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THRILLING

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ANC

DETECTIVE

FEATURING

WHAT PRICE MURDER

A STEPHEN McCLOUD
MYSTERY NOVEL

By CLEVE F. ADAMS

Originally published as a \$2.00 book
by E. P. Dutton & Co.





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THRILLING DETECTIVE

Vol. LXVIII, No. 1

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

June, 1951

Featured Mystery Novel Classic



WHAT PRICE MURDER

By CLEVE F. ADAMS

*Stephen McCloud chases up a quarter million
in hot ice amid a flock of fast cars, faster
women, fabulous jewels and predatory people!*

9

A Detective Novelet

BODYGUARD.....Larry Holden 86

*It was bad enough when the Tampa mobbies tried to bribe him, but when
they snatched his girl Chastain was really hepped up*

Short Stories

MY DREAMS ARE GETTING BITTER.....H. Mathieu Truesdell 82

They were only nightmares—but reflected stark reality

STAR SAPPHIRE.....J. Lane Linklater 107

It was a good luck charm, though not for a killer

Features

HEADQUARTERS.....The Editor 6

A department where readers, writers and the editor meet

THAT'S HOW IT HAPPENED.....Harold Helfer 81

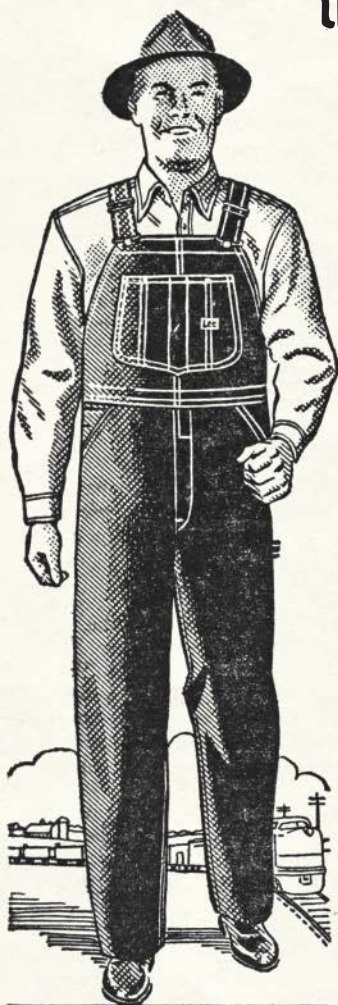
An entertaining collection of some recent alibis

RECENT RULINGS.....A Fact Feature 106

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Headquarters

THE CAR is approaching a turn in the road and the headlights pick up the shadowy outline of someone standing under a huge oak at the side of the path. The rain still continues in unabated torrents. It is a young and attractive woman and she is apparently gazing up the road the car has been approaching. Only as the car comes to a full stop does she turn and gaze at the young man who is driving.

"May I give you a lift?" he ventures.

"But there isn't anywhere for me to go," she replies and he is mildly surprised at the musical quality of her voice.

"Hop in!" he insists. "We'll think of something."

This is the introduction of Genghis Donne, amateur detective, to the beauteous but somewhat unsuccessful nightclub singer known to Broadway as Vedra Fair, and it is not far from the scene of the crime in—

Murder On High Heels

by
RICHARD BURKE

In the bookstores, this book would cost you over two dollars. Here in the friendly pages of THRILLING DETECTIVE Magazine, it is yours for only two dimes. Quite a saving—what?

And what is this tinkling-voiced and curvaceous gal doing out under the oak tree in the pouring rain? Donne is very much interested in her feet and is surprised to see that her slippers are dry—although her clothes are quite wet. It is important, as you shall see.

Scene of a Murder

Donne has just come from the scene of a murder. Clarence Elden, his neighbor, reformer and dire foe of erotic literature, has been shot in the back of the head, there within the confines of his own living-room. Welles, his secretary, found the body and hailed a passing motorcycle-cop. Genghis Donne just happened to be passing. Would the good chap be good enough to inform the police of this fact? The phone has been out of order for two days—or so the secretary says.

It is while Donne is on his way back to his

own bungalow in order to use the phone, that he comes upon this very damp yet comely Vedra Fair—but with nice *dry* slippers, mark you!

Why do we concentrate so much upon the dryness of the gal's slippers? Well, you see—completely surrounding the house where the dead reformer lies is a set of high-heeled prints, made by women's shoes. They even look as if they had been put there. But in spite of this clearing evidence, we still insist what is Vedra Fair doing alone under a tree, in the rain, at this time of the night?

It takes the inducement of a warm bathrobe and a hot toddy, within Donne's comfortable bungalow, to bring out some semblance of the truth.

Strange Audition

It is the old story of the girl from the country trying to make good on the Gay White Way—and still stay "straight." On Broadway things are bad, including room rent that she owed. Once she gets an offer from an obscure agent named Paul to give an audition at a certain Club Lisbon. If she gets the job, it'll pay three hundred a week.

Reaching there, she finds she must audition *alone*. Yet throughout her song, she *feels* rather than sees a pair of evil and lecherous eyes upon her. Later, word comes from the mysterious Paul, that "the dodo" finds her eminently satisfactory; but the engagement will include a weekend at this "dodo's" country home. Locked out of her room at the hotel, she accepts, only to find more than a "blind date"—a rendezvous with death. Surely the cup of bitterness in the life of a Broadway show-girl is full to overflowing!

But Vedra is not the only gal you'll meet in this novel of the "exotic" book publishing racket. There's Justine Jocelyn, brazen and loud—there's the law as represented by Captain Gifford and his "dumb professional" detective, Crelli; there's the Vice President of The American Purity League and that ubiquitous brother of Genghis, Kublai. Above all, there's Genghis Donne himself—smooth, suave mentally and physically alert, a detective to conjure with in a novel you'll never forget!

—THE EDITOR.

**BUILD A FINE BUSINESS
FULL OR SPARE
TIME!**



**SLIP ON—
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THE SIGN OF VALUE!
Good Housekeeping Guarantee Seal on Velvet-ez Air-Cushioned Insole shoes shows your customers they can't lose a dime! Send Coupon Today!

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This sensational Velvet-ez Casual, sizes 4-10, width AA to EEE wanted by women from 16 to 60! High fashioned shoe brings restful relief on Cushion Insole that brings your customers back for more!



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**Air Cooled
NEW NYLON MESH FAST-SELLER...
MAKE MONEY
FROM THE FIRST
HOUR!**

**FREE SELLING
OUTFIT**

Call on neighbors and friends all around home — show and sell amazing **NEW KIND OF SHOE!** Hidden elastic in front makes it easy to **SLIP-ON, SLIP-OFF.** No more broken laces, no more wrinkled tongues!

Just Blow through this shoe! Popular, fast-selling Air-Cooled feature with Genuine Nylon Mesh brings you quick orders easy as ABC!

Make up to \$3.00 easy advance commission on every order you take — start in spare time if you prefer!

BETTER THAN A RETAIL SHOE STORE OF YOUR OWN

You can satisfy nearly every man and woman in your territory with over 160 dress, work, sport styles of the nation's finest **COMFORT** shoes! Offer your customers biggest selection. Fit them all **SIMPLY, CORRECTLY** with easy accurate methods. Draw on stock of 150,000 pairs — give real satisfaction.

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You get big selling outfit, with Tested and Proved ways to make sales from the first hour you work! You get booklet of ideas written by 5,000 successful salesmen — "automatic" door openers — "magic" selling words — everything to make it easy for you to sell and make big money! Big ads in popular National magazines make you known as the expert Mason shoe fitter in your community.

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Charles Tuttle



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BILL OUTSMARTED THE SPIES AND THEN...



THEN IT'S YOURS?



YES, AND IF YOU WILL BRING IT TO ME AT ONCE, THERE IS A LIBERAL REWARD!

BILL BAKER, YOUNG LAWYER, FOUND A BRIEF CASE COMING HOME ON THE MIDNIGHT COMMUTING TRAIN AND NOW IT LOOKS LIKE HE HAS LOCATED THE OWNER...



SO... YOU HAVE EXAMINED THE CONTENTS, EH?

THAT'S HOW I FOUND YOUR PHONE NUMBER.

COME WITH ME, PLEASE.



HURRY UP! THERE'S NO TIME TO LOSE!

DON'T WORRY. HE'LL BE A LONG TIME GETTING OUT OF THIS!



WHEW! DID YOU GET THEM?

WE SURE DID... PAPERS AND ALL!

YOU'LL SEE YOUR "FRIENDS" DOWN AT THE BUREAU.

AND THEN THE FEDERAL AGENTS ARRIVED...



I'LL BE READY FOR BAKER IN FIFTEEN MINUTES!

THAT'S THE CHIEF. HOW DO YOU FEEL?

TIRED AND DIRTY. ANY CHANCE OF FRESHENING UP HERE?



HERE, A CLEAN SHAVE WILL HELP.

THANKS.



I FEEL LIKE A NEW MAN! THAT WAS THE SLICKEST, MOST REFRESHING SHAVE I'VE EVER HAD!

THIN GILLETTES ARE PLENTY KEEN AND EASY SHAVING.



SO WHEN I SAW "URANIUM" AND "SECRET" ON THE PAPERS, I CALLED YOUR OFFICE FIRST.

... AND NETTED US TWO DANGEROUS SPIES.

HE HAS LOOKS, COURAGE AND INTELLIGENCE. WE NEED MEN LIKE HIM.

ENJOY FAST, GOOD-LOOKING SHAVES AT A SAVING... USE THIN GILLETTES. FAR KEENER AND LONGER LASTING THAN ANY OTHER LOW-PRICED BLADES, THIN GILLETTES FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR EXACTLY AND ELIMINATE THE RISK OF SCRAPES AND NICKS. BUY THIN GILLETTES IN THE NEW 10-BLADE PACKAGE WITH USED-BLADE COMPARTMENT.

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NEW TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES

WHAT PRICE *Murder*



*Stephen McCloud chases up a quarter million
in hot ice amid a flock of fast cars, faster
women, fabulous jewels and predatory people!*

*Originally published as a \$2.00 book and Copyright, 1942, by
E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc. Slightly abridged
for your reading enjoyment.*

A Novel
by
CLEVE F. ADAMS

CHAPTER I

THE KAHN DIAMONDS

MCCLOUD was coming out of the Hall of Justice, and Sheila Mayo was on her way in, and while he hadn't been thinking about

her particularly, the sight of her through the glass of the big revolving door did something to his throat. All at once it became imperative that he speak to her. He followed his segment of the door around and caught her just as she was about to enter an elevator. "Hello, Sheila."

She swung about, fine gray eyes lighting with pleasure. "Stephen, how nice!" She was very smart in tweeds and topcoat. She was carrying a brown pigskin briefcase, one McCloud himself had given her when she had first opened her own office. Copper-brown hair curled down from beneath a jaunty little hat that was swagger without being silly. McCloud had always liked Sheila's taste in clothes. She shifted the briefcase, put out a slim gloved hand. "How's the great detective? I've been seeing your name a lot in the papers recently."

"I'll bet," he said. One of his rare smiles enveloped her. Against the darkness of his skin his teeth shone whitely. He was a big man; bigger than usual today, in a new hundred-dollar camel's hair overcoat he had just bought.

"How's the law business?" he asked.

"The law business? Oh, not so bad." Her face looked thinner, more tired than when he had seen her last. McCloud wondered

whether it was the press of work or her husband again. Never much of a diplomat, he asked her, and then watched her mouth get that independent, stubborn look about it. She said she was working pretty hard.

McCloud's own mouth tightened. "Maybe I'd better have another talk with the guy," he said.

She caught his arm, flushing. "Oh no, Stephen, you mustn't. Kenneth is all right, really he is. He's been doing a lot better lately."

"I saw him less than an hour ago," McCloud said in a flat voice. "He was drunker than seven hundred dollars." He didn't say that Ken Mayo was also with a lush blonde, but Sheila must have guessed something of the kind for she flinched as though he had struck her. But she was quite composed again when she said, "I must forbid your seeing Kenneth about what is, after all, none of your business." She took a step toward the elevator bank, paused to say over her shoulder, "Good-by, Stephen." Then bronze doors closed on her.

McCLOUD pushed out through the throng of home-going clerks. The clock in City Hall tower chimed. It was just five-thirty.

THIS NOVEL AND ITS CHARACTERS

WHAT PRICE MURDER is the hectic account of a most hectic eighteen hours in the life of Stephen McCloud, whose job, among other things, is to recover a quarter million dollars in diamonds which are insured by his company, West Coast Indemnity. Among his playmates we find:

Felix, the prize lush of them all.

Lieutenant Brannigan, a very tough cop indeed.

Jessup, McCloud's boss and friend, Vice President of West Coast Indemnity.

Emil Kahn, the pain in the neck, who wants his diamonds back—or their value in cash.

Duke D'Arcy, professional gambler and a smooth but rather frightening character.

Margie Garland, a two-timing lady whom Duke has no business to love, but does.

Dutch De Groot, an expert jewel thief.

Kay Mercedes, a lovelier and more refined edition of Margie.

Constance, whose mother must have had her tongue in her cheek when she chose the name.

Sheila Mayo, who is really quite a nice girl, in spite of the fact that she married someone else instead of Stephen McCloud.

The supporting cast of "*What Price Murder*" includes such odd people as taxi drivers and lawyers, business men and bums. Author Cleve F. Adams disclaims any responsibility for the way they act. He, along with Stephen McCloud, just happened to run into them.

As if it had been waiting for this precise moment the rain which had been threatening all day cut loose. Nowhere except in Los Angeles or the tropics could it rain so much in so short a time. McCloud sloshed across the street and climbed into his big coupe. There was a note twixed around one of the spokes of the steering wheel. He removed it and spread it on a knee and switched on the dash lights. The message said: "Hi, baby! Would you be buying any ice today? On account of if you would, and I do mean lots and lots of ice, you might drop around and see me some time." There was no signature. None was necessary. McCloud would have known the writer, and where to find him, even without the scrawled address of a Turkish bath on Spring Street. Van Felix was the drunken wag of the rialto.

Fired from every private agency in Los Angeles, warned off half the lots in Hollywood, apparently sowing not, he nevertheless managed to reap enough to keep him perpetually drunk. Strangely enough, he and McCloud were friends, even though McCloud himself had had to fire him from West Coast Indemnity's staff. And in the matter of diamonds McCloud was indeed interested. He was interested to the tune of a quarter million dollars. Three whole days had elapsed since the Kahn & Company heist, and in those three days this was the first lead that looked legitimate. He sat there a moment, watching the rain, wondering if Van Felix really had something, or if the note were a product of acute alcoholism. Presently he decided that the only way to find out was to look up Felix. He started the motor and nosed the car out into the second lane of traffic.

It was slow going for a while. The big town was emptying the thousands and thousands who lived in the suburbs, or in the sprawling towns of the valley. Neon signs goggled and winked at the queues of cars, their multi-colored reflections crawling like hungry fingers over rain-soaked tops.

He thought, a very little, about Sheila Mayo, and about her husband Kenneth, the man she had chosen instead of a very nice guy named Stephen McCloud. He became quite angry with himself for thinking of



STEPHEN McCLOUD

things like that when he should be concentrating on the Kahn diamonds. Resolutely he pushed the thought from his mind and pulled into one of the System auto parks just south of Fifth on Spring Street. Accepting his check, McCloud dodged under a newsstand awning and went down marble steps to the basement of the Granger Building. There was a pool and billiard hall on one side. McCloud turned left, through the swing doors of the Hammet Baths.

There was no one in the waiting room. It was a place of chrome and leather chairs which looked as though no one ever sat in them. Another pair of swing doors led into the steamy privacy of the baths proper, but McCloud did not go through these, preferring to bang loudly on the bell on the desk.

Hammet himself came out, wiping his hands on the towel draped around his neck. Hammet was a Greek made up to resemble a Turk. He felt that running a Turkish bath entailed looking like a Turk. He even wore a fez, one that a visiting Shriner had forgotten. His walrus mustaches lifted in a fiendish grin of delight as he recognized McCloud. "Waal, Meesta McCloud, sheesa really you!"

McCloud said that it was indeed he. He said, "Is that sot Felix around?"

"Sheesa here," Hammet admitted. "Why heesa wanting to get sober so he can get dronk again, so he can get sober again, so he can—"

McCloud put an end to that. "Never mind. Just forget I ever mentioned it." He shook water from his rain-spotted Borsalino. "I want to talk to him."

Hammet's fat belly shook with mirth.



"You can talking yourself blue in the face and those guy Felix ain't going hear wan word. Heesa dronk like anything. Heesa steenking."

McCloud sighed. "Is that new?" He shrugged out of his overcoat and tossed it and his hat to a chair. "Well, send out for some coffee and stuff and let's get to work." He pushed through the swing doors and went along the row of tiled booths til he found Felix in Number Seven.

THE man on the couch was painfully thin. In sleep, some of the lines were smoothed from his young-old face, and the pale touseled hair that clung damply to his forehead made him look somehow like a little boy who has been sick for a long time. McCloud's rather sombre dark eyes softened and his big hands were strangely gentle as he helped undress the limp body. The handler was a Swede, a hulking, phlegmatic brute. McCloud cursed him when he dropped



Kenneth Mayo threw the bronze vase at McCloud, who went down like a poled ox

the stupefied man's head on the hard arm of the couch. "What the hell's the idea?"

The Swede took the tongue lashing in his stride, without rancor, without remorse. McCloud, seeing it was no use, quit cursing. Fat Hammet, juggling his fez and a trayful of cups and saucers and coffee waddled in and deposited them on a table. After a while, under the somewhat heroic ministrations of all three men, Felix started gagging on the coffee. Presently he was able to stiffen his neck sufficiently to raise his head and his eyes came open and settled on McCloud. He said, quite distinctly and as though he had never had a drink in his life, "Oh, so there

you are, my buxom fraan." He then went back to sleep again.

Sighing, McCloud waved Hammet and the Swede out of the room. He lifted Felix and propped him against the wall and started slapping him, not hard, but methodically. Finally Felix opened his eyes briefly. "Oh, it's you again!"

"Not again," McCloud said. "Still. This is the same day." He put his hands under Felix' armpits, stood him up in a corner, leaned close to the flaccid face. "Look, you dope, you left a note in my car. About some ice, remember?"

Felix' mouth twisted in a cunning leer. "Sure I 'member. Elephants never forget. Felix never forgets." He thought this was very funny. He giggled. He shook himself free of McCloud's grip and sat down suddenly and put his head in his hands. His eyes watched McCloud through slitted fingers. "How much am I bid for a quarter

million dollars in diamonds?"

"The company is offering five grand," McCloud said.

Felix shook his head, cautiously, lest it become detached from his shoulders. "Not enough."

McCloud pretended to be very busy lighting a cigarette. After awhile he said, "Ten?"

"Make it fifty."

McCloud cursed him. "Christ, you must think we're the mint." He lidded his eyes, ostensibly to keep smoke out of them. "I couldn't offer that kind of money until I got an okay from Jessup and the company. Now look, Van, you know I play square. Give me what you've got, or what you think you've got, and I'll check it. Then, if there's anything to it, I'll pay you whatever the traffic will bear. Fair enough?"

Felix appeared to think this over. "All right, you Shylock, I'll take that." He blew out his breath. "There's a girl named Margie Garland. She was pretty swacked when I saw her this afternoon; swacked and a little boastful. She finally slopped over about all the things she was going to be able to buy shortly, and I got the idea she was mixed up in the Kohn & Company heist." He wrinkled his forehead in puzzled thought. "Say, you know something? She's Duke D'Arcy's gal, that's who she is. I just remembered."

McCloud frowned. "That simply doesn't make sense, Felix. D'Arcy's a gambler. He wouldn't be mixed up in a heist."

"Can I help it what he is or isn't?" Felix spread his hands in a vague gesture. He was beginning to get drunk all over again. "This dame is his gal. I've seen 'em together." His eyes went shut.

McCloud shook him. "All right, all right, where did you say I could find her?"

Felix made a valiant effort to get his eyes open, failed, and fell back on the couch. McCloud leaned over him. "Come on, Van, just the address, then I'll let you go to sleep." And finally the flaccid lips parted and the name of an apartment house in the West-lake district came out. McCloud, breathing angrily through his nose, yanked a blanket over the somnolent Felix and went out and left fifty dollars with Hammet the Greek.

Hammet said, "Why, hanh, t'ank you too moch, Meesta McCloud." He smiled wolfishly. "Fot those moch monies I am making those Felix like wan new guy."

"For twenty of it," McCloud said. He scowled as Hammet attempted to give him an argument. "The other thirty goes to Felix, understand?" He shrugged into the camel's-hair, yanked on his hat. "And no tricks, either."

Hammet was cut to the quick. "Whoosa make tricks, me? Ima your fraan, ain't I?"

"Sure," McCloud said. "You're my friend just like all the others." He sneered. "Just as long as you think you can get anything out of me." He did not really believe this. He was quite fond of Hammet, though he would not have admitted this to anybody, least of all to Hammet himself. He went out and through the rain to his car.

CHAPTER II

DIFFICULT TO COLLECT



BIG and ornate, the lobby of the Insurance Exchange Building was practically deserted when at something after six o'clock McCloud pushed through the doors. The man at the cigar stand was already putting his counter stock away and beginning to lock up for the night. Leaning on the cigar case and apparently very interested in its contents was Detective-lieutenant Floyd Brannigan. McCloud pretended that he didn't see Brannigan and headed for the elevator. Brannigan yelled at him. "Hey, you!"

McCloud turned. "Oh, hello, Lieutenant." He looked at his strap watch with exaggerated impatience. "I'm in kind of a hurry."

Brannigan was not impressed. He was a large man, almost as tall as McCloud and much thicker through the middle. There were freckles the size of pennies on the back of his hands. "So you're in a hurry. Why?"

"Now you're getting personal," McCloud said. He tried to give the impression that he had just taken a dose of Sal Hepatica. "When you've got to go——"

Brannigan's pale eyes narrowed. "Save

it," he advised. Casually, almost as though it were an accident, he blocked the elevator doors. "What's new on the Kahn & Company job?"

McCloud was indignant. "A fine thing to ask me! It's your case, isn't it?"

"Unh-huhn. That's wry I'm hanging around. Emil Kahn is upstairs, closeted with your boss."

"No!"

"Fact," Brannigan said. "What do you think of Kahn?"

McCloud appeared to think. Presently he said, "You mean do I think it was an inside job?" His mouth drew down. "It could be. I guess that's why Jessup is holding up payment on the policy."

"You're only guessing?"

"Yes."

"I think you're a liar," Brannigan said. He poked a thick forefinger at McCloud's chest. "You've been busier than a cat on a tin roof the last three days. You mean you haven't found out anything?"

"Have you?" McCloud countered.

"There's a difference. I'm a cop. Crooks don't come to me with off-color deals."

McCloud was offended. "Are you insinuating that West Coast Indemnity would traffic with thieves?"

"You're damned right I am!"

"You ought to be ashamed."

"And you ought to be in jail!" Brannigan yelled. "For years you and Jessup have been giving us the runaround, buying back stolen goods and God knows what else." He took a slow breath. "This is one time you're not going to get away with it, baby."

McCloud was beginning to think the same thing himself. Brannigan's presence at another time would not have worried him, but now that he actually had a lead, police interference was apt to be embarrassing. It was not that he or his employers condoned thievery; it was just that many times the constituted authorities managed to apprehend the criminals without recovering the loot; or to so scare the criminals that recovery was impossible. It was McCloud's job to get the stuff first and the criminals later, though sometimes this last didn't work out exactly as planned. That's what Bran-

nigan was sore about. McCloud affected a great earnestness. "Look, Lieutenant, if you can pin this job on Emil Kahn I'll be the first to congratulate you. I don't like the guy."

Brannigan was partially mollified. "What's he doing up there?"

"I wouldn't know," McCloud said. "Probably trying to collect the insurance." He grinned suddenly. "If you'd get the hell out of my way I could go up and find out for you."

Brannigan said a very bad word indeed. "I'll bet!"

"Well, I would," McCloud insisted.

BRANNIGAN stood aside and permitted McCloud to get into the elevator. The doors closed. McCloud was lifted to the eleventh floor and the offices of West Coast Indemnity. His heels made hard echoes in the empty corridor as he went along it to Jessup's suite. He went in without knocking. His entrance interrupted what had apparently been a very heated discussion between the two men already there. Jessup, seated behind his desk, looked like an entrenched but beleaguered general. Seeing McCloud, he said, "Oh, so it's you!"

"You'd better watch your blood pressure, Counsellor." McCloud's dark eyes examined Emil Kahn without warmth. "Hello."

Kahn snorted. Obviously he was not in a pleasant mood. He was a grossly fat man. He was still wearing a bandage on his head, badge of his rather unheroic encounter with the man or men who had made away with his quarter million dollars in unset stones. McCloud looked at the bandage. "You'd think they hit you with your own safe instead of a measly little sap. Why don't you go to a hospital?"

"Stephen!" Jessup was on the smallish side, closely knit. Iron gray hair and an iron gray mustache were chopped off short, like his speech, and the high blood pressure that McCloud had warned him about was evidenced by the myriad tiny criss-crossed veins in his nose and cheeks. He was a good man for his job, though. He was head of West Coast's legal department. "Stephen, I want you to remember that Mr. Kahn is

one of our policy-holders."

McCloud accepted the reproof. "All right." He sneered at the bandage. And then, addressing Jessup but really watching Emil Kahn: "Brannigan is downstairs in the lobby."

Jessup stood up violently. "In God's name, why?"

"He still thinks it was an inside job," McCloud said. "He thinks Kahn had a hand in it."

"The hell with what he thinks!" Jessup yelled.

Emil Kahn blew out his fat lips. "Well!" Two ponderous steps brought him to the desk and he leaned on it and thrust a heavy jaw at Jessup. "Look, my friend, I am not taking any more of this kind of thing from your or anybody else. I have a policy with your company that is supposed to cover the loss of those stones. I either want the stones or the money."

"Am I arguing?" Jessup asked.

"Stalling is a better word," Kahn said nastily. "You've been stalling me for three days. Do you pay off or do I have to sue?"

McCloud decided to cast a little oil on the troubled water. "I think I've finally got a lead," he said.

Both men glared at him. "Well, why didn't you say so?"

He became indignant. "I ask you, have I had a chance? Have you guys done anything but yell ever since I came in?" He helped himself to one of Jessup's fifty-cent cigars, lit it, blew smoke at the ceiling. From beneath half-lowered lids his eyes watched Emil Kahn's face. "The description you gave us, and the police, doesn't seem to fit anybody in Los Angeles. Suppose I give you one that does?"

Kahn shrugged. "I don't like your implication, but go ahead."

Meticulously, from memory, because he knew Duke D'Arcy very well indeed, McCloud described the gambler and night-club proprietor whom Van Felix had thought

might be implicated in the diamond heist. Kahn's broad face remained unchanged. "No, that is not the man I saw. Nothing like him."

Jessup looked at McCloud. "Well?"

"It was just an idea," McCloud said. He was still not satisfied about Emil Kahn's possible complicity, but he had absolutely nothing to hang an accusation on. And in the matter of Duke D'Arcy he had only Van Felix' word that Margie Garland was D'Arcy's girl. Still, meagre as the tip was he had to play it. There was nothing else that even remotely resembled a lead. He pointed the cigar at Jessup. "Can you get me fifteen or twenty grand at this time of night?"

"What for?"

"Maybe you'd better not know that. Let's just say that I know a certain lady who might-be willing to talk if her palm was crossed with something beside silver."

EMIL KAHN sucked in his breath. "You mean you'd actually compound a felony?"

Jessup barked at him. "He means we're just like you. We don't want to lose a quarter-million dollars if we can help it. And as for stalling you on the insurance, we're perfectly within our rights. There's a clause in your policy that gives us five days."

Kahn yelled. "So you're going to be like that!"

"Not if you leave us alone," Jessup said. He spread his hands. "McCloud says he's got a lead. If we can get the diamonds back, we're going to do it, and it's none of your business how we do it." He stared appraisingly at McCloud. "What's this lady's name and address?"

McCloud shook his head, then changed his mind because he saw that he wasn't going to get the money otherwise. He still didn't trust Emil Kahn; also he was quite mindful of Lieutenant Brannigan waiting downstairs. But he gave Margie Garland's name and address, then went over and stood by the tall windows while Jessup opened the safe. Presently he was counting a neat sheaf of currency and signing the customary receipt for it.

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CHAPTER III

WOMAN WITH A GUN



THE apartment house was not the best in the Westlake district, neither was it the worst. A steel and glass marquee extended out over the sidewalk, though there was no doorman. There was no desk clerk either. In fact, there was no desk. A brass plate set into the stone beside the right-hand door labeled the building: "The Normandie."

Presently McCloud got out of his car and crossed the street and went into the lobby. In the marble slab of one wall was set a row of brass mail boxes. He located the one tabbed Garland and went up carpeted stairs to the second floor and pressed the buzzer beside 204. There was no answer. He waited a moment, then rang again. Still there was no answer. Faint yellow light seeped out from under the door. The light in the hall was blue. Across the hall, another door opened, and a lady with mascaraed eyes and revealing silk pajamas regarded him with a mechanical smile. "You looking for somebody, honey?"

McCloud was reminded of the slightly ribald song about the lady up in Room 13. He had the distinct impression that this was that kind of a place. The only difference was that the old red plush and incense had given way to the newer, more modern blue leather and chromium. He leaned against the door of 204 and smiled engagingly at the lady in the yellow silk pajamas. "Am I looking for somebody?" He pursed his lips as though debating the question. "No, I just go around ringing doorbells for fun. You know—like Hallowe'en."

Her mechanical smile went away. "Oh, a smart guy!" She retreated, slamming her door. McCloud waited. Then he made heavy clumping sounds with his feet, as though departing, and reached behind him and twisted the doorknob. It turned under his hand. Dark eyes watchful he backed into 204 and closed the door.

A very jittery feminine voice said, "S-stand s-still!"

McCloud's stomach muscles crawled. Experience had taught him that there was nothing worse than a gun in the hands of a nervous female. Cautiously he risked craning his neck for one swift glance over his shoulder. As he had suspected the girl had a gun, and both girl and gun had the shakes, but the thing that really knocked him for a loop was the girl's identity. She was Sheila Mayo. Also she was so scared that she didn't recognize him at first; so scared that the gun in her small fist was liable to go off almost any second. McCloud put on what he hoped was one of his very best smiles. "This is kind of uncomfortable, Sheila. Couldn't I just sort of relax and lean against the door and let you shoot me from the front?"

Her eyes widened.

"Stephen!"

"Put the gun down, Sheila."

She did not put it down. All she did was back away from him, still taut, still pale as a ghost. But the slight change in her position discovered to his startled eyes that there was a third occupant in the room, and that this one was dead. She was a woman in her early thirties and she was sitting quite erect, propped between a pile of silken cushions and the raised arm of the chaise longue. McCloud was quite positive she was dead, because there was a bullet hole just over her right eye. A thin trickle of blood had run down out of the hole, obscuring the eye itself, but the left eye was wide open. It watched McCloud and Sheila Mayo with a certain macabre intensity. McCloud, seeing her sitting there like that, was vaguely surprised that her knees weren't crossed. It was that casual. A cigarette still smoldered in an ash tray beside her left hand. He took a deep breath. "Well, Sheila?" He had just recognized the dead woman on the chaise longue. She was the platinum blonde he had seen that very afternoon with Kenneth Mayo, Sheila's husband. Sheila had probably had every right in the world to kill her. He said calmly, "You'd better put the gun down, hon, and we'll talk this over." He nodded at the lady on the chaise longue. "Did you have to?"

Sheila ignored that. Neither did she relax

her vigilance with the gun. "What are you doing here, Stephen?"

HE SHRUGGED, humoring her. "Who, me? Why, I sort of had a date with Margie, over there. That is, I presume she is Miss Garland." When Sheila did not answer that either he took a cautious step toward her, then another. "You know, Sheila, I really should be very angry with you about this. I had hoped to get some information from the lady. And now I can't."

Sheila apparently was not as completely dazed as she seemed. As he essayed a third step the small gun in her hand steadied on his middle. "Don't come any closer, Stephen. I'm going out of here. I've got to." McCloud made his voice reassuring. "All right, Sheila, you just run along. I'll take care of everything." And then, flexing his knees slightly, he launched his big body in a power dive for her ankles, and while he managed to get her ankles all right his calculations were upset as the thick rug skidded under his own feet. As a consequence he pushed instead of pulled Sheila's legs out from under her, and she toppled over and fell on his back. Her gun went off right beside his ear, and then something clunked against one of his upthrust heels, and presently it turned out that this was Sheila's forehead. Breathing gustily, he rolled out from under her limp body and discovered that his heel had knocked her cold.

Rising to his knees he discovered something else. The blonde from across the hall, the one in the yellow silk pajamas, was standing there in the open doorway and getting ready to scream bloody murder. Cursing, McCloud grabbed the gun and pointed it at her. "All right, baby, just come in and shut the door behind you." He had no intention of shooting her if she didn't obey. Perhaps she sensed this; perhaps she just acted instinctively. She did shut the door, but she managed to stay on the far side of it, and by the time McCloud had gotten to his feet and raced into the hall he discovered her own door just clicking shut. Wondering how it was possible that everybody else in the building had not heard the shot McCloud went swiftly back into 204.

Sheila Mayo had vanished.

Margie Garland's one good eye regarded him with what seemed almost sardonic amusement, and then, as though she had grown tired of sitting so long in the one position, Margie made him a loose-jointed little curtsy and fell over on her face. McCloud ran through a bedroom and dinette and kitchen without finding Sheila. There was a service door leading down from the kitchen and it was obvious that she must have gone out this way. He listened, could hear not the slightest sound of descending steps, finally went back into the living room and located the telephone. But having found it he hesitated, trying to decide what was the smart thing to do. He could—indeed he would have liked to—vanish as completely from the scene as had Sheila Mayo, but he realized almost instantly that this would hardly be the best thing for her. The blonde across the hall would certainly be able to give the police a lot of very damaging information; she could probably describe him, McCloud, but she could not have got such a very clear picture of Sheila. Sheila had been face down on the floor.

Once more McCloud lifted the phone, once more he put it down, this time because of something he saw on the chaise longue. In tumbling off the seat Margie Garland had taken one of the loose cushions with her. In the space where the cushion had been there was a black tooled-leather envelope purse. McCloud went over and picked it up, saw with a swift tightening of the throat the heavy gold M on its side. It was almost certain that the purse was Sheila's, for where but one initial is used it is always the last one. M for Sheila Mayo, not for Margie Garland. Besides, the purse did not look frivolous enough for a gal like Margie. Not that Margie looked particularly frivolous any more. Sighing, McCloud thrust the incriminating evidence into an overcoat pocket, returned to the telephone and called police headquarters. He had scarcely heard the operator's first ring when he became conscious of the hall door opening. It opened slyly at first. Then it was suddenly flung wide and there on the threshold stood Lieutenant Brannigan, brandishing a police posi-

tive and bellowing, "Drop the rod, Irish!"

McCloud hadn't been conscious that he was still holding Sheila's little gun. He dropped it. The desk sergeant at Headquarters was yelling in his ear now: "Hey, you what in hell you want?"

"Never mind," McCloud said pleasantly. "The Marines have already landed." He hung up.

Brannigan cursed him. "You would, would you?" He ran across the room and slammed McCloud alongside the head with the police positive. McCloud fell down on the chaise, not completely out but with aching thunder racketing around inside his skull. After a time, he put up a hand and felt of his jaw. He decided that it was not broken. Presently he saw Brannigan at the telephone. There was another detective and two harness cops over by the hall door, and beside them was the shopworn blonde in the yellow silk pajamas. She gave McCloud a triumphant leer. "I guess that'll hold you—you murderer!"

McCloud said nothing. He watched Brannigan's red face get a baffled look when Headquarters reported that it had been the police McCloud was calling. Brannigan finally hung up, a kind of puzzled rage in his pale yellow eyes. He motioned the other dick and the two harness bulls and the blonde into the apartment. A sleepy-looking fat man in a red and green bathrobe tried his best to come in too, and Brannigan told him to get the hell out. McCloud made a mental note to look this fat man up later. He wondered why Brannigan hadn't recognized him. The fat man's name was Herman "Dutch" DeGroot, and Dutch was a very well-known

jewel thief with a police record as long as your arm.

The cops rolled Margie Garland over on her back and looked at the hole in her forehead. Margie didn't seem to mind a bit. Brannigan picked up the gun McCloud had dropped, Sheila Mayo's gun, and smelled the muzzle. He then broke it open and McCloud could see, even from where he was sitting, that there were two exploded shells. That meant that beyond a doubt this was the weapon which had done for Marge Garland; one shot for Marge and one that had exploded harmlessly during McCloud's tussle with Sheila. Sweat began trickling down McCloud's spine. His own fingerprints were uppermost on the gun's buttplates now. He wished Brannigan had not remembered to use a handkerchief in handling the gun. He wished a lot of things, including an acute case of paralysis on the blonde in the yellow silk pajamas, so that she couldn't talk.

Brannigan came over and kicked him playfully in the shins. "Well, mugg, I've been waiting a long time for something like this." He spat. "Who was the girl?"

McCloud pretended to be greatly surprised. "What girl?"

"You see?" the blonde demanded. "Didn't I tell you he'd deny it? I seen 'em as plain as the nose on your face, rolling around on the floor indecent as hell's hinges, and poor Marge sitting there dead!"

"Oh, you mean that girl," McCloud said. His hat had come off and his dark hair was shaggy, disheveled. "You know, Lieutenant, I'd forgotten all about her in the excitement." He knit his brows. "I wonder who

[Turn page]

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she was?" he said feigning innocence.

Brannigan moved in, hefting his gun. "So you want to play!"

McCloud took out his own gun, the one he carried in the waistband of his trousers and the one nobody had so far thought to search him for. "I'm a very patient guy, Lieutenant, but you keep on being the People's Champion and I'm going to have to take the rap for a real murder. Only you won't be here to see it."

At sight of the gun in a supposedly unarmed man's hand the blonde let out a scared "Eeek!" and the one dick and the two harness cops just stood there looking foolish. Brannigan brought up so suddenly that the Chinese rug bunched under his big feet and he sat down with a tremendous *whoosh!* He stared at his own gun as though he had never seen it before. "Well, unh, did I say you killed the broad? All I asked you was who is the other one?"

"So help me, Brannigan, I never saw her before in my life. I had a date with this Margie Garland and——"

Brannigan interrupted him. "What kind of a date?"

"Well," McCloud said, "as long as we're all taking down our back hair——" He let his voice trail off suggestively and managed to look like an all-round lecher. He even leered at the blonde. "We boys will be boys, eh, Lieutenant?"

"He's a goddam liar!" the blonde shouted. "Everybody knows Margie was Duke D'Arcy's gal friend. She wasn't no ordinary tramp like he's pretending."

"You keep your big mouth the hell out of this!" Brannigan yelled at her. He got up off his bottom and rubbed it absently with his gun. "As for you, Irish, begin at the beginning. You came and rang the doorbell. Go on from there."

"Well, I rang the bell a couple of times and there was no answer."

"That's what you say!" the blonde sniffed.

Brannigan nearly had a stroke "Didn't I tell you to shut up? For Christ's sake take her back in her own flat and sit on her!" The two harness bulls grabbed her, one to an arm, and wrestled her struggling across the hall. Her last words were, "I'll be a

ringtailed bastard if I ever try to help a cop again. The dirty lice!"

Brannigan slammed the door. Almost immediately it opened again, this time to let in a deputy medical examiner and two technicians with cameras and plate cases. For a brief moment everybody was so interested in the new arrivals that they forgot all about McCloud. He got up and wandered into the bedroom and through the hall to the kitchen. The detective who had come with Brannigan was sampling the contents of a bottle he had found in the cupboard. Directly behind him there was a broom closet, its door slightly ajar. McCloud pretended he heard a noise inside and started to open the door wider. The dick, apparently a glutton for credit, elbowed him aside and yanked. All McCloud had to do was give the guy a gentle push and turn the key in the lock. After that he went down the service steps very fast indeed.

CHAPTER IV

SHOT FROM A CAR



EDGED in a drugstore phone booth, McCloud dialed the number of Sheila Mayo's home. He wanted to tell her that so far as he knew she was absolutely in the clear; that unless the little gun she had used, now in Lieutenant Brannigan's possession, could be traced back to her she had nothing to worry about. Besides Sheila, there were a few other odds and ends bothering McCloud too. About his own position he was not any too pleased; in running out on Brannigan he had chosen what seemed to him the lesser of two evils. He had believed it almost certain that the police would eventually get around to a thorough search of his person; in addition to Sheila's purse they would find a West Coast Indemnity envelope containing fifteen thousand dollars. McCloud knew that no amount of argument would ever convince Brannigan that the money wasn't intended as some sort of payment involving the Kahn & Company jewel theft. Therefore, it had seemed advisable, even without

the menace to Sheila, to depart the scene of Margie Garland's murder. However, McCloud was still a long way from being a free agent. Brannigan would undoubtedly broadcast McCloud's description, and this in turn would so hamper his movements that locating the Kahn diamonds was going to be doubly difficult.

Sheila's telephone kept on ringing. Finally, McCloud replaced the receiver. He was still not satisfied that she wasn't home; he pictured her standing there, paralyzed with fear, afraid to touch the instrument.

Mentally he reviewed the salient features of what seemed to him a very intricate problem. Take Margie Garland, now. Seeing Kenneth Mayo with Margie that afternoon hadn't meant anything to one Stephen McCloud except that Ken Mayo was a heel and not fit to be walked on by a swell girl like Sheila. Margie had been just another one of Mayo's women. But that had been this afternoon. Now, in the light of recent developments, Ken Mayo's acquaintance with Margie might turn out to have a direct bearing on the Kahn jewel heist. McCloud remembered quite suddenly that Mayo was the junior partner in the law firm of Dinwiddie, Kleppner and Mayo, and that this law firm was frequently employed by Duke D'Arcy to keep him out of jail. Margie Garland was the property of the Duke. And it had been Margie who had gotten drunk and slopped over about how wealthy she was going to be presently. Very well, then, might it not be business instead of pleasure which had thrown Kenneth Mayo and Margie Garland together that afternoon? Here were Duke D'Arcy's girl and one of Duke D'Arcy's attorneys, together on what appeared to be a binge but might be something very different indeed. Was it possible that Sheila had misconstrued her husband's meeting with the girl and committed a murder without actual cause in fact? And anyway, how had Sheila found out about Margie Garland?

Sighing, McCloud tackled the phone again. It was well after nine o'clock now, and it took three calls to finally locate his boss, Jessup. West Coast's legal shepherd was at his club. He was sarcastic. "Oh, so it's you. Did you get those rocks yet?"

McCloud said, "I'm sorry, Counsellor, but all I've got to date is a kick in the pants." His mouth drooped at something Jessup said. "Never mind that, I've got other troubles. Brannigan and all the rest of them want me in connection with a murder. How's about squaring it for me?"

"Good Christ Almighty!" Jessup barked. "Now, see here, McCloud, we're getting pretty fed up with extricating you from jams of your own making. Who did you have to kill this time?"

McCloud was outraged. "I didn't have to kill anybody! And while we're on the subject let me tell you something else. Sure I get in jams. Who wouldn't, trying to save you guys money? You want people to know we're playing both ends against the middle rather than pay off? You want the cops to know we're buying back stolen goods that we can't get any other way? Well, they'll know it, by God, if you leave me out on a limb!"

"Now, Stephen," Jessup soothed him. "Did I say I wouldn't do what I could? Did I?"

McCloud was only partially mollified. "Well, you'd better." And then, like a small boy trying to justify himself, "Anyway, all I did was lock a cop in a closet."

Jessup made strangled sounds. "But in God's name, why?"

McCLOUD thought it best not to mention Sheila. He would have trusted Jessup with his own life, but he could not risk Sheila's. He said, "I couldn't stand a search, Counsellor. I had the fifteen grand you gave me. Besides, it looks now as though my tip about the gal was really good. A night in jail, or even a couple of hours, might make all the difference in the world."

"All right," Jessup conceded grudgingly. "I don't know how I'm going to do it but I'll try to square it for you."

"Thanks," McCloud said. He had a pleased smile on his lips when he went out into the store proper and ordered a cola at the soda fountain. He looked at his reflection in the back-bar mirror. There was a discolored bruise on the side of his jaw, where Brannigan had hit him with the police

positive. Dark eyes sultry with resentment, he took off his hat and combed his thick black hair with square brown fingers. He looked like a brooding Sioux.

Presently McCloud went out to his car. He would, he decided, let the matter of the Kahn diamonds rest for a little while. The thing to do now was to get hold of Sheila, give her back her bag and tell her that there was nothing for her to worry about. He would have to qualify this last, of course, if it turned out that the little gun was registered to her, or could be traced. But for the present he would not cross that bridge until he came to it.

The rain was only a drizzle now, but McCloud's tires made wetly sucking sounds on the pavement as he drove. Presently, cutting across La Brea from Hollywood Boulevard to Sunset, he was negotiating that section known as The Strip, that stretch of overly ornate restaurants, little shops run under the names of movie stars, too-impressive offices of movie agents and tall modernistic apartment houses. In spite of its fakiness McCloud loved it. This was his town. He resented people from the East referring to it as a hick burg.

He was so busy being resentful at one thing and another that when he turned left on Doheny Drive and started down the steep hill he didn't notice the other car swing in behind him. Possibly it was because this one didn't have any lights. The first realization that he was in for trouble came to him when, out of the corner of his eye, he saw the long black snout creep up beside him. Cursing, because he was being crowded to the curb, he stuck his head out of the window and yelled a warning.

Flame stabbed at him then. The whole world seemed to explode in his face, and he was diving down and down into blackness. He did not know anything more for quite a while.

When finally he did awaken it was to the impression that he was in a cabin, looking out the window at slowly revolving trees, and that there was also an earthquake in progress. Gradually the trees steadied and resolved themselves into but one tree, although a very big one indeed, and the cabin

window turned out to be the windshield of McCloud's car. The earthquake identified itself as a motorcycle cop, with goggles and a rakish cap. He was leaning through the open door of McCloud's car and shaking McCloud. "Hey, you, snap out of it! What goes? What happened?"

McCloud cursed him. "How do I know what happened?"

"Well, but Jesus, you can't just climb a curb and smack into a tree as big as a house without some kind of a reason!"

Quite suddenly McCloud remembered the other car, and the swift flash of gunfire. He also became conscious of a terrific headache. He put up a hand, exploring his scalp, and his fingers came away sticky with blood. The cop began yelling all over again. "Hey, you been shot?"

"I think so," McCloud said. He was no longer as dazed as he pretended. Furtively he patted his pockets. His wallet, his gun, even Sheila's purse were right where they ought to be. And then, with a sudden premonition of disaster, he remembered the envelope and the fifteen thousand dollars. His hand sought the inside pocket of his coat. The envelope was gone.

A SMALL crowd was rapidly growing into a large one. Perhaps because of this the cop became less solicitous about McCloud and more sarcastic. "Well, so you think you been shot! Don't you know?"

"Quit yelling at me, will you?" McCloud passed a shaking hand over his eyes. "I remember now. A car without lights ran me into the curb and there was a flash. After that, well—"

"So!" The cop pushed his cap far back on his head. "What'd these guys get off of you?"

"Nothing." McCloud didn't want it to get around town that he had permitted somebody to take him for fifteen grand. Especially he didn't want his boss Jessup to know it. He said earnestly, "Look, officer, the slug just creased me. There's nothing missing. Would you mind very much if I just went home and laid down for a while?"

Somebody in the crowd, a very thoughtful somebody, produced a flashlight and

turned its beam full on the registration in McCloud's car. The cop let out a yell. "McCloud, hunh?" He thrust his red face down close. "I knew there was something fishy about you." He addressed the assemblage. "There's a general alarm out for this guy!"

McCloud's right hand slipped the gear shift into reverse. His toe felt for and found the starter button. Under full throttle the big coupe yanked itself free of the tree; the swinging door knocked the cop sprawling; the hind wheels clunked down off the curb, then the front ones. There was the shriek of tortured metal as fenders clashed, then McCloud was racing down the steep hill. Behind him other cars roared into life, and presently his rear window shattered and there was the sharp *pinggg* of a slug going past his ear. That would be the cop shooting. At the foot of the hill McCloud made a screaming left turn, bounced over the Pacific Electric right of way and caromed into the parking lot of a neighborhood theatre. Then, lights out, motor silent, he just sat there and waited for the chase to go by. He was not happy. He was out fifteen thousand dollars, fifteen grand for which he had signed a receipt and which represented a year and a half's salary. He had less than five hundred dollars in the bank.

CHAPTER V

THE GIRL WITH THE GUN



AIN had ceased altogether now. Sitting there in his car, facing the blank brick wall of the theatre building, McCloud considered his position. Not only had he locked one cop in a closet; he had further antagonized the force by knocking another for a loop. Both incidents were bound to convict him in the eyes of the law, if not of the actual shooting of Margie Garland, at least of complicity.

He wondered if Jessup had managed to do anything. Apparently not, for the motorcycle cop had said that there was a general alarm out. And thinking of Jessup only reminded him anew of the lost fifteen thousand dollars. Come to think of it, there was some-

thing very curious about that.

It was almost as though the man or men in the darkened car had known that McCloud was carrying the money; as though this indeed had been the objective. Otherwise they would have stripped him of everything.

It was common knowledge, of course, that McCloud did carry large sums of money; common knowledge, at least, in the underworld. McCloud's mind probed the immediate past for those who could have known that on this of all nights he was possessed of some really important money. He sat up a little straighter as he recalled the exact circumstances under which he had gotten it.

The diamond broker, Emil Kahn, had been present, right there in Jessup's office. Already suspecting Kahn of complicity in the robbery of his own stones, McCloud had little difficulty in suspecting him of this job too. Then there was Van Felix. Maybe Felix hadn't been as drunk as he pretended. Maybe the whole thing had been a frame, a ruse to induce McCloud to get hold of the money so that it could be highjacked. You had to discount this theory, of course, when you remembered that Margie Garland had been killed.

That part of it hadn't been a hoax. But again, there was no direct evidence that the killing was over the Kahn diamonds. As a matter of fact, it was pretty obvious that the motive was jealousy. Sheila's jealousy over an affair between her husband and the lady in 204.

Reminded of the fact that he had been on his way out to Sheila's, McCloud decided that he might as well finish up that angle. He backed his car out of the parking lot and continued on his way. He wished he had a drink. With his free hand he got out a handkerchief and wiped the drying blood off his forehead.

PRESENTLY he turned into the tree-lined street which was Sheila's and parked his car at the curb before the house. It was a modest enough bungalow, considering that Sheila and her husband were both attorneys in active practice. McCloud had always been a little bitter about that last;

In a way he blamed Sheila's choice on the social distinction which placed an attorney on a higher plane than that of an insurance detective. Not, he was forced to admit, that Sheila herself was a snob. Maybe it was just propinquity, a community of interest. The fact that Kenneth Mayo had turned out to be a heel was beside the point.

Light from behind drawn shades laid a butter-yellow path across the front porch. McCloud mounted to the porch and rang the bell.

There was no answer, yet he had the distinct impression that the bungalow was not empty. He remembered what he had found behind that other door whose bell he had rung, Margie Garland's, and the hair along the back of his neck lifted. He rang again, and yet again. And still there was no response. He reached out and tried the door-knob. It was locked. It seemed to him then that inside, beyond the faintly glowing windows, there was furtive movement. More than a little angry now, because after all he was trying to do Sheila a favor, he descended the steps and went swiftly back along the driveway to the double garage. There were two cars inside. He now had definite proof that he had not been imagining things. There was someone in the house.

He crossed the small back yard and tested the latch on the door to the screen porch. This door was not locked. He opened it and went through, found that the kitchen door was not locked either and used that to gain admittance to the narrow hall leading to the front of the house. He kept on walking till he came to the open door of the living room. Kenneth Mayo, apparently as drunk as a boiled owl, was packing an open suitcase. He kept wobbling back and forth between the bedroom and the living room, carrying a little of this and that, and all the while mumbling to himself like a somewhat idiotic child. He was handsome in a rather effeminate way. Very blond hair was plastered to his well-shaped skull, and he wore his clothes like a Bond Street advertisement. His hands looked like a violinist's.

McCloud watched from the darkness of the hall. There was no sign of Sheila. Presently, he stepped forward into the room.

"So where do you think you're going?"

Mayo whirled, and his legs, all rubbery, got twisted up and sent him sprawling. He put up his hands as though shielding himself from an expected blow. The whites of his eyes were bloodshot. "My God, McCloud, what are you doing here?"

"Looking for Sheila," McCloud said in a tight voice. "Do you realize that Sheila just shot and killed one of your harem favorites?"

MAYO'S eyes rolled up in his head. Flaccid lips kept mumbling, "Oh, my God, oh, my God!" over and over again. McCloud slapped him across the face and pushed him down on the couch.

Sheila came in from the bedroom. She was still in tweeds and topcoat and she still had a gun, though naturally not the same one. Brannigan had that. This one was bigger, and the hand that held it was no longer jittery. Two spots of bright color burned high up on Sheila's cheeks and her gray eyes were hard and angry above the leveled weapon. She looked at McCloud as though he were a total stranger. "So we meet again, eh, Stephen?"

McCloud was suddenly so angry he actually saw red. "God damn it, Sheila, will you put that gun down and quit acting like a fool? Don't you realize I'm trying to help you?"

Her mouth curved downward.

"Indeed?"

"What else?" he demanded savagely. "It's me the cops are looking for, not you." He slid a cautious foot toward her. "And you want to know why? Because I stalled them, that's why. Unless the police can trace the gun back to you, you're in the clear, get it? In the clear." He hauled the envelope purse out of his pocket, tossed it at her feet. "Look, I even copped your bag out from under Brannigan's nose."

She gave it but a brief glance. "That is not my bag," she said distinctly. And then her eyes lifted and widened at something she saw behind him. Whirling, McCloud had just time to see Kenneth Mayo standing there, a bronze vase lifted in his two hands. Then the vase descended. McCloud went down like a poled ox.

CHAPTER VI

NO COMPANY WANTED



LATER, the first thing he was actually conscious of was that someone was trying to force liquor between his teeth. He swallowed some of it and almost immediately felt better. "Good!" a distant voice said. McCloud opened his eyes to see who the voice belonged to. The Samaritan was none other than Van Felix. His dissipated, old-young voice was a trifle resentful. "A terrible waste of good liquor," he said. He upended the bottle, this time over his own mouth, not McCloud's. "Ahhh!"

McCloud pushed himself to a sitting position. "A fine thing!" His eyes watched the room go around and around. "Nothing but a lush, that's all you are." His two hands came up parallel with his shoulders, feeling for his head. He was vaguely surprised when they encountered nothing but air. His head felt that big. He was suddenly amazed at the presence of Felix. "Where the hell did you come from?"

Felix had himself another small drink. "Who, me?"

McCloud cursed him. "Who do you think I'm talking to—pixies?"

"Well, no. Pixies come later." Felix lifted the bottle, measuring its contents with a practised eye. "After we finish this."

McCloud had now definitely located the perimeter of his head. Strong brown fingers explored the damage. Aside from a very natural swelling and a fresh trickle of blood from the newly opened bullet crease there seemed to be none.

He was vastly relieved. He snatched the bottle from Felix' loving clutch and imbibed with gusto.

Felix made disparaging noises. "Who hit you, pal?"

McCloud stood up, rocking slightly.

"Would it be our fair Sheila?" Felix asked.

McCloud suddenly towered over him. "You'd better not say that out loud, Van. You'd better not even think it."

"All right," Felix said equably. He watched McCloud pick up the leather envelope purse with the big gold M on its side. "As far as I'm concerned, the M stands for Malay Peninsula."

McCloud looked at him. "You haven't told me how you got here."

"I don't like to be stubborn, pal, but there are a few things you haven't told me, either. I gave you a tip, remember?" He helped himself to a very modest drink. "You took the tip, but you haven't paid off—yet."

McCloud made a bitter mouth. "Nothing but a fink, that's all you are. Somebody took me for the fifteen grand I was carrying." He watched Felix from beneath lowered lids. "I'm still not sure it wasn't you," he said suspiciously.

"Now look, Steve—" Felix gnawed at his lower lip. "Would I be here reviving you if I'd done a thing like that?"

"Not unless you were trying for some more of the same," McCloud said nastily. He was immediately sorry. "Forget it, keed." He outlined the various events since he had left Felix in a drunken stupor at Hammet's Baths. All he left out was the part about seeing Dutch DeGroot outside Margie Garland's door. He didn't want Felix getting corked all over again and fumbling that angle. "So you see," he finished, "I've had plenty on my mind beside the Kahn diamonds." His fingers toyed with the catch on the bag. "Now would you mind telling me—?"

Felix shrugged. "There's really nothing to it. The news is all over town about you being caught at the Garland girl's flat, where I knew you were going to be anyway." He lit a cigarette. "Also, there was talk of a mystery woman. I got an idea, just as the cops did, that you might be covering up, and the only woman I could think of that you might do that for was Sheila Mayo." He blew a smoke ring. "So I came out and here you were."

"Yes," McCloud said bitterly, "here I was." He looked hard at Felix. "You see anything of Sheila or that heel of a husband of hers when you came up?"

Felix shook his head. "Not even a vanishing tail light."

McCLOUD remembered that there had been two cars in the garage. He ran out through the back of the house and looked. There was only one car now.

Returning, he paused in the bathroom and examined his reflection in the mirror over the lavatory. He was beginning to have a very battered look indeed. In the medicine chest he found alcohol and Mercurochrome and adhesive, and with these laid out he was about to treat the shallow bullet furrow in his skull when his eye fell on the envelope purse and he recalled Sheila's denial that it was hers.

Not until then had it occurred to him to open the big. He did this now. To his great astonishment he discovered that Sheila had been telling the truth. The bag was certainly not hers. In the first place, Sheila Mayo was not the type of girl who would use Black Narcissus. The purse reeked of it. And in the second place, there was a handkerchief with an embroidered M, but the M was not alone. It was kept company by a K. Also, there were two letters addressed to Mrs. Felix Mercedes. McCLOUD wondered what the lady's first name was. He memorized the address on the envelope but decided that, temporarily at least, he would be a gentleman and not read the letters.

Hearing Felix approaching the bathroom door he snapped the bag shut and dropped it back into his overcoat pocket. He was dressing his wounds when Felix came in. "Oh, there you are!" Felix observed. He had managed to get himself quite drunk. There was less than an inch of rye left in the quart bottle. Cursing Felix for a hog, McCLOUD seized the bottle and drained it. Quite suddenly he too was drunk, so drunk that when he tried to set the bottle down on the edge of the basin he missed completely and it crashed to the floor. Felix regarded him dispassionately. "You know something? I think you're tight."

"Hah!" McCLOUD said. He ogled Felix. "How'd you like to help me get that fifteen grand back?"

Felix said, "How much help and how much of the dough do I get to keep if I find it?"

McCLOUD was outraged. "Have I ever

chiseled you? Have I?" He hurled a towel into the bathtub and almost fell in after it. "What'd you do with the money I left with Hammet for you?"

"I've still got it," Felix admitted. He preened himself before the mirror. "I've got Hammet's share too." He shook his head disparagingly. "These Greeks, they can't even count the spots on one of the dice, let alone two."

McCLOUD glared at him. "That's gratitude for you!" He cocked an ear at the sound of a distant siren. It seemed to him that it was coming closer. "Well, forget that for now." He stabled a forefinger at Felix' somewhat emaciated chest. "Here's what I want you to do, pal. Check up on Emil Kahn's movements tonight, say from six-thirty on. I've got a hunch it might be him that took the shot at me, and also lifted the fifteen grand."

The siren was definitely closer now. For the first time Felix heard it too. "Do you suppose we're having guests?"

"You think you're the only one that's smart?" McCLOUD demanded. "Much as I hate his guts, that guy Brannigan isn't dumb." It occurred to him that Brannigan might have finally traced the murder gun to Sheila. "Stick around and act as the welcoming committee if you want to. Me, I'm anti-social as hell." He ran out.

* * * * *

It was one of those pretentious apartment hotels which lie adjacent to Wilshire Boulevard's Miracle Mile. Cooperatively owned it, had been built for people with money and looked it. There was a striped canopy leading from the public sidewalk on Palmetto Drive, and this and the art tile walk beneath it split the immense, terraced forecourt in the exact middle.

A carriage starter in plum-colored livery looked out of his booth as McCLOUD went past, but offered no argument. McCLOUD went into the chaste lobby and asked for the number of the Mercedes apartment.

The clerk was a smallish man with thinning tan hair parted in the center. "Whom shall I say is calling, please?"

"I'd rather you didn't announce me,"

McCloud said. "It's—well, it's sort of a surprise."

"Apartment 710," the clerk said. He waved a languid hand toward the elevators. "Seventh floor."

IT WAS almost eleven o'clock, but the lobby was still pretty full. McCloud waded across miles of inch-deep carpet to the elevator bank and was presently lifted to the seventh floor. Up here there was more carpet, and more chromium and leather, though undoubtedly of a quality far beyond that of the Normandie, where Margie Garland had lived. McCloud found the door of 710 and thumbed the buzzer.

The lady who opened the door had green eyes, and a casque of blue-black hair and a lot of other things McCloud could have admired if he'd had time to go into them. She was in a green-and-silver evening gown, and her skin was like Guernsey cream, rich warm-looking. McCloud took off his hat. "Pardon me, I'm looking for a K. Mercedes—Mrs. Felipe Mercedes."

"Yes?" Her voice was full, deep-throated. She had lovely teeth.

"Well, is she here?"

"I am Kay Mercedes."

"Oh," McCloud said. He could not seem to fit this woman with Margie Garland. They were almost of separate worlds. Yet there was a distinct aura of Black Narcissus about the lady before him, and she was now committed to the ownership of the purse he had found in the Garland woman's apartment. He took out the bag. "Would this happen to be yours?"

Perhaps it was just a trick of the lights, but for an instant it seemed that the rich cream of her skin turned the color of skimmed milk. She put out a hand. "May I see it, please?"

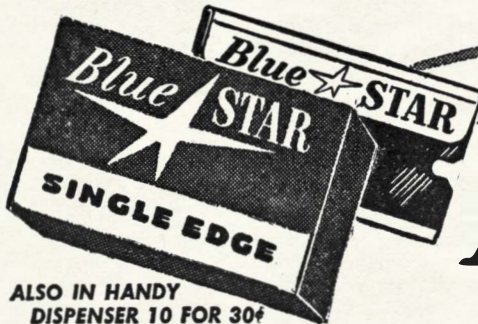
McCloud shook his head. "If you don't recognize it I guess I must have made a mistake." Behind her there was a small foyer done in black and pale gold, and there was a series of orchid-tinted mirrors. In one of these mirrors McCloud saw a man stand-

[Turnpage]

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ing just inside the living-room archway. The man was tall, darkly handsome in white tie and tails, and he was quite well known to McCloud. The man was Duke D'Arcy.

His eyes met McCloud's in the mirror with instant recognition. He came into the foyer and stood beside the lady with the green eyes. "Hello there, McCloud. What seems to be the trouble?"

"Well, unh, I don't know that you'd call it trouble exactly. Seems to be a slight misunderstanding, that's all." McCloud looked sleepy-eyed at the Mercedes woman, trying to get a lead on his next move. It seemed to him that she made a faint gesture of negation. He said, "Then it isn't yours?"

She was quite positive now. "No, it certainly isn't mine."

"What made you think the bag might belong here, McCloud?" D'Arcy asked. He put out a well-kept hand for it.

McCloud, appearing not to notice, dropped the purse back into the side pocket of his overcoat. He feigned an embarrassed laugh. "I guess I'm just a bum detective after all, Duke. There was one of the Dos Palmas cards in the purse, and the clerk downstairs said he thought he recalled seeing Mrs. Mercedes carrying a similar bag, so—"

At the word "detective" the lady's green eyes had narrowed slightly. She now looked from D'Arcy to McCloud. "Apparently you gentlemen know each other. Hadn't you better introduce me, Duke?"

D'Arcy's eyes were a trifle mocking. "Why not, my dear? This is Mr. Stephen McCloud, an investigator for West Coast Indemnity. Mr. McCloud, Mrs. Mercedes."

She said, "Oh, a *private* detective. How charming."

"Not a very good one," McCloud said. He did not really believe this. He thought he was a swell detective. He fiddled with his hat and wondered if Duke D'Arcy knew that Margie Garland was dead. Finally he put the hat back on. "Well, I'm sorry to have bothered you, Mrs. Mercedes. Good-night, Duke."

D'Arcy stepped out into the hall. "Now wait a minute, McCloud. Where'd you find this bag in the first place?"

"In a gutter," McCloud said, and shook

D'Arcy's hand and went back down the quiet hall to the elevators. This was getting to be a very funny business, he thought sourly. There were so damned many screwy angles cropping up that he was in imminent danger of going screwy himself.

Waiting for a down car, he considered some of the angles. There obviously must be a connection between all this and the Kahn & Company diamond job. Let's see, now. Margie Garland was reputedly the private property of Duke D'Arcy. According to that prize lush Van Felix, Margie Garland had also known something about the Kahn heist. Margie was now dead. Okay, looking at it from the viewpoint of somebody who knew that Marge was talking too much, her death would be almost necessary.

BUT in Margie's apartment he, McCloud had discovered Sheila Mayo, with a gun in her hand and a perfectly good reason for having killed the girl. To put it in a nice way, Margie was presumably guilty of alienating Kenneth Mayo's affections. Here again, though, you ran into something that was most peculiar. Sheila's husband was also one of Duke D'Arcy's attorneys. Did that mean anything, or was it just a coincidence? And how about the purse McCloud had found in the Garland apartment? In it were letters addressed to a Kay Mercedes, who turned out to be a married lady with lots and lots of what it took to get along in the world. So, investigating the ownership of the bag, who did you again run into? None other than Duke D'Arcy, of whom the lady with the green eyes was obviously afraid. The salient point seemed to be that Duke D'Arcy was the key to the whole business.

The elevator came up and McCloud got into it. Well, if D'Arcy actually was in on the diamond job, it couldn't have been a one-man job as at first suspected. Because why? Because Emil Kahn had sworn that the description of D'Arcy did not fit the man who had sapped him!

Debouching at the main floor, McCloud was on the point of departing from the premises when a page boy touched his arm.

"Mr. McCloud? Telephone in Booth 5, please."

McCloud stiffened. "What makes you think I'm McCloud?"

"The lady described you, sir."

"Oh." McCloud gave the kid a quarter and followed him across the lobby to the row of phone booths. He was not too surprised when he recognized the voice of Kay Mercedes on the wire. Nobody in the Dos Palmas except she and D'Arcy could possibly have known his name. "Yes, Mrs. Mercedes?"

She was a trifle breathless now. "Mr. McCloud, I've got to see you right away." He got the impression that D'Arcy was still up there, that she was speaking very close to the mouthpiece. "Where could I meet you in, say, half an hour?"

McCloud wouldn't have minded meeting the lady at any time of the day or night, even discounting the fact that she was a part of the riddle's solution. Kay Mercedes had looked as though she could be very interesting indeed, and, since losing Sheila, McCloud had begun to figure that if you couldn't have the girl you wanted you had to want the girls you could have. But there was a certain matter that he wanted to check, and quite possibly it would take more than half an hour. He said tentatively, "Could you make it an hour?"

She tried not to let her eagerness show. "Very well, then, in an hour. Where shall it be?"

"How about the cocktail lounge at the Ambassador? Say twelve o'clock."

"All right," she said, very low. She disconnected.

Presently McCloud also hung up. But on second thought he again lifted the receiver, got a go-ahead from the hotel operator and called Jessup's club. He was informed that Mr. Jessup had gone down to police headquarters. He called Headquarters. Jessup, recognizing McCloud's voice instantly, lowered his own to a whisper. "Good God, McCloud, you mean you're still in town?"

"Why shouldn't I be?"

"Because Brannigan is raising hell down here, that's why! He swears he's going to pin that woman's murder right on the seat

of your pants." He drew a deep breath. "I could have squared that other for you, boy, but you didn't tell me they'd actually caught you with the gun in your hand. Lord!"

"Don't be an old woman," McCloud said. "Have they found out who the gun is registered to?"

Jessup forgot himself and let his voice out to full strength. "They're checking that now, but what the hell difference does it make? Your prints are all over it. They've been compared with your license. And even if they didn't catch you with the gun in your hand that would be enough to hang you."

"Sure," McCloud said.

"Well, what do you intend to do about it?"

"I'll let you know," McCloud said.

Jessup yelped. "For God's sake don't. I don't want any part of you!"

"A fine thing!" McCloud sneered. He banged up the receiver, went out to the telephone desk and paid for his calls. He noted that the girl was eyeing him speculatively. "What's the matter, sister? My face on crooked?"

"No," she said. "I was just wondering if you weren't the McCloud the police are looking for."

CHAPTER VII

CORPSE IN A BATHROBE



HE WAS back in the blue-lighted upper hall of the Normandie again. For a place where a murder had been committed so very recently it was amazing that the Normandie could be so quiet.

Expecting that at least a police guard would be stationed outside Margie Garland's door, McCloud had parked his car in the obscurity of the side street and had then come cat-footed up the rear stairs. It was the fat man, Dutch DeGroot, that McCloud wanted particularly to see at this time.

The Dutchman had been conspicuous by his absence for the last couple of years. And so far as McCloud knew, the jewel thief was not wanted by the police. But he did have a police record, and to think that he

would, without cause, risk being picked up in a murder inquiry—well, somehow that just didn't make sense.

So, looking at it that way, it became almost certain that DeGroot would not have attempted to enter Margie Garland's apartment while the police were there unless he had a motive stronger than idle curiosity. Added to this you had a man who certainly knew his diamonds, and a dead woman who was alleged to have information about a very specific lot of the same commodity.

It was not stretching the imagination too far to suspect Dutch DeGroot of being the heist artist who had lifted the gems. Too, it was quite within the realm of possibility that Margie Garland, living on the same floor of the same building, might have seen or heard something relating to the theft. It could be DeGroot, indeed, who for this very reason had killed Margie. McCloud clung to this thought, and tried to forget that there was infinitely more damning evidence against Sheila Mayo.

Presently he left the semi-obscurity of the stairwell and moved along the hall, trying to guess which of the six apartments on this floor belonged to Herman DeGroot. Eliminating 204, that of Margie Garland, and 206, the one occupied by the blonde with the gutter vocabulary, this left but four possibilities. Without reason, he tried the doorknob of 203.

On the instant there were three shots somewhere beyond the door, loud, close together. The glass knob shattered in McCloud's hand. Another bullet screamed through the plywood panel and passed so close to McCloud's nose that he could smell the grease on it.

Cursing loudly, Stephen McCloud dropped to the floor, produced his own gun and sent an answering barrage right back at the guy. After the fourth shot, he just lay there, waiting. There was no return fire. He was conscious that along the hall doors were opening, but he was still intent on 203. Finally, he got up and hurled his bulk at the panel. It went inward with a tremendous crash and he sprawled flat on his belly on a throw rug. This acted as a sort of sled and he coasted with it until he finally smacked into some-

thing soft and yielding. He put out his hand and pushed himself to his knees.

THE softly yielding obstacle turned out to be the fat body of Herman "Dutch" DeGroot. He still had the garish red-and-green bathrobe on, but he certainly would not be needing it any more, except possibly as a shroud. Two bullets had pretty well ruined his chest. McCloud discovered that his left hand was sticky with blood, where he had touched the fat man's robe, and he bent, wiping it clean on the throw rug.

There was a gun on the floor near DeGroot's right fist. McCloud felt of it. The metal was cold, even colder than body heat, which meant that this gun at least had not done any of the recent shooting. McCloud got up then, and ran full tilt through the rest of the apartment. He found nothing but an unlocked service door.

Out in the main hall now there was the sound of scared voices. McCloud resisted the impulse to follow the unknown person or persons down the back stairs. He knew that he had already waited too long for there to be much hope of catching the killer. Besides, he had noted the bright glitter of something in Dutch DeGroot's pudgy left fist. He ran back into the living room and knelt and pried open the dead man's fingers. Lying there in DeGroot's hand was a square-cut diamond of at least three karats. It was an identifiable part of the Kahn & Company loot. McCloud was debating the advisability of closing the dead man's fist over it again when somebody behind him yelled, "Hey, you, drop that gun!"

He realized that he was still holding his own gun. He dropped it, noisily, so that there could be no doubt in the mind of the man behind him. Slowly, he rose to his feet and risked a glance over one shoulder. As he had suspected, the man was a cop. He was one of the harness bulls who had accompanied Lieutenant Brannigan on the first expedition into what was turning out to be a veritable charnel house. The cop was making small blubbery sounds with his lips. He recognized McCloud. "Oh, so it's you again!"

McCloud said that it was. He also said,

"I think you had better call Brannigan, my friend."

"Oh, yeah? And what would you be doing in the meantime?"

"I'm not going any place," McCloud said. "Not for a while, at least." He turned completely around and backed to a big club chair and sat down. He saw now that in the hallway beyond the harness cop there were at least three other people. One of them was the blonde in the yellow silk pajamas. Beside her stood a man and a woman, also in deshabelle and thus probably other tenants. These two were apparently struck dumb by surprise, or horror, or possibly a mixture of both. Not so the blonde. She lifted a lip at McCloud. "So it's you again!"

McCloud jerked a thumb in the cop's direction. "He said that first."

The cop motioned the blond into the room. "All right, tutz, grab that phone over there on the table and call police headquarters. Ask for Lieutenant Brannigan."

Her hips swayed as she walked, provocatively, but though usually appreciative of such things McCloud could not get interested at the moment. He was wondering if it had been his slugs or another's which had drilled those two ugly holes in the chest of Dutch DeGroot. He didn't see how it could have been his, because he had deliberately spaced his shots widely to cover the most territory. But DeGroot could have stopped one direct and then fallen into the other. But on the whole McCloud was inclined to the belief that a third person was responsible for DeGroot. There had been three shots from within the room. Dutch DeGroot's gun had been cold. Obviously, then, DeGroot had done none of the shooting and a third person was indicated.

There was a wait of perhaps ten minutes before Brannigan arrived on the scene. In the meanwhile the harness bull shuffled his big feet, rarely removing his eyes from McCloud.

Finally, as tenants from the other floors began to congregate in the hall he backed to the door and closed it with his shoulders. He didn't seem to know what to do about the blonde, though. She was already inside. He concentrated on McCloud.

AFTER a time the lady moved around back of McCloud's chair, leaned on it and put her mouth down close to his ear. She smelled of gardenias. "I meant what I said about coppers. Shall we take this one apart?"

"No," McCloud said. "No, thanks."

She was insistent. "I could go for you in a big way."

McCloud sighed. "Thanks, darling. Maybe sometime when I'm not quite so busy."

She was not offended. "Any time, honey."

The harness bull was becoming restive. "Hey, what the hell are you two talking about?"

The blonde laughed. "You wouldn't understand, copper. Not on your salary." She sat cross-legged on an ottoman and rested her shoulder cozily against the arm of McCloud's chair. "Poor old Dutch."

McCloud stiffened to attention. "You knew him?"

"Sure."

McCloud asked the cop for permission to smoke. Getting it he lit a cigarette, offered one to the blonde. She refused it. She said it wasn't fashionable for ladies like her to smoke. "You ain't no different than the society broads if you do." She yawned. "Hardly any of us gals in the business smoke or drink any more."

McCloud's eyes were suddenly alert. "Say that all over again, will you? Didn't Margie Garland smoke either?"

"No." She studied his face curiously. "Why?"

"I just remembered something," he said. When he had first walked into the Garland girl's apartment there had been a cigarette still alight beside Margie's right hand. He knew definitely that Sheila Mayo did not smoke. It now appeared that neither did Margie Garland. That meant someone else, a third person, one who had lit that cigarette, had been in the apartment. While not conclusive, here was evidence that it need not have been Sheila after all who had shot and killed the Garland girl. McCloud was suddenly so very happy about this that he completely forgot half a dozen other counts against Sheila. He even put out a square brown hand and caressed the blonde's head.

She could not know that the gesture was one of pure gratitude. She snuggled against his knee.

It was at this moment that Lieutenant Brannigan arrived. He was a trifle breathless, and his pale yellow eyes settled on McCloud with unmistakable triumph. His face was beet-red. "So you weren't satisfied!"

"No," McCloud said, "I wasn't satisfied."

With Brannigan was the detective whom McCloud had locked in the broom closet, and his first action on recognizing McCloud proved that he had not forgotten the incident. He stepped right over the body of Dutch DeGroot and aimed a big right fist at McCloud's jaw. McCloud rolled his head just enough to permit the fist to slide alongside his jawbone and bury itself in the upholstery of the chair back. The blonde, either activated by her acute dislike of all cops, or by her newly awakening affection for McCloud, kicked the detective in the shins. Yelping, he backed away.

Brannigan said sourly, "All right, all right, Selznick, quit playing around and save your grudges for some other time." Brannigan addressed the harness cop: "All right, Sweeney, let's have your side of it."

Sweeney recounted his side of it. It appeared that he had been left on guard at the Garland apartment after the departure of the others, but had chosen to rest his feet inside instead of mounting watch in the hallway. Hearing the shots, Sweeney had naturally felt called upon to investigate. Oddly, he was eminently fair to McCloud. He did not say that he had actually seen McCloud in the act of shooting Dutch DeGroot.

Presently, eyes still carefully avoiding McCloud and the lady in yellow silk pajamas, Brannigan got down on his knees and smelled the muzzle of DeGroot's gun. He then got out a fresh handkerchief and picked up McCloud's automatic and checked the magazine and firing chamber. The square-cut diamond in Dutch DeGroot's pudgy fist winked maliciously, triumphant in a secret knowledge that no harness bull, no lieutenant of detectives could ever fathom.

After some little time Brannigan got slowly to his feet. He made the rounds, counting bullet holes. McCloud just sat there. No-

body in the room said anything.

Dutch DeGroot's red-and-green bathrobe was more red than green now. It was soggy with blood. DeGroot himself looked oddly deflated, as though the two gaping holes in his chest had let out more than the mere spark of life. Pale blue eyes stared sightlessly at the ceiling.

FINISHED at last with his routine check-up, Brannigan came over and stood spraddle-legged before McCloud. The freckles on the back of his hands looked as big as new-minted pennies. "Okay, McCloud, it's your turn." He made his voice carefully casual. "Commence."

McCloud nodded toward the huddle on the floor. "Was it my gun that got him?"

"I don't think so." Brannigan said this grudgingly. "I make it that you fired from the hall. You shot four times, is that right?"

McCloud nodded. "All right, then," Brannigan said, "I've accounted for your slugs." He sucked in his breath. "And it's a cinch that Dutch himself didn't do any shooting." Beefy-red hands suddenly pounced down on McCloud's shoulders. "So that leaves a third party. I want to know who this third party is, and by God you're going to tell me. You're going to tell me if I have to take you apart!"

"Look, Brannigan, the harness cop will tell you—in fact he already has—that I made absolutely no effort to get away." His mouth drooped in bitter self-appraisal. "I'll admit I've cut corners on you guys when there was only money involved, but this is murder."

"Yes," Brannigan said, "this is murder." His breath made little whistling sounds as he straightened. "There was another one too, remember? And you ran out on that one."

"I know I did," McCloud said. "There was a reason for that, though." He did not choose even now to tell Brannigan that the reason was a girl named Sheila Mayo. He said, "I didn't know at the time—that is, I couldn't be absolutely sure—that the murder of Margie Garland had anything to do with me. It might just have been a coincidence." He sighed. "I was after a quar-

ter-million dollars' worth of hot ice. Naturally I didn't want to be detained, even for a few hours. So I ran out." He looked at Brannigan's partner. "Selznick can boot me for locking him in the closet any time he wants to."

"And don't ever think I won't!" Selznick snarled.

McCloud smiled at him, disarmingly.

"What took you to the Garland girl's apartment in the first place?" Brannigan asked.

McCloud told him, though he did not use the name of Van Felix. He merely referred to him as an informer. He became very earnest indeed. "You see there was no assurance that Margie Garland was directly connected with the Kahn diamonds. It was just a chance that she might have heard of something. I couldn't afford to skip the tip so I came up to see her."

"I see," Brannigan said softly. "And you ran into a strange woman?"

Something about the tone set up a jangling inside McCloud's skull, like a burglar alarm, but he kept his dark face impassive. He allowed his hand to caress the blonde head beside his knee, as though he didn't have a care in the world. "Yes," he said quietly, "I ran into a strange woman. She had a gun and I took it away from her and it went off." He made a little curl out of one of the blonde's locks. "The young lady here has probably told you all about what happened after that."

SHE pressed her head hard against his hand. "Believe me, honey, I wouldn't have if I'd known you like I do now." She made a very unladylike sound with her lips, meant for Brannigan, who had slapped her in the teeth earlier that night. "Cops are nothing but lice," she observed.

Brannigan ignored her. "All right, so then what?"

McCloud looked at him. "Well, I don't

want to make you sore, Lieutenant, but apparently I noticed something that you completely missed. Among those present in the hall I saw Dutch DeGroot, and his bathrobe told me that he was living here. Naturally I knew Dutch for a jewel specialist. That and his presence on the scene made it almost imperative that I have a talk with him. So I came back."

Brannigan lifted a lip. "Well?"

McCloud spread his hands. "Christ, what more do you need? Just as I got to his door, somebody inside cut loose with a flock of lead. I didn't see anybody else around that they might be shooting at, so it seemed to be me. So I shot back."

Brannigan made a fist of his right hand. "It's not quite so simple as all that, shamus. The woman you let get away was not a stranger to you. It was probably the same woman who did for Dutch DeGroot too." His yellow teeth showed briefly, unpleasantly. "Or maybe this time it was the woman's husband." He loosed some of his pent-up emotion then in a violent gesture. "And once again who do we find smearing the trail? None other than good old Steve McCloud, the two-timing son of a bitch who says he doesn't like murderers!"

McCloud's stomach was suddenly as cold as ice. "You checked the gun?"

"You're goddam right we did!" Brannigan yelled.

"It could have been stolen," McCloud said desperately.

Brannigan became heavily sarcastic. "Sure it could have. As a matter of fact, I thought you'd bring that up. So I checked, and sure enough the gun had been reported stolen. That was a couple of months ago." His beefy-red face took on a purplish tinge. "You think that gag will fool anybody? It's the first thing an amateur planning a job would think of. Report the weapon as stolen and then use it for a kill!" Magically a gun appeared in his freckled fist. "Look, McCloud, both Sheila Mayo and her husband are missing. Where are they?"

McCloud licked suddenly parched lips. "I don't know."

"You will!" Brannigan yelled. He slammed the gun to McCloud's jaw.

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CHAPTER VIII

THIRD DEGREE



ONLY half-conscious, he was in a room, white-washed brick room with scarred golden oak furniture. He felt numb, leaden-weighted. From a thousand-watt lamp in a chromium reflector white-hot light poured down on him, searing his eyeballs.

Sweat saturated his clothes, yet he felt cold inside. Words kept hammering at his consciousness, Brannigan's words and another man's. Brannigan had a short length of rubber garden hose. He began using the hose again. McCloud knew where he was. He was in the goldfish room at Headquarters.

Brannigan kept saying, over and over again, and punctuating his words with blows, "Come on, McCloud, where is she? Where is Sheila Mayo?"

The other man would occasionally slap McCloud's face with a wringing wet towel, just to be sure he was awake and listening.

McCloud would say, "I don't know," and then take another shellacking. The hell of it was that he really did not know.

Brannigan tried reasoning. "Look, Irish, why the hell don't you come clean? We're bound to get her eventually. You know that. So why don't you make it easy on yourself? Where is Sheila Mayo?"

"I don't know."

Bang went the rubber hose. It probably did not make any great amount of noise, but that's the way it sounded to McCloud, whose head was the target. And then, quite suddenly there was a new sound, and Brannigan stopped hitting him and began cursing a blue streak.

Feet slap-slapped on the linoleum floor, hurriedly, and somewhere a desk drawer opened and closed. Then Brannigan's voice again: "See who it is, Selznick."

The torture of the light went away from McCloud's eyelids. He sat perfectly still, not opening them, just waiting. A draft of cold air sifted across his wet face as a door opened. And then he heard the door slam

back against the wall, and there were voices, shouting fierce accusation and even fiercer denial. Tentatively, because he could not believe even now that rescue was at hand, McCloud opened his eyes. As through a fog he recognized Jessup, a militant and outraged Jessup leading a small army of reporters. Jessup was waving a small fist under Brannigan's nose and calling him, among other things, a bastard. "I'll have you busted higher than a kite for this, you bastard!"

As Brannigan backed away under the onslaught three or four of the newspaper boys thrust past Jessup and came over and studied McCloud as though he were a museum piece. "Christ!" One of them, apparently not relying on his own memory, made notes on the back of an envelope.

PRESENTLY Jessup too came over. Iron gray hair and mustache bristled belligerence, and the tiny veins in his nose and cheeks were purplish, yet there was something almost gentle in his eyes. He put a small hand under McCloud's chin, tilting the head far back. "What have they been doing to you, boy?"

McCloud licked his lips. "Nothing much."

"Oh, so you're going to be stubborn!"

"No," McCloud said. He discovered that Captain Seward, Night Chief of the dicks, had come in too. He had always rather liked Seward. He said, "Brannigan just had some screwy ideas, that's all." He watched the worried look on Seward's face go away. The captain went over and began talking to Brannigan and Selznick in a low tone.

Jessup put out a hand and touched the chromium reflector of the big lamp. It burned hell out of him. "God damn it, McCloud, what's the idea of trying to protect these gorillas?" He appealed to the reporters. "You know what that lamp is for, don't you?" He darted over to the golden oak desk and began yanking out drawers. Brannigan, cursing, tried to interfere, but he was too late. Jessup already had the length of hose and he waved this around for everyone in the room to see. "Exhibit B." He was talking direct to the reporters now. "This is still wet, men. Wet with McCloud's

sweat and blood. I want you to remember it." He drew an outraged breath. "The third degree is not as extinct as we have been led to believe."

Captain Seward looked almost as sick as McCloud felt. "Now wait a minute, Counsellor," he protested. "It's not nice, I admit that, but you know how McCloud is. He's stubborn, that's what he is." He avoided looking at McCloud. "We've placed him on the scene of not just one, but two murders. We have an identification by a neighbor of the Mayos, a man who actually saw him going into the Mayo home."

INWARDLY McCloud cursed all people who couldn't seem to mind their own business but especially those people who always remembered him so vividly.

Jessup snorted indignation. "Am I arguing? All I say is that you can't beat a client of mine to death."

Brannigan sneered. "Client, hell! The guy's working for you." He was seized with an idea. "You're both probably tarred with the same brush, by God!"

Captain Seward silenced him with an abrupt gesture. Jessup took this as a sign that Seward was willing to listen to reason. He stopped yelling and became only mildly accusing. "What is the charge against my client?"

"Well," Seward said uncomfortably, "well, as a matter of fact—"

Jessup pounced. "So there aren't any!" He glared at the reporters. "We knew that anyway, but now he admits it. McCloud has been subjected to the third degree, an extremely brutal third degree, and yet he has not even been booked." He pointed a quivering finger at Seward's nose. "Can you prove that my client was actually involved in either of these murders?"

Seward gnawed at his mustache. "Well, Counsellor, the facts—"

"And what are the facts?" Jessup demanded. "Even Brannigan admits that in the case of this Margie Garland he found McCloud in the act of calling Headquarters. And, in the case of Dutch DeGroot, Mc-

[Turn page]

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Cloud submitted to questioning and told a perfectly straight story. According to Brannigan's own report it was not McCloud's gun that killed DeGroot." He got out a handkerchief and blew his nose loudly. "And if you think it was McCloud who shot the Garland girl, then why in hell are you looking for someone else?"

Seward lost his temper. "Did I say McCloud shot anybody? All I'm saying is that he knows who did and is trying to cover her up." He scowled at the reporters. "We know that McCloud is in love with the girl. We know positively that he visited her home after the Garland murder, and that following that both she and her husband have disappeared."

Jessup was derisive. "You're not doing yourself any good, Captain. By your own admission McCloud is in love with Sheila Mayo. What is more natural than that he should visit her? She didn't have to commit a murder to induce McCloud to pay her a visit.

Brannigan thrust himself forward. "You're kind of forgetting the gun, aren't you? We've proved that it belongs to Ken and Sheila Mayo."

Jessup shrugged. "It was reported stolen." "Why wouldn't it be?" Brannigan demanded. "If you were intending to commit a murder isn't that the first thing you'd think of?"

Jessup was sarcastic. "Everyone is not as clever as you, Lieutenant. Nor do most of us have such an evil mind." He pretended that he was in court and that the reporters were a jury of his peers. "Gentlemen, I ask you. Is there anything in what Captain Seward, or this—this person has said to warrant the brutal and inhuman treatment shown my client? An eyewitness to the struggle in Margie Garland's apartment has positively refused to identify Sheila Mayo as the mystery woman. This witness has viewed a photograph of the said Sheila Mayo, and unequivocally states that this so-called mystery woman was not my client's friend."

"Hah!" Brannigan snorted. "That blonde is nuts about him too. She's lying her lousy head off."

McCLOUD made a mental note to do something really nice one of these days for the lady in the yellow silk pajamas.

Jessup marched over to the desk and snatched up the phone. "Get me the district attorney's office. If he isn't there, try his home."

Seward ran over and knocked the instrument down. "Never mind that."

Jessup looked at him with pretended surprise. "You mean you don't intend to prefer charges against my client?"

"No." Seward was still acutely conscious of the reporters. "Not if you can persuade these hyenas to lay off my men."

"That's hardly my job, is it, Captain?" Jessup looked with a sort of clinical interest at the sweat drying on McCloud's face, finally went over to the lavatory in the corner and began soaking a clean towel in cold water.

McCloud said thickly, "For the first time in my life I really want a drink." One of the reporters produced a pocket flask and McCloud seized it in both hands and tilted it to his puffy lips. It was rye, and it did the trick. Presently he was able to accept the towel Jessup handed him and do some of his own mopping up. "Thanks, Counsellor."

"You're quite welcome, I'm sure," Jessup said politely. He had now decided to be polite to everybody. After some further argument it was agreed that perhaps it would be better to adjourn to Captain Seward's office down the hall. McCloud offered no objection to the change of scene, and it was not until they were actually in Seward's office that he discovered his pockets were empty. "God damn it, I've been robbed!"

"Now wait a minute, McCloud," Seward said placatingly. "You haven't been robbed. We just searched you, that's all. See, your stuff is right here on my desk." He went over to the desk, and then, quite casually, he picked up the tooled-leather envelope purse. "By the way, McCloud, just who is this lady? Kay Mercedes. Mrs. Felipe Mercedes."

McCloud looked at the big clock on the wall and discovered that it was half past twelve. He wondered if the lady with the

beautiful green eyes would still be waiting for him in the cocktail lounge of the Ambassador. "Just a friend," he said in answer to Seward's question. He tried to look as though he had a woman on every corner in town. "You know how it is. She left her bag in my car."

"Oh? And when was this?"

"I don't know," McCloud said. "A couple of days or so ago, maybe." He began putting his belongings back into his pockets. The reporters watched him, fascinated, and he decided that he must be a very dilapidated-looking object indeed. He was counting the money in his wallet and finding that he had less than forty dollars when Jessup approached. "How's about lending me a century, Counsellor?"

Jessup was startled. "What did you do with"—He lowered his voice to a whisper—"with the fifteen grand I gave you?"

McCloud affected a casual air. "Oh, that!" He could not very well tell his boss that he had been highjacked out of the money entrusted to him. "It's in a perfectly safe place, Counsellor. I just didn't want to use the company's dough for my own personal needs."

"Then write yourself a check," Jessup said unfeelingly.

At this moment Brannigan appeared in the door to an inner room. With him was the blonde gal from the Normandie. She was still in her pajamas, though she was wearing a thousand-dollar mink coat over them. Besides the pajamas and the fur coat she was wearing a black eye. She gave McCloud a slightly resentful but none the less admiring stare, and shook Brannigan's hand from her arm. "He's been trying to make me say things!" She became aware of all the reporters and put on an act for them. "I never saw the woman in my life. Is it any wonder I always say cops are lice?" The eye that wasn't black closed in an almost imperceptible wink for McCloud's benefit. "That was a nice picture they showed me but it didn't mean a thing."

He nodded. "It was swell of you not to lie about it." He looked at her eye, looked at the reporters. "I see Brannigan even takes his grudge out on women."

She sniffed. "That guy!"

McCloud, on a sudden impulse, went over and pressed the forty dollars into her hand. "Buy yourself some roses, baby. To forget Brannigan and to remember me."

"No." She thrust the money back at him. And then, very low, she said, "You know damned well that isn't why I lied for you."

"Yes," McCloud said. He put a large hand under her chin, bent and kissed her full on the mouth. "I'm sorry about the forty dollars. I've been holding you too cheaply."

"Forget it." She peered past him at Captain Seward. "Hey, you, can I go now?"

Seward said that she could. She picked up an inkwell from his desk, admired it elaborately, and then, managing to look very clumsy but quite natural, she fumbled it and poured ink all down the front of Brannigan's gray suit. "Christ, that's too bad, ain't it?" She gave the rest of the room a bright nod. "Well, good-night, alk." She departed, hips swaying provocatively.

CHAPTER IX

REVENGE IS SWEET



IT WAS some little time before the office returned to even a degree of normalcy. Perhaps to cover Brannigan's wretched state, the reporters began buzzing around McCloud like flies. Who did McCloud think had killed Dutch DeGroot? Was the square-cut diamond found in DeGroot's hand really a part of the Kahn & Company loot? Why, if Sheila Mayo and her husband were not implicated, had they vanished? And what was this about Margie Garland having been Duke D'Arcy's girl friend? Why hadn't the police picked up Duke D'Arcy himself?

"Your guess is as good as mine," McCloud told them. Dark eyes sultry, he watched Brannigan trying to get the ink off his suit. He was really going to have to do something about Brannigan. He was going to have to be taken some time, cop or no cop.

A couple of detectives came in, escorting Mr. Emil Kahn, and the already crowded office became actually stuffy. Kahn was in

evening clothes. The white vest and shirt accentuated his paunch, and jowls like turkey wattles overlapped his too-tight collar. He had a muddy skin. The dominant, aquiline nose was arrogant. Strangely enough his eyes were blue.

Kahn pushed through the reporters, confronting Captain Seward. "You sent for me?"

Seward nodded. He was not too happy. He ripped open a small sealed envelope and dumped the square-cut diamond out on the desk blotter. "Is that yours?"

Kahn made a great business of getting out a jeweler's glass and examining the stone. "Yes," he said presently, "yes, it's one of mine." Then, ignoring McCloud, who was almost at his elbow, he turned and addressed Jessup. "Where are the rest of them?"

"I don't know," Jessup said.

"I'm getting pretty tired of waiting for my money," Kahn said. Quite suddenly he saw an advantage to himself in the presence of the newspaper men. "Would it interest you gentlemen to know that West Coast Indemnity is refusing to pay off on my policy?"

"We're not refusing!" Jessup yelled. "We're exercising our privilege of a reasonable delay."

"Reasonable!" Kahn sneered.

McCloud wondered if there might not be a very good motive for Kahn's urgency. He said, "You wouldn't be in actual need of money, would you?"

Kahn appeared to see him for the first time. "Everybody needs money. Am I asking for more than my due? Haven't I always paid my premiums?"

Even Jessup could not deny that. "Of course."

"Very well, then," Kahn said, "I want my diamonds or my money, and I want the settlement by ten o'clock tomorrow morning." His blue eyes held a glint of triumph. The reporters were definitely an asset now. "Three days is enough to wait."

Jessup looked harried, but he accepted the challenge. "All right, it's a deal." He sighed. "The diamonds or the face of the policy by ten o'clock tomorrow." He poked a small plump finger at the glittering gem. "You're positive about this stone?"

Kahn said that he was very positive indeed. He said, "Any expert could identify it."

Captain Seward cracked the knuckles in his left hand. "All right, then, let's you and me take a little trip down to the morgue. Maybe you can identify the man who had the rock in his possession."

Though he had not invited them, everybody else decided that they would go too. McCloud looked at Lieutenant Brannigan. "I want my gun."

Brannigan shook his head. "Not a chance."

Captain Seward backed Brannigan up in this. "You're loose, McCloud, but you're loose under conditions where you'd better not be packing a gun." He was rather obviously thinking of Brannigan's health. "It might go off and hurt somebody."

Jessup bridled. "Now look here, Captain, how do you expect McCloud to catch a couple of killers if he's unarmed?"

"I don't," Seward said acidly. "The police department will do all the catching there is to be done."

Jessup decided that he would not make an issue of the gun. He took up a position beside McCloud as they all trooped out to the elevators. "How are you feeling, boy?"

"Fine." McCloud did not feel fine. He was angry and disgusted with the knowledge that Sheila had tricked him. It was even worse than the result of Brannigan's shellacking. He said, "Thanks for springing me, Counsellor."

"Forget it."

Down in the basement now, Captain Seward led the way into the autopsy surgeon's room. Dutch DeGroot was spread out on one of the porcelain tables. The surgeon had been doing things to Dutch, not very nice things, and there were two misshapen lead pellets in a tray. McCloud saw with relief that they could not possibly have come from his gun. The slugs had come from a forty-five. McCloud himself never carried anything heavier than a thirty-eight.

EMIL KAHN, though on the verge of being sick at his stomach, managed an unequivocal identification of DeGroot. "Yes, that is the man who attacked me." He de-

cided that for the benefit of the press he would explain the whole thing again. "I was in my private office when it happened." He put a hand to his head, recalling that though he no longer wore his bandage he was still an invalid. "I don't know how the door came to be unlocked, or maybe, like the police say, the man had a key. Anyway, I didn't even have time to call for help." He closed his eyes. "My—my secretary found me unconscious."

McCloud made disgusted noise. That was the hell of it, he thought. Kahn's story was so sweetly simple that you didn't have one chance in a million to shake it. Catering to dealers and collectors only, Kahn & Company did not need the usual show rooms or store front. A suite of offices in the Bankers' Trust Building sufficed. As for the safe, that was perfectly all right—so long as it was closed and locked. But open, as it had been, it wouldn't offer any more protection than a ten-cent waste basket. Certainly not against a man like Dutch DeGroot, who was noted for his almost uncanny ability to choose the right moment. The point was, who had the diamonds now? Why had DeGroot been killed?

Jessup must have been thinking about the same thing. He nudged McCloud. "Well, Stephen, what do you make of it?"

McCloud shrugged. "I don't know, Counsellor."

Jessup made his voice even lower. "Well, you'll hardly be needing that fifteen thousand any more, eh?"

"No," McCloud said sourly. Even if he still had it, the fifteen grand wouldn't be any good now. Whoever had the diamonds was in far too deep to risk bargaining for their return. Admitting possession of the stones was the same as confessing at least one murder, and probably two.

Presently everybody decided that there was no use in looking at Dutch DeGroot any longer. The autopsy room emptied. In the corridor McCloud suddenly remembered that though he had the keys to this car he didn't know where the car itself was. He asked Brannigan.

"One of the boys brought it along," Brannigan said. "It's at the curb out in front."

McCloud thanked him politely. He said good-night to Seward and Jessup and went swiftly up the stairs to street level. It had begun to rain again. After a time he found his car and got in and drove leisurely down Broadway. In the rear vision mirror he saw another car swing around the corner in his wake. It had none of the distinguishing marks of the police department, but McCloud had no doubt that in it would be Brannigan or another just like him. McCloud, freed, was expected to lead the way to Sheila Mason and her husband. He hoped it was Brannigan in the car behind.

The recurrent rain had thinned traffic considerably. Besides, it was now almost one o'clock in the morning. McCloud had no difficulty in finding a place to park in front of the first bar he saw that had phone booths in it. He called the Ambassador, was connected with the cocktail lounge and asked to have Mrs. Mercedes paged. It turned out that there was no Kay Mercedes at the Ambassador. Either she had not kept the appointment at all, or she finally had gotten tired of waiting for McCloud to keep it.

Still with a watchful eye on the street McCloud next called the Dos Palmas Apartments. There was no answer from the Mercedes suite. He jiggled the hook to attract the girl on the hotel switchboard. "Pardon me, this is Captain Seward at Police Headquarters. This Mrs. Felipe Mercedes—is she a widow, or living with her husband or what?"

"Oooh, with her husband!" The girl giggled. "At least he's supposed to be her husband."

"Ah, yes." McCloud sounded suavely pleased. "And her husband's business?"

"He's a jewelry salesman." She thought about that for a moment. "Unh-hunh, he travels for some importing firm in New York."

"Thank you so much," McCloud said and pronged the receiver a trifle absently.

He considered going out to the Dos Palmas again, on the off chance that the Mercedes woman would return. Finally, though, he decided that he had better go home and change clothes, because these he

had on were getting very disreputable indeed.

Through the front window he caught sight of Brannigan going past, head averted, hat pulled down against the rain, but undoubtedly Brannigan. McCloud sauntered out, hands thrust deep in his overcoat pockets, feigning deep preoccupation. He did not get into his car, but continued walking slowly along until he came to the alley in the middle of the block. He went into the alley and waited. He had to wait quite a while. Presently, though, Brannigan must have decided McCloud wasn't coming out again. He ran full tilt into the alley.

"Brannigan," McCloud said.

BRANNIGAN brought up so suddenly that his feet skidded on the wet cobbles. He sat down with a tremendous grunt. "Ooomph!" And then, spotting McCloud standing there above him in the darkness, he went for his gun. McCloud kicked it out of his fist and it went skittering off down the alley. "Now," McCloud said in a tight voice, "that makes us about even. No guns, no other coppers to help you." He unbuttoned his overcoat and tossed it onto a pile of rubbish cans. "Just you and me, Brannigan."

"You son of a bitch," Brannigan said. He came up off his haunches and aimed a terrific right at McCloud's face. McCloud dodged the blow and planted a better-timed one to Brannigan's eye. Brannigan sat down again. He got up, wiping muddy hands on his thighs. "You son of a bitch."

"Sure I am," McCloud said. "I'm ungrateful as hell for all the things you've done for me." He feinted with his left and hit Brannigan in the mouth with his right. Brannigan kicked him in the stomach. McCloud grunted with the pain of it, but did not go down. Instead, he swung with all he had left in him. It was more luck than sense that the fist caught Brannigan on exactly the right spot. The big dick folded up like a poled ox.

McCloud put on his overcoat, looked at the unconscious man, finally decided that Brannigan might get run over by a garbage truck or something. He bent and got a

handful of Brannigan's hair and hauled him to the comparative safety of a refuse pile. He discovered that he felt pretty good, considering.

CHAPTER X

A VISITOR



CONTENTEDLY McCloud lived in the upper half of a Spanish duplex overlooking Silver Lake. He liked it because of its comparative quiet, and because the owners, who occupied the lower half, were nothing if not broad-minded. They were a couple of character actors who were usually so interested in their own business that they had little time or inclination to snoop in McCloud's. Parking his car out front he discovered that there was a party going on downstairs. From the number of cars, and the sounds, it was quite a party. He was halfway up the outside stairs when he observed that there were lights on in his own place. He brought up rather abruptly at that. The lights themselves were not so unusual; he had friends who frequently considered him a lonely soul in need of cheer, whether he was at home or not. Ordinarily, though, these friends were the convivial sort and they rarely bothered to pull the window shades. It was the drawn shades that halted him.

Presently he began climbing again, cautiously and very quietly, until he attained the narrow outside gallery which served as his front porch. Though by comparison with the party downstairs it was very still up here, he had the distinct impression that his visitor had not departed. He knelt and applied an eye to the faint crack of brighter light which indicated that one of the living-room blinds did not quite reach the sill. His visitor was Kay Mercedes.

She sat almost facing him, feet stretched out to the fire which apparently she had built herself. Her long slender legs were outlined beneath the sheer green satin gown he had first seen her in, and a green-lined ermine evening cape was thrown carelessly over an occasional table. She was smoking

fitfully, worriedly, though the rest of her pose gave no indication of nervousness. The great emerald on her ring finger was no greener than her eyes. Blue-black hair was shaped smartly to her head. No doubt about it she was one of the most beautiful women McCloud had ever seen. He wondered idly if she happened to love her husband.

After a moment or two he tiptoed along the gallery and investigated the kitchen and bedroom windows. The lady might have brought some rather unpleasant friends with her. Satisfied presently that she had not, he returned to the front door and opened it and stepped inside. "Hello there, Mrs. Mercedes."

She stood up so swiftly it scared him. To be so still one moment, so alive and vibrant the next—well, it just wasn't human. Her gown was a livid green flame. Her voice, though, was under perfect control. "I've been expecting you," she said.

"So I gathered," McCloud said drily.

She turned then, back to the fire, every detail of her body outlined by it. Jungle cat, he thought. Beautiful. She'd cut my throat the first chance she had, but it might be worth it at that. Providing she didn't do it too soon. She said, "You didn't come to the Ambassador."

"No," McCloud confessed.

"Why?"

"Because the police chose to detain me on another matter." He took off his hat and overcoat and began shedding his suit coat and vest.

"I see." She did not quite believe him. "Then I take it that you still have my purse? You haven't told anyone?"

He stared at her. "Told anyone what?" He was unbuttoning his shirt now.

She stamped a narrow, green-shod foot. "Damn it, stop trying to evade the issue! Have you told anyone what you know?"

"Such as?"

THIS time she did not stamp her foot. She just sort of flowed toward him in one lithe motion until she stood so close that he could smell the mixed scent of Black Narcissus and her blue-black hair. It was

like heady wine in his nostrils. She was tall, almost as tall as he, and as she tilted her head back her green eyes were candid. "We could be very good friends, McCloud."

A little pulse in his right temple began to throb. "I'm sure we could, darling."

She smiled at that, lazily. "Did anyone ever tell you you were good-looking?"

"Sure," he said. "Somebody once told me I was a detective too." He looked deep into her eyes. "Which reminds me—was it you who killed Margie Garland?"

Not a muscle in her face moved. "No."

He had a feeling she was telling the exact truth. He drew a deep breath. "All right, we'll skip that for a moment. You didn't kill her, but you might know who did."

"No."

He frowned. "Christ, you must have seen something when you were there."

"When I was where?"

He snapped his fingers impatiently. "Look, you don't have to be coy with me, baby. Where I found your bag, of course."

She appeared to be genuinely surprised at that. "But I don't know where you found it!"

In spite of himself he almost believed her. But if she didn't know where the bag had been found, why in hell was she so eager to get it back? Aside from its presence on the scene of a murder there was nothing particularly valuable about it. Or was there? He was suddenly reminded of the two letters addressed to her. He decided that before he went much further he had better have a private squint at them. "All right," he said, stalling for time, "I've got to have a shower and a change. After that we'll see about finding the bag for you."

"Thank you, darling." As if to seal a bargain she put her two white hands on his shoulders and lifted her mouth. A gentleman could do no less than kiss her. McCloud was in the act of kissing her for perhaps the third time when a slight sound from behind him broke the spell. Somewhat hastily releasing his armful of green flame he turned. Sheila Mayo was standing on the threshold. Her gray eyes were a little scornful, more than a little disappointed in him. "Pardon me, Stephen, I didn't know you were en-

gaged." She turned away.

McCloud yelled at her. "Sheila!"

She halted indecisively. He ran across and caught her arm and pulled her back into the room. "Look, hon, I've been worried sick about you."

Cool gray eyes went past him to appraise Kay Mercedes. "I'm sure you have, Stephen."

He flushed. "Damn it, Sheila——"

"It's really not important," she said. She disengaged her arm from his grip. "I just stopped to tell you that I was sorry. A news broadcast said you'd been arrested for that—that woman's murder, and I realized then that you had been trying to protect us."

"Not us," he corrected her stiffly. "You. I don't give a damn about what happens to that heel you call your husband."

She flinched as though he had struck her. And then, almost as though against her will, her eyes again sought the woman in green. Of the three in the room, Kay Mercedes seemed the only one completely without embarrassment. Moving lazily and with utter assurance she resumed her seat before the fire and made herself comfortable. Obviously, at least McCloud felt that it would be obvious to Sheila, Kay Mercedes was planning on spending the night. He said rather desperately, "Now look, Sheila, you mustn't get any funny ideas." He was suddenly conscious of his own disarray. No matter what he said, that alone was enough to damn him. Besides, this was hardly the time nor place. He again took Sheila's arm and thrust her ahead of him out to the gallery. "See here, do you realize that the police are combing the city for you?" He shook her savagely. "In spite of all I could do they traced the gun."

Her voice sounded numb. "I know."

"Why'd you have to kill her, hon?"

"I didn't."

"Then who did?" he demanded angrily. "Kenneth?"

SHE did not answer that. She didn't have to.

"You're a fool," McCloud told her roughly. "The guy isn't worth it."

"Probably not," she agreed. Her whole

attitude was one of utter exhaustion. She lifted tired eyes to his. "It's taken me a long time to admit that, hasn't it, Stephen?"

He shrugged. "Forget it."

She leaned against the railing as though for support. "He's still my husband, Stephen. I couldn't just let them—hang him."

"No," McCloud muttered. "No, you'd have to wetnurse him, just as you've always done." Aloud he said, "Why didn't you get him out of town?"

She straightened. "I did try, but he was in such a sodden condition that I knew it would be fatal if we were stopped. And now he's in a stupor or something. I can't get him awake."

"Christ!" McCloud said. After a while he said, "All right, kitten, I'll see what I can do. Where have you got the guy now?"

She shuddered. "We're at the Hoyt. Registered as Mr. & Mrs. Smith."

"What about your car?"

"I left it in a parking lot."

"For a lawyer you're not thinking very straight," he said. And then, immediately sorry even for that mild reproach, he put a gentle hand under her chin. She was crying. "I'm a heel, Sheila. Would you mind, very much, if I kissed you?"

Her eyes sought the living-room door. It was still open. "After that?"

He scowled. "What did you expect? A guy's got to live, hasn't he? Besides," he added, "this was business."

"All right," she said wearily, "if you want to." She lifted her face to his. Her lips were icy cold.

After a little while he went with her down the stairs to her waiting cab. "I wouldn't do any more running around, Sheila. As a matter of fact, it was pretty foolish to come here. I'm hotter than a firecracker."

"I'm sorry," she said. "Good-night, Stephen."

He closed the door on her, stood there watching the tail light of the cab vanish down the street. The rain had stopped again, though the night air was chill on his face. The party in the lower half of the duplex was still going strong. He went back up the steps to his own place.

Kay Mercedes apparently had not moved.

She gave him a lazy-eyed stare. "Was she someone important, darling?"

"To me," he said shortly. He bundled up his discarded clothes and strode with them to the bedroom door. He discovered that someone had done a hell of thorough job of searching this room. Turning, he noted that there were a number of things out of place in the living room too. He admired the lady in green. "You must want that bag pretty badly."

She smiled at him. "I do."

The fingers of his right hand explored the bundle of clothes in his arms. Her bag was still in the pocket of the overcoat. She had not thought to look there. He pretended that he still admired her. "How did you get in, baby?"

"The key was under the doormat." She laughed. "Even detectives aren't very original about things like that."

"I guess you're right," he said ruefully. He backed into the bedroom, turned the key noiselessly, went into the bath and turned on the shower. Returning to the bedroom he got out the lady's purse and once more inventoried its contents. Except for the two letters there didn't seem to be a thing that was worth more than a hundred dollars at the outside. Therefore, it must be the letters she was worried about. Oddly, though, after having decided this he did not read the letters. All he did was to take them out of their envelopes, substitute blank paper and replace the envelopes in the purse. His face was absolutely expressionless when he went out to the living room and tossed the bag on the table. He did this carelessly, though he made sure that he remained nearer the table than the lady in green.

She came to her feet a little breathlessly. "Where did you have it hidden?"

"You'd never guess, darling."

She sensed the difference in his manner now. "Well, are you going to give it to me or aren't you?"

"I ought to get a little something for my trouble, don't you think?"

HER green eyes suddenly hated him. "Oh, so you did read the letters!"

"No," he said, "I haven't read them."

"Very well," she decided presently. "I'll give you five thousand dollars for it."

He was incredulous. "For the bag?"

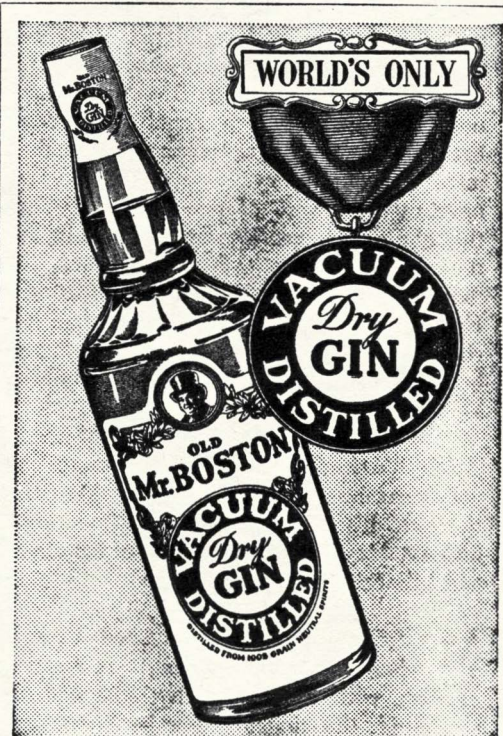
"For the bag. You'll have to take a check, though. I haven't that much money with me."

"Perfectly all right," McCloud assured her. He waited while she wrote the check, accepted it, waved it around in the air to dry the ink, finally picked up the bag and tossed it into her lap. "Nothing like a nice clean deal, darling."

She actually spat at him. "We don't have to pretend any more." She opened the purse, saw that the two envelopes were there and did not think to examine their contents also. She was quite satisfied that she was getting what she had paid for. She stood up, snapping the bag closed. "I hope you die young," she said.

"The way I've been pushed around tonight, baby, death would be almost a relief." He held the ermine cape for her, gingerly, as though afraid to get too close. At the

[Turn page]



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door he said casually, "Oh, by the way, is your husband in town?"

Cat-like she whirled and struck him across the face. "If you've double-crossed me, if you've read those letters, I'll be back to see you." Her mouth was suddenly ugly. "And this time I'll have a gun."

His eyes were darkly humorous as he put up a hand and felt of his cheek. "I give you my word," he said. "I have not read the letters." He held the door wide for her. "Good-night, and thanks—for everything." He watched her descend the stairs. He returned to the bedroom and read one of the letters, and presently, coming to the signature, he emitted a little whistle of astonishment. The writer of the letters was a man named Emil.

not too surprised when his caller turned out to be Van Felix. "Whee!" Felix said. He held a quart bottle aloft. "Lookit—gifts!"

McCloud scowled at him. "Go away."

"Who, me?" Felix was indignant. "A fine way to treat a man who has been wearing his feet down to the ankles for you!"

"I'll bet," McCloud said cynically.

"Well, I have," Felix insisted. He moved into the room, a trifle unsteadily but with due regard to obstacles. He examined the label on the bottle with a jaundiced eye. "Those people downstairs don't buy very good liquor."

McCloud stared at him. "You mean you actually crashed that party?"

"Certainly," Felix stated. "You think I wanted to stand around all night in the rain

**Next Issue: A Vice
Crusader Is Slain!**

MURDER ON

Offhand, McCloud could not think of a single person he knew who was named Emil except Emil Kahn. Also it was worthy of note that there was a definite connection between diamond brokers and salesmen for importers of jewelry. One could very well have met the wife of the other. McCloud thought of the grossly fat Emil Kahn and the sleekly sensuous Kay Mercedes. He thought too, a very little, about what Mrs. Emil Kahn would say and do if it had been she who just read those letters. He did not believe Mrs. Kahn's mind would be as broad as her hips.

And then there was Mr. Felipe Mercedes, Kay's husband. Mr. Mercedes must be a very careless fellow indeed. Whistling through his teeth, though without much melody, McCloud shed the rest of his clothes and climbed under the shower.

McCLOUD had just finished dressing when the doorbell rang. It kept on ringing, with a sort of rhythmic cadence, as though the ringer might be humming a tune to its accompaniment. McCloud was

waiting for you to come home?" He looked with patent disapproval at McCloud's somewhat lumpy visage. "Fighting again!"

McCloud made a bitter mouth. "Maybe that's what you'd call it." He remembered that he had sent Felix on the back trail of Mr. Emil Kahn. "What did you find out?"

"Now let's see, what did I find out?" Felix's voice was faintly accusing. "You know something, Steve? I never could work with a man who didn't give me his complete confidence."

"What makes you think I haven't?"

Felix leered. "Who was the lady?"

"What lady?"

Felix had a small drink. He did not offer McCloud any. "Why, the lady with the green eyes. The lady who makes so very free of your apartment."

"Oh, that one," McCloud said. He strove to create the impression that Kay Mercedes' visit was merely casual. "She's just a gal trying to get along in the world."

"And being very successful at it if you ask me."

Felix carried the bottle around on a tour

of the room. "She must have thought you were playing hide and seek. When I saw her she was certainly looking hard."

"Jealous," McCloud said. He could quite cheerfully have throttled Felix by this time. "Look, did you get anything on Kahn or didn't you?"

Felix pursed his lips. "Well, yes and no. I checked on Kahn with his wife." He giggled. "Now there's a lady definitely not in the class with your latest conquest." He squinted his eyes, recalling Mrs. Emil Kahn. "More of the *borscht* type."

McCloud cursed him. "Well?"

"Well, what? Is Emil Kahn the man who shot at you out on Doheny Drive and relieved you of fifteen grand?"

"Yes."

"Should I be?" He looked at Felix who had retired cautiously to the fireplace. "So you know the lady too!"

"Well," Felix said, "in a way, yes."

"Then you might introduce me," McCloud suggested pleasantly.

Both Felix and the blonde stared at him. Finally she said, "What are you trying to do—kid me, McCloud?"

"No, I mean it. I don't know your name."

"I see," she said. And then, with a laugh that was sharply off key, "Well, I guess it doesn't matter much—now." She backed to the door, reaching behind her for the knob.

McCloud caught her arm. "Not so fast, baby. Tell me some more about you and that lush over there in the corner."

Felix sighed. "Never mind, I'll tell it."

HIGH HEELS

Complete Mystery Novel

By RICHARD BURKE

"He could be. On the other hand, he could not be. His movements for the time in question are shrouded in dark mystery."

McCloud was disgusted. "A hell of a help you are!"

The doorbell rang. McCloud's eyes had a harried expression as he motioned Felix to answer the summons. The newcomer turned out to be the blonde in the yellow silk pajamas. McCloud still did not know her name.

She did not see McCloud at first. She stood staring with a kind of surprised fascination at Van Felix. "Well," she said presently, "you do get around, don't you?"

Felix appeared oddly embarrassed. "Well, unh—" He attempted to close the door in her face. "I'm pretty busy right now. Perhaps some other time?"

McCloud strode forward and yanked the smaller man aside. "Come in," he told the blonde. He banged the door shut. "Now, what's this all about?"

She drew the mink coat tighter about her. "I must say you're not exactly a joyous welcoming committee."

The blonde said, "So you were lying!" and McCloud said, "Shut up!" and Felix finally said, "Well, unh, to tell you the truth, Stephen, I thought there was something a little fishy about your visit to Margie Garland. It occurred to me that maybe you were not only holding out on the cops, but on poor old Felix too." The thought of such a thing saddened him. "I couldn't stand it."

"I'll bet," McCloud sneered. "So you didn't check on Kahn after all. You chased back along my trail, trying to trip me up!"

"Oh, no," Felix said. "I really did investigate Mr. Kahn." He nibbled reflectively at the neck of the bottle. "But the radio—" He paused and smiled brightly on one and all. "Wonderful thing, the radio. It told me all about a man named Dutch DeGroot being killed, and in his fist was—guess what?"

"A diamond?" McCloud hazarded.

"Correct!" Felix said.

McCloud regarded him without love. "So you thought there might be more of them lying around."

"He told me he was a friend of yours. He said he was looking for clues!"

Felix was outraged. "Well, wasn't I?" Avoiding McCloud's glare he had a very small drink. "I was looking very hard."

"But not for clues," she said. She looked at McCloud. "I got back home and found this guy taking it apart." Her mouth drooped. "And I actually let him talk me out of shooting him!"

"So you pay with guns too," McCloud said. He wondered if the blonde was not more than the innocent bystander she pretended. He said, "Would it be forward of me to inquire the purpose of your present visit?"

"Ain't I been telling you? I got to thinking maybe this guy was not as good a friend of yours as he said. So I dropped around to tell you about him."

McCloud appeared impressed. "Thank you, darling."

"Well, is he or isn't he?"

"In a small way," McCloud said. He stiffened as someone pounded on the outside door. "Well, for Christ's sake!"

The blonde moved somewhat hastily aside. Felix clutched his bottle tighter. McCloud lifted his voice. "All right, whoever it is, come on in."

Jessup came in. His short thick figure was swathed in a gabardine raincoat, and raindrops glistened on his hat. His eyes took in the blonde, Felix and the bottle, finally came to rest on McCloud with utter disfavor. "Having a nice time, Stephen?"

McCloud cursed him. "A nice time!"

Jessup cocked an ear at the sounds coming up from below. Apparently the party downstairs was breaking up. "Don't you think we ought to invite some of the more lively ones to join us?"

"Damn it," McCloud yelled, "I haven't forgotten the lousy diamonds!" He scowled. "Is that what you came around to find out?"

"I take it that our friends here are all in on our little secret?" Jessup's voice dripped sarcasm.

"Say," the blonde demanded, "are you insinuating that I ain't wanted?"

McCloud waved her to silence. "Never mind, baby, this guy just can't understand anybody having to stop for breath." He glared at Jessup. "Look, I've been mauled

all over this man's town tonight. I had to get some clean clothes."

Jessup was still sarcastic. "Then I don't have to hire another detective? Another so-called detective?"

McCloud looked at him. "One of these days something terrible is going to happen to you, Counsellor. Something like having your teeth kicked in."


Jessup was unimpressed. He said, "Well, I just thought you might have something to tell me." He looked at his watch with exaggerated intentness. "We made a little promise to Emil Kahn, remember?"

"Not me," McCloud denied. "You're the one that goes around making promises." Sultry-eyed he watched the blonde, who was now helping Felix empty the bottle. They seemed to have forgotten their little differences. He lowered his voice. "I've run into a couple of new angles, Counsellor. There's definitely a tie-up between Emil Kahn and a certain lady you wouldn't know about, and between the lady and Duke D'Arcy." He neglected to mention Sheila and her husband. "In other words, I've now got an entering wedge."

"Then you'd better start using it," Jessup suggested. "In a hurry." He went away.

CHAPTER XI

WOUNDED MAN

OMEWHAT shabby and run-down, the Hoyt was one of those definitely middle-class hotels along West Seventh Street. There were a few leather chairs in the lobby, a few discouraged-looking potted palms. A middle-aged night clerk with fading hair presided sleepily over the desk, and there was a lone bellhop of indeterminate age who sat crosswise in one of the leather chairs, legs draped over the arm, reading a racing form.

McCloud, entering, looked like a million dollars against that background. He had on a gray Homburg and a dark gray worumba overcoat, last year's but as good as new, and a double-breasted blue suit, and under the left lapel of the suitcoat he was wearing an

automatic pistol which made him feel all dressed up. His dark face was a little puffy here and there, what with one thing and another, but considering his various encounters in the past few hours he looked pretty good. The bullet furrow in his scalp hardly hurt at all. He approached the desk and asked for Mr. and Mrs. Smith.

The clerk made a great business of locating the room number, finally cleared his throat portentously and summoned the bell-hop. "Front! Take this gentleman up to 435."

The bell-hop languidly folded his racing form and stuck it in a hip pocket. He and McCloud rode up to the fourth floor and went along a dimly lit hall to 435. Neither said anything. McCloud had the uncomfortable feeling that his escort was going to stay right there at his elbow unless bribed to go away. He parted with a silver dollar. "Good-night, pal." He waited until the elevator had finally whined out of earshot before he knocked on the door.

Sheila opened it almost instantly. "Hello, Stephen."

He saw that she had been crying. "Hello, hon." He went in and closed and locked the door. Beyond Sheila, on the room's one bed, lay Kenneth Mayo, soggily inert. His slow, agonized breathing was the only sound. McCloud went over and stood looking down at the man whom, of all those in the world, he had reason to like the least. His dark eyes were sombre. "You still haven't been able to rouse him?"

"No." Sheila's voice was dry.

McCLOUD bent and took the unconscious man's head in his two hands, moving it back and forth, back and forth. Mayo's eyelids did not even flicker. Experience with that prize sot of all, Van Felix, told McCloud that the usual heroic measures would not work on Kenneth Mayo. They would probably kill him. He straightened and looked at Sheila. "We're going to have to get him to a doctor, hon. I think maybe it would be a good idea to leave here anyway. The cops are bound to find that car of yours. Starting with that, they'll check all the nearby hotels." He drew a deep breath. "You'll

have to help—a little. I can carry him all right, but you'll have to front for me downstairs. Otherwise the clerk might think I had killed him."

"Whatever you say, Stephen." Involuntarily she shivered. Under the circumstances she was standing up pretty well, though. She had taken off her modish little hat, and her hair glowed copper-gold under the ceiling light. Her gray eyes, usually so calm and self-possessed, were now dazed, as though she couldn't quite understand how all this could be happening to her. Wanted by the police, if not for the actual murder of her husband's paramour, at least for complicity; seeing her practice and her reputation about to be dragged through the public prints; probably uncertain of McCloud's feeling toward her, now that she had discovered him just another Casanova—well, it was a wonder she wasn't cutting out paper dolls.

McCloud put an arm around her shoulders. "Look, Sheila, there are a number of things that have to be straightened out between you and me, but I've got to set you right about one thing immediately. That woman you saw me with tonight, yes, and another one before her—those things have nothing to do with the way I feel about you. The way I've always felt."

"It doesn't matter, Stephen."

"The hell it doesn't," he said angrily. And then more quietly: "I've been a pretty good loser, Sheila. I've let you take your own sweet time to find out that a lawyer can be even a worse heel than a private dick." He shook her. "But I'm all through now, understand?"

Her chin came up. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean," he said grimly, "that when and if we ever get clear of this mess, you and I are starting all over again."

"You're striking a bargain with me, Stephen?"

"A bargain?" He looked blank for a moment, suddenly got her implication and turned ugly. "A bargain, hell! You're no bargain at any price." His eyes were savage. "It just happens that I'm nuts about you, that's all, and next time I want a fair

break. No unpleasant memories cluttering up the view."

QUITE suddenly she put out her hand and touched him. "I'm sorry I misunderstood you, Stephen." Her mouth trembled, ever so slightly. "Did anybody ever tell you you were pretty swell?"

His anger evaporated as swiftly as it had come. "Sure," he said. He remembered the flame in green satin, Kay Mercedes. "There was another gal told me that, but she changed her mind. She found out I was a heel." Emil Kahn's two letters rustled crisply in an inside pocket of his suit coat. "Which reminds me, hon, that this same lady had a very good look at you when you stopped by my place. She's liable to tell the cops where she saw you. That means I'll have Brannigan in my hair again."

Sheila looked at the unconscious man stretched out on the bed, the man who was her husband. There was frank disgust in her eyes now, but obviously she had set herself a job and fully intended to go through with it. "Well, we'd better get on with whatever we're going to do."

"Yes," McCloud said. "Before we start out, though, I'd better have all the angles. That way I can act more or less intelligently." He stared down at her upturned face. "What happened in the Garland woman's apartment? Was Kenneth's gun really stolen, or was that—as the police believe—just an amateurish subterfuge? How did you manage to get involved in the killing?"

"I don't know about the gun," she said. "I suppose it may really have been stolen, though Kenneth has frequently lied about things, even when it wasn't necessary." She shivered, but presently went on steadily enough. "You see, I came home this evening, last evening rather, and discovered that Kenneth had actually brought that—that woman there." She shrugged tiredly. "There were liquor glasses and things lying around."

McCloud cursed. After awhile he said in a matter-of-fact voice. "But Kenneth and the girl were not there?"

"No." She would not look at him. "I couldn't, of course, know exactly where they had gone, but I was pretty sure of the wom-

an's identity. You see and hear things, sometimes, that you pretend not to. Anyway, having brought her into our own home like that—well, it was just a little more than even I could stomach. I decided to see the woman."

When it began to seem that she was not going on McCloud prompted her. "All right, so you ended up at the Garland woman's apartment. Then what happened?"

Sheila dropped into a chair, as though all the strength had suddenly gone out of her legs. "It was pretty horrible, Stephen. In fact, it was ghastly, opening the door on a scene like that. Kenneth was on the floor with the gun in his hand. The woman was partially on top of him." She caught her breath. "I was literally stunned for a moment. Then Kenneth sort of stirred a little, and the woman's body shifted and I could see her face." She was seized with a violent fit of trembling.

McCloud put an arm about her, steadying her. "Forget it, hon."

"No, I've got to tell you." After a brief moment she again got her voice under control. "I ran to the woman, then, and straightened her up, but of course there was nothing I could do. She was quite dead. I had just made sure of this when Kenneth roused. He came to his feet, mumbling incoherently and brandishing the gun about. I knocked it out of his hand.

"He was so drunk he could barely stand, but not too drunk to recognize me in a stupid sort of way. He even asked me what I was doing there. Then he saw the dead woman and got terribly, terribly sick."

McCloud remembered that he had almost gotten sick himself. "It must have been hell for you, Sheila."

She nodded. "It was. Naturally my first thought was to get Kenneth away. And I finally got him down the back stairs and almost to the car. It was not until then that he thought to tell me the gun was his. I had to go back after it."

"And that's where I came in." McCloud was thoughtful for a moment. "He admitted killing her?"

"Of course," she said dully. And then: "He could scarcely lie out of it, could he?"

She made a resigned gesture. "Not that he didn't try to make excuses. I gathered that it was she who had the gun in the first place, and that he had accused her of stealing it, and the quarrel turned into a struggle. Finally, so he said, he got the gun away from her, but she picked up something and threw it and it hit him on the head. He must have pulled the trigger unconsciously. At least that was his story. He said he didn't even remember hearing the shot."

McCloud looked at her. "By the way, did you hear it?"

She thought a moment. "No, I don't think I did, Stephen. I remember now, though, that somewhere nearby a radio was making a lot of noise. That may have covered the sound of the shot."

McCloud turned to the man on the bed, this time to partially check Mayo's own story. He was surprised to discover that in one respect, at least, Mayo had told the truth. Half hidden by tousled blond hair there was a raised swelling just above Mayo's right ear. Whatever Margie Garland had thrown had certainly done the business. It may not have actually knocked Mayo unconscious, but it could very easily have startled him into pulling the trigger. McCloud sighed. This was presuming, of course, that Mayo wasn't playing on his wife's sympathy and lying about the whole thing.

Sheila ended on an apologetic note. "Kenneth was frantic when I told him about my encounter with you, and that I had not been able to get the gun after all. He begged me to help him get away, and I—well, I promised I would. And all the time he kept drinking, and then you appeared on the scene again." She spread her hands. "I guess we both sort of lost our heads."

McCLOUD found a certain amount of humor in that last. It had been he who had almost lost his head, literally, when Ken Mayo conked him with the vase. He remembered that Sheila had had a second gun. "Where the hell did you get that?"

"Kenneth had it," she said. "I took it away from him because I was afraid that in his condition he might kill someone else."

"Thank you," McCloud said drily. "All is now clear." He stood looking down at Mayo's inert figure. Finally he pulled the covers off the bed and started putting Mayo's clothes back on him. "Come on, baby, you and I are going places."

Sheila came over and tried to help.

After awhile, when at last they had the slim figure fully clothed, McCloud hoisted it over a shoulder. Sheila snapped the suitcase closed. They were almost to the door when a voice out in the hall said, quite distinctly, "This is the room, Lieutenant."

Brannigan's voice was a whisper, but even so you could tell it was Brannigan. "Shhh!"

McCloud took two swift steps forward and shot the extra bolt on the door. At the same instant Brannigan hit the panel with all of his two hundred pounds. It bulged inward but did not shatter. McCloud, still carrying Mayo over a shoulder, motioned Sheila into the bath, then crossed the bedroom and banged the window up, loudly, so that there could be no mistake. He too retired to the bath, and closed the door until there was nothing but a crack showing.

Under a second onslaught the hall door crashed off its hinges. Brannigan floundered in and hurled himself at the open window. The night clerk followed. McCloud opened the bathroom door, reached behind him and got Sheila's wrist with his free hand, then slid cautiously toward the ravished hall door. Ken Mayo was by this time beginning to weigh a ton. They were actually within reach of the hallway when Brannigan, out on the fire escape, turned and saw them. The little night clerk, facing Brannigan, could not understand why the lieutenant's gun should suddenly be pointing back inside the room. He must have thought Brannigan intended shooting him, for he gave a little squeak of utter terror and flung himself against Brannigan's gun arm just as the gun went off.

Cursing a blue streak, Brannigan attempted to rid himself of the clinging man, tripped on the window sill and fell headlong into the room. It seemed to McCloud that his feet were weighted with lead, yet somehow he and Sheila were suddenly at the open door of the elevator cage. The combination

bell-hop and operator was startled. "Hey, what the hell!"

McCloud dropped Mayo like a sack of potatoes, yanked Sheila inside the cage and banged the gate shut. "Shove off, sailor." As an added inducement he produced the gun from under his armpit.

"Well, sure," the kid said. He shoved off. The cage began a plummet-like descent. Somewhere up above there was a terrific clatter, probably Brannigan using the stairs. At the main floor after what seemed an eternity, McCloud picked up Mayo, this time in his two arms, and ran for the street. He didn't even know whether Sheila was behind him or not, but presently it turned out that she was. It also developed that Brannigan, or somebody just as malicious, had removed the keys from McCloud's car.

Sheila, breathing unevenly, said, "Never mind, Stephen. I'll take Kenneth. You run for it."

Down at the corner a Yellow cab paused to discharge a late fare. "Let's both run," McCloud said. Yelling like an Indian, still lugging Mayo, he ran toward the cab, threw Mayo through the open door and shoved Sheila in on top of him.

The hacker was trying to collect from his former passenger. "It's one-sixty, pal. The meter says so."

McCloud hauled out his gun again. "The hell with that. Get under the wheel, fella. I'll square this guy's ride."

The ex-fare said, "Well, thanks very much, but I really—"

"Don't mention it!" McCloud snarled. Down the street, Brannigan had just debouched from the hotel. He began shooting. McCloud's gun and the added incentive of Brannigan's slugs put wings on the hacker's feet. The cab was already in motion by the time McCloud had climbed in over the meter. "Jesus!"

McCloud pushed the gun at him. "Never mind praying, pal. Just drive."

FORCED RIDE



DRIVING rain slanted into the path made by the headlights, a million shining silver needles, and the windshield wipers pushed doggedly at their monotonous task. McCloud wished that the weather would make up its mind. He wished that he could make up his own.

Try as he would, he could not reconcile the murder of Dutch DeGroot with anything that Sheila had told him. In other words, if he believed Sheila Mayo, neither she nor her husband could have had any part in the killing of Dutch DeGroot. On the other hand, it was almost inconceivable that two murders, both having to do with the Kahn diamonds, or at least with people who knew about them, could happen in the same building, on the same night, without being connected. That was asking too much, even of coincidence.

The hacker said from the corner of his mouth, "Where we going, pal?"

"Just keep on driving," McCloud said.

The cab continued weaving in and out of dark side streets adjoining Wilshire Boulevard. Surprisingly, there was quite a lot of traffic. It was almost two o'clock in the morning. For the moment it appeared that they had successfully eluded Brannigan, though the driver had no doubt of the kind of dynamite he was carrying. The cab's radio, tuned to the police band, occasionally repeated McCloud's description, and that of Sheila and Kenneth Mayo. Fortunately Brannigan had been too busy to get the hack's license number, but it was only a question of time until the process of elimination would work in his favor. McCloud knew that he could not continue to just ride around like this.

Back of him, in the tonneau, Sheila was sitting like a stone image, holding her husband's head against her breast.

After awhile the hacker said, "You don't have to hold no rod on me, mister. I'm friends. I've been in a jam or two myself."

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McCloud considered this information. "All right, if the gun makes you nervous." He put the gun away. Presently, as though arguing with himself, he said, "You ought to see how impossible it is for me to let you take us where we want to go. You wouldn't do it yourself, would you?"

The hacker thought about that for a moment. "Well, no," he decided, "I guess I wouldn't."

"The cops are bound to catch up with you. If they got as tough with you as they have with me you'd have to tell them all you knew."

They rode in silence for a couple of minutes. Finally the driver said, "Well, what would you suggest, pal? I'm a very reasonable guy."

McCloud looked at him. "Would forty bucks pay you for a very light sock on the head? Forty is all I've got with me."

The driver was moved to sincere admiration. "A guy who offers me that when he could just as easy conk me for nothing—well, I'm for you, mister. And anyway, for forty bucks I'd take concussion." Like a man who knows the water is going to be cold, but who would rather dive in than be thrown in, he braked the cab to a halt beneath a giant pepper tree. He got out. McCloud got out after him. They went around the nose of the cab and picked out a suitable spot on the grass of the parkway. The neighboring houses were all dark, silent.

The hacker watched McCloud take out the gun again. He said, "Look, would it be all right if I took off my cap first?" He was slightly embarrassed. "What I mean is, the company charges us five bucks for the damn' things, and if this one got ruined or anything——"

"All right, take it off."

The hacker did this, laying the cap neatly on the running board, right side up, so the rain would not get at the lining. Straightening, he cleared his throat. "Well, now, about that forty bucks——"

McCloud gave him the forty and waited, quite patiently for McCloud, until it was stored away. He then raked the gun smartly across the hacker's scalp, so there would be at least a little blood to prove the hacker's

story later. The guy promptly fell down and arranged himself comfortably on the sod and apparently went to sleep. "Good-night, pal," McCloud said. He climbed into the driver's seat and drove hurriedly away.

After some little time Sheila opened the sliding window behind him. "I suppose you know what you're doing, Stephen."

"I wouldn't bet on it, hon."

By this time the cab was headed back toward town, on Third Street. "How is Mayo?"

"Just the same," Sheila said. After awhile she said, "I'm afraid he's pretty sick, Stephen. He's got a terrible fever."

McCloud's mouth was a thin hard line. "Yes."

RAIN came in the open window on his left and he reached down and cranked it shut. "I'm sorry you hate him so much, Stephen," Sheila said.

"I don't hate him," McCloud said. It was funny, but somehow he really didn't—not any more. Kenneth Mayo still offered a problem, but it was no longer a problem between McCloud and Sheila.

He concentrated on his driving, and some ten minutes later he drew to the curbing in front of Hammet's Baths.

McCloud got out and came around and opened the cab door. "You've got to trust me from here on in, Sheila. Kenneth will be as safe here as anywhere, and I'm going to see that he gets a doctor. Okay?"

"I won't be able to stay with him?"

"No."

"All right. Whatever you say, Stephen."

He reached in and got Mayo in his two arms and went carefully down the marble stairs. Mayo was dead weight. McCloud pushed through double glass doors and laid his burden on the red leather and chromium divan. He went over to the desk and banged the night bell.

Hammet came out.

"A fine t'ing!" he said. "You know you're hot like anyt'ing?" He preened his fierce mustaches. "Whatta you trying doing—getting me arrested in jail?"

"You'll have me crying in my beard in a minute," McCloud said. He led Hammet

over to the divan. "Look, here's a customer I brought you."

"Well, you can josta goddam well take heem away again."

McCloud put an arm around the Greek's bulky shoulders. "We've been friends a long time, you fat bastard. You going to let me down now?"

Hammet sighed, resignedly. "Well, putting it like those——"

"Fine," McCloud said. "Just tell the doc that you've got an old customer here and you want to get him straightened out so you can send him home."

Hammet's business instincts came to the fore. "How moch sheesa wort' to you?"

"A century," McCloud said firmly. "No more, no less."

"Is very cheap like hell, but I do it."

"And don't try to chisel an extra ten by forgetting the doctor, either. Your regular routine would kill this guy."

Hammet swore the thought had not even entered his mind. He peered down on Mayo. "Heesa look almos' like those Felix, hanh?" He straightened and fixed McCloud with an outraged eye. "You know those fifty bocks you are giving me I should splitting it with Felix?"

"Sure," McCloud said. "So you gave Felix his share and he hornswoggled you out of yours, too."

"Heesa cheat, that's w'am he are doing!"

"By this time you ought to know better than to shoot craps with that guy. He always wins."

McCloud bade Hammet a more or less fond good-night and strode to the street. Sheila was still sitting just as he had left her. He pretended to be greatly encouraged over Mayo's condition. "Well, that's that. Now we can go find a spot for you." He climbed under the wheel and started south on Spring Street. A black-and-white police car went by, going north. McCloud held his breath. The prowl car did not turn around. It had stopped raining again. After a time McCloud half turned in his seat and spoke to Sheila. "Did Kenneth ever discuss his firm's business with you?"

"Not often," she said. "Why?"

"I just wondered." He drove in silence

for another block. Then: "They're Duke D'Arcy's attorneys, you know."

"Yes," she admitted, "I knew that."

"And Margie Garland, she is supposed to have been connected with D'Arcy too."

Sheila was obviously surprised at that; surprised and a little dismayed. "I had no idea, Stephen." After a moment she said in a stifled voice, "What—what is all this leading to?"

McCloud's laugh was bitter. "There's the little matter of some diamonds. About a quarter of a million dollars' worth." He trod down harder on the throttle. "I'm supposed to find them. They're the reason I stumbled into you and Kenneth and one thing and another."

SHEILA was appalled. "And we—Kenneth and I—have ruined that for you?" She caught her breath. "I wish you had told me all this before, Stephen."

"Why the hell should I?" he demanded roughly. And then more gently, "There's no use getting sentimental about it, hon. All I want you to do is answer a couple of questions." He framed the first one. "Did Kenneth happen to mention a couple named Mercedes?"

"No."

"Nor Emil Kahn, or maybe Dutch DeGroot?"

"No, I'm sure he didn't, Stephen."

"All right," he said. He parked the cab before the downtown Y.W.C.A. "Well, here we are, Sheila. I want you to stay here. Don't go out for any reason whatsoever until you hear from me, understand?"

She nodded. "I understand."

He helped her with the suitcase. "If you need anything else, send out for it. You've money enough?"

"Yes, Stephen." She looked up at the blank face of the big stone building. "What name shall I use?"

Abruptly he laughed. "We might as well make it Smith again. You can be Mary Smith from, say, Santa Ana."

She touched his arm, briefly, then picked up the bag and went swiftly up the gray stone steps. He stood there, head bared to the cool night air, until he saw that she was

being admitted. "Good-night, Sheila," he said under his breath. He got back in the cab and drove it to a section of the city that was at least three miles removed from any place he had been in the last month.

He stepped from the cab in front of the Club D'Arcy and asked the driver to wait. He had to do this because he didn't have a dime, and the fare came to a dollar-eighty-five.

McCloud reconnoitred the modernistic façade of the D'Arcy. It was a place of curved and tinted glass brick, with broad bands of chrome trim.

At the moment the trend of patrons was outward. Somewhere inside, an excellent orchestra was playing "Goodbye, Now." It was just two o'clock, the legal closing hour, and Duke D'Arcy was careful about appearances. At closing time he closed the supper room, at least.

McCloud went inside and merged with the dozen or so couples at the checkroom counters in the small lobby. Presently, carrying his hat, he climbed carpeted stairs to the second floor.

There were two rooms on the upper floor, D'Arcy's private office and the salon. In the larger room there was a small service bar and a series of roulette and crap tables. These were only moderately busy. McCloud estimated the crowd at around a hundred. It was all very quiet, very refined.

McCloud was mildly surprised that the two or three people who recognized him didn't sound the alarm. Perhaps they hadn't had access to the radio or newspapers lately. He crossed the big room to the cashier's cage. "Hello, Clyde."

Clyde looked up from the stack of bills he was counting. "Hello, Mr. McCloud. Something I can do for you?"

"If you can't, I'm going to have a hell of an argument with my cab driver. He's waiting for me to come back with a dollar and eighty-five cents." He looked at his strap watch. "Maybe more by this time." From his wallet he extracted the check that Kay Mercedes had given him. "How's about cracking that for me?"

Clyde looked at the check. "Five thousand dollars," he said. "I'm afraid I'll have to get

an okay on that much, Mr. McCloud."

"I'm in no hurry," McCloud said.

CLYDE summoned a relief cashier. Clyde then carried the check across the big room and disappeared inside D'Arcy's private office. A passing waiter asked McCloud what he would like to drink and McCloud told him he thought a tall Coca-Cola would be nice.

The waiter accepted the order gravely, with no show of surprise, just as though it was the common thing for patrons of D'Arcy's to drink Coca-Cola. And presently he came back with the coke. It had two straws and McCloud made kind of a game of it, sipping first from one, then from the other, like pulling petals from a daisy. She loves me, she loves me not. He'll cash it or he won't.

After a time the office door opened and Duke D'Arcy himself stood in it, beckoning McCloud across the room. McCloud went over.

"Hello, McCloud," D'Arcy said.

"Hello, Duke."

They went inside. D'Arcy sat down behind the big desk and picked up the check.

McCloud took a chair, put his coke on the glass top of the desk. "Something the matter with the check?"

"As a piece of paper it's very beautiful," D'Arcy said. "As an even exchange for money it stinks. I own several more exactly like it, only I was fool enough to pay for those." He shook his head. "I'm not buying any more, thank you."

McCloud was outraged. "Why, the two-timing bitch!"

"A swell looker, though," D'Arcy said. "Gorgeous."

McCloud pretended to be very angry indeed. "God damn it, I tell you she can't do this to me!"

"She has," D'Arcy pointed out.

McCloud shook with sudden ribald laughter. "I must have had a hunch, because what I gave her isn't worth any more than the check." He put out a hand for the slip of paper. "Well, sorry I troubled you, Duke."

D'Arcy refused to let go of the check. "Maybe you'd better tell me a little more

about this deal, McCloud. Just what were you supposed to be selling her?"

"I don't believe you meant that, Duke."

D'Arcy's eyes lifted to a point somewhere beyond the top of McCloud's head. McCloud turned and looked behind him. There were two men standing there. They were not the usual dapper, hopped-up gunsels, but under the circumstances you wouldn't mistake them for Bible students either. McCloud settled back in his chair. "What was that you wanted to know, Duke?"

"Now you're being smart," D'Arcy smiled. He had dark hair and eyes, but he was not dark in the same sense that McCloud was dark. His skin, even that of his hands, was dead white, as though it had never seen the sun. Not that it looked unhealthy. It was just white. "You were selling something to Kay Mercedes. What was it?"

"A purse," McCloud said. "You were at her apartment when I called with it. Remember?"

"I recall the incident perfectly," D'Arcy admitted. "The lady denied owning such a bag, and you agreed that probably you had made a mistake." Quite suddenly he put his hands flat on the desk top and half rose. "What was in that purse, McCloud?"

McCloud contrived a look of vast surprise. "You mean you don't know?" He sighed as D'Arcy shook his head. "I sort of had an idea you did." There was still no sound from the two men behind him, but McCloud scarcely thought they would have gone away. He tried a lie, not really expecting it to be believed. "Well, if you insist, Duke, the valuable part of that purse was not its contents. It was the place in which I found it."

D'Arcy's eyes narrowed a trifle. "Keep on talking, McCloud."

"Margie Garland was sitting on it," McCloud said. He shifted slightly in his chair so that again he could see the two men between him and the room's one door. "Margie didn't know she was sitting on it," he said. "Not when I saw her." He took a deep breath. "Margie was in no condition to know anything."

"I feel pretty bad about Margie," D'Arcy said. The way he said it, the very quietness

of the statement, was enough to scare the pants off you. "Pretty bad, McCloud."

"I didn't like it too well myself," McCloud said. He picked up his Coca-Cola. "How come you haven't been tagged for the Kahn diamond heist, Duke?"

"Mainly because I was having cocktails with Kay Mercedes at the time that job was pulled." He shrugged. "And if you're thinking I might have done for Margie herself. I even have an alibi for that."

McCloud nodded. "Kay Mercedes again, I'll bet." He remembered that D'Arcy had apparently been at the Mercedes apartment for quite a while. "The lady is in a position to do you a lot of dirt, Duke."

"But she won't do it," D'Arcy said. "No, I hardly think she'll change her story on me."

McCloud thought of something. "If the Mercedes woman can alibi you, then you are just as good an alibi for her. In other words, the Mercedes could not have killed Margie Garland."

"But she could know who did," D'Arcy said. His voice had a definite edge to it now.

"I don't think she knows, Duke."

"No?" The man at the desk affected a sudden intense interest in the condition of his nails. "Then why was she so very worried with her purse? Why deny in front of me that it was hers, and then telephone you downstairs in the lobby?"

McCloud's eyes were frankly admiring. "You certainly don't miss much, do you, Duke? A guy who gets around as much as you do must have heard a whisper or two about the Kahn diamonds." He spread his hands. "I mean, the stones are my only interest in the case. If somebody like you could finger those rocks for me—well, I think I know where I could lay my hands on, say, a hundred grand." He smiled engagingly. "And positively no questions asked, either."

ABRUPTLY D'Arcy tossed his suave manner overboard. "You bastard!" Eyes glowing like live coals he came to his feet, rounded the desk and smacked McCloud in the mouth. "You're right, McCloud, I don't miss much and I do get around. I

know exactly how hot you are with the cops, and I know why the heat is on." He made a fist out of his right hand. "Where is Sheila Mayo and that lousy shyster husband of hers?"

McCloud licked his lips. He was painfully conscious of the two men behind him, or almost behind him. "I don't know."

"You're a liar."

"No."

"All right, boys," D'Arcy said. "I guess we're going to have to take him apart." He attempted to hit McCloud with the fist, but this time McCloud was expecting it. At the precise instant that the fist should have landed on McCloud's chin his right hand caught the wrist above it and yanked. D'Arcy fell into his arms. McCloud came out of the chair in one lithe movement, swung D'Arcy between himself and the two gunsels, still hung onto D'Arcy's wrist but used his free hand to drag his gun and bury the muzzle in D'Arcy's back. "You guys still want to play games?"

It seemed that they didn't. Each had a gun in his hand, but they couldn't do much in the way of shooting McCloud. D'Arcy's breathing was noisy in the stillness. "You can't get away with this, McCloud."

McCloud thought that this was probably a fact. He could not go on holding D'Arcy forever. He considered trying to push Duke ahead of him to the door, using him as a shield, but presently D'Arcy would make up his mind that McCloud did not really want to shoot him. When this happened he would become a definite liability instead of an asset. McCloud had just concluded that he was in a very bad spot indeed when there was an interruption.

The door to the main salon opened and Van Felix staggered in, beautifully drunk. Apparently he was unconscious of anyone in the office beside himself and Duke D'Arcy. "Ah, so there you are, Dukie!" A lock of pale hair straggled out from under his hat and his wizened face looked a thousand years old. His eyes were hot, feverish. In one hand he clenched a packet of currency, currency that seemed to run mostly to large denominations. "They want me to play for marbles out there, Dukie. Lousy teeny-

weeny little ten-dollar limit." He waved the sheaf of bills. "A man of my means!"

The two hoods did not move. Neither D'Arcy nor McCloud moved. Tableaux. Finally D'Arcy said in a choked voice, "All right, Felix, I'll be out in a minute and take the lid off. Run along now, will you?"

Felix essayed a courtly bow and almost fell on his face. "Very well, my good man." Fumbling at his pockets as though to put his money away he suddenly produced a gun and pointed it at the gunsels' backs. "Well, look what I found!" He seemed as surprised about the gun as was everybody else. "Now we can all play, what?"

McCloud let out his breath with a tremendous *whooosh!* "Take the key out of the door, Felix. No, you damned fool, not with that hand. With the other one. You've got a gun, remember?" He looked over D'Arcy's shoulder at the two gunmen. "This makes it better than an even break, chums. You can drop the rods now."

One of the guys looked as though he might be going to argue. D'Arcy cursed him. "God damn it, do as he says!"

Both men dropped their guns. McCloud said, "That's just swell, boys. Now you can walk over to the windows and admire the view for a while." He waited until they had done this and were standing with their backs to the room. Then, quite suddenly, he conked D'Arcy. D'Arcy sagged, out cold. Felix began to giggle. Cursing him for an idiot, McCloud dropped the unconscious D'Arcy and ran across and pushed Felix through the door and turned the key. Felix stopped giggling, said, "Ahhh!" very gently, and folded up like an accordion.

People in the salon were now becoming aware that something unusual was in progress, and a couple of the staff men started moving. McCloud waved his gun in an all-inclusive gesture, bent and got Felix around the middle, lifted him dangling like a rag doll and ran for the stairs and the outside. Felix roused a trifle as the night air hit him. He decided he would give an imitation of Charlie McCarthy. McCloud hurled him violently through the open door of the waiting cab.

"Hey!" the hacker yelled. He came run-

ning from the shadow of the left-hand wall. He recognized McCloud. "Oh, it's you. You know how much you owe me now, pal? It's three, six-bits."

McCloud was afraid the guy wouldn't turn a wheel unless he saw something on account. He reached in and dragged a handful of money out of Felix' pockets. He discovered that he was holding half a dozen hundreds and at least one thousand-dollar note. "Well, for Christ's sake!"

The hacker peered over his shoulder. "What's the matter, pal?"

"Nothing," McCloud said. From the tail of his eye he saw the two gungels come running out of the club's main entrance. He shoved one of the hundreds at the hacker. "Okay, Shylock, let's roll." A bullet from the advance guard of the pursuit chipped cement almost between his feet, ricocheted and went screaming off into the night. Perhaps it was the hundred-dollar bill, but more likely it was the bullet which lent wings to the hacker's feet. The hack was already in motion when McCloud fell in on top of Felix and banged the door. It rounded the first corner on two wheels.

CHAPTER XIII

PAY-OFF RENDEZVOUS



AS THE cab roared away, it seemed to McCloud that he was spending his life in taxicabs. He felt a deep sense of injury at this. For a man as fond of peace and quiet as he, he certainly was enjoying precious little of it. Felix snored, and the cab rocked on, and presently McCloud leaned forward and yelled in the driver's ear. "Hey, you want to get us pinched?"

"It'd be practically a relief," the hacker yelled back. He slowed up, though. "You kill anybody back there?"

"How would I know?" McCloud demanded resentfully. It occurred to him that the hacker thought he had highjacked D'Arcy's games. "Look, pal, just to relieve your conscience, if you've got any, my friend and I were the victims, not the aggressors."

"Hah!"

McCloud let it go at that. There seemed no point in trying further to convince an out-and-out skeptic. He again hauled Felix off the floor and again propped him in a corner of the seat. In Felix' pockets he discovered some more money. There was nearly three thousand dollars in all. Also there was the gun that Felix had used.

McCloud considered the evidence against his companion. It was quite possible that this three thousand dollars was a part of the fifteen grand given him by Jessup and later taken from him during the incident out on Doheny Drive. If it were not, then how and where had Felix gotten it? Early last night the lush had been stone-broke. McCloud himself had left thirty dollars for him with Hammet. And now he had three thousand. McCloud wished that he had thought to take the serial numbers of the bills. He wondered if Jessup had a record of them.

Certainly Felix had known that McCloud was going to be carrying important money. Too, there was the undeniable fact that Felix had been prowling around the Normandie when he was supposed to be doing something else. Witness the blonde in the yellow silk pajamas. Against all this, the crazy fool had just gotten McCloud out of a terrific jam. How in hell could you reconcile that?

McCloud got Felix by the shoulders and shook him. "Hey, you bastard, where'd you get all this money?"

Felix opened one eye. "My horsh came in."

"God damn it," McCloud yelled, "there aren't any races at this time of night!"

"Are too," Felix insisted. "Races at Epshom Downsh." He began snoring all over again.

Even McCloud could not cope with a situation like this. He wondered what he was going to do with Felix. D'Arcy would certainly be looking for McCloud; probably for Van Felix too. It was obvious that his information had convinced him, as the police were convinced, that Sheila and Kenneth Mayo were guilty of the murder of Margie Garland. It was their present whereabouts that he had been trying to pry out

of McCloud when Felix had intervened. McCloud thought that it was very odd that a man like D'Arcy should have been so crazy about a girl whom he must have known was two-timing him. McCloud gave up this trend of thought and again leaned forward and spoke to the cab's pilot. "Third and Broadway, fella."

The driver spat. "You gonna want any change out of this century?"

McCloud was outraged. "You're damned right I will!"

Finally, the cab drew up at the corner of Third and Broadway. The hacker got out and went into the all-night drugstore after change for the hundred-dollar bill. McCloud, finding the immediate vicinity free of cops, hauled Felix out and propped him against a light pole.

The hacker came out with a fistful of currency. "I'm holding out ten, pal. Five for the meter and five for keeping my mouth shut."

McCloud said, "Okay, am I arguing?" He seized the proffered bills and shoved them in a side pocket. "Don't let us keep you up."

"Hah!" the hacker snorted. He looked at the somnolent Felix. "Jeeze, is he drunk!"

"I think so," McCloud said. The hacker hung around for a moment, then got back into the cab, said a bright good-night and vanished in the direction of Civic Center.

CURSING, McCloud hoisted the limp Felix to a shoulder and staggered into the nearest alley. After a time he came out on Spring Street and presently to Hammet's Baths. He went rubber-kneed and heavy laden down the marble stairs and banged noisily through the double doors and threw Felix on the divan. "Christ!" He was sweating.

Hammet came waddling out. "Wal, wal, so sheesa you again!" He saw Felix and his mustaches lifted in a fiendish grin. "Hoh, what I going to do to that sonnabitch!"

"You and me both," McCloud said. "Look, Hammet, could Felix have left here around nine o'clock? Say nine to nine-thirty?"

The Greek nodded solemnly. "Sure, sheesa

all fix up hokay by those times." He scowled. "Sheesa even win my twanty bucks."

That seemed to settle it. That and the fact that Felix had almost magically appeared at the Mayo house afterward. The money, the gun and the time and place. It all fitted together. He bent and extracted the gun from Felix' pocket, smelled the barrel, finally checked the shells. The gun had been fired recently. There was one exploded cartridge. Eyes murderous with the kind of rage which comes from being betrayed by a friend, McCloud seized Felix by the throat.

Hammet hauled him off. "Hey, whatsa thees? You no lika those Felix no more?"

"Sure I like him," McCloud said. "He's one of the finest rats I ever met." Quite suddenly he realized that killing Felix wasn't going to get him any place. McCloud looked at the Greek. "All right, see what you can do with him." He thought. "But this time I want him here when I get back, under-shut?"

"Sure," Hammet said. He hoisted Felix under one arm and waddled out of the lobby.

McCloud went over to the desk phone and dialed Jessup's residence. It was Jessup himself who answered. "Well, for God's sake, Stephen, where have you been?"

McCloud's mouth drooped. "Let's not go into that right now, Counsellor. What I want to know is, could you give me the serial numbers of those bills?"

"What's the matter, have you lost them?"

"Certainly not." McCloud gnashed his teeth on the lie.

"Well, I should hope not," Jessup stated. "Listen, Stephen, I've heard from the party who has the Kahn diamonds."

McCloud was genuinely startled. "The hell you have!"

"Fact," Jessup said. "It's going to cost us a hundred and twenty-five grand to do business, boy, but we've got to pay it."

"You're crazy."

"A fine one you are to tell me how crazy I am. All you've done on this job is run around protecting your lousy love life."

McCloud could hardly argue that point. He said, "But look, Counsellor, surely not a hundred and twenty-five grand."

"All I know," Jessup yelled, "is that it's better to pay a hundred and twenty-five thousand and get the stones back than to have to shell out twice that much at ten o'clock tomorrow morning." He drew a deep breath. "Here it is, boy. You've got fifteen thousand already. You come out here and I'll give you the other hundred and ten. Then you can make the contact."

"Whyme?" McCloud demanded. "Haven't I got troubles enough?"

Jessup was hurt. "Haven't I always stuck by you, boy? You wouldn't want an old man like me to get killed, would you?"

McCloud could think of at least a dozen people he would have liked to see killed, but Jessup was not one of them. Also, it was possible, if he played it right, to not only get the Kahn diamonds, but to retain the ransom money. Also he stood an excellent chance of snaring a killer in the same trap. Not Margie Garland's killer, of course. Kenneth Mayo had done that job. But almost certainly Kenneth Mayo could not have accounted for Dutch DeGroot. Very well, then, say that he did manage to get the stones, and retain the money, and in addition bag the killer of DeGroot. That ought to help square him with the police; yes, and with Jessup too, for the loss of the fifteen grand. He would still have Sheila and her husband to worry about, but in this life you couldn't expect to have everything. "All right," he told Jessup, "I'll come out and talk to you about it." He disconnected.

Hammet came waddling through the swinging doors. "Those Felix, heesa being terrible stubborn this time. Heesa talk but he don't say nothing"

"Keep after him," McCloud directed. He took out his gun, checked the action, slid it back in the holster under his arm. "What about the other one?"

Hammet sighed. "That one, heesa gone geese, I am thinking."

"You get a doctor for him?"

"Inna there now." He looked hopeful. "You gonna talking to him?"

"No," McCloud decided. He selected one of the hundred-dollar bills he had recovered from Felix. "Here's the century I promised you, you Greek bastard. Keep on and there

may be more."

"More money or more peoples?"

"Probably both." McCloud yanked his hat down over his eyes and went out and up the stairs to the street.

AT THREE o'clock in the morning no cemetery is a nice place in which to keep a tryst. Nor is keeping a tryst with a known murderer a particularly nice thing to consider.

McCloud, passing the main gates of Forest Lawn in a rented car, as per Jessup's instructions, looked inside and beyond the tall wrought-iron gates. The neon-lighted fountain, taller even than the gates, but gossamer thin, climbed skyward with reaching fingers. High above the fountain and the chapel buildings, and perhaps half a mile farther back, the white spire of the monument gleamed palely luminous in the glow of indirect lighting from its base. Set atop the highest hill of all, the great flasher electric sign alternately dyed the sky a flaming red and sprayed it with inky blackness. McCloud was quite grateful he didn't have to actually go inside the place. Those reddening skies reminded him too much of blood.

Turning right presently he tooted the car up winding, sleeping streets. After awhile, he shifted into second gear. The car whined on, endlessly upward.

And then, quite suddenly, it was at the top, and McCloud could look down on the boulevard bordering the cemetery on the east. He brought the car to a halt and just sat there for a time, planning the coming encounter. He did not know whom he was to meet. Jessup had been unable to tell him a single thing beyond the time and the place and the manner in which the transfer was to be made. The unknown had contacted Jessup by telephone. McCloud swore that if he ever got himself out of his present predicament he was through with the racket he was in. And in the same breath he knew that he was lying. This business was meat and drink to him.

He recalled Jessup's last words. "And don't try being cute, boy. We want those diamonds."

McCloud had promised that he would not

try being cute. If this meeting did not result as he hoped it would; if he didn't get the right breaks, he certainly was not going to return to Jessup with the Kahn & Company loot. He was definitely not in a position to purchase the stones. He simply did not have the required hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars. Counting the money taken from Van Felix, and that just given him by Jessup, he was still short something like thirteen thousand. He sighed. Just one little break was all he asked. Just one.

Releasing the brakes he coasted down the winding slope, presently turned right again and climbed the car halfway up the steeply rising boulevard.

It was a well-traveled highway, even at three o'clock in the morning. Headlights topped the hill every moment or two, rushed down the grade and were presently lost in the blackness of the sleeping valley. Coming from the opposite direction the cars were fewer. Above McCloud, rising toward the east wall of the cemetery, acres and acres of vacant hillside yawned darkly, emptily under a moonless, starless heaven. In the intervals between cars it was so quiet that you could hear the clicking of the great sign's flashers.

McCloud parked in the designated spot, removed his hat and overcoat and made a lifelike dummy to represent himself back of the steering wheel. It was rather important that this particular killer should believe it was Stephen McCloud himself sitting behind the wheel. He switched off the headlamps, leaving only the parking lights on. Then, a brief case containing a hundred-odd thousand dollars in hand, he merged with the shadows on the hillside and toiled upward to a point of vantage. Under his feet the ground was soggy from the rain. A faint wind stirred the leaves of the stunted acacia tree he finally decided on. He put the brief case flat on the ground, sat on it and leaned his back against the bole of the tree. His gun felt reassuring in the palm of his hand.

ON THE sloping boulevard cars continued their almost mathematically timed appearances and vanishings. Not once did McCloud take his eyes off the rented car below.

His mind was agile enough, though. He

kept adding and subtracting the various events of the night. Was there really a central motivation behind all of the apparently disconnected episodes? It hardly seemed possible. Take the killing of Margie Garland, for instance. At first glance that had looked simple enough. Margie Garland had been about to divulge, or presumably was in possession of, certain information pertaining to the Kahn & Company diamond robbery. Therefore, had there been the slightest doubt that it was Kenneth Mayo who fired the shot which killed her, the logical assumption would be that she had been killed to keep her from divulging that information. But there wasn't any doubt. Mayo himself had admitted his guilt to Sheila.

There was the possibility, though, that Mayo might have lied about his motive for the shooting. Margie Garland had threatened him with the gun, because of some argument. He had taken the gun away from her and subsequently it had gone off and killed her. McCloud wondered if the original argument might not have started over the diamonds. Mayo was one of Duke D'Arcy's attorneys. Margie Garland was Duke's girl friend. If Margie knew about the Kahn job it was quite within the realm of possibility that Duke did too, and also Kenneth Mayo. All this presupposed a sort of criminal triumvirate intent on the diamonds. Against this you had D'Arcy's asserted sorrow over Margie's murder, and his desire to get hold of Kenneth Mayo, whom he believed to have killed her. Was this desire motivated solely by the spirit of revenge? Or was it, perhaps, because Mayo was in possession of the stones? McCloud drew a deep breath. It was all pretty complicated, and Sheila's entrance into the thing had involved it even more. His mind left that and reverted to the murder of that well-known jewel thief, Dutch DeGroot.

Here, at least, was something not in the slightest bit complicated by anything but the quarter-million diamond haul. DeGroot's killing resolved itself into two clearly defined theories. Dutch had pulled the original job singlehanded, and had later been highjacked by an outsider. Failing that, he had had an accomplice—possibly more than one—and he

had essayed a double cross and had been killed when the cross was discovered. In either event there was little doubt that his killer was now in possession of the stolen gems.

Still mentally groping, McCloud presently came to the matter of Emil Kahn and his very interesting correspondence with Kay Mercedes. There was also the matter of the lady's husband Felipe, whom McCloud had not as yet met. However, and in spite of his being not too bright concerning his wife's defections, the gentleman was allegedly a jewel salesman, and thus was in a very logical position indeed to dispose of ice that was not only hot, but was now also tainted with blood. Possibly it was Felipe Mercedes who was intending to keep this appointment with McCloud. Possibly the man was Emil Kahn himself. McCloud rather hoped this last. He licked his lips at the thought of putting his first slug in the fat paunch of the diamond broker. And again, the expected visitor could be Duke D'Arcy, or even that double-crossing lush, Van Felix. It had to be one of these four, didn't it? It couldn't very well be all of them. Or could it?

In all this time nobody had approached the car down below on the boulevard. McCloud's legs were cramping. Never taking his eyes off his target he nevertheless managed to shift his position. That slight movement at exactly the right moment undoubtedly saved his life. He had had no sense of impending danger other than from the expected source. The crushing blow to his head simply came out of nowhere. There was a terrific explosion inside his skull as :nercifully, black oblivion engulfed him.

CHAPTER XIV

GUN BATTLE



PALE dawn was graying the east when at last he awoke to nauseating consciousness. His first thought was for the brief case, and he put out his hands feeling for it. The brief case was gone.

He lay there for a little while, flat on his belly, physically sick. After a

long time he put up a shaking hand, exploring the damage. He was surprised to find that there seemed to be nothing, indeed, but a lot of dried blood and a vast and unholy ache. He pushed himself partially erect and leaned against the tree. Down the hillside, still parked at the curbing of the boulevard, sat the rented car. The overcoat and hat, which he had so carefully arranged, mocked him by their very presence.

After a brief interval of rest McCloud discovered he could sit erect without the support of the tree. If that blow had landed squarely he knew that he wouldn't be sitting here now. It occurred to him that the potential killer might believe he had succeeded in his aim; that Stephen McCloud was no longer among the living. Oddly, this thought did something to his morale. He even began to consider the possibility of a return to the fray. The first thing, he decided, was to get his head repaired and some of the mud removed from his clothes.

The sky was already turning a faint pink when McCloud descended the marble steps to that haven of sots and worse, Hammet's baths. He practically fell through the double glass doors and into Hammet's massive arms. "Hello, you Greek bastard."

Hammet pushed him over to the divan. The red fez was well down over one ear, and the fierce mustaches had come unstuck. "Hah!" Hammet said. "So this time you are bringing only yourself, hey?"

McCloud glared. "What do you care who I bring, just so you get the business?" He caught sight of his reflection in a mirror and shuddered. "Well, don't stand there. I want this suit cleaned and pressed, and a fresh shirt and at least a pint of rye."

Hammet spread his ham-like hands. "P'raps you are not realizing, my fraan, that itsa five o'clock inna morning. Where you think those Greek bastard, heesa gonna get all those theeng?"

McCloud got up and wobbled over to the water cooler and drank about a quart of water. "That's your problem." He took off his hat and it was like scalping himself. The sweatband and the matted hair and blood had got all mixed up. He sat down quite suddenly, sick all over again.

Hammet said, "Hey, wait, you can't die on me."

McCloud snarled at him. "I'm not dying. Go ahead and get the things I told you."

"But where I am getting them?" Hammet wailed.

McCloud once more attained his feet. "How do I know? Steal 'em from one of your other guests for all I care." He turned and pushed through the inner doors. He ran smack into Sheila Mayo. "Well, for Christ's sake!"

Her arms steadied him as he would have fallen. "Stephen, you've been hurt!"

He grimaced. "You're telling me. What the hell are you doing down here? I told you to stay put till you heard from me."

She gestured toward the open door of one of the little private cubicles along the tiled passage. "Kenneth is dying, Stephen." Her mouth quivered. "I couldn't help worrying about him. Finally I called up to see how he was. The—the doctor said if I cared anything about him I'd better come down at once."

"All right, hon, that's enough for you to worry about now. I look a hell of a lot worse than I really am." He took her arm, being very careful not to lean on it, and together they went along the passage and into the little room.

Kenneth Mayo was lying on the cot. He was swathed to the chin in blankets, apparently by order of the doctor, and his face was flushed and swollen till it was hardly recognizable. His breath came jerkily. Eyes hot with fever sought McCloud's. "Hello, McCloud."

"Hello, Mayo."

"I guess I had this coming, McCloud. Sheila didn't." His voice sank to a whisper. "Take care of her, will you?"

McCloud discovered a lump in his throat. "God damn it, where's that lousy doctor? What the hell's the idea leaving a guy like this?"

Sheila's hand tightened on his arm. "You mustn't blame the doctor, Stephen. He did all he could." She caught her breath. "Kenneth couldn't very well be taken to a hospital. He didn't even want to be taken. And the doctor—well, he was quite aware of

Kenneth's identity. He knew the police were after him."

McCloud stiffened. "You think he reported the call?"

She shook her head. "No, he promised he would not."

QUITE suddenly Sheila buried her face against McCloud's shoulder. "Oh Stephen, what are we going to do about him?"

"I don't know," McCloud said honestly. He pushed Sheila into a chair, reached out a hand and touched Mayo's forehead. It was like fire. "Burning up, by God!" Mayo's eyes remained closed.

Out in the lobby the Greek's voice was raised in a shout. "I don't knowing, I tell you! I don't knowing those man!"

McCloud stood up, reaching for his gun. From the lobby came the sound of a heavy blow, and of something that was probably Hammet's body hitting the floor. Almost instantly after that the swing doors bulged inward and Duke D'Arcy came through and down the passage. He had a gun in his hand.

"D'Arcy!" McCloud said.

The gambler just stood there in the doorway, careless of McCloud and McCloud's own weapon. His eyes were for the man on the bed alone. "Mayo," he said, and deliberately began emptying his gun into the still figure.

It was the very casualness of it that stunned McCloud. He realized that he himself was shooting, but it was without his usual care. D'Arcy's gun jumped from his hand, and the man himself staggered but did not go down.

Through the haze of smoke McCloud was conscious of Sheila running to her husband's side. The next instant he and D'Arcy crashed to the floor and began wrestling for possession of McCloud's gun. D'Arcy clamped both hands on McCloud's gun wrist and try as he might McCloud could not pry the hold loose. Presently he did the next best thing, grabbed the gambler's hair with his left hand and began beating the guy's head on the tile floor. D'Arcy suddenly went limp.

McCloud stood up, breathing gustily, and

went over to Sheila's side. She was kneeling beside the cot. Kenneth Mayo's eyes were wide open now, no longer feverish, no longer afraid. One of D'Arcy's slugs had hit Mayo just over the right eye, and McCloud remembered how Margie Garland had looked. She too had been hit just over an eye. McCloud lifted Sheila and held her to him. "I'm sorry, Sheila, but he's gone, and he himself said, he had it coming." He looked down at the unconscious D'Arcy, feeling no animosity toward the guy. The gambler had simply paid what was, according to his lights, a just debt. "Look, Sheila, you can't do anything for Mayo now by staying here." He listened for sounds from outside. "There's going to be hell popping around here in a minute. Can I trust you to go back to the 'Y' and wait for me?"

She clung to him. "But what of you, Stephen? You're hurt."

"I'll get along. Damn it, Sheila, we haven't got all the time in the world to argue. Will you or won't you do what I ask?"

She stood away from him then. "All right, Stephen. I'll wait for you at the 'Y'. I promise."

"That's better," he said. He lifted her over D'Arcy's body and carried her into the lobby. Seeing Hammet beginning to stir, he stood her on her feet and knelt beside the ungainly form. Hammet was breathing gently, evenly. There was a lump over his left ear.

Sighing relievedly, McCloud rose and pushed Sheila out into the marble hall. "Snap it up, hon." He watched her climb the stairs to street level before he returned to the lobby and closed and locked the double glass doors. Distantly then, he heard the wailing of sirens. Apparently someone had heard and reported the gunfire. McCloud was passing the still prone Greek, on his way back to seriously interview Duke D'Arcy, when Hammet came to life and tackled him. McCloud went down, and the two men rolled around on the floor for what seemed like an hour before McCloud finally realized that Hammet's eyes were still shut. Hammet was gradually squeezing the life out of a man he hadn't even recognized. McCloud sucked in an agonized breath and

expelled it in a tremendous yell of rage. "It's me, you bastard, McCloud!"

"Hah!" Hammet said. He opened his eyes and saw that it was indeed McCloud. "Well, I must to say I am very sorry about this."

"Fine!" McCloud untangled himself. "Duke D'Arcy just shot and killed Mayo."

A quiet voice said, "And I am now going to kill you too, McCloud." D'Arcy was standing there in the middle of the swing doors, holding them ajar with his well-tailored shoulders. He had retrieved his gun. There was a smear of blood staining his starched shirt, blood that came out of a hole and crawled stickily down inside his white evening vest. McCloud had not known that he had hit the gambler twice. He said, "Now wait a minute, Duke. Let's talk this over." His own gun was back in the shoulder holster. The one he had taken away from Felix was in his overcoat pocket. "What in hell's the idea, anyway? You crazy?"

"In a way," D'Arcy said. "I was crazy about Margie, at least." His handsome mouth tightened. "So Mayo killed her and I killed him." His trigger finger whitened.

"God damn it," McCloud yelled, "you can shoot and the hell with you, but there's something I've got to know first. What about the Kahn diamonds?"

"I'm sure I wouldn't know," D'Arcy said, still in that same polite voice. "No, I——" A sudden change came over his face and it seemed to McCloud that the man's intent gaze had lifted. He plunged forward, arms outflung, just as one of the glass doors behind him caved in with a terrific crash. McCloud's dive missed its mark and carried him skidding past D'Arcy and he was only faintly conscious of the banging of guns above him. He attained the partial shelter of the inner doors before he risked a glance over his shoulder.

IT WAS Lieutenant Brannigan out there in the marble hall, and it was Brannigan who was now Duke D'Arcy's sole concern. Hammet's red fez, just the top of it, showed above the ledge of the desk. McCloud's one brief look showed him all this, showed him Brannigan now flat on his belly and poking

the police positive through the hole in the glass door. D'Arcy was already falling as Brannigan shot again. McCloud came to his knees, then his feet, and was halfway down the tile passage when Brannigan yelled, "McCloud!" and fired twice. One of the slugs actually clipped McCloud's ear. He heard the click of Brannigan's gun as the hammer fell on an empty cartridge. He ran as he had never run before in his life.

THE blonde was indignant. "This is a fine time of night to wake a lady up!" She had finally gotten rid of the yellow silk pajamas and was looking chaste in a white gown and a loosely tied linen robe.

McCloud pointed out that it was no longer night; that it was morning. The lady looked at the bloody, muddy, and on the whole very dilapidated condition of her visitor. "I been hearing things about you, Casanova. You're hotter than the hinges of hell."

McCloud admitted this. "The cops will probably skin you alive if they find you've helped me."

Her mouth drooped. "Is it true that you're overboard about this Mayo gal?"

Telling one girl that you're in love with another is practically the same as cutting your own throat. McCloud therefore essayed a lie, decided abruptly against it. "Okay, baby, I'll be shoving off." He turned away.

She caught his arm. "Don't be a fool, Irish." And then, irritably: "Come on in. I don't mind patching you up for somebody else to enjoy." She pulled him inside, banged the door and led him over to a chintz-covered wing chair. "Lord, you're a mess!"

He could not deny this. He was dog-tired, mentally and physically.

The blonde was lighting the gas logs in the fireplace. "My name's Connie—if you're interested. Short for Constance, you know." She laughed. "Ain't that a scream?"

"Not to me," McCloud said sincerely. "I wish to Christ I'd met you before—" He sighed. "Well, just before, I guess."

"Yeah." She disappeared through a door and when she came back she had a basin and an armload of clean towels. "Better take off your coat and vest, Irish. Your shirt too, maybe. I can dig you up a clean one."

She proceeded to go to work on him. He discovered that it was sort of pleasant. He nodded. After a little while he slept.

It was the smell of coffee that brought him alive again. He opened his eyes. There was now a pillow behind his head and an afghan spread over his knees. The blonde was just wheeling in a tea cart. He wondered what there was in him to warrant the kind of care he was getting. "Connie?"

She did not look at him. "Yes?"

"I'm sorry about last night. I thought you were a tramp."

"Maybe that's all I am," she said.

He shook his head. "No."

She poured coffee into his cup. "It's raining out," she observed presently. "Maybe you'd better figure on staying here for a couple of days or so. Until the heat wears off."

"So you've been reading the papers."

She admitted that. "Though they don't say much more than the radio." She pretended to be very interested in the electric toaster. "Was it the Mayo gal who killed Margie, or was it her husband?" She lifted her eyes briefly. "Is that why Duke D'Arcy let him have it?"

McCloud blew out his breath. "So the cops actually got the truth for once!" He thought that probably Hammet had recovered from his fright sufficiently to explain things to Brannigan. He made a bitter mouth. "It's a wonder they're not blaming me for that too."

"They're blaming you for obstructing justice." Connie said. She lit a cigarette and stuck it in McCloud's mouth. "It seems they want very much to stretch your neck, but if that ain't possible they'll be satisfied with just shooting you on sight."

"Unh-hunh." McCloud sipped some more coffee. "Even if I prove it was Mayo who killed the Garland girl, which I can't. Mayo is dead. There's only Sheila's word for it now, and Sheila is in as deep as I am."

Connie nibbled a piece of toast. "What's the matter with your boss? Can't he help?"

"Jessup? The Counsellor probably thinks I've absconded with a hundred and twenty-five grand of the company's money. It might just as well be true, too, because I certainly

haven't got it."

Connie went away. When presently she reappeared again she had a clean shirt for him, and his own tie all neatly pressed. He admired her. "You know something, Connie? You ought to be somebody's wife."

"I am somebody's wife," she said. And then, casually: "You ought to know Bill. He's doing a five-to-ten stretch up at San Quentin. You helped send him there."

"Well, for Christ's sake! You mean Bill Green?"

"Unh-hunh."

MCCLOUD sat up straight as a new thought hit him. "Look, didn't Bill and Dutch DeGroot used to be partners?"

She nodded. "Sure. That's why I couldn't say a lot of things as long as Dutch was alive. It wouldn't have been—ethical, isn't it?" She made an impatient gesture.

"And after Dutch was killed—well, I didn't get a chance to see you alone, and I certainly wasn't going to sing to the cops."

McCloud got up and crossed to a wall mirror. The lady had done wonders for his appearance. The deep gash in his scalp had been neatly padded and taped. She had even combed his hair while he slept. He came back and put an arm around her shoulders. "You ever hear of the Samaritan, Connie?"

She shrugged. "I know, you think I ought to hate you for what the judge did to Bill." Abruptly she stood up. "It's all a game, Irish. You can't always win." After a little while she said, "About the other—well, a gal like me gets sort of lonesome. You do things to kind of kill time." She gave him a smile that held nothing but self-mockery. "Besides, did anybody ever tell you you were good-looking?"

"Now that you mention it, yes." He put on the shirt and began knotting his tie before the mirror. "Look, what you said about Dutch DeGroot holds true with Margie Garland too. She's dead. You don't have to cover her up any more." He turned to face her. "Maybe she was Duke D'Arcy's girl all right, but she wasn't above cheating a bit on the side. Isn't that a fact?"

"Maybe." She swayed her hips across to the windows and looked out at the down-

pour. "She had plenty of callers, if that's what you mean. DeGroot himself was crazy about her."

McCloud stared at her back. "Baby," he said feelingly, "I'm beginning to love you. You're panning out better and better all the time. Remind me to see what I can do for Bill, will you?"

"After what? After you get through doing your own stretch?"

"Damn it all, Connie, why did you have to bring that up? I was just beginning to see daylight."

She got a compact out of the pocket of her robe and began putting a little color into her face. "Speaking of daylight, I hope you're not thinking of going out in it. Even the cops can't go on missing you forever."

"Cops!" He affected a complete disregard of police marksmanship. He went over to the windows beside her and looked down at the rain-drenched street. "There's a jewelry salesman, Connie. A guy named Felipe Mercedes. Ever hear of him? Ever hear Dutch or Margie Garland mention the name?"

She shook her head. "What's he look like?"

"You've got me there," McCloud said. "I've never seen the guy myself."

"What else do you want to know?"

McCloud considered her. "I suppose it would be too much to hope that Dutch DeGroot told you anything about the Kahn heist. Somehow I can't get over the feeling that he had help on that."

"I wouldn't know," she said. "I didn't even know that Dutch himself had pulled the job until the cops found that rock in his fist." She wrinkled her forehead. "Margie could have known, though. He was crazy enough about her to tell her anything."

McCloud snapped his fingers at that. "Of course!" He gave her a crooked grin. "It's perfectly simple when you get hold of some of the missing pieces, isn't it?" He thought of something else. "By the way, Connie, it's kind of funny you didn't hear the shot that killed Margie. Happen to remember a radio playing extra loud about that time?"

"Sure," she said. "DeGroot's. Dutch always played it loud when he played it at

all. Dutch was kind of deaf."

"Thank you," McCloud said. He now had a definite check on that part of Sheila Mayo's story, and this led him to a new theory about the killing of Margie Garland. "Thank you very much." He became so engrossed with the new train of thought that he was unaware of a third presence in the room until the blonde said, "Hey, you, don't you know enough to knock?" Startled, he swung toward the hall door. Van Felix, mildly drunk, was just bowing from the waist, courtier-fashion. "Well, for the love of God!"

"How do you do, my fat-headed sleuth?" Felix inquired. "And you, my lovely?"

"I'm swell," Connie said. She then cursed him fluidly, but without any real anger. McCloud gathered that she and Felix had found much in common on their previous meetings. He took two long steps forward and got a handful of Felix's shirt front. "Come in, pal, come right in." He flung Felix into a chair. "There's a couple of questions I've been just dying to ask you."

"Me too," Felix said. "What did you do with the three grand you stole off me?"

"Where did you get all that money?"

"I told you," Felix said complacently. "I won it on a horse."

McCloud made strangled noises. "And I tell you there weren't even rabbits running at that time."

CONNIE looked at Felix with new respect. "You mean you actually won three grand on one of those things?"

"God damn it," McCloud yelled, "one of what things?"

She insinuated her body between him and the man in the chair. Over her shoulder she said, "You know, one of those games you see at the beaches. There's a big board made up to look like a track, and the horses are in slots and you make 'em run by turning a little wheel." She sighed. "Me, I never won more than a kewpie doll, though."

McCloud passed a shaking hand over his eyes. "Christ almighty!" He thought of something else. "All right, but it still doesn't make sense. The beaches aren't open at this time of year, and besides it was two o'clock

in the morning."

Felix shrugged narrow shoulders. "Well, I really don't know what I'm being accused of, but I can explain the time." He smiled at the blonde. "Joe Partik once loaned a guy some money, and the guy went broke and Joe had to take this horse-race game or nothing. So, running a wire joint like he does, Joe thought it would be a good gag to give his clients something to play with after the regular tracks closed." He winked at Connie. "I got a system."

She giggled. "My God, you must have. You won three grand."

Felix saddened. "It doesn't do you any good if some bastard takes it away from you the minute your back is turned."

"All right, all right!" McCloud snarled. "If it's yours you'll get it back." He dug in his pockets and separated the two thousand-dollar bills from the rest. "Here's part of it now." He retained only the big notes. "Who paid you off in bills this size?"

"The bookie," Felix said. "Joe Partik."

"And where did Joe Partik get them?"

"I wouldn't know about that, Stephen." Felix appraised Connie's curves. "What's the matter with them, are they hot?"

McCloud's eyes were dark with thought. "I haven't had a chance to check the numbers yet, but I wouldn't be at all surprised." Quite suddenly he concentrated on Felix anew. "How did you happen to locate me?"

Felix yawned. "I admit I looked everywhere else first. Even with your reputation I hardly expected you to compromise such a charming young lady as this. I'm disappointed in you too, Constance."

"You lush," Constance said lovingly. "You evil-minded little lush."

McCloud said, "You're so damned smart, you wouldn't happen to know where I could lay my hands on the Kahn diamonds, would you?"

"Well, no," Felix confessed. "But would they do you very much good?"

"Maybe not," McCloud said sourly. "Just the same, I'd like to put the bite on somebody for laying me out." He described the episode on the hillside below Forest Lawn.

Felix clucked his sympathy. "What I can't understand," he said presently, "is

how D'Arcy discovered Mayo was at the Greek's."

McCloud had been thinking about that himself. "I figure that when I dragged your worthless carcass out of D'Arcy's place the two gungels got the number of the cab and they could then have checked the cab as far as Third and Broadway. That's only a block from Hammet's, and everybody in town knows you spend half your life there. Probably the hoods called D'Arcy back and were waiting for him when Sheila showed up. Naturally they would tell him about her. Even if they didn't know who she was, any woman going into Hammet's Baths would be funny. D'Arcy knew, all right."

Felix looked at him. "By the way, what happened to Sheila?"

"She's at the Y.W.C.A.," McCloud said. And then, quite suddenly, he began to wonder if she really was. Suppose he had guessed right about the two hoods, that they had waited for D'Arcy and told him about her. What became of them after the fireworks started down below? Suppose they had still been waiting there when Sheila came up the stairs? "Christ!" He seized the phone book and began flipping the pages feverishly. When finally he located the number and called it his voice was shaky. "Connect me with Miss Mary Smith, please."

At the other end a woman's voice was tinged with asperity. "Miss Mary Smith is not in. She went out quite early this morning and has not returned. Would you care to leave a message?"

"No," McCloud said heavily. It seemed to him that the bottom of his stomach had just fallen out.

CHAPTER XV

CLYDE ELGIN



LIKE drumfire rain hammered on the roof of the cab. Hunched low in a corner of the tonneau, wearing a hat and trench coat that had formerly been the property of Bill Green, now sojourning in San Quentin, McCloud shivered with the early morning cold.

He had not called Jessup. Jessup couldn't help him locate Sheila. Jessup, in fact, would not be interested in anything but the Kahn diamonds and the hundred and twenty-five grand. Not having either, McCloud thought that the less he said about them the better.

He wondered how Van Felix was making out. Among other chores McCloud had assigned to him Felix was supposed to find out if maybe it wasn't the police who had Sheila in custody. This was a probability, no more. The other possibility was that Duke D'Arcy's gungels had grabbed her. The Club D'Arcy was McCloud's present destination. There was less than one chance in a hundred that he would run into the two men at this time in the morning, but he had to take it. It was his only starting point.

In order to avoid looking at the rain, McCloud looked at the driver's registration. The name, he discovered, was Herman Schultz and his age was given as twenty-seven, though he looked older and much, much tougher. Connie had introduced him to McCloud as a right guy. She had not said that Herman was pimping for her. That was just McCloud's evil mind working again. Herman had a cauliflower left ear which he scratched occasionally. He was not, apparently, a loquacious man.

After awhile the cab slogged into the curb in front of the D'Arcy, and McCloud got out. The front doors were locked and his pounding brought no one out to investigate. Presently he decided that just for luck he would try the back. He crossed the lawn and discovered a narrow passage and a gate marked: "Service Only." He went through the gate and found a blank steel door without even a knob on it. He pounded on this. There was still no answer. Gloomily he turned back and retraced his path. For the last hour he had been trying to remember the surname of some employee of the club, just one guy that he could contact and thus possibly get some line on the two gungels. There was the cashier, for instance—Clyde Something-or-other. But Clyde what? One foot on the running board of the cab, he chanced to look at his wrist watch. It was an Elgin watch. And then he remembered that the cashier's name was Clyde Elgin.

"Well, blow me down!"

The hacker looked at him. "You say somep'n, boss?"

"I did indeed," McCloud told him. "I said let's go find a drug store, Herman, or almost anything that has a phone in it." He climbed in and slammed the door and they rolled out Wilshire.

At the corner of La Brea Herman brought the cab to an abrupt halt. "There's a drug store, chief. I dunno is it open for business, though."

Through the glass of the front doors McCloud could see a Filipino porter mopping the tile floor. He got out and crossed the sidewalk and pushed at the doors. They were not locked. He went in. The Filipino yelled at him. "Hey, we ain't open yet!"

McCloud was in no mood to argue with a porter. He took out his gun. "You're open enough for what I want, pal."

The Filipino dropped his mop. Over behind the soda fountain a sleepy-eyed soda squirt stood petrified. McCloud waved the gun at him too. "Just sit tight, you guys, and you won't get hurt. All I want is a phone."

The soda squirt's knees gave way under him, or so it seemed. He disappeared behind the fountain. The little Filipino porter sat down suddenly and put his hands over his eyes. McCloud went into the nearest phone booth, carefully leaving the door wide open and keeping one eye warily cocked on the long stretch of soda fountain. The attendant might possibly be crawling along the duckboards behind it.

After what seemed like an endless delay Information finally gave him a number listed to Clyde Elgin. McCloud called the number. The little Filipino still sat on the floor, not even peeking through his fingers, but behind the prescription case at the far end of the store there was a swift flash of white apron. That meant that the soda squirt was already calling the police.

The voice at the other end of the wire said, "Yes?"

McCloud drew a deep breath. "Hello, Clyde? This is Steve McCloud. Look, I'd like a little information."

"You've got a hell of a nerve, asking me

for anything," Elgin said. "After what you did to the Duke."

"Listen, whatever I did to D'Arcy was in self-defense. Besides, it wasn't I who killed him. It was Brannigan."

"But you shot him. He was my boss, the man I worked for, and you shot him. So what does that make you—my pal?"

SOMEWHERE in the near distance McCloud could hear a police siren. "Don't give me that, Clyde. I want the names of the two hoods who were in D'Arcy's office." "The hell with you."

McCloud cursed him. He dropped the receiver, yanked the phone book from its chain and ran for the front doors. A prowler car was just pulling into the curb behind Herman's cab. Two cops got out on the run. McCloud dropped his gun in a side pocket. He banged out of the doors yelling bloody murder. "Help! Police!"

One of the cops grabbed him. "What goes on?"

McCloud gestured wildly toward the interior of the store. "In there!" He was obviously on the verge of hysteria.

The cop was disgusted. "Well, for Christ's sake, a big guy like you acting like a pansy?"

His partner grunted, "I never seen it to fail. The bigger they are—" He yanked his gun out and advanced toward the entrance.

"Wait here," the other one told McCloud. He too drew his gun and advanced on the store. Presently the doors swallowed them in one gulp. McCloud got into the cab. "I think we'd better be shoving off, Herman, old pal, old pal." The cab churned water out of the gutter like a sea sled. After a while McCloud looked back. The harness bulls were still in the store.

Clyde Elgin's address, gotten at leisure from the phone book McCloud had thoughtfully provided himself with, turned out to be a bungalow.

Sitting well back in the cab McCloud instructed Herman to drive on past, and go around the block a couple of times, a preliminary scouting maneuver. He did not believe that Elgin himself was implicated in the kidnaping of Sheila. On the other hand, he was quite sure that Elgin could tell him

who was. He looked at the house as they went by it the second time. There was a thin plume of smoke rising from the chimney, but the Venetian blinds at the windows were all shut tight, and the morning papers still lay on the doorstep. The garage doors were closed.

McCloud leaned forward presently. "All right, Herman, you can park around the corner at the mouth of the alley." When Herman had done this McCloud got out. "I'll be back." He went swiftly up the alley, counting houses. Elgin's was the fifth from the corner. There was nothing but lawn in the back yard. McCloud went along the series of stepping stones as though he owned the place. There was a screen porch and he opened its door. He went in and tapped lightly on the glass panel of the inner door. Nothing happened.

Cautiously he tried the doorknob. It turned quite easily and without noise. He took out his gun, then, and opened the door, pushing the gun in ahead of him.

Something, a very hard something, hit his wrist so smartly that he dropped the gun. The door was yanked inward, and McCloud, hand still clutching the knob, went in with it, let go suddenly and sprawled flat on top of his gun. A guy he could not see advised him to forget all about it. "Just leave it lay, chum!"

McCloud quit fumbling for his own weapon and rolled over and propped himself on an elbow. His right hand was numb anyway and he was never much good at shooting with his left. It was pretty dark in the kitchen, all the blinds being down, but he had no difficulty making out two men standing over him. They were the same two who had stood over him in Duke D'Arcy's office. He said, "Well, this is quite a surprise!"

"Ain't it!" This came from the guy who had been hiding behind the door when McCloud opened it. He grinned at his fellow. "He's surprised as hell, ain't he, Jess?"

At this point, Clyde Elgin came into the kitchen and leisurely picked up McCloud's gun. He was wearing a bathrobe and slippers, but his hair was all nicely brushed.

Elgin smiled. "We thought you'd be paying a visit, Mr. McCloud." He kept the

gun pointed at McCloud's stomach. "We sort of thought you might be smart enough to figure Jess and Lou had picked up your girl friend. And when you telephoned a little while ago we knew we had guessed right."

McCloud gnawed at his lower lip. Obviously Elgin had given him an argument purposely, making him mad enough so that he would rush right out. By the same token, then, Elgin must have wanted to see McCloud as badly as McCloud wanted to see him.

"We saw your cab going by," Elgin observed. He snapped his fingers at a sudden thought. "That reminds me, Jess, you'd better go out and see what happened to that hacker."

McCloud thought of poor Herman. He said, "You don't have to bother. I let him go."

Elgin was not impressed. "Go on, Jess, take a look anyway." He waited until Jess had gone out the back door. Then, gesturing McCloud to his feet with the gun: "Come on, shamus, let's go where it's more comfortable."

The other man, Lou, was certainly not very talkative. All he did was get behind McCloud and push a gun into his back. The three then went down a short hall and through a door into the living room. There was a fire in the fireplace, all very cheery and homelike. And Sheila was lying on the floor, thoroughly trussed up, and although her mouth was obscured by a strip of adhesive her eyes were wide open and quite expressive. She was minus her shoes and stockings. The faintly nauseous odor of scorched flesh hung heavy in the room.

McCloud went slightly berserk then. He lashed out behind him with a devastating heel, pivoted and swung a terrific right at the first blurred face he saw. This, it turned out, belonged to Clyde Elgin. Even as the fist landed and the face disappeared in the red haze before McCloud's eyes he felt the hot blast from Lou's gun. The man with the gun was now no more than a vague, shifting shape before him, but McCloud's hands, seemingly with eyes of their own to guide them, presently found a throat and a

wrist. He was dragged from his feet by the weight of a suddenly thrashing body and he knew that he was falling, but he hung on, clamping down with everything he had. After what seemed an eternity he landed heavily on something soft and yielding, and there were two hammer-like blows, very close together, against his chest.

The man on the floor beneath him quit thrashing.

McCLOUD just lay there for a little while, until finally the red haze went away from in front of his eyes and he saw that his right hand was still buried deep in the flesh of Lou's throat. Lou's face was quite black. Presently he discovered that he had also broken Lou's wrist, and that those two unexplained blows against his own chest must have come from Lou's exploding gun. Oddly enough, the slugs had not touched McCLOUD.

It had been the recoil he had felt. And whatever Lou had felt, he would not be feeling anything more, ever.

McCLOUD got to his knees, and after a while to his feet. Then, remembering that Clyde Elgin was still around, he stooped for Lou's gun, was warned of imminent danger by some sixth sense and fell flat on the floor. Gun-sound bounced around the walls. McCLOUD rolled over twice, and came up on one elbow. He saw that Clyde Elgin, using an overstuffed chair as a shield, was pushing the chair ahead of him and firing as he came. Apparently he was on his knees. Only his eyes and the top of his head were visible over the chair back. McCLOUD lunged to the right as Elgin's gun belched flame. The movement took him out of Elgin's range for just long enough to aim and squeeze the trigger once. It seemed that this once was enough.

Elgin's head vanished.

After a little while McCLOUD crawled on all fours over to Sheila's side. "This may hurt a little," he said thickly. He worked a thumbnail under the adhesive over her mouth and then ripped the tape off. He saw the sudden tears well in her eyes. "Sorry, hon." He lifted her to the couch beside the fire.

"Thank you, Stephen."

He looked at her bare feet and saw that there were burns, two of them, red and angry looking, but it could have been worse. Sighing relievedly he got out his penknife and was in the act of slashing the cords on Sheila's wrist when a voice behind him said, "Hey, did you send this guy after me?"

McCLOUD whirled. There in the doorway stood Herman the hacker, one huge fist hooked in the collar of Jess's coat. The rest of Jess sort of trailed limply out into the hall.

McCLOUD stared. He had been so busy he had forgotten all about Jess. "Well, for Christ's sake!"

Herman was painfully conscious of Sheila's eyes on him. "Did I do wrong, boss?" He finally dropped his burden altogether. "But he made me sore, see? He started waving a gun under my nose and—well, Jesus, a guy ain't got no right to do that, has he?"

McCLOUD shook with a mirth that bordered on hysteria. "You did exactly the right thing, Herman."

Herman looked around the room. "You been kind of busy too, ain't you?"

"Kind of," McCLOUD admitted. He went around the overstuffed chair and looked at Clyde Elgin. Elgin didn't have a top to his head any more. Slightly sick at his stomach, McCLOUD returned to the couch and stared gloomily down at Sheila. "You feel like talking yet, hon?"

"Of course." She stood up, testing her weight on the burned feet. "I'm perfectly all right, Stephen." She even gave him a small smile. "It's really my own fault anyway. I should have done as you told me and stayed at the 'Y'."

"Forget it," he said gruffly. He found her shoes and stockings for her. "They grabbed you as you came up out of the Greek's place?"

"Yes."

McCLOUD turned then, and saw Herman staring moodily down at the hoodlum. Jess was still unconscious. "Haul him in here, Herman, and then see if you can find a bucket of water. I want to revive him so he'll know what's happening when I kick his teeth in."

Herman obediently hauled Jess into the room and vanished in the direction of the kitchen. As yet there was no sign that the neighbors had heard the shooting. Sheila thrust a slim foot into a pump. "I still don't know the reason for it all, Stephen." She looked up at him. "I thought at first that it was because of Margie Garland and D'Arcy."

"But it wasn't?"

"No. They seemed to think I knew something about the Kahn diamonds."

McCloud was startled. "The hell!" He remembered her feet. That sort of thing, torture, wasn't the usual method of revenge; it was used to obtain information. Still, there was no doubt that all of these men had worked for D'Arcy, and D'Arcy had certainly shot Kenneth Mayo because he thought Mayo had killed Margie Garland. McCloud was not conscious that he had been thinking out loud until he saw the look on Sheila's face.

"What's the matter, hon?"

She caught her breath. "What you just said; that D'Arcy *thought* Kenneth had killed her. Is there any doubt?"

He considered that. "There could be, hon. I'm not certain, of course, but I'm beginning to see a lot of things clearer than I did awhile ago."

At this moment Herman came back with a dishpan of water. He dumped this over the slumbering Jess. Suddenly Jess was wide awake and cursing luridly. McCloud kicked him, though not in the teeth as he had at first intended. "Save it, punk," he advised. "You'll need your breath for other things."

"You son of a bitch," Jess said.

Herman knocked him sprawling. "Ain't you got no manners, you bastard? There's ladies present."

McCloud hauled Jess up to a sitting position.

"Look, you snatched the lady because you knew the Duke wanted to see her. You also heard me mention the Kahn diamonds and that I might be willing to pay as much as a hundred grand for them. Right?"

"Am I arguing?" Jess asked.

"Was it you and Lou and Clyde who

knocked me over for the hundred and ten grand out at Forest Lawn?"

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

McCloud started to launch another kick but thought better of it. "You could be telling the truth at that, you bastard." He hefted the gun suggestively. "I guess you know we're not playing clap hands. What did happen, then?"

Jess' sullen eyes appraised what had been done to his two former associates. He began talking very rapidly indeed. "Okay, Lou and I figured that D'Arcy could take care of things downstairs at Hammet's and we was loafing up the street when we seen the dame come out. So we grabbed her and brought her out here to Elgin's place. Then we heard that you'd knocked off D'Arcy. We got to talking about the missing diamonds and after awhile we got the idea that maybe the dame knew where they was. Or maybe you knew." He sighed. "Well, with D'Arcy gone his racket was bound to fall apart anyway, so Elgin thought it would be all right to clean up what we could. We was working on the broad when who should call up but you, and Clyde baited you into coming out here. He said that even if you didn't have the diamonds you'd probably be packing a lot of dough."

QUICKLY McCloud took a deep breath. The story was so logical, that he could not but believe it.

He looked at Herman. "Could I trust you to be this lady's bodyguard for a couple of hours?"

Herman admired the lady in question. "You cer'nly could, boss. You could trust me for even three hours."

"All right, then," McCloud said, "see if you can find some more rope to tie this guy up good and solid."

"You mean you're gonna leave him here? You ain't gonna kick his teeth in or nothin'?"

McCloud looked around for the phone. "I'm going to feed him to the cops," he said. "They can do a much better job than I could."

He called Headquarters.

CHAPTER XVI

HERMAN'S BULL'S-EYE



NOISILY the cab ambled along, Herman sitting very stiff behind the wheel and terrifically conscious of his responsibilities as the newly appointed bodyguard of the lady behind him. Obviously McCloud was just going along for the ride. The matter of Sheila's protection rested squarely on Herman's shoulders. He accepted it bravely. It still rained.

After awhile Sheila touched McCloud's knee. "You're in an awful jam, aren't you, Stephen? Most of it because of me."

He shrugged. "You and Kenneth have complicated things." He frowned at the rain. "Look, I hate to keep going back to those lousy diamonds, but are you positive that Kenneth never mentioned them?"

She nodded. "I'm certain."

"I have the feeling that if I could just locate those damned rocks I could manage to pry us out of some of our other troubles." He scowled. "At least I'd have Jessup and the company on my side. This way, I'm pretty well handicapped." He told her about losing the hundred and ten thousand dollars.

"Did it ever occur to you, Stephen, that the men who waylaid you out at Forest Lawn did not have the diamonds themselves?"

"Of course. That's why Duke D'Arcy was one of my prime suspects." He laughed bitterly. "I actually told the guy in his own office that I could probably raise a hundred grand. There was nothing to stop him from calling Jessup and pretending that he had the stones." His shoulders drooped. "The hell of it is, anybody else could have done exactly the same thing."

"Emil Kahn, for instance?"

"Damned if I can make up my mind," he said irritably. "I've been thinking about Kahn, partly because I'd like to hang the job on him, but also because he was present in Jessup's office when I got the first fifteen grand." He thought about that. "As a matter of fact, he was there when I told Jessup

about the tip on Margie Garland." He gnawed at his lower lip. "Against that, say that Kahn did frame the original job—the theft of the stones with himself as the alleged victim. That gives him the diamonds and he also stands to collect a quarter-million dollars' insurance. Would he go on risking his neck for anything more?"

"You speak of that 'anything more' as though it were a mere bagatelle. After all, Stephen, a hundred thousand dollars or so is quite a sum."

He patted her knee. "You're a good egg, Sheila. Foolish, but a hell of a good egg. Remind me to do something nice for you sometime."

"As if you hadn't! Where are we headed for now, Stephen?"

"Well, I had intended going to see Emil Kahn." His hand touched his breast pocket. Emil's letters to the lovely Kay Mercedes were still there. "I think I've got the means of forcing him to lay off the company for a while. That would give me time to maybe find the stones."

She looked at him. "But you've changed your mind?"

"Not entirely," he said. "I just thought of something else, that's all. I've got to make a couple phone calls, hon, and we may as well get some coffee and clean ourselves up a bit." He looked at his watch. It was eight-thirty. He had exactly an hour and a half to the deadline set by Emil Kahn and agreed to by Jessup. In an hour and a half a quarter-million dollars was due to change hands. He gave Sheila a crooked grin. "There's nothing like looking your best for your own funeral."

Sheila drew a shaky breath. "Stephen, do you really think it's possible that Kenneth didn't kill that woman after all? How could it be?" She bit her lip. "He himself admitted it." She thought of their own predicament. "And what will we do if—"

"If we have to leave town?" McCloud laughed, pretending that the idea really appealed to him. "Why, we'll just go some place else, that's all. I've got a couple of thousand I borrowed from a friend, and maybe I can even cash a check for the little I have left in the bank. You see, hon? There's

nothing at all to bother your lovely head about."

Sheila could pretend too. "Not a thing," she agreed.

McCLOUD lifted his voice. "Hey, Herman, how's about finding us a quiet spot where we can get some coffee and a telephone and a ladies' room? And I do mean quiet, get it?"

"Boss," Herman assured him earnestly, "I know the very place. The reason I know it's quiet is on account of my sister runs it and she ain't made a dime in the last six months." He wheeled the cab around in a sharp U-turn. "Did I hear you say something about a couple grand?"

McCloud cursed him. "Don't go getting any funny ideas. I definitely do not want to buy any restaurants."

Herman nodded discouragedly. "No, I was afraid you wouldn't." He presently pulled into the curb before a place whose sign proclaimed it "Ye Olde Taverne." The rain had ceased.

Herman led the way inside with a flourish. He was annoyed to find that his sister was not there. The one and only waitress gave him this information. "It just goes to show," he stated indignantly. "You can't make no money if you run around all hours o' the night, neglectin' your business." He pointed a finger at McCloud's nose. "Now me, I always say——"

"That's the trouble with you," McCloud said. "You always say too much." He discovered a phone booth against the kitchen partition and went back and called Connie's apartment at the Normandie. It was Van Felix who presently answered. He sounded fairly sober.

"Very well," Felix said after awhile. "Very well, my flatfooted friend, I shall see what I can do about it." He sighed. "By the way, have you as yet checked the numbers on those two bills you stole off me?"

McCloud said profanely that he had not. Felix made disapproving noises. "The reason I asked, pal, is that Coustance has been describing a fur coat she saw in Magnin's window. It seems that the price of this coat is exactly two thousand dollars. Would you

call that a coincidence, or wouldn't you?"

"You know damned well what I'd call it," McCloud said. He affected resignation. "Well, all right, if that's the kind of snake-in-the-grass you are, you can damned well have the gal. I'll become a monk." He banged the receiver up, lifted it almost immediately and called Jessup at the office. "McCloud, chief."

Jessup began barking like a seal. "Good God Almighty, I thought you'd run out on me! Where are you? And where are those diamonds?"

McCloud took a deep breath. "I wouldn't know, Counsellor. About the diamonds, I mean." He described in horrific detail the events of last night. "You can see I've had a lot of things on my mind."

Jessup made his voice deliberate. "It strikes me, McCloud, that you've forgotten your company's interests—and mine. You've let your personal affairs interfere with business. In other words, you've let us down."

"All right, Counsellor, so I'm a bastard." McCloud frowned at the telephone. "I'm not quite washed up, though. Have you by any chance got the numbers of those bills? Particularly the last hundred and ten grand?"

"You ought to know better than that!" Jessup snapped. "If word ever got around that we were setting traps with the pay-off money you know damned well we'd never get another chance to trade."

"Well, I've got the numbers, Counsellor." And when it appeared that Jessup was struck dumb with surprise: "It occurred to me that all was not exactly kosher in this case, and besides—well, Counsellor, this is murder." He took a slip of paper from his pocket and read aloud from it. "Will you call the police and have them broadcast those numbers?" He sighed. "Believe me, it's our best bet."

Jessup agreed that it probably was. "You said you had another angle too?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact I've got the means of scaring Emil Kaku into waiting for his money, even if I can't prove his complicity in the diamond heist. I'm on my way out there now."

Jessup's voice was almost gentle now. "I hate to say this, boy. Personally I believe your story, but I've gone as far as I can.

If you hadn't got yourself mixed up in all this killing; if the heat wasn't on you so bad—well, I might be able to square the loss of the money. As it is, Grace and the Board are sore as hell."

J. P. Grace was the president of West Coast Indemnity. McCloud could visualize the bleakness of Mr. Grace's patrician face when that gentleman was informed that not only was he out a quarter-million dollars in indemnity, but also an additional hundred and twenty-five grand which one of his minor employees had lost. "I'm sorry, Counsellor," McCloud said. Abruptly he disconnected and joined Herman and Sheila.

THE Kahn house was a big two-storied Spanish stucco, set on a half an acre of carefully tended lawn. The private drive ran straight back from the street and under a porte-cochere to end at a four-car garage which was closed.

McCloud left Sheila and Herman in the cab and went swiftly up the driveway to the porch. Expecting a butler to answer his ring he was mildly surprised when the door was opened by Mrs. Kahn herself. She was a plump, stodgy woman, well over fifty. Round dark eyes regarded McCloud with a faintly resentful recognition. She looked as though she might have been crying recently.

McCloud took off his hat. "Is Mr. Kahn in?"

"He iss in," she admitted. Her English was obviously an adopted language. "He iss busy, but maybe he should want to see you." She half closed the door. "You will please to wait." She went heavily away.

McCloud pushed the door open and went into a carpeted, well-furnished hall to which the light of day had not yet penetrated. Again he was struck by the rather conspicuous absence of servants. He wondered anew if perhaps he hadn't guessed right the first time; if Emil Kahn wasn't indeed financially pressed. If this were true it would certainly be an excellent motive for a prearranged robbery of insured gems. Mrs. Kahn reappeared from a room at the right. She gave no evidence of being surprised that McCloud had not waited outside as directed. She pointed. "In there."

McCloud went through the door into a large room. Emil Kahn was sitting at a flat-topped desk, large white hands in plain sight on the blotter before him. He was obviously nervous but trying his best to look composed. His broad face was haggard. He lifted his triple chins at his wife. "Shut the door as you go out, Mama."

She went out without a word. The door closed behind McCloud. He had the uncomfortable sense of being furtively watched, of not being alone with Kahn. There were two other doors to the room beside the one behind him and he discovered that one of these was not tightly closed. He hazarded a guess that there was someone behind that door. He loosened the trench coat, so that his gun would be more readily accessible. "I do hope I'm not intruding."

Kahn ignored that. "You have news of my diamonds?"

"Well, not exactly," McCloud said. "As a matter of fact I dropped in here hoping to get some." He moved forward and leaned his body against the desk. "You know, Emil, I've had an idea right along that you were in on this job yourself."

"That's a lie." Kahn even tried to convince himself. "That's a lie," he said again.

McCloud carried his bluff still a bit further. "We've been doing a little investigating. Seems that there's some talk of your being on the verge of bankruptcy."

Kahn essayed a laugh of derision. "With a quarter-million dollars' insurance coming to me you claim I'm broke!"

McCloud shrugged. "Maybe you needed even more than the quarter million. I know a lot of guys who would take a crack on the head for a second quarter million. The insurance represents half, the diamonds the other half. If you had them both—"

"You're crazy!" Kahn yelled. "I've already identified the man who robbed me. He was a known jewel thief, and what is more he was found in possession of one of my stones."

"And found extremely dead," McCloud pointed out.

"An accomplice killed him."

"Naturally," McCloud said. "An accomplice who knew every one of those rocks by

heart. He therefore knew when one was missing. That was the one that Dutch DeGroot held out. The accomplice went back after it—and killed DeGroot.”

“Meaning me?” Kahn demanded. “Have you the slightest bit of proof that I was implicated?”

“Not legal evidence. I’ve run across some very interesting angles, though. You actually need money. You are also acquainted with a man who could dispose of stolen jewels at the top market price. I think I could build a pretty fair case against both of you.”

Kahn glared at him. “Just who is this man you claim I know?”

“A gent by the name of Felipe Mercedes.”

“I know of no such man.”

“I’ve got two letters to prove you know his wife.” He leered. “Very well, too.”

“My God in Heaven!” Kahn moaned. He pushed himself away from the desk and tried to stand up, but couldn’t quite make it.

A voice behind McCloud said, “I’ll take those two letters, my friend.”

McCLOUD turned. The man was like the gun he held in that he was small and dark and serious-looking. McCloud decided quite suddenly that the name Felipe Mercedes would fit this man perfectly.

Emil Kahn was now pretty well on the verge of apoplexy. “So it was all a trick. You didn’t have the letters!”

“Shut up!” the small man said. “I’ll take care of this, Kahn.” He moved with infinite care toward McCloud. “The letters, my friend. I should hate to shoot you.”

“I should like nothing better than to shoot you.” McCloud smiled. “About the letters, I’m so sorry. I haven’t got them with me.”

“That, I think, is a lie.”

“All right,” McCloud said, “find out for yourself.” He raised his arms high above his head. He waited until the small man was within a foot of him. His two hands swooped downward then, and at the same instant his knee came up and knocked the gun aside and landed in the small man’s belly. Agonized breath tried to get out of the small man’s mouth, and couldn’t, because McCloud’s hands were clamped tight on the throat be-

low it. Presently he dropped the limp form. He was breathing gustily. “Try frisking me, will you!” The small man did not answer.

Emil Kahn, making whimpering sounds, ran around the end of the desk and stooped for the fallen gun. McCloud, almost carelessly, kicked Kahn in the jaw.

Out in the street there was a woman’s scream. McCloud thought that very likely it was Sheila. He ran to the French windows. He saw Sheila on her knees on the sidewalk, saw that she was handcuffed to Herman who was lying flat on his back, apparently dead as a mackerel. Lieutenant Brannigan was coming at a run across the intervening expanse of lawn, gun out.

McCloud pushed open the windows and raised his arms in token of surrender. “All right, Brannigan.” He stepped forward out onto the terrace.

Brannigan said, “You son of a bitch,” and pulled the trigger. One of the French windows behind McCloud went out as if hit by shrapnel.

McCloud yelled, “Hey, cut it out, you fool!”

Brannigan did not cut it out. The next slug plucked McCloud’s hat off. Christ, he must be crazy! McCloud thought. He dropped behind the partial shelter of the terrace rail and began backing into the room. Through the railing he saw Brannigan steady the gun for another shot, and then, magically, Brannigan threw up both hands and fell flat on his face. McCloud simply could not understand it. He couldn’t, that is, until he saw the wrench lying there beside Brannigan’s head. And presently, looking beyond the wrench, and Brannigan, McCloud saw Herman, still poised like a pitcher who has just let go with his fast one.

Herman was very pleased with himself. “I done it! And even wit’ one arm tied behind me!” Sheila was still manacled to Herman’s left wrist.

McCloud vaulted the terrace rail and ran cursing down to look at Brannigan. He was relieved to find that the lieutenant was not dead. He finally located the handcuff key and tossed it to Herman. “Get untangled, you two. I’ll be right out.” McCloud turned and ran back toward the house. He was

urged by the necessity of finding out exactly what he had stepped into. He was startled to find that the library was completely empty of all save a very hysterical Mrs. Kahn. McCloud shook her. "Where did they go?"

"I don't know." She quietly fainted.

CHAPTER XVII

A HUSBAND SETTLES UP



KEEPING one hand only on the wheel, Herman kept playing with the handcuffs, clicking them open and shut as he drove.

McCloud reached through the open partition and relieved him of the cuffs. "You're making me nervous."

"What the hell have we got to be nervous about?"

"You ought to know," McCloud told him. "You just conked the toughest dick on the force, and if you think he won't remember your ugly mug and also your license number you're crazier than I think you are."

"But how would he know it was me? I was behind him when I threw it, wasn't I?"

McCloud groaned. "He'll figure it out." He dismissed the matter of Brannigan and the wrench and turned to Sheila. She was showing unmistakable signs of exhaustion. "I wish I could send you some place to rest, hon, but every time I take my eyes off you something happens."

"I'm quite all right, Stephen. It's just that I'm beginning to feel like a weight around your neck." She stared out the window at passing traffic. "Without me you could clean this business up."

He touched her, almost diffidently. "Without you, Sheila, I wouldn't give a damn whether it was cleaned up or not." He too watched their progress along Wilshire. The rain had definitely ceased now, but the sky remained overcast.

After awhile the cab turned left into Palmetto Drive, and McCloud got out and went up the walk under the striped canopy and into the lobby of the Dos Palmas. He looked pretty seedy compared to his elegance of the night before.

There was a new clerk on duty behind the desk. McCloud avoided him by detouring around a clump of palms and managed to attain the elevator bank without being questioned. "Seven, please," he told the boy in the monkey suit. He was the car's only passenger. They rose to the seventh floor. It seemed to McCloud that the boy took an unnecessarily long time about closing the doors, but finally he did, and McCloud went down the heavily carpeted hall to 710. Before pressing the buzzer he took out his gun and put it in the side pocket of the trench coat. He left his hand inside the pocket too. The door opened as though the buzzer were an electrical release.

"Hello, darling," McCloud said.

Kay Mercedes was in lavender this morning. Her green eyes considered him. "So you had to be a heel after all."

"Heel, yourself," McCloud said genially. "That lousy check you gave me was phony."

"No phonier than the lying story you gave me." She twisted the doorknob, back and forth, back and forth. "You said you hadn't read the letters."

"And I hadn't, either," McCloud insisted. "Not at the time I told you that." He looked past her into the small foyer. "Alone?"

"Yes."

She's lying, he thought, but when she turned and led the way into the living room he followed her. He still kept his hand on the gun, though, and his eyes were watchful. He did not take off his hat.

She sat on the white, uncut-mohair divan. "Well?"

"I might make a deal," he said.

"What kind of a deal did you have in mind?"

"In exchange for some information. I might forget to tell the law that you're in the badger racket."

"Go ahead and tell the law for all I care."

McCloud played his other card. "I've still got those two letters, remember?"

She sat up a little straighter at that. "What kind of information would you have to have?"

"Well, for one thing, you said you didn't remember where you had left your bag. That was a lie, wasn't it?"

She smiled. "The letters first, please."

With his left hand he took them out of his pocket and tossed them on the coffee table at her knee. When she reached for them, he lifted the gun pocket. "Not yet, darling. I was just showing you I had them."

"Oh." She relaxed. "Yes, I lied about that. I left the purse in Kenneth Mayo's car."

"Isn't it odd that you should be so careless with something as valuable as those letters? Just what was Kenneth Mayo to you?"

She shrugged. "He was a sort of confidential attorney."

"Meaning that he was helping you put the screws on Emil Kahn?"

"Maybe."

McCLOUD thought about that for a moment. Kay Mercedes, by her own admission, had left her bag in Mayo's car. Later, riding in the same car, Margie Garland either had picked up the wrong bag by mistake, or knowingly had taken it. In either case, it was now apparent that Margie Garland had discovered how valuable a property she was holding, and Kenneth Mayo, suspecting who had the bag, had simply gone after it. That, then was the real motive for the quarrel, and Kenneth Mayo had lied to Sheila about it. McCLOUD scowled. "Of course you notified Mayo that the bag was missing?"

She nodded. "Of course."

"Is your husband in on the badger game? Or is he merely interested in the Kahn diamonds?" McCLOUD saw the woman's head come up, ever so slightly, and knew that someone else had entered the room. He turned and saw the small man standing there; the small dapper man he had last seen out at the Kahn place. The small man had recovered his toy-size automatic. He pointed it in McCLOUD's direction. "Answering your question, I am interested in both." He smiled. "I see we already have the letters, darling. Perhaps we shall be as fortunate with the diamonds."

"He's got a gun too, Felipe," the lady said. "In his pocket."

Apparently McCLOUD had been right about the small man's identity. This was undoubt-

edly Felipe Mercedes. He was annoyed at the information given him by his wife. "So? Seems like a stalemate, doesn't it?"

It hardly seemed so to McCLOUD. He had to watch two, whereas they had only to watch one. "You have the stones now?"

Mercedes' waxed mustache made a little V as he smiled. "If I thought you were going to give me any more trouble I wouldn't tell you. But as it is—" He shrugged. "No, I haven't them, but I have a very good idea who has."

"You mean Emil Kahn?" McCLOUD asked.

"Who else?"

"I get it now," McCLOUD said. He did too. "You and your wife bled the poor guy white with the letters. And when he couldn't raise any more cash you suggested that he pull a fake robbery and collect the insurance."

Mercedes smiled. "Isn't he cunning, darling? So smart!"

McCLOUD read the purpose in the man's eyes, saw the swift flash of lavender as the woman moved. He let his knees fold under him and fell forward. Above him the little automatic coughed gently, compared with the roar of McCLOUD's own gun. McCLOUD rolled over twice before he looked up to see if he had hit anything. Mercedes was still standing there, only now there was a gaping hole in his throat, and blood ran out of it and down his shirt front. He leaned far over, as if to get a better look at himself, and the tiny automatic coughed once more before it fell out of his lax hand. Then Mercedes too fell down.

Slightly dazed, McCLOUD sat up and looked around for the woman. She was there, propped between the divan and the coffee table, but she was no longer quite so beautiful. Her husband's first shot, missing McCLOUD, had hit her, dead center. McCLOUD discovered that he was shaking all over. He found himself wishing rather stupidly that they had given him just a little more time. There was the matter of Dutch DeGroot, for instance. Had Felipe Mercedes killed DeGroot, or had it been Emil Kahn?

As though produced by mental telepathy, Emil Kahn himself chose this moment to burst into the room. He too had somehow

secured a gun, and as McCloud rose in his path he waved it wildly. "Damn you, where are my letters?" He was sweating profusely. "I want my letters!"

"Why, sure," McCloud said. He waved a careless hand at the coffee table presided over by the dead woman. "There they are, Emil. Help yourself."

Kahn might have been a sleepwalker. He took his vacant stare off McCloud and looked at the letters. McCloud hit him with a roundhouse swing that even a child could have avoided. Kahn walked right into it. He collapsed. Stooping, McCloud snapped Brannigan's handcuffs on Kahn's wrists. After that he found a telephone and called Van Felix at the blonde's apartment. "Well?"

"Not very, Steve. Not well at all. No."

"All right," McCloud said presently. It seemed that his voice came from a hundred miles away. "All right, Van, if that's the way it is, that's the way it will have to be." He hung up.

After a time, with a careful eye on the goings and comings of the passenger elevators, he managed to drag the unconscious Kahn down the hall to the freight lift, and by way of that he descended to the alley. Kahn was as heavy as lead. Cursing, McCloud left him there and went around front, intending to enlist Herman's help. He found Herman sitting inside the tonneau beside Sheila. And on the cab floor, under Herman's big feet, lay Lieutenant Brannigan. "Well, for Christ's sake!"

"Sure," Herman said. "He keeps on showing up all a time, I gotta keep on hopping him, don't I?"

CHAPTER XVIII

SOME EXPLANATIONS



QUITE a crowd they made in Jessup's office. There were Emil Kahn and Brannigan, linked wrist to wrist by Brannigan's own handcuffs. Kahn had gone all to pieces, as overly fat men sometimes do. Brannigan kept nagging at him, and was himself nagged by

McCloud's gun and his inability to jump it. Jessup sat gnome-like before his desk. He was biting his words off so short they seemed to jump.

The myriad tiny veins in his nose and cheeks were now magenta.

Sheila Mayo stood at the windows, her back to the room, waiting with a calm born of utter resignation.

And Herman, of course, was there: and Mr. J. P. Grace, West Coast Indemnity's president. Grace's bleak gray eyes studied McCloud through rimless glasses. He was not liking McCloud very well.

Jessup began barking all over again. "All right, we're got Kahn. Where the hell are the stones?"

"We'll find them," McCloud said sourly. He looked down at the gun in his fist. "It seemed to me there were other and more important matters to be cleared up first."

Emil Kahn bleated. "You won't find them on me!"

McCloud stared at him. Brannigan reached around with his free hand and slapped Kahn in the mouth. "That's enough out of you. Shut up and quit jerking!"

McCloud lifted the gun a trifle. "That's typical of you, Brannigan, but I'm getting pretty sick of typical things." He drew a slow breath. "Now look, I'm telling you flat that if you don't pipe down I'm going to put a slug right in the middle of your belly."

"You son of a bitch," Brannigan said.

McCloud said, "You deliberately kept shooting at me this morning, even after I put up my hands. I want you—"

"This seems to be rather beside the point, McCloud." J. P. Grace broke in. "Admittedly you've lost the money entrusted to you, and you have not produced the missing stones. Your personal affairs are of no great concern to the company."

McCloud looked at him. "Thank you for saying that. It makes it so much easier for me to resign."

Jessup pounded the desk top. "Damn it, boy, what's the use of going off half-cocked?" He addressed Grace. "Forget what he just said about resigning. He's the best man we ever had. Go on, Stephen, tell it in your own way."

McCloud nodded. "Beginning with finding Sheila, Mrs. Mayo, in the Garland woman's apartment, it all ties into the one case. Sheila went there because she believed her husband was cheating with Margie Garland. Probably he was. Certainly he was an habitual drunkard and in the woman's company frequently enough for her to have gotten his gun at one time or another." He shrugged. "Possibly he left it in the apartment on some former occasion and then forgot all about it. He may indeed have been quite sincere in reporting it to the police as stolen."

"So what?" Brannigan snarled. "He killed her with it!"

"Possibly," McCloud agreed. "His story even admitted that he did." He looked at Sheila. "I may have to say some things that will hurt you."

"Don't mind me, Stephen."

After a long moment he continued: "Mayo lied about why it all happened. He actually went there to recover certain letters; letters that were in a purse Margie Garland had taken from his car." He made a bitter mouth. "I can't find myself feeling very sorry over Margie Garland's death, nor Kenneth Mayo's. They were pretty low in the scale of things. The same is true of Felipe and Kay Mercedes." Watching Emil Kahn with smoldering eyes he told them about the two letters.

Jessup half rose from his chair. "Good God!" And then, as McCloud waved the gun: "Now take it easy, boy, just relax."

"Sure," McCloud said bitterly. "Just relax and let the whole God-damned world walk on you." He began to shake. "Like hell I will. I'm all through, you hear?"

SHEILA came over and put a hand on his arm. Herman grinned delightedly at the room. "Ain't he a card?"

Brannigan cursed him. "I haven't forgotten you, either."

The hammer of McCloud's gun made a faint clicking sound. "Maybe you'd better forget him, Brannigan. And if you don't arrive at right conclusions, I haven't a damned thing to lose by blasting you too."

Brannigan subsided. McCloud then described the affair at the Dos Palmas. "I see

now that Kay Mercedes only told me what she did because she was expecting her husband back." He shrugged. "It was not intended that I should leave that apartment on my feet. Therefore, there was no harm in telling me the truth."

Jessup was becoming restless. "Where did Duke D'Arcy fit? What was his interest in the Mercedes woman?"

"D'Arcy was holding some of her rubber checks," McCloud said. "Apparently she was a gambler too, and had gotten into him. She didn't want D'Arcy to know about the blackmail operation against Emil Kahn, because then D'Arcy would have been in a position to really put the squeeze on her."

Jessup sighed. "But it was Kenneth Mayo who killed D'Arcy's girl?"

"I don't think so," McCloud said. "I did, but I don't any more. I think it was you, Counsellor."

The silence was terrific. The opening of the hall door was therefore like a clap of thunder. Van Felix came in, nodded once at McCloud, chose a straight chair and turned it around and straddled the seat. "The denouement, what?"

Jessup actually chuckled. "Well, well, so it was really I who killed Margie Garland!"

McCloud shivered. "I wish you had told me, Counsellor. Maybe I could have helped you figure out a way; maybe I could even have got the dough for you." His eyes were harried. The man at the desk had been closer to him than anyone in the world except Sheila Mayo. "But this is murder. A lot of it could have been stopped but for you."

Grace was incredulous. "You must be a little mad, McCloud." He took off his glasses and began polishing them furiously.

McCloud looked at Jessup. "I've always thought you were a pretty swell guy, Counsellor. But you tried to kill me too."

Jessup stood up violently. "God damn it, boy, stop it!"

McCloud went on as though there had been no interruption. "Out there at Forest Lawn you meant to crush my skull. Later, when something I said to you on the phone told you that I was getting hot, you tipped the police that I was at the Kahn house. There was nobody else who knew, Coun-

sellor. Nobody but Sheila and Herman, and they were with me every moment."

Brannigan started cursing. "By God, it's true, then! We did trace the tip to this office."

"You see, Counsellor?" McCloud's voice was almost gentle. "You thought Brannigan would shoot me on sight."

Jessup was as immovable as Buddha. His face had grayed a little, but otherwise he had not changed. "There may have been such a call from this office. It did not come from me."

McCloud nodded, as though he had thought of that too. "I read you a list of serial numbers, remember? You notified the police and the banks?"

Involuntarily Jessup closed his eyes. "Certainly."

Van Felix stood up. "That's very bad, Counsellor." He looked around the room. "Sort of a slip, you know. It's just one of the things Stephen asked me to check on." He smiled. "So I did."

Jessup made a sort of strangled sound deep in his throat and sat down heavily. McCloud turned his eyes away, but went on talking. "When I read those numbers to you I was baiting a trap. I hated to do it, Counsellor, but I couldn't afford to miss any chance." He stared at Sheila. "You remember when we were adding up the counts against Emil Kahn?" He shivered. "It occurred to me then that the same things could apply to the Counsellor. He knew that I had the first fifteen thousand dollars; he knew that I was going to contact Margie Garland; and he certainly knew where I was going with the brief case full of money, because it was he who sent me there."

Jessup must have realized then that his number was up, but he had to make one last attempt. "Damn it, McCloud, you haven't an ounce of proof. Not an ounce."

"I'm afraid I have, Counsellor." He stared very hard at Brannigan. "This morning, after I telephoned and gave him those serial numbers, he went to a bank. Because of his position he was admitted before the regular hour. He had no difficulty exchanging the incriminating bills for others, but he could not know that Felix would later call the

bank and pretend that Jessup had forgotten to take the numbers." He sighed. "Felix has a list of both lots of currency."

Jessup's reaction was startling. He looked so suddenly old and tired and broken that McCloud almost missed the abrupt opening of the desk drawer. The gun seemed to leap into Jessup's hand, and his short legs thrust the swivel chair over backward as he fired. McCloud shot him. He shot him in the belly, where you don't die for a while. After what seemed a long, long time he went over and looked down at his handiwork. "You'd better clean it up, Counsellor. Tell Brannigan about Margie Garland and Dutch DeGroot."

Jessup just lay there, singularly small and inoffensive looking. Apparently he was paralyzed from the waist down, but a smile that was almost kindly lifted the close-cropped mustache. "One last good deed, eh?" He coughed gently. "All right, boy, I guess I owe it to you at that." He rolled his head a trifle, and his eyes found Brannigan. Everybody else in the room seemed to be holding their breath. It was very quiet. Jessup said quite steadily, "This is the way it was, Lieutenant. I was actually inside the Garland woman's apartment when Kenneth Mayo came in. I had entered through the back way, from DeGroot's apartment. DeGroot himself knew what I was going to do. He turned his radio up just to kill the sound of the shot. It was really all DeGroot's fault, because he had boasted to the girl. She had already talked to at least one other."

Sheila stifled an inarticulate little cry. Brannigan chose to be stubborn. "Tell us exactly how you did it." The handcuff on his wrist was a terrific burden. Snarling, he yanked Emil Kahn to his feet. Kahn began to whimper.

JESSUP propped himself weakly on an elbow. "Mayo was stupid with liquor. He and the Garland girl were quarreling when I came in. He had the gun, as though he had just taken it away from her, and she was in the act of throwing a book end. The book end missed him. I didn't. I simply hit him with my own gun, then picked up his and shot the woman." He was quiet for a moment. "After that I put the smaller gun.

his own, back in his hand."

Brannigan scowled at McCloud. "And DeGroot?"

"I don't know," McCloud said. "My guess is that Jessup hired Dutch to pull the original job, the holdup of Kahn, but that after he found out how unreliable his stooge was he decided he'd better fence the stuff himself." He moved away from Jessup, beyond the desk. "So DeGroot turned the stones over, but could not resist holding out one of them. Jessup discovered the shortage and went back." He spread his hands. "I arrived before Jessup had a chance to pry the rock out of DeGroot's fist."

Jessup said, very low, "Would you do me a favor, Stephen?" There was blood on his lips now. "Could I—could I have a doctor?"

McCloud choked. "God damn it, can't somebody do something for the guy?" He turned and ran drunkenly out of the room and down the hall to the toilets where he was very sick.

It was a good ten minutes before he returned to the office.

Brannigan was still there, and Sheila and J. P. Grace and Herman and Van Felix, but someone had taken Jessup away. Kahn too, McCloud discovered presently. He looked at Brannigan.

"Well?"

"Well what, you Irish bastard?" And then, quite suddenly, Brannigan became terrifically embarrassed. "All right, maybe we're both Irish bastards."

The bleak and austere Mr. J. P. Grace cleared his throat. "I realize, of course, that I'm just the president of this company. I scarcely rate any genuine confidences." He fiddled with a paper weight on the desk. "But could I ask just one question?"

"You mean two, don't you?" McCloud's mouth drooped. "You want to know where the diamonds are, and why Jessup had to do what he did."

"Very well, then," Grace said. "Make it two questions."

McCloud looked at Felix. "Well?"

Felix was not above accepting his meed of credit. "Well," he said with a great affectation of modesty, "I also followed our Mr. Jessup to another bank. This one was the

First National. He has a safe-deposit box there."

McCloud nodded. "I guess that's where you'll find the diamonds, then." He tried to think of Jessup in the abstract, as just another murderer, but it was not easy. "I don't know this for a fact, but the urgency, the chances the guy took, indicate a terrific shortage in his accounts. Offhand I'd say that he was short something like a quarter-million dollars. He needed quick money; money he could not hope to realize from the sale of the diamonds alone."

Grace knit his brows in a puzzled frown. "Granted the possibility of a shortage, I still don't see how trading dollars would help him."

"He wasn't trading dollars. He was making two dollars grow where but one grew before. He had me sign receipts for a hundred and twenty-five grand. Add to that the actual money he took away from me and you've got a quarter million." He sneered at the look on Grace's face. "The diamonds themselves could have waited for years."

"I see," Grace said presently. And then, eyes very intent on McCloud's, "Did you really mean that about leaving us? We might make it very much worth your while to stay on."

McCloud looked at the empty swivel chair. "Nobody could make it worth my while," he said. "You probably wouldn't understand it, but I kind of liked the guy. I couldn't stand not seeing him there." He went over and took Sheila's arm. "Come on, hon, we've got a lot of things to do, a lot of new places to see."

Felix suddenly thought of something. "On my money?" He was outraged. "Where's that two grand you robbed me of?"

Herman let out a tremendous guffaw. "Ain't he a card, Mr. McCloud? The poor dope don't know you only got one o' them bills left."

Felix stared at him very hard. "And where, may I ask, is the other one?"

"Why, Mr. McCloud give it to me," Herman announced proudly. "For bein' a body-guard to the lady."

Felix considered him. "You wouldn't, by

chance, know how to shoot craps, would you?"

"Why, sure," Herman said, surprised.

Felix's eyes glistened. "Good. Would you, perhaps, care to teach me something of the game?"

Herman said he would be delighted. He looked at McCloud. "If it's okay with you, chief." He then lifted the yellow cap gallantly in Sheila's direction. "It's been a pleasure,

lady, a real pleasure." He followed Felix out of the office.

Sheila tucked her hand under McCloud's arm and turned him toward the tall windows.

"Look, Stephen, the sun is shining. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

He looked at the sun without enthusiasm. "Sure," he said presently. "Sure, it means that it's probably stopped raining."



That's How It Happened

A Garland of Alibis

By HAROLD HELFER

A 79-year-old woman and a 63-year-old man, arrested in Fond du Lac, Wis., on charges of drunk and disorderly conduct, explained: "It was our first date."

An inmate at Tehachapi Prison for Women, hastily transferred to San Quentin after "she" was discovered to be a man after a routine examination, explained: "My folks brought me up as a girl, and I thought I'd just let things ride."

A Boston delicatessen store man, suspected of being a bookie, explained, when he was confronted with a \$36 phone bill, that he'd get lonely in his store and just call people up left and right.

A former Potter County, W. Va., jail trusty, recaptured a year after he had disappeared, told how it happened to come about that he had not returned after a warden had sent him out for a newspaper: "He didn't tell me what kind of paper to get."

A Helena, Mont., individual, arrested for assault and battery on a man in whose car he was riding, explained he was hard of hearing and that when the motorist burst out singing "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling" he had attacked him because he thought he was being told he was being taken "for a ride."

A Washington, D. C., ice cream vendor, charged with embezzling \$34.50, attributed his shortage to his extra kind heart. "Every time a little fellow came up and asked me for ice cream, I'd give it to him," he stated.

A Bradford, Pa., man admitted setting a forest fire but stated he had only done so because he thought if he helped put it out he would get a job as a forest ranger.

Given a traffic ticket for speeding while in California on his honeymoon, a bridegroom explained he was in a hurry to get home because three in-laws had insisted on accompanying him on the trip and he wanted to get rid of them as soon as possible.

His huge body went plunging earthward



My Dreams are getting Bitter

By H. MATHIEU TRUESDELL

I KNEW that a tall, stoutly-built man with sandy hair and a beefy face had murdered my sister Helen. I could have picked that man out of any large group of men of the same general description. His face was etched in my brain;

for I had known him even before the telegram had arrived. I had lain in a mud-puddle under a GMC six-by-six in Luxembourg and I had dreamed that this man with the beefy face was slaying my sister six weeks before I heard of her death.

Only Nightmares — but They Reflect Stark Reality !

Deek Larkin—I had learned his name following my discharge from the Army after studying rogues-gallery prints in my home town police files—had been employed as a strong-arm man by a combine of middlewest numbers racketeers during the war. His job had entailed keeping unauthorized bookies from operating in forbidden territories and seeing that pick-up men arrived at the “bank” with their cash intact and various minor chores which required an ape who acted tough and toted a rod and talked out of the side of his mouth.

What had caused this Deek Larkin to kill my sister I never learned. How the life of a small-town librarian might have crossed the trail of a mobster to the extent of marking her as a murderer’s victim still remains a mystery to me. That was the reason I could simply inquire tactfully without suggesting to the law that Deek Larkin should be arrested. You can’t tell the cops:

“I had a dream—”

I’ve had dreams, ever since I was just a kid. That’s not an unusual thing for most people, but my dreams were always unusual ones. When I retired I would more often than not sleep like a log, not snoring, not moving, not dreaming. However, there were times when I did dream, very seldom, it was true, but once and again dreams would come and I would toss and turn and break out in cold sweats and wake up screaming. And nearly always I would have good cause to remember that dream later, for on some future date it would become grim, stark fact.

The first dream that I can recall came when I was about seven years of age. Maybe there were other dreams when I was too young to notice or remember, but I’ll never forget the night I dreamed that the West End branch of City Hospital burned. I could see the flames and I could hear the agonized screams over the clang of the fire-fighting apparatus and the noise and shouts. I could see people in anguish and I could feel the heat—and I had woke up in a cold sweat and screaming.

WE HAD lived directly opposite the hospital at the time and I had leapt from my bed and run to the window. It was early morning and the city was at slumber. The big gray-stone building across the street was a dark silent outline against the waning night.

I had returned to my bed, wondering with a child’s curiosity, but mostly scared. Under the bright sunlight the nightmarish dream was forgotten. I had thought no more of it, lost in my play and in school work—until the night I was awakened from a deep and dreamless slumber by the real screams of agony and the actual clangs and shouts and noise. I can remember vividly how I had stood with my face pressed tightly against the window pane and watched spellbound as the hospital across the street was gutted by ravenous flames, leaving it a roofless, hollow shell of smoke-blackened gray-stone.

I had watched, but to me it had been much as if I were seeing a motion picture over for the second time. I could recall having seen it all before.

That was the first of the dreams and its ghastly aftermath that I can remember. There were others, many others, to follow. There was the man who was killed by a hit-and-run driver and Police Officer Kerrigan, the Forrest Street Elementary School cop who helped us across the street, who was electrocuted while keeping traffic clear of a fallen high-tension wire. There was the out-of-town woman who had committed suicide by hurling herself into the old quarry out on the edge of town. There were others. . .

As I grew older, my dreams seemed to become more general and more scattered, often about distant lands and foreign people and never in a chronological order. At times they touched me, such as the dream of the death of both my parents in an automobile collision; but more often than not they concerned places and people and events which I knew nothing of. Usually I never knew who they were nor where the event would occur—but I knew that somewhere at a future date my nightmare would come true.

There were occasions when my dreams of faraway occurrences were brought back to me in realistic detail by way of scare-heads beckoning my attention from the front pages of local newspapers, such as the burning of the Morro Castle or the Graf Zeppelin and later the derailment of the Congressional Limited in Pennsylvania with a great loss of life and the Texas City explosion. Or perhaps it might be only a short news item buried deep inside the newsheet which caught my eye and brought back incidents which I seemed to recall. The only thing my dreams really had in common was that they always concerned tragedy, horror, the shadow of death.

I was overseas with the Armed Forces when I dreamed of a girl in some American city who lost both legs in a trolley accident and I witnessed the crashing of an Army bomber into an upper floor of the Empire State Building months before it was headlined as an actual fact—people and events with which I had no contact and in which I had no more than casual human interest.

Then came the night when I had lay wrapped in a poncho against the rain from a war-ravaged sky over Luxembourg and one of my tragic dreams had come close to me—I had watched helplessly as my sister Helen was choked to death by a sandy-haired man with a beefy face and her lifeless body flung from the Boulevard Bridge.

There was nothing which I might could have done to have prevented its happening. I had dreamed it; it was going to be.

LATER, I thought that I should have informed my home town police department—at least they might have been able to have captured the killer in the act, even though I was certain they couldn't have prevented the murder. In fact, I did begin several letters before I received the message which I had been expecting, but I had torn them all up unfinished in fear of being termed a crackpot. Such is the stuff that psycho-neurosis is made of.

Following my discharge from the Service, I literally battered my brains out in an attempt to find the connection between the small-time mobster and the murder of my sister—some plausible thing I could take to the law. I pored over old newspaper files and asked leading questions, all in vain. There was no discoverable connection, no sensible motive.

This Deek Larkin had quit our part of the country before my return home. A certain gambling faction was said to be nursing a healthy mad for him and he'd made himself scarce. The local law had no scores against him. The biggest grudges they had ever held against him were booked as misdemeanors such as simple assault; charges which a few dollars fine could free one of. They hadn't considered him worthy of keeping track of.

I had a living to make. I got a job and settled down to work, trying to shove my desire for vengeance into my subconscious. The months passed, a year, another; then came the dream. I seemed to be high on a platform looking down at a busy street. On the corner was a sign post and nearby lay the crumpled figure of a stoutly-built man. The beefy face upturned toward me was long before etched in the dark recesses of my mind. I woke up screaming.

I asked for a leave of absence and withdrew my savings and went to New York. Finding the location was no trouble; the sign post, liquor store across the street, a handkerchief-sized park sandwiched into the intersection—every detail had been clearly revealed in my dream, except for the hotel on the corner. That must have been my point of view.

I took a room at the hotel and my days became a succession of holding unread newspapers in the lobby or strolling the streets nearby, watching, waiting. Then I saw him. I was feeding peanuts to squirrels in the tiny park when I happened to glance up and there was the face for which I had sought so long, staring from the huge window over the fire-escape on the sixth floor.

Latent fear was mirrored upon that

face. It was the fear of a man with a devil on his tail, a man who spends his days looking over his shoulder and his sleepless nights with a troubled conscience. It was the face of a man pursued.

I suddenly entertained a wild idea of locating his room and bursting in on him to accuse him of the murder and shooting it out with him in approved movie tradition. There were a couple of drawbacks to that plan, however—I had no pistol and acquiring one in New York might take a bit of doing. Again, he could possibly just grin in my face and deny or ignore such an accusation unbased on any proof. And no matter how deep my hatred for him was, I couldn't have brought myself to shoot him down in cold blood.

I threw a last handful of peanuts to the squirrels and crossed to the hotel, absently crumpling the empty paper bag in my fist. I seemed to be guided by an unseen hand, not knowing where I was going nor what I was going to do. I walked up the stairs to the sixth floor, though my room was on the fourth, and the man at the landing window jerked about to face me at the sound of my footsteps, one hand darting into a coat pocket. I learned then

what it was to see stark fear written in a man's eyes.

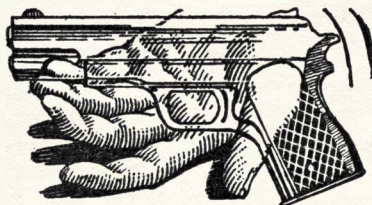
I MOVED on, climbing the stairway toward the seventh floor, and he turned again to the window. In that moment I knew what I was going to do.

Deek Larkin barely glanced at me as I returned from the seventh floor. A beefy shadow in the dimly lit hallway, he stared down at the street below, twisting a cigarette between his fingers in a nervous gesture—fingers which had choked the life from my sister Helen.

I brought my fist down, hard!

His huge body hung for a moment on the lattice-work of the fire-escape, then hurtled free, falling headfirst toward the spot by the sign post where I knew it would land.

The sound had caused a couple of neighboring doors to crack and I dashed up the stairway to escape any possible witnesses. I was thinking hysterically of how silly my story would sound to the police—how was I to know that such a childish prank as the bursting of an air-filled paper bag would send a man plunging frenziedly through a window to his death on the pavement six floors below?



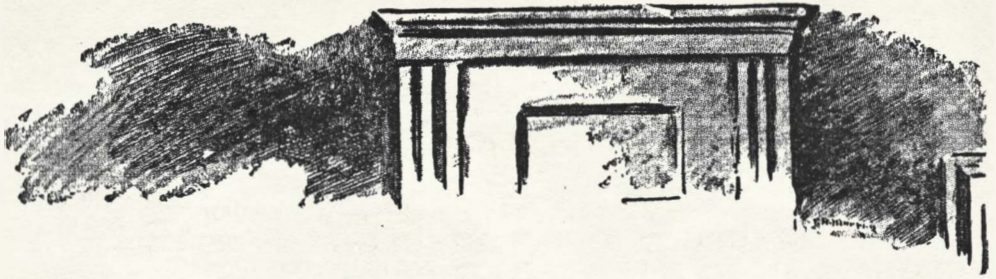
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BODYGUARD

A Novelet by LARRY HOLDEN

CHAPTER I

"GUILTY IN THE FIRST DEGREE!"

THE JURY plodded back into the courtroom with set faces, twelve zombies of justice. Frankie Melot crouched at the defendant's table like a cornered animal, and even from where I sat I could see the cold sweat of terror that pebbled his face.

Suffer, rat, suffer, I thought with satisfaction. Because if anybody had it coming it was Frankie Melot, the punk kid brother of Big Lew Melot, rackets king of Tampa.

Frankie and another hood had shot it out on the corner of Broadway and Honduras Street, down in the Ybor City section. That's the Spanish quarter here in Tampa. The other hood got away clean, but Frankie took two in the leg. The real victim, however, was a twelve-year-old girl. She took one through the head. Frankie couldn't claim self-defense either. The little girl had been unarmed.

Big Lew never showed once in the courtroom, and the scuttlebutt was that two of his toughest bowers, Joe Cuba and TB Puy, were holding him in his Columbus Drive apartment at gunpoint.

I could believe that. The only one Big

Lew had ever loved or ever would love was his little rat-brother, Frankie. Cuba and Puy didn't dare let him out of that apartment. He would have cleaned out the courtroom with a chattergun to get Frankie off the spot.

The betting had been running two to one that the jury would rat out of it, that it would come up with a disagreement, and three to two that it would turn Frankie loose entirely. Such was the power of the Melot name in Tampa. A Melot had never even been arrested in Tampa, much less convicted, and all up and down Broadway the boys with the sharp eyes and the smart money were saying that the jury—just ordinary citizens, after all, not heroes—would be scared spitless of Big Lew Melot and would do everything but hang a medal on Frankie.

Now me, I'm an ordinary citizen, too. I'm a private eye, so that makes me a small business man. This snoop and snitch isn't the babes-and-bullets racket the movies would have you believe. I had bet a sawbuck that the jury would convict every volt that was coming to him. Maybe I'm an idealist, but I had faith that twelve honest men and women

*It was bad enough when the Tampa mobbies tried to bribe him,
but when they snatched his girl Chastain was really hepped up*



couldn't do anything else and still live with themselves afterward.

And nobody could look at the dead kid's father, San Martin, who'd been sitting there day after day in the front row, without wanting to walk up to Frankie and give him what Judge Lynch used to call a taste of law and order.

I don't know how much of the trial old San Martin actually heard, for most of the time he just sat there with his eyes closed and the tears running down his wrinkled, work-worn face, and if I'd been on the jury, every tear that rolled down his gaunt cheeks

would have looked like blood.

The courtroom was so jammed that even the spittoons had been removed, and when the foreman of the jury rose to hand the verdict to the court clerk, a hush settled down like the pause before a requiem.

I'm supposed to be a pretty hard character, but my own pulses were hammering so hard in my ears that when the clerk started reading the verdict, everything was a mutter and a jumble until he came to the words:

"... find the defendant, Francis Melot, guilty of murder in the first degree, as charged."

THAT rang out like a bugle call!

I felt like shouting, and the courtroom went mad. Frankie Melot surged up out of his chair, his jaws working soundlessly with the scream that lay locked in his twisted little mind. His arms waved jerkily and he toppled straight forward across the table, out cold.

The dead girl's father, old San Martin, leaped to his feet, brandishing a cheap chrome revolver, crying hysterically: "I was going to kill him! I was going to shoot him down the way he did my little girl, if they had freed him!" He turned to the jury, "Thank you, thank you, oh thank you . . ." Sobs shattered his voice and he covered his face with his hands.

The district attorney got to him with a fatherly, comforting arm a split-second before the flash bulbs started going off like the Fourth of July.

I got out of there before I got sick in somebody's lap. Frankie Melot was as good as dead, San Martin's terrible grief would burn a little less fiercely, and there was nothing left but the clowning and the jostling for position in the headlines. I went out to the courthouse steps for a breath of fresh air and a cigarette.

But in spite of all the hurdy-gurdy that the poignant drama of the trial was turning into, I felt clean and I felt like singing. American justice was still the shining sword our forefathers had forged, and without grandstanding the D.A. had woven a net of electrodes around Frankie that even the dread name of Melot could not break. It was a good feeling.

Then somebody touched my arm. It was the whisper of a touch, the kind of touch that gives you the same sensation as walking into a faceful of spider webs in the dark. I turned, and it was a little shyster everybody called Moxie—probably because he had a lot of it, all brass.

Except for one thing, Moxie could have been the greatest rackets mouthpiece in the country. He had all the instincts, and no scruples, but fortunately for you and me and everybody else, he just plain didn't have the talent. He couldn't have convinced a jury of Eskimos that ice was cold. The sight

of him always made me feel for the safety of my wallet.

He laid an insinuating forefinger on my arm. "Mr. Chastain," he beamed like a choir master at the sight of a new pair of legs among the choir girls, "might I have a word with you?"

Moxie's breath was always the first indication of the way the wind was blowing. For that reason and no other, I said coldly, "What's on your mind?"

"Money." His smile was as disarming as a pickpocket's fingers. "A lot of money. Are you thirsty? Suppose we run across the street and have a Juicer while we talk. Liquor is not the most cooling thing in the world, but it does change your attitude toward the humidity."

A Juicer is a lime and rum with pineapple.

"Fine," I said. "Who's paying?"

He enveloped me with his smile and murmured something about an expense account. Now ordinarily I would rather drink a nice private glass of hemlock than Scotch with Moxie, but they say curiosity killed a cat, and being bigger than a cat I was sure it wouldn't kill me. How wrong I almost was.

I let him steer me across the street to the courthouse hangout, Howard's Bar & Grill, where the Juicers were reputed to have the most rum and the least filler in the tallest glasses, and on a hot afternoon a Juicer was better than a Planters Punch, because you didn't have to be a garbage collector to get to your drink.

WHEN we were finally settled in the farthest, darkest booth with a pair of Juicers before us, he came to the point in that roundabout way that even the worst lawyers seem to think make them legal beagles.

"Five thousand dollars," he said dreamily, "is a lot of money."

I yawned just to needle him. "Not if you want to buy a yacht," I said. "Or a few pounds of sirloin."

"Five thousand dollars will buy a lot of sirloin."

I had to agree that five thousand dollars would buy more sirloin than I could eat at a sitting. I was still feeling good over the

conviction of Frankie Melot, and this was entertainment. He looked at me coyly from under his long, curling lashes.

"Without lifting a finger," he murmured, "you could have five thousand dollars."

I said I was feeling good, didn't I? Okay. I wriggled my fingers at him. "Point out the finger I wouldn't have to lift," I said.

That made him sore. I could tell by the way he wagged his fat fanny on the seat. To Moxie, there was nothing funny about money, and the more money, the less funny. He popped his eyes at me like a pair of boiled eggs.

"I'm laughing," he said, showing his teeth. "Ha, ha, ha!"

"Me, too," I said. "Ha, ha, ha. What's the pitch?"

"Does this look like a pitch?" He folded back his jacket and showed a sheaf of brand-new bills in the inside pocket. He riffled them with his finger. They were all C-notes, and my eyes spread like a catfish's at the sight of the biggest worm in the world. Moxie with more than a double sawbuck was enough to make anybody stare. But I could still count.

"That looks more like ten G's," I said.

He struggled with himself, then bitterly raised the ante to ten G's but, brother, how he hated himself for having riffled that moolah at me!

"All right," he said with difficulty, "ten G's." He pointed a plump finger at me and held it there for a moment for effect. "We," he said slowly and significantly, "are making an appeal for Frankie."

An appeal, in a murder case, is automatic. I had expected it. But getting it this way from Moxie, it was like a slap across the face with a wet fish. It meant the wheels within the wheels had started to turn again. The wheels you didn't see, the wheels that had always been there. Lew Melot's wheels.

The good feeling I'd had was gone. I could feel the skin tightening across my clenched knuckles.

"So you're making an appeal," I said. "What's that got to do with me?"

Moxie pursed his lips and beamed at me from over the little rosebud of his mouth. "Love," he said pontifically, "the sublime

emotion that makes the world go round. Love. What would we do without love? Love is the flower, but"—he shook his finger at me—"marriage is the weed. Marriage takes money. It is rumored, Mr. Chastain, that you are contemplating the nuptial noose. Are my congratulations in order?"

I felt my face congeal. The whole pitch was clear to me now. Yes, it was love, but in the mouth of Moxie it sounded like something you could buy for two bucks down on Honduras Street. If I didn't reach across that table and take his fat throat in my fingers, it was only because I wanted to hear everything he had to say.

"What's your pitch, Moxie?" I croaked.

"A very simple one, Mr. Chastain. You are shortly to marry a Miss Peggy Whitney. Your prospective father-in-law must think highly of you, or he would not permit you to marry his only daughter. Your prospective father-in-law happens to be Lloyd Whitney, a judge in the court of appeals. *We* are going to make an appeal for Frankie. Ten thousand dollars."

He lifted it from his pocket and shoved it into my stiff hands. "Look at it, feel it. It's all your's. Your prospective father-in-law respects your opinion, and all we want you to do is drop a word of simple truth here and there when you are with him. Just what a raw deal Frankie got, it should have been manslaughter instead of first degree, and it was an accident anyway, Frankie doesn't go around shooting kids, and think of poor Frankie, aside from the mental anguish he must suffer at having shot down an innocent child while engaged in protecting his own life, Frankie with two bullets in his leg, he'll have a limp for the rest of his life, and why should Frankie take the whole rap while the gungel that tried to get him goes free . . .

"I don't have to tell you what to say, Mr. Chastain. It's just the simple truth. Frankie was given the wet end of the stick and deserves a break, a new trial. All we want you to do is create a little natural sympathy for Frankie with Judge Whitney, that's all. All we want is for the judge to grant a new trial so we can bring forward our evidence and prove that Frankie did not kill that poor

little innocent tot.

"We're not asking that you unduly influence the judge's decision, but merely that you show him that Frankie . . ."

CHAPTER II

PELICAN CLUB



SMACKED him. His head thunked against the back of the booth, his eyes rolled up and he slid gently from view beneath the table. I picked up the money, stalked over and gave it to the Spanish barkeep.

"For the Red Cross," I said. "For charity . . ." and walked out.

Now I knew why some guys got sore when they were offered bribe money. It was a blow to their pride. It proved that somebody could have a low opinion of them.

I hadn't gone three blocks when I discovered I had a tail—a dark-faced boy in a lavender sport shirt and chartreuse slacks. I felt the back of my neck sprout like a scared cat's tail. That was Joe Cuba, one of Lew Melot's toughest bowers.

He grinned and waved as my startled face showed over my shoulder, but he made no move to close the gap between us. He was joined a half block later by a tall, gaunt rack of bones with the pallor of death in his face, and they strolled along together behind me.

I stifled the impulse to run, to grab the nearest cop and hide behind him. The gaunt one was TB Puys, and now two of Lew Melot's prime hatchetmen were stalking me. I stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and, my tongue shriveling in my mouth, waited for them to come up. They stopped abreast of me, and Joe Cuba gave me an angelic smile.

"What's on your mind, Joe?" I croaked.

"I can't answer a question like that without a lawyer, Chastain," he grinned.

"I think," TB Puys said gravely, "that perhaps Mr. Chastain has something on his mind. Is your conscience bothering you by any chance, Mr. Chastain?"

They just stood there and regarded me with amusement while my insides churned.

Joe Cuba murmured, "The barkeep didn't want that ten G's, Chastain." He patted his hip pocket. "He gave it back."

"He didn't appreciate your kindness." TB Puys looked sad. "He wants you to pay his dental bill."

"That's the thanks you get, Chastain," said Joe. "The guy loses some teeth, and right away he wants you to pay for them. He didn't know you were only kidding when you gave him that dough."

Suddenly I was sore. Just for the hell of it, they'd beaten up a guy who was nothing but an innocent bystander. I called them every blistering name I could lay tongue to, and wound up with, "And as far as Lew Melot's concerned, you can tell him to go to hell, too!"

Joe Cuba looked bored. "You tell him, TB," he yawned. "You ain't got much longer to live anyway."

"By an odd coincidence, Mr. Chastain," said Puys, his dull eyes momentarily gleaming, "we are on our way to Lew's apartment this very minute. Why don't you accompany us and deliver your message in person?"

"Why don't you point a gun at me?"

"On the public street? Tut, tut, Mr. Chastain. That's against the law."

"Take care of yourself, fella." Joe reached out and smoothed my tie. "Take good care of yourself."

I slapped his hand away, turned on my heel and walked into the gin mill behind me. They laughed.

Inside, I ordered a double Scotch, and don't think I didn't need it. My hands were trembling like a pair of cats in a dog pound.

The bartender started sympathetically, "What's the matter, mister? You look as if—"

"Don't talk to me," I warned him. "Don't even try to exchange the weather with me, or two guys are likely to walk in and knock your block off. I'm hard luck for bartenders."

He looked affronted and walked away. He didn't know I was doing him a favor.

Two double Scotches later I had started to think things over, and the more I thought, the screwier it got. Why should Lew Melot offer me, of all people, ten thousand clams

to talk to Judge Whitney. He was Peggy's uncle, not her father, and he approved of me the way a fly-swatter approves of a fly.

He wasn't her guardian, or anything, so he couldn't forbid her to see me, but he had made it pretty clear that I was about as welcome in his house as an attack of termites. He made no secret of this, so nobody in his right mind would offer me ten cents, much less ten grand, to put a soft word in the judge's ear for Frankie Melot. It was the surest way I knew of to get Frankie electrocuted.

Which wasn't a bad idea.

I PICKED Peggy up about eight that night. She was still upstairs, putting on the finishing touches, so I waited in the hall. I was standing there patting my tie before the mirror when the judge came walking through from the living room.

I said cheerfully, "Good evening, your honor."

He grunted and went by without even a glance. "Just for that," I said to myself, "you don't get my vote when you run for governor."

Maybe that was what it was all about. His dislike of me, I mean. He wanted to be governor, and maybe he thought that having a private eye in the family would cost him votes in the caviar belt.

He would make a very handsome governor. There was no doubt of that. He looked like Richard the Lion Hearted. If you picked them for looks, he'd make a wonderful governor. He was tall, with a very legal mane of white hair and gray eyes. He'd make the kind of governor whose face it would be a pleasure to see in the papers. My feelings in the matter were that a guy who's a private slob would be a public slob as well. Of course, I don't know very much about governors, so that's just my personal opinion.

Peggy came down the stairs, and the judge was out of my mind the minute I laid eyes on her. My heart did a couple of flip-flops. She wasn't one of those patrician icicles. There was just enough Irish in her so that it showed in her red hair and blue eyes.

She came flying down the stairs, crying, "My golly, can't you be late for once? Darling!"

I was left dizzy by the pressure of her lips, the swirl of her perfume, the brief feel of her in my arms. And then she was walking down the hall to say goodnight to the judge. She was back a few minutes later with a puzzled frown on her face. She took my arm as we walked down the front steps to my car.

"What did you say to the judge, Mickey?" she whispered. "He says you were impertinent."

"Me? All I said was, good evening, your honor. What's he want me to call him—your worship?"

"Oh, damn! I wish you two would get along."

"I wish he'd get to be governor and get it over with," I growled. "When are all us lucky people going to have the chance to vote for him?"

"Don't talk like that, Micky. This fall."

"Good, I said promptly. "Then he'll be so busy having his picture taken that maybe we can pitch our woe in peace for awhile."

She murmured, "Poor Micky," and moved closer to me as I slid into the car behind the wheel.

We went to a movie, and afterward out to the Pelican Club on Route 541, where the rumba band didn't sound like a machine shop under full production. We danced, had a few frozen daiquiris, but mostly just sat at our table, smiled at each other, touched hands and said a lot of stuff that didn't mean anything except that just being with each other was the tops in any form of entertainment.

A shadow fell across our table. Literally.

A voice said, "Good evening, Miss Whitney. Good evening, Mr. Chastain. Welcome to the Pelican Club. I hope you plan to stay for the floor show. We have Zela, the new primitive dancer from Uruguay." It was a voice with a natural grate that even the best bourbon would never be able to smooth out.

I looked up expecting to see the manager or the MC or some other official baby kisser,

but that face had never been designed for kissing babies—not those long alligator jaws, those hot black eyes, that harsh blue-black hair.

It was the face of Lew Melot.

MY FIRST impulse was to jump to my feet and put my hands up to defend myself, but he had a knuckly hand on my shoulder and he was smiling a reptilian smile.

"Are you enjoying yourself, Miss Whitney?" he was saying. "The orchestra is an importation from Puerto Rico. Later it will play some of its native music, some *pasodobles*."

Peggy looked from him to me, puzzled, uncertain whether to smile or answer or what. My face must have been showing.

"I didn't know the Pelican Club was yours, too, Melot," I managed to say finally, when I was convinced that momentarily his intentions were pacific.

"I don't own it. I just have an interest in it. I have an interest in a great many things. What did you want to see me about Mr. Chastain?"

"*Me* want to see *you!*" It blurted out before I could stop it. "Huh-uh, Melot, not me."

"Well now, that's strange." He worked his long toothy jaws for a moment with private amusement. "Someone—I forget who—told me you had a message for me. That was this afternoon, I believe."

I felt a splash of cold prickles in my face. That afternoon? A message for him? Sure. I had told Joe Cuba to tell Lew to go to hell. But I had been sore then. Now I was just plain scared, but at the sight of that lizard face wordlessly commanding me to crawl, I got sore all over again.

"Yeah, I did have a message for you," I said, a little too loudly. "I gave it to a friend of yours. Didn't he deliver it? If he didn't, I'll be glad to repeat it. I said to tell you—"

His hand jerked as it tightened on my shoulder, and he interrupted quickly, "Oh, that? Yes. By the way, this is something that should interest you, Chastain. We have new evidence to prove that my brother did

not kill that little girl. She was sanding before a wooden fence when she was hit by one of several wild bullets. In the presence of several reputable witnesses, we dug three of those bullets from the fence and we are prepared to show that they did not come from Frankie's gun. That's rather conclusive, don't you think, Miss Whitney?"

At the table in front of us there was a fat little man with ear trouble.

Before Peggy could answer, I said, "Miss Whitney doesn't have an opinion, Melot. She's not very bright. She had a bad fall when she was a child. In fact—I glanced at my wrist watch—"It's time for us to go home now and look at some picture books."

Melot laughed.

Peggy's face was furious as I steered her across the dance floor toward the hat check booth, followed by some two hundred interested pairs of eyes, but she waited until we were outside the club before she lit the fuse.

"Of all the things to say about me!" she exploded. "Was it a joke? Was it funny? Was I supposed to laugh? I was never so embarrassed in my life!"

"No, honey," I said soberly, "it wasn't a joke. How would you like to have seen something like this in tomorrow's papers: 'It is whispered that Peggy Whitney, niece of Judge (Appeals Court) Whitney, nightclubbing with sleuth Micky Chastain last eve, handed down her opinion that the new evidence uncovered by the defense for Frankie Melot conclusively proves Frankie's innocence.'"

"I didn't say anything of the sort!" she cried indignantly.

"I know. But when Lew asked you that question about digging the bullets out of the fence and proving they hadn't come from Frankie's gun, what would you have answered?"

"Well, if the bullets didn't come from Frankie's gun—"

"That's all you would have to have said, honey. That little man at the table behind you was Bobby Hare, who happens to have a gossip column in the *Times* called 'Here And There With Bobby Hare.' Nuff sed?"

"Nuff sed," she agreed contritely.

"And furthermore," I said, "those bullets

are as phony as a blue toupee. If they had been there during the trial, that tricky legal eagle Lew hired to defend Frankie would have had movies made of them and given three shows daily."

"Why am I so dumb?" Peggy said plaintively.

"And on top of that," I went on, "even if the bullets were the McCoy and not plants, I don't think it should make any legal difference. Frankie Melot had no license to carry a gun, and a private shindy between two mobbies doesn't spell self-defense in any language. Both of them are equally guilty of murder."

Peggy muttered, "Showoff," and walked toward the car.

CHAPTER III

A BRIBE



WE DROVE over to Clearwater and looked at the Gulf of Mexico. But the business with Lew Melot had left a bad taste in our mouths, and after awhile I took her home.

There was a Cadillac and a Lincoln parked in front of the house, and Peggy said, "Oh-oh, council of war or something! The judge's campaign managers must be sharpening their tomahawks!"

I thought for a minute. I didn't owe the judge a thing, but on the other hand I owed Lew Melot still less.

"I'd like to talk to the judge for a minute," I said.

She looked at me. "Go right in," she said ironically. "Walk right into the meeting. They'll be glad to see you. But you ought to dress for the occasion. You should wear a crash helmet."

"No. I took her arm and gently urged her up the front steps. "You just stand outside and put the pieces together as they come flying out."

"With pins," she hissed, "with pins!"

The conclave was in the judge's walnut-paneled study. I put my hand on the door-knob, blew a kiss to the round-eyed Peggy, then walked in, closing the door firmly be-

hind me.

The three men turned sharply in their chairs. Two of them had the well-fed, cigar-studded faces of men who decide the destinies of states in back rooms. The third was the judge. He struggled with his apoplexy and finally managed to pant:

"Get . . . out . . . of . . . here!"

I smiled all round, said, "Good evening, gentlemen," and walked down the room toward them, lighting a cigarette.

The two men gave the judge an annoyed, puzzled glance, and he leaped to his feet, his face furious. I held up my hand.

"This afternoon," I said, "I was offered ten thousand dollars by one of Lew Melot's errand boys to put in a good word for Frankie to the judge here. I thought you might be interested."

If you could have punched holes in the following silence, you could have used them for gun barrels, but you'd have needed a diamond drill to do it. The judge's jaws worked up and down.

"You're . . . you're insane!" he gasped.

One of the other men said quickly, "Just a moment, Judge. This might be very serious. Who is this young man?"

"He . . . he . . ." The judge's face congested and he became incoherent. He had reached the limit of his descriptive vocabulary and could only spit.

"My name's Micky Chastain," I rescued him. "I kind of go around with the judge's niece, Peggy. I'm, uh, a confidential investigator. A shamus, if you go to the movies." I grinned.

The man who had spoken before said, "Oh, yes. My name's Barascule. I'm the judge's campaign manager. Tell me, Chastain, just who offered you this money?"

The judge turned angrily to him. "This is absurd! This man is—"

"Please, Judge, let me handle this. . . . You were saying, Chastain?"

"I wasn't, but have you heard of a shyster called Moxie? I don't know his real name. Everybody calls him Moxie."

Barascule nodded. "And he said he was acting for Lew Melot?"

"Not in so many words, no. But he had the ten thousand in cash on him, and where

would Moxie get ten thousand clams."

Barasculé's eyebrows climbed his forehead. "Then you can't actually say the offer came from Lew Melot."

I looked pityingly at him. "I just did, didn't I? Have you ever heard of a fancy-dressed killer named Joe Cuba?"

His eyes sharpened and his head nodded just slightly.

"Or of TB Puys, another talented hatchman from the Melot tong?" I went on.

"Well?"

"Well, after I poked Moxie in the schnozz, I gave the ten grand to the barkeep for the Red Cross, for charity. Ten minutes later, Joe Cuba and TB Puys caught up with me on the street. They're a pair of boys who don't always have to hammer you over the skull to put the fear of God into you. They gave me a once-over lightly, letting me know I'd made a bum play and that there was a tall, dark man in my future."

I COULD see that Barasculé was impressed, though the judge kept making outraged noises in his throat. Barasculé, however, was the boss.

"Tell me, Chastain," he said, leaning forward, "what finally did happen to the ten thousand dollars?"

"Cuba and Puys took it away from the barkeep then, I imagine, and went back to Lew for further instructions. Then tonight I ran into Lew at the Pelican Club. He could have had a half dozen of his muscles work me over, but he didn't. He patted me on the shoulder and tried to get Peggy to say that their new evidence conclusively proved Frankie innocent."

Barasculé said, "Hm-m-m," and unplugged his cigar. He looked at it very thoughtfully. He glanced up at the judge, who by this time was looking just a little sick. "I think, Judge," he said significantly, "that you owe Mr. Chastain your thanks for telling us this." That was an order.

The judge held out his hand as if he were sticking it into a blow torch and said with difficulty, "I want to thank you, Chastain—uh, Mick. I, uh, appreciate what you've done for me."

Just to see what it did to his face, I wagged

his hand enthusiastically. It felt like a shad fillet.

"Not at all, Judge," I said heartily. "It's practically in the family, anyway."

He put his hand behind him as if he couldn't wait to get to the bathroom and wash it.

"Now I wonder, Chastain," Barasculé gave me a hooded glance, "if you'd be willing to do us another favor?"

"Could be," I said warily.

"Stay away from the judge and this house until after election. Why not take a South American cruise—with all expenses paid, of course. How does that sound?"

"Wonderful," I said innocently. "I wasn't planning to get married that soon, but who could ask for a better honeymoon."

Barasculé almost swallowed his cigar, and I grinned at him.

"No, no," he said hurriedly. "I mean alone. On no account must your name be linked with Miss Whitney's until after the election. In fact, it would be better if you simulated a quarrel with her and severed all connections with this house."

"No, sir," I said. "I have only one love life, and a South American picnic without Peggy would be a hollow mockery."

Barasculé was no fool. He knew damn well that all the love between the judge and me couldn't be fermented into a drink strong enough to intoxicate a fruitfly.

"Well," he said practically, "we can't coerce you. But I'd like to have you promise me one thing. Don't breathe a word of this to a soul. Keep it completely under your hat."

I said, "Yessir," and then with a grin at the judge, "In my circle—crooks and dips and stewbums—they'd think I was nuts for not grabbing those ten G's with both hands."

Barasculé said drily, "I'm sure. But you won't regret this, Chastain. When the judge is governor, I'm sure a place can be found for you on the attorney general's staff."

"Look," I said, "I'll keep my mouth shut, but I don't want any handouts!"

I wanted them to know exactly how I felt. I walked out.

Peggy was waiting in the hall, fairly bursting with curiosity. I hadn't told her

about the bribe offer. I gave her the bare bones of a grin and muttered, "Lead me to drink, honey. I need one, bad!"

We went into the dining room, and she took a bottle of Scotch and a tall glass from the Duncan Phyfe cellarette and started pouring. I didn't stop her till she reached the Plimsoll mark.

She scowled at the size of it and said, "Did you need it *that* bad?"

"Honey," I said, "I'm going to tell you a little story. Today when the jury convicted Frankie Melot, I had a good feeling—the kind of feeling you get when the band starts playing and the flag goes by. It lasted, I think, about ten minutes. People have been sticking pins in it ever since. Just now, I got another kick in the face. The judge is embarrassed, and do you know why he's embarrassed? I'll tell you why. He's embarrassed because Lew Melot has dumped a mess in his lap."

PEGGY'S eyes started to get flinty, and I recognized that look. She didn't like me to talk about the judge, and she didn't like the judge to talk about me. Nevertheless, I had something on my mind and I wasn't going to be able to sleep until I spilled it, come hell or high water.

"You don't have to look at me as if I'd drowned your kittens," I said. "I'm sore, too, and I'm going to tell you why those civic fathers in there have ants in their pants. When the appeal comes up, the judge is the one who's going to have to say whether or not Frankie Melot gets a new trial. Whichever way he jumps, he's going to lose votes.

"If he gives Frankie a new trial, he's a dead duck with the newspapers and the church crowd. If he doesn't grant Frankie another shot at it, Lew Melot goes on the warpath, and the Ybor City vote isn't the only vote that Lew has a finger in. He's got affiliations all over the state—he could cost the judge the election. So the problem is, how can the judge keep everybody happy?"

"And I suppose," Peggy said scornfully, "they broke down and told you all this!"

"No ma'am. They did not take me into their confidence. But when I told them that

Lew had offered me a goodly sum to put in a kind word for Frankie, they did everything but stuff my throat with sugar plums to keep my mouth shut. In fact, they did offer a couple of sugar plums—a trip to South America and a job with the attorney general, if and when.

"And here's something I figured out with my own little brain. Lew Melot knew damn well I couldn't influence the judge one way or the other—but *he doesn't care*. All he wants is for me to accept that ten thousand."

Peggy was getting madder and madder. "As a gift, I suppose," she snapped.

"Nope. As an investment. It has been alleged that shortly I am to become the judge's nephew-in-law. So I accept a ten-G's gratuity. The minute I wrap my hot little hands around that dough, it isn't a gratuity, any more. It's a club. It's a club he can hold over the judge's head, because he knows the judge is going to find a way to grant Frankie a new trial, a way that will satisfy everybody.

"So here's the picture: The judge grants a new trial after I take ten G's to talk him into it, even though I hadn't. That's Lew's little club. No governor in the world could survive the scandal of his own nephew-in-law taking that kind of money. Believe me," I said, throwing down what was left of the Scotch in the bottom of my glass, "it's a wonderful world and it's so good to be alive!"

All of a sudden I realized that Peggy was not exactly applauding my keen, deductive reasoning. She stepped away from me with fire in her eyes.

"Wonderful," she said furiously, "marvelous! There's only one flaw in it—the judge is in absolutely no danger of getting a nephew-in-law!"

With one last bitter glance at me, she ran from the room, grinding her teeth in fine Irish style.

I felt suddenly very, very tired. I plodded out to my car and drove home. The apartment elevator wasn't working at this time of night, so I wearily climbed the two flights of stairs to my penthouse, opened the door and walked in.

Walked right smack into a stone wall,

a stone wall with colored lights and a tunnel that roared like a subway train as I tumbled headlong into it.

It was tougher climbing out of the tunnel than it had been falling in. There was nausea and pain and it was an uphill climb. I don't remember getting into the bathroom, but there I was with the cold shower cascading down my neck and consciousness returning as reluctantly as an income tax rebate.

I had thoroughly soaked my tropical worsted, and the water was running down my legs, but I was upright and after awhile I felt strong enough to reach out and turn off the water. I staggered into the kitchen and poured myself a prescription of fine whiskey.

Naturally, the first thing I thought of, when I was able to think, was Lew Melot and his merry men. Gripping a second glass of medicine, I plodded into the living room. There was nothing wrong with it, as far as I could see. Except that my portable typewriter was open, and in Florida you don't leave your typewriter open any more than you have to. Between the salt air and the sand, you'd soon be buying yourself a new one every six months.

So someone had used my typewriter.

I went into the bedroom. It was still there. I went through my chest of drawers. My gun was still there and the twenty bucks I kept hidden under my shirts for emergency.

There was nothing missing, not even the porterhouse I'd been hoarding in the refrigerator. So somebody had sneaked in just to practice on my typewriter. That made just about as much sense as two tails on an Airedale.

I thought about it. Dully. That smack on the head had left me very unstimulated. I was tired. I went to bed.

BON VOYAGE



ABOUT nine the next morning I was awakened by a long buzz on my door buzzer. When I opened the door, there stood Judge Whitney, a little bigger than life because a good night's sleep made him look more like Richard the Lion Hearted than ever. But when he came in out of the hall, I saw that he hadn't had a good night's sleep after all, for his eyes were a little puffy and pink.

I said, "Good morning, your honor," and waited for him to hackle up like a gamecock.

Instead, he glanced here and there around my apartment as if looking for something nice to say but was finding it hard. He cleared his throat a couple of times, then looked at me.

"I want you to know, Chastain," he said frankly, "that I do appreciate your coming to us last night. I'm sorry if my manner was a little restrained, but . . . dammit, sir, I can't like the business you're in!"

Straight from the shoulder, man to man.

"I know, Judge," I said. "There are crooks in my business, and there are crooks in your business, and it kind of makes it tough on the rest of us."

He breathed hard. He didn't like to be reminded that the judge business wasn't as lily white as nature had made the little snowflakes.

"Well," he said heavily, clinging to the olive branch with both hands to keep from using it as a club, "I hope in time we shall get to know one another better, Mick."

"I hope so, too—" I gave him a wistful smile—"Uncle!"

He winced. He turned red and cleared his throat again. I didn't want him to suffer any more than necessary, and in addition to that, I hadn't had breakfast yet, so I gave him a hand with his chore.

"You came to see me about something special, Judge?" I asked.

"As a matter of fact, I did, yes. I don't know if Mr. Barasculé impressed on you the full gravity of the situation, but, my boy, it

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is of the utmost importance that no one, *no* one learns of Lew Melot's attempt to—ah—no one at all. It could be misinterpreted. I mean, gossip can be a vicious thing. You can understand that, of course."

"In plain English, Judge?"

"If word gets out, Chastain, somebody is sure to start saying that maybe you did accept that money, and the reflection of that on my reputation would be obvious."

I plucked a cigarette from the wilted package on the windowsill and stood for a moment looking down into the street as I lit it. On the sidewalk, a skinny, hound-type dog trotted eagerly toward the garbage can at the gutter, mounted to his hind legs and nosed into it. Twice a week this same hound came trotting just as eagerly to nose into the garbage cans. He never seemed to get any fatter.

"Okay, Judge," I said wearily, "I'll keep my trap shut, and nobody'll point any fingers at you. If that's what you want to know, there it is. But please don't let's talk about handouts again."

"Of course. But, Chastain, take care of yourself. Melot does not give up very easily."

"Sure, Judge, sure!"

He smiled uncertainly, then walked hesitatingly toward the door as if worried he had left something unsaid. He stopped at the door.

"Great Godfrey, I almost forgot!" he exclaimed. He took an envelope from his pocket and handed it to me. "Peggy asked me to give you this."

My heart took a sickening lurch as I felt something bulky in the envelope, and when I ripped it open, the ring I had given Peggy fell out. The note was very short and forthright.

Dear Mick:

I don't feel like wearing this right now. I'm going up to Jax to visit the Shelby's for a few days and think things over.

Peg.

I read it twice with the slightly frantic feeling that there was more but that I was missing it somehow. I looked at the judge and stammered, "When—when did she leave."

"Last night." Then, *anxiously*, "Is there something wrong?"

I IGNORED him and sprinted into the bedroom for the phone. I ate my fingers while long distance fuddled around and got Jacksonville. The operators tossed the number to and fro as if it were a basketball, and finally Mrs. Shelby's quiet voice came on.

"Can I talk to Peg, Mrs. Shelby?" I said. "This is Mick."

"Of course, Mick. She's having breakfast. I'll call her."

I gulped air like a netted trout until Peggy's voice came over.

"Hello, Mick." There wasn't much expression to it. She sounded neither glad nor mad.

"Now, honey," I said, "what kind of a wingding is this?"

"No wingding, Mick. I just want to think things over."

"But there's nothing to think over, honey, nothing that has anything to do with you and me."

"Please, Mick, don't argue with me." She sounded tired. "It's a matter of loyalties, and I want to get them straight in my mind."

"What's there to get straight between you and me?" I was starting to shout. "It's always been straight—"

She hung up. I yelled into the phone and shook it, and if it had been a neck I'd have had a corpse in my hand. I slammed it down into its cradle. There was no sense calling her back. I knew Peggy. And there was no sense charging up to Jax to see her. She wouldn't see me.

The judge gave me a startled look when I stamped out into the living room again. The Chastains have an old-fashioned shanty Irish temper, too, and it usually shows. He made a small gesture with his hand.

"At least, Chastain," he said, "we have one common bond. We both love her."

There was a real note of pathos in it, and I was so startled that I just gaped as he opened the door and walked out. It hadn't occurred to me before that he loved anybody.

I was sore, but it drained out of me and left me feeling empty. This was the first shindy Peggy and I'd ever had. I dressed

very slowly. I didn't feel like eating breakfast, so I made myself an eggnog, added a splash of whisky, and drank it down, standing in the middle of the kitchen floor.

The door buzzed again. A voice called, "Western Union," and I opened the door quickly, thinking it was a telegram from Peg. It wasn't. It was a huge basket of flowers that almost filled the doorway, and tied to it was a wide white ribbon with gold letters that said, "Bon Voyage."

"What the hell's this?" I snapped.

"Flowers for Mr. Chastain," came the voice from behind the foliage.

Scowling, I backed into the room. The basket followed. The door closed and Joe Cuba and TB Puys, grinning, stepped out from behind the flowers.

"We hope you will have a very enjoyable trip, Mr. Chastain," said Puys solemnly.

I said, "Yeah? Where am I going?"

Puys took a ticket envelope from his pocket and pretended to glance at it. "Montevideo," he said, "on the S.S. *Maracaibo*. It sails at eleven this morning. Are you packed, you lucky man, you?"

Humor from him was like getting a hot foot from an undertaker.

I took an uneven breath and looked from one to the other. Their hands were in sight and empty, but their guns—and I knew damn well they were packed—were a hell of a lot closer than the bedroom where mine lay in the dresser drawer under the shirts.

"You need a vacation, pal," said Joe Cuba. "You don't look so good. . . . Does he, TB?"

"He could look worse, Joe. He could look a lot worse."

"You're right, TB. You're absolutely right. I've seen guys look worse. But they were kind of dead. . . . You'll look better after a nice boat ride, Chastain."

"Compliments of a friend," Puys added.

I raised a grin. It was hard, but I did it. I plucked a small brown zinnia from the basket and put it in my buttonhole.

"Let's get going," I growled. "I'm sick of this whole town and everybody in it!"

back to allow me to pass. For a brief moment that huge bunch of flowers hid us from Cuba's sight, and before Puys could do anything effective with his hands, I drove my fist into the pit of his stomach and, whirling, shoved the basket into Cuba's face.

I sprang for the door and pelted down the corridor while he was still swearing and spitting the gladioli from his mouth. I went down the stairs so fast that the beat of my feet against the steps sounded like the roll of a snare drum.

A big silver-and-blue interstate bus was just pulling up to the corner to discharge a few passengers from Georgia, and I jumped in before the driver could close the door. He was not supposed to pick up anybody in town, but before he could yap, I shoved a quick fin into his hand.

"Once around the park, my man," I muttered. "I want to watch the swans on the lake."

If he hadn't driven all night, if he hadn't been so tired, if he hadn't thought me a harmless souse, and if I hadn't gotten that fin to him before he committed himself out loud, he'd have made a good stab at heaving me to the wolves. And wolves is right, for a glance through the rear window of the bus showed me Cuba and Puys standing on the sidewalk looking up and down the street.

The driver looked up at me and said sourly: "Sit down and behave yourself."

I sat down and behaved myself. Hell, I'd have shined his shoes if he'd asked me. The bus moved majestically from the corner, leaving Cuba and Puys standing in front of my apartment, arguing angrily.

I got off six blocks down the line, grabbed a cab and went directly to my office on Florida Avenue before somebody got the idea ahead of me. The first thing I did was lock the door behind me, then I took my second gun from the file case and strapped it under my arm. I slipped it from the holster, checked the load and hefted it in my hand. It warmed up like a good friend, and I began to feel a lot easier.

I picked up the phone and called Lew Melot's Columbia Drive apartment. It was answered by some babe with a voice as sultry as a Spanish guitar.

WHEN I started around the basket toward the door, Puys blandly stepped

CHAPTER V

A BANK DEPOSIT

"Put Lew on," I said shortly.

She laughed. There were bubbles in it. "Won't I do?" she asked throatily.

"With that voice, sweetheart," I said, "and at this hour of the morning, you probably look like Dracula's little sister. Put Lew on."

She laughed again and cooed, "You are so gallant, so masterful. You make my little heart go pitty-pat."

"I heard a masculine voice growl, "Who is it?" and she answered carelessly, "Some jerk. Wants to talk to Lew."

"Find out who it is," the voice said.

She came back to the phone. "What's your name, Lover Lump?" she asked.

"Tell Lew it's Chastain."

"I might have known. A thick mick!"

She dropped the phone on some hard surface with a deliberate clatter, and I could hear her slippers go *slap-slap* across the floor. I waited to hear Melot pick up the phone. He didn't.

There was a faint click and his voice came peremptorily: "What's on your mind, Chastain?"

I sat up straighter and gripped the phone. "Look, Melot," I said, "keep your dogs away from me, or they're going to get hurt."

"What's the matter with you? Are you crazy?"

"And it's not going to do your brother's appeal any good to have another Melot shooting spread all over the newspapers. Think it over, friend, think it over."

I hung up fast before he could answer, and sat there breathing hard. Then the humor of it hit me. Brother, was I a hero! Iron-guts Chastain, that's me. Just show me a phone and I'll pick it up and get tough with anybody. I took out my gun and pointed it at the phone.

"Bang," I said.

That made me feel better. Not a lot, but some.



BUT SLOWLY I slipped back into the old slump. I wanted to talk to Peggy. I took a bottle of whisky from the bottom drawer of my desk, held it up to the light, then put it back again. I didn't feel that sorry

for myself.

The day dragged by. At noon I went down to the cafeteria and had a cup of coffee and a sandwich. I closed the office around three and went to a movie. I had dinner in a seafood den on the Bay, and when I got back to my apartment it was nine o'clock. The basket of flowers was still standing before the door in the living room.

I opened the kitchen window, made sure nobody was below, then tossed out the bouquet, geranium by geranium. The place still smelled like a funeral parlor, so I had a drink and turned on the radio. I felt as purposeless as a brassiere in a nudist camp.

There was some rumba music and I sat down on the sofa and crouched over my drink, getting a little maudlin over the memory of the last time I had heard rumba music with Peggy in the Pelican Lounge. Then all of a sudden the man on the radio was excited and his voice crackled away like a short circuit in an applause machine.

". . . killed instantly as he car crashed into the concrete abutment of the bridge that crossed Sneary's Creek. Evans was the foreman of the jury that convicted Frankie Melot. There were no witnesses to the accident, and police say that Evans had been drinking . . ."

I stopped listening as a cold little snake coiled sluggishly in the pit of my stomach. I didn't care what the police said—that had been no accident, and I wasn't the only one who was going to think that.

This was really putting Judge Whitney on the spot when the Frankie Melot appeal came up. It was a foretaste of what a second trial would be like. The new jurors would walk in fear of their lives, and if Frankie were convicted a second time, it would be

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a miracle. If he got a second trial. If.

Lew must have been out of his head to have pulled a trick like that.

No matter what happened now, all hell was going to break loose. If Frankie were granted a new trial, the newspapers were going to scream like wounded eagles. And if Frankie were not granted a new trial, Lew Melot would be a madman.

I locked all my windows, bolted my door and went to bed with a gun under my pillow that night.

The next morning I picked up my mail in the apartment lobby, and when I got downtown the newsboys were screaming on the corners: "Melot files Appeal! Read all about it! Melot files Appeal!" I didn't take a paper. I didn't want to read anything about it.

I went up to my office and sat at my desk and looked at my fingernails. There wasn't any dirt under them, but on the other hand I hadn't been doing any work either. Maybe I should have taken either the vacation Barasculé had offered, or the one Melot had bought. I felt tired and sick and just plain lousy.

I walked aimlessly over to the window and stood looking down into the street. There were cars parked all up and down the thoroughfare, but the one directly across from my office building had something special. It had a lavender sport shirt at the driver's window. There was only one guy I knew who wore lavender sport shirts and that was Joe Cuba.

My face hardened and I touched the gun under my arm. I may have done it the easy way, but I had meant every word I had said to Lew Melot. I was finished being pushed around.

I reached into my pocket for a pack of matches and felt the mail I had picked from my box in the apartment lobby. I went back to my desk and started opening it. It was something to do.

There were some bills, an advertisement from a diaper service—which, if things got worse, I might need—a notice that Dr. Morris Klugel, Chiropracist—he was notifying the right guy—had moved his offices; and a bulky letter from my bank.

I hadn't done anything to deserve a bulky letter from the bank, and I opened it with some curiosity. My bankbook fell out and there was a pink slip clipped to it. It said:

Thank you for your deposit. Our Night Depository is open for your convenience everyday from 3:00 P.M. until 10:00 A.M.

I PICKED up the bankbook very slowly and opened it, knowing very well what I was going to find, and there it was, initialled by the receiving teller: Deposit—\$10,000.00.

The cute rats, I thought savagely. That's what the shenanigan was in my apartment when I had walked in and got smacked on the noggin. They had come for my bankbook. And remembering the typewriter, I knew what that was for, too. They had typed my deposit slip on my typewriter. That didn't mean very much, but if it ever came up, the typing had still been done on my machine and ostensibly by me.

Pushed around again!

I reached for the phone, then slapped it away from me. The hell with hiding behind the telephone. I looked up Barasculé in the book. This was his baby. Let him figure a way out. He was the one who wanted the judge elected, not me. He had an office on Florida Avenue closer to the middle of town than mine. It was a four-block walk, so I walked.

Joe Cuba wasn't alone in the car across the street. Puy's was with him. They pulled out of their parking space and drifted down after me. I kept watching them, just hoping they'd make a play, but they didn't, and when I walked into Barasculé's place—which was called the Barasculé Building—they parked opposite and settled back to wait.

Their not making a play made me a little nervous, but I thought the hell with them, eyed the directory for Barasculé's office, then took the elevator to the seventh floor. I pushed open the door marked "Barasculé, Investments," and the wintry blonde at the reception desk gave me a glance that calculated to a thread the cost of my suit—\$42.50. It would have been a waste of time

talking to her anyway. I spotted the private office and barged in.

Barasculè was working over a stack of papers behind a walnut desk, also suitable for pingpong, and he looked up with irritated surprise when I slammed his door. I tossed my bankbook on the desk in front of him.

"There's an interesting item on Page Two," I said. "Tell me what you think of it as an investment."

He picked up the book but kept looking at me. His aldermanic jowls did not look plump and pink this morning; they were pendulous and hog-fat white. His eyes were rimmed in red. He, too, had spent a bad night. He opened the book and his eyes spread at what he saw.

He started up out of his chair, snarling, "You damn little chiseling—" His face clotted and he clawed the air at me with a fat, half-clenched hand.

I said coldly, "Finished, friend?"

"Get out of here!" he choked. "Get out of here!"

I didn't move. I just stared at him. He glowered back, then slowly sank back into his chair.

"I suppose," he said contemptuously, "that you have a proposition, or you wouldn't have brought this here. Well, let's lay it on the table. What is it?"

So, maybe you couldn't blame him at that. It was the kind of world he lived in. I remembered that good feeling I'd had at Frankie Melot's conviction. It seemed a long time ago.

I put both hands on Barasculè's desk and leaned toward him.

"Two nights ago," I said, "somebody swiped my bankbook from my apartment. Today it came back through the mail from the bank, ten G's fatter. I don't want it, but it's your headache, so you figure out a way to get rid of it. But short of armed robbery, I don't see how you're going to get it off the bank's records."

He looked down at the bankbook. He sucked his cheek between his grinders and gnawed at it. If he could see a way out, he didn't look it.

"I know an answer to this," I said.

His eyes leaped at me. "Then for heaven's sake, man, give!"

"But," I grinned wolfishly, "you're going to have to throw over Lew Melot. You're going to have to knife him, and knife him hard. Forgot the votes he controls and go after him."

He blustered, "What kind of nonsense is this?"

I shrugged. "Have it your own way. Clean up on Lew Melot, and I'll help."

TURNING, I started toward the door. I hadn't gone two steps when he called me back. His eyes were two nailheads in a putty face. "What's your proposition?" he said expressionlessly.

"This," I said. "Frankie's appeal has been made. It's in the judge's hands now. That 'new evidence' of the bullets dug out of the fence is worth exactly what the judge will let it be worth. Have the judge prepare and sign a statement for the press, turning down the appeal, and as a rider have him take a blast at Lew himself. You give me the signed statement and I'll turn it over to the papers. Then I'll give evidence before the grand jury how Lew tried to buy me for ten G's to influence the judge. You'll sink him! The paper'll crucify him, and the judge'll be a hero!"

He shook his jowls and said impatiently, "It's not as simple as all that."

"What do you mean it's not as simple as all that?"

"You can't break Lew Melot by accusing him of bribing you. You have no official status. It's no crime to offer you money."

"But you'll crucify him in the papers. You'll win votes from Boca Chica to Chatahoochee. Judge Whitney—Richard the Lion Hearted, the People's Champion. Let the judge make one honest effort to get rid of Lew Melot and I'll campaign up and down this state for him if I have to hire an iron lung to yell louder."

His eyes veiled, Barasculè stared down at the bankbook, tapping it thoughtfully with his forefinger. "You got something personal against Melot?" he asked slyly.

"No. I just hate his kind of guts, that's all. And maybe I kind of want my girl to

have the kind of uncle she thinks he is."

He shot a glance up at me from under his brows. "Oh, yes—Peggy," he said. He put his hands flat on the desk and heaved himself to his feet. "I'm going to talk to the judge for a minute." He walked ponderously out of the office.

I sat on the edge of his desk and lit a cigarette, surprised to see that my hands were shaking a little. If they went after Lew Melot, it was going to be war. I had a shake or two coming.

Barasculé was back in about five minutes, walking faster, looking worried.

"I can't get him," he said. "He went to Jacksonville to the Shelbys last night, but he should have been back long ago. We have an important meeting in about a half hour."

He snapped his fingers and turned back to the door. "Get me the Shelbys in Jax," he said sharply to the wintry blonde at the reception desk. He stood there at the open door for a moment, shaking his head, then turned and walked heavily to his desk.

Unaccountably, my heart was beginning to thump heavily in my chest. Barasculé sat there drumming his fingers on the blotter, and when his phone tinkled, his hand pounced on it like a fat, white cat on a mouse.

"Mrs. Shelby?" he leaned back in his chair. "Barasculé here. Can I talk to the judge for a moment? . . . Oh. A message for you? . . . Oh yes, he's right here." His eyes lifted at me over the phone. "Want to talk to him? . . . All right, I'll tell him. Well, thanks a lot, Mrs. Shelby."

Slowly he hung up, took a deep breath and looked at me. I found myself gripping the desk until my fingers hurt.

"Well?" I demanded. "What is it?"

"Judge Whitney and Peggy left Jacksonville last night at eleven. She said that Peggy left word that if you called to tell you to call her here in Tampa, even if it was the middle of the night."

That jarred me and I could only stand there and yammer while the hot and cold prickles followed one another up and down my spine. Then suddenly I found voice and yelled at him:

"What are you standing there for? Some-

thing's happened, don't you realize that? Peggy would have called me hours ago. I'm getting over there right away!"

He mumbled, "Of course, of course," and padded after me as I strode for the door. He snapped at the frigid blonde to call his car, and when we got down to the street, there it was, waiting, the Cadillac.

"You'd better drive, Chastain," he panted. "And forget the police, just step on it. They know my license plates."

CHAPTER VI

DOUBLE CROSS



THE POLICE knew it, all right. A couple of them made an angry start after us on their scooters, then turned off quickly as if embarrassed when they saw who it was. We made the judge's house so fast that the clock owed us minutes when we slewed to the curb.

The judge's sober black Buick was in the car porte beside the house, and Barasculé and I exchanged a glance as we trotted up the walk. I tried the front door, then thrust it open and walked in.

"Peg!" I called. "Judge!"

Barasculé poked his head into the living room, then waddled down the hall toward the judge's study while I took the stairs three at a time to the second floor.

The judge, still in his pajamas, was lying on the floor just outside his bedroom. He was breathing harshly and my fingers found a small lump behind his left ear in the mastoid area. I knelt down beside him and went over him quickly, but there were no bullet wounds or knife slashes.

I heard Barasculé panting at my elbow. I jumped up, thrust him aside, and ran down the hall to Peggy's room.

The covers and sheets, torn from the bed, lay crumpled on the floor. The closet door hung open and half her clothes were strewn around the entrance to it. The story was there. She had been snatched out of her bed.

I leaned against the door frame and

clenched my hands until the white and red stopped flashing in front of my eyes. Then I whirled and sprinted down the hall, holding my gun under my arm so it wouldn't flip from the holster.

Barasculé bleated after me, "Chastain, Chastain, come back here, you fool! You can't buck Lew Melot alone. This is a police matter. Come back here. This man needs a doctor!"

I swore at him and kept going. Police? He'd call the police the way I'd call Stalin. All I knew was that Lew Melot had taken Peggy—just as a little something to hold over the judge's head until he granted Frankie a new trial.

Crazy? Sure it was crazy. Whoever said Lew Melot was sane!

I dived into the Caddy at the curb. The keys were still in the ignition. I needed that Caddy to move fast. The cops actually waved to me as I went by with the gas pedal to the floor.

The car with Joe Cuba and TB Puy had followed me for the first three blocks, but after that there was nothing but a blur and the road rushing at me with maniacal speed. I was at Lew Melot's Columbia Drive apartment before that powerful motor had even had time to really warm up.

I looked up at the gaudy Spanish pile of stucco, then ducked out of the car, holding my gun in its holster, and bounded across the sidewalk. I punched every button on the board except Lew's and went in when the front door started clicking.

Lew's apartment was on the top floor. I stopped for a flickering moment before his door, snapping back my hand from the buzzer before I pressed it. The hell with that. Why should I warn him. I took out my gun, held it inches from the lock and pulled the trigger. I was in the room before the smoke had cleared.

Lew, his alligator jaws clamped, was rising from behind a small desk, on which stood a regular battery of phones, his hand digging for the top drawer.

I yelled, "Hold it. Lew!" and scuttled to one side as a figure moved on the sofa. It was a girl, an ash blonde. "Both of you!" I wagged my gun. "I want to see four

empty hands!"

Lew held out his hands, the fingers spread, but the girl just settled back into the sofa, folding her arms across her chest. She looked interested, but that's all. Lew lowered himself slowly into his chair behind the desk, still keeping his hands in sight.

"What's the beef, Chastain?" he asked evenly.

I jabbed my gun at him. "This time you're finished, Melot," I said. "This time it's the end. You've got nothing flat in which to tell me where you've stashed Peggy Whitney."

He jerked upright. "Where I've stashed who?" he said incredulously.

"Peggy Whitney—Judge Whitney's niece, pal, the judge you're trying to screw an appeal out of for Frankie."

MELOT'S eyes bulged and he shot up out of his chair. "What kind of damn fool do you take me for?" he roared. "Me put the snatch on—Where'd you get *that* from?"

"Time's running out, pal," I warned, tightening my hand around the gun.

The words he didn't care about, but the whitening of my knuckles around the gun he understood. The sweat stood out on his face, but his eyes glittered dangerously.

"Listen to me, Chastain," he said. "I don't know where this girl is. I don't know anything about this girl. And why should I pull a deal like that, anyway? Do you think I'm out of my mind?"

I said, "Yes."

His face was sheeted with sweat now. "For the love of heaven, man," he cried, "listen to me! I don't know—" He stopped and his mouth hung open. "There's more than that in your craw. What was that phone call about yesterday?"

"Ten thousand bucks you had stuck in my bank account," I snapped.

He yelled, "*What?*" and I thought he'd strangle.

"And," I said, "Joe Cuba and TB Puy trying to ship me off to South America. And Evans, that jurymen, being knocked off last night." I leaned just a little toward him, and the gun in my hand became very

still. "I want Peggy and that's the last word."

He just stood there making strangled sounds in his throat. He knew that in about five seconds that gun was going off. His teeth came together with a click.

"I don't know where the girl is," he said with finality, and clasped his hands behind his neck, waiting for the bullet.

No threats, no stalling, no nothing. It jarred me. Melot was the answer. He had to be. If he wasn't, then I was hung up, but good.

He was saying, quite calmly now, "I didn't stick any ten grand in your bank account, and I didn't have Cuba and Puy work on you, and I didn't have Evans, that juryman, bumped, and I didn't have that girl snatched. If you have personal reasons for shooting, go ahead and the hell with you. But you're not shooting me for being a damn fool!"

It came to me, sickeningly, that he was telling the truth.

I heard running footsteps on the stairs outside. I leaped to the right and quartered the gun on the whole room as Cuba and Puy burst through the broken door, their guns in their hands. They were half turned from me, facing Lew at the desk.

"Put them down, boys," I called. "I'm over here."

Puy's gun dropped immediately, but Cuba jerked twice—once as he started to whirl on me, and once as he stopped himself. Then his gun, too, thudded to the floor.

Lew Melot said, "Yours, too, Chastain."

With nausea, I realized that I had forgotten him for the instant in which Cuba and Puy were dropping their guns. I dropped mine and turned. He was standing behind the desk, a Luger held carelessly in his hand.

"Sit down, boys," he said to Cuba and Puy. "Chastain's got something on his mind. Get a load of it."

Cuba slanted a glance at Puy, then shrugged and sat down on the arm of the lounge chair, watching Lew with a mixture of boredom and insolence. Puy just stood and regarded me thoughtfully. Neither of them made a move to pick up his gun.

"Chastain," Lew went on, "has an idea I snatched some girl or other. What was the name, Chastain?"

That look of insolence on Joe Cuba's face told me something, and suddenly it was so plain that I started.

"They're crossing you, Melot," I said savagely. "They've been crossing you right down the line. That ten G's they offered me was not to persuade the judge, but to get him sore—to get him sore enough to judge Frankie's appeal on its merits and turn it down. Because they knew damn well what you'd do then. You'd try to blast Frankie out, and that'd be the end of you. They're getting ready to take over, Melot. You're half done, and you don't know it!"

Puy still regarded me thoughtfully, but Cuba yawned.

Lew said softly, "Just what was that ten G's all about, Joe?"

JOE LOOKED resigned, like a martyr whose good intentions are being questioned. "This comedian's marrying the judge's niece, Lew," he said patiently. "We thought he'd be the right guy to put it to the judge for Frankie. Then he got balky, and we tried to ship him to South America."

"You knew it was in the bag for Frankie," Lew said. "You knew I made a deal with Barascule."

"I knew that? Who told me? A little blue bird? You keep an awful lot of stuff to yourself, Lew, then expect guys to read your mind."

Lew didn't answer immediately, so it was probably the truth, or enough of the truth to shake him a little.

Cuba pressed on. "I tried to tell you we were working on this clown, Lew. I brought up his name a couple times and you shut me up. TB and me, we talked it over. It looked good, so we did it. I still think it was the right play."

"And snatching Peggy Whitney was the right play, too?" I flung at him. "He's crossing you, Lew."

"Ah, hell," said Cuba, disgusted, "when did I have time to snatch anybody? I've been on your tail all day, Chastain, and you

know it. You saw me a half dozen times, me and TB."

There was a lot of tension in the air, but it was all around me. All four of them—the girl on the sofa, TB, Cuba and Lew—were looking at me with coldly murderous eyes.

Puys said gravely, "I think Chastain's going to be quite a nuisance, Lew. I think we ought to do something about that. If he goes around giving people wrong ideas, he can get to be a headache."

Lew nodded, fully convinced.

I started desperately, "I'm telling you, Lew, they're—" I stopped as it hit me—the real core of all this, the very first move that had put Lew on the spot. "Who was Frankie shooting it out with the day that little kid was killed, Lew?"

Lew shook his head. "The guy was in a car," he muttered, "Frankie couldn't see him."

"You dug some bullets out of a fence. Was that the McCoy?"

"I got one of them right here," said Lew grimly, tapping the desk. "And heaven help the guy whose gun it matches, if I ever match it."

"Then try those two guns," I flashed at him. "Cuba's and Puys'. The cops'll be glad to do a ballistics job for you."

The girl jerked upright on the sofa. Her hand shot out and she appeared to pluck a small gun from the air. It spat twice.

"Take him, Joe!" she screamed.

The gun spat again and I felt a slap against my left shoulder. I dropped as Cuba and Puys dived for their guns. Lew was leaning weakly against the wall behind his desk, pulling up his gun as if it weighed a ton. There were two holes in his chest.

Cuba snatched his gun and came up in a half crouch, just in time to catch Lew's first bullet in the face. It flung him up and backward, as if a giant spring had exploded under him.

Puys was pulling down on me. I was lying on my gun. I rolled frantically, pumping bullets in his general direction. He straightened up, looking mildly surprised, as if he had just discovered the answer to a puzzle that had been bothering him. Then

he seemed to become disjointed and fell in an angular heap.

Lew was still leaning against the wall, breathing heavily, then suddenly he roared and shoved himself upright. His gun flamed three times, and three times the girl on the sofa was slammed back. Lew coughed, swayed, and dropped into the chair behind the desk. The trigger guard of his gun caught on his finger and dangled there.

I got stiffly to my feet. I walked over to the desk, picked up one of the phones and called police headquarters.

"I'm calling from Lew Melot's apartment," I said. "There's been a shooting. You'd better send the meat wagon and an ambulance."

I hung up. Almost immediately, the phone shrilled. I let it ring. I looked down into Lew's dark, staring eyes.

"It looks like everybody's been a sucker," I said, and walked out, holding my left shoulder. The wound was beginning to hurt.

I DROVE very slowly back to the judge's house. I saw the curtain drop back into place over the front window as I crawled out of the car and walked up the steps to the front porch. The judge, now a waxen replica of Richard the Lion Hearted, sat on the sofa, shaking all over.

Barasculé came toward me, crying, "Thank God you're safe, Chastain! What got into you, man? You might have been—"

"Where's Peggy?" I interrupted woodenly.

He licked his lips and shot a quick glance at the judge. He made an apologetic gesture with his fat, white hands.

"The judge didn't pick her up at the Shelby's" he said. "We jumped to conclusions."

"He didn't pick her up? But you called Mrs. Shelby in Jax, remember, Barasculé? You lying rat!" I shouted. "There wasn't any call to Mrs. Shelby. You suckered me. You knew damn well what I'd do if I thought Lew Melot had snatched Peggy. You knew I'd go gunning for him!"

"You—you're making a mistake, Chastain," he stammered. "You—"

"Listen, you slimy political louse, you

sent me out to kill Lew Melot—or get killed! You didn't care which. You wanted Melot out of the way. If I gunned him down, he was out of the way. And if he got me, he was out of the way, too, on a murder rap, because the public wouldn't let another Melot killing get further than the electric chair."

I was shouting too much, I was too noisy, and he knew I wasn't going to do any more than that. He recovered himself.

"Melot's dead, then," he said with satisfaction. "Good! You won't be the poorer for this, Chastain, I promise you."

Behind us a voice, thickened with blood, rage and hatred, said, "Another promise, Barascule? You're full of promises, full of deals . . ."

The sound of the gun was flat and final. Barascule fell heavily into the cocktail table. The bottle of Scotch emptied itself on the rug beside his face. He didn't move.

I turned slowly. Lew Melot was leaning

weakly against the living room archway, his fingers knotted in his bloody shirtfront. He gave me a grin, and there was blood on his teeth. "Suckers," he whispered, "suckers, everybody . . ."

He turned and lurched drunkenly toward the front door. The sound of police sirens sang closer and closer.

I looked down at the judge, shivering wordlessly on the sofa. With Barascule, his campaign manager, dead under the gun of Lew Melot, and with the dying statement Lew would make, the judge wasn't going to be elected to anything, so something had come out of this mess, anyway. The voters were going to get a break for once.

I said, "So long, Governor," and walked toward the back door.

I didn't want any talk. I didn't want any questions. I didn't want any police. I just wanted Peggy. Jacksonville, praise be, wasn't at the other end of the world.

RECENT RULINGS

Culled from the Press



Dudley, England: Policemen may wear shoes instead of boots—providing they have no holes in their socks.—*Police Department*

Springfield, Ill.: Any rooster crowing before sunrise is subject to a \$200 fine.—*City Ordinance*

Cresskill, N. J.: To give birds an even break, cats have got to wear bells.—*City Ordinance*

Chicago: A woman getting divorced can keep the false teeth her husband bought for her.—*Circuit Court*

Chicago: There is no law against beating the bookies—even if you cheat a little.—*Police Department*

Waycross, Ga.: Cows can no longer mean-der down the city streets.—*City Commission*

Belfast, Ireland: The girls at the bakery plant can hum as they work but they can't sing.—*President's Office*

Rutherford, N. J.: If a motorist drives up to a filling station and, without buying any gas, insists on the filling station operator wiping his windshield, checking his tire and testing his battery, the filling station operator is justified in chasing the motorist down the street.—*City Court*

Fort Wayne, Ind.: Adults have to stop fishing in Delta Lake. Only children can.—*City Commission*

Little Rock: It's the animal's fault if it gets hit by a train in Arkansas.—*Arkansas Supreme Court*

Talladega, Ala.: Only policemen are permitted to be seen in the company of "women of ill fame."—*City Ordinance*

Uncle George came walking
down the stairs with his
gun



Star Sapphire

By

J. LANE LINKLATER

THERE is something very tangible about a gun. It is made of steel. It is hard, it is solid, it is menacing. It is not the stuff that dreams are made of. The man in the back seat of the car was Beth's Uncle George, and her guardian, but he had the gun, and even Beth must have known the old rascal meant business.

I was at the wheel, and she was beside

me. By the light of the dashboard her piquant delicately-angular face looked pale. And her eyes seemed wistful. But then, she was always wistful. Wistful and wispy and elusive and very lovely.

"Drive out to Esterby Point, Dick," Uncle George said to me, in his hoarse rumbling voice.

I started the car, wondering if Beth

It Was a Good Luck Charm—but Not for a Killer!

had caught the significance of the direction. Esterby Point had become notorious for crimes of violence. It was a lonely spot, an ideal lovers' rendezvous, but recently a number of the lovers had been molested in their parked cars by men with guns.

If both Beth and I were found shot to death in the car up there, it would simply be assumed that we had fallen victim to some trigger-happy thug.

But Beth didn't appear to have heard. She merely sat staring straight ahead, grave but unworried.

It was impossible to tell what she was thinking about. For that matter, she had been driving me mad for three years now, trying to figure her out. I was wild about her, and she was sweet to me, always very sweet, but also very indefinite, especially about whether she was ever going to marry me.

"You're nice, Dick, dear," she would say. "So very nice. But—well, I just don't know yet. I need time to think."

"But don't you love me?"

Then she would look more wistful than ever and say: "Oh, I don't know, dear. I just don't know. Not yet."

That was the way she was; elusive and naive, and yet somehow she could be very shrewd, too, sometimes.

And once in a great while she would seem to be right on the verge of falling into my arms. Literally falling into my arms. The last time had been just a few minutes before. As we got into the car, she had sighed and fallen towards me, against me.

BUT then she had backed away again, which was just as well under the circumstances, since Uncle George, who had the gun, didn't like it and told us to break it up.

We had been driving some time when Uncle George said: "Sorry about this, Dick. You should have gone straight home last night."

The darned old hypocrite! I knew he didn't feel bad about me. Maybe he'd be just a little sorry about Beth—but his

feeling for her was nothing compared with his concern for his own safety.

Uncle George lived on a lavish scale. Always had. He'd made a lot of money in the investment business, but apparently some of his big deals lately had gone sour, which was, no doubt, the reason he had yielded to the temptation to steal Beth's star sapphire.

That sapphire was worth seventy thousand dollars. It was almost all Beth had left of an inheritance from her parents, who had been killed in an accident when she was quite young. She had hung on to it tenaciously, partly because of its money value, but more because of that old oriental superstition about star sapphires.

I guess everybody knows about that. A star sapphire, according to the ancient belief, protects its possessor from all harm. If you just have a star sapphire somewhere around, you're all right; you just don't need to worry about anything, because the thing is a sure charm against anything evil.

Beth actually seemed to believe that. It was one of the things that annoyed me. You can expect a crazy notion like that among the Burmese or the Siamese, but Beth was supposed to be a normal American girl.

The sapphire had been kept in a safe at the house—Uncle George's house, where Beth lived.

It wasn't there now, though. Just about twenty-four hours ago the thing had been stolen—and a man murdered in the process.

Along about midnight the housekeeper, in the back part of the house, had heard a shot. She had gone to investigate. She had found the safe open, and the butler lying in front of it with a bullet in his head.

Evidently the poor fellow had discovered someone just about to make off with the sapphire, and had been killed on the spot.

The housekeeper had called the police. She hadn't called Uncle George because he was supposed to have left earlier in the evening for the McMinville Hills, where he had a mountain cabin.

A couple of hours later, Uncle George was, indeed, in his cabin—it doesn't take long to drive sixty miles. It was there that the police had got in touch with him through the local authorities.

Of course Uncle George had hurried back to the house. He was terribly upset about the theft of Beth's star sapphire. He was really sad about the murder of his butler. He told everybody he would practically devote his life to tracking down the murderer.

There was only one trouble with that: I happened to know he hadn't left his house until after the murder!

The way it happened, Beth was away from home, visiting an old friend in the suburbs. I had been working late at the office. Along toward midnight I drove home. By going a few blocks out of the way—which is nothing to a fellow in love—the route took me past Uncle George's house.

Now, I knew Beth wasn't there, but I stopped and parked across the street from the entrance to the driveway, and snapped off my lights. I sat there and simply looked up at the dark window of Beth's room. This may sound ridiculous, but anyone who has been in love will understand.

I noticed there was a car parked about fifty feet further down the road. Nobody in it, apparently.

I WAS just about to start up again and drive home, when I heard a faint sound over in the house. The sound was muffled, but it could have been a shot. That seemed improbable, and a minute later I was again set to start, when a man came walking rapidly out of the driveway.

It was Uncle George.

He took a quick look at my car, but it was quite dark and he couldn't see me. He hesitated, and then hurried on to the car ahead, and rapidly drove away.

That struck me as queer, and if Beth had been home I would have gone up to the house to investigate. But, after all, Uncle George had a right to leave his own house in the middle of the night—he

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was a night owl anyway—and I wasn't at all sure that what I had heard was a shot.

So I drove home.

I didn't know about the theft of the sapphire and the murder until the next day.

Of course I should have informed the police at once, but instead I kept still. I wanted to talk to Beth before I did anything. I wanted to know the angles. After all, it was Beth's Uncle George.

I didn't get a chance until late the next evening—just a short time before we began this ride we were now taking with Uncle George and his gun.

I got Beth on the phone and told her what I knew.

"Oh, dear me!" said Beth. "I shall have to think about this."

"Is Uncle George home now?" I asked.

"Yes. He's up in his rooms."

"Then I'm coming right over."

"Oh, you'd better not."

"But I am. It looks like Uncle George is a murderer, and he's there in the house with you!"

"Well, I don't know." Beth's voice sounded vague, dreamy, as it often did. "I need a little time to think this over."

Time to think it over! Nuts to that! I slammed down the receiver, ran out and drove over there. Beth let me into the house, and we were talking in the hall when Uncle George walked down the stairs.

Uncle George had his gun.

It seemed he had listened in on our

telephone conversation from the extension in his rooms.

He said, very softly: "We shall now take a little ride, just the three of us."

So here we were. Uncle George hadn't said any more, and now we had reached the bottom of the hill road leading up to Esterby Point. I swerved the car into the road and we started climbing.

Suddenly, Uncle George was chuckling. He said: "You know, according to the old superstition, which millions of people believe, my position is invulnerable. I not only have this gun, but I have the sapphire. As the present possessor of the sapphire, no harm can come to me."

"You don't believe that stuff," I snapped.

"Perhaps yes, perhaps no. But Beth does, bless her heart."

I glanced at Beth. She was paler than ever, and her under lip trembled, but there was a half-smile on her face.

"Of course," she said. "But uncle, dear, you're wrong about one thing."

"What am I wrong about?"

"You do not have the star sapphire!"

THERE was silence for a moment. Then Uncle George's sardonic chuckle came drifting from the back seat. He didn't believe her for a minute. Neither did I.

"So I don't have the sapphire!" he said tolerantly.

Beth said: "No, uncle, dear. You see, I haven't trusted you for a long time. And I knew you had been losing money heavily in speculations. So I took the sapphire, and had an imitation made. I put the imitation in the safe. You have only the imitation, and it has no potency at all as protection against harm."

Uncle George was amused. "You expect me to believe that?"

"You should, uncle dear, because it's the truth. The imitation you have is no good at all." She sighed. "However, I'll see that you get the genuine star sapphire, on one condition."

This time Uncle George laughed outright. Beth was obviously trying to work a scheme, anything to keep the two of us from getting killed. I gave her credit for a



good try, but it was much too thin to do any good.

Uncle George, talking to me, said: "Stop against the side of the hill around the next turn, Dick. There's a good parking place there, and I don't want to walk too far."

My mind was churning furiously, but I couldn't think of any way out. I didn't have the ghost of an idea what to do, so I just did as he told me. I wondered who he planned to shoot first—me or Beth.

In a few seconds we were parked against the hillside. It was quiet and still, and lonely. The rest of the world seemed a long way away.

Uncle George said briskly: "Sorry said.

about this, but what else can I do? I think," he added thoughtfully, "you'd better go first, Dick."

Well, if it had to be, that was the way I wanted it. I couldn't bear the thought of sitting idly by while Beth was being murdered.

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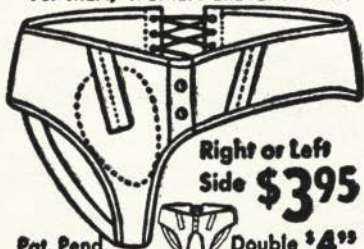
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Beth said quietly: "Uncle, dear, you're making a terrible mistake. I know where the genuine star sapphire is, and I'll see that you get it, on condition that you throw that awful gun away right now!"

Uncle George chuckled again. He still didn't believe her, any more than I did. He was breathing hard now. I felt that this was it—now was the time! I turned my head quickly, and there was the gun pointed straight at my head.

IT WAS dark in the back of the car, and about all I could see of Uncle George were his teeth, as he smiled, and a dull glitter where his eyes were. But I couldn't make any mistake about the gun, which was a revolver. I could see his finger squeezing the trigger.

It looked hopeless, but I hurled myself over the seat in his direction. Before I could get to him, he had fired.

But there was no blast, no flame. All that gun did was to make a sharp little click.

Three parts of a second later I was all over him, pounding him, smashing at him, pinning down his squirming body. I finally grabbed his gun and knocked him out with it.

I took a look at his gun after that. Nothing the matter with it. Evidently it was the gun he had used to kill his butler. At that time it had been fully loaded, but the murder had taken only one shot. In the meantime, the cylinder had been twirled so that the hammer was back in front of the one empty chamber.

"Poor Uncle George!" murmured Beth, as if she had known just what was going to happen. "He was such a fool!"

I glared at her. "He had the sapphire, didn't he? And a fat lot of protection it gave him!"

"But all he had was the imitation," she said.

"Are you telling me," I said, "you were on the level about that imitation gag?"

"Why, of course, Dick dear!"

"Then where is the original?"

She giggled. "In your pocket, silly. I slipped it in there just before we got in

the car. Remember?"

I felt in my coat pocket, and there it was! Seventy thousand dollars worth of jewelry in one hunk!

And I remembered the way she had fallen against me. At the time I had thought she was, at long last, falling into my arms, but it had been merely a trick to get the sapphire into my pocket.

For a just a moment I felt like slapping her. Then the real meaning of her action suddenly exploded in my mind. That star sapphire meant protection from all harm and, at the moment of danger, the little idiot had turned it over to me!

I put an arm around her. "So you do love me, don't you?"

"Well, I don't know, Dick, dear. I need time—"

"Don't give me that," I said roughly.

I had both arms around her and the lover's kiss I gave her stopped all denial—permanently. When I released her she sighed deeply and looked up at me. And from what I saw in those dreamy blue eyes I knew she would never believe it had been pure accident that the hammer of Uncle George's gun had hit against the one empty chamber. For the rest of her life she would firmly believe it had all been due to her wonderful star sapphire.

That's ridiculous, of course, but I have a hunch that, no matter how short of cash we may get, that star sapphire will never be offered for sale.

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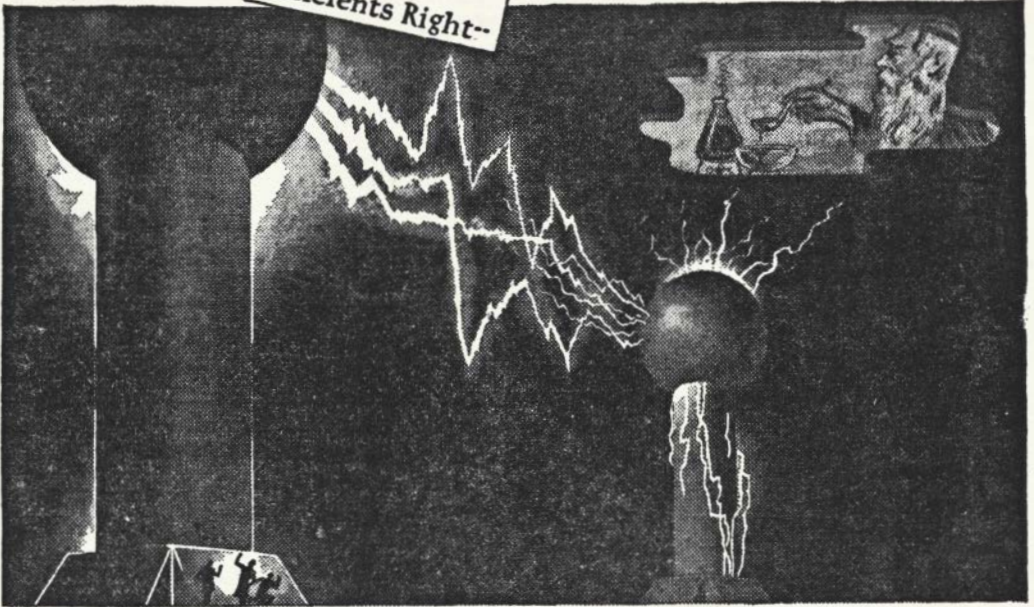
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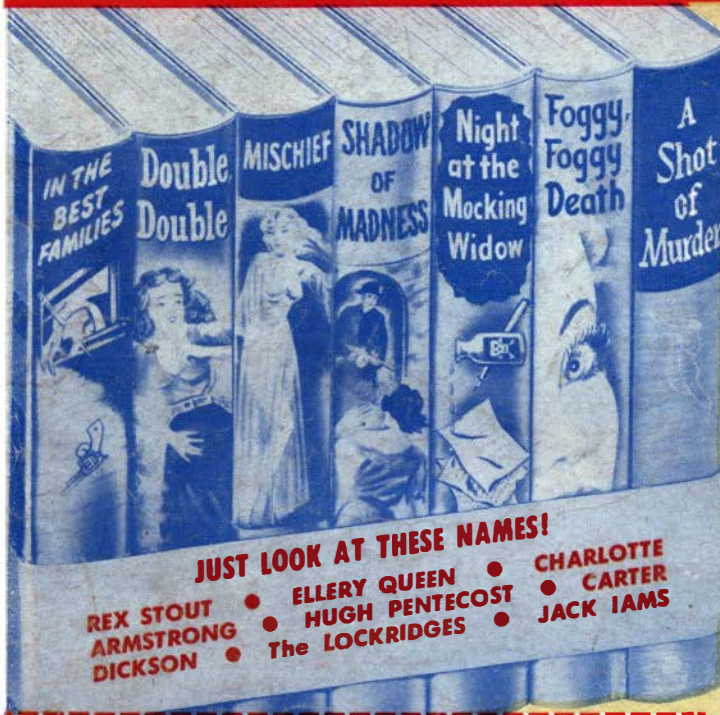
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