be a web of coincidence.

I went to sleep and my dreams were bad.

MR. HOAGLUND wore a desk three sizes too big for him. It gave me the impression that when he sat on the swivel chair he could dangle his legs like a gnome on a fence.

"I say it is our business why we fire a man, Mr. Blane. Not yours or the business of the *Express* or anybody else. You saw what Delaney did. Obviously unbalanced. We hired him right after the war. A veteran."

Betty was sitting beside me, facing the gnome. Her voice was gentle as she said, "I wonder how the public would feel about a company that fires a good man without reason? I mean, how can we help making some sort of editorial comment in the column, Mr. Hoagland?"

"How do you know he was a good man?"

"We talked to some of the other men, Mr. Hoagland. Bob Delaney never missed a customer, never got into trouble."

"Okay, okay, but will you promise to keep this out of the paper?"

I shrugged. "Let's hear it first."

"A woman called me at my home. She didn't give her name. She said she was an old customer living on Cleveland. She said she didn't want to make a fuss that would hurt the company. She wanted to handle a thing like this quietly. She said that Delaney delivered her milk that morning and tried to . . . force unwelcome attentions on her. She said she could prove it because in the struggle she hit him on the cheek and she was certain she'd left a mark. I phoned the checker and asked her if Delaney had come in with a marked face. She said he had. So that was good enough. I told Colby to fire him. We can't stand that kind of trouble. You blame me?"

"Only for not getting Delaney's side of it, Mr. Hoagland."

He nodded sadly. "Ever since I read about him in the paper, I've felt bad."

"The woman didn't give her name?"

"No. You can see why not. But what is this all about?"

I stood up. Betty followed my cue. "It's about murder, Mr. Hoagland." We left him with his eyes frozen wide, his mouth sagging.

* * *

The checker was a plump little girl with crackling black eyes and a man-conscious manner. "Gee, it was terrible about Bob," she said.

"How did he act when he came off the route that morning?"

"Kinda funny. With his jaw set. Like he was sore or something. He went across to the bean wagon to eat, like always, and then he came back later and asked me did I have an envelope he could use. I gave him one and he put something in it and gave it back to me. I weighed it and it cost twelve cents first class so he paid me for the stamps. He went over to the report desk and addressed it and then he mailed it outside the door there."

"Did he act the same when he came back?"

"Well, just about. But he winked at me then and he looked like he'd ate a canary. Like he'd done something smart. Then, of course, Colby got him on the phone in the afternoon and told him not to come back and his check would be mailed."

We went to the bean wagon. A man with a long, gray, sour face was behind the counter. We ordered coffee. "Did you know Bob Delaney?" I asked.

He gave me a long look.

"Maybe I did."

"He ate here every morning he worked."

"Who are you?"

"Reporter."

"What do you want?"

"To prove Bob didn't kill himself."

He snorted. "Great! Everybody who knew him knew that. Not the type. Not him."

"Wouldn't you like to see it proved?"

"Doesn't matter to me yes or no, up or down."

"Give us a break," Betty said, "We're working for a living too, you know. Bob came in here that last morning he worked, and then he went back over to the barns. Did anything happen in here? Anything different?"

"Delaney sat and ate with Harry Kober, like always. At the end of the counter. Them last two stools. Stranger comes in and sits beside Bob. Harry leaves after only one coffee. Usually stays for three. Stranger and Bob have their heads together. Can't hear a word. Finally Bob leaves. Stranger makes like to follow him and then changes his mind. Stranger looks sore. That what you want?"

"Would you remember what the stranger looked like?"

"I might. About six foot. Blond hair. Fortyish. Scar like an S on his left cheekbone. Heavy. Go over two hundred, I think. Nose busted once or twice. Dressed good. Ring with a blue stone on the little finger of his right hand. A lefty. Spoke quiet and dignified. Good English, but rough. You can always tell by the eyes. Real rough."

I whistled. "You just happened to notice him, eh?"

He smiled for the first time. He tapped his temple. "Got a camera in here. Stranger comes in—*click!* Never forget a thing. All pictures."

* * *

Harry Kober was sleeping and his wife didn't want to wake him up. He finally came out wearing a robe and a sour expression. But the sour expression cleared when he found out what we wanted. He verified the counterman's description.

"That's him. He sat down the other side

of Bob and said something so low I couldn't hear it. Bob looked sore. Bob was just about to tell me about something happened on his route. Something about a girl in a gray suit. The guy I'd never seen before leaned forward so he could look at me. He said, 'You're excused, friend.' He wasn't the kind you argue with, so I left. I—never saw Bob again."

"Bob was marked up?"

"A big bruise on his cheek and cut inside the mouth. I was asking him, and that was when he started on the girl in the gray suit."

It was early afternoon and Mrs. Pearl Wandaywitz puffed as she led us up the stairs. She was a hefty blonde with a booming voice and sulphurous vocabulary.

"This is my room," she said, still panting. "I'm pulling down the shade like a decent woman and then, in my pajamas, I turn out the light and put the shade up. About eleven o'clock, I'd say. What do I see?" She pointed dramatically. "Some snooper up on the limb of that big tree! He can see in the windows over there. I don't yell or nothing. I call the cops. They don't find a thing."

"And the next night," I asked, "wasn't there trouble next door?"

"That poor stoop that killed hisself? Say, you aren't trying to say that the snooper had anything to do with—"

"No. No connection."

"I can't figure this at all," she said in a puzzled tone. "Can you?"

We took time out for coffee in a quiet booth.

"One," Betty said, "Doris was wearing a gray suit. Two, there is some connection between her and the milkman taking a beating and getting fired. Take it from there."

"Okay. A guess. Suppose she was picked up. They were taking her to that room on Waller. It would be a good time to sneak her in. Everybody asleep. Maybe they gave her some sort of a yarn to get her to go up there quietly. But she got worried.

There was data in the notebook she carried. They could meet the milkman on the porch. She might have dropped the book into his milk crate or even handed it to him."

"But wouldn't they just have taken it away from him?"

"No. He mailed something to someone. Twelve cents would be about the right first class rate for a notebook. Maybe they got her up in the room and found she'd gotten rid of the book. Who did she see? The mailman. They go chase him and beat him up to see if he had it. They search where she'd been. No book. Now it begins to come into focus. They can't risk killing her if they haven't got the book. Somehow it points to them. So they keep her in the room. The timing would be right. At one o'clock they kill Delaney and get the book. They get word back to the man guarding Doris. Okay to get rid of her now. So he does."

"Why wouldn't the milkman have turned the book over to the police or to the paper?"

"Two possible reasons. One, they were covering him too closely. They got him fired so they could do a better job. Two, he saw a chance to make himself a buck. Maybe he decided the book was saleable."

"What next, Hy?"

"We check the description of the blond man with headquarters. Then we get all the dope we can on the suicide."

RUDIBAKER and Sergeant Fine drove us to 241 Hopper. Rudibaker said for the tenth time, "It's too thin. Find me one thing. One little thing, and I'll go all the way with you. Fine investigated this."

"A suicide," Fine muttered. "Plain as day."

The combination janitor-manager lived in a cellar room. He looked like something that had grown in the dark.

"I thought you was all through with this thing?" he said querulously. "Going around

bothering people! Bad enough having a mess like that here. Owner treats me like it was my fault!"

"Do you know if Delaney got any mail the day after he was fired?" Dan asked.

"Not a scrap," the old man said.

"Are you sure?" Dan asked.

"Of course I'm sure. I meet the mailman myself. Friend of mine. On the day Delaney lost his job, he met the mailman with me. He got mail that day."

"What time is it delivered here?"

"Now there's only one delivery; it comes about four in the afternoon."

Dan nodded at me. "That would check. Hy, if he'd mailed it to himself. There'd be enough elapsed time for sorting and delivery." He turned back to the old man. "What did the mail for Delaney look like?"

"A milk company envelope with a lot of stamps on it. Four, maybe."

I glanced at Betty. Her eyes were wide.

"Take us on up to the room, pop," Dan demanded.

The old man sighed and shuffled toward the stairs, fumbling for his keys.

He opened the second floor door for us. "It's been all cleaned," he said dully. "Did it myself."

I went right to the twin window. I could look across into the bedroom windows of the Wandaywitz house. The elm branch came close to the side of the rooming house. An agile man could make it, if he didn't care whether or not he broke a leg.

Betty came up beside me. "Not that way," she said.

"No."

Dan scratched his head. "Now say the guy had this book that belonged to Doris. I'm not saying he did. Just suppose he did. He gets it to his room. The first thing he does is hide it, right?" He turned to the door. "Shove off, pop. We'll holler when we leave."

The old man went down the hall to the stairs. Fine went to work at once. He was quick and competent. He straightened up.

"This room's been searched, Dan. A careful job. And most of the evidence of the search covered up again."

Dan opened the door to the small bath. "In the tub, wasn't he?"

Fine nodded. "With both wrists cut and the blade on the floor beside the tub."

Dan had an odd expression. "Cut deep?" "Awful deep."

"Then it got the tendons, didn't it?"

"Sure. The doc set the time of death as one in the morning, and—"

"Sergeant! Was there any blood on the floor beside the tub?"

"Just what was on the razor and—"

Fine stopped talking and a funny look came over his face. "A bloomer! A beaut!"

"What are you talking about?" Betty asked.

Dan looked tired. "We miss sometimes. The best of us. Deep slashes cut the tendons and the hands won't work. If there was no blood on the floor, it meant his

hands won't work. If there was no blood on the floor, it meant his hands were in the tub. And so the razor blade would have had to be in the tub too, because he couldn't have picked it up to drop it outside. More than that, both wrists were slashed deep. He could cut the left, but then he couldn't hold the blade to cut the right wrist. You win, Hy. And nice work. Damn nice work."

I flushed. "Not mine. Hers."

Dan gave her an approving look. She didn't see it. She was frowning. "I wonder what happened to the envelope the notebook came in?"

We visited pop in the cellar. He hadn't burned the trash. It took forty minutes before we found a likely envelope. It was addressed to R. Delaney in a pencil scrawl. A block of four three cent stamps was on it.

Fine peered into it and dumped a tiny object out into his hand. "What the hell?" he said.

Betty began to laugh with a trace of



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hysteria. "Oats!" she gasped. "That's what he did—put the notebook in the horse's feedbag! That's why they couldn't find it when they beat him up and searched him!"

* * *

There was plain murder in the counter-man's eyes when we picked him up and took him down to headquarters to look at the rogue's gallery. He went over pictures for three hours and turned up a blank. Rudibaker said he'd put the description on the tape to see if he could get an echo from any other department. A stenographer took down the complete description. Under urging, the counterman came up with the color of suit, shirt and tie.

We were at headquarters when the call came in. One mile from his walled residence on Valley Road, Reo Hammin had been killed, along with his chauffeur, while heading toward town in his big sedan at a quarter of five. Broad daylight.

An automatic weapon had been used. After the sedan had tipped into the ditch, someone had stood at close range and made certain. No description of the car or the assailants were available.

Rudibaker no longer had time for us. I took the counterman back in my car. He was surly. He felt as though we'd double-crossed him. We had dinner and then we went to see Dave Maroff. I told it all, Maroff listened without interrupting.

Maroff is an amazing guy. He started his newspaper career on a midtown corner. He fought his way into circulation and broke heads from the tailgate of an *Express* delivery truck during the early wars. Once he got to be circulation manager, he quit and took a job as a legman. He covered the City Hall and the police beat as well as any. He spent some time on rewrite and learned the English language. He went on to city editor, assistant managing editor, managing editor. Brass knuckles and no holds barred all the way. He is almost

fantastically ugly, and has had three wives. Hyperthyroid type.

After I was through, he jumped up and did a lot of pacing. He thinks on his feet. "You kids have done fine!" he said. "One hell of a lot better than anybody expected. Now take it easy. I'll put all the dope into the hands of my agency, the out-of-town boys I hired."

I grinned at him, after shooting Betty a warning look. "What makes you think I gave you all the dope, Dave?"

"Haven't you?" He was sore.

"Oh, we've saved enough to keep working on, haven't we, Betty?"

She nodded, gravely.

He tried to throw his weight around. He got madder than I'd ever seen him, and it stopped like he'd turned off a switch. "All right, kids," he said. "Have your fun."

I drove Betty to the Barry. We sat in the car for a time. "It's a blind alley, isn't it?" she asked.

"So far. We know this much. We know that Doris had something awfully hot in that notebook. Hot enough to kill for. We suspect that she realized she was in danger. Now if we want to make a wild jump, we can say that Reo Hammin died because the dope in that notebook got into the wrong hands. If so, it would indicate that Reo Hammin had fed her the information. She was out with him the last night anybody saw her around. Suppose he fed her something he shouldn't have. He acted very smooth when he came to see me, but the guy was worried. Badly worried. He wouldn't have come to my place if he hadn't been. Once Mr. X got the notebook, he proved to his own satisfaction that Reo had crossed him. Good-by Reo."

We talked some more without getting anywhere and then I went around and opened the car door for her. She stumbled getting out and fell awkwardly against me. Before I knew it, I was kissing her. She kissed back.

"This is no good," I said. "Not fair to

you. It's a rebound from Doris. You're too much like her."

"I shouldn't have let it happen," she said humbly.

"Now that it has, let's forget it."

She gave me a sidewise look, the street-lamps shining on her cheek. "Yes," she said, "let's forget it. If we can."

She was gone before I could add any mature comments.

CHAPTER THREE

"You're Dead!"

WHEN I let myself into my place at eleven, my phone was ringing. As I got to it, it stopped. I sat at the desk in the dark and smoked and waited. In fifteen minutes it started again. I caught it on the first ring.

A girl's low voice, and solid behind it the gutty thump of music. "Mr. Blane?" I said it was. "Mr. Blane, you don't know me, but I gotta see you. I read about you being the special investigator for the paper."

"Where are you? I'll come right now."

"Shylor's Barn, on the Balley Road. I'm with some people."

"How will I know you?"

"I'm wearing a yellow short-sleeved sweater and a navy skirt. I'm with my girl friend and her boy friend. We're in a booth on the right, drinking beer. I've got brown hair, cut short."

"Give me thirty minutes," I said.

Twenty-four minutes later I pulled into the parking lot of Shylor's Barn. It was what it claimed to be. A big barn turned into a roadhouse. Reputation neither good nor bad. Just a roadhouse. I went in and walked down the booths on the right. Four so-called musicians in straw hats, farmer hats, were attempting *Muskrat Ramble*.

She was alone. The yellow sweater was doing all it could for the sake of appearances.

"I'm Blane. You phoned?"

"Yeah, my girl friend was feeling sick and she had Bud take her home. It always happens."

She had a sallow face and great dark eyes and a crimson slash of a mouth. She wasn't bad yet, but she was right on that sad and bitter edge where they either go completely wrong or get married and recover the lost ground. Not enough looks to go after the big dough in the big time.

"Why did you want to see me? And what's your name?"

"Dotty Rudd. I'm . . . I was Bob De-laney's girl." Her eyes filled quickly and she looked away. There was a taut and angry look around her mouth. "I couldn't believe he'd done it. I didn't want to say anything. So it got splashed all over the paper tonight he didn't do it to himself, so I can talk to somebody."

"If you know anything, why not go to the police?"

She gave me a long look. "Let's just say we don't see eye to eye, the police and me. I'm in their little black book just on account of before Bobby I went with a guy who killed a gas station fella one night. I wasn't there. I only went out with the guy four, five times. So what happens? So I'm in jail overnight and the old lady throws me out and now I got to pay room rent out of my pay, which, I can add, isn't much to start with."

I grinned. "Reason enough."

"So if I tell you anything, Mister Blane, I got to have your honorable promise that I don't get into it, cops or otherwise."

"You've got my promise, Dotty."

"Okay. Bob got killed yesterday morning at one o'clock, like it says in the paper. I was with him until eleven the night before, until just two hours before he got killed. I picked him up over at his place."

"What time did you get there?"

"About eight, I think. I started giving him hell the same as the night before, about losing his job and not looking for another

one. He told me to shut up and I didn't know what I was talking about. I asked him how come. He said we didn't have to worry about money any more. I asked him if maybe he had a rich uncle he'd said nothing about. He says he's got the next best thing. I told him I didn't want no crooked stuff, because having that mess with Frankie kind of marked me, you know what I mean. He says that you can't rob a crook, whatever that means. His eyes are bright.

"I asked him what he was going to do and he says sell something. I asked him how he got this something to sell and he says a girl give it to him. I got sore and jealous and I told him I was his girl. He says nuts to that, the girl was a stranger anyway, and he didn't know what it was she gave him until he got an offer. Five thousand. Then he looked at it closer and he found out it was worth more than five. Worth maybe twenty times that.

"I can do addition good as anybody. I asked him where he's keeping something worth a hundred grand and he said that would be telling. I slapped him and he was so nervous, he hit me back and knocked me over a chair. See, here on my leg? All purple still. I got mad, but then we made up. Then he told me to get packed and be ready to leave town any time and to quit my job in the laundry. I didn't quit and now I'm glad of it."

It matched up nicely. But there wasn't enough to go on. "Are you sure he didn't give you any other clue to what he had?"

She frowned as she concentrated. "He said one thing that doesn't make sense to me. Maybe I can't even remember it right. He said we weren't going to do any hitchhiking when we left. We were going by express. And he laughed like he was crazy."

I nodded. A poor pun. He'd have seen Doris' name inside the notebook and realized who she worked for. *The Express*.

"You've been a big help, Dotty," I said.

"Now you can be a big help to me, Mis-

ter Blane. There's a creep following me around. You want to take me home?"

"Glad to."

I took her out to the car. We turned around in the parking lot. She looked out the window. "Gosh, am I glad you said yes. He's hanging around still. See him there by the light?"

I slowed down and took a look. A big silhouette. He turned quickly away as we stared toward him. I saw his face in profile against the lights. The nose was flattened. I ignored her cry of alarm as I spun the car around and put it back in the lot. She came in with me as I phoned. I couldn't get Dan Rudibaker, but I did get hold of Fine. He said he'd put it on the radio and get a couple of prowl cars around.

I took Dotty Rudd to the address she gave me. It was four blocks west and two blocks south of Delaney's rooming house on Hopper.

"Now listen," I said. "That man following you. He isn't just after a pickup. I've got every reason to believe he's part of the group which killed Bob. They were watching you. They wondered how much you might know, how much Bob had told you. Now you've been seen with me. If they recognized me, it may be that neither of us are very fancy insurance risks."

She started to tremble. She looked up and down the dark street.

"The best thing for you, Dotty, is protective custody. A home away from home in the women's wing at the county jail. I'm not trying to kid you."

"No," she said with surprising firmness.

"None of that noise for Dotty, thank you."

"Then go pack a bag. I'll come with you. I'll take you to stay with a friend of mine. In the Barry."

She thought that over. "Hey, that's the big new apartment place, isn't it?"

"And a desk clerk to get by."

"It's a deal, Mister Blane. Come on. Packing a bag won't take long."

I waited in the hallway. It didn't take

long. She came down and handed it to me. I held the door for her. She was halfway down the wooden steps when the thin orange pencils of flame lanced toward us from over the hood of my car. I could hear the hammer-thud of the slugs on her flesh. She coughed, bent forward from the waist and pitched onto her face on the concrete.

As I turned to dive off the steps, I got my legs tangled in her bag. I hit solidly on my chest, knocking the wind out. I kept enough sense to grab the shiny new gun and pull it free. As the dark figure came running toward me I aimed in his general direction and started pulling the trigger. It fired faster than I believed possible. The figure staggered and sat down. Not hard. Then I yanked on an empty gun. The figure stood up and aimed carefully at me. I tried to wiggle away. The whole big bright world was on a string, and with a crash of flame somebody yanked the string and pulled it a million miles away. . . .

RUDIBAKER'S fat red face was the size of a bushel basket. I thought it was going to fall on my face and break open like a tomato.

"Easy, easy," he said. His voice was at the other end of a tunnel.

"Where. . . ."

"The nurse says don't ask anything. I answer the questions I think you want to ask. You're in a private hospital. We took you right to the police morgue and out the back door. You're dead."

I tried to sit up. He pushed me back.

"Easy, boy. Take a look at the headlines." He held up the paper.

BLANE SLAIN

Hiram Blane was killed by an unknown gunman last night along with Miss Dorothy Rudd, fiancé of the milkman, Robert Delaney, whose suicide was recently proven to be murder. Death has struck in rapid. . . .

My eyes wouldn't focus any more. I closed them. He took the paper away.

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"You were just creased, Hy. A bad one that grooved the bone. Shock and concussion. The girl is dead. One in the heart and two in the belly. We've figured that she phoned you to meet her at Shylor's Barn. She had information for you. But she was being tailed, and they saw the contact being made. That was their tip that Delaney had told her too much. Now just pinch my hand once for yes and twice for no. Your gun was empty. Did you get anybody? Good! We're already working on that angle on a hunch. The gunman was picked up in a car. We know that much. Did the Rudd girl give you anything hot?"

His face showed his disappointment. Then he brightened. "But they don't know that!" He picked up the paper again. He read aloud. "Elizabeth Deran, sister of the dead columnist, said that she received an urgent phone call from Hiram Blane a half hour before his death. She refused to disclose to police the information Blane gave her over the phone."

I was all through with silence. "You can't make her a stalking horse, Dan!"

"Shut up! It's all done. This paper has been on the street for an hour, and nothing short of an atom bomb can get to her. I've got that Barry sealed like a pharaoh's tomb. I want somebody to try to get at her."

"I'm going to put a stop to this."

"You're putting a stop to nothing, boy. You're dead. So stay dead."

"Who knows I'm not dead?"

"Me, Fine, the captain, the chief and the commissioner."

"Does Betty think I'm dead?"

"No. I forgot. We let her in on it too. We had to."

"And the same people are the only ones who know that line in the newspaper is a plant?"

"Right. Now lie still and play dead, damn you."

He went out. I didn't like any part of it. My head felt like it had fallen apart on

the pillow into two jagged halves. It was a poor instrument to think with. Pain kept washing over it, pain that swept down to my toes and bounced back again.

After a time I sat up, by inches. They had me in one of those ridiculous short hospital gowns. I got across the room by holding onto the wall. My clothes, as I had hoped, were in the metal locker. I took them back to the bed. There were dirt and grass stains on the front of my coat, where I'd hit the grass. There was blood on the left shoulder. But not much.

The nurse came in as I was tying my tie. She gave a horrified gasp. She tried to talk me back into bed and then tried to push me. Neither attempt worked. The bandage was like a turban. She scurried off after a doctor. I found a staircase at the end of the corridor and went down two flights. Each step was like hitting myself on the bandage with a club.

I found an outside walk, a neat plot of grass, a clipped hedge and a gate. The gate was unlocked. At the corner I had luck in the taxi department.

"How does the other guy look, Mac?" he asked.

I gave him my home address. I asked him what time it was. Ten in the morning. My watch had stopped. I set it. Miss Jamison jumped up and went dead white as she saw me. She went over and I was too far away to catch her, too weak to try. She landed face-down across her chair and it didn't tip over.

When I came out again after changing my suit coat, she was just getting herself under control. She chattered like a squirrel.

"I am not dead," I said slowly and distinctly. "But for the record, I am. Any phone calls come in, just say the party is deceased."

"Yes, Mr. Blane!"

"The police are going to be looking for me. I'm not here and haven't been here."

"Yes, Mr. Blane!"

"I've got a hunch. Call up Jerry Hadie

at Central Investigations. Ask him whether an out-of-town agency registers with the local police as a matter of courtesy when they come to town. If the answer is yes, ask him to find out if any foreigners are working in town. Then let me know when he calls back. I'll be in my bedroom."

It took ten minutes. "Mr. Hadie says that no other agencies have come in to work on anything."

The cab driver was waiting patiently. He nodded approvingly. "You look better, Mac. Where to?"

"The Barry."

It was a ten minute ride. I got out in front. My eyes weren't tracking properly. The Barry had two entrances, whereas before it had only had one. I hoped I would hit the right one.

The desk clerk's eyes got bigger and bigger as he saw me. The tip of a pointed tongue slid around his lips. It was a routine I was getting tired of.

He must have pressed some sort of a signal. Foran, an ex-pro basketballer turned cop when his legs went bad, came out of the stairway door. He did the double take too.

His expression cleared. "I get it," he said. "A fake, eh?"

"Go to the head of the class, Foran. I'm going up."

"The hell you say. Nobody goes up."

"If I can be absolutely certain of that, Foran, I won't give you any trouble."

"We know our business. Nobody goes up."

There was a low couch along the wall. As my legs started to give out, I made it over to the couch and sat down heavily.

Foran stood beside me. "You can't sit here. It might spoil it."

"At the moment I can't stand up to go any place else. Give me a minute. Any trouble so far?"

"Nothing. They're up there, waiting. I give them a buzz when we throw the net over any visitor."

I couldn't make my mind work properly. "They? Who's they?"

"The girl and your boss."

"Dave Maroff?"

I thought my legs weren't working, but they worked fine. Foran didn't catch me until I was halfway into the elevator. If it wasn't for the bandage, he would have tied me up like a child. But Foran tried to be too gentle. He turned me around with one hand on my shoulder. As I came around I hit him. He supplied the leverage. His eyes glassed over and he stood there weaving like a big tree. I yanked the service revolver out of his hip holster, slammed the elevator door and punched the button for her floor. The elevator rose with an agonizing slowness. When it stopped I yanked the door open and headed down the hall. Two of Rudibaker's men in plainclothes converged on me.

"Come on!" I said. It wasn't what they expected. While they were still trying to figure it out I brushed by them. The door to the apartment was locked. I rattled the knob, put the muzzle of Foran's gun to the keyhole and yanked the trigger. A fragment of the lock whined into my chest and a warm run of blood began to flow. I shoved the door open.

It had given him warning. The big window in the small living room was open. Betty clung, half-fainting, to the frame, her hair tangled. Dave had backed away from her and drawn a gun. Before, his face had been merely uncommonly ugly. Now it was bestial, the lips drawn up in the snarl of a trapped animal.

The gun in his hand jumped. I could see it jump and see the muzzle as big as a cave in the side of a hill, but I couldn't hear the shot.

The man behind me slammed me aside and I fell. I heard the next shots. Three of them, so close to each other that it was almost one explosion. I pulled myself up by the arm of a chair in time to see Dave back against the wall and slide slowly

down until he was sitting on his heels, and then fall loosely forward onto his face.

I WAS back in bed, this time in Schuyler General. The commissioner is a little man who looks like a sleepy owl. Both the chief and the commissioner seemed content to let Rudibaker ask the questions. Betty sat over near the police clerk and his open notebook.

"One last question," Dan said. "We've gotten Maroff's testimony. We know that for the last five years he and Reo Hammin were partners, and that Reo had been trying to put the lid on Maroff's program to expand their activities to include every kind of racket instead of just the gentler varieties. Maroff was getting out of hand, and so Reo fed Doris Deran information on Maroff's extracurricular activities. The idea was to hamstring Maroff by destroying his reputation and forcing him off the paper. Doris Deran went directly from Reo Hammin to Maroff. Maroff had already smelled trouble coming and had brought in two killers through his syndicate contacts in order to take care of Reo if necessary. He had sold the syndicate on the idea that he could open the town up farther than Reo, with his questionable reputation, ever could.

"So, with the idea of giving her more information, he lured Doris to the room rented by one of the two outside boys. She got suspicious and, on the doorstep, managed to slip her notebook, containing names and dates and places, to Delaney, the milkman. In the room they overpowered her quietly and tied her up. Then she told Maroff that the notes were in a safe place. That was a mistake. Because she had used the notebook when she had faced him with Reo's data, and he had been with her every minute since then.

"Broken-nose and the dark, stocky one caught up with and went to work on Delaney. He was tougher than they had figured. In the diner he admitted to Broken-nose that he might have it and he'd be

interested in an offer. Broken-nose killed Delaney after perching in the tree long enough to find Delaney's hiding place for the notebook. Maroff killed Miss Deran because the two hired boys wouldn't touch it. The two hired boys killed Reo and the Rudd girl and tried to kill you. One of them has skipped. The other one is in bad shape with two holes in the right lung. We found him. Now, Blane, what made you begin to suspect Maroff?"

"All vague," I said. "I started thinking subconsciously along that line when Reo visited me. His visit didn't make much sense. He wanted me to print his wish to cooperate in taking care of whoever killed Doris. That seemed almost as though it might be a concealed threat against someone. But it would be Reo's style to make his threat in person. Unless, of course, the person couldn't be contacted in the normal way. That might mean that the person was a 'respectable' person. The next thing was Maroff telling me that he'd hired an out-of-town investigating agency.

"The more I thought of that, the less sense it made. As a friend of the commissioner, it wasn't like him to take action that could be construed as a criticism of the department. And there are good agencies in town, and the paper has always plugged for local buying. Then I began to realize that if Maroff had to make contacts in a rather furtive way, and if he were seen doing so, he'd already covered himself with that agency story. I still didn't have anything. Then I began to think more about the pun on the word 'express' that Delaney made to his girl friend. It sounded almost as though he were trying to sell the notebook to the *Express*. When I began to think about Maroff's character, I began to wonder. He clawed his way to the top. A guy like that doesn't rest when he reaches one peak. He heads for the next available one.

"I guess he thought he was in the clear if Doris, Delaney, Reo, the Rudd girl,

Betty and myself were all dead. He could keep on being respectable and take over Reo's half quietly. As far as he knew, Betty was the only one left who might know. It was worth risking a song and dance about fear making her feel faint, and opening the window for her, and then not catching her as she went out. How is he, anyway, Dan?"

"He'll live. Slug had clipped the spinal cord."

That was all. They left, then. All except Betty.

"Now you can get back to school," I said. "You and your mother inherit half the column. I'll keep it going."

"You'll need help," she said.

"You're still green. A little more school won't hurt."

"You mean that I'm not a newspaper woman yet?"

"Something like that."

She sighed. "Maybe you're right, Hy. I

was frozen with fear as he was forcing me back out that window. Then all that shooting. I thought he'd killed you when you pulled yourself up by the arm of the chair and then fell back. I came right to you and found that you were breathing and I couldn't find any new wounds except a little shallow one in your chest. Then I went right to the phone and gave the whole story to rewrite. I suppose I should have phoned first and then looked to see if you were dead "

I swallowed hard.

"No. It was better for you to check the facts first."

Her smile was mocking. "Then I really did all right?"

I gave her a long look. "Okay, okay. The houses out near Summit Park are falling down on the veterans who paid fifteen thousand apiece for them. It ought to be worth a column. Get on your horse and get the facts."

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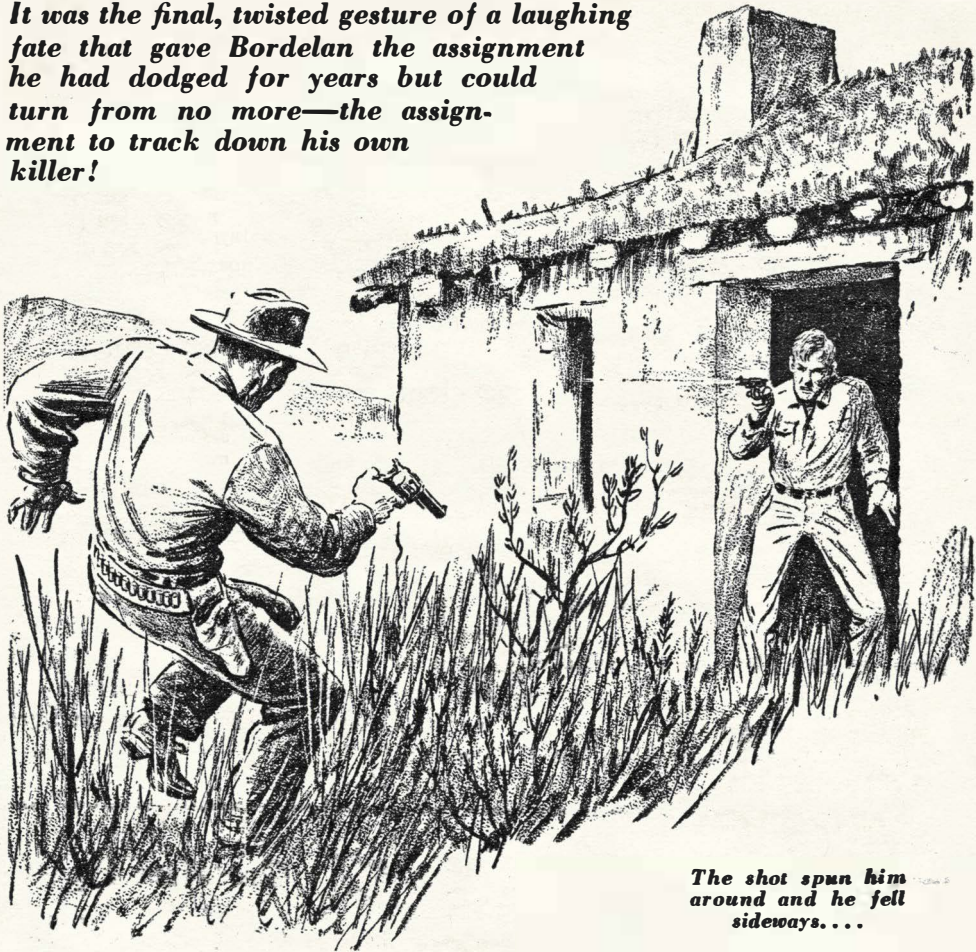
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It was the final, twisted gesture of a laughing fate that gave Bordelan the assignment he had dodged for years but could turn from no more—the assignment to track down his own killer!



The shot spun him around and he fell sideways....

THE HUNTED

By John Eugene Hasty

THE telephone bell, full of vehement malice, jangled disturbingly in his dreams.

Presently Bordelan opened his eyes and stared stupidly at the clock that stood on the table alongside his bed. The hands pointed to five thirty-five. The bleak light of early morning seeped under the window shades. The phone kept up its clamor. Bordelan grasped it, and swung his legs out of bed.

"Yeah," he said.

"Sheriff Bordelan?" It was a young voice, excited and tremulous.

"Yes, this is Bordelan."

"This is Joey Webber! Mr. Bordelan, you know Pete Pederson, at the Crescent Service station? He's been shot!"

"Shot?" Bordelan repeated the word a little thickly.

"Killed! There was a holdup! It was Bodie Talbot that done it! He got away!

Mr. Gurley came up right after, and—and he sent me to phone you! He says he'll take charge till you get there!"

"All right," Bordelan said, "I'll be right over."

He had tried to say it calmly. He hoped he'd succeeded. He didn't feel calm. After he'd replaced the phone, he felt sick, and for a moment too weak to get up from the edge of the bed. Finally, he stood up, and began getting into his clothes. After he'd slipped on his coat, he picked up his gunbelt. He seldom wore the belt. It was a gauche, theatrical trapping that made him feel a little like a youngster playing cowboy. But a holdup and a killing—there'd be a crowd at the service station. They'd expect him to wear it.

He buckled the belt on, and went downstairs.

Gronnick, the night clerk, was still on duty, leaning against the desk in the yellow glare of a single electric light. It shone feebly on his leathery face and scraggy gray mustache. Gronnick was an old-timer in the valley, a former cattleman, and his attitude toward Ed Bordelan was one of faint amusement blended with contempt.

"Mornin', Sheriff," he said. "What's the matter? Worried about somethin'?"

"There's been a killing," Bordelan told him. "Over at the Crescent Service Station."

"Oh, that!" Gronnick said casually, "Yeah. I listened in on the Webber kid's call. So Bodie Talbot done it. Well, surely you ain't bothered about bringing in a white belly like Bodie, are you? Why, I remember when Ben Gurley was sheriff, and he brought in the two Fitzmaurice boys. Done it all by himself. And the Fitzmaurice boys was really bad *hombres*. But Bodie Talbot—say, mebbe you'd better deputize Ben, and let him go after Talbot."

Bordelan thought, *It would have to be*

Gurley who happened to drive past the place. He said, "My office isn't open yet; but around eight o'clock call them, will you, and tell them where I am?"

He went out and got into his car. A thick, white fog lay over the floor of the valley, and he had to drive slowly. There was plenty of time for thinking. Bordelan did a great deal of it.

He hadn't wanted to run for sheriff. The reform crowd had talked him into it; and on the upsurge of the movement to oust the Maguire crowd, he had won over Ben Gurley, who'd held the job for a good many years. The reform had lost its momentum now, had played out. Bordelan was rather certain that even those who had voted for him regarded him as incompetent and ineffectual. Oh, they'd concede he ran the office efficiently and honestly, but if ever there arose an occasion calling for guts, he knew they doubted that he'd face up to it.

Well, the occasion had come. He had to find Bodie Talbot, and arrest him for murder.

Behind the wheel of his car, Bordelan felt stiff and sluggish, as if his muscles had become wooden. His eyes watched the road, gray pavement mottled with patches of black moisture, slipping smoothly beneath the front wheels, but in another part of his mind he looked at a series of pictures which ran on like a film.

He saw Bodie Talbot, a lanky youth, with bristly blond hair and sullen eyes, standing over him, daring him to get up and fight. There was a tiny, triangular scar on Bordelan's upper lip where, on that afternoon, Bodie had kicked him. He had hated and feared Bodie Talbot; yet curiously, all through high school days, the two had been companions. They had together explored the San Gregorio hills, and had shot doves on Mesa Verde, and had taken out girls in Bordelan's jalopy. In these ventures, Bodie had always made the plans, had always given the orders,

and Eddie Bordelan had followed them.

For almost as long as he could remember Bodie Talbot had, in some fashion, dominated him. He recalled the rather childish feeling of elation and relief when the Talbots had left the valley, and had moved to San Francisco. That had been nine years ago. During those nine years he was reminded of Bodie only once, when a San Francisco newspaper carried a small item concerning a Bodie Talbot who had been convicted of robbery and sentenced to eighteen months in San Quentin.

Then one day Bodie had suddenly reappeared in the valley. He was heavier now, and his face was lined and hard. There was no longer any sullenness in his eyes, only a vast, cold serenity.

The moving picture in Bordelan's mind ran on. He saw himself going to the house where Bodie lived with a married sister, saw himself knocking at the door, and Bodie waiting behind the door with a gun.

BY THE time Bordelan reached the service station, the mist had begun to dissipate, and thin, pallid sunshine was filtering through. A truck loaded with lettuce stood near the gas pump, and there were several other cars, and a dozen or so men crowding around the service station door. Bordelan recognized most of them, but as he got out of his car, none spoke. He was conscious they were watching him curiously. Deep in this awareness, he didn't notice the man who came around the end of the truck, and he jumped, startled, when the man hailed him. It was Ben Gurley.

"Hey, not nervous, are you?" Gurley laughed. He was a stocky man who looked a little fat, but actually was muscular and solid. He had a thick neck and heavy face and dark brown eyes.

Bordelan laughed too, but the laugh sounded weak and forced.

The crowd shuffled away from the doorway as Gurley and Bordelan went into the station. Ike Maroni, driver of the lettuce truck, was sitting on a stool near a high desk, and smoking a cigarette. From the desk, a portion of a shattered telephone hung by its cord, and fragments were scattered over the floor. With the phone smashed, Gurley had obviously found it necessary to send the Webber boy to call the sheriff.

Pederson lay face downward at the foot of the desk. In his shirt, below the left shoulderblade, was a hole that could have been made by a .38. The wound was not bleeding, but moments ago it had bled a great deal.

Maroni began talking.

"I saw the whole thing happen, Sheriff. In a way, I guess it was my fault. When I rolled in with the truck, Bodie must have been trying to pull off a stickup. When he heard me, he got panicky, I suppose, and commenced shooting. Looks like one of the slugs hit the phone, and the other got Pete. I didn't actually see that part of it, but a second later Bodie came running out. He had a gun in his hand—a nine millimeter, eight shot Luger. I noticed it especially, because I got one just like it—brought it back with me from overseas." The group outside the door crowded in close to hear his account. "Well, Bodie headed for his car there, but it was blocked by the truck, just the way it is now. So he hightailed it on foot."

"You're sure it was Talbot?" Bordelan asked.

"Sure! Don't you think I know Bodie Talbot when I see him? And that's his car out there, the one he always drives."

Bordelan nodded.

"He ran around back of the station," Maroni resumed, "and then cut across the field."

"Making for the hills," Gurley added, "That's pretty rugged country up there."

Not going to be easy to track him down. Looks like you've got quite a job ahead of you, Sheriff." Gurley's tanned face held a faint sardonic smile. "Don't suppose you'll be tackling it alone, will you?"

Bordelan didn't reply. He gazed out the windows across fields that merged into dark, softly contoured hills where pine trees grew. In the early morning, with the sun just beginning to burn up the mist, a faint blue aura seemed to surround the pines, and out of this aura thrust the first range of the San Gregorio mountains. A mysterious and violent land of erosion-scarred slopes and giant boulders, a bewildering criss-cross of ravines and deep canyons, their sides covered with thick tangles of *manzanita* and pines and scrub oak. A land of vast, quiet mesas, and grotesque, barren peaks, at times hidden by clouds or rain or swirls of golden dust and at others standing against the sweep of sky with sharp, startling clarity.

Somewhere up there Bodie Talbot would be waiting for him—and he would have to kill Talbot, or Talbot would kill him.

Gurley went on talking in confident, casual tones that conveyed thorough familiarity with the handling of the situation. "No, I guess you'll need some help, Ed. Better deputize me and some of the boys, and leave us run Talbot down." He took a cigar out of his pocket, and thrust it into his mouth. Around the cigar, his lips curled into a grin. "I suppose you'll be pretty busy with the D.A. and the coroner's office, takin' care of all the legal angles and so on. I was never much good at that part of it myself. But I still know how to round up a killer."

Bordelan continued to look out the window. He could feel the stare of the crowd on the back of his neck. Futile anger burned within him, anger at Gurley for making it so easy for him to dodge the whole unpleasant business. Gurley knew

well enough that, given the slightest opportunity, Bordelan would dodge it.

Something inside Bordelan kept yammering, *And why not? Go ahead and let Gurley do it. You'll never be elected again anyway. What difference what they say about you? Let Gurley have his posse.*

The silence lengthened. Gurley struck a match, and lighted his cigar. "Well, what about it, Sheriff?"

Bordelan turned from the window. "How large a posse?"

"Ten or fifteen men. It'll take that many to cover the ground. There's a lot of room up there. Talbot could be hiding out anywhere."

"My guess is he'll be at the old Ortega ranch," Bordelan said. "He'll get that far and stop. He'll pretty nearly have to stop. At this time of year, it's the only place there's any water. He'll take the fire trail to the top of the ridge, then cut down across Arroyo Seco, and pick up the road to the ranch. Surround the ranch house, or what's left of it, with a half dozen men, and you'll have him. I don't see why you need ten or fifteen."

Gurley shook his head. "I'm not making any guesses about where Talbot is. I'm taking enough men to comb the country and find him. Bodie Talbot gets out of prison on parole, and then kills a man. It's curtains for him now, and he knows it. Killing a few more men can't make it any worse. And he's pretty cute. Guess wrong about him and you won't have a chance to guess again. You'll be dead." Gurley went on as if the posse, and his heading it, had been definitely settled. He was already beginning to take charge and give orders. "I'll want fifteen men, and a couple of pack animals. We might be out for two or three days."

BORDELAN felt the resentment building up inside him. Gurley was making a big thing out of it, blowing it up large. He'd see that it did take

two or three days. There'd probably be reporters down from San Francisco. There'd be headlines—**BEN GURLEY LEADS MAN HUNT — GURLEY'S POSSE SCOURS HILLS FOR KILLER.**

A cheap trick. And Gurley was quite aware that Bordelan recognized it for a cheap trick, and didn't dare to do anything about it.

Maroni slid off the stool. "If you're all through with me, Ben, I ought to be rollin'. That truckload of lettuce is perishable."

Gurley waved a gracious gesture of dismissal. "Sure, Ike, go ahead. The D.A.'s office will want to talk to you later, but Bordelan will get in touch with you about that." His gaze followed the truck driver to the door. "But if any other of you men can spare a little time to help me bring in the murderer of Pete Pederson, now's the time to speak up."

Bordelan studied the faces in the doorway—the stupid faces filled with admiration for Gurley—the grinning, intelligent faces of those smart enough to realize how shrewdly Gurley had outmaneuvered him.

In spite of the yammering inside Bordelan, something went cold and taut. He said, "We'll wait a while before we get a posse together. I still think Talbot'll be hiding out at the Ortega ranch. As soon as I've finished here, I'll hike over there and have a look."

Gurley removed the cigar from his mouth, and blew out a cloud of smoke. "Oh, well, in that case, we'll hold off till we hear from you, Sheriff. You're right. It won't take more than one man just to look around."

Bordelan hadn't meant to go by himself. There were two deputies permanently attached to his office; he probably would have taken both of them with him. But now Gurley had jockeyed him into a spot where to locate Talbot at all he would have to set out alone. Somehow Gurley

had always known precisely what to say.

It was past noon before Bordelan got started. The sun had long since burned up the mist, and now from directly overhead seared the earth. As he trudged up the fire trail, a wide, bare, gravelly strip extending between patches of dry grass and aromatic chapparal, Bordelan's shirt showed dark splotches of sweat under the arms, and plastered itself against his back. His knees were beginning to ache with fatigue, and the back part of his mouth felt stiff and dry.

There would be another hour of climbing before he reached the ridge, a two hour hike through the arroyo before he reached the ranch. That would put him there around four o'clock.

Most of the return trip would have to be made after nightfall. Darkness would roll in swiftly, a black tide, swallowing the landscape, sucking up the tiny sounds of the day, leaving crouching, malignant silence. Silence and the night—and perhaps in the bunching shadows, among the rocks and ravines and tangle of brush, Bodie Talbot would be waiting, tensing, listening for the scrabble of footsteps along the trail.

Bordelan wondered abstractedly whether Talbot really would go as far as the ranch. As Gurley had said, there was plenty of room. Talbot could be hiding anywhere. Within the next quarter hour, this theory ceased to be abstract, and presented a concrete possibility.

The fire trail dipping into a little swale brought into view a shack used to house brushfire equipment. Seeing it, Bordelan stepped swiftly off the trail, and squatted in the brush. The shack was an obvious hiding place—a bit too obvious, Bordelan decided—the first place a searching party would investigate. Talbot would be too smart to stop there.

Yet the shack was not without strategic location. Standing in the far end of a small canyon, it could be reached only by

a narrow path, stemming off at right angles to the fire trail. An armed man, barricaded in the shack, could deal out plenty of trouble to a party advancing up the path.

Crouching in the brush, Bordelan studied the structure for a long time. Brilliant sunshine drenched the hillsides; but cupped in the end of the canyon, the shack stood in shadows. Bordelan could have bypassed the place. Yet if Talbot did happen to be hiding there, bypassing would leave him free to follow Bordelan if he chose. The thought of Talbot behind him, trailing him wraith-like until he got Bordelan in his gunsight, settled the matter.

Bordelan waited and watched. After a time, he moved ahead through the brush, paused, and watched again. He could see nothing in the dim end of the canyon that indicated movement. He stood up, and warily crossed the fire trail to the entrance of the canyon. He saw the shack more plainly now—the unpainted boards, dry and cracked by weather—the barn-type double doors. Suddenly his muscles tightened. The staple and padlock had been torn off, and one of the doors stood slightly ajar.

Bordelan reached for his revolver. It felt heavy and clumsy in his hand. He started along the length of the canyon. He didn't want to go up there, but he did, walking slowly, conscious of putting one foot ahead of the other. It seemed to

him he had been walking for a long time, yet he had covered only little more than half the distance. He paused again, listened, moved on, walking swiftly now. He was within twenty feet of the shack; nothing happened. He was at the door.

"Bodie! Bodie Talbot!"

The sound rebounded from the sides of the canyon. Then silence. If Bodie were in there, he would be crouching in a corner, taking cover behind pieces of equipment, difficult to see in the shadowy interior of the shack. He would fire as soon as Bordelan opened the door. In his imagination, Bordelan saw the flare and heard the crash of the guns, Talbot's first, then his own.

Slowly Bordelan put out his left hand, and hooked his fingers around the edge of the door that stood slightly ajar. In his grasp, the door moved a little on creaking hinges. With a swift, sweeping motion, he swung it swiftly open, leaped back.

The shack was empty, not even containing fire-fighting equipment. Apparently the staple and padlock had been removed when the equipment had been taken away. Bordelan went weak with relief. But he had guessed correctly. Talbot wasn't there.

THE fire trail ended at the top of the ridge. Below stretched the arroyo, desolate, dusty and dry, and across the distance, somewhere in the yellow haze of mid-afternoon, was the Ortega

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ranch. For a moment, loneliness and nostalgia converged upon Bordelan. For a moment, he was a boy again, hiking across the arroyo with the other kids, bent upon reaching the ranch and getting back home by suppertime.

There swept upon him the memory of a warm spring afternoon, and the inviting shade of the cottonwood trees around the old ranch house, and the cool water drawn up from the well. Now he was all alone, and hunting a man who had been one of the youngsters he'd hiked with, lacking the courage to do it yet doing it somehow, and knowing that before all this was finished the man would murder him.

Again anger coursed through him, and he silently lashed out at the circumstances that had placed him in this situation, that had made him what he was, and Bodie Talbot what he was. The anger ran out of him, and left only the thought of the cool water, spilling over the rim of the bucket and falling back into the depth of the well with silvery, tinkling sound. He made his way down the rocky hillside to the arroyo.

It lay between two ridges, a great, pallid expanse of coarse sand, serrated by gullies torn in the earth by some ancient flood, studded with huge boulders, the bare and gleaming bones of a land long dead. A desiccated mummy, dreaming beyond time, deep in eternity. There was no sound. No movement. The dry, stifling air hung heavy and motionless. The sun bore down malevolently. Sand and expanding loneliness, and heat that lay over Bordelan's face like a huge, smothering hand.

He moved slowly, partly because of the punishing heat, partly because he sought some indications of Talbot's passing—a footprint or two, a depression in the sand where Talbot might have sat down to rest in the shade of a rock. There were none. There was nothing to signify that

in this wasteland there had ever existed a living thing.

Bordelan kept walking, shuffling with heavy feet in the sand, lulled by the rhythm of his motion, his mind blank. Time drifted by. Then, suddenly, a doubt assailed him. Suppose Talbot hadn't gone to the ranch where, as Bordelan himself had immediately realized, he could easily be surrounded by a small number of men? Talbot might have taken refuge in a gully, or in a crevice between the rocks, with a good chance of a posse passing him by. Talbot might, for that matter, even now be flat on some ledge, waiting for Bordelan to advance within pistol range.

The thought struck with impact, and Bordelan spun quickly around, scanning the terrain. He saw nothing that he had not seen before, except that the sun, swollen and red, had swung farther to the west. It was later than he had thought. He had wasted too much time investigating the shack. He walked on. Ahead, an outcropping of rock, thrusting upward against the hot, pale blue sky, commanded his attention. In the glare of the sun, the rock's outlines were liquid and sinuous.

Bordelan's gaze did not leave it. Closer now, he observed the outcropping was really two rocks, set closely together at the base, but with a V-shaped valley between the tops. From this valley, as Bordelan watched, there drifted a trickle of white sand. Something between the rocks had moved.

Bordelan stopped abruptly, his nerves crisping. His hand whipped toward his holster, fumbled awkwardly, held the butt of his revolver. The explosion of his shot ripped a hole in the silence which flowed back smoothly to fill it. Another trickle of sand glided from between the rocks, spiraled for a distance, and slowly settled. A faint puff of air brushed Bordelan's face. The first, tentative stirring of a breeze that always ran through the arroyo at sunset.

Bordelan had forgotten about that breeze. It had been the wind that had stirred the sand, nothing more. But Bodie Talbot, if he were at the ranch, would have heard the shot. Bordelan had obligingly signaled in advance of his coming.

What a fool! What a complete idiot!

He had two enemies now—Bodie Talbot and time. In a very little while the sun would drop behind the ridge, and shadows would slide into the arroyo. He had to get to the ranch before dark. Impelled by this necessity, he started to run, racing against the approaching darkness, racing to meet a bullet that would snuff out his life, perhaps even before he'd heard the report of Talbot's gun.

The running tired him, but eased the surging sickness in his stomach. Eventually he came to faint markings on the ground, all that was left of the old road. There he stopped, and stood sucking in gulps of air, conscious of the swift thumping of his heart and the heaviness in his legs. He went along the road slowly. Beyond the ridge the day was beginning to die in a welter of blood, but he had reached the end of his journey. The ranch house was just ahead.

It squatted on a rise at the end of the arroyo. Low and oblong, it seemed to have grown up out of the earth, grown and decayed, its sod roof sagging in, its thick mud walls returning to the source. Desolation lay over the place. Tall grass ran up to the open doorway, now the entrance to a dark cavern. The narrow windows were black slits. The silence was complete.

The air seemed cooler above the grass, and as Bordelan moved through it, its lush, rank, evening smell filled his nostrils. Out of the shadows that filled the house, a voice spoke to him.

"That you, Eddie?" The voice was calm, a little arrogant.

Bordelan stopped, stood quite still, his

hand resting on the butt of his revolver. In a moment, he said, "Yes."

Suddenly, Talbot stood in the doorway. He wore a khaki shirt and jeans. His face was dirty, his hair mussed, somehow giving him a boyish appearance. Across a distance, the two men looked at each other. Bodie smiled a little as he said, "I didn't think you'd come, Eddie."

Then he made a swift motion, and Bordelan saw the Luger in his hand, and heard the explosion. A white hot needle jabbed into Bordelan's left arm just beneath his shoulder. Force spun him around. He slid sideways into the tall grass. Above his head, the air exploded again, and he heard the thin whine of a ricochet.

HE ROLLED in the grass, came up on his knees, holding his revolver. He steadied himself. The revolver jumped in his hand, and flame cracked against the dark background of the grass. From the doorway, Talbot melted into the sooty blackness of the house.

From inside of the house Talbot's Luger sounded thunderously, and a bullet zinged through the grass.

Bordelan dropped to his hands and knees. The instant he put the weight of his body on his left arm, agony, scalding and bitter, gushed through his shoulder and across his back. He went down flat on his face, and lay there till the first shock of pain subsided. It left him weak and trembling.

He tried hitching himself along on his belly. This was better. As long as he remained deeply concealed in the grass, Talbot would have no target to fire at, but only motion. Yet it would take Bordelan, advancing by inches, a long time to reach the doorway.

The grass, close to his eyes, hid the house; but by twisting his head he could see the sky, a deeper blue now, with

gashes of crimson. Bordelan squirmed on, half resting on his right side, pushing with his legs. The evening breeze riffled the grass. That was good. The movement of the breeze through the grass would absorb and conceal his own movements. Squirming along by inches. By fractions of inches. His shoulder throbbing, but not hurting too much, except when a jolt set off fiery, pain-filled sparks. Pausing to rest. Easing himself along again. Gently. Gently. Surely he would soon be within a dash of the house. Surely, by now. Ever so cautiously, he raised himself to his knees, and looked.

He had come only a little way. The house still stood at a distance, and Talbot was again visible in the doorway. The Luger rapped out three shots, fast, running together into a kind of rhythm.

Bordelan threw himself forward, unconsciously flinging out his left arm, and falling upon it. Pain ignited a flash of flame that consumed him. His muscles melted. The revolver slid out of his grasp. He cried out, and clawed about for the weapon, trying to peer through the stalks of grass. But darkness beat frantically, crazily, at the grass around him. He made no contact with the revolver. It was gone—hidden—lost to him. His revolver was gone. The thought grew into widening significance, like ripples from a pebble dropped into calm water.

This, then, was the end of it. This was the finish, the swift erasure, of all the things he had felt and seen and heard and experienced. This was the moment before the final curtain. In one gigantically congealing instant, it would all be concluded.

Yet now, under the stratas of pain and fatigue that clouded his mind, Bordelan remembered something. Ike Maroni had said the Luger held eight shots. How many shots had Talbot fired? How many were left? Bordelan tried to remember. The shot that had killed Pederson. The

shot that had drilled his own shoulder. The second shot from the doorway. Another from inside the house.

That was four. Four—and then these last three. Something that seemed apart from Bordelan added them up. Seven shots in all. If Ike Maroni had been right about the eight shots, there remained only one more shell in the Luger.

One more shot, and if Talbot missed with that one—if Talbot could be made to fire quickly, haphazardly. . . . And now it was almost dark, not easy to shoot accurately. Bordelan stood up. He shouted, "Bodie!"

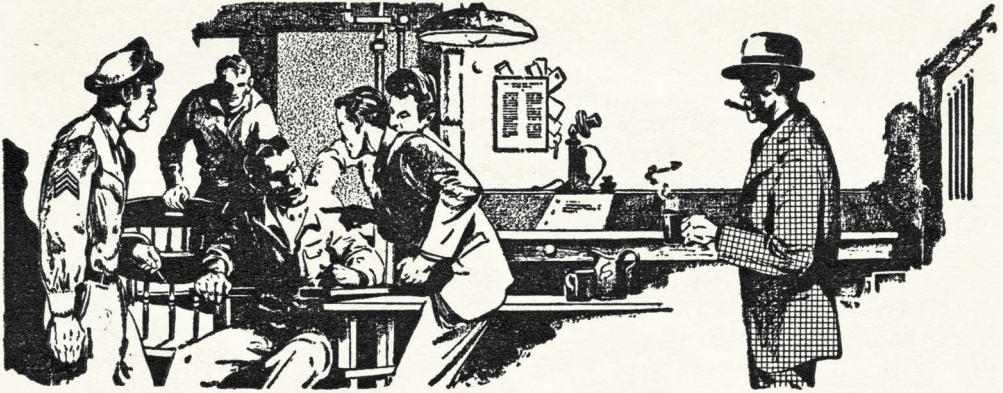
Talbot held the automatic in close to his waist. He swung the muzzle to cover Bordelan, but he did not pressure the trigger. Both men stood very still. Over the scene lay a hush, the deep hush of impending fulfillment that precedes a thunder-storm.

Bordelan's ruse had failed. He had guessed wrong. Now, so close to the end, he wanted it over. Desperately he wanted it over. He began walking toward Talbot, walking not fast but with measured strides, the grass whipping against his legs. Walking, and looking straight ahead. He was within a yard of Talbot before Talbot squeezed the trigger to fire point blank.

The firing pin clucked dully. There was no explosion.

Bordelan took one more step, and with all the strength left in him smashed Talbot hard where the line of his jaw met the lobe of his ear. The Luger slipped from Talbot's fingers. A little sigh issued from his lips as he sagged wearily to the ground.

Bordelan bent over him, and clumsily, using only his right hand, slipped handcuffs on Talbot's wrists. Then he picked up the Luger, and managed to remove the magazine. It was empty. He'd forgotten—and so had Talbot—the shot that had shattered Pete Pederson's telephone.



THE THIRD DEGREE

By Hallack McCord

(Answers on page 85)

HOW'S your "Detective I. Q." holding up these days? Top notch? Then test yourself on the following twenty questions. If you can answer eighteen or more of them without a hitch, then you're definitely in the supersleuth class. Answer sixteen or seventeen, and you're still good. But answer fourteen or fewer, and well, better luck next time!

1. If a crook acquaintance, currently in jail, sent you after some "fall dough," which of the following would you return with? Tools for breaking jail? Money for lawyers and bail? Homemade bread?

2. If the chief of detectives told you he was going to "dig up a gopher," would you think he might be going out to capture a safe robber?

3. True or false? In the language of the underworld, a "gum mob" is a gang of crooks.

4. In convict terminology, what is a "hoosier"?

5. If a crook acquaintance told you he was planning to "rob a jay," which one of the following should you get in touch with? The police? The humane society? The coroner?

6. True or false? Shoe prints made while walking seldom are exactly the same size as the shoes which made them.

7. How can the scientific detective determine from tire tracks the direction in which an auto was moving?

8. True or false? Hair samples are often taken from a corpse involved in a homicide—before it is buried.

9. What is a "lig robber"?

10. If the chief of police sent you out for a "locust," which of the following items would

you return with? An insect? A sawed-off shotgun? A policeman's club?

11. True or false? In the language of the underworld, a "moll buzzer" is a pickpocket who specializes in robbing women.

12. If a convict told you the "man" was coming, who would you expect to see?

13. What is the meaning of the underworld slang expression, "on the legit"?

14. What is the meaning of the prison expression, "politician"?

15. True or false? The term "racket," meaning unlawful occupation, has been developed in the last 25 years.

16. True or false? Cocaine may be taken by sniffing it up the nostrils.

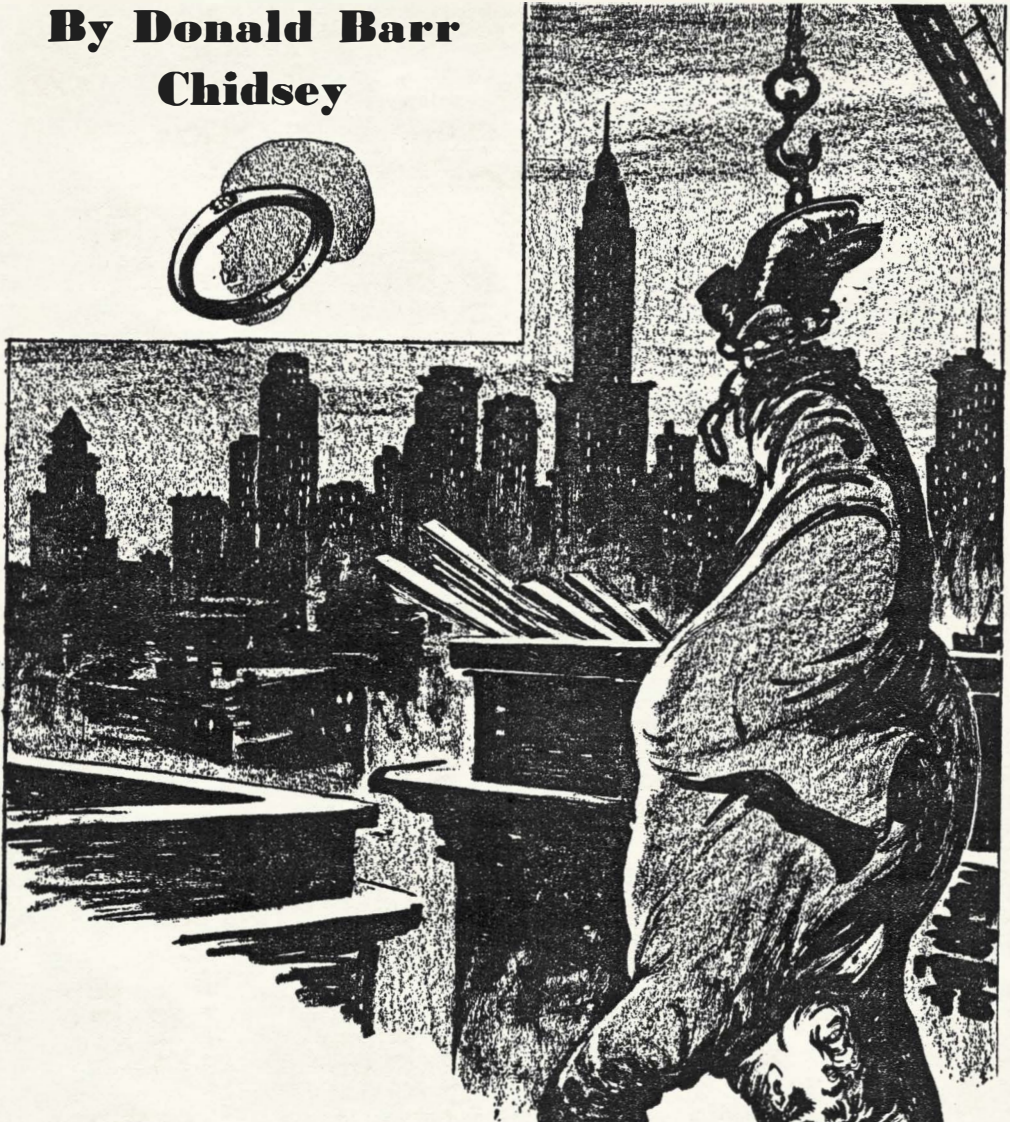
17. True or false? "Bhang" is a term used in reference to the liquid form of hashish.

18. True or false? The bromide addict is generally typified by his happy, carefree nature and ability for clear thinking.

19. In the slang of the crook, the term "ranked" means: Disarmed? Discovered? Dismal? Dis-
traught?

20. If a crook acquaintance told you he was seeking a "righty," which of the following would you feel he was looking for? A revolver? A set of brass knuckles? A disguise?

By Donald Barr Chidsey

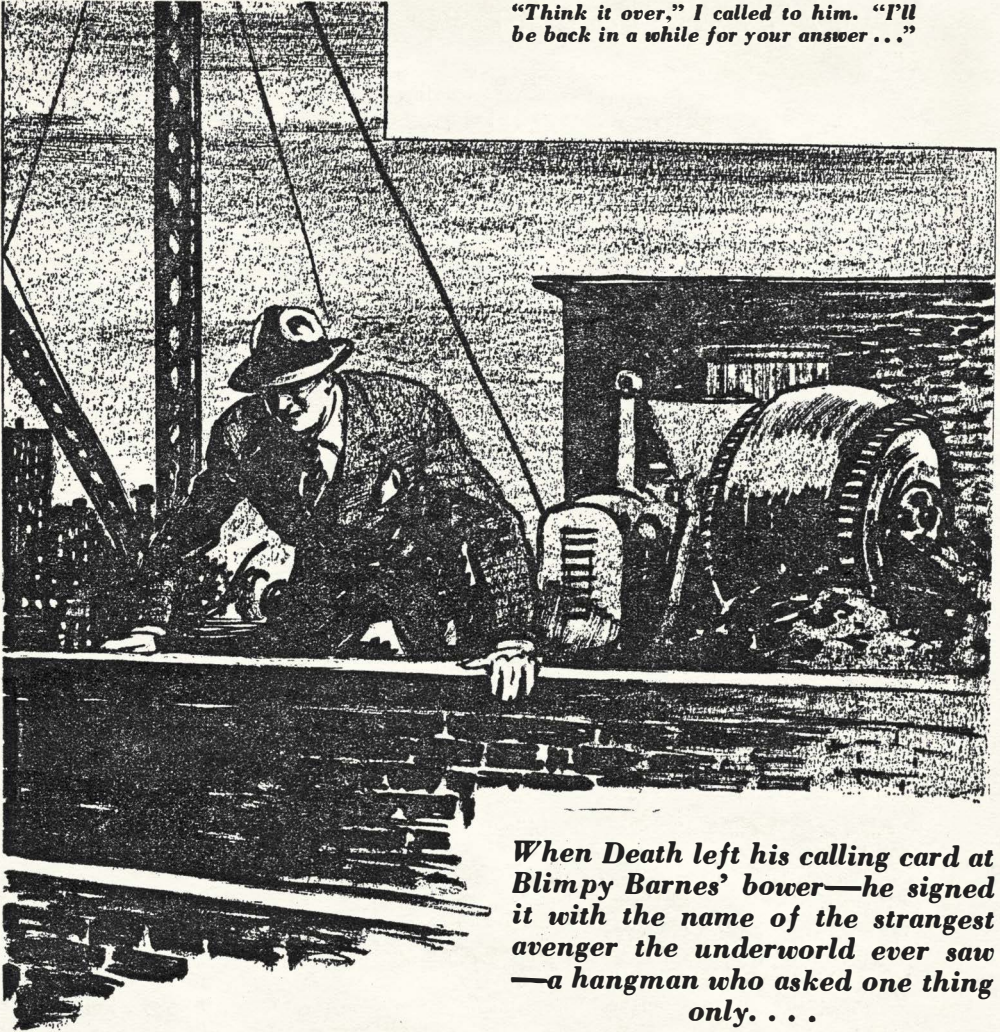


CHAPTER ONE

Mrs. Creighton's Bangle

THE first one I disposed of with a straight right to the jaw followed immediately by a straight left to the same place. But two others were upon me promptly, and at this instant the barman vaulted over the bar with something in his hand—a bungstarter, perhaps, or it could have been a truncheon—and I didn't know whether he meant to attack me or my as-

"Think it over," I called to him. "I'll be back in a while for your answer . . ."



When Death left his calling card at Blimpy Barnes' bower—he signed it with the name of the strangest avenger the underworld ever saw—a hangman who asked one thing only. . . .

SAVE ME A KILL

sailants. I retreated, and the two miscreants pursued me, but that gave me a chance to get at them one by one. Fortunately I was able to put them on the floor before the barman arrived. The fourth member of the group escaped.

It was a disgraceful scene, and I was thoroughly ashamed of my share in it. In no way was I surprised next morning when Emerson L. Whitts, a senior partner of

Bateman, Coffey, Whitts, Ellison, Ellison and Young, called me to his office.

"First of all, Kiernan," he said, and harrumphed, "I want to ask for your resignation."

It hurt. I sat gasping like a fish out of water. Mr. Whitts harrumphed again and shifted some papers.

"That, uh, somewhat unfortunate tussle at Simpson's—"

"I couldn't help that, sir! Truly! I was set upon!"

"So I understand. And by four men, three of them professional, uh, thugs. It must have been an, uh, interesting conflict in many ways, Kiernan. I am given to understand that when the police arrived only one of those ruffians was still, uh, perpendicular."

"I had no choice, sir!"

"Still, there seemed no reason to pursue the fourth robber for two blocks. Yes, yes. Impulsiveness, Kiernan. Impulsiveness."

I started to expostulate, but he raised a hand.

"You misinterpret me, Kiernan. The incident was unfortunate but not disgraceful. And it is because of it that I am asking for your resignation—because, bluntly, I have an assignment which might well call for all your proved battling skill."

He shifted some more papers. For an instant I almost thought I saw something like a smile touching the corners of his mouth.

"I'll not deny that there may be a certain amount of, uh, physical peril in this assignment, Kiernan." He sighed. "It could be that its execution will call upon you to do some slightly unorthodox things. All this, you comprehend, is to be strictly confidential. The name of Bateman, Coffey must not enter into the proceedings in any way. This is why I'm questioning your resignation first. I sincerely hope that we shall have no occasion to accept it—to disavow you."

He harrumphed again, and tilted his head. Abruptly he asked me if I knew Mrs. Hattie Russell Ross. Of course I did. Everybody knew her—or knew of her. Even in Boston she was regarded as somewhat eccentric. A widow who looked as if she'd never die, she was not fabulously wealthy. Her fortune amounted to perhaps a million dollars; but it was carefully invested, and Mrs. Ross had an acute awareness of every single share of it and

an alert conviction that she would be cheated if she didn't fight pauselessly in its defense. She was connected with many of the best families, and when she cracked a whip, things simply had to happen. She was very fond of cracking whips.

But what had "battling" to do with Mrs. Ross? Surely Mr. Whitts did not expect me to pummel her? There were doubtless many who would have enjoyed that, but it would hardly be proper in an employee of Bateman, Coffey. I waited.

"Mrs. Ross lives in a large house on Beacon Street. That house was broken into last night by burglars. It could hardly have been what the police term an, uh, inside job. There is evidence that the intruder prowled for a considerable period of time, searching. He or they at last came upon and stole Mrs. Ross' personal jewelry, which she was in the habit of keeping in an old cigar box on the floor under the dining room sideboard. All the servants knew and had known for years of this secret hiding place. The jewelry is probably not worth more than ten thousand dollars. Mrs. Ross has directed Bateman, Coffey, Whitts, Ellison, Ellison and Young to get it back for her. This is now your mission."

"Oh," I said and swallowed. "Is that all?"

"No," said Mr. Whitts. "The most important part is that there must be no publicity of any sort whatever. You understand, of course, that Bateman, Coffey would not customarily have anything to do with such a search. But Mrs. Ross is—well, different. You will not, however, approach her personally. Nor will you go to the police. The robbery has been reported, of course. That was unavoidable. But every precaution is being taken that no account of it shall appear in the papers. Furthermore, the jewelry was not insured, so there will be no private detectives. You will have a clear field, Kiernan."

"Yes," I said. "I can see that."

"Moreover, you are being supplied with an important, if somewhat, uh, improper, bargaining asset. Here is a list of the stolen articles, with descriptions and estimates. Note the third item from the bottom. It is a small, simple gold ring—and it means more to Mrs. Ross than all the rest of the loot put together. Indeed, she has instructed me to say that she will take that one ring back with no questions asked. In other words, if she gets that ring she will pursue the matter no further."

I examined the list. The item in question was described as a woman's fourteen-carat gold ring containing a small table-cut flawed diamond. Value, less than one hundred dollars. Inside the ring in Gothic capitals was stamped: *Hattie, to whom my heart yearns. E. W.*

It was hard to remember that there must **once** have been a husband. Now it appeared that there had even been a somebody else. I swallowed.

Mr. Whitts rose hastily, not looking at me.

"Very well, Kiernan. You are strictly on your own now. Good luck. And if you get into any trouble, uh, don't come to us."

I WALKED over to the Common and sat on a bench, wiped my glasses and tried to think this thing out. I knew nothing whatever about the underworld. Mr. Whitts had mentioned my boxing ability. At college, obliged by an exceptionally heavy schedule to confine myself to one sport, I had elected the art of self-defense, for which it immediately developed I had a genuine talent, being indeed what our instructor, one "Skeets" Mulligan, called a "natural". This was gratifying, so far as it went; but what in the world did my dexterity with six-ounce gloves have to do with the recovery of Mrs. Hattie Russell Ross's love token from long ago?

It appeared to me that the first requisite was a total change in my point of view—

that is, I was called upon to regard things as they were regarded by the less fortunate portion of mankind. With this in mind, for more than an hour I accosted sundry human male derelicts of the sort one finds on the Common, endeavoring to strike up a conversation and establish a perhaps helpful intimacy. I was in every case either rebuffed or solicited for funds. It was discouraging.

Night came. Pondering, I reflected that since I sought to determine the whereabouts of a piece of stolen jewelry, I might steal a piece myself and see what happened. Such a theft might land me in the presence of somebody who could enlighten me. Or, of course, in jail.

It came to me that Simpson's would be a good place to begin. I had been there only once, on the occasion of the fracas with the ruffianly young men. Needless to say, I had been there on business. Simpson's is not a place you would care to be seen in. At least, not if you worked for the law firm of Bateman, Coffey, etc. It was—well, flashy. Nevertheless I went there.

It proved a fortunate thought. At the bar was a Mrs. Creighton, who, like Hattie Russell Ross, was a widow and rich, though she was not like Mrs. Ross in any other respect. I had once met Mrs. Creighton, though briefly and in circumstances I preferred to forget. I would not have dreamed of renewing the acquaintance, ordinarily. However, she was not in any condition to remember me.

Mrs. Creighton—I might as well be outspoken here—Mrs. Creighton was intoxicated.

Simpson's being what it is, this fact in itself was not enough to attract attention to her. She was not unaccompanied. A slender oily young man in a dinner coat attended her, indeed fawned upon her. What did make her conspicuous was the oversized bangle which clanked against the lesser bracelets. It was encrusted with diamonds, and whenever she swung her left

arm, illustrating a point, the stones caught and threw back the light in a thousand tiny dancing specks.

I had no sooner decided that at all costs I must endeavor to steal that diamond bangle, when Mrs. Creighton suddenly prepared to depart. Leaving my ale scarcely half finished, I hastened to the door after her. She stood swaying, tapping a foot, impatiently waiting for her escort, who stood by my side at the hat check counter. I got my hat before he got his, and immediately went to Mrs. Creighton.

"Sure I remember you," she said. "Name's Wood. Hyah, Woodie!"

I didn't correct her. I took her left arm. Outside, her chauffeur and a doorman all but pounced upon us, and immediately afterward her escort emerged, fuming.

That escort, the slim oily fellow, made remarks that were in the worst possible taste, yet, wholly by chance, they helped to serve my purpose. If it hadn't been for the scene he created, Mrs. Creighton, despite her condition, might have noticed that she no longer wore that spectacular diamond bangle.

"Tryin' to horn in on something, huh? Listen, would you like me to hang one on your chin?"

There was a mighty temptation to strike the slim young man, but I resisted this. Both the chauffeur and the doorman were in an equally protective frame of mind, so that one blow might have precipitated a mêlée. In such a mêlée, however short-lived, I could hardly hope to keep my hat on. And Mrs. Creighton's diamond bangle was by this time in my hat, which I'd placed on my head.

"He's all right, Squirty," Mrs. Creighton said. "Friend of mine named Woods. Meet Woody, Squirty."

"I'll meet him with a flock of knuckles across the kisser," asserted Squirty. "Get the hell out of here," he shouted additionally.

He took a step toward me. I muttered

something, and turned and shuffled away.

"And don't come back either, Reginald," Squirty called, though of course my name isn't Reginald at all but Joseph.

* * *

In the morning, glancing over my *Herald*, I ate an excellent breakfast. For one who had just embarked upon a criminal career I was not only at ease but downright smug. In my pocket was a bauble stolen from a well-known if not admirable woman, the loss of which was sure to be widely publicized. With it, it seemed certain, I could determine what was done with such objects.

So I was humming, and mightily pleased with myself, when I strolled through sunlight to the Common.

I had elected to return to my original scheme of learning about the underworld by questioning members of that world, though this morning I was equipped with something calculated to point up the reason for my interest. Selecting adult male vagrants at large, I furtively displayed Mrs. Creighton's bangle, whispering, "See here, I wonder if you could tell me what I should do with this?"

The first, a man who I fear was under the influence of alcohol, mumbled something incoherent and swayed toward the glitter as though hypnotized.

The second took one look and scurried away like a rabbit.

Nonplussed, I yet persisted indefatigably.

The third man, long and lugubrious, smelled of boiling cabbage. His eyebrows leapt when he saw the gaud.

"That's some shim!" He leaned closer. His breath was most obnoxious. "I know a piece of Injun ice when I lamp it, bub. Hot, huh?"

Through incredible negligence, I had failed to consult a dictionary of underworld cant before sallying forth. However, the

general meaning of his questioning was clear, and I nodded.

His own nod was portentous, his whisper confidential.

"What're you going to do with it?"

There might have been a modicum of asperity in my answer.

"Well, I don't plan to stand here holding it all day!"

He nodded again, unoffended.

"I catch on. Stranger, eh? Funny, I thought you was a Bostonian. You sure talk like one. Picked up the lingo fast, huh?"

It was so disconcerting, and distressing, to be mistaken for a resident of any other city than Boston that for a moment I scarcely heard what he said. It was something about following him.

"Don't go in till I come out and give you the high sign."

He rapped my chest with one of the dirtiest forefingers it has ever been my misfortune to behold.

"This ain't no Blimpy Baynes, like they got in New York, y'unnerstan? But they oughta be able to uncle yuh okay, see?"

"Quite. Well, uh, lead on."

He did, and I must say it made me feel singularly silly following him up one street and down another. He repeatedly turned to grimace and make beckoning gestures, and it was a wonder that his grotesque antics did not attract attention.

I shall not give the address at which he

finally arrived. Suffice it to say that the house was a notably unexciting one.

My guide stayed indoors for an unconscionable while. Yet when at last he emerged, he was grinning.

"It'll all jake," he reported. "Sashay yourself right in, bub."

A tiny beady-eyed man received me in a dim room, while in the doorway stood the hulking, sulking youth who had admitted me. The youth glared at the back of my neck.

The beady-eyed man strove to be affable, but he was nervous and showed it.

"You got something to sell?"

I drew from under my coat Mrs. Creighton's bit of bijouterie, and the effect was astounding. The beady-eyed man fairly jumped into the air. He backed to a wall, cringing there, as though I had aimed a weapon at him. The hulking youth started blaspheming.

"You get out of here with that thing," screeched the little man. "I wouldn't touch that if I was Blimpy Baynes himself! Izzy, let him out!"

Izzy opened the street door for me, but his belligerence was gone. He no longer glared. He stepped back from me when I went out, as though he was afraid I would brush against him.

"You take that to Moe Lester," the little man screamed as I went out, and he gave me an address. "He might be tough enough to touch it. I certainly ain't!"


AMAZING THING! *By Cooper*

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MY LONG lugubrious guide had gone, so I found my way alone to Mr. Lester's unprepossessing establishment. It might have been the same place I had just left, and Mr. Lester might have been the same man, though his behavior was even more vehement.

"Get out! Get out with that thing! Get away from here!"

He did consent to give me the name and address of another merchant who might be interested, and also, on my request, he gave me the New York address of the Blimpy Baynes I had been hearing so much about. I think he would have given me anything I asked, he was so eager to be rid of me.

At the third place the arrangement was identical. Again I was greeted, by a small middle-aged man with greasy hair, while behind me in a hall doorway stood a stupid, stolid, suspicious young man.

This time, however, the greeter did not cast me forth. When I produced Mrs. Creighton's bangle he took it with trembling hands, and examined it. He nodded solemnly, and handed it back. It was clear that he was shaken. He swallowed several times.

"I think we can do business," he said at last. "I will make you an offer. You couldn't get better nowhere than what I'll offer you. But I have to make an important phone call first."

I bowed in assent, and he scuttled out. There was a sibilant whisper from the back of the house. I was left alone.

There being nothing else to do, and surely nothing to look at, I moved my chair closer to the light, and took the *Herald* from my pocket and began to read it again.

It was then that I saw about the Creighton holdup.

And I realized for the first time that I was in what I have heard called a bad spot. A very bad spot indeed.

If you demand to know why I had not noticed this story at breakfast I can only retort that it has never been my custom to hang upon news of sordid crime. I scan

those items occasionally, but seldom read, being interested rather in less reprehensible matter.

Now I sat up. I was no longer bored.

The Creighton car had been stopped about ten minutes after it drew away from Simpson's, in a dark street, by three masked men. Mrs. Creighton had been knocked unconscious, and when she recovered, it was to find that she had been stripped of her jewelry.

Sanders T. ("Squirty") Harris, her companion, twenty-four years old, no occupation, of the Hotel Shelbourne, had departed at full speed from the scene. He was later to explain that he had gone in search of aid, in spite of the great risk he ran, for he said that the holdup men fired repeatedly after him. However, the police declared that there was no evidence that any shots had been fired except the two fired at the chauffeur, one Joseph F. X. Cassidy.

Cassidy had put up a fight and been killed.

The police were looking for a stocky, clean-shaven, sandy-haired man of about twenty-five, who wore steel-rimmed spectacles, was of middle height, spoke in a low educated voice, and wore unobtrusive brown tweeds. He had unquestionably fingered the Creighton party, the police said, by forcing his acquaintance upon Mrs. Creighton when she emerged from Simpson's, until chased away by Sanders T. Harris.

"He was just the kind of guy would do a job like that," Mr. Harris had told reporters. "Yellow as a canary."

There was a list of the stolen articles, with special emphasis on a certain diamond bangle, which was described in detail.

You can perceive how all this filled me with dismay. I thrust the paper into my pocket and went to the door through which the proprietor had passed. I could hear his voice, low, urgent.

"Yes, yes, right here now! *Sh-sh!* Yes, Luther'll keep him here. But don't take any chances. Surround the place. . . . And don't

forget me when it comes to divvyin' up the reward."

I passed back into the hall. There was a chain latch on the street door. I had reached for that when an arm came over my shoulder, a hand closed over my hand.

"Going somewhere?" asked Luther.

He was an exceptionally big lout. He looked at me with an expression of gloating greediness, and actually smiled in a horrid way.

"I thought I'd go out," I said, taking my hand back.

"Aw, don't do that," he said. "Stick around awhile."

Now, I had been trained never to strike a man unless he was on guard and fully prepared for a bit of sparring, nor would I in usual circumstances have done so. But this Luther was another matter. I must forget sport, with him. So I punched him in the jaw.

He was very heavy, and must have been solidly stanced. Or maybe it was that his reflexes were slow. At any rate, I had to hit him twice more before he went down.

I then let myself out, closing the door quietly, and went back to the Common. Three police cars passed me on the way.

Yet even the Common was no longer for me. The first person I noticed on my return was that little man to whom I had showed the bangle, the second one. He was walking about in a very self-conscious way, studying every well-dressed man he saw. Behind him, their hands in their pockets, strolled two lumbering men who were acting elaborately casual.

CHAPTER TWO

Rough Stuff

I HAD read that the police habitually watch railway stations, airports, and bus terminals, so I proceeded as far as Providence by a series of small local buses. At Providence I got on the railway. It was

almost eleven o'clock when I reached New York, and fully midnight when I arrived before Blimpay Baynes' celebrated place.

It would be hard to say what I expected, but scarcely not what I found. I must withhold the address, but it may be of interest to those unfamiliar with the metropolis to learn what I learned from a booklet purchased at the Providence station—that New York City, or at any rate, Manhattan Island, is divided into three general parts: downtown, uptown, and midtown, or, roughly, business, apartments, and theaters. The section I sought, which appears to have no particular name, is between downtown and midtown. By day it might be bustling enough, but at night I found it positively sepulchral.

I was unable to refrain from reflecting, as I surveyed the bleak prospect, that at least nobody of my acquaintance was likely to see me there.

The building I faced outdid in ordinariness the other three receivers' dens. Situated in the middle of a block, it was indistinguishable from its fellows on both sides of this drab, dull street. They were loft buildings, wholesale mercantile houses. There were no show windows, no hint of light. Not even a cat prowled in that lonely block. There was a far, impersonal mumble of traffic, but no immediate sound. When a sheet of newspaper, lifted by a whimsical breeze, skittered along the middle of the street, rustling and flapping, the noise was positively thunderous. It made me start, ducking my head.

My right hand, gripping the diamond bangle in my pocket, was wet and sticky with sweat. As soon as I was able to do so, I would post it to the police. Meanwhile I needed it as proof, as it were, of my depravity. It would serve as my membership card, my credentials in the land of the Blimpay Bayneses.

I drew a deep breath and went to the door. It was a wooden door, heavy, impassive. No light shone around it. I tried

the handle. It would not turn. I sought in vain for a bell.

"Looking for something, buddy?"

I fairly whirled around. A man had issued from a doorway across the street, a thin man to whom I took an instant dislike.

"I'm here on business," I said coldly.

"Monkey business?"

I did not deign to answer. The man was cocksure, leering.

"Who is it you want to see?"

"A Mr. Baynes."

"You don't say! Well, Blimpy gets some pretty queer callers, but he likes to have me look 'em over first. Turn around."

Now I had already decided to be more bold and forceful with this fourth receiver, this fabled Blimpy Baynes. When in Rome— I was, in short, fixed in my determination to get tough. And it seemed a good plan to start with this fellow.

I don't think that he sensed my resolve. I think it was by mere chance that he took his hands from his pockets at this moment.

"I said turn around!"

In his left hand was a small brass key, in his right an exceedingly large black automatic pistol.

I turned, furious. He started putting his hands on me here and there, patting my pockets. I didn't like that. I have never liked to have people touch me, and especially people I despise. Indeed I was rendered so angry by this behavior that I held myself rigid, trembling in my effort to control myself. I felt the blood pounding in my temples, and little greasy blobs of sweat sprang out all over my body.

"Oh-oh! What have we here?"

"A geegaw," I said icily.

"I'll say! Shucks, them's real rocks!"

He was silent a moment. Then: "Say, that's from the Boston job last night. You move fast, buddy. You can turn around now. Here."

I replaced Mrs. Creighton's bangle in my pocket. The change in his tone, in his whole manner, was amazing. He was actu-

ally looking up to me in admiration now— now that he had learned, as he supposed, that I was in league with the hoodlums who had clubbed a middle-aged woman into unconsciousness and cold-bloodedly murdered the man who tried to protect her. That, of course, made me a personage.

"Still, you don't just walk in on Blimpy. I'll go too."

"I should prefer to go alone."

"Sorry. No can do. Here, open that door."

He handed me the key. For all his newfound respect, he kept that pistol pointed. I tried the key in the keyhole and pretended that it wouldn't work. I leaned over, shaking my head.

"There's something stuck in there."

He was a fool. He leaned over. Almost instantly he started to straighten, but it was too late. The pistol had been out of line for a split second, and I hit him with a right cross followed rapidly by a left hook. His knees gave. I am ashamed to say that I punched him once again as he was collapsing. I was really very angry.

Well, I had the key, and it opened the door. What was inside I could not tell, for the darkness there was pitchy.

I didn't stand there long. I backed away, bumping into the man from across the street. What to do with him? Well, he'd come from a doorway over there. Perhaps it would be only politeness to replace him? There was no one in sight, so I seized the man by his collar and dragged him across and dumped him back into the doorway from which he had issued.

"Tit for tat," I muttered as I searched his pockets.

I had already confiscated the gun—less because I wanted it than because I didn't fancy the thought of him recovering and going after me with it. The only object of interest I found was a small flashlight. I took this back to Blimpy Baynes' building, and went through that ominous doorway.

I stood motionless.

At first there was no sound of any sort, not even the distant bumble of traffic.

Then there was a sound right in front of me, from a place perhaps fifteen or twenty feet away. When I heard it the hairs on my head stood erect.

It was a high, small giggling.

It was not a woman's giggle but a man's.

Some time passed before I could find the courage to move. When I did move it was toward the sound. My heart beating like a triphammer, I crept along a wall my hands had found.

The sly giggling went on, intermittently.

It seemed to stay in one place, and by following the wall I was getting nearer to it.

At last when I could stand the tension no longer, I lugged out the automatic pistol, got down on one knee, and holding the flashlight at arm's length, snapped it on.

DIRECTLY in front of me, at the end of a large bare hall, were four freight elevators, three of them empty, while in the fourth a lank old man sat asprawl in a chair. His eyes were closed, and he was in the relaxed condition of a sleeper, yet he was talking to himself and giggling. He seemed to be having a jolly good time in that dream of his. My light didn't disturb him a bit.

The man had a long white scar on his right cheek. He was untidily dressed. There was no odor of liquor, but in a saucer on the floor near his chair were four cigarette butts. I sniffed one of these. It didn't smell like an everyday cigarette, but was much more acrid.

The man seemed harmless, if slightly imbecilic. But when I stepped behind him I saw a large revolver sticking out of his hip pocket.

I removed this revolver gently.

Using the flash only when I had to, and even then muffling its glare with my handkerchief, I went exploring. The hall extended the depth of the building. There were three doors on each side, all locked. I

found the door to the fire stairs, and went up to the second floor.

This hall was at right angles to the downstairs one, and parallel with the street. It was completely inside, that is, there were no windows. There were eight doors, all locked.

The third floor, and the fourth and fifth, were exactly the same as the second.

From time to time I would stop, holding my breath, and listen—I never heard anything.

I never saw a glint of light but that from the flash.

I had reached the landing of the sixth floor when I froze in my tracks. I had heard something downstairs.

It was a muffled calling. Then somebody opened a door, and started up the fire stairs. Whoever it was, he was muttering angrily and striking matches as he came.

A light would flare feebly, lower in the stair well, and then go out; and then another would flare, and go out. Each was higher than the previous one.

When it became evident that the man was going to climb at least as high as where I was, I slipped out into the sixth floor hall and flattened myself against the wall next to the door.

When he entered, if he entered, he could see me by simply turning his head; but I had to take that chance.

He did enter. This was his floor. He pushed the door open angrily, muttering, cursing, lighting still another match.

I only glimpsed the newcomer in the light of that match, which was whuffed out almost instantly by the closing of the door.

What I saw, briefly, was a large man with a bulldog-like face, a tremendously undershot jaw, very heavy eyebrows and a mouth open in a snarl.

Then the match went out, and, still walking, he struck another. I saw only his back this time, while I held my breath. He did not turn. Holding the match high, he strode down the hall to the third door on

the left. There was a light coming from under this door. The man knocked three times, then once, then three times. After a moment the door was opened.

"That nitwit elevator operator of yours has been hitting the reefers again, Blimpy. Door's unlocked down there, and nobody around."

I crept forward, on hands and knees, my chin almost scraping the floor, and peered into the office. Bulldog had his back to me. Facing him, and me, behind a desk, was a large man with many jowls, a man bellied like a Buddha, hairless, immense, a doleful expression in his reddish pig's eyes. His absurdly childish knob of a nose and pouting Cupid's-bow lips were much too small for the rest of his face. He was appallingly pale, his skin looking like whipped cream—soft like that too, and unstable, as if you could have poked holes into it with your finger.

This was my first sight of Blimpy Baynes.

"Don't know what the trouble is." He had a deep, rumbling, rasping voice with bumps in it. "Keating's out, but he'll be back any minute. Where the hell's Ellis?"

"Not a sign of him down there."

"Go take a look, won't you? I can't leave now. He ought to be in that doorway across the street. If that guy's gone to sleep—"

Bulldog cursed, and turned, and I got away from there.

I might have flattened myself against the wall in the hope that he would pass me as he'd done before, but that seemed like asking too much of Lady Luck. I could have hurried downstairs and out, but there were six flights and he probably would have heard me.

So I went up.

I heard him clumping and clattering down the stairs, a swirl of curses in his wake. I heard the last door slam.

I put my handkerchief over my flash again and explored the seventh floor. It

was exactly the same as all of the others.

There was not much to be said for the roof. It was bigger than I had expected it to be, and though this was a cloudy night, it was bright up there after the utter darkness below. Other similar roofs extended on each side, and there was a sort of court in back. The only thing that distinguished the roof I stood on from the others was that there was some sort of construction job in progress. There were piles of rectangular building blocks, a concrete mixer, sand. A penthouse? The base for a projected water tank? I wondered idly.

I examined a small, strong-looking steel crane which jutted out over the back parapet, over the court. Assumedly this was used to hoist building blocks to the roof. The power was off, but I found that the arm could be swung by means of a detachable hand crank.

I spent much time examining this crane, perhaps four or five minutes, thinking wildly that it might be useful as a means of escape, if I were trapped on the roof. I soon gave up this idea. Jumping to an adjoining roof would be simpler.

Besides, I had no thought of escape anyway. Not yet.

I WENT down to the sixth floor, to the third door on the left. This would be the back of the building, facing the court.

I rapped three times, then once, then three times again.

The door was opened.

"Hello, Mr. Baynes. May I come in?"

He was anything but stupid. When I had glimpsed him previously, I formed the impression of a beefwit. He's been wrinkling his brows, aghast at what Bulldog-face had just reported, and this had lent him the air of a ponderous baffled baby. It was a mistake. Blimpy Baynes was nobody's fool. There was wiliness in those eyes, craft and cruelty in those Cupid's-bow lips.

"Oh," he said, and stepped back, permitting me to enter.

Leaving the door open, he made for the desk. He seemed to float there. I do not mean that he was graceful, but he did not puff or wheeze, he didn't quiver, he moved easily. When he seated himself, it was all in one motion and without a sound. In that same motion, as carelessly as though he were picking up a pad of matches, he scooped an automatic pistol from an opened drawer and placed this on the desk.

"Now," he said silkily, "who in hell are you?"

The walls and floor were bare, and despite the enormous desk and the enormous man behind it, the room showed singularly empty. Three tall windows in the back were covered by thick steel mesh screens set in heavy steel frames; they might have been penitentiary windows. On my right were a few large green metal filing cases, looking new. On the left, unexpectedly, was a door on which was painted *Men*. There was no other article of furniture excepting the office chair Baynes sat in and a rickety kitchen chair. I sat on the kitchen chair.

I told him who I was.

"I'm from Boston," I added.

"No?" he cried, and I resented his voice. "Nobody would ever have guessed it. And what is it you want, Mr. Kiernan?"

I started to reach under my coat, and he said "Easy!" and dropped a hand on the automatic. I drew out Mrs. Creighton's bangle.

"Oh, yes," he said, scarcely glancing at it. "Boston, of course. It didn't take you long to get here."

I shrugged.

"There was a little matter of murder involved in that job. Were you one of the marksmen, Mr. Kiernan?"

I didn't answer, and Baynes nodded. He paid no further attention to the bangle.

"That's all you have?"

"That's all I have—now."

He grunted. Folds of fat hung over his eyes, and he seemed asleep as he sat there. Suddenly, with his left hand, he opened a drawer and lifted out a package of money. This he spun across the desk, so that it came to rest within a couple of feet of me. There was a brown paper wrapping around it, and on that was written, in red ink, \$1,000. I did not reach for it.

"Ridiculous," I murmured.

He scooped the package up and returned it to the drawer.

"The thing's hot, remember. I couldn't keep it around here. It'd have to go into the deep freeze for a long time. However—good night, Mr. Kiernan."

I did not stir.

"I used to believe," I said with maybe some bitterness, "that there was honor among thieves."

"That's all right," comfortably. "Matter of fact, you probably used to believe in Santa Claus too, didn't you? And the Easter rabbit?"

I shifted.

"There is another, uh, job, as you put it, that took place in Boston a few days ago. I'm more interested in that," I said.

"Oh?"

From memory I recited the list of articles stolen from Mrs. Hattie Russell Ross. Blimpy Baynes nodded.

"Oh, yes. Came in only a few hours ago. They're in a cigar box."

"You get a lot here," I observed politely.

"We get practically everything."

"That plain gold ring I mentioned—it has *Hattie, to whom my heart yearns. E.W.* stamped inside it."

"Has it really? How interesting."

"I would like to have it—the ring."

"How much are you prepared to pay?"

"Frankly, nothing. I was under the impression that a man of your position would scarcely haggle over an item of minor importance."

"You were under a wrong impression, then."

"After all, Mr. Baynes, it is merely a matter of sentiment."

"Which notoriously, Mr. Kiernan, does not mix with business."

I lost patience. I slapped my hands against the sides of the chair and started to rise. Blimpy Baynes said sleepily, "No, don't smash him, George."

I looked up. Looming over me was Bulldog face, who had entered without a sound. He was gripping a five-inch piece of steel pipe.

"He's just a little excited, that's all," said Blimpy.

He heaved himself to his feet and drifted over to the door marked *Men* and opened this, revealing a closet almost entirely filled by a big, square, old-fashioned safe. He stooped.

"We never keep stuff here long. But this just came in."

He handed me a small gold ring. It was certainly not the sort of thing you'd associate with an old battle-axe like Hattie Russell Ross. I wondered again who the "E.W." of long ago was.

"What's the word?" Baynes asked George Bulldog.

"I don't get it! The elevator guy'll be all right soon—though I don't trust him. But I can't understand what happened to Joey Ellis. He was in that doorway, sitting down, moaning, holding his head."

"What's he doing now?"

"Walking up and down out there, keeping his eye on the door like he's supposed to, and trying to figure out what happened. Maybe something accidentally fell off a roof onto him?"

Baynes frowned.

"I don't like this. And Keating out buying cigarettes—" He picked up the telephone and called a number in a voice too low for me to catch it.

"Hello, I want to speak to Mr. Havelet."

He waited for some time to get Mr. Havelet, and his manner toward that personage was one of the greatest respect. He

complained that he needed more guards, and said that something funny was going on tonight. Oh, no, he didn't think it was important enough to justify Mr. Havelet himself coming down! Just a couple of the boys. Thank you very much. Good night, sir.

The phone back in its cradle, he became the former Blimpy Baynes again, arrogant, assured. He nodded at the ring.

"You can have it for a thousand dollars, Mr. Kiernan."

"Nonsense! It isn't worth fifty!"

Baynes shrugged.

"Besides, I don't happen to have any money with me."

"You have something I just offered you one grand for."

For a whimsical moment I was intrigued by the thought of using Mrs. Creighton's property to recover Hattie Russel Ross' love token. But that would have been dishonest.

"No," I said.

Baynes shrugged again, and took the ring. He put it back into the cigar box, and replaced this in the safe.

"Mr. Kiernan is leaving, George. Better go clear to the street with him. And check with Ellis while you're down there. See if he's figured out what happened to him. And incidentally, tell him to keep his eye peeled for a couple of boys from Mr. Havelet's. Good night, Mr. Kiernan. Sorry we couldn't do business."

"I'll be right back," growled George. "Come on, you."

We left the door ajar.

CHAPTER THREE

Get Out of Town

GEORGE appeared now to dislike me. I'm sure I don't know why. I brought out Ellis' flashlight, and with this we easily found the stairs. Watching me closely, he motioned for me to pass

through first. I did, and when I heard him step through, and heard the door swinging shut, I whirled on my heel and flashed the light into his eyes. At the same time I struck him on the point of the chin with my right fist. It was an extremely hard blow, for I'd been prepared for it, and, as the expression is, had virtually "brought it up from the floor." I caught George under the armpits as he started to fall. He was very heavy. I half dragged, half carried him up to the seventh floor.

I had to work fast. Keating, whoever he was, was coming. Two men from the office of Mr. Havelet, whoever he was, were coming.

And there might be others.

I took a large flat automatic from George Bulldog, as well as the piece of pipe. As before, it was not that I wanted these weapons, but only that I disliked leaving them behind.

I went directly back to Baynes' office and walked in.

"I tell you, George," he said without looking up, "there's something funny about that kid you just walked out with."

"There is," I agreed, "and what's more, it's loaded."

His head went up and his eyes bugged out when he saw the gun.

"Mr. Keirnan," slowly, "is this by any chance a stickup?"

"Mr. Baynes, it is. Now you go get me that ring."

He shook his head, flapping innumerable chins and jowls.

"It's locked up. I can't open that safe."

"You did just a little while ago."

He gave me a look that was all venom, but did not budge. I raised the revolver, drew back the hammer with my thumb until it clicked into cock. Still he didn't move.

"The combination."

"Go to hell."

He was looking at me right over the barrel, and it must have taken a great deal

of courage. It must have taken training too, and judgment. He knew that I was not a killer. He knew I wasn't likely to lose my head. I was bluffing, and he called my bluff.

Besides, what good would he be to me dead?

It was no time to stand around looking foolish. Time was all on Blimpy Baynes' side. I tossed the revolver on the desk, and followed it with a couple of automatics.

"All right," I said. Put your fists up."

He rose promptly, even eagerly, smiling. I closed right away.

This massy man proved hard to hit—at least, to hit squarely and well, tellingly. For all his size, he was quick, and he was a master at rolling his head to punches. He was no hooker and never swung an uppercut, but boxed in the classical manner, straight from the shoulder, not even using a cross or an old-fashioned roundhouse. His fists were big, nor were they by any means as soft as they looked. I waxed careless, and caught one on the left cheekbone. It spun me half around and caused me to stumble backward. Blimpy Baynes came right after me.

Oh, in time I could have beaten him. But time was something I didn't have much of.

I ducked and hooked in, slugging low for the belly. From a technical point of view it was a deplorable performance. If any boxing instructor at Harvard had seen me he would have been shocked. But it worked. Blimpy Baynes could not, as the expression goes, "take it" in the middle. He went "oo-oof!" several times, and sat down.

I hit him twice in the jaw as he sat there, which wasn't very nice to do. I don't think he even knew it. He was dazed.

That receiver must have weighed close to three hundred pounds, and I don't know to this day how I ever managed to get him up on the roof, but somehow I did. Once or twice he grunted, but I think that this was involuntary. I don't think he was truly conscious at that time.

He was stirring by the time I had dragged him across the roof to the low parapet where the crane was, and when I started to fasten the chain about his ankles, he sat up suddenly.

"What are you doing to me?"

"You'll see."

With that I pushed him over the parapet. He gave a chopped-off scream. Then the chain caught, and he swung. He was suspended just a few feet from the parapet. His face red, his eyes popping, he flapped his arms wildly, trying to reach the edge.

There is no denying that he looked ridiculous, twisting and flapping out there, upside down, like a trussed fowl.

"The combination," I called to him, coaxingly.

"Go—to—hell!"

He tried to hitch himself up so that he could grab the chain that bound his ankles, but he couldn't reach that far. He swung back and forth, hoping to get close enough to the parapet to grab it, but I turned the crank a little and lowered him a foot or two. Once only he looked down. He was quiet for a moment then, but soon began to struggle again.

"The combination," I called.

He answered only by calling me something I don't care to repeat. I felt sorry for him, but I needed that ring.

"Think it over," I called. "I'll be back after a while."

WHILE the thought of inflicting torture upon anybody was repugnant to my nature, I figured that it wouldn't do Baynes any harm to hang there a while longer. I scampered below.

It was as well that I did. On the seventh floor I met George Bulldog, partly recovered, wandering aimlessly, shaking his head. In a little while he might have got enough of his senses back to summon aid. I knocked him out again. Then I went down to the office.

I went to the closet and tried the safe

door. It was locked. I stood staring somberly at it. Somebody knocked.

My caller was an exceedingly small man, verily a midget. He wore flashy clothes, and had a shrewd sharp face.

"Who the hell are you? Where's Blimpy?"

"He's hung up right now. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Just wanted to know if there's any boxes he wanted me to open. Sometimes they bring in the whole business, and Blimpy likes to have a good job done, so's he can use the box again afterward."

"Boxes?"

"Sure. I'm a box opener. Like that one over there." He pointed to the closet. "Only you don't need to work on one like that. You just whistle, and they fly open."

"Oh," I said. "Well, suppose you do that, will you? The fact is, Blimpy did want that opened. There's something in there he wants."

"He knows the combination."

"He must have forgotten it. He's kind of up in the air right now. You really think you can open it?"

"Like opening a pack of cigarettes." He unbuttoned the top of his shirt and scooped out a piece of twine which had looped his neck. There was fastened to this, like a lavalier, a small red rubber ball. He twirled the thing. "Won't need the soup on a job like this," he said.

"Soup?"

"Sure, soup. I don't use it much anyway, unless it's a hell of a tough box or I happen to be in a hurry."

"You mean, uh, you mean that's—nitroglycerine?"

"Check. I carry it all the time. Safest place. Around my neck. If I had it near my hips somebody might bump into me."

The little man twirled the ball.

"But what if you should trip and fall?" I asked.

"Here? Why, it'd take the whole top two or three stories off the building."

He eyed the ball affectionately, and placed it on the desk.

"Well, let's see this box of yours. Shouldn't take long. But if anybody comes, shut the door on me. I happen to be a very hot guy right now."

"I'll attend to it," I promised.

There was a knock on the door. The little man pulled the closet door shut on himself. He wouldn't be able to work, that way. There was barely room for him to stand up.

I let in a young woman. She was angry. She was fairly attractive, in a vulgar way.

"Where's Blimpy?"

"Higher up," I answered mysteriously. "He's a bit upset."

"The louse is never around when you want him. I got some glassware. Can you make me an offer?"

She opened her handbag and tossed out eight dazzling diamonds.

"I'm afraid I'm not authorized to make such a purchase," I said cautiously. "Perhaps if you were to come back in an hour—"

"And go walking around with all that stuff, when I might get picked up? Blow your nose, kid, your head needs cleaning out. Leave 'em. Tell Blimpy it was Sarah. He'll know."

She talked, as she moved, in jerks. She certainly wasn't drunk, but there was something the matter with her. Perhaps, like the elevator operator, she smoked marijuana.

"All right," she said. "You tell him Sarah was here. And tell him I want a decent offer this time. Damn his fat hide!"

For emphasis she lifted her handbag and slammed it down on the desk. It struck not one inch from the little red ball.

She stamped out, and I collapsed into a chair.

The little man came out of the closet.

"What's the matter? You look as if you'd seen a ghost."

I mopped my face. My hand trembling, I pointed to the ball.

"I—I'd appreciate it if you took that thing out of here."

"Okay. Lot of people feel that way about soup." He fastened the thing around his neck, tucked it under his shirt. "No accounting for tastes. Now I wouldn't feel comfortable unless it was here."

He started for the door.

"Aren't you going to open the safe?"

"It is open. I told you it was like a pack of cigarettes."

He went. I rose, when at last I felt sure of my legs, and found the Ross cigar box easily enough. I took only the ring.

Then I decided to go straight out of that building. Seconds might count now. I could tell the elevator operator about Baynes.

In a couple of strides I had reached the door. I opened it—but I didn't step out. There was a man there.

"Oh, hello," I mumbled.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked.

He came in, eyeing me. He closed the door. He was young and large, and had wide shoulders, big hands.

"You must be Keating. Did you get your cigarettes?"

"Where's Blimpy?"

"Up on the roof. Getting a little air."

"Up on the—getting—say, what is this anyway? What are you driving at?"

"You," I answered, and punched him in the body with my left fist, immediately afterward stepping in with a right uppercut. He went down as though he'd been hit with a sledge-hammer.

I would have left him lying there, being intent only on escape now, but at this moment there were three knocks on the door, then one, then three again.

That was my only way out, that door.

I PICKED up Keating, taking care to remove a pistol from his pocket, and carried him to the closet. I stood him up there, and closed the door on him. Then I went to the hall door.

What entered was a small, neat, exact, somewhat fussy man. He wore a well-brushed derby, and in fact everything about him was well brushed and well fastened down. He wore rimless glasses, with a thin gold chain going from one end of them and looped over an ear.

This man smiled at me—no, positively beamed. He might have been a Sunday School superintendent in some small suburban town.

"Good evening," he said. "I'm Mr. Havelet."

He was the only person I had encountered this night who hadn't demanded to know who in hell I was, and out of sheer gratitude I told him, all unasked.

"Ah, yes," he said, bobbing. "From Boston, eh?"

"Well, yes," I said, wondering how he knew.

He looked around. There was something birdlike about the way he did this. He wasn't missing much, if anything.

"And where is Baynes?"

"He, uh, he's devoting himself to higher things right now."

He glanced at me, and there was a wry, dry glitter in his eyes, but his mouth and the rest of his face went right on smiling.

"Perhaps we had better have a little talk first anyway, Mr. Kiernan, before we summon Blimpy Baynes. Frankly, I'm afraid of you."

Now you may be wondering why I had not dashed out, as a moment earlier I had been purposing to do. Well, one reason was because the newcomer, for all the insignificance of his appearance, had something compelling about him. I watched him, fascinated, the way you might be fascinated by a beautiful, deadly snake.

A second and more important reason was that Mr. Havelet had not come alone. There were at least four men behind him. They were not large threatening men, like Keating, like Bulldog-face. They were lean, compact, quiet. They looked as if they

knew their business. They watched every move I made.

"Afraid of me?" I cried. "Why, surely not that, sir?"

"Oh, yes. Something is wrong here."

A disheveled young man whose appearance was somehow familiar pushed into the office. He stabbed a finger at me.

"There's the guy! That's him!"

Now I remembered him. It was the man outside, the one I'd left in the doorway across the street.

"This gentleman, uh, assaulted you, Ellis? Alone?"

"No, there was three or four of 'em. The other guys held me while this guy slugged me."

Here was a shameless lie, but I saw no profit in denying it.

"In the circumstances, Mr. Kiernan," Mr. Havelet said, still smiling, "you can scarcely blame me for asking a couple of my friends to examine your pockets. I mean, before we continue our talk."

"Certainly not, sir. However, I may as well tell you that I never carry a pistol."

Two came at me warily, keeping out of my reach until they were behind me, and then crouching as they reached toward my person. I'm bound to say they were very decent about it, not at all rough, though they were thorough.

"Never carry a pistol, huh?" one muttered, and tossed the elevator operator's revolver to the desk. "And what's this?" He drew forth Bulldog-face's piece of pipe and automatic.

"Never carry a pistol, huh?" said the other one, and he lifted from my pockets the automatics I had taken from Keating and from Ellis. "What d'ye call these things—pogguns?"

The first one found Mrs. Creighton's bangle, and he whistled. I saw from Mr. Havelet's face that he knew where it came from.

"You, uh, you did not by any chance get this from Baynes?"

"No," I said. "I brought it here. Mr. Baynes and I were not able to come to a satisfactory agreement in regard to the price."

"I see," said Mr. Havelet. He looked at the closet door: "All the same, you wouldn't be offended, surely, if I asked some of my friends to check the contents of the safe in there?"

I bowed. Mr. Havelet nodded to the two men who had just searched me, and they opened the closet door.

Keating tumbled out, full length.

"Oh, dear," said Mr. Havelet. "What is this, now?"

One of the men knelt, felt Keating's heart, turned him over.

"He's alive and not a mark, but he's out like a light. It must have been a terrific belt on the button."

They all looked at me, and I looked at the ceiling. The truth is, I couldn't think what to say.

Mr. Havelet examined the contents of the safe. After a while he said, "All there except one small ring, and we won't worry about that." He had consulted no list, only his memory. He asked about the diamonds on the desk, and I said carelessly that Sarah had left them.

He nodded.

"Now," he said, "I don't know quite what to do. I wish you'd tell us how many men you have with you, Mr. Kiernan."

I didn't say anything.

"I don't want to have you, uh, removed," he went on earnestly. "I would much rather just send you back. But I wonder whether I dare. Let's see Baynes and ask him. Where is he?"

"I'll lead you to him."

They were afraid of me all right. They simply could not believe that anybody would have the audacity—or in this case the stupidity—to enter a place like this alone. They scented a trap.

As we started up to the seventh floor a weird prolonged moaning filled the air.

I guessed what it was, but the others couldn't, and their flashlights wobbled. Yet they went right along after me.

When we pushed into the top floor hall

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we saw that the moans, as I had deduced, came from George Bulldog-face, who was seated on the floor, rocking, his hands against his head.

"You know this man, George? Ever see him before?"

I must have hit the poor fellow harder than I'd intended, for he seemed half out of his mind. When he saw me, he shrieked.

"Oh, no, no! Don't let him get me! Not him!"

He tried to run away. Somebody took him downstairs. We could hear his re-treating sobs. It had been a trying experience all around. We were shaken.

It was the same when on the roof we came to Blimpy Baynes. He still struggled, but more feebly now. He moaned.

"I'll give it to you, Kiernan! I'll give it to you!"

At least, this is what I made it out to be. I don't think that anybody else understood it, they were so awestruck.

"It's all right," I cooed as I cranked him in. "I don't need it now anyway. Sorry I had to be so severe with you."

* * *

Mr. Havelet and I talked it over later, in his own office. He still believed that I had confederates.

"Your methods, frankly, are too much for me, Mr. Kiernan. I admire you, but I don't want to deal with you." He leaned closer. "Now, if I should send you back, would you promise never to work in New York again?"

"I would be very glad to make such a promise."

He rose with a sigh. "Thank goodness for that," he whispered.

Four of them escorted me to Grand Central Station, and they stood around while I bought my ticket, and they bought tickets too. My escorts were quiet and respectful, attracting no attention. But they protested vehemently when I bought only a day coach ticket.

"How 'bout a parlor chair? We can't sleep anyway, but at least we want to be comfortable."

"You're really going all the way with me?"

"Orders."

But I shook my head. I explained that I was working on an expense account.

"Here," and they bought me one.

They were gentlemanly and even sedate on the trip, playing a card game. At Back Bay Station they gravely bade me *adieu*. We all shook hands..

AFTER that Mr. Whitts thanked me and he hinted that it was possible that I might soon receive a slight raise. He approved my expense account too, after scrutinizing every item.

The little gold ring with *Hattie, to whom my heart yearns. E. W.* on it, reposed on his desk, but he appeared to pay it no attention.

"Very well, Kiernan. You will be re-assigned tomorrow."

"Nothing involving fisticuffs, I hope?"

He almost smiled.

"It will not involve fisticuffs," he promised.

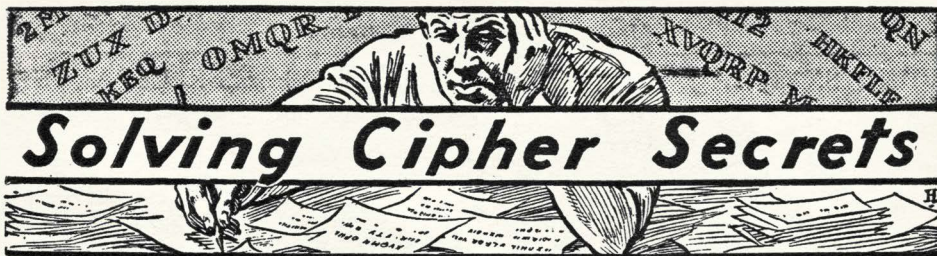
I had left, when I remembered something about the expense account I had neglected to explain, and I started back, not knocking.

Mr. Whitts was telephoning.

"Mrs. Ross's residence . . . Is Mrs. Ross—Oh, Hattie? This is, uh, Emerson—Yes—Yes, I have it. . . . Our ring . . . yes."

Emerson L. Whitts, as I may have mentioned, is an eminently respectable family man, a Harvard trustee, a deacon of his church. Fortunately he had not seen or heard me. I stepped out again.

It may seem incredible, but I verily believe that I had caught a glint of tears in Mr. Whitts' eyes. I am perfectly sure that there were tears in my own—a circumstance which, if fantastic, nevertheless is demonstrably indisputable.



Founded in 1924

Article No. 856

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. 5391—Poisonous Potion. By Bill Thomas. Beginners, start with Z and ZPP as "a" and "all." Continue then with TZPPFH (-all-) and FH as "gallon" and "on."

FHO-SZPU FDHXO FU LSO VOZVPK ZPRZPFAV GNDXAHO,
GALLONOYL YDGYLZH XO RHF BH FH OZNL S, BAPP NOHVON
GALLON ZPP LSO BZLON AH Z LSF DÝZHV-TZPPFH BOPP.

No. 5392—Hottest Spot. By Vulcan. Guess short words ODU, ODHO, and HO. Also note HP, phrase HPR SJ, and ending -J, checking with OUP. Next, 6th, 7th, 8th, and 9th words; etc.

UPUGVB FGTRKYUR HO ODU JKP'J YUPOUG UHYD JUYTPR
UAYUURJ ODHO TI OUP XSEESTP HOTZ XTZXJ, HPR SJ
XUESUNUR OT XU VUPUGHOUR XB HP HOTZSY-UPUGVB
FGTYUJJ ODHO YTPNUGOJ DBRGTVUP SPOT DUESKZ.

No. 5393—Famous Last Words. By °Sc. D. Contrary to all grammatical rules, here's a sentence with seven final prepositions! ROUR, HOUR, and RA for entry. Also E and LELT'R.

*RAGGS, EBB INDRUEKD, HOYT GAROYK JYZUT KYULETZ
RA OEG, PKYRRYL: "HOUR LEL SAI JKETZ ROUR JAAW E
LELT'R HUTR RA JY KYUL RA PKAG AIR AP AT IN PAK?"

No. 5394—The Falun Mines. By Scorpio. Compare FXEV with phrase EVABHUV EVP. Then complete EAPPD and USBAXBHD, checking with SXUVE and UAPF.

"ONLLSXXU SXUVE DVBKP EVABHUV EVP ZXKP DVNTE. FNSSD
UAPF GARDENS GSPNA. QPFPSD, DEAPNZXKU FXEV TXAP,

VHKU SXYP TAHXED, JHOD, NKO JSBDDDBZD HCBK USBAXBHD
ZPENSSXG EAPPD."—*VBTTZNKK.

No. 5395—Stretchy Stuff. By °Jaybee. Note affixes DY- and -DYF in 18th word. Follow up with phrases DS EOT and DT OY. Substitute in HAOTSDL, and fill in.

LOXRSLEXRL DT OY HAOTSDL TRNTSOYLH ZOKH GUXZ SEH
CRDLH XG LHUSODY SUXVDLOA VAOYST. DS EOT ZOYP RTHT,
DYLARKDYF ZOB DYF GONU DLT QOSHUVUXXG.

No. 5396—United Front. By Alma L. Roy. Attack through prefix RK-, and suffixes -RKO and -V. Next in line, VUKVU. Thus to *VSTSU and OUKS; and so on.

ZYXVU, *VSTSU *JTRX SZYXYPONXUL UKSXTKS, NRSUV
TLHRXRKO NGVSTKLUX. RKQPXUL OUKS TFFXYTEZUV YDKUX,
EYHFBTRKV. YDKUX'V ETKR KU TOXUUV DRSZ UAPR KU, TBVY
NRSUV HTK! LYOOUL ZYXVU VUKVU.

No. 5397—Flesh Preferred. By Jack Ketch. Note 3-letter connective EAT in connection with affixes FA- and -FAV. Proceed with EAFLESH and HLESS.

EAFLES-UENFAV ZSEANH, HKATUDH, ZFN RXUO ZSEANH,
PKNNUODYONH, FAXEPFN DENUOG ZSERUH, TELZ XUENXH,
PYVH, LEOHXUH, NOEZ EAT RYAHKLU HLESS PFOTH, NYETH,
LFRU, SFBEOTH, HFLFSEO EAFLESH, FAHURNH.

No. 5398—Expectant Triumph. By †Florence Mack. How many fans can guess ZTA-X'-LCTBZNF, noting apostrophe, hyphens? This will unlock first six words.

ZTFVR ZNFATQTBZ ZNBVL ZFRLZ; ZTPNL ZFXWLLNTW; ZTA-X'-
LCTBZNF, ZTJJNZT ZTKTFV, ZXHTD ZTFETZTB ZWBG I, ZYNNV
ZFWBPL. ZFTMNEGBQ ZNBVNFJXXZ.

No. 5399—Technical Terms. By Maj. Tenace. Identify symbol G by high-frequency and heavy use in last two positions, and symbol K by finality and ending -GK. Next, AEHOGO-VHKKHZG.

ATDGNUVGUF AEHOGO-VHKKHZG DTLXYEZXNQ. TRRHLHXZ
SXVSPZGF, JETFGK BTNOK ZHCG: YZHS, KJEHY, YENYZG,
NXFNXLG, OTBUBXKP, PXUARHNG, ZGXCXULG, DXNKHFTN.

No. 5400—Fourth Century Justice. By H. L. Kruger. Spot your own clues, cryptofans, in this final cipher. Asterisks prefixed to cipher groups indicate capitalization.

NKXPRKU ARKNOUD: XBOAFPU HUNGRY, XSNPKRY AFCKR
BACK TFCBKY; ZROOD FPAARY CARK, HUBVVRY MPUS XCFK;
FNERKCBH SCTH UBFKRY OCCHR, YRECBFPKT TFPNK NOHC
HSFPRGPKT EPXUPL'H OPEPKT RKUFNPOH.

ZADIG'S No. X-5402 presents an exciting problem in which an entire message has been converted into numbers by the same process used in many cryptographic systems for deriving a numerical key from a keyword or keyphrase. The 123 letters of this 21-word message have been numbered serially from one up, taking letters in alphabetical order from "a" to "z," and each letter of the alphabet from the start of the message to the last. For example, the short phrase NUMERICAL CIPHER would thus become 11-15-10-4-13-7-2-1-9 3-8-12-6-5-14, letter "a" being 1, "c" left to right being 2 and 3; etc. In solving, two numbers in sequence may be tried as a doubled letter, as 110-111 in the 4th word; groups having common differences might signify the same word, as 2-63-17 and 4-64-18; short words and affixes may offer comparison, as 44-66 and prefix 45-67; and so on.

H E T) M W L I A (E S T
 L M I
 H T T I
 I I B M
 E L A
 E I S
 I M

ANSWERS FOR LAST ISSUE

5379—Human blood once tempered Damascus steel! Accounts reveal tempering a sword to redness by plunging it through the body of a living slave.

5380—Confronted with a sudden danger, a child will turn instinctively for assistance, a puppy will grovel in abject submission, and a kitten will brace its tiny body for frantic resistance.

5381—Red communique: Have foe on run (chasing us) along entire line. Will form new position when they drop from exhaustion. Same tactics until we completely rout(e) enemy over to our side.

5382—Bees are attracted to flowers primarily by their odor. But if flowers of different colors smell alike, bees will choose the yellow ones.

5383—Fort San Lorenzo, Canal Zone, built in Fifteen-Seventy-Five, later taken by Sir Henry Morgan, British buccaneer, is said to be the oldest fort under the American flag.

5384—Sign-painter upon scaffold, irked by critical remarks of bystander, overturns bucket, spilling entire contents into upturned face of tormentor!

5385—Aspiring cryptanalysts soon attain success when possessing these three essentials to ward cipher solution: pencils, patience, perseverance.

5386—Fatuous Francie flippantly flaunts flowery flounces, fancies Francis, Frances' finical fiancé. Flirtation fails, foments female fray. Fur flies! Frolicsome flirt finally flees.

5387—Words menu: gewgaw, museum, bazaar, knickknack, mimicry, withhold, pajamas, rarer, foolproof, supperless, ringing, Habakkuk, plus alfalfa.

5388—For sale: small farm, one big acher, ramshackle buildings, fallen fences, thorn tree, poison ivy, muddy creek, unusual damn sight, extra good-bye, can't last, jailed owner yells "Cell!"

5389—Key:

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
 B E A U T Y S H O P

All answers to current ciphers will be duly credited in our *Cipher Solvers' Club*. Address: M. E. Ohaver, *New Detective Magazine*, 205 E. 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y.

No. X-5402. Concerning Tips. By Zadig.

- 109-120-71 34-89-72-118-83-100 73-26
- 84-1-110-111-19-90-62-101, 52-74-75-85-102
- 2-63-17 3-91-12-36-20-103, 121-37-76-92-53-104
- 4-64-18 13-77-59-86-78-105-40-112-21-106,
- 27-41-122 113-38-22 87-93-42-60-5-94-123
- 28-95-6-14-114-43-79-65 44-66 115-39-23
- 45-67-29-7-54-55-46-11-56-24 30-80-96-61-119-57-8
- 31-81-97 32-47-68-35-25-98-88-99-48-69-116
- 15-58-9-107-108-49-33-50-16-10-117-51-82-70

Scorpio's No. X-5390, last issue, used simple shift alphabets for the following ten words: *aggressive, ballistics, chinchilla, difference, elliptical, fellowship, guillotine, hippodrome, illuminate, and judicially*. The only letter in common to these words is "i," symbols for which, in the ten different keys, spelled out in acrostic fashion the eleventh word, BLOCKADERS.

Newcomers, and old-timers coming back, continue to swell the ranks of our Solvers' Club! Returning triumphantly after a record absence of sixteen full years, †Ksea writes: "Long time since I've sent sols to you! From way back 'round '33 or thereabouts!" Our records reveal †Ksea's last answers were, to Aug., 1935, ciphers, his score being 119 at that time. *Ty N. Twist, Canadian cryptofan, away for eleven years, score 923 including his answers for May, 1940, comments: "Have never lost interest in ciphers. Now that so many old-timers are answering your call, thought I would again join in the fun!" And °Jayem, score 3174 in July, 1942, advising us that he has been buying the mag right along, resumes solving after nine years absence.

New fans at this writing: Mr. & Mrs. Peter Descoteaux, Ed & Carrie Schroeder, Nomiss, Manus W. Conway, Peggy Lindemann, Yac, and Harold R. Derr. Say the Schroeders: "Have been buying the magazine for at least twelve years, and always work the cryptograms!" Welcome, fans, one and all! And thanks for your wonderful letters! More names, and current answers, in next issue.

No. 5401—Cryptic Division. By *Betty Kelly. Sequence IT indicated in 2nd subtraction will unlock T x E = I when compared with L - I = I. Key is numbered: 01234 56789.

BLOOD MONEY

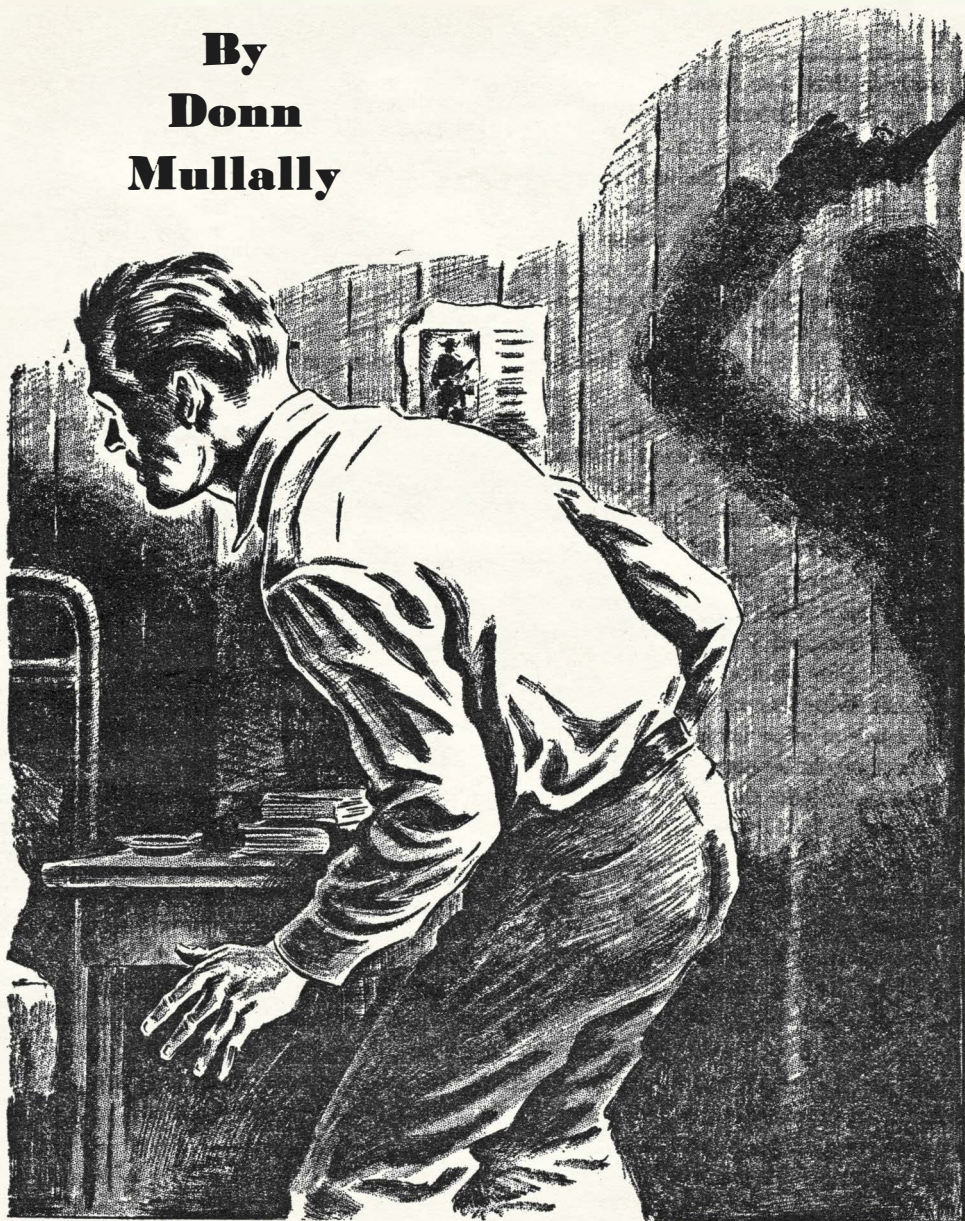


She opened her mouth—screamed “Look out!”



*Unseen he challenged that crimson hour, the stealer of
life whose victims lived dying . . . the hour past Murder!*

**By
Donn
Mullally**



HANK TOOMEY woke himself up—screaming.

It had been that old familiar ride. His pet nightmare. He and Mickey Azurian, rocketing down a mountain road in their semi-trailer, out of control, with tons of oranges riding behind them . . . the big transport snapping through the guard rail

on a curve, thrashing over and over to the bottom of a draw . . . he and Mickey, sealed in the cab, smelling gasoline before it spread to the hot engine . . . a searing wave of flame . . . and then the scream that still rang in his ears as he started up in bed.

Hank Toomey's eyes adjusted slowly to the dark. His senses sharpened, fighting the

paralysis that had flowed into the vacuum left by the nightmare. His hard body was drenched with sweat, the bedclothes were tangled and sodden. He realized where he was—in his own bed, the room he shared with Velma in the little house they were buying on his GI loan. He remembered coming home, Mickey dropping him off the truck just at dinner time.

He and Mickey had been living in the truck for three weeks while they made the early grapefruit harvest in the Imperial Valley. They'd spelled each other driving, sleeping; had eaten at hamburger joints along the way when they had stopped to fuel the transport. It had been rugged. He'd had barely enough energy left to pull off his dirty socks and fall into bed.

Hank reached out in the dark to touch Velma. She wasn't there. She probably couldn't stand his milling around in bed. It was a hell of a life for her.

He thought he ought to get up, find her—tell her to take the bed; he'd move to the davenport. It didn't make any difference where he slept. He threw his legs over the side of the bed and sat up. His head felt as though it were full of rocks—loose rocks, the kind which spray against the undercarriage of the trailer when one of the big double wheels strays off on the shoulder.

He could see a light under the living-room door. Velma's reading, he thought. Great. It must be a real pleasure for the kid to have her old man home. She doesn't see me for weeks, and when I do turn up, it's like trying to stay in the sack with a sick boa constrictor. Maybe we ought to have twin beds.

He decided he'd take it up with her tomorrow—at breakfast.

His nightmare was more real this time than ever before. Humped there on the edge of the bed, his eyes staring, he still thought he smelled raw gasoline dripping into the cab from the ruptured tank, thought he heard the roar of fire, almost felt the heat on his wet skin. He shook his

head. The sound was still there—the smell. Gasoline!

Probably that smell would never work out of him, even if he spent the rest of his life as a perfume salesman.

He stood up. The floor was hot to his bare feet—the roaring grew louder the closer he came to the living-room door. Suddenly, he realized that the light under the door wasn't the steady glow of a reading lamp. It throbbed. The smell of gasoline was real, too—not his imagination. He burned his hand on the knob, opening the door.

Flame sluiced through, like water into an irrigation ditch.

Hank Toomey threw himself out of the way, shielding his face with his arms. He felt as though he were suspended in the fire, breathing it.

Hank edged as close to the open door as he could, tried to see inside the living room. It was like looking at the sun. A big, hot ball of fire. But close. Stabbing. The fire was in the bedroom now, racing through the drapes, the windows, the bed.

Hank did the only thing left—tore the burning drapes and curtains away from the window, and crawled out. He stumbled onto the lawn, tearing his legs, his pajamas, on the shrubs Velma had planted next to the house.

Mrs. Draves, the next-door neighbor, who was just coming out of her kitchen door, shouted to him, "I've called the fire department, Mr. Toomey." She was wearing a quilted robe and, in the light from the fire, Hank could see she had her hair in curlers held down by a heavy net fastened with a strap under her chin, like an aviation helmet.

She said, "Where's Mrs. Toomey?"

Hank looked over his shoulder at the house. The windows were choked with flame; the bedroom window he'd just climbed through was curtained with it. The front wall of the house caved in, the roof of that section crashing in a shower of

sparks. He tried to raise his hand, point. He was suddenly cold, stiff. There was no response in his muscles. His jaw hung limp. He looked wildly at Mrs. Draves, muttering, "Velma . . . Velma is. . ."

The ground rushed to meet him, bright green in the hot light from the fire. "Velma is. . ." he gasped.

The lawn let him have it. Toomey tried once to raise his face out of the bristly, sharp grass. *Lost*. For him the fire, the terror, was over.

MICKEY AZURIAN opened his eyes and jumped about a foot, straight up. It was the only direction he could go. He had been sleeping with his head cradled on the backs of his hands, which were gripped fast to the steering-wheel of the Toomey-Azurian Transit Company's one piece of rolling stock. His body was wedged in the leather seat, his whole rear assembly numb.

He glanced out of the open window beside him, chuckling when he realized where he was. He recognized the Army-surplus quonset hut, remembered pulling into the lot after he'd dropped Toomey at his house. The quonset home office of the Toomey-Azurian big deal and Mickey Azurian's home complete with desk, telephone, Mickey's cot and a coffee-maker.

Azurian glanced at the luminous dial of his wristwatch. Three-twenty a.m. He whistled. It couldn't have been more than six o'clock when he had set the hand brake and switched off the ignition, closed his eyes for just a second because it felt so good.

He climbed down to the ground holding on for a couple of minutes while he pounded circulation back into his legs. He swore to himself. "Azurian, you must be queer for this racket. You can't tear yourself away from that damn agony wagon long enough to catch a decent night's sleep!"

He teetered a little unsteadily, toward the door of the quonset, was finding the

lock with his key when a car stopped at the curb in front and someone shouted, "Hey, Azurian?"

Mickey turned, squinting in the glare of a spotlight; said, "Yeah. Turn that thing off. What'd'ya want?"

A car door slammed in back of the spotlight, and a man walked toward Mickey. He threw a hell of a long black shadow, which was all Mickey could tell about him until he came close enough for the light to pick out his features.

It was Scooter Mitchell, the Redwood County sheriff.

Scooter had been an all-American quarterback at U.S.C. After he finished college, he'd coached high-school football in the county for a few years before he ran for sheriff . . . a likeable guy and a good mixer, which was all the voters asked of a sheriff.

Mickey grinned. "Hi, Scoot. What cooks?"

The sheriff shook his head. "I hope you're not trying to be funny, Mickey. It's a lousy gag—if you are."

Mickey Azurian leaned against the door of the quonset hut, studying Mitchell's face. It was cut out of black shadows and white light. His eyes were in two of the shadows, so Mickey wasn't able to read anything there. He said, "I asked you a simple question—I thought."

"Where have you been tonight, Mickey?"

Azurian told Mitchell how he'd pulled into the lot and then gone to sleep at the wheel of the big transport. "I woke up just a couple of minutes ago," Mickey said, "decided I'd sleep in a regular bed for a change."

"You don't know about Toomey's fire?"

"No," said Mickey. Suddenly he smelled sour, he itched, and his lips felt dry. He said, "Was it bad—the fire?"

Mitchell nodded solemnly. "A hundred per cent."

"Did they get out—Velma and Hank?"

"Hank did," Mitchell answered. "He's

pretty badly burned. The hospital gives him a fair chance to pull through."

Mickey wiped a hand across his face. It was wet, cold. "Velma . . . what about her?" he stammered.

"The firemen just found her body—half an hour ago. There wasn't much left. There never is, with a gasoline fire."

"Gasoline? How would gasoline get in the house? I . . ."

"Someone carried it in there, Mickey. A lot of gasoline. Enough to make a torch out of Velma and the house."

THE Redwood County courthouse where Scooter Mitchell maintained his office and jail was a fairly modern structure. This was thanks to an earthquake back in 1932 which had demolished the old red-brick seat of government built in the eighties. The new building had started out to look like an early California mission, had ended up more like an out-sized motel. It had cost a lot of money.

Scooter Mitchell's office was on the street floor, off the cloister. When he and Mickey Azurian got there, it was the only office showing a light. One of the deputies, a florid-faced man, had the telephone watch. Looking up from a magazine he was reading, he said, "Nothing new, Scooter."

Mitchell nodded, led Mickey to his private office. The big windows were sealed, the air mechanically washed and maintained at an even temperature. It felt sterile, to Mickey. Like a hospital.

Scooter fixed that. He took a cigar out of a box in his desk drawer, tossed it to Mickey, had one himself. Mitchell kept his hat on—a soft, rancher-style Stetson. He always kept his hat on. There was a reason. With the hat he was a lean, handsome young guy. Without it, he looked like a fugitive from a monastery.

He nipped the end of the cigar with a thumbnail, clamped the stogie in his jaw, lit it. They both settled back before Mitchell opened up, and asked, "You and

Toomey have been friends for a long time, haven't you, Azurian?"

"Right," Mickey agreed. "We flew together in the war, over the Hump in China. Transport pilots. They called us truck drivers. When we got out and saw all the other guys sinking their dough in feeder and non-scheduled airlines, we decided flying wasn't for us. We'd be truck drivers."

Mitchell squinted at Mickey through the blue smoke as it settled in a kind of definite strata midway to the ceiling. He said, "You've done all right."

Mickey bobbed his head. "We've been getting by—meeting the payments on our notes. Our semi's almost paid for. We were looking at another one when we were down South this time. Just looking—but figured, if we had a couple of breaks, maybe we could swing it. Double our operation. We can forget that, now," he added grimly.

"Did Toomey ever talk to you about his wife?" Mitchell wanted to know. "How he felt toward her?"

"Sure," Mickey said. "Lots of times. He was pretty gone on Velma. I remember, in the Air Force, he always carried a pair of her shorts with him. For luck."

"They lost a baby last year, didn't they?" asked Mitchell.

"Yeah."

"How did Toomey take it?"

"Like you'd expect. Rough. There wasn't a hell of a lot anybody could do—something about Velma's blood, Hank told me."

Scooter Mitchell shifted his weight in his office chair, propped one leg on an open drawer of his desk. "Toomey's work kept him away from home a great deal of the time," the sheriff said when he was comfortable. "Did he ever show interest in other women?"

Mickey scowled at his clenched fists. "I suppose he did—if you call a little kidding around 'interest.' You know—the sort of fast line you hand a girl & a hamburger joint. It doesn't mean anything."

"You're sure that's all, Mickey—there wasn't one particular girl?"

Mickey shook his head. "If there was, Scooter, he didn't let me know. Look. . . ." Mickey went on, leaning forward against the edge of Mitchell's desk. He could see his reflection in the plate-glass covered top of the desk, his neck and jaw black with a three-day beard. He looked like a poor man's Abe Lincoln. "Look, Scoot. I'm willing to answer any questions I can. But let's take off our dancing shoes. What's your hunch on this fire? You don't think it was an accident—faulty wiring or something?"

"No, Mickey, I don't—because," Scooter Mitchell paused, dragged heavily on his cigar, "because, as I told you, there was some kind of incendiary agent used. Like gasoline."

"Maybe Velma was cleaning a dress. It happens."

Scooter nodded. "Would she clean a dress at night, in the living room?"

"Okay," Mickey said. "Now, why all these questions about Toomey's home life? You think he set the fire?"

"It's a good bet he did, Mickey. He was badly scorched himself. A gasoline fire's tricky—it can go up awfully fast after it's lighted. Practically explode."

Mickey snorted. "Hank Toomey's one guy who'd know," he said. "We flew highest aviation gasoline into Chungkin, saw enough gasoline dumps blown up during the war."

"Maybe he miscalculated somewhere," Mitchell said uneasily. "Maybe he even wanted to be burned a little. It would look better if he was."

Mickey shook his head. "You're straining, Scooter," he declared. "You must want to stick Toomey awful bad."

"I don't want to stick anyone, Azurian. But there's certainly something very wrong here."

"I'll buy that," Mickey declared, half rising from his chair. "But it's not Toomey."

Mitchell waved him into the chair. "All right," he said. "We'll look at the other side of the penny. Your side. You said you were asleep in your truck, from the time you pulled in beside your office to shortly before I drove up."

"Right," Mickey said.

"It's not much of an alibi, is it?" Mitchell asked.

"What do I need with an alibi?"

Scooter Mitchell told him. "You're Toomey's partner. I imagine you'd inherit the business if something happened to Toomey—any partnership insurance."

Mickey Azurian sat back hard against the leather chair, looking at Mitchell. It was as though he were seeing the sheriff through the wrong end of a telescope. His hands felt sweaty, even in that air-conditioned room. He said, "Scooter, you're kidding. You've got to be."

"No, Mickey. This is on the level. You could use a better alibi."

Mickey shook his head sadly. "Yeah. I'll bet," he said. "And I'll tell you, Sheriff—if I'd set out to kill my best friend and his wife, I'd have one. I'd have the shiniest damn alibi you ever heard."

Mickey Azurian stood up, leaned on the corner of the sheriff's desk. "And something else, Sheriff. If I was fruit for money to the point of killing for it, I wouldn't be a lousy truck driver. I'd be in some good racket—like politics!"

He turned and stalked to the door. After his second step, he was waiting for Mitchell's shout to stop. With his hand on the knob, he looked at the sheriff. Mitchell hadn't moved or changed his expression; he was chewing on his dead cigar. Mickey said, "You'll know where to find me."

Scooter Mitchell nodded silently.

IT WAS just beginning to turn light when Mickey arrived at his quonset hut. The first anemic glow seemed to point up all the dents and scrapes and road scars on the big semi-trailer. The quon-

set, the Home Office, showed signs of poverty, too. The war had been over a long time. As hard as he and Hank had worked, there ought to be a lot more to show for it.

If this hadn't happened, they might have bought that new truck. It would've made a lot of difference. A lot. "You'd better forget it, son," Mickey told himself. The way Mitchell was talking, Toomey & Azurian will be lucky if they don't wind up their partnership holding hands in the gas chamber.

He went in, and scraped himself out from behind the tangled mat of whiskers on his chin and throat, washed, and put on some clean clothes. He was going very formal—a white shirt under his leather jacket.

It was still cold when he came out, the sun barely teeing off over the Sierras.

Mickey walked a block down the street, to a diner. He ate breakfast, cut the waitress short when she wanted to talk about the fire at Toomey's. She'd read the paper. "Do you think Hank really did it?" she wanted to know.

"Why not?" snapped Mickey. "His home, wife—all he had in the world—why shouldn't he burn 'em up, if he wanted to?"

The girl laid off until he was paying his check. "Sorry, Mickey," she said. "I didn't mean nothing."

He said, "Forget it. And forget what the papers said about Toomey killing his wife. He didn't."

Mickey went to the hospital to see Hank, got as far as the front desk. The nurse said she was very sorry, but Mr. Toomey was not able to have visitors.

"What d'ya mean, he's not able?" growled Mickey. "Did his doctor give the order, or was it Sheriff Mitchell?"

The nurse fluttered a little and said, "Oh, I'm sure it was his doctor."

Mickey smirked. "Yeah. I'll bet. Well, tell me this—if it's not top secret—how's the guy doing? I mean, is he as good as can be expected?"

The girl looked in a card file attached to the side of the hospital switchboard, smiled at Mickey. "Mr. Toomey's condition is satisfactory."

Mickey backed away from the desk. "Thanks," he said sardonically.

He stood outside the hospital, trying to decide what to do next. He could feel those hundreds of windows peering over his shoulder. Behind one of them was Hank Toomey. His condition was satisfactory, whatever that meant. If a guy's head was blown off, Mickey supposed the doctors would be satisfied he was dead. They probably had Hank loaded with dope.

Mickey thought of the guys he'd seen with bad flash or gasoline burns—the skin cooked, falling off the bones. There'd been plenty of them in the CBI theater—planes ground-looping on those coolie-made strips. It made a hell of a bright fire; and the men they pulled out never lived very long, as a rule. The docs pumped morphine into them to keep them alive for a few hours. Then it was the chaplain's turn. . . .

Mickey climbed into his shabby, pre-war coupé and racketed across town to Toomey's place . . . the charred pile of masonry, plumbing and heat-twisted junk which had been Toomey's house.

* * *

Mickey Azurian kicked around the fringes of Hank's ruined home for a while, trying to put together what had happened from what the sheriff had told him, what he'd read in the paper, and what he knew about Hank and Velma.

He got two entirely different pictures. Somewhere in between was the true one—he wondered what it was.

Mickey wasn't coming up with any answers, when he saw Mrs. Draves, the next-door neighbor, looking at him over her grape-stake fence. She was wearing a housecoat, a shiny plum-colored job. Her hair was twisted around curlers.

Mr. Draves was either a late sleeper or he could stand a terrific shock before breakfast.

Mickey nodded to her, and she simpered across the fence. "I know you. You're Mr. Toomey's partner."

Mickey smiled. "Correct."

"Isn't this simply awful?" Mrs. Draves waved a limp hand to take in the blackened scar on the lawn where the Toomey's house had stood.

Mickey nodded.

"You know," she confided, "I was the first person over there last night. I saw Mr. Toomey just after he climbed out the bedroom window. My—the poor man!"

Mickey asked, "Was he badly burned?"

"Oh yes, indeed! He fainted, just a few feet from where you're standing."

Mickey ran his fingers through his crisp, black hair, massaged the back of his neck, where the nerves were tied in bunches. "Do you know if he ever came to—said anything?"

"Oh, I wouldn't know. The poor man . . . and his poor, dear wife! Such a shocking thing!"

"Yeah," Mickey said hollowly.

"You know, I was talking to Mrs. Toomey yesterday afternoon. We were always talking over the fence." Mrs. Draves smiled wanly. "Mr. Toomey was gone so much of the time with his truck, I think the poor little soul was lonesome. That's what was so tragic about her losing her baby last year. The baby would have been a real help to her, don't you think?"

Mickey leaned his back against the stake fence, felt the points jab along the line of his shoulder-blades. He nodded, which was enough to prime Mrs. Draves.

"She took the loss of her baby very well, I thought. Medicine is so wonderful, nowadays, of course—they knew why the baby didn't live."

Mickey glanced at Mrs. Draves absently, said, "I imagine that was a real comfort."

"Oh, it was more than a comfort, Mr.

Azurian. They knew what caused the baby's death—they could then take steps to correct the condition. Mrs. Toomey's doctor had been seeing her every few days. She told me he said she'd be able to have a normal baby next time. Of course . . ." Mrs. Draves sighed and struggled with a wisp of hair. "That's all wasted now. That beautiful young life."

Mickey said, "It is for sure, Mrs. Draves. I don't suppose you saw anyone monkeying around out here last night—before the fire?"

"No." Mrs. Draves' morning mask set in a thoughtful expression. "Although I thought I saw Mrs. Toomey's doctor's car parked out in front, earlier."

"How much earlier?"

"I'd say at least an hour . . . oh, seven o'clock."

"Did you see him drive away?"

Mrs. Draves nodded jerkily, seemed a bit embarrassed. "As a matter of fact," she said, "I was hanging some curtains in my living room last night, and I did see the car leave."

"Long before the fire?" Mickey asked.

"Oh, yes. At least a half an hour—maybe more."

Mickey said, "Thanks, Mrs. Draves. It's been nice talking to you."

He took a couple of steps toward the front of the lot. Mrs. Draves called after him. "Mr. Azurian. I was thinking I'd pick some flowers and have my husband take them to the hospital. Do you think Mr. Toomey would like that?"

Mickey looked back at her eager, homely face. There was a real, kindly thing under those curlers. He smiled. "I think he would, Mrs. Draves."

DR. CARL WISTER practiced his medicine out of a medical community center. He and half a dozen other M.D.'s specializing in different branches of medicine shared a modern building just off the town's main stem. Wis-

ter's specialty was snatching babies. He was supposed to be pretty good.

Mickey remembered that it had been a big deal when the Toomey's were expecting their first and had been able to get Wister for the job. Hank had never spoken of any other doctor, so it must have been Wister who was at the house last night. If the doc left half an hour or so before the fire, he probably wouldn't know any more about it than Mickey did. But Mickey thought he ought to talk to the doc anyway. There was just an outside chance he'd know something that would help Hank's situation. It would be damn near impossible for him to hurt it.

The sun had stopped doping off, by the time Mickey found a place to park near the medical building. The whole town was shimmying with heat waves; the asphalt in the streets was soft underfoot, gummy.

Azurian left his leather jacket on the seat of his car when he went in to see the doctor. As soon as he stepped into the double-decked reception room of the medical building, he wished he had the jacket. Air-conditioning: His shirt was damp across his shoulders, and now it felt as though someone had poured a glass of ice-water down his neck.

Mickey clicked across a waxed asphalt-tile floor, to the receptionist's desk set dead in the center of this lobby. She looked cool, efficient in a well-cut nylon nurses's uniform. What she did for this uniform was strictly a public-relations pitch.

She dimpled at Mickey, said brightly, "Yes, sir?"

"I want to see Dr. Wister."

"Certainly." The receptionist smiled. "And what is your wife's name, sir?"

"I don't have a wife," Mickey declared. "I don't want to see him about . . . that." He felt vaguely uncomfortable.

"Are you sure you wish to see Dr. Wister? He only handles obstetrical work, you know."

Mickey said, "This is a personal mat-

ter. I'm not selling anything. It's just a personal matter."

The girl studied him for a moment, perplexed. Then she smiled. "Of course. If I may have your name, I'll try to arrange for the doctor to see you."

Mickey told her. "And look," he went on. "Maybe the name won't mean anything to the doctor. I don't know why it should. But this is important. The life of a friend of mine may hang on what the doc can tell me. Will you explain that to Wister? I won't stand for a brushoff, just because I'm not about to be a little mother!"

The nurse smiled bleakly. "I'll tell the doctor," she said. "Will you have a seat, please? I'll call you."

There was a low, overstuffed bench along the wall of the lobby. About a dozen other people were waiting. None of them looked sick to Mickey—none of them as jumpy as he was. He watched the receptionist using an inter-office phone—pleading his case, he hoped, with the doc.

She hung up, looked his way, smiling, "Mr. Azurian, the doctor will be right out."

Wister was a big man, well-fleshed, with gray hair. The hands dangling at the ends of his long arms looked as though he would have made a hell of a good lumberjack. His hair was a little thin and parted precisely in the middle, showing a very clean and sun-pinkened scalp. He met Mickey a couple of feet from the receptionist's desk. His manner was suspicious.

"Yes, Mr. Azurian?" he said.

Mickey looked around the big room. No one seemed to be paying any special attention to them—even the girl at the desk was busy with a small, portable typewriter and some cards she had in an index box. Mickey said, "You were Velma Toomey's physician, weren't you, Doctor?"

Wister rubbed his jaw thoughtfully, said, "Yes—within the limits of my specialty only, however."

"That's what I understood." Mickey nodded. "Of course, you know what hap-

pened to her last night. About the fire."

Dr. Wister did.

"I was talking to the Toomeys' next-door neighbor," Mickey explained, "and she told me you had been visiting Mrs. Toomey shortly before the fire."

Wister shook his head. "I'm sorry. The lady was mistaken. I haven't seen Mrs. Toomey for at least a month—and on that particular occasion, she came to the office."

"I don't get it," Mickey said. "Mrs. Draves told me you were out to the Toomeys' every few days."

Dr. Wister shrugged, smiling. "I'm sorry, Mr. Azurian, she's wrong. I assure you. There was no occasion for me to call on Mrs. Toomey."

The blond receptionist had stopped beating her mill; she said, "I beg your pardon, Doctor. I couldn't help overhearing your conversation with Mr. Azurian. I wonder if Mrs. Toomey's neighbor might have been referring to Dr. Innes. I believe he's been calling on Mrs. Toomey from time to time."

Dr. Wister scratched his lower lip thoughtfully. "It's entirely possible," he admitted. "Is Innes available now, Miss Stark?"

The girl thought he was, confirmed it with her inter-office phone.

Dr. Wister said, "We'll drop in on him." He led Mickey down a corridor, past a lot of doors bearing different medicos' shingles, or *No Admittance* signs. The last door at the end of the corridor had a double-barreled sign:

LABORATORY—DR. HUGO INNES,
PATHOLOGIST.

Dr. Innes's private office was a glass-partitioned corner of the laboratory, containing a desk and filing cabinets. It smelled like a laboratory, even with the air-conditioning and the partitions. Innes was a stocky, high-strung type. He was standing beside his desk when Mickey and Dr. Wister came in. Mickey thought he had the flattest head he'd ever seen on a man—

looked like somebody had hammered it in with a mallet. His forehead bulged over the top of his thick, shell-rimmed glasses; the blood vessels were ridged and snake-like under his tight skin. He was wearing a long white coat that covered all of him Mickey could see.

Dr. Wister introduced them, said, "Innes, Mr. Azurian is a friend of the Toomey family. Velma Toomey. You'll recall, I referred her to you for a transfusion series."

Innes nodded. "Mrs. Velma Toomey, yes. An Rh negative. I read in the paper this morning, she was killed in a fire. Very unfortunate. Very."

Mickey said, "You've got the right party, Doctor. Like I told Dr. Wister, I was out at the Toomey place this morning, and a neighbor told me she'd seen a doctor call at the Toomey house an hour or so before it burned. I thought I ought to talk to the doctor, see what he knew . . . about the climate around the house. I mean, was everything peaceful between Hank and Velma just before the fire?"

"I wouldn't know," Innes said. "I wasn't there last night. As a matter of fact"—he thumbed through the leaves of a desk calendar—"my next appointment with Mrs. Toomey was for the day after tomorrow." He took a pencil and made a black mark through the notation of the appointment.

Mickey shrugged. "Well, I guess that's it. Thanks a lot for your time, Dr. Innes—Dr. Wister." He turned and left the two medicos standing in the office.

As he passed the receptionist's desk, she sparkled her teeth at him, and asked, "Was Dr. Innes able to help you, Mr. Azurian?"

He shook his head glumly. "No, honey. I drew a blank. I guess the Toomeys' neighbor lady is seeing doctors before her eyes. Maybe she better call one in."

He stalked across the lobby, the floor wax snapping at the heavy leather heels on his working boots. He opened the street

door, and the dry valley heat shook him by the throat. His head was pounding as though he had a loose piston up there, about to crack through the engine-block.

Mickey Azurian went back to the quonset, stripped off his shirt and pants, threw himself on the cot. It wasn't any hotter than you'd expect a tin can lying in the sun to be. Just about a hundred and ten degrees. He let the sweat soak into the quilt beneath him. Even when the quilt was wet, it felt hot to his skin. He didn't expect to sleep. He'd just lie there for a while, until his head let up.

He closed his eyes, felt the salty sting of sweat running in them. That was the last he remembered. Sleep broke over him—black, hot.

When he woke up, it was cold. The sun was down, and the quilt felt clammy. The pounding in his head had stopped. Now it was a ringing . . . intermittent, shrill. He sat up suddenly. The telephone out in the office.

He pulled on his pants and padded into the office in his bare feet, picked up the telephone and growled, "Yeah?" His voice sounded strange and raw to him, as it fed back into the receiver.

A woman said, "Is this Mr. Azurian?" She had a nice telephone personality—soft, exciting.

Mickey couldn't place her.

He said, "That's right."

"This is Betty Stark. I'm the receptionist at Dr. Wister's office."

Mickey bobbed his head at the phone. "Oh, yeah. What's on your mind?"

"I want to talk to you, Mr. Azurian—about Mrs. Toomey. But not on the telephone."

"Okay, Betty. Where'll I meet you?"

She said, "Do you know the Oro Grill?"

Mickey said he did. It was a little highway saloon just north of town.

"Can you meet me at the bar in half an hour?"

Mickey said, "It's a date."

THE Oro Bar was a cave, and the air inside cold and damp. Overhead, gold cloth draped from the ceiling. The only light came from the bottle-racks and some neon reflectors over the bar mirror. A real cozy trap.

When Mickey came in, the bartender had just one customer—himself. He was buying himself a drink. Mickey was a few minutes over his half-an-hour, but he didn't see anything of Betty Stark.

As he crawled onto a stool, the barkeep came over; said, "You Mickey Azurian?" "Right."

"Just had a telephone call. A girl named Betty Stark. She said she'd be a little late and would you mind waiting?"

Mickey grinned narrowly. "I mind. But what the hell can I do about it? Let's have a beer."

He had several beers, and still Miss Stark didn't show. By nine-thirty, Mickey was convinced she wasn't going to. This was a stand-up. About the weirdest stand-up he'd ever known. He hadn't asked for it, and he didn't get it.

Mickey had one more beer—because it was on the house. He was nearly finished when the telephone rang. Tris, the bartender, answered: "Hey, Azurian, for you," he said. "That Stark tomato."

Mickey leaned across the bar to take the instrument from Tris. "She's all tomato, in my book! Strictly catsup."

Into the mouthpiece, he said, "All right, babe. What's the story now?"

She sounded like a different person from the girl he'd spoken to earlier in the evening. Frightened, tense. Mickey wondered if he really sounded that tough over the phone. She said, "I'm sorry, I can't come out, Mr. Azurian," and hung up before Mickey had a chance to blow his top.

He slammed the phone down. "How about a dame like that?" he said to Tris.

"What was it, the brush?" Tris asked.

"Yeah," Mickey muttered, finishing his beer. "And the beautiful part is, it wasn't

my idea. She called me and wanted to meet me here."

Tris shook his head, said, "Women!"

Mickey stepped back from the bar scowling. "You just inherited my share of them," he said. "So long, Tris."

Mickey drove by the hospital to see how Hank was doing. He got tossed for a loss again by another gal at the reception desk. The doctors hadn't written any new dialogue for this kid. Hank's condition was satisfactory, she said.

At least, the guy was still alive.

* * *

It was about eleven o'clock when Mickey pulled in beside the big semi-trailer. In the dark, it looked more like an elephant, the quonset like a peanut shell. Mickey felt groggy. Not from the beer he'd soaked up at the Oro Grill while waiting for the Stark dame—but the hot, sweaty sleep he'd had that afternoon. It was as though all the strength had drained out of him.

He made his way through the office without turning on a light, or thinking about it. He was moving in a well-worn groove, as if he were walking in his sleep. He moved toward the door to his room, and stopped. Something cold had gotten to him, waking him up. It was more than the night air. A raw feeling . . . a smell he couldn't define . . . a sense of movement in the dark. A sound like the soft rustle of someone breathing.

He reached for the switch beside the door. A reading lamp on his desk flashed on. Spotlighted in the white circle of light, Betty Stark huddled against the wall. Her eyes were large, staring, her rouged lips the only color in her face.

Mickey said, "What . . ."

She opened her mouth, screamed, "Look out!"

He jumped, but not fast enough. The whole rounded ceiling of the quonset seemed to crash down on his skull. The

light was doused for Mickey, sputtered out in a shower of pain.

It came on again, the same way—a fitful, twitching flicker; a slow awareness. First, of the rough board flooring under his face, his hands clawing weakly as he tried to lift his head. A few inches away, he could see a great puddle of yellow hair on the floor. Hair the color of Betty Stark's. But not neatly combed, trim, the way he remembered it.

He pushed harder against the floor, drawing his knees under him so he could see her. She was sprawled out on the floor now, her body flat and still. Her jaw gaped open, almost hiding a ragged wound on her throat that drooled blood onto the floor.

Mickey had come to his knees, said, "Betty . . . Betty . . . Miss Stark . . ." His hand moved out to touch her, hesitant, as though he expected to be burned. He knew she was dead. His mind told him she was, his stomach. Mickey felt sick. But he kept repeating her name, until someone behind him said, "I don't believe she'll answer you, Azurian."

A quiet, precise voice.

Mickey swayed to his feet, looked at Dr. Wister standing just inside the room. Wister said, "I see I'm a little late." He indicated Betty Stark's dead body with a nod of his head.

Mickey Azurian mumbled, "Yeah. Late."

"I don't have to ask you whether you did it, of course," Wister declared sternly. "That's fairly obvious."

Mickey stiffened. He hadn't thought of being accused. He hadn't had time to think of anything. He'd only been living from his eyes down. Now, the rest of him came in—the throbbing pain in back of his ear, where he'd been struck. What had Wister said?

"I didn't do it, Doc. I didn't!" Mickey shook his head, trying to clear it, to stop the hammering. "When I came in here, she was alive. I don't know how she got there, but she was alive."

"What did you do then?"

Mickey ran his hands through his hair. It felt greasy, matted. He was trying to think. What *had* he done?

"I turned on the light, Doc," he said, "from the switch there by the door. I remember I saw Betty, Miss Stark, sitting upright in bed over there. She looked scared. She said something to me. I think she said 'Look out!' That's all I remember. Somebody slugged me."

He fingered the back of his head tenderly. "And I got the lump to prove it. I just now came to."

Dr. Wister knelt beside Betty. She was holding the telephone in one hand, like a club. The cord had been broken off flush with the circular base. The doctor turned the instrument over by rotating Betty's wrist.

"There seems to be black hair stuck to the felt here, Azurian," the doctor said. "Are you certain this happened the way you explained it to me?"

"Sure," Mickey muttered. "Sure. It did."

Dr. Wister stood up. He seemed a lot bigger to Mickey. Maybe it was because Mickey felt himself shrinking; his leather jacket too big for him, too heavy. He wanted to sit down.

"I'll tell you why I came here, Azurian," the doctor said.

Mickey nodded. "I was wondering, Doc."

"Miss Stark telephoned me at home. She said she was here—she needed help. She pleaded with me to come over at once. I thought at first it was some kind of an office joke. Then, I heard her scream. It was too good a scream to be put on—and the line went suddenly dead."

THE doctor took in Mickey's office, with a sweep of his hand—the overturned chairs, the table on its side in the center of the room. "It is abundantly clear what was happening, Azurian."

"Okay, Doc. Maybe you'll explain it to me."

"Betty was fighting for her life, with the only weapon she had . . . the telephone base. I suppose she hit you. The black hair I pointed out would seem to indicate as much. But she didn't have a chance, Azurian. You were so much bigger, stronger—and you had a knife. What did you do with the knife, Azurian?"

Mickey frowned. His tongue was so fat it hurt. "You tell me," he said. "All I know is what I told you. I don't know how Betty ever got here, nor how she was killed."

"Do you carry a clasp knife, Azurian?" Wister asked.

"Sure, but . . ."

"May I see it?"

Mickey shrugged, reached in the hip pocket where he carried the knife. Before he had it out of his pocket, he knew what he would see. The bone handle was sticky. His fingers were smeared, dark red.

"I believe that's sufficient, Azurian," the doctor said. "We're going to the police."

Mickey's shoulders and back felt slack, limp. Right then, the doc could have taken him by the ear and led him down to Sheriff Mitchell's motel without an argument. But the doc booted his opportunity—had to say something else.

"You know, Azurian, abnormal psychology is not my field. But when I come face to face with a situation of this kind, I can't help but wonder. What did you feel? What were your reactions when you were slashing Betty's throat? Was it elation, or fear—what was it?"

Mickey looked thoughtfully at his hands, the heavy knife smeared with blood. He weighed the clasp knife in his hand. It was almost as heavy as a roll of nickels. He glanced at the doctor. No pushover. A well-conditioned guy.

Mickey closed his fist around the knife. He looked at the doc, forced himself to smile. "I'll tell you," he said. "I wouldn't

do this for everybody—but I'll tell you how it was, Doc." He waved his open left hand at Betty. "This dame stood me up, see? I never could take that from a dame."

He had edged closer to Dr. Wister, where he couldn't miss. "You want to know how I felt, Doc?"

Dr. Wister nodded—right into the knuckles of Mickey's right hand wrapped around the knife. Wister's knees buckled, his eyes glazed. For insurance, Mickey slammed his loaded right hand into the doctor's face a couple more times. Wister hit the floor with a noise like a tool-bag being dropped six feet.

Mickey stepped over him, turned out the light. He walked through the office and got in his car. He backed out of the lot without his headlights, drove a couple of blocks before turning them on.

Mickey stopped at the main highway that divided the town. Was he going north to Frisco, or south to L.A.? Maybe try to make the Mexican border? He had a few bucks. He might get to Mexico.

Whichever direction he was going, he'd better make up his mind. Fast. He wondered if there was any place really far enough from the valley, from Sheriff Mitchell, after Doc Wister came to, reported what had happened between him and Mickey, and they found the body sprawled out on Mickey's bed. Yeah. Wister would have things all his way—just as he'd told it to Mickey.

They'd hunt Azurian down with dogs, like an animal. And Wister would head the pack, baying for a kill.

Mickey started to pull onto the highway, turn south. He swore. The road was clear. He kept the wheel cramped and made a complete U-turn. He'd been just that close to being a big-league sucker—playing exactly as Wister wanted him to.

How did this baby-catcher know so much about the hair on the base of the telephone in Betty's hand, the knife in Mickey's

pocket? Why would she call him? If she needed help, she'd yell for the cops. If she got to a telephone, like Wister said she did, she'd have screamed, "Murder!" at the operator—who could trace the call, and have Mitchell and his mob down there in two minutes flat.

Yeah. The doc had sold him a ripe story. He'd said he hadn't seen Velma Toomey for a month. . . .

Mickey bared his teeth. That was probably a lie, too. Wister was out there at Toomey's last night, and something happened. Something connected with the fire. So he was covering up. Maybe this girl knew he was covering up.

The doc had built a very tricky frame around Azurian—getting him out of the place for the evening; establishing with Tris, the bartender at the Oro Grill, that Mickey and the girl knew each other—and Mickey was even sore at her. How cute can one man be?

MICKEY jammed his heap to a dead stop a quarter of a block from the lot, went the rest of the way on foot. If Wister was shaking off the effect of that beating, Mickey didn't want to give him any advantage like driving into the lot and making a target of himself. He had his mind made up, what he was going to do.

He'd take Dr. Wister out and let Mrs. Draves have a look at him. If she said Wister was the doctor who'd called at the Toomeys' before the fire, then Scooter Mitchell could have his innings.

Mickey eased around to the back door of the quonset, by way of the cab of the big semi-trailer—where he picked up a six-cell flashlight. If there was going to be any head-bashing this time, Mickey wasn't coming to the party empty-handed.

Just as Mickey reached the back door, the light in his sleeping room snapped on. Through a small square of glass in the door, he could see the interior of the room,

Dr. Wister on his prayer-bones against the far wall, his hand just leaving the light switch. He was looking at someone in the door to the office. Mickey couldn't make this new character out, from that angle. He saw Dr. Wister, talking to the man, shake his white head. While Mickey was watching, Wister tried to claw his way up the wall. This new man was no help. He latched onto the Doc's collar, swung him toward the center of the room.

They were struggling, Wister receiving for the worst of it. As they spun around, the light hit the new man's face and Mickey recognized him. Dr. Innes—the man who ran the laboratory in the building where Wister had his office.

Dr. Innes' free hand was raised. There was a gun in it. He brought it down against the side of Wister's jaw, knocking his head to one side.

Since it wasn't a clean fight, Mickey decided he'd buy in. He tore the door open, leaped on Innes's back. He smashed his heavy flashlight against the pathologist's gun hand. The weapon clattered to the floor, and all three of them made a dive for it. Mickey saw he was going to be a bad third, so he poured the flashlight to Innes's bare skull twice—felt him go limp. Wister was still scrambling for the gun, which had been kicked under the washstand. Mickey made a flying change of mounts, from Innes's back to Wister's. The gun was still out of reach.

Mickey hauled the doc to his feet; wagged the shiny, chrome case of his flashlight under Wister's jaw. "Be good, Doc," he growled, "or you'll be trying to talk through a wire brace."

"Azurian!" gasped Dr. Wister. "Where did you come from? You weren't here a minute ago."

"I know," Mickey nodded. "I took my conscience for a ride. I got a lot of things straightened out—I thought. But what is this hassel with you and Innes?"

"I don't know," Wister said, his eyes

still on the edge of being glazed. "You struck me, didn't you? That's the last I remember."

"Yeah."

"When I came to, I was lying here in the dark. As soon as I'd focused, I began to feel my way across the floor. I heard someone in the office, thought it was you coming back to finish me. I found the light switch just as Innes came through the door. I was surprised to see him. I think I said, 'What are you doing here, Innes?' He seemed very nervous, frightened. I can't imagine what came over him. He drew a gun, and we struggled. He hit me."

Mickey looked down at Innes. The pathologist started to move, groaned. Mickey reached under the washstand, fished out the gun. He waved it at Wister, said, "You're a doctor. See what you can do for this guy."

Wister knelt beside Innes, rolled him over. Innes' glasses were broken, cracks cobwebbing out to the shell rims, but still on his face. He moaned and pawed the air blindly.

Dr. Wister said, "I don't believe he can see, with his glasses in this condition. He's very near-sighted—myopic."

Mickey smiled. "All right. He won't have to see anything. Get him on his feet. You can lead him. The three of us are taking a short trip—out to visit a lady. She's going to pick one of you two jokers, and he'll be crowned King of the May in the San Quentin death house!"

Mickey wagged the barrel of the gun at Wister impatiently. "Come on, Doc. Get with it."

SHERIFF Scooter Mitchell tossed a cigar over across his desk to Mickey Azurian. Mickey peeled it from the cellophane, grinning. "Look, Scoot. You'll never be elected to anything, if you pass out cigars to unimportant jerks like me."

Scooter crossed his feet on the glass

top of his desk. His Stetson was tilted over one ear, showed most of his bald head.

He said, "I don't know anybody I'd rather have smoking my cigars, Mickey."

"Then can I make a suggestion, Sheriff?"
"Shoot."

"Would you mind changing your brand? I like a clear Havana."

Mitchell grinned, said, "I might even do that." He looked up, as Dr. Wister came into the office.

One side of the doc's jaw was the color of an overripe banana. Otherwise, he seemed pretty natural, his gray hair parted in the middle and combed back smooth. His tan gabardine suit, for all the wallowing he'd done on the floor of Mickey's room, was at least ninety-nine per cent pure. He tried to smile as he took a chair across from Mitchell, but his jaw queered that.

Scooter Mitchel picked up several sheets of close-packed typing which had been lying under his hand and scowled at it for a minute. He said, "I know Innes set fire to Toomey's house. He took Betty Stark to Azurian's room; forced her to wait for Mickey to return from the Oro Grill. Then he gun-slugged Mickey, made Betty phone Dr. Wister for help—cut her

throat with Mickey's knife. Fine. But I still don't understand the why of this vendetta."

Dr. Wister rubbed his jaw gently with the tips of his fingers. "It was not a personal attack," he declared. "It began as just a very sordid racket, I'm afraid; got out of hand. After talking to Innes in his cell, I can almost feel sorry for the man—like one sometimes feels sorry for a mad dog."

"Okay, Doc," Mickey snapped impatiently. "What was he playing for in this deal?"

"Money," the doctor answered. "Blood money, in the most literal sense of the word. . . . Mrs. Toomey's blood, at four hundred and fifty dollars a pint."

Mickey whistled. "What'd she have—solid gold corpuscles?"

Dr. Wister nodded. "A property more valuable than gold, Mickey. Life. Because she was an Rh negative who had borne a child, her blood was sensitized, could be used as a serum to detect Rh symptoms in other expectant mothers. If detected in time, this condition can often be successfully checked, and then a child's life is spared.



Andy Warren's bride of a week became the corpse of the year. . . .

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Detective Tales 25c

"We discovered Mrs. Toomey's condition when she was expecting her child. I referred her to Innes. He was to draw off a certain amount of her Rh negative blood each week, and give her transfusions of what we call cell-mash, which keeps the red-cell count normal. This, I wish to stress, is proper procedure and, in a great many cases, has resulted in an Rh negative mother giving birth, finally, to a healthy baby.

"However, Innes was what I believe Mickey would call an eager man for a buck. He stepped up production, was drawing blood from her every two days. This increased production had been going on since shortly after the birth of Mrs. Toomey's child—which, as you know, we were not able to save."

Mickey nodded. "I think I get the picture now. Innes bleeds Velma white—and last night her ticker ups and stops while he's draining off another pint. Innes is scared stiff. He's got to do something. If there's an inquest, good-by, sweet racket—and probably hello, San Quentin. He'll take a chance, and proceed to destroy the evidence.

"So he puts his gear in his little black bag, goes out to his car and drives away—leaves the car, comes back on foot with a can of gasoline he probably drained from his own carburetor. He splashes this around the living room—it doesn't take much—boom! A big fire."

Scooter Mitchell nodded. "It's all here in his confession. This receptionist, Miss Stark, heard you asking about the doctor visiting the Toomey house just before the fire. She knew who it was, because she and Innes had a date and she'd had to wait for her dinner until he got back. When she found out he'd lied about being there, she knew something was wrong and tried to put the squeeze on him—which was very bad judgment on the little girl's part. He killed her, and framed our friend Mickey, here."

"This is all jolly," Mickey said, drawing heavily on Mitchell's gift cigar. "But, Doc, when you were talking to Innes, did he tell you why he gun-whipped you?"

Dr. Wister patted his sore jaw again, shook his head. "Innes may be a twentieth-century vampire," he said, "but he's no murderer, by nature. He doesn't have a murderer's nerves. He was too frightened, excited. When he entered your room—the light flashed on and I was looking at him—I think he reacted like a cornered animal, lashing out."

"What was he doing there?" Mickey wanted to know. "Why didn't he shove, after he was all finished with his killing Betty?"

"It's hard to explain," Wister declared. "But I imagine he was hiding somewhere close by, to see me bring you out a prisoner. That's why I was there—why he made Betty call me before he killed her. You came out alone and drove off. He didn't plan it that way, had to see what had happened."

Mickey asked, "Were there any other women on Innes' milk route?"

Wister nodded gravely. "I'm afraid there were—several."

Mickey Azurian stood up. "Four hundred and fifty clams a pint!" he said, wonderingly. "Three pints a week from each dame. Brother, there was a sweet, sweet touch! When I think of all the oranges and grapefruit, spuds and other stuff Toomey and I have hauled for four hundred and fifty lousy bucks. . . ."

He started slowly toward the door, stopped.

"By the way," he said, "while I still have you two very important citizens in one room, can I ask a favor?"

Scooter said, "Sure."

Mickey grinned. "How's for you guys throwing your weight around a little and fixing it so I can see Toomey?"

Scooter Mitchell said, "You're in, kid I'll even drive you there."



ANSWERS TO THE THIRD DEGREE

(Questions on page 45)

1. If a crook acquaintance told you to get some "fall dough," you should return with money for lawyers and bail.
2. If the chief of detectives told you he was going to "dig up a gopher," he would mean he anticipated capturing a safe robber.
3. True. In the slanguage of the underworld, a "gum mob" is a gang of crooks.
4. In convict terminology, a "hoosier" is a prison visitor or other outsider.
5. If a crook acquaintance told you he was "going to rob a jay," you should call the police. A "jay" is a bank.
6. True. Shoeprints made while walking are seldom exactly the same size as the shoes which made them.
7. Dirt and dust thrown by the tires will often "point" in the direction in which the auto was moving.
8. True. Hair samples are often routinely taken from a corpse involved in a homicide before it is buried. Naturally, it would be difficult to obtain such samples after the corpse was buried.
9. A "lig robber" is a crook who hides under the bed or elsewhere in a house, coming out to rob when he finds it safe to do so.
10. If the chief of police sent you out for a "locust," you should return with a policeman's club.
11. True. In the language of the underworld, a "moll buzze" is a pickpocket who specializes in robbing women.
12. If a convict told you the "man" was coming, you could expect to see the warden. The warden is also sometimes known as the "old man."
13. The underworld slang expression "on the legit," means engaged in legitimate business.
14. The prison slang expression, "politician," is used in reference to prison clerks.
15. False. The word, "racket," has been used in the sense of dishonest occupation for at least 150 years.
16. True. Cocaine may be taken by sniffing it up the nostrils.
17. True. "Bhang" is a term used in reference to the liquid form of hashish.
18. False. The bromide addict is usually characterized by his melancholy disposition and tendency toward hallucinations.
19. The crook slang term, "ranked," means "discovered."
20. If a crook acquaintance told you he was seeking a "righty," you should know he was looking for a disguise.

STRANGE TRAILS

MENTAL MAGIC TRAPS A KILLER

THE BOOHERS WERE A HARD-WORKING PROSPEROUS FAMILY OF WHEAT FARMERS IN ALBERTA, CANADA, UNTIL THAT TERRIBLE EVENING IN JULY, 1928.

POLICE, SUMMONED TO THE FARMHOUSE FROM NEARBY MANNVILLE, FOUND MOTHER BOOHER HAD BEEN SHOT IN THE BACK WITH A HEAVY CALIBER RIFLE WHILE SHE PLACIDLY HULLED STRAWBERRIES. HER SON FRED AND THE TWO HIRED MEN HAD BEEN SHOT IN THE FACE, APPARENTLY WHEN THEY CAME TO INVESTIGATE. FATHER BOOHER WAS SUPPOSEDLY OUT OF SIGHT OVER THE HILL AT THE TIME AND HIS OTHER SON, VERNON, 20, WAS PATCHING THE FENCE IN A FAR FIELD, OR THERE IS NO TELLING WHERE THE CARNAGE MIGHT HAVE ENDED.



THE SOLE CLUE PROVED A SINGLE CARTRIDGE CASE FROM A BRITISH LEE-ENFIELD, WHICH THE KILLER HAD OVERLOOKED. THE ONLY SUCH RIFLE IN THE REGION BELONGED TO A MAN WHO SAID IT HAD BEEN STOLEN WHILE HE ATTENDED CHURCH. VERNON HAD BEEN SEEN NEAR THE MAN'S HOME SUNDAY MORNING, AND THIS, TOGETHER WITH THE FACT THAT HE WAS ANGRY WITH HIS MOTHER FOR BREAKING UP HIS ROMANCE WITH A VILLAGE GIRL, CAUSED VERNON TO BE HELD ON SUSPICION.

HE INDIGNANTLY DENIED THE CHARGE AND, WITHOUT THE MURDER WEAPON, THE EVIDENCE AGAINST HIM WAS SLIM, UNTIL DR. MAXIMILIAN LANGSNER, PROBABLY THE WORLD'S WEIRDEST SLEUTH, WAS CALLED INTO THE CASE.



to MURDER

BY
LEE

THE DOCTOR, A VIENNESE MENTALIST THEN PLAYING CANADIAN THEATRES, CLAIMED THAT THE BRAIN PRODUCED ELECTRICAL IMPULSES WHICH HE COULD READ, AND THAT HE'D AIDED EUROPEAN POLICE IN SOLVING DIFFICULT CRIMES. SEATING HIMSELF OUTSIDE VERNON'S CELL, DR. LANGSNER GAZED FIXEDLY AT THE BOY. NOT A WORD WAS SPOKEN AS MINUTES, A HALF HOUR, AN HOUR PASSED.

SUDDENLY THE DOCTOR ROSE. "TAKE ME TO THE FARM," HE SAID. "HIS WORRIED MIND HAS TOLD ME WHERE THE MURDER WEAPON IS." NOT FAR FROM THE HOUSE HE ORDERED THE CAR STOPPED.

WALKING UP A RAVINE, HE EXPLORED ABOUT IN A CLUMP OF BUSHES, AND PULLED OUT THE LEE-ENFIELD RIFLE.

CONFRONTED WITH THE RIFLE AND TOLD HIS FINGERPRINTS WERE ON IT, THOUGH POLICE DIDN'T KNOW WHETHER THEY WERE OR NOT, VERNON CONFESSED. HE WAS HANGED AT EDMONTON THE FOLLOWING SPRING.



NBODY KNOWS HOW DR. LANGSNER PICKED THE INCRIMINATING CLUE OUT OF THE KILLER'S MIND WITHOUT A WORD BEING SPOKEN.

35-170

DESIGN

FOR



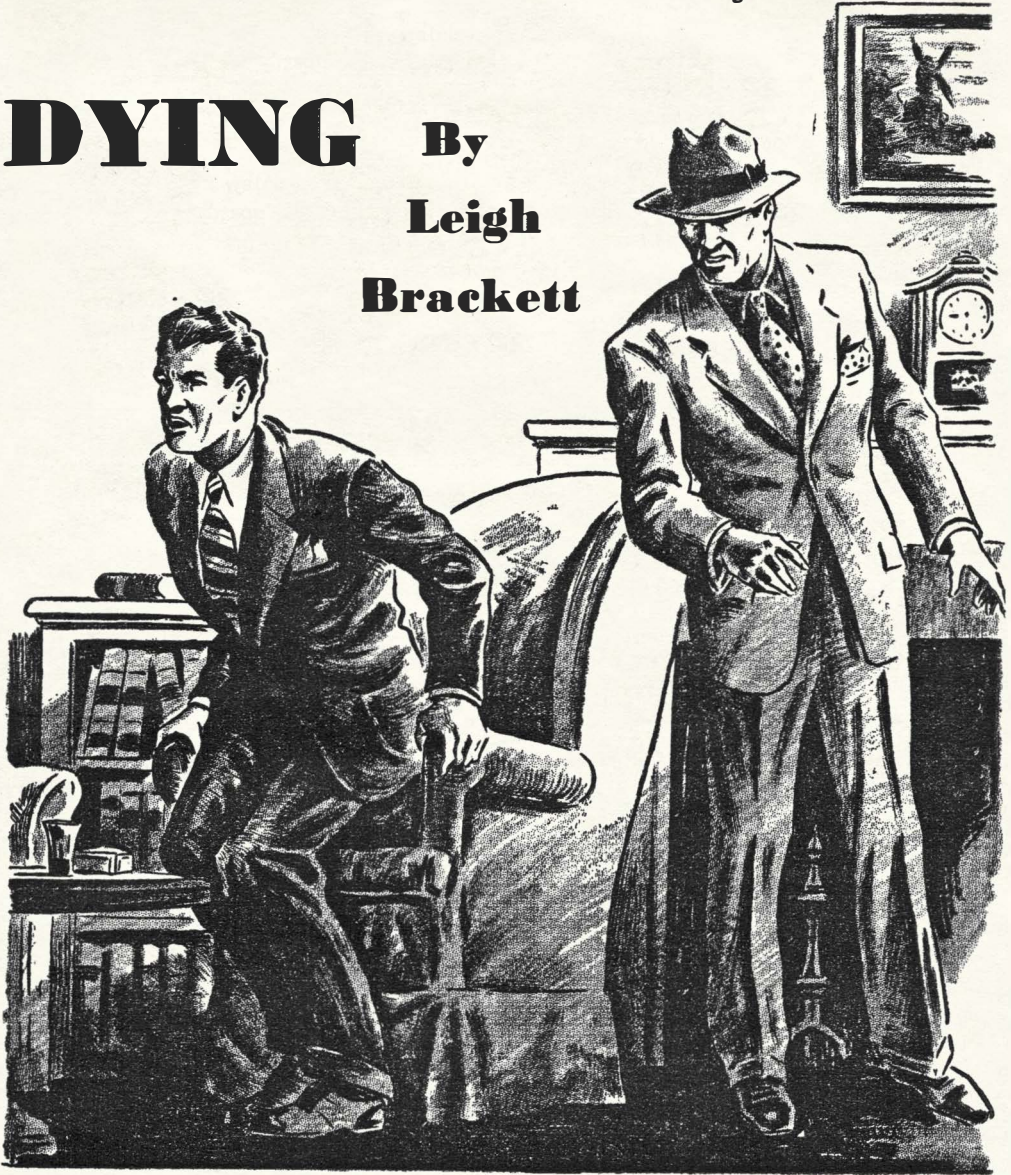
"There'll come a day when you'll be wanting to die fast—and I'll be wanting you to take your time!"

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"What the hell do you think you're doing?" asked Sligh.

DYING

By
Leigh
Brackett



CHAPTER ONE

Big-Time Crime

I LET her get out of the three-year-old coupé and into the vestibule of the upstairs flat. Then I went in, fast, just before the door swung shut again.

She didn't say anything. She leaned her shoulders back against the wall and let the

paper bag of groceries slide down out of her hands, and that was all. I stood looking at her. Evening light crawled in through the glass window high in the door, and the empty steps went up beside us, smelling cold and musty, and it was quiet.

After a while she said, "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know."

She leaned against the wall, watching me with wide, still eyes. The grayish light caught in them and put a silvery wash over her hair. They were exactly the same shade of golden-brown, her hair and eyes. Her mouth was just the way I remembered it, red and sulky above her round chin. Fourteen years had made a woman out of a girl, but she was still Jo—the Jo I married.

I got lost all of a sudden. It was like we were both standing in a shaft of still water, and I felt the way you do when you've been down on the bottom too long.

I heard her whisper, "You've changed, Chris."

"Sure," I said. "Why not?"

I put my hands flat on the wall each side of her shoulders.

"Chris, what are you going to do?" Very quiet, looking up. Her skin had a film of sweat.

I brought my hands together, slowly, until there was only her neck between them. I laced my finger tips over the bone in back and set my thumbs together over the place in front where I could feel the breath going in and out. Her face was blurred.

Her hands came up very gently and lay on my cheeks. "Chris—kiss me, just once, like you used to."

I tightened my fingers. I think I laughed. Her hands went away from my cheeks and caught my wrists instead. There was thunder in the place.

Her lips came clear of the haze in front of me. Still red with the paint on them, parted, and hungry for breath.

I gave them breath. I gave them something else, too.

After a while she was crying on my shoulder, and I was holding her tight. And I was cursing her with everything I had.

"Fourteen years I sit in that stinkin' cell and think how I'm going to tear off your lyin' no-good head, now. . . ."

I pushed her off. She tripped on the steps and sat down hard. I blew the rest of my vocabulary out through the roof before I realized she wasn't listening to me. She was sobbing like a kid, with her hands over her face.

"I've been so worried, Chris—ever since the break. Every paper that came on the street, I'd think, this is it—they've got him. I couldn't eat or sleep. Oh, honey, are you safe? Does anybody know you're here?" She turned those big eyes up, all shiny with tears.

"Oh, for God's sake! Turn off the act," I said.

She crumpled over like she was very tired.

"What are you going to do? I mean, have you got plans?"

"Why would I tell you?"

"No reason, I suppose. Chris, how did you find us?"

"Kind of a shock, isn't it? You and your sweet brother, Sligh—you felt so safe, with me in the can for more years than Methusalem could live out."

"I didn't have anything to do with that, Chris. Nothing!"

"I heard that one before. Sure, you and Sligh were pretty well off. All my dough, no charges against either of you, your names changed . . . you even came out to the Coast, after awhile, where nobody knew you from Adam. Yeah. Well, I had a little cash and one contact even Sligh didn't know about. I've known where you were from the beginning."

I glanced up the shabby steps and laughed.

"Looks like my eighty grand didn't hold out so well."

She said tiredly, "It's been hell."

"That's tough."

She didn't fight back. She seemed to have no fight left in her. She got down and began picking up oranges that had rolled out of the bag.

"Sligh's in Las Vegas," she said.

"He'll come back."

She leaned back against the wall. Her hair fell soft and heavy around her face. I could see the warm curve of her throat above her yellow dress.

"Oh, God, how I've missed you, Chris! There hasn't been anyone else since I left you."

I didn't say anything. She let her head droop forward.

"Look, Jo. There are two guys I got business with. They'll come here, because they know the address. So I think I'll stick around. Besides, I never did like hotels."

She started picking up oranges again.

"You're a fool, Jo. Maybe as big a fool as I am."

She didn't answer that. I got down beside her and began heaving oranges in the bag.

NEXT morning around ten the bell rang, and when Jo called down it was Ray Jardine's voice asking could he come up. I checked to make sure he was alone and then said into the speaker:

"Come on in, Ray. You're expected."

Jo was staring at me, looking like someone had just hit her in the stomach.

"Yeah," I said pleasantly, "you heard right. Ray Jardine." I had to laugh at the expression on her face.

Jardine was just like I remembered him, only more so. He'd put on about ten pounds, his gray suit was a little sloppier, his podgy blue-eyed face a little stupider looking. He had one of those soft, baggy necks that curves straight down from the jawbone and always looks a little dirty, like the skin was too tender to shave close.

"Well, well, well," he said. "The guy himself. Good ole Chris Owens, right in the ole groove. God, that was a beautiful break! I sure never thought you'd make it, even if I did fix things for you myself."

"Thanks," I said sourly. "You remember Jo."

"Sure, sure! How are you, Jo?"

"I don't know yet," she told him. "You mean you've been in touch with Chris all this time?"

"And with you and Sligh, too. Just like the old days, ain't it?" He sat down like he owned the place and lit a cigar. "And now let's talk a little business."

Jo started to go out. I said, "Sit down, baby. I like you where I can see you." Jo's eyes spit sparks at me, and Jardine laughed.

"Same old Chris," he said. "Always the acid tongue."

Jo tossed her head. I sat down on the couch and, after a minute, she came over beside me, not very close but close enough. I grinned at her and then nodded to Jardine. "Yeah, Ray. Go ahead."

Jardine watched his cigar smoke, with dull eyes. He looked like a fourth-rate drummer out of a job, but he wasn't. He was one of the smartest private dicks that ever went on the crook. He was our fix man, back in the old days of the combine when Sligh and I kept half the U. S. reading about us. There wasn't anything that slippery little rat couldn't do if he had a thick enough wad in his kick.

He said, "You owe me a lot of money, Chris."

"I know it."

"I'm a poor man. In fact, I'm flat busted. Crime ain't what it used to be, with the damned F.B.I. lousing things up. And I ain't in what business I got just because I like the people I meet."

"I know that, too."

"I figure, Chris, that you're sort of an investment."

"I figured that was what you figured. Go on."

Jardine waved his cigar slowly back and forth, not thinking about it. The shaky line of the smoke tipped off the fact that his hand wasn't steady.

"The way I look at it, Chris, you're clean so far. Ain't no record on Sligh—he's got you to thank for that because you handled

things so smart—nor on your wife. They got different names out here, too. No reason for the cops to connect 'em with you, and a damn long job of tracing if they ever did get ideas. Fourteen years is a long time."

I said, "Yeah."

"I got a contact for you, Chris. Georgie Molino."

He watched me to see how I would take that. I dead-panned it, and he went on.

"Molino practically owns the southern part of this state. Every tinpot gambling hell kicks in to him, and his own place takes in a terrific haul each week."

"Then what does he need of me?"

"It's like this, Chris. He's having trouble. The new administration looks like it might get tough, on account of beefs from the families of fellows who drop a lot of dough there. The big boys are yelping, too— Say Georgie causes absenteeism at the factories. On top of that, a couple of Georgie's own boys are fixing to split their britches. Georgie ain't a well man, and he don't care too much for rough stuff. He's like you there, Chris, only he ain't got the brains you have to get around it. So I figured there was an opening there for you." He grinned. "I sure gave you a build-up, Chris. Not that you needed one. The papers were doing it for me, anyhow."

I was still giving him the Great Stone Face. He began to sweat a little on his fat neck.

"What's the deal?" I said.

"A hideout, Chris. Takes a guy as big as Georgie Molino to cool off a guy as hot as you are. You're no penny-ante hood, Chris. You're big time. You was more than half the combine, and you know it."

"Yeah," I said. "But just brains don't stand up so good against a Thompson, and I'm no lousy hot rod. That's why I tried to pull out when the going got too tough for just brains. That's why I got a frame nailed on me."

I got up and began walking around. I

was shaking worse than Jardine and I felt like I was full of boiling water instead of blood.

"Yeah, a dirty rotten frame. They couldn't trust me to run loose and maybe change my mind—get tough and start up some competition they couldn't handle. They didn't quite dare to try shooting me. I was a hard guy to hit, and my boys would have thrown some lead around in my memory, and they didn't like that. Besides, they always thought maybe some day they could use me again. Me, and my big brain! Sure. So now I got stripes on me that'll never come off. I lost fourteen years in that stinkin' prison. And maybe. . . ."

I cursed and broke off short. I stood there trying to light a cigarette, and I caught a glimpse of Jardine's face, and then Jo's. I laughed.

"Like you said, Ray—fourteen years is a long time. A guy grows up in fourteen years." I sat down again.

Jo put her hand out and took it away again, like she would with a strange dog.

THAT'S RIGHT," said Jardine. "Well, Georgie is willing to do everything he can, than which there ain't no more to be had. All you have to do is take care of whatever business he wants you to. Georgie told me himself he'd rather have your brains and ability even if you were too hot for comfort, than anybody else."

"All right," I said. "So I'm very smart and I used to carry New York around in my pants pocket. But I was working for myself. I've been working for myself since before I was old enough to shave."

He made himself say it, and kept his eyes on me while he did. "Looks to me, Chris, like you ain't got any choice."

And he was right.

"And what you get out of it," I said, "is a nice place in the country and the gold fillings out of my back teeth."

"Now, Chris, I ain't no gouger. I've

worked hard for you. If it wasn't for me, you wouldn't have the chance of a snowball in hell to get by. . . ."

Jo got hold of me. "Chris, honey, don't be that way. You are in a spot, and this chance—well, it's wonderful! Chris, please. . . ."

Jardine waved his cigar. He was smiling. The sweat stood out on his soft neck, but he nailed that smile on his face and kept it there.

"The little lady's right, Chris. Times change, and you got to change with 'em. You got to take the realistic view."

He tried to see just what view I was taking, gave it up, and then came out flat-footed with what he'd been holding back.

"Don't you forget this. You're worth money to me, more money than I ever saw before. I got your neck right in the palm of my hand, and I got it fixed so if you kill me the cops'll be told just where to look for you."

He wasn't feeling so scared, now he'd said it. He was beginning to enjoy himself.

"Times change, Chris. We can't always be what we were once. I'll treat you right. I won't gouge you too deep."

I didn't say anything. I sat still, and Jo's hand on my wrist was as a dead man's feet.

After a while I said, "Okay, Jardine. I'll take the realistic view." I got up and walked around some more, lighting another smoke. This time the match flame didn't jerk too much.

"There's just one thing I got to take care of first."

Jo's copper-brown eyes looked at me, shiny as new-minted pennies and just as unreadable.

Jardine said, "Sligh."

"Yeah," I said. "Sligh."

Jardine chuckled. He leaned over and gentled an inch of ash into a tray, and just about then the buzzer went for the front door. Jo got up, slowly, and crossed over to the speaker. Jardine kept on looking at

his cigar, very calm, but he was corpse-colored and sweating.

Jo turned around. She whispered, "I can stall him off. Get out the back way. If you kill him now, you'll be caught. The whole thing will come out. Chris, you can't get your money back, nor the years you've lost. . . ."

"Can I get you back?"

The blood crawled up in her face. She let her lids drop heavy over her eyes, and a ray of sunlight in her hair burned hot enough to sear you, like molten copper.

"You've got me back. You've always had me. You drove me away because you thought I helped frame you, after we—split up. But I didn't. You know I didn't. And I've never loved anyone but you."

I laughed. She turned white and picked up a vase with flowers in it and let me have it. It missed, and in the middle of the racket it made smashing on the wall, Jardine let out a bray like a jackass.

"That ain't Sligh down there. He's got a key!"

And it wasn't Sligh. It was a girl from Western Union with a wire saying that Edward A. Mines—the name that Sligh was going under—had been killed in Las Vegas by a hit-run driver.

Jo sat down. I went over and got a handful of Jardine's collar.

He gasped, "You be careful, Chris."

I shook him. "Coincidence, Jardine. I don't like 'em."

He grinned. He felt safe enough to grin. "You'd be surprised what you can buy for a couple of bucks, when you know where to go. No risk, no kickbacks. Listen, Chris. I knew nothing could hold you off that dog. You think I want you hanging a murdered corpse out of the window for cop bait?"

I held onto him, and all of a sudden you could tell from Jardine's face that he didn't feel so safe after all.

It was about then I felt a hell of a crack on the head and passed out cold. When things finally crawled back in focus again

I was on the floor with my head in Jo's lap and she was rubbing it with ice wrapped up in a dishtowel and crying like a scared kid. Jardine was gone.

"I ha! to," Jo sobbed. "You were killing him. Oh, Chris honey, are you all right? I didn't mean to hit you so hard."

My head felt like the Green Bay Packers had been using it for kicking practice. All of a sudden I laughed.

"Hell, this is like old times, Jo!"

"We did have terrible fights, didn't we?"

"Yeah. But it was fun. I could never love a dame I couldn't enjoy fighting with."

"Chris. . . ."

I sat up, holding the pieces of my skull together. Jo was bent forward a little over her knees, her face hidden by her shining copper mop. There was nothing seductive about her now. She looked like a little girl that's been naughty, been punished to beat hell, and is too tired out even to cry.

"Chris, I've been dead ever since I left you."

"Yeah

"I never stopped loving you, not for a minute. But we'd been so unhappy, you and I, and things just got worse, and I guess I thought I hated you."

"I guess maybe you had a right to. I've got a rotten temper."

"You should have trusted me, Chris. You should have let me stand by you."

I looked at her. I said quietly, "Should I?"

She shivered. "I guess I can't blame you, all these years. My brother wanted me around, to keep house for him, and to use as bait for his business deals. He told me what would happen to me if I left him. Besides, I always hoped that if I stayed with him I could find some proof that he framed you, and maybe then I could get you free again."

I didn't say anything. She let her hands go loose in her lap.

"You have your faults, Chris, but you're straight. You're a man. Sligh wasn't. He

was crooked and rotten and hateful, and I can't cry because he's dead." She lifted her face up, all soft and open and young with tears. "But I can cry for you, Chris. I did a wrong thing to leave you, a wrong thing to let you stop me from coming back. I've paid for both those things."

The warm sunlight fell on her through the window and made the tears shine like little stars. I took her in my arms and kissed her, gently, the way you would a child. I felt a way I hadn't felt for years. Not since I used to stand in the choir stall of the cathedral and send my voice reaching up after *The Gloria*.

THIS Georgie Molino business here looked like it was going to work out.

The first thing he did was ship me secretly to his place in the desert—Jo had to stay behind and clear up the details of Sligh's funeral and everything, so it wouldn't look too funny.

Then Molino turned loose a couple of regiments of experts on me.

They fed and exercised me like a prize horse. They studied my mug, my clothes, my choice of colors, the things I like to eat, the games I play.

What they did about it was nothing short of murder.

I gained back about seventeen pounds, acquired a heavy tan, and got in the pink again, which was good. But the rest of it. . . . They changed my hairline, and made me grow a mustache. There was quite a lot of gray in my hair—you turn gray young in prison. Instead of dyeing it dark, they bleached it the rest of the way, to snow-white. It looked swell, with the tan, but it didn't look like me.

They did fancy needlework on my face to change the shape and the expression, not much, but enough. My clothes were designed to make my build look a little different. My shoes made me change my walk.

I like green and brown. They put me in blue and grey. They changed my food

habits and my taste in drinks. They took me off golf and chess and put me on tennis and poker. They did things to my teeth, to change my mouth and even the way I talk. I'm a cigarette smoker, so they gave me a pipe. When they got through with me, I could have moved into a single room with J. Edgar Hoover and slept easy.

Jo came out to join me after a while. There was no risk in that. The Eastern cops never had a picture of her, and the Western boys didn't know she was alive. She was just Jo-Ann Mines, another housewife.

Nobody cared what she did.

The experts did some light work on her, though, just in case we should meet somebody who did know her. She looked swell with black hair, cut short and curly. She thought I looked swell, too. She said I looked like a combination of Ronald Colman and Humphrey Bogart, and I said that was a hell of a mixture, and she said I should worry as long as she loved me. We were happy out there, like we used to be when we first got married, when it was easy for smart youngsters to clean up, and get a thrill out of it.

It was funny, to feel like a kid again, to think it's me and Jo having fun together—and then to remember that fourteen years had dropped away behind us, and we were somebody else now. You think I'm just putting a mask on the present. Tomorrow it'll be pulled off. You get scared sometimes, thinking of time and years and the way life flows under your feet. That's how you know you aren't a kid any more. Life has a solid feel when you're young. It's only when you've been around it awhile that you realize how shaky it is, like a swaying plank across a ditch, that may break or throw you any minute.

Jo felt that, too. I remember one night we were walking around, watching the desert stars swinging down so low you could almost feel the silver heat of them, and suddenly I realized Jo was staring up

into my face with a funny, searching look. "Who are you, Chris? Who are you really?"

"Is the new map my fault? And who are you, with that black hair?"

"Don't laugh me off, honey. It isn't the way you look that I mean. It's the way you are inside. Sometimes I think, He's still Chris, he hasn't changed at all. And then there'll be a note in your voice, a look in your eyes—and it isn't Chris at all."

"You've changed too, baby. Anybody does, in that length of time."

"That still isn't what I mean. You were always a businessman, Chris. You wouldn't kill, or strong-arm people like the others did. But now . . . Chris, did we have to come back to the rackets? Couldn't we have gone away somewhere. . . ."

"Where? With what? And how could I make a living?" I laughed all of a sudden, not loud. "Besides, I'm no different from the others, now. I'm an escaped con, a guy with a record, a public enemy. They got what they wanted, Sligh and his pals."

"You're not Chris now," she whispered. "Chris couldn't have laughed that way. . . . Darling, couldn't we run away, now? Nobody'd know you."

"Think of Georgie. Think of Jardine. How long would you want to bet we'd live?"

She didn't say anything for a minute. Then she sighed. "I guess once you go wrong, really wrong, you can't ever find your way back." She took my hand in hers. "Let's go back to the house. I'm cold."

We never talked about that again.

This Georgie Molino was a right guy. We got along. He was a big man, well on in middle age, getting slow and pretty soft. He had a heart that threatened to quit on him any time, and his boys knew it. Some of them were getting big ideas. Like Jardine said, that's why he wanted me. And we both knew it was not going to be any soft job.

He let me know, just once, that if I ever

got any ideas myself I wouldn't be around to enjoy them. I told him that was fair enough and we both left it, right there. He paid well. Even after Jardine's cut came out, I had plenty to fool around with. Jardine kept clear of me. I sent a check every month to a phoney name and a P. O. box, and that was that.

After about three months I made my début.

CHAPTER TWO

Showdown

MOLINO'S place was Class A, and running wide open in a spot that formed the hub for two big towns. Molino owned what local law there was.

He walked Jo and me around the house, introducing us as Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Medbury from Saint Paul. The T. Medburys could stand a check-up in Saint Paul, too, if anybody wanted to try it. Molino wasn't the kind who left any loose ends lying around.

Jo left us presently to powder her nose, and Molino steered me into one of the big gambling rooms. "These are the guys," he said quietly. "Whatever trouble you have, they'll make it. The rest just follow."

We went over to the crap table and watched a while. Pretty soon a well-built, perfectly tailored young fellow with curly auburn hair and a nice face called his luck a couple of hard names and turned away, grinning.

Another guy turned right by his shoulder, like he might be a Siamese twin. He had straw-colored hair plastered onto a skull shaped like an egg and looking just as unsubstantial. His face was too small, and from the way his pale grey eyes looked he wasn't above hitting the hypo now and then.

The good-looking kid said, "Evening, Georgie. How goes it?" He had violet

eyes, the kind you read about but never see. The kind of eyes you would trust with your last dime and your young daughter, and that would go on looking clear and sweet while they aimed the bullets into your guts.

Molino said, "Tom, this is Micky Shayne and Shadow. Boys, this is Tom Medbury, my new partner."

Shayne hadn't been much impressed up to then. Maybe it was the white hair. While he was shaking hands he took another look, and his grin got a little stiff around the edges.

"Swell," he said. "I hope you like it here."

Shadow watched me like a dead fish, over his shoulder.

Shayne's gaze moved over toward the door. He made a low whistle through his teeth.

"Pardon me, fellas. Some new business just came up."

He moved away. I watched him, and the business turned out to be Jo. I didn't blame Shayne. In that green dress, with her chassis and her black hair and copper-brown eyes, I wouldn't have blamed anybody. I followed. The Shadow watched me. Probably he would watch me from now on, until one of us was dead.

I took Jo's arm. "Sorry, Shayne. This one's earmarked."

He took it slow, easy, and smiling. "Sure," he said. "Funny. I knew that the minute she came in."

After he was gone Jo said, "Gee, he's nice." She looked up at me and laughed. "The way you look now, there's no Ronald Colman. You'd scare the whole Warner Brothers' contract list!"

* * *

After he showed me the ropes, Molino took himself and his bum ticker out on the desert for a long rest, and I bought myself a bodyguard—four hired guns with no loyalties but their pay checks. I was all ready for trouble.

I didn't have any.

There's a lot of work to running a big gambling syndicate—the kind of work I take to like a pup to a pound of hamburger. A flock of tough babies to be kept in line, cops to be squared, collections to be made and checked, debts brought in, percentages figured. The collection and debt department belonged to Micky Shayne, and he was good at it, like me.

The funny thing was that Shayne and Shadow were very friendly, very co-operative. They went out of town on business a few weeks later, and we had a couple of drinks together before they left, all sweetness and light. I looked close, but I couldn't see anything phoney about it.

The new administration got a little muscular, but they turned out to be like most administrations. We got along fine, after I talked to them a few times. And the local cops were swell dropping in for a beer and a hand or two of poker. I quit worrying too much about maybe catching a rumble. T. Medbury seemed to be standing up okay. Jo and I got a swell little house in one of the swank suburbs and settled in.

She wasn't happy, though. She kept looking at me like she wondered if she knew me, and I'd catch her sometimes sitting all by herself, staring out the window at nothing.

I'd ask her what was wrong, and she'd give me the old headache routine. And then all of a sudden she broke down and said:

"Chris, I'm scared. Something's wrong. I don't know what, or why, but I know it. I dream about it nights."

"Just what do you mean, Jo?"

"Nothing. Just. . . Chris, why do you look at me like that?"

"Why do most guys look at you?"

"You weren't looking that way. . . . You still don't trust me, do you?"

"Sure I do."

"What could I do to you, Chris? I wouldn't have any way to hurt you, even

if I wanted to." She came and put her arms around me. "If I could only make you trust me! I love you so much."

I patted her. "You got the meemies, hon. Of course I trust you. Trouble is, you lived around Sligh so much you think everybody's a double-crossing heel. But Sligh's dead now."

"Yeah. I saw him in the coffin. He's dead."

"Sure. So forget him." I kissed her. I guess we both forgot about Sligh, and everyone else, for a while. But that night I didn't sleep.

And all this time, like I said, Micky Shayne and his Shadow were out of town, and the rest of the guys just took it easy, waiting.

Waiting. Yeah. Toward the end, I just about decided that Molino was really a sick man and seeing bogies where there weren't any. A lot of guys go that way, when they begin to slip. I remember I was thinking that that last night, when I went home.

Jo seemed funny all through dinner. Quiet, like a kid that's scared about some secret thing. It was different from those other moods she had. This was something alive and chewing on her. Finally I cuddled her up and told her to spill it.

"I guess I'll have to, Chris." She was curled up tight against me on the couch, and her fingers went around mine like she wanted to keep me from slipping away. She was trembling.

"Jardine called me up this afternoon."

"Jardine! Say, has that little—"

"I didn't want you to know about it, honey. He's been getting money out of me, too. Chris, don't look like that! You got to keep your temper. You know what'll happen to us if anything happens to Jardine."

I began to shake, too. "Okay," I said. "Go on."

"He's never called me or come here before. I always met him downtown. But he said over the phone that he was in a spot

and had to have the money fast, and it was more than I could give him. He sounded awful scared, and mean. Chris, what are we. . . ."

I kissed her. "We'll take care of it, baby. Don't worry." I got up and started for the hall closet.

Jo caught me. "Chris, you got to be careful!"

"I'll be careful. A set-up like this works two ways. I'm worth dough to Jardine, and that gives me a hold, too."

"I'm going, too."

"The hell you are!"

"You think I'm going to let you go alone and lose your temper and maybe do something terrible? I'm going, Chris!"

She went.

I didn't take the bodyguard. There was no need of it around Jardine. And a deal like that you don't spread around. Even a hired gun can get ideas.

Jardine lived in a fairly secluded separate house. I guess he had his reasons. The neighborhood was what you'd expect, flashy with dough but still cheap. Jardine's lights were on behind drawn shades, and a throaty-voiced dame was singing *How Sweet You Are* on the radio.

I rang the bell. I rang it twice, and then the door opened.

It opened fast. I saw the guy's arm raised up, and the sap in the hand of it, and all of them slashing down. I tried to get out of the way, but Jo was beside me in the doorway, hampering any move I made, and the damn thing came too fast.

I took it square on the crown of my hat. I fell down, and on the way I saw a man standing in the living room. It wasn't Jardine. It was the Shadow, and he was holding a revolver with a silencer on its nose, looking high as a lark and four times as happy.

I heard Jo cry out. I tried to get up again.

Something whacked me behind the ear, and then all the lights went out.

WHEN I could see again I was sitting in a big chair all by itself in the middle of the room. My gun, even my pocket knife, had been taken. The radio was still on, but softer, and it was giving a Strauss waltz. The lamplight was nice, quiet and rosy, only I couldn't see much of it. My head ached, and the ache came with flashes like sheet lightning, so I was half blind—but between flashes, I saw enough.

Jo sat crumpled in the corner of an overstuffed couch. Her hands were palm up on her thighs, limp like a dead woman's hands. She stared at me, not moving her lids, and her copper-brown eyes had a flat, burnished shine.

The Shadow leaned against the wall, facing me, still with that distant, happy look. His gun hand was cradled in the crook of his left arm, but I knew how fast it could come out, if I moved.

Shadow was one of those rare things—an honest-to-God dead shot.

Micky Shayne was the only one that looked perfectly normal. He lounged on the couch arm, smoking. His violet eyes were clear and innocently pleased, and he had one hand on Jo's shoulder, where he could feel her bare neck.

I didn't see Jardine. Nobody spoke.

After a while I said, not to anybody in particular, "Only four people knew about Jardine. Jardine, Molino, me, and Jo."

Shayne smiled. "There's going to be even less than that."

I looked at Jo.

Her mouth opened. Nothing came out. Her hands twitched in her lap. Her head swung a little from side to side.

No. That was all.

Shayne said, "You're through, Pop. You know that. I wanted to give you plenty of time to know that." He laughed pleasantly, and ran his thumb up under the lobe of Jo's ear and back again. "Molino's as stupid as he is yellow. Sending an old phutz like you up against me!"

I went on looking at Jo.

Shayne said, "You told me that night she was earmarked. She sure was. But I've kind of changed the brand." He rumbled up her short black curls. "White hair don't go with that, Pop." He leaned over and kissed her.

Jo gave one convulsive jerk and screamed.

You've heard cats scream like that, just before their spine snaps in the dog's jaws. She ripped it out right in Shayne's face, with their mouths touching. Shayne jumped back, and then swore and cracked her across the face.

"Damn you," he said. "You vixen!"

Jo didn't even blink. She tried to push past him, to come to me. He caught her and slapped her again, so hard it dazed her. She slid down to her knees, never taking her eyes off mine.

"Chris, I didn't tell him. I didn't tell him."

I didn't say anything.

"Chris," she whispered. "Chris." The tears ran out of her eyes and caught in the corners of her mouth and stood out on her white neck like diamonds. "I haven't seen Shayne. Not even once. Not since that first night."

I lay back and let the chair cushion hold my head up. I looked at Shayne. "You must have made a good deal with Jardine."

"Jardine? Oh, the little guy. Yeah."

"So now you're king snipe."

He nodded. His violet eyes were bright like a kid's on Christmas morning. "Molino's cracked up. He's yellow. And the rest of the bunch are right here." He held out his right hand and closed it. "They want new blood at the top, but not yours, Pop. We don't need any outside help whatever."

I nodded. I could feel the sweat coming out on my face. I held Shayne's gaze and laughed.

"Okay," I told him. "So you've got me. I guess maybe you can handle Molino, too.

But what about the big guy—the boy upstairs?"

Shayne stared at me. Shadow's dopey eyes got some life into them, and Jo's lids widened.

Shayne said, "What the hell are you talking about?"

Shadow chuckled softly. "Canary," he said. "Trying to scare us off with fairy tales."

"I said, 'You tell 'em, Jo.'"

"Chris, I don't understand. . . . What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking it's easy to have a funeral."

"Yeah," said Shayne. "No trouble at all. Listen, Pop, Molino's all there is and you know it. He don't work for anybody. After tonight, I won't work for anybody. And you won't work, period." He bent over and got Jo under the arms and started to lift her back on the couch, so he could hold her in case she tried to get in front of Shadow's gun. She was as limp as a wet rag, and about the same color.

"He doesn't believe you, baby," Shayne said. "You see what a louse he is. Okay, Shadow, he's all yours."

Shadow lifted the gun out of the crook of his arm. Slow, like a kid with one piece of candy, wanting to get every bit of the good out of it.

I pushed my feet hard against the thick pile of the carpet, threw my arms backward over my head and arched my body. I gave it everything I had. The armchair went clean over, away from Shadow. His bullet made a nasty little snarl over my head, but it was a clean miss. I rolled over my own shoulders, sheltered momentarily by the chair, and grabbed the cushion out of the seat.

Shadow didn't fire again right away. He was in no hurry, and he was enjoying himself.

Jo doubled up suddenly. She got her feet back between Shayne's, threw her weight forward, and tripped him flat before he even realized she was moving. He was fac-

ing toward me, and that's the way he fell. He wasn't eight feet away.

I threw the seat cushion at Shadow and made a dive after it.

Shadow was a damn good shot. I'll say that for him. Shayne's fall had distracted him and the cushion made him dodge, but even so he scraped the back of my shoulder with a bullet before I could cross that eight feet of space.

I got myself on top of Jo and Shayne, and after that Shadow didn't dare shoot until something came clear of the tangle.

YOU are never just sure afterward what happened in a fight like that. I think I took a few stiff ones, but the way it wound up I was lying on my back with Shayne on top of me, my legs locked around his and my left arm around his neck as tight as I could hold it. Our right hands were both wrestling for the same gun, which happened to be mine.

Jo had crawled clear, shaking her head like she'd stopped a good one. Shadow was walking around on his toes, and he didn't look happy now. Shayne began to make noises like strangling.

The Shadow took his finger off the trigger and laid it along the barrel, and got hold of my head by the hair.

I yelled. Jo pitched into him. They both fell on top of us and Shayne's gun hand was pinned down. I got my own right loose and began throwing in short ones to his temple. Between that and the throttling and the weight on his stomach, he quit.

I clawed Shayne's gun out of his shoulder clip. I tried to get loose, but it was no dice. Jo was lying beside us, as limp as wet macaroni, and I didn't know if she was dead or not.

Shadow wasn't dead. He was up.

I fired first and jarred his aim a little. We both missed. We tried again, and just by the split fraction of a second I beat him. His slug went past my cheek close enough to burn it, and then he sat down, very slow

and sedate, in a chair that happened to be behind him. Blood came out on his light blue coat. His right hand lay along the chair arm, still holding the gun, but his eyes weren't focused on me. They were way off somewhere, looking at a new world and pretty surprised about it. He was still breathing, but it didn't matter.

Jo was beginning to come around. She had only got clipped. Shayne started to moan and jerk. I got my hand in his hair and pulled his head back so his jaw stood out clear.

"Old phutz," I said. I slammed the gun barrel down. "Old phutz, huh?"

He didn't answer. I didn't think he would. I rolled him off me and got up. The room started to go round and my insides heaved up under my chin. I shut my eyes and took some deep breaths, and the feeling passed off enough so I knew I was all right. I heard Jo, then, saying my name.

Her dress was torn off her shoulder, and her skin showed white as new milk against the green. Her hair was tumbled, her eyes wide and tear-stained, and she looked younger and softer, like when I first knew her, and so beautiful it hurt. The life was beating in her so strong that it glowed like fire in a dark place. Her mouth was open, trembling, eager.

"Now do you believe me, Chris?"

I pulled her to me. Her arms went around me, and mine around her, my fingers in the warm silk of her hair at the back of her neck. I put my mouth over hers.

"Now do you believe?" she whispered.

It took me a long time to answer. Then, "Yeah," I said. "I believe you."

I wasn't looking at Jo. I was looking over her head, at Ray Jardine.

* * *

He stood in the door to the back wall. There was blood on the front of his rumpled gray suit, so you could hardly see it was gray any more. He was cursing, and blood trickled out of his mouth while he

did it. Sometimes he choked on it. He'd been shot through the lungs and he was dying on his feet, but he didn't seem to care. He didn't seem to see me, or Jo. He started to walk toward Shadow.

"You want to kill my bank account," he said. "Chris. My bank account. You want to kill him."

Shadow sat up in his chair, with the gun leveled square on Jardine's belly. A faint light of recognition crawled into his eyes, dragging them back from wherever they'd been.

Jardine went on walking. He went on cursing. He didn't mind the gun. "You and Shayne, you dirty scuts. Don't touch him!"

Shadow's face sort of crumpled apart, and all that was left was a bleak and stricken horror.

"I killed you," he told Jardine. "Through the heart, an hour ago."

Jardine went on, one foot before the other.

"My God," whispered Shadow. "I made a bad shot. I missed."

That was the thought he took to hell with him. He was dead before Jardine touched him. Jardine sort of pawed at him, maybe with the idea of strangling him, and then slipped down so that he was kneeling at Shadow's feet, whimpering and choking.

I went over to him. "Ray," I said. "Ray, it's me, Chris. I'm all right."

He was going now, with a rush. He didn't see me, didn't know who I was.

"Chris," he said, the words coming slow and without form. "Good guy. Smart. But I hung the frame on him." He was pleased about that. "I put him on ice for Sligh." He shook my hand off him and tried to crawl away, retching the blood out of his throat. "Sligh!" he yelled. "Sligh, I got him here for you. I broke him out and I got him for you. You got to boost my cut, Sligh. After Molino goes. . . ."

He wavered on his hands and knees. "Sligh," he said pitifully.

His voice went up to a childlike wail, and choked off. He pitched down on his face and stayed there. He didn't even twitch.

I began to laugh. I felt good, and the laughter sounded that way. Jo looked stunned.

"Chris. . . . He couldn't have meant that. He was delirious. Sligh's dead. I saw him!"

I said, "Sure you did, honey."

"Oh, God—and now they'll know about you—the police, Chris. Jardine's dead, and they'll know." She came up and took my wrists, and her fingers were ice cold. "Chris, look at me! Chris!"

I did. She let go of me and took two or three steps backward. She didn't say anything more. I turned around to the phone, and on the way I caught a glimpse of my face in a wall mirror. I looked young and happy, like I did when I was a kid with nothing more to worry about than which girl I should take out on Saturday night.

I called Georgie Molino.

"Medbury speaking. Yeah. You can relax now, Georgie—the Shayne - Shadow business is all cleaned up. They—decided to go away for a little vacation. Yeah. Oh—and, Georgie, Jardine went with 'em. Yeah at Shadow's special request. Before he left he told me to remember him to our mutual friend." I let that sink in, and then I said, "I'm starting for your place now."

He said slowly, "All right. We'll plan to have breakfast together, the four of us. You're bringing Jo, of course."

"Of course. So long, Georgie."

I hung up and went back to Shayne. He was still out cold. I dragged him out into the back hall and tied him up, with his ankles drawn up to his wrists behind his back. I wasn't very careful about making him comfortable. I wanted him to be there, when I wanted him. He was breathing all right. I shoved a gag in his mouth, locked all the doors into the hall and then the one into the living room. I thought Shayne would be safe.

All the time Jo watched me without saying a word. After I was all through she said:

"You told Molino that Shayne was dead."

I nodded, punching the crown of my hat back in shape.

"Why, Chris? What's going on? All this about Sligh. . . . Chris, you've got to come back and tell me!"

"What do you mean, come back?"

"You've gone away. You're not Chris any more, at all. You're somebody I don't know, and I'm afraid of you."

I turned off the radio, and the lamps. "Come on, kitten. We go now."

"Chris, you've got to tell me!"

Her voice had a horrible sound in the dark.

"Sligh's dead! I saw him buried! What's the matter with you, Chris? What are you thinking? Why are you treating me like this?"

Her face strained up at me. It was only a pale blur in the darkness, without shape of features, but I could see it. I could see it more clearly than I ever had in my life before.

I struck her, with the palm of my hand and then the back of it. The blows sounded almost as loud as shots against her cheeks. She let her breath out, hard. I caught her before she fell, and carried her out to the car. Nobody saw us. Everything was peaceful under the stars and the palm trees when I drove away.

I was not feeling good, then.

CHAPTER THREE

The Corpse Steps Out

THE dawn blazed up red over the desert. Jo sat back in her corner of the seat, her face swollen and sulky, her eyes half shut. I didn't know how long she'd been conscious. She didn't speak, and neither did I. The sun was well up when

I turned off onto Georgie Molino's private road.

They were waiting for us on the terrace. The house was like most of those desert palaces—low and sprawling and cool, with red roofs and thick white walls and a lot of wood and iron showing for trim. The terrace was a broad, tiled, semi-patio thing, with a hell of a view—miles of desert, and a line of misty blue hills beyond. The table was set for breakfast, everything very rustic in the expensive department-store manner, and they were sitting there waiting, smoking their early-morning cigarettes.

I stopped the car and went around and opened Jo's door and helped her out. She didn't look at me. We climbed the shallow steps together. In the background were the long windows, or doors, that opened into the living room. I saw one of the curtains move, and I knew I was covered. I didn't make any sudden moves, taking my hat off and tossing it on a table.

Sligh got to his feet and said, "Well, Chris." He was smiling, but only with his mouth. He looked a lot like Jo—same copper hair and eyes, almost the same face, only masculine and hard. A big, well-kept, handsome guy with a swell personality. I used to love him like a brother.

I said, "Hello, Sligh." I nodded to Georgie and sat down. Jo was still standing by the wall at the top of the steps. She was studying Sligh, her eyes sunk deep under reddened, puffy lids. Her face was so white you could see the blue marks where I had hit her as though they'd been painted on with a brush.

"So it was all a frame-up," she whispered. "A lie from beginning to end. The telegram, the funeral, the whole thing. You were alive, lying there in that coffin. You never told me about Molino. You never told me about Jardine. You just used me for bait, to draw Chris back."

Sligh sat down again, smiling. "Don't take it so hard, kid. A guy has to use what he's got. Anyway, you should beef. You've

got Chris back." He looked at the blue marks, and laughed. "Or have you?"

Jo walked over to the breakfast table. She had the pot of scalding coffee in her hands before Sligh got hold of her. She fought him for a minute like a wildcat, and then she seemed to have reached the end of her rope. She crumpled up, and Sligh dumped her in a chair, and she stayed there. Sligh sat down again.

"Well," he said. "So Jardine spilled over."

I said, "Yeah."

"You don't seem very surprised."

"I had fourteen years with nothing much to do but think about life and people, Sligh. I knew Jardine pretty well, and I knew you pretty well. Jo—well, who could ever figure a dame? Jardine could have been telling the truth, so could Jo. But the whole set-up was so pat and pretty that I kept an open mind on the question. No, I wasn't too much surprised."

Sligh nodded. "Well, it doesn't matter. Only three or four people know I'm really the guy behind Georgie. I've kept it quiet for two reasons, besides you, Chris. There's a couple of boys from the old mob who'd be glad to catch up with me, for one thing, and then there's the cops. I've never been booked, but they might remember me if it got around, and maybe they're not as dumb as the movies make 'em out. I'd just as soon they didn't have to worry about me."

He paused, and then said, "We've done pretty well by you, haven't we, Chris—Georgie and me?"

"Yeah. Pretty well."

That was the whole idea behind the set-up; to put me in debt to Sligh, and incidentally Molino, for the crash-out, the hideaway, the protection, the disguise. And more than that. I was to start living again, to feel the reins in my hands and get back the taste of power and good green dollar bills, so that when I finally found out about Sligh I would be willing to let bygones be bygones for the sake of them.

Sligh grinned. "I had an idea I better keep out of your way for a while, until you kind of cooled off. I wanted you to enjoy yourself. That's why I framed my own kill. Even Jo didn't know about that." He chuckled. "Jo didn't know about anything. I had better places to spend my money than on her, and besides, she was a hell of a good front for me."

I didn't say anything. Sligh studied me for a while. Molino just sat quiet and smoked. This wasn't his party. Sligh said finally:

"How are you taking it, Chris?"

I shrugged. "Jardine told me once, times change and you got to change with them. I'm taking the realistic view."

He didn't answer for a long time. He was testing me, running my voice, my expression, the way I was sitting, through a mental filter and studying what came out. Finally he said quietly:

"You understand why I had to frame you that time. You were too big and too dangerous to run loose."

"I understand. Jardine said he did that for you."

"A lot of it. I'm sorry to lose the little rascal—he was a handy guy for anything dirty."

"Yeah, very. I suppose that yarn about information going to the cops in case Jardine got bumped was just a little club to keep me in line."

"Naturally. A guy in Jardine's business can get killed too many ways to take a chance on anything like that. We just wanted to slow you down in case you felt like wringing his neck."

We smoked awhile longer, without speaking, and then Sligh went on:

"You won't forget that framing, or those years in a cell. I know that. But we don't have to like each other. We don't even have to see each other very often. This is business, big business, and I'm willing to run any risk involved."

"It must be big business."

"Biggest you ever saw. The gambling syndicate alone is big enough. But we're forming a sort of black market combine with the gambling syndicate for a front. That's why I needed your brains again. And there's more to it than that. The Prohibitionists are setting up a big holler again. We're pushing that campaign. If we can get dry laws in again, by God, we'll own the country within ten years! Even the government can't stop us!"

He was excited, flushed, and talking too loud. Sweat trickled down under my armpits, but my hands were cold.

"Hell!" I said. "As big as that!"

"Yeah. You can see why I had to have you, Chris. Georgie here, he's a good man, but he's sick. He's got to quit."

Molino nodded heavily. "That's right. And, anyway, I never was as good a man as you, Chris."

"Then why did you make me go up against those two hot-rod pals of yours? Hell, I might have been killed!"

Sligh said, "We had to find out something, Chris. Prison does one of two things to a guy, when he's in for as long as you were. It breaks him down, or it hardens him so he can handle anything. We had to know which way you went."

"Now you know," I told him.

SLIGH chuckled. "You sure have lost your aversion to rough stuff! Good, too. That was your only weak point. It is what ruined you the first time. . . . By the way, how the hell did Shayne get onto Jardine?"

"He didn't have time to tell me, but I can make a guess. He and Shadow didn't go out of town at all. They were looking for a safe way to get me. So they checked up on Jo and found out Jardine was black-mailing her, and maybe me, too. But Shayne didn't bother to find out what about. Most blackmailer's dope isn't of any interest to anyone but the victim, and all Shayne wanted was a way to get me

off guard at Jardine's house. He didn't have any reason to think Tom Medbury might be somebody else, or guess that there was anybody standing behind Jardine and Molino."

"Uh-huh. No traces of you or Jo around the place?"

"No. And no connection between us and Jardine, as far as anyone knows. Georgie may have some talking to do—they were his boys."

"Obviously it was a private quarrel," Georgie said. "I never heard of Jardine. He may have been squeezing them some way. Too bad. I'll give 'em a swell funeral . . . after the cops find 'em."

There was another silence. Jo sat huddled up in her chair, watching me the way a snake does, split-eyed and unwinking. Presently Sligh got up and crushed out his butt.

"Okay, Chris? You going to string along?"

"What else have I got to do?"

"I'm glad you see it that way. I guess you don't want to shake hands on it, though."

"No."

"Fair enough. Let's keep it that way—strictly business." He let out a deep sigh. "Well, folks, how about some food? I'm starving!"

We had breakfast. It was a good breakfast, plenty of eggs and bacon and thick cream and butter. Jo had black coffee and then went away, up to our old room, I guess, without saying one word. Finally Sligh pushed his chair back.

"I guess it's time to talk business, Chris. I got the whole layout in the library, just roughed out. I want you to look it over."

We all got up, and Georgie said, "Well, I guess I'll go have a smoke in the garden."

He turned away and walked down the steps. He looked old and kind of shrunken, and he walked the way a man does when he isn't going anywhere and has all the rest of his life to get there in.

I went inside with Sligh, into the library, and closed the door. There was nobody in the house but the three of us and Jo, and probably a couple of Sligh's boys. At least one, I knew that. The place was familiar, from many nights I spent there with Jo curled up beside me in front of an open fire. There was an alcove with a mess of bronze statuary in it at the far end. The red velvet portières were shoved back, like always. Clear sunlight poured in through the windows.

Sligh went over to the desk, taking a key out of his pocket. I went along. I was a little behind him, working on my pipe to get it drawing right. He bent and put the key in the drawer lock.

I let the pipe and the match go and grabbed Sligh around the neck with my left arm, so that he made a shield for my body. Just before I pulled him into me, I cleared my gun and fired twice into the red velvet hangings of the alcove.

Nothing happened for a minute except that Sligh started to fight and then changed his mind when I jammed my hot barrel into his back. I moved us a little so I could see the door. And then a little dark guy fell slowly out from behind one of the portières, curled himself up on the floor and stayed there. His heavy Colt auto slid out of his hand.

"Yeah," I said. "That's what I thought. You were smart not to trust me, chum."

The walls of the house, like I said, were heavy and thick. The noise of my shots wouldn't have carried far. But someone must have been hanging around close outside, because a man's voice called through the door:

"You okay, Sligh?"

I said, "He's just fine, sonny. Come on in." Sligh yelled a warning, and I laughed. I kept my gun where it was, jammed into Sligh's middle. The man did not come in. We stood waiting, the two of us, and I said softly to Sligh:

"You were right, I won't forget the

framing and those fourteen years in a cell. Why do you think I played along? Why do you think I belly-crawled to Jardine; and Molino, and you? Because I had a little debt to pay, and I wanted to be sure nobody got left out.

"Did you think I was so dumb I couldn't guess at what was coming? Sooner or later, if you were alive, you had to show. I wasn't in any hurry, Sligh. Time sort of loses its meaning, after fourteen years where all the days look alike. Shayne got to Jardine first, damn him. But I'm here now, Sligh, with you and your stinkin' little black market combine. You don't deserve shooting, Sligh. You ought to be stepped on, like a snake."

The door began to open, very slow, very quiet, about an inch. Just enough to get a gun barrel through and sight it. The panel was heavy, a double slab of oak strapped with iron. I turned a little more, holding Sligh in front of me, my gun digging his ribs. I could feel him shake. I watched the crack in the door.

But the shot came from the other end of the room.

My legs went out from under me. It was funny, the way it didn't hurt. One second I was standing up, and the next I was down flat. I remember Sligh kicked the gun out of my hand. From where I was lying I could see past the corner of the desk, and there was the little dark punk I shot out of the alcove, crouched over his knees, steadying his rod with both hands.

He looked at me. You ever seen the way a born killer looks at somebody he hates? He tried to fire again, but he couldn't hold onto the gun any longer. It hit the floor, and he hemorrhaged and fell over. This time he would stay down.

Sligh booted me one in the guts about that time, and I'm not too sure what happened afterward. The guy must have come in out of the hall and the two of them boosted me up on the big davenport in front of the fireplace, because that's where

I was when I finally shook the thunderstorm out of my head. I was not feeling very good. Somebody poured a slug of brandy down me, and then I got the idea there was something wrong with my legs. I leaned forward to look.

There was. The punk's .45 slug had smashed through my left knee and stuck somewhere a little higher up in my right thigh.

I must have been standing full profile, all lined up to his sights.

Sligh leaned against the mantel, facing me. He was over his scare now, and his mad. He looked cold, businesslike, and nasty.

"You okay now?" he asked me. "You know what I'm saying to you and you know what you're saying back?"

"Yeah."

"All right. Get this, Chris. I need your brains, I need your ability. There isn't another man I know of that's big enough to make a go of this business—crooks are a dumb lot, by and large. So I don't blame you for bearing a grudge. I don't blame you for trying to get me. But now you've had your fun, and you know where you are. Will you throw in with me, on a pretty damn generous deal, considering everything?"

"No."

"Think it over, Chris. You can be—" Jo's voice floated in from somewhere. The words didn't register right away. I turned my head and she was standing there in the doorway looking at me and Sligh and the third guy, holding a hell of a great big gun gripped in her hands.

She had them covered, and she had them off guard. I think Sligh had forgotten she was alive. His gun lay with mine on the desk. He hadn't thought about needing it again—why should he? The other boy made kind of an instinctive movement toward his coat. Jo snarled at him and he quit, looking at Sligh to see what he should do.

SLIGH just stared at her and said, "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"What I've been wanting to do for fourteen years." Her lopsided face was pasty-white except for the bruises. Her eyes were all red and puffy, not as though she had cried, but as though she wanted to and couldn't. Her mouth was set. It was Sligh's mouth now.

"You've messed up my life so it'll never be worth anything," she said, talking to Sligh. Her tone was slow and expressionless. "You've used me and kicked me around and treated me like dirt, and I've taken it, because I had a reason. I don't have a reason any more." She looked at me. "You were just using me, like Sligh. All right, Chris, you got what you wanted. You're in with him, in his dirty rotten racket. You're no better than he is and I . . ."

Sligh threw back his head and roared with laughter. "Chris! You hear that, Chris? Stand up and show the lady!" He laughed louder. "Go ahead and shoot him, Jo. He'd thank you for it."

Jo scowled at him suspiciously. Then she looked at me again. I tried to turn around, to see what was going on in back of me. There was sunlight on me from the high windows. I guess Jo got a better look this time. She said, "Chris!" uncertainly, and moved forward.

I saw the third guy going for his gun.

I yelled to Jo. She saw him too, and fired, a snap shot that hit dead center the way those things sometimes do. The guy never cleared his rod at all. He spun around and flopped, and Jo started running across the room to me.

There was a long table behind the davenport. There was a bowl of flowers on it, and some little decorative gadgets, and book ends. I twisted over and grabbed the bowl of flowers and threw it. I didn't wait to see if it hit. I pulled myself up on the arm of the davenport and pitched forward.

Jo was close enough to me so I could catch her legs when I fell. She came down. I heard Sligh's shot and the thin *whang!* of the bullet overhead. Then I had the gun out of Jo's hand.

I fired at Sligh, and missed. I couldn't see very well. I heard Jo scream my name. She lurched against me, and there was another shot, and then Sligh came clear of the mists for a minute and I shot him straight between the eyes. I watched him fall.

He looked as big as a giant redwood, crashing down.

For a while there was dead silence; I don't know how long. Then Jo began to curse softly under her breath. Her face was all screwed up. I got terribly afraid all of a sudden.

"Did he get you, Jo?"

"Yeah."

"What happened? I thought I had you covered. . . ."

"You did, Chris. But he had you, he was going to shoot, and I managed to take it. I had to take it, Chris. I couldn't stand losing you again."

"But where did he get you? Is it bad?"

She laughed loudly. "I can't tell you where he got me, only I'll be standing to meals for a while. Ain't that romantic?" She must have heard the edge her voice was getting on it, because she shut up and lay in my arms shivering for a while. Then she whispered:

"Are you hurt very bad, darling?"

"Not so it'll kill me. Where's Georgie?"

"Down by the pool, I think."

I dragged myself over to the low table

where the phone was, not very far away. Jo said, "You going to call the law, Chris?"

"Yeah. I'm going to give 'em the whole set-up, and then take whatever they want to give me. With luck, with what Molino and that Shayne louse can tell, with Sligh's plans for the combine to show them, I should get a decent break.

"I don't know what they'll do about it, Jo, but we've got to get on the other side of things if we can. There'll never be any happiness for either of us if we don't make a clean break and stop playing it crooked. I'll throw the dice that way, and take my chances on the outcome."

She came over to me. I took her in my arms and kissed her. "If you want to clear out, now's your time," I told her.

Her copper-brown eyes blazed. They were normal again, Jo's eyes, full of life and spirit. She said, "If you weren't a cripple I'd pay you back those wallops you gave me last night."

"I'm sorry about that, Jo."

"Well, I guess I can see how you felt. But you're never going to get rid of me again, Chris, no matter what happens."

She put her arms around me, tight. I reached the phone down off the table.

"Chris. . . ."

"Yeah."

"You do love me? You'll always love me?"

I let go of the phone. Pretty soon she sighed and nestled her head against me. I laid my gun where I could get it quick if Georgie came in, and picked up the phone again.

Tax On Crime

By DON GREEN

Last year, Adam Taylor of Cleveland had a hunch. Something told him he was slated to get money for nothing. Trusting his luck, he went out and committed a robbery instead of going to the movies. Police, unsuperstitious, didn't like his explanation, sent him to prison.

In jail, he received a telegram from the management of the theatre he hadn't gone to. Seems he would have been the winner of a thousand dollar bank night prize, if he'd been present. As consolation, he was offered ten dollars, if he would come the following week. But Adam just couldn't get out nights any more.

(Continued from page 12)

was the coldness, not Wilson, that spoke: "You shouldn't have said that, Helen." It was the coldness that turned the car onto the shoulder of the road, slammed on the brakes, turned off the motor. In the silence, the coldness grew, pressing behind his eyeballs, tautening the skin of his forehead. He saw his hands reach out.

The girl's eyes widened, rings of white around the dark blue irises. "What's the matter with you?" she whispered. "Get your hands off me!" His hand was fumbling toward her throat. She pushed at it, then screamed and struck him in the face.

The coldness felt nothing, not the repeated blows, not the feel of her flesh under his hand.

Her fingers clawed at the dashboard compartment, came out with a small electric iron. He saw it, and his own hand reached out and took it away from her. The coldness liked it. She screamed once more, just before he struck.

She was not moving any more. Wilson stared. His hand went out clumsily to push at her. Her head lolled over; the latch of the door clicked and she sprawled abruptly out over the sill.

Wilson got out to follow her. He pushed her off the running board as he stepped down, and she rolled over on the hard baked earth. Was she dead? He could still hear her screaming. The sound did not seem to come from her limp body, echoing rather from all around him, from the sky, from the earth. But if she screamed, she might be alive. That was it; he must kill her again.

He looked at the red iron in his hand uncertainly, then dropped it inside the car. He picked up her gray polo coat from the front seat. Kneeling, he wrapped it around her head and pressed, pressed. . . .

After a while the screaming stopped. But he could still feel her presence all around him. How could she be dead, if

she was still there? *Why won't you die?* the coldness asked.

A piece of rope. That was it. There was no rope, but he found a length of string in the compartment. It would have to do. Carefully he knotted it around her throat, drew it tight until it sank into her flesh; tighter until he was afraid it would break and release her. At last he stood up. She was dead now; he could tell, because the coldness was going away. "You're dead," he told her.

Was this really he, himself, standing over a corpse? He groped frantically for reality, and it was nowhere. *Your name is Arthur Wilson*, he told himself. *You have just killed a woman*. It didn't make sense; he had to keep telling himself what to do. Identification. He must destroy the identification. He stooped and began to take the labels from her clothes. When he was done, he picked her up and put her back in the car. There was a side road up ahead, screened by cottonwood trees. He drove up it until he was out of sight of the road, then carried her body a hundred yards away and dropped it.

The limp, sprawled body was not right, somehow. He could not leave her like that. He thought a moment, images running through his head fuzzily, in slow motion. Then he stooped and carefully propped her up, legs under her, head resting on folded arms.

John Cravens, a cowhand, found the body on the morning of November 7, 1933. Walking down toward the highway from the ranch for which he worked, he noticed a gleam of white from the desert to his left. It had not been there the last time he'd come this way. He walked toward it, then broke into a run as suspicion became certainty.

Kneeling there alone in the desert, the woman had apparently been dead for several days. The head and face were horribly battered. In the flesh of the face, pressed there so deeply that it had

Escape Me Never

remained, was a gray button from a coat. A string was tied around her neck.

Cravens notified Sheriff Chris Fox of El Paso, and the body was taken to the morgue in that city. The sheriff made a cursory examination, but there was little to work on. The woman's age was estimated at 22. There were no birthmarks, scars or other identifying marks. The face was beyond recognition.

It was impossible to say what the motive of the crime had been. Cause of death, according to the coroner, was fracture of the skull. The cord around her neck, the button in her cheek, were enigmas.

Sheriff Fox followed several false leads: a woman of about the dead girl's age and height who had complained of being followed; another who had been reported missing. Both eventually turned up safe and sound. Then a gang of workmen stumbled across paper-wrapped bundles in a culvert near Pecos. Opening the bundles, they found a collection of partly burned woman's clothing: a sweater, hat, shoes, a gray polo coat.

Fox examined the clothing. The buttons on the coat matched perfectly the one found embedded in the dead girl's cheek. It was the first lead. A week later came the second: a tourist-cabin owner and his wife who had a strange story to tell.

Wilson drove on aimlessly, sometimes slow, sometimes at breakneck speed. Something drove him; he could not remember what. There were moments of clearness when he recalled what he had been and thought, the plans he had built; but they faded quickly into the gray half-world in which he lived.

It was late at night when he came to the tourist cabins. He got out and roused the proprietress. Something of his old fluency came back as he apologized for the lateness of the hour and asked for a cabin; but it was like a stranger speaking with his mouth.

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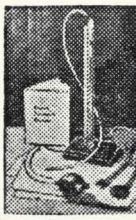
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New Detective Magazine

In the cabin, it suddenly struck him how inquisitively the woman had peered at his shiny new Buick, at the woman's clothing heaped in the front seat. He felt uneasy, in danger. Something clicked in his hazy mind. Identification. Yes, again. He must destroy all the evidence of his own identity. Then they could never catch him.

He emptied his pockets. Letters, papers bearing his name, he tore into pieces and flushed down the drain. Then he remembered something else. The iron! There was blood on it. And the clothes—should he destroy them? That would have to wait until morning. He got the iron out of the car and scrubbed it with soap and water. The redness swam before his eyes. It would not go away. He washed it again and again, hour after hour, but the redness stayed—no longer the stain of clotted blood, but an aura, something about the metal itself, a red will-o'-the-wisp.

Dawn came, and as the light strengthened, it seemed to him that the redness faded slowly away until the iron was clean and bright. He felt a great relief. He put the iron under the bed, walked out to the car and drove away. Now there were only a few things left to be done.

He tried to burn the clothes a few miles from the tourist camp, outside Pecos; but they burned badly, smoking a great deal, and cars were beginning to appear on the highway. He left them in the culvert. With luck, they would rot away and no one would be the wiser.

Then there was the upholstery. He thought a long time about that. Finally he ripped out the bloody portions and threw them away. In Tulsa, he sold the car to a second-hand dealer, saying that Mexicans had robbed him and ripped the upholstery. So much for that. Now there was only one item left: his bloodstained suit and shirt.

He could not burn them, that was too

Escape Me Never

dangerous. At last he had a magnificent idea—mail them! He knew a girl in Cleveland who would destroy them for him and ask no questions. He sent them off. Now it was all done; now he was free.

Back at Pecos, Sheriff Fox had retrieved the watersoaked bits of paper from the plumbing in the tourist cabin. On one of them, still perfectly legible, were Arthur Wilson's name and his Cleveland address. Fox got in touch with the Cleveland police.

The gears began to mesh. Sergeant Bernard Wolf did the legwork in Cleveland; District Attorney Roy Jackson took up the trail in El Paso. The dead woman was identified, and the murder weapon had been found. The girl in Cleveland was questioned and told what she knew. The car was found in Tulsa, and the second-hand dealer told his story. Descriptions and photographs were sent broadcast over the country, to every village and hamlet. Newspapers sprouted pictures and black type.

Wilson kept on the move. As time passed, the living nightmare of those first days crystallized into a garish world in which he moved as naturally as a fish in water. The god of his new world was Fear, and it hovered always just beyond the rearward horizon. So long as you fled from the god, it would not hurt you. Wilson went from Texas to Oklahoma, to Cleveland, to Washington. In Washington he tried to get a passport to Germany, but he could not stay long enough; he felt that he had to keep moving or die. He tried New York, then Boston; at last he took ship to Nova Scotia.

The police had missed him narrowly in Washington and again in New York. They traced him finally to Nova Scotia, but there the trail ended.

On the *Lady Nelson*, a Canadian steamer on the South American run, Steward "Robert Jones" moved constant-

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New Detective Magazine

ly on the policeless sea. He lived quietly on a floating city that fed him, paid him, gave him occupation—and left the fear-god forever behind. He had had some bad moments, but he had carried it off. He had committed not one, but two perfect crimes. That is, Arthur Wilson had. He, of course, was no longer Wilson. And you couldn't execute one man for the acts of another; it was as simple as that.

When one of the seamen came up to him with Wilson's picture in a detective magazine, he was only mildly startled. "Say, Jones, take a look at this," the man said. "This fellow Wilson is your spit an' image."

Jones looked at it casually. "No, hardly that," he said. "Same general type, that's all."

He was not warned. It was so abundantly clear to him that he was a new person, it did not occur to him that others might not think so. Even when he was placed under arrest a month later, he felt nothing but surprise and outrage. The seaman, it appeared, had taken surreptitious snapshots of him and had them forwarded to Sheriff Fox. Wireless messages had bridged ship and shore.

Wilson-Jones was put ashore at Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, and held for extradition. Protesting that it was all an incredible mistake, he almost convinced the local authorities. But two of the law officers who had hunted him for so long flew out from Texas and brought him back.

Now the fear-god came back, and there was no escape. The hot Texas desert came back, and the bloody iron, and all that was Arthur Wilson. Abjectly he confessed, telling all that his distorted brain remembered. The state demanded death, but one juror wavered, and the sentence he received was 99 years in the state penitentiary.

He is still there today.

THE COCKEYED CASEBOOK

THOUGH bigamy is not among the more common crimes, those guilty of it frequently go in for multiple marriage on a large scale. In Sheffield, England, a rather homely young bigamist confessed that from the age of nineteen to twenty-four she went through the marriage ceremony with just sixty-one men. Without bothering to secure a single divorce, she averaged snaring a new husband every thirty days for the five-year period.

No cheap crook was Thomas Robinson, Jr. Sixteen years ago, he kidnaped a Louisville matron at gunpoint, received fifty thousand dollars ransom money for her safe return. Later captured and sent to Alcatraz for life, he felt the place was beneath him. Formerly a college man, he now studied law in jail, and seven years later, forced the state to give him a retrial on a little-known technicality. There was nothing cheap about the second trial, either—it cost the government another fifty thousand, but it cost Robinson even more.

The second penalty, one he could barely afford, was death.

Marie Louise Gilot was the happiest woman in Paris. She loved her home, her five children, and her artist husband. There was only one problem. Without Marie's help, Gilot's paintings did not seem to sell. So she helped. Acting as his agent, she took out his paintings, and returned with good cash prices for them, totaling forty thousand dollars in seven years. Recently, police discovered, she had not made a cent selling her husband's art—instead, she had been a burglar and her money came from fences. Sadly, they sent her to jail, informed Artist Gilot of her mistaken devotion. Gilot was not grateful to the wife who had risked her liberty for love.

Burglary he could have forgiven, but—

It seems she had torn up his paintings and thrown them in ashcans, as soon as she was out of sight of his studio.

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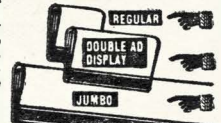
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