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JULY

# NEW DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

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*A NOVEL OF MIDNIGHT MURDER*

*by* G.T. FLEMING-ROBERTS

## WISH YOU WERE DEAD

*by* C. WILLIAM HARRISON



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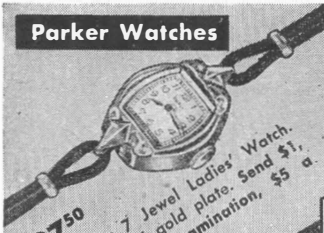

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# NEW DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

Vol. 7 Contents for July, 1945 No. 1

## TWO LONG CRIME-ACTION NOVELS

**DEUCE FOR DEATH** ..... **Dean Owen** **10**
The dead man winked at Johnny's ride to the death house—with a girl who thought a knife was the way to a man's heart!

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Of dopes and murderers.

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# THE WITNESS CHAIR

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For he is the typical narcotic-using criminal of the stage and screen and novel. All he apparently needs is a shot or two of dope to transform him from a weak, cowardly wreck into a swaggering, brutal, gun-toting desperado.

It's a romantic, although a terrifying picture. The only trouble with it is that it's about as far from reality as one can imagine.

For it isn't true that the most desperate criminals are usually knights of the needle. Strange as it may sound to those brought up to believe the above picture, the very opposite is the real fact.

According to Mr. Joseph Fulling Fishman, former U. S. Inspector of Prisons, whose

*(Continued on page 8)*


Accounting faces an unusual situation during the postwar period. The need and demand for accountants—both beginners and experts—is large while the supply is short. That spells opportunity for many—perhaps for you.

The reason is simple.

Government uses many accountants. War activities enlarged old bureaus and created new ones—taxes, social security, price regulation, contract renegotiations, more indeed than we can name here.

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This need will persist for years—it will open many, many fine jobs, fine both in responsibility and pay. Nor will it end with the difficult postwar adjustment period.

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fascinating account of a death chase which shocked Cleveland appears elsewhere in this issue: "There is not one really desperate or 'first class' criminal out of a thousand, who uses narcotics in any form.

"Not only that, but from my years of experience as inspector of prisons for the United States government, and in other jobs which brought me into contact with tens of thousands of criminals, many of whom used 'the stuff,' I know that the really big shots in the criminal world, not only are non-addicts themselves, but will not have anything to do with one who is a 'sniffer'.

"To illustrate, it is a common practice for members of 'swell mobs' who have had a 'fall' to form new criminal associations from the ranks of their fellow-convicts. They study the characteristics of likely additions to their gang in the same way an employer tries to 'peg' a man or woman he is contemplating hiring. Scenes such as the following, therefore, take place in the prisons of the land many times during the course of a year:

" 'Dick Evans looks pretty good to me,' one of these jailed mobsters will say to another. 'What do you think? He goes out about the same time we do.'

" 'Don't touch him,' the pal warns.

" 'Why not?'

" 'Because he's a junkie.'

"The other nods. He doesn't even argue. For he knows that the presence of a narcotic addict in their ranks is far more of a menace to them and their safety than all the cops in christendom.

"This is because—as many crooks have learned from bitter experience—every 'snowbird' is a protential squealer. All the police have to do to make him spill everything, once they have him in their custody, is to keep narcotics from him for a day or two, and then promise him a shot if he tells them what they want to know about the other members of his gang.

"Not one addict out of ten thousand has the stamina to hold out under such circumstances —the fortitude to resist the agonizing torture which follows the withdrawal of the drug to which he is accustomed.

"No one who has not witnessed it can have any idea of the indescribable suffering of users deprived of their drug. In county jails, where local physicians know practically nothing of treating addicts, I have on innumerable occasions seen these unfortunates lying on the floor of their cells, screaming in agony, beseeching anyone to get them a shot. They will sell their own mothers into slavery to obtain 'God's medicine'—as they call it. The mere betrayal of their fellows means nothing at all to them.

"And maybe the police don't know this! On many occasions, while I was Deputy Commissioner of Correction in New York City, I had detectives ask me to have our prison doctors withhold dope from certain users, out of whom they were anxious to pry information. Narcotics addicts of the type who drift in and out of the jails—there are thousands of others who never commit any offense—not only are *not* big shots among the criminal brotherhood, but are the smallest kind of small fry.

"And I can prove this from an actual study which I made of 1133 addicts who came to the New York County Penitentiary on Welfare Island in the course of a year.

"What were those men, those 1133, there for? For murder? For big stickups and robberies which required intelligent planning and dash and courage?

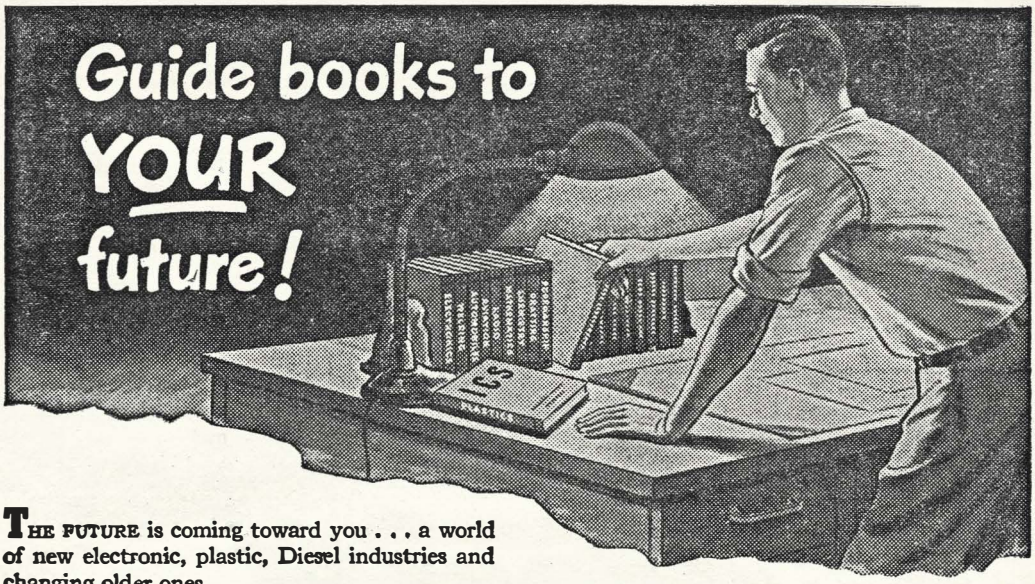
"Not at all. They were there for vagrancy, for panhandling, for petty theft, for failure to support their families, and for other more or less trivial things. *There was not a single one out of the entire 1133 who had been convicted of other than the most inconsequential offense!* And this was true not only of their current sentences, but of others which they had served in the past!

"I once wrote to Chief Hoover, of the F. B. I., and asked him how many of the men on a list which accompanied my letter were drug addicts. The list included the so-called public enemies of that day: Al Capone, Harvey Bailey, Roy Hamilton, the Tuohy boys, Baby-face Nelson and thirty-five or forty others of about the same standing in the underworld. Mr. Hoover replied that not a single one of these men was a drug addict!

"The reason should be obvious. To commit really big crimes—to control 'big business' criminal organizations—requires the same qualities and abilities as big business in an honest framework. And these qualities narcotic addicts—again of the type who get into the jails—do not have.

"They are not even interested in committing such crimes. The only thing on earth they are interested in is getting enough of their beloved dope to keep them comfortably 'under.' They live dope, and eat it, and sleep it, and drink it and dream it. It has become the sole purpose of their existence. The only reason they commit petty robberies is to get money necessary for their supply. If it were not for this fact, it is doubtful if they would arouse themselves sufficiently to indulge in even this minor stealing.

"So, don't let your sympathies or resentment overwhelm you the next time you see a dope-taking rat committing big crimes or managing huge criminal organizations on the stage or screen. It may be swell drama. But it just ain't true."

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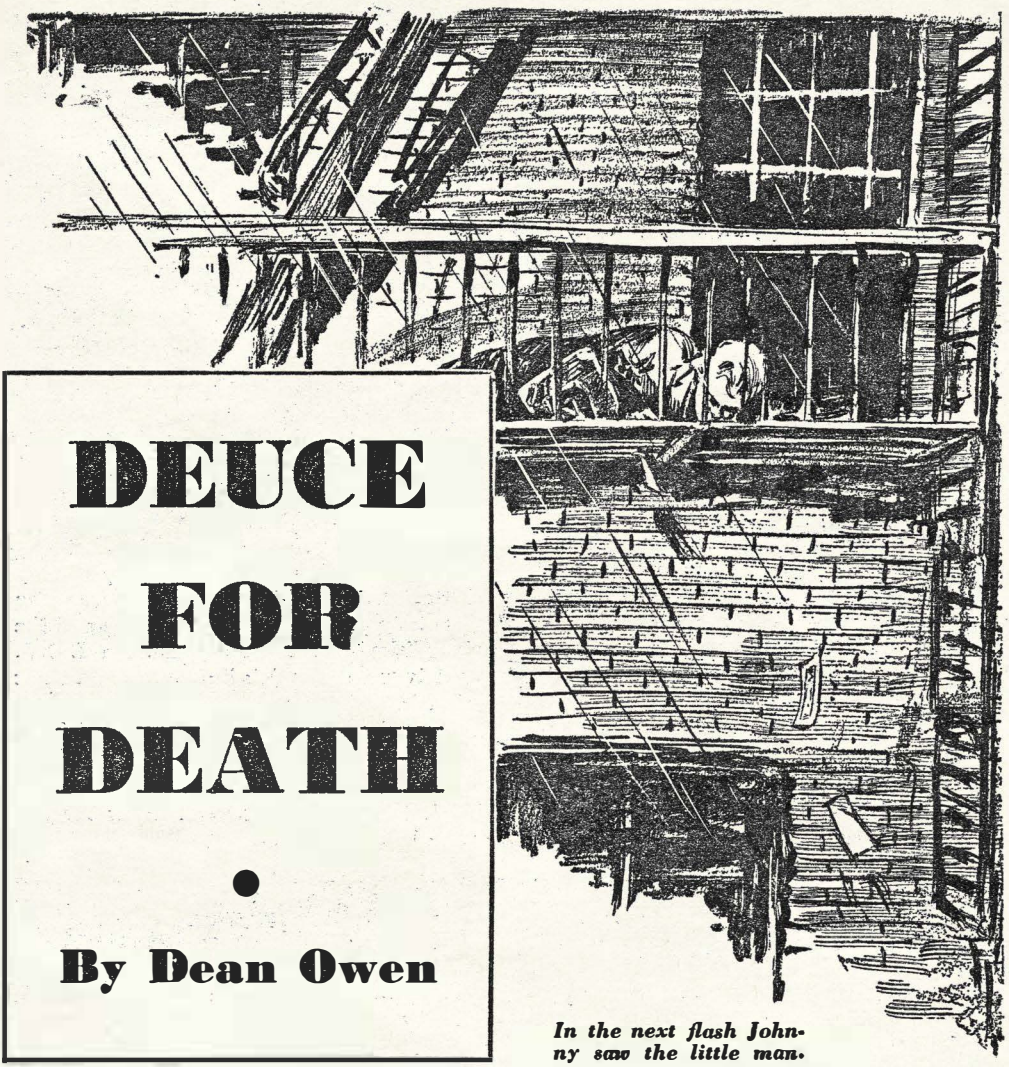


*In the next flash Johnny saw the little man.*

# DEUCE FOR DEATH

●

**By Dean Owen**

●

***The dead man winked at Johnny's ride to the death house—with a girl who thought a knife was the way to a man's heart!***

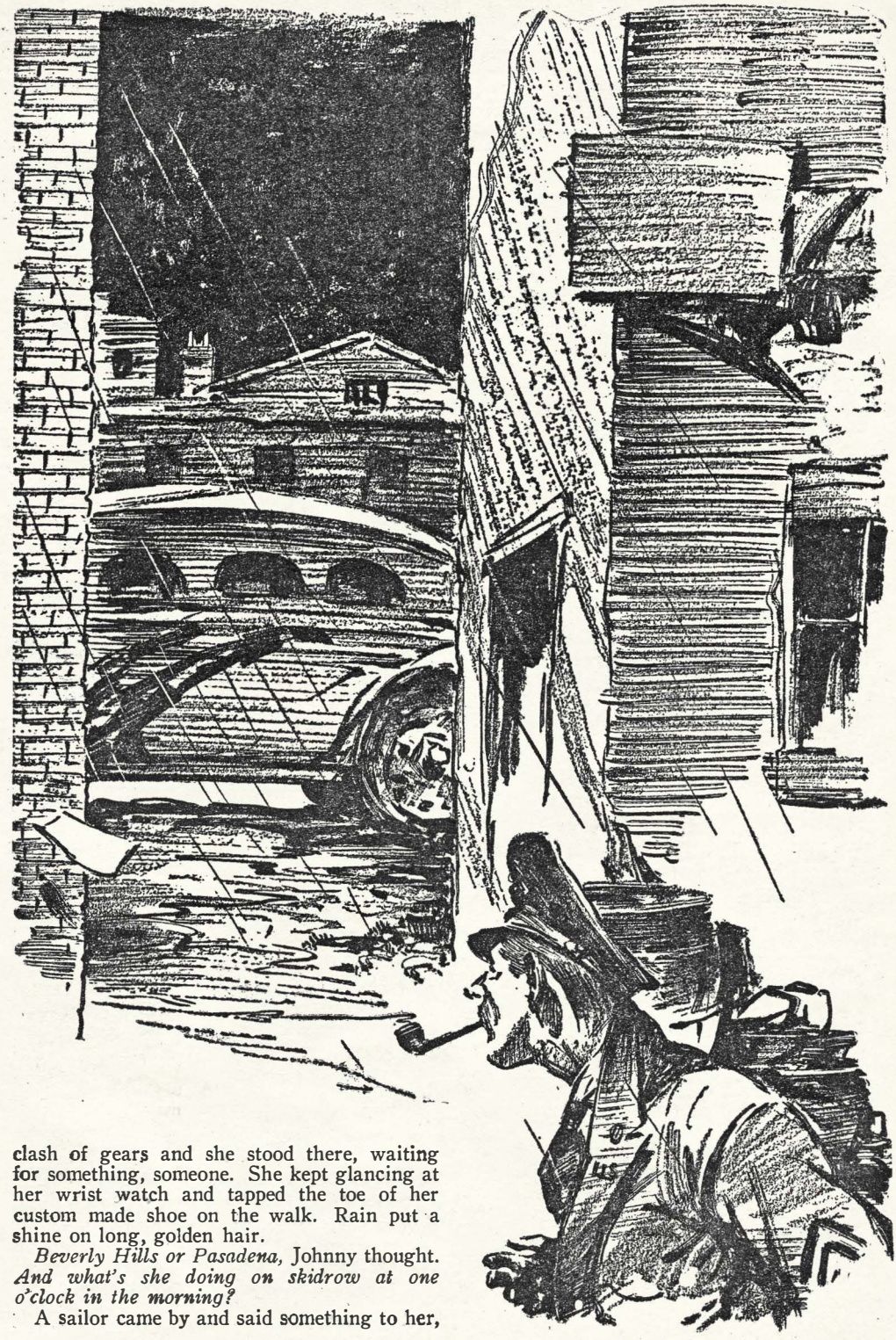
●

## CHAPTER ONE

### Dead Man's Eye

JOHNNY WALES leaned against the damp wall of the bus station, chewing on the stem of an old pipe slanted out of the corner of his big mouth. He had a half an hour to kill, waiting for the San Diego bus, and he felt miserable and cold. The whiskey he had taken aboard in San Francisco that morning made his head buzz and his mouth taste as if he had swallowed a bottle of hair oil.

He watched the tall girl who got out of a cab at the curb. Her expensive slippers glistened in the rain. The cab went off with a



clash of gears and she stood there, waiting for something, someone. She kept glancing at her wrist watch and tapped the toe of her custom made shoe on the walk. Rain put a shine on long, golden hair.

*Beverly Hills or Pasadena,* Johnny thought. *And what's she doing on skidrow at one o'clock in the morning?*

A sailor came by and said something to her,

then grinned. She turned her back and he went on, shrugging his shoulders. A clock bonged once in the distance and this brought the girl to life. She looked at her wrist watch as if to verify the fact that it was 1 A.M.

She turned into the entrance of an old four-story brick building next to the all-night coffee shop on the alley corner. It might have been an ornate building at the turn of the century, but now it stood mouldy and uncertain in its company of pawnshops and darkened gin mills.

He was alone again. Street lamps pasted dirty yellow light on the greasy Main Street sidewalk, and the fine rain spinning down from the black Los Angeles sky turned Johnny Wales into a big, wet G.I. shadow in the darkness of the alley. Cocktail joints and bars had closed their doors and the sidewalk was as deserted as a parade ground at midnight. Then two M.P.'s went by, swinging their clubs, slickers shining in the rain. They didn't see him there in the alley and he was glad. He didn't want to drag out his papers and go through the routine of why he had been let out of the Army.

He was standing like that when another oblong piece of paper came floating down from the sky. That was the third one and they lay in the alley mud a few feet away. He stared at them idly, seeing that one looked green in the flash of the neon sign from the coffee shop.

It looked like paper money and he wondered who would be tossing dough away. Might be something like pennies from heaven, he thought.

But the girl was the pleasantest thought he had since he had been waiting, and he was still thinking about her when he went over and picked one of the paper oblongs up. In the dim light he saw that it was a newly-minted two dollar bill. He turned it over. The other side was blank.

*Uncle Sam's getting careless,* he thought, *turning out this kind of money.*

He picked up the other two. They were the same. Two dollar bills, printed on one side—blank on the other.

Another one came fluttering down like a wounded bird. Johnny tilted back his head, squinting blue eyes against the rain. At that instant the neon flashed again, and in the momentary glow, he saw a face peering at him through the iron slats of a second floor fire escape across the alley. The same building where the girl had gone.

Maybe it was the whiskey. He shook his head. No, the liquor couldn't have been that bad. In the next flash of the sign he saw that it was a little man, lying on his face, his body draped over a shiny cowhide bag. The bag was open and the bills were spilling out. Now and then one of them would work through the bars and come zig-zagging down in the rain.

*The little guy's drunk . . . or dead,* Johnny thought.

TWO years in the Army had, if anything, sharpened the restless instinct which had made his name a by-line on a half-dozen police beats up and down the coast. Still, this was none of his business, he thought. He looked over his shoulder at the big red-and-white wildcat bus in the alley behind him that he would soon be taking. This other thing was none of his business, he told himself—the girl and the little man on the fire escape and the two dollar bills.

His eyes suddenly caught a station wagon which had eased to the curb. Its headlights were out, but the motor idled. He moved out of the alley and saw the Mexico license plate and the pimply-faced man behind the wheel.

He stepped into the lobby of the old building next to the coffee shop. Shoving the bills in his pocket, he stood there for a moment, a big man with yellow hair and brows. Feeble light from an ancient wall lamp, washed over his blocky figure. His snub nose wrinkled at the odor of stale cigarette butts in the gaboon by the dark elevator. There was a directory on the wall with only one name: Walker's Tips.

About to go up the stairs beside the elevator, he tensed when he heard the click of high-heeled slippers that were moving fast. The girl came down the stairs quickly and ran into him. He liked that, for he had to put out his big arms to keep her from falling on her face. Her cheeks were the color of the frilly white blouse that was bunched at her slender throat. He couldn't see her eyes, for now she wore a pair of dark glasses.

With a startled gasp, she tore free of his arms and her lips formed an O. She stood there, fists clenched at the sides of her camel's hair coat. Her suit gave off the musty odor of expensive tweed when it is damp.

"I'll yell my head off if you touch me," she said in a throaty voice that trembled.

He grinned at her, but there was no mirth in his eyes. He pointed at the dark glasses.

"Kind of silly for this time of night."

She didn't say anything, just stood there, her breast rising and falling. He touched her on the sleeve.

"The little guy up there—"

That snapped her out of it. She trembled and shot a glance up the dingy stairs, then pulling off the dark glasses, walked rapidly out of the building, and even though she moved fast, she never lost her poise. Stepping to the entrance, he saw that she went into the coffee shop next door.

He went back into the building and up the stairs, remembering the vivid mark of fear on her face. The subtle odor of her perfume lingered in the dank hallway like an overtone

against the faint smell of cordite. And he sensed now that murder had been done. He paused at the head of the stairs, seeing the rows of glass office doors, shining like dead eyes in the red light thrown out by a cracked exit sign.

One door was open and he moved closer, the scrape of his shoes on the dirty floor sounding to him like a squad on parade. It was that quiet. He saw the open door had WALKERS TIPS painted across the glass in shiny black paint. Inside was a long table piled high with yellow folded paper. For a dozen seconds he stood there, straining to hear any foreign sound. But there was only the rattle of a street car going by with a clank of old iron and the dim far away moan of the juke box in the coffee shop downstairs.

Turning his back on the office, he went through a narrow hall to the fire escape, a prickly current of danger running up his spine.

He stepped through an open window onto the iron balcony and rain pelted the back of his neck. He shivered, but it wasn't from the cold.

It was from the sight of the little man. He was still crumpled up there. Johnny could see the dark stains on the iron slats.

"He tried to run away," Johnny thought, "and somebody gave him a skinful of lead. He was going to beat it down the emergency ladder when somebody—"

Johnny stared. A few moments before, the little man had been lying on his face. He no longer stared down into the alley with his dead eyes. He was lying on his back. Somebody had turned him over when they pulled the cowhide bag from beneath him. He was remembering that bag and the fancy brass work that caught the light.

The bag was gone. And he remembered the girl had been empty-handed when she came down the stairs.

HE STOOD there on the fire escape, a cold hollow feeling in his stomach as if he'd suddenly swallowed a scoop of shaved ice. Nothing moved in the corridor, no shadows materialized into a killer, yet Johnny sensed there had been someone else here besides the girl.

He looked back at the little man, seeing a crushed Homburg under his head. Cracked horn-rimmed glasses lay on the fire escape. He had seen death many times and had acquired a cynical view of murder, but even so it always made him a little sick.

The little man's eyes were open, staring and there was a hurt look in them as if he resented anyone's cutting him off from life. To Johnny he looked like a small town college prof. His clothes were good, but the coat was ruined, for when Johnny lifted him off the cold iron he found the two bullet holes in his back.

The little man's lips were open as if to say: "What about me is so interesting? Why do you stare?"

Yes, a college prof. And it seemed to Johnny that he might lift himself off the fire escape and begin to lecture on philosophy, or perhaps economics. And while Johnny thought of this, he saw the thin edge of white paper showing above the man's clenched fist. He pried open the warm fingers, pulled out a ragged piece torn from a newspaper.

In the flash from the neon, Johnny saw that it was torn from a column headed: "Visitors." One item was circled. "Milton P. Remmah, miner from Baja California, here on business trip. Staying at the Hanover Hotel."

Then out of the silence came the creak of stairs. Johnny shoved the paper in his pocket, tensing as he looked back down the corridor. Nothing moved, yet someone was going down the stairs, moving slowly, yet deliberately.

Back in the hallway he found no one. Only the musty smell, yet a new, pungent odor. Cigar smoke. He stepped to the open doorway where the sign read: WALKER'S TIPS. And the odor was heavy.

*The killer waited here till I'd gone on the fire escape,* he thought and it brought cold sweat to his forehead.

He stuck his head in the door and struck a match. In the flickering light, he saw that file cabinets were open, the contents strewn over the floor. The rug was turned back and pictures had been moved so that they hung from crazy angles.

Cautiously he went down the dim stairs and when he came to the lobby, he stood there a moment, eyes searching the dark corners. But he was alone. Whoever had come down was gone now.

Outside, the station wagon with the Mexico license plate was still at the curb, a thin line of vapor sliding out of the exhaust, like your breath on a wintry day. The pimply-faced man behind the wheel stared at him out of cold eyes as he went by.

Back in the alley once more, Johnny leaned again against the alley wall, trying to figure out why the girl had gone into the building, in the first place. Why had the little man, who looked like a college prof, been carting around a bag full of half-printed two dollar bills? Somebody had killed him not many minutes before, the sound of the shots obviously lost in the noise of occasional passing cars.

And Johnny realized that the killer might have been watching him from the fire escape, waiting until he left before removing the shiny cowhide bag from beneath the dead man.

He didn't have time to think further on the subject, for the door to the coffee shop swung

wide and the girl came out, moving toward him swiftly.

*Keep out of it,* he told himself grimly. *You've been lucky so far. Don't crowd your luck. The girl and the little guy mean nothing.*

But when he saw the girl look quickly over her shoulder at the big man plodding along in her wake, he went tense. Her slippers made a nervous *tap-tap-tap* on the wet sidewalk. Then the hard slap of heavy shoes made a bass note behind the staccato sound of the slippers.

The big man who followed the girl moved with a studied purpose. His face was a shadow beneath a dripping hat brim and the glow from the street lamps put a shine on the fancy brass work of the expensive cowhide bag swinging from a long arm.

AND Johnny stuck his old pipe in his mouth, biting down on the stem to help keep his jumpy nerves in line. For he was remembering the cowhide bag he had first seen up there on the fire escape. He thought of the two dollar bills, printed on one side. And the dead man, and the girl coming out of the building, wearing dark glasses.

A dozen paces separated the man and the girl and the distance was rapidly being chopped down as he moved up. Her long golden hair swept back over the collar of her coat and Johnny could see the splash of red that marked her half-opened lips.

Nobody on the sidewalk, but the man and the girl. Only the rain-swept buildings and the glistening rails of the car tracks and the station wagon with its purring motor.

He stepped away from the building and the girl saw him, wheeled down the alley toward him, the light of desperation in her wide, staring grey eyes.

"Bill, Bill!" she gasped, fingers digging into his thick arm. "I'm so glad you got your furlough. I—I thought I'd be late—"

She was on the verge of hysteria. Her voice was tight and he could feel her tremble against him. In the glow of the street light, her pretty face was the color of dead grass.

The big man slowed down, came closer, his high-laced boots slapping at the wet sidewalk, cowhide bag at his side. His shiny leather jacket didn't hide the width of powerful shoulders. To Johnny he looked like a mining engineer or surveyor.

And the man swung toward the alley, where Johnny and the girl stood in the deep shadows. Johnny didn't like the look of him, the close-set yellow eyes or the long gash of a mouth, which cut across a heavily-tanned face. Not too many men topped Johnny Wales in size, but this stranger did. A good inch taller and thirty pounds heavier.

The big man crowded close and his right hand dropped into the pocket of his leather jacket.

"Turn it over," he snarled. "Either you or the girl has it." And to Johnny his voice sounded like the low notes on a bass fiddle.

Anger smashed its way through Johnny's reason and he suddenly shoved the girl aside, chopping down with the flat edge of his hand. It was judo that the Army had taught him. The blow caught the big man just above his right wrist and pain flashed across his face. His hand jerked from the pocket as if he'd touched hot metal.

He backed up, showing blunt teeth as he bared his lips. And Johnny hit him squarely on the jaw. The big man went back, tripped over the cowhide bag and fell heavily across it. The bag snapped open, spilling a flood of half-printed two dollar bills in the alley.

And Johnny bent low to grab the big man by the shirt collar and pull him erect, for his anger had not yet run its course.

He hadn't heard the wooden slap a station wagon door makes when it is slammed. But he sensed the sudden danger. Turning, he glimpsed a down-sweeping arm and a gun butt. Bent over as he was, he had no chance to get out of the way. But instinctively he pulled his shoulder up. Pain exploded in his head like a Roman candle and he fell on his face.

He wasn't out, but he couldn't move a muscle. He just lay there, feeling as if someone were cutting into his head with a meat saw. He heard the clatter of high-heeled slippers, heard the big man say:

"The girl's beat it into the bus station. Can't follow her in there."

Then a high, falsetto voice and Johnny remembered the pimply-faced man who had been behind the wheel of the station wagon.

"Maybe this guy's got it, Hammer."

Hands tore through Johnny's clothes, but he could do nothing but lie on his face. He was paralyzed. But he could pray and he prayed for M.P.'s or a harness bull. But no one came by.

Finally Hammer said, "He doesn't have it, Sammy. Either the girl's got the other plate or Seliba has."

"Looks like Seliba was set for a double-cross," Sammy said. And he laughed like an hysterical girl. "Sellin' us out before we did him."

"Craig only had the one plate and the bag full of bills," Hammer said coldly, as if trying to analyze the situation. "Too bad he tried to duck out. I didn't want to kill him. We could have burned the truth out of him."

They talked on and Johnny knew the little dead man was Craig. And he learned that Hammer had been waiting in the office of WALKER'S TIPS when Craig came in. And when Hammer turned his back, the little man

tried to duck out by the fire escape. Then the girl had come up and Hammer, not knowing who it was, had remained hidden in the office until she left.

"Then this big G.I. came poking around," Hammer finished. "I sneaked out, figuring he was just a jerk. But when the girl headed his way in the alley, I changed my mind. They're working together."

Hammer sent Sammy to see where the girl had gone. In a moment he came back.

"She's buyin' a ticket," Sammy said. "Got close enough to hear her talkin' to the clerk. San Diego."

"That's where Seliba is," Hammer said gruffly. "Craig spilled that much. We'll tail the girl. She'll lead us to him."

They stood there as if they had all the time in the world. And finally Sammy said, "How about the soldier?"

"We'll fix his clock." And Johnny felt a hand lift his wallet from the hip pocket of his khaki pants. "Without papers he won't bother us. He'll be guardhouse bait when the Army bulls find him without a pass."

They moved away down the alley and Johnny tried to move. He heard the slam of the station wagon doors, the roar of a motor—then silence. He didn't know how long he lay there, only a minute or two at most. But soon the strength returned to his body and he got to his knees. His head ached as if somebody had driven a cold chisel between his eyes. There was a bump behind his ear and he was glad he had seen the blow coming and pulled in his head. Otherwise he would have wound up with a split skull.

He leaned against the wall. His bus ticket was in the alley mud and he picked it up. All he had was the ticket and eighty-five cents in change. His wallet was gone.

*I'm guardhouse bait, sure enough,* he thought, recalling Hammer's words. He looked at his muddy clothes and tried to brush some of the dirt off. There wasn't much improvement and he knew the moment M.P.'s spotted him in this condition, they'd come running.

He looked up at the fire escape and the little man was still huddled on the cold iron slats.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Night Ride

A THIN shadow slanted across the dark alley and Johnny turned to see a lank man in a shiny wet suit standing beside him. The battered felt hat on his head looked as if it had been carried for a year in

somebody's hip pocket. A frayed collar was buttoned around a skinny neck. Two grease spots loomed up on a red tie like a pair of eyes.

The thin man said, "I been waitin' for you to come around." His voice was wheezy as if gallons of cheap whiskey had slid down his throat during a misspent life. "Where you fit into this, soldier?"

Johnny lifted a big hand, placed it just above the grease spots on the tie and shoved. "I don't fit any place," he snapped.

The man's muddy eyes showed a brief flame of anger. Then he let a crooked grin slide across his thin face. "Harley Dobbs can smell a good racket, chum. He ain't bein' touted off his horse."

He took a yellow sheet from his pocket. Johnny could see WALKER'S TIPS printed across the top, then a lineup of horses. And he remembered the pile of yellow, folded papers he had seen on the long table in the office upstairs. Dobbs unfolded the sheet and inside was one of the two dollar bills. He stood there looking up at Johnny, that knowing grin on his lips. Then he pointed a skinny forefinger at the fire escape where the dead man was huddled. And Johnny felt cold all over.

"You two-bit chiseler!" Johnny said angrily. "That won't buy you anything but a tombstone."

Harley Dobbs shook his head. "It'll buy me a stake for South America."

Johnny tried to move away, but the thin man clung to him as if they were tied together.

"Get out of here," Johnny said roughly.

"I seen you come out of the buildin'," Dobbs said. "The gal was up there, too. Roy Craig's dead. He was goin' to meet the gal for a five grand payoff. All he bought himself was two slugs in the back."

A street car rattled by, faded and yellow, in the night, the conductor dozing on his stool. Johnny took a deep breath, looked down at the thin man.

"How come you know so much?" he said softly. He had run into many petty crooks like Harley Dobbs when working a police beat. Scum of the underworld, lice who clung to the edges of crime, ready to chisel a dollar here or there.

Dobbs grinned at Johnny's question. "That's better, chum. Craig talked too much when full of beer. The gal's carryin' heavy sugar for a payoff. I aim to get a cut."

"You'll get a cut," Johnny said. "On your throat."

But Dobbs was very confident and he chuckled when Johnny turned away and went into the bus station. A couple of M.P.'s came away from the ticket window, swinging their clubs. And Johnny ducked into a dark corner and held his breath. He watched them shake down a pair of soldiers for their passes. When they were gone, he let the breath out of his tight lungs. He took off his garrison cap and ran strong fingers through his curly yellow hair. The lump on his head was getting larger by the minute and when he touched it, pain flashed over his face.

He stood there, looking at the bench by the side door, where sleepy passengers sat in the gloom, waiting to board the bus in the alley. And in a moment, he saw Harley Dobbs come swinging in the door, the yellow tip sheet a spot of color in the pocket of his baggy coat. He went to the ticket window and haggled with the clerk.

THERE was a bank of phone booths across the station in the deep shadows. The girl was in one of them, the overhead light bringing out the tense set of her face. She was leaning over the mouthpiece, talking earnestly.

When he walked over and leaned against the booth, he heard her voice faintly. "Operator, I'm trying to get San Diego. Bayshore, three-nine-five-six."

There was a strident note in her voice, but Johnny was thinking of that phone number and the unpleasant memories it brought back. Three-nine-five-six. Those were almost the same as the first four numbers of his Army serial, and as he thought of it, he put a hand to his khaki shirt, feeling the bulge of the dogtags he wore around his neck. And he thought of the bunch he'd been with for two years. Probably even now they were marching down the ramp of a San Francisco dock, to board a transport for the Pacific. Two years behind a desk and when the big moment came to go over. . . . He didn't finish the thought, for it made him feel sick all over.

And he was thinking of what the medical officer had said two weeks before.

"I'm sorry, Wales, but sometimes these stiff physicals we give men before shipping them overseas turn up defects we may have overlooked before."

"But I don't want to get out," Johnny protested. "I've waited two years to go over."

"That's the way it is, soldier," the officer snapped. "The Army has regulations. A punctured ear drum and that knee of yours will put you out. I'll put through a C.D.D. You'll be discharged in about two weeks."

And Johnny remembered college football and knew those reckless days when he was known as "Jolting Johnny Wales" had caught up with him. It was great to hear the crowd yell themselves crazy and read what the sports writers said the next day. But now he wished he'd confined his athletics to golf or tennis or something where a man didn't get kicked in the head or wind up with a trick knee.

After getting his discharge, he wired Dunham, and receiving confirmation of the job at the Globe, had proceeded to drink San Francisco dry. Then, without buying civvies, he had taken the bus. And as long as he wore a uniform, he was subject to Army regulations. Without identification, he was fair game for the M.P.'s

"Three-nine-five-six?" It was the girl's voice coming from the booth. "Mr. Seliba? This is Linda Walker. I'm calling as you suggested—" A pause. "Yes, I met Craig. . . . Everything is all right." Her voice broke, but she recovered quickly. "My brother, is he well? Yes, I have the money. . . . All right, I'll call you from Oceanside and arrange a meeting place. . . . You know I wouldn't risk calling in the police. I think too much of my brother. . . ."

Then Johnny heard the slam of the receiver into the cradle. The booth door folded back and she stepped out. And Johnny thought, "Linda Walker is her name. And there's Walker's Tips and a dead man on the fire escape."

She saw him standing there and her mouth opened and strong white teeth nibbled at her lower lip. "You were listening," she accused.

"I'm funny like that, when things concern me."

"Nothing concerns you."

She started to walk away and he gripped her by the arm. "You forget. I was trying to help you. The thanks I got was a sock on the head. Now I haven't my papers or money."

Her lips tightened and she took a long black purse from under her arm and started to open it.

"How much did you lose?"

"Are you nuts?" he said angrily.

She walked to a candy counter, dark now, with a canvas cover over its top. Her hands were in the pockets of her camel's hair coat, pulling it tight so that it revealed the splendid lines of her figure. When he came up, she turned and looked at him, a quizzical light in her eyes.

"I'm sorry you got hurt, but—"

"Sorry nothing," he snapped. "There's a dead man and a bag full of half-printed two dollar bills. It adds up to counterfeiting to me."

A tiny pulse throbbed at her throat. "I don't know much more about it than you do—"

"Listen, I'm an ex-newspaperman and I can smell a story here. Why would anybody bother printing two dollars bills? They're rare and would be plenty hard to pass."

She shrugged her shoulders, as if even she did not know the answer. Then the bus driver came to the alley door. "All aboard for San Diego."

When she turned to go, Johnny said, "You didn't tell Seliba that Craig was dead."

"I couldn't."

"Because of your brother?" She nodded and his voice was softer. "He's in some kind of a jam. I've had some experience in such things. . ."

"What things?" she asked quickly.

"Murder."

Her cheeks went pale and she turned quickly to walk across the tile floor, her high heels setting up a clatter that echoed in the big empty building. He followed her with his eyes, noting the graceful swing of her shoulders. Nice legs, in as good a pair of hose as money could buy these days.

HE STARTED to follow, then he saw the M.P.'s at the front door, standing out of the rain. They had their backs to him and he cut swiftly across the station, expecting at any moment that they would hail him and give him the shakedown. He needed Dunham's job more than ever now, he thought, for he was flat broke. He had all but forgotten it was the reason for his travels. Eighty-five cents and a bus ticket!

But he got on the bus and nothing happened. There was an empty seat beside Linda Walker and he dropped into it, but she did not turn or look up.

At that moment the thin, high wail of a siren cut through the night's stillness. And when the bus pulled out of the alley, Johnny could see a police car at the curb and a pair of burly plainclothesmen pushing their way into the building.

"Somebody spotted Craig on the fire escape," Johnny thought, and turned to look at the girl. She sat tensely in the seat, twisting a lace handkerchief in her lap.

They rolled on through the night, along a dark shiny pavement. The effects of his binge was beginning to wear off and Johnny's nerves were tight as piano wires. He swore at himself for getting mixed up in this mess. Yet, he reasoned, why not look at it objectively and when he got to San Diego he'd have a story for Dunham that would rate a by-line. Not a bad start as a civilian.

The throb of the bus motor was a pleasant sound. Most of the passengers had their seats tilted back and were trying to sleep. Now that he had made his mind up to see the thing through for the news value only, he tried to get her to talk. But she just sat there, staring out the window into the darkness. And he tried to tell himself that his only interest was in a story.

Then he felt a hand touch him on the shoulder and he looked back to find Harley Dobbs sitting behind him. The thin man grinned and tapped the yellow racing tip sheet in his lap

as if to remind Johnny again of something.

"Tell the gal to see me at the next stop," he said in his wheezy voice. "I got information to peddle."

The girl heard him and twisted around in the seat to glare back at him. Dobbs was leaning forward so that his thin face was inches from hers.

"What do you know?" she asked in a tense whisper.

"Plenty. Enough to spoil the whole deal if you don't make it worth my while."

Then he settled back in the seat as if his pockets were full of money and he was on a plane bound for Rio. Johnny longed to throttle him.

He leaned close to Linda, catching the subtle fragrance of perfume that would cost five dollars for a spot big as a tear drop. "I'll handle the boy friend," he said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder at Dobbs. But she didn't say anything, just stared out of those big grey eyes.

The bus rolled on and Johnny's eyes grew heavy and he tried to count the times the bus wheels hit the spacers in the concrete highway, anything to keep awake. They came into Long Beach and the driver switched on the lights.

"Ten minute rest stop," he announced.

Johnny looked out the window and asked Linda to come in for coffee, but she shook her head. He went into a cafe next to the station where a sleepy waiter drew his coffee. And he sat there staring into the inky blackness of the java, comparing its muddiness with his own thoughts. Two years in the Army—then disappointment. On the loose, now with a dead man behind him and his chances probably shot for that job with Dunham on the *Globe*. Of course he could land something else, but you couldn't move around without money.

He looked up from his thoughts to find the thin-faced Harley Dobbs beside him.

"The gal better take my advice," he wheezed. "I'm waitin' right here. If she don't come in and talk business, I'm goin' to the phone. The cops would like to know a few things."

Anger burned through Johnny, but he fought it down. "Maybe you would do it at that," he said.

Johnny got off the stool and nodded at Dobbs. Two french doors separated the cafe from the bus station. They were open and he walked through the doorway into a deserted waiting room, Dobbs trailing along like an old hound dog expecting a pound of hamburger.

Johnny shut the doors, then whirled quickly and grabbed Dobbs by his greasy tie, pulling him up close.

"Now let's hear it," he snapped. "Play the rotten record all the way through—now!"

DOBBS tried to yell but the tie choked him and stark fear showed in his muddy eyes. And he seemed to know, as all petty crooks do sooner or later, that he had gone too far. When he spluttered, Johnny let up on the pressure and backed him up against the wall.

"I don't know nothin'," he said hoarsely, rubbing his neck. But Johnny grinned coldly and pulled on the tie again, and this time he got results. "I hang around Main Street with the horse players. I know most of the boys—"

"Make it short," Johnny ordered. "How about the dead guy?"

"He's Roy Craig, although his name ain't Craig. He's done time in federal pen. He was the best plate-maker in the racket."

Johnny nodded. "Engraver. Makes counterfeit plates. Go on."

"Me an' Craig knowed each other from the old days. Him and me split a pint in my room this afternoon. I sneaked a look in his bag and seen it was full of deuces, two dollar bills. It was the queer an' Craig admits it. He says he's goin' to meet this Linda Walker at the office of Walker's Tips at one o'clock. She's goin' to buy one plate and the bag of queer for five grand. That's why I'm hangin' around."

Johnny's yellow brows formed a straight line above his eyes. "Craig only had one plate?"

Dobbs nodded. "Mike Seliba, who runs Walker's Tips, has got the other."

"Why was Craig trying to sell out?"

"He was afraid the feds was gettin' wise."

"What about the girl's brother?"

Dobbs shrugged bony shoulders. "I got a hunch Seliba is holdin' him till the gal comes down an' pays off."

"Kidnaping is a tough rap. You can get the gas house for it."

"Hell, I ain't got nothin' to do with it. Lemme go. I'll keep my mouth shut."

Johnny grinned coldly. "I know you will, my friend. But what about these two dollar bills? They'd be hard to pass."

"That's why the gang was jinxed," Dobbs said in a confidential tone. "A smart gambler won't touch a two dollar bill, 'cause it's a deuce, the deuce of death, chum."

Johnny shook his head. "That's not telling me why they made nothing but two dollar bills."

Dobbs fingered his pointed chin a minute. "That's easy. Two dollar bills are the only ones a gent can take into Mexico. The country's flooded with 'em. It's a natural, shovin' the queer down there."

And Johnny knew that was it. If you wanted to take cash into Mexico, you did better to

have the money changed into two dollar bills. There were plenty of them down there and relatively easy to pass.

Then the bus driver shouted, "All aboard."

Dobbs said, "You go on, chum, I'll bum a ride back to town."

Johnny shook his head. "You don't want to waste that ticket," he said.

He propelled Dobbs outside. And as he was about to board the bus, he saw the station wagon with the Mexico license plate, standing at the curb a half block down the street. Johnny swore and pushed Dobbs into the bus. The thin man went to his seat, a sullen light in his eyes. And then he looked back over his shoulder at the dark station wagon and grinned, as if something had just occurred to him—maybe South America and how he could get there.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Corpse File

AS THEY moved on into the wet night, Johnny thought of the paper he had taken from Craig's hand, back there on the fire escape. He fished it out of his pocket and stared at it. It still read, "Milton P. Remmah, mining man from Baja California."

He showed the clipping to the girl and she read it in the light thrown out by passing cars. But it evidently made no sense to her, for she shrugged.

"Craig knew someone was after him, that's why he had you meet him at one o'clock in the morning. He figured this Remmah was going to meet up with him some place. When he got shot, he pulled this clipping out of his pocket and held it in his hand. He hoped that would point the finger at the killer."

"I don't know any Remmah."

Johnny watched her closely. "Remmah is Hammer spelled backwards. If he's located across the line in Lower California, he'd have a natural setup for passing the phoney two dollar bills."

She sighed. "I imagined it was something like that."

He leaned close to her. "I've got the whole picture, except for one thing."

She looked up at him and her grey eyes widened, then she went back into her shell. "Please don't mix in this any more—"

"They're holding your brother. Kidnaping is out of date, but that's the way it looks. I've got it figured out this way. Craig has been running off the bills on a press he had hidden away some place. But he got cold feet on this last batch and, after running through a bunch of the bills on one side, he lost his nerve. He and Seliba figured to clear

*Three inches to the left of Dobbs' tie, Linda's red-handled nail file was stuck.*

out. Craig had one of the plates, Seliba the other. Seliba has grabbed your brother and is holding him until you come down and pay him off."

She gave a tight little laugh. And she seemed to let down. She told him how her brother had always been interested in horses. And just before he had gone into the Army, he had let Seliba talk him into starting the tip sheet. Seliba figured that the Walker name would mean protection. The tip sheet was a natural as a blind for the counterfeit shop.

"My brother, Joel, is back from the South Pacific. He had twenty-one days here before going back. He suspected Seliba was up to something and went to San Diego in order to have it out with him. I haven't seen him since."

Johnny nodded. "Seliba has your brother tied in neatly with the counterfeiting setup.

Your brother can't yell without implicating himself. And his leave is about up, is that it? He'll be in dutch with the Army."

"He's up for promotion. If it gets out that he was tied in with a racket like this, it may ruin him."

It seemed that some of the tenseness went out of her as Johnny talked, for she fished in her purse and brought out a folded letter. When Johnny scanned the sheet of note paper, he pursed his lips thoughtfully. There wasn't much there.

> Dear Linda: Seliba will call you. Do exactly as he says. Every day counts, as I am already overdue at my base.

"Sure that's your brother's handwriting?" he asked suddenly.

"Of course." Then her eyes darkened and she stared at the letter again. "That's funny, he never called me Linda before. It's always been 'Lin', ever since I can remember."

She put the letter back in her purse and Johnny could see a roll of bills—big around as a baseball bat. She pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a silver lighter. She snapped the lighter nervously and broke a nail and sat there staring at it, as if this bit of feminine tragedy were the most important thing in the world.

Then Johnny settled back in the seat and headlights cut alongside the bus and Johnny could see the station wagon and Milt Hammer's yellow eyes crawling with hatred. The man was leaning out, as if to make sure the girl was still aboard. Then the wagon dropped back into the gloom and the rain.

Linda's face tightened as she laughed, hysteria creeping into her voice. "I can't stand much more. . . ."

Tears flooded her eyes and she rose out of the seat. Johnny gripped her arm so tightly that pain flashed across her face. But it brought her out of it. For a moment anger showed in her eyes, then the fight went out of her and she sat down.

"Thanks," she said. "Guess I needed that." She shuddered.

She opened her purse again and took out a nail file with a bright red handle, sawing away at the broken nail. And the miles went by. The bus rolled into Oceanside and the driver switched on the lights, twisting around in his bucket seat to look back at the sleepy passengers.

"Twenty-minute stop," he announced.

Passengers groped their way down the aisle. Linda started to follow and Johnny said, "Better stay put. Hammer and his sidekick just rolled up in the station wagon. You don't want any more trouble."

But she shook her head. "I have to phone Seliba from here. I can't take any chances."

She pushed by him, the red-handled nail file still gripped in her hand. She went down the aisle as if somebody had singed her lovely skin with a cigarette butt. She went into the cafe and Harley Dobbs followed her.

Johnny sat still, peering out into the darkness. Through the front window of the cafe, he could see Dobbs talking to the girl. At first she shook her head, then she seemed to be considering something.

*He's trying to chisel her,* Johnny thought grimly.

He got out of the bus and the air was heavy with the tang of the sea. The rain had stopped and dim stars were barely visible through the fog. Breakers pounded the shore not far off.

Inside, the cafe was warm and stuffy and he shut the door on the booming surf. He saw Linda was in the phone booth, making marks on the dingy wall with her nail file. When she came out, she got a bottle of coke and came toward him. She got lipstick all over the straws. Her hair was over one eye, and when she came up, Johnny thought she looked like a double-sized order of Veronica Lake.

He put a nickel in the juke box and the moaning trumpet of Harry James made things like murder seem very far away. Then she gripped his arm.

"Johnny, two M.P.'s just pulled up outside."

A JEEP with a red spotlight rolled up at the cafe door and Johnny saw the M.P.'s get out. Keeping the tall, red juke box between them and himself he ducked out the side door, stood there shivering as the night air cut into his damp clothes.

Through the window he saw the M.P.'s come in the cafe, heard the red-haired sergeant bark, "Furloughs, men!"

The half dozen soldiers in the cafe started digging for their papers. After five minutes of this, the M.P.s went back and sat down in the jeep, but they didn't move and Johnny swore. He looked back into the cafe. Linda was gone and Dobbs was gone. A few yards down the road, was the dark station wagon, vapor coming from the exhaust pipe.

Johnny couldn't tell whether Hammer was in the car or not; then he remembered the pimply-faced Sammy and the blow on the head. The thought brought a curtain of red anger before his eyes.

It seemed he hadn't been there long, when the driver yelled, "All aboard!"

Passengers headed for the door. From where he stood, Johnny could see Linda walking toward the bus from the opposite side of the cafe. She had evidently gone outside some minutes before, through the other side door. He waited for Dobbs to show himself, but

the thin man didn't come and that was odd.

The bus loaded up and Johnny sneaked around the building, for the M.P.s still sat in the jeep. They were facing the opposite way from the bus and he figured he might be able to slip around, get aboard without them spotting him.

He saw them pull away just as the bus motor coughed to life. He broke into a run, coming along the opposite side of the cafe from where he had been. His foot kicked at box filled with tins cans and he sprawled on the damp ground. He put out a hand to raise himself and touched a shoe.

A vague uneasiness began to build up in him. His eyes were accustomed to the darkness by now and he could see Harley Dobbs. The thin man was sitting on an upturned box and a cigarette had burned down between his fingers till the skin was black. Johnny shivered and felt a little sick, but surprise kept him rooted where he was, there on hands and knees.

The bus had already pulled out and he could see the tail lights go dancing off down the black highway. He turned back to Dobbs and saw the man was leaning against the cafe wall, that warped grin on his lips. He looked as if he might be contemplating a good horse in the third race.

Johnny's eyes slid over the body. Three inches to the left of that greasy tie was Linda Walker's red-handled nail file. It had been driven into Dobbs' heart as he sat on the box. A lot of blood was on his shirt, but he didn't seem to mind, for he would never mind anything again. Johnny swallowed the hard lump in his throat.

His thoughts pinwheeled to Linda Walker and he was remembering how normal people can sometimes be driven to commit murder. He had seen many beautiful women in his career as police reporter; seen them on the witness stand and seen them led out to a train, shackled to a matron for the trip to Tehachapi where they would sweat out their lives behind the bars.

Steeling his nerves, he pulled the nail file out of the dead man's heart. His stomach turned over when he wiped the rough blade on a box, then in the dirt. He stuck the file in his pocket, intending to ditch it later.

He was staring at Dobbs' dead face when he heard a sound. A cook stood beside the building, smoking a cigarette. He came closer, his white cap and apron making him look ghostly in the gloom.

"What'sa matter?" he asked, pointing at Dobbs. "The guy drunk?"

Then he saw the blood and his eyes widened and his mouth flew open. But Johnny's fist silenced his yell and he dropped to the ground, his white hat making a pillow under his head.

"Sorry," Johnny grunted and went quickly along the cafe building.

A blond waitress stuck her head out the kitchen door. "Hey, Charlie. T-Bones on two, one rare, one—" Then she saw Johnny. "Hey, handsome, you seen the cook?"

HE DIDN'T answer but walked swiftly into the fog-shrouded night, his heart rapping against his ribs like a chunk of lead. When he reached the highway, he saw the station wagon was gone. He lit out down the road, trying to put as much distance as

possible between himself and the cafe. He came upon a flock of seagulls and they took off at his approach, like feathers in a whirlwind.

There wasn't much chance of flagging a ride at this time of night, but nevertheless, he stuck out his hand at approaching cars. But they passed him up, their headlights blinding him momentarily, then leaving him in a cavern of darkness. He threw the nail file into the brush beside the road. Above the sound of the booming surf, he heard the roar of a motor.

The car came down the road fast, its motor whining in second gear. He stopped, stuck out his thumb, but there was no car in sight. Only the darkness. His heart crowded up into his throat when he saw it hurtle toward him out of the night, without lights.

He recognized the station wagon. It came whipping through the fog. The lights went on suddenly, bright, and they blinded him and all he could see was a wall of white. It was only reflex action that saved him—he leaped backward off the road. As his feet left the pavement, he felt a stinging sensation in his left ankle and knew some part of the car had touched him. It was that close.

He rolled down an embankment, and lay there in the brush, trembling. Silence now, only the boom of the surf. He got to his feet and his knees were weak. His left ankle was numb, but when he staggered back to the highway, feeling was beginning to come back to it.

The station wagon was not in sight. He began to walk again, and gradually the shock of that close call gave way to anger. Hammer or the pimply-faced Sammy had deliberately tried to run him down. And as he walked, he knew he was a fool. The sensible thing to do was to go back to the cafe, wait for the cops and tell them the whole business.

If he did that, they'd look him up on suspicion. And he suddenly realized that he was more interested in Linda Walker than he had ever been in a girl before. Her nail file was gone; there was nothing to connect her up with the murder of Harley Dobbs. Even if she were suspected they could rig up a story of some kind that would protect her. But he had to get to San Diego and find her.

Two headlights cut through the fog and Johnny tensed, wondering if Hammer had come back for another try. But this time it was a big diesel truck that rolled into sight, exhaust pipe beside the cab, belching a funnel of black smoke. The truck slowed down and Johnny grabbed the cab door and swung aboard.

The driver wore a slanted cap on his head and chewed a dead cigar. "Always glad to give a soldier a lift," he said and sent the truck rolling down the highway.

"Thanks," Johnny said and froze in the seat as he saw a big black and white highway patrol car come heaving down the road toward them, its red spotlight cutting through the early morning gloom.

"They've called the cops already," he thought.

"Wish I could get in," the driver said. "Got a wife an' four kids. I'd give a helluva lot to get away for a while an' see some peaceful action for a change."

But Johnny didn't answer. He stared through the big windshield, trying to spot the bus, but he knew it was useless. They had too much of a start on the slow-moving truck. Then he got an idea.

"I've got to make camp before sunup, or I'll be AWOL," he told the driver.

"Why'n't you say so," he snapped. "I'm travelin' light, we'll make time. Headin' for Diego?"

When Johnny nodded, the driver put his foot down on the accelerator and the big truck shot ahead. Tires sang on the wet pavement and there was the pungent odor of diesel fuel in the air. They flashed up Torrey Pines Grade, down the other side. Then the long line of buildings that house Columbia Aircraft spun by.

The big red-and-white outline of the bus loomed up in the fog. Johnny tensed, for he spotted a maroon sedan rolling beside the bus. Its headlights flashed off and on three times. Then the maroon sedan cut in front of the bus.

The truck driver said, "Must be some gent wants the cops on his tail, doin' a stunt like that."

The bus slowed down, came to a jarring stop at a red light and the truck pulled alongside. That was when Johnny saw the girl. She had left the bus and was running toward the maroon sedan that was parked up ahead. He tried to crank down the cab window so he could yell at her, but it stuck and he watched her get into the sedan.

Johnny snapped open the cab door. "I'll get out here," he yelled at the driver.

Then he was running past the bus that was now in low gear. The maroon sedan started up and whipped out of sight before he could even get the license number. He stood there in the murky dawnlight breathing heavily. He knew she had met Mike Seliba.

HE WALKED the three blocks to the bus station, intending to use the phone to call Dunham at the *Globe* office. When he got there, he saw the bus at the curb and the black sedan pulled up on the wrong side of the street. There were red lights on either side of the windshield.

Ducking into the shadows, he watched the passengers file out one by one. Two burly men were by the door.

One of them said, "We're lookin' for a gal in a camel's hair coat, and a big blond soldier."

The bus driver stepped forward. "Mebby I can help."

"Shuddup," the cop said.

The other flatfoot pushed forward. "Lay off, Hank." He turned to the driver. "Well?"

"Come to think of it, the gal had a camel's hair coat. She was with a yellow-haired G.I. The soldier never got back on the bus when we left Oceanside."

"That ties it," the cop named Hank said. "The G.I. and the gal knifed the guy, then split up. What about the gal?"

"She got off a couple of blocks back."

"Why didn't you say so, dummy?" The cops piled into the sedan and went roaring up the street.

Making sure he wasn't seen, Johnny slipped back into the bus station and found an empty booth. He dialed the number of the *Globe,* all the while keeping his eyes open for police or M.P.'s. When he got hold of Dunham, the city editor began to cuss.

"You do things up right. They found your wallet beside a gent named Roy Craig, who was shot on a fire escape in L.A. Then a call comes in from Oceanside, that a blond guy, answerin' your description, was seen hangin' around a dead tout by the name of Harley Dobbs. Just because you can't kill Japs isn't any sign for you to go around committing homicides—"

Johnny tensed. "Wait, Dunham. Are the cops tracing this number?"

"What do you think?"

Johnny slammed down the receiver and got out of there quickly. And just then two M.P.'s came by in a jeep and one of them leaned out.

"Let's see your pass, soldier."

The jeep cut into the curb, but Johnny didn't wait. He took off and the jeep came to a stop and the M.P.'s piled out. They ran after him and one of them blew a whistle and yelled for him to halt. Johnny kept going. He knew he was in a spot. You don't argue with M.P.'s—you just go along quietly and let them jug you until they get around to looking you up and why.

Since hearing from Dunham and knowing he had two murder raps hanging over his head, he couldn't take a chance. He cut down an alley, kicked at a snapping dog. Over a fence and through another alley brought him to the next street. It was getting daylight fast, but sounds of pursuit had faded. He kept walking and he knew that every cop and every M.P. in town would be looking for him now in earnest.

And as he walked he was thinking of what Dunham had said. *They found my wallet beside a gent named Roy Craig. . . .*

Johnny had a pretty good idea how that had happened. Hammer had taken his wallet and tossed it up on the fire escape beside the body of the little engraver, who figured the cheapest way to riches was to make plates for two dollar bills.

A short time later, he took a chance and slipped into an all-night drug store. He half expected the sleepy clerk to yell for the cops, but nothing happened. He knew there was one chance to trace Linda, and it had just occurred to him.

He stepped into a phone booth. "Three-nine-five-six." That was it, the phone number Linda had used, with a Bayshore prefix. When he thought of the mess into which he had stepped, his mouth went dry.

The phone buzzed a dozen times, but nobody answered. Then he called Dunham again. Disguising his voice, he said, "This is Jones at the courthouse. Get me the address of Bayshore, three-nine-five-six."

Dunham started to splutter into the phone. "Jones? Jones? Who the hell—"

"It's a hot one."

"Oh, yeah, Jones." He left the phone and Johnny could hear him yell at somebody. While he waited, he strained his ears, expecting to hear a siren in the distance. But nothing happened. In a minute Dunham picked up the receiver. "Listen Jones, it's the Graystone Building on Palm Road." He gave the number and Johnny wrote it down on the inside of a match cover.

"Thanks, Dunham."

"You're hot as a depot stove—Jones. Play it easy. That cyanide they give you at the gas house is hard on a guy."

He stepped out of the booth and at that moment a patrol car went by slowly, the cops scanning both sides of the street. Johnny tensed, expecting them to come in, but they drove on.

The clerk came up to stand beside Johnny at the front window.

"They must be looking for somebody," he said.

"You're not fooling, brother." Then Johnny bought a morning paper and opened the pages quickly to see if anything about Craig or Dobbs had gotten into print yet.

In the second section he found an item that brought him up short. His blue eyes narrowed as he saw squib with a Los Angeles dateline. It went on to tell how a secret mission had landed in Burma, then the startling wind-up:

> Lt. Joel Walker, former horse-breeder and owner of Star King, piloted the bomber which landed the party in the Burma jungle. . . .

Johnny looked up and his fist crumpled the

paper. "If he's in Burma, it's a damn cinch he can't be in San Diego at the same time."

He tossed the crumpled paper on the cigar counter and went out, the clerk staring after him. He found he was alone on the sidewalk and he kept moving in the direction of Palm Road. Cars were going by, loaded with workers heading for the day shift at Columbia Aircraft.

And the more he walked, the more he swore at himself for ever getting mixed up in this murder deal. He thought of the girl's brother, Joel Walker. Mike Seliba didn't have him prisoner. The girl was walking into a trap and she was carrying enough hard cash in her long black purse to invite death.

It was daylight now, but he gave a mental vote of thanks to the power that kept the city of San Diego shrouded in a fog bank. He tried to walk casually, but felt that every pair of eyes was on him.

He found Palm Road all right. It was off the beaten track, a dingy street lined with second-hand auto lots and garages. The Graystone Building was a two-story brick affair with peeling white paint clinging to the walls. There was no sign on the building, nothing to indicate what might be inside.

He went through an alley, saw the maroon sedan and the station wagon pulled up behind the building. As he crept forward, he could see that the station wagon motor was still idling.

*Gas rationing doesn't bother them at all,* he thought as he eased up.

He didn't want Sammy to spot him in the rear-view mirror. But he had to chance it. He reached the left-hand door of the wagon before the pimply-faced man saw him. Sammy's eyes widened in surprise and his hand flashed under his coat. Then Johnny hit him and when his knuckles smashed jaw bone, he grinned. Sammy fell back in the seat.

"That'll even us up for the bop on the head," he said grimly.

He turned off the motor and pulled the hood release on the dashboard. Then he lifted the hood, swept his hand underneath, then locked it again. Back in the driver's seat, he searched the pimply-faced man. He found a snub-nosed .38 in a shoulder holster.

"This is it," he said, taking a deep breath. Then he faced the back stairs and began to climb.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### House of Death

HE WENT up the steps slowly, the boards protesting at his sudden weight. Nothing moved above him, no sound came to his straining ears.

He held the gun in his sweaty hand, the feel of it giving him a measure of confidence. There was the smell of gasoline and stale grease in the air and he guessed the lower floor had once been a garage. As he moved up, his stomach was cold and hard—frozen.

At the head of the stairs he saw a loft filled with odds and ends of machinery. In one corner was a hand press and he figured this was where they ran off the two dollar bills. At the far end a partition ran to the ceiling, with a door in the center. There was the smell of dust and cobwebs.

He felt sweat break out on his forehead and his every nerve was tight as he strained his eyes against the gloom. Then there was a sliding sound like a panel being opened.

He halted, poised on the balls of his feet, trying to locate the sound. A voice came from somewhere—Hammer's rumbling voice.

"I can see every move you make! Drop the gun! If you don't the girl gets it!"

Johnny stood there, watching the door open. Linda Walker stood in the opening and behind her was a dark man with rumpled black hair. Johnny figured this was Mike Seliba. Linda's face was a tight mask of fright, but she did not cry out and Johnny could see that Seliba had gripped her by the arms.

"Drop the gun," Hammer said again. "I don't want to shoot, but I will if necessary. The girl dies first."

Johnny let the gun slip from his fingers and it made a hollow sound when it struck the floor. Hammer ordered him into the room and there was nothing else to do but obey. In the distance came the sounds of an awakening town, but in this dusty building was death.

Inside the room he found Hammer at a slot in the wall and smiling. Hammer closed the slot and leaned against the wall, a big black Luger in his hand.

Seliba shut the door and stood there, patently nervous. Linda said nothing, but her fists were clenched at her sides and her grey eyes were very cold. And Johnny thought of the red-handled nail file in Dobbs' heart.

He saw that the place had been fixed up as an apartment. There was a kitchen and a bath. The windows were shut and the air was dead. Half a window shade hung down like a wind-struck sail.

Seliba picked up a dirty glass, half-filled with whiskey.

"What's next, Hammer?" he asked, his black eyes sliding over the big man's face.

Hammer laughed and looked at Johnny. "I figured we'd run you down back there near Oceanside." Then his eyes darkened. "How come you got by Sammy?"

There was no expression on Johnny's face. "Might be another way into his place, you know."

Hammer made Johnny sit in a big overstuffed chair that was split along the seam so that some of the padding stuck out. Johnny looked up at the girl.

"I guess you know by now that your brother isn't here."

She nodded. "When I first came, Seliba said that Joel was being held in a shack at the edge of town. When I gave him the money for the plate, he would give me the address, so I could get my brother."

There was no mirth in Johnny's smile. "You've had a drawing-room education. Too many cocktail parties, too much luxury. Your brain needs fixing, or you'd never walked into this setup—without proof that they really held your brother."

Her breath caught and her eyes were startled. Johnny told her about the news story he had seen in the paper and she sighed with relief.

Hammer, too, was startled. He turned to Seliba almost admiringly. "How'd you dope out this shakedown? It's pretty fancy for you."

SELIBA ran a thick finger around the glass rim, licked it thoughtfully. "Walker come here to pull outa the tip sheet. I figured it was time to ditch the whole thing if he was wise. He was on leave and while he was here he got a wire from the Army. He left sudden like on one of them secret missions. I figured he wouldn't make trouble till he got back. But that might be soon, the way they're flyin' around the world these days."

Linda said, "What about the letter you sent?"

Seliba shrugged. "A smart penman copied your brother's writin'. I took a chance on you not knowin' your brother had left."

Hammer laughed. "I was burned at you, Mike, for a while."

"There wasn't no way to get in touch with you," Seliba said. "We had to move fast."

Hammer grinned. "Still, it was lucky I had wires out—even Craig didn't trust you. He was going to get his cut in Los Angeles where you wouldn't have a chance to knife him. That's why he ran out with one of the plates and the last batch of queer. He figured he could work your racket with the girl. He almost did, but not quite." Then he said, "You and me and Sammy are going to Mexico."

Johnny thought of the pimply-faced Sammy and hoped he'd stay out like a light. The phone began to ring and when Seliba made a move to pick up the receiver, Hammer shook his head.

"No phone calls, remember? I don't like 'em."

"It's probably Millie," Seliba said.

Hammer grinned coldly. "It might be the cops." With his free hand, he ripped the cord from the wall.

Johnny knew he had to do something and do it quick. He had to shake Hammer, get the big man worried. You can stall a worried man—keep him hesitant. He grinned and said, "That ties it. Central will look into that and every cop in town will come busting in here."

Hammer stepped close, punched the muzzle of the Luger against his chest. "I'll kill you and smile when I do it," he said savagely. "I just polished off one chiseler at Oceanside. I can do the same with you."

Johnny's grin stayed put. "Harley Dobbs?" he asked. "You found Linda Walker's nail file where she left it in the phone booth and picked it up. Dobbs was trying to put the squeeze on you, so you took him outside to talk it over. Then you just drove the file into his heart, while he sat there looking at you."

Hammer's eyes narrowed. "How the hell do you know all this?"

"I was there, brother. And if you figured the nail file would start the cops looking for a woman, you're wrong. Because I pulled out the file and threw it away."

Linda's eyes were very big and very round. "You thought I killed him, Johnny—"

The veins stood out on the back of Hammer's fist as he gripped the gun tighter. "All I can promise you now, soldier, is a hell of a time!" He grinned and shifted his glance to Seliba. "Tie 'em up."

The swarthy man got an old shirt from a closet. He tore this up and bound Johnny's wrists. Then he tied up the girl. Hammer stood there all the while, the gun very rigid in his hand.

Hammer looked curiously at Seliba, as if seeing him for the first time. "Pour me a drink, Mike," he said softly.

Seliba went into the kitchen and Hammer picked up a book end from a dusty table. It was a heavy glass affair. He went on tiptoes, stepping into the kitchen. Then there came a squashing noise like somebody had hit a watermelon with a baseball bat. There was a thud as something heavy hit the floor.

Johnny's stomach pinwheeled and he tried to get loose. Linda's face was colorless.

Hammer came out of the kitchen and the book end was covered with something that looked like brownish paste. There were strands of black hair sticking to it.

From the street below came the sound of a girl's laughter, and to Johnny that seemed very far away and unreal in this house of death.

"I had to kill him," Hammer said, hardly moving his lips. "He and Craig had a chance for a cut on a million dollars. They got yellow. Nobody can get yellow—nobody can double-cross me."

Johnny said, "You're crazy, you're kill-crazy."

He wasn't grinning any more and he tensed there in the chair, watching Hammer lift the gun muzzle so that it was lined on his chest.

THEN Hammer relaxed and that crazy light went out of his eyes. He put the book end on the table, after carefully wiping it off. Then he pulled out a jackknife, snipped open the blade and for one shattered second, Johnny thought the man was going to plunge the steel into his body.

But Hammer cut Johnny loose and then the girl. But he held the Luger in his hand, steady as if it were riveted to a steel beam. He stepped back and Johnny rubbed his wrists, feeling the sweat crawl over his body. Hammer reached over and pulled Linda to her feet, screening his body with hers. He stood like that and pressed the muzzle against her back.

"Pick up the book end," he ordered Johnny. "Open the window and drop it out."

Johnny told him to go to hell.

Hammer said, "This is big dough and I've gone all the way. Do as I say."

There was nothing else to do. Johnny picked up the book end, feeling the cold glass in his hand. And he thought of Mike Seliba, lying still and lifeless in the kitchen. He opened the window and dropped the book end. He saw it fall into the dust beside the building. Then he closed the window and stepped back. There had been no chance to attract attention, no chance to yell. The street had been empty, and you didn't risk the life of a girl like Linda Walker. You just played along, hoping for a break.

Hammer grinned crookedly. "That book end has your fingerprints on it. You won't be hunting it, because the cops will have you."

He pulled Linda to the door, fumbled with a key and looked at Johnny over her shoulder. Then he slammed the door, turned the key and was gone. Only his footsteps and the creak of the stairs.

Johnny threw himself at the door, but it was old-fashioned and stout and it held. He was picking himself up to try again, when the sound of high-heeled slippers moved up from the front end of the building. Linda's eyes were bright with fear.

In a moment a woman's voice came through the door. "Mike, open up. I been tryin' to call you. It's Millie."

In the distance came the sound of a grinding starter and Johnny smiled grimly. Linda threw Johnny a frantic glance as the woman called through the door again, an insistent note creeping into her voice. Then a key rattled in the lock. Johnny grabbed Linda by the arm, stepped forward as the door swung open.

He got a glimpse of blonde hair, the color of silver wire, piled above a hard little face. Rouged cheeks and too much lipstick. She carried a suitcase.

All this he saw in a split second. Then he was pushing past her and the suitcase she was carrying slammed to the floor.

He yelled back over his shoulder, "Take care of her, Linda!"

Then the blonde evidently saw Seliba's feet through the kitchen door. She let out a scream that could have been heard on North Island.

"Mike! Mike!" she shrilled. Then the sound of a hand cracking against a cheek. The blonde shut up. The door slammed.

Johnny tried to find the gun he had dropped when he came up the stairs. It was not in sight and he figured Hammer had picked it up. He went tearing down the stairs and knew that Mike Seliba wouldn't be running out for a rendezvous with a hard little blonde ever again. Things like Millie and two dollar bills were out of Mike's mind forever.

The starter ground again in the back alley and this time a motor roared.

"He's put back the wires I tore loose," Johnny thought.

The station wagon was moving. Hammer saw him and leaned out the window. He fired and the bullet gouged into the wall by Johnny's face. Somewhere in the distance, a woman began to scream. Johnny dived for the station wagon as Hammer fired again. His slug made a jangling mess of a lower window.

He could see cars slowing down on the busy street that fronted the Graystone Building. People were running along the walk like frightened birds, trying to get away from the bullets.

The station wagon had no outside running board, but Johnny leaped, anyhow. His hands shot through the window on the driver's side, fingers clutching the wheel. He could see the pimply-faced Sammy slumped on the seat, still—or again—out cold.

"Let go!" Hammer yelled. "I'll kill you!" And he tried to brain Johnny with the gun muzzle.

But Johnny ducked the blows and hung on, drawing up his legs. The wagon was in second and Hammer pushed down on the accelerator. The wagon jumped ahead, but Johnny did not loosen his grip.

The wagon made a screaming turn. It plowed through a rusty wire fence, then down an embankment into a used car lot. It rolled over and there was a splintering, crashing sound as the wooden body caved in.

The shock sent Johnny rolling in the dirt. He skinned his knees and felt a little as though he were coming apart, but that didn't bother him. On his feet, he charged forward, past the inert body of Sammy, who had been tossed

through a shattered door when the car went over.

Hammer fought his way out of the wreckage and turned with his gun raised. There was a gash on his cheek and blood made a zig-zag pattern on his forehead. He fired as Johnny dived low and the bullet seemed to burn right down Johnny's back.

But it was a clean tackle—Johnny had never made a better one in his football days. Hammer was dumped into the dust and the gun left his hand. He sprang to his feet and Johnny hit him at the belt line. Pain flashed up Johnny's arm but he pulled Hammer close, grabbing him by the shirt front and tried again. Cloth tore and there, shoved into Hammer's belt, were two copper plates. One of them was bent a little.

A squad car roared into the alley and when Hammer tried to break away, one of the cops shot him in the foot.

He sprawled in the dust.

A pair of cold-eyed uniformed cops had their guns trained on Johnny when Linda came running out of the building. There were tears in her eyes and a scratch on one cheek and Johnny knew she'd had a time with the blonde. But there was a smile on her lips when she saw he was all in one piece.

"Johnny!"

He liked the sound of that and the look in her grey eyes, but the cops didn't seem to notice either.

Still, he managed to kiss her.

A crowd was around the shattered station wagon and more cops came. One of the station wagon's leather seats had split open. It was neatly fixed with a zipper and inside, it was packed with those half-printed two dollar bills.

"They were goin' to finish printin' the other side when they got into Mexico," a big flatfoot named Jameson said. "They been gettin' by with this stuff for quite a spell, but our boys and the Mexican authorities have been beginning to get wise."

Johnny said, "Remmah, or Hammer as he called himself, was in the mining business in Mexico. He got across the line without having his stuff too rigidly inspected. That phoney seat with the zipper was a natural for the bills. Still—I will be damned!"

They shut him up, but after a while they patched up Sammy's jaw long enough for him to talk. And Sammy talked, with Hammer glaring at him, and the police stenographer taking it down at the station.

Jameson turned to look at Johnny. "It would have been too bad if they kept you in the Army and let you go across. You've been right useful the first twenty-four hours of your release."

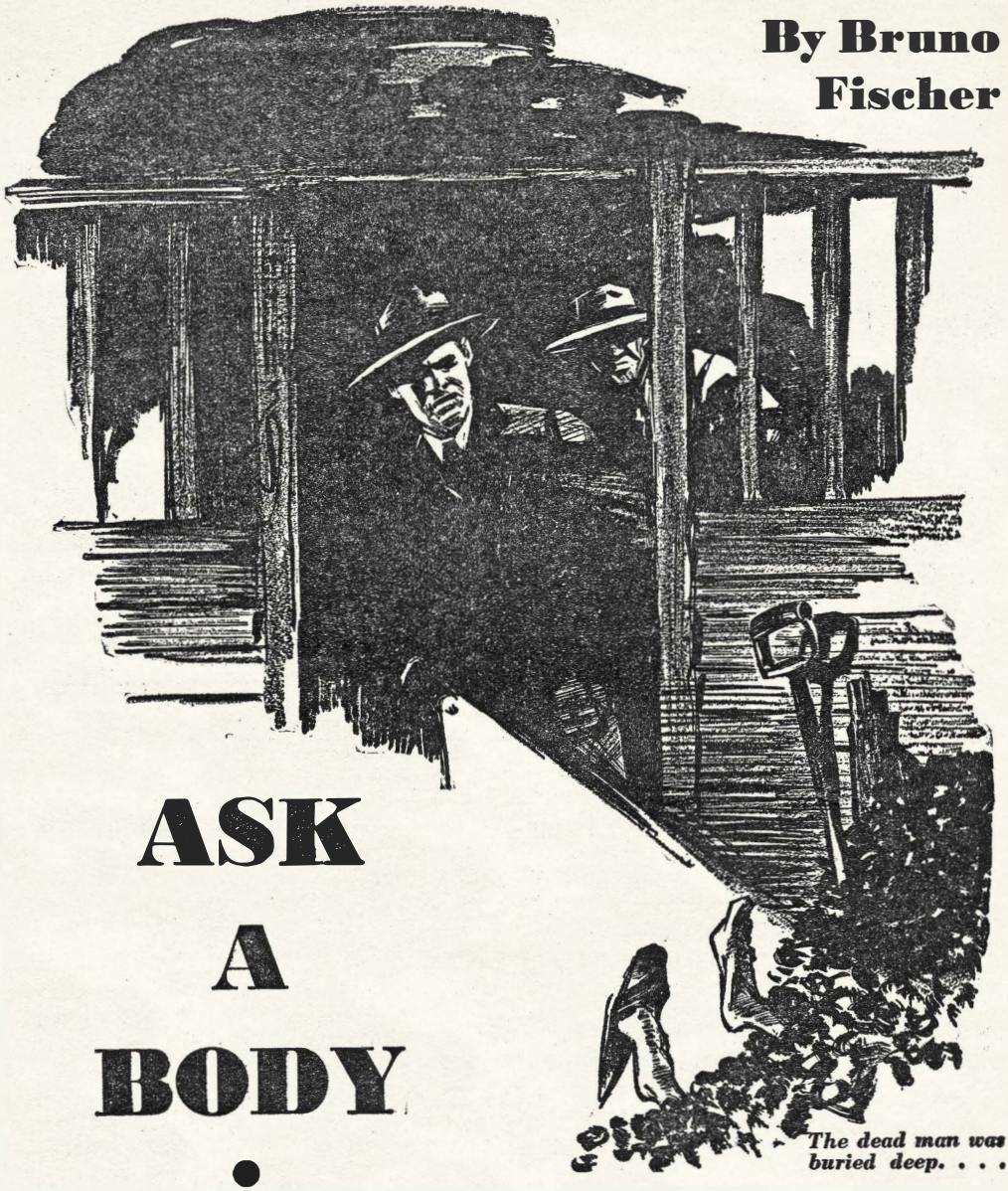
Johnny grinned and got on the phone and called Dunham at the *Globe*. He gave Dunham the story and Dunham went delirious. But Johnny looked across the room where Linda was fixing her face in a cracked mirror on the wall.

"Dunham," Johnny said into the phone. "Run a 'rent' ad in the classified and charge it to my first check. Yeah, I want an apartment . . . big enough for two, I hope."

He hung up.

Linda put down the lipstick and stared at him through the cracked mirror. Then she smiled.

By Bruno Fischer



# ASK A BODY

*The dead man was buried deep. . . .*

***"You're a murderer," her eyes told me. "You murdered the man I loved!" But something had died in me, too, the night I killed Bob Wilk — something that couldn't live until I'd chalked up another corpse!***

THE worst thing that can happpen to a man is to have his daughter hate him.

I was shaving when Julie's voice came, flat and dull: "Breakfast is ready." It used to be a cheery, "Come and get it, Pa." For two days now she hadn't called me Pa. She hadn't said more than a dozen words to me.

I ran a comb through my thinning hair and went into the kitchen. My hot cereal was on the table—just one setting. She wasn't eating with me, either. Her back was to me as she stood at the stove frying eggs—slender and

straight, the way her mother had been. I spooned up cereal and it was gravel in my mouth.

Julie turned from the stove with the frying pan. She'd had a complexion no makeup could duplicate, but now there was no color in her cheeks, no life in her dark eyes. She didn't look at me as she came to the table with the eggs.

I put down the spoon. "Julie, this can't go on. I only did my duty."

She didn't say anything—not in words. But her eyes lifted and lay on me for a moment. *You're a murderer,* her eyes said. *You murdered the man I loved.*

After a while I couldn't take it.

I pushed the bowl away from me and went out to the hall and took my hat off the rack. Julie's voice came after me: "Aren't you finishing your breakfast?" She sounded like she was reciting something she wasn't interested in.

"No," I said and closed the door hard behind me.

Ty Wilson was weeding his garden next door. Up until yesterday Ty would have come up to the fence and jawed for a couple of minutes. This morning he just gave me an unsmiling nod and went right back to his hoeing.

The sun was bright and warm on Main street, but I cut a swath of coldness through it. Time was I'd have been busy swapping greetings. Now everybody looked at me and said nothing. Said nothing to me, that is, though there was plenty of whispering when I went by. I knew what they were saying. To their minds I was a cold-blooded murderer who could walk the streets freely.

When I turned into the county building, Judge Cyrus Bliss was coming down the broad steps. He had been county judge for twenty years and looked the part—a black frock coat and a string tie and an eternally sour expression. We didn't have a bit of use for each other.

He said briskly, without greeting or preliminaries: "I'll be frank with you, Mead. Yesterday morning I had the governor on the telephone. I told him that you weren't fit to be sheriff and why."

"You told the voters the same thing last election," I said. "They re-elected me with plenty of votes to spare."

The corners of his thin lips twisted. "They elected a sheriff to uphold justice, not to violate it. If an election were held today, you wouldn't get a dozen votes in the entire county."

Judge Bliss was right. I muttered, "I did my duty," and brushed by him. A triumphant laugh followed me. He had reason to be pleased.

I WENT up to my office. I was tossing my hat on the filing cabinet when Tom Fletcher, the district attorney, came in.

"You're late this morning, Ed. Things have been happening." He looked closely at me. "You don't look well."

"I'm all right," I growled.

He thumped my back. "Don't let it get you down. I'm backing you all the way."

Tom Fletcher was a young, smart prosecutor who would go places in state politics. We'd campaigned together on the same ticket against Judge Bliss' party. But it was a lot more than party loyalty or personal friendship that was putting Fletcher on my side. There was Julie.

I said, "Thanks, Tom, but your support won't help me. People will say you had as much reason as I did for disliking Bob Wilk."

His square-jawed, rugged face flushed. "Julie never gave me a tumble."

"She'll forget Wilk after a while."

Slowly a startlement grew in Fletcher's eyes. I shouldn't have said that; it was a little too pat. I had preferred him to Bob Wilk as a son-in-law, and Wilk had died with my bullet in him. He couldn't help having the same thought about it as everybody else. It was one thing for a sheriff to shoot and kill a known criminal. It was another thing to use his office to kill a man he did not like."

"I said I'd back you," Fletcher said carefully, "but that doesn't mean I don't think you were too quick to use your gun." He stuck a cigarette into his mouth and did not look at me. "There's a man in my office sent by the governor."

"So they'll try to remove me!" I said, feeling the fight growing in me.

"It may come. This man is a special investigator." He brushed a fleck of tobacco from his lip. "Judge Bliss was up to see me a little while ago. He suggests that it would save a lot of embarrassment all around if you were to resign."

I laughed bitterly. "What do you advise?"

"I don't know, Ed," Fletcher said unhappily. "If it comes to a choice between being removed from office or resigning—"

"I don't quit," I said harshly and went to the door.

Fletcher stepped to my side and together we went down the hall to his office.

The governor's special investigator was a mild-looking, middle-aged man named James Hastings. He solemnly shook my hand and picked up the coroner's report he had been reading. The district attorney's report was on the desk; he must have finished it already.

"I see," Hastings said casually, "that Wilk was shot in the back."

"He was swinging away when my bullet struck him," I retorted.

"And Wilk had no weapon on his person," Hastings pursued.

"I couldn't know that. And even if he wasn't armed, he was a fleeing burglar, and it was my duty to stop him."

"Of course." Hastings glanced again at the report. "He seems to have been in a struggle. There were scratches on his face and wrist. Yet you say that you weren't near him at any time."

"That's right," I said.

"And the jewels," Hastings said musingly, "appear to have vanished along with George Graham, who was caretaker at the Dallin house. It would seem that Graham was the thief."

There it was—the case against me. I had shot Wilk on the grounds that he was the burglar, but he hadn't even been that.

I SAID, "So Wilk and Graham pulled the job together. I got Wilk, but Graham got away. What's complicated about that?"

Hastings looked at Fletcher and smiled. Fletcher dropped into the chair behind his desk and miserably set fire to another cigarette.

"There are several complications," Hastings said softly. "One is that you had threatened to kill Wilk."

"Wait a minute." My voice was quivering with rage. "If you want the story, here it is. You'll hear plenty of versions in all the talk going around town, so I might as well tell you the right one. I never had any use for Bob Wilk. Neither did anybody else except silly, hairbrained girls who fell for his handsome face and smooth ways, and they—"

I stopped. Fletcher had turned pale.

"Yes, including my daughter Julie," I plunged on. "She's a fine, sensible girl, but even the smartest will at times lose the sense they were born with where there's a man. I tried to tell her the sort of boy Wilk was. He never did an honest day's work in his life—and he had too much money to spend. I was sure he was a thief, though I had never been able to catch him at it. Maybe I should've kept my mouth shut about him, because my talk only put Julie's back up. Last week I came into the house and found Wilk there. I got excited. And Julie reared up on her hind legs and said that, as a matter of fact, she thought she was going to marry him."

I took a breath. "Maybe I lost my head. I said I'd kill him before I'd see him my daughter's husband. Ty Wilson, who lives next door, heard the shouting and came over to see if anything was wrong. He heard me say I'd kill Wilk, and later, when I did kill Wilk, he told everybody what I'd said. But I didn't mean it, of course. It's just the way a man will talk when he gets real sore."

Hastings looked at me out of pale eyes. "Judge Bliss claims that there was no reason why you couldn't have taken Wilk alive, even if Wilk had committed the crime."

"So you saw Bliss even before you saw me?"

Hastings shrugged. "I arrived late last night and the judge met me at the station." He tossed a smile to Fletcher. "I understand, Mr. District Attorney, that you also are interested in the sheriff's daughter."

"So what?" Fletcher snapped, bristling. "Just what are you implying?"

"Not a thing," Hastings said with deceptive mildness. "Except that I like to know where I stand."

Fletcher glowered. "You mean to what extent you can rely on my report."

"The governor wishes me to conduct an objective investigation." Hastings turned back to me. "Go on with your story, Sheriff."

"I've finished it," I told him. "The other story is about Mrs. Dallin and her jewels. There's no connection. Mrs. Dallin is a retired actress and rich widow. She has a house on Maple Hill in back of the town. Since her husband died, she doesn't use it much. George Graham is handyman and caretaker and keeps the place in shape. Tuesday morning Mrs. Dallin arrived, to spend a few days of quiet in her country home, as she told me later.

"Around twelve o'clock that night her phone call woke me up. She sounded scared half to death, whispering into the phone which was beside her bed. She said somebody was trying to break into the house; she could hear a window being forced open. Lots of people in town know that she always wears a ring worth a small fortune, and this time she'd come with a bracelet worth almost as much. Plenty there for a burglar. So I dressed and got there as fast as I could. As I drove into the Dallin driveway, I saw somebody coming down the front porch. I yelled to him to stop. He turned and then—"

"Did you see his face?" Hastings broke in.

"No. There was only starlight and every window in the house was dark and I hadn't time to get out my flashlight. He was just a shape. I went toward him, and when I was maybe fifty feet away, he turned his back and started running toward the trees. I pulled out my gun and yelled I'd shoot. He stopped again and his arm came up."

"A gun in his hand?" Hastings said. "But the report states that he was unarmed."

"How could I be sure? Try seeing anything definite by starlight. His arm came up and I shot. He was whirling away again when my bullet reached him. That was why he was shot in the back." I wet my lips. "And even if I hadn't thought he had a gun,

I would have shot. He was a fleeing criminal. I had to stop him."

"By killing him?" Hastings said softly.

Fletcher leaped to his feet. "Remember that it was dark, Hastings, and that he was fleeing. It was pretty good shooting for Sheriff Mead to have hit him at all. And, of course, he hadn't any idea who it was at the time."

THERE was more talk between them, but I didn't hear it. My mind had drifted out of that office and was back to Tuesday night. I was seeing myself go forward slowly and cautiously to that motionless blotch on the ground. My stomach twisted when I saw that I had killed him. I had never killed a man before, and it wasn't a nice feeling, no matter if it was a burglar. I turned him over on his back. The face was a pale, unrecognizable blob in starlight. I fumbled my flashlight out of my hip pocket.

Bob Wilk's dead face leaped into being. He was no longer handsome, no longer sleek—no longer anything but dead. I felt a sickness then which was beyond the sickness of taking a human life. I had taken that particular life, and I knew that Julie would never forgive me. But I hadn't known till later how bad it would look to everybody else. I turned away from the dead man and went into the house.

Hastings' question brought my mind back to the office. "Couldn't Mrs. Dallin furnish any description of the burglar?"

"She never really saw him," I said. "After she phoned me, she lay cowering in bed, listening to the small noises he made coming into the house. She didn't dare move or utter a sound. Then the door of her room opened and she screamed. He shone a flashlight on her, but she couldn't see him behind the glare. He struck her and she fainted dead away. She was still in the faint when I entered the house, and I had a time reviving her. The ring had been yanked off her finger. The bracelet, which she had tossed on the dresser earlier, was also missing."

There was a silence. I hadn't finished the story, but all the rest was bad for me. Very bad.

"Did George Graham sleep in the house?" Hastings asked.

"He had a room above the garage, which is a couple of hundred feet from the house. What became of him after that night nobody knows. He hasn't been seen since. It's likely that he decided to walk out on his job."

"And take the ring and bracelet with him," Hastings muttered.

Fletcher cleared his throat, but said nothing.

"That's crazy," I said. "The burglar entered the house by jimmying open a window. That was the sound Mrs. Dallin heard. Graham had a key to the house. He would merely have unlocked the door and walked in."

That was no good, and I knew it and so did Hastings. He smiled vaguely.

"Come now, Sheriff. Assuming that Graham was out to steal the jewels, would he have given himself away by unlocking the door and entering that way? He would have jimmied open a window to make it look as if an outsider, a sneak thief, did the job. And where are the jewels?"

"All right," I said desperately, trying to convince myself as well as Hastings. "So Wilk and Graham were in the burglary together."

"A two-man job, Sheriff? One man could handle it himself and save splitting the loot." Hastings fixed his eyes on a spot above my head. "Besides, Sheriff, there's the time lapse. How long was it between the time Mrs. Dallin phoned you and the time you got there?"

That was the dead end I was up against. For two days and nights I'd been trying to see my way out of it, and there didn't seem to be any way out.

I muttered hopelessly, "Say ten minutes."

"I'd say more than that," Hastings declared. "You had to dress. You had to get your car out of your garage. You had to drive seven miles. Closer to fifteen minutes,

if not more. But let's concede it was only ten minutes. Would it have taken more than a single minute to have jimmied open that window?"

I had studied that window and lock and a child could have forced it in very little time. But I said, "Maybe." But I knew I was on the defensive.

"More than two minutes?" Hastings persisted. "More than three minutes? And when the burglar got through the window, how long would it have taken him to go into Mrs. Dallin's room, snatch the ring and bracelet and flee? Seconds. Perhaps all of a minute. Yet when you arrived, ten or fifteen minutes after Mrs. Dallin heard the window being jimmied open, the burglar was fleeing the house. Don't you see, Sheriff, that that's an impossible interval?"

I saw. I had seen nothing else since that night.

"This is ridiculous," Fletcher said. "What are you getting at?"

Hastings turned his gentle smile on him. "Of course, I am only beginning my investigation. But I have heard what people are saying—"

"You mean what Judge Bliss is saying," Fletcher cut in.

"Let's say, the conclusions people are drawing from the logic of events," Hastings said mildly. "Both Mrs. Dallin's jewels and her caretaker disappear. It is reasonable to assume that Graham went with the ring and bracelet. Sheriff Mead arrived some minutes after the robbery. He saw Bob Wilk and without further investigation—"

"Wait!" I said. "If Wilk wasn't the burglar, what was he doing there? He had no business—"

Hastings shrugged. "I doubt if we'll ever know. Wilk is dead and dead men don't tell. The fact that he was at the Dallin residence doesn't mean he didn't have legitimate business there. Your suspicions don't make a man a thief—and they don't matter. What matters is that when you arrived, a comparatively long time after Mrs. Dallin phoned you, you saw Bob Wilk. You saw your chance to kill him, as you had threatened, and get away with it on the pretext that you shot him in the line of duty."

I suppose I should have thrown my anger at him, but Hasting was only repeating what everybody in town, including my own daughter, believed. I clenched my fists helplessly and said nothing.

"Have you anything to add to your story, Sheriff?" Hastings asked.

Tom Fletcher was looking at me the way you view your best friend laid out in his coffin.

"No," I said and went out.

MY TWO deputies were in when I returned to my office. For two days they had been trying to pick up George Graham's trail, and now I sent them out again, although it was very unlikely that he would be hanging around the county after all this time.

When they were gone, I sat down at my desk and ran up a terrific phone bill, calling city and county and state police to see if anything had turned up on Graham. Nothing had. I was wasting my time and the county's money, of course, because I'd hear soon enough if Graham was picked up. But I had to do something.

And the irony was that I wasn't sure I wanted Graham found. If I could prove that Wilk had been working with Graham on the burglary, that would justify my having shot Wilk—anyway, in the eyes of the law. But if Graham confessed that he had stolen the ring and bracelet by himself, I might as well go out and put a bullet in my own head, and nobody would care.

Not even Julie.

When lunchtime came, I had a couple of sandwiches sent up from the drugstore. I told myself I was busy, but I didn't succeed in kidding myself. I hadn't the nerve to go out and face people. Because it was becoming plainer and plainer to me that whatever turned up, I was through, finished. Hastings was right: That burglary couldn't have been a two-man job. I had shot an unarmed man without even the justification that he had been a fleeing burglar.

I had done even worse. I had killed a man I had had the best possible reason to want out of the way.

Toward evening Tom Fletcher stuck his head into my office. He said, "Hastings has gone back to the capital. He isn't wasting any time."

"What do you expect?" I said bitterly. "Hastings didn't come here to investigate. He had his report made up long before he arrived."

Fletcher came all the way into the office. "It's a mess, Ed. The shooting would have been bad enough by itself, but on top of that the governor belongs to the wrong party."

There was that, of course. I was county leader of my party, and for years, now, Judge Bliss had battled me for votes in the county. He was the governor's man, and the governor yearned for a senatorial seat in Washington after the next election. Smashing me meant Judge Bliss' whole political future—and the governor would be grateful.

I said nothing, and he tried again. "Ed. I'm for you all the way."

I didn't look up when the door closed behind him.

AFTER a while I left my office and walked home. I was turning in at the gate when Julie came out of the house. We both stopped.

"Julie," I said huskily. "We've always been so close. You've got to believe—"

Her eyes slid past me. "You'll find food in the refrigerator," she said tonelessly and moved past me.

I looked after her—at the slim grace of her figure, so much like her mother's. If her mother had been alive, I thought, I wouldn't be so terribly alone now.

I went into the house and sank into a chair. I must have dozed off because it was dark when the phone rang. I yawned and stretched and then fumbled my way groggily into the hall—and for a dazed moment I thought I was back to Tuesday night when Mrs. Dallin's call had dragged me out of sleep. Only this time it was the governor.

The governor himself, calling from the executive mansion and his voice dripping phoney sympathy. "I'm sorry about that shooting, Mead. It was a terrible thing."

"Sheriffs have shot burglars before," I said.

"Mead, I've just read Hastings' report. I was deeply shocked."

"I bet you were."

The governor ignored my sarcasm. "I am afraid I will be forced to act. It won't be pleasant. The papers will splash your name all over their pages during the removal hearings. There will be a nasty scandal. You can avoid it if you wish."

"By resigning, I suppose?"

"It will make it easier for you, Mead."

"You mean for you," I said. "If you remove me from office, I can claim political persecution. But if I resign under fire, it will be an admission of guilt."

His voice took on an edge. "So you are determined to face removal proceedings?"

On my lips were the words to tell him to go ahead and be damned. I didn't say them. Instead I said weakly, "I'll think it over."

"You have until tomorrow," he said crisply and hung up.

Just then light came on and I saw Julie standing just inside the door. She said, "Oh, Pa!" and flew into my arms.

I held her tightly, feeling myself choke up. This was the way a man and his daughter should be.

"Since Tuesday night I was so shocked, so stunned," Julie said. "Then just before, after I saw you, I started to think clearly again. It should have been plain to me right away, Pa, that you couldn't kill a man in cold blood. It was an accident, a mistake."

"A sheriff shouldn't make mistakes," I told her dully. "When the law gives a man a gun, he has to be careful how he uses it. He has to be sure he has no choice but to shoot, even if it means his own life. Maybe I'm not fit to be sheriff."

Julie's face tilted up to mine. "Pa, I heard what you said on the phone. You're not going to resign?"

"Yes."

"Pa, you're not a quitter. You're a fighter."

"There's no good in fighting when you're in the wrong, Julie."

THE phone rang. I released her, but as I reached for the handset, my hand stopped. In back of my mind a nagging voice was trying to tell me something about a phone.

I said, "Hello?"

"Listen, Ed," Tom Fletcher said excitedly. "Judge Bliss was just in to see me. He demands that you be indicted for murder—or at least manslaughter."

I stood looking off into space, trying to think, but it wasn't about anything Fletcher was saying.

"I told Bliss, not while I was district attorney," Fletcher said. "But I'm not sure I can control the grand jury with all the feeling against you. Bliss will go to them, and if I know—"

I said suddenly, "Tom, do you remember if there was a phone in Graham's rooms above the garage?"

"A phone? I don't know. It seems to me there was. Listen, Ed. It gets worse and worse. If the grand jury acts, it will appoint a special prosecutor and the case—"

"I'm sure Graham had his own phone," I muttered.

"Ed, you've got enough troubles—" Fletcher paused. "What's this about a phone?"

"I'm not sure," I said and hung up.

Julie was watching me, wide-eyed. "What is it, Pa? You look as if you've had good news."

"Good news?" I laughed a little crazily. "Judge Bliss is trying to get the grand jury to indict me for murder."

"Pa!"

But I was already on the way out of the house.

THE Dallin house was dark. Wednesday morning, with her nerves in a mess, Mrs. Dallin had returned to the city, leaving the keys with me. I rolled my car past the house and to the garage. I was getting out when I saw the hump of another car parked at the fringe of my lights.

There was no sound, no movement. I cut my headlights and loosened my gun. My flashlight was in my left hand, but I didn't turn it on.

Tom Fletcher said, "You were pretty long

in coming, Ed." His own light spread over me.

"I had to stop off at the office for the keys." I removed my hand from my gun and took out the keys and went to the small door at the side of the garage. "I didn't expect you to be here, Tom."

Fletcher stood frowning beside me. "What you said on the phone made me curious. Have you really got something?"

"We'll see."

I unlocked the door. Narrow wooden stairs led up to a room and bath above the garage.

"There's the phone," Fletcher said.

It was on a table beside the bed. I picked it up and the operator said, "Number, please." I hung up. "The phone's alive."

Fletcher stood with his hands in his pockets and rocked on the balls of his feet. "I think I follow you, Ed. There's a chance Mrs. Dallin phoned Graham Tuesday night right before or after she phoned you."

"She must have. After all, Graham was only a couple of hundred feet away while she lay in bed listening to the burglar enter. Only, by then she was so terrified that t e next morning she completely forgot to tell me that she had phoned Graham. In her state, you couldn't expect her to volunteer information unless she was asked, and nobody thought of asking her that question."

Fletcher nodded eagerly. "We'll get in touch with Mrs. Dallin tomorrow. If she says that she did phone Graham for help Tuesday night and if Graham still was around at that time and answered, he couldn't have been the guy she heard entering the house. That will mean it was Bob Wilk." Suddenly he scowled. "Not so good. Graham could have heard his phone ring and rushed back to answer it. The house and garage aren't so far apart."

"But Wilk was here when I arrived."

"Ten or fifteen minutes later." Fletcher sighed. "The time element is still against you, Ed."

I went downstairs to the garage and looked into a cabinet. Fletcher was tagging after me. He said, "You think the ring and bracelet were hidden somewhere in the neighborhood? But why? They were easier to carry away than hide. And if Wilk is the one, how does that explain Graham's disappearance? I'm sorry, Ed, but your idea about Graham's phone hasn't proved anything."

I shone my light on him. "Don't you see it yet? It wasn't till a little while ago that it struck me that Mrs. Dallin must have phoned Graham after she phoned me. From there my mind went on and saw the flaw in the assumption that Graham could possibly have been the burglar. Because Wilk didn't have the ring and bracelet on his body and because Graham had disappeared, we all of us got a blind spot in our thinking."

"Make sense, Ed," Fletcher said irritably.

"It's the first bit of sense in this case," I told him. "George Graham, as caretaker, had keys to the house. If he entered the house by jimmying open the window, there was no reason for him to disappear after the burglary; the whole idea of that method of entry would be to steer suspicion away from him. In other words, if he had entered through the jimmied window, he would still be around, pretending he had slept through the burglary. He would have run away only if he had made the entry through the way only he could have—by unlocking a door and walking in."

By the light of my flash Fletcher's square jaw dropped. "Then where is Graham?"

"Not far from here," I said. "Come on."

We walked to the house. I threw my light around. "Wilk was running across the porch when I pulled up in my car. He came around this side of the house." We turned the corner. "Here's the cellar door. Wilk probably—"

I stopped. In the spray of my light the padlock of the inclined double cellar door hung open.

Fletcher looked at me. When he spoke, his voice was a whisper. "Ed, you were the last one here. You locked the place up."

"That's right, and that padlock was locked." I took out my gun.

As I reached down to the door, it started to rise toward me. I stepped back, levelling my gun.

Judge Bliss' face appeared, his eyes blinking into the two lights centered on him. He came up the cellar steps until half of him was level with the ground. "Good evening, gentlemen," he said.

Fletcher gawked.

I said, "Did you find him?"

"I did." Judge Bliss put his hands on his frock coat lapels and smiled sourly up at me. "The coalbin isn't the best of hiding places."

I said tightly, "So that's the way you're going to play it?" and went down the cellar steps, pushing him roughly out of the way. I would as soon have knocked him down, judge or no judge.

I SWEPT by the furnace and sent my light into the half-filled coalbin. Two scrawny bare legs were sticking out of the coals.

From the toes of one foot dangled a slipper; the second slipper would still be buried. Judge Bliss had dug up that much when we had interrupted him.

"My God!" Fletcher gasped. "Don't tell me that's Graham?"

"Ask Judge Bliss," I said. With that smile plastered on his bloodless lips, he was stand-

ing beside Fletcher. I found the light switch on the wall and clicked it. "Naturally you put the light out when you heard us coming," I told the judge.

"I wanted to surprise you, Mead," he said placidly.

Fletcher was inside the bin. He had a shovel and was using it like a brush to clear the coals from the body.

"Here's the bracelet!" I cried. It had tumbled to the floor along with some coals.

"And the ring?" Fletcher asked.

"Somewhere under the coals," I said. "We'll find it later."

The dead man was buried deep. When the body was exposed, Fletcher leaned on the shovel and we both stared at the ugly wound in the top of his head. George Graham had been wearing pajamas and bathrobe when he had died.

"You're pretty zealous in finding the body now, Mead," Judge Bliss said dryly.

I didn't bother arguing with him. I straightened up. Fletcher was splitting bewildered glances between myself and the judge.

I told Fletcher, "Here's the way it happened. Mrs. Dallin heard Bob Wilk jimmying open the window. She phoned me because I was sheriff, and then she phoned Graham in the garage because he was so much nearer. Graham put on a bathrobe and came to the house without showing a light. By that time Wilk had the ring and the bracelet and Mrs. Dallin was lying unconscious in her room. Graham caught Wilk as he was coming out of the house. There was a struggle. Wilk still had in his hand the iron with which he had forced open the window—my guess is we'll find that buried in these coals also—and bashed Graham's head in with it.

"Wilk must have been mighty scared when he saw that he had added murder to burglary. But it occurred to him how he could be absolutely in the clear by having Graham disappear and thereby shunting the blame for the burglary on him. He had to work fast because for all he knew Mrs. Dallin or Graham had phoned in an alarm. The body was near the cellar door. He dragged it into the bin and covered it with coal. That was to be temporary, of course. Later, when the whole thing blew over, he would have plenty of chance to ccome back one night and bury the body where it would never be found.

"He was about to leave the cellar when he heard my car approach. There was only one way out for him, through the outside cellar door, because the door up to the house was locked on the house side. If he were caught and hadn't the ring and bracelet on his person, he might have a chance to bluff himself out of it. Anyway, there'd be no proof. So he shoved the jewels and murder weapon in among the coals, figuring he'd get them when he returned to bury the body. But I shot him as he was fleeing."

I paused and then added, "I shot a murderer."

Judge Bliss' laughter was like the cracking of dry twigs. "It's a glib story, Mead."

"It's the true story," I said. "You know it is because it also occurred to you that Wilk might have murdered Graham. The finding of Graham's body would vindicate me for shooting Wilk, and you didn't want me vindicated for political reasons. You came here to see what you could do about disposing of the body so that I would never be able to clear myself."

"Fascinating nonsense!"

There was a little silence. Then I said softly, "I think that if there is any resigning to be done, Judge Bliss, you'll do it."

"Oh, no, Mead." Judge Bliss tugged at his frock coat lapels. "The discovery of Graham's body proves beyond doubt that you are a murderer. Perhaps Wilk was a burglar; perhaps not. That we will never know because dead men do not tell. But there is no doubt that Bob Wilk was unarmed and that you shot him down in cold blood because you hated him. Graham came from the garage and saw you do it. So you had to kill Graham also. Temporarily you buried his body in the coals until such a time as you could hide it more thoroughly."

I saw Tom Fletcher go white around the lips. He didn't seem able to find any words.

"Which story will be believed, Mead?" Judge Bliss went on. "The fact remains that you had reason for wanting Wilk dead and that you killed him. You can't get around that. You can't prove that Wilk murdered Graham. Dead men don't talk."

"Don't they?" I said. And this time it was my turn to laugh.

THE sun was full on my face when Julie and Tom Fletcher barged into my bedroom and woke me up.

"Pa, a report just came from the state police laboratory," Julie exclaimed. "Guess what is said?"

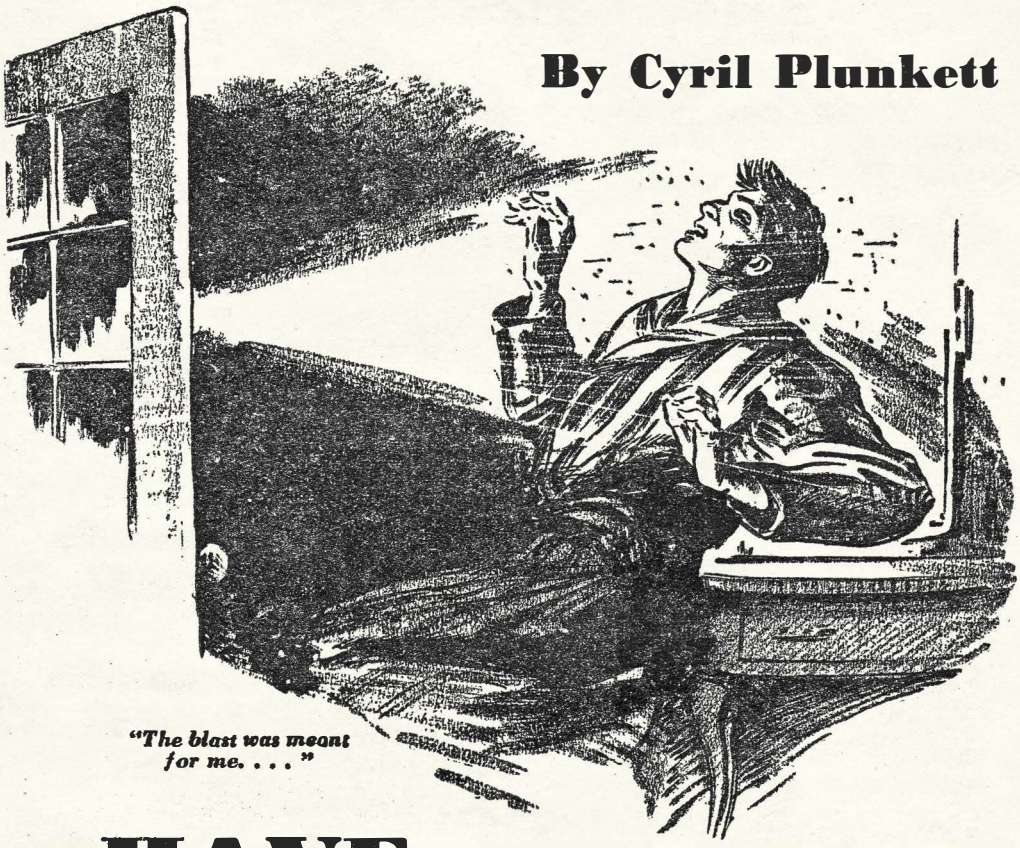
"That flakes of Bob Wilk's skin were found under George Graham's fingernails." I pulled the covers up to my chin and yawned. "Judge Bliss forgot that Graham had struggled with Wilk and that Wilk's wrists had been scratched. Or if he didn't remember, it hadn't meant anything to him. I suppose it takes a policeman to know what to ask a corpse."

Julie sat on my bed. She looked at me and her eyes were moist.

I patted her hand. This was the best of it.

***It was right there at his ear—the voice whose owner he had never seen and never would see, now, for though she could have kept him from murder—nothing, now, could keep him from the chair!***

**By Cyril Plunkett**



*"The blast was meant for me. . . ."*

# HAVE A CORPSE ON ME

THE phone rang again and again. But I couldn't move now. I was sick, my insides turning over; my heart was beating madly. The phone subsided finally, almost sighing, and then I stumbled on across the room, sank into a chair. It was after ten. Time, first shocked into utter immobility, began racing. I licked at my dry lips, looked numbly at my hands. They were white, clenched. I was shaking all over.

There was a decanter on the table by the chair. I drank from its slim throat, a long pull. There was but one stern course—I knew that. One course, despite horror, shame. The liquor burned inside me, stoppped the awful shivering. One course, I thought—and reached out for the phone.

Curious. The service had always been erratic. I've damned the phone a thousand times in the past few years. I've lost time, money, trying to get through to the city. But

tonight, surprisingly, Central's nasal voice said when I had barely raised the receiver, "Oh, Mr. Cameron—"

I heard the rain, still falling hard. I heard the steady *drip-drip* from a leaky eave. Through these years I'd kept the country place I'd never seen her—Central. I don't know if she was old or young. She was just a voice that knew me; a woman who sat, doubtless, seven nights a week in a dingy corner in a dingy building down the valley. A woman who, it seemed, knew everything and everybody. It was no party line, of course, and she said, "Mr. Cameron, I've been trying hard to get you—"

"Give me the sheriff," I interrupted.

She gasped, "The sheriff?" Perhaps I was panting. Perhaps she sensed my—my urgency. "Mr. Cameron—" she began.

"Damn it, get the sheriff!"

What's-his-name. I couldn't think of it—the sheriff. I could only see him in my mind as I'd seen him in the past. The old fogie. Tobacco behind stubbed cheeks, stains on his lips, his vest. I gripped the phone suddenly as a crisp young voice said, "Yes, sheriff's office."

It wasn't the sheriff.

"Who is this?" I said.

"Greer. Deputy."

My throat tightened a bit. "Where is the sheriff?"

"Ill. Hasn't been in for several days. What is it, please? I'm in full charge."

For a moment I didn't know what to do. I didn't know this man Greer. I mean, my mind was still aquiver and not ready for the unexpected. I wet my lips again, said, "This is Cameron, Larry Cameron."

"Yes?"

"The stone house on Gates Road."

"Yes, I know. What is it, Mr. Cameron?"

"There's a man out here, in my house—dead."

He whistled. "Stranger?"

"No, it's the manner in which he died. I—I've just found him. He was—murdered."

The crisp voice seemed to sit up straighter. "Touch anything?"

"Not a thing, except—"

"Yes, I understand, the phone. Okay, hang on, Mr. Cameron. Be with you in a few minutes."

I sat there with the phone still in my hands. A voice began to call metallically, "Mr. Cameron? Mr. Cameron?" It sounded weird, from afar; it came from my lap and I looked down dumbly. It came from the phone. "Mr. Cameron, are you all right? Are you there yet?"

"I'm all right." I closed my eyes, drew in a deep breath.

"Mr. Cameron, I've been trying to—"

The trembling had started again. *In a few minutes,* he'd said. Greer. I shuddered and replaced the receiver.

YES, it was after ten now, and listening to the rain I had the queerest thoughts. Fear I had, of the lights, the windows—and the dripping darkness. It had rained all day, all evening—the rain was tapping at my brain. I got up at last, walked into the kitchen. *His* clothes were there, his coat, his hat, sogggy wet, but no longer drippping.

I stood looking at them.

*Sure I'm scared, I'll tell Greer. It's the horror of this night. The night's inside of me, now, way down deep. It's in my heart, frantic with each beat. It's in my throat and choking me. It's what should have happened. You don't understand—You don't see it. Did you ever believe desperately in someone who was dear to you?*

All right, I would have to say to Greer, I have always been a gentle and a quiet man. Look at me—fifty-five. Look—grey hair and thin shoulders. But my wife is not like that—she's not thirty. When we met and married she was only twenty-five. Dignity and love were to have bridged the gap, I'd thought. I'd believed in her. I'd been mad with her, with her slimness and her blondness and her beauty. I adored her, gave her everything. The trouble was, I guess, I didn't give her youth.

Well, Phil Berot had plenty of that. And who is Phil Berot? Give me time, man! Can't you see I'm trying? He was on the scene from the beginning. It was through my wife, in fact, through Millicent, that I met him. He was one of her crowd. It was through her that I took him in the office. He'd never had a chance and she felt sorry for him, she said. Yes, of course, I believed her—but who is Phil Berot?

Blond, handsome, very big, smooth in a virile, footballish fashion. Perhaps his shoulders, his massive build, his chest, the strength and might of him entranced her. Certainly I admired him, for I had no such background. I'd grown up in the back streets, too often with too little to eat. Yes, I had the average man's fondness for sports, but look at me—fifty-five. Where, now, would I find the strength and energy?

It's true I swam a bit—not that I was good at it. I did it only for Millicent. I did a bit of hunting—rabbit, quail—although tramping across fields in the cold with them, with Phil Berot and Millicent, was almost more than I could bear. Killing, too, never was much pleasure. I enjoyed a book, fine music. I enjoyed my home. Can't you see how stupid I appeared beside him?

He, of course, seemed to live for hunting,

guns. He had guns all over his place, rifles, shotguns, revolvers. He was proud of his collection, and would show it at the drop of a hat. He would break the guns and fondle them, and clean them while we talked; he would use an oiled rag on them, shining, shining lovingly.

Naturally we, Millicent and I, maintained an apartment in the city. I would have preferred to commute. But she liked the big hotels, she said, she liked dining out and dancing. She liked the theatre, parties. It was reasonable that a gay life was her sole interest—I believed her. I closed this house, in the country, although I would drive out often. Just to look around and perhaps call a few friends on the phone. Just to dream of what might have been. Then one night while we were entertaining—in the city, that is—I chanced to stroll out on the terrace. There, in the shadow of the parapet—

He had her in his arms. My wife. Berot.

Something died in me that night—something else was born. You begin to see it now? The fear? There was nothing I could do. I know—I know. Divorce is in your mind—but you do not understand yet? They didn't want divorce. They wanted—money. I could give them all my money and just—just disappear?

Remember, they would insist that I go hunting. And off-season, afternoons, to the range, for target practice. I would catch them smiling at me when I turned abruptly, or looked abruptly in a mirror. Remember, he would contrive that I see his guns—he would sit across from me and clean his guns—now do you understand my fear?

IN A few minutes, he'd said on the phone. Greer. Still I stood in the kitchen, holding to a chair; and suddenly a motor pounded through the stillness. Headlights swam up from the valley. Yes, I would have to tell all that, the black past, now to Greer. I turned on the outside light with a sigh, then. I stood in the kitchen doorway as the car swung in.

It was Greer. He was alone. "The boys will be along," he said. He ran through the lashing rain, across the driveway, black slicker over his blue uniform. He had a scar across one cheek, still new, rising from his neck. I remembered who he was then. A lad who had come back. Congressional Medal of Honor. I'd read about him in the papers, one of the local heroes.

I let him in. His slicker dripped a path across the floor, and only then I discovered that I still wore my raincoat. I took it off now, tossed it in a corner. "The body?" he said.

"Yes," I said, "in here."

I led him up the hall, and we stopped and I stood there, dumb, feeling foolish, for it lay a futile thing, twisted and so lonely. It wore a striped bathrobe. The face? There wasn't much. A gun blast had blown the face away.

Greer's eyes were very busy. He saw that death had entered by the front door. He saw this front door stood ajar, that beyond it was a storm vestibule. What else could he see?

"Can you identify the body?" he asked.

I said, "My servant, I think. I'm convinced it is a man named Elwood, whom I hired just today."

I stopped as he touched the body lightly, with his fingertips. Of course it would be warm yet. But he squinted up at me and said, "Go on."

I added, "I was going to reopen the house. I needed the house. I know nothing of Elwood except that he answered my ad. I sent him on ahead, in the station wagon. He was to get a fire going—"

"Go on," he said, when again I'd stopped.

"The robe. The striped robe. It belongs to—me."

Now Greer looked at me, and his eyes were slanted, frowning, and I wished all of this, the sad and sordid aftermath, could have been avoided. I wished I could have turned my back to it and walked away.

"His coat is in the kitchen," I said, "soaked. He drove out with the wagon's windows open, very likely. At least my wipers wouldn't clear the rain. And the house was damp, cold—he was new here. It's obvious that with his own clothes still unpacked he removed his wet coat and put on my old robe."

"So that's the way you see it?"

"That's the only way it could have happened."

"Put it into words, Mr. Cameron."

"Well—" I clenched both hands and closed my eyes a moment. "Someone came to the door."

"Lights?" Greer interrupted.

"I haven't touched the switch, if that's what you mean. Probably he couldn't find the hall switch, or the switch to the light in the vestibule. So the hall was dim, just as you see it. Then he—he must have unlocked the front door. He was about my build, and the striped robe stood out in the dimness. The blast—"

"Go on," Greer almost whispered when I'd cut the last word off.

*"The blast was meant for me."*

He nodded. He walked to the door, took a flashlight from his pocket, looked around outside, in the storm vestibule. His light found the stout spring on the storm door, and he knew then why the house door was open and the storm door was closed. The light flashed around, hesitated, went out. Then Greer faced me again.

"I don't suppose, Mr. Cameron, you passed

a car when you came up the road, did you?"

"No, I passed no one."

"Notice any evidence that a car, other than the station wagon, had been here? Tracks?"

"No, it's a cement driveway."

"Had you mentioned engaging Elwood?"

"No-o."

"Sure? Not to anyone?"

"My secretary—the office, you know—might have inferred it. It was she who announced him and she knew I'd run an ad."

"No one else?"

"No, sir—except the garage, a public garage. I called to clear the station wagon for him."

"Did you expect anyone out here this evening?"

I caught my breath, held it. It set my heart to racing. It hurt there in my lungs.

"Are you married, Cameron?"

"Yes," I said.

He took a crumpled pack of cigarettes from his slicker pocket. He looked at his watch. Then he lit the cigarette and another word slipped out. "Enemies?"

We'd turned back to the living room, away from the horrible thing—the body. Now I picked up the decanter, filled a glass. It gave me something to do. "I've led a quiet life," I said cautiously, with every word carefully examined, now, before I said it. "I've always tried to be honest in business, to believe in people, to be fair."

"No enemies?" he repeated.

I took the glass, raised it, drank from it. I drank too fast and choked. Greer, standing stock-still, did not take his eyes from me.

"Mr. Cameron, you're holding something back," he said.

"It's the—the shock."

He shook his head. "It's raking you, inside of you. Something you know, guess, had seen. It's fright, isn't it?"

"Well—yes," I admitted.

"Of what?"

*Did you ever have a wife you believed, trusted, worshipped? "Yes, I'll be out later tonight, Larry," she'd said. Do you know what it is to be tricked, to face the world—a fool who has nothing but money?*

Greer's voice had become hard. "Did your wife know you were coming out here?"

The glass slipped from my hand.

I TOLD him. There was nothing else to do. I had to tell him. I had known from the beginning what I'd have to tell him. Look at me, I said. Fifty-five. Thin shoulders and grey hair. She said she loved me, and I believed her. But he was there, Berot,

***The killer came in the back way, a scared man. . . . .***

from the beginning. With his strength, his guns, his curious smile for me.

I finished, sat numbed in the chair. I poured another drink and downed it, not from cold now; I was burning with the shame of it—sick, now, with the shame of it. Greer, as though to hide his pity, turned away, to the phone. He picked it up, said, "Hello, hello. . . . No. . . . No, this is Greer."

Central. I could hear the rattle of her quick voice. And then Greer said, "Yes, he's here. He's all right. I'll tell him." Greer said, "Now please give me the coroner. Oh, he's on his way, you say?"

He replaced the receiver, swung around on me. But his voice was gentle. "He was with your wife tonight, this chap, Berot?"

I shrugged, but he wasn't satisfied with gestures.

"Don't you know?"

"We had lunch together, the three of us. It was then I asked her to drive out here for the week end, if she could. She promised."

Greer said queerly, "Would Berot know about ballistics?"

"Ballistics?"

"That guns can be identified? And closely allied, that tests can be made to prove a man did or did not fire a weapon?"

I stared at him. He saw my surprise; his lips tightened. "Tests?" I repeated. "But we were shooting, before lunch this afternoon! On the target range!"

"I was afraid of that," Greer murmured. "Then you, your wife and Berot all fired a gun today?"

"Yes, this afternoon," I said.

"Did he seem strange, act different from usual?"

"He was tense," I said.

"And your wife?"

"She was tense," I said.

"As though there was something in the wind?"

"They were tense," I said. "I realized it would be a rough trip, with the rain, and she said the rain wouldn't stop her—"

We both looked up. A car was rolling up the drive, and another up the lane. I listened for the footsteps, but these footsteps all were heavy, made by men. They pounded through the kitchen, coming toward us. Only then I heard what Greer was saying.

"I have no doubt we will find the gun, Cameron. One belonging to Berot."

I began to nod. Then my head jerked, hurt with the sudden halt it made.

"But your rationalization of the crime is wrong on one important count. The killer didn't use the front door; he came in through the kitchen."

I didn't speak, couldn't.

Greer continued softly, "It was raining, as you know, Cameron, hard. Had the killer used the front entrance he would have left his mark there, inevitably. Moisture. And there isn't a drop of water on the vestibule floor, Cameron."

I tried to get up from the chair, couldn't. My legs were shaking, wouldn't hold me.

"The killer," Greer said, "*suggested* to Elwood that he put on the striped robe. The killer, secure in his victim's complete unawareness, *spotted* Elwood in the hall for the murder. The plan was a frame on Berot, with the law sure to wreack the revenge. Very pretty, and as strong as the stuff it was built on. Because you see, Cameron, our killer was a scared little man—"

"No!" I cried. I tried to get my breath and couldn't. "You don't see it! You don't understand at all, Greer!"

"—who knew his wife and friend were false," Greer went right on, flatly, "and yet believed them when they promised to drive up here tonight."

He motioned to his men. Then he called back from the archway, "Oh yes, Central had a message for you, Cameron. Your wife and Berot were tense today, all right—they skipped tonight. Yes, they left the city by plane, hours ago—long before the murder."

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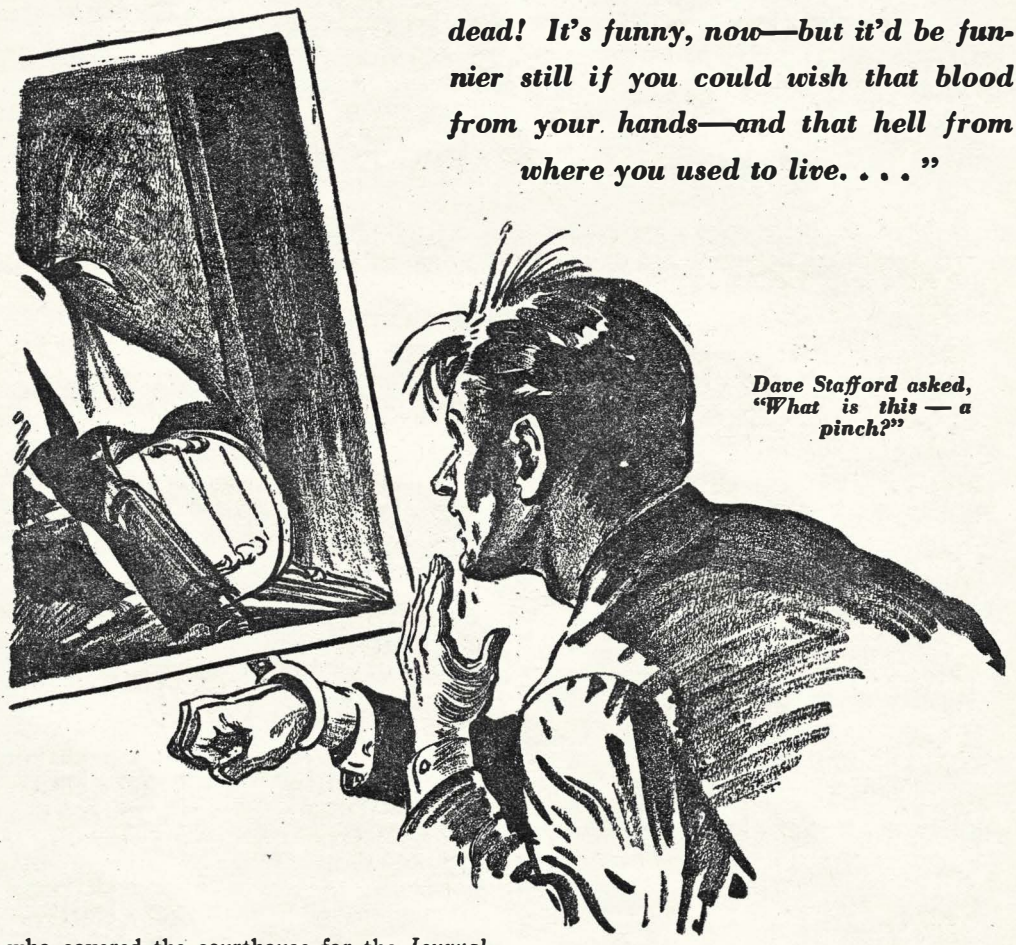
# YOU WERE DEAD

## By C. William Harrison

***"So you told her you wished she was dead! It's funny, now—but it'd be funnier still if you could wish that blood from your hands—and that hell from where you used to live. . . ."***



*Dave Stafford asked, "What is this — a pinch?"*

who covered the courthouse for the *Journal,* had come to his table.

"Dave, you look like a cloud hunting a place to rain."

"I feel that way."

Phil grinned. "Me, too, when I've had a run-in with the little lady. That how it is?"

Dave nodded. Phil Colby was a pleasant sort, and it was good for a man to have someone to tell his troubles to. They had had drinks, and Dave had talked, while Phil listened sympathetically. Later Phil had excused himself and left, and Dave had finished the evening alone.

His head was beginning to ache now and he was feeling sick at the stomach when he turned up the flagstone walk toward the frame and stucco cottage. The lights were out in the house, but that was how he expected them to be. All this was following the old familiar pattern of their quarrels. Clair would spend the night locked in the guest room, and Dave would sleep alone. Tomorrow she would say nothing about what had happened, and after a while Dave would batter down his pride and apologize.

He remembered Phil Colby's amused laugh as he fumbled his key into the lock.

*"So you told her you wished she was dead!*

*Funny, but when I'm sore I tell my wife the same thing. It's beginning to sound trite, Dave. But none of us ever really mean that."*

HE GOT the door open, and closed it quietly behind him. He pondered a moment, and then pressed the wall button. But the lights didn't come on. That unreasoning anger came surging up through him again. Clair must have pulled the master switch, just to spite him.

He raised his voice through the darkness. "Clair!"

He got no answer. The place was dark and silent, and somehow the old homey atmosphere was gone. It was almost as if he were alone in a house he had never before been in. He had a sudden stab of fear that Clair had left him—then he threw that off. He was letting whiskey get the best of his imagination—Clair, he told himself, was no quitter.

But he knew he could get no sleep until he had assured himself that she was here.

He started toward the guest room, but at his first step his foot struck something on the floor. He stooped automatically and picked it up. It was round and hard and oddly damp to his touch. He groped both hands along the object, and when he felt the fluted knob on the end he knew it was the fireplace poker.

Some small and metallic sound clicked in the room, but he hardly feared that.

He turned through the darkness to the fireplace and, slipping the poker into its holder, felt strangely relieved. Clair might throw things to wear out her temper, but if she had left him, pride and habit would not let her leave the house in disorder. So she was spending the night in the guest room as she had always done after their quarrels. The best thing, Dave told himself discreetly, was not to awaken her. He groped his way into the bedroom, rolled under a blanket, and fell instantly asleep.

A bell rang. Dave reached to the night stand, his eyes clamped tight against the ache pulsing in his temples. He picked up the phone, said, "Hello—go 'way," and hung up the receiver.

But it was the doorbell, not the phone, ringing. He sat up in bed and tried to knuckle the sleep out of his eyes. It was, he saw by the clock on the night stand, nearly nine o'clock in the morning. The harsh jangling of the bell hurt his ears. He wished it would stop ringing. Why hadn't Clair answered it?

He groped around with his feet for his shoes, but he couldn't find them. Mallet-swinging demons were at work in his temples, and there was a sour, cottony taste in his mouth. He wondered if he should go to the bathroom or answer the door. He wondered why Clair didn't answer the bell. He had never before known her to carry a quarrel into the second day.

He suddenly remembered and felt guilty over the bitter way he had lashed out at Clair at the dinner table last night.

*"Clair, we're just no good for each other. If anything ever happened to you, I couldn't care much."*

If anything ever happened to Clair, it would be like losing everything worth while in his world. Dave knew that. Why does a man say such things? He never means them. He lets some trivial difference of opinion flare into something bitter and hating and unreasoning. He says things he never means, and he is sorry later. Sorry as hell, but he can't take back what he has said.

The bell rang again, insistently.

Dave pushed to his feet, and made his way unsteadily into the living room. Sunlight slanting through the venetian blinds on the east windows hurt his eyes. He went to the door, opened it.

"Well, well," he said, "The pony express!"

The postman was a small, prim man. He said, "Mr. David Stafford? A special delivery for you."

"Through rain and blizzard goeth the mail!" But Dave didn't feel funny. His head ached, and he was sick, and he was worried about Clair. He wished he could hear the small busy sounds she made working in the kitchen. Maybe she wasn't feeling well.

He took the large manila envelope, and reached for the pencil and postal receipt pad. He saw the expression change on the postman's face, tightening up his eyes and mouth.

"Did you hurt yourself, sir?"

"What?"

"There's blood on your hands."

Dave looked down, quickly. Blood was dry and reddish brown on the palms of his hands. He looked at it with a strong feeling of surprise and shock. He didn't remember hurting himself the night before. He didn't remember anything happening that could have put blood on his hands.

"Did you cut yourself, Mr. Stafford?"

"I just killed a chicken." It didn't seem like a smart thing to say. It sounded hollow, foolish. But he couldn't think of anything else.

The postman nodded, but he still stared. Dave wondered if the other realized that the blood was already dry. Crazy thing to have said.

Then he realized the postman was saying something about dry blood.

He grunted. "That's how we raise all our chickens—with quick-drying blood. It's strictly a Stafford development, increases the calory content in our feathered friends."

He closed the door, leaned back against it, trembling.

HE WAS afraid. He didn't know what he was afraid of, and yet suddenly there were many things. Little things that had meant nothing to him before. Little things that were mushrooming into big things now.

In all their other quarrels, Clair had not tried to spite him by pulling the house's master switch. But last night the wall buttons had been dead; there had been no lights.

The house had seemed queerly, silently empty. He had called out to her once, but she hadn't answered.

"Clair!"

His cry ran off through the house, and hid itself in silence.

He remembered stumbling against something in the darkness last night, and picking it up, and it had been the fireplace poker—strangely wet to his touch.

Dave's glance jerked to the poker, and the same dry red-brown stain was on the heavy iron rod that was on his hands. Blood!

His fear became something real, striking deep into his mind, and he could no longer trust his memory. He had been drunk last night, and maybe his brain was playing tricks on him. Maybe he had not stumbled against the poker just after coming into the house after all! Maybe he'd gone directly to bed, still bitter and angry with Clair—with his memory of the blood-wet poker coming from something which had happened later in the night. The fear whipped up in him. He had been a police reporter in his younger days, and he had heard of men committing murder without ever remembering it.

*"Clair!"*

He ran to the guest room—the bed had been used the night before, but the room was empty. He ran to the bathroom and kitchen, and searched the basement, but he couldn't find her. Clair was gone. Something had happened during the night, and Clair was gone.

He went back to the living room and sat down, trembling and cold with sweat.

*You're acting like a damn fool, Dave, he told himself. Maybe she was just sore, and left to spend the night with some friend.*

He searched the house again, this time forcing himself to keep a grip on his panic. None of their luggage was gone. As near as he remembered, he could account for all of her dresses. Fear began piling up in him again. She would have taken a dress or two with her if she had gone to spend the night with a friend.

Some violence must have happened last night. He searched for signs of it, and found but little—the poker and a small dry blood-stain on the living room rug, not far out from the front door. And the blood on his hands.

Panic began to drum maddeningly in his temples. It didn't seem possible that he could have done murder without remembering it. It seemed even less possible that he could have carried his wife's body out into the night for disposal without remembering it.

Standing there, he became conscious of the envelope the postman had brought, still in his hand. He opened it automatically, pulled out the enlarged photograph that was inside.

It was a picture of murder—of Dave Stafford standing just inside the door with a poker in his hand. The body of a woman was on the floor not far in front of him, arms outstretched, face down on the rug. He could see only a small part of her face, but memory filled in the familiar details that were not visible in the photograph.

"Clair!" he whispered. "Oh, Clair!"

He stood there like that, still and white with shock. He couldn't get his mind working. It was as if a heavy blow had pounded all the life out of him, leaving him cold and numb inside. Yet there were little thoughts, thready and easily broken, lacing in and out of his brain.

THEY had been married in July five years ago, and they had honeymooned in a lakeside cottage, far up in Michigan. There had been a soft breeze combing the high tops of the pines, and there had been music in the wavelets breaking on the beach, and much later that night Clair had said, "I'm yours, darling, and you're mine, forever," and he had teased her.

*"Forever is a long time, honey."*

*"Not long enough. Till death do us part."*

*"I kill all my wives when I'm tired of them. I'm a Bluebeard!"*

*"You're a darling!"*

*"You're trying to spoil me. You belong to the corset and bustle age. I'm immune to that kind of charm."*

*"You think so? You think so, darling? Come here—"*

*Her hair, on the pillow, caught and held some of the moonlight slanting in through the window, and there was a faint, knowing smile on her lips. . . .*

The police came while Dave stood there, staring at the photograph. The doorbell jangled, and Dave moved unthinkingly across the room. He opened the door, and there was Sergeant Mulhavy.

"Well, well, the crusading newsman in person!" He was a short, a square man, this sergeant of detectives, and once he had worn a lieutenant's badge. Black was the key to the man. His suit and his eyes and hair were that color, and powder over a fresh shave gave his jaw a faint blue-black tinge. There was, Dave had long felt, black in the man's soul. But in his way, Mike Mulhavy was a good cop. Tough and sometimes ruthless in his methods, but a good cop.

Dave said, "Ah, the man with the rubber hose!"

"In the flesh!" Mulhavy grinned. But his eyes didn't grin. He pointed to the photograph Dave had tried to slip under his coat. "We got one in the morning mail, too!" he said.

"You always were a sucker for a gag," Dave said. But his voice was thin and tight.

"That's what I came over to talk about," Mulhavy answered dryly. He put his hand on Dave's chest, and moved slowly forward. He came into the room, and closed the door behind him. He locked the door.

"Mind if I look around?"

"Help yourself, Mike." Dave was trying to keep cool, but blood was pounding his brain into a turmoil. Why had that picture been mailed to him *and* to police headquarters? Who had taken it? When? Why were they doing this to him? Where was Clair?

"You lead the way," Mulhavy said.

Dave shrugged, turned. He should have known what the detective would do. He felt his arms jerked behind his back, heard the snap of handcuffs locking his wrists together.

He flared over his shoulder, "What is this—a pinch?'

Mulhavy laughed mirthlessly. "Don't be coy, Stafford. I never take chances with killers."

"I'm not a killer."

"That," Mulhavy said coolly, "remains to be seen."

They went through the house from room to room, the detective's hard black eyes taking in every detail. Mulhavy paused in the kitchen, his glance searching the rear yard. But the grass out there had not been disturbed. He spun suddenly to bark a harsh question at Stafford.

"Where did you hide it?'

"What?"

"The body. Don't try to play innocent, Stafford! Where did you hide your wife's body?"

"I didn't—"

"You did! What do you take me for, Stafford—a damn fool? You murdered your wife last night, and hid her body. I want to know where."

"I'm trying to tell you—"

Mulhavy slashed the back of his hand across Dave's mouth. He could be, when he wanted to be, brutally patient.

"All right, Stafford," he said softly. "You go on with your little game. I'll play mine. And when I'm through I'll have you wrapped up and ready for the chair!"

They went into the basement, and Mulhavy turned to a door. "Is this your darkroom?"

Dave nodded.

Mulhavy's mouth was a tight trap that squeezed out cold amusement. "I heard you were an amateur photographer. So am I, but you didn't know that, did you? Let's look around in here, Stafford."

He switched on a light in the darkroom. It was a small, compact room where Dave had spent many idle moments over his trays and tanks. Everything was neat and in order, all the equipment in its proper place.

Mulhavy ran his finger into the film developing tank, and it came out wet. He gave Dave a meaning look.

"You should have dried this out better last night."

"I haven't developed a negative in a month."

Mulhavy shrugged, turned to the enlarger. He pulled out the holder that held the negative while an enlargement was being made. He separated the two metal plates, and pulled out the negative that had been in the enlarger. He held the rectangle of celluloid up to the light, and from where Dave stood he could see the image on the negative. It was the film from which the murder picture had been made.

Mulhavy's glance was bleak, sardonic. "Now tell me you haven't seen this negative before," he jeered.

It was as if a web of wire had suddenly wrapped around Dave Stafford. It tightened his breathing, it started his heart slugging the walls of his chest.

"I never saw that film until you took it out of the enlarger. You've got to believe me, Mulhavy! Someone is framing me, and I don't know why!"

"They all say that, Stafford."

"But it's true! I loved my wife! We had our spats, but I loved her. I couldn't have killed Clair!"

"You ought to be able to do better than that, Stafford. You're a newspaperman, and you sound like a punk."

## CHAPTER TWO

### Dark Light

HE SHOVED Dave out of the darkroom, switched off the lights. He pushed Dave upstairs, and into a living room chair. He bent forward, and his voice came bleak, brittle.

"I'm going to burn you, Stafford! Get that under your bonnet, and keep it there. I'm going to wrap you in a sack, and deliver you to the death house for this murder."

He turned to the flood lamp and reflector he had brought up from the darkroom. He plugged in the cord, and threw the hot white glare of light into Dave's eyes.

"Now talk!"

The glare of light hurt Dave's eyes. It burned. He tried to look away, but Mulhavy slapped his face back around. Now the de-

tective was slipping into his old way of working. He was shrewd and he was brutal. He was a rubber-hose cop who beat confessions out of his suspects. It was this method of working that had cost him his lieutenant's badge, and he blamed Dave's newspaper writings for his demotion.

"You used your paper to get me busted, and I couldn't fight back. Now I've got you against the wall, Stafford. I've got my evidence, and I'll have your confession. Where did you hide your wife's body?"

"I didn't kill her." It was all Dave could say. His mouth hurt and his eyes hurt and his head hurt. He was sick, and blood was between his teeth. Knots of ache were in his body where the detective's fist had struck. But those blows kept coming. And those harsh, probing words kept coming.

"Don't give me that guff about picking up that poker just to put it back where it belonged. You were drunk, but not too drunk. You murdered your wife, and I'll burn you for it. You quarreled with her last night."

"How'd you know that?"

"Everyone on the force knows it. Phil Colby came in last night and told about meeting you at the Press Club last night. He thought it was a joke. But it wasn't a joke. You told him you'd quarreled with your wife, that you told her you wished she was dead. Phil thought it was funny. But it wasn't funny for your wife. It won't be funny for you."

"I didn't kill her. I'm trying to tell you—"

"Then how did you get all that blood on your hands?"

"From the poker, I told you. I picked it up. . . ."

"And how did the blood get on the poker?"

"I don't know."

"If you didn't take that photograph, who did?"

"I wish I knew!" Dave ran the tip of his dry tongue across dry lips. He was sick and beaten, but he couldn't get Clair out of his mind.

*We celebrated our first anniversary by returning to the lakeside cottage where we'd honeymoned, but there was a fire and the cottage burned down, and Clair cried. . . .*

"How long did it take you to develop and print that negative?"

"I told you I didn't take that picture."

"Someone used your darkroom last night?"

"Anyone could have. I'd been drinking. I passed out when I hit the bed."

*I love you, darling. Dave, sometimes I love you so much it hurts.*

Mulhavy punched the tips of his stiff fingers into Dave's stomach. "I want the truth."

"I gave you the truth." He was sick. He wondered how long he had been taking Mulhavy's beating. An hour? A year? It seemed

that long, because all he could do was sit there and take it. Take those stabbing blows that hurt but left no marks, take the hot glare of the floodlight trained against his eyes, take Mulhavy's persistent, maddening words.

"You murdered your wife, and I'll prove it, Stafford."

"No!"

"You came home last night, and murdered your wife with that fireplace poker. You set your camera up and took that picture by using the delayed-action mechanism. You thought you were being smart by framing yourself. You thought you were being very smart! You made the enlargements in your darkroom, and mailed headquarters a print for what you thought was a good reason. You slipped up on just one thing—no outside murderer would have sent a picture *both* to you and to us.

"Most killers try to run away from murder, but your plan was to wallow in it. You wanted all the evidence so clearly against you and so easy for us to find that we'd believe you had been framed. No man with your intelligence would do murder without trying to escape or alibi himself. That's what you wanted us to think. Maybe the rest of the force will think that, but not Mike Mulhavy! Don't you pass out on me, Stafford; Keep your head up, damn you! I want you to get this straight. I'll find where you hid your wife's body. No matter how long it takes, I'll pin this murder on you."

That was all Dave Stafford heard.

HIS HEAD ached, and even his teeth ached, and the dry taste of blood was in his mouth. Mulhavy was gone, but that gave Dave no feeling of surprise or hope. It was Mulhavy's way of working, to throw the fear of God into a man, and then leave the suspect on his own. If the suspect tried to leave town, he would be damning himself with new evidence.

Mulhavy was efficient, and he was cruel. Once he set out to pin a crime on a man he felt certain was guilty, the detective would let nothing stop him. He was tireless, inexorable. And there were rumors around headquarters that Mulhavy had more than once manufactured the evidence necessary to convict a killer. Yet the man was undeniably honest, a cop who could not be bought.

But Mulhavy was human, and in that Dave Stafford knew a cold, tightening fear. The man was human enough to have his prejudices, even if he would never admit it. In that was the core of Dave's danger. Mulhavy hated him because Dave had once used his newspaper campaign to force the detective to tone down his rubber-hose method of working. So he would use every trick and skill to pin this murder on Stafford. With Mulhavy, it would be an opportunity to prove once and for all that when it came to convicting a killer, the means justified the end.

Dave got out of his chair, went into the bathroom, and washed the dried blood out of his mouth. He examined himself in the mirror, but the beating Mulhavy had given him had left no marks. Mulhavy was too smart for that.

Dave turned back into the living room, a man lost in his own worry and fear. It seemed unbelievable that his wife—his Clair—could be dead.

*Yesterday morning I kissed her before leaving for work, said, "I must have been using someone else's luck when I got you. You're tops, honey." And last night we quarreled. . . .*

He picked up the photograph, and stared at its image of murder. Yes it was Clair. He knew that. The right arm of the woman in the picture was bare to the shoulder, and there, dark and distinct, was the strawberry birthmark. That alone was all the identification Dave Stafford needed.

He wanted to cry, but he couldn't cry. Everything inside him was a dry, barren hurt. He kept telling himself over and over again, "Drunk as I was, I couldn't have killed Clair without remembering it. Someone else did this. Someone murdered Clair, and framed me. I've got to think. I've got to find out who it was."

He examined the envelope the photograph had been mailed in. But it told him nothing. It had been mailed special delivery from inside the city, and it bore only his printed name and address. And the thought suddenly struck him, grim in its certainty, that if this case got far enough along Mike Mulhavy would show proof that the envelope had been addressed with Dave's ink and pen. It would be, in Mulhavy'd mind, further evidence that Dave had tried to frame himself for murder.

Some peculiarity in the photograph nagged Dave. He had more than the average amateur's skill with a camera and darkroom equipment, and yet he couldn't put his finger on any definite fault in this picture. The composition had been dictated by the grim purpose of the photograph—to draw Dave Stafford into a murder case. The focus was clean and sharp in the picture. Whoever had snapped the shutter, Dave decided, must have stood near the dining room, training his camera to pick up the entire front wall when Dave had entered the house last night.

*Yet the room was dark when I came in! I was drunk, but I remember that much!*

A photograph made in a room that was completely dark? A flash shot made without a visible spill of light?

Dave bent closer to the photograph, picking out details in the room's furnishings and bal-

ancing them against his experience behind a camera lens. The table vase in the picture was pink, but it didn't show up in the photograph as it normally should, a neutral grey. The vase appeared pure white. The seascape hanging over the radio showed water that had photographed black. The strawberry birthmark just above Clair's knees showed dark and vivid against a skin that was unnaturally transparent in the picture. Yet the woman's fingernails, which normally would have matched the birthmark in color, appeared quite colorless.

Dave examined his own image, and that told him the rest of the story. He had shaved before leaving the house yesterday evening. Yet a distinct dark beard had been brought out along the flat planes of his jaw. And then he had it.

Infra-red!

It was the key to everything Dave needed to know about the picture. The murderer, the cameraman, whoever he was, had used a blackout bulb and film to get this damning photograph—he had used a film that was sensitive to the infra-red rays of light, a coated bulb that made no visible flare of light when it flashed out its infra-red rays to make a picture. Infra-red rays brought out the below-the-surface beard in a man's skin, recorded blues as solid black, bleached reds into white.

Excitement began kneading Dave's brain. He picked up the phone, dialed police headquarters, and asked for Mike Mulhavy.

"Who?"

"Mike Mulhavy, and hurry!"

THEN fear came back into Dave Stafford, and he dropped the phone back into its cradle. Telling Mulhavy what he had discovered would do no good. Mulhavy claimed a working knowledge of photography, himself. If he had not already noticed that infra-red had been used to make the picture, he would not be long guessing it. And he would only claim Dave had used this method to build up a murder frame against himself.

The irony hurt and numbed Dave Stafford; he had solved one puzzle in this murder—a murder he wanted to solve mostly for Clair's sake—but he hadn't helped himself to remain free to finish the job. And he had no one to whom to turn for help.

The room with its memories of all the living it had given Dave and Clair began squeezing down on him. They had had their quiet, pleasant evenings here, they had laughed and sometimes they had danced to music from the radio—Clair had died here.

He got his hat and went outside, locking the door carefully behind him, because that had always been his habit when Clair was not at home. He started down the walk, trying to force himself to think of who could have wanted Clair dead. She had no enemies that he knew of. Robbery could not have been the motive. His own enemies, then?

As a crusader he had made his enemies—but none he could consider capable of murder. Mike Mulhavy hated him, but it was the honest hatred of a cop who felt that justice had been injured when he had been forced to soften his method of working.

There was the bond broker who had been exposed as a crook in Dave's column. That man was still in prison, but could one of his relatives or friends be behind this murder? It seemed a hollow possibility.

There was George Maston, head of the city's Board of Public Works. Maston was a man with the ability of some politicians to get rich quickly and questionably. He campaigned, like many others of his kind, for the votes of the little man, and then used his elected position for his own petty benefit.

Dave had been fighting Maston's re-election, and had earned that man's hatred. Maston might use tricks and threats and political weight to batter down opposition, but murder was not in his line. As for others. . . .

He was turning down the street toward the bus stop when he heard the voice.

"Hey mister!"

He halted, turned. A small boy was running toward him, bright-eyed, tow-headed.

"Are you Mister Stafford, mister?"

The boy stopped running, grinned. "I got something for you that you lost. It's right here." He held out his hand. "It says on it there's a reward if you lose it and get it back."

It was a lipstick, and scratched in its plastic case were the words: "Return to D. Stafford, 67 Winthrop Place. Reward."

"It says you'll pay a reward," the boy said eagerly.

Dave pulled the cap off, and the wax stick inside was not red, but a deep brown. It was part of a makeup kit used in taking infra-red portraits to give the lips a natural color. It was what had been used to make the birthmark above Clair's knee stand out in the phograph, so identification of the body would be unmistakable.

"You weren't kidding about the reward, were you, mister."

Dave said grimly, "I wasn't kidding." But he had never bought this makeup stick, had never seen it before. He handed the boy a dollar.

"Where did you find this, sonny?"

"In the alley behind your house. Only I didn't find it, exactly. I was playing out there with Ronny and Judy, and a man come along and found it. He gave it to me and said I could have the money if I brought it to you." The boy suddenly looked alarmed. "Oney I wasn't supposed to tell you that."

"What?"

The boy's grip tightened on the dollar. "The man told me not to tell you about him. He said you might not give me the reward. You ain't going to take it back, mister?"

"I'm not going to take it back, sonny. What did the man look like?"

"He was kinda tall."

"How tall?"

"About as big as you, I think. And he was wearing a blue suit, I think, or maybe it was black—"

Mulhavy! The thought stabbed thin and cold into Dave's mind. This was to have been part of the evidence Mulhavy was building up against Dave!

"And I think he was smoking a pipe."

Mulhavy was strictly a pipe man, Dave remembered.

"Oney I ain't sure," the boy went on. "I was consecratin' on something else. I was playing war, and Ronny was a 'Merican Ranger, and Judy was a nurse, and I shot thirty-'leven dirty Japs—"

Dave had to run to catch his bus into town.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Joker

THE morning sun was climbing high, and heat came up from the sidewalk and pressed against Dave Stafford. The bus let Dave out on Monument Circle, and across the street, in the center of the circle, was the towering grey memorial that had been erected in honor of Indiana's Civil war dead. The water that spilled into the monument's twin pools was blue-green and clean. It looked cool, but the day was hot. A sailor, home on furlough, was leaning against a parapet, talking to a girl who reminded Dave, strangely and with a stab of bitter pain, of Clair. Neither the sailor nor the girl saw Dave approach.

The sailor said, "A guy has a lot of time to think when he's out there."

"A girl waiting at home thinks a lot too, Bill."

"I was thinking—that is, a guy gets to thinking that if he had someone at home, a wife—that if you'd marry me—"

The girl said, "I would. . . I will—Bill, yes!"

Dave moved past them, and on. They were in their world of life and hope, and he was in his world of anxiety and loss—of murder that had no reason or answer.

He walked slowly. He looked behind him, thinking it would be Mike Mulhavy's way to have him tailed. But he could see no one following him. He left the Circle, turned up Penn Street, and then into the camera store. This was the largest and most complete dealer in photographic supplies in the city. Ken Stratton, who managed the store, moved up the counter.

"Hello, Mr. Stafford."

He was a large man, this Stratton, with a strange and friendly glint of secret amusement close up in his round eyes. Dave took the makeup stick from his pocket, laid it on the counter.

"Did you ever see anything like that before, Ken?"

The man looked down at the brown lipstick. He raised his glance again. Except for that suggestion of mirth in his eyes, Stratton's face was grave. Dave sensed, rather than saw it, and it worried him without reason. It was as though the man behind the counter knew something—almost as if he had expected Dave to come here with this question.

Stratton nodded. "Why, sure, Mr. Stafford—it's part of an infra-red makeup kit. We're the only store in town selling it. You ought to know that."

Surprise reached into Dave Stafford. "I?"

"Sure."

It was more than Dave could understand. But then he had frequented this place, like all other amateurs, and perhaps the store manager thought Dave had noticed his stock of infra-red supplies.

Dave said, "Look, this is important to me. I've got to know who bought this makeup stick."

"Don't you know?"

"Damn it, Ken, stop trying to kid me! How should I know?"

"I m not kidding," Stratton said. "You bought that lipstick."

A cold finger traced Dave's spine. "Now look—"

"It's got your name scratched on it," Stratton reminded him.

"I know that! But I didn't put it there. I never saw that stick before!"

"You came in a week ago and bought it from me," Stratton said firmly. "And you bought half a dozen blackout flash bulbs. We don't do much trade in that line, and I remember distinctly."

"You're crazy!"

"You said you were going to take some infra-red flash shots. Of your wife, I think—a joke on her, or something. I'm not crazy, Mr. Stafford."

Dave stood staring at the man. He was cold inside, and he was scared. "Then I am," he said hoarsely. He was more afraid than he had ever been before in his life.

He went to the terminal, and stood there watching the buses load and pull out for distant cities. He didn't know how long he had been there, or how he had got there.

And being there meant nothing in particular

to him. He had been walking, driven by the restless panic that was crowding his reasoning, and suddenly he was here in the terminal. Some sub-conscious urge to flee, perhaps. . . .

He put his mind on that question, and let it lead him on to other questions. Did his fear stem from guilt, from a murder he had done and could not remember committing?

He had said, hot with anger, *"Clair, if anything happened to you I wouldn't care.*

He hadn't meant that, not really. He had been working hard, and his temper had been frayed, and Clair had been angry with him, and he had been angry with her. She had always been more potent than he in an argument. He had said that because he had been on the defensive and knew it. He had wanted only to hurt her.

But had what he told her become rooted in some dark corner of his mind to be released in an insensate, murderous fury while he was drunk? *Could* he have murdered her?

It was, he knew, psychologically possible. But such things happened only to other people, not to David Stafford. Yet there was the photograph Mike Mulhavy claimed Dave had taken. And the film developing tank in his darkroom had been freshly used—the negative from which the picture was blown up had been in his enlarger. And the manager of the camera store claimed Dave had bought infrared supplies that Dave could not remember either purchasing or using.

Dave thought, quick and frightened, *Maybe I am crazy!*

HE TURNED, and it was as if some dark force made him single one man out of that roiling crowd—Mike Mulhavy. The detective was standing far across the terminal, and as Dave walked toward him, that cold, inexorable smile was on the man's mouth.

Mulhavy said, "What made you change your mind about leaving?"

Dave shook his head. "I wasn't going to leave."

A baffled anger was in the detective's stare and tone. "I've been watching you for five minutes, Stafford, ever since you got here. You came here to try to slip out of town, but you couldn't decide what bus to take. You came here because you're guilty of murdering your wife. You know it, and I know it. You didn't think we'd let you out of sight, did you?"

"I told you I didn't do it, Mulhavy."

"Where did you hide her body?"

"I didn't kill Clair, I tell you."

"You were planning to take a powder. That's why you came here. You were afraid, and it was in your face. You're not the first murderer I've seen crack."

Dave said harshly, "If you're so sure I'm guilty, why don't you take me in?"

Mulhavy smiled, mirthlessly patient. "Everything in its time, Stafford. When I drag you in, you're going to be wrapped up for the chair. Right now you've got enough drag to be out again in no time. But, believe you me, I'm getting what I need against you."

"What?" Dave asked. "What have you got against me?"

Mulhavy shrugged.

"You haven't got a damn thing, and you know it!" Dave flared. "Until you know who took it, that photograph isn't evidence. Let me tell you something, Mulhavy. For a while, when I stood over there watching those buses pull out, I thought maybe I had murdered my wife. Everything that's happened almost pushed me off my rocker. I might have tried to get out of town without knowing exactly why, I was so mixed up for a while. But I didn't. You can thank yourself for that."

Mulhavy's eyes narrowed. "Me?"

"You!" Dave snapped. "You missed your bet there, Mulhavy. You tailed me too close. I saw you standing here, and it knocked me back to my senses. I'd forgot about you and how you work. Now I know I couldn't have murdered Clair. I can't prove it, but I know it—because you know it.

"Someone—and I don't know who—framed me with that picture. But everything else against me is of your making. You think I took that picture. You tried to beat a confession out of me. And now you're trying to frame me with trumped-up evidence of your own."

Mulhavy spat.

"You were in that camera store before I got there. You told Ken Stratton to tell me I'd bought supplies for taking infra-red pictures. You were trying to scare me into making a break."

There was no expression, either admission or denial, in Mulhavy's hard face.

Dave dug the lipstick out of his pocket. "You even gave that kid this makeup stick for infra-red just to get me into Stratton's store."

Mulhavy took the stick of lip coloring out of Dave's hand. A surprised and puzzled expression flickered across his face like a shadow, then was gone.

"So I did that, did I?" he growled. He gave Dave a long narrow stare. "You're either a fool or damn smart, Stafford. When I find out which, I'll have you all wrapped up for the chair. And don't try to leave town, chum. You couldn't get very far."

IN THE stockroom of his camera store, Ken Stratton was apologetic, and the glint of expectant mirth was no longer in his eyes.

He said, "I'm sorry as the devil, Mr. Stafford. It was Mike Mulhavy's idea. He said telling you that you bought that infra-red stuff was to be some sort of a joke. But after you left, I got to thinking it over—"

"Murder's no joke," Dave told him.

Stratton's stare widened, startled. "Mur—" he choked.

Dave asked, "Who bought that infra-red outfit?"

But he couldn't break through the alarm and curiosity that gripped the store manager's mind. There was no patience left in Dave Stafford. He had been beaten by Mike Mulhavy's blows, and he had been beaten by his own doubts and fears. Now he was against a wall, and he was fighting back. He put the flat of his hand against Stratton's chest, pushed the man against a packing crate.

He said savagely, "Look, Ken, you can keep your curiosity until the noon papers hit the street. I asked you a question, and I want to know the answer. Who bought that infra-red stuff?"

Stratton's answer came without hesitation. "George Maston."

*"What?"* It shocked him and he asked, "Are you sure?"

The store manager nodded.

"But Maston is a politician! He's a politician inside and out. It's his hobby and his business. I've studied him and his history, and I know him. He doesn't know shutter from infinity when it comes to photography!"

"Maybe so," Stratton said, "But I've been reading your news column, Mr. Stafford. You've been riding George Maston, and I remembered his name when he phoned here for that infra-red stuff."

Dave gripped the man's arm. "You mean he didn't come in after it?"

"Not in person. He phoned his order, and had a girl pick it up."

"His secretary?"

"I wouldn't know. But she was a looker." Stratton made motions with his hands. "She paid me with Maston's check, in the exact amount. That was ten days ago, and the check went through. So it was George Maston, all right!"

"But who was the girl?" Dave asked savagely. "What did she look like, height, weight, coloring?"

"About five feet four, I imagine. I noticed her because I thought at the time she'd make a good photo model. She'd weigh about one-eighteen. A dark blonde—wore a blue dress—nice legs. I've never seen her before or since."

Dave groaned. From that description, the woman might have been, he knew, his own wife.

He asked wearily, "You told Mulhavy all this?"

Stratton nodded. "Sure. He asked if you'd bought any infra-red stuff, and I told him no."

Dave's thoughts narrowed down. "Mulhavy didn't buy that makeup lipstick I showed you?"

The store manager shook his head. "He didn't buy anything."

Then, Dave thought, some one else had planted that lip paste near his house where it would be found—yet the description given by the boy who had brought Dave the lipstick did not match with George Maston.

Dave turned slowly away.

The store manager caught his arm. "There's one thing I forgot to tell Mike Mulhavy. I just remembered it. When that woman opened her purse to get out Maston's check, I saw part of an address on her billfold. It was twenty-one hundred and something on Central Avenue. That help you any, Mr. Stafford?"

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Killer for Mike

IT WAS a nondescript neighborhood of frame houses and brick apartments. Dave tried the grocery and local restaurant, but he had no luck. He went to the corner drug store, questioned a clerk.

He repeated the description Stratton had given him. "She answered an ad I put in the papers for a stenographer. I decided to give her the job, but I lost her name. I remember her address was somewhere around here."

The drug clerk frowned. "It sounds like she might be Mrs. Collings. Only she works in some defense plant, and she said once she wouldn't take another job until her husband came home from war." He suddenly snapped his fingers. "How about June Harvey?"

Dave rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "The name does sound familiar—"

The drug clerk said, "She's the only other one around here that answers your description. She lives in the Carmon apartments—number thirty-two. I deliver cokes up there—"

The apartment was a walk-up and Dave found number 32 halfway down a dimly lighted hall. He knocked on the door, and got no answer. He waited. A man who had been idling at the far end of the hall, came out of the shadows at a slow walk.

Dave rapped on the door again. The man in the hall moved closer, short and heavy and strangely light on his feet. The man drifted to a halt, watching Dave with small, deep-set eyes. There was a dent in his nose and scars around his eyes, and his right ear had been mutilated in some past ring battle.

"You looking for June?" He had a hoarse, whispery voice, a strangely hostile voice.

Dave nodded. A queer coldness was settling in the pit of his stomach.

"June ain't answering the door today," the man said. "I'll let you in."

Dave frowned. He didn't like the way this man kept watching him. There was something personal in it, a menace, a danger.

He said uncertainly, "I can come back later—"

"June won't mind at all," the man whispered. He fitted a key into the door, twisted it. He pushed the door open. "She won't mind at all, mister. Go right on in."

It was, Dave thought, more of a threat than an invitation. He couldn't understand it, and yet it was there, cold and unmistakable. He hesitated, but only long enough to read the warning in the man's unblinking stare. The man wanted Dave to go inside. He was an ex-pug, and he could—and would—force Dave to go into the apartment if necessary.

"Thanks," Dave murmured. He moved through the doorway, two slow strides, and there he halted.

The body was lying at one side, on the floor, with one arm thrown over her face, and she was quite motionless. She was, Dave knew, dead.

The man behind him said, "There she is—you said you wanted to see June."

Dave said nothing. He didn't move. He stood there, staring at the body and noticing how much this woman looked like his Clair. The woman wore a white dress with a pink floral print that was a duplicate of one Clair had bought only a few days ago. Her hair was only slightly darker than Clair's. But there was a different cut to that portion of the face which Dave could see under the woman's still arm.

The man caught Dave's shoulder, jerked him around with sudden violence. He said harshly, "I warned you not to see June any more!"

And then he swung his fist.

Dave went down under that short, clubbing blow. His ribs hurt where the man's knuckles had landed, and he couldn't pull air into his lungs. But the man wouldn't let him stay down.

He jerked Dave to his feet, and said in a raw, hating voice, "I warned you to stop playing around with my girl!"

HE WAS a man made mad by his bitterness and hatred. He released Dave, used his left fist again, and his right. Dave sagged and hit the floor. He rolled over, and forced himself to sit up. He was sick in his stomach, and he thought, *That man's going to kill me!*

He tried to say, "I've never even seen this woman before!" But there was no air in his lungs, not enough strength in his words to reach up to the man with the ring-scarred face.

He felt himself jerked to his feet again, shoved back against the wall. He struck out, blindly and instinctively, but he did not have the skill even to hit the other. He watched the man's fists coming up again, hard, white-knuckled knots that could bruise and hurt. Fists that could knock the life out of a man. The pug had the power in his meaty shoulders, he had the skill—the will to kill was in his small, hot eyes.

Dave veered to one side, scraping along the wall with his back. He dodged away from the wall, and into the open, but he couldn't get away. He couldn't escape.

A blow caught him below the ear, halting his movement. Through the red haze that was in his vision, he saw the man crowd in close. The man's weight and his cruel strength bent Dave over the back of a chair, stretching the muscles of his stomach taut. He heard the man's low, gritting hatred in his ears.

"You killed my girl, and now I'm going to kill you!" His face was darkly flushed, and his eyes were ruthless, and his fist was raised

and cocked over Dave's stretched stomach muscles. "When I hit you, damn you, I'll bust your belly wide open!"

Another voice said, so low and distant in Dave's dazed brain that he was not certain he had heard it, "Don't do that!"

But the pug's cocked fist did not relax.

The voice was sharper this time. "Don't do it, I said! I'd hate to have to shoot you!"

The balled fist sank out of his vision and the pressure was released from Dave's straining back. He tried to straighten, but he couldn't straighten. He slipped to the floor, and sat there, staring dully at Mike Mulhavy at the door.

THE detective came into the room, and a gun was in his hand. It was strange, Dave thought, that Mulhavy had given no more than a passing glance to the body of the woman on the floor. No surprise showed in Mulhavy's face. It was almost as if Mulhavy had known death was waiting inside this room.

Phil Colby came through the door behind Mulhavy. Because it was his job to handle news and photography at police headquarters, Colby had his camera with him. He saw Dave Stafford, and after his first flicker of surprise, he was strangely and coldly impersonal.

Milk Mulhavy said, "You all right, Stafford?"

Dave nodded. "I feel like I'd been hit by a tank." He tried to plumb Mulhavy's stare, but the man's eyes were opaque. Still they did not seem unfriendly, as inexorably accusing as they had been before. Mulhavy was silent, plainly waiting for explanations.

Dave told of his second talk with the owner of the camera store, of the tip that had led him here to the dead woman's apartment.

Dave motioned toward the pug, "This fellow was waiting down the hall when I knocked on the door, but I've never seen him before. He claims he was June Harvey's boy friend. He let me in, and—" he hesitated—"there she was, dead. It was the first time I'd seen her, but I couldn't make this pug believe me."

The ex-fighter was looking at Phil Colby with sullen interest. Then he said bitterly, "Hell, it wasn't this other guy. It was you playin' around with my girl! It was dark the night I caught you with June—"

Phil Colby shrugged.

Mike Mulhavy said dryly, "If you want pictures here for your paper, Stafford, you'd better take them yourself. I don't think Colby works for your sheet any longer. He's the one who helped put you in this jam."

Dave got slowly to his feet. He wished someone would throw a sheet over the body on the floor. He wished he could bring back yesterday and those hundreds of earlier yesterdays of Clair's talking and Clair's laughter and Clair's close, warm presence.

He looked at Phil Colby, and Colby sneered, "You told your wife you wished she was dead, and George Maston told me he wanted your column killed. I thought this was a cinch."

So, Dave thought, Colby had worked with Maston in building up this murder and frame! It was a jolt. To Dave's knowledge, there had been no lost love between Colby and the politician since Maston's son had welched on a big I.O.U. he had lost to Colby. How much had that note covered? Ten thousand dollars, Colby had claimed, and the politician had refused to pay for his son's losses.

Mike Mulhavy was saying, "Until an hour ago, Stafford, I thought you were either plenty smart or a damn big fool for claiming you had been framed. But when you handed me that infra-red lip makeup at the bus station, I remembered the camera store manager told me George Maston had bought some. I gave you the benefit of the doubt and checked that angle.

"When I got to Maston's house, he was as crazy as a horticulturist with ants in his plants. He opened the door, recognized me, and yelled that he hadn't meant to kill her. I wasn't even sure what he was talking about. Then he slugged me, and made a break for upstairs. Before I could catch him, he got a gun in his room, and shot himself. Before he died, he told the whole story. It was Colby, here, who gave Maston the idea of framing you for a faked murder."

"Faked?" Dave looked at the detective. Hope was suddenly in him, and a deep-driven fear that his hope would be futile. "You mean—you mean that Clair. . . ."

"She's all right. She should be back home by now. She was blindfolded and tied up in Maston's house. All he wanted was to keep you in trouble until he was reelected in next week's elections."

Relief, swift and unbelievable, ran through Dave Stafford. He wanted to cry and he wanted to laugh. He wanted to go home and kiss Clair, and when his vacation came he wanted to paint the kitchen like no kitchen was ever painted before.

MULHAVY said, "Colby cooked up the plan, and sold it to Maston. He rigged up his news camera for taking the infra-red picture in total darkness, and told Maston what to do. They got this June Harvey—she's got a yard-long record on the headquarters blotter for shake-downs—and her job was to put on one of your wife's dresses, and play dead on the floor.

"According to Maston, he got some blood from the coroner's office to put on the floor

and on the fireplace poker. They left the poker where you'd be sure to stumble over it and pick it up when you came home last night. When you came in drunk, Maston snapped his picture, and the Harvey girl slipped out of the way until you'd gone to bed. Then Colby came in, used your darkroom to develop the negative and make the enlargements that framed you."

Dave rubbed a hand across his eyes. Everything he had heard shaped into a pattern, but there was more—there had to be more—to it.

Mulhavy continued, "Your wife was gagged and blindfolded, and she couldn't testify who kidnaped her. Maston must have thought he'd pulled a safe, sure job against you, but the rest he told me wasn't clear. He gave Phil Colby a clean bill, but the Harvey girl must have stayed a while with Maston. I figured she tried a shakedown of her own on him. He claimed she felt sick, and wanted a bromo. He got one for her, and it killed her. Only it was potassium cyanide he gave her. I found traces of it in an empty bromo bottle in his medicine cabinet."

Dave said, "Maston admitted giving her the poison?"

Mulhavy shook his head. "He died just after telling about bringing her body here." He added belligerently, "Anyhow, what more proof do you need than what killed this woman and what was in Maston's medicine cabinet. The coroner will find cyanide did this job. I know my business, Stafford!"

"You thought you knew your business when you were accusing me of murder," Dave reminded him. He rubbed the back of his hand across dry lips. He went into the kitchenette, got himself a glass and filled it from the faucet. But he didn't drink the water. He found the salt shaker he wanted, and looked at it grimly. His eyes were hard, and his mouth was hard.

He returned to the living room and looked at the body on the floor. Whatever June Harvey had been in life, hard and grasping, death had softened the lines of her face. She lay, Dave noticed, in much the same position she had taken when she had helped fake Clair's death. The brown coloring of infra-red make-up had been removed from her shoulder, but a small dark stain still showed. Looking at this, Dave remembered the picture she had posed for, the fears and doubts and terrors she had helped give him. But she had not been alone in this. There had been others, George Maston and Phil Colby.

Dave looked up at Colby. "I ought to beat all hell out of you," he said with slow, even hatred. "But you'll pay your price when you go to the chair for murder!"

Colby's mouth tightened, and a faint streak of grey came across each cheekbone, but that was all the change of expression he showed.

Mulhavy blurted out, "Stafford, what the hell!"

Dave said, "George Maston framed me, and we know that, but Phil Colby framed Maston. Here's your murderer, Mike!"

Colby sneered, "What are you trying to do, Stafford—manufacture yourself a column?"

Mulhavy growled, "Now don't start giving out with any smart theorizing." But he was intent. He was listening.

Dave said, "It was easy for Colby to frame Maston, because Maston knew nothing about photography. Maston ordered the infra-red supplies Colby said they'd need and paid for them with his check, not knowing, as Colby knew, that such supplies are not frequently bought and would certainly be traced back to him. Which was what Colby wanted."

Phil Colby said mockingly, "Now don't you sound cute!"

Dave went on, "Colby tipped June Harvey off to play sick and ask for a bromo while she was alone with Maston. He told her if she worked it right, she could squeeze a lot of money out of Maston. But Maston didn't know the 'bromo' he brought her was really poison Colby had planted in the bottle. Sure, Colby did that! Potassium cyanide is a chemical—and a quick-acting poison—any photog-

rapher can buy at a camera store. It killed June Harvey, and Maston knew he was on the spot."

Dave looked at the detective. "When you went to ask Maston about the infra-red bulbs and makeup, Maston thought you were after him for the murder. He confessed killing the girl, and then shot himself. If he hadn't killed himself, he might have gone to the chair for murder. That was what Colby wanted. With George Maston dead, Maston's son would inherit, and then Colby could collect on that note for ten thousand."

Colby was silent, and now he was tense. Mike Mulhavy said, "And what do we get for proof?"

Dave shook his head. "I haven't any."

He watched mockery and relief rise in Colby's dark eyes. He said, "I'll take the camera and film holders now, Colby."

Colby shrugged. "I'll see you in a slander court, Stafford." He handed over the camera. He reached into his coat pocket, brought out two film holders.

Dave took the holders, glanced at them, and at the white granular substance caught in their corners. He looked up.

"This white stuff, Colby," he said. "Some of it must have been spilled loose in your pocket with the film holders. What is it—part of the potassium cyanide you put in that bromo bottle?"

For a moment the man stood rigid, the sheen of falseness in his eyes changing to sudden panic. Then he broke for the door. Mike Mulhavy yelled, reached for his gun. Dave threw the camera. It was a good camera, and a heavy one, but it was worthless after it and the man it struck hit the floor.

Dave said, "George Maston framed me, and Colby framed Maston, so I just framed Colby. It wasn't cyanide on the film holders, only some table salt I got in the kitchen. Mike, if it takes a rubber hose to get a full confession out of him, I won't care."

WHEN he got home the lights were on, and Clair was waiting at the door. They had their soft words, and made their promises that never again would they ever argue.

But much later that night Dave sat up suddenly in bed, his mind pierced by a single sharp question.

"Clair!" he said.

"What?"

"That infra-red makeup above the Harvey girl's shoulder was in exactly the right place! How did Phil Colby know about that birthmark?"

Clair's voice was drowsy with sleep. "What did you say, darling?"

Dave Stafford reconsidered. "Nothing," he said. "Nothing at all, dear."

# The Ape Saw Murder

FROM reports of Mississippi criminal records comes a strange true story dated a number of years back. All the entertainment on the river was then furnished by showboats, floating theaters, many of them large and magnificent. Old Cap Mosely's boat was small and unpretentious but, in his way, he was as popular with audiences as any. He gave a one-man show, marionettes, Punch and Judy, trained cats and dogs, and Jocky, a Barbary ape who could do all sorts of human tricks.

One morning the inhabitants of a riverside village were delighted to see Cap's theater boat lying at the wharf where it had tied up in the night. All the children came running and calling the captain. But he did not come out, and all they could see was Jocky, chained to his usual post, straining at the chain and dancing with rage. He was waving something in his hand.

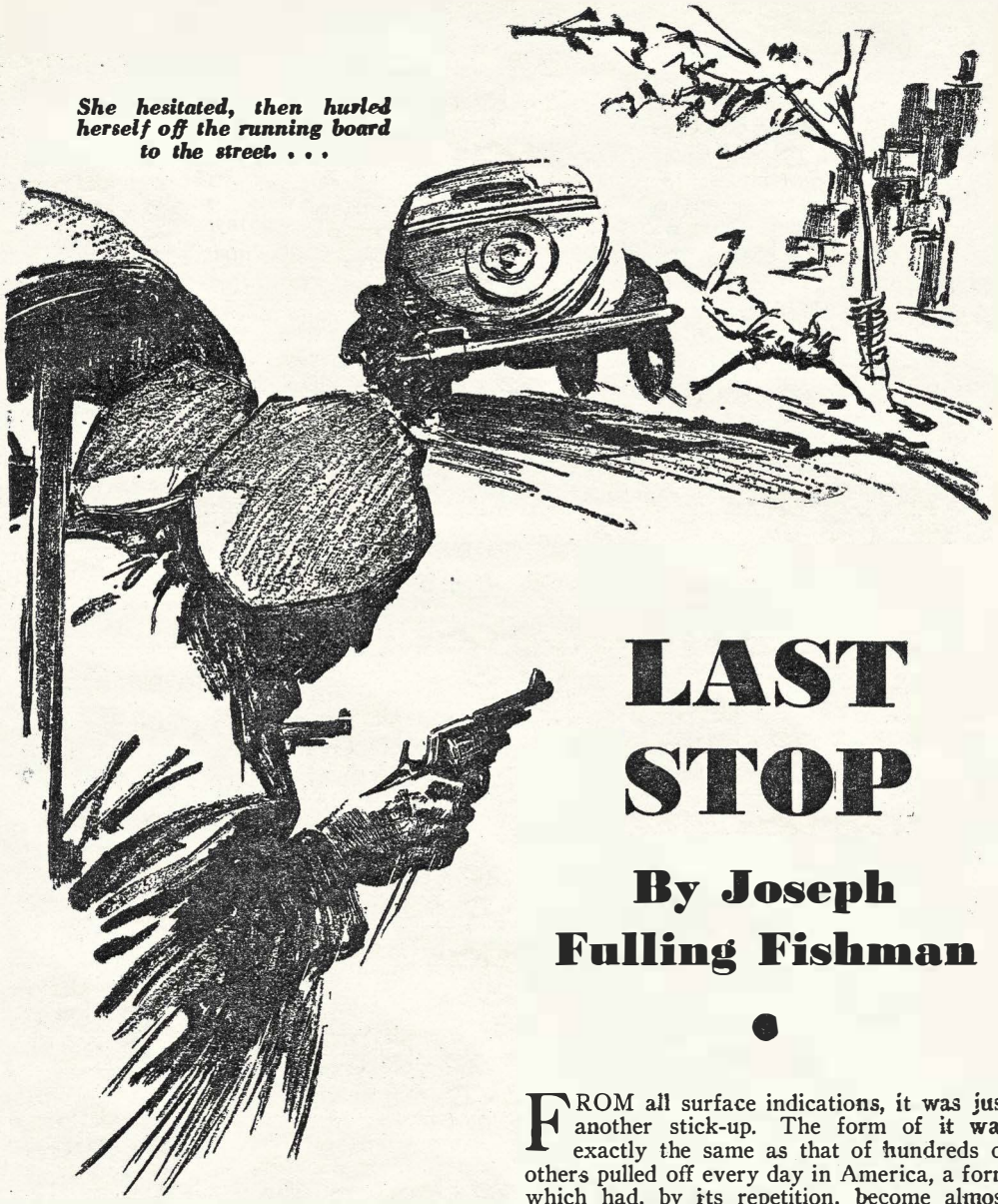
As noon approached and there still was no sign of the captain, who usually gave his first show shortly after that hour, the Sheriff of the county went on board. He saw that what the ape held appeared to be a strand of a woman's hair. Search on the boat revealed no sign of the proprietor or his money.

Word was swiftly sent up the river and it was reported that at his last stop-off there had been a couple on board with the captain, two stranded actors, Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Johnson, whom he had befriended. This pair were soon traced, found to be in possession of quite a sum of money.

They were brought back to where the showboat lay. No sooner did the ape spy them than he screamed and danced with rage. They were hurried to the county jail, charged with murder. The strand of hair taken from the ape's clutch matched the hair on the woman's head.

There was no trace of the missing man for days—then his body, the skull battered, came to the surface. The woman broke down then and confessed that her husband had attacked the captain with a long heavy iron weight and that, while they struggled, she had backed away and within reach of the ape, who had wound his long fingers in her hair and yanked out a lock.

—*By Robert W. Sneddon.*



*She hesitated, then hurled herself off the running board to the street. . . .*

# LAST STOP

## By Joseph Fulling Fishman

●

***Stopping at a red light is usually temporary — then you go on to where you wanted to go, maybe a movie, a wedding, or to see a friend. But to one woman and her young daughter that brief pause meant the difference between death—and nameless terror!***

FROM all surface indications, it was just another stick-up. The form of it was exactly the same as that of hundreds of others pulled off every day in America, a form which had, by its repetition, become almost monotonously routine.

Any cop in Cleveland would have recognized the two bandits immediately. Both of them, Francis Bush and Norman Townsend, had been members of the mob which, eight years before, had stuck up the Madison Heights branch of the Cleveland Trust Company and got away—for a time—with $20,000. Bush had been sentenced to twenty years, while Townsend had drawn from twenty to twenty-five. Both were paroled.

And here they were, in the jewelry shop of Edmond S. Quinlan in the Keith Building,

located in the very center of Cleveland. Mr. Quinlan and his son Herbert, a handsome young man of about twenty-five, were discussing the value of some diamonds which the elder Quinlan held in a bag in his hand. They were interrupted by the entrance of two rather attractive-looking young men.

One of them handed over a solitaire ring. "Can you tell me the value of this?" he asked.

Young Quinlan took the small circlet. "Just a minute—" he began. He got no further. With the bewildering ease of magicians, both men produced guns.

"Stick-up," Bush said, his voice soft but businesslike—the tone of the professional case-hardened bandit. "Hand over those stones," he followed up, "then get down on the floor behind that counter—and stay there."

But at this moment the stick-up changed from a routine, everyday "heist" into the most exciting real-life thriller which the city by the lake had ever known.

Young Quinlan struck out with his fist. The blow landed on the nose of the surprised Bush. The latter's coolness vanished like smoke in a puff of wind. His eyes blazed with rage. He dropped back a foot or two to get clearance for his gun. A thin line of saliva appeared between his rigid, now almost colorless lips.

He raised the gun and pulled the trigger.

A choked "Oh!" came from Quinlan. He clapped his hand to his abdomen. Through his fingers and on to the floor his blood trickled. He bent over farther and farther. Then, losing his equilibrium, he toppled to the carpet.

"Hero, eh?" Bush sneered. "That'll teach you—"

The elder Quinlan leapt forward, his hand outstretched to grab the bandit's revolver. But the fight shown by the son had made Bush cautious. He stayed clear now and once more pressed the little curved pin. The bullet burned a path of red along the side of the second victim's head.

It was a mere crease. It dazed the older man for a moment, but did not render him unconscious. Nor did it dampen his belligerence. He started to shout.

"Murder! Help! Thieves!"

The bandits' assurance deserted them completely. In its place came panic, a mad desire to get as far away as possible from what had appeared to be such an "easy lay," but which, in the fraction of a moment, had been transformed into a deadly menace.

The two men turned and ran into the street. The passing crowd had not yet taken into its consciousness the significance of Quinlan's screams. Rapidly the two men threaded their way in and out. They then slowed heir pace, figuring to mingle with the other pedestrians and simply lose themselves.

BUT this plan, too, went awry. For the jeweler, panting, half-fainting from excitement and with his face, collar and shirt discolored by the red stream which dripped from his head, ran into the street and, pushing his way in and out through he stunned spectators, managed to keep the bandits in sight.

There was a traffic officer, Fred Blazier, stationed at the intersection of East 17th Street and Euclid Avenue. Quinlan stumbled up to him and in gasping, breathless wheezes, jerked out his story while pointing a shaking arm toward the two fast-receding bandits.

Standing first in line on the fatal street, where the red light was up, was a small truck. Blazier raced over to it and climbed up alongside of Andrew Fleming, the driver.

"Get going!" he commanded. "Give 'er all she's got. Those two men there, running up Seventeenth."

The driver stepped on the accelerator, weaved skillfully in and out of the traffic going at right angles and swung the truck into a clear space beyond Euclid.

Townsend looked back over his shoulder. He rapped out something to his companion. Both started to run. There was a parking lot about a block away. They swerved into it, covered its width with amazing speed. They leapt up on a fence and dropped down eighteen feet to another parking lot below.

They scrambled to their feet and started to run, Townsend with the same speed which he had previously shown. But Bush fell behind. He limped laboriously, his face showing excruciating pain at every step. Then, realizing that he had fractured his ankle, he hobbled between two lines of cars, opened the rear door of one and cowered down in its interior.

But one of the attendants of the parking lot had seen him. He pointed out the car to the ever-growing crowd of spectators and the two or three patrolmen who had been attracted by the disturbance. The latter dragged the anguished thug from his hiding place and took him to headquarters.

Officer Blazier, following in the commandeered truck, had anticipated the direction which Townsend and Bush would take. Bush, of course, was stopped by his accident. But Townsend did just what Blazier had expected, running from the second parking lot into Chester Avenue. Here the patrolman saw him. He urged the driver ahead. They were approaching 18th Street and Chester. The red light was up on Chester. First in one line was a Buick sedan. In it were Mrs. I. W. Martin and her nine-year-old daughter, Beverly.

Blazier saw Townsend jump on the Buick's running board, swing the door open, push the

two occupants of the front seat over to the right side and slip behind the steering-wheel, himself.

The red light was still on. The Buick was now only a few feet away. Blazier dropped to the ground and raced to it. He jumped on the running board and started to open the door. Without taking his left hand off the wheel, Townsend swung his right around and sent a bullet into the officer's right lung. Blazier's hands released their hold. He dropped to the street, struggling for breath as something warm and choking gushed into his mouth and out through his open lips.

The light changed to green. Townsend swung the clutch into second and then into high. The Buick sedan, with the two panic-stricken women at the bandit's side, raced up the wide, paved highway.

Fleming had seen it all. He started his lumbering truck and thundered up the road after the commandeered sedan.

IT WAS a puzzled group of officers that was standing on the pavement in front of the Central Police Station, at Payne Avenue and Twenty-First Street. Things were happening, happening with lightning speed, and yet there they were, stalled, hesitant, not knowing what to do next.

It was but a few moments before when the first message was received about the Quinlan stick-up. In almost the same motion, five men lounging around the detectives' room, Lieutenant Knute Gloeckner, and Detectives Thomas Osborne, John Walsh, Ralph Kennedy and Roy Heisley pounded down the stairs toward the seven-passenger Lincoln at the curb.

But even as they started to climb in, another message came, a message that both the Quinlans had been shot.

And then, as the detectives again began to pile into the car, still a third:

> One bandit, Francis Bush, captured after breaking ankle. Other got away. . . .

"Bush!" Gloeckner exclaimed. "The other must be Townsend. He's a bad—"

Again he was interrupted by a voice from the magic diaphragm in the little box in front of the car:

> Patrolman Fred Blazier shot by escaping bandit while attempting arrest. Was seen at Chester and Eighteenth Streets. Believed to have seized car. Be careful. Man dangerous.

"All right!" shouted Gloeckner. "Something to go on at last. Chester and Eighteenth."

But even before the car could get started another message, quick, staccato, urgent, came to the ears of the tense officers:

> Quinlan bandit in Buick sedan with two women. Ohio car. License number 678574.

"Women!" Gloeckner ejaculated. "Bet one of them is that dame we never caught, the one in the mob that stuck up the Cleveland Trust."

A Buick sedan shot by the police car. It was going a good sixty miles an hour. Before the officers could move, a truck lumbered up. It was Fleming's. He had managed to keep the Buick sedan in sight. He didn't stop. But as he came abreast the Lincoln he leaned far out.

"That's the man!" he shouted. "The stick-up man!"

The last words, whipped by the wind, trailed tenuously. But Gloeckner got their import. "Step on it!" he commanded Osborne, in the

driver's seat. The car jerked ahead. In a moment its motors were humming and its rapidly-heating tires sending forth a whining moan as they slipped with ever-increasing speed over the asphalt. Glancing into the mirror, Gloeckner could not repress a smile when he saw the truck trailing far behind, but still keeping up the chase.

Townsend rounded the corner at 30th Street, turning into Perkins Avenue and racing toward East 40th. His car was no match for the Lincoln. Slowly at first, and then more rapidly, the distance between the two vehicles began to decrease. The officers opened fire with their .38's, trying to hit a tire. They were unsuccessful.

"Pull up alongside and push him to the curb," Gloeckner directed.

Now only a few yards separated the speeding vehicles. The bandit roared across an intersection at East 39th Street, swerving sharply to avoid a car coming at right-angles. Osborne had to slow up to keep from striking it. He picked up speed rapidly. At 41st Street he drew abreast of the Buick. Sunk down in a corner next to the bandit were the two women. They were cowering near the floor, their faces in their hands as though to shut out the disaster which threatened them.

"Pull over!" Gloeckner shouted.

Again, as with Blazier, Townsend did not turn around. Keeping his left hand on the wheel he swung his right over his left shoulder and sent three bullets into the police car windshield. Two of them did no damage. The third struck Heisley, sitting in the back seat, squarely in the cheek. He sank to the floor of the car.

"All right," Gloeckner bit out. "I didn't want to hurt those women, even if they are molls. It's on their own heads now. Use your automatics, boys."

The blazingly angry officers grabbed the .45's from the racks on top of the car and sent a stream of bullets after the sedan. The slugs crashed through the back window. The Buick swerved, struck the right curb, bounded to the center, swung into an S-curve, righted itself and hurtled on. With the pursuers not ten yards behind, it crossed 42nd, 43rd and the other 40's until it reached East 55th. Here, warned by the screaming siren, Officer Francis McVeray mounted his motorcycle and followed the police car.

It was a miracle that neither automobiles nor pedestrians were hit. Wide-eyed, open-mouthed, bewildered people jumped for safety and then followed the speeding vehicles with their eyes.

"He's making for Euclid Avenue," Gloeckner said grimly. "Thinks he'll have more room to maneuver and lose us there."

He was right. The bandit twisted his car into that famous thoroughfare and began to thread in and out between the hundreds of cars visible ahead. An incessant rain of bullets beat against the back of the sedan and poured through the shattered back window. Once more the Buick swerved, as if by a spasmodic twist of the driver's wrist.

"Think we hit him," Gloeckner shouted. He's swinging back and forth! He's losing control! Looks like— My God! Look out!"

THE right front door of the sedan had opened. One of the women was crawling out on the running board, stooping down, making herself into as small a ball as possible. She straightened, hesitated, then hurled herself out to the street, rolling over and over, to come to rest in a crumpled heap against the curb.

Instinctively Osborne jerked the wheel around. His foot came down spasmodically on the brake. His right tire tracked the asphalt not three inches from the rolling woman. The instant cessation of speed threw the officers forward.

"Don't stop!" the lieutenant ordered. "The boys will take care of her. It's that lad we're after."

Osborne released the brake. The car leaped ahead and the police guns resumed their deadly chatter.

Again the Buick gave a breath-taking twist. It lifted on two wheels, righted itself, swayed from side to side. Its driver was losing control. In jerky spasms he swung to right and left. The sidewise motion reduced his speed.

The police car started to draw abreast. The front of it reached the sedan's rear. Now the officers could see the other woman occupant crouched on the floor. Also they discerned blood spots on the bandit's left shoulder.

"Got him all right!" Osborne bit out grimly. "There he goes!"

Townsend had turned finally into 73rd Street. His car ran a few feet, twisted left and right, swung in a crazy half-circle. Then, completely out of control, it leaped the curb, catapulted over the pavement and, in a welter of twisted and broken metal and shattered glass, crashed into a solid brick retaining wall.

Gloeckner and his men, with the exception of the wounded Heisley, tumbled out of the car and ran toward the wrecked Buick. The lieutenant started to pull the door open. Townsend, bloody, disheveled, glassy-eyed and apparently only semi-conscious, raised his automatic laboriously with both hands.

The lieutenant dropped to the ground. He was taking no chances with this maddened killer. Three times the latter pulled the trigger, apparently unaware that he no longer had a target.

Walsh sent a gas shell through the broken

right window. Through the stifling fumes could be seen the dim outlines of Townsend and the woman. In a few moments the fumes cleared. Now sure he was taking no chances, Gloeckner opened the door, reached inside the car and pulled both its occupants to the street.

The first glance at Townsend assured the officers that neither they, nor society at large, had anything further to fear from him. The three bullets which had entered his body had done their work, slowly, but effectively. Already dying when he had made his last defiant gesture of trying to shoot Gloeckner, Townsend's last breath had been snuffed out by the fumes from the gas shell.

THE officers turned their attention to the woman, still under the impression that she was probably the member of the Bush-Townsend mob who had taken part in the robbery of the Cleveland Trust, and whom they had never been able to catch. She was unconscious, but only slightly wounded.

"She doesn't look like a moll to me," Gloeckner observed.

He searched through her bag. Included among the articles which always seem to be in such receptacles was a business card reading:

I. WRIGHT MARTIN
FOREMAN, COLLINGWOOD SHOPS,
N. Y. CENTRAL R. R.

"There's something phoney here," Gloeckner commented. "Kennedy, you phone Martin and tell him to come down to headquarters and you and Walsh, Osborne, go back and find out about that woman who jumped out."

It was not until Martin reached headquarters that the officers learned that both Mrs. Martin and her daughter were innocent victims of as vicious a thug as the Cleveland police had ever encountered. Mrs. Martin was not badly injured, but her nine-year-old daughter, Beverly, as well as young Herbert Quinlan, were in a critical condition.

The little girl's skull had been badly fractured by her frantic, panic-stricken leap from the car. She was unconscious for a full month. When she recovered, her mind was a blank concerning the events of that kaleidoscopic and dramatic half-hour, during the scant thirty minutes of which an attempted hold-up had resulted in one of the wildest chases through the city's streets that Cleveland had ever known, in the shooting of four men and one woman, and the serious injury of a little girl.

And this was not all. For young Quinlan, after days of agony, died of his wounds, thus changing the charge against the crippled Bush from robbery and assault to murder.

Bush went on trial for first degree murder on November 14, 1932, before Judge George P. Baer. He claimed that he had had nothing to do with the robbery, that Townsend had phoned him to meet him in front of the Keith Building and that, while he was waiting for him, Townsend and another man ran out and Townsend yelled to him that he should join them.

That the jury considered the contention a ridiculous one was shown by the speed with which they returned a verdict of guilty. Bush's rather handsome face lost its color and his manner its usual assurance when he heard the verdict. But he brightened and became his normal self when the foreman added "with a recommendation for mercy," which automatically changed the sentence from death to life imprisonment.

On November 23, 1932, just about six weeks after he had entered the Quinlan shop with such confidence, Bush stood up to hear himself condemned to spend the remainder of his days in the Ohio State Penitentiary at Columbus.

# A HILLARY HOUSE NOVEL

*Necktie Sam swallowed audibly. "Patrick—Patrick, it ain't possible!"*

## CHAPTER ONE

### Death's Cover Girl

IT WAS too bad she waited for Pat Oberron, when the police knew about her some ten hours before Pat did. About eleven o'clock that hot August night her call came through to the radio dispatcher at police headquarters. That was one thing you could say for her—she'd had the good sense to ask for the dispatcher instead of giving her message to the desk sergeant. But it was a pity she couldn't have named names before she went into hysterics.

"Help! For God's sake! He—he's going to kill me!"

And then the connection was broken. She was just a frantic voice crying out in the night. Aside from sending out an all-cars alert, there wasn't anything that could be done for her.

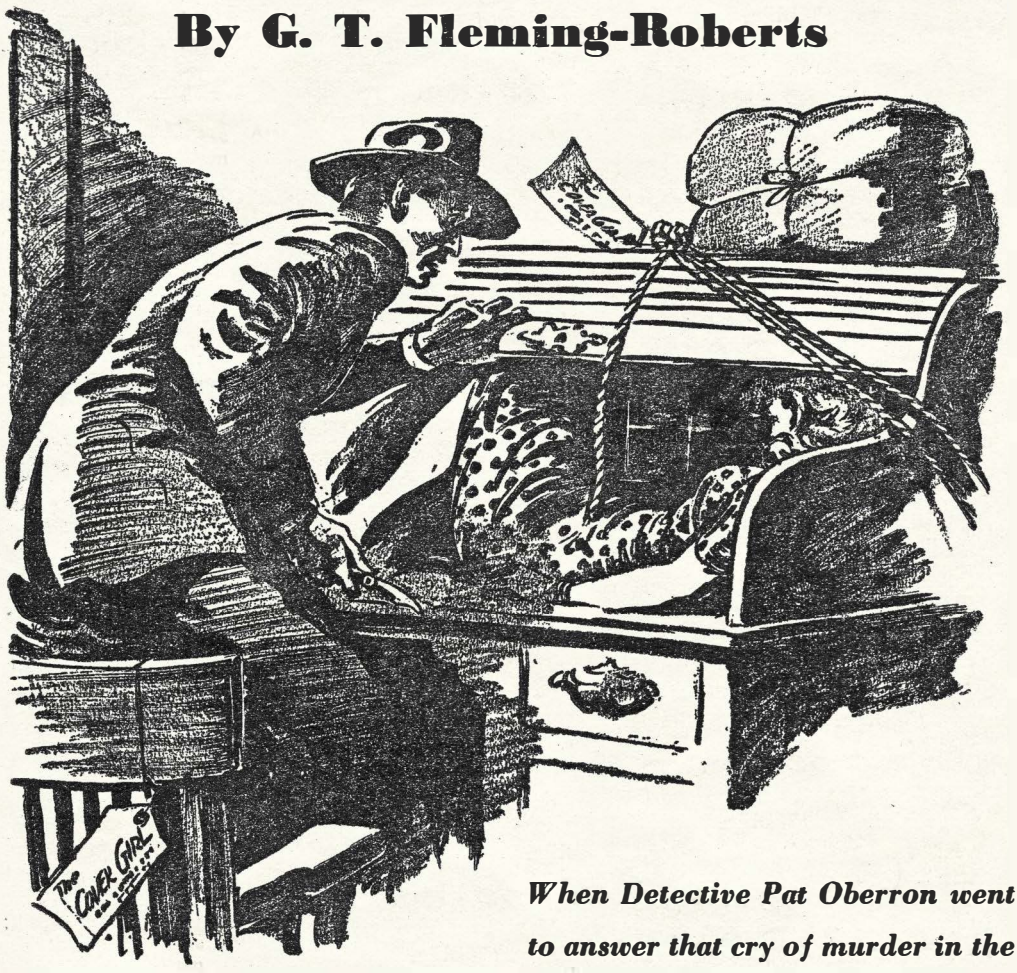
The radio dispatcher shared that feeling of utter futility with Lieutenant Tom Gherrity of the homicide bureau, some time later. Gherrity, who knew it was possible to chew your fingernails off to the elbow over a thing like this, allotted about five minutes of worry to the matter. There were pranksters, he explained. And he had known of wife beatings that started out like murder and ended with maudlin love-making.

"Hell, maybe she's just neurotic," Gherrity consoled the dispatcher. "He probably didn't kill her. If he *did*—" he shrugged heavily—"well, she'll turn up."

She turned up, of course. But not until after ten hours of waiting for Pat Oberron. And if it had been ten months or ten years it would have been all the same to her—it wouldn't have mattered at all.

# REMAINS—TO BE SEEN

## By G. T. Fleming-Roberts




***When Detective Pat Oberron went to answer that cry of murder in the night he found he could either starve or fry—or promote strictly dead cover girls and burned-up corpses—at a half-a-million bucks a head!***

FOR PAT OBERRON it was Black Friday. He was broke, and there were indications that his financial embarrassment was common knowledge, for when he entered the Hillary Building that morning Sure-thing Ike, who sold tickets on horse and baseball pools, politely ignored him. Of the several assorted get-rich-quick schemers who operated from the lobby phone booths, not one approached Pat with an offer of opportunity to

get in on the ground floor of an enterprise hell-bent for bankruptcy or a fraud indictment.

Not until he reached the third floor was there any evidence that Pat Oberron was not the Invisible Man. Necktie Sam came down the corridor as fast as bow-legs and the burden of his pitchman's suitcase would permit. The breeze born of his haste had plastered the limp brim of his near-Panama hat back from his pale, peaked face, and his dark, deep-set eyes mirrored disaster.

Pat Oberron looked over a thin, square shoulder. His narrow, cat-green eyes regarded with distaste the small, too-dapper figure in the cheap blue suit. Necktie Sam had never been an omen of good luck.

"Patrick!" Necktie Sam gasped as he skidded to a stop on the oiled floor. "Patrick, what is happening to you shouldn't happening to a pole-kitty! You are being obliterated. Annihilated even, not mentioning rubbed out!"

"I am?" Pat asked warily.

"Not you, personal," Sam assured him seriously. "The Oberron Detective Agency I'm referring to. Your business—it ain't, starting now."

He seized the wrinkled sleeve of Pat's suit coat and hauled him down the corridor. In front of the door of Pat's office was a chubby-cheeked man in white overalls and cap. He was employing a razor blade paint-scraper on the black lettering across the outside of the door glass. Working from right to left, he had already removed the word "Detective" and was now half way across the "Oberron."

"The 'Agency' he could save from the paint shortage," Necktie Sam suggested.

The chubby man turned to Necktie Sam. His blue eyes were amiable. In fact, the cheerful manner in which he accomplished the demise of the Oberron Detective Agency struck Pat as nothing short of gruesome.

"Say, you've got something there. I can save 'Agency' and in a rainbow across the top I can put 'Cover Girl'."

"You can?" Pat was coldly incredulous. "Oh, you can. What the hell is a cover girl agency?"

Necktie Sam leered. "Imagine! Now they should have an agent when always I am under the delusionment cover girls is self-evident, self-explanatory, and practically self-advertising!"

The sign artist shrugged. "All I know is that Simon Kern, the building manager, said the Oberron Detective Agency was evicted for non-payment of rent, and I was to come up here and put 'Cover Girl Agency' on the door. Don't blame me. If you heels and gyp-artists and soft dollar promoters in this building didn't go in and out of business all the time, I'd have to go out of business myself."

"Nobody," said Pat with feeling, "can do this to me." His sharp elbow gouged the sign artist to one side. His thin, bony fingers trembled as he took his keys from his pocket and unlocked the door. He strode into the tiny office, with Necktie Sam scuttling through behind him, and closed the door. Sam caught Pat's arm, ducked his head as though somebody had slapped him, and peered cautiously out from beneath the flop brim of his hat.

"Patrick, when Simon Kern said you was evicted he meant absolutely!"

Pat said, "I see what you mean."

Gone were Pat's couch, his desk, his file cabinet, and his battered swivel chair. In their place were the meager furnishings of the Cover Girl Agency—a huge rolltop desk and a straight-backed mahogany chair. The desk had evidently been moved in that morning, for lengths of hemp rope bound the drawers and top shut. Pat moved over to the door of the closet, opened it. A moth fluttered bewilderedly out of empty darkness.

Sam said, "Patrick, it should make a stone weep! That poor leetle moth waiting for your overcoat which ain't going to be here next winter—"

Pat wheeled on Sam and his lips licked back from small, sharp teeth. "Cut that out. Go peddle your neckties."

Sam put his suitcase down on the floor and sat on it. He smiled faintly. "Always I got for you admiration. Even envy, you are such a smart, unscrupulous heel. Every night I am going to bed I am saying to myself, 'Some day, Sammy, opportunity will knock at the door you should help Patrick out from the fire back into the frying pan. The opportunity, Patrick, she is knocking!"

"Ha! You mean she kicked the damn door off its hinges!" Pat paced like a caged cat toward the rolltop desk. That was when he first saw the tiny corner of dark, silk-like material that was sticking out from beneath the edge of the jointed wood curtain that closed the front of the desk. He saw it, but was too preoccupied to attach any significance to it.

"Have you got any money, Sam?"

Sam's grin faded. "Not precisely money. I got something practically as good as money."

"Nothing," said Pat, "is as good as money." He dumped his lank bag-of-bones down in somebody else's chair, in front of somebody else's desk. He began picking absently at the bit of silk that showed beneath the edge of the roll top. The fabric was navy blue with white polka-dots.

"Maybe on credit we could get Attorney Si Borden across the street to slap Simon Kern with an injunction or something," Sam suggested.

"Ha!" Pat's half-laugh was all derision. "That antique collector? That mossback—"

Sam said: "That self-same mossback is a pretty smart shyster, Patrick. I've—" he paused—"Patrick, what's that you got? Somebody's skirt?"

Pat wasn't at all sure what he had. He had pulled as much of the polka-dot material as he could from beneath the edge of the roll top. It hung limply, was attached to something inside the desk. He stood up quickly, groped in the pockets of his trousers, took out a worn pocket knife. He opened it, began picking at the knots in the rope which was bound around the middle of the big desk. Necktie Sam giggled nervously. He got the knots untied, threw back the rope ends, hooked his fingers under the hand-hold of the desk front. The jointed wood curtain rolled back suddenly in its grooved end-guides. A woman's purse—a long, puffy bag of gay red-and-yellow print cloth—slid off the front of the desk and fell to the floor with a soft *plop*. Pat stared down at the body of the murdered woman, his green eyes cold.

Necktie Sam swallowed audibly. "Patrick," he said. "Patrick, it ain't possible!"

IT WAS possible only because the desk was large and the girl was small. Even so, she was horribly cramped. Not that it made any difference to her. Alive, she had been no cover girl, and strangulation has never been any sort of a beauty treatment. For one thing, she was unnaturally tiny; her hands were pudgy, almost dwarfish. She was dark complexioned, her dull brown hair bobbed short and permanented. There was a bruise over her right temple, centered by a small cut where blood had dried. There were other ugly bruises on her throat where a strangler's thumbs had pressed—and pressed. The polka-dot silk material was her skirt. Her blouse was plain and white. A gold pin, V-shaped, except that the extremities drooped and curled under, was fastened to the front of the blouse. Though he was certain he had never seen the girl before, Pat thought the pin was vaguely familiar.

Out of the corner of his eye, Pat detected movement in the direction of the door. He wheeled, lunged, caught Necktie Sam by the tail of the coat just as Sam would have escaped through the door. He jerked Sam back.

"My pal! Right away you have to see a man about a dog."

Sam turned slowly. His face could have found protective coloration in a bowl of pea soup, it was that green.

He smiled faintly.

"You know, Patrick, it's remarkable how

sudden death affects me. Couldn't we just ooze out of here silently like the Arabs folding their tents—so nobody should know about it?"

Pat nodded toward the door where the silhouette of the sign artist was faintly discernible against the frosted glass. "It's a little late to do any successful oozing."

He returned to the corpse on the desk. He stared at the gold pin on the girl's blouse, wondering where he had seen something like it before. Then he sat down in the chair, hitched it around sideways so that the murdered woman was not quite so evident to his apprehensive eye. He picked up her purse from the floor.

"Suppose," Sam said, "purely from the sake of speculation, somebody should bust in, catching you with the goods? Somebody like Simon Kern or Count de Pression."

"Count who?" Pat scowled. He rested the purse across his lean thighs, reached into his pockets for cigarette makings.

"Count de Pression," Sam repeated. "You ain't heard? His real name is Oliver P. Tolliver, but with him everything was always from depression. He couldn't pay for his pastrami sandwich in Herbie's lunchroom, it was from depression. You couldn't collect from him an I.O.U. it was from depression." Sam shook his head, became fondly reminiscent. "Count de Pression was a genius. In all probability he still is."

Pat tongued his cigarette, put it into his lips. "What brought that up?"

Sam's deep-set eyes blinked rapidly. "And nobody told you? Why, Patrick, Count de Pression is out from jail six months now. He is opening from this self-same office a cover girl agency, whatever that is!"

"You mean he's the heel who thinks he can run me out of here?"

"Sure," Sam said.

Pat lighted his limp cigarette. He laughed, short and bitter. "Well, the hell with him, then." He unclasped the dead woman's purse.

"Always with Count de Pression it's some girl racket. As a gigolo for rich dowagers, he was pretty smart at kiting and forging checks. Always small amounts, so the dowager she wouldn't squawk to the cops. Once he was managing a stable of lady box-fighters, too."

Pat said, "Save the gruesome details." He turned the contents of the purse out into his lap.

Sam said weakly at last, "Patrick, could you pull down the front of the desk the dead lady shouldn't goggle at me like I done it?"

Pat's lips tilted at the corners. "Shift to one side. You're not paralyzed." He turned his attention to the stuff that had fallen from the woman's purse. There were handkerchief, lipstick, compact, twenty-five cents in change, and the numbered inspection ticket which had been put in the purse at the factory by the person who had examined it for defects in manufacture. On the face of the tag was printed:

Grew Mfg. Co. U. S. A.

Inspector No. 4

But across this printing somebody had written in thick, black pencil the name Smith. Pat turned the tag over. Here again the heavy pencil had left its mark. The numerals 69 were so drawn as to fill the inch square surface on the back of the tag.

"Hey!" Sam whispered. "That sign artist has gone elsewhere. Ain't it prudent we should do likewise?"

Pat looked up. "We're not in any hurry." He stepped over to the door with the inspector's tag in his hand. He pressed the side that carried the bold 69 firmly against the glass. He took his thumb away, found that the tag stuck to the glass. He picked the tag off with his fingernail and dropped it back into the purse along with the other stuff.

Returning to the desk, he put the purse beside the dead woman. Looking beneath the desk, he discovered that his phone had been placed onto the floor by the men who had moved out Pat's own furnishings. He lifted the phone, crammed it inside the desk with the corpse, then closed the roll top of the desk, bringing it all the way down to the phone wire.

At that moment, the knob of the office door rattled, and Necktie Sam uttered a startled yelp.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Count De Pression

PAT OBERRON took a shallow breath, forced himself to turn slowly, coolly. He stood with his back to the desk. Five feet from the door, Necktie Sam stood with his suitcase held like a shield. Sam's jaw was lax, his black eyes fixed on the man who opened the door.

The man closed the door by backing against it, and he kept his hands behind him in a way that Pat Oberron did not like. His yellow-brown eyes shifted back and forth between Pat and Sam. He was big and rawboned, with a rugged, sunburned face. His shaggy red hair had been streaked by the sun. His blue suit fitted snugly, and there were horizontal wrinkles in the pants legs as though the trousers had spent a good deal of time on a wire hanger. Something about the man reminded Pat of blackberries which are red

when they're green. The guy rubbed him raw.

"Which one of you gents is the boss?" he asked. His voice was deep, chesty.

Sam rolled his eyes toward Pat. "Well, it ain't me!"

The big redhead took two lumbering strides that brought him within a yard of Pat. He said, "I'm going to kill you."

"Imagine!" Sam gasped. He added with thin bravado, "Frank, ain't he?"

Pat's mouth tilted at the corners. "Now?" he asked.

The redhead's hands were still behind him. There was a metallic click, and the right hand showed suddenly, grasping a clasp knife with a five-inch spear blade. Pat straightened slowly from the desk and started to worry. All he had in the way of a weapon was the green hock ticket that covered his pawned revolver.

"Just who do you think I am?" he asked.

"You're Oliver P. Tolliver," the redhead accused. "You're the Cover Girl Agency, and after what you did to Marlene—"

Pat said, "I'm not Tolliver. I'll prove it." He reached back to his hip pocket for his wallet. But the redhead was taking no chances. He lunged, threw Pat back against the curved top of the desk, caught Pat's left arm. His right hand streaked up, down. Pat squirmed, jerked his head to the right. The knife, aimed for his throat, buried its point in the wood of the desk top, but so close that Pat could feel the chill of the metal against the side of his neck.

Pat looped up a fist, caught the big man a jarring blow on the side of the head. The redhead let go of the knife, got one hand on Pat's throat and started to put on the squeeze.

The knife skittered down the jointed wood curtain of the desk front to strike the floor. The redhead changed his mind and he and Necktie Sam went for the knife at the same time, and Pat landed a kick on the seat of the redhead's trousers. The man went flat on his face, and Sam got the knife, brandished it heroically in front of the fallen man.

The redhead turned over, ready for more fight, and Pat thrust his private detective's license into his face. "You can read, can't you, junior?" he snapped.

The man stared. His heavy jaw dropped. "You—you're a detective?"

"The best in the business!" Necktie Sam put in. He snapped the knife shut, dropped it into his pocket.

"Gosh-all!" Red stood up. His grin was sheepish. "You see, I asked a fella in white overalls where the Cover Girl Agency was, and he pointed to this door, so naturally—"

Pat looked at Sam and jerked his head toward the door. "Go sell your ties. I want to talk to this bird alone."

SAM drew his mouth down at the corners, but picked up his suitcase and left the room.

The big man sat down awkwardly and pulled at the creases of his pants. He said, "I guess I'm pinched, huh?"

Pat shook his head. "What do they call you besides Red?"

"Haggerty," said the man. "Robert Haggerty. But you guessed it—most people just call me Red."

"Yeah?" Pat lighted his cigarette. "Where are you from?"

"I got a farm outside of Hookston, Illinois." Haggerty didn't seem to know what to do with his hands. Because of the tight fit of his suit, he couldn't get them into trouser pockets. "You know what this Oliver P. Tolliver went and done?"

According to Necktie Sam, the Count de Pression's talents included everything from forgery to plain and fancy fleecing. Pat shook his head, his green eyes resting dispassionately on Haggerty's rugged face.

"He came to Hookston and put on a contest. A cover girl contest, with a ten thousand dollar prize. He put up five thousand out of his own pocket and the merchants of Hookston were to put up the other five."

"Aw-aw!" Pat shook his head. "That's the one that gets the tank towns."

Haggerty stared at Pat. "You mean it's crooked?"

Pat stared right back, just as incredulously. "Well, hell!" he said finally. "Look, Red, let me tell *you* how it was worked in Hookston. The girl collects the prize money. She's not only a prize looker, but she's a prize dope, because that's part of the pitch. She comes to the big city. She thinks she's headed for Hollywood, via the cover-girl route. Her agent, the guy who 'discovered' her, wheedles money out of her—his own dough and what the merchants contributed—pretending that it will cost at least ten thousand to put her into pictures. After she's thoroughly plucked, he drops her. She's too ashamed to go back to Hookston, and probably vanishes behind a counter at Woolworth's.

"Look, Red, if you didn't think it was crooked, what's your gripe?"

"Because," Red said, scowling, "in Hookston it was Marlene Harris that was picked as the prize girl, that's why! I didn't want her to go into the contest and I never paid any attention to it, see? Marlene and I were going to get married, but along came this contest and turned her head. She came here to the city and got a lot of high-and-mighty ways. She wrote me letters for a while, but they were mostly about the wonderful things this Oliver Tolliver was going to do for her—put her face on magazines and her name in lights on movie

houses, and that sort of stuff. After a while, I didn't get any more letters, so I came to town to look for her."

Pat asked hopefully, "And you can't find her?"

Red Haggerty looked miserable. "I can't find her and neither can the police."

Pat practically purred. "You lucky man!"

"What's so all-fired lucky about me?" Haggerty demanded.

Pat shrugged as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. "You're lucky to have found me in Oliver Tolliver's office. I ought to be able to find Marlene for you—at a price."

Red Haggerty brightened, but slowly, like the dawn of a new day. Pat studied him and wished he knew more about the economic situation and its effect upon farmers.

"For a price," he repeated. "Think you'd care to put two hundred dollars into it?"

Haggerty stood up so he could get into his pants pockets. He pulled out a roll of bills big enough to choke a horse. Pat's eyes bugged, but he kept his head.

"Two hundred dollars for a retainer," he added hastily. "When I find the lady, you'll owe me five hundred more. With the usual expenses added, it'll come to a thousand."

Either money meant nothing to Red Haggerty or Marlene Harris meant a great deal, for he didn't bat an eyelash. He counted off ten twenty dollar bills from his roll, handed them to Pat.

"And I guess maybe you'll want a picture of Marlene?" he asked.

Pat might well have overlooked that detail entirely. His hands trembled somewhat as he formed the twenties into a beautiful green pile and slid them into his wallet. Haggerty had removed a folding leather case from his pocket, and from this he took a photograph which was a little the worse for wear. He handed it to Pat.

"That was taken when she graduated out of business college," he said. "Marlene's a lot prettier now, even if she has put on airs."

Pat glanced at the picture and it was immediately apparent that Marlene was not the dead girl whose unseen presence haunted the office of the Count de Pression's cover girl agency. Miss Marlene Harris was a dizzy blonde, her pale hair frothing out and up in a halo around an amazingly pretty face.

He looked up at Haggerty who was staring fondly at the picture. "Where can I get hold of you, Red?"

"Hotel Spann."

"Okay. I'll—" Pat's attention was drawn toward the door of the office. A shadow moved across the frosted glass, returned to stand directly in front of the door. Somebody knocked.

Red Haggerty came out of the chair in a hurry, stood staring at the door, the muscles of his jaws working as though he were chewing gum or—preferably—the Count de Pression. Pat fixed the man with a glacial stare.

"Don't always be a dope, Red. Tolliver wouldn't knock at the door of his own office." He peeled himself away from the desk, went to open the door.

OUTSIDE he found Silas Borden, shyster-at-law extraordinary, whose office was in the Brill Building, across the street. Pat had frequently done leg work for Borden and he was somewhat undecided whether Borden was foxy or slightly demented. The lawyer collected antiques, indulged in the once fashionable hobby of china painting, and still found time to make more money than any ten of the grifters in the Hillary Building.

Si Borden looked squarely at Pat through nose-pincher bifocals that dangled black ribbon from the right lens. His grey-tufted brows flapped up and down, settled.

"Is Mr. O'Brien in?" he asked. "I'm having a devil of a time finding him. No. Wait a moment." He snapped long, double-jointed fingers three times. "O'Brien? Or could it be O'Baron?"

Pat reached out and lifted Si Borden's bifocals from Si Borden's nose. "Oberron," he said. "Me. Pat Oberron. You know me, remember?"

Si Borden fumbled his glasses back from Pat. "Of course, of course! I always forget names and never remember faces!" He edged his way into the office.

Red Haggerty grunted. "I guess I'll just get on back to the hotel, Mr. Oberron," he said. "You'll let me know, won't you?"

Pat promised and, as Haggerty left the room, turned his attention to the lawyer. "What the hell do you want?"

Borden tapped his lower teeth with the gold rim of his bifocals. "It was important. Very important." He snapped his fingers, pounced on whatever it was that was slipping his mind. "To be sure! I have a job for you, Mr. Oberron. See me this afternoon, about four, for particulars. You're to find a girl."

Pat eyed the dumpy, grey-haired man suspiciously. "Yeah? Not Miss Marlene Harris?"

Borden shook his head vigorously. "No-no-no. Don't confuse me, please. Never heard of the name. Have trouble enough with names I've heard of. Uh—MacFarlan! That's it!"

Pat groaned. "You want her alive or dead?"

Borden drew himself to his full height. "You—uh—nauseate me. Alive, of course. How else could she spend all that money? But that'll come later, my boy."

"Oh, go to hell," Pat said.

AMONG the more pretentious offices on the fourth floor of the Hillary Building was that leased by a lank, lugubrious woman who called herself Madame Sibyl. She did a rushing mail order business in astrological forecasts and things occult.

Madame Sibyl was not in her office at the precise moment when Pat entered, but then she wasn't at all necessary to Pat's purposes. All he wanted was to gaze upon the signs of the zodiac which decorated the heavenly blue ceiling of Madame's reception room. When he left the room, he knew just where he had seen something similar to the gold pin which the dead girl in the desk wore.

He returned to the third floor, and it was as he came out of the L of the stairway that he saw the couple at that moment alighting from the elevator. The female of the species so far eclipsed her companion that Pat was scarcely aware of the man at all.

With all due apologies to previous knockouts, this girl was one. She was taller than average and seemed to like it, and she was perfectly aware that walking could be more than a means of locomotion. Her dress was black and simple, detracting in no way from the manner in which she filled it. Her black hair was center-parted from a broad smooth brow and drawn back to a soft bun at the nape of her neck. Her eyebrows curved slightly upward at the extremities, lent worldliness to what might have been innocent blue eyes.

About halfway down the hall, the man stepped a little ahead of the woman and headed for the door of the newly christened Cover Girl Agency. He was slight, wore a tan suit of soft shade, shirt, tie, and straw hat to match. His face tapered from widely-spaced liquid brown eyes to a pointed chin. The mustache that shortened his already inadequate upper lip was brown and downy, reminding Pat of one of those caterpillars that for some undiscovered reason crawl across the highways in early fall.

The man unlocked the door, stepped aside to allow the woman to enter ahead of him. As soon as he was across the threshold, he closed the door.

Pat's chuckle was malicious. He sauntered on down the hall and a little beyond the office which the Count de Pression and this lovely bit of all-right had entered. Since only a few of the Hillary Building heels could support a private telephone, three pay stations were mounted against the west wall of the corridor. At one of these phones was a man in a pink striped shirt and a pair of hounds-tooth check trousers, and at the moment he was asking some sucker at the other end of the line for a donation for Bundles For Baluchistan, whatever that might be.

Pat waited, then dug deep into his pocket to bring out a slug. A gullible telephone coinbox digested it without question and Pat dialed the number of what had been, no later than yesterday, the Oberron Detective Agency. He let the receiver dangle, and walked back toward his former office.

The phone rang three times before the Count de Pression located it. The exact moment was recorded by the woman's short scream. The phone rang a fourth and a fifth time. The woman wasn't screaming now. She was at the door, working the key in the lock. She exploded from the office.

Pat stepped to the door of the office she had just left, jerked it open, and looked in upon the Count de Pression.

Pat said, "So you uncovered a cover girl, finally."

The count dropped the phone to the floor. He twisted around, saw Pat, turned all the way around again, arms flinging out widely as though to reach for some other exit from the room. There was no other exit. He stood still, breathing audibly.

"I—I—I" he began. He stopped helplessly, as Pat entered, closing the door. Then he pulled himself together and speared Pat with a steady look. "I know you," he said abruptly.

Pat nodded and the count's face began to work again. He said, "Let's get out of here," and shoved Pat back out into the hall and followed. He turned back, locked the door, and caught at Pat's arm as a drowning man clutches at a floating spar. Pat led him quickly towards the stairs, where the count suddenly hauled him up.

"By gad!" he said. "What am I running away for?" His round eyes blinked. "That's *your* office."

Pat looked him up and down, his eyes glacial. "So now it's my office. What about the desk? And that oversize paperweight in it had to be moved in right along with your desk."

"Exactly," the count agreed. "Yesterday afternoon, I had everything ready to move. The draymen were to pick up my desk from my old address early this morning. Somebody must have broken into my old office last night and hidden the corpse in my desk!"

Pat nodded. "That's the way I figure it. You want to hire yourself a detective, or do you just want to dream your police record will permit the guys from homicide to believe that?"

The count thoughtfully brushed his downy mustache with a fingertip. His eyes avoided Pat's. "How much do you want? Of course it's nothing but blackmail. Unadulterated extortion."

Pat grinned amiably. "Say, two hundred bucks. And you can knock me down to the girl friend as an extra favor."

De Pression nodded. He put his left hand into the patch pocket of his soft tan coat, fumbled around. What he was groping for proved to be as hard a set of brass knuckles as Pat Oberron had ever examined at close range. He tested them with the side of his jaw—and found them very effective indeed.

It was the last conclusion he was to draw for some time, before night closed upon him.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Burned-up Corpse

HE CAME to in exactly the place where the Count de Pression had dropped him—in the third floor corridor of the Hillary Building. He was surrounded by a veritable stockade of blue pants legs, overhung by police paunches. He rolled his eyes somewhat to the left and encountered the florid face of Lieutenant Tom Gherrity of the homicide bureau. Pat promptly closed his eyes again.

Lieutenant Tom Gherrity took hold of Pat's shoulders, hauled him to a sitting position, and shook him. "Always horsing around," he growled. "Whenever there's a killing, I can count on you. Come on out of it, Oberron. We've got to talk about a dead babe in your office."

Pat opened his eyes. He inhaled deeply and exhaled via the Bronx. "I am a floating detective agency as of yesterday. If I had lured a babe into my office, she wouldn't be dead—if I had an office."

Gherrity got behind Pat, hooked huge red hands under Pat's arms, put Pat onto his feet. One of the uniformed cops picked up Pat's battered felt hat and put it on the back of Pat's head. Pat felt like he was taking a fast turn on skis. He said, "Oops!" and keeled over in Gherrity's arms. Gherrity simply dragged him down the hall and to the door of his erstwhile office. Hillary Building tenants were clustered around the door, which was guarded by a single cop.

Holding Pat up with one arm, Gherrity gestured widely with the other. "All right, get this corridor clear," he ordered somebody. "I don't want you boys to go back to headquarters with your pockets picked, see?"

In the tiny office, hospital interns were about to remove the dead woman from the desk and into the wicker morgue basket. Gherrity told them to hold it a minute. He dropped Pat into Count de Pression's chair. Pat pressed a hand to his throbbing head, glanced dourly at the corpse.

"How long has she been like that, Tom?"

Gherrity replied, "Maybe twelve hours. We think she called headquarters about eleven last night. Notice that bruise on her head? We figure the guy who killed her thought he had knocked her out and got careless and she managed to get to a phone. All she got through to the dispatcher was that a man was going to kill her." Gherrity shrugged hugely. "Then he did. Who is she, Oberron?"

"Rebecca," Pat said.

Gherrity took out a cigarette. As he lighted it, he nodded his satisfaction. "I knew you'd know. Rebecca who?"

"Just Rebecca—a dead woman from the movie of the same name."

Gherrity hurled the match to the floor, stomped over to Pat, seized the slack in Pat's coat front. "Listen, Oberron, I can take you down to headquarters and throw the book at you!"

Pat grinned faintly. "Nothing I'd like better."

The red in Gherrity's face was deepening to eggplant purple.

Pat said, "Honest injun, I don't know the girl. She's just part of the new tenant's office furnishings, I guess. I was tossed out yesterday. But"— he slid a glance toward the dead girl—"that gold pin she's wearing is one of the sort that Madame Sibyl on the fourth floor sells. It's the astrological symbol of Aries,

the Ram. Could be the girl is one of madame's dissatisfied customers."

Gherrity swiveled ponderously, made shooing gestures at the two interns. "Get out, boys. I've changed my mind. I'm not through with her yet." He followed the interns to the door, closed the door after them, turned back to Pat. "Let me show you what was in her purse."

The contents of the dead girl's bag had been turned out onto a square of white cloth which lay on the floor. Gherrity picked the factory inspector's tag from the other items, handed it to Pat.

"Looks like she made some sort of a hasty note on this. Can you make out the name?"

Pat nodded. "It's Smith, a very common name. Also, a favorite alias."

Gherrity took back the ticket, turned it over to show the heavily drawn numerals 69 on the back. "That mean anything to you?"

Pat said, "Turn it over, Tom."

"Aw, hell!" Gherrity exploded. "Sixty-nine is sixty-nine, even when you turn it upside down."

"Turn it so that it lies on its side," Pat suggested, "and what have you got?"

Gherrity turned the ticket and scowled. "All right. What have I got?"

"The sign of the Crab," Pat said mysteriously. "The zodiacal sign of Cancer, the Crab. You can check on that with Madame Sibyl on the fourth floor."

"Yeah?" Gherrity was suspicious. "Now we got a ram and a crab. So what?"

"Try it on your melodion this way," Pat said. "The girl is picked up by a stranger—the man who killed her. She's a dope, on all counts. She's nuts about astrology. During the course of the evening which ends in the worst way for her, she asks the guy when his birthday is. He tells her. Maybe the girl wants to make a note of it. She has that little ticket in her bag, but no pencil. Wherever they are at the time, she finds a pencil. On the tag she writes the name Smith, which is either his name or a phoney name he's given her. On the other side, she puts down the symbol for the astrological sign under which he was born. Maybe she figures that when she gets home, she'll look up about him in a book on astrology."

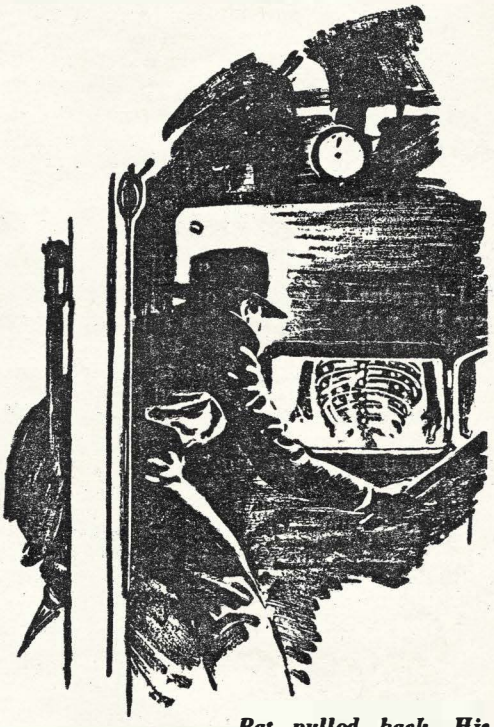
If Gherrity saw sense in this he gave no answer. "But he kills her?"

"Right. The Crab gets his pincers into the throat of the Ram and strangles her—" Pat broke off, frowning dubiously. "Her? What am I saying!"

AT BURK'S PLACE, across the street from the Hillary Building, Necktie Sam fiddled with his shot glass on the bar, looked at Pat Oberron, and giggled nervously.

"Ain't it coincidental? I drop in here maybe I should sell some classy neckwear, and you should be here taking on some medicinal liquor."

Pat eyed Sam coolly. "I can't get over it."



*Pat pulled back. His shaking fingers found a handkerchief. . . .*

He stirred what was left of his rye and soda, drained the glass. "Another thing I can't get over is how the hell I missed a speech you made just before I uncovered the body in the desk. You don't suppose I'm slipping, do you?"

"You, Patrick?" Sam was aghast. "A heel like you slipping? It couldn't happen even on ice. I have always maintained you are the greatest mind in the Hillary Building, which, as everybody should know is lousy with great minds."

Pat stared Sam into a fine start toward a nervous breakdown. Finally, he said, "All right. Who's the corpse in the desk?"

The shot glass slipped from Sam's fingers and broke against Burk's floor. A barkeep at the other end looked over and scowled. Pat shook his head at the barkeep. "I'll pay for it, pal. Just keep your distance." He reached across and took Sam's wrist in his thin, crooked fingers.

"Now," he said quietly. "You know who

the girl in the desk was. Even before I uncovered her, you knew. There was that little piece of silk-like fabric sticking out from beneath the desk top, and right away you concluded it was a skirt. You said as much. Now, why a skirt? Because you knew it was a skirt. You had seen the girl wearing such a skirt. And if you'd noticed that much, you know her—or I don't know you."

Sam's pallor was greenish. His mouth was slack.

Pat said, "Give. Or it's Tom Gherrity—and Tom takes."

Sam held up a protesting hand. "No-no, Patrick. I'll tell you. Phooie on me I should think I'm concealing from you! That—that girl—I didn't know she was back already from her vacation, because when she got back I was to see her about a big deal." Sam's face brightened somewhat. "That proves something, don't it, Patrick? I didn't know she was in town!"

"Go on. What's her name? Where did she live?"

"Jenny Woods," Sam said. "That's her. She lives seven-o-two East Forty-ninth Street. And she ain't married."

"What was the big deal?"

Sams small sharp face crinkled. "Patrick, do we have to go into that?"

Pat nodded. "I think so."

"She was going to buy from me some stock," Sam concluded sadly. "I'm not mentioning it to nobody. I don't want to get mixed up in murder."

"Stock, I think you said."

Sam reached inside the pocket of his too blue suitcoat and brought out packet of ornately engraved certificates. Pat glanced at the face of the top certificate.

THE PONCE DE LEON
MINERAL WATER COMPANY
OF AMERICA

Common Stock
5
Shares

Pat snorted. " 'Of America'. That always helps! Who's behind this canal water swindle?"

" 'Canal water,' he says!" Sam was indignant. "Patrick, on my word of honor as a gentleman and scholar, not to mention our sacred friendship, it is genuine Artesian well water comes from the ground, and nothing should taste that bad if it ain't good for you." Sam shuddered at the memory of having tasted Ponce de Leon Mineral Water. "As to who is behind it—it's me."

"You?" Pat stared, incredulous.

"Me." Sam chuckled. "And did I outsmart that hick onion farmer just west of town! For two hundred dollars the only piece of land he's got the mineral water is coming from."

Pat threw back his head and laughed derisively. He stood off the bar stool, put a hand on Necktie Sam's sloping shoulder. Sam's eyelids batted.

"What's wrong, Patrick?"

Pat said, "I know where you can sell that Artesian well for ten bucks."

"Ten bu—" Sam's jaw sagged.

"Yeah. The onion farmer will buy it back from you for ten bucks. You're the fifth Hillary Building smart guy he's sold that particular chunk of land to. And that Artesian well is nothing but seepage from the tanning factory next to the onion farmer's land."

Necktie Sam threw himself forward across the bar and burst into tears.

From Burk's Place, Pat Oberron went to Uncle Joe, present custodian of Pat's .38 caliber revolver. There, for a green ticket and other valuable considerations, Pat recovered his weapon, stuck it into his pocket, and went out into the bright afternoon sun to find a cab.

THE house of Miss Jenny Woods was a yellow brick bungalow with two prim, round maples precisely spaced on either side of the yellow brick approach walk. Pat paid off his cab, went up onto the porch, and rang the bell. While he waited for the answer that never came, his green eyes appraised the lock on Miss Woods' front door and decided that it was a little too much for his talents.

He walked around the side of the house, passed through a white picket gate, into the shadowed yard at the back. He had never discovered why some people spent eight dollars for a lock to the front door and seventy-five cents for the lock on the back, but he was grateful to learn that Miss Jenny Woods had done just that. The third skeleton key which he tried let him into the kitchen.

It was uncommonly hot inside. With his anemia, Pat Oberron naturally appreciated August's soaring thermometer, just as in winter he liked nothing better than a roaring furnace. But when the two were combined, it was more than even he could enjoy.

He moved quickly across the kitchen, where the electric refrigerator labored noisily against excessive odds. In the dining room, the temperature was, if anything, somewhat higher.

He was actually panting as he went through the wide cased opening into Miss Woods' nicely furnished living room. There he took a squint at the thermostat attached to the inner wall. The mercury stood a hair above one hundred and eighteen degrees, and it was pretty apparent that somebody had been up to malicious tampering with the furnace. For one

thing, this person, who had no consideration for the fuel shortage, had shoved a matchstick through the brass grill at the side of the thermostat case. Pat guessed that the match wedged the metal tongue of the thermostat mechanism over against the electrical contact point. If the basement controls on the gas- or oil-fired unit were knocked out in some similar manner, there was nothing to stop the automatic furnace until the house itself finally burst into flame. Judging from the odor of scorched wood and varnish that emanated from the hot air register in the living room floor, Pat thought it wouldn't be long before Miss Woods' house would be a job for the fire department.

He ran back through the house to the kitchen, found the door at the top of the basement stairway, went clattering down wooden steps into more of the same kind of temperature. The big square jacket of the hot air furnace stood out from the surrounding gloom because it was heated a cherry red. A scant eight feet from the furnace, the ruddy glow was reflected in the grey enameled sides of a big oil tank. That is, he hoped it was reflection, because if the tank was actually that hot, he, Pat Oberron, was on the verge of concluding his ninth life.

He rounded the furnace, saw the master switch on the side of the steel shell, burned his fingers jerking its handle. The frantic hum of the oil burner died gradually and overheated metal began to pop and snap as it cooled. Pat looked around, saw a rick of fireplace wood stacked neatly at the other end of the basement room. He went to the pile, got a length of hickory, returned to the furnace where he used the piece of wood to bat up the red-hot handle of the door. The door swung open, and Pat stooped over to stare into the interior.

Against the hellish background of superheated fire brick, blackened skeletal ribs arched grotesquely like the legs of some monstrous spider. Pat stepped back. His shaking fingers found his hip pocket, pulled out a handkerchief. He patted the beads of sweat from his brow. As he turned and stumbled for the stairs, he thought maliciously that here was a sweet headache for Lieutenant Tom Gherrity.

Pat left the house of the late Miss Woods by the front door, cut across the lawn once more, and stepped into the yard in front of a sedate white frame house on the east side. He clacked the brass knocker, and after a few moments' wait, a plump, comfortable woman in a blue plaid house dress opened the door.

"You'll have to be quick about it, young man," she said. "I got a pie in the oven."

Pat grinned. "I'm cooking on the back burner myself. This won't take a second. I'm from the Old Home Loan Company, and I'd like some credit information on Miss Jenny Woods who lives next door."

The woman unlatched the screen and came out onto the porch. "I don't know as I can give you much that will help," she said. "Miss Woods seems like a right nice little person. She and her father moved in there about six months ago—it was a sad thing—he died about six weeks after. I don't know how she stands it, living there all alone."

Pat said, "You say she lives alone? Not even a cat?"

"Oh, there's some relative or friend or something staying with her right now," the lady said. "Stayed there while Miss Woods went on her vacation, too. Say, I didn't know Miss Woods was back yet! I haven't seen hide nor hair of her."

Pat nodded. "She's back. About this friend or relative, now. Would you say it was male or female."

The woman chuckled. "You put that funny. It's a girl. A tall, dark, sickly-like girl. She's got the worst cough."

"What's her name?"

"Goodness me, you want to know a lot!" said the woman. "What's that got to do with Miss Woods' credit? I don't know her guest's name. Folks around here don't neighbor much, like they used to. It's just 'good morning' and 'howdy-do' mostly."

Pat took from his pocket the worn photograph of Miss Marlene Harris which had been given him by Red Haggerty of Hookston, Illinois. He showed it to the woman.

"Block out the blond hair," he suggested. "Is that Miss Woods' house guest?"

The woman shook her greying head. "Not in a million years, it's not. I've got a good memory for faces. I never saw that girl in the picture before."

Pat sighed, put the photograph back into his pocket.

"Thanks," he said limply.

"That's all right. Only would you mind telling me what Miss Woods wants the loan for?"

Pat said, "For a funeral, I guess. I hadn't thought much about that."

He walked along East Forty-ninth Street to Central Avenue, dropped into a drugstore, went into one of the phone booths at the back. He called police headquarters only to learn that Lieutenant Tom Gherrity was not there. He then dialed his own number—the phone that was in the office of the Count de Pression's cover girl agency—and a cautious Lieutenant Gherrity answered, "Yes?"

Pat laughed. "What're you trying to do—sound like a cover girl?"

Gherrity grunted. "So it's you. Trying to get hold of the Count de Pression, huh?"

"Trying to get hold of you, you big ape," Pat replied. "If you haven't identified the girl in the desk yet, she's Jenny Woods, and she lived at seven-o-two East Forty-ninth. You might skip out there and view some more remains."

"What the hell!" Gherrity roared. "Whose remains?"

"Just remains," Pat said. "In the furnace."

ON THE fifth floor of the Brill Building, two doors led into the suite of rooms occupied by Silas Borden. One door said, after the manner of the spider to the fly: "Silas Q. Borden, Attorney-At-Law. Walk in." The second door said: "No Admittance." Pat Oberron naturally chose the latter.

Borden was seated at his desk, his back to the door. He had put on a white smock over his rusty brown suit, and there was a small paint brush bracketed behind each ear.

"That must be our Mr. O'Brien," he said without turning around. "He never did believe in signs."

Pat walked around the desk so that he could face Borden. The attorney was engaged in hand-painting a nosegay of posies on the side of a shaving mug. He glanced through his bifocals at Pat. Pat reached out, removed the glasses from the man's nose.

"Look," he said. "Oberron—not O'Brien. Remember me?"

Borden nodded. He held up the mug and admired it.

"Beautiful," Pat said with no enthusiasm. "Do you know it's four o'clock? You wanted me to find a girl."

Borden took off his glasses and used them for some thoughtful tooth-tapping. His eyes widened, his white tufted brows went up, and he uttered a prolonged "Ohhh!" of discovery. He tucked the paint brush he had been using behind his ear, contributing a streak of gentian violet to his white sideburns. He stood up, removed his smock, started to clean up his paint box.

"Sit down, Mister—ah—Mister—"

Pat said, "Don't bother. Just call me 'you'." He dumped his lank body into the chair beside the desk, discovered that Borden was looking for his paint brushes. "Try behind your ears," he suggested. "And tell me about this Miss MacFarlan I'm supposed to find."

"A very, very lucky woman," Borden commented as he put the paint brushes into their box. "Inherited roughly half a million dollars. No grief connected with it, either. An uncle she has never seen died in Utah. A nice, clean estate, a simple will, everything fine and dandy." He smiled broadly and then quickly switched to a frown. "Only difficulty seems to be locating Miss MacFarlan. That's your job. That's what I came to see about."

"For how much?" Pat asked.

Si Borden scowled at him. "You're so mercenary. Would a thousand dollars satisfy you?"

Pat thought that was fair enough. He watched the attorney go to the door which connected with his reception room. Borden opened the door, called out, "Buzz me, Mrs. Findley." His secretary's name was Farley, as Pat recalled, but she got the idea. The interoffice communicator on Borden's desk buzzed obediently, and Borden stepped back to it.

Pat nodded at the instrument. "Why don't you get that thing fixed and save yourself some steps?"

Borden stared blankly at him a moment. "Why—that reminds me. It *is* fixed. Was fixed six months ago. An odd thing, the habits we get into." He pressed the switch on the communicator box. "Mrs. Findley, I'm expecting a—a—"

"Mr. Carpenter?" suggested Borden's secretary, hopefully. "Mr. Carpenter is waiting. Shall I send him in?"

"By all means do." Borden tilted back in his chair, put his glasses more firmly astride his nose. "Carpenter, Carpenter," he murmured. "I must remember that."

Mr. Carpenter proved to be a fat, clean-shaven man of about fifty, with thin, grey-blond hair and small, twinkling eyes. All of his excess flesh had not entirely concealed a square, determined chin. His forceful manner was the direct antithesis of Si Borden's fuddle-brained fumbling.

"Mr. Carpenter is a banker, Mr. Oberron," Borden explained.

Pat's green eyes became coldly resentful. "One of those guys who always wants collateral, huh?"

Carpenter laughed good-naturedly and got to the business at hand.

"I am handling the affairs of the MacFarlan estate," he explained. "Everything has been cleaned up, and we are now ready for the final settlement. But Miss Ruth Addison MacFarlan, the sole heir, is conspicuously absent. We have traced her to Columbus, Ohio, and from there to Cleveland. Out latest information is that she moved to this city."

Borden interjected, "Miss MacFarlan is an orphan, Mr. Oberron. She was brought up in an institution, and the usual ties through which missing persons are traced, simply do not exist. I suggest, Mr. Carpenter, you give Mr. Oberron such photographs as you may have."

Carpenter frowned as he opened his briefcase and took out a photo. "I am sorry that this is the best I have to offer. Miss Ruth MacFarlan must be twenty-four at the present

time, and as you will notice, this picture is that of a girl not more than thirteen, I should judge."

Pat studied the picture of a leggy kid in short skirts, with thick, straight bobbed black hair that seemed to have sapped most of the strength from her sad, pinched-looking face.

"And then," Carpenter added, "I have a signature card which Miss MacFarlan filled out when she opened an account at a bank in Cleveland. I shall read you her general description. Age, twenty-four; height, five feet eight inches; weight, one hundred twenty; hair, black; eyes, blue." The banker looked up from the card, smiled. "Think you can find her for us?"

Pat nodded. "For a thousand bucks I'll produce Minnie The Mouse—in the flesh." He turned to Si Borden. "But I want the thousand in cash, see?"

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Half-a-Million Dollar Baby

HE LEFT the office and the Brill Building, went back to Burk's Place. There he sat alone in a booth, drank beer, and indulged in the luxury of ready-made cigarettes. The gravy, he thought, was flowing right past him in a steady stream, while he stood by with only a fork. Two missing women were worth a thousand dollars apiece to him, and the only discoveries he had made so far were a couple of corpses—one female and the other doubtful. He ought to have been an undertaker instead of a detective, he thought bitterly.

At five o'clock he left Burk's Place, feeling slightly mellow. He wandered up the street a couple of blocks, turned into the marble lobby of Hotel Spann, and there called the room of Red Haggerty of Hookston, Illinois. He could have said all he had to say over the phone, but Haggerty recognized his voice and announced that he would be right down.

Pat draped his disreputable self into a taupe plush lounge chair in the lobby, tilted his hat over his eyes, and would have dozed off if Haggerty had given him time. The big redhead came lumbering over to Pat and dropped down to the edge of the chair on Pat's left.

He asked excitedly, "Have you found her yet?"

Pat looked askance at him. "Yes and no." And that, he decided, was the beer. He watched Haggerty's face. Anxiety plowed deep furrows across it.

"Don't look like that," he begged of Pat. "You look like bad news."

Pat said, "Ha! When I was a mere child, my mother spanked me with a sad iron. I've looked sad ever since. And who wouldn't?"

"What did you mean just now—'yes and no'?"

Pat thought that over. What he had meant was that if those ribs he had seen in the glowing furnace at Jenny Woods' house constituted all that was left of Miss Marlene Harris, the answer was yes. And another way you looked at it, the answer was no, because it was doubtful if Red Haggerty would accept the ribs as Marlene.

He asked aloud, "Just how frail was this frail of yours, Red?" That, too, was the beer, and he tried again. "I mean, is Miss Harris a sickly girl?"

Haggerty grinned broadly. "She won the Four-H Club award for the healthiest girl in the county when she was in high school." He flushed, added modestly, "I was the healthiest boy."

"You were?" Pat asked. "Isn't that peachy?"

"Of course she's slimmed down since then," Haggerty went on. "She started taking off weight when she began putting on airs."

Pat said, "Uhm. That keeps her balanced." He sighed, stretched his skinny legs, crossed his ankles. "I must think, Red. I want to be alone with my thoughts. If they frighten me, I'll scream for help."

Which must have been his last words before he dozed off.

When his snores awoke him, he sat up, turned to Haggerty. Only it wasn't Haggerty. A bald man with his nose in a newspaper occupied the chair on Pat's left. He looked dazedly across the hotel lobby, looking for a clock, and forgot to be interested in the time. A woman had just alighted from one of the elevators—a tall, lovely creature in a grey crêpe dress. She wore a matching hat with a coquettish veil. A big orchid bloom was pinned at her waist. The high heels of her grey kid pumps tapped neatly across the marble floor and to the border of the big rug that centered the lobby. There she stopped. She was looking straight at Pat, her red lips parted.

Pat lifted a hand and waggled it back and forth at her. She turned quickly, started running across the lobby in the direction of the side door. Pat yanked himself out of the chair and ran right after her.

When he got to the sidewalk, the girl was climbing into a cab. He ran across to the cab, yelled at the driver.

"Which way you going, cap?"

The cabby—he was sixty if he was a day—stuck a grizzled head out of the window and said, "South."

"Fine," Pat said. "So am I." He opened the rear door of the taxi and got in beside the brunette.

The girl came forward on the edge of the

cushion. She glared at Pat. Her gloved hand tapped the driver between the shoulder blades. "I was here first!" she said indignantly. "This man must get out."

Pat laughed. "Don't get exclusive, baby."

The driver turned his head, watching traffic. "Now lady," he placated, "you know there's a war and that we've got to share things there's a shortage on. You know there's a shortage of hacks, and hack-drivers, and rubber and gas. This gent is going south and so are you."

"I certainly am not going south!" she said hotly. "I'm going north."

"Me, too," Pat said. "I'm going north."

The hack swung out into the street and gunned for the intersection. The driver said, "Well, make up your minds. You sure said the first time you wanted to go to eight-six-five South Emmert, and that ain't north!"

The girl put her hand on the latch of the door. "Stop! I'm getting out right here."

Pat pulled his revolver and let the girl catch the glint of the barrel of it under his left arm. "Now, now, honey. Just relax. Either we go to the address you just mentioned or to police headquarters. You say which."

She stared at the gun and slowly settled back in the seat. Her lovely blue eyes lifted fearfully to Pat's face.

"That's better, hon," he told her.

"Don't you call me—that."

He shrugged. "What else?"

"None of your business!" Her mouth could be bitter as well as sweet.

The cabby called back: "Would you two mind letting an old man in on something? I can go 'round and 'round but it's costing you money. You want to go north or south?"

Pat said, "We're going to eight-six-five South Emmert, and don't let Mr. Anthony tell you different. The reason we don't get along so hot, captain—hon and I—is that we've been married ten years come Michaelmas." He looked at her and winked. She stared straight ahead, stonily.

The driver got the cab headed south and kept it on the beam until they had gone seven blocks beyond the main drag. Then he turned west for ten blocks and reached Emmert Street. Halfway down the next block south, he stopped in front of a two-story yellow brick building that bore the number 865.

Pat paid off and got out, but not until he had a good hold on her wrist. They stood on the sidewalk in front of the flat building, and the cab pulled away.

"Well?" Pat said.

HER blue eyes narrowed contemptuously and her lips pouted. "All right!" she said furiously. "You brought this on yourself. Oliver took care of you once and I guess he can do it again—if you'd like."

"Oh—Oliver, huh? Oliver Tolliver—better known as the Count de Pression." Pat linked arms with her, and they turned up the walk.

Going up the steps to the second floor of the flat building, Pat followed a step behind the girl, his hand on the butt of the revolver in his pocket. At the top of the steps, his grin faded, and he whirled sharply. At the end of the corridor a door stood ajar, almost hidden by billowing, grey smoke. Pat snatched the girl's wrist, broke into a run down the hall.

Beyond the open door, the first thing Pat saw was the waste basket. It was big and olive-colored and the paper in it was blazing away merrily. Then he saw the man in the tan suit, who slumped over the writing desk. The horn hasp of a knife jutted out of his back in the worst possible spot and there was quite a bit of blood. A telephone handset had fallen to the floor beside the desk and its wire dangled. The receiver of the phone was giving forth with a series of impatient hellos.

Pat shoved the girl into the room, stepped in after her, and kicked the door shut. He stepped to the desk, yanked the phone handset up by its wire.

"Hold the wire," he snapped into the transmitter. "Something's cooking." Then he dropped the phone to the desk, crossed to the window. The window was open, and he unlatched the screen. He turned back, saw the brunette sneaking toward the door. He drew his gun and she stopped. He scooped up the steel waste basket, carried it to the window, and chucked it out. He swung back toward the desk, shaking his blistered fingers in the air. He looked toward the girl.

"Don't hover around the door that way, hon. You're not going anywhere."

She raised her eyebrows, turned, sauntered over to a chair and sat down. Just like that, with a dead man sitting in the same room with her. Pat picked up the telephone. Out of the receiver came the steady clatter of a typewriter. Pat's dispassionate green eyes regarded the brown hair on the back of the dead man's head, moved on down toward the knife. Oliver Tolliver, the Count de Pression, was as dead as anybody Pat had ever seen.

He said into the phone, "Hello."

"Hello," came right back at him over the background noise of the typewriter. "Oh, hello, Mister—ah—Mister—"

"The name is Oberron, Si," Pat said.

"No-no. Don't be ridiculous," Silas Borden objected. "Oberron is a detective. You're Mr. Tolliver. We were talking about a girl—remember? We were rudely interrupted—"

Pat said, "Now, Si, take off your glasses. This is Pat Oberron. I am, I think, at Oliver Tolliver's apartment."

"Fine," said Borden. "I was talking to

Tolliver about this Ruth MacFarlan. He says he knows where she is."

"Nuh-uh," Pat denied. "Not any more, he doesn't. The Count de Pression is not in a position to know anything. He's dead."

From Borden's end of the line there was silence except for the clack of the typewriter. Then the attorney gasped, "But that's impossible. I was talking to him not three minutes ago, and then he said to wait a minute, and I've been waiting."

"And in the meantime," Pat said, "somebody stabbed him in the back."

Si Borden groaned. "And he was our best lead to Miss MacFarlan!"

"A possible reason why he was killed," Pat concluded. "Just a second, Si—and don't worry, nobody's going to knife me in the back." He put his palm over the transmitter, looked across the room at the brunette. "Hon, is your name Ruth MacFarlan, by any chance?"

She said, "Why, of course. I am Miss MacFarlan. What about it?"

Pat sighed deeply as he uncorked the transmitter. "Unlax, Si. Miss MacFarlan just ankled into the picture. And very, very pretty, too."

"What? What?" Borden yelled. "You're sure? You're absolutely certain? She'll have to identify herself, you know. There are some papers to be signed, and this Mr. Carpenter is a cautious chap."

"I'll find out and call you right back," Pat volunteered.

"No! You bring the lady with you to my office. Right now!"

PAT hung up. As his hand left the phone, his eyes encountered a paper-thin curl of some yellowish substance on the blotting pad close to the left elbow of the corpse. He picked the thing up, and his first impression was that somebody had been making some home-made soap-chips from a yellow bar of laundry soap. But on closer inspection, he decided the stuff was wax. He raised one corner of the blotter, saw three more tiny fragments of wax. He stepped back, turned toward the girl, his eyes on the floor. More wax, and something else not far from the spot where the blazing waste basket had stood—a hole in the carpet as big as a dime.

It looked like a cigarette burn, except that the edge of the hole was bleached to a sickly yellow. Acid, he decided.

He looked up at the girl. Her knees were crossed, and she swung one beautiful leg back and forth. She was nervous, but she had good control of herself.

"What was Tolliver to you?" he asked.

"My fiance," she said, her voice level. "We were to be married at high noon at the City Hall. But he didn't come to the hotel for me. I called him on the phone, and he said he was detained."

Pat nodded. "He couldn't show himself. Because the cops were after him. They were after him because of the corpse that was stashed in his desk. That's why the body of the girl was put there—to prevent Tolliver from marrying you, to scare him into line. I think he was going to double-cross somebody. Incidentally, you're all broken up over his death, aren't you?"

She shrugged. "It was a marriage of convenience. He had promised to put me in the movies."

Pat laughed shortly. "He told that to all the girls. Can you prove you're Ruth MacFarlan?"

She nodded, unclasped her purse, took out two documents, which she handed to Pat. The first proved to be a photostatic copy of the registration of her birth. The second was the release which a Mrs. Hannah MacFarlan had signed when her daughter, Ruth Addison MacFarlan, had been turned over to the St. Agnes Orphanage, at the age of three years. Pat lifted his eyes from the documents to the girl's lovely face.

"Will you marry me, hon?"

Her laugh was unadulterated derision. "How utterly absurd! Marry a sinister character like you?"

He shrugged. "No harm asking. You're worth about half a million dollars on the hoof. Shall we go and collect?"

Her frown was puzzled. "Wh—what's that?"

He said, "An uncle of yours kicked the bucket. A banker named Carpenter is looking for you so he can hand you the whole estate, amounting to half a million dollars. What are we waiting for?"

She passed a trembling hand across her lovely forehead, stood up, smiled faintly. "Yes, what *are* we waiting for?"

Which was, Pat thought, a very funny way to take all that good news.

They went out the door, and Pat closed it behind them. Across the hall, the door of the opposite flat stood part way open, and within an exited male voice was talking on the phone.

"Police headquarters? I want to report an assault. A prowler, I guess. A big man with a suitcase and a handkerchief tied over his face. He hit me over the head with a gun, and I've been unconscious for about thirty minutes!"

Pat looked at Ruth MacFarlan. She shuddered prettily. Across the hall, the man was giving his name and address. He added, "The guy was big."

Pat said, "They're all big, brother, when they've got guns." And as he hurried the brunette off down the hall, he thought that he must have been born ten feet behind this killer and was destined to stay ten feet behind him for the rest of his life.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Design for Dying

FATE, who by now owed Pat quite a bit, all things considered, gave him a break by practically steering a taxicab into his lap. Pat and the girl got in, and fifteen minutes later they alighted in front of the Brill Building, where Si Borden had his office. Pat took the girl with him into the drugstore on the ground floor of the building. There he made three purchases. He turned from the counter with a dime's worth of fullers' earth, which he put into the right hand pocket of his coat. The ten cent package of lampblack went into his left pocket. He put the pint bottle of tetra-oxide of hydrogen in the inner pocket of his coat. All the while, Ruth MacFarlan was eyeing him suspiciously.

"What's that stuff for?"

He put a crooked forefinger to his lips. "A secret formula. Mix all that stuff together and you get a cheap imitation of synthetic rubber ideally suited for bouncing checks. . . . Wait a second, while I call Si Borden."

He stepped into a phone booth, watched the girl through the glass of the door as he dialed. There was no answer. He got the nickel back, spent it again for a call to Borden's house. Borden himself answered.

Pat said, "That's all I wanted to know. We'll be right over."

"You mean you've identified her?" Borden asked.

"Yeah," Pat said. "She's identified clear up to her eyebrows." He hung up, left the booth, cupped a hand under Ruth MacFarlan's elbow. They had stepped out onto the sidewalk, when Pat heard somebody hail him. He looked across the street, saw Necktie Sam scuttling toward him from the entrance of the Hillary Building, and stepped to the curb.

Sam stopped in the gutter, his mouth open, gaping at the girl. Pat took hold of one of Sam's wide coat lapels. "Never mind the lady. Opportunity has kicked the door down again and you can do me a favor."

"Sure, Patrick. Anything if it don't cost money."

"Go to Hotel Spann. Get Red Haggerty. He's the guy who tried to knife me, remember? Bring him to Si Borden's house."

Sam nodded. "To Si's house. Okay."

THE house was green, with scalloped wood siding, fret-work, and impossible balconies pasted in front of second story windows. The doorbell had a T handle and you twisted it. Pat twisted it, glanced over at the tall brunette at his side. Her blue eyes were dewy, and she was trembling slightly.

"I—I still cant believe it! Me—a millionaire!"

"Just half a millionaire," Pat corrected. "Not that you'd call that hay."

Si Borden opened the door. He peered at them over the tops of his glasses as though he didn't want any. Then his eyes and mouth widened and he gave forth a prolonged, "Ohhhh!"

They went in. Si Borden looked the girl up and down. "Miss Ruth MacFarlan! Lovely, isn't she, Mr. Oberron? Perfectly lovely!"

Borden led the way into the library. A stout and smiling Mr. Carpenter got up from a platform rocker that squeaked as though he had stepped on a cat's tail. While Borden was performing introductions, Pat's eyes prowled about the room. Borden's furnishings were antique to the point of being uncomfortable. There were crinoline chairs, a haircloth sofa, a lumpy Victorian love seat, a wormy secretary that incongruously supported a streamlined portable typewriter on its writing surface.

Si Borden was saying, "And now, my dear,

if you'll show Mr. Carpenter such identification as you may have, we'll get on with the not unpleasant task. Let's see"—his eyes fumbled around the room—"where shall we write?"

Pat stepped to the secretary. "What's the matter with right here?"

Borden shook his head. "Miss—ah—the lady would find it a trifle high. This little table right here will be much more suitable."

The table was carved walnut with a slab of veined rose marble for a top. Borden put one of the crinoline chairs in front of it, pushed back a hob-nail glass compote. He looked over his glasses at Carpenter and the girl.

"Everything in order, Mr. Plumber?" he asked.

"Er—Carpenter, if you please," said the banker. "Yes, these papers are genuine. There is no reason to suppose that Miss MacFarlan isn't genuine, too." He chuckled pleasantly, led the girl toward the table which Borden had prepared.

Pat was begining to get nervous. He asked, "What about my thousand dollars, Si?"

Borden looked at him, frowned. "What thousand—" he began, then held up a hand in protest as Pat's green eyes narrowed dangerously. "Oh, of course. You've done an excellent job. Excellent!" He took a roll of bills from his pocket, moistened a thumb, counted off ten of them. They were hundred dollar notes. Pat all but snatched them, tucked them into his wallet, and immediately felt better.

Miss MacFarlan sat stiffly at the antique table, Si Borden's fountain pen poised in her right hand, her left hand pressing up against her slim throat. Her full lower lip was quivering. Carpenter put a fatherly hand on her shoulder.

"Now, now, my dear. It's a shock, but a pleasant one. Just a few documents to sign, and you will be a very wealthy young woman, and I will have discharged my duty." He turned to Borden. "I think a test signature would be advisable."

Borden said, "Of course, of course." He went to the secretary, got a piece of white paper, brought it to the table where the girl was seated.

She said limply, "Where?"

"Any place, any place," Borden chirped. "Right there will do. A mere formality." He indicated a point on the paper with a penciled X.

The girl put the pen to the paper, began to write slowly, then quickened her strokes. The signature was concluded briskly and firmly—*Ruth Addison MacFarlan.* She looked up at Borden, her eyes wide and questioning. Borden took the paper, stepped to Carpenter's side. The banker had Ruth MacFarlan's signature card in one hand. His bright eyes skated back and forth between the signature card and the paper on which the girl had just written.

Pat Oberron stepped behind the girl, looked down at the marble top of the table. He wondered if he ought to use lamp black or fullers' earth, decided suddenly upon the latter. He took the paper package from the pocket of his coat, hastily broke it open with his thumbnail, emptied the entire contents on top of the table. Ruth MacFarlan's gasp was a scream going the wrong direction. For Pat ducked his head, blew hard into the middle of the mound of light grey powder. The stuff was dissipated in all directions. Some of it hit the brunette in the face, and she pushed back from the table, blinking. Pat stepped behind her, mock dis ay written all over his thin, shrewd face.

"Now look what I went and done, Mr. Carpenter. Spoiled the whole damned scheme!"

Carpenter looked. So, for that matter, did Si Borden and the girl. There on the rose surface of the marble were no less than ten signatures of Ruth Addison MacFarlan, all in the same handwriting but differing slightly, as signatures from the same hand must always differ—all clearly visible where they had been invisible before, because of the light grey powder that clung to the engraving.

Pat Oberron had the bottle of tetra-oxide in his right hand. He pulled the cork with his teeth, and unceremoniously dumped the contents onto the top of the girl's black head.

The girl screamed. She plastered both hands over her eyes, got to her feet, staggered away from the table. Black hair dye and the oxide wash flowed down over her hands, wrists and arms. Light streaks showed up in her hair.

Across the room, Si Borden showed an inclination to go somewhere in a hurry. He darted toward the hall door, turned, fled back to the secretary. He was trying to get a drawer open, when Pat hauled out his revolver and put two bullet holes in the wood so close to Borden's hand that the attorney stuck his fingers into his mouth as though he had been burned. Borden heeled around, panting.

"No!" he begged frantically.

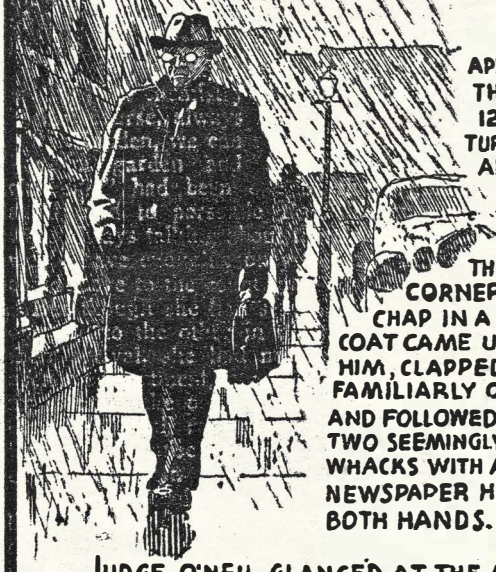
PAT kept the gun leveled as though he might. He glanced at the girl. She was over near one of Borden's windows, using one of Si's drapes for a towel. With her face streaked with makeup and hair-dye, she was a mess.

Banker Carpenter stood near the marble-topped table, breathing audibly. His lower jaw was thrust forward like a Yankee bulldozer cutting through a jungle full of Japs.

*(Continued on page 92)*

# STRANGE TRAILS

## The MYSTERY of the LETHAL JOKER



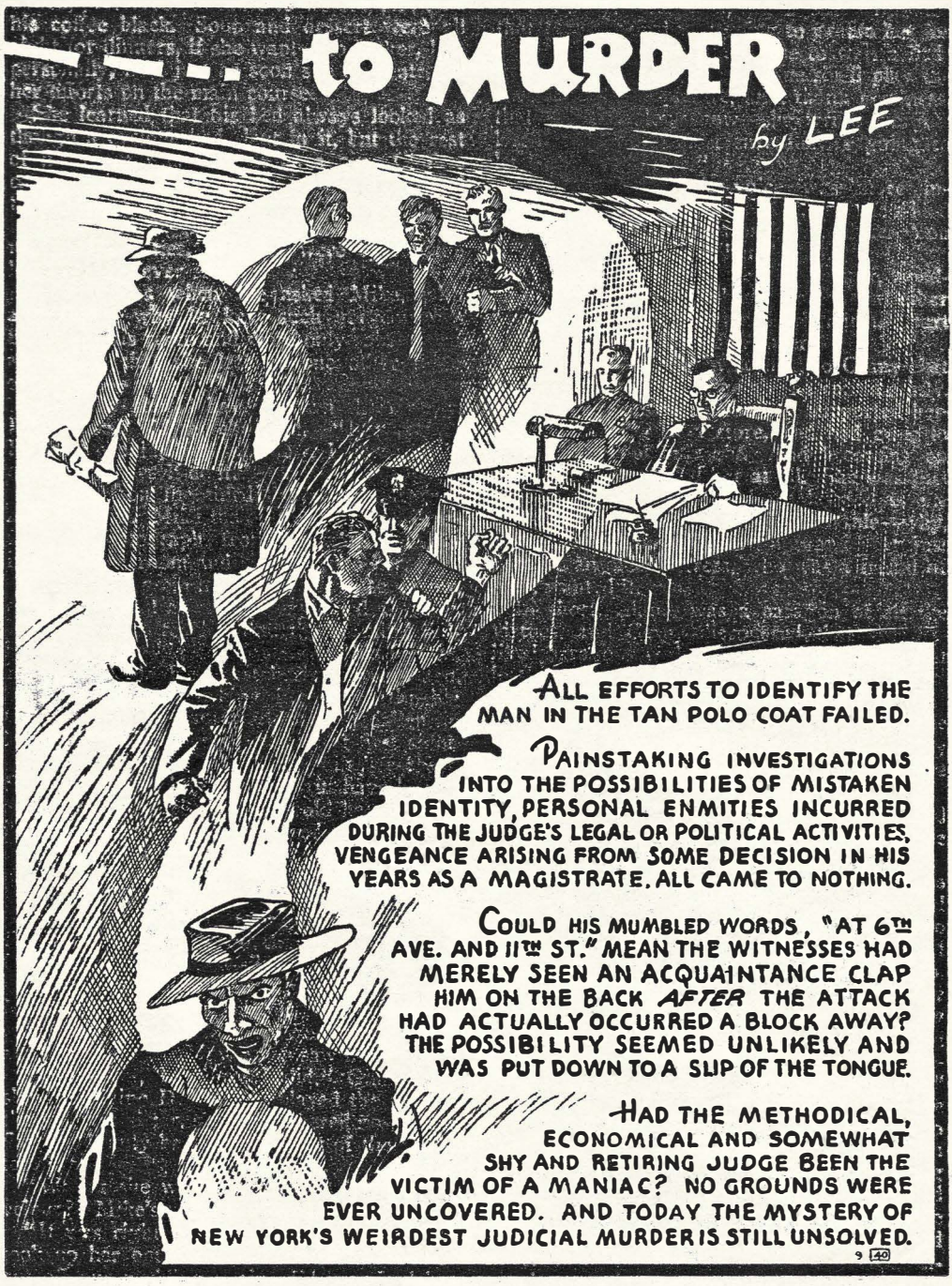
SHORTLY AFTER 9 ON THE MORNING OF APR. 27, 1937, JUDGE JOHN F. O'NEIL DESCENDED THE STEPS OF HIS BROWNSTONE HOME ON WEST 12TH ST. IN NEW YORK'S GREENWICH VILLAGE, TURNED HIS COLLAR UP AGAINST THE DRIZZLE AND WALKED THE HALF-BLOCK TO 6TH AVE. TO CATCH A BUS TO MUNICIPAL COURT.

WITNESSES STATED LATER THAT, AS THE 69-YEAR-OLD JUSTICE PAUSED ON THE CORNER, A STOCKY RUDDY-FACED CHAP IN A TAN POLO COAT CAME UP BEHIND HIM, CLAPPED HIM ONCE FAMILIARLY ON THE BACK AND FOLLOWED UP WITH TWO SEEMINGLY JOCULAR WHACKS WITH A FOLDED NEWSPAPER HELD IN BOTH HANDS.

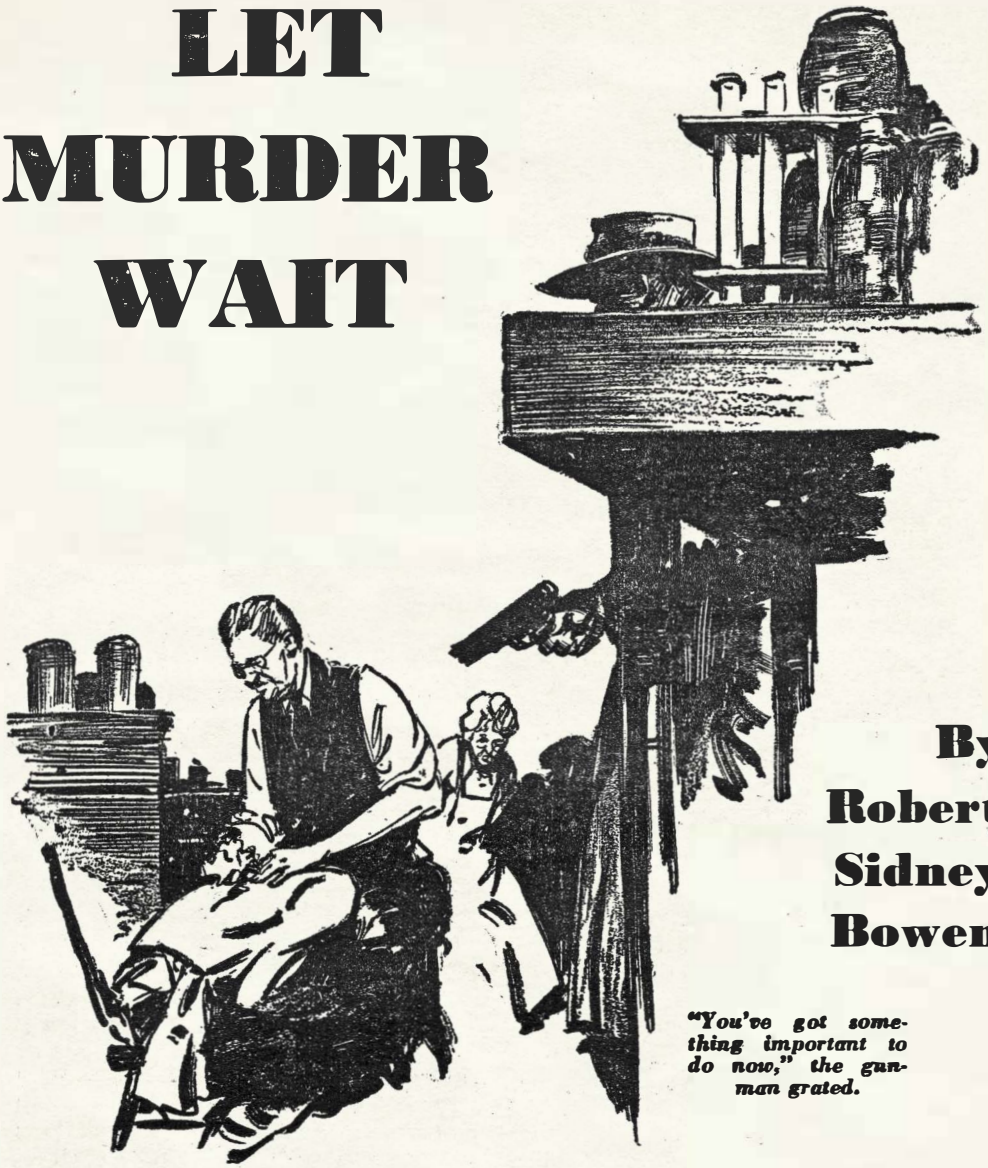
JUDGE O'NEIL GLANCED AT THE MAN WHO SWUNG AROUND, SLOWLY CROSSED 6TH, TOOK TO HIS HEELS AND VANISHED TOWARDS 5TH AVE. THE JUDGE THEN RETRACED HIS STEPS TO HIS DOOR AND RANG THE BELL. RECEIVING NO RESPONSE, HE CRIED: "FOLLOW ME TO ST VINCENT'S HOSPITAL," STUMBLED AND FELL FLAT.

TO THE SUPERINTENDENT OF A NEARBY APARTMENT HOUSE WHO ASSISTED HIM THERE, JUDGE O'NEIL MUMBLED: "I WAS STABBED AT 6TH AVENUE AND 11TH STREET." EXAMINATION REVEALED AN 18-INCH THRUST BY A SLENDER BUTCHER KNIFE ENTERING HIS BACK HAD PENETRATED A LUNG, ANOTHER ONE HAD BROKEN TWO RIBS.

THREE DAYS LATER HE DIED, AFTER FURTHER CONFUSING THE ISSUE BY MUTTERING HE'D THOUGHT AT FIRST HE'D BEEN HIT BY A CAR, AND DIDN'T KNOW WHO STRUCK HIM.


... to MURDER
by LEE
ALL EFFORTS TO IDENTIFY THE MAN IN THE TAN POLO COAT FAILED.
PAINSTAKING INVESTIGATIONS INTO THE POSSIBILITIES OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY, PERSONAL ENMITIES INCURRED DURING THE JUDGE'S LEGAL OR POLITICAL ACTIVITIES, VENGEANCE ARISING FROM SOME DECISION IN HIS YEARS AS A MAGISTRATE. ALL CAME TO NOTHING.
COULD HIS MUMBLED WORDS, "AT 6TH AVE. AND 11TH ST." MEAN THE WITNESSES HAD MERELY SEEN AN ACQUAINTANCE CLAP HIM ON THE BACK AFTER THE ATTACK HAD ACTUALLY OCCURRED A BLOCK AWAY? THE POSSIBILITY SEEMED UNLIKELY AND WAS PUT DOWN TO A SLIP OF THE TONGUE.
HAD THE METHODICAL, ECONOMICAL AND SOMEWHAT SHY AND RETIRING JUDGE BEEN THE VICTIM OF A MANIAC? NO GROUNDS WERE EVER UNCOVERED. AND TODAY THE MYSTERY OF NEW YORK'S WEIRDEST JUDICIAL MURDER IS STILL UNSOLVED.
9 40

# LET MURDER WAIT



"You've got something important to do now," the gunman grated.

**By Robert Sidney Bowen**

***It was past his lifetime, but Dr. Benton scarcely knew it. There was much to be done in the borrowed moments left for him—after he'd needled those who would kill him to the chair!***

DR. BENTON roused himself from a rambling reverie and looked at his wife seated by the radio cabinet.

"Eh, my dear?"

She gave him a maternal smile and nodded her head of snow-white hair. "I asked you, did you hear that just now?"

"Did I hear what?" he demanded.

As he put the question Dr. Benton took out his watch and scowled at the dial. The hands showed exactly fourteen minutes to eleven o'clock. His wife gave a little sigh, reached a hand to the radio and turned off a commercial.

"That news flash, of course," she said. "But, then, you never do listen, do you? Not lately, anyway."

"Of course, I do," he said with a slight testiness in his voice. "Radio's a wonderful substitute for the papers, when you haven't the time. I just didn't happen to be listening that time. What was it about?"

"Put your watch away, Gerald," his wife said gently. "You won't make the time go faster by looking at it. You said it wouldn't be until midnight, didn't you?"

He nodded, and reluctantly obeyed. "At exactly midnight—I'll know," he said in a low voice, as though talking to himself.

A glow of tenderness touched his wife's face. She reached out a hand and touched his arm. "I hope so terribly much, for your sake, Gerald dear," she said softly. "You've worked so hard over this serum. I've been so worried about the way you've been sleeping and eating these last few weeks. I only—"

He stopped her with a gesture of his hand, as though he were actually brushing the words aside.

"Its been worth it," he said firmly, "because I know I've got it this time. I didn't before. Of course, it will still be only a first step—we've still much to learn about polio. But I know that my new serum will halt it, if administered in time. Of course there's . . . . No! At midnight I'll have absolute proof. I know I will. Now, what about that news flash, Mary? Don't tell me those Nazis have surrendered?"

"No," she assured him. "It wasn't about the war, anyway. "You remember about that armored car robbery a month or so ago? I mean the one where the driver and guard were killed, and goodness knows how much money was stolen? The police caught the two men who did it a few days later. It was all in the papers. You remember, don't you?"

He shook his head, and started to take out his watch again. He checked himself.

"Afraid I don't, my dear," he said. "Not much interested in that kind of news, anyway. That's what was on the radio?"

"Yes," she said. "It was about those two men they caught. Their trial ended yesterday, and they were both sentenced to the electric chair. Well, they escaped a few hours ago, while they were being taken by train to the state prison. They got away from their guards somehow. The radio didn't say if they killed them, or anything like that. It just said that they leaped off the train and ran away. But it also said that a policeman, or somebody on the train, had shot at them but it wasn't known if either of them had been hit."

"The guards?" the doctor asked absently and took out his watch to consult the time.

"No the criminals, of course, Gerald!" his wife said in exasperation. "The police are hunting high and low, and—but, you're not listening. Gerald, why torture yourself sitting there? Why don't you go to your blessed laboratory and find something to do? It will at least help to pass the time."

He smiled over at her and rose from his chair.

"I believe I will, my dear," he said. "That's a very good idea. You'll excuse me?"

"Go along with you," she said, and reached for the radio. "If there are any calls I'll see that you're not bothered."

A FEW moments later he was in his well-equipped laboratory with its hundred smells, each of which was as attar of roses to his nostrils. He paused inside the room for a moment, smiled faintly and let his gaze wander about. Sixty-four years he had lived in this house man and boy. Forty of them with Mary, his wife. But this one room was something apart from all the rest. It was himself. His very soul, it seemed so at times. And on the dot of midnight, in this very room, the greatest moment of all those sixty-four years.

He walked past a table that held racked rows of equipment and over to a small but compactly built electric oven in the far corner. A little red light showed that the oven was on, and extending out of the top at an angle was the eye-piece tube and thumb screws of a microscope. The gadget was an invention of his own and made it possible for him to examine anything being heat-processed inside the thick-walled oven.

Bending over he put his eye to the piece, adjusted a focus thumb screw a hair, and then froze motionless for several minutes. When at last he lifted his head his face was wreathed in smiles, and there were dancing bright lights in his eyes.

"Coming along perfectly!" he breathed softly. "I've—got it!"

Automatically he pulled out his watch and looked at the dial. The time was eleven minutes after eleven o'clock. Forty-nine minutes to go before he would have proof that his infantile paralysis serum was a success. He scowled at the watch, jammed it back in his pocket, and moved over to the table of test tubes and other experimental equipment.

Some twenty minutes later the muffled sounds of a voice raised in protest came to him through the laboratory door. It took him a moment to realize it was his wife's voice. He was half turning toward the door when he heard her voice again—this time more distinctly.

"You can't go in there! The doctor is very busy, I tell you. He is not to be disturbed. You'll have to go some place else."

Then came the other voice. Deep, rough, and menacing.

"Look, lady, we're seeing the doc, see? We got business with him."

"But I tell you. . . . Oh!"

The last was a gasp of pain and the doctor froze in unbelieving surprise. A split second later the laboratory door was kicked open and two men came in, shoving his wife ahead of them. She held her right hand to her cheek, and between the spread fingers the skin shone fiery red. The doctor glared at the two men.

"What do you mean by—"

The taller of the two men took a hand out of his jacket pocket. The hand was smeared with blood from a trickle that ran down from under the jacket cuff. But it wasn't the blood that made Doctor Benton straighten and gasp. It was the gun that was held in the hand, and pointing straight at him.

"Sorry to bother you, doc," the owner of the voice said in a flat voice, "but my friend and I have business for you that can't wait. It shouldn't take you long. Not if you're smart, it shouldn't. Take my friend first. I can wait. He got clipped in the back, and the slug's still in him. You dig it out, and then fix my wing for me."

The doctor stood there blinking as though he hadn't heard, or at least as if the words didn't make any sense to him. He blinked first at the man with the gun, then at the other one—a man with red hair and a coarse-featured face. His thin lips were twisted and pressed tightly together in acute pain. He stood leaning forward slightly, with his right arm crooked and held tightly to his side.

"Snap out of it, doc!" the man with the gun broke the silence. "Get to work and get that slug out of my friend. I don't think it's very deep, so it should be easy. Dumb, though, to travel with it in him. Come on, get to work."

THE doctor licked his lips and then his aged eyes flashed.

"Are you crazy?" he demanded. "Remove a bullet? Certainly not—I haven't done an operation in years."

The other's eyes narrowed and the glint that came from them was cold and deadly.

"You're a doctor, aren't you?" he bit off. "It says so on your shingle outside. Quit stalling, and get busy. Fix him up."

"Certainly I'm a doctor," Benton replied. "But I haven't even engaged in general practice for years. Just research. Go to a hospital, and they'll take care of you. There's one not two miles down the road. I haven't any right to do that sort of thing, strictly speaking."

"Maybe you don't get the idea, doc," the tall one said in a brittle voice and hefted his gun. "This gives you the right, see? So get busy. And don't worry about dough. I'll see that you get paid."

Doctor Benton lifted his chin and put back his shoulders in a severe gesture.

"It isn't a question of money," he said. "It is one of ethics. Gunshot wounds should be treated by a practising physician, and there's always one or two on duty at the hospital. What was it, a hunting accident?"

He heard his wife gasp, but it didn't register on him. The man with the gun smiled thinly.

"Yeah, a hunting accident, doc," he said. He stared, then said, "We'll let it go at that. Now—get busy. Joe, there, couldn't last to any hospital, so you're elected."

But Doctor Benton made no move. He stood scowling at the gunman, and there was a puzzled expression on his face. A moment later the red-headed one broke the silence with a loud groan.

"Work on him, Pete!" he gasped out past stiff lips. "The guy is stalling, and this thing is killing me. Work on him, Pete. Make him go ahead and do his stuff."

The gunman nodded without looking at his friend. He kept his narrowed eyes fastened on the doctor's face.

"You hear that, doc?" he rasped and brought the gun up to a level with Benton's heart. "You fix up my friend, and fast, or you get blasted, but good. And your old lady, too!"

A bewildered expression crossed the doctor's face, and returned as one of anger.

"See here, you can't order me to do a thing like that, even if you do have a gun in your hand!" he cried. "Go to a hospital and they'll—"

"Gerald!" his wife broke in in a strained voice. "The radio, Gerald!"

He jerked his head around to stare at her. "Radio? What radio?"

A low whistle slid off the gunman's lips. He backed up a step and flicked his eyes from one to the other.

"So they sent out a flash, eh?" he echoed. "You two heard it on the radio?"

Doctor Benton ignored him. He looked at his wife out of puzzled eyes. She still held one hand to her cheek, but she reached out with the other in timid appeal.

"Do what he asks, Gerald," she said with great effort. "Don't you understand, Gerald? They are the escaped criminals. From the train. Do what they ask, my dear. You must!"

"Right!" the gunman said. He grinned faintly. "She's talking sense, doc. It won't take you long and then we'll be on our way. I'm not kidding, doc. Letting you and the old lady have it isn't going to make things any worse for us."

Surprise, consternation and a little fear,

battled for a place on the doctor's face. For a brief moment he acted as though he were powerless to move, as though the truth finally dawning in his brain had robbed him of all power of action. The gunman swore softly and came forward the step he had retreated.

"Time's up!" he grated.

Doctor Benton shook himself and licked his lips. "But I haven't the necessary instruments," he began. "I—"

The other stopped him with a jerk of his gun toward an instrument filled glass cabinet set against the wall on the right.

"Right there, doc," he snapped. "I've seen slugs taken out before. Cut it—or maybe you still think I'm kidding, huh?"

He pivoted so that the gun was pointed at the woman.

The words came off the doctor's lips in a strangled gasp. "No, for God's sake! Don't. Yes, I'll do it. Only stop pointing that gun at her."

"That's the idea," the gunman said in a flat voice and swiveled the gun from the woman to her husband. "Get going, then. Okay, Joe, let the doc have a look."

THE doctor hesitated, but when his eyes met those of his wife's he wavered no longer. He turned toward the redhead.

"I'll have to remove your jacket and shirt, and it will hurt," he said in a cold professional voice. Then in a gentler tone, "Light the light under the sterilizer, Mary. And heat some water on the other burner. Now, you—"

The redhead groaned as the doctor removed the blood-soaked jacket and shirt. The flesh where the bullet had entered was puffed up and looked like so much raw, and bleeding beef. The doctor peered at it a moment, and then lifted his head.

"Not deep, eh?" he snapped. "You didn't know what you were talking about. The layman never does. Move that chair over here so he can sit down. You'll have to help me. And for heaven's sake put that gun away. I'm doing what you ask."

"Sure you are, doc," the other said and pushed a chair over with his foot. "But I'll just keep this little thing out where we can all see it. Hey! What's the idea of looking at your watch?"

The doctor threw an anxious glance toward the electric oven in the far corner. "I've something important to do at midnight."

"You've got something more important to do now!" the gunman grated. "How you feel, Joe?"

"Like I was going to pass out," the redhead whined. "Ain't there something he can give me, Pete"?

"What about it, doc?"

"There's nothing I can give him," Benton said and went over to the instrument cabinet. "I've no anesthesia equipment here, and a local anesthetic wouldn't do any good in this case. I thought you said you'd seen this done before!"

"Okay, just get it done," the other growled. "And hurry it up. This wing of mine isn't getting to feel any better."

Doctor Benton acted as though he hadn't heard. He was bending over the wounded man again and swabbing wet blood with a wad of gauze. His thin hands moved swiftly and deftly, and he seemed completely concentrated on the job. Only once did his eyes flicker over toward the electric oven. Eventually he stopped swabbing and, bending closer, he gently parted the edges of the hole made by the bullet. The redhead caught his breath in a quavering moan.

"God, doc!"

"Be quiet!" Benton said coldly and straightened up. Then speaking over his shoulder to his wife, he said, "Mary, bring me that third tube from the right in the second rack. I've got to stop some of this bleeding first."

His wife moved quickly to the table of racked tubes, lifted out a tube of violet-colored liquid and brought it to him. He took it without looking at it. He was staring at the gunman instead.

"If you won't put away that gun, then help me with your other hand," he said. "Unless, of course, you want your friend to bleed to death?"

"Sure, doc, sure," the other said and stepped closer. "What do I do?"

"Put your hand on his back, there," the doctor said and indicated the spot. "Now, press gently and draw your hand to the right at the same time to stretch the skin. A few drops of this—"

The doctor finished the rest in a strangled gasp, and stood frozen motionless and staring horrified down at the spreading purple stain on the wounded man's back and on the gunman's pressing hand. Then he jerked his head around and held up the tube of purple liquid. His hand shook so that he almost dropped it.

Then he spoke with a rush:

"Good Lord, Mary! This isn't the tube I asked for. You've given me. . . . Don't move, either of you! Mary! The alcohol solution there on the table, quickly. And some swabs!"

Even as he spoke Benton turned around quickly, replaced the tube of violet liquid back in the rack and hastened over to another glass cabinet.

"Hey, what's the idea?" the gunman barked. "If you're trying any—"

"Don't be a fool!" the doctor shouted at him without stopping. "Just stand still. Don't move. I've made a terrible mistake. Your skin's been impregnated with paralysis culture-medium. Don't either of you move, and don't touch that stain with your other hand."

"With what?" the gunman shouted with a faint hint of terror in his voice. "Why you—"

"Shut up!" the doctor barked as he came back. "It could be a whole lot more serious. Now, roll up your sleeve with your other hand, but don't touch that stain, and give me your arm. I'll inject the serum and swab the stain later."

DR. BENTON held a tiny vial of milky liquid in one hand and started to puncture the sealed cap with the needle of a hypodermic. The gunman had held his hand flat against his pal's back as though it were stuck there, but when he saw the hypo he jerked his hand away with a sharp oath, and backed up quickly, gun leveled and rock-steady.

"Hold it!" he snarled. "Nothing doing on the hypo. I've seen *that,* too! Nothing doing! You louse, I'm going to blast you—and Joe and I will take our chances, see?"

If there was terror in Doctor Benton's heart it did not show. He finished filling the hypodermic needle and then looked the gunman straight in the eye.

"Don't you understand, you fool?" he asked with a little vehemence. "You both have been impregnated with paralysis culture which has taken me years to isolate. That's been my work ever since I gave up general practice. I've been developing a serum to counteract and check infantile paralysis, if it's caught in its early stages. This is the serum, here. If I give you each an injection you stand a ninety-nine per cent chance of not being affected at all. If you shoot me you'll both be helpless paralytics in no time at all. And then *nothing* can save you! Bare your arm, and hold it out quickly, man!"

The gunman's mouth twitched, and his eyes darted to the left and right, as though seeking a way out of some kind of a trap. The doctor stared at him coldly for a moment, and then shrugged.

"Very well, then, suit yourself," he said. "But this serum has been my life's work, and it can save you. However—"

He stopped as the gunman's lips moved.

"Give it to him first—I'll see what happens."

"Your choice!" the doctor snapped, and turned from him. "So just stand there, and count the minutes. I don't know *how* many you've got left before you'll feel the first

tingling sensation. Mary, the alcohol solution, please."

His wife handed him a bottle and he poured some of the liquid it contained over a gauze swab and applied the swab to the purple stain on the redhead's back. A moment later he tossed the swab into a tray and pinching with his thumb and forefinger the skin of the wounded man at a point just below the nape of the neck he inserted the needle and administered an injection.

"Don't move."

Picking up a piece of cotton he wiped the point of the needle, and then suddenly looked at the gunman.

"Your hand!" he said sharply, and pointed. "You feel a tingling sensation, don't you? Look at it. Its shaking. Well, you wouldn't listen."

The gunman's hand wasn't shaking, but when he looked down at it the fingers twitched.

"Okay, give me some!" he said with an effort. "But by God, you, I'll—"

By now the gunman was trembling like a leaf, and it was with some difficulty that Doctor Benton was able to push up his sleeve and pinch the skin so that he could inject all that was left of the milky liquid in the glass cylinder of the hypo. When he had withdrawn the needle he hooked a nearby chair with his foot.

"Sit down and hold your hand up above the level of your shoulder," he said. "Relax as much as you can. There, that's it. Now, let me see your pupils."

Completely ignoring the gun that the man held not three inches from his chest, the doctor pried each lid apart with thumb and forefinger, and stared long and searchingly. When he stepped back he gave a little frowning shake of his head, and took out his watch. Worry and annoyance flashed across his face. He put back his watch, and then suddenly seemed to realize that his wife stood beside him, white and trembling.

"Watch the sterilizer over there, Mary!" he said sharply. 'I've still got to get that confounded bullet out. Lord, what a mess! Half my culture-medium spilled on them!"

With a groan and a sad shake of his head he put the hypo needle on the glass cabinet, and picked up a piece of gauze and began absently to wipe his hands. He didn't look once at either of his patients. Instead he took out his watch and studied it intently, with his back turned to the two men. Year-long minutes dragged by, and then. . . .

The sound had come from the tall gunman's lips. He was struggling to stand up, trying to lift his gun.

"You—" he choked. "Joe's out. I'll—"

But that was as far as the man could go. The gun roared once and the bullet made a hole in the floor at his feet. In the next instant he toppled over it. . . .

"Thank God!" Benton breathed, with a quavering sigh. "I was afraid I hadn't given him enough."

"Gerald!" his wife gasped. "Are they dead?"

"No," he said. "But they might just as well be. Go call the police, Mary, or somebody to come and get them out of here. I've got work to do."

HE HAD already turned from her and was heading for the electric oven in the corner when she stopped him.

"Then it wasn't, Gerald?" she cried out. "I didn't give you—"

"Of course not," he said. "You gave me a vial of Gentian Violet, that's all. A mild antiseptic. Not any paralysis culture-medium. Fact is—there isn't any such thing, yet. We haven't got that far. But they didn't know that. They, being laymen, and unusually stupid ones, believed me. Nor was that my precious serum. It was just a violently strong opiate that I've been using in my experiments and research work. Took long enough to get that tall one, though. I was terribly worried for fear. . . . Good heavens, it's midnight!"

The realization put speed into his legs and he hurried over to his electric oven. His wife shivered, then gingerly stepped around the two unconscious killers, and hurried out of the laboratory. She was back in two minutes.

"I got Chief Jones on the phone, Gerald," she announced. "He's coming right—"

He waved one hand angrily, not taking his eye from the projecting microscope tube.

"Don't bother me!" he snapped. "I've got it. I've—"

He suddenly cut himself off short, and straightened.

"I'm sorry, my dear, terribly sorry," he said softly. "I didn't mean to talk like that to you, but I'm afraid I'm not quite myself tonight. Come, dear, I want you to be the first to see it. It's beautiful, Mary. I've got it at last—"

She went over to him, her small face glowing. Several minutes later the night outside was rent by the wail of a police siren. And a moment after that the front door bell jangled sharply.

"That's the police," she said, and stepped back from the electric oven. "I'll go let them in."

But he had heard neither the police, nor her. He was squinting again down through the microscope at the result of a lifetime of work.

## New Detective Magazine

*(Continued from page 81)*

"What is the meaning of all this?" he demanded.

Pat thought it was obvious. "It means that hon by any other name would smell. Ruth MacFarlan is a bunch of blackened bones in Miss Jenny Woods' furnace. It means Miss Woods was killed because she could have upset the whole scheme by saying that hon wasn't Ruth MacFarlan. It means that the Count de Pression was the penman who etched those forged signatures with wax and acid on that marble slab, just so hon could trace Ruth MacFarlan's signature onto any number of legal documents. It means de Pression got it in the back because he conceived the idea that he could double-cross Borden, marry hon, and walk off with the MacFarlan money."

Her face muffled in the drapes, hon was crying and expressing a distinct and unprintable dislike for Pat Oberron. Across the room, Si Borden was trying to talk his way out from behind the eight ball.

"Miss MacFarlan killed herself," he was saying. "After all the time and money I had spent looking for her, when I found her at Jenny Woods' house, she was dead. A suicide. I've got the suicide note which she wrote to prove it. It was her signature on that note that was used as a pattern for the forger. All I did was dispose of the body, actually."

Pat eyed the lawyer coldly. "What about Miss Woods?"

Borden took off his glasses and tapped his chest with them. "Me? You mean I would kill a woman?"

Pat nodded. "With your bare hands, just last night, and right in this house. You got Jenny Woods here. Jenny was a dope from Dopeville, what I mean. You just struck up an acquaintance with her, told her your name was Smith, brought her here. Jenny was nuts about astrology, so it was perfectly natural she would ask you when you were born. What you told her didn't have to be the truth, but the date you gave her was sometime between June Twenty-first and July Twenty-second, or under the sign of Cancer, the Crab.

"Jenny opened her purse, looking for a piece of paper to write on, found the inspection tag that had been put in the bag at the factory. She didn't have a pencil in her purse, but she found one around here somewhere. She wrote Smith on one side of the tag and the sign of the Crab on the other. The cops have that tag, and they won't give a damn what Jenny wrote on it. It's what she wrote *with* that's important."

Borden looked suddenly much less sure of himself. "Wh—what do you mean?"

"I mean she wrote with a wax pencil—the

kind that sticks to glass or china or any smooth surface that the ordinary lead pencil won't adhere to. You use it in your china-painting to sketch the pattern to be painted onto the china."

Carpenter was looking at Borden as though the attorney were something that had just crawled up out of a sewer. He said, "Not only fraud and forgery—but murder."

"You can say that again," Pat said. "Two murders. Count de Pression was in the plot, too. He furnished the fake Ruth MacFarlan—our hon, here. And the count was the man who did those forged signatures on that chunk of marble. The count got to thinking that he and hon could carry out the plan alone and split the take two ways instead of three. He and hon were going to get married. Borden knew about it last night, so after he got through strangling Jenny Woods, he took the girl's body to Count de Pression's office, stashed the body in the count's desk."

Carpenter nodded. "I see. And the count was important to Borden because of the forgery angle. Then he killed him."

"I did not!" Borden denied. "I was in my office at the time—" He caught himself, coughed.

PAT grinned. "At what time? How do you know what time the count got it? You know, all right, because you were there. Let me tell you how you worked it. You went to that flat building on South Emmert Street with a suitcase. You tied a handkerchief over your face, knocked at the door of the flat across the hall from the count's place. Whoever came to the door was a pushover. You knocked the guy out, went into the apartment, and telephoned the count who was directly across the hall. You were all set for sound effects. In the suitcase, you had that portable typewriter over there. You manipulated the typewriter. The count thought you were in your office and felt safe.

"What you did was to tell the count to hold the wire a moment. Then you simply stepped across the hall and killed him. You let the phone dangle. You picked up the marble table top which had the completed signatures on it, put it into your suitcase. You cleaned up most of the wax which the count had used to cover the marble slab for the acid etching, but you couldn't do anything about the acid burns in the carpet. You started a paper fire in Count de Pression's waste basket, left the door open when you went out and back across to the apartment on the other side."

"Fire? What was the fire for?" Carpenter wanted to know.

"To attract attention," Pat explained.

"Anybody passing in the hall would have smelled the smoke and investigated. Borden wanted the body discovered in a hurry, because Borden was in the flat across the hall, pounding his typewriter and yelling into the phone all the time. Anybody investigating would have picked up the phone, just as I did. Borden identified himself, made like he was in his office. He thought it was an alibi, see?"

It was Carpenter who phoned for the police, while Pat and his gun watched over Borden and the girl. Just as Carpenter replaced the phone, the door of the Borden house was opened and Red Haggerty and Necktie Sam crashed in on the party. Sam was wide-eyed and expectant, Haggerty a little bit bewildered. The phoney Ruth MacFarlan swayed slightly forward from the window, let go of the drape she had used as a towel, and swooped toward Haggerty.

"Oh, Red! Red!" She put out both dye-stained arms to him.

Sam said to Pat, "What you think, they know each other!"

Haggerty said, "Marlene, darling!"

Pat watched for a moment with jaded eyes. Then he stepped over to Haggerty and nudged him. Haggerty looked around, interpreted Pat's gesture with thumb and forefinger. He grinned happily, stopped hugging the girl long enough to get out his roll of bills.

"Help yourself, Mr. Oberron. She's worth it."

Pat doubted it, but he counted off his money, stuck the roll back into Haggerty's pocket.

Haggerty grinned over the girl's shoulder at everybody. "Gosh, she's wonderful, isn't she?"

Pat tapped the girl on the shoulder. She looked around at him, her eyes streaming with tears.

Pat said, "I withdraw my proposal of marriage, lady. You're a blonde and I'm no gentleman."

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