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THE BLONDE FROM BLOOD ALLEY

A NOVELETTE

by MERLE CONSTINER

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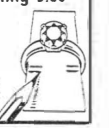

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Vol. 18 Contents for December, 1952 No. 3

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SHORT STORIES

DEPARTMENTS AND FEATURES

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THE WITNESS CHAIR

GREED, jealousy and revenge are the outstanding urges that bring about murders. And the triple murder that began with a baby-sized doll and finished on the gallows was a murky composite of all three—a terrifying miasma that gave the Royal Mounted Canadian Police stationed in New Brunswick the hardest problem of its experienced career.

When Otto Blakney stepped out of his cabin that January morning, the ground was covered deep with snow. The nearest cabin was a mile away, around a bend of the road. But a sudden longing for companionship in the white monotony made him decide to drop in on the Lakes.

The way led through the woods. As he came out on the road, he glanced to his right. Then he gasped and broke into a run. For where the night before had stood the Lake cabin now was a smouldering ruin.

There was nothing he could do. Among the debris he could make out a skeleton, the skull glistening among the ashes. Close to it lay a pitiful, scorched pile of small bones.

"That must be the baby," thought Blakney.

Woodsman that he was, his eye was next caught by a double set of footprints leading from the ruins. He knew enough to keep away from those tracks. But running alongside he followed them and, about a quarter of a mile farther, came upon the body of a woman, covered by a towel, bedded deep in the snow.

It was Bertha Lake. And close to her lay a small figure, frozen stiff. This was two-year-old Jackie Lake.

Blakney hurried on to the home of Mr. and Mrs. Omar Lutes. After telling Mrs. Lutes of the tragedy, he raced on to the railroad station at Pacific Junction where Omar Lutes was the station master. Here he would find a telephone and could notify the Moncton police.

Shortly before noon Sergeant B. P. Peters, Constable J. M. Fenwick and Dr. Caldwell had arrived at Pacific Junction, and

(Continued on page 8)

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(Continued from page 6)

the reconstruction of the tragedy began. Bertha Lake had probably been taking a bath when the flames began to devour the cabin. She had rushed out with Jackie, probably expecting her husband to follow with five-months-old Peggy Ann. For some reason Phil Lake had not followed.

But Dr. Caldwell's medical examination disclosed more sinister implications. Mrs. Lake's head had been bashed in by repeated blows. She had died in the snow where she fell. And, some distance away, the keen eyes of Sergeant Peters discovered a trail of footprints leading eastward. They would follow this trail as soon as they had removed the bodies.

The charred remains of Lake were put on a toboggan and taken to the handcar which had brought the three men from Moncton. Another bore the skeleton. One of the men carried the frozen body of Jackie Lake. And that pathetic heap of small bones, gently scraped into a box, went along.

Not much was known about the Lake family. They had moved into the cabin at Pacific Junction shortly before the birth of Jackie. He made a living snaring rabbits, using the meat for food and selling the pelts. During the summer he took odd jobs with neighborhood farmers. Somehow the Lakes had made out.

No one could imagine the Lakes with money, so murder for profit was out. Jealousy? The Lakes were a devoted couple. Neither had been seen with anyone else. Bertha Lake seldom came to Moncton. Lake was too busy earning a living to give another woman a thought.

That left revenge as a possible motive. The Lakes had never talked of their early days. Neither Blakney nor the Lutes, who had known them best, knew anything about them.

In the meantime, Sergeants Peters and Fenwick were trailing those footprints that led from the spot where Bertha Lake and her small son had been found.

The snow had been falling steadily that Sunday, stopping only around midnight. It lay three feet deep. Since the prints were still discernible, it meant they had been made after the snowfall had stopped.

There were three sets of prints. Usually after a heavy snowfall people walked along the railroad tracks, but the prints cut across the country, through woods and along back trails. They led, however, in a straight line for Berry Mills, the nearest settlement. Here the trail ran into the main road and was lost.

But shortly before the troopers came to the end of the trail, Fenwick picked up a double mitten. The outer one was of leather, inside it a hand knitted one. Everybody wore such double mittens, but since it lay atop the snow, it must have been dropped after the snow had stopped. And since it was close to those footprints, the likeliest guess was that it had been lost by whoever made the trail.

And the trooper tucked the mittens carefully in a pocket. About the only use anybody has ever found for a matchless mitten is a murder clue—unless the killer had been smart enough to discard it, the other mitten might even now be sheltering a red right hand.

IT WAS now dusk and the troopers decided to call it a day. They would return the next morning to Berry Mills to see if anyone in the hamlet had noticed three persons tramping in the snow late Sunday or early Monday.

Tuesday morning's papers had carried the story of the tragedy, and shortly there came a telephone call from St. John. The pasts of the Lakes cracked open to engulf the present. At the other end of the wire were Mrs. McBeath and Mrs. Pitt who said they were sisters of Bertha Lake.

Only Bertha Lake wasn't really her name. She had married one Eddie Ring

(Continued on page 10)

AS HEALER. One Lady writes: "My sister suffered very badly for years, but since I gave her a Joan the Wad to keep near her she is much easier. Do you think this is due to Joan or the water from the Lucky Well?"

AS LUCK BRINGER. Another writes: "Since the war my wife and I have been dogged by persistent ill-luck and we seemed to be sinking lower and lower. One day someone sent us a Joan the Wad. We have never found out who it was, but, coincidence if you like, within a week I got a much better job and my wife had some money left her. Since then we have never looked back and, needless to say, swear by 'Queen Joan'."

DO YOU BELIEVE IN LUCK ?

AS MATCHMAKER. A young girl wrote and informed me that she had had scores of boy friends, but it was not until she had visited Cornwall and taken Joan back with her that she met the boy of her dreams, and as they got better acquainted she discovered he also has "Joan the Wad."

AS PRIZEWINNER. A young man wrote us only last week: "For two years I entered competitions without luck, but since getting Joan the Wad I have frequently been successful although I have not won a big prize. But I know that . . . who won $5,600 in a competition has one because I gave it to him. When he won his $5,600 he gave me $280 for myself, so you see I have cause to bless 'Queen Joan'."

HURRY

Mrs. WILSON, of Falmouth, says, 1951:
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Mr. Jones of Cheltenham, says, 1951:
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and I will send you both History and Mascot.

(Continued from page 8)

and left him some years ago to go off with Phil Lake.

The deserted husband had made no effort to bring back his wife, but in a recent letter Bertha had written that she had seen Eddie on the street in Moncton. She had passed him by without speaking, and wasn't sure he had seen her.

Ring became the logical candidate for the role of murderer, and the police throughout the city began an intensive hunt for their quarry. Before the day was over, he was brought in to headquarters.

Eddie Ring was a mild-mannered man, thin and shabby. He was the handy man in a hotel on Main Street, and admitted he had recognized his wife the day they had met on the street, but he hadn't known she had seen him.

"I didn't try to find her," he insisted. "I didn't know where she was living, though I took for granted she was with that Lake."

He had been out Sunday afternoon on a trip to Georgetown with his girl, he said when questioned as to his whereabouts the day of the tragedy. They had returned around six o'clock. He had orders to paint the stairs in the hotel and he wanted to get a nap in before he started. At midnight he got up and began the job. He had been at it until around five Monday morning.

It wasn't difficult to check his alibi. Several patrons coming home late had seen him at work, and their testimony completely exonerated him.

By now Peters and Fenwick had been questioning the residents of Berry Mills and were ready to report their findings. They had found three men, two of whom had seen others out Sunday despite the snow storm, all headed in the direction of Pacific Junction, while the third threw additional light on the mysterious tracks in the snow.

Leonard Carrol, who lived in Moncton, had been in Pacific Junction that day. On his return he had passed Arthur Bannister, 17, who had a rifle under his arm. He had been going to look at his traps, the boy explained.

Guy Jones, a farmer living near Berry Mills, had seen three sets of footprints on the road, early the morning of the 6th. He didn't think they had all been made at the same time, however.

And William E. Horsman, section man at the Berry Mills railroad station, up at five o'clock that Monday morning, had also noticed the footprints in the snow. Back at his home at seven-thirty, he had seen Arthur Bannister trudging along toward the cottage, four doors from the Horsman home, where the boy lived with his mother, brother, and sisters.

The two troopers had now decided to drop in on the Bannisters.

The Bannisters were a down-and-out family. The father had walked out on his wife and children some months earlier, they had learned. Since then the boys, Arthur and Daniel, seventeen and eighteen, had gone trapping and brush-cutting to earn money. The mother had taken odd jobs as housekeeper.

As the men entered the cottage, they found Daniel, the two girls and the mother huddled around a stove. Before Mrs. Bannister was a carton of coat hangers which, as she talked, she continued to break into small pieces which she thrust into the stove.

None of the others questioned had recognized the double mitten, but Daniel Bannister claimed it immediately. Arthur had borrowed his mitten and had probably lost one that Monday.

"Arthur has about seventy-five traps in the woods between Berry Mills and Pacific Junction," added Mrs. Bannister. "He went out Monday to look at them."

Arthur said he had seen no one in the woods outside Berry Mills that fateful morning. Asked if he knew of any one going to the Lake cabin recently, the boy nodded.

"Ask Earl O'Brien. He was out there

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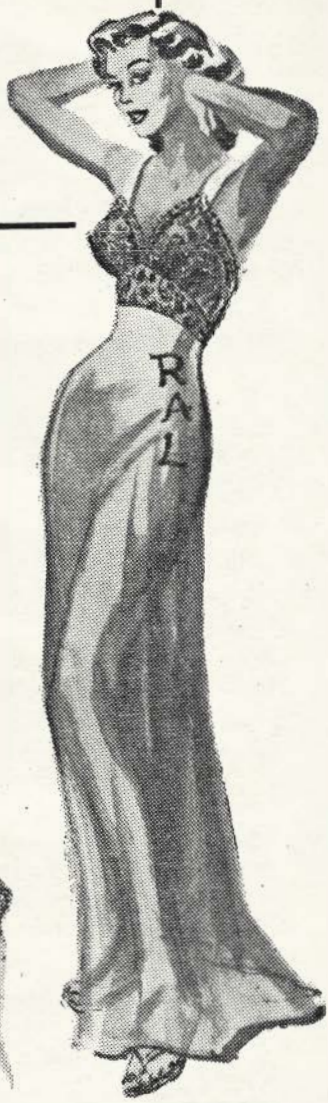
ALLURE...

with a "PERSONAL" TOUCH



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THE BLONDE FROM BLOOD ALLEY

By

Merle Constiner

In the kill-crazy humdrum of the city, she opened a door for Pat Gavitt—a door to a world where nothing was right—and only the dead were real!

A NOVELETTE

Gavitt came through the door in a rush. . . .

THE Bannister Equipment Company, in the south of the city, four blocks from the Ohio River, was always yeasty with river scent. Its business was to supply heavy construction machinery, scrapers, shovels, and so on, to contractors for rentals. Pat Gavitt, fresh from the West Coast, had been with the outfit three weeks.

Monday, February 11th, at 7:45 in the

morning, he pulled into the company lot and climbed from his car. Above him loomed ancient brick warehouses. Along one side of the yard were ranked gravel trucks and cement mixers. Through a stringy mist he saw three men under a yellow light tinkering with the engine of a bulldozer.

One of these was Bannister, the chief, a fanatical pennypincher. Near him was Kentucky, a wizard mechanic who could have handled the problem alone. Snell Prentice crowded in, offering advice. Prentice was Gavitt's immediate superior, purchase boss.

Gavitt had come along the hard way in construction; he was thirty-five, taut cheeked, mostly silent. As he strode past them they turned to face him and Bannister said, "Get off the premises. Pick up your pay Friday."

Gavitt slowed down to a stop.

"This company has five automatic discharge rules," Bannister said hoarsely. He was about fifty, potbellied, sallow. "Rule number one, drunk on the job."

Gavitt grinned. He hadn't had two drinks in three months.

"Okay, Snell," Bannister ordered.

Snell Prentice threw himself on Gavitt from behind, anchoring his elbows. Three times Bannister swung his big knuckles into Gavitt's face, splitting his cheek. The fury of the attack almost brought him to his knees. Prentice released him and stepped back. Black rage surged through Gavitt and he bunched his muscles.

Bannister said, "And that'll teach you to leave my wife alone."

A group of laborers had ringed them, and Joan Keenan had come from the office. "Taking money from her," Bannister mouthed. "Like a first class West Coast louse. You know she's mentally irresponsible."

Gavitt relaxed. To Kentucky, he said mildly, "You let them beartrap me. I thought you were a friend."

Kentucky's eyes were bleak. "Yesterday, not today. I favor a man to earn his own money."

Gavitt glanced at Joan Keenan, expecting—perhaps simply because she was there—some sort of response, or at least a reaction from her. But there was nothing.

He turned. walked stiffly across the yard, piled into his car, and rolled very slowly down the street and around the corner.

Slowly he drove back to his room, while the mists thinned, and sunlight moved in like a saffron powder. He drove past packing houses, past stockyards with their slatted sidewalk fences enclosing sheep pens, and turned into Berger Street, striving to close his mind to the incident at the plant, until he knew more about it. He liked the wilderness of this great city, and the eddied haven which was Berger Street with its little row of antique German houses, each two stories high, one room wide, each with its tiny lateral strip of yard.

His quarters were in the last house, ground floors, rear. As he shut the door behind him he saw Mila Bannister standing by the fireplace. White-skinned, golden-haired, with dusky, dark lashes, she was much younger than Bannister, perhaps twenty-eight.

On Saturday she'd come to his room and introduced herself. He'd heard the story about her, of course, that Bannister considered her unstable, but her gaze was so clear it had fooled him. "Pat," she'd said. "My sister out in California has a baby. I want to adopt it but Dave says no. If I can hire a lawyer and get things started he'll come along. I've saved up a lawyer's fee but I'm afraid to keep it around the house. Will you hold it for me a few days?"

The story had been unusual enough to sound probable to Pat Gavitt. If you were going to invent things, why not something simpler? And she'd come to him because

he was new with the outfit, and yet had a reputation.

"Very well," he'd said quietly. "What can I lose?"

She'd handed him eight hundred dollars in fifties, which had astonished him. He'd written out her receipt. Alone, he'd stowed the cash in his moneybelt. Then he'd begun to wonder. Sunday morning he'd phoned Kentucky and asked a few vague questions. Mila Bannister had no sister.

Now she walked from the fireplace to meet him. Her hand outstretched.

Wordlessly, he peeled up his shirt, opened his belt, and counted out her money. She recounted it and handed him his receipt.

They stared at each other, she amiably, he pensively. "You've hurt your cheek," she observed. He nodded.

After a moment, he asked, "How did you expect to find me here at this hour, Mrs. Bannister? Did you know I was going to be fired?"

She looked sympathetic. "I suggested it."

"Did you tell your husband I was sponging money from you?"

"No. I just showed him your receipt. I never keep anything from him."

Dangerous. A pathological liar. Gavitt sank to the edge of his bed.

"Wasn't he curious where you got all that money?"

"It drove him crazy."

"Where did you get it, incidentally?"

"I sold my stamp collection. When I was a little girl I used to take nail scissors and cut postage stamps off letters."

"Eight hundred dollars. It must have been a nice one."

That clear gaze and firm chin. "It was. I had stamps from as far away as Paris, France." She went to the door. "And Nineveh and Tyre." Then she was gone.

A cold chill went up his back.

I'll take a crack at that job out in St. Louis, he thought, *with Rusty Haslet. Whew. Maybe I got off lucky at that . . .*

He fumbled around in his suitcase for his second best pipe and couldn't seem to find it. His corduroy hunting cap was missing, too, but he didn't realize it until later.

MILA BANNISTER had three hours to kill. She drove her battered convertible out of Berger, onto Springrove, turned left and eventually reached the heart of the city; here she parked in a basement garage, went up the ramp to the street, and picked up a few folders at a travel bureau. In the powder room of a department store she read them. *Dazzling Argentina . . . Beautiful Ireland . . . From the Cape to Cairo . . .*

At twelve-thirty, according to her schedule, she met the man.

He was waiting for her on the upper floor of a second-hand bookstore, far at the back, in the gloom and dust between the crowding shelves. She handed him first the money, then Pat Gavitt's pipe and cap.

"I'll run over it again," he said. "He passes beneath that culvert every evening at about five-forty eight. Tomorrow's our day. You be nearby in your convertible. I'll take care of the smash. Afterwards you simply get in beside him and pretend to be dazed. I'll leave in your convertible. You must be there to explain to the police. Don't talk too much."

"I never do."

"When they show you the pipe and cap, don't recognize them. They'll be identified at the company. You had your eyes on the road and didn't see the driver of the truck, either. Understand?"

"When they ask me about Gavitt and the money?"

"Say there's something magnetic about him. You like him, just like him, that's all. He needed money. You lent it to him for three days and he returned it. If they ask you where you got it, you got it from your husband. He won't be contradicting you."

After a moment he said, "When you're free, I hope you're happy. Have you any plans?"

"I might travel. I might go to Dazzling Argentina."

"Good idea," the man said. "Very good idea."

AT FIVE o'clock the next afternoon Dave Bannister left the company lot and started his long drive to his home beyond the northern outskirts. Two things were on his mind. Pat Gavitt and a gravel truck. A loaded gravel truck had disappeared from the Pearl Street job; it would show up. Gavitt bothered him more. There were angles to the Gavitt situation he couldn't quite get. The fringe of the city thinned out, and he was in rolling farmlands; he left the pike at Haggard Lane.

The lane was a back road, shouldered by raw clay banks topped with an overhang of briars. Afterglow in the sky burned everything to watery color, cherry red and stark black. Ahead of him at the base of a steep slope the road went under a shadowy concrete arch, a railroad underpass.

A truck roared down on him from behind.

A loaded gravel truck, cannoning for his rear.

With split-second timing it swiped him as he entered the underpass, smashing him against the concrete abutments. His engine stove through his dash, doors crinkled like foil, his windshield bellied out in flinders. He died instantly.

The driver of the truck had jumped clear. Now he came forward. He felt Bannister's pulse, held a watchglass to his lips. Mila Bannister appeared from a clump of sumac, her high heels awkward on the leafmold.

"The wrench," the man ordered.

"What wrench?"

"You said he always carried a wrench."

She produced it from the luggage compartment.

The man lifted it from her hands and struck her. He struck her coldly and powerfully, twice, between the eyes. Now it was her pulse he felt, her lips he tested for breath—he placed her body in the car beside her husband's.

His gloved hands moved calmly. He placed Gavitt's cap and pipe in the upset truck. He backed Mila Bannister's convertible out of the brush and drove it down the road. Dusk had gone into night when he parked it in the dark under the Bannister porte-cochere. This moment and the moment he'd taken the gravel truck had been his worst gambles. He was sure he'd been seen neither time.

They could only have it one of two ways now; an accident, or Pat Gavitt. He walked across the fields and left the wrench in a drainage tile. On the highway he caught a bus into the city.

He knew he was safe.

AT SIX o'clock Pat Gavitt lay on his bed in his shorts, locked hands behind the nape of his neck. He'd spent a boring day roaming the city, whiling away the time. Friday seemed a long way off. He got to thinking about Bannister and the great empire of machinery Bannister had built up. This very day Bannister's equipment had worked a half dozen southern states, Texas to Tennessee to Florida; in the spring it would move north. Gears and treads and power, demolishing, excavating, constructing.

Miss Hoffmeyer knocked from the hall and Gavitt threw on a robe and called her in.

She carried coffee, a shirred egg, and some cake. "Medicine from your old landlady," she said. "This makes well." She was wispy, walked with a froufrou, and had a wart in her nose that looked as though a dried pea had been slipped under the skin.

"I'm not sick," Gavitt declared. "But thank you." He began to eat.

Affectionately, he watched her depart. After a bit he dressed and went to a neighborhood movie.

Darkness had wiped out Berger Street and a drizzle rolled along the house fronts when he returned. Half a block away, under a corner light, stood a company pick-up truck, the job Snell Prentice cherished for his personal use. Prentice, in baggy raincoat and slouch hat, stood on Miss Hoffmeyer's sidewalk doorstep. He was a chunky man with a meaty face and as Gavitt approached the runnels of rain on his cheeks shone from the Hoffmeyer window lamp.

"Wait a minute, Pat," he rasped. "Do me a favor."

"Not me," Gavitt said softly. "You've got the wrong man."

He put his hand on Gavitt's forearm to slow him, and Gavitt spun him so savagely that he slammed against the brick housefront.

Gavitt spoke, and his voice was low and calm. "In my book you're just a toady, Bannister's toady. My grandfather was a track-layer, my father a bridge-builder, and I was raised in a thousand camps. How the likes of you ever got into the construction game I'll never know. Now get into that little tin pick-up and putt-putt the hell away from here."

"Three detectives came around to my apartment about an hour ago. They had your cap and pipe and asked me to identify them. I was afraid something had happened to you, so I did."

Expressionless, Gavitt said, "Detectives don't travel in threes on a simple identification." *Mila Bannister,* he thought. "In singles, or maybe pairs, but not in threes."

"Dave Bannister and his wife are dead. What's it all about?"

Gavitt froze. He didn't ask for details and he knew Prentice was standing there, noting the omission.

Finally, he asked, "What's this favor of yours?"

Prentice scraped his shoesole on the doorstep, boyishly. "I lost my head this morning and I want you to accept my apology. I just want you to shake my hand and let bygones be bygones."

"I'll tell you the honest truth—I can't." Gavitt's lips were thin and flat. "I'll let bygones be bygones, but it would be physically impossible for me to shake the hand of a man who held my arms while another man clouted me."

"That's good enough for me," Prentice said gustily. "Good-by, old-timer." He hammered along the sidewalk to his pick-up.

Old-timer, Gavitt thought angrily. He uses it like a password to a lodge.

Next to Miss Hoffmeyer's front door was the door to the hall. Gavitt stepped inside, laid the phonebook on the newel-post, and found Joan Keenan's number. He dialed it on the wallphone.

Although they knew each other only slightly from his short tenure with the company, she recognized his voice immediately. She was neither friendly nor unfriendly.

"Joan," he said, "something's going on that I don't understand. Dave and Mila Bannister are dead."

"I know. The detectives were just around. They asked me to identify your cap and pipe. I thought maybe you'd fallen in the river or something, so I told them. Then they told me Dave and Mila had been killed by a gravel truck." She didn't exactly ask a question, but it was there.

Gavitt changed the subject. "You were Bannister's secretary. What'll became of the company now?"

"You'll get your job back." She was very grave. "A better one, I mean."

The hall was bare, with woolly grey paper. Down at its far end he could see a pencil of light across the pine floor and

up the opposite wall. Someone was in his room, with the door ajar.

"You're talking nonsense," he said.

"Everyone knows it but you. Haslet Service out in St. Louis bought us out last Wednesday. They've been negotiating for months. That's why Bannister brought you in from San Francisco, it was one of Mr. Haslet's conditions. I've wired him and he's sending along a new general manager. I think you're slated to be chief of distribution."

Rusty Haslet. His father's dearest friend.

Shake my hand, old-timer, and let bygones be bygones. Already Snell Prentice was scrambling on the bandwagon.

Gavitt said, "Good night, Joan. And thank you."

"Wait a minute, Pat." Her voice was urgent. "Are you in trouble?"

"No trouble," Gavitt said. "Good night."

He strode down the hall, shouldered open his door and kicked it shut behind him.

CHAPTER TWO

Dead End

THERE were three men in his room—two sat on the edge of his bed and the third on his hickory rocker. The men on the bed were quietly dressed, intelligent looking.

They stood up and one said, "Mr. Gavitt? I'm Lieutenant Sencki and this is Sergeant Zellers."

He opened a briefcase and displayed Gavitt's cap and pipe. "These yours?"

Gavitt nodded.

The man on the chair was staring at Gavitt fixedly. He was lanky, long-jawed, and sunburned.

Sencki asked, "How about it?" and the lanky man said, "You know how it is. It's hard to tell. Maybe yes, maybe no."

Lieutenant Sencki snorted. "Maybe no. You heard Miss Hoffmeyer. Gavitt has an alibi." To Gavitt he said, "Here's the story we got from your landlady. You've been home all day, in and out. Sick. Tonight at six she served you a light supper. Right?"

Gavitt flicked his gaze to the man in the chair. "Who is he?"

"Mr. Aubrey Gunn," Sencki said. "He has a farm out on Haggard Lane. Tonight, at three minutes to six, he was in his pasture training a border collie. He heard a terrific crash and ran to his fence. The fence tops a hillside cut. Down below was the road and a railroad underpass. A gravel truck was on its back. A passenger car, smashed, had a man's body in it. Another man was standing in the dusk and a woman came from some bushes and joined him. He struck the woman with something, put her in the car, and put something else, probably your cap and pipe, in the truck. He then drove a convertible out of the brush and away. Mr. Gunn rushed home, phoned a few of his friends, made an entry in his diary, and finally called the sheriff."

"I didn't make no entry in no diary," Mr. Gunn said indignantly. "I keep a pig-book but I don't keep no sissy diary!"

Lieutenant Sencki sighed. "Mr. Gunn is a policeman's dream come true. An eye-witness to a murder. Only trouble is, he didn't have his spectacles."

"I seen a two-legged man kill a woman with skirts," Mr. Gunn said heatedly. "It was a horrible sight and I'm glad you fellers was spared it."

Sergeant Zellers took Mr. Gunn into the hall and closed the door.

Sencki tarried. "Anything you want to add?"

"Plenty," Gavitt said. "Without Miss Hoffmeyer I'd be in the soup." Meticulously, he told about his fight with Bannister, about Mila and her eight hundred, about the sale of the company. Lieutenant

Sencki frowned as he listened to him.

"You got a mighty bad enemy, son."

"Impossible. I've only been in town three weeks."

Lieutenant Sencki smiled grimly. "One day back in thirty-seven I was walking on Reading. headed for a drugstore to buy a teething ring for my third baby. A man backs out of the Zenith Loan with a pistol and a shopping bag full of currency and whams into me, literally. I put the cuffs on him. He turns out to be a third offender. They send him to Columbus. He hails from a pinpoint down in the Big Smokies. He has five slavering brothers and umpteen uncles. They take a blood pledge to kill me on sight. I don't know about it until their preacher writes me two years later saying they've called it off."

"Wow," said Gavitt.

"Wow is right. Here was I promenading around beefing about my cigars and down in that mountain jungle was a clan of wolfmen, brooding themselves crazy, wanting to suck the marrow out of my bones. Son, you don't have to even know a man to have him your enemy."

Pleasantly, Sencki added, "If anything turns up and you can't catch me at the office, feel free to phone me at my home."

"I surely will. And thanks."

"This is going to be a mean one," Sencki said, and waved good-by.

Gavitt went to the stable, which was Miss Hoffmeyer's garage, drove crosstown past the university to Mount Auburn, to Joan Keenan's.

EVERYWHERE the city erupted in precipitous hills, shops and houses jampacked, sheathing their slopes and crests. Mount Auburn was a neighborhood of fine old homes and new, of fiery neon signs and black shrubbery. The drizzle had stiffened, and rain fell on the twisting streets in slim hard needles. Joan Keenan's great grandfather had been a pork baron, Gavitt had heard, in the down-river trade; a panic and a depression had changed things. She lived with her widowed mother. The house was squarish, of sawn stone, with a narrow stone doorstep and a recessed, fanlighted door. He beat his wet hat against his thigh and rang the bell.

Joan Keenan met him at the door, dressed in ice blue cotton; her hair was in a horsetail. Now, away from the office, he was intimidated by her freshness and youth.

In the hall, he looked about him, at the umbrella stand full of dusty walking sticks, at the pierglass with its New Orleans frame, at the little alcove under the stairs with taboret and telephone and rosewood loveseat. A china clock visible through a doorway said three minutes after ten.

She seemed relaxed, pleased to see him, as though he were a long-time intimate.

"Can you audit?" he asked. "Read files and ledgers and stuff like that?"

"Yes. That's how I came to Bannister. A couple of years ago his books got in a jumble and Accountancy brought a team of us in to help straighten things out. His repair bills were terrific. We got it straightened out and he asked me to stay on, as his personal secretary."

"Got a key to the office?"

"Of course." She pulled him into the alcove and pushed him down on the love seat. "Tell me about it."

He told her about the murder, as Mr. Gunn had seen it. "It was all set up for me but luckily I had a good alibi. Mila Bannister helped to rig it but she seems to have got caught in her own trap. You know what Lieutenant Sencki's doing right this minute? He's eating cigar butts and trying to figure how I might be in two places at the same time. He's convinced I'm innocent, but he's convinced I might be guilty too. That's why he's a detective. He's got an open mind."

She said thoughtfully, "Pat, you've got an enemy."

"That's what Sencki said but I don't believe it. I just think that when I came to town I stepped into some of Mila Bannister's secret trouble. Or so it seems to me. Mila just fell by the wayside. It was Bannister he was after."

"Who was after?"

"For a guess, I'd say Snell Prentice. That's why I want to look over the books."

The little alcove was aromatic with the smell of sandalwood and musty carpet. A droopy spaniel ambled down the hall, gave them a withering look as he passed, and disappeared.

"I think Dave Bannister led a double life," Joan said. Gavitt smiled at the quaint phrase.

"Three times last week he had me get him the number of a club. Marlowe three-seven-o-o."

"What did he talk about?"

"I don't know. He always sent me out of the room. He always seemed sly when he had me ring them, and bewildered when I returned."

"I see nothing mysterious in calling a club," Gavitt said. "Do you?"

"Yes, I do. Bannister was frugal, not a club man. And there's something off-color about this particular club. In the first place I checked and it's not in the book. It's a private listing."

"What happened when you called, I mean your end of it?"

"A man with a busy voice said, 'The Blue Rose.' I could hear glasses clinking and in the background a jukebox was pounding out *Pale Hands I Loved Beside the Shalimar*. Always the same tune, and pretty maudlin for a dive, I thought. The place was obviously a dive."

"Thugs are sentimental," Gavitt said. An arm's length away was the telephone. For a long moment they stared at it. Suddenly it seemed cold and deadly, an instrument of disaster. Slowly Gavitt lifted the receiver and dialed Marlowe 3700.

A crisp voice said, "Hello." There was no music, no clinking of glasses at all.

"I'm calling for Dave Bannister," Gavitt said. "He died in an accident this evening. He left a note on the back of an envelope saying he owed you a little money. How about it?"

"Wait a minute," the voice said. "I'll see." In a moment it returned. "I can't find no record. Was it a birthday party? Was it a group? Did we use our Shetland pony?"

"This is The Blue Rose, isn't it?"

The voice laughed. "This is the Tiny Tot Photographic Studio."

Gavitt hung up. He reached for the phone book and turned to classified. There was no Tiny Tot Studio.

Joan Keenan looked scared.

"Well, it wasn't Snell Prentice," Gavitt declared. He repeated the conversation. "And I'll tell you something else. He was too smart for me. He really fooled me." There were lines of anger on his face, and, for the first time, caution. Once more he dialed, calling Lieutenant Sencki.

"Lieutenant, I think maybe I've got something. I wonder if you'd run down a telephone number for me, Marlowe three-seven-o-o. Call me in about an hour and a half. I'll be at the company."

"Anything. Just name it, I'll do it," Sencki said cheerfully. Too cheerfully. "Anything up?"

"It's a number Bannister used to call."

"My. That's important, isn't it? Go to it, son. Work like a beaver."

Joan Keenan said somberly, "I take it you want me to audit the company books? That would take a staff, and weeks. Besides it isn't necessary. That'll be the first thing Haslet does when he moves in. He'll go over those ledgers with a microscope."

"It's not that. I need a little information. Tonight."

Without a word she stood up and put on her coat.

The rain had increased and the streets,

swooping up and down the hillsides, rippled like butter in the enfolding blackness. Only once did Joan Keenan speak.

"Did you really take money from Mila Bannister?"'

Gavitt leaned forward, over the wheel. "Sure. Eight hundred dollars, which I returned. She got the money by selling her little-girl postage stamp collection. She had stamps from as far away as Nineveh and Tyre."

"Don't tease me. I knew they were wrong."

THE Bannister Equipment Company kept no night watchman. The great wooden yard gates were closed and locked at night, and that had been enough for Bannister. Using Joan's keys Gavitt spread the gates, and Joan drove his car inside. He followed on foot.

The building itself was a remodeled section of an ancient, continuous row of brick warehouses a block long. A weak bulb on a gooseneck burned over the blistered office door and a feeble night light tinted Bannister's grimy window. Decades ago the yard had been paved with brick, now crumbled, sprouting dead turf, licked to a glaze in the rain. They opened the door, entered a boxlike hall, and stepped into Bannister's office. Beyond a scarred railing was a row of cubicles, some open, some with frosted glass; all the woodwork had been painted with syrupy yellow varnish. They passed into the largest cubicle, Bannister's personal sanctum.

Here were two battered desks, Joan's and Bannister's. An old-fashioned safe stood in the corner, a giant affair peeling black paint and bearing a landscape, three cows drinking in a meadow brook. Gavitt sat in Bannister's swivel; Joan turned on extra lights and opened the safe. She laid out certain ledgers.

"Why did you pick Snell?" Joan asked.

"A hunch that suddenly became logical. I heard Bannister tell Kentucky that Snell Prentice had become steam shovel crazy."

"Why not? I'm lipstick crazy."

"But you're not a purchase boss. And a lipstick costs a dime—"

"A dime?"

"A quarter, then. While a steam shovel may cost thirty thousand. Did you ever hear of racing checks?"

She shook her head.

"There was a famous case of check-racing twenty some years ago. Say a man controls banks in, say, four states. He puts checks through for credit and these checks are raced from bank to bank, never coming to rest. They just circulate, you see. And while they're valuless, they represent money. My hunch was that maybe Prentice, as purchase boss, was racing shovels and other expensive equipment."

"You mean he'd pretend to buy machinery, then allocated this mythical equipment, purely in paperwork right here in the office? Shift it to Florida, Texas, Maine and so forth? Paying the local contractor rent, part of the capital, back like Ponzi?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"Impossible."

"Why impossible?"

She looked at him in admiration. "That's what I like, a man that uses his noodle, has original ideas. And no one can say you don't have ideas. It couldn't work, Pat. There would be too many departments, too many persons involved. He might put through a fake buy all right, he had a lot of power with Bannister, but from then on it would be out of his hands, the allocation and so on. That stuff is shipped, checked received, time value paid for, and reshipped. That's why we have a big office. But I'm glad I know you. You're wonderful."

"Nuts," Gavitt said.

"I'm serious."

She opened the books and proved it to him conclusively. The old octagonal Seth Thomas on the wall ticked on.

Finally, she returned the ledgers to the

safe. "I have a hunch about this myself, Pat. Quite different from yours and Lieutenant Sencki's. You're going on the theory that Bannister was the principal murder victim, and that Mila was eliminated as a byproduct. Why not the reverse? Maybe someone wanted Mila out of the way, and Bannister was just used as the instrument."

"Then why kill Bannister at all?"

"Maybe he was a potential hazard. He was incurably inquisitive about his wife, you know. Perhaps he was on the trail of something. That would explain his calls to The Blue Rose. My money's on Mila. She was psychopathic tinder, and who knows how she spent her spare time."

Gavitt looked dubious. "She was a strange creature, certainly, but she was basically good."

"Grow up, Pat. Don't be silly. She was basically bad."

The phone on the desk rang. "That'll be Lieutenant Sencki," Gavitt said, and lifted it to his ear.

It wasn't Lieutenant Sencki. A solid sounding male voice said, "You get out of there, and I mean now, or I'll call the police!"

"I'm Pat Gavitt," Gavitt said, smiling. "Who are you?"

"Louie Matelli. I got a apartment across the street, above the corner tavern. We seen the light in the cellar and Mrs. Matelli has been at me for a hour to report it. We never seen no light in that place before after dark. I take it you work there, hey? Excuse it, please."

"Thank you, Mr. Matelli," Gavitt said. "I won't forget it. This was pretty swell of you. Good-by." He laid the handset gently on its cradle. He wasn't smiling now. He pulled out a desk drawer, groped behind some papers, and stuck Bannister's payroll gun, a .32-.20, in his waistband. Joan Keenan's eyes widened.

"Everything's under control," he said calmly. "Just sit tight. I'll be right back."

The place had a basement but no one used it, ever. He'd been in it but once; floodsilt covered its floor, root-ends split its mouldering brick walls.

He crossed the office and entered the long corridor.

JOAN KEENAN watched him vanish, marveling at his litheness, at the natural silence of his step. She was mulling him over in a pleasant speculative way when the frosted glass of a cubicle opened and a man slid out and walked toward her.

He was a complete stranger. His face was bloated and stubbled and his eyes were milky, opaque. He wore a cheap two-toned sports shirt, green with a maroon collar and button strip. His jacket was threadbare and his hands were hairy and chapped. He carried a heavy pistol.

"Get up," he said. "Don't argue." He spoke dully.

A broad slab of adhesive was slapped over her mouth, stifling her. Outside she heard the engine of a car start as it was being driven away. Pat Gavitt's car, but Pat, she was sure, wasn't in it.

Pat would return, she would be gone, the car would be gone. He'd think she'd taken it. It was part of a plan.

"Come along," the man said.

Her hand was in her pocket, with her lipstick. She thumbed out the bar of paste, dropped the lipstick into the kneehole of the desk, and ground her heel upon it.

"Move," the man ordered. "Quick and quiet."

Numbly she walked beside him into the hall.

When they came to the foyer he turned not left, to the entranceway, but right, up the dusty stairs to the second floor. Here they climbed once more, to the attic. He took her by the arm now, for she was paralyzed—she ascended docilely. They entered a broad, low door. The attic was slant-ceilinged, an airspace of criss-cross beams and dangling cobwebs that ran the

entire length of the building. Her captor lighted a candle stub and closed the door with his hip.

He paused and looked into her eyes. "So what am I going to do with you?" he asked. Then, softly, he answered, "It's just possible I'll cut your throat, and leave you behind a chimney to rot."

The river wind gnawed at the eave troughs, and a gust of rain spiraled across the roof like buckshot.

PAT GAVITT walked swiftly, brooding, roiled. A light in the cellar? Anyway you turned it, it didn't make sense. The mildewed corridor seemed interminably long; something confused him and he couldn't quite put his finger on it. At the far end he passed Snell Prentice's office, and his own adjoining cubbyhole, passed through a fire door, and descended a flight of six steps. The cellar was actually a sub-cellar, for the north edge of the first floor was partly below ground level.

As he stood before the cellar door, even before he saw the rusty bolt firmly in place, he knew he'd been tricked. He knew what had been bothering him. There was no window to the cellar on the street side—it was a good five feet below street level. He wheeled and returned to the main office in a lope.

Joan Keenan was gone. He went into the yard. His car was gone. It never occurred to him that Joan had left voluntarily—he thought at first that she'd been abducted in his car. He returned to the office to call Sencki.

It was then he saw the blobs of lipstick across the brown linoleum. He thought it was blood, that Joan had been wounded, and then he found it was lipstick.

The traces got thinner and thinner, disappearing completely in the foyer.

It was only because of his great intensity that he found a faint smear on the second step of the stairway leading up.

Rapidly he searched the second floor, storeroom after storeroom, using his keychain flash. No results. That left only the attic.

He mounted the last flight of stairs and stood on the landing by the attic door. A wavering wisp of light came from beneath the warped doorsill. A man was talking.

"You do what we tell you to do, say what we order you to say, answer any questions we ask. You don't get any pay except long life and happiness. For the past two minutes you've been studying me. Help yourself. I'm a visitor. I've been hired. Maybe from Pittsburgh, maybe from Las Vegas. In a half hour I'll be on my way. How about it? You going to be reasonable? Just nod your head."

There was a pause. "Oh? You figure on giving me trouble?"

Despite himself, Gavitt grinned.

The voice was strained now, edgy. "All your life you've heard about girls in a big city. Sometimes they vanish. You vanished tonight, didn't you? You could vanish again tomorrow, or the next day, or the next. If you ever see a tomorrow. Does that change your mind?"

Gavitt came through the door in a rush.

He saw a flabby, ragged man, back half to him, a pistol in his hand. He saw the candle on the floor, its flame elongating in the door draft, and Joan Keenan, terrified but defiant, the scar of adhesive tape across her mouth. The man turned, and Gavitt hit him.

He hit him construction-camp style, bringing the blow up from the floor. The man's knees twisted, his legs intertwined, and he fired wildly. Gavitt was on him before he fell, laying in three crushing swings, convinced he'd broken a rib when his opponent shouted in pain.

Desperately the man rolled across the planking, squirming and writhing, reaching a great cross of oak beams. Behind it, he

laid his pistol in the crotch and opened fire. Gavitt stamped out the candle and brought out his .32-20. He touched it off, with slide rule accuracy, one shot, then two, then one. The reverberations echoed like kettle drums among the rafters.

They heard the man sigh, and heard his footsteps hammering away in the distance.

Gavitt ripped off the adhesive. "A dozen companies have a dozen doors to this attic," he said. "He's gone. He's been slightly altered, but he got away."

Unconsciously, she held his hand as they went down the steps, to Bannister's office. She related her experience, never repeating, adding detail to detail—he was astonished at her intelligence and poise.

When she'd finished, he picked up the phonebook. As he'd expected, there was no Louis Matelli.

"It's amazing what can be done with a telephone," he said. "Matelli and his solicitous wife are like The Blue Rose and the Tiny Tot Studio, entirely nonexistent." Lines deepened in his face, his eyes looked tired. "You see how it was done, of course. We touched it off when we called The Blue Rose from your home. They must have had a man on me who was keeping in touch. A quick trap was laid for you."

"Why me?"

"I'm a principal, you're not. You could give valuable information. They think we're that way, you and me."

Poker-faced, she passed this up.

"The thing that's got me alarmed," Gavitt said. "Is the way my analysis has been upset." He returned the pistol to the desk.

"Was that man, the man in the sports shirt, the Bannister killer?"

"I'd say definitely no. I'd say he was just what he claimed to be. A hired man. Our murderer is too cunning to show his face."

"What do you mean, your analysis is upset?"

"I'm convinced now that you and I are up against some outside group. Snell Prentice, for instance, wouldn't know how to hire an imported thug like your friend. And it may be quite a gang. Let's count them. One followed me to your home. One answered Marlow three-seven-o-o. One waylaid you here, and one drove my car away."

"That could be boiled down to two."

"And I don't care much for those two."

The phone rang. Gavitt said hello, and Lieutenant Sencki said, "It's me, son. Anything new?"

"My car's been stolen." Gavitt gave him model and license.

"Can't you people out there hold on to anything? This afternoon it was a gravel truck. By the way, I forgot to tell you something confidential. Mila Bannister had travel folders in her purse. That woman interests me. Could it be that she planned to help knock off her husband and then take a little pleasure trip?"

"I wouldn't know. I only met her twice. What about Marlowe three-seven-o-o?"

"What would you say? Make a guess?"

"I'd say it was a private listing."

"Wrong, son. It's in the book, a business number. The Trion Sales Company, two-eleven Minton Row—that's a dead end off Gloster not far from the river. Sells wrecked stuff, wrecked cars, used parts. Mantels and bricks and furnaces and lumber out of razed houses. I been there myself."

But you didn't call it The Blue Rose, Gavitt thought.

"Do a big business. Have two phones."

Gavitt thanked him, called a taxi, and took Joan Keenan home.

CHAPTER THREE

The Blue Rose

NEXT day was a busy one at the office. Haslet's man from St. Louis arrived and took over, an old line construction

man with seamed cheeks and calloused hands—Gavitt liked him on sight. Mid-morning, a call from the police said Gavitt's car had been found, intact, downtown by the Fountain on Fifth. Snell Prentice skittered about with a spanking new haircut and a breast pocket full of pencils, impressing the new management.

Joan Keenan had nothing to say to Gavitt about the night before, in fact she had nothing to say to him at all; once, however, in passing he caught her glance and it was so liquid and intimate it petrified him. Later, to make sure, he met her eyes again but this time they were stony, and slightly nauseated. The change baffled and upset him.

Nice work, Joan Keenan thought.

The story had gone around that he'd been accused of the murders and strangely, and to his astonishment, the whole staff rallied with friendship and support. Out in the yard Kentucky, the mechanic, elbowed him behind a semi, offered him a dip of snuff, and said woodenly, "Last night at six you was bowling with me at the Pleasureplay Alleys. I got two pinboys, a countergirl, and five other parties to swear to it."

Gavitt shook hands, and knew he'd regained a friend. "I have a better alibi than that. My landlady."

They stared at each other. Gavitt asked, "Will you be in your room tonight, about nine?"

Kentucky wiped his chin. "I won't skip it." He ambled around the semi, out of sight.

Just before lunch, Gavitt had his second inspiration. He walked from his cubbyhole to the front of the building, and stepped into Accounting. Mr. Mosley the chief, slightly bald and perpetually harried, stood by a window, brooding. He'd been with the outfit for twenty-one years, was a valuable and scrupulously honest man, and was wondering how the transfer would affect him; he had an invalid wife.

When he saw Gavitt, he grinned.

"How about it?" he asked. "Is Haslet tossing me out?"

"Not unless he tosses me out too," Gavitt said, and he meant it. "Forget it. I want to ask you a question."

They entered Mosley's private office. "Shoot," said Mosley.

"What's the worst repair bill we've had in the past year?"

Mosley chewed his lip. "The bad ones don't come that way, in big lumps. They come in steady breakdowns, in incessant minor outlays. Take that Saxby scraper we call The Dyspepsia here in the office. Never anything big, but a perpetual nuisance."

"Where's the Dyspepsia now?"

"Down at Croyton, Tennessee. Let out to the P. Smith Company, a Nashville contractor."

Gavitt thanked him and went next door, into Allocation. Miss Ederson was in charge here, a clubwoman wealthy in her own right, who worked simply because of an urge to dominate. Vain, arrogant, and a slave driver to her force of girls. It was Miss Ederson Gavitt might supplant. She bridled when she saw him.

He asked, "Did Mila Bannister ever come in here and ask to see your records?" Allocation records told what piece of equipment was where, at what time.

Miss Ederson quivered in flabby rage. "If Mila Bannister were alive you wouldn't take my job. We were like sisters. I think you killed her just to—"

"Like sisters? You mean you knocked around together?"

"No, but she never came down without visiting me. She kept her reserve hose with me."

"Reserve hose? I don't get it."

"You wouldn't. She was very fastidious and if she came to town and snagged her stockings she'd come into my private office and change. Dave Bannister was very lucky. Not every man had such a

fastidious wife as Mila Bannister was."

"Just where did she keep these stockings?"

"Why in my filing cabinets, of course." Miss Ederson flounced away.

During lunch hour he drove to a pay phone and sent a wire.

> The P. Smith Construction Company, Croyton, Tennessee. Bannister Company has changed hands now Haslet Service of St. Louis. Rechecking inventory. Your Saxby scraper accredited with extensive repairs. Could there be anything abnormal here at our end? Please wire immediately Patrick Gavitt.

He gave his Berger Street address. He then called his landlady and asked her to pass on any telegrams he might receive.

This was his second inspiration: Mila Bannister had been married to a miser and had desperately needed pocket money. Could Mila have worked out some way of padding the company repair bills and diverted this spurious margin to her own use? The idea was fantastic but fascinating. Had she worked out some trick to outsmart office routine, to short circuit it? It was becoming increasingly indicative that she might have led a life unknown to her husband, and this might have required money. Such a graft wouldn't have run into much, she dare not overpad, but to a woman with expensive tastes and Bannister any income at all would have been welcome.

It was near closing time when Miss Hoffmeyer called Gavitt and read him his answer from Tennessee: " 'Can assure you all repairs on Saxby scraper legitimate. Model 1936 and rolling mainly on glucose, strychnine and a will to survive. Hi, Patrick Gavitt. Patrick Smith.' "

So that's the end of that, Gavitt thought. Perfectly normal. Heavy equipment depreciates rapidly, even after two years. It had been a wonderful inspiration, but Joan Keenan was right after all. The solution lay in Mila Bannister herself, in her personal life. He'd have to backtrack her.

AFTER much deliberation, he had dinner with Sencki. They ate in the backroom of an old German restaurant, with hoary old men in immaculate aprons flittering about, serving food that was out of this world. There was a massive, black, funeral bar and a great framed poster, dated 1882, of a goat in a top hat, holding a foaming stein, saying: "I love Breimer's Bock."

Gavitt told Sencki everything, every detail.

When the lieutenant had finished the last of his potato pancake, he said fondly, "You kids. It's lucky I got children of my own. Such activity. Simmer down. I don't think Joan Keenan's in any danger, not any more. You've got them on the defensive, bless your foolish little hearts. It might make it a little harder for us, but it's been fun for you, hasn't it?"

"No," Gavitt said. "It's not been fun, and you know it."

"What are your plans now, son?"

Gavitt hesitated. "To help you any way I can."

"Then take up a home course in taxidermy."

"I'm interested in how Mila Bannister spent her spare time."

"So are we, and she proves to have been quite a girl. Looks like she might have had some kind of an understanding with a fellow named Hugh Rhoades that worked for a while for Mr. Trion. The actual link is pretty shadowy but we've found sometimes she'd visit a hole-in-the-wall nightspot, run up a modest bill, and charge it to the Trion Sales Company. If you're all steamed up over Trion and company, you can cut your valve. I went down and talked to them this afternoon. Trion said Bannister had phoned him a couple of times, pretending to be a customer, pricing second-hand furnaces and window sills, and such, always bringing the subject around to his wife. Trion knew Rhoades and Mila were pulling shenanagens to-

gether, didn't want to get involved, so he always brushed Bannister off."

"How did Bannister get Trion's telephone number?"

"Trion thinks he must have found Rhoades name and the number in Mila's pocket."

In a low voice, Gavitt said, "Do you believe all this, Lieutenant?"

"Who cares what I believe, son. I'm just a professional. What do you believe?"

"Part, but not all. Where is this Hugh Rhoades now?"

"Well, sir, Mr. Trion isn't too sure. When Rhoades quit him a month ago he said something about buying a small boat and adventuring downriver. Toward the Mississippi, out into the great beyond." Lieutenant Sencki looked dreamy. "Into the western sunset, no forwarding address. A sweet and beautiful picture."

Gavitt arose and reached for his hat. "Smells pretty bad, doesn't it, the whole thing. Hugh Rhoades." He frowned, harrassed. "That rings a bell somewhere, Hugh Rhoades."

"You've heard the name before?"

"No. That's the funny part about it, I haven't. I know I haven't. Yet at the same time, I have. That doesn't make sense, does it?"

"Makes plenty sense, son. I went through the same torment myself."

"And you figured it out?" They went out on to the sidewalk.

Lieutenant Sencki smiled modestly. "Yes, son. I figured it out." They parted at the curb.

Angry and moody, Gavitt drove to his room.

Sporadically, for three days, February drizzle and rain had sponged and whipped the streets and tonight, a little after seven thirty, the temperature dropped those few critical degrees and the entire city was glazed in glare ice. He was standing at his window, watching the pear tree in the yard

go into glass, watching the brick walk and the iron rods of the garden gate coat to quicksilver in the black shadows of the streetlight, when the hall door opened behind him and Miss Hoffmeyer whisked in.

She handed him a cigar and a kitchen match. "Puff up. You're nervous."

The cigar looked as though it had been rolled from jute and oak leaves and was incredibly dry; cautiously he put it between his lips and lighted it. Lavender sachet clogged his nostrils.

"A roomer left it in nineteen thirty-eight," Miss Hoffmeyer said. "I've been keeping it in my handkerchief drawer."

The cigar wrapper unrolled backward in a tongue of flame; something that looked like a wad of goat's hair plopped out of its middle and fell smouldering on the hearth; its gutted stump billowed smoke like a boy's test tube.

"Pretty comfy now, hey?" said Miss Hoffmeyer. "Relaxed. So now I'll tell you about Mr. Pennywether."

"Money can't buy a cigar like this," Gavitt said gravely. "What about Mr. Pennywether?"

"He's a vermin exterminator. Very polite. Seven children and a wonderful wife. Wife makes all the little dresses and he cobbles all the little shoes. Julia, that's the baby, aged four, was watching the television one night and began to tap-dance, no lessons or anything. They're all gifted."

"Glad to hear it," Gavitt said and waited.

"Mr. Pennywether's gift is curiosity. He's got a talent for curiosity. Not only in business about cockroaches and things, but about everything. Could Mammoth Cave in Kentucky be connected up with Carlsbad Cave in New Mexico? If we've got iron in our bloodstream have we got slag and by-products too? Is Jesse James alive? Why would a man in a hundred-and-fifty-dollar suit and expensive Borsalino hat drive a gravel truck?"

Gavitt froze.

"He's been around three times today to see you," Miss Hoffmeyer explained. "A cute knobby little man with twinkly eyes. Read our name in the paper and looked up our address. Wants to talk to you about that gravel truck. No reward, he says, but if he's helpful, and you're grateful, you could give Marybelle, his oldest, a white kitten with a blue ribbon."

"I'll give them all white kittens," Gavitt said. "Where can I get in touch with him?"

"He said he'd be waiting for you on a bench in Gustin Square."

"Now? In all this sleet and ice?"

"That's what he said, and I'll bet on it. He has a wonderful curiosity, that man."

The abnormal cigar had extinguished itself. Gavitt laid its corpse tenderly in the basket grate. Miss Hoffmeyer retrieved it. "I'll spray it with disinfectant," she explained. "And put it away again. Maybe sometime in the future some other roomer'll need it. That's the way to settle a man's nerves for him. Get him to puff up."

Gavitt patted her thin shoulder and slipped into his coat. Out on the streets he put chains on his car and started for Gustin Square. The weather had worsened. The streets and sidewalks were deserted. Everything, cement, brick, ironwork, rippled in silvery treacherous ice. He saw two car wrecks in three blocks.

GUSTIN SQUARE was in a dingy neighborhood, just off Pearl Street. In the center of the small rectangle were a few park benches and a statue of John Brown with his musket at the ready; mouldering buildings, shops and offices, closed in on all sides. Gavitt's headlights cut a swath and picked out a solitary figure, a man huddled on a bench. A wiry little man, knobby-faced, blanketed in a plaid topcoat. He idled his car alongside, opened the door, and said, "Howdy. I'm Pat

Gavitt. And you are Mr. Pennywether?"

The little man tumbled in beside him, said, "One block east, two blocks south."

This brought them out on Pearl.

"Stop here," Pennywether said.

Gavitt killed his engine.

They were directly in front of a building under construction.

A scaffolding supported by new timbers, boarded at the back, hung out over the sidewalk making a ghostly colonnade of velvet shadow and icy yellow pine. Suddenly Gavitt remembered this place. This was the Pearl Street job. This was the place the gravel truck had been stolen.

"You got to get the layout," Mr. Pennyweather said proudly. "You got to look at it artistic, in your mind's eye, like I done. Follow me." They left the car and groped their way down an alley, toward the building's rear.

To be sociable, Gavitt said, "I hear Julia's quite a tapdancer. That's a nice name, Julia."

"All my little girls' names begins with J. Jill, Judy, Janey, and so on. Now look around you."

Sleet was coming down with a lash now, like wheat grains, and the blackness of the alley was almost impenetrable. To Gavitt's left he could sense the rear of the building under construction, to his right lofted the backside of a sqtalid tenement, windows lighted here and there revealing a precipitous and ancient fire escape.

"I was up in that tenement, on the top floor," Mr. Pennyweather said impressively. "Estimatin' a vermin exterminatin' contract. I looks out the window, down here in the alley. It was then I seen the hundred-and-fifty dollar suit and the Borsalino hat get out of a robin's egg blue convertible, standing just where you're standing, and climb into a gravel truck and drive off."

"Fine. What make car, and what year?"

"I don't know because it drove right off. But I know the license."

"Better yet," Gavitt said. "What was it?"

"Oh, no you don't," Mr. Pennyweather said. "You got to show a little brainwork before I give 'er to you. I'm up there in that corner room, six stories up. The blue convertible is directly below me. I want to see the license number but it's impossible. How do I do it?"

Gavitt craned his neck and peered through the blackness toward the tenement roofline. Suddenly something bothered him, something trivial.

If Mr. Pennywether's seven girls all had names with a J, how did Marybelle sneak in? Could it be that Mr. Pennywether, fond father, forgot the names of his offspring? Other thoughts crowded in on Gavitt. Children and pets. The Tiny Tot Studio and its Shetland pony, Mr. Pennywether and his little white kitten. What a cozy and plausible snare, lovable children and lovable pets. Could this be the same intelligence repeating itself?

Could Mr. Pennywether, so fussy and human, be a complete phony?

If so, what was the idea? What was the idea of getting him alone, wrapped in sleet and night, and having him peer upward at nothing?

Like a chicken with its neck on a block!

Silently, he took out his keyring with its midget flash, turned slowly and released the beam.

The first thing he caught was two pairs of knees.

Two pairs, flexed for action.

He raised the disc of thin light and saw them, the man in the seedy sports shirt, one arm in a sling now, in his other hand a short woodsman's axe. Beside him, tilting forward, was Mr. Pennywether, his face no longer muddled and droll but foreshortened in the flash gleam to a vortex of snarling teeth. This, Gavitt knew, was an execution.

There was no blue car, no mythical license number, no vaporous man in a Borsalino. There was nothing but this, the trap.

The man in the sports shirt, off balance, tried to set himself for a quick swing with his axe. Gavitt lashed out with his foot—his boot heel pounded the man's elbow into his rib cage and the axe went spinning and clattering into the sleet storm. Mr. Pennywether ran back, rabbit-like and swung about with a big-barreled revolver cradled in both hands. Instantly, Gavitt cut his light, threw himself sidewise against the tenement wall, and drew himself upward, onto the overhanging fire escape.

Blackness engulfed him. Mr. Pennywether's pistol stayed silent.

These people play for keeps, Gavitt thought, *but they play for certainties. They missed this one, but they'll try again.*

A motor roared past him beneath his ledge and out of the alley mouth. As it cut through the orbit of a distant streetlight he saw that it was a battered moving van. Tall lettering on its side said, THE TRION SALES COMPANY.

KENTUCKY'S real name was John Brigadier Jones and he hailed from that wild bobcat county down in the mountains known as Bloody Breathitt. Once, explaining to Gavitt why he'd come north, he'd said, "Mainly I couldn't stand the pace of that coonskin high society. I lived in a mansion and my pappy was a blueblood. Not a mansion, exackly, a one-room cabin made of stole timber and henhouse roofing. And my pappy wasn't a blueblood, exackly, but more on the type of a sneaky, brush-hidin' lardcan moonshiner. Yessir. I may have crost the Smith and Wesson line and fell into the sin o' honest labor, but I have my sentimental memories."

Here in the city he lived in a squalid room above a cigar store. When he lay on his bed at night he could see a double bend in the great Ohio River below him, threaded with strings of slow-moving towlights. It was nine o'clock ond he was on his bed now, fully dressed, with his shoes on, and Gavitt sat on a stool beside him talking.

Kentucky got up, scratched beneath an armpit, and said mournfully, "It's a vale of weepin' and wailin' and gnashing of teeth. Trouble, trouble, trouble. Okay, Pat."

"There'll be no trouble," Gavitt said. "Everything's under control."

Kentucky laughed. "You mind me of my cousin Nesbit. A hundred farmers, eight bloodhounds, five deppities and two sheriffs had him holed up in a cave. Thirty-six ladies of the Happy Hands Needle Club was skittering about in the brush serving hot coffee and cake. A loud speaker was set up and it bellered, 'We're a-coming in after you.' Cousin Nesbit made a funnel o' his hands and bellered back, 'You'll never take me alive!' So they took him dead."

"I'm not at bay," Gavitt said stiffly. "This is entirely different."

"Hah. That's what you think."

They left the room, went down the stairs, and got into Gavitt's car. The sleet had gone into light wet snow which drifted down in feathery rags; the weather was breaking.

As he pulled from the curb, Gavitt said, "I'll run over it again. I'll be inside Trion Sales, talking to Trion. At nine forty-five sharp you call Marlowe 3-700. Whoever answers, ask for Mr. Trion. Say you're Louie Matelli, speaking for Mr. Pennywether, and ask if this is the Tiny Tot Studio. That brings in about everything, and should be dynamite."

"And what will you be doing?"

"I'll be studying Trion's reactions."

"Just like Cousin Nesbit."

They passed through a channel of ghostly warehouses and came out into the little spur street which was Minton Row. The neighborhood was incredibly dilapidated. A grimy matchbox restaurant on a corner had written across its glass, PIG AND FRENCH FRIES—ALL YOU CAN EAT! A cat prowled rubbish in the gutter and two teen-age boys in leopard jackets sat on the restaurant

door step playing with switchblade knives.

"I'll drop off an' phone from here," Kentucky said. "This looks like a nice friendly place."

Gavitt let him out.

The house for Trion Sales turned out to be a derelict Victorian residence, and struck Gavitt as being in an evil half-world of its own. There was a desolate ledge along the river here and the building stood on a slight hillock, about the base of which stood shallow pools of weedy, stagnant water. Through the snow, a downstairs windowpane showed yellow. Gavitt drove abreast of a long, low shed and left his car. Beside him was an antiquated moving van. He'd seen that van before. He got out his flash and took a quick look inside. On the floor four massive furnace grates were lashed together with a rusty chain. *So I missed not only death but a watery burial,* he thought. *Enough iron to keep a body on a riverbed till kingdom come.* He mounted the trellised porch and knocked. A floodlight burst on, white as magnesium, lighting the sides of the hillock, junked cars, lawn furniture and sundials, salvage from dismantled homes.

A man opened the door. He was about Gavitt's age, in baggy tweeds, and his crew-cut hair was flattish and slightly pinwheel on the top of his head; his eyes were like black plastic.

"I'm Gavitt," Pat Gavitt said. "Mr. Trion?"

The man nodded, and Gavitt pushed past him into a mildewed hall. Wordlessly, they walked along ancient floorboards into a small neat office.

On a rolltop desk was a telephone. The number plate said Marlowe 1115. There was no other phone, no Marlowe 3700.

"Did a man named Hugh Rhoades work for you, Mr. Trion?" Gavitt asked.

Trion smiled affably. "No."

"No? I believe you told Lieutenant Sencki otherwise."

"So you're a friend of Lieutenant Sencki's? The lieutenant must have misunderstood me. I said that Rhoades worked here. He didn't work for me. He rented my front room as an office. I think he sold mail order neckties or something. I never liked him."

"Could his number be Marlowe 3-700?"

"Right."

"And he's gone?"

"Like the snows of yesteryear."

For a long moment they scrutinized each other, Gavitt serene, grave, Trion courteous and intangibly mocking.

"Why are you here, Mr. Gavitt?"

"There was an attempt on my life tonight and that van of yours outside was involved."

"Impossible. I never lend my van."

Always an answer, quick, glib, seemingly foolproof.

Gavitt came in at an angle. "Did you know Mila Bannister?"

"I've heard she was mentally unsound."

The first evasion.

"I'd like to hear you on this," Gavitt said mildly. "Three times last week Dave Bannister called Marlowe 3-700 from his office. His secretary put through the call for him. Each time she thought she was ringing a cafe or club called The Blue Rose. Music would come to her, jukebox music, and the clinking of glasses, and a man would answer briskly, 'The Blue Rose.' It's my belief that this hocus-pocus, set up purely to confuse Bannister, is directly related to his death. Did Rhoades have a jukebox in his office?"

Trion looked stupified. "A jukebox? I never had a jukebox on the premises." He chewed the corner of his lip, and snapped his knuckles. "We'll have a look into this."

They went into the hall and turned into a large front room.

"Hugh Rhoades' office," Trion said.

A PRETTY poor excuse for an office, Gavitt thought. A cast-iron garden chair was pulled up to an old kitchen table.

On the table top was a phone with the number plate reading Marlowe 3700. Beside it was a squat silver pitcher, tarnished, and a thick tumbler. In the tumbler were a half dozen cutglass pendants from an old fashioned chandelier.

"What did he do with these?" Gavitt asked. Trion picked up the tumbler and shook it; it went clinkety-clink.

"He liked to play with cutglass," Trion said. "He'd shake the prisms like this in the light because they gave off rainbows." Trion picked up the silver pitcher. "Here's a novelty, Mr. Gavitt." He tilted it and it broke into strident music box clamor. It played *Pale Hands I Loved Beside the Shalimar.*

Gavitt looked sleepy, bored.

"Jeepers, we've got it!" Trion exclaimed excitedly. "Miss Keenan heard the music-box, and the rattling of the glass pendants, and got the erroneous impression that she'd called a cafe!"

Guilelessly, Gavitt argued. "But he answered, 'The Blue Rose.' "

This was the machinery, all right. This was the incredibly simple way it had been done.

Trion frowned. "By golly, I think I've got that too. She hears the music and glasses and thinks it's a cafe. Right? So her ears are all set to play her false. Hugh answers, 'Hugh Rhoades.' Romantically it comes out to her Blue Rose. An easy mistake to make."

Then, at that moment, Gavitt knew there had never been any Hugh Rhoades. Trion, in his conversation with Sencki, had glibly invented the name for just such an emergency.

A soft burr came to them as a phone rang down the hall, from Trion's office.

"Excuse me a moment," Trion said, and left.

Gavitt's watch read precisely nine forty-five. The phone before him remained mute. Kentucky was calling on schedule, but his call was coming through down the hall.

Marlowe 3700 was Trion's personal phone. In anticipation of Gavitt's visit he'd merely changed number plates.

Trion was the Tiny Tot Studio, and the Blue Rose, and the whole simple but deadly spiderweb. Tonight, after Gavitt had left, he would simply change back the plates—tomorrow, if there was need, he could deny everything, and think of a thousand glib ways to prove his denials. Nowhere was there a shred of evidence against him.

There was no link at all between Trion and Mila Bannister.

In a sly way Trion had been enjoying himself. He'd deliberately shown a knowledge of Joan Keenan's name, for instance. Almost like a game he'd allowed himself to become entangled in petty contradictions, always keeping himself fundamentally safe, untouchable.

Why, Gavitt wondered suddenly, were there two offices and two phones?

An eerie feeling came over him that Mila had been in this room many times, had primly perched herself on that very cast iron chair.

Down the hall, Kentucky was apparently prolonging the conversation.

One room, Gavitt had noticed, was sandwiched between this and Trion's office. He tried a door in the north wall, found it unlocked, and entered Trion's living quarters. A bedside lamp burned faintly, showing an antique four-poster gleaming with wax, covers turned geometrically back, morocco slippers by an easy chair, a cloth of gold dressing robe waiting by an open book. The book was titled *Every Man His Own Lawyer.* There was a lateral door here too, but it was locked. Gavitt sat on his heels and placed his ear to the panel. The phone, he estimated, was but a pace away.

He could hear Trion quite plainly, but the conversation was puzzling.

"No, little girl," Trion said. "I'm not any Louie Matelli." Surprisingly, he seemed edgy, off balance. "No, little girl, I've told

you I didn't know any Mr. Pennywether." Somehow, he seemed mesmerized. "No, little girl, I've told you five times this isn't the Tiny Tot Studio. Good-by. I must hang up now."

Gavitt blinked.

Little girl? Kentucky had a rasping bass voice. It would be physically impossible for him to talk falsetto. What went on?

Trion was busy in his office, hard at work at something. His frantic steps went back and forth, back and forth. Abruptly he was on the phone once more, dialing, talking hoarsely.

"Joe? Things are blowing up. Gavitt's here and knows about the van. I've just had a call from a little girl who seems to be on the inside too. No, not Joan Keenan. I've talked to Keenan on the phone, she has an alto. This was just a little sprout. How should I know? Don't ask me. Makes no sense to me either."

A pause. "You and Soupmeat get out of town and quick. You hit for Seattle, Soupmeat can dive for Tampa." Another pause. "I know you've got money coming. Meet me back of Estell School at two-thirty. And don't come tailed."

Joe must be the big man in the sports shirt, Gavitt thought, Soupmeat has to be Mr. Pennywether.

Gavitt was waiting in the frontroom when Trion joined him. His black eyes were no longer mocking but frightened, and his lips were dry and cracked.

"I've always been a good friend to the police, Mr. Gavitt," he said. "I don't know what this is all about but I'm behind you one hundred per cent."

Gavitt walked from the room without speaking.

WET, leafy snow covered the rubbish which littered the hillock as Gavitt descended the slope and crawled into his car. Kentucky, lank and sardonic, was curled on the front seat eating a barbecue sandwich and french fries from a greasy paper bag. He was obviously enjoying it.

Gavitt got his car in action. "You're supposed to be somewhere else. You're too much for me."

"I'm too much for myself sometimes," Kentucky said sadly. "Doggone, I wonder, how can one man be so tarnal smart." The car turned onto State.

"What happened?" Gavitt asked dryly.

"Well," Kentucky said, "a heap happened. I used my brain. They was a nice little ten-year-old girl, the daughter of the cook, hangin' around that restaurant so I jest give her a big kiss and asked her to put in the call for me. Little ten-year-old gals loves to do things for people, and if you're patient with 'em they hardly ever make mistakes. Then I come hopping around to Trion's, because that was where you really needed me."

"You thought."

"I knowed."

"But I didn't."

"But you did. Leave me out at the corner, I got a date with the boys at the Pleasureplay."

He scrambled out onto the curb. "When I got to Trion's I looked in a few windows. You was in the front room where Trion was showing you a silver pitcher. Then he goes to his office and answers little Sally's telephone call; outside, I trail right along. When he finishes talking to little Sally he roams the room, clicking his knuckles, his mouth working. He opens a desk, takes out a sheet of paper, tears it up and puts his lighter to it in his ashtray. Then he leaves. I nips in through the window. Most of the paper is burnt by now but I save a piece. That's all. How did I do?"

"Wonderful. Where's the paper?"

"See you tomorrow at the company. And take care of yourself."

"I will, and thanks. Where's the paper?"

"Thought I'd make you ask for it twice. Always relished being appreciated." Kentucky laid a fragment of paper in Gavitt's palm and vanished into the night.

Gavitt held it in the glow of his dashlight. It made no sense to him whatever.

Lieutenant Sencki was in his office and very glad to see Gavitt. He listened in a sort of wrapped distraction as Gavitt brought him up to date. Then he began to talk and ask questions, disjointedly, topsy-turvy. About a loose filling in his tooth, about the various aspects of the construction game, about how wonderful marriage was, how nice Joan Keenan was, and how when he was Gavitt's age he'd already had a stockpile of five kids. Then, casually, he asked to see the paper. Gavitt laid it on the desk top.

The first line was in large type, part of a letterhead. The next three fragmentary lines were in script, the following three in fine type.

ZLO, Realtor
2½ story, frame
no basement
211 Min
further consideration of your advertisi
attempting to find
property

"My, my," said Lieutenant Sencki.

"What is it?" Gavitt asked.

"Part of what is known technically as an Exclusive Sales Contract, but what is known popularly as a real estate listing. You want to sell your house. Okay. You go to a realtor and sign this paper giving him exclusive permission to handle the deal. Two and a half story, no basement, 211 Minton Row. So brother Trion is selling out."

Gavitt looked bleak. "Travel folders in Mila Bannister's purse. Trion unloading. They were pals, they were planning on clearing out together."

"Maybe," Sencki said. "And maybe not." His eyes, tired, red-rimmed, bored into Gavitt's. "You want to see some fireworks?"

Gavitt nodded.

"There's a little one room cinderblock novelty shop on South Astrack Street, one block north of Estell School. Be there at two-fifteen tonight."

Gavitt drove out to Mount Auburn. To Joan Keenan's. He felt lonesome, lost. He wanted to talk to Joan Keenan. He wanted a home of his own, a town of his own, a wife.

He wanted a stockpile of five kids.

SHE met him at the door and led him down the hall into the library. Never had he seen such a room as this; it stirred him and instantly became a part of him. The massive furniture was black leather and teak. The fireplace was black marble with golden seraphim; the walls above the bookcases were a sooty raspberry plaster. Everywhere were wall placques of Assyrian lions and plaster busts of statesmen and poets. The books were faded with age and along the edge of each shelf was a scalloped fringe of black leather, intervalled with black leather tassels, studded with big-headed brass tacks. The room was softly lighted by a punched-brass globe inset with amber and cobalt and emerald glass. Wearily he sank into a chair and gave her a full report of the day's events.

"I can't get that scraper out of my mind," he said. "That Saxby scraper down in Croyton, Tennessee. The one Accountancy calls Old Dyspepsia. Do you happen to know anything about it?"

"By chance I do," Joan Keenan said slowly. "Now let me see. We got it about two weeks after I'd come to work for Bannister. It was bought in Birmingham, Alabama, and sent immediately to South Carolina where some sort of a large housing project was being started. I believe it has worked as far north as Gary and as far south as Mobile."

"How do you happen to know so much about this particular scraper?"

"Miss Ederson and I had a scrap over it once. Her records had gotten jumbled."

"Miss Ederson?" Gavitt looked startled. "I'd forgotten Miss Ederson. By the way,

she tells me that she and Mila were bosom chums."

"Ha," Joan Keenan said. "Ha-ha."

Gavitt cocked an eyebrow.

"I'm not an eavesdropper, but they were yelling. It was about five-thirty one evening and they thought everybody had gone. Miss Ederson was screaming that Mila had stolen her boy friend."

"What else?"

"That was all, and that was enough. It sounded like feeding time at the panther cage."

It was one-thirty when Gavitt left. The snow had stopped. Now he knew the big answer. Elated, he slid into his car.

South Astrack Street was a district of the city's oldest slums. A moon, almost at the full, had come through a shattering of clouds and laid pools of lavender and green across the snow-topped filth. The cinder-block novelty shop, about fifteen feet square, edged a vacant lot and was flanked by a billboard. Its windows were dark. Along the curb were two police cruisers. A knot of men, some glinting official metal, some huddled in scarves and great coats, clustered behind the billboard. Gavitt was there, and Lieutenant Sencki, and a slim young man introduced to Gavitt as Mr. Lazlo, a real estate agent.

"There'll be a cordon around the school," Sencki said. "When the three of them get together we move in. We need them all together, that's the trick. And there'll be shooting. Let's go."

Gavitt started to move.

"Not you," Sencki said. "You and Mr. Lazlo are taxpayers. You wait here. We'll need you for identification." They melted away.

Alone with Gavitt, Mr. Lazlo said, "My wife is going to be mad when she hears I just stood still in all this slush. She's a great believer in exercise and circulation."

Gavitt grinned. "So am I. Let's walk."

They cut through the vacant lot on a diagonal and came at last to a low stone wall inset with a waist high iron fence of spears and bars. A hundred feet away in the moonlight was Estell School, a Victorian monstrosity of brick and stone, slate roofed and gabled.

"Those old-time public contractors really knew how to run up a bill," Mr. Lazlo said in admiration. "I'm sure the children enjoy those floral cornices." Gavitt felt a sudden liking for his companion.

Between the school and the fence was an asphalt play-yard, patched with snow. Here the moonlight was a fiery silver. There was no movement anywhere, no sign of life.

Trion had said the meeting would take place behind the building. Gavitt turned his gaze in that direction. Nothing but shadow there, boiling blackness.

Eleven minutes went by.

Pistols began to crack behind the building, in chips of scalding color. Three men in overcoats ran out of the shadows, into the play yard. Gavitt recognized Mr. Pennywether, bringing up the rear. They were firing from their waists as they ran, and abruptly two groups of policemen converged on them from the east and west. Mr. Pennywether went down as though he'd been poleaxed. Trion went down too, Gavitt observed, but the big man known as Joe somehow weathered the fusillade and set off at a lope around the corner of the building.

Pursuit roiled after him.

The play yard was momentarily abandoned but for the two bodies in the snow. It was then that Trion got to his feet. He was badly hurt and made it only after two staggering attempts.

Once erect he seemed to gain new strength, new life. A blurred shadow in black coat and hat, he walked to the fence some yards to their left, climbed it, and started down the brick-paved alley, away from them. A pistol gleamed in his hand.

"You go for help," Mr. Lazlo said hotly. "While I catch him."

"Simmer down," Gavitt said affectionately. "This is a big deal. Get Lieutenant Sencki." He walked away, down the alley.

Everywhere were cubes and recesses of black shadow. He walked carefully.

The alley changed its nature, became a ravine between ancient slum buildings, ended finally in a dead end and loading platform. Slowly, Gavitt retraced. That was how he found the footprint.

The brick paving was grey with shapeless slush, but there was a small ridge of drifted snow by a garbage can, and in the drift was the mark of a man's shoe. It was at right angle to the alley, pointing directly at the wall. Gavitt felt with his fingertips and found that he was facing a rotting door of tongue-and-groove. A knotted rope through an eyehole served as a latch. He opened the door and found himself in a narrow passage. He'd heard that this neighborhood was honeycombed with such warrens. He followed the passage and came into a small dismal courtyard.

Moonlight showed him a quadrangle of incredibly dilapidated and antique tenements, ascending in latticed tiers of narrow catwalk front porches. The ground floor of each building was pitted with sunken stone areaways. If his man had no connection with this place, which was likely, and had merely holed up in flight, it was ten to one he was crouching in one of these dark areaways.

Systematically, Gavitt began his search.

He'd reached the third areaway when his quarry revealed himself. Not from the sunken entrance before him, but boiling up out of the moonlight and shadow across the court.

And as the man rolled toward him, in fanatical rage, holding his fire for the kill, Gavitt saw that he'd been wrong. This man was not Trion.

It was Snell Prentice.

Much happened, all at once. Lieutenant

Sencki and Mr. Lazlo came out of the passage into the courtyard at a dogtrot. Mr. Lazlo, with a happy whoop tackled Prentice about the knees and Prentice beat him to the snow with his pistol barrel. Gavitt threw himself into the turmoil and caught one of Prentice's bullets through the fabric of his topcoat. Then Prentice wheeled on Sencki and Sencki shot him through the heart. He was dead when he struck the earth.

Sencki swept him with a flashlight and Mr. Lazlo said, "Yes, Lieutenant. That's the man. He was the one who signed the sales contract with me. He said he was moving to Canada. He was the real owner of Trion Sales."

"Where's Trion?" Gavitt asked.

"Safe and sound," Sencki said. "We picked him up at the terminal, catching a bus to Florida."

THREE weeks later they were gathered in the Keenan library, Joan and her mother, Gavitt and Lieutenant Sencki. "The scheme was a very simple one," Sencki said. "Prentice was Bannister's purchasing boss. He was selling Bannister reconditioned equipment, that he'd picked up all over the country at bargain prices. Trion was his scout and intermediary. Surprise you?"

"It had to be something like that," Gavitt declared. "Joan gave me the tip. Old Dyspepsia was a '36 model, yet it had been purchased during her incumbency, within the past two years. Without his knowledge Bannister had bought a relic. But how did he handle it on the company record?"

"Trion gave us the whole story. Prentice, a ladies' man, used Miss Ederson. He used Mila, too, and then killed her. Prentice was our murderer."

"Why did it pivot around Pat?" Joan asked.

"It really pivoted around Haslet," Sencki said. "Around Haslet's buying Bannister out. That called for an inventory, of course, and Bannister somehow became suspicious that he'd been duped. They'd covered up well, but they made a slip somewhere. He began to ask questions. That brings us to The Blue Rose. The Blue Rose was just a device to keep Bannister off balance until they'd killed him. And it served its purpose."

Joan's mother, silver haired, erect, with a cameo at her throat, said, "Horrible."

Sencki leaned forward and lowered his voice. "You, Miss Keenan, and you, Pat. They tell you're going to get married soon."

"That's right," Joan said.

Sencki rubbed his palms, briskly. "Okay. I got seven kids. You got none. I'll lend you three till you get on your feet. In a few years you can return them with an extra one for interest. Now I admit that's high interest, but where else can you pick up a proposition like that?"

Joan's mother, poker-faced, said, "Snap it up, daughter!"

Gavitt looked stunned. ■ ■ ■

The Inside Story

By David Crewe

At Cambridge, Massachusetts a candidate for the police force was disqualified when the examinating physician discovered the man had hidden half a cocoanut shell beneath his long hair to make the required height of five feet six inches.

And in Chicago, Illinois another police force candidate was disqualified when a routine check with the Federal Bureau of Investigation revealed that the man was wanted in at least two states for petty larceny and auto theft.

At Spright's Corner, Pennsylvania the police force, one man, was fired when the village council discovered he was the owner of the two gambling machines they had discovered, one in a bar and one in the men's room of the bus terminal.

HARD MONEY

A lone girl against the world—that was Carol Lannister. A man who gave her her first chance at a new life—that almost described her murderer!

"You asked for it, if any woman ever did!"

By Philip Ketchum

SHE was hard. That was perhaps the most outstanding characteristic about her, though it didn't always show in her face, or in her voice, or in her general attitude. But it was there, just under the surface. An iron shell within which she lived. A shell which nothing could dent. Nothing.

She was really, of course, two people. On the outside, on what she showed the world, she was a charming, and friendly, and beautiful person. A tall and slender girl, nicely put together. A girl with dusky brown hair, and dark eyes, and a wide and generous smile. And a throaty laugh. An intimate laugh.

But inside. . . .

To understand Carol Lannister you have to look back at the early years of her life. She was reared in an orphans' home. Not one of the better orphans' homes. A place with overcrowded dormitories. Understaffed. A place where regimentation was the keynote of the program, and where those who rebelled were punished. That is, they were punished if they weren't clever, if they couldn't lie with an absolutely straight face.

Carol's record at the institution was not good. She was neither sly nor clever at breaking rules. She could lie, and did, but was usually caught at it and punished. Punishments, however, seemed to have little effect. Whippings she learned to endure. The darkness of a locked closet soon lost its terrors. Being deprived of food could be compensated through stealing food. There was almost a day of rejoicing at the institution when Carol ran away. She was then fourteen.

Nowhere is there an accurate or complete account of what she did during the next six years, and Carol seldom talks of those years. But she was twenty when she went to work for Holliday and Hall, Accountants, and became to John Holliday, just another name on the payroll. Another girl in the filing department.

Three months after she took the job, Carol went into John Holliday's office one morning and stood in front of his desk. Holliday looked up. He was a grey-haired man in his early fifties, large, square shouldered, personally attractive. He smiled as he saw Carol. Most men did.

"You wanted something?" he asked.

"Yes," said Carol. "I want you to read this."

She handed him a typewritten note.

Holliday glanced at it. Read it. His face flushed with anger and, perhaps, embarrassment. He looked at Carol. He looked at the note once more. His mouth opened and closed several times before he managed to gasp, "What is the meaning of this? Where did you get it?"

"That piece of paper you are holding," said Carol, "is a copy of a note you slipped to Eva Krause the other day. She was careless with it. I found it. I have it safely hidden. It occurred to me that your wife might like to have it."

A shocked expression had come into Holliday's face.

"Or I could sell it to you," said Carol.

"Blackmail!" roared Holliday. "I'll not pay you a cent. We'll call the police on this."

He reached for the telephone.

Carol shrugged her shoulders. "If I am arrested, I'll talk, Mr. Holliday," she said sweetly. "Your wife will hear the story. Everyone in the office will hear it. The entire story, for I know of more than the note. I know where you spent last Wednesday evening. I know about your trip to Philadelphia with Eva Krause last week-end."

John Holliday sucked in a sharp breath. He said some things in a grating voice. Not pretty things.

And then he said, "How much?"

"Ten thousand dollars," said Carol.

"You're crazy," said Holliday. "Five hundred."

"Make it a thousand," said Carol. "And you've got ten seconds to nod your head."

Her voice was no longer sweet or pleasant. And she wasn't smiling. The hard crust had come to the surface.

THE thousand dollars Carol received from John Holliday was important money, not because of the amount but be-

cause of the way Carol earned it. The easy way. And because it pointed to an easy source of income. Not from Holliday, again. Carol wouldn't make that mistake. She would find other John Hollidays. She would take from them what the circumstances of life had denied her. Her days of struggle were over.

The thousand dollars didn't last very long, but it lasted long enough. It took Carol to Florida, and into the lives of Arthur Gillian and Helen Cotterel.

Gillian was an attorney. He was well-to-do. His wife was socially prominent. Helen Cotterel was the spoiled daughter of a very wealthy man. She had her own apartment, her own car, and too much money. She was a small, very intense person, and quite young.

Carol noticed them first in a restaurant where they paid no attention to anyone else. She followed them when they left. She spent a week finding out all she could about them, and after this, made Helen Cotterel's acquaintance. She visited Helen's apartment, once at the girl's invitation, and again when Helen wasn't home. On this occasion she found some letters Gillian had been foolish enough to write, and which Helen had been foolish enough to keep.

This time Carol planned a double take. She asked Helen Cotterel for money for the return of the letters, and got it. Five thousand, paid to her by a frightened, immature girl, terrified at the thought of publicity and her father's anger. Then, with one letter which she had saved, she approached Arthur Gillian. She demanded five thousand of him, and she got it—five thousand more, paid to her by a suddenly nervous man who treasured his standing in the community and who feared his wife's temper. Ten thousand in all. Easy money. Paid with no argument.

In New Orleans and in Chicago, Carol added to her stake, but her experience in Chicago was rather distasteful. The woman involved made a messy but unsuccessful effort at suicide. Carol was glad to leave Chicago. Never, so long as she lived, would she enjoy another visit to the Windy City.

It was pleasant in California. It was a nice place to rest, to take things easy. It was nice not to have to worry about money. Carol took a room at the Arlington hotel in Los Angeles. An exclusive hotel. An expensive hotel. She posed as a wealthy widow from the east. There was racing at the Santa Anita track and, almost daily, Carol took a bus or a train to the race course where she sat in one of the boxes and watched the horses run, and watched the people around her.

Carol had set a goal for herself. She had twenty-five thousand dollars, a tidy sum, but not enough to represent security. Her four ventures into the field of blackmail had each paid off, but she didn't like remembering what had happened in Chicago and she knew she couldn't continue what she was doing, indefinitely, without sometime making a disastrous mistake. But she could try the same old pattern once more and make a real killing if she picked the right people. Wealthy people. Prominent people. And that's what she would do. Play the game once more, then quit it forever.

She made a few acquaintances in California, among them a man named Henry Beal who had a job in the publicity department of one of the studios. Beal didn't rate very high in Hollywood, but he knew people. Important people. Wealthy people. And to Carol, that was important. Beal would point out to Carol the great and the near great and tell her what he knew about them. The obvious things, the things everyone else knew. But that was important, too. That, and what Carol could observe.

And she had become very observant. She was watching for another Arthur Gillian and Helen Cotterel. She was watching for the betraying look or gesture on the part of prominent man or well-to-do woman. The hidden secret which could mean

money to her. If dug up. If verified. If properly packaged for sale.

GRADUALLY, as the days moved on, Carol came to know Malta Engle and her daughter Betty, who lived in a suite of rooms across the hall from her in the Arlington hotel. She didn't dream, in the early stages of their acquaintance, that through Malta she would find the big chance she was looking for. In fact, she was never very much interested in Malta, though Betty held a strange fascination for her. Carol had dinner with them a few times in the hotel dining room. She visited them several times in the evening, once at Malta's request when her daughter was recovering from a cold and needed cheering up.

Betty Engle was about eight. She was a thin, awkward, dark haired girl, very plain in appearance, with none of her mother's vivid beauty. She was quiet, moody, unfriendly. Only once did she really open up and talk to Carol, and on that occasion, her talk was almost wholly about her father, Captain Harold Engle, who had been killed at Okinawa during the war. She idolized his memory. Carol didn't quite understand her attraction to Betty. She didn't realize that Betty reminded her very much of herself when she had been eight.

One evening when Carol dropped in to see Malta, the telephone rang and Malta answered it. Carol waited, sitting in one of the big chairs near the window. And it was by accident that she found the letter. It had slipped down out of sight between the arm of the chair and the cushion.

Letters addressed to other people and found in other peoples' rooms, were always exciting to Carol Lannister. As she held the letter in her hand she realized she knew hardly anything about Malta Engle, or about her source of income, or background, or the men in her life. This letter, addressed in a bold hand, was obviously from some man. Carol couldn't remember ever having seen Malta with a man. She quickly put the letter in her purse.

Later in her own room, she read it, and was startled by what she read. The letter was brief, hardly more than a note, written in a hurry. It read:

> Dear Malta,
> The sum you have asked is unreasonable. I tried to see you today but you were not in. I have to go up to San Francisco but I will return Friday and will call to see you late Friday night. I am sure we can reach some agreement. Please do nothing until then.
> Harold

Carol's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. The date on the envelope was recent. The Friday night mentioned in the note would be tomorrow night. Of course, this might lead to nothing so far as she was concerned. Or it might hold real possibilities. A great deal depended on the man who had signed the note. On "Harold." Betty's father had been named Harold, but Betty's father was dead. Or was he? Carol remembered now that Malta had never spoken of her husband and when Betty had talked of him, had changed the subject as quickly as possible.

The next night, Malta Engle had a visitor. He arrived quite late. He stayed only a short time. And he was the only visitor to enter the Engle suite. Carol Lannister, watching at the slightly opened door of her darkened room, was sure of that. And she was puzzled, for the man who called on Malta Engle was a man Henry Beal had once pointed out to her. A man named Jim Olmstead.

Carol was awakened the next morning by an insistent hammering on her door. She got up, put on her robe, brushed back her hair, and answered the knocking. Two men stood in the hall. Tall men. Scowling men. One was thirty or thirty-five. The other was older.

"Fleming, Homicide," said the younger man, giving her a glimpse of something in his hand which was probably his identification. "And this other man is Detective

Walden. We'd like to have a little talk with you."

He didn't ask permission to come into her room. He took her permission as granted. He came in, and the other man followed him, and Carol noted the sharp way their eyes circled the room.

She was confused. Confused and frightened. She clutched her robe tightly together at the throat. She brushed her hand through her hair once more, knowing how mussed it looked, and how pale she was without any make-up. But that was only a passing thought. These two men were detectives. And she was Carol Lannister. And back in Chicago . . . in New Orleans . . . in Jacksonville . . in New York . . .

"How well did you know Malta Engle?" asked Fleming, abruptly.

"Malta Engle?" Carol repeated.

She felt an immediate relief. It flooded over her body, draining away her strength. She made it to the edge of the bed and sat down.

"Yes, Malta Engle," said the detective.

He was staring at her, a grey, cold stare. His face was thin, his lips so tight she could hardly distinguish them. And he was still scowling.

"She was just an acquaintance," said Carol.

"Did you see her last night?"

"No."

"Were you in your room last night?"

"Yes."

"Did you hear anything? Any noises from across the hall?"

Carol shook her head. "What's happened?"

"Malta Engle is dead," said the detective. "Someone entered her room last night, and killed her. Murdered her, if you want us to use the ugly word."

Carol felt the shock of what Fleming had said. It showed in her face. But she wasn't too shocked to think, to sum things up, quickly. And she knew what she must do.

She must know nothing.

IN THE questioning which followed, Carol thought she did very well. She made her relationship to Malta Engle sound even more casual than it had been. She couldn't suggest who might have visited Malta the evening before. She said she had gone to bed early, slept soundly, heard nothing at all.

The detective gave up after a while, but asked her to get in touch with him if she could remember anything which she thought might help. Then, with the other detective, he left her room.

Carol dressed, went outside and, after breakfast, took a long walk. From what the detective had told her of the estimated time of Malta's death, she knew the murderer. She had seen him. She had possession of the letter he had written Malta, making an appointment to see her. That is, perhaps he had written the letter. She couldn't yet be sure of that. But what she did know was of value, and if the police investigation didn't lead to Jim Olmstead, her knowledge might be worth money. A lot of money. If she played her cards right. If she used her head.

Later, Detective Fleming paced back and forth across Carol's room. Scowling, shaking his head. And Carol watched him, wondering if the man ever smiled, and what his face would look like, if he did.

"No woman lives a life as empty as that," said Fleming suddenly. "Ten years ago, Malta Evans and Harold Engle were married in Cleveland. Engle worked for an investment concern. He enlisted in the army shortly after Pearl Harbor. He had been shipped overseas before his daughter was born. He was killed at Okinawa. Shortly after his death, Malta and her daughter left Cleveland, and from then to right now, all we have is a blank. Where Malta went, what she did, we don't know. All her daughter can tell us is that they lived in places like this, but Betty's memory probably doesn't go back more than a few years. Malta and her daughter registered into this

hotel from Des Moines, from an address which doesn't exist. Nothing in her rooms gives us a clue as to the past years. The hotel says she received very little mail. No guests. She was a darned beautiful woman. There were men in her life. There had to be."

"Had to be?" said Carol, smiling.

"If she was a normal woman, yes. Think, Miss Lannister. Think. What did she ever tell you about herself? About what she did? Where she was from? What man's name did she ever mention?"

"Malta never talked about herself," said Carol.

"Then what did she talk about?" asked Fleming.

"About her daughter, mostly. Where is Betty, Mr. Fleming?"

"At Juvenile Hall."

"What's that?"

"A detention home for juveniles."

"What will happen to her?"

Fleming shrugged his shoulders. "How should I know? So far as we know now, Betty has no relatives. Her mother left no money. The girl will probably become a ward of the state."

"You mean she'll be placed in an orphanage?"

"Either that, or some home. There's nothing else to do."

Carol frowned. She hadn't seen Betty Engle since Malta's death, but she could picture the little girl. She could see her thin, almost colorless face, the deep-set eyes. Frightened eyes. Frightened at what had happened, at the unknown life ahead. A life in some orphanage.

The detective went on talking, driving questions at Carol. And Carol answered them, but she couldn't get Betty out of her mind. A girl like Betty didn't belong in an orphanage. Some girls could take it, but not a girl like Betty.

"What would happen if you discovered that Malta had left some money?" Carol asked abruptly.

"Where would we discover that?"

"In your investigation," said Carol slowly. "Maybe there's money in a bank somewhere in Malta's name. Or in a vault. Or hidden somewhere."

"Hidden?" said Fleming.

He was staring at Carol thoughtfully, as though trying to read her mind. Carol bit her lips. The sudden idea which had come to her was crazy. And she had said too much. She would have to be more careful.

"If we found any money," said Fleming finally, "of course it would be used for Betty. But I doubt if we'll find any."

THE lettering on the door read: JAMES OLMSTEAD INVESTMENTS. Carol read that, and nodded, remembering that Harold Engle, who was supposed to have died at Okinawa, had worked for an investment house in Cleveland. She entered the re-

ception room of the office, which looked quietly expensive. At the information desk was an attractive, dark-haired girl.

"I'd like to see Mr. Olmstead," she suggested.

"Have you an appointment?" asked the girl.

Carol shook her head. She reached into her purse and took out an envelope. It was a plain envelope. Sealed. On it she had written: "Mr. James Olmstead—personal."

"Will you take this in to him?" she asked. "And tell him I am waiting?"

The girl took the letter and went to another room of the office. She returned almost immediately, nodded to Carol, looked at her curiously, and said, "Mr. Olmstead will see you. This way, please."

Carol closed the door after entering Olmstead's office, then stood against it for a moment and stared at the man at the desk. He was a big man, broad shouldered, about forty years old. He had thin, brown hair and a ruddy complexion. There was no welcoming smile on his lips, but Carol hadn't expected one. The letter she had sent in to him was a typed copy of his note to Malta. If he had sent the note, and she thought he had.

"What do you want?" asked Olmstead, and there was a grating harshness in his voice.

Carol walked forward. She fired all her guns at once. It had never been her way to be easy with a man like Olmstead.

"Malta lived across the hall from me," she said bluntly. "I knew her quite well. I have the note you wrote her. It has your fingerprints on it. I saw you enter her room Friday night. I saw you leave after you killed her. I haven't yet told the police what I know, but I could."

Olmstead's face had lost most of its color. He was perspiring. "What do you want?" he asked again.

"For myself," said Carol, "nothing. And you don't know how funny that is. But for Malta's child, I want fifty thousand dollars."

"Fifty thousand dollars," said Olmstead, weakly.

He moistened his lips. He mopped his hand over his face. He shook his head. "I don't have a tenth of that amount."

"Then twenty-five thousand dollars," said Carol. "And not a penny less. You have until I reach the door to give me your answer."

She turned, then and started for the door. She reached it and put her hand on the knob.

"Twenty-five thousand," said a faint voice from the desk. "Twenty-five thousand for Betty. If I knew Betty would get it—"

For Betty, he had said. For Betty. And Carol was positive, now, that this man who called himself Jim Olmstead, in reality, was Harold Engle. He had been Malta's husband. He hadn't been killed in Okinawa. Someone else had been killed and buried under his name, and for some reason he hadn't wanted to resume his own identity. He had married again—perhaps married well, and apparently hadn't wanted to give up his new position when Malta and Betty appeared on the scene.

Or it could be something else.

Carol frowned, aware of a momentary regret. Here was her big chance, and she was letting it go. Letting it go for a little girl she hardly knew. Letting it go because she had been reared in an orphanage, and hated it. Letting it go for a silly, sentimental reason. Orphanages were probably better now than they had been when she was a girl, or here in a rich state, were probably better.

"How do I know Betty will get the money?" asked Olmstead.

"You don't," said Carol. "You'll have to trust me. But I promise you, Betty will get it."

"It will take me until tomorrow to raise the money."

"Until tomorrow, then," said Carol. "And don't forget what I could tell the police."

She nodded, smiled, and left the office.

TO PLAY safe, Carol stayed at another hotel that night, but the next afternoon when she called at Olmstead's office, there was no trouble at all. Of course she really hadn't expected any. What she could have told the police, if arrested, was too dangerous for Olmstead to risk. Tight-lipped, scowling, he handed her the money, and accepted his letter to Malta in exchange.

"This is all," he said gruffly. "This ends it."

"Yes," said Carol, "I won't bother you again." And her attitude was quite pleasant.

She had bought an old suitcase and filled it with second-hand clothing, picked up at a Goodwill store. The money Olmstead had given her she now packed in with the clothing. She then checked the suitcase at a bus terminal and enclosed the claim check in an envelope addressed to the police. There was also an unsigned note in the envelope, stating that Malta Engle had left the suitcase with the writer of the note, a suitcase containing some of Betty's clothing, and that the writer of the note, anxious to avoid being dragged into the notoriety of the murder, was taking this method of getting the suitcase to Betty.

The police, Carol realized, might be skeptical when they read the note, and more skeptical when they found the money. But they would find the money, and the money would eventually be used for Betty. Olmstead wouldn't dare to claim it.

Carol felt quite pleased with herself when the letter was mailed. She was smiling as she walked up the street from the bus terminal. Smiling, and humming a song. A slim, dark-haired young girl, well-dressed, attractive. Not a few young men turned to stare after her. And one man, in particular, stared at her, watched her, followed her. But Carol didn't know that.

She stood in the late afternoon with a crowd of people at a busy intersection, waiting for the traffic lights to change so she could cross the street. She stood at the edge of the curb, still smiling, still humming under her breath. There was a stir in the crowd behind her and she felt hands suddenly against the back of her shoulders. And with no more warning than that, Carol was shoved abruptly into the street. Shoved so hard that she lost her balance and reeled forward, in front of an approaching car.

She heard screams, one of which must have been her own. There was a screeching of brakes. The car swerved, but not enough to avoid her. She caught a glimpse of the driver's face. Pale, startled, frightened. And then the car struck her, and pain knifed through her body, and she felt herself tossed through the air. Picked up, and tossed, and dropped. And for a moment, everything went black.

But only for a moment, for lying in the street, Carol realized almost instantly what had happened. Someone had shoved her into the path of the approaching car. She could remember the feel of the hands against her back. Striking her suddenly. Pushing her forward. And a car had hit her. It had almost stopped. Almost, but not quite. It had been coming down the street too fast.

A crowd was standing around her. Faces stared down at her. Scared looking faces. A woman kneeling at her side whispered to her to lie still. A man in a police uniform bent over her and asked her how she felt. And Carol answered him. Answered him automatically, without thinking of what she said. Then quite abruptly, her eyes widened. There, in the crowd around her, was a face she knew. A scowling face. The face of Jim Olmstead. She caught just a glimpse of him before he stepped away. Disappeared.

AN AMBULANCE took her to the emergency hospital, and shortly afterwards, a tired looking doctor stood at her bed.

"You're a lucky young lady," he told her. "A few bruises, a slight shock. Nothing more."

"You mean I can go?" said Carol.

"To another hospital, if you wish," said the doctor. "It might be well to spend the night in a hospital. Or you can go home, but take it easy for a few days."

"I'll go home," said Carol.

But she didn't mean that, exactly. She would go to the hotel, pack the few things she would need, and leave town tonight. There was no other safe course to follow. She had done some pretty quick thinking in the brief time since the accident. She was convinced it was Jim Olmstead who had pushed her into the path of the automobile, and she thought she knew why. He was frightened by what she knew. He had tried to kill her and make her death look like an accident. He might try again. She could tell what she knew to the police, but that might endanger the money intended for Betty.

The nurse who brought Carol the release form she had to sign, shook her head when Carol mentioned a taxi.

"You won't need one," she said smiling. "Someone is waiting for you. He just came in. The doctor told him you were dressing and would be down in a minute."

Carol stiffened. She took a deep breath. She didn't have to ask the name of the man who was waiting. She knew who it was. Jim Olmstead. She had been here less than an hour. No one else could have learned so quickly where she was. Olmstead could have known. He could even have followed the ambulance which brought her here. And he was waiting for her now. Waiting for another chance at her. A chance to finish what he had started.

There was a side door to the hospital. Carol found it. She stepped out on a darkened street, looked quickly each way, then started for the far corner. Hurrying. Every step was pure agony. Every step reminded her of her buised body, but with every step she was escaping.

The desk clerk at the Arlington seemed quite disappointed when she told him she was checking out. He wanted her to postpone her trip. He wanted to know where she was going. But then, he was like that. A sallow faced young man, interested in women. Women who lived alone. He had annoyed her before.

"I'll pay for the room for another week," said Carol. "There won't be time to pack all my things. What I can't take tonight, I'll send for."

She gave him a San Francisco forwarding address, fairly sure she wasn't going to San Francisco, asked him to send someone up for her bags, and then turned to the elevator.

In her room she packed swiftly, ignoring the protesting pains in her body. There wasn't much to take, much which couldn't be replaced. And the important thing was to get away. To get away before Jim Olmstead guessed where she had gone. Before he could follow her.

A KNOCK sounded on the door. Carol turned that way to admit the boy who had come for her bags. But it wasn't a bell boy who had knocked. It was Jim Olmstead. Jim Olmstead, standing in the hall, and now moving into the room, and closing the door with his foot, and standing against it. Standing there looking at her. Just looking at her.

The sudden shock of it held Carol speechless.

"You asked for it," said Olmstead. "If any woman ever asked for it, you did."

And suddenly he was moving forward, moving toward her, his arms lifted, his fingers extended claw-like. Big, thick, powerful fingers. Reaching for her throat. Reaching. Reaching until they touched her.

The feel of them seemed to break the paralysis which had gripped her. A scream lifted to her throat, but was cut off, and Carol could sense that she was being carried backward. Backward to the bed. And then she was across it, and under the heavy weight of Olmstead's body. Tears, smarting in her eyes, blinded her. She tried to twist free, clawing at Olmstead's wrists. A pain was building up in her chest like no pain she had ever known. And in her head, stabbing through from temple to temple.

Then, quite abruptly, she could breathe again, and the fingers were gone from her throat, and the weight from across her body. And she could hear a voice, some man's voice, shouting. And the sounds of blows, the sounds of a struggle. But not a long struggle, for it was soon over.

"So this is what you were in such a hurry to get back to?" said a voice, somewhere above her.

Carol's blurred vision settled into focus. She stared up at Detective Fleming. A scowling man whose eyes were puzzled. He was opening and closing the fingers of his right hand. His knuckles were bruised, bleeding.

"I was at headquarters when the report of the accident came in," she heard him saying, "I missed you at the hospital."

Carol Lannister sat up. She could see a figure on the floor, the figure of Jim Olmstead. His hands were manacled. A shudder ran over her body.

"He killed Malta Engle, didn't he?" said Fleming. "I was at the door when he admitted it. And he meant to kill you. Why, Miss Lannister? What was the reason?"

Carol glanced at Jim Olmstead again. It would all have to come out now. The entire story. Who Olmstead really was. Why she had gone to him. What she had made him do. And that meant that Betty Engle would never get the money in the suitcase. It meant she had failed. The only decent thing she had ever tried to do had ended in complete failure.

"I'm waiting to hear what you have to say," said Fleming.

Carol nodded. She started to talk.

AFTER their brief visit at Juvenile Hall, the little girl said, quite formally. "Thank you for coming, Miss Lannister. Good-by, Miss Lannister."

Carol bit her lips. She tried to keep a film of tears from her eyes. She said, "Good-by, Betty. I'll try to come to see you again, quite soon."

And then she stood watching while Betty Engle disappeared behind one of the far doors in the room.

"It's pleasant here, Miss Lannister," said the matron. "And Betty seems quite well adjusted, under the circumstances. Of course she'll be placed out for adoption, soon."

Carol nodded. There wasn't anything to say. She went outside to where Detective Fleming was waiting in his car. He had driven her here and would drive her back to her room in town. She didn't live at the Arlington anymore.

"How is she?" asked Fleming.

"Frightened," said Carol. "Bewildered. Scared to death."

"They won't keep her here long," said Fleming. "They'll find a good home for her. But what about you? What are you going to do?"

Carol had no immediate answer. She had been lucky. The police in New York, and Florida and New Orleans and Chicago had no record of her by name. The past hadn't caught up with her, but she wasn't entirely free. She was on probation. And that meant she had another chance.

"Well?" Fleming was asking.

"Whenever I make my probation report," said Carol slowly, "tell them to remind me of Betty. I don't want to forget her, ever. As long as I live."

"You think that'll help?" said Fleming.

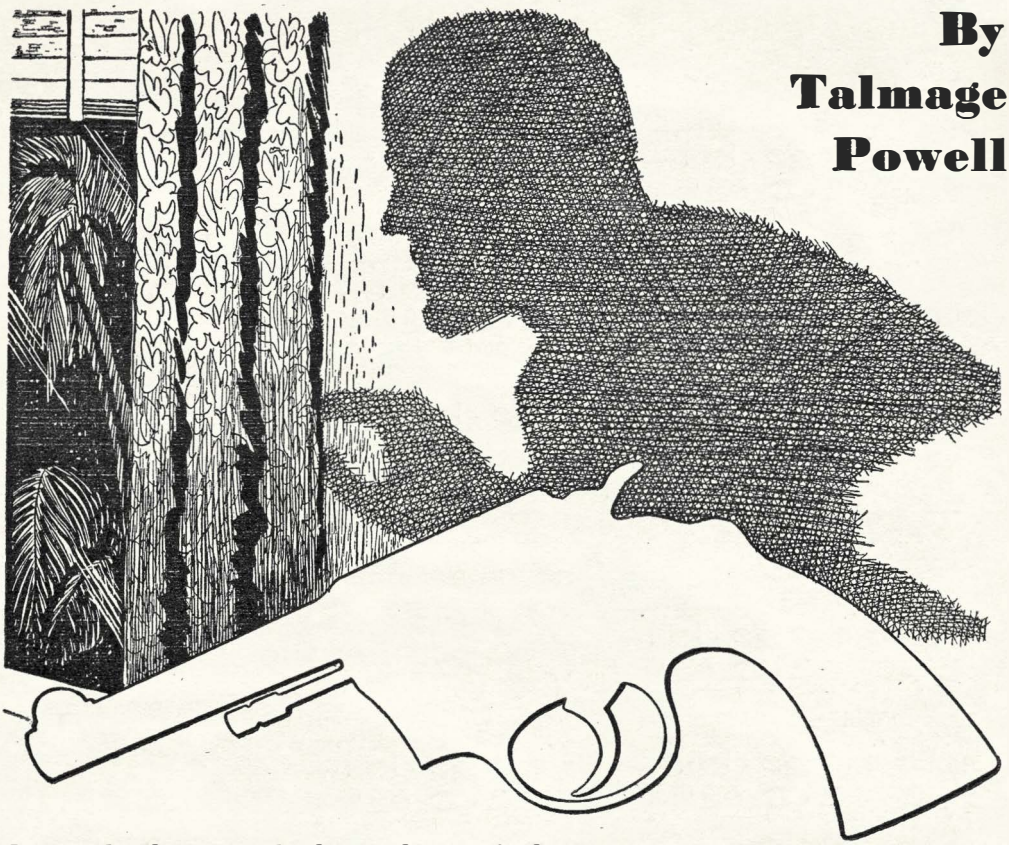
"Yes," said Carol honestly. "Yes, I think it will." ■ ■ ■

The shadow of a man, long, distorted, showed briefly against the living room wall.

I WAS murdered at exactly eleven o'clock on a Monday evening. I am able to recall the time exactly because the tall clock in the foyer was striking the hour as I shoved the papers to the back of the desk and started up the long, dark stairway to the upper hall.

There were many things on my mind that night. I wondered where Vicky was, for one thing. She'd said at dinner that she was playing bridge at Thelma Grigsby's tonight. Was it okay with me? Sure, I said. I had some work to do anyway. She'd pouted prettily, her hair like spun gold about her face in the soft candle light in the dining room—Vicky always liked dinner by candlelight.

"If only you could be a husband and an important man at



By Talmage Powell

I was dead—everybody said so. And Vicky—poor, faithless Vicky, trapped alone in the night with my murderer, would soon be dying, too—unless they heard my gun-backed plea. . . .

KILLER BE GOOD

the same time, Doug," she'd said. "All this work and no play—"

"Gives mama spending money," I said.

After dinner I went in the study. For a moment I stood looking at the desk. I didn't want to sit down to it and face the mass of papers on it. I was tired, and I had that pain across my abdomen again. Maybe I was developing an ulcer. Was it worth it, the work and strain required to keep a few steps ahead of the rest?

Then I pushed the smothered feeling aside, ripped the cellophane off a fresh package of cigarettes, and sat at the cluttered desk.

I heard Vicky pass through the hallway and without quite realizing it I listened until I heard the car start in the driveway outside. The motor raced until it sounded as if it would throw a rod. Vicky had never been able to get a motor started smoothly.

I heard the motor whisper away to an idle and the liquid, golden sound of her voice came through the open study window that overlooked the driveway.

"Mr. Shoffner, we'll cut some glads for the house tomorrow morning."

I heard the old, tired voice of Wendel Shoffner answer, "Yes, mum." He was our gardener and general handy man. He'd been with us a month now, a tired, sagging man with watery blue eyes and baggy pants.

The car engine raced again as Vicky left the driveway. Shoffner's slow footsteps crunched by the window as he went to his room over the garage. I was still too taken with lassitude to get to work. Could we afford a glad garden and a man to keep it and the grounds up? Of course we couldn't. You don't live that way on the pay of an investigator attached to the office of the district attorney. But there are ways. You don't have to act in an illegal manner, either. You just have to stretch a point here and there. Politics, some people call it.

I told myself that I had to get rid of this feeling of depression, the nagging sense that I was caged and on a treadmill. I had to shake loose the insinuation in my mind that it was all for nothing. Life was still sweet, very much so.

I wanted to live a very long time that night.

Lew Whitfield phoned me about nine o'clock. He had been elected D.A. a year ago on a reform platform. He was a short, deliberate man, given to flesh and losing his hair. He smoked black cigars and lived with his slender, greying wife and six children in a rambling barn of a house. "Only place big enough to hold the brood," he would explain. There were croquet and badminton courts in his yard. His lawn was like the hide of a mangy dog, scuffed bare of its pitiful, dried-up grass by the pounding of many childish feet. He romped with his kids until his balding head gleamed with sweat and his breath grew short, and they tumbled all over him when he went into the house to sit down. Through it all he moved as placidly as a good-natured elephant.

"Going over the Sigmon brief, Doug?" he asked that night on the phone. A radio was blaring and a kid was screaming laughter in his house.

"Just starting on it," I said. The Sigmon case wasn't particularly fresh or interesting. It happened a dozen times a day in different parts of the country. Loren Sigmon, a scrawny, underfed, cheap punk. His girl friend, after an argument, had tipped us that he was the boy we were looking for to clean up a filling station robbery. Maybe they made up and she, in that sudden reversal of emotion that takes hold of such women, told him that he'd better scram before the coppers came. Or perhaps she was still angry and threw it in his teeth that he was going to jail, when he showed at her place. He wouldn't tell us about that. He wouldn't talk about anything. But we had him. I'd gone to her place not quite in time to keep him from shooting her to death.

Lew tried to tell me something about the Sigmon case over the radio and the noise of his children.

Then he said, "It isn't important. Put it aside and bring Vicky on over. We'll have coffee after canasta."

"Sorry. Vicky's out to win us a set of ashtrays or something at Thelma Grigsby's tonight."

We hung up, and I rocked back in the desk chair, smoking and thinking. You live along for years, and then somehow you start doing that. Thinking. Questioning. What have I done with the thirty three years of my life?

College, an investigator's job with an insurance outfit. The war. And you remember the eruption of emotion that swept the country, the release from boredom, from the everyday treadmill that seems to have captured you. You return and meet Vicky

and marry her. Then you set to work to build a future.

Yet one night, without warning, without reason, you find yourself unable to work, sitting and thinking. . . .

I threw the pencil I'd been toying with on the desk. Dammit, I knew what was wrong with me. I was lonely. I wanted the sound of Vicky's voice. I wished she were here to go with me to Lew Whitfield's house. I wanted the noise of his kids, and Vicky's eyes lighting as she looked at a dress Lew's wife had made.

"Marge, however do you do it!" Yes, I could hear every inflection of her voice in my imagination.

Or perhaps she'd put her head next to the oldest Whitfield child, Sharon, over Sharon's high school homework.

And then later we'd leave the Whitfields and drive across town, the soft Florida night a caress in our faces. We might stop someplace and dance a few minutes. Then home—and the warm darkness.

I was still very much in love with Vicky. That night I hoped we would have many, many years together.

AT TEN o'clock the phone rang a second time. I was deep in some notes Lew had made on a joint at the edge of town which was taking, we thought, illegal bets. Minor, but important. You go after those things and splash them big to keep the public convinced of your worth as a public servant. You like to keep the voters saying, "No organized crime in our community." It our case it was true, as true as in any place in the nation. This was saying a lot, considering that we were in a Florida resort town on the Gulf coast while right across the state from us on the Atlantic side lay a city which had attracted the Kefauver committee itself.

On the second skirl, I picked up the phone. "Doug? Is Vicky busy at the moment?"

I caught my breath. My hand went a little chill on the phone. The voice was that of Thelma Grigsby. Her bridge parties never broke up as early as ten o'clock.

"She isn't here," I said. I hesitated. "Didn't she stop by your place?"

"Why, no. Was she planning to?"

"No," I said, surprised at how fast the word jumped out of me. "I just thought she might. I'll tell her you phoned when she gets in."

"Doug—is anything wrong?"

"Of course not. Why do you ask?"

"Oh. just a silly feeling the tone of your voice gave me." She laughed. "Old worry bird, that's me. We'll be looking at you, Doug."

"Sure," I said.

I replaced the phone and sat there looking at it for a moment. It had never occurred to me to mistrust Vicky. She came and went pretty much as she pleased. But tonight my tired mind began asking questions. Was there something behind her absences during the past few weeks? Was this, tonight, a simple matter of her having changed her mind about attending the bridge party? If so, why hadn't she returned home? There were several places in Santa Maria, movies, the homes of friends, where she might have gone alone, of course. But she hated to go anywhere for a good time alone.

I found it hard to break the chain of thought, once it had started. She had taken an interest in water skiing recently, which occupied most of her afternoons. She was rehearsing a play with a little theater group, and that took several of her evenings. Had she really been at those places?

Was there another man?

The question cut through my consciousness with a pain as acute as physical torture. I couldn't sit still any longer. I had to get up and walk about the study. The very silence of the house, the oppressive heat of the night ate away at me.

It happened. Hell, it happened so many

times every day that a man was a complete fool to think it could never happen to him.

I'd never fooled myself into thinking that nine men out of ten who looked at Vicky wouldn't like to take her from me. I'd never blamed them, and I'd never been of a jealous disposition. She had that natural animal magnetism that was felt the moment she entered a room. Blonde, golden, a tall, striking woman. She knew how to dress to advantage, but that attraction would have been felt had she donned a mother hubbard.

Yet I had never once believed that any other man would ever succeed in stirring Vicky's feelings to the point that would lose her to me. She was too damn forthright and honest for that. Or had I been simply too smug and sure of myself?

I was frightened at the thought of losing her. I tried to reason myself out of my state of mind, but my reason would not respond to the reins.

My reason became cold and clear and remembered a dozen little things. The far-away look in her eyes during the past few weeks. The rapt expression of her face. Sometimes I'd had to voice a question or statement twice. It was as if her thoughts, her interests were elsewhere at the moment.

I recalled the night a week ago when I'd called for her at the Bath Club. She'd come into the club room with its long bar and bamboo tables and chairs, and when she'd seen me, sudden fright had flared in her eyes. She'd been out on the terrace, and when I'd suggested going out there, she had pleaded a headache and rushed me home.

Who had been concealed by the warm darkness of the terrace? Whom had she been with out there?

I ripped the next to last cigarette out of the package, lighted it from the one I'd smoked down. Bitterness had crept into my reasoning now. I had probably raised a brow myself at the situation some time or another. A man enwraps himself in the task of giving his wife an ever higher standard of living, leaving her lonely, more and more leisure on her hands, free to draw the assumption that she is unloved.

With Bill Farnsworth and his wife it had been that way. And I recalled a remark I'd made to Vicky the night Bill's wife had walked out on him, *"Can you really blame her? How about him. After all he couldn't expect her to become nothing more than a hot-house plant. She's a flesh and blood woman."*

Vicky was that, very much so. A flesh and blood woman.

A light tap sounded on the jamb of the study doorway. I glanced up. Old Shoffner said, "Anything else I can do before I turn in for the night, Mr. Townsend?"

I shook my head. He was looking at me closely, and I colored a trifle and stopped running my fingers through my already tousled hair.

As he turned to go, my voice stopped him. "I suppose Mrs. Townsend is pretty busy with the garden these days?"

He hesitated. "She works at it."

My gaze held the attention of his salt-and-pepper stubbled face. "Come in, Shoffner. Sit down."

"I'm really tired, Mr. Townsend. Been hauling muck for the flowers."

"You can spare another moment. I don't get to see much of her, Wendel. I hardly know how she spends her days. Is there anything I could get, a gift to please her? Does she ever talk of anything she feels she missed?"

He remained rigid in the doorway, twisting his dirty cap in his hands. "She doesn't talk to me much, Mr. Townsend."

"I'd thought she would. She's always so full of chatter, and out there gradening, I figured she might talk quite a lot. Her birthday is next month. I'd like to get her something very special."

"She hasn't said anything about it. I'm afraid I can't help you, Mr. Townsend."

I stood looking at him. He had a rather grim, seamed face, and I suspected that he knew the trend my thoughts were taking and recognized that I was offering him the opportunity to tell me anything I might need to know.

"She probably stays busy with her friends," I suggested.

Shoffner nodded, and I said, "She knows a great many young matrons her age. I suppose they call for her in the afternoon to go shopping."

"Yes, sir."

He was looking more uncomfortable with each passing moment. I waited for him to add anything he knew about the people who called for her when I was away. Perhaps the man who'd been on the Bath Club terrace had never called here, but Shoffner's reluctance, the cold bead of his washed-out blue eyes was answer enough. He knew something. But he was not going to get mixed up in anything. He was thinking of his job and how hard it might be for him to find another at his age.

"I'm really very tired, Mr. Townsend."

"All right, Shoffner. Goodnight."

He went away from the study and I heard the rear screen door slam behind him. I sat down again at the desk.

CHAPTER TWO

Mind Over Mayhem

IT COULDN'T be true, I told myself. Vicky would never be unfaithful to me. Damn it, I almost wished that Thelma Grigsby hadn't phoned tonight.

I tried to concentrate on my work. I had done a ratty thing, trying to pump old Shoffner. Bringing out the family skeleton before a servant. Spying on Vicky, who was a part of me, without whom I never could live.

I realized that I was exhausted. Conflicting feelings of shame and then anger—when I thought of a stranger on that dark terrace—beat at my mind. I would never give Vicky up; not as long as I thought there was any chance at all of continuing life with her. She must know that. She must realize the depth of my feeling. It seemed incredible, come to think of it, that she, who was so very kind and thoughtful, could do anything to hurt me.

I rose from the desk. I thought, *You'd better stiffen your spine, Townsend, and start thinking like a man. Vicky started life with you without too many material comforts. You had a small inheritance. You've invested wisely and well, thanks to politics, and the inside dope you've had. You could even take a year, two years off, and coast, putting Vicky first in your life. Quit working so hard, chewing so hard at the muzzle. Even if some joker has caught her in a bored, lonely mood, you can win her back.*

The clock in the foyer began striking eleven. I went out of the study, crossed the sunken living room with its square, modern furniture that Vicky had chosen.

I was feeling better as I started up the stairway. I was glad I had lived this night with its introspection. I must admit that things hadn't been right between Vicky and me for several weeks now. We'd grown distant. I would stop the drift in that direction; for tonight I'd experienced the sodden fear that would only be the beginning of my feeling should I ever lose her.

I was almost at the top of the stairs. The upper hallway was hot and very dark. I fumbled for the light switch; and then I sensed that I was not alone. A rustle of cloth, a whisper of breathing, and I knew another presence was in the hallway with me.

I was not afraid at first; no time for that. Only jarred to a sudden immobility. The instant of my indecision was my undoing. And then terror!

The gun crashed and a tongue of flame lashed toward me. It was quite close. A searing pain shot through my head and I had the swift sensation of a sickness like

vertigo multiplied a thousand times. There seemed to be nothing beneath me except black nothingness. I fell, loose jointed and with a complete lack of control over my limbs. End over end, elbows bumping, legs flying like strands of rubber, I jolted all the way to the foot of the stairs, to the parquetry of the entry foyer.

I jolted to rest with my limbs at awkward angles. I could feel no pain now. I could, in fact, feel nothing, except the wild terror that came with this feeling nothing.

I tried to move, and could not. I was wrapped in a blackness, a helplessness that made of my body a lump of cold clay. Then I heard the footsteps coming down the stairs, and I seemed to know that they belonged to a man. A light fell on my face, and I guessed that my eyes were open; for I could see the light like the haze of a faint moon almost obscured by clouds.

The light moved. He had moved. I heard his breathing, like two skeins of silk being rubbed together. I supposed that he was giving me a quick examination by the light of a flashlight. What he witnessed must have satisfied him. The light vanished, and after a considerable time I decided that I was again alone.

As I became accustomed to this numb lack of sensation, some of the sickening fear of it left me. I was feeling no tiredness; no pain, as if in the next moment I might swoop off to some world beyond the stars. The images of my thoughts were possessed of that same peculiar weightlessness that had taken my body.

Was this the experience of death? The question did not seem at all surprising to me right then, but very concrete and real. I doubt that I would have been surprised had several beings of this strange world floated forward to bid me welcome to their company.

I was human, and therefore concerned first with myself. Next followed a flood of questions regarding the man who had shot me. I didn't doubt that the murder had been a deliberate one. He had known I would turn out the study light, cross the living room with its dim night light and walk up the stairs.

Had it been a burglar? I dismissed that possibility. The smart second story man never enters a house with the male head present and visible—as I had been through the open study window. Neither does the smart house-breaker carry a gun. The risk of a much stiffer sentence—even the chair—if caught armed is too great.

There was still the remote chance of course that he'd been a very dumb second story artist, but in that case he would have bolted and run. Instead this man had been cool, in full possession of his nerve as evidence by the fact he'd followed me down to make sure he'd done the job right. His examining me before taking flight was proof enough that he'd been waiting in that upper hall for the express purpose of murdering me.

But why? Doug Townsend had few enemies—and those Lew Whitfield and every policeman in Santa Maria could also claim. I'd only been a part of every investigation I'd worked so far. If some minor hood had finished his sentence I had done nothing to provoke him to return and commit murder. True, there was young Loren Sigmon, whose crime I'd eyewitnessed. But he was safely in jail. So there seemed little possibility that my work or anything connected with it was the motive for my murder.

I experienced a fresh fright at the detached manner in which my mind could view the situation. This was me! Put a few tears into it! This is personal, Townsend.

Personal, but still a problem in criminology, and my mind went ahead in its own fashion, as if, being released from body, it was for a time released from all emotional hedges also. Coolly, my mind went about the business of sorting out motives for murder. There are only two, provided, the

murderer is not insane. Passion, and gain.

Passion was most probably out. I had quarreled with no one, insulted no one; I had not been sufficiently vicious to drive anyone to murder.

Was a killing for gain to be any more seriously considered? Wealth of course is a relative matter, and it was possible that my earthly possessions, a good home, two cars, several decent investments that were putting money in the bank, were great enough for someone to value them higher than my life. But those things of course would all go to Vicky once this inert hulk at the foot of the stairway was buried.

THERE was only one possibility left, a mixture of the two motives. Passion *and* gain so interwoven that the motive became a single driving force. A desirable woman, plus the estate of the deceased.

Can hell hold any greater torture? The desirable woman. Vicky. The deceased. Doug Townsend.

In desperate agony I wanted to be done with this reasoning. But my mind, with a grim, macabre relentlessness clung to that one idea, for there was no other with any substance.

Perhaps he had been plotting his very act that night I'd been so close to him, when only the curtain of darkness on the Bath Club terrace hid him from me.

Fresh light came, a shimmering in a fog. Footsteps moved toward me, around me. Someone had heard the shot and hurried to the scene. . . .

I couldn't see him. Just one flick of my eye muscles would have put him in a line with my vision, but the muscles were dead, powerless and the vision was dim and distorted.

I experienced a great need for his presence. He was human—he was living. Don't go away! Look at me and tell me that this is not death!

A door slammed and fresh footsteps whispered into my foggy world. They stopped then came forward with a rush.

"Doug! Oh, Doug!"

It was Vicky. Thank heaven, in that moment the sound of her voice was too dear for me to think of murder and its motives. Whatever the man had done, Vicky had had no part of it. Vicky would never be a party to a thing like this.

Right then I could have forgiven her of anything. I had never needed her more. The presence of living human beings had driven a fresh awareness of my present state through me. A fresh terror.

Surely she would drop by my side. Her hands would touch me. Yet the moment lengthened and I heard a voice, Shoffner's. "Easy, Mrs. Townsend. You look pretty green. I heard something that sounded like a shot and ventured to come in just a few seconds before you got here. Don't you think we'd better call a doctor and the police?"

He must have helped her to a chair. She moaned softly and the moan mutated into weak, soft sobbing.

"Yes, the police. How could he have done it?" And then she whispered brokenly, "Oh, Doug—how could you?"

If I had hoped there was a limit to the depths of torture, I knew better now. For a moment her words brought only a stunned, blank nothingness to my mind; then the insinuation behind them began to sink in. I didn't understand. Desperately I thought, *Darling, if I could look at your face at this moment, would I see something there I've never beheld before?*

The last prop beneath my world was shattered completely. I might possibly have accepted oblivion right then; but oblivion failed to come. If this were death, then death was far from oblivion.

Only minutes passed before they came. The doctor. The police. My co-workers. I don't know how many of them there were. At times it seemed the room was filled with the babble of many voices; then again there was the silence of emptiness.

Lew Whitfield came, of course. I sensed it was he when I heard the elephantine pad of footsteps on the foyer carpet. He stood over me during one of those silences before going down the two short steps that led to the living room.

The vague outlines of his heavy-jowled face came through to me. I could fill in the details of his expression, the pain in his eyes as they seemed to sink in the fat rolls of their sockets, the bitter passing of color from his ruddy cheeks, the sorrowful drooping of his heavy lips.

"My God," he said, like a prayer, "this is terrible." His words might have been inane, considering the situation, but I knew the meanings behind them. The days we'd worked together, the trust between us, the feeling of being on the same team. Those were the wonderful things Lew was talking about.

"He looks pretty gory, doesn't he, with his right temple all torn and bloody. His eyes, glassy and staring—as if looking at hell itself."

"He doesn't look like Doug Townsend," Lew agreed with tears in his voice. "Where is Vicky?"

"Out in the kitchen. A matron is feeding her coffee."

"She find him?"

"No, the yardman heard the shot and came in the house just before she got here."

"I can't believe it," Lew said. "I just can't believe it. How much more have you got to do here?"

"We're about finished, photos all taken, statements down. It seems like a clear-cut case of suicide. His wife told us he kept the revolver upstairs in their bedroom when he was off duty. He must have gone up, got it, and came back down. Maybe he was planning to do it in the study, or the kitchen, or out in the yard someplace. Or maybe he was only thinking about it, toying with the idea, and the impulse became suddenly overwhelming. The gun is in his hand, and he does it right here in the foyer. We've found only one set of fingerprints on the gun—his."

I knew the scene as well as if I'd been able to stand away and look at it. I'd been through the scene before, in a different role, of course. A far different role. The body inert in death. A photographer, a lab man, a cop or two in uniform and a couple in plain clothes. Most of them smoking nervously, until the air was thick and blue with the smoke, ashes scattered on the carpet. All of them prowling like restless shadows in the knowledge that they were human and this dead thing had been human too. Nervous neighbors on the lawn trying to gawk through the windows, shushed away by the patrolman assigned to that duty. The phone screaming, and the sound of weeping.

But always the dead one was the center of the scene, the hub around which the prowling took place, the subject of all the questions.

That flat, droning voice which had been speaking with Lew spoke again: "Charlie Markham is out of town. So the autopsy will have to wait. Of course Mrs. Townsend's own doctor came over as soon as the servant called. We have plenty already to establish the time of death. The shot, heard by Shoffner at about eleven. The wound still oozing blood when Mrs. Townsend came in. The body still warm when the doctor got here. The doctor hoped for a second that Doug was still alive. But there was no heartbeat, no response of his eye pupils to light. Death must have been instantaneous."

"All right," Lew sighed. "Send the body on over to the funeral home. Markham will be back early in the morning, in a few hours. We'll do the autopsy then."

There was a tired finality in Lew's voice, a deep touch of sadness. The case was closed as quickly as it had begun. His friend was gone. In two or three days the funeral would be held. The rains would

wash the grave and the massed flowers would wither to nothing. Would there be rest for me then?

THAT reasoning part of me which refused death was overcome with bitterness and despair that bordered on madness. *He* was safe. His plan had been successful. Only a little while now and he would have to meet her in the darkness over a terrace no longer. Let the rains wash the face of the grave and the seasons change, and he would be able to call openly on Doug Townsend's widow.

My mind writhed in agony. To know that he had not only robbed me of life, but of everything else that had given that life significance as well—even Vicky—the very completeness of his triumph was the most refined torture of all.

Soon he would know how complete his triumph had been. He could stop his restless pacing, his sweating, his watching the clock and hearing it tick, wherever he was waiting for. He had made one mistake, I knew now. He hadn't meant for me to catch him in the upper hall. He would have preferred to arrange it better. He'd had to fire before he was ready. But his luck had held. He had been close enough to me so that there must be powder burns on the torn flesh of my temple. His quick examination of me had shown him there was still a slender chance his plan for making it suicide would succeed.

Yet he wasn't sure that his luck had held, and during these present long minutes he must be enduring an agony akin to my own.

They must have moved me. I was aware of no movement, no sensation in any part of me. Light came and went, fuzzy, distorted. A voice said, "'Watch that end of the stretcher. You almost dropped him."

"Hell, he wouldn't feel it. It wouldn't matter to him."

An engine came to life. An ambulance, I supposed. The purring of the engine stayed close to me, and I guessed that I was taking a ride. To the city morgue. . . .

I wondered what he was like. Tall, good-looking. It would take somebody like that to attract Vicky. A good dancer. Not necessarily a smooth talker, but a good one. Vicky was always fastidious in her conversation. He would have a good face, too, and a smile open and honest. A mask, shielding the workings of his mind and the morbid plotting in his heart.

My thoughts whirled back to Vicky. A thousand memories of her came through to me. She'd been working for a living when I'd met her, a secretary in a lawyer's office. Her employer had been defense counsel on a case to which I'd been attached. Vicky and I had met over a dry mass of legal briefs. But she had been almost illegally beautiful and I'd taken her to lunch, and after that the world was a different place for me.

I'd looked at her with eyes that made everything about her perfect. She'd grown up right here in Santa Maria. Her mother had never been well and her father had never made quite enough money out of his trio of fishing boats. Yet it had been a wonderful life, she'd said. A barefoot kid in jeans and T-shirt, a kerchief binding the mass of gold that was her hair. More tomboy than girl when she was small, scampering about her father's boat with sun and spray in her face.

She'd finished school and worked part time to get her business course. Then her job for a couple of years before I'd met her.

"Really a very dull and uninteresting life," she said once with a smile. "I wish I were made for better things."

"You are!" I'd told her fervently.

And she had been. She had a good mind. She never ceased bettering it by good reading. She had a natural sense of good taste —a flair for clothes. She took to an ever higher mode of life with simplicity and a naturalness that was amazing.

Could this woman have been a part of

a plot to kill me? Had some foreknowledge of the plan caused her immediately to label my death as suicide? Had the sudden, wild turbulent emotion of a love affair killed the Vicky I'd known, leaving in her place a creature beyond my normal understanding?

I thought of husband-murders from the time of Ruth Snyder. Quiet women, delicate women. Women who had trod the marriage path with gentleness. But one day the monotony had become suffocating. The routine and dull respectability had become unbearable. And the smoldering fires had erupted, all the more violent because they had been buried so long and so deep within here.

Let me finish dying. Let this be over. There must be an end even to this horrible torture. . . .

The purring of the engine ceased. A man grunted. Light came again, like milk splashed in water. There was a fresh mumble of voices.

"The D. A. says leave him on a slab until Charlie Markham gets back in town and can make an autopsy."

"Looks terrible, doesn't he?"

"Oh, I've fixed 'em for the casket when they looked worse. Fixed a farmer once who'd used a shotgun."

"Well, you're the undertaker. Me, I wish I'd never studied medicine. I don't like this interning."

"Oh, undertaking's all right. But right now I want to get back to bed. I'll undress him and throw a sheet over him. I'm glad that Markham won't start the autopsy 'til morning."

Time passed and light faded again. I lay naked on the slab and each marching minute brought the autopsy closer. My mind crawled away from the knowledge of that experience. The deadly quiet about the autopsy table. Then the click of a scalpel, the gleam of it. . . .

My mind stopped working for a terrible moment.

CHAPTER THREE

The Death of Me

THE slab on which I lay was cool. That fact in itself was not surprising. Santa Maria's leading undertaking establishment was also the town morgue, as is often the case in small cities. And the stone slab supporting me was just as cool as the air conditioning of the place had made it. Yet it was not the workings of my mind alone that told me the slab was cool. I was aware of the coolness. I could feel the coolness.

Alone in this dark, silent house of death, my mind screamed a question. How could this be? What was happening to me? The dead do not return.

I lay there with a fresh urge to move a muscle, to flick an eye. I was powerless to do that; yet I could feel the coolness of the slab against my calves and buttocks.

How much time passed I have no way of knowing. I was too caught up in the grip of a new, fearful knowledge to think of anything else. With the coming of day, Charlie Markham would arrive. The autopsy would be performed on a living man!

Every post mortem that I'd ever witnessed came marching across my thoughts. The slash of the knife, the removal of the vital organs, the splitting of the scalp, the sawing of the skull . . . my thoughts became a wild, silent screaming.

A pain began to ooze from the right side of my head through my brain. A tingling touched my toes. Still I could not move or bring my eyes in focus.

Light began coming back into the room, slowly, grayly. Dawn. How much longer until Markham came? I almost wished he would hurry and get it over with.

Then I gradually realized that the ceiling over my face was of plaster—I could see it. And I could feel the clammy sheet clinging to me from my waist downward. The pain in my head was excrutiating now; so great that it brought a gasp from me. A

gasp—which meant that my lungs were functioning normally.

My hands were like two dead weights as I tried to move them. I tried again and the effort succeeded.

My heart was pounding now, rocketing blood through every artery, bringing a singing sensation through the pain in my head.

It took me perhaps five minutes to sit up. I was dizzy and almost fell from the table. I clung to my senses until the dizziness had passed, pulled my feet around, and felt them drop to the floor. The pain in them, through my toes, was almost unbearable as I tried to stand.

I next took cognizance of my surroundings. The room was bare, the table in its center, two doorways leading from it.

I drew the sheet around me, stood up, and fell to the floor. I spent several gasping moments in a prone position before I was able to clutch at the leg of the table and crawl to my feet again.

Like a baby tottering through its first steps, I made my way to the doorway across the room. It opened into a hallway, and I closed it again. The second door opened into a small washroom. My clothes were there on hangers.

Before I tried to put my clothes on, I looked at myself in the mirror of a medicine cabinet on the wall. I almost retched at the grey-faced man who stared back at me. Blood had run down the side of my head, matting my hair. There was a heavier, uglier clot on my right temple. I bathed it gently in the corner wash basin. It was too sore to stand washing thoroughly, but I got most of the blood off.

I looked again in the mirror. Color was seeping back to my cheeks now. The wound was a nasty gash in the flesh and the bullet had torn its way along the bone, but had not penetrated the skull.

I slipped into my clothes, weak, gasping. I stood a moment before leaving the room, gathering strength. I was seething now with a fierce hatred that sent ripples of heat out through my being. I didn't know how it had happened. I didn't know why. I knew only that I was back in the land of the living. I had returned—to find my murderer!

Gray dawn hung over the alley behind the funeral home. I reached the mouth of the alley. The streets were still deserted except for a passing milkman and a whistling boy with a bag of newspapers slung across his shoulder. Santa Maria was still drugged with sleep. The gulf breeze was cool and fresh across my face. Save for the extreme, blinding pain in my head, I was feeling better by the minute. The last thing I'd done before leaving the washroom had been to find a compress and tape it over my temple.

In my thoughts a plan of action was forming. He must not know that I was after him. Secure in the belief of his success he would be emboldened, until the moment came for me to strike.

Somehow a way must be found to keep hidden my disappearance from the funeral home, the fact that I still lived. That would take some doing. There was one man with the power to swing it. Lew Whitfield.

Normally I could have walked the distance from the funeral home to Lew's house in ten minutes. Today that movement required a full thirty minutes. I hurried as fast as I could. I knew that my absence from the funeral home might be discovered at any moment and an alarm raised. I passed few people. Dock workers. Fishermen. I got a glance or two from some of them, the kind of glance they might give a man who's been out all night on a drunk and got in a fight.

I was reeling on my feet when I arrived at Lew's. His large, old frame house loomed against the red eye of the rising sun like a hulking barn. For three years Lew had promised himself to paint the place next summer.

I walked around the side of the house to

his study window. The window was open against the Florida weather, as I had guessed it would be. The screen, however, was locked. My head was spinning, and it took me a few seconds to figure a way out of that. Then I remembered the pen knife in my pocket. I used it to cut a small hole in the screen through which I could slip a finger and throw the hook latch.

I pulled the screen out, crawled over the sill, and collapsed on the floor of Lew's study. I was going again, back into that nether world of shadows. I clenched my hands and almost screamed aloud. I was slipping—slipping. The shadows were heavier. Sweat broke cold on my forehead. The effort of my exertion had been too much. Over me the shadows came.

The blackout didn't last long. I woke slowly, blind with that ache in my head. I could hear footsteps moving about overhead. A child came running down the steps outside the door, and from the back of the house I heard Marge Whitfield, "Breakfast!"

I heard the scramble toward the dining room. Then the house was silent as the family ate.

I pulled myself across the floor, up on the leather couch against the wall. I sat down with a deep sigh. Lew's desk, as cluttered as my own, was across the room from me.

FIFTEEN or twenty minutes passed before Lew came into the study. The door swung open, admitting him, partially concealing the couch. He closed the door. He was alone. He patted his stomach as if his breakfast had been the best; and then he walked to the window and stood looking out at the day, lost in thought. Perhaps he was thinking of the friend he'd lost.

When he turned, he saw me.

He had nerve. His face drained of color and his body went rigid, but he made no outcry upon beholding the apparition before him.

He breathed out explosively, crossed the room, and reached out to touch my shoulder.

"It's really me, Lew. You're not seeing things."

"But how, Doug? How?"

"I don't know myself, yet."

"I'll get Marge, Vicky—a doctor."

"No, wait! No one must know, Lew, until we're ready. Until I say the word."

"But, man, you may be dying."

"You're probably right, but I'll take long enough in the process. I have that feeling. That I won't die until I find him."

He dropped to a sitting position on the edge of the couch beside me. "I don't understand any of this, Doug!"

"You thought last night I tried to kill myself," I said, "but such a thought was the furthest thing from my mind. Somebody tried to murder me."

He found a cigar in his pocket with fingers that shook. Then he dropped one flat word: "Who?"

"I don't know. That is, I don't know his name. I can't think of anybody who would have done it—except maybe the man who's been fooling around with my wife."

"So you know that? Although 'fooling around' might be a little strong."

I cut a quick glance at his face. "You mean you've known for some time?"

"Nothing definite, Doug. Just talk I heard—behind your back."

I felt more than a little ill. "The old saying has some ground under it, then, about the husband being the last to know. You're going to help, Lew. First, you've got to get hold of that undertaker. Next you've got to dig into—her recent past. Find the man. Find out if he's the kind who might commit murder for a beautiful woman who will come into considerable material comforts and money through her husband's death."

He made no move to interrupt as I tried to bring back everything that had passed through my mind last night. I told him of the growing distance between Vicky and

me lately. I told him about the incident on the Bath Club terrace.

"Thelma Grigby's phone call only brought the matter to the forefront of my mind. Now we've got to lay a trap for him. He mustn't know that his plan has failed—until it's too late to do him any good."

Lew's heavy face had taken on a greyness. "It might hold water," he admitted. "It's an old story. But what of Vicky?"

"I have to know about her, too," I said slowly. "She was pretty quick to tell the world that I'd killed myself. If she was covering for him,—I—I've got to know that, too, Lew."

"It's a pretty hateful business," he said, rising. "But we deal with hateful things every single day in our line."

"Then you'll help?"

"I'm your friend," he said simply. "And I'm the D.A. I don't know whether or not it's ethical for me to hide you, to conceal the fact that you're still living—I don't have a precedent to establish the ethics of the case, do I? But if there's a would-be killer in our town, I want to know it." He hesitated. "It'll take some fixing, Doug. With the undertaker, Charlie Markham—one or two others I'll have to bring into the thing."

"You can do it," I said.

"I'll try."

A LITTLE later that morning Lew got his family out of the house. I learned then that they'd brought Vicky over for the night. Marge and the kids were taking her home. I wondered what it would be like in that silent, empty house. What thoughts would pass through Vicky's mind as she went from room to room, each with its own flood of memories?

Lew brought me food; then he took me upstairs to a small back room with windows on two sides overlooking his side and back yards. There was a three-quarter bed in the room, a scarred bureau, a night stand holding a lamp, and a single boudoir chair.

Next Lew brought a visitor up to the room, a tall, florid man who wore grey tropicals and a pince-nez. He was Doctor Hardy, and he knew the story and we could trust him, Lew assured me.

I was silent during Hardy's examination; then when he stood up and snapped his bag shut, I asked, "Do you know what happened to me? Can you explain it?"

"Certainly," he said. "You've been deeply depressed lately?"

"For some time," Lew put in. "He's been working too hard."

"And of course you were deeply frightened when the shot rang out and the bullet struck you?"

"Scared to death."

"That's almost my precise diagnosis," Hardy said. "Lying in your foyer last night you were in a state of very acute catalepsy, a nervous condition in which the power of your will and of sensation are suspended. It arises from prolonged depression and acute fright. It's more common, in its less acute phases, than many people would think. Your condition was aggravated by the wound, of course, which came very close to killing you."

"A doctor examined me," I reminded him.

"Of course. But in a state of acute catalepsy no heartbeat was audible. No pulse could be felt. Your eye muscles had completely lost for the moment the power of contraction, of focusing; so your eyes responded to the doctor's light exactly as a dead man's would respond. That is, no response at all. In short, you exhibited several signs of death, and in the moment the doctor is not at all to blame for interpreting your state of suspended animation as he did. We're human, too, you know. We make mistakes like the rest of the race, though often our mistakes are never known—they're buried."

With a smile and a last admonition that I should be in a hospital under observation, Hardy prepared to leave.

I felt a lassitude taking hold of me, and then I slept.

The sun was dying a crimson death in the Gulf when I awoke. I was ravenous, but forced to wait until Lew should show up, as he did half an hour later. There were a dozen questions trying to spill out of my mind, but my first interest right then proved to be the food he brought. Once I started eating, I felt as if I would never be filled again.

"I had to ring Marge in," he said, watching me spoon up the last drop of the broth in the bowl. "She's too much the homebody for me to succeed long in sneaking food up here and keeping the door locked. She was shocked, of course."

"And Vicky?"

He hesitated. "We've found the man, Doug."

I tried to keep my voice casual. That was impossible, and the word quivered when it came out of me: "Who?"

"Keith Pryor."

"The water-skiing instructor at the Bath Club."

Lew nodded, and a silence came to the room. I recalled Pryor to my mind. I'd met him when he'd first come to the club three months ago. We'd had him at our table two or three times for drinks. He'd danced with Vicky during a couple of our evenings at the club. He must have been every day as old as I, but he looked more boyish. Slender, but extremely well knit with wide shoulders. A lean, almost hungry face, topped with a close-cut sun-scorched blonde hair. With his deep suntan, the brilliant white of his teeth flashed when he smiled, and he had an easy, relaxed air about him. On the whole he was the kind of man who would appeal to every lonely instinct in a woman.

"Have you got anything on him?" I asked.

"Only a little. He's not exactly a gigolo, but he's never made much money and he likes to live high. Two items on his record. A Jax woman had him arrested for making off with some of her jewelry, but in the end broke down in court and admitted she'd given it to him, as he'd claimed, bringing the charges later because he'd walked out on her. An assault charge in Miami. He punched an irate husband in the nose in one of the beach clubs. But the man's wife testified for Pryor. Pure self defense, she said. Nothing at all between her and Pryor. Her husband was just a nasty-minded old man, she said."

"A nice boy. Does Vicky know any of this?"

"Of course not! You listen to me, Doug! You're hurt because she happened to look at another man twice in a weak moment. She's never been alone with him, though they've met at the club and parties. Maybe she was lonely. You've been moody, depressed, you've neglected her."

"Dammit, Lew, are you for her or me?"

"I'm for both of you, son, and don't forget that!" he said in a rough tone. "But I want you to stop acting like the emotionally wounded little boy. You're jealous and mad as hell, deep down, and in a way I can't blame you. But just because Pryor's made a play for her doesn't mean she'd ever be a party to hurting you."

"I hope you're right."

"You're damn right I'm right. Now forget it. I've got things to do. I'll see you in the morning. How's the head?"

"Better."

"Then take some more of those pills the doctor gave you and rest. That's the thing you need most."

THERE wasn't much time. Every meal I ate, every nap I slept brought the sands that nearer to a finish. We could not keep secret the disappearance of the body from the funeral home indefinitely. The time would come for a burial, for an official statement. Lew knew all that as well as I did. He knew how far he had his neck out.

But there was, for me, too much time. Time in which to think. To picture Keith Pryor gradually making head way with Vicky—perhaps holding her in his arms. To watch them in the tortured eye of my mind standing close together. How many times had she lifted the warm softness of her lips to his? How many words thick with passion had he murmured to her?

I tried to keep the pictures out of my mind.

Lew came to my room the next morning with a downcast expression. She had seen Pryor last night. I knew that even before he spoke. They'd met on a downtown corner, gone to a dine and dance place in a cheaper section of town. They hadn't come in until very late. The shadow that Lew had put on their trail had reported that they hadn't danced much. They'd talked with people in the juke joint, drifted on to another in the raw section of town. They hadn't been at all romantic, the shadow had reported.

Good, I thought with grim satisfaction. Maybe it's going sour between them, with death a black blight on their feelings. Maybe the husband, dead, stands between them now far more than the living husband had.

Or perhaps he was simply playing it smart, biding his time, not rushing her.

I sat there thinking about it a long time after Lew had gone. The pictures of him and her together came back more vivid than ever. I wondered how much more of this waiting I could endure.

The second day passed, and I knew my nerve was going. I was cracking up and I seemed unable to halt the process. Lew wasn't moving fast enough. He had found nothing conclusive. The second night his shadow had lost Vicky and Pryor across town in a section of cheap hotels.

Lew was a worried man that night. He wouldn't take his eyes off my face. He insisted on staying in the room until I had gulped the pills Hardy had given me.

But I palmed them instead and drank the water as if I were swallowing the pills. I lay back across the bed, closed my eyes, and after a time Lew went out. I waited until I heard his footsteps fade downstairs; then I sat up, threw the pills under the bed, and began dressing. I didn't put on my shoes. I wanted no echoing footsteps as I slipped down the rear stairs out of the house.

I stayed in shadows and used back streets. I was still weak, and it took me thirty minutes or better to get from Lew's house to my own. My place was dark, and I didn't go in. I stood in the shadows of a row of royal palms across from the house watching, waiting. Expecting the two of them together.

But she came alone. She swung the green sedan in the driveway, entered the house, and I saw lights flash on. She appeared in the living room window for an instant, going toward the phone alcove. I moved quickly across the street, into my own yard. I could see her through the window. She was across the expanse of living room, talking quickly with someone on the phone. Then a shadow, the shadow of a man, long, distorted, showed briefly against the living room wall. Before I could catch a breath the light in there snapped off, and then Vicky screamed.

I hit the front door. It was locked. I fumbled for a key. A voice shouted from inside, "Stand back, or I'll shoot her."

Sweat popped out on my face. I heard a door slam, and I ventured the key into the lock then. Another door slammed, and I tore toward the rear of the house. I heard the surging roar of the engine of the green sedan. I was hearing his words over and over, "Stand back, or I'll shoot her."

I knew him. I'd recognized the voice.

I hurled myself across the yard toward the driveway just as the big car careened out of the drive into the street with a scream of tortured rubber.

I stood there a moment, gasping. Then I forced strength into my shaking legs and charged back into the house.

My hands were shaking so badly I could hardly dial Lew Whitfield's number. His phone screamed twice before anyone answered, and then it was Marge, not Lew.

"I've got to talk to Lew," I bellowed.

"He's not here, Doug. He just got a phone call from Vicky. He's on his way over there now."

"He'll be too late, Marge! Shoffner's got her! He barrelled away from here with her in my green sedan. Got that? Old man Wendel Shoffner, my yardman, has Vicky as hostage, at his mercy, in my green car. Call headquarters. Tell them to make it an all-car signal. That's an order from the D.A.'s office!"

She got it, she said, and I didn't waste any more time. I slammed down the phone and pushed my reeling body back out of the house. The second car, the light coupe Vicky usually drove was still in the garage. There was a key for it on my ring.

The sedan had disappeared by the time I got the coupe on the street. It had turned west, and I turned that way also. In the distance I heard a siren. Lew would get the call. A dozen cars would get the call. They'd pinpoint my home—and we would get him. But it would all be less than worthless if he harmed Vicky first.

I heard another siren and then another. They were converging on the downtown area. I saw the swarm of cars when I skidded the coupe into Central Avenue. A fire truck rounded an intersection and clanged to a stop just ahead of me. Patrolmen were trying to move the crowds gathering on the sidewalk, and a searchlight threw its yellow tongue up the side of the six-story Parker Building.

I'D STOPPED the coupe, but I couldn't let go of the wheel when I saw that light snake its way up the face of the building. I knew then that he had her up there and we might never get her down alive.

Somehow I crawled out of the car and was able to stand. I found Lew standing beside his own car. He was snapping orders. To firemen with a net. To the cops rigging a loudspeaking system.

"For God's sake, Lew, be careful!"

He showed only brief surprise at seeing me. "We're doing that, Doug. If we wanted to take chances, we'd send men up after him."

I could see them now, Vicky and Shoffner, near the low parapet around the building roof.

Shoffner's voice rang out, thin and high-pitched: "Go away! All of you go away, or I'll push her over!"

Lew's shudder almost matched my own. "He's cracked. He's gone. Loony as they come. He's Loren Sigmon's father, Doug."

I stiffened. I had been the single eyewitness to Sigmon's crime.

Lew said, "He was probably out to get you from the minute he went to work for you. We found some dirt from your garden in your bedroom near the night table where you kept your gun. Ordinarily it wouldn't have meant much to us—either you or Vicky could have brought it in—but to Vicky it suggested Shoffner. She remembered that Shoffner had been working in muck that afternoon, bringing it in for the flower beds. She slipped into his rooms, found some pictures of Sigmon in the old man's things. She went to some of Sigmon's old haunts last night and tonight with Keith Pryor. She was asking questions and must have got a few answers. She phoned me that she was certain of the old man's identity. But before I could get to your house, he snatched her, found himself cornered, the street blocked, and dragged her in the building."

Now she was six stories above the street. This, then, was the ultimate torture. . . .

"You'll never talk him down, Lew," I said. "There's only one way—let him know he isn't guilty of actual murder. I'll have to go up, alone—"

A trooper was standing near me. I slid the carbine he was holding from his hand.

Lew made no move to stop me. He knew that Shoffner might kill me, but he knew too that this was something I had to do. For myself. For Vicky.

The stairs upward were long, silent, manned by patrolmen who sucked in breath when they saw me, a man they'd believed dead. The last flight of stairs was steeper and narrower, leading up to the radio tower on the roof. I saw Shoffner and Vicky the moment I pushed my exhausted body out on the roof. The spotlight limned them, Shoffner behind Vicky, waving a gun, yelling threats.

Shoffner must have been dropping quick glances behind him to make sure no one else was coming on the roof, for he saw me.

"Don't take another step," he shouted, and his full intent was in his voice. "I'll push her!"

"I came to help you," I said. "I don't want you getting yourself into any worse trouble."

My voice brought a little cry from Vicky's throat, and a startled gasp from Shoffner.

"You can't be Townsend!" he said in a thick, fearful voice.

"But I am. Move away from her, Shoffner. And I'll come toward the light. You can see for yourself."

I took another step. A little of the light caught my face. The old man screamed and started shooting. Vicky crawled aside. I hated to do it, but I squeezed the trigger of the carbine. The bullet hit him high in the chest. He stumbled back against the parapet.

And then he was suddenly gone.

The gun slid from my fingers as Vicky stumbled toward me. The boys who came to the roof found us locked in a tight embrace, Vicky's face burrowed into my neck, hard sobs racking her. She was trying hard to tell me something about being a fool, about never having let a pipsqueak gigolo turn her head for a moment, but about having been lonely. But until I'd gone she'd never known what loneliness meant. She'd told Pryor that and he had understood; he had been willing to help her in any way he could in bringing her husband's murderer to bay. Did I believe her?

Her question echoed in my mind. Yes, I believed her. I knew that I would never doubt her again. I led her toward the stairs.

"Darling, it's time," I said, "that we were going home." ■ ■ ■

A GHOST IN THE HOUSE

By Dale Clark

Something flew off the tip of his sword and came bouncing and thumping down the steps!

Ghosts? Of course Mr. Paragal didn't believe in ghosts—not even his own!

IT WAS a very funny thing. It would still have been a funny thing if it had happened to just anyone, but most especially was it funny that this thing should happen to Mr. Paragal. For Mr. Paragal was quite a guy in Hollywood. He had a good job—story supervisor at C-P-C—but his real fame came from his reputation as a skeptic.

He was the last guy on earth you'd ex-

pect would ever meet up with a ghost.

"You got to *show* me," was Mr. Paragal's pet remark. If you showed him, he dusted the moth balls off that other old classic, "I don't believe anything I hear, and only half of what I see!" He was a stubborn as an army mule, and twice as suspicious. A regular doubting Thomas.

Funny how he got to believe in ghosts.

For, of course, he never had believed in them. He didn't swallow such stuff—spiritualism, telepathy, second sight, witchcraft, black art. Naturally not! In order to accept the most common, ordinary, everyday fact he had first to walk around it for a couple of days, look it over, feel it, bite into it.

When he dined at the Troc, he would not simply surrender his check and take any hat the girl offered him as his own. No—Mr. Paragal had to inspect that hat inside and out, examine the initials in the band, try it on, and, finally, study the result in the mirror.

How could a ghost convince such a man?

It happened on location—in the mountains due east of Malibou, in a region the natives call Celluloid Alley because so many dramas have been filmed there. Celluloid Alley in the movies, however, is almost always referred to as "God's Country."

And it is beautiful. Emerald grass carpets the floor of the valley. Noble pines lift their heads on the mountain slopes. Limpid streams purl in their pebbled beds, or splash and fall in crystal rapids. All around the horizon lofty peaks look out to the Pacific.

On this location, director Harry Janifer was about to make the last shots of an epic script entitled *Maid of Mist Mountain.* That was the working title. C-P-C subsequently released the opus as *Love All Night*—but the title didn't make any difference, anyway. The plot was still the granddaddy of all God's Country dramas. The one where the handsome, young mining engineer comes into the mountains and meets this lovely and untutored child of nature. She falls for him, but he only laughs fondly at her advances. So she goes away, and gets to be a famous actress, and the villain lures her to his lodge in those same mountains. And then the hero falls for her, seeing how swell she is dressed, but next he finds out about this villain, so he gives the girl the brush. But meanwhile the villain is phenagling the hero out of his mine, and the girl finds out about that, so she—etc., etc.

All the indoor takes had been made right on the C-P-C lot, and were neatly shelved in metal boxes in the C-P-C vault. The hitch came when the company got up into Celluloid Alley, to the ranch that was their base of operations.

June Justine, the star, took one look at the ragamuffin costume she was supposed to wear—then she opened her lovely mouth and yelled like a panther. "I won't! I won't!"

"Listen, June. Listen! You are playing the part of a simple, little backwoods girl. You wear gingham and you got your hair in braids. It says so in the script, and common sense says so! A simple backwoods girl *can't* have a Simpson hair-do and wear Paris frocks. It wouldn't look right, and it wouldn't be right!"

"I won't! I won't! I wo—!"

Harry Janifer tried yelling right back. "You will! I'm directing this picture! You will, or else!"

"Won't!"

"Will!"

"Won't! Won't! Won't!"

So Harry Janifer thought awhile, and finally, he asked: "Well, June, why won't you?"

The star drew a long breath. "Because my Swami particularly warned me—"

June Justine, you see, was the reverse of Mr. Paragal in every way. Miss Justine was a beautiful blonde, but at that she was very lucky to be earning four thousand dol-

lars a week. Deep in her secret heart, she knew this—and she intended to keep on being lucky.

She passed up no bets. She played all the superstitions straight across the board. She not only walked around ladders, and threw spilled salt over her shoulder, and never whistled in the dressing room, but also believed in numerology, crystal gazing, tea leaves and card readings. She was a sucker for palmistry. If she had ever heard of alectryomancy, she would have been a sucker for that, too.

At the present moment, she was wax in the hands of a Swami who fetched advice straight from the Dog-Star.

"The Swami warned me," she concluded, "not ever to wear any common, ugly clothes. He said it would spoil my vibrations."

Harry Janifer threw up his hands. He couldn't argue with a Swami who wasn't even there.

He wired C-P-C offices for instructions. June Justine was holding up a ten thousand dollar a day production schedule, and the producer would gladly have kicked both her and the Swami clear to the Dog-Star—but June's face was on practically every foot of that film in the vault.

That afternoon Mr. Paragal and a bright, young writer named Joe Beetle flew in a chartered plane to Celluloid Alley. That's how it began. The mills of the gods not only grind very slow, but also they often grind whole bushels of corn to get at a particular kernel.

MR. PARAGAL was the particular kernel in this case—but nobody guessed that yet. So far he was just one of the gang that sat in conference on the ranch-house verandah. There was also Joe Beetle, and Harry Janifer, June Justine, the wardrobe designer, cameramen, and script clerk.

It wasn't even Mr. Paragal's idea—Joe Beetle thought it up. "All right!" said Joe. "She don't have to wear clothes at all!"

"Why, you . . ." began June Justine.

"Get this!" Joe Beetle cried. "The engineer can find her in swimming, see? Wearing a bathing suit she made herself—kind of gay, and showing plenty of curves, but still kind of funny. It's the same idea as a gingham dress, and then she don't have to braid her hair either—it can be loose on her shoulders."

Harry Janifer said, "We can't have her in a bathing suit in every scene in this picture!"

Joe Beetle's round face grinned. "Why not? The engineer happens along past the old swimming hole every day, but still she don't make so much progress with him. So she thinks maybe her outfit is all wrong, see? So she turns up one day in a scream—one of those old bloomer suits, she made it herself. It hands the gink a laugh, and she says, 'Don't you like it? Why, I made it myself—copied it out of a big city magazine that belonged to Maw,' and she shows him the magazine—and we cut in on the date-line. 1891!

"So the gink laughs more than ever, but by this time the audience has quit laughing. So now we cut to the girl, and she starts crying, see? And we see how her heart is breaking—and she runs away and beats it to the city. How's that?"

"It's swell!" Harry Janifer said. "Ain't it, June?"

Miss Justine frowned, "Well, the Swami didn't say anything about bathing suits. I guess it's okay."

Mr. Paragal frowned, too, and thought a much longer while. He never okayed a gag in a script unless that gag had been laughed at a hundred times in the past. He never okayed a scenario that wasn't just like every other scenario—that's why he was a story supervisor.

He was a little guy with a flinty face. He was the kind of guy almost everyone hates. The writers hated him because he always cut their bright ideas to pieces, and the directors hated him because they wanted to

supervise their own stories. The cameramen hated him for no particular reason—just because he was that kind of a guy. Unpopular.

"Well, I have my doubts," he said at just because he was that kind of a guy. I don't trust these new ideas."

This made the idea look twice as good to everybody else.

"No," said Mr. Paragal. "No, I think I'd better consider it a day or so."

The ten thousand dollar a day overhead didn't bother him—let Janifer worry about that.

Harry Janifer said, "I think it's a honey. I think it's better than the original script. Maybe there's something to this Swami stuff after all."

"Nuts!" grunted Mr. Paragal.

Miss Justine blinked blissfully. "The Swami is wonderful. The things he tells you about yourself, things he couldn't possibly *know* except from the stars. He's amazing."

"Bunk! He hires private detectives," said Mr. Paragal.

"Still, funny things happen," began Joe Beetle. "I remember a dream my mother told me she had just before I was born. . . ."

Mr. Paragal interrupted, "I don't believe anything I hear, and only half of what I see."

"That's easy for you to talk, Paragal," Harry Janifer said. "But I bet now, for instance, you wouldn't spend a night in a haunted house for a hundred dollars."

Mr. Paragal gave an incredulous laugh. "Say, I'd *give* a hundred dollars to spend a night in a haunted house! It would be worth it to show up that stuff!"

Harry Janifer tipped Joe Beetle a wink—then he leaned forward and said softly, "Curiously enough, that old house up on the hill is said to be haunted."

Mr. Paragal looked around. The house stood on a hill about a half mile from the ranch building. It was very old, made of stone, and its windows were boarded.

"HOOEY!" said Mr. Paragal with a louder laugh.

"No, I mean it," insisted the director. "One of those old Spanish dons lived there a hundred years ago. One night in a fit of jealous rage he killed his wife—cut off her head with his sword. The next day he learned she was innocent. So he committed suicide."

"There were no Spaniards here a hundred years ago," said Mr. Paragal with a superior smile. "The valley wasn't settled then."

"All the same, the don can be seen wandering around the empty rooms at night," said Janifer. "People have gone by there and heard him moaning and crying."

"You mean they heard the wind in the eaves."

"No, they looked in and saw him."

Mr. Paragal's thin lips twisted. "They saw cobwebs."

"That isn't all," and Harry Janifer drew a long breath. "When people look in, that makes the don sore. He picks up his wife's head and slings that at them."

"Anybody who saw that was drunk enough to see pink elephants," replied Paragal.

Janifer gave the rest of the company another wink. "Paragal," he said, "I'll bet you a hundred dollars you wouldn't dare go up there without a gun and spend the night."

Not a muscle flickered in Paragal's flinty face while he considered it. "I'm not a betting man."

"I knew you didn't dare!"

"Oh, I'm not afraid. I'd just be a fool to do that, when I could just as well be sleeping in a comfortable bed," replied the man from Missouri.

Janifer laughed. "You said you'd give a hundred dollars. You've got a chance to find out for yourself, but you are secretly too superstitious to tackle it."

The word *superstitious* rang the bell. Mr. Paragal smiled disagreeably. His sharp

little eyes snapped. "I'll do it! But it'll cost you a hundred dollars. I'm taking your bet."

"It's a bet," Janifer grunted, "and I got fifty more says you change your mind before nightfall."

They named Joe Beetle stakeholder. As Harry Janifer counted the banknotes into Beetle's plump hand, he muttered under his breath.

"We'll show him! I bet the guy don't stop running this side of Pasadena! Then we'll go ahead and finish this picture *our* way."

Mr. Paragal didn't back down before nightfall. It was dusk when a property truck left the ranch and chugged up the hill. The driver, Paragal, and Harry Janifer wedged into the seat. Joe Beetle and the make-up artist sat in the back on a pile of blankets.

The house with its boarded windows looked more sinister at night. The truck headlamps shone on a crazy porch, weather-blackened, and falling to pieces. A bat swam blindly in the white beam.

"Whe-e-ew!" muttered Joe Beetle.

The front door was scarred with initials, hearts and arrows, and similar schoolboy art.

Mr. Paragal laughed shortly. "It looks like the don is pretty handy with a jackknife!"

"Maybe he uses his sword," Harry Janifer said.

"Bunk! Come, boys, bring that stuff in." Mr. Paragal swung down from the truck, took a flashlight from his pocket, and climbed the creaking front steps. He gave the door a push, and went in.

The white circle of the flashlight played around the house. It found a decrepit stairway facing the door. Cobwebs festooned the bannister. Across the room was a dirty fireplace.

"Put the things there," ordered Mr. Paragal. The floor groaned as Joe Beetle stumbled with an armful of blankets to the fireplace. Behind him came the driver and the make-up expert, each with a load of faggots.

Mr. Paragal played the flashlight on the tattered, peeling walls. "Do you suppose they had wallpaper a hundred years ago?"

He watched Joe Beetle spreading the blankets. The writer's round face was very pale.

"Boo!" said Paragal, and laughed.

The laugh echoed gratingly through the house. Janifer came up to the story supervisor. "Remember the terms of the bet?" he said. "You haven't got a gun on you, have you?" He patted Mr. Paragal's pockets.

"No, why should I want a gun? The only thing I wonder is, how are you going to know I spent the night here? I could easily take those blankets and sleep outside."

Janifer nodded. "We brought a sack of flour. We'll scatter that around the doors. Besides, we may come up during the night to see how you're making out."

"Oh, I'll be asleep."

They went out, and Mr. Paragal smiled as he heard them sifting the flour about. Then he heard the truck growl away down the hill. His thin smile went away, then, too.

"It's rather cold in here. I'll just take the chill off." For some reason he said it aloud. And he really wasn't the kind of man who did much talking to himself.

Kneeling on the blankets, holding the flashlight between his knees while he did so, Mr. Paragal flung a generous heap of faggots onto the hearth. He fumbled for matches, struck one.

The flame licked up eagerly, snapping and crackling. It cast a wavering red shine onto the cracked and peeling walls. Queer shadows flickered on the stairway.

Mr. Paragal sat down on the blankets. He watched the shadows, and his eyes grew a little wider than usual.

His nostrils widened, too. He sniffed. The air had a peculiar odor. It was dank,

and musty, and earthy—it smelled a little as he imagined a grave would smell. . . . Smelled that way more . . . than just a little. . . .

"Bunk!" he said—aloud.

IT WAS an old house, and its air was stale. It smelled like any house that had been shut up a long time. Sure, it did!

But all the same he sat there with his eyes and nostrils widening and flaring, his eyes seeking and staring, his nose sniffing. And his ears were wide open, too. They caught every creak and rustle and groan in the place—and there were a lot of creaks and rustles and groans. The floor sighed every time he shifted his weight. The flames made noises as they rushed up into the chimney.

Paragal said, "One of these days the whole business is going to fall down."

The fire burned down rapidly. He threw on more sticks and those burned, and he threw on more. He gave one glance to his fuel supply, and another to his watch. It was clear that the faggots wouldn't last through the night.

Mr. Paragal stood up and looked around the room. It was warm enough—so warm that sweat dotted his forehead and soaked his collar. He no longer needed the fire. But he wanted it. The fire was a companionable and cheerful thing.

And he did not fancy the thought of what this room would be like when there were just a few embers dying on the hearth.

There was a door across the room. He walked to it, and for some reason he walked on tiptoe. The door gave a loud shrill groan as he opened it. A thin cold prickle chased along his spine.

He threw the flash beam into the next room. There was nothing in there—nothing at all, except more bare and tattered walls, and more of the strange musty smell.

But Mr. Paragal did not like the room.

He closed the door. Turning, he went to the stairway. "This will do," he decided.

He laid one hand on the bannister, jerked, and six or eight feet of it came crashing to the floor. The crash echoed through the house.

A start jerked Mr. Paragal. His flinty face tightened and his little figure stood quite rigid while he listened for the last echo.

He did not like this house. There was something about it—not the cobwebs, not the dirt, not the smell. There was something *else*.

He dragged the broken end of bannister across the floor, kicked and twisted it into bits, and piled the bits beside the fire.

He lighted a cigarette. He piled more wood on the flames.

And all the time, with some sixth sense, he felt that something *else*. It wasn't the creaks and rustlings and groans, nor the echoes of them. It wasn't the red shine of the fire, nor the shadows.

Nor was it imaginary—it had nothing to do with the fanciful don of Harry Janifer's story.

Very intangible, it was, very secret and unknowable. Mr. Paragal could not put his finger on it at all, and Mr. Paragal was not used to admitting the reality of things he couldn't walk around, feel, and bite into.

"Bunk!" he said.

And then he decided not to say anything more. His voice had gotten a little shaky, and its sound no longer comforted him. Indeed, it was a somehow frightening voice. . . .

He sat down on the blankets—sat down, but didn't lie down. He threw the last of the faggots on the fire. Then he began throwing on the broken bannister. This burned, to be sure, but it didn't burn cheerfully.

The flames changed, were more green than red. They shrank in size, and cast hardly any light into the room.

It seemed to Mr. Paragal that this fire was like a strange green beast hunkered on the hearth, gnawing the wood, licking

the wood with its sharp green tongue. It made the sound of gnawing and licking. It made sounds like a wild beast cracking bones.

Mr. Paragal wet his lips, and his eyes grew wide as eyes could grow, and his ears kept straining and listening to the sounds of the fire and other sounds in the house.

It was very warm in the room. The skin on his face and hands felt quite toasted. But underneath, the flesh stayed queerly cold. . . .

Mr. Paragal was afraid. He had a good large notion to go out of the door, say the hell with it, and pay Harry Janifer his bet.

But also he had another and a stronger notion. There was a stubborn streak in Mr. Paragal—stubborn and proud. In fact, he took pride in being a skeptic. He didn't really give a damn for the bet, so far as the money went, but he knew that his reputation as a show-me guy hung in the balance.

Stubbornness proved stronger than fear. Pride kept him listening for a noise that he knew could not be heard, kept his eyes straining for a sight that could not be seen.

Presently he looked at his watch. The hands showed midnight. A little hard knot tightened in the pit of his stomach, and he hastily stirred the fire. Yet common sense told him that midnight was just like any other hour.

All the same, he piled the rest of the bannister on the fire. Then he tiptoed to the stairs. He stretched a hand up, but could not quite reach the place where the bannister had broken off.

Mr. Paragal looked around the room undecidedly, looked up the stairs. Somewhere the house groaned. He stared around hastily, and the fire opened its green mouth and seemed to laugh.

He started up the stairs. As he did so, another sound came from the hall over his head. A footstep?

Mr. Paragal's heart thudded heavily in his chest, and his fingers knit into nervous fists. But he knew it could not be a footstep! He climbed a little higher, and the stairs cried out under his weight. But what was that other sound? Just like some one breathing! Breathing!

Mr. Paragal was of a great mind to get off the stairs and out through the door. He bit his lip, and stared up the steps. It was a longish stairway, and the rest of the bannister promised enough wood to last out the night. He might as well take it all.

But he would have to take it all now. For he knew that he wasn't coming up these stairs again! That sound of breathing in the upper part of the house had become altogether too realistic.

He gripped the bannister, gave it a trial shake. Instantly came a dying wail from overhead:

"*Whoo-oo-ooo!*"

Mr Paragal staggered, and then stiffened. The corners of his mouth twitched, and his breath seemed to sink claws into his throat. He flung a terrified glance up the stairs.

"*Whoo-hhoo-hoo!*"

Mr. Paragal's bulging eyes glimpsed a shadowy apparition looming up at the other, upper end of the bannister. It wore a curious kind of wide-brimmed pancake hat. Then Paragal's blood chilled, for under the brim was what looked very much like a death's head—a faintly luminous skull with grinning teeth and staring eye sockets.

The figure also wore a short jacket, a sash, and what might have been pantaloons—but Mr. Paragal did not investigate these details closely.

With a sob he tore the flashlight from his pocket, aimed it up the stairs, and pressed the switch.

There came a shriek of devilish laughter. A sword flashed into the electric beam. Something flew off the tip of the sword and came bouncing and thumping down the steps. The something was round, and had

a lot of flying back hair, and as it tumbled down the stairs it bled and spurted red onto the steps!

A blurted cry tore Paragal's lips. His fingers froze on the flashlight. His hands went rigid with terror.

The thing turned over and over as it rolled toward him. He gimpsed pallid cheeks and wide-open, glassy eyes. Its neck was a gory stump.

Mr. Paragal sprang wildly aside. The bannister snapped and buckled under his weight. He gave a scream, threw out his arms, and pitched into mid-air.

The next moment, his flying body collided violently with the floor.

It knocked the wind out of him. It stunned him, for he had fallen head-and-shoulder first. For an instant his senses spun wildly in black void.

HE OPENED his eyes. He was about to spring to his feet and throw himself out the door when he saw the ghost standing directly over him.

In the green glow of the fire, the shadowy figure took a vastly more definite shape. It looked very substantial and fleshy. The death's head no longer shone luminously. It was merely painted on a cheesecloth mask. Looking up from the floor, Mr. Paragal could see a round, pale face behind the cheesecloth.

Mr. Paragal choked a sickly laugh of relief. The don was only Joe Beetle, the sword a mere property blade.

Now Joe whirled around, ran across the room, and wrenched open the door.

Feeling none the worse for his experience, physically, Mr. Paragal clambered to his feet and also went to the door.

The truck was parked about a hundred yards down the hill, and by its lights Paragal saw Joe Beetle flying along the road, waving his arms, and shouting:

"Harry! Janifer!"

Mr. Paragal saw something more—a ladder propped up to the wall, reaching to a second story window. It explained how the ghost had entered the house. And it also explained the true nature of the footsteps and breathing Paragal had heard.

Smiling a bitter superior smile, Mr. Paragal swung around to stare at the head which had bounced down the stair.

It was merely a doll's head. He had often seen such things in shop windows—as large as real babies, with natural hair, and something inside them that cried *"Maa-ma-a!"* when you squeezed them. The hollow head, made of some unbreakable composition, had been filled with catsup.

"Good Lord!" said Mr. Paragal.

As he stood there, wagging his head in self-disgust, he heard the truck come to growling life.

And now a hot blush of mingled shame and anger suffused his being. He jerked around and glared through the open door. The twin eyes of the truck seemed to widen with laughter as they neared him. He knew the men behind those headlamps were laughing their fool heads off—at him!

Paragal winced, and his head hung sadly. They would have him the laughing stock of the film colony. In every taproom, at the Troc and the Brown Derby, in the palatial offices and the more palatial dressing rooms, they would shriek out this story about Paragal—the guy who didn't believe anything he heard, and only half of what he saw!

Possibly he exaggerated. Possibly he was not quite that famous. But it was very real to him.

Suddenly, though, Mr. Paragal gave a quick little start. His downcast eyes stared at the floor on the porch. It showed only *one* set of foot tracks—Beetle's!

Swift as flame came courage—and a plan. After all, he hadn't broken the terms of the bet. For it was only Joe Beetle's word against his own! All he had to do was to deny that he'd been frightened at all. Say he saw through the whole thing. . . .

(Continued on page 111)

STRANGE TRAILS

The Portrait that Wasn't There

WHEN FOUND EARLY ONE SEPTEMBER MORNING IN 1927, AGING POLICE CONSTABLE GUTTERIDGE WAS LYING ON HIS BACK BY THE ROADSIDE NEAR STAPLEFORD ABBOTS. HIS HELMET AND NOTEBOOK WERE BESIDE HIM; HIS FINGERS STILL HELD A PENCIL. THERE WERE TWO BULLET WOUNDS IN HIS HEAD, EVIDENTLY MADE BY A .45 CALIBER WEBLEY ARMY PISTOL — AND BOTH HIS EYES HAD BEEN SHOT OUT. ALL ENGLAND WAS HORRIFIED.

WITHIN 24 HOURS, BEARDED INSPECTOR WILLIAM BERRETT OF SCOTLAND YARD GOT TWO IMPORTANT BREAKS: A DOCTOR LIVING NEARBY REPORTED HIS MORRIS CAR AND SURGICAL BAG HAD BEEN STOLEN; AND, SHORTLY AFTERWARD, THE MORRIS WAS RECOVERED ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF LONDON. THERE WERE BLOODSTAINS ON THE RUNNING BOARD, AND BEHIND A SEAT WAS FOUND A SHELL CASE FIRED FROM A .45 WEBLEY.

AS INSPECTOR BERRETT RECONSTRUCTED THE CRIME, THE CONSTABLE HAD STOPPED THE CAR AND BEEN SHOT WHILE QUESTIONING ITS OCCUPANTS. AS HE LAY THERE, THE KILLER HAD BLOWN OUT HIS EYES, AS BATTERED SLUGS WERE TAKEN FROM THE GROUND BENEATH HIS HEAD. THE MURDERER, BERRETT DEDUCED, WAS A COP HATER, A PROFESSIONAL CAR THIEF, AND EXTREMELY SUPERSTITIOUS.

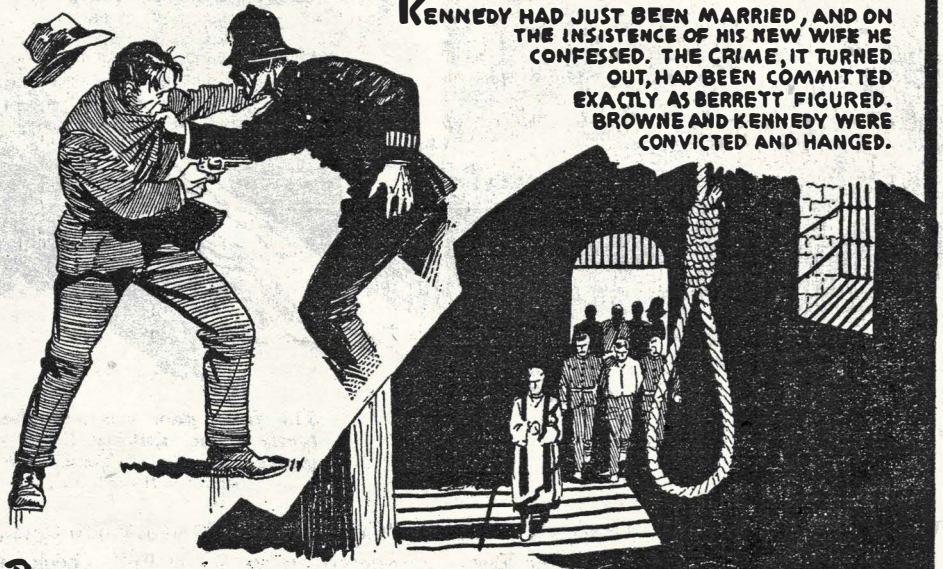
—-.. to MURDER

by LEE

DETECTIVES PATIENTLY SCREENED KNOWN AUTO THIEVES WITHOUT SUCCESS UNTIL THEY CAME TO THE HIDEAWAY GARAGE OF FREDERICK GUY BROWNE, AN EXPERT MECHANIC WITH A LONG STOLEN-CAR RECORD. ON THE PREMISES WERE FOUND SURGICAL INSTRUMENTS, A WEBLEY ARMY PISTOL AND AMMUNITION SIMILAR TO THE SHELL CASE. BROWNE SNEERED AT POLICE ATTEMPTS TO QUESTION HIM, BUT HE FITTED INTO TWO OF BERRETT'S CATEGORIES — HE WAS AN AUTO THIEF AND HE HATED COPS.

AN INTENSIVE SEARCH WAS INSTITUTED FOR BROWNE'S PARTNER, AN EX-CON NAMED BILL KENNEDY. HE WAS FINALLY LOCATED IN LIVERPOOL. KENNEDY'S GUN MISFIRED TWICE BEFORE HE WAS SUBDUED BY THE UNARMED ARRESTING OFFICER.

KENNEDY HAD JUST BEEN MARRIED, AND ON THE INSISTENCE OF HIS NEW WIFE HE CONFESSED. THE CRIME, IT TURNED OUT, HAD BEEN COMMITTED EXACTLY AS BERRETT FIGURED. BROWNE AND KENNEDY WERE CONVICTED AND HANGED.



BROWNE WAS VERY SUPERSTITIOUS, KENNEDY EXPLAINED. AFTER DELIBERATELY SHOOTING THE CONSTABLE, HE GOT OUT AND BENT OVER HIM. NOTICING THE EYES STARING GLASSILY UP AT HIM AND REMEMBERING THE OLD SUPERSTITION THAT THE LAST THING HE SEES IS PHOTOGRAPHICALLY IMPRINTED ON A DEAD MAN'S EYES, HE'D BLASTED THEM OUT IN A HYSTERICAL ATTEMPT TO OBLITERATE THIS TELLTALE EVIDENCE.

38-103

LET'S CALL IT A SLAY

Could a tough city cop bring himself back from that small-town limbo which had swallowed two country cousins without a trace? Would he even want to come back—alive?

The front door was wrenched violently open, spilling light, and a man's figure loomed huge and black against the glow. . . .

VANESSA DODY, Gordon's wife, ushered me into their old New England farmhouse. Then she began to cry—soundlessly. It was hell to watch.

I said, "A few months ago a dairyman named Winters disappeared. Now it's Gordon. I figure there's a connection, Vanessa."

"Gordon drove the truck into town," she answered dully. "The milk check was in and we needed some grain and things. He never came back. He—must be dead. I know he's dead—I tell you, I feel he's dead."

"And, the truck?" I asked harshly.

"They found it at the bottom of Still-

By Kenneth Hunt

man's Lake. The sheriff said the steering wheel was wiped completely clean of fingerprints. He thought that meant something, Mr. Wiley."

I said, "Call me Bill." But I was thinking about Gordon. Remembering that we had grown up together, had served in G-2 together. After the war, I'd private-opped it in the city, and Gordon had bought this place up in Vermont. I'd thought a lot of Gordon Dody.

Vanessa's face was slack, waxen. I'd seen that same look in the glazing eyes of a run-over Pomeranian.

She said in a monotone, "The milk check was a big one. Six hundred dollars. He cashed it into tens and twenties. He drew four hundred more out of the bank."

"A thousand bucks in small bills," I said slowly. We both thought about this a minute. Then I asked her, "Who were some of his closest friends? Who did he do business with—stuff like that?"

"It's a small town. Gordon has lots of friends. He teamed up with Humboldt Barker, the bank cashier, on real estate deals. Gordon liked Tom Calumet pretty well. Tom raises mink up the valley."

We didn't say much for a while. I stared out through the big bay window at the stony pastures stretching sere and brown in the hot August sun. The green line of the mountains rolled clean and cool against the bright, brassy sky. I loosened my collar.

I said, "This Humboldt Barker is a bet. There has to be a starting point somewhere."

She tried to get me to bring my things in from the car. I told her I'd rather room in town, it would be easier to move in and out. She wasn't satisfied, but she felt a little better when I told her I'd call as soon as I learned anything. It was a hot, dusty drive back into Harlequin Falls.

HUMBOLDT BARKER'S red face looked like a perspiring Michelangelo cherub through the steel cashier's cage. He divided his time between answering my questions and swatting at the sticky flies.

"No," he said, "Gordon didn't say why he wanted the money like that. I sort of figured he had a deal on. There was a calculating, trading look in his eye."

"I understand you and he were partners?"

There was a line of fat bulging over Humboldt's eyebrows. His little blue eyes almost disappeared into the fat now. He pursed his lips and shook his head.

"Hell, no. Just a couple of land deals, that's all. I bought a piece of his Stillman Lake property."

"Stillman Lake is where they found the truck," I pointed out. Humboldt frowned.

"The main road runs beside that lake," he said stiffly. "You're barking at the wrong cat, friend."

We both turned, stared, when a white-haired oldster with a seamed, mahogany-red face strode briskly through the door. It must have been a hundred odd in the sun outside, but this old character was wearing a plaid flannel shirt and high topped boots. He passed by, and went on through a door marked PRIVATE. My nose did acrobatics when he was gone. Humboldt grinned faintly.

"I'd like to be in his shoes, any day," Humboldt said. "That was Tom Calumet. He's made plenty. That smell on his clothes is from the mink."

"He's pretty husky for an old-timer."

"Tough, is the word. He killed a black bear with an elm limb last summer. Split its skull with one big blow when the bear attacked him in the woods. Folks still step mighty soft around Tom Calumet."

Humboldt began clinking pennies into an automatic coin counter. I watched him for a minute. Then I said, "Who is this Joe Everts guy—the one they got locked up?"

"Joe had a run in with Winters—the other man that dropped from sight. Joe works for Calumet. Joe's a trifle—well, simple. I hear Winters laughed at him for

crooning to the mink. Joe chased him off the ranch with a feed fork."

"He spells fall guy to me. That's pretty slim grounds for locking a man up."

Humboldt lifted his fat shoulders in a shrug. "Maybe so. It's the only suspect Sheriff Higgens has been able to dig up. And Gordon Dody tangled with Joe once. Joe made a pass at Vanessa."

"I see. So, where would I find this jail?"

"Two blocks down, same side of the street. Higgens is apt to be touchy with strangers. Not that you're exactly a stranger—I guess half the town knows Vanessa wired for you to come."

I thanked him and we shook hands. I stepped out onto the spongy tar sidewalk.

Sheriff Higgens was a thin, angular man with a thin, angular face. He had a scraggly tobacco-stained wisp of hair under his nose that could have been a mustache. His bright blue eyes were antagonistic.

"I've heard about you," he drawled. "The big city operator that's gonna solve this mess in a few hours."

"Nobody can do more than you've already done," I said soothingly. "Only, when you're too close to a mirror you can't see yourself for the way your breath fogs the glass. Coming in cold, I'm getting a clear view. But I can't spin a wheel without your help."

He grunted something and loosed a brown stream of tobacco juice into a battered coffee can. He said, "What for do you want to see Joe Everts?"

"You dig a little here, a little there. Sometimes you uncover something. Mostly, you don't."

"Horsefeathers! Joe Everts don't know a damn thing. Them other city cops found that out."

"Then you're lucky a smart lawyer hasn't grabbed you where your pants are fullest before this."

"Look, mister," his thin face reddened. "I don't need no advice about Joe—there's feeling against him an' he's better off in jail. You want to visit him, go ahead. Talk as long as you want—for two minutes."

He turned his back and pretended to get absorbed in a pile of old magazines. As I stepped into the corridor leading to the solitary jail cell, I figured Sheriff Higgens hankered to turn the key behind me—then throw it away.

Joe Everts was a sun-bronzed young giant with a slack, expressionless face. I didn't impress him much. As an opener, I tossed my pack of cigarettes through the bars. He let them stay where they fell.

"I'm trying to help you, Joe," I said. "You'd like to be out there—out in the sun again, wouldn't you, Joe?"

Something bright gleamed briefly in his eyes. Then they went dull again.

I said, "Where's Gordon Dody, Joe?" He just stared at me. I tried another angle: "I hear you're a good mink man, fella."

I struck gold. He spoke so suddenly I jumped.

"It was a poor year, last year. Hardly no whites at all. Tom was mad. Awful mad."

I nodded sympathetically. I said, "Tom treats you fine, doesn't he?"

A shadow passed across Joe's face, saddening it. He said, "Carl wouldn't have bothered the mink like Tom does. Carl would have liked the mink."

"Who's Carl?" I prompted gently. But Joe Everts' eyes were glazed again. He stared morosely at the floor. He wouldn't talk. I gave it up.

I asked the sheriff, "I suppose you've covered the usual angles in trying to locate Dody and Winters?"

"We've searched for corpses, if that's what you mean. Used posses, bloodhounds. Covered the woods, the fields. Even drug the lake."

I said, "Who had a reason for fingering them?"

"Don't know as they're connected."

"I figure they are."

He studied me, his blue eyes twinkling with derision. I watched him unload an-

other brown squirt into the coffee can. Then he drawled, "I heard you was a crackerjack, Sonny."

I asked patiently, "Who's this Carl Joe mentioned?"

Higgens' bored gaze swiveled around the yellow, fly specked walls. He said, "Carl Calumet. Tom's boy. He's dead."

Higgens saw that I was waiting for more. He added grudgingly: "Carl got convicted of a robbery killing. At the trial, Carl swore he'd been with a girl the night of the kill. The girl couldn't be found. A few months later she was picked up in Chicago. It was too late to help Carl. The state paid Tom Calumet a lot of money. Tom's a hard one; he allowed he'd rather of had the money than the boy, anyway. Tom built his mink business with the money—blood money, folks called it."

"I see. Was it a local affair?"

"Yep. Trial took place in our courthouse. Must be you don't read the papers much."

I told him I remembered reading about it now. Sheriff Higgens regarded me thoughtfully.

He said, "Did you know that Humboldt Barker was after some of Guy Winters' Stillman Lake property? Winters wouldn't sell. Gordon Dody had property there, too."

"What makes it so valuable?"

He lowered his voice, and a crafty look crept into his eyes. "Ever hear of that new-fangled Radar defense network? There's been a bunch of government men nosing around. They camped for two weeks by that lake, took all sorts of measurements."

It made interesting news, and I told him so. Then I asked, "Where does the Winters family live, Sheriff?"

"Three—four miles down the road. White house with yellow blinds. Barn's got a big red silo out back."

I thanked him, and left.

THE local inn charged three bucks a day for a musty, sparsely furnished room. The desk clerk insinuated that ten dollars more might locate a fifth of rye, although this was a dry town. I left the details up to him, and drove on out to the Winters farm.

Mrs. Winters was a plump, bustling woman who made me feel right at home. She shooed a brood of bright-eyed youngsters out of the kitchen, and peeled the supper potatoes while we talked.

"My husband set out to buy some cows that day," she said, rubbing her nose reflectively with the back of the paring knife. "He had nearly two thousand dollars on him. He's skylarking in the city someplace now, laughing at me, like as not."

"Then you don't think he—"

"Think he's dead? Guy?" She laughed heartily at the thought. "He's too cantankerous to get killed. He's as rambunctious as a young bull in a field of heifers, that one. No, mister—Guy'll come back when his money is all spent."

I was thinking Mrs. Winters could be wrong as hell. The coincidence of both Guy and Gordon carrying big rolls was too obvious. I kept my thoughts to myself. Mrs. Winters made me eat a huge slab of her blueberry pie before I left. I went outside and saw a familiar figure climbing out of a new Ford truck parked behind my convertible.

Tom Calumet.

Walking up to him, I saw that he was really big. I'm six foot myself, but I had to look up to meet his brown twinkling stare. The wrinkles in his face deepened into a smile when I eased to the windward of him.

"You get used to it," he pointed out. His voice was deep, pleasant. He was one of those guys you can like at once. I grinned back at him.

"How's the detecting business?" he asked.

"Fine. Joe tells me your business hasn't been so good."

Tom laughed heartily. "Joe wouldn't know. Had a damn good season last year."

I figured that subject was well covered.

I asked, "Were you friendly with Guy Winters?"

"Sure was. I try to help his family a little, now." He indicated a large box of groceries on the back of the truck. "That's the way I am. I'm friendly with everybody in Harlequin Falls. And maybe you've heard about me posting that thousand dollar reward for whoever locates them boys?"

I told him no, I hadn't. I watched him pick up the box of groceries as if it were a box of snuff. He carried them easily into the house.

I had supper with Vanessa Dody that evening. Afterwards we sat on the porch, watching the moon silver the sides of the mountains. The soft light mellowed the lines on Vanessa's face, and her dark hair was lustrous, shining. Gordon had married a pretty girl.

She said suddenly, softly, "You're thinking about Gordon, aren't you? I've been watching your face."

"I'll find him. If it's the last thing I ever do, I'll find him." I lit a cigarette, and flipped the match over the rail. I asked, "What was the trouble over Joe Everts?"

I couldn't see the blush, but it was there, in her voice.

"I—it really started at Calumet's ranch. Gordon kind of thought he might buy into the business, and we went up to talk things over. Afterwards, we decided to take a dip in the lake. I—I was changing my clothes behind the car, and—well, Joe was in the woods, too, only we didn't know it. I don't think Joe meant any harm—Gordon was furious, though. Then, the next day, Joe followed me down the street. Gordon hit him, knocked him down. Gordon was—is a big man, too."

I noticed her switch from "was" to "is." I let it pass. I left, after a while. It was too hot to sleep soundly that night.

Sheriff Higgens called the inn about nine-thirty the next morning. I had to go downstairs to answer the phone.

"Just thought I'd tell you Joe Everts is out," came Higgens' soft drawl. He paused, and I could picture him aiming at that coffee can. His voice came clear again: "Seems like Tom needed him bad at the ranch. Tom mentioned getting Joe a lawyer. That's where my pants was tight, like you said."

I said. "I didn't run into much of that feeling about Joe that you mentioned."

Higgens chuckled. "Yes sir—a real crackerjack. You scare me, Sonny." He chuckled again, and hung up.

I SAT around the rest of the morning and did enough heavy thinking to build up an appetite for lunch. After lunch I went for a drive.

A huge sign made of white birch twigs nailed to a black painted board read: CALUMENT MINK RANCH. I drove up a steep driveway, parked the car before a small frame house perched on the crest of the hill. Off in the distance, I made out the shimmering waters of a lake nestling like a jewel in an encircling cushion of dark green pines. I figured it for Stillman Lake. Halfway up the hill there was a group of weatherbeaten buildings and row on row of fenced-in cages. I walked on down and there were the mink. Hundreds of them, thousands of them. Browns and yellows and blacks and black-whites. Over in one corner of the pens, separated from the rest, were three or four dozen pure white little creatures in individual cages.

"They're rare. They're worth a lot." It was Tom Calumet's voice and I jumped a mile. He carried a bucket of red, hamburgy stuff in one large hand. "Ground horse meat, raw," he explained, grinning at me. "They're crazy for it—watch."

The mink did seem to go crazy when he moved on up to the cages. He stood there a minute, swinging the bucket in slow, tantalizing circles and the mink became restless bright streaks in the sunlight. They flashed back and forth almost faster than the eye could follow. Tom tired of teasing them

finally, and ladled the stuff out with a large metal spoon.

"Nervous animals, mink," Tom said conversationally. "Good fighters, too. Teeth like razors—could rip a man to shreds in no time, if they'd a mind to."

I watched the sleek flat heads tear into the raw meat and I shivered. Tom laughed.

"Never heard of it happening," he assured me.

"Where do you get the—the feed?"

"Buy old, worn-out horses. That's my slaughter house in that building there. Grind the bones up and make phosphate fertilizer—good money in that, too. Joe Everts does most of that work for me—that's why I got him out of jail. Me, I don't like blood."

I'd seen enough. I moved back up the hill and waited for Tom to finish.

When he finally joined me, I asked, "Where's Joe now?"

Tom shrugged. "The blame fool took off on me," he admitted. "Probably fishing in the lake, darn his hide." Tom's eyelids lowered then, and he stared at the ground. He kicked aimlessly at a dusty clod of grass and said slowly, "I suppose Mrs. Winters told you Guy and me had an argument once. Guy was thinkin' some of buying into my business, but my price was too steep. We argued a little—dickered is a better word."

I said, "A layout like this must have cost plenty."

Tom agreed. "Big money. I reckon you know where I got my start. Folks will have told you by now."

"You built this as a sort of monument to Carl?"

"Hell, no! Monument? Listen, mister—Carl was no damn good. It was his carryings-on that put maw in her grave. I tell you, Carl was bound to get killed before he reached prime, one way or another."

"I heard you were a tough old nut. I also heard Joe Everts doesn't feel the way you do about Carl."

"Joe is touched, mister. But Carl used to stick up for Joe. Nobody picked on Joe when Carl was around. Maybe it made Carl feel important to have Joe worship him so."

"Maybe," I said thoughtfully. "But it sort of proves there was some good in him, doesn't it?"

Old Tom Calumet glanced at me obliquely. He didn't say anything to that. We chatted aimlessly a few more minutes, then I drove on back to town.

SHERIFF HIGGENS had both feet propped on his scarred, rolltop desk when I came in. He handed me a couple of legal-looking documents and said, "I've had me some ideas too, crackerjack."

They were bills of sale for Stillman Lake property, sold to Humboldt Barker by Gordon Dody. They had been duly recorded, and one was dated a year ago. The other involved a month-old transaction. Sheriff Higgens nodded when I looked up.

"Look at Gordon's latest signature," he said. "I ain't no handwriting expert, but I ain't blind, either."

"It looks bad for Barker. Where did you get these?"

"I keep all the town's records in the safe here. I ain't told Humboldt about the bills of sale, yet—but I did tell him about this ring. It was found in an old irrigation ditch. Said ring belonged to Gordon Dody. Said ditch is on property involved in that forged bill of sale."

I sat down hard. I studied the battered band of golden metal that Higgens handed me, just making out the initials, G.D., stamped on the band.

Higgens drawled, "That fat bank clerk turned fifteen colors when he saw the ring. Claimed he only went near that property to tend his truck garden there. I've just got word that Humboldt drove out towards his house—it's a mile beyond the Dody place. Shall we take my car, or yours?"

We settled for mine. Twenty minutes later, as I was driving past Vanessa's place,

Higgens grabbed my arm. "Turn in here," he ordered grimly "That's Humboldt's coupe parked in front."

I cut the ignition and followed the sheriff up on the wide, shady veranda. The front door was open, drawing flies, and somewhere in the house a radio soap opera was on full blast. We found the radio in the parlor. Higgens turned down the volume, and called Vanessa's name loudly, twice. She didn't answer. We went on into the kitchen. The first thing I saw was a smashed milk bottle littering the floor. Then I noticed the overturned chair and I became conscious of the overpowering stillness stifling the house. Higgens felt it too. He glanced uneasily at me.

"They're probably in the barn," he said. "We'll take a shortcut through the woodshed."

He opened a door and then froze suddenly, one foot poised in mid-air. I heard him suck in his breath.

"Goddlemighty!" he whispered.

I pushed on by. Maybe some day I'll forget what I saw.

Humboldt's fat, little body was draped grotesquely across the wood box, limp, motionless. I saw the bloody axe on the floor. I followed Higgens' horrified stare towards the wood pile.

Vanessa Dody was sprawled out by the base of the pile, her arms outstretched, one leg doubled beneath her as though she had stumbled while running. The dress was nearly torn off her back and I was seeing the deep gouges on her soft white skin, the purple yellow bruises.

"Goddlemighty!" the sheriff whispered again.

We stumbled outside somehow. Higgens reached dazedly for his plug of tobacco, and said hoarsely, "He must have come up here —attacked her—she tried to fight him off—"

"No." I was having trouble with my vocal chords. I said tinnily, "Humboldt probably heard her screams. She was dead when he rushed in—didn't you see the blood on the soles of his shoes? He stepped in it coming through the door."

I stared at Higgens, but I wasn't really seeing him. The faces of Vanessa and Gordon Dody kept floating in between.

"I want to see some records—some records in your safe."

IT WAS almost dark when I braked to a stop in front of the jail. Higgens opened the safe. He stood by with a puzzled frown when I began reading. He left after a while, and I figured he was notifying the coroner, or selectmen, or whoever had to be notified in a town like Harlequin Falls. When he returned, I nodded at the records.

I said, "It's all there in the story of Carl Calumet's trial."

He didn't get it at first. I said, "Among those in the jury were: Guy Winters, Gordon Dody, Vanessa—and Humboldt Barker. Does that mean anything?"

Higgens stared at me, his lips tightening. "Joe thought a heap of Carl," he said grimly.

The sheriff reached in a desk drawer, brought out an old battered .45 colt, and scowled an inquiry at me. I patted the shoulder rig under my coat. He nodded, and we stepped out into the warm night.

We parked my convertible just inside the gate and we went the rest of the way on foot, silently, towards the light gleaming from the huddle of buildings near the mink pens.

Higgens whispered in my ear, "This is the slaughter house where they grind up the food, make the fertilizer. That must be Devers in there, now. You take this side, and I'll go around that way. We'll meet in front—and be careful of old Tom—don't get him riled."

The sheriff melted into the blackness. I dug the .38 from its rig and began my slow, circling stalk. The ground was uneven, stony. I groped around the front corner of

the building, stumbled, and my automatic slapped loudly, hollowly against the clapboards. The sound of machinery died down inside. The front door was wrenched violently open, spilling light, and a man's figure loomed huge and black against the glow. I heard a hoarse shout as the sheriff came pounding up. The man in the doorway lunged, light flooding his features. He snarled, smashed at my head with a fist that felt like a mallet. I staggered back and Joe Devers sprinted madly down the hill.

Sheriff Higgens charged after him. The night air was split by orange streaks from the sheriff's gun. I moved warily into the slaughter house.

The light was hard and bright against my eyes and the cement floor was wet and slimy from a recent hosing. I saw hunks of red, raw meat suspended from hooks in the ceiling. A large ice refrigerator dominated the room and an oversized meat grinder squatted beside a gleaming, wide-jawed contraption that was used to crush bones. Tom Calumet stood in front of this machine, a short, heavy stick in his hand, a look of puzzlement on his broad face.

I said, "Joe's nerve broke. He ran. I'm glad you didn't. I like the thought of just you and me—like it very much."

He was a slow thinker. He shoved the stick into the wide jaws of the grinder and moved it in a tamping motion. His eyes slid down to my gun, rested there.

I felt a cold, hard ball begin welling in my chest and I had to push the red thought of the Dodys from my mind. I said carefully, "Winters and Gordon were interested in your mink business. They both were carrying a large roll when they vanished. I'm thinking last year was a hard year for you, after all."

He jerked the stick from the machine, stared blankly at me. A line of muscle stood out rigidly on his jaw and his powerful shoulders rippled once under the plaid shirt.

There was a sudden fusillade of shots outside, then everything was quiet. The night song of crickets and frogs swelled faintly through the door.

Tom cleared his throat. He said mildly, "You're a little mixed up."

"So were you when you sent Joe after Vanessa. You forgot he had a crush on her. He went out of his head, ran amok. Humboldt got in the way."

The wrinkles on Tom's leathery face split into a hard grin, but his breathing was

ragged. "Why would I want Vanessa up here?"

I watched the grin, and I had to fight then against that cold lump, fight the hate that was twitching at the .38.

I said, "A battered man's signet ring could answer that one. It was found where a man was working on a truck garden—maybe pulling weeds—maybe spreading phosphate fertilizer made from bones!"

Something dull pounded through Tom Calumet's eyes. "You'll find that damn hard to prove."

"No. The cops have laboratories, fella."

He cocked his head to one side, studying me, toyed with the stick in his hand.

I said woodenly, "You really loved your boy Carl. You covered it up but it festered in your mind, boiling every time you saw those that convicted him."

Something flickered over his face, tightening it. He nodded casually—and snapped the tamping stick forward in a fast flat arc. It struck my wrist, numbing it, and the automatic clattered to the floor. Tom kicked it spinning towards a corner and jumped cat-like between me and the door.

He charged then, crowding me, and I kept him off only by heaving fast lefts and rights, though I couldn't see clearly through the redness boiling in my brain. Then his huge arms broke through, went around me, lifted me easily from the floor and my hands were slipping and sliding on his sleek hard body. He smashed me back against the wall, again and again, and there was the bright taste of blood in my mouth and his twisted face was fading into haze. I had to break this—I had to get away. I brought my knee up hard and we crashed together to the floor. I rolled, arching away toward that corner and my clawing hand struck the .38. I had it then, and I lurched around to meet his rush.

I CROAKED, "So help me—I'll shoot!"

He didn't hear me; there was but one thought in his mind. He hunched forward, lips working stiffly, murderous eyes raking at mine. I squeezed the trigger. His shirt front flapped but I couldn't stop him. I squeezed—squeezed again, and the room rocked with sound. He stopped then. His face went dull, slack, and that slackness seeped down to his knees, bending him. He fell heavily and lay still.

I staggered to the door. I let the night breeze curl around my wet face and when Higgens came running up I just stared dully at him.

"Joe is dead—what was all the—" He stopped, his eyes straying beyond me towards the cement floor. I told him what happened and he stared down at Tom.

I said, "I didn't think it was in character for a generous, gentle appearing guy to hate his son so deeply. I'd seen Tom bring in groceries to the Winters family, heard of the reward he posted. I figured that Humboldt's land grab was too thin a motive—too many people knew about that radar business. I also figure Humboldt squared himself by trying to protect Vanessa."

Sheriff Higgens nodded slowly.

I said, "And Joe Devers didn't have the intelligence to do away with Winters and Gordon without leaving clues of some sort."

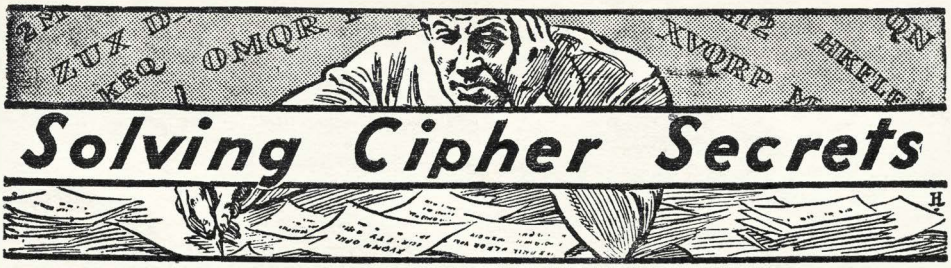
The sheriff rubbed his mustache reflectively. He said, "Yeah—but where in hell *are* them bodies? Tom can't tell us, now."

"Maybe we don't want to know," I said woodenly. His eyes followed the direction of my stare towards the gleaming machinery. His jaw sagged and his face turned a sickly yellow.

"Let's hope that a couple of lonely graves will turn up some day," I said harshly. "Maybe hunters will find bones in the woods, or maybe fishermen will snag two underwater bundles. I think there's been enough horror in this town. Why not take my advice? Why not leave it that way?"

It was hard trying to figure out what Higgens was thinking then. But the way things turned out, he took my advice.

He left it that way. ■ ■ ■



Founded in 1924 **Article No. 864**

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. 5487—Pacific Pun. By °Jaybee. Singleton X, tried as "a," unlocks RDXR (--a-) as "that," noting R as initial and final. Next, RDA (th-), "the"; RDAOA (the-e), "there"; etc.

UA SHZAOPRXHZ RDXR RDA UXTEHC KB X UDERA BFXC GAXHP X RAGNKOXOV YAPPXREKH KB DKPREFEREAP. PKGAREGAP, DKUATAO, RDAOA EP HK "ROSYA" EH ER!

No. 5488—Deceptive Steps. By †Mrs. J. M. Watts. Two-letter words FE and AS combine to form ending -FAES. Note also FPY and HAFP, then EV and VETTEH, etc.

UVFYN DYNQALY DFUFAES NEGGYNC, DTYOFPD VETTEH VEEFXNASFD AS DSEH, OX UTTYC, UNEOSK DFENYD, FE GULR KEEND EV NYDAKYSLYD. VASUTTC LUFLP OX HAFP BUS BURASZ FNULRD—FPY HUFYN-BYFYN NYUKYN!

No. 5489—Attractive Motive. By †Helcrypt. EBD, DB, and OBE'D, duly observing the apostrophe, should quickly yield to comparison. Next, ESSO, KASEOHEL, and DYHELK.

NFER ASBATS, EBZFOFRK, FGS FTZFRK KASEOHEL NBESR DYSR YFMS EBD RSD SFGESO, DB PXR DYHELK DYSR OBE'D ESSO, DB HNAGSKK VBTUK DYSR OBE'D THUS.

No. 5490—Joy to the World! By H. L. Kruger. Short words RF, PFE, and PK, taken with endings -RFH and -RFHN, give all letters in KRERFHN. Next, KZFTN, NKTTYOT, YTPO, etc.

*VSXRNKAPN VSRATN, RF KZDTXRFH NKTTYOT, YTPO

UZXKS APQZX-KXRPE KZFTN, *U PK KSRXKB NKXZMTN YTX ARFGKT, *P PK KSRXKB-NRC, PFE AREEOT-*V PK UZXKB-KDZ, NZGFE HOPE KRERFHN PN FTD EPB EPDFN.

No. 5491—Potent Compound. By *Sara. Identify BSP used between long words. Note also phrase VAEO EOG, with repeated EO. Then complete BSGRAB.

RAPPUG-BHG DBEAHXG BSP FGKSALANXZ BSGRAB LBS TG NYGKLNRG VAEO EOG SGVUC PAZLNYGKGP FNVGKDXU YAEBRAS *T-EVGUYG, AZNUBEGP DKNR UAYGK.

No. 5492—Just to Stall You! By Capt. Kidd. Identify AC from position in word-series. Follow with phrase DPH HAP'Y, substituting for A and filling in. Then YSPHSC, YAAYREAXS, etc.

RSGGA, RACES XSDY! BAAH-KUS, FAT! PAT TROPPU ANSC YAAYREAXS FGANSC-ZSH "ZOGGU" XOBPAP, YSPHSC VACYSC-"RACES" EYSDQ, HSGOFOALE "VAPU"-KLCBSC, TOP, VGDFS, AC ERAT! DPH HAP'Y EDU XS "PSOBR!"

No. 5493—Minor Exodus. By *Amoroj. Guess endings -ANTY and -ANTYE. Letters thus found may be substituted in AOXRFOANTYE, and the rest filled in. Continue with KHYERE, etc.

XHORANURF DTRYAONY KTRYABPENGH HYKLOYAE RYVO-BP ZOKOANTYHBE. KHYERE KTRYA AOXRFOANTYE BHZHOF EFTV DNSBOANTY UBTD RBXOY OBHOE ATVOBG UOBDE.

No. 5494—Expensive Excursion. By R. G. A. Note prefix OZ- and suffix -OZV. Follow up with pattern-word UMMAZKAC, phrase MCOAZK OZHIOCAK, and so on.

ENEGAIC *ZONCUK PRUG KUA. VENA XECKAZ MUIZK UMMAZKAC, ATEDGAK QIPG BAZESGJ. PJNBEGROWOZV MCOAZK OZHIOCAK: "DUPG JUI PALACES FIDYP?" RIZGAC CABSOAK: "KAEC KAAC! PUNA KUIVR, JAP!"

No. 5495—The Earth Enwrapt. By Photon. Start with IUUQICCK, comparing ending -ICCK with twice-used suffix -CK. Next, TCIUAM, TITAN, etc.

TITAN PIUQVISMQNAL IUUQICCK HEQCL SEPTCAMACK SEDAN POCA-HOLA NEILHIK ABMAULOUY AUMONACK INEQUL MJOZ PQULIUA EXCIMA-ZTJANEOLIC TCIUAM.

No. 5496—Unsolicited Bodyguard. By Vulcan. Spot your own clues, cryptofans, in this final alliterative message. Asterisks in ciphers indicate capitalized words.

NCVZUZXCTX NJRXVJJT NCZXCVZ NRCOZUTHRP NRABN "NARDEVUXAIUTJAZ" NOXVJTCZZ. NJVXRP NCICZXVUOT, NOZZUTH, NATDECZ NVJLJZDUZ, NVJZXVOXCZ NVJYJFUTH NROHACV, NCTIUTH NVJZNCDXUYC NJRUDC NVJXCDXUJT.

NOW for a novel cipher of the substitution class, No. X-5498 by °C. S., which will reveal several interesting features as the solution unfolds! Each pair of digits in this cipher system signifies a letter of the plain-text, one such pair also being reserved for use as a word-separator. Further, in the cipher key itself, the order of the letters is determined by a key-word which you must also discover. In solving, the methodized key may be developed along with the plain text. Find the message, cryptofans, and reconstruct the secret key! Full explanation in our next issue!

No. X-5498. Numerical Cipher. By °C. S.

2-3 7-2 3-3 8-2 7-1 5-1 6-1 3-1 7-1 7-3
3-3 6-2 6-1 3-1 4-2 7-1 1-1 7-2 2-1 3-2
3-1 4-2 1-1 7-1 7-3 2-1 4-1 8-3 7-1 9-3
8-2 6-3 7-1 8-3 3-1 7-3 7-2 9-2 3-1 7-1
9-3 7-1 3-2 7-2 2-2 3-1 2-1 7-1 6-3 3-1
5-1 3-1 7-3 5-1 3-3 3-2 3-1 7-1

°Jaybee's No. X-5486, the transposition cipher in last issue, conveyed the following message: *"Seventy-two letters, a multiple of nine, placed around a hollow square, to trap the unwary."* The "military formation" mentioned in the clues was the familiar hollow square, the transposition rectangle being of 9 x 9 dimensions, minus the 3 x 3 central cell, as shown herewith. Inscription was by regular descending horizontals, extraction by decending verticals, left to right, in sixes, SOMFLR HATELU, etc.

S E V E N T Y T W
O L E T T E R S A
M U L T I P L E O
F N I N E P
L A C E D A
R O U N D A
H O L L O W S Q U
A R E T O T R A P
T H E U N W A R Y

Letters of the diagram "qu," the suggested clue, occurred at an interval of 9, as 61st and 70th letters of the cipher, agreeing with the same interval for "the", as 9th, 18th, and 27th letters. Efforts to expand the initial trigram "sev" into "seven," "several," etc., however, required a shift to an interval of 6 in the middle section of the cipher, eventually revealing the plan of the transposition.

Our Solvers' Club extends the welcoming hand to these new cryptofans, sending in their first solutions: Idid, Robert G. Brown, G. H. King, and Gordon P. MacDavitt. Also, to the following old-timers once more entering our friendly circle, after time out for various reasons: †Mrs. Archie Hill, "SCS" fan since the late '20's, absent for 11 years, with a final score of 395 in Apr., 1941; Royal R. Coryell, away 6 years, score 19 in May, 1945; N. H. P., 5-year absentee, score 66 in Nov., 1946; †Sally Fischer, picking up her score of 221 from July, 1948; and †M. J. Martinson, score 127 in Nov., 1950. °Nick Spar veteran °ICC'er 83-years young, asks when he began solving. °Nick's first sols were to 3 ciphers in Dec., 1930. And °Alphamega, your start was 8 answers in Nov., 1939.

No. 5497—Cryptic Division. By †Jayemen. Third substraction will show values of G, N, and E, in that order, for a start. The ten-letter keyword is numbered: *0123456789*.

G A R) D E N I N G (D U G
A I E R
U I A N
S N P N
G A P G
N A D N
G U E

ANSWERS FOR LAST ISSUE

5475—A horribly ugly gorilla
Got his wife a fine coat of chinchilla,
Then said: "Wifie dear,
Give out with some beer!"
Said she: "You take sarsaparilla!"

5476—Ever see a "ghost word"? Such word has no real existence, being due to error by speaker, writer, editor, or printer. Thus, Korean War radio broadcast reports "sabre jets" as "jabre sets."

5477—Bingo, famous game of five-in-a-row, probably came from Italy, being a form of centuries old Genoese game lotto, known in America as keno.

5478—The best method to use, if you want to win an argument, is to listen carefully to what the other man has to say, then keep your mouth shut.

5479—Lots of communities were hotter than Hell this summer. But Hell itself will no doubt freeze over this winter. Hell, the suburb of Ann Arbor, Mich., is referred to, of course.

5480—Bandit get-away cars, traveling one-way streets, careen at intersection, crash with terrific impact, cause two-hour ten-car traffic tie-up. Ambulances, cruisers clutter collision scene.

5481—Bald-headed, clean-shaven, non-spectackled thug dons wig, false beard, eyeglasses, loots homes, robs stores. Removes disguise, eludes police.

5482—Halloween yesterday: window soaping, bonfires, gate hiding, apple ducking, similar horrendous deeds! And today: auto wrecking, thuggery, arson, robbery, murder, other innocent antics.

5483—Polo player playfully pinches pet pony. Animal rears, disrupts game. Opposite team reaches post first. Captain, furious, punishes trickster.

5484—Aged boatmen calmly defy enemy. Form guerilla horde, invoke justice. Kayak lost, marine nomad openly provides quixotic rebels safe transport, using various worthy xebecs, yelling zestfully.

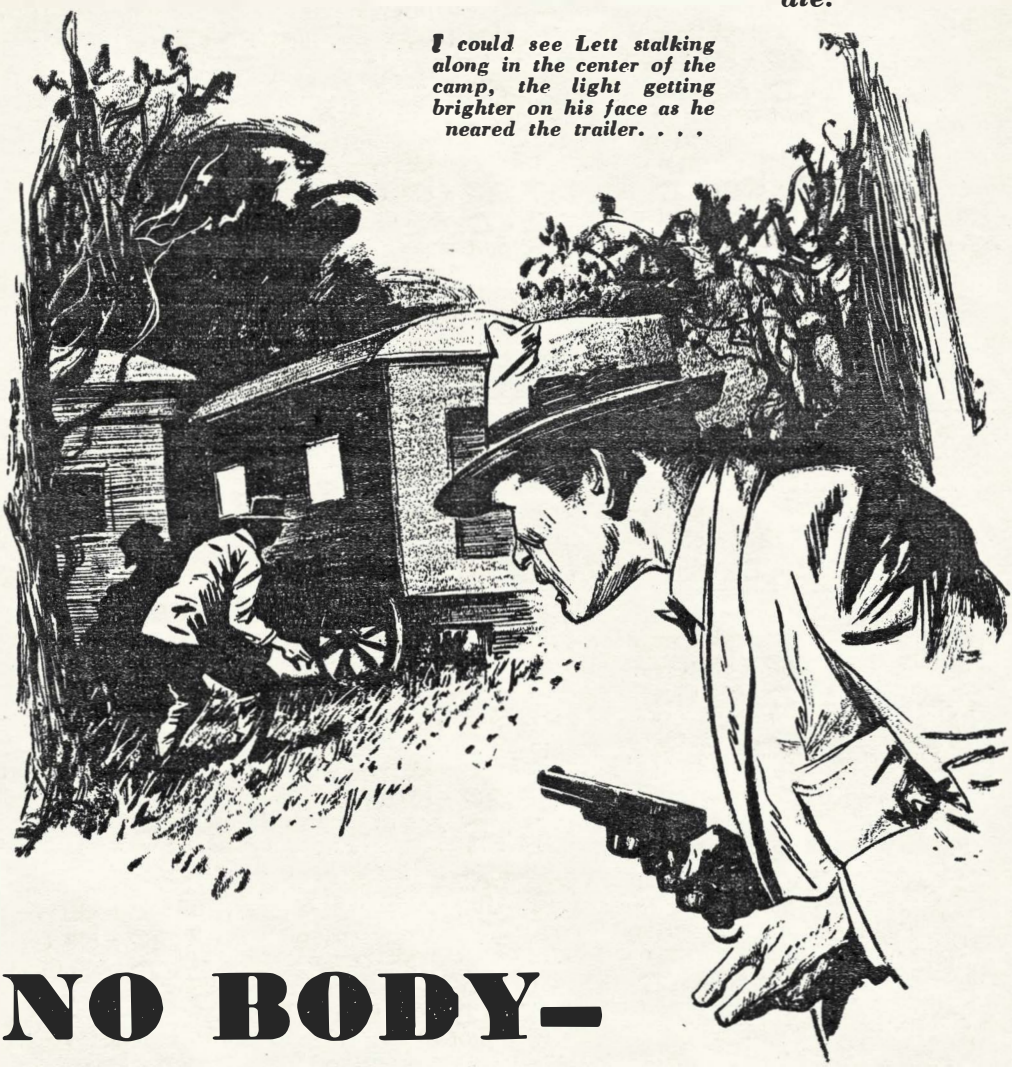
5485—Key:

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
T O U G H L I F E R

All answers to current ciphers will be duly credited in our Cipher Solvers' Club. Address:

M. E. Ohaver, *New Detective Magazine*, Popular Publications, Inc., 205 E. 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y.

Smokey's not to reason why —Smokey's but to kill—and die!



I could see Lett stalking along in the center of the camp, the light getting brighter on his face as he neared the trailer. . . .

NO BODY— BUT ME

SURE, I remembered Lydia. That wasn't her real name—her real name was Annie Pinkham but the boys called her Lydia for the gag. When Benny brought up her name in the conversation that way—easy and sly like a river rat dangling bait at a catfish—I got the old xylophone solo up and down the spine again, just like old times.

Man, that gal was with it—real cool all

By Bruce Cassiday

the way, as the music junkies would say it.

But the next minute Benny had to bust the illusion by mentioning Hank Lett. My lovely dream of Lydia clobbered up and the old sour slime crawled through me. I and Lett never used to dance no minuets together. But then I always was the punk of the outfit and had to eat a certain amount of garbage. Still, I'd rather be shipwrecked on a desert island with a harness bull than with Hank Lett. For some reason there was just dry rot between us.

Benny was dealing the cards around and I was hurting so much about Hank Lett that everything he said didn't filter through to me at first. Then suddenly I got the picture, clear and bright. Hank Lett *plus* Annie Pinkham—that put a bad taste in my mouth. I let it be known I was shocked by hanging my mouth open and gaping at Benny.

Benny winked at Winnie and Sam, the other two ghees playing cards, and then he grinned at me. "That's right, Smoke," he chuckled. "Lydia and Hank. I got a short one-page stiff from Hank in California just the other day. They're spending the summer in Lone Pine. That's a hick town out somewheres in the Big Sierras."

"High Sierras," Winnie groaned, being from L.A. and unable to forget it. He shifted the stub cigar that got him his nickname, and raised his eyes, scandalized, to the ceiling. " 'Big Sierras!' "

"Big Sierras, Little Sierras. They're in Lone Pine, enjoying the sticks." Benny's grin got funny, and I suddenly wondered if all this had something to do with me. The boys used to rag me about Lydia, saying I followed her around like her pet coon. She used to laugh with them at me, but I've got it on high authority that she was doing that for a cover. I favor the theory she was always a little soft on me even though I was just a cheap punk—then.

Benny was going right on, still looking at me. "Good thing Hank wrote. We got a delivery for Hank Lett. Lucky the consignee happened to contact us before we got out the Geiger counters to spot him. Now isn't it?" Benny grinned.

You could have heard a bookie drop. I didn't see anything for a long time, even if my eyes were focused on the bicycles in my hand. I was caught with my flaps down, flat on my back at twenty thousand feet. What's more, so were Winnie and Sam. Their eyes were bugged out like peeled onions. Nobody knew till that minute that Hank had been marked for the slab.

After a while Winnie shifted the cigar and said, real pale, "Why has Hank got to go? That's close to home, Benny. It don't make sense."

Benny shrugged, the grin letting some of his gold molar show, but none of his true feelings. His eyes slid around to me, and I could feel him thinking about me, remembering me and Lett and our natural antipathy. *Here's a guy who's building something rotten in his head,* I thought to myself. *About me. Look out for the booby trap, Smoke, boy.*

Benny raised his shoulders. "No idea. The word comes down, it's Hank Lett who has to go. One rumble has it Hank turned hold-out to the tune of eighty G's—and that tune ain't a two-bit song, it's a symphony. Another cackle claims Hank and the court of appeals didn't see eye to eye on a caper that soured up down in Miami. I say its mopery in the third degree." And that meant, forget it.

Sam pinched the brim of his hat and tugged it tight. He always wore a hat when he was playing cards.

He wasn't superstitious, but every time he didn't wear it, he lost. Sam grunted, "I smell a fat rat, Benny."

"Hank Lett has got to go," Benny went on, not even changing gears. "That's why I called this game. Figured the fickle finger could find the lucky man."

"Now, wait a minute!" growled Winnie belligerently, throwing down his cards. "We should ought to of known. It ain't

right, dragging us here under false pretenses and—"

"One thousand bucks says it is," Benny said evenly. "Plus expenses."

"Swindle sheet, yet!" whistled Sam, astonished. I didn't blame him for being surprised. Expenses and a solid G! Those prices don't come these days, what with the tax boys taking every other buck and the justice department hiring six G-men for every bangman in the biz. It's getting so a dishonest man has got to work harder to get a dirty buck than a square-john has to make ten honest ones. Believe you me, inflation is undermining the crime industry.

Benny was rolling right along. "You been screaming for a first chance in this outfit a long time, Smoke," he said, letting a half-grin seep out over his face. "I figured to let you draw cards with us."

I'd been waiting for a long time for that from Benny. And what a break—blasting Hank Lett—a ghee I never was aces with, or for that matter, even deuces with. I licked my lips. I knew Winnie and Sam didn't want to leave Brooklyn for nothing. I knew I could buy the job from either of them for a song, if one of them grabbed the high card. But I figured that would look funny. The only decent way I could beat them was by sleeving the ace of spades.

Which I did.

Sam drew a five of clubs. He didn't even look sad. Winnie pulled out a seven of hearts. I laughed and reached for the deck, figuring I could make it without trying. Then I stopped. Just be my luck to draw a trey of clubs or some lousy lowspot. So I slid out the ace onto the top of the deck and flipped it up.

Benny looked at me and laughed. "High card, Smoke. She's all yours." His yellowish eyes were amused somehow. I wondered what the gimmick was. I looked down at the deck and lifted the real top card. Ace of clubs. When I glanced back at Benny, he was cutting the end of a Havana and twirling it in his mouth.

I didn't like the look in his eyes, but who was I to clamor about that? I had a G practically in the bank, and a big trip to the Coast in my Xmas stocking. Plus I had a job of the heart—chilling Hank Lett, and double plus, I had a big hot try for Lydia again. That one and I could take up where we left off. Man, that was gentle stuff, that nylon-sheathed fever-rash. . . .

LONE PINE was a sorry little tank out in the middle of a saw-tooth mountain range in central California. It was two blocks long and had a movie house that played shows three times a week. A hermit or a desert rat would have loved it—I thought it was one step this side of the nut hatch.

In the first place, to the west of the town rose a big range of mountains—the High Sierras. One of the tallest ones had snow on top of it, and it hunched up there like a big vanilla ice cream cone. Mount Whitney, the dudes called it, but to me it was strictly a stack of van.

In the second place, the jerkwater was so small there was no place for an Eastern cowboy like me to hole up. Down two blocks either way, and you were on open range. Hank Lett and Lydia lived a couple miles out of town on a strip called the West Road, but they'd drive into town every so often. They'd pop their lids if they bumped into me over a cherry float at the drug store. Pop their lids, and then pop me.

In the third place, as an alien from America, I'd probably draw a hundred cool, steady ganders the minute I enrolled at the town fleabag. These hick meat balls were curiouser than cats. They'd have my biography complete two shakes after I flipped my satchel under the sack.

In the fourth place, I had no idea where to lug my iron. A shoulder holster would be pretty obvious. If I went sashaying around town with a double-breasted suit flapping in the wind somebody'd spot it

sure. I couldn't wear a holster on my belt like a frontier cowpoke—these ghees were real ranchers and could spot a phony in the shake of a lamb's tail. Mine. I couldn't strap it to my leg—the wind blew so hard down from the Sierras and up from the desert even Lydia wouldn't dare stand on a corner in a cotton dress.

I beat the rap by rigging myself out like a Hollywood tourist, equipped with brown smoked glasses, sports get-up, a flashy hat, and an Arizona sunset tie. The heater I stashed in a fine leather camera case which I carried around town suspended from my neck—in case of untoward action. That was a tricky quickie, for my dough.

The afternoon of the day I got there I conned the town up and down and strolled into the drugstore for a short refresher before taking the West Road to zero in Lett's love nest. Like a poor man's Gary Cooper, I sauntered nonchalantly across to the soda fountain and bellied up to it. The camera case banged around against the edge of the marble-top fountain and I cursed under my breath as I brought the case up on top.

I was trying to catch the attention of the cute, little strawberry blonde behind the counter when I felt somebody breathing down the back of my neck. Normally, I'm a fairly settled guy who's good friends with his nerves, but right then I was on a pretty risky assignment, and I guess I was jitterier than I thought. Anyhow, I don't like strangers poking their noses in my biz, especially when they ain't noses I recognize.

I spun around and almost flung my dark glasses into the far corner. About one inch from my face was this face—the face of an angular, hawk-like gent also wearing dark glasses, although his were green and mine were brown. For a split second we stared at each other.

He took off his blinders and grinned. "Howdy."

I looked at him coldly. Or brownly, I should say.

"Stranger in town?" he asked, chatty. His accent was an odd combination of twangy mid-western and frontier western. I stared at him a little longer. He had brown eyes and a browned face and brown teeth. I suddenly realized he might be bright yellow and I couldn't tell the difference with those smoked glasses on. But I wouldn't take them off for anything. He grinned affably and mounted the wire seat next to me.

I nodded coldly. But I didn't know what cold really was until I glanced down at his chest and found a leather case just like mine hanging from his neck. Of all the lousy rotten luck, I gritted. A lens loony—and he'd spotted my camera case and right away figured me for a fellow fiend!

"Stopped a seventy foot waterfall cold with a one hundredth this A. M. at F-eight on superpan." The hawk-faced man looked me over triumphantly. "Taken many shots yet?"

I jumped, involuntarily. "Not yet," I said quickly. "I just got here this morning."

"Great country, fan. Absolutely everything a box-jockey'd want for the rest of his life!"

The strawberry blonde came over and took our orders—a choc malt and a razzberry float. She went away. My new buddy and I watched her move down among the cartons and ice cream bins, and then he turned to me again, his big grin as fatuous and brash as ever.

"What brand you got?"

I clouded up. "Huh?"

"Kind of mill? The camera? How's it named?"

Camera? How would I apprise this funny boy I had a Smith and Wesson five-shot blued-steal finish .38 revolver inside my leather case? I thought about cameras for a minute and dredged up a name.

"Why, it's a Brownie," I said.

The hoosier's eyes froze. "A Brownie?"

"Yeah. A five-shot Brownie. You just roll them off one at a time—without reloading."

My new buddy's eyes narrowed up. "Okay, wise guy," he said, sort of hurt. "I didn't mean to be prying."

I grinned. This was going to be a cinch. I'd fan the blaze this duffer'd started, and I'd get him off my tail. "What kind's yours?"

His eyes brightened up. "Exacta. Neat little job. Thirty-five. Won a prize last year in the Seattle exhib. Wild life. Maybe you saw it? Honorable mention—a beaut showing my wife's cat and pet parrot scrapping." He looked at me quickly. "Tore hell out of the parrot—but the picture was a dinger."

"I'll bet," I said.

The chocolate malt and the razzberry float came up. We attacked them.

"From the East?" the man asked, curiously, eyeing me sideways.

I didn't move a muscle. "Sort of. East Los Angeles."

He looked crestfallen. "Didn't mean to pry!" Then he thought about something else and said, "Eyes bad?"

I turned and stared at him. "Pink eye," I said, finally. "Too much television. I'm up here in the mountain to get away from Milton Berle."

He didn't know how to take that. "Yeah," he said uneasily. "This is the place. Be here long?"

I turned and froze him, through the brown glasses and all. That scuttled him, and he hurried through his razzberry float and put his money on the counter. Then he slid off the stool, gripping his precious case close to his chest, and made for the door. He turned, just before he got there, and grinned at me, kind of timid.

"Well, take care of that—uh—Brownie," he said. He pushed through the doors and went stalking off down the street, all lanky and unbalanced. I had to laugh.

AN HOUR and a half later I was stashed away in a clump of pine trees, casing the back end of Hark Lett's gay rancho. I had zeroed in the love nest from down the West Road, and then circled in on it from the rear.

From the clump of pines I could keep a squint on the place long enough to clock Hank and Lydia in their afternoon routine. I wanted to see if Hank-boy started his car up in the redone cow barn all by himself, or if he took Lydia in with him. If he gunned her up solo, I figured the barn was the best place for the chill. I could blast him down and be safe in the woods before Lydia had time to cry "Thank you."

After about twenty minutes of squatting there, I saw the afternoon sun flash on the window in the back door, and the tough, thick body of Hank Lett stepped out into the sunlight. I could tell it was Hank all right, even from that distance. He got in the sun and blinked like a bat fresh out of a cave, and then he started for the cow barn where his car was. His face was pasty white, as if he'd done a long stretch up the river—or on the rock, as they say out on the Coast. Probably he'd spent most of his mountain sojourn playing cards or craps. Or Lydia.

I watched him pull open the door to the barn and step inside. A half a minute later the engine was purring and Hank backed the Ford convertible out into the rutted gravel driveway. He backed it up even with the house and yelled inside.

"Annie!" he yelled. He always called her Annie because he thought Lydia was not very nice.

Lydia came out the door and climbed down the steps of the back stoop. I could see her legs from the clump of pines. She was clean and golden-headed and blue-eyed like always, and she fitted into that cashmere sweater like a peeled banana. I got sweat on my hands and face just looking at her.

Hank Lett backed up to the West Road and turned toward town. The two of them sped along the winding road and all I could see was a long streamer of dust flying out behind them like a pennant.

It took me five minutes to case the cow barn and find the best place to sit with my mahoska at the ready, right behind an empty upended oil drum. I could pick him off like a clay pigeon the minute he climbed inside that Ford convertible.

I was so tea'd up over the success of the venture I whistled *Shrimp Boats Is a-Comin'* all the way back to Lone Pine. Smoke Malone was a-comin' too.

I got back from a movie about ten-thirty that night. It'd been a lousy Western, but some of the rod work really rang the bell. They must have had an old rackets man doing technical work at the studio. There was a honey of an Indian fight, planned right down to the last bullet and arrow. Them pioneers would have made good mob men today—they knew what they wanted, and they went after it with boy howdy and blood and thunder.

I pushed open the door to my room and slammed it shut behind me. I flipped on my light switch, but no light went on. Power out so early? I wondered. You'd think they'd at least leave the Lone Pine electric works running until after eleven. But maybe—

"Smoke."

It was a woman's voice, soft and throaty. And it was calling my name. I groped forward, trying to touch whatever or whoever it was in the pitch black.

"Smoke—it's me, Lydia."

I touched her face then—her smooth cheek, and her chin and her throat. Lydia! It was, too, near as I could remember. I'd wrassled with her once at a shinding back in Brooklyn one night, but that was the closest I'd gotten.

"Smoke—now leave me alone. I've got to talk to you."

I relaxed and she got away from me, a little huffier than she should have been, for my dough. After all, she'd dreamed up this rendezvous. But that's a dame.

"How about some light?" I said. "I'm in the dark, but big."

"Pull down the shade," she whispered. "I'm scared."

"Where is it?" I muttered, stumbling across the room in the general direction of the window. I reached up and found a torn, tattered mains'l and pulled it down. It rattled and ripped, but it must have covered the window all right, because it got dark as the inside of a bag of black cats.

"For Pete's sakes, get the light," I said.

I heard her move for the lamp. She screwed the bulb back and the light blazed on. Boy, she was cuter than ever. I looked into those enormous saucer-like blue eyes, and sized up those luscious red lips, and the trim neat figure bandaged up in that cashmere rig.

BEFORE picking up with Hank Lett, Lydia had been Left-Handed Louie's girl friend. Somebody had hung a cement block on Louie's barkers and attached him to the bottom of the East River. Previous to Left-Handed Louie, Lydia had run around with a couple of the other boys in the rackets. Before that she'd been a singer in a night club in Arizona. Most of the stardust had rubbed off her in her progress up through the rackets, and now her eyes held a perpetual brittleness, and her mouth was tired and cynical.

But all that didn't mean a thing, with her standing there like a little blue angel, smiling up at me. The birds were tweeting and the stars were reeling in the sky. I was so happy to see her I could have blown a safe.

"Baby," I said. "How'd you know I was in town?"

She sat down on the bed and patted the bedspread beside her. I went over and sat, not really caring how she'd found

out I was in Lone Pine at all—or why.

She said, "Who do you think sent for you, honey?" Her eyes got all crinkly and she laughed in that husky, whisky-ragged voice of hers. I got goose flesh up and down me, and I reached over and took her in my arms. She didn't protest. She liked it. I liked it too, but suddenly I got the drift of the last words she'd said. I unwound from her and sat there staring at her blankly.

"*You* sent for me?"

She shrugged, looking pretty pleased with herself. "It amounts to the same thing. Got a cigarette?"

I lit her up. She got behind the smoke and leaned back on the pillows at the head of the bed. "Yeah. Honey, I never liked Hank Lett—didn't you see that? We blew N. Y. and came West, and I finally got sick and tired of running around with that has-been." She stared down at the floor, her finger nervously flicking against the cigarette. "I figured Hank had hurt enough people. It was time he got paid back."

I licked my lips. This was where I came in. Somehow I didn't like the whole thing at all, from aardvark to zebra. But I listened.

"I knew Hank had held out eighty G's on the boss—" her face broke into a grin and she shot a self-satisfied little glance at me—"because I suggested it to him in the first place!"

I gulped. This was putting it up right on the table for us to look at. "And you sang to the boss—is that it, Lydia?"

She laughed, dragged off the cigarette. "I got to thinking about you Smoke, and all the fine times we had together. You remember?"

I remember, but I felt clammy cold in the guts at the way it was shaping up. The sweat oozed off me.

"I wanted New York back. The bright lights. I wanted Smoke Malone—the guy that was always going places. You, baby."

Yeah. Me, Smoke Malone. She'd figured I was traveling places, even back there when I was a punk. All the time the boys had been ragging me for being a square and a soft touch for a dame. But all that time she'd wanted me, and couldn't do a thing about it because of that louse, Hank Lett.

"So I sold the info to the boss, and suggested you be dealt the job." She laughed, her laugh velvety and fogged. "Kill two canaries with one buckshot load. See? You'd chill Hank, and be here to clinch-fadeout with me."

I said, "How come you never told me direct, honey? How come you went after it in such a roundabout way?"

She put her finger over my mouth and smiled mysteriously. "I wanted to surprise you, Smoke." She wrinkled her nose like a movie heroine and leaned back with a chuckle. "Surprised?"

"Out of my wits. So why did you come down here tonight—and how'd you know I was in town?"

She got more smoke from the butt—bleeding the turnip. "I have ways of finding out, honey. And now I'm here to help you set up the job."

I stood up, walked back and forth. I was fidgety—I don't know why—and I didn't like this dame butting in on my first blast job. It was her I was doing it for, sure, but somehow I didn't like her messing around.

"Why don't you blow, baby, and I'll meet you in Santa Barbara next week after this thing is on ice. I don't want anything frosting up the works."

She raised her eyebrows. Her mouth got hard. I felt like a man in a rock crusher, getting worked over by those diamond like eyes. But then she got the curtains down in front of her eyes.

"I want a good alibi, Smoke. I don't want to be there when Hank gets his final papers."

That was straight thinking. "Okay," I

said. "Got any idea where to be when I do the blast?"

"Sure," she said. "I've been coming down to Lone Pine every couple evenings to visit an old pal named Maggie. She used to work a strip act out in Jersey. I knew her when. .She's living in an auto court down here. I'll skip there and call up Hank right after I leave you. Then you got the green light."

I walked up and down some more. Sounded all right to me. But somehow I didn't like it. I'd spent time and thought on the caper and I wanted it to go my way. "I was figuring on blasting Hank when he's climbing inside his car."

She shook her head, her eyes gleaming. "Too much noise to tip the neighbors. Pistol-whip him while he's asleep. Then shoot him through a pillow. That'll deaden the sound, but won't slow down the slug. Then blow."

I thought about that. It sounded legit. It was better than the gimmick I'd dreamed up. But I said, stalling, "I don't go for it."

She stamped out the cigarette on the floor and sat up, irritated, but with a big smile on her mouth. Her eyes looked funny. She put her hands on my shoulders.

"Honey," she said softly, "I thought you went for me."

I grinned to myself. I must have been unconsciously trying to test her attitude. It assayed one hundred per cent. She went for me, all right, otherwise she wouldn't be playing up to me to prove it.

"So-so," she repeated. She got her arms

She laughed, tossing her head way back. I saw a million bucks worth of cashmere sweater. It was all mine. I was a fool for sitting around dreaming up obstacles.

"So-so," she repeated. She got her arms around my neck. "So-so?"

In a minute I was laughing too, because there was nothing to be suspicious about any more, and she was laughing, and everything was a picnic. It was one of the doggondest picnics I can ever remember . . .

LYDIA pulled out of my place about eleven thirty, and twenty minutes later I got a buzz from her. She said she was at Maggie's, and she'd called Hank and he was up reading a book. All I had to do was shag out to the rancho and wait for the lights to go out.

Which I did.

I pasted myself alongside the cow barn and sat down to wait for developments inside Lett's house. There was one light burning in the front room, and pretty soon that one went out. I was waiting for the light in the back room to snap on—when suddenly the whole caper blew up in my face.

The back door opened, and Hank Lett stepped out onto the porch. I shrank against the side of the cow barn so he wouldn't see me—it was pretty bright out there in the moonlight. But I needn't have sweated none. He wasn't interested in me at all. He was interested in what he held in his hand. And it didn't take a numerologist to tell it was a snub-nosed jerry.

He was holding it out in the light of the moon, spinning the chamber and squinting at the rounds in it. I hadn't thought of a jerry at all. It's a small sawed-off .38 which can fit neatly in a jacket pocket or even under a sleeve. Smart.

Then he did a funny thing. He felt in his pants pocket and turned to go back into the house, closing the door behind him. In a flash I knew he was going back for his car keys, and at the same moment I got the bright idea of jumping in the back seat of his convertible. I sure didn't want my big fish to jerk loose from the line at this late hour.

I eased into the garage and hopped in the back seat. I jammed myself low to the floor and held the gun on top of me, pointing up. A minute later Hank Lett came out, hopped in the car and started

it up. I'd swear I heard him mumbling something about "Dirty little double-crossing—" somethin, but I couldn't tell for sure. How did he know about me?

We banged along the road and I figured we were headed east by my mental astrolobe. That meant we were going to Lone Pine. That figured. You had to get to Lone Pine to hit the highway north or south. Or maybe he was going after me; I got a hoot out of that. He was going after me.

But we never got to town. He skidded to a stop down the road. I hunched closer to the floor. But all I heard was the door slam and shoes crunch along gravel. The sound kept getting farther and farther away.

Then there was silence. I got my head up above the edge of the convertible and stared off into the distance. We were parked alongside the road at a trailer camp west of town. I could see the shapes of the trailers hulking up like prehistoric monsters. Most of them were dark, but towards the rear there was one with the lights snapped on. And silhouetted against this one lone lighted window, I could see the shape of Hank Lett moving forward, half crouched, stepping cat-like on the balls of his feet.

I climbed out of the jaloppy and kissed the .38 for good luck. I made for the far end of the trailer camp so I could move toward that lighted trailer without Hank Lett catching sight of me. As I passed each of the six trailers I could see Lett stalking along in the center of the camp, the light getting brighter on his face as he neared the trailer. Finally, he moved slowly up to the window where the light etched the lines and the beads of sweat on his face.

Then I heard voices inside the trailer, and I got a cold chill up and down my spine. One of the voices was Lydia's. I figured, Hank has come to give Lydia a brand new hair-do with that sawed-off jerry. I swallowed hard, and I knew what I had to do. I lifted the gun and leveled it on Hank Lett's fat, dirty heart.

But then I caught the sound of another voice from inside the trailer. It wasn't a woman's voice at all—it wasn't any Maggie. It was the voice of a man, full-grown. Suddenly I wanted awful bad to see Lydia a little more clearly. I wanted to stare into that lighted caravan where such happiness and joy and good humor prevailed.

It came to me that the trailer must have another window on the far side. I skinned around to it in the darkness. I could see inside, plainly. I saw Lydia and I saw her lifting a glass of liquor to her lips laughing with her gay, happy, tired laugh and smiling with her wide, weary, blue eyes. And when I saw the guy with her, I like to dropped my socks.

It was my friend the ham camera-man, the box jockey par excellence. He was laughing too, his teeth sparkling white, his eyes dancing merrily. He hoisted a slug to his own lips and gulped down a big draught of it. I wanted him to choke, but he didn't.

I noticed the camera equipment hanging from the walls of the trailer. The enlarger, and the clips on the ceiling, for drying films and the red light, and the bottles of hypo. A roving dark room—and what did he have to do with Lydia? And vice versa? With an accent on the vice.

About this time Lydia glanced at her wrist watch. "Just about time," she said. "The show is finishing off. Shall we drink to the completion of a job well done?"

The camera bug leaned forward and circled Lydia's waist with his arm. He planted a firm kiss on her lips. What's more, she liked it. She wriggled. He said, "To you, baby, for the neatest little knock-off of the year."

They lifted their glasses again and drank.

"I can't forget, Danny, it was you who thought of that lovely frame-up angle." Lydia chuckled deep in her throat.

Danny shrugged. "Camera technique, baby."

Lydia threw back her head and laughed. Just like she did with me there in my room an hour before! "He was easy to frame, Danny. He was a boob—a big, fat boob."

Danny grinned, proclaiming another toast. "To big fat boobs."

The sweat was pouring down my forehead, my back, my palms. I knew who the big, fat boob was—it was me! She'd played me like an out-of-tune piano to get rid of Hank Lett so she could run off with this Danny Snapshot.

HANK LETT chose this moment to tear the door open and clamber into that narrow, low-ceiling cell on wheels. The trailer shook like a paper bag in a wind tunnel. Boy, for a second there I figured I'd seen Lott's wife turned to a pillar of salt. I refer, naturally, to Lydia. She turned into granite, and I ain't whistling Dixie. And that Danny Snapshot—he was strictly from bronze.

For a long time nobody said anything. Hank looked at Lydia. Danny looked at Hank. Lydia looked at Danny. I looked at the three of them and thought of one of Danny's stops at one hundredth at F-eight on superpan.

"Hello, Maggie," sneered Hank Lett at last in his familiar, flat voice, nodding to Danny. "It took me a long time to figure out that 'Maggie' routine, but I finally got it tonight, just after that phone call. Annie, you should have hid Danny's face under a sack, baby, so's I wouldn't remember it from the old days."

"Hank, baby!" Lydia babbled. She wasn't the babbling kind, but she was in there now, making like a bellows in a bathtub. "For glory's sake, Hank—"

Hank's flat, battle-scarred voice went on. "I knew I'd spotted that pan of yours someplace else before Lone Pine, Danny. Annie, meet Danny 'The Camera' Malloy—the man who made a life work of duplicating Alex Hamilton's mush on phony ten-dollar etchings."

Danny The Camera licked his lips. "You got both of us all wrong. I'm a professional photog, teaching Annie the tricks of the trade." Danny started across the trailer, reaching out his hand for the leather camera case hanging from the wall alongside a lot of his other camera equipment. "Look, Hank. I'll show you the instrument we've been practicing on. Annie's catching on to it fast, Hank. You'd be proud of her."

The hand inside Hank Lett's jacket tightened, and I figured he was about to draw his jerry.

"Evening, folks," I said cheerily, coming up quickly into the doorway, my .38 big as a cannon in my hand, aimed right at Hank Lett's expendable guts. "Mind if I join the jamboree?"

Lydia's throat rattled with the breath going out of it. Her face was the color of grey ashes. Her lips were blurred crimson. She took a quick little breath and tried to get her eyes the way they had been back in my hotel room, but the lovelight just wouldn't strike spark. I felt sorry for her—the way you'd feel sorry for a dog that bit your hand while you were feeding it.

Hank Lett's surprised, dirty eyes were black with hate. "The boy wonder," he grated. "Who let you out of the layette?"

"Shut up, Lett," I snapped, jabbing him in the ribs with my .38. I tell you, that was the happiest minute of my life. The happiest and the saddest. I had Hank where I wanted him, but with Lydia, I had hold of a loose rope.

But I wanted most of all to grind the knife into Hank Lett's guts. "Guess who sent for me, Hank—and guess *why* they sent for me." I was staring at Lydia, and her face was a sight to behold. She was scared and mad and speechless. "Make a bright stab at it, Lett—you'd never guess what blond-headed little angel hired me to

bump you off—and who she meant to go off with once she double-crossed me!"

Lett got it hard and heavy, right in the guts. It hit him like a blockbuster and he doubled over, almost sick to the stomach. He bent over, and the next instant I saw the flash of metal as he drew out the jerry from under his jacket. I turned my own gun, but I wasn't fast enough.

Out of the tail of my eye I saw the quick flip of Danny The Camera's leather camera case, and then came the crash of the gunshot. Danny was pumping lead into Lett's body—not a half inch from my own gun, stupidly hanging there now in front of me. Danny had stashed his own roscoe the same place I'd been carrying mine—in his camera case! I was as original as Adam and Eve.

I got the fog out of my head and moved to snap a shot at Danny, but before I had a chance to, hot flame seared my own elbow. Hank Lett was blasting away at Danny, and Danny was sinking down onto the floor with a moan. The gun he'd pulled out of the camera case slid to the floor.

I turned to Lett, to give him the lead he so richly deserved, when I was astonished to see his big teeth bug out, his lips draw back tight, his eyes close in pain, his gun go limp in his mitt. Danny The Camera's bullets were so heavy they were dragging him toward the floor.

Looking down at the useless gun in my hand, and then up quickly at Lydia's lovely, terror-stricken face, I cursed in disgust. I stared down at Danny in horror. He was going out fast, and he knew it. His eyes flickered in recognition for a second; then the film came over them.

"Take care of that Brownie—"

And then he went out.

I turned and Hank Lett's thick body twitched and fell into the trailer doorway. It slid slowly out through and went headfirst down into the gravel.

I looked at my gun again, and at Lydia, and I weighed a few considerations carefully. Lydia started this whole blast-out—maybe she should be the one to finish it. But then I thought about my mission to Lone Pine—the death of Hank Lett. Through no doing of mine, that was accomplished, and my claws were clean. If I knocked off Lydia, I'd be suspect, but good.

I stashed the gun and pulled her quickly out the trailer with me. I dragged her along in the darkness toward the car.

"Smoke," she cried, "Baby! You'll never believe me, but I was going to ditch Danny and meet you in Barbara. Smoke, you've got to believe me—"

"Shut up," I growled. I got her to the convertible and into it but before I climbed inside, I remembered I didn't have the keys. I cursed and turned to get back in the trailer, but by that time the whole camp was alerted and lights were flashing on everywhere. Voices were sounding off, a kid was wailing.

"The damned keys!" I said, and Lydia came to life. She pulled some keys out of her purse and slapped them into the dash. We blazed out of there like a jet fighter.

Lydia and I are enjoying our vacation at Santa Barbara. Funny thing, that kid is all right. She was just using Danny The Camera for a cover while I was supposed to kill Hank Lett. She was stringing along Danny in the trailer when I overheard her. She was nuts about me all the time.

Great kid, Lydia. She's interested in everything. She's off now visiting the missions with a hired guide. Funny guy with dark olive skin and a howl of a mustache. After the mission the two of them are going north of Barbara to paint some of the scenery. Oranges and cactus and monkey flowers.

Yeah. She's got a new hobby. Oil painting. And this guide claims he can teach Lydia how to paint better than Whistler's mother. ■ ■ ■

SECRET STREET

By Bess Ritter

Meet Mr. Mint, who had nothing to hide—not even the killing he made!

ONE Secret Service man remarked to his companion, as they walked along a Buffalo avenue together one day in the 1940s, "You'd be a better agent if you gave more thought to your profession and less to your hobby. Of course mechanical engineering is okay in its place, but right now we're concerned with the Zerzow case."

"You're right," agreed the other sheepishly, "but the subject is fascinating. Take automobile batteries for example. Why, did you know that—" Then he stopped, because they'd reached the residence of William Zerzow, a suspected counterfeiter who specialized in the manufacture and distribution of bogus fifty cent pieces.

Everybody at headquarters was convinced of his guilt, but there wasn't one shred of positive proof. They knew he got his sheet silver from a highly reputable jewelry firm, which erroneously believed that sales were being made to a "G and M Company of 1200 Niagara Street, Buffalo, New York." But there was no such firm at the particular address, and the man who always purchased the metal in person was Mr. William Zerzow.

They also knew how he passed the coins. For the source was tracked down to one particular bank, which received them via the deposits of one solitary streetcar company. And the same Mr. Zerzow, it was learned by trailing him, spent whole days riding first one trolley and then another of only this line. He habitually paid all his fares in half dollars, got change, got off, then hopped another street car.

They even knew exactly how the cash was manufactured. A careful search had revealed a powerful hydraulic press installed against one wall of Mr. Zerzow's cellar. It was the very latest model, heavy enough to exert twenty-five tons of pressure, and had obviously been kept in perfect working order. It had been neatly camouflaged behind what appeared to be at first glance a home owner's workroom, and was surrounded by all kinds of local color impedimentia like storage batteries, tools, a workbench and the like.

To the casual layman this would certainly seem to be evidence enough to convict the suspect. But headquarters knew better. First, there was obviously no ordinance in existence that prohibited the purchasing of plain sheet silver. Nor could any city law, no matter how blue, convict a man for spending his time riding public streetcars. Of course he passed counterfeit coinage while engaged in the process, but so did lots of other people, who were getting it in change from the trolley motormen. While the existence of the excellently conditioned press had an even better alibi: "I can't," protested Zerzow, "pursue my favorite pastime without its assistance." Which the agents thought was grimly funny till he brought out some specimens of exotic costume jewelry and claimed that he employed the press solely for manufacturing them.

What made things even tougher was the fact that the man was such a solid-looking citizen (he was a retired engineer, distinguished in appearance and faultless in his manner) that to suspect him was incredible. William Zerzow a counterfeiter? There must be some mistake!

Which is exactly what the man protested to the two agents who now stood on the threshold of his dignified-appearing home. Then he added, with a gesture that conceded the inevitable, "Won't you kindly come in, gentlemen, and reexamine my premises? I have nothing to hide—and I want you to know it."

But all three men knew full well that he was hiding something that was very vital to his safety—the steel dies in which the silver had to be cast, in order to transform it into authentic-looking coinage. If the agents had these, Zerzow would go behind bars. Without such evidence, however, the man was quite free to continue manufacturing as much more "costume jewelry" as his greedy heart desired.

They planned to examine the premises minutely, beginning with the cellar where the press was installed. Then they intended going from room to room of the six-chambered dwelling, and pull it apart, stick by stick if they had to.

But the plan went wildly awry, for although one of the men stuck to the prearranged procedure and gimlet-eyed every rug, wall, ceiling, chandelier and piece of furniture, the other just couldn't pull himself away from the workroom. The fascination of the batteries, the motors, and the mechanically driven tools was far too potent. As a matter of fact he didn't become "conscious" till he heard his confederate, who'd come back down to find him, whisper softly in his ear, "This case looks pretty hopeless. Let's quit for the day."

Startled, the other knocked over a battery—and the whole case was closed.

For its full cover fell off and exposed a 38-caliber revolver, fully loaded for firing. Underneath it rested the elusive steel dies, that could be used for one thing only—the manufacture of phony, silver fifty-cent pieces. ■ ■ ■

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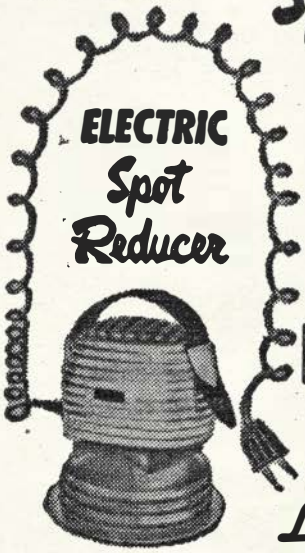

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LOSE WEIGHT OR NO CHARGE

(Continued from page 10)

Thursday night. I was, too. Maybe he can tell you more."

After leaving the Bannister cottage, Peters and Fenwick looked up O'Brien.

"Sure I was there Thursday night," began O'Brien. "I was helping Lake make over the hencoop into a camp for hunters. We made a bunk and put up a stove Thursday evening."

While they were working Arthur Bannister had arrived, and Lake had traded a hatchet and some .22 caliber shells for a trap and a carbon lamp which Bannister had brought with him.

About ten o'clock Lake had returned to his cabin and Arthur and O'Brien had decided to spend the night at the hunting camp project. O'Brien had gone to bed and Arthur said he would stay up a while to keep the fire going.

It must have been about twelve, continued O'Brien, when he was awakened by voices outside. He had opened his eyes in time to see Arthur go out. A few minutes later he had returned and told O'Brien his brother and sister had come but that he had decided not to return with them.

"Did he tell you why they had come at that hour?" interrupted Peters.

O'Brien shook his head. "I was too sleepy to ask," he answered.

The next morning they both had left.

THE troopers decided to retrack old ground. A second trip through the woods, close to the whistle post and about sixty feet from the railroad, yielded a dark object sticking up from the now melting snow. It was the butt end of a broken rifle. The stock was split and splintered, below the trigger guard.

About twenty feet farther on, the barrel of a .22 caliber rifle was uncovered.

Automatically the troopers began to won-

(Continued on page 104)

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(Continued from page 102)

der if this broken rifle was tied up with the killings at Pacific Junction.

In the meantime Dr. H. Paul Melenson, Dr. C. S. Baster and Dr. A. L. Landry had performed the autopsies. Mrs. Lake had died from the repeated blows on her head. Jackie had frozen to death. Phil Lake had not burned to death as had first been taken for granted. For embedded deep in the skull, in the brain, the physicians found a .22 caliber bullet.

This discovery explained why Lake had not followed his wife from the cabin.

But still another, and more amazing discovery was made. That heap of small bones found close to Lake was not the remains of five months old Betty Lake but of a small animal. Probably of the family cat, said the three physicians. Then where was the baby?

And why had the killer taken her? Did her strange disappearance supply the motive for the triple murders?

A hunt perhaps even more intensive than for the killer was launched for the baby.

Gossip in small towns saves the detective much time. And barely had the local newspapers come out with this latest news than the phone at headquarters rang.

"That Mrs. Bannister has a baby in her house," a woman reported excitedly.

"And you suggest it might be the Lake baby?"

The woman hesitated. She didn't mean to go that far; she just thought the police should know.

Those who had seen Arthur Bannister that snowy week-end were positive he had not carried a baby. Nevertheless, Constables Kent and Randall sped out to Berry Mills to check up on this story. Mrs. Bannister made no answer to Constable Kent's question. Instead, she got up, went into an adjoining room to return with a small baby in her arms.

"She was born to me two months ago,"

explained Mrs. Bannister. She had gone to a midwife at Fox Creek for her confinement. No, she had no birth certificate.

The men left. One detail had puzzled them. The Bannisters were practically destitute. Yet they had noticed a profusion of diapers, baby clothes, sweaters and other paraphernalia needed for an infant. Whence had come the money for them?

Local gossip soon cleared up this angle. Mrs. Bannister had been the housekeeper for Milton Trites, a business man of Moncton, and Trites. gossip had it, was the father of the new baby.

Trites, approached by Constable F. A. Randall, was evasive, but the detectives found out enough seemingly to rule out any hope that the missing Lake baby might be the infant in the Bannister cottage. Peggy Lake was five months old—the infant in the Bannister home was very small, much tinier than an average five-month-old child should be.

IT WAS generally conceded that if the Lake baby could be found, its present guardian would be tied up with the murder of its small brother and parents. Also, the elusive motive might become obvious. But as yet both baby and motive were missing.

The next development in this puzzling case came from St. John. It was a letter from Mr. H. Usher Miller, honorary secretary of the New Brunswick Orphans' Home.

The name Bannister in the current tragedy had caught his attention, wrote Mr. Miller. The preceding February, the orphanage had received a letter from a Mrs. May Bannister of Berry Mills. She had asked for an infant for adoption. However, she did not want it before the end of the year.

For some reason he did not recall, wrote Mr. Miller, the negotiations had fallen through.

Now a light began to glimmer. Authorities considered a possible blackmail angle,

with Mrs. Bannister in the role of villainess, and Trites the potential victim. But since the adoption plan had fallen through, where did this tie in with multiple murder?

That was still another mysterious angle that needed clearing. A few persons said they had seen Mrs. Bannister carrying a well-bundled baby in Moncton in December.

On the other hand, neither had neighbors of the Bannisters at Berry Mills caught a glimpse of the baby. Some of the women folks had been in the home and even they had not seen or heard an infant.

"I know of one way we can settle whether this baby at the Bannister cottage is Betty Lake," suggested Dr. Landy to the Moncton authorities.

He had attended Mrs. Lake at her confinement. Her baby had a definite strawberry mark on the crown of her head. And Mrs. Lake had told him that she and Jackie had similar marks.

Inspector Bird, Dr. Landry and Police Matron Mrs. Marie LeBlanc went back to the Bannister cottage. It was close to midnight when the party arrived. Quickly they explained their mission. And Dr. Landry took the baby in his arms and pushed back the soft hair on its head. There was the pinkish birthmark.

Back to Moncton went the three visitors, with the baby wrapped in heavy blankets.

Again and again Mrs. Bannister was questioned. She had no explanation for the letter to St. John asking for an infant.

Finally, however, she broke down. Late that Sunday night of the tragedy, two men had stopped at her door. They had asked her to keep a baby they had with them until she heard from them. She did not know the men.

But the Moncton authorities were not satisfied with this story.

A life-size doll had been found in the Bannister home. It was new. This doll, muffled in blankets, its face covered by the

veil, had been used to convince people in Moncton that Mrs. Bannister had given birth to a baby.

It was now generally believed that Arthur Bannister, perhaps with his brother and older sister Frances, had kidnapped the Lake baby in order to provide their mother with an infant to continue this fraud. The mechanism of the rifle found in the snow drifts in the woods, along with the bullet taken from Phil Lake's head, were forwarded to Doctor Jean Marie Roussel, leading ballistics expert of Canada.

And after making the usual tests, Dr. Roussel reported that the bullet could only have come from this rifle.

It was Frances Bannister who first broke down. Arthur had gone out to the Lake cabin Sunday afternoon, after telling her and Daniel to meet him there at eight o'clock.

She had barely turned into the woods when Daniel came with the baby and they had gone on. In another fifteen minutes Arthur had joined them.

Her story cleared up another mysterious angle. She and Daniel had followed Arthur to the Bannister home the Thursday before. He had come from the remodeled hen coop and told them Earl O'Brien was there. So they had had to call off their plans for that night.

Before the end of January, Arthur and Daniel Bannister were charged with the murder of the Lakes. Mrs. Bannister was held as an accessory after the fact.

At noon of March 11th, 1936, the jury retired. In two and a half hours it returned with a verdict of guilty.

Mrs. May Bannister next went on trial. She had known nothing of her sons' plans, argued the defense. And on April 6th, the mother was sentenced to three and a half years for extortion.

And on the same day, her two sons were sentenced to be hanged.

The Editors

THE CASE OF THE CORNERED RAT

By Joseph Fulling Fishman

When "cheese it, the cops!" took on a brand new meaning . . .

THE pair of gloves found on the floor of the Union Produce Company's store at Pecan Gap, Texas, when the manager arrived in the morning, told him plainly that whoever had robbed the place the night before of approximately $80.00 had taken precautions to leave no fingerprints.

Mr. Herman Bramlett, the manager, saw at once what the burglar's method had been. He had taken a heavy hammer, such as the store sold, and pounded into the back of the safe a hole sufficiently large for him to get his arm through.

Mr. Bramlett notified Sheriff John G. McKee. The officer examined the premises carefully but found no clue of any kind, beyond the hammer and gloves.

Unlike some officers, however, particularly those in the smaller places, Sheriff McKee had a wholesome respect for science. He realized that while *he* could find no clues, some of the smart young men in the laboratory of the Texas Department of Public Safety at Austin might be able to dredge up a dozen or more.

He phoned the Department and asked that they send Bill Rogers to Pecan Gap to assist him in running the prowler to earth. Rogers had a reputation for solving clueless crimes.

This time Mr. Rogers again ran true to form. He examined the jagged edges of the hole in the safe with a magnifying glass. Then, with a small brush, he swept into a paper whatever dust and other particles might be clinging to the sides of the opening. Following which he began to question Mr. Bramlett:

"Did the thief take anything beside money?"

"No, not a thing."

"Well, did he do anything unusual?"

"Not that I know of. He made himself quite at home."

"How do you know he did?"

"Because he ate part of a slab of cheese."

"He did, eh? Ate part of it? Where's the other part?"

Bramlett eyed Rogers in surprise. "Why, it's here," he said. "Of course we cut off the part where his bite showed."

"What did you do with it?" Rogers demanded.

"Threw it in the garbage, of course."

"Is the garbage still here?"

"Yes, I think so."

The manager watched in amazement as Rogers picked through the smelly mess in the garbage can until he came to the little edge of cheese. He put this in a small box and took it away with him. He then instructed the sheriff what to do in the event he picked up any suspects.

It didn't take the sheriff long to find one. He was Myrle Sullivan, an unemployed man in his early thirties, who had been in trouble with the law on several occasions, and who had served a two-year prison term for forgery. As Rogers had instructed, the sheriff took Sullivan to Austin.

"I'll have a little talk with him," Rogers said. "In the meantime, will you be kind enough to go out and buy about a half pound of some hard cheese, Sheriff?"

The puzzled sheriff left. Rogers turned to the confident-looking suspect and told him to roll up his sleeve.

Sullivan, looking even more bewildered than had the sheriff, slowly complied. On his right arm there was a long scratch. Rogers, on the pretext of examining it more closely, suddenly plucked a couple of hairs from the forearm.

The sheriff returned with a slab of hard American cheese. Rogers cut off a piece

and started to eat it. Then he cut another and handed it to the sheriff, with a suggestive wink which told the officer he wanted him to accept it. A third piece, he offered to Sullivan.

Immediately after the latter had bitten off a piece, however, Rogers snatched the remaining hunk out of his hand. Then, leaving the sheriff to guard the suspect, he disappeared into his laboratory. He emerged about twenty minutes later.

"You've got the right man, Sheriff," he said. "He's the one who robbed the Union Produce."

"You're crazy," Sullivan snarled. "I wasn't anywhere near the place."

"Oh, yes, you were," Rogers came back.

"Yeah? That's what you say. But you can't prove it."

"And that's what *you* say," the expert retorted, mimicking the other. "Well, you ran your arm through that hole you made, and you not only got that scratch, but you left several tiny arm hairs on the side of the hole. I just examined them under the microscope with the two I plucked out of your arm, and they're exactly the same. Also, the small piece of skin which came out with those two hairs is of the same quality and texture as the bits of skin you left when you scratched your arm.

"Also, in that store you bit into a piece of cheese. The impression of your teeth is on the part you left. And the tooth impressions on the piece I just took away from you are exactly the same."

For a moment, the prisoner glared.

"Will I get any kind of a break if I cop a plea?"

"You might," the expert said. "That's up to the court. You'll probably get four or five years anyhow because of your previous record. By the way," Rogers added, grinning, "do they have cheese on the diet up there?"

"Lots of it," Sullivan replied. "But I ain't gonna eat any." ■ ■ ■

A Ghost in the House

(Continued from page 73)

Mr. Paragal whirled around. He darted at full speed up the stairs. He flung himself into the darkness of the upper hall. He wasn't at all afraid of the house now. Its creaks and rustlings and groans no longer bothered him.

QUITE cooly, Mr. Paragal knelt beside the thick top post of the bannister. A smile spread over his face. Janifer and the rest of the gang would rush in after a moment, expecting to find their victim winded and spluttering with fright.

Well, they would get a very different reception! One that would make Joe Beetle look like the world's prize liar.

He would say that he'd torn down the bannister for fuel—there were pieces of it in the fire to prove that. He'd say that he hadn't even been on the stairs when Beetle showed up! He'd been asleep on his blankets, and only waked up to see Joe Beetle tearing down the steps.

Mr. Paragal chuckled. It would look as if Joe had come in to scare him and had taken fright himself.

Mr. Paragal nodded contentedly. He felt very cheerful about it all, very comfortable and light-hearted—almost lightheaded. It seemed absurd now that he

could ever have been afraid of this house.

"Why," thought he, "I wouldn't mind spending the rest of the night here. In fact, I think I will!"

And his smile grew. It was a nice house. He had even begun to feel quite at home.

"It could be bought for a song, I suppose. And it could be fixed up, I guess," he told himself. "I daresay a thousand dollars would put it in tiptop shape. And you can't beat the scenery around here."

The idea grew on him that he might really do it. For one thing, it would prove that he hadn't been frightened.

Footfalls rang out, and Mr. Paragal popped his head out from behind the bannister post and stared down.

Harry Janifer came in first. Behind him was Joe Beetle—an absurd sight in his pancake hat and short jacket. Mr. Paragal wondered how he had ever been taken in for a moment by *that*. Behind Joe Beetle came the make-up expert, responsible, no doubt, for Joe's costume.

The three men passed from Mr. Paragal's sight, around the side of the stair.

Mr. Paragal drew a long breath, and cried out, *"Whoo-oo-ooo!"*

He half expected them to stampede for the door. But no sound came from below. No doubt they were paralyzed with fear.

So Mr. Paragal started down the steps. He moved quietly, on such light feet that not a creak or groan of the ancient timbers and boards betrayed him. Leaning out over the broken bannister he cried:

"Who-hoo-hoo! Hoo-hoo-hooey!"

The three men were right under Mr. Paragal. But they didn't look up when he *who-hoo-hoo'd*. In fact, they acted as if they hadn't even heard him.

Funny. Very funny. It disquieted him.

Then he saw that Janifer and Beetle and the make-up chap had their hats off. Bending over something, they were. A limp, quiet, strange something. And they were moving it, picking it up.

A Ghost in the House

Mr. Paragal caught his breath, and a quick, nervous flutter went through him. "Boys!" he said. "Boys! What's that?"

They paid no attention to his voice. But now he saw what it was. The flutter came again, and this time it went straight to his heart. For what Janifer and Beetle and the make-up expert picked up was a body.

Mr. Paragal gripped the bannister, and stared, and he saw beyond any doubt that this was a dead body. They carried it right past him to the door, and when they turned to go out the door he saw it more clearly.

He shrieked, "Boys!"

For locked in the corpse's hand was a flashlight. And the face—hanging queerly as if the neck had been broken in a bad fall—was a flinty little face that Mr. Paragal knew well, since he saw it every morning in his shaving mirror. He reeled and fell full length on the stairs. But his falling made no sound, for what the men were carrying out was his body. ■ ■ ■

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