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THRILLING DETECTIVE

Vol. LXXI, No. 1

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

February, 1953

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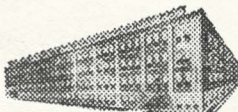
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The Lookout Was Lovely



A True Story of Crime by BESS RITTER

THE night was young and the girl in the parked auto was certainly beautiful. And it was very evident that the man who sat beside her thought so, too, because they both seemed to be completely absorbed in each other when the two border patrol men sighted them. The time was a sultry summer dusk in the 1940s, and the place happened to be the Florida Keys.

"That's love for you," remarked the driver, whom we'll call Allen, as he politely dimmed the lights of the patrol car he was driving.

"Yeah," sighed the other, relaxing his second-nature toughness for a matter of seconds. Then he added, "Humph. And how would you know? You've never been in love."

The other grew indignant. "So what if I haven't. Joe? Anybody can see—"

"Aw, cut it out. Or we'll be singing a duet of hearts and flowers any minute. Come on. Step on it. We haven't got all night."

"Yup," replied Allen as he slapped at a mosquito. And, "Boy, oh, boy, but the bugs are certainly biting."

These men weren't cruising the Keys on a routine, mundane mission. Instead they were actively engaged in the pursuit of a band of extremely wily smugglers. Headquarters knew for certain that their boat had taken off from Cuba, and was in the process at the moment of attempting to make an illegal landing *somewhere* on the shores of the Florida Keys. The approximate time was known, and Joe and Allen were ready.

But they didn't have the answers to the how and where—yet.

The police car picked up speed, and ate up the road for a while. Then Joe said quietly to Allen, "Turn around, and go back."

"Why? What's up?"

"Never mind asking questions. Just move quietly—and quickly. And—douse the lights!"

They crept up softly within sight of the unsuspecting romancing couple's car. They patiently waited. One hour. Two hours. Three hours. An eternity.

Then they were rewarded with what was unmistakably the low but insistent thrumming made by a motor boat. And they really hit the jackpot when the auto they were watching neatly blinked its lights—three times in succession.

"That's it," muttered Joe.

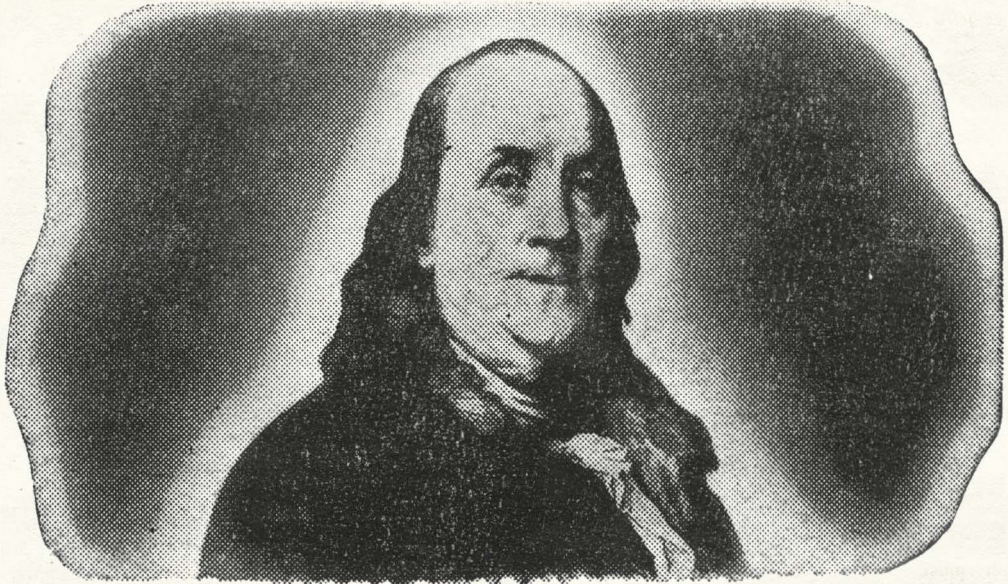
"Yeah—but—" replied Allen.

He didn't get the time to say any more, because he and his pal were quite busy, for the rest of the night, rounding up the gang of smugglers with their human-alien cargo.

Later on, however, he nabbed his pal and demanded: "Okay. Come on. Tell me—how did you know?"

Joe grinned and said lightly, "The trouble with you, Allen, like I told you before, is that you've never been in love. Because if you had, you'd know very well that it's almost impossible to concentrate on even the lushest of dames if you're pestered with the kind and quantity of mosquitoes that buzzed around us that night. So, if that's all you were parked for, you'd take off for elsewhere. But that pair stayed put. Why? Because they were lookouts, you chump, and not lovers!"

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CRIME CAPERS

THE CRIMINAL MIND is capable of many vagaries, some of which provide a chuckle for the busy sleuth. Here we've rounded up a few of the more colorful items that have spiced the current crime news.

IN CHICAGO, a bandit not only robbed 14 card-playing bookies of \$700, but also of their pants. He growled out this explanation: "I've lost my shirt in here a dozen times."

WHILE A VICKSBURG, MICH., judge was addressing the students at the town's high school on "Crime and Punishment," thieves stole \$100 from the principal's office.

IN TOLEDO, O., a man walked into a pharmacy and asked, "How's business?" The pharmacist said: "Swell," with a smile. "My business is good too," reported the visitor, and proceeded to rob the druggist of \$78 at gunpoint.

WHEN DETROIT POLICE arrested the town's No. 1 burglar, he had a complaint: He'd only netted \$1,500 in 49 burglaries.

A MARIETTA, OHIO, man, arrested for shoplifting, explained he was only trying to get some things together so that he could go to Florida for the winter.

IN DALLAS, a citizen drove to the Y. M. C. A. to hear a lecture on how to prevent theft of autos. When he got out, he found his car had been stolen.

LOS ANGELES POLICE have been looking for a thief with a lot of mosquito trouble. He broke into the City Health Department's pest control division and made off with 1,000 *Gambusia Affinnis*, mosquito-eating fish.



IN WICHITA, KANS., somebody swiped four alligators from the zoo.

TWO BANDITS with a keen sense of the melodramatic held up a Porterville, Cal., store manager. After robbing him, they took him to the edge of town, bound and gagged him and left him propped up against a cemetery tombstone.

SPOKANE, WASH., POLICE, dashing to a bank when its burglar alarm system went off, discovered that the switch had been pulled by a small boy who'd become bored while his parents were in an office with a bank official discussing a loan.

IN WARE, MASS., a housewife finally ambushed the mysterious intruder who had been raiding her kitchen—it was a flying squirrel.

IN INDIANAPOLIS, A THIEF tried to rob a passerby—and the thing ended in a draw. The victim held onto a \$50 bill the thief tried to grab. They both tugged at the bill until it tore in two, the thief fleeing with his half.

IN HAYWARD, CAL., a man was arrested for trying to break into jail to get a night's lodging.

LOS ANGELES OFFICIALS finally got a thief to cough up a stolen diamond. He'd kept it in his throat for three days.

A JONESBORO, ARK., city jail prisoner inserted an advertisement in the local paper, offering matrimony to any lady with enough money to help him get out of jail.

IN JACKSONVILLE, FLA., two red-faced policemen admitted that somebody had made off with their squad car riot gun.

—Harold Helfer

MURDER'S



She threw her head back and laughed

STRIP TEASE

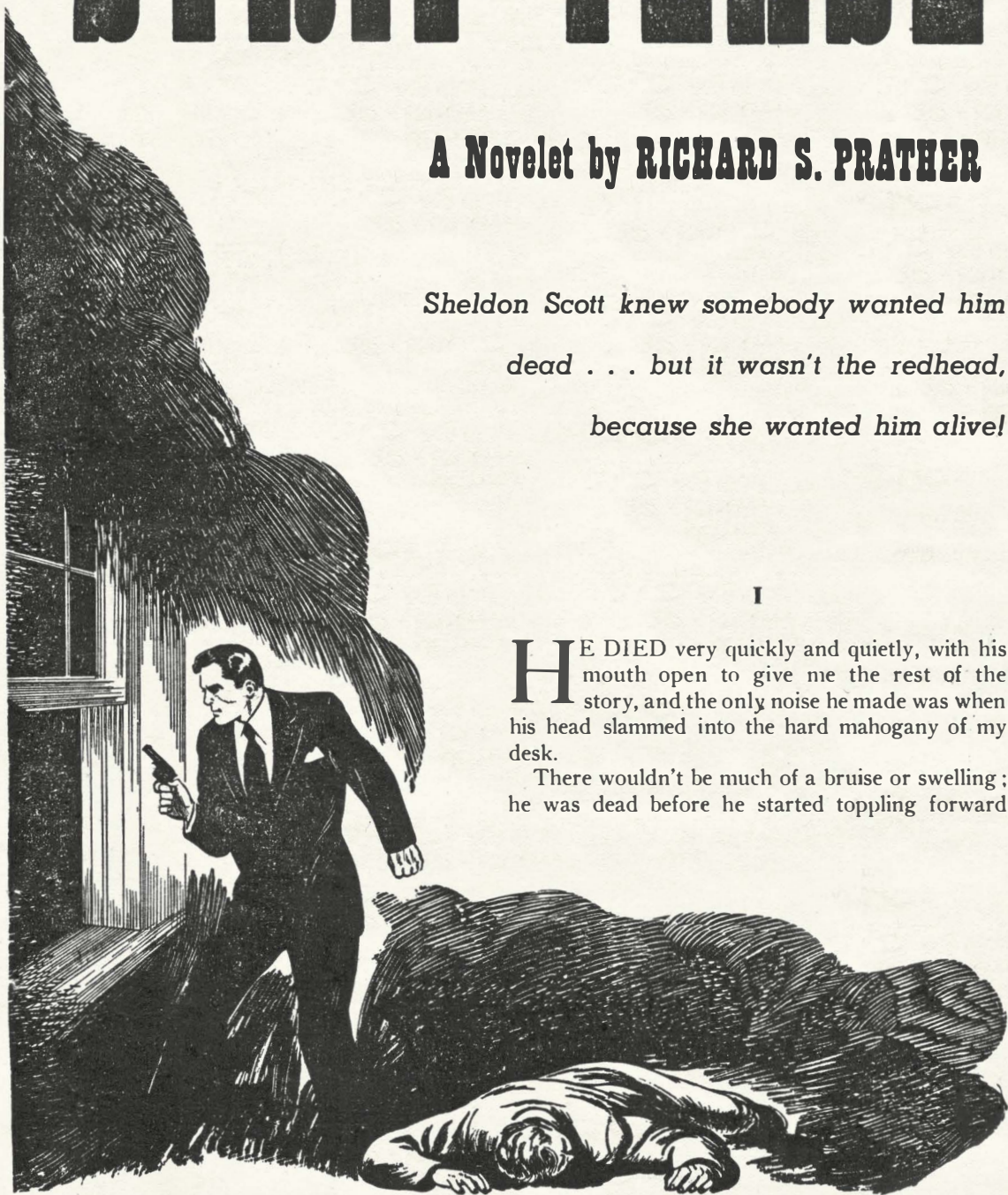
A Novelet by **RICHARD S. PRATHER**

*Sheldon Scott knew somebody wanted him
dead . . . but it wasn't the redhead,
because she wanted him alive!*

I

HE DIED very quickly and quietly, with his mouth open to give me the rest of the story, and the only noise he made was when his head slammed into the hard mahogany of my desk.

There wouldn't be much of a bruise or swelling ; he was dead before he started toppling forward



out of the best chair in my office, with the neat hole slightly off center in the middle of his forehead staring vacantly at me like a third sightless eye.

That wasn't really where it started; it started about five minutes before the bullet roared through his brain and messily out the back of his head. At least as far as I was concerned.

It was about seven o'clock Friday night and I'd just finished feeding some dried shrimp to the guppies I keep in a ten gallon tank on top of the bookcase in the office when he came in. Guppies: that's short for a kind of tropical fish that makes like rainbows. Yeah, guppies. I like guppies and the hell with you.

The guy was middle-aged and tall. Almost my height, say six-one, and he weighed maybe twenty pounds more than my two hundred and six. The extra twenty pounds was on his belly where he was starting to go to pot. He wore steel-rimmed glasses over eyes that were a washed out watery blue and he had a square, red face, a weak chin, and a thick neck that wasn't quite comfortable in what must have been a size seventeen collar, at least.

He asked in a surprisingly thin voice, "Mr. Sheldon Scott?"

"That's right."

"Loring. John Loring." He gave me his hand like it was a tip. The skin was soft and smooth like a woman's.

I said, "Sit down, Mr. Loring. What can I do for you?"

WHILE he planted the end of his tailbone on the edge of the leather chair before my desk I remembered the name Loring. It was spelled with dollar signs in Los Angeles, but up to now there'd always been a Mrs. in front of it. I'd hardly realized there was a Mr.

The Mr. got his tailbone perched satisfactorily and said abruptly, "Scott, I'll pay you five thousand to get somebody for me."

I wiggled a couple eyebrows at him, coughed quietly, and said, "Slow down, Mr. Loring. I'm a private investigator, not exterminator. What do you mean, get somebody?"

He grinned quickly, nervously, "Excuse my choice of words, Mr. Scott. I'm somewhat overwrought. I didn't mean you were to kill anyone. At least I don't think that will be necessary."

He chuckled without humor and went on, "I want you to get a blackmailer off my back. I'm being blackmailed, and the funny thing is I haven't stepped out of line." He hesitated, "Not really, you know. I told the skunk tonight—just before I came here—that I wouldn't pay anything and if the pressure wasn't removed I'd go to the police. All I got was a laugh in my face. I remembered reading about some of your, ah, exploits, Mr. Scott, so I looked you up in the phone book and came here."

"Why me instead of the police you mentioned?"

"Well, blackmail you know. I'm not exactly proud of it. I'd like it as quiet and private as possible. That's why I came to a private investigator. It's rather an odd affair and I want to be kept completely out of it if I can. That's important." He fumbled in his coat pocket, drew out a white envelope and handed it to me. "It's worth five thousand dollars to me if you do it my way."

I picked up the envelope, peeled it open and looked fondly at the crisp green C-notes inside.

I closed the envelope, tapped it against the back of my hand and said, "The offer's very attractive, Mr. Loring, but maybe you'd better give me the whole story. Who's blackmailing you? Who'd you have the beef with tonight? Start at the beginning."

He sighed and adjusted his steel-rimmed glasses. "Well, it actually started when I became unduly interested in art." He frowned. "Art," he repeated bitterly.

That was the end of the five minutes and from there on in he was dead.

He leaned forward toward me, opened his mouth to speak, and the shot came from the open window behind me. It sounded like it came right out of my ear.

I saw the neat round hole appear slightly off center in Loring's forehead just before my legs uncoiled and hurled me sideways toward the wall. The gun cracked again and a slug ripped a hole in the carpet a foot from my

body as I came up on my hands and knees against the wall and leaped toward the corner parallel to the window.

I yanked my revolver out of its spring shoulder holster and had it ready for action just as Loring's head smacked suddenly into the edge of my desk and he flopped onto the carpet like a sack of cement. At almost the same instant I heard the guy drop off the fire escape and make tracks down the alley behind the building. I got to the window just in time to hear the roar as a car motor was gunned and clashed into gear. The car was gone with a shrill screaming of rubber before I could get a look.

I DUG a flash out of the desk and went over the fire escape, finding exactly nothing, then closed the window, locked it, and pulled down the shade before I paid any more attention to Loring. He didn't need any attention; he was slumped carelessly on the floor like he was all tired out after a hard day's work. I left him resting and called Homicide.

It definitely wasn't my day. Instead of some nice guy like Captain Samson or Lieutenant Brown, I got Kerrigan. Lieutenant Jason Peter Kerrigan with ears. His voice over the phone was a shrill whine that went through me like fingernails scraping on a window pane. I gave it to him fast, hung up on his screech, and dug a finger into the ear that had suffered the most.

Then I searched Loring.

He had the usual junk in his pockets: handkerchief, comb, wallet, change. I stuffed everything back except the wallet and went through it. The only things of interest were two cards. They were of interest because they had something to do with art. One was from Massy's, a well known art store on Grand Street in downtown L.A. that specialized in fine paintings for a price; the other was printed "S. A. Fillson—Learn to Paint—Life Drawing," with an address on Broadway. I appropriated the two cards, illegally, and sat down behind my desk to wait for Kerrigan.

There's just one door into my office—the one that says, "Sheldon Scott, Investigations" on the frosted glass window—and Kerrigan came through it like he was making

a first down.

He stopped short for a moment, bandy legs spread wide while he glared at the body on the floor, then turned the glare on me. A little perspiration glistened on his fat face and the inevitable dead cigar jutted from between his thick lips. His voice was the same as it had been over the phone five minutes before, only louder.

"So someone shot him from the window, huh? You told me through the window, right Scott?"

I said wearily, knowing what was coming, "That's right."

"Right through the window. Right through the shade, too?"

"The window was open. I shut it and pulled the shade. Or should I have left it open so the guy could come back and try again?"

"You expect me to swallow that, Scott?"

He didn't like me.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Stop stretching so goddamn far, Kerrigan. O. K., so I murdered him. Things were dull."

THAT was when his face started getting red. The longer we talked, the redder it got. When it got to the shade where he was ready to book me on suspicion of murder and toss me in the pokey I cooled him off. A little.

"Act your age, Kerrigan." I yanked my .38 Colt Special out of its holster, grabbed it by the two inch barrel and handed it to him. "My gun hasn't been fired for days. What did I do with the murder gun? Eat it? Flush it down the drain? This guy was a client; I never saw him before in my life. I was supposed to help the guy, not knock him off. Whoever did it took a shot at me too, incidentally."

Kerrigan sniffed at the gun barrel, mumbled something under his breath, then shut up temporarily while the boys from Scientific Investigation went through their flashlight routine around the body. I did get my gun back, but when the lieutenant left, I went along with him.

After half an hour at Headquarters I was on my way with the usual admonition to keep myself handy. It was after six o'clock so I had to use the Main Street exit from the

City Hall, then took a right toward First. My office is between Third and Fourth on Broadway, just five blocks away, so I walked and wondered what the hell.

I was still wondering what the hell when I crossed Third Street and approached the Hamilton Building where my office is, but I also wondered vaguely why a car would be parked in the alley at its edge. The car was facing left into Broadway, half out over the sidewalk, and I'd casually noticed it a few moments before. As I got closer, I could hear the soft purr of the motor running. Maybe I was keyed up, but I kept an eye on the car as I drew abreast of the Hamilton's wide doors.

It was a good thing.

There was a guy behind the steering wheel and when I caught the glint of metal in his hand I jumped sideways and dropped to my knees. It was automatic. Pure reflex. I've seen too many guns not to get out of their way in a hurry. I was digging for my .38 before my knees hit the sidewalk.

Flame licked out of the car window, and the slug tugged at the cloth of my coat and burned across the skin of my shoulder. I flipped my gun up and snapped a quick one at him.

It had to be quick.

Don't get me wrong; I'm not usually that good. It was a lucky shot. But I got a glimpse of him as he slumped forward onto the steering wheel and his gun fell from relaxed fingers and clattered into the alley. The car horn started braying raucously as his body pressed against it.

A couple of pedestrians darted frightened glances at me and scurried down the street like startled birds.

I kept my gun ready, got to my feet, and walked up to the car. I pulled the guy away from the steering wheel and the horn stopped braying suddenly.

A little guy, he had an empty space in his mouth like he'd lost a tooth. He had. He'd also lost the back of his head.

He was nobody I'd ever seen before and I started what-the-hellin' all over again.

It didn't make sense; but it was finally filtering through my skull.

Somebody wanted me dead.



CAPTAIN PHIL SAMSON, tough, tricky, but thoroughly honest head of the Los Angeles Homicide Division, peered at me through bushy gray eyebrows after I gave him the whole story. His big jaw stuck out like a lump of cast iron and he wiggled a thick, big-knuckled finger at me.

"Two of 'em," he said sweetly. "Two stiffs. One wasn't enough, huh, Shell?"

"Look, Sam," I said. "I told you how it happened. You've known me long enough so you know that's the straight copy. Why it happened, I don't know. Not yet, anyway. Loring didn't get to tell me a damn thing except he needed help. And he mumbled something about blackmail."

"Then this mysterious person plugged him from the window, that what you said?" I nodded.

Samson didn't say anything; he just looked at me, wagging his big jaw slowly from side to side like a cast iron pendulum.

I got up. "Well, Sam. I'll, uh, be getting along. Not enough sleep lately. Pretty tired."

He started to say something, then changed his mind. I started for the door and he spoke.

"Guess I don't have to remind you to stick pretty close, Shell."

"You don't have to remind me."

Nobody said anything to me on my way out. It was easier than I'd expected. Too easy. I'd have bet fifty bucks Samson had a tail on me. My pal.

I wasn't as sleepy as I'd pretended to Samson so I headed for the office for a new coat. The hole in the coat I was wearing and the burn across my shoulder was reminding me I had a personal interest in this case now.

Samson had told me the guy I'd popped was Slippy Rancin, a two-bit torpedo with an I.Q. like two and two. I couldn't see Rancin dreaming up this caper all by himself the way it was beginning to shape up. And I wanted the right guy to get kissed off for the slug with my name on it. Besides, there was

five grand of Loring's money resting where I'd stuck it in my inside coat pocket and I like my clients to get their money's worth. Even the dead ones.

This thing was screwier than a rejected pretzel. Probably the damndest case I'd seen in two years of private eyeing in L. A. A guy had been murdered right under my broken nose and in my own office; I'd shot a little hood myself, and slugs had been tossed at me twice; I'd been twice to Headquarters; and I had a dead man's five G's in my kick.

And I hadn't even started on the case.

Hell, I didn't even know what it was all about. But I did know somebody wanted me removed from among the living. They'd tried twice and maybe they thought the third time would be the charm.

It was high time the sleuth sleuthed.

MY DISGUSTINGLY yellow '41 Cadillac convertible got me out to the Loring place on Lorraine Boulevard by a quarter to nine. The phone book had given me the address but it hadn't given me the dimensions. Anyone with a house that big had to be in the social register. Or a politician. It looked a little bit like a southern colonel's old mansion with glass bricks and modern improvements added. And it looked like enough moolah to choke all the cows in Carnation.

There were lights on inside so I walked up and fingered the buzzer. The door opened and a small, birdlike woman with a middle-aged, doll-sized face turned a pair of clear brown eyes on me. She didn't look like a wife who'd just learned she was a widow so I asked for Mrs. Loring.

"I'm Mrs. Loring."

So she *was* the widow, but apparently she didn't know it yet.

"I'm a private investigator," I said. I'd just started to give her my name and state my business when she interrupted me with a remark that stopped me like Louis stopped Schmeling. The second time.

"Oh, yes. Come in, Mr. Ellis."

Ellis! I tossed that around like a hot dime while she led me into a spacious, soft-looking living room and sat down facing me under the one lamp that was burning.

She said, "I won't need you after tonight,

Mr. Ellis. The police were here earlier and informed me that my husband had been murdered."

She said it like she was telling me it was Booth who shot Lincoln.

She glanced toward a shadowed corner of the room and said, "Nancy, bring me my checkbook, please." She turned to me again, "Did you have anything to report?"

My head was spinning like the tenth Martini. I've been told I'm fast on the uptake but I was a lap behind and losing ground fast. After everything else, now this. Ellis? Checkbook? Nancy? Report?

Nancy . . . I glanced toward the corner where there was some kind of a low slung divan, just in time to catch a dim flash of white thighs as someone I hadn't noticed up to now swung her legs to the floor and got up. I didn't know whether to appreciate it or be disinterested; Nancy might be nine or ninety.

"Report?" I mumbled. "Well, no. I haven't anything to report. Nothing of any importance." What the hell *could* I say? I was as confused as a pallbearer at the wrong funeral.

Mrs. Loring shrugged her tiny shoulders. "No matter," she said. "Oh, thank you, Nancy."

I looked up.

I gnashed my teeth.

I breathed heavily.

THE GIRL was standing by Mrs. Loring and I could see with half an eye she wasn't nine or ninety. She was closer to twenty-five and she looked like she'd started life with a beautiful face that had grown easier to look at every year.

And the body. The body had tagged right along.

She was about five feet four inches of perfectly proportioned woman dressed in a terrifically curved white sweater and a pleated black skirt. Red hair hung down around her shoulders and she had a sullen red mouth with lips so full they looked like they'd been bruised and swollen. On her, they looked good. Her eyes didn't fit with the sensual body and the bruised-looking lips. They were a deep brown that was almost black—

and they were the widest, most innocent-looking eyes I'd ever seen in all my thirty years.

She was staring at my big frame with a hungry look.

I've got short-cropped blond hair that sticks straight up a half inch all over my head, almost white eyebrows that slant up and then swoop down at the corners of my gray eyes, a nose that hasn't been the same since it got busted on Okinawa, and a strong jaw. My face has seen a lot of sunshine and a lot of women, and some of the women have given me that hungry look before. But this was the full treatment.

She looked well-fed but half-starved.

Do you follow me?

Mrs. Loring took the checkbook and said, "Nancy, this is Mr. Ellis. Mr. Ellis, my daughter, Nancy Howard."

I must have looked a little surprised because she added, "By a previous marriage."

I nodded moronically at Nancy while she said, "How do you do?" in a voice that rustled against my ears like a caress.

I hated to stop drooling but I had to stop nodding sometime and I had an idea this screwball situation wasn't going to last much longer. I'd noticed some big framed canvases hanging on the wall so I asked Mrs. Loring, "Incidentally, how long had Mr. Loring been interested in art?"

She looked at me curiously, then smiled thinly. "Mr. Ellis," she said, "isn't that what you were supposed to tell me?"

SHE continued to stare at me with dawning suspicion on her doll's face as she tore a check out of the book and waved it gently back and forth. I figured the party was about over, so I stood up.

"Sorry," I said. "No check. My name isn't Ellis; it's—"

"What!?" I could almost hear her girdle ripping. "But you said, you told me. . . ."

I interrupted politely, "No ma'am—you said. I told you I was a private investigator, which I am, but I didn't get a chance to give you my name. I came out to investigate your husband's death."

I might have said more, but Mrs. Loring opened her mouth a couple of times to

say something, then thought better of it and whirled to face dream girl.

"Nancy," she said in a quiet, controlled voice that might have come straight from the depths of Siberia, "show this man out. Quickly!"

By the time we reached the door Mrs. Loring had stalked into another room where she was probably quietly hating me. Nancy followed me onto the porch and shut the door behind her.

"That wasn't nice," she said. She didn't sound angry.

"What wasn't?"

"Impersonating that man."

"I didn't intend to. Your mother jumped to the wrong conclusion."

"I know. It's all right. She's naturally a little upset."

She hadn't looked particularly upset until she'd found out I wasn't Ellis. The thought must have showed on my face because Nancy said, "I suppose you think we should have been crying in our pillows."

I didn't say anything.

"Well, we shouldn't have," she continued hotly. "John Loring was no good. I don't know how mother stood him for two years."

I let it ride. "Incidentally," I asked, "who is this Ellis? Mrs. Loring didn't seem surprised to find a private dick at the front door."

"That's what *he* is. A detective, I mean. Mother hired him a few weeks ago."

"Hadn't she ever seen the guy?"

She shook her head. "No. She arranged everything by phone. It was a little distasteful to her anyway."

"Want to tell me why?"

"Why what?"

"Why your mother hired Ellis in the first place."

She frowned delightfully and said, "It couldn't possibly have anything to do with John's death. Honestly."

"O.K.," I told her, "skip it for now. Can you give me an idea why anybody would want to kill your stepfather? Any scandal? Blackmail maybe? Had he stepped on anyone's toes lately?"

"No. Not as far as I know. Just that he was a heel."



I flipped my gun up and snapped a quick one at him

That wasn't much help so I thanked her, said goodnight, and turned to go.

She stepped close to me and laid a hand on my arm. I could feel the gentle pressure of her fingers through the rough tweed of my jacket.

"Wait," she said. "If you aren't Ellis, who are you?"

"Scott. Shell Scott."

"Honestly, Mr. Scott—Shell—I'd help you if I knew anything that would do you any good. I just don't know a thing I could tell you. I would like to help. Really I would."

FOR no good reason I believed her. Maybe because there was no good reason not to. I said, "I've got a couple things to do. If you're not in bed, maybe we could talk later when I've got a little more on this."

"I won't be in bed."

Maybe I imagined it, but I thought she swayed closer to me. Her hand felt like a branding iron on my arm, and the dim light from inside the house spilled soft shadows on her face. She was looking up at me with her lips moist and half parted in apparent invitation.

But at the same time her wide innocent eyes were screaming "No, No. A Thousand Times, No!"

A hell of a note. What would you have done?

I mumbled thanks, and goodnight again through lips that were suddenly a little dry, and started down the steps.

At the bottom, her voice rustled softly down to me:

"Call me later, why don't you, Shell? I'm interested, Really."

I said, "Sure," wondering just what she meant by that.



AFTER driving up a couple of one-way streets just in case a tail was on me, and checking a phone book, I found Ellis listed in a small hotel on Hill Street. It was only a little after nine-thirty P.M. but the room was dark. I rapped on the door thinking Ellis wasn't going to like being waked up.

He didn't seem to mind. The light inside clicked on and the door opened and a short, husky guy in white shorts opened the door and squinted at me through brown hair hanging down over his eyes.

I asked him, "Are you Mr. Ellis?"

He brushed the hair out of his eyes and grunted an affirmative.

I showed him my credentials. "I'd like to talk to you, if you don't mind."

He blinked sleepily a couple of times, then his face brightened a little. "Yeah, sure," he said more cheerfully. "Come on in. A brother peeper, huh?" He waved me to a straight-backed wooden chair and sat down on the edge of the rumpled bed.

"I hate to say it," I told him, "but you're out of a job."

"Huh?"

"I just had a little chat with Mrs. Loring. She's got a final check all made out for you."

He looked puzzled. "I don't get it. She change her mind?"

"About what?"

"Don't she want no divorce? Or am I taking too long?"

"Neither," I said. "Somebody shot Loring through the head tonight. And in my office. You can see why I'm interested."

He whistled through his teeth. "Brother! Why'd you want to see me?"

"I haven't got much to go on; thought maybe you could give me a lead."

He was cooperative enough. Mrs. Loring had wanted a divorce, but papa said no sale. Mrs. Loring thought her husband had maybe been playing around so she'd hired him by

phone to follow Loring and try to catch hubby with his pants down.

Figuratively speaking.

Ellis had tailed Loring for three weeks without digging up anything he could take to Mrs. Loring. She'd told him to call on her when he had something; he'd never had anything, he said, so he'd never called on her.

I asked him, "Where did he go mostly? Who did he see? I need some kind of a lead." I thought a minute and added, "And how about his artistic interests? There's some kind of an art angle."

Ellis tossed me a cigarette, lit one himself, and held a match for me. "Tailing Loring was a dull job. He played a lot of golf at the Wilshire Country Club, had all his meals either at Mike Lyman's in Hollywood or at home, spent all of his nights at home. Not many kicks in his life. Now, if I had all that dough . . ." His face got a dreamy look for a minute. "Art, huh?" he continued. "Well, he bought a couple pictures at Massy's on Grand. Modern stuff like a wormhole in an apple called 'Triumph of Dawn'; you know the junk. Then he went to an art class at a walk-up on Broadway near Sixth. Least I guess it was an art class; guys went in carrying brushes and easel things."

I got interested. "What kind of a class?"

"I dunno. Some painting thing run by a guy named Fillson."

ENTER Fillson again. I dug out the card I'd taken off Loring's body, looked at it and asked, "How long had Loring been going to this Fillson's?"

"I dunno how long." He fumbled in his pants draped over a chair, dug out a dime-store memo book, and flipped the pages. "Let's see. I started tailing him on a Monday three weeks ago. He went to Fillson's Tuesday and Thursday at one-thirty that week, Tuesday and Thursday the next week, and Tuesday this week. He didn't go this Thursday—that's yesterday. He'd usually stay about an hour."

"Anybody else go with him, or was he alone?"

"Never with anybody. A bunch of others showed up about the same time. Around a

dozen; all men about forty or fifty. Looked like they'd all probably already made their dough and were maybe taking up painting as a hobby."

"How about tonight?" I asked.

"What about tonight?"

"If you were tailing Loring, maybe you saw someone follow him to my office."

"Oh." He shook his head. "Not tonight. I been tailing that guy day after day and sitting outside that mansion half the nights. I gotta sleep sometime. Besides, Loring always stays home nights. I been in bed since four this afternoon. He was home when I left and come here." He frowned and scratched his head, "Maybe I shoulda slept yesterday."

"Maybe," I said. "What do you know about Fillson?"

"Not much. Tall, thin guy. No chin and a black mustache with about ten whiskers in it. Used to run an artist's supply store. I guess you'd say he's graduated now. Has an expensive taste in dames."

"How's that?"

Ellis held up two fingers wrapped around each other. "He's like that with Velma Vail, strip queen of the Sabre Club. Torchy and terrific." He sighed, "But terrific. For a tomato like that I could learn to like pictures of wormy apples, myself."

I ground out my cigarette in a glass tray. "Anything else you can tell me?"

"That's about it. The guy didn't lead a very exciting life."

I thanked him and got out.

I stopped at the desk and checked with the room clerk. He told me Ellis had come in sometime during the afternoon and gone straight to his room. That was that.

In the phone booth in the lobby I checked Massy's. The only phone listed under that name was for the business downtown and nobody answered there. Nobody answered either at the number listed for Fillson's Studio or at his home. Blanks. I decided to check Fillson's place of business anyway.

At the office I grabbed a pocket flash and a ring of keys I'd collected in the course of my meanderings. Not exactly legal, maybe, but better than breaking down doors. And quieter.

I LEFT the Caddie parked behind the Hamilton Building and walked up Broadway. The address I wanted was just on the other side of Sixth. I walked between a loan office and a real estate agency and up one flight of stairs and found the door labelled in simple gold letters, "S. A. Fillson."

The third key worked. I eased quietly inside, made sure the blinds were drawn, and poked around with my pocket flash. The place was really designed for comfort: one huge room that would have seemed more like Mrs. Loring's living room than a studio if it hadn't been for the strong, heavy odor of oil paints and turpentine that clung to my nostrils. There were stacks of half-finished canvasses along the walls and propped on half a dozen wooden easels, plus four or five surrealist blobs of crazy squares and circles hanging on the walls.

I took a peek at the canvasses. Mostly nudes, all lousy, and a scattering of landscapes and still-lives. The furniture, except for a few straight-backed chairs and three leather hassocks, was lush overstuffed divans and chairs done in deep reds and grays. A thick, shag carpet stretched from wall to wall and I half expected to see a brace of Irish Setters curled up before a nonexistent fireplace. No desk, no cabinets, no nothing to prowl through, though I hadn't the remotest idea what I expected to find if there were any.

Half a dozen big potted plants loomed in the shadows like miniature trees. I darted my flash around them one by one and caught a flash of white in the leaves of one of them. I walked over and picked up a little triangular piece of cloth that meant nothing. It looked a little like half of one of the toy parachutes I used to make as a kid out of an old handkerchief, four pieces of thread and a rock. Only it looked like three threads, half a handkerchief, and no rock. I stuck it in my pocket anyway.

Fifteen minutes later I'd been over the whole place and found nothing more except a padlocked door in back that none of my keys would open. I started to turn away and get the hell out when light glimmered momentarily on something stuck in the back crack of the heavy door. I bent down and looked. It was a torn celluloid strip like the

negatives you get back from the drug store, only much smaller.

I wormed it out and flashed my light through it and a shapely lass with her hands high over head in the attitude of a top-heavy Balinese dancer peeped back at me. The image was too small for me to see much, but what I could see was pleasant. It looked like she was wearing nothing except skin. Altogether a delightful morsel. I dropped her into my shirt pocket, patted her gently, locked the front door behind me and left.

At the Owl Drug Store on the corner, I gave S. A. Fillson's residence another ring. I let the little buzzing noises snap out of the receiver till it was obvious nobody was going to answer, then hung up.

Outside, I lit a cigarette and ankled back to the Cadillac, and swung North into Broadway. I took a left at Second Street, followed it till it became Beverly beyond Lucas Avenue, and rolled on out Beverly Boulevard.



THE Sabre Club is on Beverly Boulevard about a mile beyond the Wilshire Country Club. It's one of those small, intimate spots where you know everybody or nobody. A bar along one wall. Behind it, a mural of delicate fawns chasing equally delicate female behinds over a grassy green field. Two white-coated bartenders expertly mixing pink ladies and extra dry martinis: "Just the tiniest touch of vermouth, you know." Tables surrounded by dinner jackets and broad, padded shoulders, low-cut evening gowns and obvious white breasts.

The too smooth, faultlessly tailored headwaiter approached me and looked at my sport coat and slacks as if they were a red and white bathrobe. I looked over his shoulder to the small dance floor where a blonde with outside curves and inside curves was batting 1.000 into a microphone hanging down from the gloom of the ceiling.

I told the headwaiter, "I'm expected; I'm joining a friend."

He stared at me stonily.

Over his shoulder I watched the curvy blonde. It was easy to recognize her from the blowups outside the club. Velma Vail. And singing away like mad in a low, hot voice to a tall, thin guy at a ringside table.

I stopped at the ringside table and looked at the tall, thin guy. He had a triangular face, wider at the top than at the bottom, arched eyebrows, and no chin. There were maybe ten whiskers in the wisp of a mustache on his narrow upper lip.

I sat down.

"Fillson?" I asked.

He unhooked his eyes from Velma and looked at me.

"I beg your pardon."

"Fillson?"

"That's my name, yes."

"I'm Shell Scott."

He didn't bat an eyelash. "So?"

"I'd like to talk to you."

He turned his head and looked at Velma Vail. He looked back at me, slightly annoyed. "Certainly. In a few minutes." He swiveled his head around and gave his undivided attention to the floor show.

You couldn't blame him.

I took a look myself and understood his desire to avoid conversation at the moment. Velma had stopped singing and was gliding over the floor in the dim blue light of a baby spot. She moved with the slow, easy grace of a jungle beast and there was something of the jungle's savagery in the controlled, sensual swaying of her body. She was dressed in a low cut silver gown that clung to the voluptuous curves of her body like a second coat of varnish. She was tall, with wide hips, a narrow waist, and breasts that were almost too big.

Almost, I said.

She moved with a fluid undulation to the husky moan of saxophones carrying a weird melody over the heavy, rhythmic beat of the orchestra.

Ellis had said, "Velma Vail, strip queen of the Sabre Club." This was Velma Vail; this was the strip; and she was good. She was out of this world.

IT WAS over suddenly and Velma was gone and the brighter lights that flooded the room seemed brazen after the fragile dimness of the blue spot.

"Highball?" It was Fillson.

"Sure. Bourbon and water."

He signalled the waiter and ordered the drinks, a dry martini for himself.

"Now, Mr. Scott was it? What did you want to talk about?"

"I'm a private investigator. I'm checking on the murder of John Loring."

"Loring! Good God! *Murdered?*" He did have a chin; it dropped about an inch.

"Murdered."

"Why, I knew him. He was a student of mine."

"I know. That's why I'm here."

He shook his head back and forth for a moment. "But why come to me. I knew nothing about the man."

"Nothing?"

"Except that he admired fine paintings and had absolutely no talent for drawing." His voice was pleasant, surprisingly deep for so thin a man. He continued to wag his head vaguely.

The waiter brought our drinks and I sipped at the bourbon. "How long had Loring attended your classes?"

"Why, I'm not sure. Two months or more. I don't see what bearing—"

"Just curious."

He grunted and lifted the olive out of his martini and twirled it on the little orange stick.

I said, "I'd like to see some of his work. O.K.?"

"Certainly. Of course he was a beginner. Not very good."

"When?"

"When what?"

"When may I see them?"

"Tomorrow. Say three or four in the afternoon."

"Say four." He nodded and I said, "About Loring. Did he ever talk about any trouble he might have been in? Anything bothering him?"

Fillson shook his head. "The only things Mr. Loring and I ever discussed were in connection with his painting. His personal

life was entirely his own affair." He said abruptly, "I'm sorry I can't help you, Mr. Scott," and the conversation seemed to be ended. I thanked him and stood up and walked over to the bar.

I tossed down another highball to join the first and examined the room. A few feet beyond the end of the bar was a curtained doorway through which the girls in the floor show danced in and out. On the walls, more murals, more behinds.

The lights dimmed and a spotlight cut through the smoke and fell on the master of ceremonies who was announcing the end of the show and exhorting one and all to drink rapidly for the next hour, ha-ha. There'd be another show at midnight. I walked casually past the end of the bar and through the curtained doorway. Nobody stopped me.

GIRLS in various stages of dress—or undress—stood chatting and smoking, or scurrying about looking very nice indeed. I watched them chatting, smoking and scurrying—especially scurrying—for a moment, then stopped a cute little brunette in a G-string and a lacy brassiere that looked like it was made out of imagination.

"Where would I find Velma Vail?"

She pointed at a door directly opposite me. "In there."

"Thanks, beautiful." I looked her over. I enjoyed looking her over. On the street she'd have looked good. She'd just finished her act which consisted of dancing around in about a half ounce of clothing. So now she looked better than good.

I told her so.

She wrinkled her nose at me, but spun on her heel and walked off, jiggling. I let my eyes follow her; they followed easy.

She opened a door and turned and looked at me before she went inside. Pleasure, pleasure, but duty calls.

I walked over and knocked on Velma's door. Something was nagging at my brain while I waited, but I couldn't pin it down. No answer. I knocked again. Finally I got smart and opened the door. Nothing. The silver gown with the low neck was there looking drastically different on a hanger, a lot of odds and ends, but no Velma. I'd daw-

dled over my highball too long.

I walked out front and climbed back on my stool at the bar. Over a double bourbon and water I squeezed my brains a little and wondered what had been nagging me. All I got was a headache so I called the highball a nightcap, downed it, and took off. It was eleven-thirty on the nose.

On my way out I glanced over at Fillson's table. No Fillson. Just a waiter mopping up with practised swipes of a white cloth.

The lovebirds had done flew.



I LIVE in the Spartan Apartment Hotel on North Rossmore, just a long chip shot from the Wilshire Country Club's golf course. I parked the Caddie around the corner, walked up to the second floor and down to room 212. I was just putting my key in the lock when somebody behind me said, "Shell Scott?"

I turned around, "Yeah?"

There were two guys standing at the side of the hall a few feet from me. One of them was a big, blunt-faced man with little pig eyes and two funny bumps on the bridge of his twisted nose like the humps on the back of a camel. He looked tough as a four-bit steak. The other was a pint-sized character with wispy blond hair and a red face. His ears stuck out at almost right angles from the side of his head. Both of them had their right hands buried in their pockets. A couple of fine citizens, no doubt.

"What do you want?" I asked conversationally.

Camel-nose spoke, "You, Scott," not conversationally. He lifted his hand out of his pocket like it was heavy. The reason it was heavy was the .45 automatic that nestled in his big fist. He shoved the gun back in his pocket. "Don't make any sudden motions," he said.

I didn't make any sudden motions.

The little guy walked up beside me, but

didn't get between me and Camel-nose. He reached out and jerked my .38 from its spring holster and flashed a twisted grin at me.

"Just take it easy, pally," he said in a grating voice that rubbed my nerves like a file on my teeth. "We're goin' for a little walk."

"Oh?" I said brightly.

Camel-nose came alongside and wrapped thick fingers around my right wrist. Casual like. The little one walked a couple steps behind and to my left. Three guys out for a stroll. So far they were pretty smart.

Like that we walked downstairs, out onto North Rossmore, and left to Rosewood Avenue. Nobody said anything. Rosewood was even darker than Rossmore; that I didn't like.

A few yards ahead of us I could see a long Buick sedan parked parallel to the curb.

It looked like three were going to ride out and two were going to ride back. One of those deals. I had the feeling.

Just like I didn't know. I said, "What is this? Anything personal?"

"Patience, brother," the big man said. He talked like he had an impediment in his head.

"Looks like I been chosen," I said. "Why? It can't hurt to tell me, can it?"

Camel-nose laughed deep in his muscled throat as if I'd just told him the one about the lumberjack and the water barrel. But he didn't relax his hold on my wrist.

"No," he gurgled. "It can't hurt to tell you. But we ain't."

The little guy with the right-angle ears said, "Scott."

"Yeah?"

"How old are you?"

"What the hell's it to you?"

"Curious."

"Thirty."

"Hell, Scott, that's old enough." He laughed like he'd said something funny. I didn't think so.

We were at the car. Camel-nose let go my wrist and lifted his right hand out of his pocket. I caught the dull gleam of light on his automatic. My insides felt like cold jelly. I licked my lips with the wad of cotton in

my mouth.

I asked, "Here?"

"Not here. Get in."

The little guy walked over and opened the back door of the car and held it. Polite. Camel-nose jabbed me with his gun.

UP TO now they'd been smart. They slipped a little. Maybe it was enough. Maybe not. I could wait and get it in the back on a lonely road, or I could take a chance and get it now. Maybe.

The three of us were standing at the right side of the car next to the sidewalk. I took it slow and stepped up into the rear of the Buick. Camel-nose started in after me. I squatted on the edge of the seat—still slow and easy—and let my left hand fall on the inside handle of the door. Camel-nose flopped his fanny heavily on the seat.

The slow motion stopped.

I twisted the handle and lunged sideways in the same motion. I flopped out the door like a drunk sprinter tumbling off his blocks and the crack of the automatic sounded over the roar of the blood pounding in my ears. Something slapped at my hip, but I clung to the handle of the door and it flipped me around with a jerk that should have snapped my arm at the elbow.

I slammed the door backward and dropped flat on my back and pulled my legs up against my belly as Camel-nose crashed out the door. He was looking out toward the middle of the street, but he caught a glimpse of me on the ground and angled his gun down. Flame licked out of the muzzle and the hot breath of the slug screamed past my cheek as I uncoiled my legs.

I lashed out like it was fourth down and I had to boot him twenty yards to save the game. He was so close I didn't have to aim; I just let go, and both heels hit him where he lived.

He started wishing he didn't live there any more.

The fight went out of him quicker than a crease out of three dollar pants and he dropped on top of me like half the Chicago Bears. The breath whooshed out of my lungs as his automatic clattered to the street.

I strained against the weight on top of me

and pawed for the gun. The little guy was around the back of the car now and cracking down as I felt the butt of the automatic. He fired twice and I felt the sock and jar of the slugs before the gun was rocking and roaring in my fist.

He sagged to one knee and I kept pulling the trigger till the hammer clicked on an empty chamber and the little guy pitched forward on his face with his behind up over his head.

I threw the empty gun at him.

The silence was thick and heavy except for the blood pounding and beating like a drum in my head. The little guy slowly unfolded and toppled over onto the street with a soft thud and lay very still and quiet.

I started wondering how *I* was.

Camel-nose was still lying half across me so I grabbed the back of his coat and pulled him off. My hand came away wet and sticky. The warm, sticky stuff was blood. I ran my other hand over my stomach and chest. O.K. Camel-nose had picked up the slugs meant for me.

At least I was alive; but neither of these guys was going to tell me who sent them after me. This was the third time that was supposed to be the charm.

I was beginning to get irritated.

I got up shakily and felt a twinge of pain. The first shot that clipped me had plowed a groove in one cheek. It wasn't going to bother me shaving. I dug my .38 out of the little guy's coat pocket and got out of there fast.

I WAS four blocks away and working all hundred and fifty horses under the Caddie's hood when I head the shrill crescendo of police sirens and remembered my fingerprints were all over the .45 automatic I'd left behind. The hell with it. I couldn't afford to have any cops grilling me now. I was starting to get mad even if I didn't know who I was mad at.

I pulled into the parking lot at the Lanai Club on Wilshire. Inside, over a water-high, I thought about Velma and Fillson and Ellis and Mrs. Loring and Nancy and the cute little gal in the nothing-brassiere. About Nancy's wide, chaste, innocent eyes. Pure, "No, No, A Thousand Times, No!" eyes.

And the provocative, inviting, sullen lips. Nice. I spent a nickel and called her.

"Hello." Musical.

"Nancy?"

"Uh-huh. Who is this? The big blond man?"

"Yeah. Shell. Said I might call, remember?"

"Sure, I hoped you would."

"Look," I said, "I'd like to talk to you some more. Too late?"

"Never too late, Shell. Where are you?"

"Lanai Club on Wilshire. I'll pick you up in a few minutes."

"Never mind, Shell. It's just a few blocks. I'll meet you there. Order me a shot with a beer chaser."

"Huh?"

She laughed merrily, "I was only kidding. You can order me a sidecar, though."

She didn't waste any time. The sidecar was barely delivered with my second drink when she walked in. She'd changed from the sweater and skirt combination she'd worn earlier and she was something to see. She had on a black rayon dress.

Strapless.

It was obvious what was holding the dress up, and what was holding the dress up was obvious.

I loved it.

She slid onto the stool beside me and said, "Put your eyes back where they belong."

I grinned at her. "Don't tell *me* where my eyes belong. Not when you're nearly wearing that dress. You look good, Nancy."

"Thank you, sir."

AFTER a little light banter I got down to cases. "Look, Nancy, things are getting a little rough. The shooting war's started."

The big, innocent eyes got wider still, "Someone shoot at you?"

"Nothing serious yet," I went on, "but there's just a chance you might know something to make things easier for me. Maybe you could give me some help."

"If I can, Shell."

"Can't you think of anything or anybody that might have been giving your stepfather a bad time?"

She shook her head and the red hair

swirled about her face.

I said, "I'm in this thing too deep to get out now even if I wanted to. Which I don't. Loring was in my office tonight when he was shot. Just before he was killed, he'd said something about blackmail. Doesn't that ring any bells at all?"

She shook her head again, "I'm sorry, Shell. Actually, I didn't have much to do with him."

"How come? And if you feel like telling me now, why did your mother already have a private detective working for her?"

Nancy took a long swallow of the sidecar and said slowly, "Mom wanted to divorce John. He was nothing more than a parasite, really. He just married Mother because of her money. He didn't have any money of his own—maybe a few thousand dollars he'd wheedled out Mom on one pretext or another.

"But I think most of that was gone and lately she wouldn't finance any more of his so-called investments. He wouldn't quietly give her a divorce; said he'd fight it all the way, he might even frame evidence against her and try to get alimony."

She pressed her full lips together, "Alimony! Can you imagine? Anyway, that's what Ellis was working on—positive evidence for a divorce. Something he couldn't wriggle out of. Mother had lots of time and money, so she just told Ellis what she wanted and let him handle it. She wouldn't have done anything crooked; she just wanted to catch John in something."

I said, "You don't suppose Ellis actually did get anything on Mr. Loring, do you?"

"Why no. He'd have reported to mother if he had; that's what she was paying him for. Why?"

"Nothing," I said. "It's not important."

We had another round, and I sipped at my drink and thought. Maybe I was beginning to feel the drinks a little, but everything in this case seemed crazy as three reefers and a quart of absinthe. I thought back to the moment Loring had come into my office, and I went over everything I'd been told since then and everything that had happened.

I gargled bourbon quietly and drew designs on the moist spot on the bar and ap-

preciated Nancy's sitting silently beside me. I tortured my brains and favored the left side of my behind on the bar stool.

And all of a sudden it hit me.

It hit me, *wham*, like that, and I slapped a hand against my forehead. The bartender looked at me with a hostile squint, then darted a look under the bar at his war club.

Nancy said, "What's the matter?"

I said, "Honey, go home. Papa's got work to do."

"See me later?"

"Yeah, honey. I'll see you later."



I KNOCKED on the door of room 316 in the Brandon Hotel on Cahuenga. I'd got the address for five bucks from the bartender at the Sabre Club and this time Velma was in.

She opened the door wide and stood facing me in a rose-pink negligee. Light streamed out of the room behind her and wrapped around her body like mist. I swallowed and walked into the room with my face a little warm. And not just from the drinks.

"Hello, Velma."

"Hello. What's with you?"

"Too bad, pretty baby. Party's over."

She said slowly, curiously, "Whaat?"

"Ended, pfft, finished."

"You must be in the wrong room, Mister."

"Right room." I could feel the double bourbons ganging up on me. "Right gal. You're Velma Vail. I'm Shell Scott, private eye, a snooper. I'm on the Loring kill and I've got it cold. And I've got you cold and your pally cold, and the blackmail's all washed up. Cold."

She stood across the room looking at me, not saying anything.

"I'm almost sorry for you, pretty baby. This is the payoff." It sounded nice and dramatic, so I said it again, "This is the payoff."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

she said, but there was an edge to her voice that hadn't been there before. Wasn't there?

I pulled the strip of cloth with the threads, and the little strip of torn celluloid out of my pocket and showed them to her. "These are yours, aren't they Velma? I picked them up at Fillson's famous Studio d' Art. Up the river, baby. Bye-bye."

She looked at the stuff in my hand and then back at my face. She didn't seem scared and she should have been. I was tired of getting shoved around.

She said, "Shell, that's no way to talk to me. Not really. Not when you hardly know me."

A cool number.

"Cut it, Velma," I told her. "I know you well enough already."

"Why, Shell," she said softly, "you don't know me at all."

She'd been holding that rose-pink negligee together with one hand at her throat.

She let go.

I must have raised an eyebrow, or something, because she laughed right out loud. Threw her head back and laughed through parted white teeth. Then she shrugged her shoulders, let the gown fall to the floor and stepped out of it. In the bright light pouring from the ceiling, it was worth seeing; she stood straight and still with her hands at her sides, smiling at me.

She was naked as a new boil on a Roman nose.

She looked different than she had in the dim blue light at the Sabre Club; her body was something a man might dream about. Round and warm and full of promise.

I stared. I admit it. I stared, but good. Gabriel could have blown his trumpet in my ear and I wouldn't have heard it.

I guess that's why I didn't hear anybody come up behind me. Or the swish of the sap. One minute Velma was there looking like the new *September Morn*. The next minute there were only shooting stars and a deep black pit.

I'd had it.

THINGS WERE FUZZY. Very fuzzy. The bright light was in my eyes and dancing around and the little guy kept on

banging on my head with the big pan that went bong, bong on my skull, and I felt sick as hell.

Only there wasn't any little guy and there wasn't any pan, and my head kept going bong, bong, anyway. There was only Velma sitting in an easy chair and pointing a wicked looking little automatic at my navel.

I looked at the gun and I looked at Velma. "That might go off."

"It might." No gay banter. Just sort of bored.

I was flat on my back on the carpet and my hands were bent under me and the left side of my fanny felt like somebody had branded it. I tried to pull my arms out from under me and couldn't. Somebody had looped a fine rope around my wrists and I could feel it cutting my skin when I pulled. But it felt like a sloppy job. Sloppy or not, there was still a gun pointed at my middle.

Velma had changed from the negligee into a tan suit, and a couple of travelling bags were at her feet.

"Going someplace?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Me too?"

She nodded again.

"Where?"

"Does it matter?"

"It matters."

"It shouldn't. You're only going part way."

I didn't like the sound of her voice. Suddenly she wasn't feminine any more.

I lay on my back and pulled easily, then harder at the rope.

"Hold still," Velma said. "Very still. I couldn't miss you from here."

She couldn't, at that. That was the third strike on me, but I was still standing at the plate. I didn't know I was out. I hunted around in my bonging brain for a weakness in her armor, and I had an idea. Not much of an idea, but an idea.

"Velma," I said, "you're a hell of a crummy excuse for a woman, aren't you? You'd let a guy get shot just to save some dirty nickels. You're not a woman, you're a flabby bitch on a broom."

She curled her lips back and hissed at me, "Shut up!"

I kept my voice low and steady and as contemptuous as I could make it. "You're a lousy tart. You're one of the slimy, crawling things that hides from the sun." I kept it up for about a minute, looking straight at her. I said things I thought I'd never say to a woman, then spat on the rug at her feet.

It worked. Her face got white, then it got red and she got up and come toward me with her lips drawn back and her breath bubbling between her teeth. The gun was still in her right hand, pointing at me.

I thought she was going to let me have it in the belly and my muscles tightened and crawled till I saw her reaching for my face with her left hand. Her fingers were curled into hooks and the long, red nails could have torn out my eyes and ripped the skin from

THE ADVENTURES OF

IT SMELLS GRAND



SNIFF A WHIFF—
IT SMELLS RIGHT JOLLY!

IT PACKS RIGHT



CUT TO PACK JUST RIGHT, BY GOLLY!

my face.

I rolled away from the clutching fingers and at the same time hooked my right heel behind her left foot. I drew up my left leg, fast, and jammed it as hard as I could against her knee.

I heard the sickening pop of the bone, and she screamed like a cat in a furnace.

She hit the floor hard and dropped the gun. But she had guts. I'll say that much for her. While I struggled and scrambled to my feet, she reached out—still moaning, half crying—and got her hand on the automatic. I didn't have any choice. I took one step toward her and laid my number ten Cordovan boot along the side of her head. And that was that.

I felt a little ashamed of myself, but better a bump on her skull than a hole in mine. I found the little apartment kitchen and a butcher knife, and five minutes later I was out of the ropes and had them tight around Velma's wrists. She was still out, and I didn't worry about tying her legs.

She wasn't going to walk anyplace.

WEARILY, I picked up the phone and called Homicide. Even Kerrigan's nasal whine almost sounded good. I told him what he'd find at the Brandon Hotel, hung up, and took off for my last stop.

This time I went in the door with Velma's little automatic in my hand. The door to the room in back was open and I walked quietly over the thick, shag carpet. My .38 Colt was

resting on a small table against the far wall of the little room.

I said, "Surprise, surprise."

He whirled around, disbelief staring from his eyes, the ten hairs on his upper lip twitching like a crawling caterpillar. He sputtered, but nothing came out.

I said, "Fillson, I'm going to break you in two. The boys you sent after me should have done a better job. And you shouldn't have left a woman to look after me. I'm going to crack your spine."

"Wait." It was a little squeak.

"Wait, hell! You didn't wait when Slippy Rancin told you he'd knocked Loring in my office and scared hell out of me. You didn't want me scared. You wanted me dead in case Loring had already spilled your blackmail caper to me." I said through my teeth, "You shouldn't have sent him back, Fillson."

He was pitiful he was so scared. His face was the color of stale dough and he was shaking like an overweight matron skipping rope.

"I didn't know what I was doing," he whimpered. "I was out of my mind. Let me go. I'll pay you anything. Anything."

I shook my head at him. "No soap."

"I'll give you thousands," he croaked. "Everything I've got."

"Nope. I wouldn't want that black money. But I'll give you a gun." I dropped the little gun at my feet and watched him. He let out a little sigh like something had busted inside him, and leaped for the gun.

[Turn page]

UNCLE WALTER

IT SMOKES SWEET



A MERRY SMOKE—*Sir Walter Raleigh!*

IT CAN'T BITE!



SIR WALTER RALEIGH'S BLEND OF CHOICE KENTUCKY BURLEYS IS EXTRA-AGED TO GUARD AGAINST TONGUE BITE. THE LARGE SIZE CANISTER OF SIR WALTER RALEIGH—IN A BEAUTIFUL YULETIDE PACKAGE—MAKES THE PERFECT CHRISTMAS GIFT!

I timed it like a Golden Gloves champ and met him halfway. I whipped my right fist up into the middle of his face like I was trying to split it in two.

I was trying.

He went up a little into the air, stopped, then went down slow and easy like a rubber belt on a fat man.

I told the back of his head, "That's for the lump on my skull, sucker," but he wasn't listening. Maybe I was being a little bit of a heel, but when a guy tries to introduce me to rigor mortis as hard as Fillson had tried, and then decides to do the job himself, I lose any fondness I might have had for him.

I took a look around the little room and saw just what I'd expected to see. A 16 millimeter movie projector, complete dark-room equipment, and several shiny tin cans. The cans were all filled with exposed film. One reel was already spliced into the projector so I switched it on and grabbed an eyeful. I *do* mean eyeful. It was Fillson's Course all right, and I wasn't surprised at that, either.

KERRIGAN didn't seem very happy about the way I'd handled the situation, but he chewed his black cigar and listened while I filled in the events of the evening.

"Fillson had a swet setup," I finished. "The squeeze. A new gimmick on the extortion racket. He ran an art class with a live model, but I'll bet neither she or the customers knew a palette from an easel. The model was an artist, too—Velma Vail—a bump and grind artist from the Sabre Club. And, incidentally, the cookie with the busted leg."

I flipped Kerrigan the torn strip of celluloid I'd pried out of the door: a big-bosomed gal posturing in a lot of fair skin and a G-string—possibly the same little triangle of cloth I'd picked up here at Fillson's earlier.

"That doesn't have to be Velma," I said, "but I'll give odds it is when your lab makes a big print of it. She's got some distinguishing characteristics that are hard to hide."

Kerrigan held the film up to the light and said, "Mmm."

"That's not a negative," I said, "it's a

positive made from a negative so it can be run through a projector—movie film. It's all on reels in the back room. Including Velma."

"So what?"

"So this. Fillson picked the 'students' for his so-called classes with a lot of care. I got to wondering about that when I remembered a guy telling me they were all prosperous looking and middle-aged, and *all men*. He let them park here in the easy chairs and soft divans while Velma went into her act. She might sit on a few laps or muss up a guy's pompadour—good clean, harmless fun, huh? Everybody has a roaring good time. Only all the while, a couple of cameras hidden behind the squares and circles in the surrealist paintings on the walls, or in the potted plants, or any other convenient place, are getting it all down on film.

"When just part of the film is run off, or some black and white prints made from choice frames, it doesn't look so much like good clean fun. It looks more like a sofa party. A man who wanted to keep his nose clean—a guy like Loring for instance—would pay good dough to keep the pictures out of circulation. If he didn't, he'd have one hell of a time explaining that his relations with Velma were purely platonic, or that he was merely attending a class in art appreciation."

Kerrigan spoke around the corner of his soggy cigar, "So where does Loring fit?"

"Fillson got his slimy hooks into Loring, but Loring couldn't pony up enough to keep Fillson satisfied and he knew it. His only chance was to spend what dough he had trying to mess up Fillson's game—which is where I came in. If he could keep the pictures from getting to his wife, maybe he could get her to turn back into the goose that laid the golden eggs. But if the pictures ever got to Mrs. Loring, happy home, goodbye.

"He knew she wanted a divorce, anyway, but he wouldn't give her one. What he didn't know was that she'd hired a private cop to tail him. Anyway, he was getting squeezed where it hurt, and he threatened Fillson with exposure if he didn't lay off. With Loring ready to pap, Fillson had to get rid of him

or lose his sweet racket. Enter Slippy Rancin and exit Loring. The mistake was pulling it off in my office. Five gets you ten the slug used on Loring fits the gun Rancin was waving at me just before he departed this world."

I got up and stifled a groan. "The hell with it," I said. "You've got all you need in the back room. Amuse yourself. I've got a date."

I heard the whir of the projector starting as I went out the door and down the hall. Kerrigan was going to have himself a whale of a time.

I LOOKED at my watch. It was two-thirty in the A.M. I found a nickel in my pocket and flipped it. Heads I call Nancy, tails I get some sense and go to bed. Tails. I gave her a call.

She met me at the door, the wide eyes almost black in the dimness, the swollen lips half curved in a smile. I didn't kid around. I pulled her to me and kissed her. I kissed her good. When I let her go her breath was coming a little faster and I was getting plenty of oxygen myself. Her lips still looked bruised and sullen, and tempting, but she looked different somehow. Then I got it. Something had happened to her eyes.

A little sigh escaped her lips and she squinted up at me.

"Shell!" she said breathlessly, "My goodness. After all, I've only known you five or six hours."

Come to think of it, she was right. I laughed.

"Baby," I said, "wait till you've known me a week."



FEATURED IN THE NEXT ISSUE

•
PAYOFF

*A Tough, Hard-Hitting Crime Novelet
Packed with Suspense and Fast Action*

By **FRANK WARD**

and

DEAD MEN WON'T TALK

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PLUS OTHER OUTSTANDING NOVELETS AND STORIES!



By JAMES M. COX

The Man Who

Maybe the town was built for pretty blondes to cry in, but

this weeping babe really had a reason for her tears. . . .

I DON'T much like to tell this one, because, put it any way you want, it comes out sounding as if it were nothing but a whopping big fluke all around. Just the same, it was a nice case, with a quick turn-over in profit and business goodwill to us, much as it looked like picking up an old two-dollar bill on the sidewalk and hitting the daily double at Santa Anita.

It was on a Thursday afternoon, around the middle of last December. We'd started out right after an early lunch to do some Christmas shopping in Beverly Hills. We were low on gas, so I swung the Packard into Ray's gas station on the corner of Broxton and Wilshire.

Ray was changing a tire on a mangy old Ford convertible, working fast, and he waved us an apology. The girl in the driver's seat had her back turned to us. She was a small honey blonde in a coffee-brown gabardine slack suit, and she sat hunched in a queer kind of crouch behind the wheel, as if she were bucking heavy traffic at sixty miles an hour.

"She's crying," said Suzy, squinting against the bright California sun. "I wonder why."

"She and twenty thousand more like her," I pointed out, callously. "You know this town was built for pretty blondes to cry in. We came in here for gas, remember?"

Ray finally abandoned the tire and came trotting over to us when I blew the horn at him.

"Sorry, Mr. Marshall." He grinned, slamming the hose into my tank. "The lady's in a hurry, and she's been pushing me."

Suzy slipped out of the car and wandered over to the Ford.

some other guy crowds her at the intersection, so she hits the curb and blows one. What the hell, she's lucky she didn't roll over."

KHAN, our Great Dane, dozing comfortably on the back seat, lifted his huge yellow head and opened one wary eye. Rising quietly, he stepped daintly over the front seat, jumped lightly out through the open door and ambled across the lot toward the Ford. I jacked up my eyebrows and gave myself a cigarette.

"Be two-sixty-five, Mr. Marshall," said Ray.

"Johnny! Come here a minute, will you please?"

I groaned, under my breath, and reluctantly joined the procession. The girl in the Ford watched my progress intently over her shoulder with big, tragic eyes stained by flecks of running mascara. She was quite young, twenty or better, and the tears carving gently into her makeup made her look younger and more helpless still.

Suzy tossed her auburn curls at me and shot me one of those now-you-behave-you-goog glances.

"This is Inez Walters," she said. "She's in trouble, darling. I told her you'd help and get it all straightened out in a jiff."

"Oh. Did you?"

The blonde opened those dewy cornflower eyes all the way and said, "Please! You've got to believe me. He c-couldn't have done it. He just couldn't, that's all!" She rushed the words, almost stumbling over her own trembling lips.

"Don't worry, hon," said Suzy, patting her hand on the wheel. "This character looks

Watched the Door

I asked Ray, "What's eating the lady?"

"Aw, I dunno," he told me. "Never seen her before. She comes down Wilshire in a great big rush, just a few minutes ago, right behind a sheriff's car going wide open, and

like a lug, but he's the smartest private dick in California. He'll fix."

That did it. The minute she called me that, I knew there were mice in the joint.

"Fix nothing! What is all this, anyway?"

Who couldn't have done what?"

"Johnny, don't be unreasonable. You've simply got to do something. This poor kid's to be married tomorrow, and now they've arrested the boy for something utterly absurd!"

"Yeah? Such as which?"

There was a second or two of embarrassed silence before the Walters girl broke out some more big tears and sobbed, "It's all my fault. I never should have listened to that awful Mr. Grant. Oh, it's all just too horrible for words!"

She slumped over the wheel, burying her face in both arms and settled down to a nice quiet bawling spell. Khan pricked up his ears, cocked his head in surprise, reared up to place one enormous yellow paw gently on her back and whimpered at her.

"Now see what you've done," said Suzy, giving me a look with claws on it.

"All right," I said wearily. We were having a hot December, too hot for this much exercise. "Don't mind me—just tell me. I'll bite."

"The boy's name is Tom Duncan," she reported. "He's a vet, and has a job clerking in a bookstore in Beverly Hills. The kids have gone together for years, they're both from Kenosha, Wisconsin, but when he went into the Navy she took singing lessons, and now she's almost ready for the big time—movies, light opera, anything. This Grant began to take an interest in her about two years ago.

"You've heard about him—Jefferson P. Grant, the Oklahoma oilman, he's half Indian and filthy rich, always handing out scholarships and sponsoring young artists, mostly girls. He brought her out here, paid for her lessons and things, and she says he was always on the up and up until last night when he took her to dinner and she told him she was getting married, and he made a hard pass at her.

"Scared her so much she told Tom, first making him promise he wouldn't do anything about it. But the boy was furious, and today he went to see Grant, and they had a row, and Grant was killed. So the police came, and they said he did it, and they took him away, just when Inez arrived—she heard

about it from Grant's secretary when he called to cancel an appointment she'd made for this afternoon."

"They wouldn't listen to me!" the little blonde wailed. "They said it was all over. The sh-show, they said! They wouldn't even let me talk to him!"

THE dog took its paw off her back and laid its ferocious black muzzle in her arms. Ray was working behind me, fidgeting with a tire iron and getting an earful. I began to feel more and more displeased.

"Look, Miss Walters, what you need is an attorney," I said. "It's a question of pleading self-defense, or the unwritten law. They've got the case itself all neatly done up in gold tinsel, of course. There'll be nothing left to investigate. Anyway, this sort of thing is out of my line. We work on insurance cases, jewel robberies, divorces, that sort of thing. Murder is a cop racket. We don't touch it if we can help it."

My sweet little wife and self-elected helpmate had slipped away to the public phone in Ray's office. Now she came running back, aglow with excited pride of achievement.

"Darling, we're all set! They're holding him at the Hollywood station. I talked to Dave, and he's there now. Let's hurry down."

"But this is silly!" I protested. "There's nothing we can do, cherry pie, you know that. We'd be—"

"Oh, Johnny, please, don't be a square! We can try, can't we? Dave says he'll let us talk to him. Come on, before they take him all the way downtown."

The Walters kid had been staring at us with those wide, frightened eyes. Now she burst into a fresh flood of tears.

"But I haven't got any m-money!"

Khan nudged my leg, gazed up at me reproachfully and gave me a short, persuasive, impatient bark. . . .

Detective Lieutenant David Hogan, Confidential Squad, watched us walking into his office with a quizzical glint in his narrow, clear blue eyes, and pushed himself wearily out of a comfortably battered swivel chair. He was a short, stocky, carefully preserved citizen in his late forties, except for the maze

of lines and grooves in his leather-skinned face where skepticism and sad experience had taken a long-term lease.

"Boy, are you hot," he praised me. "Ain't much more than an hour we been sitting on this Duncan. Right now our psychiatrist's giving him the once-over. Acting a little screwy, he is. Who you working for, Johnny?"

He sounded almost jovial about it. In this town anything goes, but I'm still supposed to be the big laugh in the profession here—a guy with an education and fancy ideas, with a stubborn, good-looking babe for a wife, and a big dog for a pet. It helps, sometimes. When they don't take you seriously, they don't worry so much about you, and you can get by with things.

I told him about Inez Walters, and he shrugged it off.

"We already got her statement," he said. "Ain't nothing to this one. Grant was a chaser. Everybody knew it, including his own wife. Duncan got mad, picked a fight with him and stuck him with a letter-opener, is all. Nobody seen him do it—they were alone together in the old man's study. But they made a lot of noise when it happened, so his wife and the help busted in right away. They hung on to this Duncan and called us."

"Did you get a confession?" I asked.

"What do you think? The guy was all over blood. He says sure, he figures he done it all right. Says everything went black on him. That's why the doc. I figure it's second degree, if he can cop a plea. Maybe ten years, maybe two; it depends."

"His prints confirmed?"

Dane almost laughed at me, pulling open a drawer and tossing the knife on the desk. It had a long, thin, slender blade, with one straight blunt edge and one razor-sharp, tapering to a needle point, the gleaming steel still obscured by a dull reddish film clear up to its small oval sleeve guard of hammered gold.

The hilt had been fashioned out of coarsely grained sharkskin ivory, with a gay little bow of green silk cord attached to it near the guard. It was a knife that would take fingerprints like a bishop will take from the

poor box.

"Jap hara-kiri," said Hogan, succinctly. "Grant's. Been on his desk for twenty years. Asking for it, huh?"

SUZY pouted at him and said, "But Dave, if no one saw it happen and that thing doesn't show prints, then where's your proof?"

"Are you kidding? Nobody else could of done it. Mrs. Grant was out on the sun deck, having her nails done by the maid and dictating letters to this guy Hilliard—he's a secretary or something. She and Hilliard are the only ones with a key to the joint, except Grant himself. Not even the manager of the Bellagio has a passkey. They took the pent-house on a long term lease and had their own locks put on. Duncan rings the bell at twelve-ten, Hilliard lets him in and shows him into the study, and goes back to the sun deck. Five minutes later—bingo!"

"That's a pretty small staff for the Bellagio penthouse," said the little woman, sulkily thoughtful.

"They got a Filipino butler and a Swedish cook, which it happens to be their day off. There's a guy named Dwight, Mr. Grant's personal chauffeur and pilot, flying one of his business partners to Arizona, something about a mine. That's the works. We talked to the hotel staff. No other visitors went up or came down, no deliveries even, after eleven-thirty."

The door opened and a plump little man bounced into the room, shrewd eyes twinkling in his jolly little moon face.

"All yours, Lieutenant," he announced merrily. "Help yourself. Nothing in this for me, I'm happy to say. Nice boy, very nice boy, pity he blew his top. Shouldn't have any trouble getting him to sign a statement."

He smiled upon us all, waving us a cheery good-by, and bounced right out again.

Hogan grinned at me smugly, and asked, "You still wanna play?"

The way he put it, I was stuck with it, and my face must have told him so. He chuckled and pushed us into the next room, where two bored deputies sat on chairs tilted against the bare stucco wall, lazily picking their teeth.

Tom Duncan stood by the window, staring out into the court-yard, a pleasantly homely young fellow in his early twenties, tall, dark hair neatly groomed. He was dressed quietly in a plain brown business suit, and wore an expression of uneasily subdued bewilderment.

"You got visitors already," Hogan said to him. "This guy's a private cop who's been hired by your girl-friend to prove you didn't do it. The lady's his wife what got him into this. They're old friends of mine, is why I'm letting them talk to you in the first place. You tell 'em, boy."

"That's right," I said. "Did you or didn't you? Better lay it on the line, Duncan. If you're guilty, now's the time to admit it. It's only a manslaughter rap, at worst. They'll take it easy with you if you'll just be frank with them."

He looked me straight in the eye. "Mister, I just don't know. This is downright silly, but I can't remember a thing. I guess I must've done it since they say there wasn't anybody else. But I never saw that knife, and I sure didn't go there to do anything like that to him. All I wanted was to tell him to keep his hands off my girl."

"Well, how'd it go? How much *do* you remember?"

"I got there a few minutes after twelve," he told us. "I'd been worrying about it all night and morning, so at last I thought I'd go out in my lunch hour and talk to him. Some man opened the door and said he was the secretary, so I told him that I was Miss Walters's fiancé, and Mr. Grant heard us and shouted at him he should let me in. So he did, and left us there alone, with the old guy sitting behind a desk and me standing in front of it.

"I never had a chance to talk much, because right away he started calling me names, telling me Nicky was just infatuated with me, and I was taking advantage of that to latch on to a girl who'd be famous and making a lot of money soon. He said I ought to stick to my own sort and leave her be. He wasn't shouting then, he just sat there kind of snarling at me.

"I got so mad I couldn't see straight any more. I think I yelled at him to shut his

dirty yap or I'd shut it for him, but then he gave me a nasty laugh and the next thing I knew he was lying half-across the desk, holding on to my coat with one hand, and blood running out all over everything.

"I guess it was the shock of seeing him like that made me sit down, right on the floor. Then in no time at all the room was full of people, everybody screaming at me, yelling for the cops. They had me in such a tizzy I just gave up and waited to see what next."

"You're sure you were alone in there with Mr. Grant?" Suzy pressed him stubbornly.

DUNCAN said, "I thought we were. I never noticed anybody else."

"You never saw the knife that had been lying on the desk?"

"No, ma'am, I sure didn't. But of course I wasn't paying much attention. They all said it'd been there for years, he used it for a paper cutter."

"Satisfied?" Hogan asked me drily.

"Are you? I'd like to see the situation pictures your photographer took."

He beckoned us out of the room, back into his office, and carefully closed the door.

"This is where you get off the bus," he told us calmly. "I don't mind fracturing a rule or two to give you folks a boost once in a while, but this is just about as far as we can go for now. I'm sorry for the kid myself, but he shouldn't of lost his temper. I'm leaning over backward as it is, so he'll get a square deal. You wanna look at pictures, go and take your own. . . ."

The Bellagio Tower, eight stories of glass brick and terra cotta concrete, is perched on a Brentwood hillside, half a block north of Sunset Boulevard. It is probably not Los Angeles County's swankiest apartment hotel, but it is in there trying.

The clock on our dashboard said three-thirty when I shoved the Packard in between a Rolls Royce town car and an ancient Deussenberg cabriolet under the royal palms along the driveway esplanade.

"Darling, do you think they'll let us in?" the little woman asked me apprehensively. "When Mrs. Grant finds out we represent

that girl—”

“Relax, honey bun. We can make it.”

We left the dog in the car and passed through the Bellagio's quietly opulent chromium and blue velvet lobby unchallenged. The Negro elevator boy gave us no more opposition than a wary double take. He delivered us without audible comment on a narrow top floor corridor, rose marble and malachite, serving the two passenger cars—a service car, a fireproof indoor stairway and a single teakwood apartment door framed in steel, the gleaming bronze knob secured by a shinily efficient Yale lock.

Triple-tongued chimes sang out gaily inside when I pressed a wall button. The man who appeared in answer to this euphonious summons looked like a small but wiry and capable thirty-five. He was wearing a smartly cut double-breasted blue serge, and a courteously intelligent poker face that did not quite seem to match his huge, callus-riddled work-man's hands.

“Yes sir?”

I gave the man a card that said I was a Claims Adjuster for the Mutual Life and Indemnity Insurance Company of Boston, Mass. He looked at it and nodded, made us wait outside. He had me puzzled for a minute while I tried to place him in Hogan's account of the Grant establishment. He certainly was not the secretarial type.

He came back soon enough to let us in. The front door opened on a large, sunken living-room cheerfully paneled in lacquered lemon wood and tricked up with a tremendous crimson and black Navajo rug and a lot of extra fancy custom-built Monterey furniture. The heavy mahogany executive desk faced the door, its back to the French windows of the patio.

The room was tidy, almost immaculate, much as its decorative scheme tended toward the slightly overhearing. It seemed hard to believe that it had been the scene of such radical violence only a few hours before.

A woman and two men watched us walk in. They were unsociably distributed over three widely dispersed easy chairs. There was considerable tension in the air, and not the kind that constitutes an atmosphere of mourning, not as far as I could judge.

The tall young man in the dark toothbrush mustache and the hounds' tooth flannel sport jacket who came to meet us did not quite click his heels. He said his name was Hilliard, offered me a limp and beautifully manicured hand, and executed formal introductions all around.

WE MURMURED the conventional apologies. They were accepted with that typical apprehensive condescension of the very rich to all the world's white-collar busvhodies.

Mrs. Maria Grant turned out to be the girl who could have won a vote as the widow a man would be least reluctant to leave behind. She was a fat and florid, highly artificial blonde in her late fifties, with an icily imperious manner that passes for evidence of solid culture in some circles.

She wore Chinese orange hostess pajamas that might have looked stylish on a slender and rather daring young brunette, and a rope of pearls that would have served to lasso a fractious Hereford bull. What little sympathy I had been able to muster for the late Jefferson P. received substantial reinforcement.

“From the insurance company? Must you? The police have already been imposing on me all day. Can't you just go and get your facts from them?”

“The police have no stockholders and don't pay claims, madam,” I pointed out carefully. “Under circumstances such as these our company usually prefers to make its own independent investigation.”

“Really. I'm afraid I don't understand. My husband was murdered by that revolting young man in a quarrel over some stupid little wench my husband was trying to help. My lawyers will submit all the necessary papers to your company in a few days. What more can you possibly want to know?”

The third member of our jolly little group coughed discreetly. He had been introduced as Mr. Joseph de Castro, a lean elderly party, almost completely bald, and tanned to a deep corrugated mahogany brown. His shabby old shooting jacket and the frayed, disreputable stetson he clasped in his lap did not seem to belong to this setting,

but he'd be the last to give the point a second thought.

"Ain't no call for getting excited, Miz Grant," he drawled. "These folks are just doing their job, way they been told to." With him, lack of grammar almost sounded like an affectation.

The woman raked him with a look of furious contempt, but her bristle subsided somehow, and Hilliard said smoothly, "Of course, if there is really something we can do for you—"

They had me feeling like a fool, there was so obviously nothing to be done for us. I'd have been strongly tempted to drop the whole thing flat, if I could have thought of a way to extract myself without leaving my face on the door mat.

"Our policies carry a suicide clause," I said diffidently. "That in itself means we can never afford to overlook any angles in a case of violent death."

I got a little reaction on that one. Hilliard pursed his lips in deprecation, and Mrs. Grant frankly snorted.

"Men of that age are sometimes subject to sudden fits of depression," I pointed out carefully.

Hilliard said, "I think you can safely rule out the possibility, Mr. Marshall. I have worked for Mr. Grant for six years, and his health has always been excellent. He had no business worries, and I can't remember any occasion when he was not in the best of spirits. Mr. de Castro was in conference with him all morning, and he can tell you the same."

De Castro nodded and smiled at me. "You're way off the rail, friend. Jeff wouldn't think of killing himself. Happier than an old coyote in a coopful of chickens, Jeff was."

"Are you Mr. Grant's partner, the one who was flying to Arizona today?" I asked, feeling my eyebrows click up to half-cock.

"That's right, friend. We turned back. Mr. Hilliard called the airport, and they give us the word."

"Mr. De Castro flew in from Morningstar before breakfast in Mr. Grant's private plane," the secretary said.

So the wiry little man in blue serge who had let us in would be Dwight, the pilot-

chauffeur Hogan had mentioned.

"And he left before this man Duncan arrived?" I asked.

HILLIARD nodded. "Mr. de Castro departed about eleven-thirty, after his conference with Mr. Grant was over. Mr. Grant remained in this room, working alone. Duncan arrived a little after twelve. Except for Miranda, Mrs. Grant's personal maid, all the servants were out, so I opened the door when he rang."

Suzy inquired innocently. "What happened?"

"He said he was Miss Walters's fiancé," Hilliard told her. "He seemed to be angry, and I didn't like the look in his eyes too well. I meant to send him packing, but Mr. Grant must have heard us, because he called to me that he would see him. So I let him in. I thought I'd better stay around, but Mr. Grant dismissed me, so I went back to the patio where I was doing some work for Mrs. Grant. Perhaps five minutes later we heard shouting and a heavy bumping noise in this room, and when we came running in, Mr. Grant was slumped forward across the desk, with the knife he kept for a letter-opener buried in his throat. I grabbed Duncan and held him while Mrs. Grant phoned the police."

"Nobody else was in the apartment?" I asked.

"Only the maid, and she was out on the patio all the time," he assured me. "She had hysterics when she came in here with us, and after the officers took her statement we put her to bed with a sedative. I showed the police that it was impossible for anyone to get in. There is no separate service entrance to the penthouse here. The fire-escape is out in the hall, and only Mrs. Grant and I have keys to that door." He pointed to the entrance, and added with a shrug, "Anyway, Duncan could hardly have failed to notice if someone else had come in and stabbed Mr. Grant."

"What about that knife? It was right there on the desk all morning?"

"Of course."

"You remember seeing it when you left Duncan with Mr. Grant?"

Hilliard flushed. "Certainly not," he snapped angrily. "It didn't occur to me to look for it. Are you insinuating—"

De Castro held up a pacifying hand. "Ain't no call for getting excited, friends. Stands to reason that knife was there all right. Happens I seen Jeff using it this morning, opening his mail."

That was the way it all stacked up. We kept on with it for another fifteen or twenty minutes, asking more smart questions and silly questions, and getting nowhere with them. Mrs. Grant bluntly refused to wake up the maid, and I let it ride, feeling reasonably sure she would have nothing to contribute.

We inspected the windows as a last resort. Grant had had his back to them, but he might have turned around or something. All we got was a nice view straight down the hillside, where the city of Beverly Hills snuggled cozily in the sunny green valley, not unlike a huge and elaborately decorated cake on a low table, waiting for you to cut yourself a slice.

At that point there was nothing left for us but more apologies.

On our way down in the elevator, Suzy frowned at me and said, "Darling, I don't believe it!"

"Why not? Most killings are simple and stupid, just like this one. Somebody gets mad or wants the other guy's dough or his woman. He rarely stops to figure it out—just goes ahead and does it. Then a cop comes along and grabs him and everybody wonders how come he made such an ass of himself. That's why so many of 'em get caught. If every killer used his brains, the way they're supposed to in books, we'd hardly ever catch any, if only for lack of proper evidence."

"Do you really think that boy is guilty?"

"I don't know, cherry pie. I'm handling it on the assumption that he isn't, but no one else seems to've had both motive and opportunity, if either. That woman is a witch if I ever saw one, and she doesn't exactly seem sorry about the whole thing, but it doesn't look as if we're going to be able to tag her for it, much as I'd like to."

BY THAT time we were walking down the driveway toward our car, and Khan had already pawed open the door for us from inside, his tail expectantly lashing the back seat, when we ran into the poker-faced little chauffeur, Dwight, who was aimlessly polishing the windshield of the Rolls parked next to us.

"'Lo, soldier," I said. "I almost forgot about you. Cops get your statement yet?"

He nodded, looked at my open cigarette case, took one and stuck it behind his ear.

"Dick from Homicide waiting for us when we got back," he said briefly.

"When was that?"

"Somewheres around one-thirty." He hesitated and threw in "sir" as an afterthought.

"Pretty quick," I said, surprised. "If you left here at eleven-thirty you must've been halfway to Arizona by the time you got the flash."

"Tower called us back ten minutes after we took off," he told me. "I had landing gear trouble on the way in this morning. Fixed it myself before we pulled out. Them airport grease monkeys—" He spat reflectively.

"Let me get this straight," I said. "At eleven-thirty you drove Mr. de Castro out to the airport. He waited around while you fixed the plane. Then you took off, and ten minutes later you got Mr. Hilliard's message by radio from the tower. You got back here by one-thirty. Right?"

"Yeah. Took me something like an hour on the stilts. We got away at twelve-forty-five."

I chewed on that for a minute and asked, "What's cooking in Morningstar, Arizona?"

"Lousy dump," he said contemptuously. "Piece of desert the size of your hand cleared for a landing strip. They're digging in a mountain nearby. Mining proposition. I wouldn't know."

He resumed polishing his windshield with an air of finality, so I said, "Thanks, soldier," and got into my own car behind the wheel, slamming the door on my side and snapping the catch to lock myself in from mere force of habit.

That's when it came to me in a flash. It

was the only possible answer, if you could call it an answer, and it was so ridiculously elementary that I didn't even like it. Worst of all, it would be almost impossible to prove. . . .

Lieutenant David Hogan said, "Boy, this better be good."

I grinned at him weakly. The big penthouse living room was filled with people, most of them bored, skeptical, or frankly outraged. Mrs. Grant, Hilliard, and De Castro were in a huddle around the desk, telephoning lawyers. The maid, Miranda, had been dragged out of bed after all and sat in a corner, wearing a loud green kimono and crying fitfully.

Tom Duncan, between two hard-faced deputies, shifted his feet and looked more bewildered than ever. On the sofa, Suzy had a job talking the Walters girl into behaving herself.

My watch said five-forty. Outside, the sun was getting ready to duck behind the Baldwin hills across the valley. From the driveway eight floors below came the blast of a powerful outo horn, twice repeated.

"It's just one of those things, Dave," I said. "You've got nothing to lose. Your suspect hasn't signed a confession yet, and if this stunt doesn't work you can always drag me up before the Board and get them to pull my license. Let's get it over with."

"Okay, Johnny. It's your neck." He almost smiled in anticipation and raised his voice to a growl. "Your attention, please, everybody. We're gonna reconstruct what happened here this morning, so's we can clear up a few points, is all. I'm counting on all of you to cooperate with the police on this. We'll figure the time is now twelve o'clock noon." He swung a finger at Mrs. Grant. "You, ma'am. Will you kindly sit out on the patio, please? Take Mr. Hilliard and the maid with you. Come on now. You wanna help us convict the guy that killed your husband, don't you?"

FOR A minute I thought she was going to spit in his eye or bust, the way she glared at him. But both Hilliard and De Castro made a fuss over her until at last she flounced out of the room, carrying the maid along

in her wake. Hilliard was following when I took him aside to whisper instructions in his ear. He frowned and shrugged his elegantly padded shoulders and went out.

"Now you, sir," Hogan said to De Castro. "If you'll kindly oblige. We got to have a substitute for Mr. Grant, he should sit behind that desk. You was a friend of his, so you'll know just how to act."

The old boy looked a bit startled, but he gingerly sat down in the high leather-backed executive chair.

"Good thing Jeff ain't here hisself now," he drawled. "Kind of jealous of this chair, Jeff was."

"That right? Okay, Duncan, outside. Ring the bell and do your stuff. Don't mind us, just act like we wasn't here at all."

"Wait a minute," I said quickly. "We'll need some kind of a prop for the knife."

"I got a pencil here," said Hogan, slapping it on the desk in front of de Castro. "That'll do the trick for us."

He glowered at the sofa, where the Walters girl was off on another weeping jag when she saw Duncan with his guard of honor walk out into the hall and close the door behind them.

"You ladies stay out of this now," Hogan warned. "Keep your mouths shut and don't move."

We had a few seconds of tense silence, then those silly chimes went off *ding-dong-dong* as if it were Christmas already, and we could hear Hilliard's footsteps crossing the next room. He came hurrying in, passed us with eyes averted and opened the door, not more than a few inches.

"Er—can I see Mr. Grant?" came Duncan's voice, uncertainly.

I'm no more impressionable than the next guy, but from there on in the skin between my shoulders crawled, it was such a nasty business. The room's atmosphere seemed to grow thick and stifling, building up from one moment to the next. The girls were pale and jittery; Inez Walters had stopped crying. Hogan looked on, grimly impatient.

"I'm his secretary," Hilliard was saying. "Did you have an appointment?"

"I'm Miss Walters's fiancé. It'll only take a minute."

"Sorry. Mr. Grant sees no one without an appointment. If you'd care to drop us a note—"

I motioned to De Castro, who sat listening open-mouthed, and hissed at him, "Go on! Tell him to come in!"

He woke up and complied. Duncan entered the room, alone now, looking scared. Hilliard closed the door behind him and followed. They stood around for a moment until I prompted De Castro again, who suddenly remembered the man he was impersonating and snapped his fingers, giving Hilliard a hammy, exaggerated scowl. Hilliard flushed and almost ran out of the room.

Duncan said self-consciously, "All I want from you is keep your hands off my girl. We're going to be married tomorrow—" He stopped and glanced at me, baffled. "That's as far as I got. That's when he started yapping at me."

"All right," I told De Castro. "Bawl him out."

The old prospector stared at me. "But I ain't mad at him."

"Get on with it!" snapped Hogan. "Talk to him about his girl. Tell him you don't want her to marry him."

De Castro shrugged, self-consciously, as if he thought we'd lost our minds. He said, "What do you want here, eh, young man, I'd shore like to know? You ain't gonna marry this here young lady, not if I have my way. Go on, get outa here, you little coyote!"

Tom Duncan listened and fidgeted sheepishly, one uneasy eye on the pencil that was supposed to be a murder tool waiting for his grasp.

"You going to take this lying down?" I snapped at him.

He started and suddenly found his voice in a frightened croak.

"You shut your dirty mouth, or I'll shut it for you!"

IT HAPPENED so fast that I had quite a job testifying accurately in court when the case came up later, although I knew exactly in advance what would occur. The front door opened, a man appeared briefly, De Castro ducked and let go a yell of surprise. A bright streak of metal sizzled by, striking home with a dull thudding noise.

The door slammed shut again. The slender, vicious blade of Grant's fancy Jap

[Turn page]



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knife had dug itself an inch into the desk top, neatly splitting Hogan's pencil in half.

For the next five minutes we had a nice little riot on our hands. Everybody screamed at everybody else. The party from the sun deck came running to join in the chorus. Inez Walters broke away from the sofa and fell sobbing into Duncan's arms.

Hogan elbowed his way to the front door and got his deputies back from the hall, three of them this time. The pilot, Dwight, came in with them, bland and unconcerned. Between them they finally managed to restore some sort of order.

"We saw you watching that door," Hogan told De Castro. "You ready to spill?"

The old miner stared up at him from the edge of Grant's big swivel chair. "You ain't pinning this on me, friend," he protested hoarsely. "Why, Jeff and me was like that!" He demonstrated with two shaky fingers.

"Mr. Grant told me he was thinking of pulling out," Hilliard said vindictively. "They were supposed to find uranium ore on Mr. De Castro's claim, but it was beginning to look like he'd swindled us."

"Nice shot you made, Garcia," I said to the third deputy, a small, swarthy detective-sergeant. "What'd you find out at the airport?"

He showed me a beautiful set of little pearly white teeth, grinning at me.

"Pretty good knife," he judged. "Me, I like knives. The airport checks. They remember seeing this guy around, but only before twelve and after twelve-thirty. The parking lot reported a Dodge sedan stolen around noon. Found abandoned a couple of hours later on the boulevard, opposite Gate B. Most prints wiped clean, but we got one latent he overlooked on the hand brake."

"That's how it was," I told Hogan. "I knew there'd be a long delay before take-off while Dwight fixed the plane's landing gear.

It's only a fifteen-minute ride from the airport, ten if you lean on the gas. He palmed the shiv while Grant wasn't looking. Used the fire stairs when he sneaked back up, counting on Grant being alone, so it'd seem like suicide or like an inside job, the door being locked and all."

"But how did he get in without a key?" Hilliard asked me, thoroughly puzzled.

"That spring lock on your front door has a stop-work," I said. "He pushed in the button when you showed him out at eleven-thirty, so he could get in merely by turning the knob on the outside. You'd never notice, not even when you admitted Tom Duncan later. Then when he ducked out the second time, he pushed the other button, releasing the spring catch. His prints are still on the face of that lock."

DE CASTRO reared up out of his chair, eyes blazing. His homespun accent had completely disappeared.

"Frame-up!" he snarled. "The whole story's a pack of dirty lies! I never touched that lock, so help me!"

"Get his handkerchief, Dave," I suggested. "We know he left no prints, but the lock's been recently lubricated. There'll be traces of machine oil."

It took another small riot before they had him down. They found the handkerchief on him all right. They also found a crisply folded document bordered in fancy blue and gold litho and covered with fine print.

"Well, well, what do you know," said Hogan, staring at it.

"Mutual Life and Indemnity Insurance Company of Boston, Massachusetts, a partnership life policy for a hundred grand!"

"Looks like we'll get a fee out of this after all, doesn't it, darling?" said the little woman proudly, and stood up on her toes to kiss the tip of my chin.

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Irving gripped the
arms of the chair



Little LOST BRAIN

By DOROTHY DUNN

*Ever since
Fred's murder
there
was something
the matter
with Daphne*

IRVING BELMONT, greeted his hostess with a sincere smile and a warm handshake. He was delighted to be here. He meant it. Some men would have found Nadine Holt's dinner parties dull, but Irving was always happy to attend anybody's dinner parties.

The food was never an attraction, as he had a delicate stomach that he fed only to combat the discomfort of complete hunger. For the same reason, the drinks were never an attraction, either. Particularly the martini cocktails that Nadine served—a horrible concoction with an olive bobbing like bait in the bottom of the glass.

So many people offered the excuse that they drank them only for the olives. Irving thought the travail involved was too

great for the procuring of an olive that one could have speared directly from the briny bottle minus the gin. But he always smiled agreeably at the excuse, as though he'd never heard it before.

Irving had that faculty of smiling agreeably, no matter what the conversation. But it was a vacuous smile. It was just an interested smile.

Being a brain surgeon, he knew perfectly well that people drank martinis because they wanted to escape for a moment before dinner. And he knew that Nadine served them because she wanted her guests to escape, because she was aware that they needed just that.

Nadine was a hostess who collected oddly assorted people and tossed them into the social pot carelessly. Her guests were usually ill-matched, like haphazard clumps in a marvelous stew.

Irving Belmont was delighted to attend Nadine's parties because he enjoyed the flavor of her guests, the tang of home style, mixed with the subtle flavor of obscure spices. Once, Nadine had invited to the same party a member of the British consulate and a girl who was ticket-taker at her neighborhood movie.

Irving had enjoyed that night. The British consular representative had knocked himself out for the strawberry blonde, who didn't keep much knowledge in her pretty head beyond the names of next week's features. At the end of Nadine's potent martini marathon, the ticket-taker had emerged victorious, more dignified than the dignitary.

The episode had delighted Irving Belmont's macabre sense of humor. Sometimes he suspected that Nadine was afflicted with a streak of sadism that made her plan and execute these ridiculous human encounters. If so, he had a similar streak. He enjoyed what she planned.

NADINE manipulated the strings and he could always laugh at the puppet show. He really meant it when he smiled at Nadine and told her how happy he was to be at her dinner party.

"My God, Irving! I don't know why. You won't drink. You peck at your food."

"You know why, darling. One meets such interesting people. What is it tonight? A Russian spy and a girl who works at Oak Ridge?"

"You're quite horrible, Irving. Really. You've spent so many years at surgery that you don't think of people as human beings. You probably look at every head and see it with skin folded back ready for that devilishly clever knife of yours. The miracle man! Tell me, does that pre-frontal lobotomy business really work? Can you cure people of insane notions?"

Irving laughed, delighted as always, at Nadine's lack of subtlety. She had something up her sleeve for him, like the time she'd aroused his sympathy for a maid of hers who'd had a brain tumor and couldn't afford the operation. Even Nadine, rich and charitable as she was, couldn't take on the cost of an Irving Belmont operation for her maid. But she had worked him around so that it had amused him to remove the poor woman's tumor without charge.

"There's no such thing as an insane 'notion', Nadine. Fixations—obsessions—"

"Just answer my question, Irving. I haven't the time for the right words. You know perfectly well what I mean. Does that pre-frontal operation do people any good? You know, people who act crazy about certain things."

Irving patted her beautiful arm. "Don't worry about yourself, darling. Your deviation from the normal pattern of behavior is the greatest contributing factor to your charm. I wouldn't change you for the world!"

"You dog. You know you could answer my unethical medical questions quicker than you can think of a way to dodge them. Would you rather I came and paid for an office call, Irving?"

"Don't be silly, Nadine. Are you being serious?"

She took a cocktail from the tray that was being passed. Irving declined.

"Very serious. In fact, I think perhaps I *should* come to your office. I have this party to look after—"

"Nonsense. In one sentence, what is it?"

"My niece. Daphne Dehaven. You'll

see her tonight." Nadine leaned closer, almost whispering. "I think she needs that pre-frontal thing. That operation on her brain."

Irving Belmont mocked her whisper. "Dear God! Why? How could you, as a layman, diagnose a thing like this? Really, Nadine, medical science has to probe a little deeper than the articles you read in the popular magazines!"

"I know. But there's something terrible the matter with Daphne. Ever since Fred was murdered, she's been strange about little things. I thought being away at school would help her, but it hasn't. She's worse. Much worse."

"For instance, Nadine? What little things bother her?"

"Fred's room, for one. The room where he died. She keeps talking about it, but she has a morbid fear of the room. She won't cross the threshold. Would you believe it, Irving? She fainted when I tried to insist!"

Irving remembered Daphne from years back. She had been a gangling adolescent, strangely out of place with her sophisticated aunt and uncle.

"She's been four years at school, Nadine?"

"Yes. She just came home."

"Was she here when Fred was murdered? Seems to me that was during a Christmas holiday."

"She was here. How can you forget? You were here, too. Sometimes, Irving, I think you try to impress people that you're important and busy. You were in a cold sweat the night that Fred died, and you attended Daphne for two hours. How can you pretend to forget?"

Irving Belmont smiled. Nadine was striking pretty close to his biggest fault—his self-importance.

BUT his subconscious rebelled against telling how well he remembered the night of Fred's murder. He didn't want her ever to know about the nights he'd had to get up and change his pajamas, the nights of cold sweat and pounding blood pressure. But he didn't want her to know about the dreams he'd had after Fred's funeral.

"You're right, Nadine. I'm sorry. I remember the whole ghastly night, right down to the smallest detail. You had on a simply cut black gown and looked very lovely. I just couldn't see any reason for your torturing your own mind with memories."

"Nonsense. You know I don't have that kind of a mind!"

She swallowed her martini and poked at the olive with a beautifully manicured finger.

"Maybe not," said Irving. "But we don't know what kind of mind Daphne has, either."

"It's a very sick one. I know that much, and I know that I've got to do something to help her! All of her trouble goes back to the night of Fred's murder. Wouldn't the pre-frontal operation make her forget that night?"

"It would make her forget a lot of things. She might not end up the same Daphne you know. The operation eliminates mental stress, but changes the personality. Would you want that? As I remember, Daphne had a lot of personality!"

"I know, Irving. But the way it is now, she wants release only in death. The operation, no matter how it turned out, would make her forget, would give her peace of mind."

"More likely 'piece' of mind," said Irving. "Half a loaf. A brain with the imagination cut off completely!"

"In Daphne's case that would be good. All her anxieties are imaginary."

Irving sighed. "You don't understand, Nadine. She could lose all interest in keeping herself clean, in the refinements that she's grown up with. She could become a dead weight, an embarrassment to you."

"I just want to help her, to save her from complete insanity. And I would have confidence in you. I know your reputation, Irving. And you've answered my question. The operation would make her forget the night that Fred was killed."

Irving got excited, in spite of his attempted mental discipline. He loved doing a pre-frontal. There weren't many men in the country who could execute the operation. Nothing made him feel more important than cutting into a patient's brain. And so many

families won't sign over a pre-frontal. Many people consider it a form of murder, just as they do abortion.

And yet Nadine was willing to sign Daphne over! He wondered why. Surely the slight streak of sadism that he suspected couldn't spread to the proportions of wanting to dabble in the complete changing of a human personality. Unless she had some reason. Women were complex. Could it be that Nadine hated the younger girl and was manipulating the strings on a more serious puppet show than her dinner parties were?

But whatever the motive, she was willing to assume the responsibility for the consequences. And best of all, she had the money to provide for the post-operative care.

Now that Fred was dead, Nadine had plenty of money. Much more than she would ever need.

Irving didn't like what was happening inside of him. As a surgeon, he knew he wouldn't operate unless his diagnosis indicated that a pre-frontal was the last hope to save Daphne's mind. But he was being excited by the prospect that the operation might be necessary. And Nadine was doing that to him deliberately. Nadine knew how to handle people, and he felt that he was going to be handled.

"Come to my office at three tomorrow afternoon, Nadine. And bring Daphne."

"Bless you, Irving!"

She had got what she wanted. She moved away to another group, and Irving Belmont stood by himself looking over the guests at one of Nadine's dinner parties. But he was no longer amused. He was worried. He didn't like to think about the night of Fred's murder, and he was afraid that Nadine might be following a devious method to tell him something about Daphne that she dared not put into plain words.

By the time he sat down at the table, his ulcer was active and he felt miserable. . . .

DAPHNE DEEHAVEN'S mind seemed to have turned so far inward that her eyes reflected meditated horrors more awful than anything she might confront in reality.

Her responses to the nurse were hollow sounds, coming after long pauses. She thought for a good while before giving her age as twenty-one. And her eyes darted helplessly about while she was thinking.

Irving sat across the room, observing Daphne's responses to the nurse's simple questions.

Nadine whispered, "Is it as bad as I think, Irving?"

He gave her a look of professional impatience.

"I don't know. But you'd better do some shopping, or something. Come back in a hour. I don't want you here when I start talking to her."

"But Irving—"

"Sorry. I must insist on a private examination."

Nadine took overly long drawing on her gloves and standing up. She was reluctant to leave, but Irving noticed that, with her departure, some of the fear seemed to go out of Daphne's eyes.

He dismissed the nurse with a nod of his head and went forward slowly, holding out his hand so Daphne could see it before he got to her, so she would know that his approach was friendly. Slow. Easy. Like an approach to a timid child or a wary animal.

"Hello, Daphne. I'm Dr. Belmont. Do you remember me?"

She let him take her hand and looked up at him with large, haunted eyes.

"Yes," she said. "I remember everything that happened. Uncle Fred was there and you were there. And suddenly Uncle Fred was dead and I found him, with that—*thing*—sticking out of his ear. And I didn't know then that somebody had done that to him because there wasn't any blood—"

She was tumbling the words out rapidly now. This wasn't like trying to remember how old she was. This was the effortless recital of the scene that kept flashing through the gray folds of her brain. This was shock, the result of its confusion.

Irving patted her hand. "I know, Daphne. I was there, too, and it was a bad night. A year ago. You were home for the Christmas holidays. Then you went back to school. You got sick at school, didn't you?"

Her eyes registered the beginning of a retreat.

Irving prompted her quickly. "Did you have a doctor when you got sick at school, Daphne?"

"I was sick," she said haltingly. "Sometimes I was sick." Her lips began to tremble and she blinked her eyes, as though tears were near the surface.

"I know," soothed Irving. "Let's go over to the light and have a look at you. I'm going to help you get well. You want me to help you, don't you?"

He exerted faint pressure on her hand and she followed him like a child, babbling.

"You couldn't help Uncle Fred, Dr. Belmont. I was there and I called you, and you didn't do anything to help. I remember just how everything happened. I remember the room where he died. Do you remember the room, Doctor? The Christmas tree lights were off and Uncle Fred was dead in a dark room, and there was a party going on in the next rooms."

"I remember, Daphne."

She was sitting on the end of his examination table. He turned his back to her and opened the door of the cabinet that held his instruments. The rubber mallet slipped out of his hand as he turned around. When he picked it up, he noticed that his palms were slick with sudden moisture. The clammy feeling was on him again.

Did he remember the room? Had he noticed that the lights had been out on the Christmas tree?

Just how many minute details can a sick mind retain?

HE BEGAN his examination automatically. But he didn't call his nurse, as he would have done with any other patient. He wanted Daphne to keep talking about the night of Fred's murder.

He began testing her reflexes with the mallet. But she stiffened unnaturally against the taps.

"The room was dark, wasn't it, Daphne?" he prompted.

"Until I turned on the light. I was looking for Nadine. I remember hunting among the guests for her and then going into

Uncle Fred's den, thinking she might be with him."

Irving said, drying his palms on the back of his white coat, "You didn't see her there, did you?"

"No. She had on a black dress. It was dark in the room. The Christmas tree lights had been on, but they were off when I went in. I think the murderer pulled the plug out of the socket so the room would be dark. Don't you?"

Irving wiped his palms again and put his hands gently on top of her head, his thumb against her eyelid. He leaned close, peering into her haunted eyes with a beam of light.

Then he stepped back, frowning. When he spoke, his voice had lost the confident ease of his professional manner.

"You're going to be all right, Daphne," he said, with more sarcasm than he'd intended. "But I'd like to talk to the doctor you had at school. Do you remember his name?"

"No. I just remember the night that Uncle Fred was killed. That sharp thing going into his ear and into his brain. Do you suppose that hurt him when it happened, Doctor? You know about things like that. Does a person suffer when something sharp goes into the brain?"

"He didn't suffer, Daphne. He didn't even know that anything had happened to him."

She looked down at the floor instead of at him.

"You're a brain surgeon," she said softly. "I suppose you ought to know. Do you think the murderer will ever be caught?"

Irving Belmont smiled nervously.

"The police have given up, I imagine. No clues were found, and it's been a year."

Irving wished that Nadine would get back, wished that he'd never sent her away. She was off someplace laughing at him, no doubt. She liked to make fools of people. Like those ridiculous parties she gave. The sadistic streak. The cruelty.

Daphne raised her eyes to his as the office buzzer sounded. The metallic voice of the nurse come over the inter-com.

"Mrs. Holt is here, Doctor."

"Send her in in five minutes."

Daphne leaned over him now, her eyes

probing his. He tried to control his facial muscles, to stop the twitching.

Her voice was firm and confidently low. Intimate. A statement for his ears alone.

"You know about the clue, don't you, Dr. Belmont? You know that I've known all along?"

"And you've known it can't be proved, Daphne. That's why you haven't done anything about it. And your insanity act was good enough to fool a casual observation, but if you want to convince a doctor, don't ever let him look at your eyes or test your reflexes. I can't understand what you hoped to gain by the dramatics."

"Maybe practice. I majored in theatre and hope to get a television show. And if you could see yourself, you'd know what I've accomplished!"

Irving was more tired than he had ever been in his life. And his weak stomach was pitching on the waves of the ulcer.

"Did you know," he asked, "that Nadine told me she thought you needed a pre-frontal lobotomy? Wonderful woman, Nadine. She's quite an actress herself!"

"You must have been in love with her, Dr. Belmont. That's the only answer I can find. What were you planning to do? Wait the decent interval and then ask her to marry you?"

Nadine came into the office then and put her arm around Daphne.

"Have you told him yet, honey?"

"Yes, Nadine. And I'm sure now. He gave himself away a dozen times. Look at him. Drenched in the sweat of his own conscience. Isn't it a relief, Dr. Belmont? Wouldn't you like to talk about it and get rid of the tension?"

Irving gripped the arms of the desk chair, fighting for control. Nadine was looking at him with loathing, and he couldn't stand much more of that.

"You didn't tell me what your clue was, Daphne," he said, clutching for something, if even a moment of time to think.

"You know as well as I do. You saw me staring at your shoulder when you came into the room. You brushed it off your suit."

She was right. It *would* be a relief to

relax, to stop worrying about it.

"The snow," he said. "The artificial flakes that were sticking to my shoulder."

HE SAID it more to himself than to them. He was remembering the way her eyes had stared accusingly at the white flakes that had been so hard to brush off the wool suit with his hand. He had hoped that she had forgotten, or never realized, their significance.

"From the bottom branches of the tree," said Daphne. "When you leaned down to pull out the cord, it happened. You must have hoped that Uncle Fred wouldn't have been found until after the party. You wanted him to lie there in that darkened room—"

Nadine said, "Never mind, Daphne. Irving has admitted his guilt, in his own way. That's all that's necessary. There's no point in talk any more."

Daphne began to cry. Real tears this time.

"I'm sorry, Nadine. But I loved Uncle Fred a lot. It seems such a shame that—"

"We both loved him," Nadine reminded her. "But it doesn't help to dwell on that now."

She was looking at Irving as she said this, and he tried to meet the steady gaze of this woman he loved, the one with the sadistic streak. She was trying to tell him something with her eyes, something she didn't want Daphne to know. He understood, but he didn't approve.

Her voice was a rustle in his ears, like the sound of swirling black taffeta moving across a room.

"You're a celebrated surgeon, Irving. You've saved a lot of people from death. There are patients who have confidence in you, and I don't want to shake their faith in the medical profession. Do you know what I mean?"

"One man isn't the medical profession," muttered Irving. "One foolish man. Just a man. Not even a doctor at the time. It doesn't make any difference, Nadine."

"I think it does. And it would be easier for you. For all of us. I'm sure you'll see it that way, too, Irving. It's a chance to do something for others, to spare them disil-

lusionment and to protect your sense of self-importance."

The sudden anger that he felt toward her was upsetting. Irving was seized with a violent colon pain. But he tried to meet Nadine's smooth smile squarely.

"I hope you never need a pre-frontal, darling," he said through clenched teeth. "I'm one of the few men who could do it."

Nadine took Daphne by the arm, sure of herself now, sure of him.

"Good-by, Irving."

They left. Irving buzzed for his nurse.

"I'm not well," he said. "Cancel all my appointments. The ulcer. I'm going home."

His pain was evident, was real. His nurse would remember. She would be a supporting factor for the death certificate Nadine wanted recorded as "natural causes."

He couldn't blame Nadine too much. After all, he'd always known about her cruelty, had enjoyed it. They were two of a kind.

When she'd asked Irving to "do something about Fred" so they could "have each other," he'd been thrown off-balance, thinking she loved him. But he knew now that it had been Fred's money she wanted. And she had played along with Daphne's scheme simply to taunt him, to upset his weak stomach and his wrecked nervous system.

And now she had given the final jerk on her puppet strings. She wanted him to be noble, felt sure that her influence would carry even that far, that she could shape his thoughts just the way she had shaped them

for the murder of Fred.

Well, maybe she could. If Daphne told her story to the police, it wouldn't convict him, but the notoriety would ruin his practice.

Nadine had been using the weapon of mental influence, which is flimsy enough, but with Daphne's story she had a bayonet to back up her position.

THE taxi driver said, "You look sick, mister. Need help getting upstairs?"

"No," said Irving gently. "I can manage by myself, thanks."

He wondered if he could. There was so much to think about. Nadine was right about his patients, about his own pride. But there was Daphne to consider, too. A bright girl. Very bright. Very talented. Her act had been superb. Irving hadn't really known that she was acting until he had examined her eyes.

He hated to leave Daphne in such a vulnerable position, not knowing about the cruel streak in her aunt.

All the way up to his apartment, he was weighing Daphne against his own reputation.

But the mental exertion was too great. By the time he had opened the door, he gave way completely to the physical pangs of the ulcer.

He was sick this time. Really sick.

He would have to make his decision later. Right now, he couldn't think. Thinking always made the pain worse. And if it got any worse than it was, he knew he wouldn't be able to stand it. Death would be better. Anything would be better!

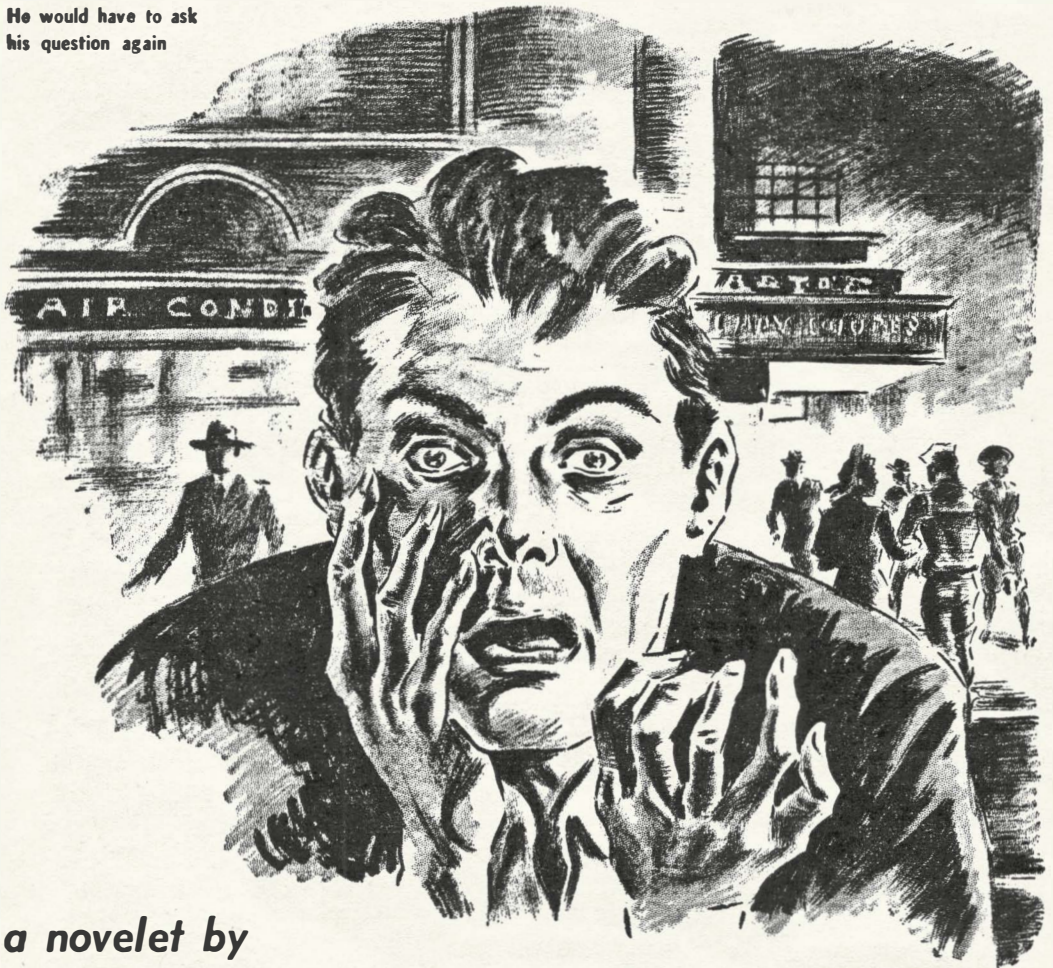


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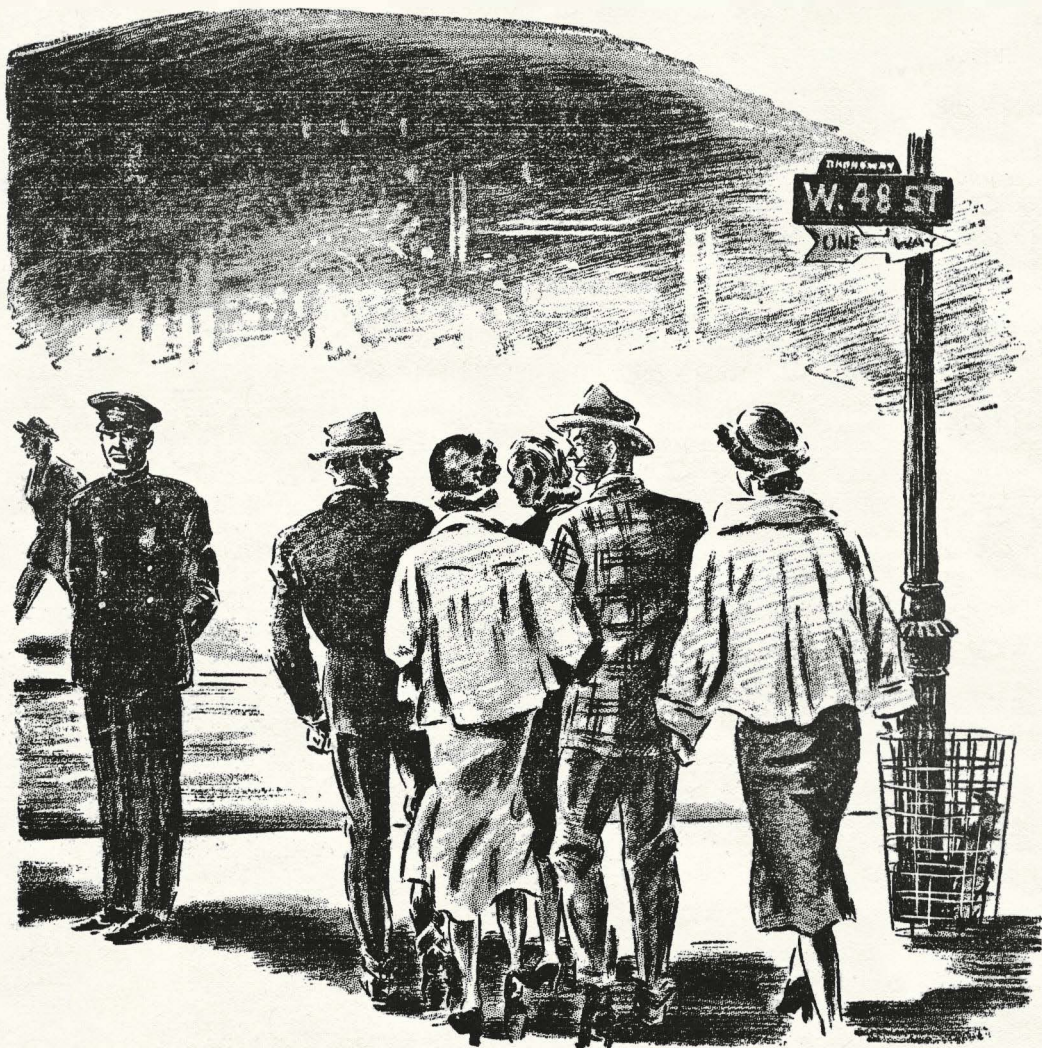
DO YOU

IN THE small room just over the huge, ever-flashing electric sign, slightly east of Broadway, on West Forty-seventh Street, the man nobody knew sat on the edge of his unmade bed and felt life return.

New York autumn was crisp, outside his window, but the comfort-giving coolness did

not penetrate into the room with door frame and windows stuffed with newspapers. The first harsh clanking in the radiators proved that even the landlord of this fifth-rate rooming house knew that summer was gone. The dry acridness of the dusty radiators as the heat forced its way through the long unused

He Walked in the Glare of the Great White Way



KNOW ME?

pipes showed that. Next to the radiator, the dirty stove squatted, its two burners coated with rank-smelling grease.

Sweat poured down from the man's armpits. Sitting there on the edge of the bed in his shorts, his thin, hairy chest heaving slightly with the effort of getting some of the

overheated air into his lungs, his hands knotted on his lap, his lumpy, unfinished-looking face set with the hurt of concentrated thought, he forced his brain through the tortuous patterns that filled his days and his nights with agony.

Statue-still he had sat poised like that for

Looking for Love...with a Knife in His Hand!

twenty hours. Night had gone, the day had gone, twilight had come and gone, the glimmering flashing lights of Broadway so near him in reality, so far away from him as he was, had flickered on and off, and now, as night fell again, slow-moving life was returning to him.

The plastic shell that surrounded him was slowly dissolving. Not that it ever went away completely, but sometimes it was soft enough so that he could move inside it, like a deep sea diver inside his suit. And sometimes it froze solid so that he could not move a muscle. That was what had kept him immobile for so long. It had caught him just as he was sitting down on the bed.

Now the gelatinous mass was so soft that he could lift his broken-knuckled hands a trifle. The hurt, as the ability to use them returned, was something he was long acquainted with, and the pain was in some odd way not connected with him.

Staggering, he tottered to his feet. Like a man coming out of ether, he rotated in slow motion. The pattern of his movements was so stereotyped that he might have been doing a macabre dance.

HE WORKED his mouth, making it gape like an open wound. His dry lips were sandpaper-rough as he pushed one lip against the other. Water, he thought dully, water would help.

The glass was full of bubbles, the water long stale, but it was enough, it would serve. He gulped at it greedily and some drops dripped down from his mouth across the hair on his chest, down toward his waist.

He was not hungry, not for food. He never was when he came back to life. Instead, there was that other hunger, that desperate need that drove him despairingly, the desire to be known, and loved.

Only if he were recognized, only if he were loved, could he feel that he had indeed come back to life. Without that recognition he was nothing and less than nothing.

It was difficult getting his worn slacks onto his stiff legs, and his dirty shirt tore as he forced it into place on his thin, high shoulders. The leather jacket he donned last was worn and hung almost pathetically from his

skinny body.

There was a knife in the jacket pocket. The blade that snapped out into view at the pressure of his forefinger was almost as lean as he. Six inches long, and razor-sharp, it was the solution to many of his problems.

He whetted it on his callused palm. The light caught on its edge and almost held him, but he shut his eyes to it. He would not be forced away from life again. Not now, not when he could feel the hot baked air of the room surging in and out of his wheezing lungs.

Closing the blade of the snap-knife back into its pearl handle, he dropped it into the one whole pocket in his slacks.

Uncomprehendingly he looked at and was puzzled by the newspapers he had earlier so carefully stuffed into the cracks of the windows and the door. It seemed like an odd thing to have done, before the plastic froze him in, but then he did so many odd things.

Forcing the door open he kicked the rumpled papers out of his way. He had not even seen the message he'd scrawled on the wall near his bed in the girl's lipstick.

Since you can't catch me, and since I don't want to kill again, I'm going to kill myself.

Sprawling, each letter larger or smaller than the rest, the scrawl, red as the lipstick, redder than the girl's blood, remained after he closed the door, remained as a message of despair from a long-lost soul.

It was forgotten as he had forgotten so many things.

His hand in his pocket cuddling the knife that was his only beloved, he made his lonely way down the dirty steps of the stairs that led to the street.

Meeting no one on the stairs, he stood for a moment in the narrow doorway. The cool air of autumn dried the sweat from his long unwashed body. But he did not feel it. Sweet and fragrant, a wisp of air that had not yet been curdled by the smell of the city, that had not yet been defiled by the exhausts of the cars, met his flaring nostrils. It contained the sweetness of the winter-dying trees in Central Park, not fifteen blocks away. But he was not aware of it.

The eddying crowds of hurrying people who darted back and forth across the streets

were quite unreal to him, as they would be to anyone who had to look through a thick layer of translucent plastic. Distorted, the faces of the masked people wove in and out of his consciousness. Why, he wondered hopelessly, did they insist on wearing masks?

If only once one of them would remove the mask, so that he could see them the way they really were!

He thought, God knows I've tried to get them to take off their masks. But somehow, when he cut the mask away, that which remained, the bloody pulp, was never what he expected to find.

AND, too, they were so unfair. That girl, the last one. She'd lied to him!

He walked the street, silent, cold as the grave, and he could see it happen again. Not a girl, not really, but a woman. Broad in the beam and heavy in the breast, face painted with a representation of youth, big purse hanging heavy at her side. Night, long past midnight, nearly four A.M.

Hopelessly he asked her his question. "Do you know me?"

"Sure, honey. What's new? How ya?"

Delighted, unable to really believe that it had finally happened, he asked, "You *do* know me? You recognize me?"

"Surest thing you know, Good-looking. How about it?"

Then the walk down the silent streets, a few paces behind her because she'd said, "Let's not louse around with the cops, baby. Just follow me."

Through the streets where the garbage collectors were the only ones still hard at work, past the scrawny cats that infest Eighth Avenue, that wait till late night before they come out and scrounge for the scraps that feed them, and fight for the love they need, past the bars which were closing now, he followed her heavy, slow-moving hips. Her too-high heels made her teeter ridiculously, but what did that matter?

She knew him!

Delight was like a live thing. He could taste it in his mouth, feel it in his throat, his heart sang with joy.

Then up the long white tile stairs to the room.

Crowded with junk, with baby dolls that had long spindly legs, and souvenirs of Coney Island, and the smell of an unclean woman, she'd sat on the edge of the bed and moaned as she kicked off her too-tight shoes, from which the fat had bulged upward at the instep. The springs of the bed had jangled loudly when she had slouched down on it.

Then he'd asked, "Where do you know me from?"

Massaging her sore feet, her bulky dead-white thighs showing above the slatternly stockings that bisected the meat of her upper leg, she had said, "C'mon, honey, we're alone now, so cut out that crap, willya?"

Puzzled, he had stood over her, looking down at the balloon softness of her fish-white breasts that rested now on the protuberance of her jelly-soft belly and he'd said, "But—but—don't you know me?" Unbelieving, not wanting to accept the fact that he'd been lied to, that she really didn't know him. "Didn't you recognize me?"

"I reckernized a guy who needed what I got," she'd said and smiled, a horrid caricature of mirth that had made the coldness come back into his bones.

It was so unfair. Of course, he wore a mask, too, but his was plastic and you could see through it to his real face underneath. It was distorted, that face, distorted by the thick layer of soft ooze, but you could see his face. His mask was semi-transparent. But all the others wore those flesh masks through which you could not peer.

She'd patted the dirty sheet next to her and, still with that false smile on her puffy mask had said, "C'mon, baby, this is the last trick I'm gonna turn tonight. I'm tired."

Bending over her he had tried to look through the skin to her real face that he knew was in hiding under the mask. He could not make his eyes penetrate that far.

There had been only one thing to do.

It was a pity that you had to kill them, he thought as his shoulder and one hand brushed against those others in the lonely, lonely crowd that throngs Times Square.

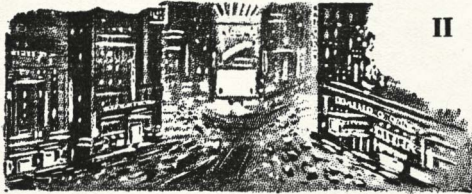
Such a pity that they had to die before you could peel off the mask. Just once, he'd like to be able to cut and rip off the mask while breath still coursed through them. But that

was almost a hopeless dream. He knew that even while he wished wistfully that his dream might some day come true.

Looking about him, seeing and not seeing the happy, sad, lonely, extroverted, introverted humans who hurried by him, each intent on their little errands, he thought, I'll walk over to the pigeons.

They at least did not wear masks. No animals did. That, he thought proudly, was lucky, for it was the one thing that kept him from going mad.

If animals wore masks then there would be nothing to live for.



II

STOPPING at a gigantic white store where animated dummies of men in the shape of peanuts advertised that goobers were for sale, he bought food for his only friends.

Through the vast expanse of glass that made up the store's window he could see his destination.

Duffy Square.

In the center of Broadway where the triangle of the Square that is not a square comes to a point at Forty-sixth Street, in the very middle of the coexisting arteries that are Seventh Avenue and Broadway, on a plot of land so valuable that its price would be astronomical, if it were for sale, there is a little island of ground. On it stands a statue of a gallant chaplain who died in what was to have been the war to protect democracy.

Father Duffy stands there always, covered with pigeons, and facing downtown. On the west there is a bus stop, on the east, if he could turn his head he would see the Palace, home of a dying art form called vaudeville. Behind him there is a building in which, during the second war, which was to have been the last one, servicemen were given free soft drinks and coffee.

Now that the world is waiting with baited breath for the next, last war, servicemen do not seem to be quite so highly regarded. So

the big store that faces Father Duffy's statue is empty but for some ads for the soft drink that was formerly given away.

Nearer to the statue, on the island, are two of the only existing admissions that New York makes that humanity has to do something with that which it eats and drinks.

On the west side is the men's room, down a flight of stairs, under the surface, hidden away from prying eyes, and on the east is the ladies' room, just as hidden, just as far underground.

Over all the island and over the statue there is a coating of white, since there is no doubt in anyone's mind that pigeons must do something with what they eat and drink.

He spent his last dime for food for his friends, then ducked through the ever-present traffic to the statue. He liked to think that the pigeons knew him. He was aware of the fact that they smelled the hot-roasted peanuts, but he tried not to realize that this was what attracted the tame, sophisticated birds.

Covering him like a feathered blanket, the birds poked inquisitive beaks into his pocket till he smiled and took out the bag for which they were searching. They clustered on his shoulders, rapped at his hands with their hard beaks as he teased them and alternately proffered and withdrew the offer of food.

But too soon the peanuts were gone and when he was empty-handed, the birds left him, and with them went the only warmth he ever felt. The cold was back.

Leaning his tired body against the iron bars that keep interlopers at a respectful distance from Father Duffy, he looked about.

A cluster of people were waiting at the iron sign that said this was a bus stop. Hurrying by were office girls, living in their odd manless world, sticking together out of fear, going to restaurants in groups large enough so that if a man dared to try and single one of them out from the crowd they would be able to hide their hunger from each other by sneering at the man who had dared to try and rescue them. Gulping down their tasteless food so that they could hurry equally fast to a movie where they could swallow down the predigested stuff of which dreams are made. Scurrying from the movie to soda fountains where they could snare their sexual

appetites with food, and blackjack their desire into submission by the lethargy of a too-full belly.

Separating at last, they disappeared into the different subways that would return them to their various homes. There they would fall into bed so tired that they would be able to go right to sleep instead of being tormented by the tumescence caused by the titillation of the movies. Or by men, more arrogant in their need, eyes moving restlessly, almost sickly as they feasted on the visual aphrodisiac that is New York's woman. The men singly and in pairs, like gaunt wolves who tried to cut out a woman or two from the herds where they traveled for self-protection against that which they did not really want to be protected from.

THE man no one knew crumpled up the empty paper bag which had printed on it a picture of a peanut shaped like a human, wearing a top hat. He smashed the paper into a hard ball, pressing it harder and harder as the need in him grew greater and greater.

He would have to ask his question again, and soon!

Throwing the ball of paper over his shoulder, his hand darted to the pocket where the knife lay waiting as he heard a voice squawk, "Hey, what do you think you're doing, throwing things at me?". . . .

She was young and she was pretty and she was in a hurry. "I get out of work," he'd said, "at eleven-thirty. Meet me in front of Father Duffy's statue. It's right across from the Automat where I work."

Such terribly hard work he had to do. He was a busboy, and it meant being on his feet for six and a half hours, clearing off the tables, bringing the dirty dishes into the kitchen—but that was at night. In the daytime he went to school, and next semester was the last one he'd have to work, for he had a scholarship coming up that would allow him to concentrate all his energy on his schooling.

But there had been a slowdown in the subway and before that the inevitable fight with her mother about going out at, "Such an ungodly time of the night! What'll the neigh-

bors say? The idea of a young girl like you meeting a man at this time of night."

No point in repeating it over and over again, no point in telling her mother that this was the only free time Danny had. No point at all. So she had set her young face and squared her lovely round shoulders and walked out of her house while her mother had yelled, "If your father was alive you wouldn't be actin' this way, young lady. No indeed! He'd have walloped your behind good, the way he used to, and you'd have obeyed me."

But then the door had cut off that shrill voice and she had hurried down the rickety stairs, almost run the three blocks that separated her from the subway station, and then relaxing, she'd caught her breath as she sat in the train, and held her skirt. Of course, she'd seen the man across the way slump down in his seat when she'd first sat down. She knew that trick, she knew he was trying to see up under the hem of her dress, knew it, and without anger and almost without being aware of it, because it happened so often, she'd grabbed her willful skirt and held it down.

The man had grunted and picked up his newspaper and had read the so-called comics with a set, angry face. It seemed to get angrier and angrier as he read each strip, every one more filled with blood and violence and sorrow than the last.

Then consciousness of the train had faded away. Sitting primly and stiffly, her purse on her knees, her back straight, she listened again to what Danny had said the last time they were together.

"It won't be long, darling, honest it won't. It just seems that way. Then we can be married and have each other for always."

For always. How wonderful!

But then the train had slowed down, come to a stop, and the lights had flickered. Some kind of momentary power failure, the conductor had roared out in a brogue that filled the ear with soft, slurred consonants.

But it hadn't been a short time. It had taken half an hour before the stuffy train had again begun to move. And that had made her terribly late.

She'd rushed out at Times Square, run up

the steps past the soft drink stands and the stores that sold souvenirs, and the magazine stands that sold magazines from all over the world and in every language, and in a mad rush up and out onto Forty-Third Street, past the out-of-town newspaper stand, where every small-town paper in America is represented. Then, without a look to the left where the flashing marquee of the Paramount advertised a mammoth stage show and an even more mammoth feature picture, she had rushed up Broadway past the Bond Building where the artificial waterfall on top of the roof roars like a miniature Niagara, up past the stores and the other movie houses toward the little triangle of empty land where Danny waited.

Or did he?

SHE strained her eyes trying to see across the two remaining blocks but it was in vain. She could not make out his familiar, beloved shape, let alone his features.

Hurrying on, she almost scampered past a man who looked at her and thought, "So clean, so sweet, so pretty. I'd like to kiss her from the tips of her little feet to the top of her red hair." But when he spoke his voice was harsh and he muttered, "Hey, honey, don't I know you?"

She didn't even bother to answer, and he cursed her aloud even while he silently wailed, I could make such beautiful love to you. Honest I could.

Then he, too, was swallowed up as she breathlessly ran on and, pausing on the street corner nearest the triangle, she looked for Danny.

There he was, and he was furious. She could tell that from the way he threw his cigarette butt on the street and ground it out with his heel.

But what did that matter? He was there, and he'd get over being angry. Then they would be together for their one hour in all the other lonesome, miserable twenty-three hours of the endless day.

He was there and as soon as she could wheedle him out of being angry and had explained what had happened, then they would go to the little delicatessen on Sixth Avenue—she never thought of it as the Avenue of

the Americas, any more than any other New Yorker ever does—and they'd get bagsful of good food and a couple of ice-cold cans of beer for him, and then they'd hurry, feeling like guilty children, to his little furnished room that was so horrible for him except when she was there.

And then—and then—

They'd make love just as if they had a right to.

Just as if they were really married; just as they were so soon going to be in reality.

Rubbing her finger on the five and ten cent store wedding ring that she'd slipped on her left fourth finger as soon as she'd left her mother's house, she truly felt married and that made it all right.

The angry north eye of the traffic light was red and that meant it was safe for her to cross the street.

He was lighting another cigarette and looking up at the clock on top of the Paramount building and she knew he was thinking, "I'll give Rosie another ten minutes and then the hell with it!"

Racing the last ten feet that separated them, soft, sweet face aglow, she smiled her greeting. But he was still angry. She could hear him let out the anger in an expostulation as a ball of paper hit him in the back of the head and he spun around, away from her and her outstretched hands that reached for him.

She heard his voice and to her love-tuned ears, even the harsh, brusque anger of it was good to hear as he snapped, "Hey, what do you think you're doing, throwing things at me?"

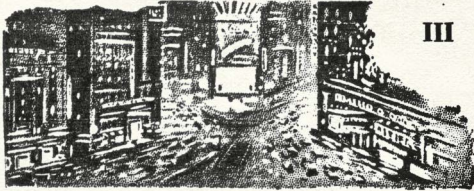
She smiled a secret smile and was rather glad that he was being able to take his anger out on someone else. This meant he'd get over being peeved at her that much faster.

She waited for the little flurry, the burst of words to end, knowing that as soon as the other man apologized that Danny would turn and welcome her, take her in his arms and kiss her. Then and only then would she be able to forget her nagging mother and the dullness of her job and the horror of her too crowded Bronx apartment where her mother insisted on never throwing anything out.

Oh, she'd forget everything and be hap-

py! So happy, just to be with her beloved. And how happy he'd be when she told him the news! She almost hugged herself. Of course it would mean they'd have to get secretly married, but who cared? They'd meant to anyhow.

The other man, the lean one who'd thrown the paper ball was turning around now, facing Danny.



NEW YORK is people. More than eight million of them, plus the odd million or so who daily pour in and out of town from Jersey and the suburbs, from Long Island and Staten Island, from New Rochelle and Mount Vernon. Every week day without fail, coming from their bedrooms to the workroom that is New York.

He'd left his big white house in Mount Vernon late that morning, later than usual, for he'd known that at the end of his day at the advertising office he was going to have to go to his analyst. Three visits a week, and so far it had cost him as much as a new home, and he'd be damned if he could see what good the analysis was doing him.

He'd sat all day behind his big blond desk, looking at the back of the little triangular wooden stand. He knew that there was a brass plate on the front of the stand, and he knew, too, that his name was on it in big letters.

Thomas C. Berring. "The Third" was not lettered on the sign, but it was in his head as he always thought of it, the way it had looked in the headlines:

Thomas C. Berring III in Trouble Again

Of course that was one thing that the analysis had done. It had been four years since any scandal had been printed about him.

But that wasn't why he was lying on that damned couch, not just to keep out of the headlines. That was just part of it. No, he wanted peace, and escape from that hag

that rode him always.

Most of his life nowadays was spent between commuting to town, his trips to the doctor, and the return to the big house he hated and the woman he was married to whom he hated, and the squawling, too-white-faced son that he was supposed to love and cherish, but whom he hated even more than he hated its mother. For it was the proof that he was a man.

The hell with her and the kid, and the damned doctor and the probing questions, and forcing himself to remember his mother, lovely and serene and not the way the doctor tried to make him see her at all.

And he had never had any desire to do to his mother what that sneaking, sniveling doctor was always suggesting he had. The hell with the whole bloody mess of his life!

He'd left the doctor's office on Park Avenue and walked slowly across town west of Fifth Avenue where he rarely went except to the theatre. Tonight he'd forget the whole shabby pretense, the sham of normality within which he'd been hiding for these four years. And most of all he'd forget what the doctor was trying to make him say about his dear, sweet mother.

The foul-minded, lecherous slob! He wished the doctor would die. Horribly.

He'd forget women altogether. He'd go back where he had come from.

To men.

It had been a long time since he had cruised. But not so long that he had forgotten the belles on Forty-second Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenues, the love for hire, with the bleached hair and the plucked eyebrows, and the pancake makeup, and the tell-tale holes in their arms, and in their thighs.

He'd never wanted that, not even when he had taken it because he could not get what he wanted.

No.

Tonight he wanted a man and he didn't care if it was dangerous, and he didn't care if rough trade sometimes turned on you and beat you up, and sometimes even killed you. He wanted a real man.

But while he trod the streets, and flirted with the truck driver types for whom he

would have given his soul, he knew that the homosexual paradox was going to defeat him once more.

When he had been young and had just "come out" an old aunty had said, "Do you know, dear, why straight, normal people are called jam?"

HE'D said no, while he'd tried to keep his skin from crawling as the old man's hands molded his young thighs. The aunty had tittered and said, "Because there's an old Tibetan proverb that says 'You can have jam yesterday, and you can have jam tomorrow. But you can't have jam today.'"

Yes, he thought disconsolately, that was the paradox. For the men he wanted, if they allowed him to do to them what he wanted to do would cease to be the men he wanted.

Rubbing his forehead tiredly, he wondered if perhaps the analyst might not be right. Perhaps he had stayed forever in a narcissuslike state through which normal men passed. Perhaps that was all homosexuality was—delayed, continued adolescence. But then as the hunger surged through his veins he said no, it could not be true, and his hands itched as he passed a tall, rather lean, rather dirty-faced man in a torn leather jacket who was leaning against the railings in front of that simply foul statue of some long dead chaplain.

Forcing his face into the semblance of a smile, he watched as the masculine man rolled a paper bag into a tight ball and then threw it over his shoulder.

Now, now, now he told himself, as soon as that paper bag lands on the ground, I'll speak to him. He must come with me—he must. I've got to have him! And the strength of his desire was like bile in his throat.

He thought, as soon as the paper bag lands, I'll speak to him. The worst he can do is refuse me. But he looks poor and I'm rich. I can buy him clothes, and I can love him—cuddle him, cuddle him. Oh, please, he thought with anguish, let him be nice to me!

The paper did not land on the ground. It hit another young man on the shoulder.

Thomas C. Berring the Third waited while

the other man spun around in a passion and roared out, "Hey, what do you think you're doing, throwing things at me?"

This little squabble would soon end, Berring thought, and when it did, he'd approach the man and say—What would he say? No sense in frightening him. If he was straight, maybe he didn't even know about the gay life. In that case better go slow. Offer to buy him a drink. Something like that.

Gritting his teeth, he waited impatiently for the little flurry to end. Good God, would they never get it over with so he could make an attempt to know the dark, sullen-faced beauty?

But wait! Was that a knife that flashed in the air? . . .

Not everyone races away from Manhattan at work's end, or at play's end. Some live there. If you have been on your feet all day for fourteen or sixteen hours, and if you're not as young as you once were, then its worth a little extra, he always said, to live close by the shop.

Besides, he thought, as he looked down at her bent back, it was easier for her. If only the little candy store made just a couple of dollars more so he could afford to hire someone, so she would not have to work, waiting on the insolent ones, pretending to smile at the ones who were thoughtlessly cruel, scooping up ice-cream, cleaning the malted milk machines that soured so easily, unwrapping the heavy bundles of newspaper, picking up the fat magazines and putting them in the racks.

If only they could afford to hire someone! For himself, he did not care. He was a man, and if no longer young, still a man. But she was a woman and a mother and a grandmother three times over.

He sighed.

He thought, it is hard, very hard, to have run from Russia and the pogroms, and to have settled in Germany only to have Germany turn into a trap, and have to run from the gaping teeth that were called Dachau and Buchenwald, only to end up one's years working in a candy store.

Not that he was ungrateful. Never! But it was such a little thing he wanted. A dry store. If he could have a dry store, he

thought, then life would be good. A wet candy store is one that serves ice-cream and soft drinks. A dry one is a stationery store selling only newspapers and the like.

MAYBE some day, he thought, as he held her arm tight and helped her across the street, across Broadway, toward the bus stop they always waited in front of for the trip home. Maybe some day they could get away from the wet store between Eighth and Ninth Avenues, away from the tough people and the bad children, to a nice neighborhood. Maybe in the Bronx on the Concourse.

Almost unconsciously, he squeezed her thin old arm to give her reassurance, as though she could read his mind, and his hand could tell her that all he wanted out of life now that they had their children and the grandchildren, were good things for her.

She felt him squeeze her arm and it was a *mechaye*, and she almost knew what he meant by it. But tomorrow was Friday, and at sundown it would begin the Sabbath, the day she liked best. She was looking forward to getting up early in the morning and chopping up the fish, and boiling the chicken and mincing the carrots for the *tsimnis*. Perhaps tomorrow, on the Sabbath, she would surprise him and put both *luckshen* and *knoedlen* in the chicken soup; maybe even *krepplach*, too!

What a surprise that would be! The chicken liver chopped up fine with the warm, golden-rich chicken fat running over it, and then the soup with three surprises in it, then the gefilte fish made as he loved it with plenty of freshly ground horseradish ready to be spooned over it. Then the chicken.

But best of all, she thought, was the white table cloth, and the lighting of the seven candles. That was when she really felt that she was partaking of the sacredness of Shabbos. For the men folk was the *schule* and the *do-venning*—the praying. But she felt closest to Him-who-must-not-be-named when all the food was ready, and the sun was almost gone, and she lit the candles.

To *bench a licht*, that was the holy part of the day to her.

Her raddled old face turned to him and she said softly, "My dear one."

He barely heard her, but then his ears had not been right since that awful night in Berlin. Better not to even think of it. Thanks to Him on High that all was over, and they could live and die here near their children and the grandchildren.

So what, she thought, if Moishe had changed his first name to Maurice? It still meant Moishe and her love was just as great. So what if the children had strayed a little from the faith? Wait till they got a little older. They'd come hurrying back. She knew they would.

Perhaps this Sabbath they would all come and visit, and she could really enjoy the glory of being a grandmother. How she'd spoil the little ones, and tell them *bubemeises!* Grandmother stories. Sure they were grandmother stories, but that didn't mean they weren't good ones. Stories about the wonder-rabbis who could do miracles, and about the wise old men who—

But there was the bus stop up ahead.

A warm wave of gratitude welled up in her that another week's work was done and that now on Friday and Saturday she could again be what she had been made for—a cook and a housewife. She loved the Sabbath so much that she was a little worried for fear it might be sinful. Perhaps she had better ask the rabbi about it.

Arm in arm they waited near the iron sign. Behind the old couple there was a loud voice, raised in anger, and they turned slowly to see what was wrong.

"Mama," he said in Yiddish, his voice heavy, "we have seen so much violence, I hope there will not be trouble."

"Shah, old woman," she snapped, "a young man raises his voice and right away you fear! For shame. It was not thus that you carried the children across the border in the dead of night! Where is your manhood, old woman?"

HE SMILED, and it made his tired old face warm. The fact that she was snapping at him meant that she was worried, too.

His eyes were not as good as they had been and he had to peer to see what was going on. Pushing his glasses closer to his eyes than the ear-pieces held them, he squinted at

the scene in front of the statue.

A knife?

It was, and it had just been buried in a man's stomach!

He grabbed his wife and turned her away, pulling her head down on his shoulder, he shielded her eyes and said, "Don't look, mama, is trouble. Bad trouble."

His old eyes looked sick as he saw the blood rush out of the outraged stomach.

"Where are the police?" he demanded loudly.

The cossacks! When you didn't want them in the store, eating up all the profits, tearing the magazines, then you couldn't get rid of them. But when you wanted them, where were they?

Pcha! A black plague on them! But still he wished that one of them would appear.

She shook him free of her. She snapped, "Since when I have to close mine eyes? Since when I am afraid of what is to be seen?"

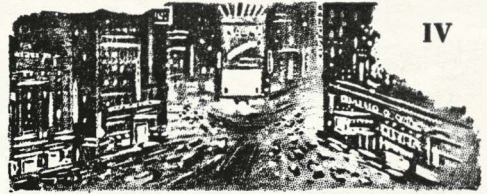
But she held onto his arm with a death-like grip as she turned slowly and looked at the man who rolled over and over on the ground, watched grimly as he tried to hold the pieces of his stomach together, and the looks of his *kishkes* hung out over his straining fingers.

Her old eyes went up from the scene to the man who still stood with the wet knife in his hand and chanted, "Don't you know me? Don't you recognize me? I asked you and I asked you and you wouldn't answer me. Why wouldn't you answer me? Why won't anyone answer me?"

Then, the knife outstretched like a wicked elongation of his finger, pointing out in an arc that passed in turn each of the people who stood in frozen horror, he gasped, "Do you know me? Any of you, do you know me? Please, please, do you recognize me?"

The old woman thought, The poor sick boy—he's in agony. That's why he did it. He can't help himself. How could he get so sick in the head? Did no one love him?

Before she could think any further, he had leaped over the fallen body of the man he had stabbed and now, horror of horrors, the old woman thought, he was running straight at them!



IV

PATRICK MURPHY, detective second class, felt lousy. He always did when he had to make the pick-ups. Damn and blast all crooked cops, he thought, and most of all his immediate superior who was too far above graft to dirty his own hands with it and made him, Pat Murphy, an honest man, do the picking up of the filthy, rotten money.

Was it for this he had strained a gut, he thought, passing the patrolmen's examination, lifting weights, running a mile, straining his brain to remember things he had never needed to know once he donned a uniform? Was it for this that he had grabbed a hold-up man bare-handed and at imminent risk to his life and limbs, and so been promoted to plainclothesman?

No, he answered himself, it was not for the likes of this. The poor little guys who owned the stores from whom he got the graft on various pretexts that ranged from violation of an obsolete ordinance against stores being open for business on Sunday all the way up to outright violations of the law at which he had to wink, just so his lousy crud of a sergeant could wax fat on the petty, dirty, rotten dollars!

Oh, and he was in a fine mood for a fight was Pat Murphy. He prayed obscenely for something to happen. He looked about him as he crossed the street from Broadway over toward Seventh Avenue. If only some hold-up man would come along who could be impressed with the power and majesty of the law in the person of one Patrick Murphy!

He felt a little better when he saw, perhaps forty feet away, Mr. and Mrs. Ginsberg, the old couple from whom he got his newspaper when he was swinging his shift. A nice old pair they were, and how pleased and proud they were at the little Yiddish and Hebrew he had picked up in the course of living in Manhattan most of his life. Of course it was funny, he thought, for someone like him, as Irish as Paddy's pig, to be

after speaking a little of their language.

But they were flattered by the fact that he had bothered to learn at all. That was nice, for he liked to make people, especially old people, feel good. And, too, there was the odd fact that Mrs. Ginsberg, despite the difference in backgrounds, did remind him a lot of his old granny.

Walking a little faster and feeling some of the anger in him ebb away, he prepared to pass the time of day with the old people.

But then—

Mother of God! That shriek! It was like his old granny keening at a wake. And the words—the skin on the back of his neck felt strange as he heard the old woman scream; *Me schlugt der Yidden!*"

He knew enough to know that it meant, "They're beating the Jews!" And he knew, too, that it was a cry that should not be heard in America.

Loosening his gun in its holster he ran through the maze of waiting cars toward the little island in the center of the street in which Father Duffy, Mary bless his name, stood in all honor.

He was closer now, and there was enough light cast by the flashing signs on Broadway for him to see that there had been trouble. Bad trouble.

Two men were on the ground, and one stood holding a bloody knife, and he was waving it at the other people who stood in front of Father Duffy!

Murphy was a good Catholic, and it made him feel strange to hear the old woman chant the words He in his weakness and suffering had cried out on the cross that meant, "Why hast thou forsaken me?" The thin voice of the old woman trailed off in the silence that followed Murphy's running toward the man with the knife.

PATRICK MURPHY saw at a glance that old Mr. Ginsberg was done for, another glance showed that a younger man was near death. His gun out, he said, and his tone was pleading, "Just make one move, you rotten bastard, and I'll cut you in half!"

But the man no one knew was not concerned. With the railings behind his back and his knife in his hand and death at his

feet he was as alive as he ever was.

He could feel the soft plastic hardening and he knew that he did not have long now. If he were to get an answer to his question it must be soon, very soon, before the plastic was as stiff and unyielding as glass.

Making his voice low, for he knew that sometimes people seemed to be afraid of him for some reason, he beseeched the people in front of him, "Do you know me, any of you? Doesn't anyone know me?"

And then a miracle came to pass, and it held the plastic for a moment, prevented it from freezing up as quickly as it usually did. A well-dressed, quiet man whose mask was not as impenetrable as most people's was coming toward him slowly and there was recognition in his face. The mask was fading, fading away and the man with the knife wondered wildly if he had finally found the person whom he had been seeking all the days of his life.

Thomas C. Berring III, eyes wide with excitement, pushed the puzzled, heavy-shouldered man with the gun, who was so clearly a police officer, out of his way.

Stepping over the vapidly pretty little girl who was crouched over the dying man whose stomach had been ripped open, Berring came closer to the man no one knew. Berring paid no attention to the little old woman who cradled her dead husband's head in her lap, and who was now making a rather disgusting public display of her emotions over the corpse.

The man no one knew lowered the hand with the knife as the other man came closer. How long would the plastic stay soft? That was the question on which his sanity depended. For the man who was coming to him had fallen to his knees.

Thomas Berring III, on his knees in public for the first time in his life, unashamedly looked up at the man with the knife.

The man no one knew looked down at the other and asked his question. His voice was plaintive as he repeated, "Do you know me? Do you recognize me?"

The answer came plain and true. "I know you. I recognize you."

"Who am I?" Could it be that he was finally to find out the truth? Was it possible

that after the long continued nightmare he was to have escape and peace? "Who am I?" he asked again.

"You are death, and I love you."

Wild jubilation surged up in the man with the knife. How could he not have known? Of course that was the answer, of course that was why he was always cold, cold as the grave, cold as—death. In the wild ecstasy of the knowledge he dropped the knife.

Berring picked it up and handed it back. Berring said, "Death, take me."

Someone, someone in the whole lonely world who knew him and loved him, who wanted the boon that was his to grant! Smiling as he had never smiled in his whole life he took the knife.

He would give his greatest gift to this man who knew and loved him.

But then the agonizing ecstasy faded, and he knew love and recognition had come too late. The plastic was solidifying.

It was perhaps the very fact of the killer freezing where he stood and then suddenly falling over like a tree chopped down, stiff and immobile, that freed Patrick Murphy from the state he had been in. Never had he been faced by anything similar to this. Too astounded even to pull the trigger on his gun, he had stood like a fool, he thought, with his fat face hanging out, and had made never a move.

THE man who was on his knees suddenly crumpled inward on himself and began to cry. "Too late!" he wailed. "Too late!"

It had taken him sixty seconds too long to know that death was the goal of all his days. And now it had been taken from him. And the horror of it was that he knew himself too well, knew he was too much of a coward to do to himself what he had tried to make the madman do.

Murphy looked about wildly. There had come a sudden cessation in the city's noises. When he had been a kid, he thought incoherently, he had looked at the clock to see if it was wearing a mustache, for that had always seemed to be the signal for a sudden incomprehensible period of quiet.

The city's silence was broken only by the sound of three people crying. The heavy,

racking, self-pitying sobs of Thomas Berring III almost drowned out the sounds the young girl and the old woman were making.

Then the roar of traffic was back and Patrick Murphy came back to life and began to do that which he should have done earlier. He went through the prescribed sequence for taking care of murderers.

First the ambulance and then the meat wagon and then the patrol wagon. That was the proper order, and that was the way he took care of the situation.

The faceless mob that gathers anywhere in New York at scenes of violence was pushing closer now and the island was being overrun. But reinforcements were coming, and Murphy was finally able to do what he had wanted to do in the first place.

Dropping down besides Mrs. Ginsberg, he put his arm around her thin shoulders and said, "Macushla, I can't tell you how sorry it is that I am."

Burying her face on his chest she cried—little, old woman's tears—and the agony that was in her seemed to come from her bowels. She had ripped the front of her dress and she was mumbling over and over, "Why him? Why not me? A poor woman am I, and I would not question your decisions. But how am I to live without him?"

"Hush, honey," Murphy heard himself saying. "We'll get him back to you, and you'll sit *shiva*, and before you know it, you'll be waitin' to be after joinin' him. Now don't take on, any more, please, Granny."

And it was as if he was holding his long dead grandmother in his arms and trying to comfort her. It made him feel both older and younger than his years.

When his sergeant did finally show up at the scene, bad cess to him, there were tears in Murphy's eyes, and he didn't give a damn that the lousy scut could see them.

Ambulances in New York no longer have internes riding in them. In a wave of economy and man-shortage during the last war that was to have been the last war, the city decided to send out orderlies instead of medical men.

It was just plain luck therefore that Dr. Aaron Bedrick happened to come out of the newsreel theatre that faces Father Duffy's

statue in time to see the ambulance roar up. Hurrying to the scene, he was just in time to see the white garbed orderly reach down to a disemboweled man and attempt, with the aid of a cop, to roll the man onto a stretcher.

The doctor found that his voice had risen too high when he yelled, "Don't move that man, you idiots!" So he lowered it to a more dignified tone when he said, "He must be treated here. Any movement may be instantly fatal."

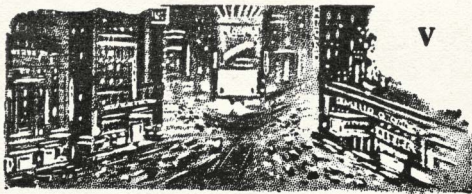
When you are young and have been in practice only a short time, and you have cultivated a heavy mustache in order to make you look older, it does make you feel a little silly to find that you have shrieked in what almost amounts to a falsetto because of excitement.

The orderly looked at him in annoyance and said, "Who the hell are you, Buster?"

"I'm a doctor." It still sounded good, just hearing the word. "I will treat that man here. You must have some of the sulfanilimides in the ambulance. Bring them to me. You—" he called to a big, stupid-looking, insensitive-seeming red-faced man who must be a plainclothesman. "There's a five-and-ten over there. Run and get me some needles and thread. That is—" he felt a wave of embarrassment come over him—"if there aren't any on the ambulance."

The orderly snarled, "Sure there are. Whyncha ask?"

But he hurried to get the things the doctor ordered.



IF THERE were only some way to perform a blood transfusion why then the scholarly looking young man who lay gasping his life away might have a shred of a chance, the doctor thought. Impatiently he made the young girl move away from the dying man.

She said, "Doctor, is there—any chance?"

He might have snarled at her that he

wasn't God, which is what he was tempted to do, but the emotion was so plain on her face that he couldn't. Instead, he said, "I don't know, my dear. I'll do what I can."

Danny, she thought. He couldn't die. Not this way, not futilely by the hand of a maniac. If he died now, in front of her, there would be nothing left for which to live. She and the life in her belly would have to die too. Young she might be, foolish, but she knew that she could not go on living with him dead. Live—to face the taunts of her mother? Live—to bring up a bastard? No, death was much easier than that.

"Doc," Patrick Murphy said, "when you get a chance, see what you can do for the little old lady, will ya?"

"Sure, sure, but don't bother me now." The fool, the red-faced dolt! Couldn't the man see that he was busy?

The doctor sprinkled the sulpha drug into the gaping cavity of the young man's intestines, then bemoaning to himself the fact that there was no time for surgical sterility, he dusted his hands with the sulpha powder and found, rather to his surprise, that he was praying that what he was doing was the right thing.

Gently picking up the looped intestines he replaced them in the gaping unbelievable cavity that is a man's heritage.

The man, the doctor thought, was almost completely ensanguinated. He must have blood. That was all there was to it.

The orderly returned with the curved needle and a length of catgut. The doctor stitched as rapidly as he could, hoping that he would not have to disappoint the frightened girl who stood and watched what he did with her heart in her mouth.

The uniformed cops were busy pushing back the mob.

Patrick Murphy stood over Thomas Berring III and said, "You better get up outa here, Mack, or you're gonna go right straight to the psycho ward."

Berring heard the words, but it took a long moment for them to penetrate. Pushing himself upright, he looked down at the man who might have given him release.

Frozen stiff, like a side of beef, the man who had held death in his hands was curled

up in a position that Berring had seen before. His knees tucked under his chin, his arms around his calves, he looked like—a foetus—an unborn child, Berring realized with a little falling of the stomach and a feeling of infinite disgust.

Dusting the dirt off the knees of his Brooks Brothers's suit, he looked around wildly. Had he been momentarily out of his mind? What had ever possessed him to make such a public spectacle of himself? Good God, if anyone he knew ever heard about this—his wife, his business associates, his analyst— He must have been insane!

Melting back in the crowd that surrounded the scene he thought with a slight return to normalcy, "If there were a couple of more bodies strewn around this'd look like the last act of Hamlet."

But just when he thought he'd made good his escape, a plainclothesman spotted him edging away and sent a uniformed cop after him.

Berring drew himself up and demanded, "By what right are you taking me into custody?"

Before the officer could answer, Murphy, the beefy red-faced plainclothesman called out, "Book him as a material witness." And then went back to watching the doctor who was hard at work over the young man, who lay so still, whose breathing had become so stertorous that it hurt the ear just to listen to it.

THE young doctor was getting desperate. He had sewn together the gaping raw edges of the wound, and he knew from things that medicine had learned at the battlefield that there was a sporting chance for the young man to recover, if the sulfa drugs prevented peritonitis. But that still left the biggest problem of all.

He looked up at the girl who hovered nearby, whose hands were so tightly pressed together that the knuckles were dead-white, and asked her, "By any chance do you happen to know what his blood type is, miss?"

It was the last question in the world that Rosie was prepared for. Blood type? She racked her brains. She put out of her mind the wild prayers she had been repeating over

and over again. Blood type? That time that both of them had gone down to the Red Cross and donated blood.

Bending over, she slipped her pallid hand into his back pants pocket. His wallet. Opening it she found a card that the Red Cross gave out to all donors.

The doctor glanced at it and grunted. "Most common type of blood. That's good."

Then he looked up at the police officers who were pushing and yelling at the crowd that alternately surged forward and slowly retreated, as the policemen threatened and pleaded with the people that made up the mob.

Surely one of them must have the proper type blood. The doctor now had one more big problem. He needed the apparatus for a transfusion. It was simple and that was one good thing. All he needed was— Would the ambulance be likely to have it?

He asked the orderly the big question, and found he was holding his breath as he waited for the answer.

"Nah. We don't carry stuff like that. But the hospital's only a few blocks away. I can rush back and get it."

"Then hurry, man, hurry!"

The doctor wondered whether it was worth the trouble as the orderly hopped onto the ambulance and the car drove away. The young man who lay so quietly on the city's property gasping away his life was so nearly dead that he had begun that awesome sound that is called Cheyne-Stokes breathing. He was, what is known in medical parlance as, in extremis.

But looking up at the pale face of the girl who loved the wounded man, the doctor knew that he would have to continue trying. Under the prodding of those eyes he could not quit.

Patrick Murphy said, "Doctor, the old lady—"

Anxious to let out his helpless irritation on someone, the doctor snapped, "Send her home in a cab, tell her to get some—No, wait a minute."

Taking out a prescription pad he scribbled a request for some nembatal. That would let the old woman sleep, would force her to sleep, he thought. And almost anything in

the world seems a little less bad after a full night's sleep.

How had Shakespeare put it? The young doctor was proud of his classical knowledge. "To sleep, perchance to dream—" No, not that. "Let sleep knit up the ravell'd sleeve of care." That was the quotation.

"Doc," Murphy said, "what about the screwball?"

Leaving his patient, for whom he could do nothing until the transfusion apparatus arrived, Dr. Bedrick rose from his kneeling position and went to where the murderer lay curled up in the foetal position.

Psychiatry was out of his field, but even a first-year medical student or a psychology major would be able to spot this one, he thought.

LOOKING down at the man's frozen features, at the uncomfortable rigidity of the psychopath, the doctor said. "He's in catatonia. He may not move from that position for days."

"No kiddin'?" Murphy was astonished.

"No kidding." The doctor's tone was almost surly. Where the hell was that ambulance?" "Yes catatonics freeze that way, and some of them will stand poised on tiptoe, or bent over about to open a door, just the way they were when it hit them. He's probably a paranoid-schizophrenic." Let the cop try to figure out what that meant!

There was the clanging of the ambulance's bell. They were no longer allowed to sound their sirens for fear the public would confuse the sound with that of the special sirens that had been installed to alert the population in the event of an A-bomb attack.

Fear, the doctor thought, piled on fear, A-bombs and H-bombs and eight million people pressed into a city that had never been meant to contain that many humans. No wonder, he thought, as he walked away from the madman, that people cracked under the strain. No wonder at all.

Then he was calling for volunteers and found that the ambulance orderly had fore-stalled him by bringing blood plasma of the proper type from the hospital.

The transfusion took almost no time at all.

Rosie asked timorously when the doctor was done:

"Now"—she gulped and repeated herself—"now will he live?"

The doctor wished he could give her the promise she wanted, but he couldn't. He said, "Now he's got a sporting chance. That's all I can tell you, dear."

It was enough, it was flimsy straw, but a straw to which she could fasten all her hopes.

She watched and waited and prayed as at long last Danny was placed on a stretcher and put in the ambulance. Now it was in the lap of the gods. But she would pray. Oh, how she'd pray.

The doctor looked around. He'd given the girl the address of the hospital so she could go and sit in the corridor and wait there as he had seen so many others wait, and hope.

PATRICK MURPHY watched the caloused men from the meat wagon pick up old Mr. Ginsberg's body and drop it in the big wicker basket.

He was grateful that he'd sent Mrs. Ginsberg home before this so that she'd not have this memory.

The dead man was gone now, the wounded man, too. The killer was the next to be taken away and a tough job that was, Walsh thought, watching the orderlies as they struggled with the statue-stiff body of the madman.

Then it, too, was gone.

The crowd was ebbing away. They watched silently as Thomas C. Berring was escorted to the patrol wagon. Then he also was gone.

No more show.

The doctor glanced at his watch. Good Lord! His wife would be worried about him. He waved to Murphy and then hurried away.

Then Murphy was alone with the pigeons, and Father Duffy and the blood-stains that scarred the pavement in front of the statue. But, Murphy thought, the rains would wash that away, and the scurrying feet of the crowds and the pigeons would cover the stain that remained. Soon there'd be nothing

left to tell you that an old man had died there.

Nothing at all.

New York is people. Eight million of them. And they are born and live and die, some peacefully, some violently, just as if they made their homes in the tiniest of whistle stops.

Patrick Murphy, detective second class, walked off into the night and left Father Duffy staring sightlessly down at the heedless, sleeping pigeons who surrounded him.

But the maniac's question haunted Murphy for days. "Do you know me?" When you come right down to it, he kept wondering, who knows anybody?

—ARE YOU BALLISTICS WISE?—

IN EARLY GREECE, they called it ballein—meaning to throw. A Roman war machine, which hurled large objects, was named ballista. From these two ancient words, the modern term ballistics was derived to indicate the science of moving projectiles.

Interior Ballistics pertains to the performance inside a gun. Exterior Ballistics deals with what happens to the projectile in its flight from gun muzzle to target. For example: An extractor is the mechanism that withdraws the cartridge from the chamber of a gun; while energy is the amount of work performed by a bullet, in foot-pounds.

Listed below in jumbled fashion are 16 other interior and exterior ballistic terms commonly used in connection with firearms. Match up at least 12 correctly for a passing score; 13-to-15 is excellent; 16, perfect.

- | | |
|-----------------|--|
| 1. BORE | (a) the expanding of a bullet on impact. |
| 2. CALIBER | (b) the decreased diameter of a shotgun barrel toward the muzzle—for the purpose of regulating the spread of the shot. |
| 3. BREECH | (c) the curve a bullet makes in flight. |
| 4. GALLERY LOAD | (d) the distribution of the shot charge after leaving the muzzle. |
| 5. RICOCHET | (e) the firing mechanism of a rifle or pistol. |
| 6. SQUIB LOAD | (f) the allowance made for the drift of a bullet. |
| 7. TRAJECTORY | (g) the rear extremity of a rifle. |
| 8. VELOCITY | (h) the shape of a hole made by a bullet traveling off its axis. |
| 9. ACTION | (i) the amount of drag in a trigger before it lets go, instead of a short, snappy let-off. |
| 10. KEYHOLE | (j) the diameter of the bore measured in hundredths of an inch. |
| 11. MUSHROOMING | (k) the mechanism of a firearm. |
| 12. WINDAGE | (l) a defective load or charge. |
| 13. CHOKE | (m) a glancing shot. |
| 14. PATTERN | (n) the speed of a bullet in its flight. |
| 15. CREEP | (o) the inside of the barrel of a shotgun, revolver, rifle, or pistol. |
| 16. LOCK | (p) a light or reduced charge in cartridges for use indoors. |

—(Answers on page 114)—



LIPSTICK

By RAYMOND DRENNEN

Ellen felt she was losing her grip on sanity . . . and her husband

ELLEN heard his key in the latch but she didn't become aware of him until he spoke to her. She sat with her hands clenched tightly in her lap staring at the telephone as though it were something repulsive. He laid his package on the dining room table and took off his coat and hat.

"Hello, Ellen," he said.

She was aware of his presence then. With her eyes still fixed on the telephone, she said, "George . . . George, I answer it but there's no one there." Her voice was strangely low and lifeless.

George walked back to the foyer and hung his coat and hat in the closet. "Probably some one with a wrong number," he said

wearily. "What's for dinner?"

"No, George." Her voice was barely above a whisper. It sounded as though she could not quite believe what she was saying. "This is the third time today. It rings and I answer it and there is no one there. Then I hang up and it rings again . . . and there is still no one there."

"Then it's some joker with a perverted sense of humor," he said crossly. He started into the dining room, but stopped and looked at his wife. He frowned and walked over to her as she rose from the telephone. Her eyes had a dull look in them and her face was cold to his touch. "Ellen, are you all right?" he demanded.

"It's happened before, George," she said, turning away from him. "Many times."

He followed her into the dining room. "How long has this been going on?" he asked. His voice was worried as he watched her slender back, her brown head bowed forward. With her finger she touched the package he'd put on the table.

"About three weeks," she replied.

"Have you reported it to the telephone company?"

"Yes . . . the man came out to look at the phone. The lines are all right." Her voice choked slightly as though she were about to break into tears. "They say it wouldn't ring, unless someone called."

He studied her a moment, shook his head in mild bewilderment and walked past her into the kitchen. "I'll have it taken out if it bothers you," he said tiredly.

"Oh, no! George," she cried suddenly. She lowered her voice and put her finger again on the package. "I mean, there is no need to do that, of course. As you say, it's probably just some practical joker."

BUT she knew it wasn't that. There was no one in their limited circle of friends who would do such a thing. Ellen had thought of that and had been wracking her brain, trying to think of some person she knew, someone who would carry on a cruel trick of that kind. It was cruel, the anguish and suffering it caused her.

"George . . ." She had her finger still on the package, her eyes staring at it in a

kind of morbid fascination. It was an ordinary looking package, wrapped in brown paper and tied with string. It was about twenty inches long and ten inches wide. She knew she must ask him, but she was afraid. There had been other times recently. . . .

"Yes, Ellen. What do you want?" he asked irritably from the kitchen. He was getting ice out of the refrigerator to fix martinis for them. He always liked a martini before dinner. When he got home from the office, he was tired and it relaxed him, especially if he had to go out on a call after dinner.

"What's . . . in the box, George?"

"It's the doll you asked for," he called in to her. "I don't for the life of me see why you want it though."

She didn't reply to him for a long time. Some place in her mind, she could hear him stirring the martinis. "The . . . doll . . . ?" she asked in a small voice. It was timid and frightened.

He came into the dining room carrying the drinks and set Ellen's down on the table.

"Yes," he said clearly. "You asked me to bring it this morning. Don't you remember, Ellen?"

No, she didn't remember. A doll . . . what would she do with a doll? It was so absurd, but . . .

"It's got a tongue that comes out when you squeeze the cheeks," George went on a bit caustically. "You particularly instructed me about that."

"Oh, yes . . . I remember now," she said haltingly. "The little Banks girl is having a birthday. I wanted to send it to her."

But that wasn't it. Mary Banks's birthday wasn't for several months, but she had to tell George something. She watched him fearfully as he walked into the living room and sat down in his chair to read the evening paper.

The truth was, she didn't remember asking him for the doll at all, and there was no earthly reason why she should want it. There'd been other occasions recently. The scooter he'd brought home last week. She'd passed that off as a present for the Harrison boy. And the bag of cement the department store had delivered day before yesterday.

George didn't know about that. She'd been home and refused delivery, but it was her signature on the charge slip.

Ellen walked slowly into the kitchen. How much longer could she fool George? How much longer, she thought hysterically, could she fool herself? Was this the way people went . . . insane!

THE next afternoon she went down to see Dr. Fulsinger, the leading psychiatrist in the city. She'd heard George speak of him. She stayed for two hours and when she was ready to leave, she insisted that he tell her the truth about herself.

"I can't tell you at this point, Mrs. Gordon," he said patiently. "No psychiatrist could. You seem perfectly normal, except. . ."

"For the hallucinations?" she demanded tensely.

"Not hallucinations. That would be wholly imaginary, without any external manifestations. In your case, there are external evidences. The packages are actually delivered from the store, for example. You don't just imagine they're delivered. I would prefer to say, these momentary lapses."

No, she wasn't just imagining things, Ellen thought.

"All of us," Fulsinger went on gently, "are latent schizophrenics. Now that's not as bad as it sounds, Mrs. Gordon. It means only that we have one personality which is potentially capable of dividing. It may do that sometimes under stress or for a variety of other reasons. Then our problem is merely to relieve the stress or other reason by finding out what it is and understanding it."

"But I have no stress, nothing causing me worry," she protested.

"Usually we're not consciously aware of the cause," he explained. "It may be some small incident tucked away in our mind which we've forgotten about completely. It may go back clear to our childhood, and when we find out what it is, then the trouble vanishes."

He told her not to worry about it and to come back and see him next week. He told her it might take months, and that frightened her.

George was home when she got there and she could tell by the way he was pacing nervously in the living room that he was angry with her. She took a long time in the hall hanging her coat in the closet, steeling herself for what she'd come to know in fifteen years of marriage with George, would be a difficult session.

She'd resolved not to tell him about her trouble, and she'd made Dr. Fulsinger promise not to call George. Her husband was trying to finance a new sub-division which would be one of the nicest residential districts in the city and she didn't want to cause him any additional worry at this time.

"Ellen," he said quietly. "Are you out of your mind?"

The blood rushed from her head and she felt dizzy. He'd said it loosely, she realized, but its fearful meaning devastated her.

"What have I done now, George?" she asked.

"A dozen parrots," he snapped. "I don't know what's come over you lately."

"A dozen parrots . . . ?" she echoed.

"Yes, they were delivered to my office this afternoon," he said succinctly. "I sent them back, of course, but will you please explain to me why you did it?"

Ellen laughed weakly. "But, I didn't, dear. A dozen parrots. That's ridiculous."

He looked at her closely. "You said you were going shopping this morning, Ellen. Did you go?"

Yes, she'd gone shopping. She'd gone to Helfors and bought some new damask napkins they'd been needing. Then she'd had lunch in Helfors and gone on to see Dr. Fulsinger.

"I bought some napkins," she admitted.

He studied her for a moment, then turned abruptly and walked to the sofa. She hadn't seen it before, lying there still partially wrapped in the paper it had come in. He picked it up and walked back toward her, holding it in front of him.

"This shotgun, Ellen, and box of shells," he said. "It was at the desk downstairs when I got to the apartment."

She was shivering as she watched him and her head was whirling around dizzily. He was holding a slip of paper out to her,

but she didn't take it for she knew what it was. A charge slip, with her signature on it.

BLINDLY she turned and ran into the bedroom and threw herself across the bed, crying. What did it mean? She didn't remember ordering parrots, or buying the shotgun. It was ridiculous. Did she have these moments, were they real—when her mind was a complete blank and when she did irrational things?

George came in and she was aware of him standing at the foot of the bed looking down at her.

"I'm going to call Fulsinger in the morning, Ellen," he said grimly. "And make an appointment for you."

"No!" she cried, without looking up. "No, I won't see him. I'm not crazy, George. Do you understand?"

If he'd only say she wasn't . . . that it was some horrible dream. These things didn't happen. They weren't real. If he'd only tell her. . . .

"I have a dinner meeting downtown, Ellen," he said. "We'll discuss it in the morning when you feel better."

She heard him let himself out of the apartment, and when he came in later and went to bed, she was lying in her own bed, pretending to be asleep. But she hadn't slept. . . .

The next morning she was up before George. She squeezed two glasses of orange juice and put them on the table, then she went back into the kitchen to fry eggs and bacon. When she returned with their breakfast, he was sitting at the table reading the morning paper.

Silently he handed his glass of orange juice to her and she looked at it wonderingly. Then her eyes filled with horror as she walked to the kitchen and poured it in the sink. It was half castor oil, with one of George's trout flies floating on top. She went into the bathroom and was violently sick.

When she returned to the dining room, she felt incredibly weak but she'd regained her composure.

"Now will you see Fulsinger, Ellen?" George demanded.

See Fulsinger . . . Admit her weakness

to George, that she was crazy and needed psychiatric treatment? She couldn't do that to him. He was worried enough these days and nights about the sub-division. He was always working, hardly home two nights of the week. He was depressed and irritable and needed a rest himself.

Ellen forced herself to laugh, but it sounded hollow. "It's not necessary for me to see Dr. Fulsinger, George. About the orange juice," she stammered, "I needed a laxative and fixed it for myself, then the toast was burning and I forgot it."

"And the fly?" he asked coldly.

"It must have fallen in off the shelf," she explained evenly. "I banged it with my head when I was putting the castor oil back."

Ellen described all of this on her next visit to Dr. Fulsinger, and he asked her questions, questions, questions. . . .

"You're not getting enough rest for one thing, Mrs. Gordon."

"I can't rest . . . I can't sleep," she told him. "George watches me like a hawk, and at night when we're in bed, he lays there in the dark looking at me."

"In the dark, Mrs. Gordon?" he repeated patiently, and she suddenly knew that she had to explain to him it wasn't too dark for her to see that George was lying awake looking at her.

"You haven't told your husband?" he asked.

"No," she said resolutely. "I don't want to worry him."

Fulsinger considered a moment, and nodded.

"Perhaps, if you don't wish to," he murmured, "it's all right."

She was glad he thought it was all right for her not to tell George.

IT WASN'T until the following week that she found out. She remembered it vividly, for it was the day after Dr. Fulsinger suggested that she go to the sanatorium. For a rest, he'd explained. But she couldn't agree to that. There was something else the matter.

It was George.

He'd been coming home late, very late. Two or three o'clock in the morning. And one morning he hadn't gotten home at all.

She shuddered thinking about it.

"Where were you last night, George?" she'd asked after she'd come in from the kitchen.

"Where?" he repeated, looking at her wearily. "I was asleep."

"But, where?" she insisted.

"Where? Ellen!" he started to explode. Then he said patiently, "In our bedroom, in the bed next to you. Don't you remember?"

"Oh . . . yes," she stammered.

But she didn't remember. When she'd gotten up, she'd looked at his bed and it hadn't been slept in. Then when she'd come downstairs, he had been sitting in the living room reading the morning paper.

After breakfast, she'd gone back up to the bedroom to look at the bed, and he had missed it up, to make her think he'd slept in it.

It was the next day she found out.

She was driving past his office downtown in the middle of the afternoon and she saw him come out with Hazel Gerling. Ellen didn't know Hazel, but she knew about her. A divorcée about thirty years old, a little younger than Ellen, and extremely pretty. She was supposed to be wealthy. George had mentioned her when she first came to him looking for a house. He'd been very much impressed with her, he'd told Ellen, but that had been some time ago and George had gotten very busy with the plans for the new sub-division and hadn't mentioned her again. Of course, Ellen forgot about her completely.

Until she saw them coming out of George's office together. That was when Ellen had her first fleeting insight into George's trouble. Ellen didn't really intend to follow them, but they pulled away from the curb in front of her and she stayed behind them for several blocks. Then Ellen had turned off to go home, thinking that Mrs. Gerling had probably come to the office on business and they'd gone out to look at another house.

If Ellen thought about it at all, it was in a favorable light, until that evening when George failed to come home. She tried to get him at his office, but there was no answer.

It was then, and not until then, she re-

membered afterwards, that she looked up Mrs. Gerling's address in the telephone book and found that she lived in Ridgcrest. That was the direction she'd seen them driving.

When George got home later that evening, he seemed very tired and when Ellen commented upon it, he told her he'd been in a board meeting all afternoon and it had run into the dinner hour.

"Oh, I thought . . ." she started, then for some reason she stopped.

"You thought what?" he demanded shortly.

She was silent for a moment as he glared at her, then she said, "Nothing," and lapsed into a pensive silence.

Ellen had expected, if he told her anything, he would explain how Mrs. Gerling had come and he'd taken her out to show her a house. Ellen would have been perfectly satisfied with a simple answer like that.

As it was, Ellen wanted to think about whether or not he had lied to her. She didn't trust her own judgment. It had been so mutilated and distorted these last weeks that she wanted to be sure of the implications of her thoughts before she consciously entertained the thought itself.

BY THE next afternoon, she had thrust from her mind the idea that George had lied to her. It was too utterly fantastic. Similarly, she refused to concede that she was afraid of the idea of his lying. There was a perfectly simple answer, once she saw it, and she laughed in sheer relief when she thought of it.

It had not been George she had seen at all, but some other man with Mrs. Gerling. She herself had erred, she decided happily.

Then she had a moment of terror when she realized the mistake was consistent with her recent behavior. But, on further thought, she found some relief in being able to perceive her mistake herself. Gradually she began to feel triumphant, and the more she thought about it, the more exhilarated she became, until she resolved to go to George's office and tell him her whole trouble.

She could afford to now, because having perceived a mistake of her own, she was surely on the road to recovery. He would

share her joy with her.

It was midafternoon and she dressed prettily and drove to the office, prepared to be received gloriously, as one who returns from a long difficult trip. It didn't occur to her to telephone to see if George was in, and when she arrived and found the office locked, she was keenly disappointed.

She drove to Ridgecrest.

She was never able afterward to isolate the impulse which made her do it. It was something that she didn't determine to do consciously, but as she drove, the quiet inner conviction came that she would find her husband's car parked in front of Mrs. Gerling's.

She drove past slowly and was surprised that she was so serene about it. Her mind had undergone a complete metamorphosis and there was a new light of understanding in her eye. She recalled seeing Mrs. Gerling and the man coming out of her husband's office, and Ellen knew she had not made a mistake. It was George and he had lied to her. She had been afraid to face the truth.

In her new perspective, she began remembering things. It had started with the telephone calls, and for the first time she realized that she had always been alone when the calls came. George had never been with her.

She remembered the castor oil in the orange juice, and how she had been in the kitchen when George found it. Couldn't *he* have had a little vial of oil and the trout fly in his pocket, ready to put into the orange juice himself, when she wasn't looking?

Ellen's mind was racing feverishly now, seeking out the answers to things. The dozen parrots! She had never seen them. George had merely told her about them.

The shotgun, the cement, the toys. They'd been delivered to the apartment with the duplicate sales slip bearing the signature of the purchaser. Ellen had never looked at the slips closely, but they were carbon copies, smudged and imperfect, and could very easily have been forgeries of her own signature.

Ellen was only vaguely aware of parking the car in front of their apartment. She was shocked, her pulse beating furiously at her temples as she remembered other things—things George could have done himself and accused her, if . . . HE WAS DELIBER-

ATELY TRYING TO DRIVE HER INSANE!

His motive, of course, was Hazel Gerling, rich and young and beautiful. It wasn't until after she had become his client that he started staying out late. It wasn't until then that the new sub-division took shape in his conversation . . . always his excuse for staying out.

ELLEN hurried into the apartment feeling the deepest sense of urgency and angry indignation. He was trying to drive her insane, to get rid of her, so he could have the Gerling woman! But if his scheme failed. . .

Suddenly terrified, she realized he would find some other way! If he would try to damage her mind, effectively destroy her, he wouldn't stop at anything. Her life, she knew, was in deep danger and she must do something.

But what . . . ? She couldn't go to the authorities. George would merely tell them she was under psychiatric treatment, and they wouldn't believe her. Dr. Fulsinger hadn't diagnosed her case, except to urge a rest. But, if she could catch them in the act. . .

With her decision, came fear. If they were really planning on disposing of her one way or another, then they might kill her immediately if she confronted them. She went to George's bureau and got his service gun and put it in her purse. She didn't know how to use it, but just showing it, if she had to, would give her protection until she got help.

She drove to Ridgecrest and as she went up the steps to the door, she felt herself trembling with shame and humiliation. She'd never thought what she would do if she were a wronged wife, but now it was terrifyingly real to her and she was afraid.

Mrs. Gerling answered the bell and looked at her questioningly, waiting for her to say something. Ellen knew Mrs. Gerling didn't recognize her. There was no reason she should. They'd never met.

"I've come to see my husband," Ellen said.

Mrs. Gerling stiffened slightly and stepped back to admit Ellen.

"George, your wife is here," she said quietly.

As Ellen stepped in, she saw George on the sofa smoking a cigarette. There were two glasses on the table. He stood up, frowning, and Ellen felt Mrs. Gerling brush past her to George's side.

"What do you want, Ellen?" he asked abruptly. "We're very busy."

"Yes, I see," Ellen said bitterly. "I suppose she's financing your new sub-division."

Ellen saw the quick subtle glance pass between them, the faint amusement come to Mrs. Gerling's lips.

George laughed shortly. "As a matter of fact, Ellen, that's exactly what she's doing. Part of it, at least."

"Don't lie to me again," Ellen cried scornfully. "Not now, because I know what you've been doing to me."

He started toward her and she was suddenly frightened, unable to comprehend the look on his face. He wasn't laughing now, just a cruel, hard smile. "Don't come any closer!" she cried, backing away. The gun! she thought frantically. . . .

"Give me that, Ellen!" he shouted.

He kept coming and Mrs. Gerling was running toward her. They were closing in on her. Ellen pulled the trigger and there was an explosion and she kept pulling it. She closed her eyes tight against the noise and smoke and flame. She stood there for a long moment, her eyes shut, feeling ill. She opened her eyes and they were both lying on the floor, neither one of them moving. The room was swirling in front of her eyes and she turned suddenly to run out, her mind carrying the pictures of lipstick on her husband's shirt!

She was in a daze as she drove home, not knowing what to do. The air was blowing in the window of the car on her flushed face, and it took away the feeling of illness in her stomach. Gradually her mind cleared of the shock, and she realized dully that she would have to call the police.

The phone was ringing when she walked into the apartment. Perhaps it was the police calling now, she thought. Lipstick . . . or was it blood? She rushed to answer the phone. "Hello . . . Hello! . . . HELLO!" she shrieked.

There was no answer. ● ● ●

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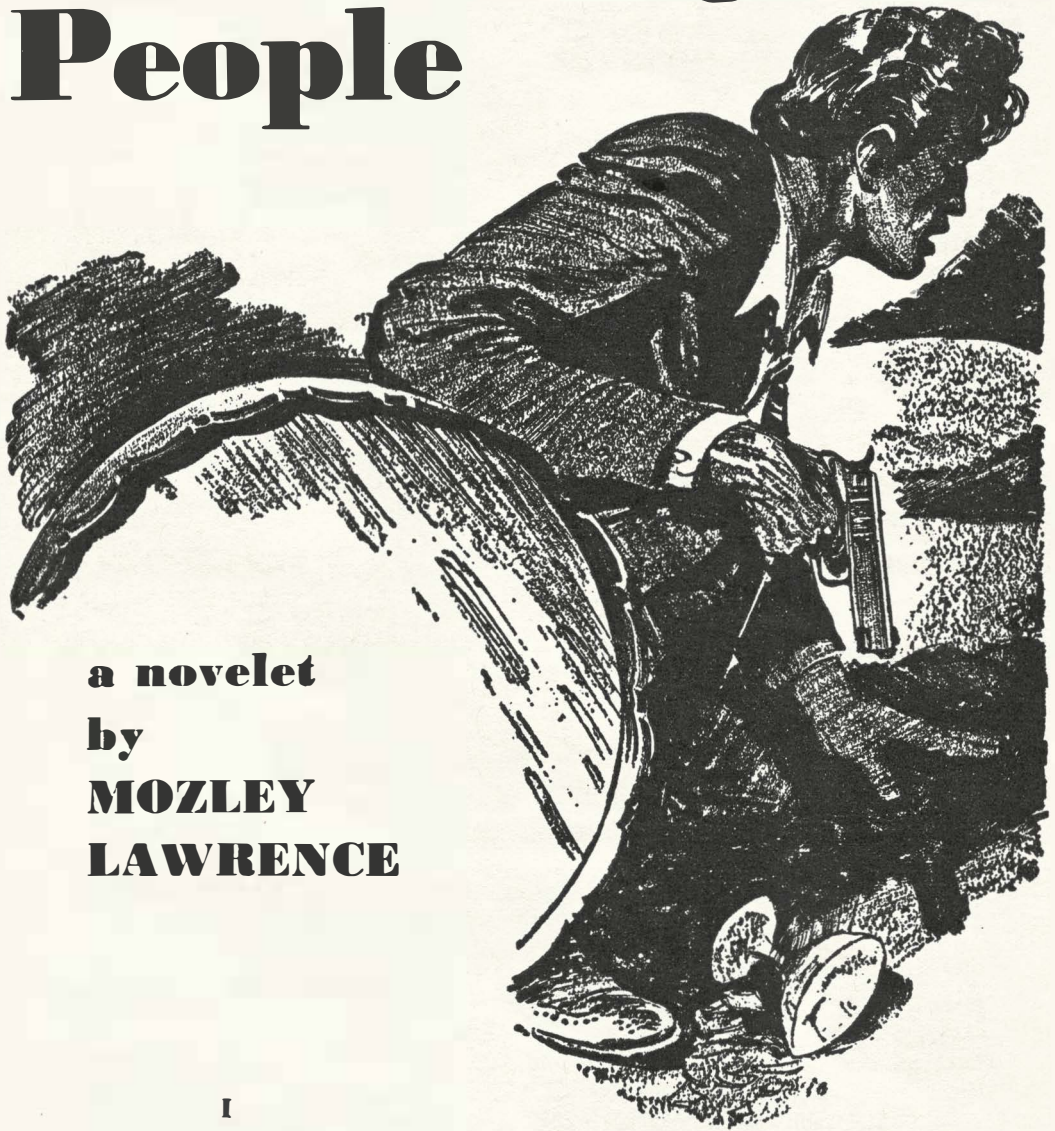
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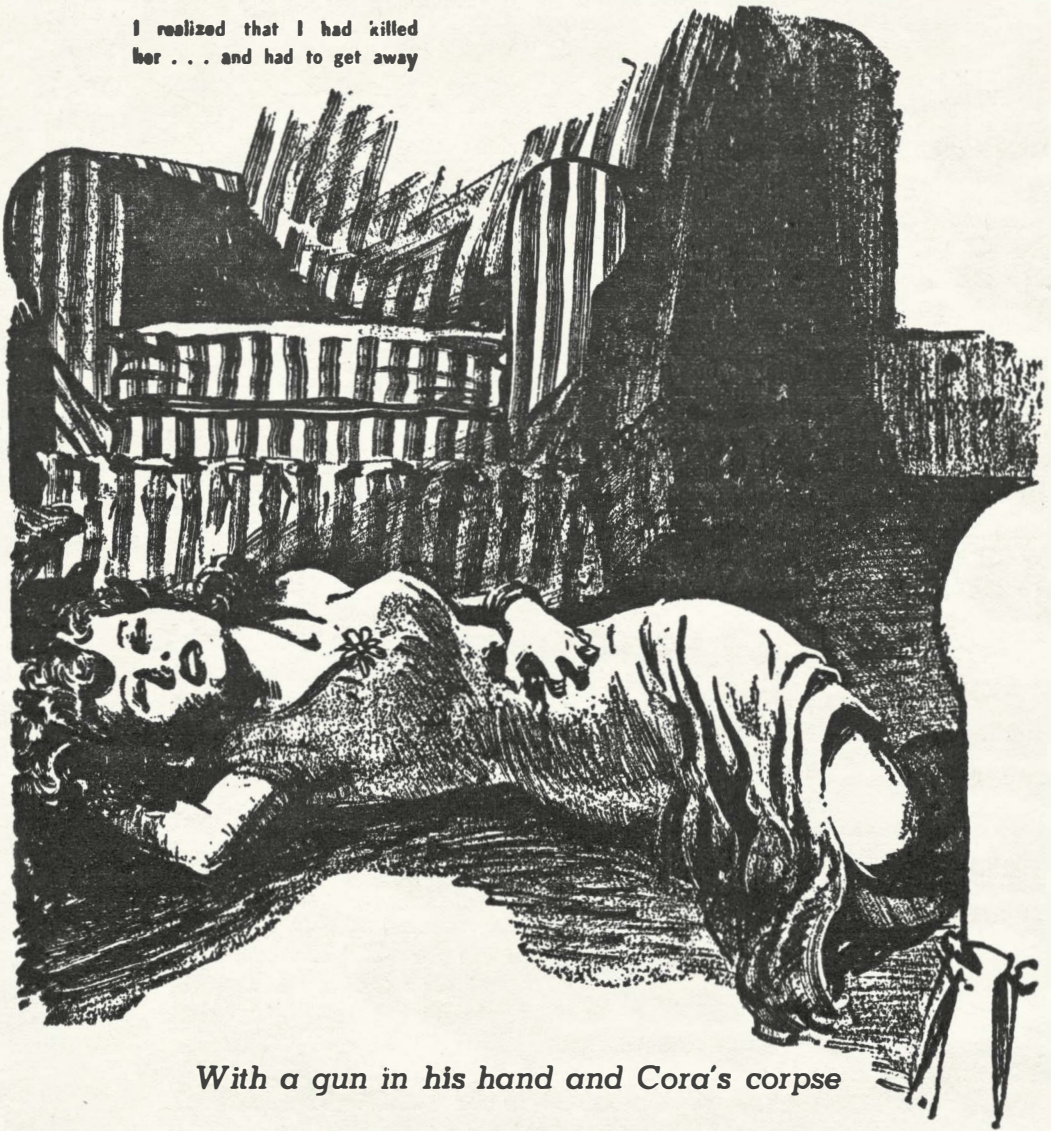
IT'S A DREAM, I told myself. It isn't really happening. It's the whisky—more than a year and a half since you've touched it, and you started out again in too big a way. You're having one of those nightmares, the kind that killed your old man.

But it wasn't a dream. The pounding on the door—that was real, as real as the pound-

ing inside my head and the violent pounding of my heart. And the gun by my hand was no toy, or something I had brought back from the nightmare. I had never seen it before, but I knew what it was. A .45 automatic.

Cora was no dream, either. Once she had been, to me. She had been heaven and hell, the stars, music, all the things that only one

I realized that I had killed
her . . . and had to get away



*With a gun in his hand and Cora's corpse
at his feet, all Randy could do was run away—*

from the police, from his friends, from himself. . . .

woman can be to a man. But no more. Cora, my beautiful, my love—Cora was dead.

I closed my eyes, painfully, agonizingly, but the sickness in my stomach, the ache in my head—they were real, too. When I opened them again some of the sickness passed and I could see a little more clearly.

She was there, stretched out limply on

the floor, one arm flung out to the side and the other clutching at her stomach. She wasn't pretty any more. Her face was twisted, her eyes fixed glassily at something she couldn't see, would never see. There was blood—a lot of it—some on her hand, but most of it on the floor in a crimson pool that began somewhere beneath her body and crept

along the door to be dammed by the edge of a carpet.

I couldn't think, beyond realizing that I had killed her and had to get away. Then the pounding at the door again. And someone shouting. The voices were muffled, but I knew they'd be inside in a minute, and I'd better not be there.

I stumbled to my feet. My legs were rubbery, my head was a toy top that I couldn't stop spinning. I glanced around. The apartment was new to me. I had been there only once before, but I thought it might open onto a fire-escape.

IRAN, if you could call the loose-jointed stumbling of a drunk running, to the window. Nothing but space. Nothing but four stories of space between me and the street. Maybe for a second I thought of ending it that way, right on the spot, but the survival instinct is still strong, even when you think you have nothing left to live for.

So I didn't jump. I ran into the bedroom, the kitchen. There it was. The fire-escape.

Somehow I got the window open, and the wind slapping me in the face felt good. I stepped out onto the grilled landing. From inside the apartment I could hear them battering the door, then a ripping sound as the lock gave and they thundered in. It was no time to linger.

I was almost all the way down when they spotted me. Glancing over my shoulder I saw a head pop out of the window, heard someone shout for me to stop. The head became a body as it emerged from the apartment, a body wearing the blue of a cop.

I jumped the rest of the way, maybe six feet, and rolled as I lost my footing. There was another shout. I scrambled up and started running, and I heard the thud of the cop's bullet striking the sidewalk behind me even before I heard the sound of the explosion.

Then I was around the corner of the building. Safe from the bullets, but far from safe. I kept running. No one tried to stop me, and finally I slowed down, leaning breathlessly against a lamp post.

A bus came by, and I got on. Just any bus. I couldn't care less where it was going.

For a few minutes it meant safety, time to think.

And I had a lot to think about. The money—eighteen thousand dollars, my pay for giving away a year and a half of my life at a thousand bucks a month. Gone. The money and the time, and my rights as a citizen. And Cora. Gone.

Cora. She had gone first. Maybe she had never really lived, as far as I was concerned. She was someone else—another person. The beautiful wife, the unselfish partner who had shared my plans. She had been a shell, a vision. Not the real Cora, the deception, the fake. Not the thief, who could steal a man's heart and his money, who could laugh at him for being a gullible fool, and throw the filthy truth in his face as though it were a huge joke.

So now she was really gone, and she would never make a fool of me again. She would never again be all things to another man—or other men, more likely. Poor Cora.

I could pity her now, now that I had killed her.

Except—and this was one of the things I had to think about—where had I got the gun?

I had been drunk when I returned to the apartment, but I could remember everything. Her devilishly beautiful body as she swayed before me, the sheerness of her negligée as she fiendishly tormented a man who had just returned from eighteen months in jail. The torture of her wild laugh when I discovered the still warm cigar on the ashtray, the bedroom door closing slowly.

Then the filth she threw at me through lips I had once kissed so hungrily—and the rage I'd felt as I stepped closer, the rage that blinded my reasoning. The violent contact as my open hand struck her face once, twice, then the scream as she fell.

But she had not been dead. Her eyes had been filled with fear and hate and terror as she glared back at me. Even then she had known she was going to die. The rest—it was a terrifying blank.

I must have blacked out. A man can do that when his rage is as great as mine. But had I? I rubbed my forehead, the back of my neck, my head.

NO! I HADN'T blacked out! That lump —I had been lying on my face when I'd come to. I hadn't fallen on my head. I had been knocked out!

And the gun—of course I couldn't remember where I'd got it. It wasn't mine!

Me, with all the motives a man would ever need to kill a woman, I was the fall guy, the sucker.

I was a natural for the part.

I don't remember how long I rode the bus, thinking. Twice the driver tapped me for extra fares, and when he kept glancing at me in his rear view mirror I decided it was time to get off.

But where was I to go? Where could I hide? In a year and a half you can lose all your contacts. That kind of contact. Sure, I was straight, had been all along, ever since my rap in reform school for playing with hot cars. But I knew my way around. I knew who was safe, who to see. I could thank Lew Youngman for that.

I could thank Lew Youngman for a lot of things.

Lew—he'd know what to do. He could tell me.

I hailed a taxi. I still had the hundred bucks Cora had thrown at me during my first trip to the apartment. Better to use it now than throw it away, like I first wanted to do. The heat wouldn't be on me for a little while yet, and a taxi would be safe this once.

The cabbie didn't pay any attention to me, and I tried hard to look like any other tired Joe at the end of a hard day at the office. I got him to let me off a block below Hardy's place, which had been Lew's headquarters at the time I was sent up.

I wasn't worried about being spotted yet, not until they could get hold of my most recent prison portrait. Stir hadn't been bad for me, physically speaking. I had put on twenty pounds working in the shops; my face was fuller, and instead of the scrawny, underweight punk they were used to seeing squeezing lemons behind the bar in The Cellar, I was a hundred-and-sixty-pounder. Until this afternoon I had felt better than at any other time in my life.

Still, no percentage in taking chances. I

watched Hardy's from across the street for maybe fifteen minutes. No one I knew walked in or out, and I decided it was worth a try.

Hardy was in, working the bar. He would be by himself for another hour, until the rush business began. There were three or four luses in a huddle at one of the tables, and except for an impersonal glance in my direction they ignored me. But not Hardy.

Even in the dim light I could see him pale when he recognized me. I sidled up to the bar nonchalantly.

"Hi," I mumbled, and his lips twisted into a frightened snarl.

"Are you crazy, comin' here?" he muttered in his low rasp. "You're hot—white-hot."

"I know." I tried to sound casual. "Where can I get in touch with Lew? I've got to see him."

"You don't want to see Lew. Beat it."

He gestured emphatically with his head, and I shook mine in the negative.

"I want to see him—real bad." My hand was in my coat pocket, nursing the automatic I had unconsciously brought along. The gun that had killed Cora. Hardy didn't miss the move, and his lips tightened.

"The back room," he muttered. "Go back there and wait. See you in a minute."

He turned his back on me and fiddled with the bottles on his shelf. I checked the luses out of the corners of my eyes. They were busy with their drinks. I walked back toward the men's room, then angled off to the door in the corner, the one that led to the base of operations for the bookies on this block.

IT WAS empty. I flopped into one of the chairs, but who could rest? My nerves were tight, my head was fuzzy. I was sick—the kind of sick that happens when your soul has been killed, when you want to die but have to go on living. Cora—

The door eased open and Hardy came in. There was no friendliness in the way he looked at me, and I couldn't blame him. He had liked Cora. Once she had waited on tables for him before she moved on to The Cellar, where I met her and fell in love with her. But maybe he didn't know her as well as I did.

"Get out of town, rat," he snarled. "Beat it!"

"No." I shook my head. "I've got to see Lew. He'll help me."

"You'll get no help." He brought his hand from under his apron, and he was holding a pistol in it. Another time I might have been scared. "Maybe I'll give it to you myself."

"No, Hardy." I stood up. I figured I knew him pretty well. He wouldn't shoot. "Not you."

I moved toward him slowly, and he backed against the door. The gun didn't waver. Maybe he would shoot after all. But so what?

He didn't. When I was on him I grabbed his gun hand and twisted it. The pistol clattered to the floor. In the same movement I jerked him around, holding his arm at a bone-breaking angle behind his back.

"Where's Lew?" I hardly recognized my own voice. "Tell me, damn you!"

Sweat flooded his face, and he bit his lower lip until the blood came.

"You're dead, Wheeler!" he gasped. "The word's out—you're dead!"

"Where's Lew?" I gave his arm another jerk and he moaned in agony.

"All—right." I relaxed my grip; Hardy sighed. I must have been using more pressure than I realized. "But you'll be sorry. Lew, he's not—"

"Lew's my friend," I said. "You gonna tell me?"

"Sure—sure." He winced, half-expecting me to break his arm. He mumbled the address, and I turned him loose. "Go see him, rat," he said, rubbing his elbow. "Get him to tell you everything—about Cora. He's your friend!"

Maybe he was sneering, but I was in too much of a hurry to care. I had what I'd come for. Now I had to see Lew.

II



EXCEPT FOR SIS, Lew Youngman was the only friend I'd ever had. He and Sis were going steady, when I got out of reform school, and he'd played big brother to me ever since. He made me finish high school, and

when I graduated at twenty, he staked me to a course in bartending and eventually got me a job at The Cellar.

Sis had never married him, and I could never understand why. Or maybe I could. She didn't like him being a bookie, and he wouldn't give it up. Or couldn't. He was pretty high up in the organization, too high up to be able to get out and go on breathing.

Sis had even tried to get me to break away from him, although I knew she was still crazy about him. But he was a right one, and he'd treated me square. I'd have done anything for Lew—anything.

Even go to jail for him. Though I could have screamed my head off and beaten the rap, maybe.

It was one of those things. "Meet a guy for me, Randy," Lew had said. "Give him this envelope. Personal favor." For Lew, anything, and I knew it hadn't been his fault when something went wrong. The guy turned out to be a cop on the Vice Squad—Sergeant Langmeier, one they'd never been able to reach. The envelope had held fifteen hundred bucks, and the next thing I'd known I was being charged with attempted bribery.

Lew posted my bail, and we had a long talk.

"It's the investigations, Randy," he said. "The town's hot, and they'll try to make an example of you. Sure, you're not part of it—you're clean. But if you scream they'll nail me and a lot more, and we won't get off so light."

He could have stopped there and I'd have taken the rap for him. A year, two years. Except for Lew I might have gone all wrong and been doing a lot worse than that. One of the kids that was in on the hot car deal that sent five of us to reform school had wound

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up in the chair, and two more were doing long terms. But Lew had looked out for me.

And he didn't stop there.

"Look, Randy," he went on, "we'll treat you right. Ten C's deposited in your name the first day of every month you're in stir."

A thousand bucks a month. Sis had begged me not to do it, but Cora thought it was a terrific deal.

"Fifteen or twenty grand when you get out," she'd chortled. "Enough to set us up in a bar of our own."

I'll never forget the agony in Sis' eyes the day I got sentenced. One to three. Her lips had quivered, and when I tried to make her see my side of it she turned her back on me and walked out. I had never seen her since.

And Lew—he had seemed pretty worried. I knew he hated me taking his rap; even when he made the deal with me he'd been nervous and upset. He had always said I didn't owe him a thing for all he'd done for me, and I couldn't seem to make him understand that I was grateful for the chance to pay him back.

But Cora was in seventh heaven. "Sure, I'll miss you, honeybunch—I'll miss you like everything—but think of when you get out!"

I couldn't think of anything else—now.

I decided to walk to Lew's apartment building. The chances of my being recognized and picked up were slim. The walk would do me good. I was still in a daze. The whisky I had gulped down earlier helped a little, but I wasn't drunk any more. Just dazed—and sick. What was I after? I asked myself. A hide-out? Why should I hide? What difference if they found me, shot me on sight or saved me for the chair? Who cared?

I DIDN'T know. Maybe Sis; certainly Lew. Me? Why should I care? Cora was gone. And the money—although I could have got over that. But Cora. She had been everything. Before her I hadn't really cared about anything, anyone. Then she'd come along, and suddenly I'd become alive. Living acquired a purpose, dreams were something to build on.

Now I knew the truth about Cora, and everything—living, dreaming, working—everything was crazy.

Especially Cora's death. I hadn't gone back to kill her, and I *hadn't* killed her. Someone else—the man, the warm cigar, the slowly closing bedroom door—it must have been him. But why? Why kill Cora, why destroy the beautiful body that had been his for the taking? And why frame me?

The man—the man. *Who was he?*

A couple passing me on the street stared at me with queer expressions, bringing me back to the moment. I picked up my step, breathed deeply of the cool, twilight air. One more block, turn to the right—there it was. Lew's place. I felt better already.

I slowed down. Small chance of Lew's being staked out. Although there might have been a few cops with sharp memories, like Langmeier, who would recall that he and I had been pretty close. So I slowed down, but I saw nothing out of the way. It seemed safe.

His apartment was on the third floor. I found his buzzer and jabbed it—two short, one long, two short. The signal hadn't been changed; the answering buzz came back and the door clicked. I pushed it open and raced up the stairs, not stopping long enough to use the self-service elevator. Lew was waiting for me.

"Randy," he murmured, grabbing my shoulders as his eyes probed mine.

Lew hadn't changed much; a little older, maybe. He would be thirty-nine now, and his hair was thinner, but otherwise the same old Lew. Lean, well-massaged face, sensitive eyebrows, the thoughtful lips that seemed always poised on the brink of a question.

"I guessed you'd come here," he said as he led me inside. "I've been waiting."

That was Lew. I felt alive again; Lew would help, would tell me what to do. But this was different from the other jams, and I could see he was worried. His forehead was creased in a deep frown, his eyes were filled with concern. He poured me a drink, and after I took it he sat down across from me, nervously tapping the arms of his chair. I began to feel uncomfortable as he studied me silently.

Finally he said, "This is bad, Randy, real bad. You've got to get out. You won't have a

dog's chance if they catch you. I've got some money—"

"But Lew!" I set my drink down. "I can't run. I didn't kill her!"

The words babbled out in an uncontrollable gush, and I told him everything—about the "home-coming" to the new apartment Cora had told me she'd taken, the cool reception she'd given me, how she'd laughed when I asked her what had happened to the money, and my blind rage when she told me to beat it and leave her alone.

Then the drinking, and the fury that had become more unbearable with every drink until I'd had to go back and beat the truth from her. Yes—beat. But I hadn't been prepared for the truth—the other man, or men—the love nest she had built with the money that was to have been our future.

THE PART about the man in the bedroom—that was the weak spot. No, Lew. I hadn't really seen him, but I'd seen the door closing slowly, I'd felt the warm cigar butt in a living room ashtray, and Cora hadn't denied a thing.

"But did you really see him? Could you point a finger at him and say, this is the man?"

"No, Lew. But he must have been there!"

Lew shook his head hopelessly and I could feel the cold terror churning in my empty stomach again.

"I believe you, kid," he said. "You've always leveled with me. But that's not enough. Lieutenant Langmeier's handling the case himself, and—"

"Lieutenant Langmeier?" I raised my eyebrows. "He was a sergeant when I went up."

"Promoted."

"Did I help?"

"Maybe. Anyway, he's a lieutenant in Homicide now, and you know how he felt about Cora."

Sure, I knew. He had spent more time in The Cellar than he did down at Headquarters. He would sit at the end of the bar for hours on end, nursing the same glass of ginger ale, and stare at Cora. I knew she had gone out with him a few times, but when I'd mention it to her she'd wrinkle her nose and shrug her shoulders.

"That creep?" she would say. "He's no place, but his money spends good."

Langmeier hadn't thought much of me as a rival until the night when I'd poured him a glass of ginger and remarked, maybe a little gloatingly, "This one's on me—celebrating Cora and me getting married this afternoon."

He'd left the ginger untouched and stayed away for months. Then, five or six weeks before I delivered Lew's envelope, he'd started dropping in again, once or twice a week. Maybe Cora was friendly with him, but that was her job. Good for business.

Then he'd made a pass at her and she fluffed him off. And, cop or no cop, I'd put in a word. After that he'd left her alone, but I didn't doubt that he was still crazy for her. And I couldn't blame him. Cora was the kind of woman men go crazy for. I just felt sorry for him.

It had always rubbed me the wrong way that he had been the cop who took Lew's envelope. Langmeier got a kick out of it—the same kind of kick a sadist gets from pulling off a live butterfly's wings. But Lew was real upset about the slipup. He said there'd been a leak, that Langmeier must have got a tipoff and spotted the chance to make a record for himself.

It had been an unhappy coincidence that he'd also got a chance to hit back at me.

Sure, I knew what I could expect from Langmeier. He wouldn't save me for a jury—"guilty as charged," and a date with a few thousand volts of electricity. Not Langmeier. He'd give me a bullet, right where it would hurt the most and take the longest to kill.

He wouldn't care about the man in the bedroom. Hardy was right. I was as good as dead.

All the fight was taken out of me. What's the point in fighting when you're whipped before you start?

"What can I do, Lew?" I slumped in my chair, lost, defeated.

"Run," Lew replied tersely. "Hide. Change your name, face, habits. Pick up another identity."

"How long would that last? How long before they'd recognize me? What's the point?"

LEW stood up and walked over to the window, idly rattling a pocket full of change.

"The point is keeping alive. Maybe you'll get a break. Maybe they'll turn up her boy friend." He lit one of his custom-made Turkish cigarettes, and the sweet aroma drifted across the room and hit me in the stomach almost as hard as a body blow. I could never stand his cigarettes. "In the meantime, I'm going out to see a couple of guys. I'll make some arrangements—money, place to stay for a few days until it's safe to blow. You stay here until I get back. Get some sleep, fix yourself something to eat. I won't be longer than an hour or two."

"All right, Lew."

I locked the door behind him, secured the night latch. I thought about fixing a sandwich, and I thought about sleeping. The sandwich lost, and I sprawled on the cushiony chaise longue.

Worried, sick, scared—none of it affect my ability to sleep. I must have dropped off in a matter of seconds.

III



IT WAS a restless nap. I rolled, groaned, and fought off a dozen nightmares, and perhaps half an hour passed before the shrill of Lew's phone brought me to my feet with a start.

It rang again, insistent-ly. I debated whether to answer it. I knew his phone had a private listing, and likely it was someone on a matter of business. On the other hand it might be Lew trying to reach me. Maybe something had broken, one way or the other. From the persistence of the ringing I decided it must be Lew after all, and when it had buzzed an even dozen times I took a chance and lifted it off its cradle.

"Yes?" I mumbled into the mouthpiece.

"Lew?" It was a woman's voice. I was wide awake now. She spoke again in her throaty contralto and I recognized it as a voice I hadn't heard in eighteen months. "Is that you, Lew?"

"Sis! It's—"

"Randy!" I heard the quick intake of her breath. "Randy! Is Lew there?"

"No. I—"

"Get out of there, Randy! Get out of there fast!"

I blinked, shook my head.

"Sis, it's all right. I'm all right. Lew's gone to fix things for—"

"Randy, please!" She sounded almost hysterical. "You've got to get out of that apartment now, before—"

I jumped, almost dropping the phone. Someone was at the door, pounding furiously. A heavy voice shouted. Sis was babbling something but I couldn't hear her.

"Come out, Wheeler! You're trapped!"

I returned the phone to the cradle mechanically. The blood rushed from my face, and I knew that I was as pale as a ghost. I had been spotted, there had been a stakeout at Lew's, and I had walked into it blindly.

Unconsciously I breathed a prayer of thanks that Lew had got out. No need for him to be dragged into something that was my doing.

The pounding continued, the shouting was more insistent, and I palmed the automatic. Fight? Kill a cop, get killed? For what? Don't take it out on the cops because you're a fool, a sucker who's been had. They're doing a job. Make it easy for everybody. Don't mess up Lew's apartment.

I threw the gun away from me, mutely watched it hit the carpet, bounce, and lie still. I wanted to cry, but I didn't. I just screamed. All the hopelessness, the futility, the misery of the lost, was wrapped up in that scream.

"All right!" They heard. The pounding stopped. "All right!" I shuffled toward the door. "I'm coming out—with my hands up!"

It took a moment to get the door unlocked. I had to use ten thumbs. Then it was open, and there he was, big, coarse, the hate shrieking out of his body like steam rising from the sidewalk after a summer shower.

Langmeier. Lieutenant, Homicide.

His hands were empty, and I fumed at myself for surrendering like a petty coward to an egotistical cop who knew I wouldn't resist. And he was alone.

I trembled, not from fright. I was mad. I

wanted to laugh, I wanted to cry, I wanted to strike out at someone, anyone. Taken, trapped—by a lone miserable cop who hated my guts.

He sensed my feelings and bared his teeth in a satanic grin.

"You're makin' it too easy, punk," he sneered. "Come on. You lead off."

HE MOVED aside, and wordlessly I walked out. With feet like lead I started toward the elevator.

"Nix. The stairs."

Without turning my head I changed direction and started down the steps. Three flights. I gritted my teeth. Smart cop, sure of himself. So sure I won't make a break that he hadn't cuffed me, or even pointed a .38 at my back. So I was a punk?

Yeah, punk. Without planning, without caring, I whirled and made a grab for his legs. He outweighed me by forty or fifty pounds, but I had the element of surprise, the advantage of balance. He cursed and grabbed for my head, but he was falling. I dropped under him as he rolled, and he thundered over me. He hit on his face, crumpled, then sprawled helplessly on the landing. He didn't move.

Cautiously I approached him, a new fear gnawing at my guts. I hadn't meant to kill him, hadn't dared dream I'd get away with this. My act had been one of frustration and rebellion rather than a serious attempt to escape. I reached down to feel his pulse, but I didn't need to. He was alive, breathing—and out cold.

A wave of relief swept over me, as refreshing and reassuring as cold rain stinging my face. Now I had made my move. I had no choice any more. When Langmeier regained consciousness he would surely kill me—for trying to escape. He would enjoy having my blood on his hands.

So I ran. I raced down the stairs, hurled the foyer door open, and ran.

Sis had known something was wrong. She had called Lew, but when she'd recognized my voice she had been deathly afraid of something—afraid for me. She couldn't have known I was there, hiding temporarily in Lew's apartment as she couldn't have known

that Langmeier had found me. But she had anticipated danger for me.

How? What did she know? What was the danger?

The few letters she had written to me while I was in the pen had all given the same return address, and I knew she would still be at the old place. She had lived there for years, and I had shared it with her until Cora and I were married and found an apartment of our own.

I took a devious course, hopped two taxis and walked the rest of the way, just in case Langmeier hadn't been entirely a lone wolf. Whatever tails I might have had were hopelessly lost now.

Sis's apartment was in a once stylish section of brownstone buildings, most of them of identical architecture. Now they were respectable enough residences, although little of their old dignity and none of the pride remained.

My main worry as I studied them was that some of the neighbors who had known me three years ago would remember me now and sound the alarm if they saw me going up to her place. So I waited until most of the lights went out and the street settled down for the night.

No lights were on in her apartment, but she was home, and she was awake. I tapped lightly on her door. In seconds she was there. I slipped inside, and her arms were around me and her tears blending with the perspiration on my jacket. She didn't say anything—just sobbed and clung to me.

Finally she turned me loose and I moved quickly to the windows, giving the Venetian blinds an extra tug to make certain we were safe from prying eyes. I found a light switch and flicked it.

SIS was still as pretty as ever, although she was beginning to look thirtyish. For the millionth time I wondered why she had never sacrificed a tiny portion of her principles long enough to marry Lew and be happy. She would have made a wonderful wife; she'd be perfect with a couple of kids. Soon it would be too late.

"When you hung up on me," she was saying, "I was afraid—"

I nodded and told her about Langmeier and how I had got away. She shuddered, her blue eyes widened, and she grabbed my hands tightly.

"Oh, Randy, Randy, what are we going to do?"

"First, I'm going to keep you out of it. I've been enough trouble to you. I only came here to let you know I'm safe, and to find out what you meant when you told me to get out of Lew's apartment 'before'—before what, Sis?"

She turned her head, averting her eyes.

"Now, wait a minute!" I stood up, maybe raised my voice a little. "Are you trying to say Lew turned me in?"

"I'm not trying to say anything!" Sis had a lot of spirit in her, too. Her eyes flared behind their tears. "Look, baby, I know you didn't kill Cora—although I could never hold it against you if you had. Try to understand that I want to help."

I shook my head. "You want to help, and you're trying to turn me against Lew. If you don't trust him, how can you trust me? How do you know I didn't kill Cora? You

CRIME IN THE KITCHEN



AN INTRIGUING true life episode which seemed more like the plot of a comic opera was revealed in Paris a few years ago, when the police intercepted a letter from a young wife to her lover. In this communication the faithless woman reported progress in the poisoning of her husband and requested a further supply of poison.

The young woman was brought into the police station, where she was soon confronted by her supposed confederate in crime. Her youthful lover, calm and unruffled, readily admitted that the philandering wife had told him that her husband stood in the way of their happiness and that if he wanted to marry her he would have to help her get rid of her unwanted mate.

To this enterprise, he said, he had agreed, and since had sent the young woman many chemical packets. But now the proceedings, which up to that point had been pretty grim, broke into high comedy. For, no longer able to keep a straight face, the handsome young lover laughingly asserted that the packets had contained nothing more harmful than bicarbonate of soda!

"You are lying, Leon!" the young wife shrieked. "Say you are lying! Confess! I would rather go to prison than suffer this humiliation!"

But Leon had not lied. Investigation proved that the young woman had been feeding her husband bicarbonate of soda, which, considering the atrocious quality of her cooking, laughing Paris thought was pretty good for the long-suffering husband.

—Andrew Meredith

Then she looked back at me and asked abruptly, "Randy, where is Lew?"

"Where?" I shrugged. "Out. I don't know where. He said he was going to make arrangements for me to hide out. But I don't—"

"Out." She repeated it flatly. Her lips were pale, tight lines on a wan and weary face. "Out, finding you a hideout, when all he had to do was lift his phone and find a hundred hideouts. How did Langmeier find you there, Randy? Where was Lew when Langmeier walked in on you?"

have only my word for it."

"I know. I—I was there, Randy. This afternoon."

It took a while to sink in.

"You, Sis?" I gulped, ran sweaty fingers through my hair. "What were you doing there?"

She leaned back in her chair and stared at her fingernails.

"I wanted to see you, Randy. I wanted to see you before—before you found out about—her."

"You knew all the time about Cora?" Sba

wouldn't look at me. "Sis, why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you write?"

She whirled and fixed a defensive glare on me. "Would you have believed me? Have you ever believed me when I've tried to help you?"

"All right," I was contrite. "All right. Maybe I wouldn't have. I could hardly believe it when I saw for myself, when Cora came right out and admitted it." There was a strained silence, and then a cold blanket of dread fell over me. My throat tightened. "Sis, what time were you there this afternoon?"

"I wondered when you'd ask." She spoke in a husky whisper. "I got there too late to do any good. You had already been there. Cora was laughing about it. I wanted to kill her right then, especially when I learned the other man was there."

A horrible idea was forming. I fought it, fought it with all I had, but it grew and grew, and I was almost shaking.

Sis went on, "But I left. I had reached the sidewalk and started away when I saw you. I almost ran into you, but you weren't seeing anyone in your condition. You had been drinking, and I knew you were going back upstairs and that there would be trouble."

"Sis, did you see the man? Did you recognize him?"

SHE SHOOK her head. "No, baby, I didn't see him—not too well. Just a shadow."

"Sis—" I blinked my eyes, trying to think clearly. "What about that call to Lew's? What did you mean?"

"Randy—" I could tell she was groping for something. "Believe me, I'd rather die than hurt you. But you've been wrong, terrible wrong, about Lew." I waited; I had to hear this. "That business that you went to prison for—that was no accident. You were the sucker. You were deliberately framed, and you were supposed to go to jail, to be out of the way. Lew knew about it. He was in on it from the beginning."

Try to imagine how you would feel if you knew the world was going to end in sixty seconds—just try. I had that feeling now,

and I tried to deny it. She couldn't be talking about Lew Youngman—not my best friend. Not Lew!

"But—the money? If it wasn't a fluke, why did they offer me all that money to take Lew's rap and keep my mouth shut?"

"Do you really think they were scared of what you might tell the police, Randy? No, that was Lew, too. It was his way of softening the blow. Even when he helped frame you he wanted to try to make it up to you some way. He put up the money himself."

Somehow I knew she was right; somehow, I believed her. But—

"All right, Sis. Tell me this then. Who wanted me out of the way? What's the gimmick?"

"Can't you guess, baby?" She smiled sadly.

Yes, I could guess. It hurt, but it made sense. Suddenly everything made sense.

"Then, the man—Cora's— Tell me, Sis! Lew was the man?"

IV



SIS STARED at me incredulously for an instant. Her eyes bored into mine, looking for something, and I squirmed in spite of myself.

"Well," I said, "go ahead. Tell me. Was it Lew?"

"Randy." Her voice was quiet. "Honestly, Randy, don't you know about Lew?"

I must have been breathing pretty heavily. All I could hear was the pumping of my heart, the in-and-out of my breath.

"No," she said. "I guess you don't. Poor, naive kid."

"What is it about Lew that I don't know?" I whispered hoarsely.

"Think, Randy, think about him. His habits, the way he dresses, everything about him. Has there ever been a woman in his life, Randy? You would know if anyone ever did. Would a man like—like Lew go to such extremes for a woman?"

She had named it; poor, naive kid. Me. All these years, and I never once suspected.

And then I knew why Sis had never married, and I wondered about the hopelessness of a woman who loves a man like Lew.

No, Lew wouldn't have been the Other Man. He would know who the man was, and maybe I'd ask him. But I had to do something else first.

Suddenly I didn't care for the moment who that man was. He was secondary; the important thing was to get back to Cora's apartment and make sure there was nothing that could prove Sis had been there this afternoon. Because I was afraid, I knew the answer to the one question I would never ask Sis—How could she be so certain I hadn't killed Cora myself, if she hadn't returned to Cora's after I did?

I had nothing to lose. When they're after you for murder, what's a small matter of breaking and entering? Cora's apartment would be sealed, but I didn't think they would leave a police guard there.

With the case against me cut and dried, my identification a fact, there seemed little chance that Homicide had gone ahead with the usual hocus-pocus—fingerprinting all the rooms, an all-out search for clues. After all, there were no suspects; there was no mystery. I was their boy. Randy Wheeler, murderer.

So maybe I wouldn't be too late to help Sis. There was always a chance that someone might remember seeing her there, but as long as I was Langmeier's candidate the issue might never come up. I wanted to keep it that way. And just to be on the safe side, I had to destroy any physical evidence, if any, that could involve Sis.

It was well after midnight when I approached the fire-escape that led up to Cora's kitchen window. There was little traffic on the street, and I wasted no time. I couldn't afford to. Except for one terrifying scrape when I grabbed the bottom ladder, I made the climb quietly.

I got up to the window without being detected and checked the inside lock with my pencil flashlight. It was fastened.

I took a roll of wide adhesive tape from my pocket and stretched it across the glass in long strips, overlapping their edges until I completely covered the pane. I pressed the

tape down carefully so that no air spaces remained, and I tapped it, lightly at first, then harder. The glass cracked, and I almost jumped. But the sound was muffled and none of the slivers fell onto the floor inside.

I made sure the glass was thoroughly broken, then I eased the tape off. The shattered pieces stuck to it, and in a second I was able to slip a hand through and unfasten the window lock.

I WAS INSIDE. I slipped off my shoes in the kitchen, just in case the people downstairs might be awake and heard me slipping around. I turned the flashlight on and headed for the living room. Gingerly I sidestepped a darkened stain on the floor.

With my handkerchief I started wiping—the door, tables, chair arms, any place that Sis might have touched, and I was relieved not to find any signs of fingerprint powders around. I had no idea whether she had sat down, or even come any farther than a few feet inside the door, so I wiped everything.

It didn't take long. I paused and took a deep breath. I wasn't scared any more. I wasn't running to save my own hide now. Sis had always tried to do the right thing for me, but she hadn't had the know-how at eighteen to handle an incorrigible kid of twelve when our old man died of the D.T.'s at Bellevue. Still she had tried.

She had finished a business course somehow, and she'd always said that when she made enough money for us to live on for awhile we'd leave here. Except that I hadn't helped. I ran with a wild gang, wound up in reform school, and now this.

Because of me she might be involved in this mess up to her neck, so I was going to do something for her for a change. It was high time.

I satisfied myself that I had taken care of everything and had started to leave when I remembered something. My clothes. Cora had written me that she was taking care of them for me. I might need them, just in case Langmeier didn't catch me. I went into the bedroom, spotted the closets and opened one.

Cora's things. The next door—there they were. Two suits, a couple of sports jackets,

slacks, and a red bathrobe.

The feeling came back—the tenseness, the hate. *His* bathrobe. I had never owned one!

I pulled it out and looked at it. A crude, loud affair, and what a huge thing! It must have been six or eight sizes too large for me, or Lew. Lew and I were about the same build. No, Lew *couldn't* have been that man. Even if Lew had been a man, period.

I threw it on the floor, wanting to scrape it in filth. Blindly I reached for one of my suits—and stopped. There was a sound; a key scratching around in a lock; a door opening slowly, cautiously. I stepped away from the closet, freezing in my tracks as I waited for a light to come on.

But no light came on. I heard footsteps move—slow, careful steps, and then the brilliance of a flashlight almost blinded me. He hadn't seen me, but he would—he would! He was heading straight for the bedroom.

Frantically I looked around for a place to hide. The bed—*that* bed. I moved swiftly around it, slipped to the floor and lay flat on my face with the bed between me and the door. Maybe—

No maybe. He was coming in. I could see the light leading him, then he was in. I tensed. How long before he'd look over here? What a place to be caught! But he had stopped, he was at the closet. It was *him*. He had come back for his bathrobe!

I must have made a sound; maybe my foot bumped against the bed. He whirled in my direction and bathed the bed with his light. I wondered if he had a gun, but it couldn't make any difference. I had to make a break for it. My fingers found something—a shoe—and in one movement I jumped up and threw it at him.

A GOOD pitch. It struck the flashlight, knocking it out of his hands. I ran. He was between me and the door, so I charged and pushed him over as he tried to recover the flash. He was cursing, grabbing at me as I passed him. I broke away from his grip and ran for the door, hoping he'd left it unlocked. I might make it, I shouted to myself, I might make it!

I almost did.

I was halfway across the living room

when the ceiling light went on. Then something struck my left shoulder, throwing me off-balance, and as I fell I heard the roar of a gun. I rolled as I hit the floor—and I saw him.

The cop—the creep—the Other Man—*Langmeier!*

Desperately I crawled toward the door, my shoulder numb and my left arm useless. In my mind's eye I could see him carefully leveling his pistol at me. In my imagination I could feel the hot lead burning through my back into my stomach. Why didn't he shoot? What was he waiting for? Why didn't he get it over with?

Someone was holding a red filter in front of my eyes, then a darker one. Then I saw the feet—shadows of feet, lots of feet and none of them Langmeier's. Men were talking, babbling. It was a crazy picture that kept fading, fading. . . .

I was moving. I blinked my eyes and tried to see, and when they cleared I realized I was in an ambulance. A white-coated intern was holding a tube over my head and someone—Sis—had a firm grip on my arm. I guessed that it was plasma; I must have lost a lot of blood.

I felt nauseated and lost. That's it, Doc. Take good care of the patient. We want him in good shape, when we burn him!

Sis was trying to say something that sounded like, "It's all right, baby—it's all over. It's all right."

How could she say things like that, now? When I couldn't run any more?

There was someone else in the ambulance with us, a nice-looking man in civvies, but I knew he was a cop. Another cop. They were giving me a police escort.

I closed my eyes again, wanting to cry. Instead, I passed out once more. . . .

They were still with me when I came out of it, but now I was in a room, white, cool, clean and impersonal, like a cell in the death house. I twisted my lips into a grotesque smile for Sis.

"Don't worry, honey," I said. "I'll be okay."

Her eyes were brimming with tears, but she was smiling back at me.

"I know, Randy. You'll be fine."

The cop, the nice-looking fellow, stepped closer, and I thought for a minute he was going to put his arm around her. "They caught Langmeier. He hasn't confessed, but they can prove everything."

"Langmeier!"

"That's right, kid." The cop was talking, and Sis was looking up at him with a strange light in her eyes. "You almost upset the apple cart and got yourself killed."

And then they told me. This cop was another Lieutenant—Gerard—and he'd been trying for months to build a case against Langmeier, the cop the organization couldn't reach. They suspected him of being thick with the racket boys, and they traced him to Lew Youngman.

The cops had smelled something fishy in the deal I'd gone to jail for. Gerard knew I was taking a bum rap, but they couldn't see the connection. That's because there was none. It was one of Langmeier's private deals. He wanted Cora, and he wanted me out of the way so he could get her. He bullied Lew into his part of it, but Lew had a little conscience and had made the money proposition to me.

THINKING that I might be part of the organization, Gerard had contacted Sis several months ago. She had convinced him

that I was nothing more than a gullible jerk, and then he'd let her in on the rest of the story.

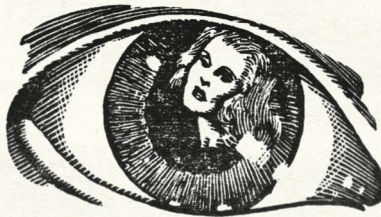
So Langmeier had killed Cora. He had been in the bedroom when I'd knocked her down, and he'd seen a perfect chance to get rid of her and frame me. Why get rid of Cora? I couldn't be sure, but knowing Cora as I did now, I could guess she'd become too ambitious. Spending my eighteen grand must have made her money hungrier, and she was making Langmeier shell out.

Tonight he had come back for virtually the same reason as I—to destroy evidence. But Gerard, knowing that Langmeier had been keeping Cora, had been right behind him all the time.

"There's nothing to worry about any more," Sis said, and beamed, "except getting well. You'll feel pretty terrible for awhile, but you'll be all right. You always have been—except that you knew too many of the wrong people."

They left me then, and I couldn't help noticing the way they felt about each other. Sis and Gerard. I wondered if he was good enough for her. I was glad—glad she'd got over Lew. I wondered when I'd be able to do as much—get over Lew, get over Cora, the wrong people.

You never know until you try.



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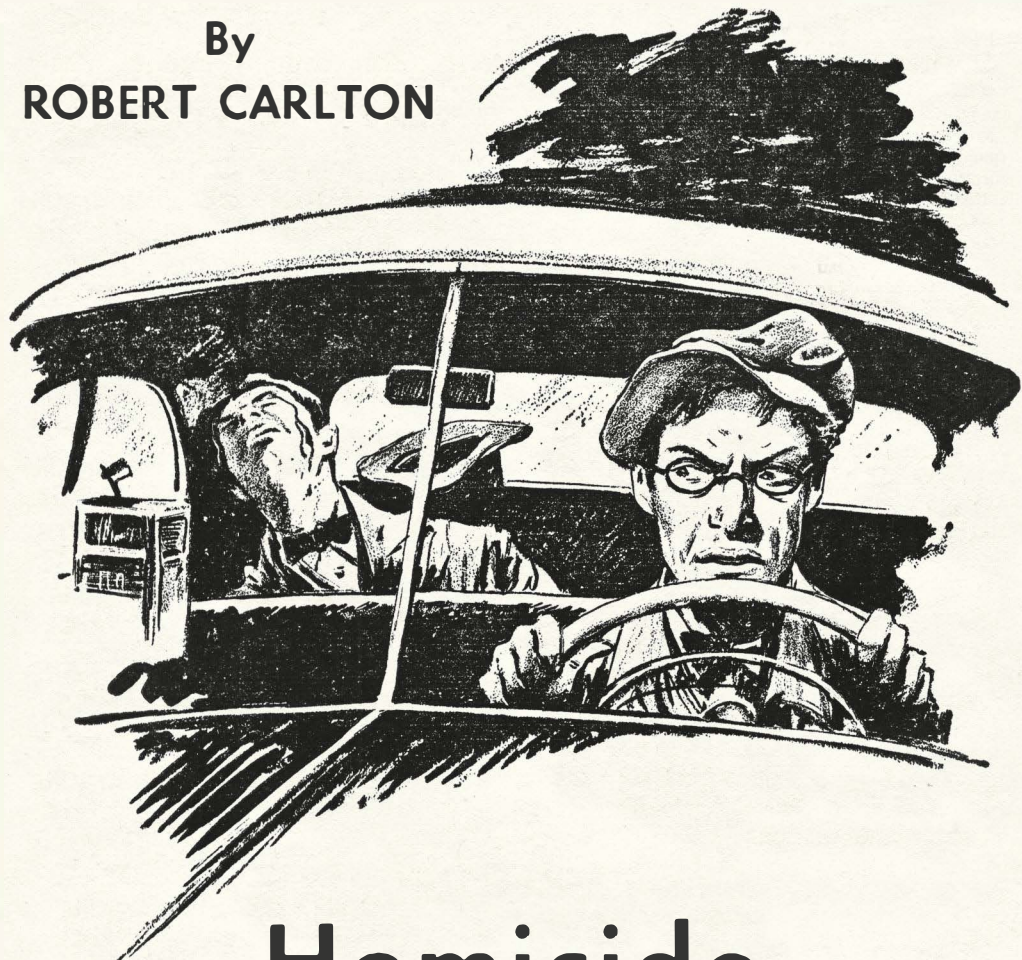
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By
ROBERT CARLTON



Homicide Haul

A NIGHT cabby is liable to find almost anything in the back seat. The past five years I've found some dillies, including a gent's wig, size seven, a ladies' South African love charm, and the keys to Tyler, Texas. Once I found a live duck-billed platypus, and I don't blame the guy for losing it. But I'll never forget the date—September 12th—I found a corpse.

The day drivers get the ordinary custom-

ers, the businessmen, the shoppers, the old ladies frantic to catch a train. The night cabbies, especially the graveyard shift, ride the characters—the great lovers, the part-time millionaires, and the deluxe drunks.

This Nelson Claredon was a lush, and a back-seat orator. He talked. About everything—his brokerage business, education, health, his grandmother's funeral, the ponies, politics, and his future. Mostly he talked

The taxi meter was ticking . . . but not the passenger's heart!

about his wife, Mona. He said she was earth's most beautiful creature, and he loved her beyond words.

But when I asked if Mona returned his love, Mr. Claredon fell oddly silent. Then he'd talk about Jed Sever, and I got it Jed Sever was a skunklike cousin of the platypus I'd found. Mr. Claredon stated all artists who induced other men's wives to sit for midnight portraits were wicked. He further asserted Jed Sever was uncouth, immoral, no gentleman, and low. He said all Sever's ancestors were degraded; that Sever should be shot, then hung.

From this I got it Mr. Claredon did not like Mr. Sever. And since it is not a hackie's job to raise a customer's blood pressure, I asked no more. But I put two and two together and got four, so I wasn't surprised to learn Mr. Claredon was not divorcing his wife, for such a so-and-so. Among other things I can say Mr. Claredon was a prophet, but here is exactly what happened.

IT WAS the night of September 12th, or the morning of the 13th, if you start your day at midnight as I do. At one a.m. as usual, I parked Five-Twelve outside the Clover Club. I had a standing order six nights a week to pick up Mr. Claredon at the club. Since Mr. Claredon was a folding-money tipper, I was on time.

He wandered out of the dine-dance-gamble joint, listed to port, and trailed his expensive topcoat across the sidewalk. His black homburg teetered precariously over his thin face, and his big dark eyes regarded me broodingly.

"Joey," he said thickly, "I'm tight."

I touched my cap and helped him into the rear seat. "Six nights a week, Mr. Claredon. With you it's a career. What do you do on Sunday night?"

He flopped back on the cushions. "On Sunday night I pray."

I closed the door and climbed behind the wheel. I'm not tall, only five-six, and I use a cushion for better visibility. As I sat down, I felt the Stilson under the cushion. I was aware the riding public looked questioningly at drivers who carried wrenches in the front seat, but considering the hazards of a night

driver's life, I'd adopted a public-be-damned attitude. I slipped the DeSoto in gear. As we coasted away from the curb, Mr. Claredon leaned forward and rested his elbows on the window's edge.

"Pray, Joey," he repeated. "I'm no good. My heart is no good. My soul stinks. Prayer is all I have left. You know how I got my start in the brokerage business?"

I eased the cab into the right-hand traffic lane. They talk better if I drive slow. "Sure. You worked hard and saved your money."

"Like hell I did," Mr. Claredon retorted. "I sold worthless bonds, Joey, to people with faith. Little people—widows, small businessmen, retired conductors, fruit peddlers. I got them to stick their life savings in bum stocks, and left them with the sack."

"So?" I stopped for a red light. "It's a rough old world, Mr. Claredon. Dog eat dog. Big fish gets the little fish. You did the best you could."

"No, Joey." I glanced in the rear vision mirror as Mr. Claredon's voice broke. Tears streaked my fare's pallid face. Mr. Claredon had started his crying jag. "No. And now I'm without hope. The Man Upstairs is paying me off. You ever wonder why I go to the Clover Club six nights a week?"

The light flashed green. "To have fun, I suppose. See some undressed chorus cuties, win some dough. Me, I got a wife and two kids, and can't afford it."

"I go to forget what a fool I am," Mr. Claredon sniffed. "I thought money alone could bring happiness. You ever been in love, Joey?"

"Well," I said. "You tell me what love is."

MY FARE flopped back on the seat. "The reason a man breathes, that's what love is." Mr. Claredon's voice sounded yearning, soulful. "The reason his heart beats and he can see the sun and the stars. His essence, Joey, his very life. The reason he goes to the Clover Club six nights a week."

"That ain't what I got," I said. "I got the monthly payments on the refrigerator and washing machine."

Mr. Claredon fell silent as I toiled Five-Twelve through the thin after-midnight

traffic. Silent with words, that is, but breathing hard, mumbling to himself. I turned into Parkway, slowed as Verne's neon showed through the trees. I glanced over my shoulder. Mr. Claredon was huddled in the corner, looking blankly out the window.

"You want that peanut butter sandwich tonight?" I asked.

Mr. Claredon nodded dumbly. Every night he had me stop at Verne's Drive-Inn for the sandwich. I considered it a screwy idea, but Mr. Claredon thought the peanut butter absorbed alcohol and prevented a bad hangover. I parked in the shadows back of the stand, where the carhops wouldn't disturb my fare's meditations. Mac, the counterman, hollered the minute I stepped in the door.

"One peanut butter, no mayonnaise."

"Quiet night." Mac wrote up the ticket. "How come that gashound never comes in and eats his sandwich at the counter?"

"He's funny," I explained. "He don't like people staring at his dress clothes."

I carried the sandwich back to the cab. I wear glasses to correct near-sightedness, and barely passed the chauffeur's examination last April. I peered in the cab window. Mr. Claredon was slumped in the seat, his homburg pushed over his eyes. He looked asleep. I figured he might be sore unless he got his alcohol-absorber.

"Wake up, Mr. Claredon," I said. "Here's your sandwich."

He didn't answer. I opened the back door and the ceiling light flashed on. Mr. Claredon's lips looked pale. I joggled his arm and the hat tumbled off. For a moment I thought I was in Mme. Vinand's Wax Museum. An ugly red gash traversed Mr. Claredon's forehead and blood trickled down his nose. His eyes were open, glassy. I yelled and dropped the sandwich. As the plate shattered on the pavement, I climbed in the cab, grabbed Mr. Claredon's shoulders, and shook him hard.

"Wake up, Mr. Claredon." I pleaded. "For the love of Mike, wake up! It's me, Joey. What happened? Talk to me."

Mr. Claredon's head rolled loosely. I grabbed for my fare's pulse. He had no pulse. He was dead. My brain went numb. Then a bright object on the cab floor caught my eye.

Thick-fingered, I picked it up. It was a Stilson wrench, the chrome-steel head stained red. My Stilson, from the initials scratched on the handle—the one I kept under the front cushion to discourage belligerent fares.

IT'S POSSIBLE at this moment, I became confused. My school records disclose I had trouble getting out of the sixth grade. At any rate I did something no seventh grader would be guilty of, something utterly contrary to a boy scout's principles. I searched Mr. Claredon's body. I hold no brief for guys who roll passed-out fares, but if the riding public will strain hard enough, I think they'll see my point. A lot of people, including cops, mistrust cab drivers. They don't see the overall picture, the fine service rendered in emergencies. They read of this driver or that who got involved in a crime, and because of a few bad ones, call the whole barrel rotten. Honest, I just wanted to see if Mr. Claredon had been robbed.

He'd been robbed, all right. His watch and wallet were missing. That fact brought the creeps to my spine and started a train of first-class, sixth-grade thinking. Suppose I called the cops? Suppose they said I robbed and killed Mr. Claredon? There was blood on my Stilson, and could I prove otherwise? Inside Verne's a juke box blared to life, pounded out boogie. An oblong of light appeared on the pavement as the kitchen door swung open. Ruthie, one of the carhops, stepped onto the parking lot, lit a cigarette.

"Hey, Joey," she called. "Who yelled? It sounded like somebody was being murdered."

I shoved Mr. Claredon's hat over the wound and backed out of the cab. Carhops pick some of the damndest times to smoke. I got between Ruthie and the cab. She stared at the broken plate on the pavement.

"Who dropped that?" she asked. "And what are you dancing around about?"

"I got a chill," I chattered. "Run inside and get me another sandwich, quick."

She started for the cab. "The lush again? What's the hurry? I'd like to meet the guy. I hear he's got dough."

I met her nine-tenths of the way, pushed her into the kitchen. "Get going. It's worth

a buck if you hurry up with the sandwich.”

I ran back to the cab. If possible, it was getting worse. Ruthie had heard somebody yell and had seen me getting out of the cab. The cops liked easy solutions. I got behind the wheel and drove out of there. I drove around the park, where there was less chance of running into a company supervisor. I think the public will agree I was a cab driver with a problem. I tried to light a cigarette, but I couldn't find it with a barn on fire. Thinking only gave me a headache. I finally pulled in behind Eddie Mason's cab at the Owl Restaurant stand.

“Hey, Eddie,” I called. “C'mere a minute.”

Eddie is a good boy who knows the value of a buck. He detached his lanky frame from a fender and walked back to Five-Twelve.

“Hi, Joey,” he said. “You going to make the two o'clock line outside the Grove?”

“Not me,” I said. “Look, Eddie—you're one of the smartest hustlers on the streets, and you got a high school diploma. If you found a dead body in the back of your cab, what would you do?”

“Dunno, Joey.” He scratched his ear thoughtfully. “That's a pretty academic question.”

“Academic, hell!” I said. “Be practical.”

“Dump him in the river,” Eddie said.

“I can't do that,” I protested. “The guy was a good tipper. At least, he deserves a decent burial.”

Eddie looked at me queerly. “He does, huh?”

“Yeah.” I felt goofy, and my voice sounded tight, funny. “The guy wasn't a saint exactly, but who is? Eddie, do I look all right? I mean, I don't seem to be sleep-walking, or having a nightmare, or anything?”

“You look peaked,” Eddie said. “You been drinking? I got some garlic salt in my hack, you're welcome to it in case you—hey, yqu got a fare!”

THE riding public will please note I am recording this conversation exactly as it was spoken. A hackie driving a dead man around does not entirely have all his marbles.

“You wouldn't want to loan any garlic salt,” I said absently. “You might not have enough to put on your spaghetti when you break for lunch.”

I saw Eddie peering hard at the back seat, and glanced in the rear vision mirror. Mr. Claredon's hat had slipped. I slammed the DeSoto into gear and roared away from the curb. Behind me Eddie waved frantically.

“Hey, Joey—wait! What you got back there. Who—?”

Wait, nothing, I thought. I gunned the cab around a corner and into a dark side street. I fixed Mr. Claredon's hat, jammed it over his ears. Then I drove south, obeying the traffic laws, and keeping a weather eye out for prowling cars. If Eddie tipped the cops, if—

Ifing was useless. I was in the soup and everywhere I turned, it got soupier. South, the street lights grew farther apart, and the pavement got rougher. Dark loft buildings rose steeply from narrow sidewalks, blotted out the moon and stars. A dank smell hung in the air, and mist fogged the windshield. I turned the wiper on. As the squeegee swished across the glass, I saw the pier shed at the street's end; and beyond that, dark, oily, gleaming in the night—the river.

The public will probably say I had no one to blame but myself, that all bodies should be reported this instant to the police. What happens now, was the result of my frame of mind, and is no reflection on other Democrats. Mr. Claredon was a rich man. I want no confusion. I am a loyal, taxpaying American. I do not believe in chucking rich men, even dead ones, into the river.

Loose planking rattled under the DeSoto's wheels as I drove onto the dock. I parked in the blackest shadows next to the shed. I cut the headlights and the motor. I listened. Water slip-slapped the pier pilings, and somewhere a boat whistled mournfully. I buttoned my leather jacket and crawled out of the cab. The nearest light was a pale yellow blob in the river mist, a block away.

The interior light snapped on as I opened the rear door. I jumped back and nearly fell in the river. I'd forgotten the light went on automatically. Mr. Claredon had skidded down in the seat, so one hand dragged the

floor. It was not nice work, I recall. Goose pimples chilled my arms as I dragged Mr. Claredon from the cab and lowered him to the dock planks.

"Mr. Claredon," I said, "I hate to do this, but I think you'd understand."

I grabbed the back of his coat collar, and that's when I saw the flashlight winking down the pier. I let loose of Mr. Claredon's collar and straightened up. My mouth felt like a hole in the central Sahara.

THE light bobbed along the shed's creosoted sides and a pair of authoritative feet thumped the dock. I thought about returning Mr. Claredon's body to the cab. I thought about running. For these things I had no time. I rolled Mr. Claredon under the DeSoto and stepped out of the shadows. The flashlight swung, limned me against the shed.

"A hack driver." The voice behind the light was hard, guttural. "What do you want out here this time of night?"

A guy in a mild state of shock grabs the nearest thought. "I want to get rid of a dead guy," I said eagerly. "Got any ideas?"

"Dead guy? None of your wisecracks, now. I'm the watchman. We been having a lot of robberies along the front lately. Come on, what're you doing here?"

"Look," I amended hastily, "I only drove out here so a drunk could get some air. Give me a break, will you?"

The watchman beamed the light into the cab. "I don't see no drunk."

"He went up to the end of the pier, to feed the fish."

The watchman grunted his suspicion. He flipped the light down, and the beam caught on the tips of Mr. Claredon's glossy shoes, protruding from beneath the cab near the left front wheel. His yell awoke the echoes. Talk was useless. I jumped him.

I wrapped my arms around his waist and shoved him back toward the river. He was active. He dropped the flashlight and flailed both fists. He hit me behind the ear, but I felt no pain. I called up all the reserves, and forced him to the dock's edge. I bent my back and heaved. His figure arched over the oily water. Came a loud plop, then much

hollering and splashing. I ran back to the cab, dragged Mr. Claredon inside. I back off the dock, full speed, without lights, and to hell with traffic laws.

Keeping to the back streets, I worked up to the hillside cemetery. Call it the power of suggestion. I parked in a dead-end street, the city lights spread below. I struck a match and inspected myself in the rear vision mirror. It was some guy I'd never seen before, a grimy gray-faced character with wild eyes any cop would arrest on sight. I wiped the dampness off my forehead, and got out. Ahead, over a vine-covered wall, tombstones loomed in the moonlight.

I opened the rear door again. I stared hard at Mr. Claredon's waxy face, while creepy, clammy things crawled up my back. What I had in mind was ghoulish and unholy, but there was a spade in the rear compartment for emergencies, and I had to admit an emergency existed. I reached for Mr. Claredon and glanced at the meter. Already the guy had run up a seven-fifty fare. And that's when I got the big idea.

THE RIDING public must remember I was operating under plenty of pressure. What seems screwy to the calm and untroubled mind, seems very logical to the gee whose life is endangered. Under ordinary circumstances I wouldn't dig a hole in my back yard, crawl in, and pull the hole in after me. But let a bomb fall, and it's a different matter. Out of the tempest and turmoil of no previous experience, forged in the hot crucible of the night's dizzy events, came a gem of purest ray serene.

Jed Sever should be shot, then hung.

I got the artist's address from a gas station phone book. Fourteen Andrew Lane, in the west side's bohemian district. It was a four-story graystone with gingerbread cornices, housing art studios. I parked in the trademan's entrance, pushed Mr. Claredon's body to the cab floor, and covered it with the topcoat. In the foyer, I rang Mr. Sever's bell. A man's voice came down the speaking tube.

"Your cab is waiting, sir," I said.

The voice sounded grouchy. "You've got the wrong bell. I didn't order a cab."

"You'll want this one," I said firmly. "There's a guy inside it you know—name of Nelson Claredon."

The tube was silent so long I thought maybe I had rung the wrong bell. Then the voice said: "Come up to four-nine."

The latch buzzed and I went inside. I rode up to four in an automatic elevator. Jed Sever was waiting in the corridor outside his apartment. He wore slacks, a sport shirt open at the throat, and sandals. His face was deeply tanned and his dark hair looked marcelled. Broad shoulders sloped to a narrow waist—the kind of build I thought some women might eye hungrily.

"What's this about a Mr. Claredon in your cab," Mr. Sever demanded. "Is he drunk again?"

"He's not drunk," I said bleakly. "He's dead."

The news didn't exactly floor Mr. Sever. He looked me up and down closely. "Why tell me?" he asked. "Take him to a hospital or the morgue."

I figured it wasn't natural. If Mr. Sever knew nothing about Mr. Claredon's murder, he would at least inspect the body—so I grabbed the bull by the horns.

"Look," I said. "I didn't come here to toss words around. I know you killed Mr. Claredon, and you're trying to frame me with the murder. You're in love with his wife. You knew he stopped every night at Verne's. So you done him in and made it look like I robbed him."

Mr. Sever chewed his mustache a moment and plain stared. Then he stepped back and held his door open. "You're quite mad," he said, "but come inside."

AS I WALKED into the studio, I thought I heard a flurry of feet and saw movement behind a corner screen. The whole north wall was window, and paintings on easels littered the room. A log simmered in the fireplace, flicked shadows on the beamed ceiling. Mr. Sever motioned me to a divan that hugged the floor. He went to a table cluttered with brushes, tubes of paint, and palettes. He took a gun from a drawer. He started toward a desk phone.

"Now," he said, "I'll call the police."

"It's your funeral if you do," I said. "I'll show them the picture."

Mr. Sever stopped abruptly. "What picture?"

I kept a stiff upper lip although my heart was pounding one-fifty a minute. "You got a bad break, Mr. Sever. I'm a candid camera fan; see? I got a camera rigged in my hack's meter box to get unexpected shots of people. When you open the rear door a light goes on, and the camera takes a picture automatically. I got a picture of you conking Mr. Claredon."

The public will know cab companies do not allow any such gadgets in meter boxes, but Sever didn't know Mr. Claredon was a back-seat orator. I could see the guy thinking, wondering how I knew about Claredon's wife. The lie got other results. A woman stepped from behind the screen and walked over to Mr. Sever. She was a blonde with bangs. She wore a pale green skirt, a white blouse with broad brown stripes, and brown suede shoes. Pearls glowed in her earlobes. To someone in a rummy fog she might appear as the world's loveliest creature.

"Jed," she said, "perhaps you'd better not call the police."

Mr. Sever opened his mouth to argue the point, but she waved him into silence. "Let me see that picture, cabby," she said.

I began to breathe again. "I'm not that dumb," Mrs. Claredon. The picture is in a good safe place until you two pay off."

"I see." She eyed me thoughtfully. "How much will the picture cost?"

"Five thousand. I thought you'd see the light, and I'm not above making a fast buck. You get the negative."

"We get the negative," she repeated. "Jed, what do you think?"

Mr. Sever lifted the gun. "I think he is lying. I think we should call the police, or—"

"A hacky pal of mine has the picture," I cut in fast. "If I don't show in an hour, he gives it to the cops. So you shoot me. Does that get you anywhere?"

Mona Claredon pushed Mr. Sever's gun down, stripped a diamond ring from her finger. "We can't take the chance, Jed. He's here, and that means he knows too much. I don't have five thousand dollars, cabby, but

this ring is worth that much."

"You don't have to pay me until I deliver," I said. "Anyway, I need your help."

Her eyes narrowed. "How?"

"Dumping the body," I said. "I'm not getting rid of Mr. Claredon by my lonesome. I need a lookout, a pair of eyes to watch while I do the dirty work."

Mona Claredon turned to Mr. Sever. Her voice had a nasty edge. "You're coming along. You started this. Get my coat."

"I started it!" Mr. Sever looked surprised. "It was your bright idea. You said he wouldn't divorce you."

I got up. "Come on," I growled. "We haven't got all night and the cops might investigate my cab. You can fight about it later."

I'VE MET some cold-blooded hussies, but this Claredon woman took a posy. She stepped over her dead husband as if he wasn't there, settled back in the cab and waved me out of the areaway. Sever put the gun on me and leaned forward to inspect the meter.

"The camera is inside the box," I explained quickly. "It snaps through the fare window. You can't see the lens."

I turned down Grant toward town. The meter ticked in my ear, like a loud clock. Time was running out. Now I had the body, the murderers, and the motive—but what to do with them? I considered running the cab into a lamppost, but I'm careful of company property, and Sever might have a quick trigger finger. All through the downtown section I looked for a policeman. Any other time a hundred would have been around, but now, no cops.

I ran a red light, hoping the car behind was a prowler. Sever growled at me. "Do you want us to get caught? Be careful of those lights."

"I had my mind on the back seat," I said.

I knew it was thin ice, but I ran past the Owl Restaurant. Eddie Mason's cab was parked at the curb again. I blasted the horn, and the dumb cluck waved. Sever leaned forward, but I beat him to the punch.

"Pal of mine," I said lightly. "I want everything to look kosher."

Then my scalp started tingling again. The street lights got thinner, the loft buildings rose, and the dank river smells seeped into the cab. At the street's end the pier shed loomed. I bounced the DeSoto over the railroad tracks, past the watchman's shanty, and onto the dock.

I pulled into the shadows, switched off the lights and motor. The steering wheel felt damp and cold. "This is a good place. Nobody around."

The back seat lit up as Mr. Sever opened the door. I glanced through the glass partition, saw Mrs. Claredon take her feet off her dead husband's torso. "Get that damned light out," she said, "and make this fast. Let's get out of here."

I wasn't in any hurry. I took my time getting out of the cab. I looked up the dock and prayed as never before. Mr. Sever pulled Mr. Claredon to the wharf. He turned around and stuck the gun into my stomach.

"This is where you get yours," he said coldly. "You pulled a smart trick, and I didn't catch it right away. You don't have a camera concealed in the meter box. If you had, it wouldn't have taken my picture when I killed Claredon. The light goes off when the door closes. And I had the door closed when I hit him." a

The gun felt big as a 105-howitzer. "It took your picture when you got in the cab," I said feebly. "You'll have a tough time explaining that to the cops."

"I'll explain nothing, cabby. After I fix you, I intend to plant Mr. Claredon's watch and wallet on your body and put the gun in Claredon's hand. The police will think he shot you during a robbery."

THAT'S when I saw the flashlight winking down the dock. The happiness started at my toes, and I grinned at Mr. Sever.

"Not so fast," I said. "There's a guy coming up the dock behind you, and if he's mad as a guy who's been dumped in the river should be, he's got a gun. You see, Mr. Sever, I brought Mr. Claredon's body down here earlier tonight and the watchman spotted me. I thought he'd spot me again. You can tell him why you and Mrs. Claredon are riding around with Mr. Claredon's

body. It might be a bit difficult to explain.

"You're full of corny tricks," Sever said.

"Don't look," I shrugged. "It's your funeral."

Then Mona Claredon screamed as the flashlight beam outlined her frightened face in the rear window. Sever spun around, and his gun spat flame across the dock. I swung the wrench. Sure, I had the Stilson. I'd put it back under the cushion in case I ran into any belligerent customers, and Sever could sure qualify.

The wrench thudded into his head and he crumpled. I let him have it again, not too hard. I didn't want to kill the guy, but I was

plenty sore, and I hoped Sever's noggin would be that way, too, when he woke up. Folding-money tippers are rare birds. The dime guys are different. Some of them I could cheerfully murder, myself.

Handcuffs clinked as the watchman rushed up—but maybe the public read the rest in the papers. They booked Jed Sever and Mona Claredon for murder and Mr. Claredon got a decent burial. I even attended the funeral.

But I think the riding public will agree—it was unfair to union labor, when the company asked me to pay the twelve-sixty fare run up by Mr. Claredon's body.

CASE OF THE TOO-CAREFUL THIEF

WILLIAM HURTERS had come up with a scheme. He thought it was a pretty good scheme. While temporarily employed as a wrapper-and-mailer at a men's clothing store in Memphis, last Xmas, he helped himself to a couple of fine suits and some nice shirts and neckties, wrapped the stolen items neatly, and discreetly mailed them to himself.

He had been careful—mighty careful. No one had seen him filch the clothes. No one had observed him putting his own name and address on the packages.

Even in the matter of postage, he was careful. Requiring only 28 cents postage, he was careful enough to paste 98c worth of stamps on each package. He wasn't taking any chances on the post office returning the package for lack of the required postage. Still, careful as he was, his scheme backfired.

The package was never delivered to his home. He wondered what had happened to it. Police dropped by a few days later, and enlightened him. The post office had returned the package to the store. The store, seeing his name on it, became suspicious, checked, discovered what he had been up to, and notified the cops. Hurters—he was puzzled, indeed.

"But why," he wanted to know, "should the package have been returned to the store. I was awfully careful to prevent exactly that from happening . . . by putting more than enough postage onto the package!"

That, police revealed as they arrested him, was the whole trouble. He'd been careful, all right—TOO careful. The package had been returned by the post office—as per rules and regulations in all such cases—for having far too much postage affixed to it!

In court, the judge sentenced William Hurters to a one-year jail term.

It was certainly ironic! Many a thief has been jailed for being a mite too careless when carrying out his scheme; but, here, he, Hurters, had been jailed for being, of all things, a mite too careful!

—Joseph C. Stacey





The HOOD HARVEST

a novelet by WILLIAM F. SCHWARTZ

*When Johnnie Dekker, once a Big Shot, trudged back into town,
he made some new pals right away . . . the kind he didn't want*



JOHNNIE DEKKER felt like a dead man. Gone from his frail body was all hope and feeling, and there was nothing inside but an aching void. Hatless, without an overcoat, he limped down the trash-littered alley, only vaguely conscious of the raw March wind that buffeted him and tore at his thinly clad frame with icy fingers.

A rat, bloated from over-eating, wheeled about at his approach. The rat had been gnawing on some potato peelings from a spilled garbage can and it struck a defensive pose as though it expected the derelict to battle for the food.

Johnnie hunched thin shoulders, carefully avoided the rat and limped on. The limp was no product of nature or injury. He limped because his right shoe, the one with the bigger hole, was stuffed with a thick wad of cardboard.



He brought the gun up in an arc and aimed, pointblank, at Johnnie

This was Johnnie Dekker and this was his home-coming. He dug his right hand, the one with the three fingers missing, deeper into the torn pocket of his sport jacket—the sport jacket that was already ragged when he had bought it, months before, at a second-hand store on East Baltimore Street in Baltimore.

This was his home-coming. He was back in the Big Town. But nobody who saw him would remember him as Johnnie Dekker, one of the slickest card handlers the Big Burg had ever produced. Once Johnnie Dekker had wagered thousands on the turn of one card. But that was long ago—long ago before they had framed him on that murder rap and he had fled southward, penniless and friendless, living on borrowed time, cloaked with assumed names.

He had lost his fingers in a workhouse laundry in Georgia when he had been picked up on a vagrancy charge. He had served his time as Johnnie Dinsmore. He'd never had a record before, had never been fingerprinted. That's why he had served his sentence quietly. Nobody at the country jail down in Georgia knew he was Johnnie Dekker, who was wanted back in the Big City on a murder charge.

Once he had been Johnnie Dekker—the big shot. Now he was cowed and beaten. A ragged, wandering bum. He hadn't even shaved in weeks.

HE HAD wandered back to the Big Town without plan, without reason. The rap still hung over his head. If he was picked up and recognized, the only end would be in the hot seat. That, he knew. But he didn't care. He was beyond caring any more. He was more dead than alive. Was he coming back for revenge? He didn't know. He didn't care. In his pocket, he had thirteen cents—a nickel and eight pennies. Not enough for a shot. Barely enough for a cup of coffee. His wasted belly groaned and he knew he was hungry again.

Despite the chill of the day, a bright sun beamed overhead. Its smiling brightness mocked him, made him feel more unwanted, more neglected. He shuffled out of the alley on to a bustling thoroughfare. Pedestrians,

muffled to the ears in warm clothes, walked briskly along the sidewalks. Automobiles and trucks and taxis screeched their tires and honked their horns in the street. Everywhere was life. And inside Johnnie Dekker was death.

He looked for policemen. He still avoided the Law. But there were no signs of blue-coats anywhere. Well, hardly anywhere. There was one—a traffic cop at a nearby busy intersection who used his white-gloved hands to bully the racing vehicles, the scurrying pedestrians. But he was too busy with the hurrying crowds, the jammed-up traffic, to notice the ragged figure who limped along so painfully.

Johnnie's eyes found what he sought—a white-fronted restaurant. He shoved at the polished glass door with his grimy left hand. He hardly ever used his right any more since the fingers were slashed off. He limped inside.

Warmth, the scents of coffee and of frying hamburgers assailed him. He shuffled to the counter and lifted himself onto a high stool. He shoved his nickel and pennies on the gleaming white counter and muttered "Coffee" to the waitress who sniffed at him, almost in disdain.

Johnnie eyed her with baleful eyes. She was a pretty creature all right, in a cheap sort of way. A thick but shapely body in a white uniform, close-cropped blonde hair and round, rouged cheeks. She was pretty all right. But once Johnnie Dekker had consorted only with the beautiful. Women, beautiful women, really beautiful women, were once a dime a dozen to Johnnie Dekker. The memory of it smote at him and he cursed inwardly. Then he sighed at his anger. His anger was the first spark of feeling that had invaded his being in hours.

He sipped at the scalding hot coffee, felt his guts come alive with its comforting hotness. He became aware of the smells of frying hamburgers and again hunger gnawed at him. But he had only thirteen cents. Above the price of the coffee, he possessed only three dull copper pennies.

He started to grab at the pennies. Then a touch of bitter irony raced through him. Leave the pennies there for a tip, he muttered inwardly and began to ease his tired

frame from the stool.

But the waitress came back again. There was a faint clatter as she brought down a dish on the counter in front of him. On the dish was a steamed bun and inside the bun a succulent hamburger that oozed grease and stewed onions onto the plate.

Johnnie's greedy eyes feasted on the hamburger. How good it would be, he told himself, if that meat were his. It was insane to tempt a starving man with meat.

Then a voice boomed behind him.

"Eat that, old-timer!" the voice said to Johnnie. "Eat that. It's on us. Want another cup of Joe?" And Johnnie heard the voice tell the waitress, "Give him another cup of Joe."

Johnnie located the voice. It came from one of two well-fed and well-dressed men who stood behind him. Each man had a fat cigar stuffed in fat lips. Each face was freshly shaved and powdered. Each man was big and well-groomed and wore an expensive overcoat. They were big and fat and soft. Only their eyes were hard.

"Go ahead, old-timer," one of them urged. "Eat it. It's yours."

BOTH of them chuckled. But there was no mirth in the chuckles.

Detectives! Johnnie's heart leaped within him. But no. No. These men weren't detectives. They looked too soft. Their well-manicured hands were too fleshy and too soft for detectives.

But what was their game?

They made him aware of his own dirtiness and raggedness. He hated their fat, soft, bloated faces. They reminded him of the bloated rat in the alley. He hated their confident, well-fed smirks.

If he still had one spark of decency, one spark of self-respect, he would have lifted the plate and the greasy hamburger and slammed them flush into their bloated faces. But he was hungry. Insanely hungry. The smells of food, of frying meat was bringing insanity to his brain, to his belly. He lifted the hamburger. Not to hurl it into their faces. But to wolf it down in sudden, greedy gulps. While he swallowed the warm, moist, life-saving meat, he heard again their con-

fidant chuckles. And a loathing grew within him.

"Want another, old-timer?" the voice asked again.

He shook his head. Old-timer, eh? he asked himself. Well, maybe he looked old. But he was only thirty-eight. They were hardly younger than he. They were at least forty, he guessed. But he was aged with hardship. He knew he looked old. His thin face was whiskered. Their bloated cheeks were soft and pink and shining. He was dressed in rags. They were impeccably groomed. Each wore a gray hat and a dark blue coat with a black velvet band at the neck. They were dressed alike. They looked like twins, almost.

One of them took Johnnie by the elbow.

"Come along, old-timer," he said and steered Johnnie toward the door.

Johnnie shook his head, tried to free himself.

"What's the pitch?" he asked.

"He talks," the other said. "Imagine. He talks. Come along, old-timer. We just wanna take care of you."

"Why?" Johnnie asked.

"Charity!" one of them retorted. "Just plain charity." And they both laughed. Like it was a huge joke.

Johnnie went with them meekly. He had no place to go. He would have trusted the rat in the alley more than he trusted them. But he went meekly. What did he have to lose?

The car parked beside the curb was a long black limousine. One of the fat guys produced a big bunch of keys from his pocket, selected one of them, opened the door and slid himself over under the wheel. The other reached back inside and opened the back door.

"You sit in the back, old-timer," he said. Then, when Johnnie was inside, he closed the door and sat in the front seat with the driver.

"We want to give you a home, old-timer," he said back to Johnnie as the car glided away from the curb into the stream of traffic. Then they both laughed again, like it was another huge joke.

Johnnie let his weary body sag back into

the soft cushions of the limousine. Although his slowly awakening brain was flashing danger signals because of the unwarranted kindness of the two fat men, he felt more relaxed than he had been in months. He watched the traffic flow by as the car moved down the busy streets.

It was good to ride down the streets of the Big Burg once again in the back seat of a limousine. This was the Big Burg, the place he loved. His exile had been a lonely one. He closed his eyes and imagined that this was one of his old cars and that he was being driven out to one of his old spots for a night with the cards.

ALL his troubles had started five years before when he'd bucked Tug Gomers. Tug Gomers had moved in from Chicago with a mob of gunmen to take over all the gambling interests in the Big Burg. Johnnie had bucked them—until two of his own men had been gunned down and he woke up one morning with a gun in his hand and Lucille Holly, the torch singer, dead at his feet with her guts blasted out.

It was his own gun. But he could never remember shooting her, could never even remember going to her apartment in the first place. They had never been close, even if he had dated her, like he had dated dozens of others before. But there she had been—sprawled out in death like a big kewpie doll. His gun had been in his hand. And he'd had no alibi. Besides, the D. A. had been a close friend of Gomers.

Johnnie had made his getaway down a rear fire escape while police sirens screamed outside. In his haste, he had dropped the gun. He had read all about how he was wanted for murder when he made that hasty trip down South, thumbing rides on trucks and even riding the rods for several hundred miles at one stretch of the way.

He had realized, later, maybe he should have stayed and faced the music. But with Gomers and the D. A. as close as bed buddies what chance would he have had? Nothing but a one-way ticket to the hot seat.

That certain D. A. was gone now, swept out of office by a reform movement. But the murder rap was still over his head. And

Gomers was still around somewhere. Quieted down somewhat. But still around. Somewhere.

II



JOHNNY hardly noticed the limousine had stopped until the one big fat guy came back and opened the rear door of the car.

"This is it, old-timer," the fat guy said. "This is your new home."

It wasn't much of a home, even for Johnnie Dekker in his present state. It was a battered-looking flophouse that had a sign painted, "Beds—50c" outside.

The two fat guys barely nodded to the desk clerk inside the flophouse. They walked Johnnie up a couple of dark flights of steps and down a corridor that needed new wall-paper badly.

They used a key to open a door and Johnnie found himself inside a room that was quite large for a flophouse. It was almost an apartment. There was a door that led off to what looked like a kitchen, and another that led off to a bathroom.

"Like it?" one of them asked, and repeated, "This is your new home."

Johnnie eyed the iron bed, the dresser that had a cracked mirror in it. There was no rug on the floor. But there was a round table in the center of the room. The table was big enough for a good-sized card game and there were rings and ovals on its stained top that showed it had been used for holding plenty of bottles and glasses.

"What's your game?" Johnnie asked, finding his tongue. "Your racket? What racket you in?" He kept asking himself inside if these were some of Gomers's boys who had recognized him and brought him here for the rub-out.

One of the big fat buys twisted his bloated face into a big fat smile.

"We're in the insurance business," he said and clapped his partner on the back, like it was the start of another big joke.

But, for the first time, the other man didn't respond. Instead, he frowned.

"Cut it, Sam!" he ordered. "Cut it."

Sam looked like a hurt child whose gag has misfired.

"Aah, Chuck," he began, almost petulantly. "He won't wise. He—"

"*Cut it!*" Chuck barked. His tone was almost a snarl.

Sam's face sobered in seriousness.

"Okay," he said quietly.

"Sit down, old-timer," Chuck said to Johnnie. "Sit down. Like a drink?" he walked out into the kitchen and came back with three tumblers and a bottle. Then he sat down at the table with Sam and Johnnie. He filled one of the tumblers almost to the brim and shoved it over in front of Johnnie. "Here, drink this, old-timer," he said. "This'll warm you up."

Johnnie shook his head. And Sam laughed again.

"Go ahead, old-timer," he said. "It ain't rot-gut. It's good whisky."

"You drinking, too?" Johnnie asked. He was filled with suspicion now.

"Sure," Sam said. He poured himself out about a quarter of a tumbler and downed it at one gulp. "Sure," he said. "That's good grog. It won't hurt you? What you afraid of—poison?" Then he laughed again.

Chuck didn't laugh, though, Johnnie noticed.

"Go ahead, drink!" Chuck urged. "Do you good. You looked half-froze when you came in that hamburger joint. Maybe that's why I pitied you."

Johnnie took the tumbler in his left hand. His right hand was still in his pocket. He sipped at the whisky. It tasted all right. He had drunk plenty of whisky in his time. With taxes and all, a fifth of this stuff should cost about six or seven dollars. He wondered why they were wasting it on him.

BUT he took another sip, felt the fire burn inside his belly. This was making him feel good. He felt a little drunk from the first mouthful, even. His body wasn't used, now, to liquor. But it wasn't deadening him. Liquor never deadened him. It made his

brain more active. In the old days, he had been known as a guy who could hold his liquor.

He took another sip. He felt less suspicious now, now that Sam and even Chuck were taking more drinks from the same bottle.

"What's your handle?" Chuck asked.

"Handle?"

"Handle. Your name."

Johnnie took another sip, a bigger one this time. He felt like bragging, telling them he was Johnnie Dekker, the former big shot, a guy who once could afford imported champagne and not only whisky. But his awakening brain was urging caution.

"Johnnie Dinsmore," he said quietly.

"From any place in particular?" Chuck asked.

"Nowhere in particular," Johnnie said.

"Got a family?"

"No. None to speak of."

"Take another drink." Chuck started to fill Johnnie's tumbler again.

Johnnie's brain was flashing danger signals. He started to move his chair away from the table.

"No, thanks," he said. "I'll go now, if you don't mind."

"We mind!" Sam said and he shoved Johnnie back into his chair. Sam was strong, for a man who looked so soft.

"Aw, take another drink," Chuck said. He was smiling, trying to put Johnnie at his ease. "It won't hurt you. Like I said, ain't we all friends? Take another drink."

"No," Johnnie said.

"Aw, g'wan, old-timer! Don't be backward. We got plenty more."

"No," Johnnie said. "I don't want no more."

The smile vanished from Chuck's face and he lifted himself to his feet. Sam was on his feet, too, and they went to work together like a team. Sam grabbed Johnnie's long hair and jerked back Johnnie's head, suddenly and savagely. As Johnnie cried out in pain, Chuck hurled the contents of the tumbler into Johnnie's open mouth.

Johnnie choked and gagged, but the fiery liquor burned a path down his throat. He gasped for breath as Chuck seized the bottle

and began to pour whisky into him. When they freed him, his brain reeled and the room spun before his eyes. He was quite drunk.

Chuck pulled a long, legal-looking document from his pocket. "Sign this!" he barked and shoved a fountain pen at Johnnie.

When Johnnie made no move to take the pen, they yanked his right hand from his pocket where he had held it concealed.

"Cripes!" Sam ejaculated. "Look at his hand! Three fingers gone."

"What difference does that make?" Chuck yelled. "Who the hell cares if he ain't got no fingers at all?" He thrust the pen into Johnnie's hand. "Sign!" he said. His eyes were iron-hard.

Johnnie shook his head. Then he felt a blinding flash of pain as Chuck slapped him in the mouth with an open-handed blow. For such a soft-looking hand, it hurt. Pain raced through Johnnie in waves as Chuck slapped him again and again and again.

SAM slapped him, too. A blow that hit Johnnie on the top of the head, almost put the lights out.

"All right—all right!" Johnnie screamed. He was beyond fighting back, even though his hurt and drunken brain told him, now, what they were after. "I'll sign!"

He began to sign the bottom of the document. It was a sprawling, uneven signature. But he could still write with his mangled hand. His brain, sodden with drink though it was, told him to write "Johnnie Dinsmore" instead of "Johnnie Dekker."

Then Sam hit him again. This time with his fist. Johnnie tumbled back, felt the floor crash into him. He closed his eyes and feigned unconsciousness. That wasn't hard. Darkness was already closing in.

He felt rough hands lift his head, fingers tug at his eyelids.

"He's out," a voice said.

He barely heard it. Blackness was engulfing him. . . .

He awoke to find his head spinning. The inside of his mouth was raw and dry and a persistent hammering beat at his brain. He was in the throes of a terrific hangover.

The lights were on and the bottle stood inviting on the table. He raised himself pain-

fully from the floor and reeled over to the table. He raised the bottle. This would cure his hangover. A little of the dog that had bit him. This would cure the hangover.

Then it hit him.

Yes, this would cure his hangover—forever.

His brain was working now. Shock had brought it back to life. His brain was working now. His nimble brain that had amassed fortunes at the gambling tables. The brain wasn't too nimble. But it was nimble enough to warn him to keep his mouth away from that bottle.

This wasn't the same bottle. This was another bottle. This was the clincher. This was the wood alcohol. Or maybe even worse. This was the empty bottle they would find beside the rum-soaked body of the homeless drifter. This was what would make the pay-off.

The old insurance racket. Insurance men were they, eh? Maybe crooked insurance men. Oh, it might be odd that the homeless drifter had a paid-up insurance policy, even signed by his own hand, naming Chuck or Sam as the beneficiary. Sam or Chuck would be a cousin or nephew or some relative of the dead man. They would collect. It wasn't a new racket.

No. It wasn't a new racket. More than one harmless old drifter had been blotted out that way, and insurance money had been collected. But the thought of it sent rage streaming through Johnnie. To think that he could fall so low that a couple of hoods would mistake him for nothing more than a drunken bum who would drink his life away with a bottle of wood alcohol!

This changed the picture! He had to live now. Those hoods would pay for all his years of misery. They—and Gomers!

He went to the door. It was locked and there was no key. He lifted his left hand to pound on the door. Then he stopped. He went to the windows. There were two windows in the flophouse flat. One in the main room. One in the kitchen. But both had heavy bars on the outside. The sucker had no way out.

He went into the bathroom. There was no shower. Only a tub and a commode. He went

into the kitchen. There was a cold water faucet in the sink. He stuck his aching head under it and let the water pour out on him. The water drenched his long hair—and it sobered him.

He was sober now. But far from out of the trap. He Johnnie Dekker, the big shot, was alone, locked in a flat by a couple of hoods. Without a penny in his pockets. He smiled, wryly and grimly—his first smile in

there, he staggered in weakness and hunger, but the liquor was gone from him.

The cheese made better eating. Age and mold couldn't hurt cheese. He smiled when he thought how the rat would envy him his cheese. Or was it only mice that liked cheese?

The piece of cheese was a sizable hunk. But he ate only half of it and washed it down with plenty of cold water from the faucet.

THE BLUE VEIL



THE annals of crime are replete with stories of escapes, but it is doubtful whether there ever was one that, for sheer cleverness and split-second timing, matched a get-away perpetrated by Frances Staley, a notorious female shoplifter and swindler of the middle of the last century.

She'd been a pretty smart babe but the law finally caught up with her. When on trial, she was wearing a stunning blue gown with a blue veil to match, but the jury found her guilty anyway, and a deputy took her by the arm. Out of the courtroom he led her and down a street, enroute to the nearby city jail.

As they were moving along, the deputy tripped over the leg of a stranger heading in an opposite direction. The deputy turned and berated the pedestrian for his clumsiness. Then, having got that off his chest, he took his charge by the arm again and said, "All right, let's go."

Only now she wouldn't budge. "Come along, come along," he muttered gruffly. But she wouldn't move. He began to drag her. She struggled, screeching at the top of her voice. A crowd gathered.

"Why the gall of you!" she cried. "Trying to carry a lady off somewhere against her will! What's this country coming to!"

Then she lifted her veil. And, to the deputy's horror, it wasn't Frances Staley! He promptly let go of the strange woman and dashed down the street looking for the convicted swindler. He looked high and he looked low, but there was no Frances Staley anywhere.

As it dawned on him that he'd been the victim of a thought-out plot, that a switch had been pulled on him, he hurried back to arrest the woman with the blue veil who'd been dressed exactly like his prisoner. But when he got back she'd disappeared, just as cleanly as if she'd never existed. And, of course, the other participant in the plot, the clumsy pedestrian, had vanished too.

The deputy lost something else besides his prisoner that day—his job.

By Jack Benton

ages—when he thought of the three-cent tip he had left for the blonde waitress.

THERE was on ice-box. But no ice. But, in the ice box, there was a moldy piece of cheese and a half-rooted ham bone with some shreds of meat clinging to it. His thoughts drifted back to the rat and the potato peelings. He remembered the hamburger and he hungered for meat. He chewed at the particles of ham that clung to the bone and his sickened stomach retched. He went reeling to the bathroom. When he had finished

The cheese and the water helped fill the horrible emptiness in his belly.

He made a thorough search of the flat. The dresser yielded practically nothing. Only a pair of woman's panties, crumpled and covered with dust.

The closet in the main room was filled with cobwebs, dirt and dust. Clothes hadn't been hung in it for years. His hands probed in the dust for a weapon. Any sort of a weapon. Then he found it.

A hammer!

The hammer was rusty and had only half

a handle. It had been left there heavens knew when. Maybe by some carpenter. Maybe by some killer who had smashed out somebody's brain in this death-trap. But it was a weapon. And that was what he needed.

There was no clock in the flat and, of course, he had no watch. He could tell the passage of time only by the way darkness and light came to the windows. Chuck and Sam, he knew, wouldn't come back right away. They would leave him to grow moldy, like the cheese; to rot, like the ham.

That insurance policy would be dated months before. Premiums would have been paid on it. But eventually someone would come. Someone had to find the body. Not the beneficiary, of course. Not the one who would pose as the nephew or the cousin or some other close relative. But the other one. That one, Johnnie told himself grimly, the one who would come to find the body, that one would die.

He ate the cheese conservatively, kept his belly filled with water. Two days passed. Sometimes he heard footsteps in the hall outside. Once the laughter of a drunken woman. But nobody stopped at his door. The cheese and water diet, mostly water, might have starved another man. But Johnnie's stomach was accustomed to going long periods without food. He could stand it.

What worried him most was that he might doze off and be asleep when one of the fat men came.

III



STRETCHED out on the bed, Johnnie was trying to rest and, at the same time, to fight off sleep when he heard the key rattle in the key-hole. He slipped noiselessly off the bed and hurried through the darkness of

the room to the door.

The door began to open slowly, sending light into the room. There was a strong odor of cigar smoke. Johnnie was behind the door and watched, breathlessly, as the bulky figure came cautiously inside. The big man

was extremely cautious for somebody expecting to find only a dead man.

Johnnie raised himself on his toes and aimed. Not for the head, because the hat might soften the blow, but for the jaw. He swung the hammer at a point a few inches behind the end of the glowing cigar. Every ounce of his strength was in the blow.

There was a soft thud as hammer met flesh. The big man grunted and toppled forward, his hat flying from his head.

Johnnie smashed the hammer again and again into the back of the big man's head, and grinned in savage satisfaction when he saw the blood spurt out of the coal-black hair. Then he kicked the door shut with his foot, snapped on the light and rolled the fat man over. It was Sam. There was sort of a silly grin on his bloated face. The back of his head was bashed in. He was dead.

Johnnie worked quickly. There was a .38 automatic in Sam's inside coat pocket and a thick wad of bills in his wallet. Johnnie took both money and the artillery.

He would have liked to strip the big man of the warm heavy overcoat. But he contented himself with just the shoes and hat. The shoes were several sizes too large but Johnnie's feet were no longer used to being comfortably shod.

He eased himself out of the room and found an open window in the corridor below. There was a fire-escape and he made it to the street without being spotted. Then he hailed a cab and went over to the other side of town.

Johnnie selected the hotel with care. A cheap-looking dump where a man in his attire wouldn't be out of place. Then, with Sam's money, he tipped the seedy-looking character who served as desk clerk, bellhop and house dick to run down to a drug store for a razor, some sandwiches and coffee. He gave the guy a dollar over the bill. A dollar was nothing out of that roll. Sam had been carrying seven hundred and seventy-eight dollars on his fat person.

Johnnie ate first, filling his belly with his first good meal in weeks. Then he hacked off his beard, filled the rusty-looking tub with tepid water and had his first real bath in ages.

The sheets on the bed were cool and clean and he crawled between them naked. For the first time in years, he felt like a new man—clean and well-fed. He gloated for a while at what Chuck's reaction would be when the news came out that Sam's body and not the body of a derelict had been found in that death trap. Then he slept the clock around.

When he woke up, it was night again and he sent the old man out for some more coffee and sandwiches, and the newspapers. It puzzled him at first when he failed to find any mention of Sam's demise in the papers. He had expected to see printer's ink splashed around recklessly in large, gory headlines.

But when he thought it over for a while, he was no longer puzzled. Chuck and whoever was in that racket with him were probably concealing Sam's death from the police. After all, Sam's demise might lead to an investigation, now that that certain D. A. was out of office. It would be better for Chuck and all concerned to dispose of Sam's body quietly. It would be healthier for them that way.

And healthier for him, too. He chuckled when he thought of it.

THE next day, Johnnie was ready to seek out two men—Gomers and Chuck. It didn't really matter which one he found first. The result would be the same.

He needed new clothes. To get them, he had to go out on the streets and chance being spotted by the police. But when he thought it over, he decided it wasn't too much of a risk. Time and hardship had altered him.

Once he'd had fat, well-fed cheeks like Chuck and Sam. Now his cheeks were thin and hollow. Hard luck had changed his eyes, too, and his hair. His hair had more gray now than black. With a pair of dark glasses, he would almost be in disguise to anyone who remembered the old Johnnie Dekker. It would take close looking before any one would recognize him.

And nobody knew Johnnie Dekker had three fingers missing. The mangled hand would be a help now, instead of a hindrance. He could make a show of it. That would make people look at his hand, instead of his face.

He felt absolutely no pricks of conscience when he used Sam's money to buy new underwear, socks, shoes, a dark blue suit, a dark blue overcoat with a velvet band at the neck—just like Sam's and Chuck's—and a new gray hat.

He tipped the old man at the hotel a fin, paid his bill and moved to a better hotel. The old clothes he left at the cheap hotel with the seedy old man, with instructions to burn them.

It was a brand-new Johnnie Dekker who walked into the pool room. He adjusted his gray hat carefully, smoothed down the collar of his dark blue overcoat and wrapped his left hand around the .38—Sam's .38—that was inside the pocket of the overcoat.

There were six pool tables in the place, all strung out single file in the long narrow room. Only one table was being used—the second one from the rear wall. There were two pool shooters there.

The only other person in the place was a big, hulking man behind a candy case in the front of the building. He was adjusting a new tip on a cue stick. A bright light overhead gleamed down on his shiny bald head that had only a fringe of gray hair like a monk's tonsure.

"Hi-yuh, Lefty!" Johnnie greeted.

"Hi-yuh," the big man answered without bothering to look up.

"I said 'Hi-yuh, Lefty,'" Johnnie said. "What's the matter? Don't you know me?"

A battered face with a smashed nose glanced up from the cue stick. Annoyance flashed in the dull green eyes.

"I don't think I do," he began, his heavy brows, mixed gray and black, in a frown. Then his puffed lips spread in a grin of surprise and happiness. "Why, Johnnie!" He thrust out a hand that had fingers the size of bananas. "Johnnie! Good old Johnnie! When did you get back? I didn't know you. You changed. Lost some weight, didn't you?"

Johnnie extended his left hand and let the big man squeeze it with a grip that was almost a wrestling hold.

"Did they lift the rap, Johnnie?" Lefty asked. "Hell, I'm glad. Glad to see you, too." Johnnie shook his head.

"No," he said, "the rap ain't lifted. I came back to lift it myself. It was a rotten rap, Lefty. You know that, don't you?"

Lefty nodded. "It was Johnnie. A one-hundred per cent rotten rap. I know you didn't do it, Johnnie. I know you wouldn't do nothing like that."

JOHNNIE gazed up into the big man's face, at the broken nose, the scars around the eyes.

"Lefty," he said slowly, "you were with me that night. I went with you to the Follies Club. What happened there? I don't remember. All I remember is when I came to the next morning and saw—But skip it. What happened to me at the Club? That's what I want to know, Lefty."

"I don't know, Johnnie. All I know is you got stinko. Very, very stinko."

"I never got drunk. You know that, Lefty."

"You did that night, Johnnie. You got stinko. I remember it real good. You was staggering all over the place when you left."

"Was I alone—when I left?"

"No, you had that Holly doll with you, and two of Gomers's gorillas. The Holly doll was slightly stinko, too."

"Two of Gomers's gorillas? Lefty, you should've known something was wrong. Why didn't you follow me?"

Lefty clenched two hamlike fists. His battered face twisted into a grimace.

"I couldn't, Johnnie. Three of Gomers's gorillas shoved artillery into me. They wouldn't let me move. They told me to let you be. They said that Holly doll would take care of you, see that you got home all right."

"Then what?"

"Well, then, the next day, a flock of dicks come busting into my room and asked me where you were. I told them I didn't know and they said I way lying. They even took me down to Headquarters and—and the dirty sons went to work on me. They locked me up for twenty-four hours. When I got out, I read all about it in the papers—how that Holly doll had been rubbed out and you was the cookie they was looking for. I didn't know what happened to you. I looked all

over town where I figured you would be. I stopped when I saw they had a coupla dicks tailing me. I figured you'd got away some way, though."

Johnnie rubbed his eyes with his good left hand. He tried to think.

"I never got drunk. You know that, Lefty. Somebody musta slipped me a Mickey."

"Yeah, Johnnie. That's what I figure out, later."

Johnnie gritted his teeth together.

"Gomers still around?" he asked. "Ever see him?"

"Oh, he's still around. I never see him no more, though. I don't get around much now. Been sticking close to the pool room. It's about me only source of income now. The gang broke up pretty well after you went. Joe and Mitch, I think, went over to Philly. Clooney went back to Detroit. Gomers's gorillas made it too hot for them here, I guess. I didn't get out. This town's the only place I know. Now and then, I'd find one of Gomers's gorillas tailing me. When they saw I was keeping my nose clean, they left me alone, though."

"Listen, Lefty," Johnnie said. "Did you ever see two big fat guys named Sam and Chuck—I don't know what their last names is—hanging around anywhere? Could they be some of Gomers's mob?"

Lefty's battered face wrinkled in thought.

"Sam and Chuck? Big fat guys? Soft-looking? Always smoking big cigars? Guys like that?"

"Yeah."

"Sounds like the Cernak brothers, Johnnie. They're a couple of Gomers's gorillas all right. Brought them from Chicago, too. I didn't think you knew them, though. Thought he brought 'em in after you left here."

"I guess he did," Johnnie said. "But I met them. What do they specialize in?"

"Anything, Johnnie. Anything. Even pushing snuff, maybe. I don't know. They got a million angles to make a crooked buck. They're as crooked as Fido's hind legs. They're good guys to steer clear of."

"That's what I figured," Johnnie said.

In his mind he saw the bloody-headed body on the floor of the flophouse room.

THEN he told Lefty all—about his trip down South, his home-coming, about what he did to Sam. He knew he could trust Lefty. Lefty cursed in anger at almost every sentence. Tears came to his big, dog-like eyes when Johnnie showed him the mangled hand.

"We gotta get 'em, Johnnie," Lefty said vehemently.

"Yeah, we gotta, Lefty. You in with me?"

"Sure thing, Johnnie! Sure thing!"

They shook hands on it. Johnnie used the mangled right hand for the shake. He felt Lefty's big paw tremble when he clutched it.

Lefty chased the two pool shooters from the place, locked the door, and they talked it over.

"Gomers is still surrounded with gorillas," Lefty said, "even if he ain't got much power no more. He's gonna be hard to reach. I know the new D. A.'s gunning for him, but he ain't been able to pin nothing on him yet."

"Maybe we can," Johnnie said.

"Maybe we can," Lefty agreed.

"Now, if we could only figure out who slipped me the Mickey," Johnnie said. "Maybe we can start somewhere from there. Remember anybody special that was hanging around my table when I was with that Holly dame?"

Lefty thought hard.

"It's such a long time, Johnnie," he protested. "But I think I remember. Remember Scraggs, the waiter? I never trusted that weasel-face. I'd bet my last C note that he was the cookie that slipped you that dose."

"Where's he at now?"

"Don't know," Lefty said. "But maybe I can find out." He went to a pay phone on the wall, slipped in a coin and dialed a number. He talked long and earnestly.

"He's still around," Lefty said when he came back. "I know where to find him. Let's go."

The landlady at the rooming house looked askance at Johnnie and Lefty. She was sloppy fat and untidy, and had unkempt gray hair that she wore in a sort of bun at the back of her neck.

"Mr. Scraggs is sleeping," she told them.

"He gets sore every time somebody wakes him up in the daytime. He works all night. I don't want to get him sore at me."

"Now don't worry about a thing, missus," Lefty said. "We're old pals. He'll be glad to see us, won't he?" He looked at Johnnie for affirmation.

Johnnie nodded. "Sure. Sure," he said. "What room did you say he was in?"

"I didn't say," said the landlady.

Johnnie pulled out Sam's roll again. He peeled off a five-dollar bill.

"Here's something for your trouble," he said. "What room you say he's in?"

The landlady eyed the bill for perhaps five seconds. Then she made a grab for it with a dirty-nailed hand.

"Fourth floor. Second door from the left at the top of the stairs. But don't tell him I left you in."

"We won't," Johnnie promised her.

IV



THE hallway on the fourth floor was dark, even though a small, naked bulb glowed in the ceiling.

Johnnie knocked on the second door from the left at the top of the stairs, but there was no response from inside. He knocked again, much harder this time. A sleepy voice inside began to curse.

"Go away, damn you!" the voice shouted. "You don't have to clean this room. Go away, damn you! Stop bothering me. I want to sleep."

Lefty winked at Johnnie. He rattled the knob.

"Telegram!" Lefty called. His voice was boyish, almost tenor.

There were more curses from inside. "Slide it under the door!"

"I won't!" Lefty called. "I want my tip."

"Slide it under the door, damn you!" the voice bellowed. "Tip—why, I'll break your damn neck!"

"I still want my tip," Lefty said. "No tip, no telegram." He made noises with his feet like he was starting to walk away.

There were more curses from inside, intensified in volume and filth. A bed squeaked and there were sounds of footsteps hurrying to the door. A key rattled in the lock. The door came open a few inches.

Lefty hurled his big body into the opening. Scraggs, bare-footed and clad only in pajama bottoms, raced for the bed. But Lefty caught him with a flat-handed blow on the back of the neck and Scraggs went sprawling to the floor.

Lefty picked Scraggs up and smashed him to the floor again while Johnnie reached under the pillow and brought out the automatic.

Scraggs cringed under Lefty's grip on his scrawny arm. Mechanically he wiped away at the little trickle of crimson that was oozing from his mouth and staining his heavy blond mustache. Scraggs had a bony face and protruding teeth that he couldn't cover with his lips. The teeth reminded Johnnie of the rat in the alley. Only the rat had showed fight. Scraggs face showed only terror.

"Remember me, don't you?" Lefty jibed. "You dirty worm, I shoulda come after you long ago."

"Remember me, too?" Johnnie said, and took off his hat.

Scraggs's eyes popped wide. Terror deepened on his face.

"You're gonna remember a lot of things," Johnnie told him quietly. "Especially the night you slipped me the Mickey."

"I didn't—I didn't!" Scraggs's voice was pitched to a scream.

"Shut up!" Lefty bellowed and slapped him, open-handed, across the mouth. "Wanna wake the neighborhood?" He shoved Scraggs into an arm-chair.

"You're gonna talk, Scraggs," Johnnie said, in his quietest voice. "Or else I'm gonna tell Lefty here to beat you to a pulp."

"And I'd sure like to," Lefty chimed in. "Let me, will you, Johnnie, please!"

"He'll talk," Johnnie said, and added in mock persuasion, "Won't you, Scraggs? You don't want Lefty to beat you with his big fists? Do you, Scraggs?"

Scraggs buried his tousled blond head in his skinny hands.

"I can't!" he moaned. "I can't talk! I'm afraid."

"Of who?" Johnnie asked. "Gomers? Don't be afraid of Gomers, Scraggs. Gomers is done, all washed-up. The D. A.'s after him. You know that, Scraggs. He's gonna burn. And maybe you'll burn, too, if you don't talk."

LEFTY shoved his fist under Scraggs's nose.

"Let me, Johnnie," Lefty begged. "I'll make him sing. I'll make him yodel like a cuckoo clock."

"What do you say, Scraggs?" Johnnie asked. "Wanna talk? Or do you want Lefty to give you a going-over?"

Scraggs looked at the towering Lefty with fear-stricken eyes. His tongue darted out as he licked his bloody lips.

"Okay—okay!" Scraggs said. It was almost a moan. "I give you the Mickey. I was only following orders."

"Gomers's orders?" Johnnie probed.

"Yeah. Gomers's orders. I slipped you the Mickey. I didn't do nothing else, though. Believe me. I didn't! I didn't! I didn't know they was gonna rub out the dame."

"Oh!" Johnnie said, like he was surprised. "Then they did rub out the dame? You know that, huh?"

Scraggs tried to close his lips around his teeth. But he failed. His teeth were chattering.

"I say nothing—nothing more. I talked too much already."

"No, you didn't," Johnnie said. "Lefty—go ahead."

Scraggs cringed back into the chair, as far as possible away from Lefty's fist.

"Don't hit me!" he screamed. "Don't hit me! I can't stand being hit!"

"Then you'll talk," Johnnie said. "To the police. Get dressed. I'm turning you over to the D. A. The new D. A. The one that ain't Gomers's friend. You better talk to the police, too, Scraggs. They got some pretty tough babies on the Force that don't like guys that don't talk. Don't they, Lefty?"

"Yeah," Lefty agreed. "You better sing long and loud. The new D. A.'s after Gomers. He wants to fry him. He'll fry you, too, if you don't canary." He winked at Johnnie over Scraggs's head. "Johnnie's in

the clear now, Scraggs, See? He's in the clear. Gomers is looking for a new fish now to frame for that rub-out. And we hear it's you."

They went back to the pool room, with Scraggs in tow. At the pool room, Johnnie dialed Police Headquarters.

"You crazy?" Lefty asked. "I'll turn this worm in myself. You better lay low until you're sure they get Gomers all tied up and packaged."

Johnnie ignored him. He asked the cop who answered the phone to put Holahan on. He knew Holahan from the old days. They had been good friends then. Holahan had been demoted from a lieutenant of detectives to a beat by the old D. A. The new D. A. had promoted him back to lieutenant again.

"Greetings, Holahan," Johnnie said. "I got a present for you. You want the Gomers crowd, don't you?"

"Who is this?" Holahan's voice came back over the wire.

"Dekker," Johnnie told him. "Johnnie Dekker."

"Dekker? Johnnie Dekker?" Holahan's voice sounded surprised. "Want to surrender?"

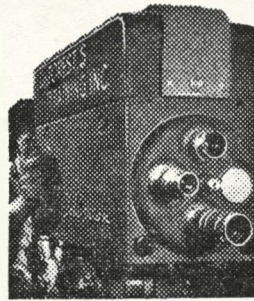
"No—not yet," Johnnie said. "Keep your hands off me for twenty-four hours and I will. Don't trace this call, either. I'm sending over a friend of mine with one of the Gomers mob that wants to talk. Take him and let me go—for the time being. Is it a bargain?"

"Can't make any bargains," Holahan said. "You're wanted for murder, Johnnie. I can't promise you a thing. Turn yourself in and you'll get a fair trial. That's all I can promise. This new outfit's honest. Gomers isn't running it. But I can't give you a thing. I'll have to come after you. That's final, I can't make any deals."

"Okay, then," Johnnie said. He saw it was no use to dicker. "Come after me. But I'm innocent. And I can prove it. I'm going after Gomers. I'll have the whole crowd singing in a couple of hours. But, listen, I got a guy here who wants to talk. I'll turn him over to the first cop I see. He's your meat from then on. He's in a talkative mood now.

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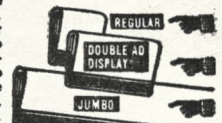
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THE cop on the beat shot pool sometimes, when off duty, at the pool room. Lefty knew him, and always slipped him a sawbuck at Christmas.

"Want a promotion, Reilly?" Lefty asked the copper when they found him just a half block down the street from the pool room. "Just hold this worm until the D. A.'s office comes for him. He's a little worm who turned—yella. He wants to talk."

There wasn't much time to say much more because police sirens were screaming all over the neighborhood. They left Scraggs with the policeman, who had a big flabbergasted look on his big red face. He paid no attention at all to the gibberish Scraggs was trying to tell him.

Johnnie and Lefty leaped into Lefty's car and started down the street. They passed two police cars enroute to the pool room.

Johnnie and Lefty sauntered into the hamburger palace. The same blonde waitress was still dishing out hamburgers. After all, it was just a few days after Johnnie's homecoming. She gave Johnnie a big toothy smile when he strolled over to the counter and he grinned a little when he recalled his reception when he'd shuffled in here just a couple of days before.

"Yes, sir?" she greeted. Her big blue eyes were wide and bright.

"Seen Chuck today?" Johnnie asked.

"Chuck?"

"Yeah. Chuck. Chuck Cernak."

She pursed her painted lips together. She washed off some invisible grime from the gleaming counter with a cleaning rag.

"You know him?" she asked.

"Sure. We're old pals."

"Well," she began dubiously, "I don't know."

"We're old pals," Johnnie reassured her. "I think maybe he's wondering whatever became of me." And that "maybe," he told himself, was no lie.

"He was here a while ago," the blonde said. "Left for the barber's down the street. For a shave, he said."

They waited outside the barber shop until Chuck came out. He was puffing on a big fat cigar and he looked up and down the sidewalk, cautiously, before he left the door-

way. Then the cigar dropped out of his mouth when Lefty stepped in and shoved a gun into his ribs. The gun was in a pocket on Lefty's loose-fitting raglan topcoat.

They walked over to Lefty's car and Lefty got in the driver's seat.

"We'll sit in the back, old-timer," Johnnie told Chuck. He had Sam's gun jammed against Chuck's ribs now.

"What's this—a snatch?" Chuck asked as the car started down the street. His big fat face was grim, but he didn't look too scared—yet.

"No," Johnnie told him. "We're just gonna give you a new home, old-timer."

"What!" Chuck ejaculated.

Then Johnnie held up his mangled right hand and Chuck blanched. He made a leap for the door handle but Johnnie stopped him with a slash to the temple with the .38. It wasn't a hard blow. Just enough to half-stun the man.

"We're a couple of insurance men," Johnnie said to Chuck and Chuck groaned.

"Nod to the man," Johnnie told Chuck when they walked into what served as a lobby in the flophouse.

CHUCK nodded at the desk clerk as Johnnie pressed the .38 inside his coat into Chuck's ribs. Lefty's face wore a broad grin. He nodded to the desk clerk, too.

They walked up the dark stairs and down the corridor that needed wall-paper so badly. They went into the flat. Except for some dark stains on the floor near the door, the room wasn't changed much. Even the bottle was still on the table. They must have got the body out fast after they found it, Johnnie told himself.

"This is your new home, old-timer," Johnnie said. "Want a drink? You look half-froze." He grabbed the bottle from the table.

Chuck said nothing. His fat face looked gray.

"Figured you might talk a little faster in these pleasant surroundings," Johnnie said. "Want me to get some glasses or don't you need liquor to talk? No, we ain't gonna ask you to sign any papers. We're just gonna ask you to talk. We're gonna ask you to tell

us all about yourself and Gomers—especially Gomers. Gomers is the guy we wanna talk about most.”

Chuck licked his lips as if they were dry. They did look a little blue.

“I don’t know nothing,” he said. “Nothing at all about Gomers. I don’t know what his rackets is.”—

“Maybe I should get the hammer,” Johnnie said, and watched the blood leave Chuck’s fat face again. He pretended to think hard. “Now, let me see. Where did I put that hammer?”

Chuck found his tongue. “The hammer ain’t around no more,” he stammered. “You—you killer!”

Johnnie laughed. It sounded so childish, what Chuck had just said.

“Tch—tch!” Johnnie clicked his tongue. “Look what’s calling the kettle black.”

“This is as good as any hammer!” Lefty cut in. He stuck his big fist under Chuck’s nose, and Chuck backed away. “Leave me sock him a couple of times, Johnnie. Just a couple of times. This is as good as any hammer.”

“No,” Johnnie said. “Let’s see if he’ll talk. Insurance men are supposed to be good talkers. Look at those stains on the floor, Chuck. Remember your little brother, Sammy?”

Chuck closed his eyes and turned his bloated face away from the stains. But Johnnie kept talking.

“I’ll bet the flies were having a good time when you found your little brother, Sammy. Bodies always draw flies, don’t they, Chuck? But I forgot. It’s too cold for flies. Maybe it was the cockroaches that were crawlin’ all over him. Plenty of them in here—feel like talkin’ now, Chuck?”

Chuck buried his big fat face in his soft fat hands. He looked as if he was going to retch.

“No,” he said. He was almost gagging. “I ain’t talking.”

“Tch—tch!” Johnnie said again. “You’ll talk all right. Maybe Lefty here might hold you down on the floor—right near those blood spots. Maybe you’ll change your mind and talk then.”

[Turn page]

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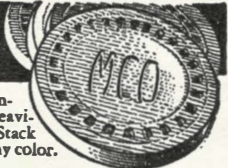
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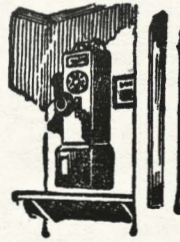
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V



CHUCK'S face, the part that showed through his sweaty hands, was no longer gray, but a sickly white. His big body rocked back and forth. It looked as if at any second now he was going to topple over and faint. He

started for the door on unsteady legs. "Let me out of here!" he pleaded. His breath was coming in gasps. "Let me out of here! Please!"

Lefty's big hands collared him as he reached for the door knob. Chuck went flying back on the bed. He lay there panting.

"He'll talk," Johnnie told Lefty. "He'll talk. Any time we're ready, he'll talk." He headed for the door. "Just watch him."

"With pleasure!" Lefty said.

Johnnie walked down the corridor to where a pay phone hung on the wall. He grinned a little when he heard the smack of flesh against flesh. He knew who was hitting who. Lefty was a good guy. But he was a little rough with his fists sometimes.

Johnnie dialed Police Headquarters.

"Get Lieutenant Holahan," he told the copper who answered the call. "Tell him Dekker's over at—" and he gave the address of the flophouse.

He smoked a cigarette leisurely. Then he dialed another number.

"This is a tip," he said when a bored voice answered, "Follies Club". "Cernak is over at his favorite flophouse, and Johnnie Dekker's with him." Then he hung up and went back into the room.

Chuck was sitting on the edge of the bed. His right eye was discoloring and was nearly closed. Claret was dripping from his nose.

"That's enough, Lefty," Johnnie said. "I want him alive. I want him to be able to talk. . . ."

Lieutenant Holahan said when he strode into the room, flanked by a few plainclothesmen, "What's all this, Johnnie?"

"I got a guy here ready to talk, Lieutenant," Johnnie said. "Ready to tell all about Gomers. Gomers is a sitting duck now.

You can take your pick—salt him away for a hundred years or sit him in the hot squat.”

Chuck rose hurriedly from the bed.

“This man,” he began, “he killed—” But he didn’t finish because Lefty smashed him in the mouth and he toppled back on the bed.

“Cut that out, Lefty!” Holohan barked.

“Aw, let me have some fun, Lieutenant,” Lefty pleaded mockingly. “I wanna play I’m a copper.”

“That’s enough!” Holohan’s voice was a bark again. And he sounded as if he meant what he said.

“Lieutenant,” Johnnie said, “I give you two talkers. They’ll clear me. This”—he pointed to Chuck—“and Scraggs.”

“Scraggs talked a little already, Johnnie,” the lieutenant said. “Down at Headquarters, he’s trying to convince everybody that he didn’t rub out the Holly dame. I don’t get it, Johnnie. You were the one. Weren’t you?”

“I wasn’t the one,” Johnnie said. “And I can prove it.”

“You can?”

“Yeah.” Johnnie turned to Chuck. “Chuck, listen. I know you know all about Gomers. He’s a pal of yours from way back. He imported you from Chicago. Now, listen, real hard. Talk about Gomers. I know every one of his rackets. Talk about Gomers and I won’t talk about you being an insurance man. Get it? An insurance man. Maybe I was the first. I don’t know. I’m still alive. I’ll keep my mouth shut if you open yours. Get it?”

Chuck was still ashen-faced. He was keeping his eyes away from the spots on the floor. They were hardly visible now, so many plainclothesmen were standing on them. But Chuck was keeping his head turned away from them anyway.

“Get it, Chuck?” Johnnie asked again.

CHUCK nodded. “I’ll talk,” he said. His voice was barely a whisper.

“What rackets is Gomers in?” Johnnie asked. “Tell the lieutenant.”

Chuck rubbed a sweaty hand across a sweaty face.

[Turn page]

111

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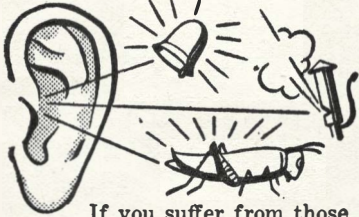


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"Think hard, Chuck," Johnnie said. "Anything else? Did he ever tell you how he framed me on that Holly deal? I got the rat that slipped me the Mickey. Did Gomers ever tell you that—how he framed me?"

Chuck still had his eyes closed.

"Will you take me outta here if I tell? His voice was high-pitched, almost cracking. "Will you protect me from Gomers if I tell? Will you?"

"Sure," Johnnie promised.

"Well—well—" Chuck licked his lips again. They were a peculiar shade of blue. "One night Gomers bragged how he ran you outta town. One night, he was drunk and bragging how he took this town over like he did Chi. He was laughing and saying how he got the rap pinned on you. He was laughing and saying how the police would catch up with you some day and—and you'd fry. He told me and—and Sam that the same thing would happen to us if we ever tried to buck him like you did." He paused for breath and licked his lips again. He was holding his fat hands over his heart. "Now let me outta here! I told you everything! Let me outta here!"

"Convinced?" Johnnie asked Holahan.

"Don't know," Holahan said. "That's only hearsay evidence. Wouldn't hold a candle in court."

"But I got the guy who slipped me the Mickey," Johnnie protested. "That's Scraggs. He'll tell you about that."

"We'll have to get Gomers," Holahan said. "I'm sorry, Johnnie, but we still got no real evidence on Gomers. Unless we get Gomers to confess, well—" He shrugged his shoulders.

"Okay—okay!" Johnnie said. He was boiling over now. "You're a hard guy to convince. Well, listen. Gomers'll be coming over here. But he won't come in if he sees all those police cars outside. Get 'em off the street."

Holahan turned to his men. "Get those cars off the street."

Three of the detectives left. But there were still three in the room, including Holahan.

"Get in the kitchen," Johnnie said. "Close

the door. Take Chuck with you. Me and Lefty'll wait for Gomers and whoever he brings with him."

"Okay," Holahan said. "It's your party, Johnnie. But I want your guns."

Johnny cursed. "You mean you're gonna let us face Gomers without artillery?"

"It's your party, Johnnie," Holahan repeated. "You thought this up. If it misfires, it's your responsibility."

"Okay—okay, you thick-headed copper! Okay. Let Chuck here point an empty gun at me. Gomers might be hard to convince, too."

Johnnie felt the lump in his throat when the door eased open. A big, flat-faced man moved in without a sound. His big fist clutched an automatic.

"It's him," the big man said over his shoulder, without hardly moving his lips. "It's Dekker. Looks different, though. Cernak's here, too."

Then Gomers walked into the room. There was another big man with him. Both Gomers and the big man had automatics in their hands.

"Yeah, that's him," Gomers gloated.

HE WAS tall and neatly dressed and wore a neatly clipped black mustache. He was showing his white, even teeth in a smile. He was proud of those teeth, Johnnie knew. He would have given ten years of his life to be able to kick those teeth down Gomers's throat.

"Nice work, Chuck," Gomers said.

Chuck didn't reply to the compliment. His bloated face was deathly white. The gun hung limply in his soft fat hand. A blind man could see he was about ready to keel over.

"So you came back, Dekker?" Gomers said. "I thought I was rid of you for good. Well, this time I will be. I'm not gonna wait for the cops to pick you up this time. This time it'll be no frame. This time I'll do the job myself. Then I know it's done."

He brought up the gun on an arc. He aimed, pointblank, at Johnnie's face.

Johnnie asked himself. Oh, where, oh, where is Holahan? Why don't he come out of the kitchen?

[Turn page]

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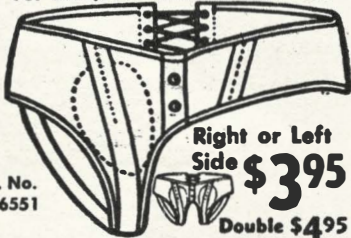
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"Then that was it?" Johnnie blurted, more to stall for time than anything else. "I didn't kill that Holly dame. You did!"

Gomers showed his teeth again.

"No, I didn't do it." Gomers laughed. "Not myself, personally. I just arranged it for my boys. Steve was there; though." He patted the big, flat-faced man on the back. "Weren't you, Steve?" Steve nodded. "Steve used your gun, too, Johnnie. Steve's a bright boy. All my boys is bright boys. I pick 'em that way." He asked, "Wanna do this, too, Steve?"

Steve nodded again. He brought the automatic up slow.

"Holahan—Holahan!" Johnnie screamed in panic and threw himself backward, chair and all. "Holahan, where the hell are you?"

The last few words were drowned out in the roar of gunfire and a hot flash of pain stabbed Johnnie in the shoulder as a slug from Steve's automatic smashed into it.

There were more shots and Johnnie waited for the jolt of the slugs tearing into his body.

But Steve was crumpling. His mouth was wide open in surprise and his next shot crashed on the floor. Then the automatic dropped out of his hand.

Gomers and the other hood, too, were going down. Gomers was spitting blood through his nice white teeth.

"You heard, Holahan?" Johnnie asked as soon as his ear-drums seemed normal.

"Yeah," the lieutenant said. His service pistol was in his hand and it showed signs of just being fired, like the guns of his subordinates. "I heard. Looks like you're in the clear."

"Four dead men!" Lefty ejaculated, admiration in his voice. "I knew you coppers could shoot if you ever got riled up."

"Four?" Johnnie asked. He saw only three bodies. Steve's, Gomers's and the other hood's.

"Yeah, four," Lefty said. "Look at Cernak. He's dead, too. Only he ain't shot. Musta had a bad heart. I knew that guy had a bum ticker. He scared too easy."

Answers to Quiz on Page 64

1-o, 2-j, 3-g 4-p, 5-m, 6-l, 7-c, 8-n, 9-k, 10-h, 11-a,
12-f, 13-b, 14-d, 15-i, 16-e.

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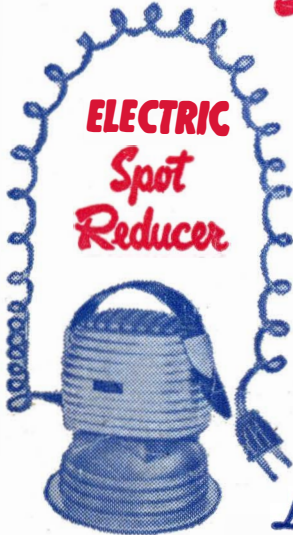
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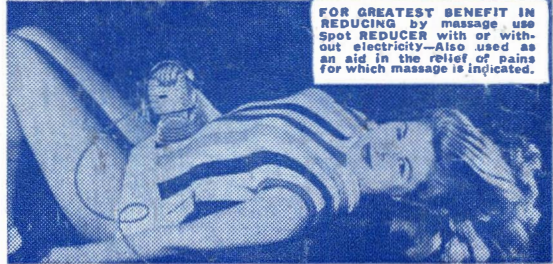


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