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DEATH BEFORE DEFENSE
An Exciting Novelet By W. T. BALLARD

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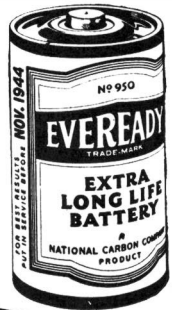


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THRILLING DETECTIVE

Vol. LII, No. 3

EVERY STORY BRAND NEW

September, 1944



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**SPECTERS WALK
BESIDE ME**

By **JIM O'BRIEN**

Andy Reid, retired industrialist, grapples with his own soul to find the answer to the maddening question: "Am I guilty of murder?" . . . 11

A Mystery Novelet

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but faces a sleuth who has magic in his bag of tricks!*

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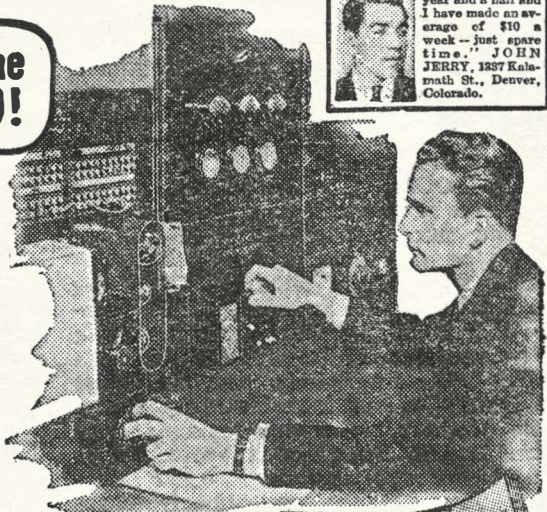
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HEADQUARTERS

Where Readers, Writers and the Editor Meet



OCTOBER is not the conventional month for brides—which is June—but, you know, nobody has ever picked a month for bridegrooms. So let's pick a month for **THE PHANTOM BRIDEGROOM**. October with its russet and garnet autumnal foliage and that chilling and pleasantly thrilling Hallowe'en couldn't be more appropriate.

THE PHANTOM BRIDEGROOM, by that master of the macabre, G. T. Fleming-Roberts, will be the featured novel in our October issue of **THRILLING DETECTIVE**. This novel deals with the trials and tribulations of a maiden lady named Grace Hathorn, to whom romance came rather late in life. And it proved to be somewhat of a chimera, because her bridegroom, Harry Evans, mysteriously disappeared on the wedding night while at the wedding celebration party at the Club De-Lisso down in the Village.

The trouble was that nobody save the bereaved bride recollected seeing the man at all. He simply—disappeared. No trace. No body, no blood—not even a fingerprint.

It Was No Dream!

The shock put Grace Hathorn into the hospital, where she was pitied as a spinster with a subconscious yearning who had dreamed the whole thing. But Grace Hathorn had not dreamed away her entire fortune—which had disappeared with the phantom bridegroom. So Sunny Rogers, a nurse at the hospital, gets interested in the patient and calls in her boy friend, George Hazard, who is an actor and an amateur criminologist on the side.

From here on things get tangled up in a perplexing snarl of mystery and intrigue

which leads, inevitably, to murder. The vanishing man, devout Mohammedans, night-clubs, wily gangsters and treasure hunters mingle in a murder melange which gives George Hazard the workout of his career before he pins down an avaricious schemer and a deadly killer.

Put **THE PHANTOM BRIDEGROOM** down in your date book as the most interesting wraith to be met in October!

Willie Brann Is Back!

But don't stop with this. Better renew your acquaintance with an old friend. Detective Willie Brann, that peanut-chewing, straight-shooting and fast-acting investigator returns next issue in an exciting novelet called **MURDER COOPERATION**. You know, there's nothing like lending a helping hand when a corpse needs a candle, and Willie Brann is always glad to oblige. He uses the candle to give the murderer a hot-foot as usual.

In **MURDER COOPERATION**, by Benton Braden, our goober-eating gumshoe accepts a special commission from the governor of the state to investigate intolerable racketeer conditions in the town of Crown City. Willie gets off to a bad start in the very suburbs of town when he is stopped by a traffic cop for a minor violation and then is grabbed for carrying a gun.

From this point on, Detective Brann moves like a cyclone through Crown City, sweeping up chaff and dust alike in his wake and ranging from horseplay to homicide as he digs up the local dirt and sweeps the town clean.

This rapid-pace novelet is exactly the type of adventure-detective story that

(Continued on page 8)

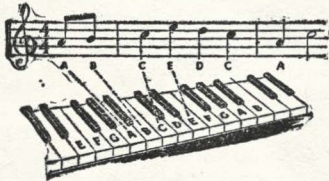


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HEADQUARTERS

(Continued from page 6)

everybody likes. It will carry you at a breathless rate from one acute climax to another until the final riddle is raveled and the last racketeer is routed.

Of course, there will be a number of short detective stories to complete the October docket and make you armchair detectives realize that you have spent a strenuous but profitable day in court. Don't overlook these short cases. You will find yourselves quite interested in them.

THRILLING DETECTIVE is admittedly out to try only the very best detective cases for you readers. And we want you to tell us when the cases go humdrum—and we'll relegate them to the night police court.

Letters from Readers

This month we have received some very nice letters—as well as a couple of taps from a blackjack or two. Here is a comment from the Florida playground:

The July issue of THRILLING DETECTIVE is excellent. A good novel, a good pair of novelets, and several swell short stories. Say, that Leigh Brackett fellow wrote a swell human interest yarn in NO STAR IS LOST, didn't he? What better value a man can get for a dime—nowadays or any time—I do know. Just maintain your present quality, I'll never kick.—John C. Lyman, Miami, Fla.

Now you are cooking with helium, Mr. Lyman, and you can bet your bottom dime that we are going to do just that—keep
(Concluded on page 81)

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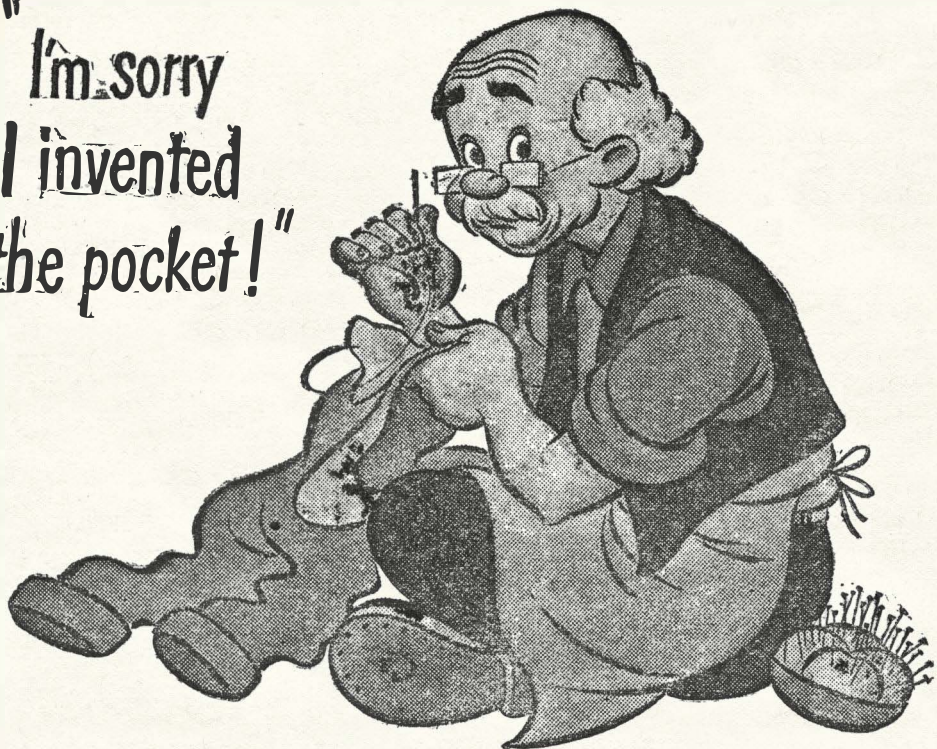
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I'm sorry
I invented
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Pockets are good places to keep hands warm.

Pockets are good places to hold keys . . . and loose change for carfare and newspapers.

But pockets are no place for *any* kind of money except actual expense money these days.

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Bonds buy security for your old age.
Bonds buy education for your kids.
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Bonds buy peace of mind—knowing that your money is in the fight.

Reach into the pocket I invented. Take out all that extra cash. Invest it in interest-bearing War Bonds.

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You'll be happy too.

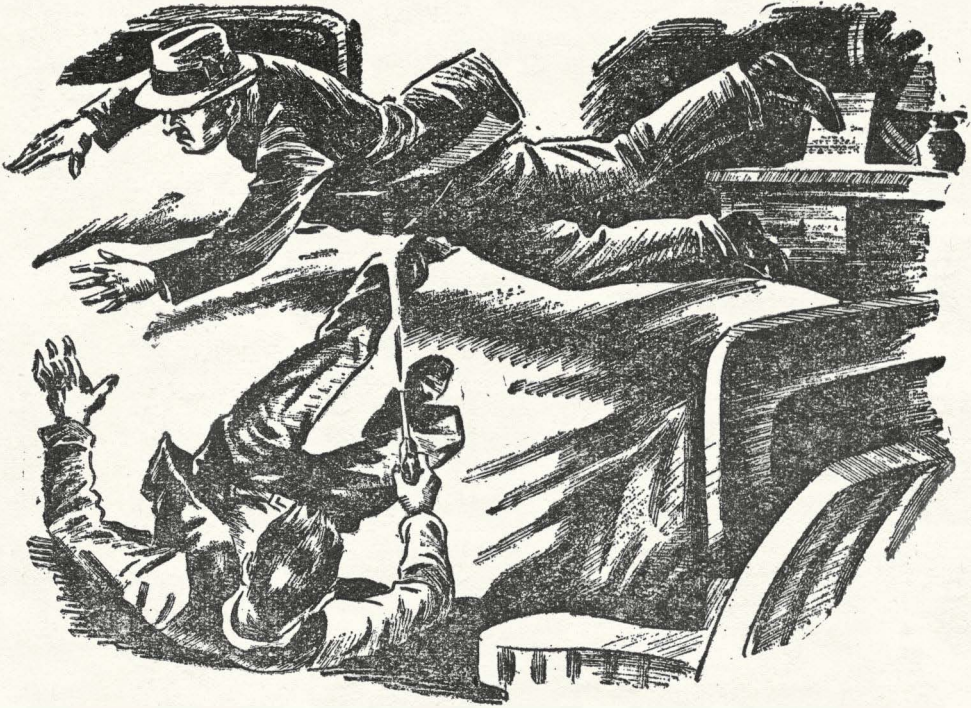
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I was on my back on the floor when he dived over the bed (CHAPTER X)

SPECTERS WALK BESIDE ME

By JIM O'BRIEN

Baffling mystery stalks Mirror Lake Lodge as Andy Reid, retired industrialist, grapples with his own soul to find the answer to the maddening question: "Am I guilty of murder?"

CHAPTER I

A WOMAN SCREAMS

ONE of the more interesting points of the affair, to me, is that I awoke the moment Bonnie sat up beside me. She hadn't touched me, nor had she spoken.

I had often heard of people, especially hunted criminals, who instinctively developed animal abilities, such as awakening instantly without betraying the fact by so much as opening their eyes. I, of course,

was not a hunted criminal. Nor in any sense unusual, unless the nervousness which had ridden me since childhood could be so considered and which, during the past few months, had become more intense, more frightening.

I was merely Andrew K. Reid, a prematurely retired Detroit industrialist suffering a mid-winter vacation at Mirror Lake Lodge in the wilderness of Upper Michigan's timbered Porcupine Mountains. More exactly, I was being subjected, entirely against my will, to three weeks of

A GRIPPING COMPLETE CRIME NOVEL

"invigorating outdoor activities" by my wife, Bonnie, and an amazingly expensive psychiatrist who had accompanied us.

And, certainly, during my thirty-two years there had been no manifestation of any animal abilities slumbering within me.

Nevertheless, there I was—entirely awake and with every sense alert. I was suddenly and fully aware of the wind that whipped sleet against the windows, of Bonnie's tenseness, of her head and shoulders faintly silhouetted against the frost-crusted window.

"Something wrong?" I asked.

Bonnie gasped, one hand darting to her throat.

"You frightened me," she said. "I didn't know you were awake." Then she laughed a bit uncertainly. "I thought I heard some-one scream."

"Probably just the wind," I said. "Better lie down before we both catch cold."

As she nestled her head against my shoulder, the wind attacked with new fury. It moaned through the towering pines about the lodge, tore at the eaves and the chinking between the log walls.

"It wasn't the wind, Andy," Bonnie said suddenly. "I'm sure of that."

"Then blame it on that second custard you had at dinner," I told her. "Go to sleep, my sweet."

"Second custard? What in the world—"

A SOARING, half-muffled scream cut her short. She lifted herself on one elbow, clutching my arm.

"There!" she exclaimed. "I told you!"

"Please don't be childish," I cut in. "That was a timber wolf, or something."

"Wolves don't scream. They howl. That was a woman, Andy."

"For Pete's sake, Bonnie—" I glanced at the luminous dial of the clock. It was just 2:10. "I'm supposed to be the one with the frazzled nerves. Will it make you feel any better if I step into the corridor and see—"

"I wish you would, dear," she said almost breathlessly, and I realized with something of a start that she was trembling. "You're probably right. An animal, I suppose. But— Oh, I have the darnedest feeling. I just can't explain it.

"Never mind," I told her. I threw back the covering and reached for my robe and slippers. "I'll look around."

"Leave the door open, Andy," she said.

Suddenly, I felt oddly pleased—the male protecting his own. Of course, I simply couldn't picture Bonnie in the rôle of Protected Womanhood—Bonnie of the aggressive manner, who jumped her own horses and bagged her yearly deer and faced the most formidable ski jumps without a qualm. Perhaps it was the novelty of the situation—Bonnie turning to me rather than plung-

ing ahead on her own. Anyway, it salved my somewhat abused feeling of masculine superiority.

I stepped into the dimly-lighted corridor and the momentary surge of elation subsided. I felt just a bit silly, and I think I had started to turn back when the door at the far end of the corridor opened and Emory Weir appeared.

He came toward me, fat fingers knotting the cord of his blue silk robe. He was enormous, four inches taller than my five-eleven, and weighing at least a hundred pounds more than my one-sixty. Yet there was a catlike grace to his movements.

"Hello, Reid," he said. "My wife thought she heard someone scream—a woman."

"Mrs. Reid and I heard it, too," I told him.

We stood there staring at each other. Neither of us, I'm sure, had the slightest idea of what our next step ought to be. Emory Weir, a Chicago realtor, obviously was not accustomed to being routed from his bed at 2:10 A.M. to investigate mysterious feminine screams.

He brushed a huge pink hand back over his round, bald head.

"Suppose we ought to make a few inquiries?" he asked. "Your wife and my wife are okay, so that leaves Mrs. Phelps and Miss What's-Her-Name—you know, the redhead who arrived this morning."

I hadn't learned of the arrival of the red-headed Miss What's-Her-Name, but I had met Mrs. Phelps—a quiet, charming little person whose loud-mouthed husband, Lyman Phelps, hadn't drawn a completely sober breath in years.

"Let's try Mrs. Phelps first," I said, starting along the corridor.

EMORY WEIR padded beside me with almost feline ease, despite his great bulk. I felt awkward beside him, and an ember of resentment within me suddenly became a flickering flame of dislike for the big, pleasant-faced Chicagoan. Childish? Of course—but from just such unreasonable feelings of inferiority develop blinding, mind-warping hatreds.

Rounding the first corner, I almost collided with Dr. Michael Patterson, the psychiatrist Bonnie had insisted upon dragging with us. It seemed to me that he had taken just one quick step forward as we met.

"Oh, Mr. Reid," he said, apparently surprised. "And Mr. Weir. Nothing wrong, I hope?"

Something about his voice set my teeth on edge—a faintly reproving, doctor-knows-best tone. He was of average height, and compactly built, with an expertly-trimmed black mustache and probing gray eyes. He was about forty-two, with little wings of



I throw my arms about Kirby's knees and jerked hard (CHAPTER IV)

white at the temples of his sleek raven hair, but there was a youthful hardness about his jaw that hinted at hours of gymnasium toil with the gloves and bar-bells. I judged he would be quite a man in a scramble.

"We heard what we thought was a woman screaming a few minutes ago," Emory Weir said.

"So did I," Dr. Patterson said. "Came over to find out if Mrs. Reid and—"

"They're all right," I cut in. "What about Mrs. Phelps?"

Dr. Patterson swung around and strode along the short cross-corridor a few steps ahead of Weir and me. Mirror Lake Lodge was really two long log structures connected by a narrow center building—a perfect letter "H". There were twenty rooms on the upper floor—ten in each of the two wings, the Lake Wing and the Mountain Wing. The room Bonnie and I occupied was in the Mountain Wing, facing the Porcupines.

In the Lake Wing corridor Patterson paused at the second door. He listened, then knocked softly. He was lifting his hand to rap again when the door opened almost an inch.

"What do you want?" Lyman Phelps asked.

"Sorry to disturb you," Patterson said, "but we heard a woman scream, and wondered if Mrs. Phelps is all right. Just checking up, you know."

Lyman Phelps threw the door open so violently that it banged against the wall. He towered in the doorway, a tall, gaunt-faced man with thinning blond hair and a long, bony nose that seemed to hook in at the nostrils like a parrot's beak. He wore brown trousers, a tan shirt, and an unbuttoned vest. His shirt collar was unfastened, and a brown and white striped tie hung loosely about his lean neck, still knotted.

I realized then that Dr. Patterson, too, was fully dressed.

"Just checking up, eh?" Phelps snarled, fists on his hips. "You mean sticking your nose into other people's business, don't you?"

"Hold on—" Emory Weir said.

"Don't give me any of your fat lip," Phelps told him. He shot a quick glance at me, then at Patterson. "Figure I've been beating my wife, eh? I ought to punch you square in the mouth."

"You'll punch no one in the mouth," Patterson told him matter-of-factly. "I didn't mean to imply that you were beating—"

"The heck you didn't," Phelps said, and called: "Mildred! Come here!"

"Please, Lyman!" Mrs. Phelps stepped into view, clutching a negligee about her slight figure. She was a faded, pathetic, timid little woman with graying brown hair and eyes that were much too large for her face. "I'm sure Dr. Patterson didn't

mean—" She tried to smile at us. "Lyman and I were just discussing those screams when you knocked."

PHELPS faced Patterson again.

"Satisfied, Sherlock?"

"Yes, thank you," Patterson said.

Emory Weir was scowling at Phelps.

"Come along, Weir," I said, and we followed Dr. Patterson along the corridor.

Patterson stopped at another door and rapped softly.

"One moment," a woman called from within the room.

"Must be all right," Weir said.

Then the door opened.

"Sorry to trouble you at this hour, Miss Royce—" Patterson said.

"I should think so," she drawled, one hand clutching an orange kimono patterned with little black dragons. Then her slightly almond-shaped green eyes shifted to Weir and me and she smiled. "Why, Mr. Reid! What's the trouble?"

You could have floored me with a handkerchief. She knew my name! I managed a smile in an attempt to cover my confusion, but probably succeeded only in appearing stupid. I wanted to say something, but when Patterson glanced at me with his "Well-well!" expression, a dull, unreasoning anger locked my jaws.

Patterson was explaining our call, but his words made no impression upon my mind. My full attention was centered upon Miss Royce. It was impossible that I had ever met the woman. She was about twenty-seven, tall and shapely—the Sunday supplement type. No, I wouldn't have forgotten that swept-back mass of copper-red hair, the coolly confident eyes, the full, sensuous lips.

As she was slowly closing the door her gaze met mine, and she smiled.

"Don't forget this afternoon," she said, and the door clicked shut.

Patterson and Weir exchanged glances and I felt the surge of blood to my face. Of course, I take things in my stride. I had to smear myself with the tar brush by blurt-ing:

"But I don't even *know* the woman!"

"Seems to know you, though," Emory Weir said, and winked at Patterson. "Might be one of Mrs. Reid's friends."

"See here—" I began.

"That accounts for everyone except Ames, I believe," Patterson said, and strode toward the door at the end of the corridor.

I stalked after him with some vague idea of forcing him to hear what I had to say, but when I caught up with him he was knocking on the door and I was at a loss for words. After all, how could I explain something about which I knew absolutely nothing?

CHAPTER II

LOST DAY



STUART AMES was the proprietor of Mirror Lake Lodge. He opened his door and blinked myopic blue eyes, moving his semi-bald head as though trying to focus his bewildered gaze. He was about forty, short and barrel-shaped, with surprisingly thick arms and legs, and hands that were even larger than Emory Weir's. The two top buttons of his maroon silk pajamas were unfastened, exposing a mat of reddish-brown hair.

"Something wrong?" he asked anxiously. Patterson told him about the screams. Ames hadn't heard them.

"But nothing ever does disturb me," he explained apologetically.

"I'm going back to bed," Emory Weir said. "Everyone's okay, so there's no sense in standing out here the rest of the night."

Stuart Ames nodded, stifling a yawn. "Probably someone had a bad dream and is ashamed to admit it. I—"

A shriek of pure terror rocked along the corridor, then another, and another. Bonnie! I'll never know why I was so sure. I'd never heard her scream before.

I recall only that huge Emory Weir was outrunning me along the cross-corridor toward the Mountain Wing. Patterson and Stuart Ames were somewhere behind us. Raw fright enabled me to gain on Weir, but he reached the corner two steps ahead of me and stopped so abruptly that I crashed into him and floundered against the wall.

"Don't come no closer, you guys!" a flat voice said.

The man who spoke was backed against the closed door at the end of the corridor—a short, solidly-built fellow with a heavy automatic in his left hand. A pushed-back gray fedora revealed blue-black hair parted in the center. He was about twenty-nine, and every bit the "sharpie" in his high-waisted gray trousers, deep blue shirt, and maroon suspenders. He wore no coat.

"It's Mr. Kirby!" Stuart Ames cried from behind me. Then he called, "Don't point that gun at us."

"I'll do more than point it if you guys start something," Kirby said. He waved the automatic toward the open door of Bonnie's room. "All I done was walk past the dame's door and she blew a fuse."

I pushed by and ran into the bedroom. Bonnie was sitting up in bed, a corner of a quilt between her teeth.

"What happened, darling?" I asked, putting an arm about her shoulders.

"I—I was lying here, wondering about those screams and where you were, Andy,"

she explained, "when I saw him sneak past our door. I saw a gun in his hand and—I wanted to warn you, and—"

Weir and Patterson and Ames were grouped just outside the doorway.

"It was a fellow named Kirby," I told Bonnie. "Ames knows him, so it must be all right. You lie down and get a grip on yourself while I get a little more information."

I went into the hall and faced Kirby. He had pocketed the gun and was smoking a cigarette.

"Don't get tough, Mister," he said, as I moved toward him.

I stopped a few feet away from him and my left eyelid began to twitch—a positive sign that I was about to go to pieces.

"What do you mean by slinking around at this hour with a gun in your hand?" I demanded.

"Listen, you!" He stabbed the cigarette toward me. "I'm sorry I scared your wife, see? I heard a dame yipping and come out to have a look around, just like you guys. As for the heater—I always carry it, and sometimes I use it, see?"

"Please, fellows," Stuart Ames said. "No need to get hostile with each other."

"Sure," Kirby said. He jerked a thumb at the closed door behind him. "Got a key for this thing? Left the night-hickey on when I come out." He grinned crookedly. "Otherwise, you guys wouldn't've found me out here with that babe doing the fire-whistle act."

SUDDENLY I felt foolish. And my hands had started to twitch.

Emory Weir was watching Kirby with half-closed eyes.

"I'll get a pass-key from my room," Stuart Ames told Kirby, and hurried away. Dr. Patterson, I saw, had already left the corridor.

"Say!" Suddenly Emory Weir snapped his fingers. "You're Sid Kirby, of Chicago!" "Yeah," Kirby admitted. "What about it?"

"Why, I've been in your place hundreds of times," Weir said. "The High Hat Club."

I felt very tired, and the left corner of my mouth was beginning to jerk slightly.

"If you'll excuse me," I said. "Mrs. Reid—"

Sid Kirby was watching me with a quizzical expression on his hard face. I couldn't hold my hands still now, and my left eyelid was completely beyond control. I nodded at Emory Weir and swung about.

The light had been turned on in our room. Bonnie's hair was a black fan on her pillow. Dr. Patterson was just turning away from her, an empty glass in his hand, as I entered.

"I've just given Mrs. Reid a sedative," he said. "She had quite a shock."

"I could use something myself," I told him.

He produced a small glass vial from a vest pocket and shook two pink tablets into a clean glass.

For several moments he stood looking at me.

"I'm afraid this has been more of a strain on your nerves than you realize, Mr. Reid," he said then. "I suggest that you postpone anything you might have in mind for this afternoon, and dig into a good book. Good-night."

"Good-night," Bonnie said.

I just stood there, staring at the closed door. "I suggest that you postpone anything you might have in mind for this afternoon. . . ."

Why, curse it all, he'd had in mind the Royce woman's remark, "Don't forget this afternoon."

I picked up the glass containing the two pink tablets, went into the bathroom, and turned on the water. I remember my hand was shaking so violently that the glass rattled against the water tap. . . .

Then—the next I remember, Bonnie and I were struggling in the bedroom. She was sobbing and holding my arm, and I was swinging her in a great circle, trying to break free. It all struck me with stunning force, as though I were someone else who had been watching a dark screen upon which the scene had been suddenly flashed.

I stood perfectly quiet for several moments, looking down at Bonnie's terrified face.

"Bonnie!" I said then. "What in the name of—"

She gave a choked little cry and sank to the floor.

"Andy! Andy!" she sobbed, face buried in her hands.

Her nightgown was torn, and there was an ugly red blotch on her arm. Buttons had been ripped from my pajama blouse, and one sleeve of my robe had been torn almost entirely off. Blood was smeared over the back of one hand from half a dozen cuts.

I SWEEPED Bonnie into my arms, carried her to the bed, and sat down beside her. "Please, darling, please—stop crying." I took her hands in mine and tried to think of something else to say that wouldn't sound so inane.

She turned her head away from me, caught her lower lip between her teeth. I sat there, silent, trying to understand what had happened, what I'd done. They were the most horrible two minutes I've ever experienced.

Bonnie's gaze met mine, and there was something deep in her eyes that I'd never

seen there—a look of uncertainty, of fear.

"I don't understand just what happened—" I said, and my voice trailed off. I felt entirely helpless before her gaze. "Please, Bonnie, believe me—"

"I do, Andy," she said slowly, softly. "I wasn't struggling with Andrew Reid. I can't explain it, but I *know* that it wasn't *you*."

"Please, dear," I begged, "what happened?" I held out my bleeding hand. "These cuts, that mark on your arm—"

For a moment I thought she was going to cry. "You went into the bathroom," she said then, "and I thought you were ill. Your face was white, and drawn, almost ghastly. I heard you running the water, then you began to curse terribly. I ran toward the bathroom and heard the drinking glass crash in the tub. Just as I reached the doorway you smashed the mirror with your fist and whirled around to me. I grabbed you and you tried to fight me off. You were cursing and shouting, trying to open the door to the corridor. I—I managed somehow to pull you away from it, and you started to swing me all over the room—"

I was stunned. Then a feeling of horror swept over me like a chilling draft. I stood up. There was blood on my hand, and on the front of my robe, and on Bonnie's nightgown.

My blood on Bonnie!

It seemed to hypnotize me until my eyes felt hot and hard and too big for their sockets. And for the first time in my life I felt the cold clutch of panic.

I went to the bathroom doorway and saw the shattered mirror in the wash-basin and on the floor. In the tub, a half-dissolved pink tablet lay among pieces of thick glass. I stood there until Bonnie said, "Andy," and put a hand on my arm.

"All right," I said. "Get that little bottle of iodine from my Gladstone. There's a pad of cotton, too."

I held my hand under the cold water tap, trying not to face the questions marching against my disordered reason. But one question outdrove the others, beating down the barriers.

"Bonnie—" She was daubing my hand with iodine, but I didn't feel the bite. "Just what did you mean when you said you weren't struggling with—*me*?"

The cotton swab fell to the floor.

HOLD still," she said in a small voice, but it was her hand that had jerked, not mine!

"What did you mean?" I repeated.

"N-nothing." She was rolling another swab on a matchstick. "I was just upset. Now hold still."

"Bonnie—" I gripped her wrist. "I want to know exactly."

"Please, Andy!" And the same look was in her eyes again—uncertainty, almost fear. "I only meant that you were—not quite yourself."

"You meant," I said slowly, softly, as I released her wrist, "that I was temporarily insane, a madman."

"No! No, Andy!"

"Yes! You meant that you were struggling with a maniac, a beast that—"

"Stop it, Andy!" She threw her arms about me, buried her face against my shoulder. "Don't say such things!"

I held her at arm's length. "We aren't children, Bonnie. I can face facts. I must face them! There's something wrong with me, dreadfully wrong. I want to know what it is—and you must help me."

"I—I'd rather not talk about it tonight. In the morning—"

"You'll discuss it with Patterson," I finished for her.

I'd struck the nail squarely on the head. Her face told me that. Something twisted within me.

"Yes, in the morning you'll discuss it with Patterson. But right now, you'll discuss it with me." I led her to an armchair, feeling strangely calm. "Sit down, my dear. Now, let's be sensible."

She seemed to cower before me. "Andy—"

"First," I interrupted, "have I, during the past few months, said or done anything that might be called queer?"

She didn't look at me directly.

"You're acting queer right now, Andy," she said.

Her words, almost inaudible, struck me like ice water.

"I'm simply trying to be logical, Bonnie."

"You're being extremely illogical," she said, and her voice was stronger, a bit tight. "You're asking me to diagnose—"

"I see," I cut in, smiling. "So Dr. Michael Patterson has cautioned you against discussing my condition with me."

She didn't have to answer. I knew!

"All right," I said, trying to keep my voice matter-of-fact. "If you'd rather not help me, that's that."

Bonnie looked up at me. "I do want to help you, Andy, only—I'm so bewildered, so confused."

I smiled. "Then you can imagine how I feel."

"You haven't been quite yourself for the past three months, Andy," she said suddenly. "At first, it was just that you became easily offended. Then, about a month ago, you began losing your temper over trivialities. And you became unreasonably suspicious of others. Yesterday you acted so—well, so peculiar. It's difficult for me to explain, Andy. For instance, at dinner you refused to speak civilly—"



"Reid!" Dr. Patterson cried, as I dived into him (CHAPTER VIII)

"Just a moment, Bonnie." I sat down on the arm of her chair and put a hand on her shoulder. "Isn't it just possible that you imagined things? I distinctly recall laughing uproariously at your story about the fireman."

"That was Thursday evening, Andy."

I tugged her ear. "Sleepy! Of course, it was Thursday. And here it is—" I glanced at the clock. "Three A.M. Friday."

A frown cut little vertical grooves between her eyebrows.

"This is Saturday morning, Andy."

Somehow, I managed to grin as I stood up. "All right, sweet, you win. It isn't important."

But it was important! Saturday morning? What about Friday?

They mustn't know, Bonnie and Patterson. I wouldn't tell them. I couldn't tell them!

CHAPTER III

A RED-HEADED WOMAN DIES



THE frost-crusted window at the foot of our bed was an opaque square of silver-white when again I glanced at the clock. It was seven-twenty-five. I hadn't closed my eyes. Bonnie slept beside me. There had been no further discussion of my condition after we had retired for the second time, at three A.M.

I had faced the matter squarely, trying to determine the cause of the change within me. Though sketchy, my knowledge of psychiatry was more comprehensive than that of the average person. That is, it was broad enough to enable me to grope my way in the general direction of understanding.

I knew that different theories were advanced as to the causes or factors underlying disordered behavior and criminal conduct; theories roughly assembled into two principal groups.

In the first group, the Constitutional, it is implied that disordered behavior is due to something inherent in the individual.

Opposed to the Constitutional group is the Environmental, which advances the theory that disordered behavior is due to factors or causes entirely outside the individual.

Common sense obliged me to recognize my recent behavior as being both disordered and criminal. After all, Dr. Patterson's remark as he left our room had thrown me into a violent rage. In attempting to escape from Bonnie and get out of our room, I undoubtedly had had some idea of going to Patterson's room to settle the matter violently. Therefore, at best, my conduct had been potentially criminal.

Viewing myself thus, I could reasonably

assume that my difficulty was constitutional, caused by some form of inadequacy.

I was familiar with the belief of psychiatrists and penologists that people who come into serious conflict with the law or with the customs of the community in which they live do so because of some form of inadequacy. They might be divided into two main groups:

The first group would include people whose habit and behavior responses fell short of their highest, or true, capacity.

The second group would include people whose capacity was actually below the level of adequacy.

I felt that I might include myself in the first group, which embodied the great bulk of delinquents both in and out of prisons, and also a majority of the general non-criminal population. Few behave at all times according to their best abilities.

My life, I realized with something of a shock, had been, really, just a series of minor inadequacies. There had been so many things to which I had been unequal. It was galling, but I forced myself to face the fact that I had failed under fire.

Upon graduating from the university I had stepped into a tailor-made executive position at Reid Marine Motors, with little to do other than watch Dad run the show. When he died in a motor car accident, I shouldered the load, and somehow managed to keep the company off the rocks.

THEN, Pearl Harbor!

The challenge of tripling production on Government orders, the struggle for priorities, the problems of plant expansion, and a thousand and one other matters that fell squarely upon my shoulders had been too much. I'd gone to pieces, turned the grief over to a bristling, bustling production expert and withdrawn from the picture "for the duration."

There in the early morning darkness, the north wind wailing over the Porcupines off Lake Superior seemed to tell me the truth. I was a slacker. I hadn't been equal to my share of the war load. I'd ducked the task, tacitly telling myself that when others had won the war, I would step into production harness again.

I hadn't been much of a man, either. I had come to rely completely upon Bonnie during our four years of marriage. It had been something of a relief to have her make my decisions for me.

Someone was knocking on the bedroom door. I sat up, momentarily confused, and looked at the clock. 11:15. I was alone. I got up and put on my robe and slippers and answered the summons. It was the lodge proprietor, Stuart Ames. He wore an ordinary suit, which clung to his powerful frame.

"Morning," he said. "Dr. Patterson wants you to come to Miss Royce's room right away."

"I'll dress and—" I began.

"Better come the way you are," he interrupted. "Dr. Patterson—"

"Tell him I'll be there soon as I'm dressed," I cut in.

Ames stared, then turned away. I closed the door and went into the bathroom. The broken glass had been cleaned up. My injured hand throbbed and gave me a bit of trouble as I dressed.

Bonnie had put a fresh suit and a white shirt on a chair near the bed. I cursed silently as my stiffened fingers fumbled with the shoe laces, but something new within me beat down an impulse to hurl the shoes into a corner. I was equal to a pair of laces, at least!

I went to the Lake Wing and knocked on the door of the Royce woman's room.

Patterson opened the door.

"Hello, Reid," he said, and stepped out of the room, closing the door behind him.

"What is it?" I asked, a bit sharply.

He studied me for several moments.

"I'm afraid this is going to be rather unpleasant," he said then. "I hope you won't think that—"

"What's the trouble?" I said.

His lips became a thin, white-edged line as he opened the door.

"Step inside, please," he said.

Stuart Ames and big Emory Weir were standing near a window. Weir wore a baggy suit that seemed to increase his bulk. He turned to face me, frowning.

"This is the devil of a—" he began.

"Over here, Reid," Patterson interrupted, moving toward an open doorway.

I WENT to the open doorway. It was the bathroom. In the tub, her orange kimono torn and awry, was the red-headed Miss Joyce. She was dead. I knew that the moment I saw her. There was a ribbon of coagulated blood at one corner of her rouged mouth. An ugly red scratch extended from just beneath her left ear down her milk-white throat and across her half-exposed chest.

"Strangled," Patterson said matter-of-factly.

I began to breathe again. The first numbing grip of shock was easing, but a mounting feeling of horror made me back away.

I whirled to face Patterson, groping frantically for words that just wouldn't come. I had to say something—something was expected. They were watching me so closely, Patterson and Ames and Weir, so strangely.

"Who—who did it?" I managed.

Patterson closed the bathroom door, leaving me shrouded in an unexplainable sense of guilt.

"That," he said softly, "is what we hope to learn."

And still they stared at me!

Stuart Ames had rubbed a clear spot on the frosted window and peered out.

"Have you notified the authorities?" I asked.

"The phone line's down," Ames said, without turning from the window, "and I'll not send anyone over the trail in this storm."

Ames maintained his own telephone line between the lodge and White Pine Mine, a spot of a hundred and sixty population about ten miles to the east on M-64, between Bergland and Silver City. It was about fifteen miles by the winding wilderness road—really nothing more than a trail, as Ames called it.

And so, we were temporarily isolated with a corpse and a murderer.

"But we can't just sit here!" I protested.

"Of course not," Patterson said. "We'll do what we can to clear up this matter."

Emory Weir was sitting down now, hunched forward on the edge of a chair that seemed ridiculously small under his great frame.

"Count me out," he said, peering up at Patterson from beneath shaggy brows.

"What do you mean?" Patterson asked.

"I mean," Weir said slowly, heavily, "that I'm not a detective. This is murder, fellow—and I don't know a blamed thing about solving murders. The best thing we can do is keep our fingers out of this and wait for someone who knows what's what. No one's going to get away from here in this weather."

Patterson was watching him closely. "At least, you'll cooperate?"

"I don't play detective," Weir told him.

Patterson's smile was almost imperceptible. "If I play detective, will you cooperate to the extent of answering a few questions?"

"Sure, sure," Weir said quickly. "I'll answer any question anyone wants to ask."

Patterson shifted his gaze to me without turning his head. "What about you, Reid?"

I resented his tone, his manner—everything about the way he was assuming control. I merely nodded.

STUART AMES had turned from the window.

"It's okay with me," he said as Patterson glanced at him. "Of course, I'll have to notify the deputy sheriff at White Pine Mine as soon as this storm lets up, but I guess it won't hurt none to sort of clear the ground around here."

"Very well." Patterson thrust both hands into his pockets and moved leisurely about the room, looking just a bit melodramatic, I thought. "First—"

"First," I cut in, surprising even myself, "why did you send for just the three of us?"

"I didn't send for Ames," Patterson said. "He discovered the body and came to me. I sent for you and Weir because we three saw Miss Royce early this morning, and were probably the last to see her alive."

"With the exception of the killer," I put in.

"Of course," Patterson agreed. "Anyway, I didn't send for anyone else because I thought it best to keep the murder as much of a secret as possible until we could decide on a course of action. Ames had already tried to contact the authorities. I'll let Ames tell you how he happened to find the body."

Ames lowered himself into an armchair, blinking his myopic eyes.

"Well, she told me last night that she wanted an eight o'clock call this morning. I phoned her room at eight-ten and she answered. She said she had a headache, and asked me to call her again at ten o'clock. I did, but there was no answer. I came upstairs and knocked on the door. No answer. I went away, but got to thinking about it and came back a few minutes before ten-thirty and knocked again. Still no answer, so I tried the door. It was unlocked. I came in here and found her like she is now. So I got Dr. Patterson, and tried to phone White Pine Mine."

"That places the time of her death at somewhere between ten minutes past eight and a few minutes before ten-thirty," Patterson said. "However, my brief examination makes me think that she died at about nine."

"I was just getting up," Emory Weir said. "I was kind of tired after being rolled out of bed last night."

"I was asleep when Ames came for me," I said.

"Do you happen to know what time Mrs. Weir got up?" Patterson asked Weir.

"Eight o'clock," Weir said. "I went back to sleep."

Patterson looked at me.

"I don't know when Mrs. Reid got up," I said.

"She came downstairs at ten o'clock," Stuart Ames said.

"When did you get up?" I asked Patterson.

"As a matter of fact," he said, smiling slightly, "I haven't been to bed yet." He made a little gesture with one hand. "An especially interesting book—'Asylum,' by William Seabrook. It fascinates me."

Which explained his being fully dressed when Weir and I met him in the cross-corridor at 2:10 that mornning.

"And you didn't hear anything wrong in here?" Stuart Ames asked.

"No," Patterson told him. "But I always lose myself in a good book."

"You heard those screams earlier this morning," I said.

"I happened to be getting a drink of water at the moment," Patterson said, a bit sharply. "What happened to your hand?"

And there I was—again the object of suspicious stares.

"I slipped in the bathroom," I said, "and broke the mirror when I threw out my hand to catch myself."

I suppose I had subconsciously prepared myself for that question. What else could I say? Surely, under the circumstances, I dared not tell the truth.

"Under the circumstances!"

CHAPTER IV

TWO-TIMER



THINK that it was then I realized, for the first time, exactly what the circumstances were. My left eyelid began to twitch and I had to fight down a desire to move even farther from the bathroom door, from the body, from—*what?*

Bonnie! I had to talk with her before Patterson and Weir and Ames began questioning and "cooperating."—If they learned that I had absolutely no knowledge of my activities Friday—

But they couldn't learn that! Even Bonnie didn't suspect. An almost overwhelming sense of relief made me sit down with what I hoped was a fair degree of nonchalance. Still, I would have to talk with Bonnie, ask her not to mention my—should I call it "spell?"—in our room.

I realized with a start that Patterson had been speaking to me. He was silent now, frowning.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I was thinking about those screams this morning."

"I asked about your acquaintance with Miss Royce—how long you'd known her," Patterson said.

"I didn't know her," I said emphatically. "I never saw her before she opened her door this morning."

Ames had lighted a cigar and was puffing slowly, steadily. His gaze never wavered from my face. I could hear big Emory Weir's snort, and cold anger mounted within me.

Patterson faced me from the other side of a heavy center table.

"I think," he said slowly, "that it would be better if you told the truth."

Which was the wrong approach. I stood up and moved around the table and stopped with my face within twelve inches of his.

"I don't give a nickel what you think, you—" I said.

Weir thrust his bulk between us. I tried to force him aside, but it was like pushing against a Norway pine.

"Easy, Reid," he said, backing me toward my chair. He faced Patterson. "Seems to me you're pretty quick to call a man a liar, Doc. I still think we ought to let the police handle this."

"You don't believe me either, Weir," I said. "I heard you snort. But I never saw the woman before this morning. How she knew my name I can't explain."

Patterson studied me for a moment. "What did she mean about you not forgetting this afternoon?"

"I don't know," I said, and sprawled back in the chair. My hands were moist and beginning to tremble. I thrust them into the pockets of my coat and tried to keep my voice steady. "Are you accusing me of having been meeting—"

"I'm not accusing you of anything, Reid," he cut in. "But you must admit that Miss Royce's remarks require some explanation."

"They do," I agreed. "But I can't provide that explanation."

"Maybe she was one of Mrs. Reid's friends," Emory Weir said.

I shook my head. "Impossible. My wife would have mentioned that to me."

AND suddenly, I wondered if Bonnie had made the Royce woman's acquaintance Friday, and introduced me? That would explain how Miss Royce happened to know my name. If that were the case, possibly Bonnie and I had planned to spend the afternoon with the woman.

I decided that I'd better dodge further questioning until I had an opportunity to talk with Bonnie.

Patterson turned to Stuart Ames. "Where was Miss Royce from?"

"Chicago," Ames answered. "Lots of Chicago folks come up here. Phelps and his wife are from Chicago. So is Kirby, and Weir here."

"Miss Royce been here before?" Patterson asked.

"She spent a couple weeks here this last summer—in July, I guess it was."

"Any of these other people been here before?"

"No."

"At what time did Miss Royce arrive yesterday?"

Ames pursed his lips for a moment. "About ten in the morning."

"And what time was it when this Kirby fellow got here yesterday?"

"About eight o'clock last night. The station car was held up by the storm, and—"

Someone was knocking on the door, but no one spoke for several seconds. The knock was repeated.

"I'd better answer," Patterson said.

He opened the door a few inches, and I saw Sid Kirby in the corridor.

"Come in, Kirby," Patterson said.

Kirby moved into the room, dark eyes shifting from me to Weir and Ames, then back to Patterson. He did not remove his hat.

"Why the mob scene?" he asked, jabbing a cigarette between his lips.

Patterson closed the door and seated himself on the arm of a chair. "You're acquainted with Miss Royce?" he countered.

The semi-pleasant expression faded from Sid Kirby's face. "I might be. Why?" As he produced a lighter and touched flame to his cigarette I thought his hand was just a trifle unsteady. "Who're you, Mister?"

"I'm Dr. Michael Patterson. This is Mr. Reid, and Mr. Weir, and our host, Mr. Ames."

"So what?" Kirby said, scowling, obviously uneasy.

Patterson made an apologetic little gesture. "I'd like to ask you a few questions."

"For instance?"

"Did you have an appointment with Miss Royce for this morning?"

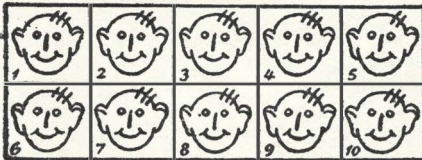
"Say—" Kirby ground his cigarette into an ash tray on the table. "What's this all about?"

Patterson got up and opened the bathroom door. [Turn page]

WHAT DO YOU SEE?

WHAT DO YOU SAY?

All the same except one . . . which is the odd picture?



ANSWER:
Number Five. He is only "two-handed"



"Look in here, Kirby," he said.

The dapper night-club operator flicked a suspicious glance about the room and went to the open doorway. He stopped there, as though he had walked against a blank wall. Then, slowly, he moved into the bathroom, stopped beside the tub.

I GLANCED at Weir and found that he had been watching me, frowning. He averted his gaze, and I switched my attention back to Kirby, who was just coming out of the bathroom. His face was chalk-white, grim.

"Well," he said, looking at Emory Weir, "she won't two-time nobody else."

"What do you mean?" Patterson asked.

Kirby crossed the room and stood in front of Weir's chair.

"Thought you were putting something over on me, eh?"

Weir started to get up, but Kirby jammed the palm of one hand against the big man's face and pushed him back.

"Sit down, slob," he said, "and take it like a man." He put his right hand into his coat pocket.

Patterson was already lunging across the room. He gripped Kirby's shoulder and spun him away from Weir. Kirby caught his balance directly in front of me. The automatic was in his hand.

"Stand back, croaker!" he said.

I leaned forward and threw my arms around Kirby's knees and jerked hard. Then Kirby and Patterson and I were scrambling on the floor. Patterson was struggling for the gun. I was struggling to get away.

When I gained my feet I saw that Ames had moved into the fray. He shifted about the grappling men for a moment, then coolly stamped a heavy boot on Kirby's wrist. Patterson stood up with the automatic in his hand. Weir hadn't moved. His face was a sickly gray.

Patterson dropped the gun into a coat pocket and told Kirby:

"Get up."

Kirby stood up, rubbing his wrist. He didn't take his gaze off Weir.

"You did it, you no good tramp!" he said.

Emory Weir surged to his feet, but Patterson blocked him. Stuart Ames had moved in on Kirby again.

"You can't accuse—" Weir said.

"Who says I can't!" Kirby shouted. "I'll kill you, you rotten—"

He lunged forward, but Ames bulldogged him to the floor. Kirby struggled briefly, then seemed to crumble. Ames dragged him to his feet and thrust him into a chair.

"Okay," Kirby said after a moment. "I'm okay now. It kinda hit me between the eyes. That's my wife in there."

Emory Weir's mouth was open, and perspiration beaded his forehead and upper lip.

"I'm sorry I handled things so crudely, Kirby," Patterson said. "I had no idea—"

Kirby made a weary little gesture. "Skip it. Sorry I blew a fuse, but . . . You've sent for the cops?"

Patterson explained our predicament.

"Yeah," Kirby said. "But this is open and shut. This rat got her up here and killed her."

"See here—" Weir said.

"Shut up," Kirby interrupted matter-of-factly. "You called her long-distance Thursday. I know, because I had the call checked."

"That's a lie!" Weir said.

"Now wait a moment," Ames put in. "You called somebody in Chicago right after dinner Thursday. There's no getting around that, Weir."

WEIR looked up sharply.

"That was a business call, he said quickly.

"You're a liar," Kirby said. "You put through a person-to-person call for her at the club. She wasn't there, so you called her apartment." He looked at Patterson and me. "Y'see, I'm in the restaurant business—the High Hat Club. Babs—that's her professional name, Babs Royce—was featured there. Specialty dances—bubbles and fans and stuff like that. We split up about five months ago, but she kept on working for me. In fact, the joint's part hers.

"Anyway, I've been trying to patch things up. I knew she was running around with some guy, but I couldn't learn who. So Thursday afternoon when I got down to the joint my secretary told me there'd been a long-distance call for Babs, and did I know where she could be reached. I called the operator and found out that the call was from a guy named Weir, up here in the sticks. When Babs didn't show up at the club Thursday night, I went looking for her and learned that she'd taken a midnight train north. I followed her."

"Did you talk with her after you got here last night?" Patterson asked.

Kirby seemed to hesitate. Then he said, "No."

"I see," Patterson said, and motioned Ames aside.

"Just a minute," I called as they put their heads together. "What's so confidential? Or are the rest of us suspects?"

Patterson faced me quickly. "See here, Reid—"

"Wait a moment, Doc," Ames cut in. "Maybe he's right. We've got no call to cut anything up in private, yet."

"Get yourself a badge before you go into any huddles in front of me," Kirby said.

Patterson shrugged. "I'm sorry. I didn't

mean it that way. However—" He turned to Ames, and his voice took on a professional edge. "We can't leave the body in there. The heat, you know, and there's no telling how long it will be before the authorities can take over here."

Weir stood up. "You aren't going to move that body. I know the law, and since I've been accused of murder, I'm going to see to it that nothing's touched until the police have a chance to look around. I don't care if it lays there—"

"Shut up!" I exclaimed, glancing at Kirby. His face had blanched, and I blamed myself for having caused Patterson to speak out.

"I'll tell you what," Ames said. "Suppose we turn off the heat in here and open the bathroom window enough—"

Patterson silenced him with a nod.

CHAPTER V

NO ALIBI



AMES closed the hot air shutters and went into the bathroom. I heard him hit the window frame several times with his hand, then he came out and closed the door.

"I opened it about half an inch," he said. "That'll keep out the snow."

"Weir," Patterson said, "about that phone call. . . ."

"In view of Kirby's accusation, I'll do my explaining to the police," Weir told him.

"Perhaps we'd all better wait for the police," I said.

"Sure," Kirby put in. "This round-table stuff is a lotta malarkey."

"What about you, Ames?" Patterson asked.

"Well—" Stuart Ames blinked his eyes uncertainly. "Whatever you fellows say is all right with me. I don't want to cause no hard feelings, but I'll tell you this: *Somebody* killed that girl, and since I'm the owner of this place, I feel kinda responsible for what happens until the sheriff gets here. So I'm going to make it my business to see that nobody leaves until this thing's settled. And I might say that I'm a dead-shot with a rifle, and pretty handy with snowshoes on the trail."

"A regular Yukon Kid, eh?" Kirby sneered.

"Since we've agreed to discontinue our investigation," Patterson said, "perhaps we'd better clear out of here and let Ames lock the door."

Kirby held out his hand. "My equalizer."

"No," Patterson told him. "I'd better keep it until—well, later."

"Come right down to it," Emory Weir said, "you've no priority on innocence, Pat-

erson. Why should *you* hold his gun?"

"This man has already made one attempt on your life," Patterson said. "Come right down to it, none of us has any more right than anyone else to hold this weapon—but I've got it, and I'm going to keep it until *someone* is behind bars."

We filed out of the room and Kirby locked the door. We stood in a silent group in the corridor, each hesitating, suddenly ill at ease.

"Well, I'll be catching a few winks in my room in case I'm wanted," Patterson finally said, and strode away.

The rest of us separated.

Bonnie wasn't in our room. I started out to find her, then changed my mind and sprawled on the bed. There were a few things I wanted to straighten out in my own mind before facing her.

Of course, I would have to tell her about the Royce woman's remarks. It would hurt her terribly to learn of them through someone else.

And that would make it necessary for me to tell about Friday being a lost day.

My left eyelid twitched slightly, but only once, and I recalled that my eye had started to twitch when Patterson had questioned me about my injured hand. But I hadn't gone to pieces then, as I always had in the past! I had lost my temper, and my hands had started trembling when Sid Kirby arrived, but—

Had I become so interested in Kirby and the others that I'd forgotten my nerves?

I HELD my hands up. They were perfectly steady. Yet my left eye had twitched its warning a *minute* before—the second false warning!

And those screams we had heard that morning. I realized, upon thinking back, that I hadn't been even slightly disturbed. As a matter of fact, I had been calm enough to investigate! Then why had I gone to pieces in the corridor upon facing Sid Kirby last night?

I had been in something of a rage because he had frightened Bonnie. And then, immediately after that, Patterson had heaped fuel upon the fire by suggesting that I postpone anything I might have in mind for this afternoon.

I drove my thoughts back to Thursday night. I'd been all right at dinner, and later in our room. Then, shortly after retiring, Bonnie had suggested that I open a window a few inches, and I had tried without success. And I had become enraged, striking the frame with both hands, cursing and throwing myself into bed.

Then I had awakened at 2:10 *Saturday* morning to find Bonnie sitting up beside me. Friday remained a complete blank.

Bonnie came in at that moment.

"Hello, you lazy bum," she said, and came over to sit on the edge of the bed. She was smiling, but with only her lips.

"I was just going to look for you," I said.

She stared at the wall for a moment, then looked at me. "Andy—" It was little more than a whisper. "Who is Babs?"

It was like a blow to the solar plexus.

"Babs Royce," I said. "Why?"

Bonnie opened her hand and held out a small yellow-gold compact. I stared at it and saw "Babs" engraved on the lid.

"Where'd you get that?" I managed.

"I found it in your coat pocket this morning when I hung up your things," Bonnie said.

I pulled my gaze away from the compact and looked up into Bonnie's eyes. They were steady, unwinking. Now was the time to tell her the whole confused story. Instead, I asked:

"And you have wifely suspicions?"

"Naturally," she said, smiling. "I think you and this Royce woman have been telling each other soft nothings secretly. Being an avid reader of the Aching Hearts column, I'm too worldly to consider the possibility that you found the compact. You undoubtedly slipped it into your pocket during a meeting in some romantically secluded spot in the mountains. I've been done wrong by. That's obvious."

"Silly!" I said, and pulled her down beside me.

But my thoughts were tumbling over each other. Bonnie hadn't known Babs Royce, and therefore, couldn't have introduced us during my "condition" Friday! I realized, then, that I had more or less accepted that simple solution of the mystery connected with the Royce woman's knowledge of my name. What was the answer? And how did the compact happen to be in my pocket?

BONNIE kissed me lightly on the cheek. "Come on, you big cheater—confess your sinful doings."

I sat up and propped a pillow behind me.

"Bonnie," I said, "I'm afraid that this is something more than just one of those farcical situations that embarrass Hollywood heroes. I mean—"

She was hardly breathing it seemed. She had my left hand in both of hers. She didn't speak.

"First," I said, "I haven't been meeting Miss—"

"Of course, you haven't," she interrupted softly. "I was being funny."

"Wait," I told her, frowning. "Someone else raised that question today."

"Andy!" She sat up quickly. "You're not serious."

"But I am serious." I felt that I could talk better if I didn't have to meet her gaze,

so I put another pillow against the headboard. "Sit here beside me," I said, "and don't say any more until I've finished my story."

She leaned back and I put my arm about her shoulders and talked. I told her everything, beginning with my rage at being unable to open our bedroom window Thursday night. She interrupted only once—an exclamation of horror when I told of Babs Royce's body in the tub. After that, Bonnie listened in silence, holding my hand until I finished.

"I think Sid Kirby killed her, Andy," she said then.

"Maybe," I admitted. "But it looks bad for Emory Weir, too. And for me."

"For you?" Bonnie's eyes were wide, frightened. "Why in the world should anyone—"

"You're forgetting that Babs Royce knew my name," I said. "In fact, she talked as though we were old friends and had an engagement for this afternoon. Patterson and Weir heard that, and neither believed me when I told them right to their faces that I'd never seen the woman before this morning."

"Nevertheless, Andy, you couldn't have—have . . . I mean, she was alive when you and Patterson and Weir left her, and you didn't go back there. You talked with Kirby in the corridor, and everyone saw you come in here.

"Dr. Patterson knows you were here when he left, and then we went to bed, and you were still sleeping when Stuart Ames came for you this morning."

"Yes," I said, "we know that. By the way, Ames saw you come downstairs at ten this morning. When did you actually get up?"

"I awoke at nine-thirty." She gripped my arm. "Don't you see, Andy? Dr. Patterson estimated the time of her death at about nine o'clock. But you were still asleep at nine-thirty when I awoke, so they can't possibly say—"

"That's just the point, Bonnie," I said. "You can swear that we retired at three, and that I was asleep at nine-thirty when you awoke—but that leaves six and a half hours of which you have absolutely no knowledge."

"Andy!"

"We've got to face it," I went on. "When the police learn of Babs Royce's remarks, and about her compact being in my pocket, they're going to consider the possibility that I went to her room while you were asleep and killed—"

"Stop it, Andy!" Her fingernails were knifing into my biceps. "We won't tell them about the compact, and I'll say that I—that I knew her and that's how she happened to know your name!"

CHAPTER VI

ALL SUSPECTS



BONNIE'S words were like a dash of cold water. What was she thinking? That I was concealing the truth? That the truth was to be avoided?

"No dear," I said. "That wouldn't be right. And in the end, they would know that we lied. We'll tell them everything

we know."

"But that won't explain her remarks, nor about the compact," she said.

"No," I agreed. "But lying to help me wouldn't be—well, it just wouldn't be in keeping with the kind of people we are, Bonnie. And it wouldn't settle this thing in my own mind."

She looked bewildered. "What on earth do you mean, Andy?"

"I'm considering every possibility," I said, and my voice seemed to be coming from across the room. "When we tell the police about Friday being a complete blank to me, they're going to wonder if there might not have been a recurrence of that condition between seven-thirty and nine-thirty this morning. That is, how do I know that I fell asleep at seven-thirty? I might simply have no recollection of my actions after that hour and until Ames awakened me at eleven-fifteen."

"And you're afraid that might be the truth," Bonnie whispered.

"I don't know what to think, dear," I said. "But I do want to know who did kill Babs Royce."

Her eyes were searching my face. "You want to know because you aren't sure. . . . Oh!" She stood up quickly. "This is preposterous, Andy!"

"But it isn't," I said doggedly, swinging my feet to the floor. "I want to be sure in my own mind that I didn't go to that room sometime after seven-thirty and—"

"Please!"

"—strangle her," I drove on, "and return to this room before you awakened at nine-thirty." I stood up. "Don't you see, Bonnie? *I've got to know!*"

She folded her arms, hugging herself as she always did when exasperated.

"If you insist upon building a possible case against yourself—" She walked slowly across and now stood facing me. "Suppose the police question your story about Friday being a blank?"

"I don't understand," I said.

"I mean, suppose they proceed on the theory that you did know Babs Royce, that you were with her yesterday, that after being placed in an embarrassing position by her remarks and my discovery of her compact in your pocket, you concocted a story

about having no recollection of Friday?"

"I think," I said, "that an account of what happened in this room last night will make my story about Friday seem quite plausible."

"On the other hand, Andy, such an account might add weight to their suspicions."

"Then I'll just have to face it," I said.

"But the scandal—"

"We might fabricate an explanation of Babs Royce's remarks, and keep quiet about the compact, but that isn't the point."

"What is the point?" Bonnie asked, her voice edged.

"Simply this: Are we going to risk a bit of newspaper notoriety, or are we going to lie our way out of facing the facts and go through the years wondering if I have that woman's blood on my hands?"

"We? The question is entirely in your mind, Andy."

SOMEONE knocked on the door. I opened it to find Stuart Ames with a mirror under one arm and a tool kit in his hand.

"Sorry to trouble you," he said, coming into the room. "Thought I'd replace that busted mirror."

"Add it to the bill," I told him. He went into the bathroom and I said, "Think I'll go downstairs for a cup of coffee, Bonnie. Coming?"

"I'll be down in a few minutes," she said, and intercepted me at the door. She kissed me, thrust a lock of hair off my forehead and whispered, "Don't be such a foolish duck."

I went downstairs and had two cups of coffee and went into the lounge. Lyman Phelps was standing at a window, peering out through a clear spot he had rubbed on the frost-crusted pane.

He glanced over his shoulder at me.

"Y'solve the mysterious case of the screaming woman?"

"No," I told him. "Probably someone having a nightmare."

I saw that he was already half seas over. I pulled an armchair closer to the blazing logs in the fireplace and sat down.

Phelps left the window to hook an elbow on the mantel and sneer at me.

"Thought I was beating my wife, eh?"

He laughed derisively. "Disappointed, weren't you?"

"Sorry you feel that way about it, Phelps," I said. "I'm sure Dr. Patterson didn't mean to—"

"Oh, yeah, he didn't!"

"Well—" I reached for a magazine. "I'd rather not discuss it, if you don't mind."

"Then let's discuss your red-headed girl friend," Phelps said.

"What do you mean?" I asked, staring at him.

Phelps didn't answer. He was staring past me. I turned my head to find Ames and Weir and Kirby entering the room. Ames caught the question in my stare.

"Doc will be down in a minute," he said. "He asked me to have you and Mr. Phelps wait here with us until he arrives."

Emory Weir and Sid Kirby had taken chairs. Ames stood near the fireplace. They all looked a bit awkward, and I felt that something had happened.

Lyman Phelps was scowling. "I'll do as I please," he said, turning away. "Patterson can go to thunder."

Ames touched him on the arm. "I think you'd better wait here, Mr. Phelps."

"Say!" Phelps' face was suddenly flushed, contorted. "What's this supposed to be—a jail?"

"It is for one of us," Patterson said, coming into the room.

Big Emory Weir leaned forward in his chair, a worried frown wrinkling his brow.

"How is she?"

"Just a touch of hysteria," Patterson said. "She's all right now. Mrs. Reid and Mrs. Phelps are with her."

"What happened?" I asked.

"She was asking me questions about last night," Weir said, "and I told her and she got kind of excited. Then she passed out and I called Dr. Patterson."

"I'm afraid you weren't any too tactful," Patterson told him. He turned to Lyman Phelps. "You've heard about Miss Royce?"

"The redhead?" Phelps flicked a quick glance at me. "What about her?"

KIRBY swayed forward, lips pressed into a thin, white-edged line. "She's dead," Patterson said bluntly. "Murdered in her room early this morning. Strangled."

Big Emory Weir was sitting up straight in his chair, big hands gripping his knees. Phelps remained perfectly motionless for several moments.

Then he said, "Oh!" and shifted his gaze from face to face. "And we're all suspects. Is that it?"

"That's it," Patterson said.

"I see." Phelps was looking at me, but talking to Patterson. "And you're positive that she was murdered this morning?"

"Quite positive," Patterson told him. "Why?"

"It couldn't have been last night—say about six o'clock?" Phelps asked.

Patterson made a quick gesture of impatience. "Speak out, man! What are you driving at?"

Phelps was smiling thinly. "I guess that lets you out, Reid."

I tried to stand up, but my legs wouldn't respond.

"Lets me out?" I said.

"Surprised, eh?" Phelps was grinning now. "Didn't think anyone saw you and that red-headed jane with your arms around each other, did you?"

It was like a scene from a motion picture film that had suddenly stopped unreeling. All eyes had shifted to me with the dropping of Phelps' bombshell. I think we were all holding our breaths. Then, as abruptly as it had stopped, the film began unreeling again.

Sid Kirby lurched to his feet, cursing. Ames stepped in front of him.

"Easy, now!" he said.

I was the only one still seated. Phelps' statement seemed to have robbed me of the power to speak or move. Patterson was frowning at me. Phelps grinned crookedly, obviously pleased with the reaction to his accusation.

Big Emory Weir pushed past Ames and Kirby to a spot immediately in front of me.

"So you didn't know her!" His voice was hoarse. "Never saw her before she opened her door this morning, eh? Why, you lying pup! I thought all along there was something phony about you!"

Patterson had him by the arm. "Just a moment, Weir. Let's not jump—"

Weir shook him off. "And the devil with you! Came up here with him, didn't you? Birds of a feather!"

Patterson struck him across the mouth with an open hand, and Weir fell back a step.

Then Ames threw bearlike arms around Patterson's chest, from behind, and hurled him against the fireplace.

"That's all, you guys!" he said, and pointed a thick forefinger at Weir. "This ain't no barroom, and I'll be hanged if I'm going to have any more trouble around here."

"Tough guy, eh?" Sid Kirby sneered.

Ames moved toward the dapper nightclub operator.

"Listen, you—" He stabbed Kirby's chest with a big thumb. "I'm running this show until the sheriff gets here, and I don't need any wise remarks from a two-bit punk like you." He thrust his face close to Kirby's. "Now maybe you want to do something about it?"

SID KIRBY met the hotel man's gaze for a moment, then turned away. Ames faced the rest of us, eyes squinted.

"I've been trying to be nice with you guys," he said, "but you don't want it that way. You want to get tough with each other and bust up my joint. Well, you ain't going to do it, see? If there's any fighting to be done around here, I'll do it. I got an empty back room, and if anybody doesn't like what I say, let's go. I don't bar nobody."

And he wasn't bluffing. Something about his voice, the way he stood with his head down between massive shoulders, made me think that he would enjoy a free-for-all. Phelps eased the tension by laughing.

"You're the boss, Ames."

A man called, "Mr. Ames," from the doorway, then came into the room. I recognized him—the wiry little Indian who drove the station wagon, one of several Chippewas Ames employed about the lodge.

"I can go now," he said.

"Storm letting up?" Ames asked, and went to the clear spot Phelps had rubbed on the window pane. He peered out, then told the Indian, "No. It's still pretty bad. Maybe in the morning."

CHAPTER VII CHALLENGE



WE WERE silent for perhaps a minute after the Indian went out, each waiting for someone else to speak. And again, it was Patterson who drove in the wedge.

"Better come up to my room and let me look at that hand, Reid," he said.

"It's all right," I said curtly.

"Many a hand has been 'all right' one day and amputated the next," he told me. "Better come along."

"What about a game of billiards, Kirby?" Phelps said as Patterson and I left the lounge room.

I followed in silence to Patterson's room, where he closed the door.

"Sit down, Reid," he said.

"This is a waste of time," I told him.

"Is it?" He was watching me closely.

"Certainly," I said. "My hand's perfectly all right."

"Of course," he agreed impatiently. "I just thought we'd better have a talk."

I said, "Oh!" and went on the defensive. "Is there anything to talk about?"

Patterson threw himself into a chair opposite mine. "Good Lord, man!" he exclaimed, frowning. "What's the matter with you?"

"That seems to be a moot point," I said stiffly.

He leaned forward and clasped his hands between his knees.

"Reid, this thing is building up around you like a wall. Can't you see that?"

"Not particularly," I said, though I wasn't sure whether he was referring to the murder or my own condition.

"I suppose you realize what the police are going to think?" he said.

So it was the murder that was building up around me like a wall. Strangely enough, I felt relieved!

"I don't see that my position is any more precarious than Kirby's, or Weir's," I said.

He was studying me with narrowed eyes. "And you're not greatly worried. Is that it?"

"I'm not worried," I lied.

Patterson made a quick gesture of disgust. "You're worried sick, Reid. It's in your eyes, in your voice, in every move you make." He hesitated, then snapped, "What are you trying to cover up?"

I had been expecting something like that. Nevertheless, I experienced a sinking sensation. I forced my eyebrows up in what I hoped was a look of surprise.

"Never mind the dramatics," he said, before I could open my mouth. "Can't you understand that you aren't fooling anyone? That you're only making things worse for yourself?"

"Why do you think I'm trying to cover up something?" I asked.

"I wish you wouldn't counter with such inane questions, Reid," he said, and stared at the wall above and behind me. "Let's consider this thing from the viewpoint of the police. Emory Weir will tell them about Miss Royce's—or Mrs. Kirby's—remarks when we talked with her this morning, and about your statement that you'd never seen her before. The police are going to believe you lied in an effort to get out of an embarrassing situation. And that belief will be strengthened when Lyman Phelps tells them he saw you and the Royce woman with your arms around each other last night."

"Suppose I did know her," I said, "and was meeting her secretly. Does that necessarily mean that I murdered her?"

PATTERSON shook his head.

"No-o-o-o," he said hesitantly.

"What about Weir?" I continued. "What about Kirby? There's a fine set-up for murder. Kirby certainly had a motive."

"Yes," Patterson agreed. "But the fact remains that you are the only one who has been directly connected with Babs Royce. And you've denied that connection. After all, it hasn't been definitely established that Weir did phone Miss Royce. And it certainly can't be established that he asked her to come up here. If Weir did phone her, that isn't a crime. It's entirely possible that she came up here without Weir knowing anything about it. On the other hand, Sid Kirby has been frank. He admits he followed his wife up here, knowing that she probably had come to meet another man."

"Kirby brought a gun," I said. "He tried to use it on Weir. It's reasonable to believe—"

But I saw, then, that it was not entirely reasonable to believe that Kirby intended to kill his wife.

"Babs Royce was strangled," Patterson reminded me. "It would be more reasonable to believe that Kirby came up here with the intention of killing Weir. However, it would be difficult to prove just what his intentions were, especially if he can show that he always carries a gun. No"—he shook his head—"I'm afraid most of the suspicion is going to fall on you, Reid, simply because your statements conflict with the dead woman's. And you haven't denied that you and Babs Royce were together last night."

I didn't say anything. I was thinking about the compact Bonnie had found. That would be conclusive proof.

"Why don't you tell me what's on your mind, Reid—what you're holding back," Patterson said. "Possibly I can help."

"I need no help," I interrupted, standing up, "and there's nothing more to be said."

"Yes, there is," Patterson said, his voice edged. "You're being a fool, Reid. I hope you change your attitude and your story before the police arrive. If you don't, I'm afraid your troubles are just beginning."

I went to the door, opened it, and glanced back at him. He was smiling. I slammed the door shut and strode toward the Mountain Wing.

Bonnie was in our room.

"How's Mrs. Weir?" I asked her, dropping into a chair.

Bonnie wrinkled her nose. "Sleeping like a baby. Dr. Patterson gave her a sedative." She sat down on the arm of my chair. "What are you stewing about now?"

"Nothing," I told her.

"You're fibbing."

"There's nothing wrong," I insisted sharply.

She was quiet for several moments. Then: "I think this has gone far enough, Andy."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You aren't telling me the truth," Bonnie said flatly.

"Suppose somebody told you that they'd seen me with Babs Royce about six last evening?" I said.

"That would explain the compact in your pocket, at least," she answered matter-of-factly. "Does someone say they saw you?"

"Yes. Lyman Phelps."

BONNIE smiled.

"And now, of course, everyone thinks that you lied about not knowing her."

"Naturally."

"Was there anyone else? I mean, was Phelps the only one who saw you?"

"It seems that way," I said.

"Then it would be your word against Phelps'." Bonnie was smiling again. "Have you thought of doubting his word?"

I made an impatient gesture. "I've no

reason to question it. Great heavens, I don't know whether I was with her last night or not! Can't you understand that?"

"And if you were, that doesn't make you guilty of murder, Andy," she said.

I got up and wandered about the room, and as I walked, I told Bonnie what had happened in the lounge, and about my talk with Patterson.

"I think it's about time you took Dr. Patterson into your confidence," Bonnie said.

"No," I said, whirling to face her. "Just as soon as I reveal that yesterday was a blank to me, I leave myself open to any accusation anyone wants to make."

"Suppose—" Bonnie crossed to my side. "Suppose I told you that I know you didn't kill that girl?" She put her arms around me and threw her head back, smiling. "Suppose I told you that you couldn't possibly have been anywhere but in this room when she was murdered?"

"This is no time for riddles," I said curtly.

"Sh-h-h-h!" She put a finger over my lips. "Listen to Bonnie. You couldn't have left this room after we went back to bed at three o'clock. It completely slipped my mind, Andy, but when you were struggling with me to get out of the room this morning, I managed to lock the door and remove the key before you started whirling me about. I remembered that while Mr. Ames was replacing the mirror, but before I could get downstairs to tell you, Mrs. Weir began to carry on and I was called to her room."

My legs had turned to rubber. I sat down and stared at Bonnie, and it seemed as though someone had taken a fifty-pound sack off my shoulders.

"You—you're sure?"

"Positive," she told me. "While I was getting the iodine last night, or rather this morning, I hid the key in your bag. When I went downstairs at ten this morning, I forgot that I'd locked the door, and I had to open your bag and get the key. I never thought of it again until Mr. Ames told me he was putting new automatic locks on all the doors, and that he'd probably change ours this afternoon or tomorrow."

Which explained why Sid Kirby had locked himself out of his room early that morning. He had a new automatic lock, while ours was the old-fashioned keyhole type.

"Then I couldn't have killed her!" I said.

"And you aren't angry with me for forgetting?"

"Of course not."

"Then why the new scowl?"

"I was just thinking," I said. "We know I didn't kill Babs Royce, but until the police learn who did, I'm still in a bad spot."

My wife was like a kid with her first War Bond, and I found it difficult to con-

vince her that her unsupported testimony about our door being locked wouldn't in itself clear me of suspicion. And it just had not occurred to her that anyone might question her story.

"Nevertheless," I told her, "you've done more for me than you can possibly realize. Lord, what a relief!"

"There's only one thing we can do," she said slowly, not looking at me. "It's up to us to uncover some evidence against somebody else before the police take charge here."

"We'd better mind our own business," I said flatly.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Andy!" She was facing me now, eyes flashing. "Why must you be so—so darned nicey-nice, so completely spineless?"

I was dumbfounded. Never had Bonnie jolted my ego so completely. I felt the hot rush of blood to my face. Nicey-nice! Spineless!

"I'm sorry," I said.

"You should be," she interrupted. "Here you are, suspected of having strangled a woman after apparently having been meeting her regularly. You know you didn't do it, but it's obvious that nothing short of the actual apprehension of the murderer can clear your name. Yet, when I point out that the logical thing for us to do is uncover evidence against someone else, you say, 'We'd better mind our own business!'" She quoted me with a whine in her voice, hands steeped piously before her. "Have you ever in your entire life thought of fighting back, of being just a little bit less conscious of your ethics, of doing something for yourself, for a change?"

I stood up, struggling to maintain my self-respect. Bonnie had struck the nail on the head with every blow of her verbal hammer. I realized that, yet I heard myself saying:

"One would think that you'd rather have me act like Lyman Phelps, or—"

"It would be a change for the better," she cut in, whirling away from me toward the door. She paused with a hand on the knob. "I can't imagine Phelps minding his own business under these circumstances. He'd probably have us all backed into a corner for questioning, whether we liked it or not!"

Then she was gone. She hadn't slammed the door, but somehow, I wished she had.

I felt sick. I threw myself on the bed and stared at the ceiling, but Bonnie's words kept beating through my mind until I couldn't lie still. I thought of the scorn in her voice, and something seemed to squirm within me.

I got up and walked about the room and found that the palms of my hands were filmed with perspiration. I stood at a win-

dow for a while, watching the wind-driven snow slanting out of the north through the pines.

Then I got an unopened quart of Irish whiskey from one of my bags and had a drink, breaking my rule never to drink alone.

"Here goes part of my ethics!" I told myself aloud.

I put the bottle away after just one drink, and put on my corduroy breeches, boots, a warm sweater and a heavy mackinaw, cap and gloves. It was 4:20 when I went downstairs. Stuart Ames, Sid Kirby, and Lyman Phelps were just leaving the lounge.

"Going out in this weather?" Ames asked, surprised.

"Any objections?" I asked sharply.

"Well—maybe you'd better not," he said.

And that probably would have ended the matter if Bonnie hadn't come out of the lounge with Patterson at that moment.

I turned toward the front door, buttoning up my mackinaw.

"Andy!" she called. "Mr. Ames said you'd better not go out!"

"The devil with Mr. Ames," I said, and opened the door. Snow swirled in above me, and I had to shout to make myself heard above the moan of the wind. "I'll be here for dinner!"

CHAPTER VIII

LOST IN THE SNOW



LOSING the door after me, I stood on the big porch as I fastened the front of my up-turned collar with the loop-cord that crossed my upper lip. Darkness was gathering up behind the Porcupines, preparing for its quick sweep down over the lake.

I left the porch, heading toward the first fringe of pines fifty yards away. The snow was thigh-deep, with a wind-hardened crust that broke into hand-size slabs beneath my boots. It was stiff going, for a city man, and I had to pause twice to catch my breath.

I reached the shelter of the trees and turned to stare back at the lodge—a dark, rambling shape spotted with blobs of yellow light. I realized then, with some misgivings, that darkness had overtaken me during my trek across the clearing. It would not be wise to wander too far. This was wilderness country where hunters and native woodsmen still went into the Porcupines and never returned. On the other hand, I couldn't picture myself returning to the lodge immediately, not after my manly display.

In the woods just behind me, I knew, a

trail horseshoed about the clearing, beginning at the lake just north of the lodge, and ending at the lake just south of the lodge. Bonnie and I had followed it Tuesday afternoon.

I turned my back on the lodge and pressed deeper into the woods. The snow here was only calf-deep, although in some spots stunted pines formed backstops for shoulder-high drifts.

I found the trail without difficulty and turned left to the south end, slogging along. I could no longer see the lights of the lodge, but I knew that by holding to the trail I couldn't get lost. Upon reaching the lake, I would simply follow it directly to the rear of the lodge.

Pushing ahead, I grappled with the idea of attempting my own investigation into the murder of Babs Royce. Alone there in the woods, with the north wind sobbing through the towering pines, I actually felt equal to the task.

Though uncertain as to exactly how one went about the investigation of a homicide, I knew that motive played an important part. Motive and opportunity. But evidence! How in the world did the police go about the uncovering of evidence? They asked questions, of course, but that wasn't all. I, too, could ask questions. In fact, there were a number of questions I wanted to ask.

For instance, if Emory Weir and Babs Royce were running around together in Chicago, as Sid Kirby charged, why hadn't she spoken to or even glanced at Weir when she opened the door to us that morning?

And why had Weir lied about that long-distance phone call? I was sure he had lied. However, as Patterson had pointed out, it was possible that Weir had not asked her to come north. After all, Weir was with his wife.

Also, had Weir seen or talked to Babs Royce alone at the lodge? It seemed likely that having followed him to the Porcupines, she would have communicated with him upon arriving.

ASSUMING that she had, her appearance there might have angered Weir. There might easily have been an argument, with Babs Royce threatening to expose him to Mrs. Weir. That certainly would have provided Weir with a motive!

As for the opportunity—Weir said he had awakened at eight o'clock that morning, when Mrs. Weir got up. Then, according to Weir, he had gone back to sleep until about nine o'clock.

Patterson had estimated the time of Babs Royce's death as having been about nine o'clock. So if Mrs. Weir had gone downstairs before nine o'clock, leaving Emory Weir alone in their room, he might easily

have gone to the Royce woman's room and murdered her and returned to his own room.

Sid Kirby, though, had a much more acceptable motive. He had followed his wife north, knowing that he would find her with another man. And he'd had as much opportunity as anyone else.

As much opportunity as anyone else! Lyman Phelps, for instance. Or Stuart Ames. Or, Dr. Michael Patterson?

Suddenly I stepped into snow up to my waist. I looked about uncertainly and saw that somehow, I had wandered from the trail. Trees and undergrowth pressed in ahead of me and on both sides, and I had a quick moment of panic. How far had I gone? Then I laughed. There was nothing to worry about. All I had to do was follow my tracks back to the trail.

I started back, wondering why I had not noticed the uneven footing. My tracks twisted slightly, and I saw that unconsciously I had been picking my course through the timber from one clearing to another. I realized, too, that I had been walking in what eventually would have been a great circle!

Then, halfway across a little clearing, I stopped abruptly, staring at the footprints stretching before me—my own prints, and those of another man! I hadn't noticed them before because the other man, whoever he was, had been walking in my tracks. At this particular spot, though, he had moved just a bit to the side.

I whirled about, gloved hands clenched, jaws locked. A man had followed me into the untracked wilderness. He had not caught up with me when I discovered my error and turned back, nor had I met him along my backtrail.

What had happened? It was impossible that I had passed him, unless he had seen me backtracking, and had hidden until I passed.

Who was it that followed me in the darkness? Anger shortened my breath, started the blood throbbing in my temples. I'd soon find out!

I started back across the clearing, but stopped upon reaching the trees from which I had just emerged. It was dark in there ahead of me—not pitch-black, but dark enough to warrant caution. I moved forward, then stopped again. After all, there was a murderer at the lodge, and my unknown tracker had undoubtedly come from the lodge. And why had he avoided a meeting? So that he might again pick up my trail, attack me from behind?

I REALIZED that my hands were perspiring inside their gloves. Something chunked behind me and I started, peering over my shoulder. I could see nothing. And

that made me wonder if my follower was lurking just ahead, watching me, waiting until I passed again.

Fear chucked at my side, urged me to turn and run—run to Bonnie.

I forced myself ahead, hesitating after each cautious step, expecting the lunge of a killer at any moment. Then, from behind the trunk of a huge fallen tree to the right of me and immediately ahead, a crouching figure floundered out of sight among the pines.

Surprise held me motionless for several moments, then I scrambled over the tree and stumbled along the other's trail. It cut sharply to the right, returning to the tracks we had already made and holding to them toward the trail from which I had strayed.

I was breathing loudly through my mouth when I reached the little clearing where I had first discovered that I was being followed. But now the tables were turned! The prey was pursuing the hunter!

And ahead of me across the clearing, a dark shape was running heavily, lurching.

I pressed on, feeling the needles in my chest, the perspiration soaking the heavy underwear across my back and stomach.

The figure ahead stumbled, floundered to the side and went down in the knee-deep snow. As he struggled to his feet and turned to face me, I could hear his labored breathing.

I loved my head and dived, the way I had seen them do on the Ann Arbor grid-iron, the way I had always wanted to do, if I'd had the nerve.

"Reid!" he gasped, as I smashed into him.

Then we were down together, grappling in the snow. I was on top for a brief moment, until he swung a leg up and hooked it across my shoulder and threw me aside.

"Reid! Stop it, you fool! Don't you recognize me?"

It was Dr. Michael Patterson.

Patterson and I got to our feet and stood facing each other, breathing deeply. My legs were trembling from the exertion of plowing through knee-deep snow.

"What do you mean, following me like a blasted animal?" I blurted.

He laughed a bit sheepishly. "Mrs. Reid asked me to—well, tag along. Of course, I couldn't refuse. I knew that you would resent being followed, so when you doubled back on me I hid behind that fallen tree."

"You're fortunate that I didn't have a gun," I told him.

"You did fairly well without one," he said. "Perhaps we'd better head back."

I followed in silence, not entirely satisfied with his explanation. Something about it just didn't ring true. If I had been in his position, suddenly discovered following . . . That was it!

"Why did you run after you 'knew I'd seen you?" I called.

"I don't know," he answered, without stopping. "I suppose because I knew you couldn't possibly have recognized me."

"Some psychiatrist!" I exclaimed. "You'd have let me go on wondering who had followed me. Swell for my nerves!"

HE DIDN'T answer, but I thought he quickened his step. I put another three inches to my stride. When we reached the trail, Patterson stopped. I automatically clenched my fists, expecting almost anything.

"Must be just about time for dinner," he said. "What say we continue straight ahead to the lodge rather than follow the trail?"

"Go ahead," I said, then added, "I'll follow you for a change."

Still he didn't speak. Perhaps he was too occupied. The snow was thigh-deep here, and we were obliged to circle a sudden profusion of stunted pines and swing over many fallen trees.

Then, as though stagehands had shifted the scenery before us, we were in the clearing about the lodge. We continued in silence toward the yellow blobs of light, and it was with a distinct feeling of relief that I mounted the porch steps.

Bonnie appeared at the lounge doorway as Patterson and I entered the lodge.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, smiling. "I'm so glad you're back. Thought the wolves caught you."

Patterson laughed and continued on up to his room. Bonnie and I were alone.

"Why did you ask him to follow me?" I said.

She stiffened. The smile faded. "I didn't. He suggested it."

"Oh-h-h-h. . . ." I removed my coat and threw it over my arm. "And how'd he happen to suggest it?"

Bonnie's cheeks turned from pink to red. She didn't look at me.

"Let's not talk about it, Andy."

I knew, then!

"So you told him about my—my fit!" I said.

"Please, Andy—"

"You went behind my back, told him all about it, even after I asked you not to." I tried to choke off my laugh, but it bubbled forth, harsh, almost inaudible. "And you thought it possible that I was prowling again, not in my right mind. So he tagged along, my nurse-maid!"

I turned on my heel and took the stairs three at a time and banged a fist on Patterson's door.

"Yes," he called. "Come in!"

I threw the door open and stepped inside. Patterson stood in the bathroom doorway, a Turkish towel in hand. He looked puzzled.

"You told me that Mrs. Reid asked you to follow me," I said. "Now I learn that it was you who suggested it."

He came into the bedroom, tossing the towel with an air of unconcern over the foot of the bed.

"Sit down. It's about time we had a straight-from-the-shoulder talk."

"I'll stand," I snapped. "And never mind this big-brother act, because—"

"Just a moment," he cut in. "I'll be frank. I suggested following you because I feared that you were going to take your own life out there. I didn't tell Mrs. Reid that, of course, but—"

"Suicide?" I blurted.

He was watching me closely. "D'you recall telling me that I was fortunate that you didn't have a gun? I did think you had a gun, Reid. That's why I tried to get away even after I knew you'd seen me."

Patterson had knocked a bit of the steam out of me.

"But what the devil made you think that?"

"Sid Kirby's gun was taken from my room sometime this afternoon," he said.

"And you suspected me."

"No. I suspected Kirby, but I wasn't sure. Then Mrs. Reid phoned my room. I found her in the lounge, and she told me what had happened early this morning, and about yesterday. I decided to have a talk with you, and started upstairs. That's when you met us coming out of the lounge. Something about the expression on your face as you went outside jammed the idea into my mind. If you had taken the gun—"

"Well, I just didn't like the set-up, Reid. I was really trying to overtake you, but when you turned back, my suicide theory vanished. So I hid to avoid meeting you and causing more ill feeling."

I sat down then, suddenly too weary to feel indignant.

"What do you think of it?" I said. "I mean, my lapse yesterday and that rumpus this morning."

"Tell me about it," he said, sitting down on the bed.

CHAPTER IX

A NEW MAN



KEEPING nothing back, I told Patterson the whole story. When I mentioned Babs Royce's compact, I knew by his surprised glance that Bonnie had not included it in her story. That lifted my spirits.

When I finished, Patterson stood up and moved to a win-

dow.

"I think," he said slowly, turning to face me, "that we can safely attribute yester-

day's lapse to the strain you've been under during the past few months, combined with a sudden high degree of excitement. You know, rage is nearly a narcotic. That is, sudden and violent loss of temper easily becomes a habit which in most cases eventually results in complete inability to govern the emotions. This emotional instability, in turn, thrives at the expense of other mental powers—something like a weed in a garden. Follow me?"

I simply nodded.

"All right," he went on. "That explains much of your difficulty, Reid. Your own diagnosis was pretty much to the point, which makes our job a great deal easier. That is, in a case such as yours, there is little a psychiatrist can do other than determine the causative factors and drag them into the light of common sense, get the patient to understand exactly what's what. You've already accomplished that."

"Then you don't think that I'm—"

"You aren't insane," he cut in quickly. "You're saddled with what I'll term a situation psychosis which, if uncorrected, would become a progressive form of insanity. By situation psychosis I mean your work and your defeatist complex which let you turn the job over to someone else when the going got a bit rocky."

"But I'm no longer worried about the plant," I objected.

"Ah-ha!" He stabbed the air with a forefinger. "I wanted you to say that!" He was standing directly before me now, almost over me. "You are worried about the plant, Reid. You know you quit under fire, and you know that others think the same thing. You withdrew and thought you'd take a rest, but your conscience won't give you peace. The strain of wartime production, instead of being eased by your retirement, has been increased by your knowledge that you weren't equal to the fight. You've become disgusted with yourself, Reid. You're trying to run away from yourself, but you aren't succeeding!"

I smiled and said, "Specters walk beside me, eh?"

"Exactly," he said, ignoring my attempt at lightness. "This morning, in your room, you reached what we might call the crisis. You became enraged at my remark, and that rage assumed complete control for a minute or two. Then, probably because of Mrs. Reid, you regained control of yourself. The shock of suddenly being faced with the facts was the real challenge. Fortunately, you met it intelligently, and the moment you did that, you won the battle. Now, it's up to you to face another and more important fight."

"What's that?" I asked.

"You've diagnosed your own difficulty," Patterson said slowly, "and you've pre-

scribed the only remedy. The question is—have you the nerve to go through with it?"

I SHOOK my head, bewildered.

"You're getting ahead of me," I said. "Go through with what?"

"The cure," he answered. "You've got to meet these problems head-on, Reid—smash into them. You've got to quit pampering this so-called nervous condition you've been prattling about. There's nothing wrong with your nerves. You found, during your school days, that you were able to avoid unpleasanties simply by allowing yourself to become emotionally upset. It's become a habit.

"Something doesn't go exactly according to expectations, so you automatically shield yourself with an attack of nerves. In the future, you've got to tackle whatever it is that upsets you, drive into it with everything you have. Just quit trying to run away from yourself."

I thought about that for several moments, then asked:

"What do you think about the Royce woman's death?"

"Well—" He turned to the window again. "In view of what you and Mrs. Reid have told me. I'd say it's a toss-up between Sid Kirby and Emory Weir."

"Then you did suspect me?" I said.

"Not exactly, Reid. I just couldn't understand why you denied knowing the woman."

"By the way," I said, "why do you suppose she failed to say anything to Weir when we three were at her door this morning? I mean, she didn't even seem to recognize him."

"They probably had some sort of an agreement."

A new suspicion had been worming into my mind during the past few minutes. I was anxious to get away from Patterson, but didn't want to seem too abrupt about it. He provided the opening by glancing at his watch.

"It's six-thirty," he said. "Dinner's at seven, you know."

"I'd better be getting dressed," I told him, going to the door. "Thanks for the—information."

He nodded, smiling, and I stepped out.

Bonnie was not in our room. I was glad of that. I got the bottle from my bag and poured a drink and sat down on the bed with the glass in my hand.

So Sid Kirby's gun had been taken from Patterson's room! That was—according to Patterson. I swirled the liquor in the glass, staring at it.

And Patterson had suggested to Bonnie that he follow me in the darkness, to see that nothing happened—he said. He had intended to overtake me—

I swallowed the drink and balanced the

empty glass on the palm of my hand. Just suppose the gun hadn't really been stolen from Patterson's room. Suppose, when Patterson saw me going out for my walk, he did a bit of fast thinking, ran upstairs for his coat and hat and overshoes, and the gun! And suppose that if he had overtaken me, out there in the darkness, with the gun in his pocket—

Murders have been made to look like suicides.

But why hadn't he ambushed me when I doubled back on him? He might have lost his nerve, or been uncertain of his aim in the darkness.

Or possibly my doubling back had been such a surprise that he ducked behind that fallen tree before realizing that he was leaving tracks which would undoubtedly cause questions to be asked. For the same reason, he couldn't shoot me while we were wrestling in the snow, or while we stood there talking. There would have been signs of a struggle.

SO IT was entirely possible that I had been tracked through the woods by a killer. After all, Patterson was not entirely in the clear regarding Babs Royce's murder. And he had been lurking in the cross-corridor when Emory Weir and I ran into him.

For all I knew, Patterson might have known the woman—dapper, good-looking Dr. Patterson. And if he had trailed me with the gun he claimed was missing, it was entirely possible that he would make another attempt. But why kill me? The answer was so obvious I had to smile.

If I were found dead, with a gun in my hand and an apparently self-inflicted death wound in my head, it would be a confession that I, a mental case, had murdered Babs Royce. Simple! The newspapers would announce:

INSANE KILLER TAKES OWN LIFE

I went into the bathroom and started the hot water in the tub. Bonnie had suggested getting evidence against someone else, evidence that would offset the purely circumstantial evidence against me.

Fine. Get evidence. But how? One just didn't gather clues like a handful of snow. And suppose there were no clues? It was entirely possible that even the police would fail to find a clue to the murderer's identity. That is, a clue pointing to anyone other than myself!

Questions? Somehow, I didn't feel quite clever enough to concoct leading questions which would actually trap anyone. They might even refuse to answer. Then what?

I began unbuttoning my shirt. My hands were all thumbs, and the button popped off

my left cuff and fell into the tub. I stood rigid for several moments, staring down at it, while an idea fought for room to expand in my mind.

Shirt button. Shirt button. Men lose shirt buttons in the darndest—

And then, just like that, the plan took shape in my mind. I couldn't force people to answer my questions. I couldn't be the masterful sleuth who uncovers strange and mysterious bits of evidence. But I could force a showdown, if I didn't fumble my play.

I turned off the water and picked the button out of the tub and opened the drain. I went into the bedroom and saw that it was only a few minutes until dinner, at seven. It would be better if I went down a few minutes late.

I got an envelope from the writing desk and put the loose button inside and sealed the flap. Change clothes? No. It would add realism if I appeared just as they had last seen me.

I rolled my shirt sleeves halfway to my elbows to hide my buttonless cuff. I sloshed a bit of whiskey on the front of my shirt. A glance at the mirror revealed perspiration-matted hair and a stubble of beard. Satisfied, I put the envelope in a pocket and left the room.

The others were already at their tables in the dining room when I paused in the doorway. I made my stare just a trifle belligerent as I looked about. When I was certain that all eyes were upon me, I lurched toward Bonnie's table. Her face was chalk-white, expressionless. She had never seen me like this. Then she smiled and made a little gesture with one hand.

"I was beginning to think you weren't coming down," she said clearly.

ACTING, trying desperately to pass off my disheveled condition as though she were quite accustomed to it. But I, too, must put on an act.

"Y'knew well enough I'll be down," I said loudly. "I told you I'd be down, didn't I?"

She managed to hold her smile, though I knew that my words were like knives twisting into her heart.

I sat down heavily and folded my arms on the table.

"Why didn't you wait?" I asked. "Didn't I say I'd be down?"

The others were watching us, listening. Bonnie's cheeks were flushed now.

"Please, Andy, not so loud," she said. "I'm sorry—"

I made a disgusted gesture with my hand and managed to upset my water glass.

"What's the matter?" I complained. "Maybe you don't want to eat with me. Maybe you think I'm not dressed in the best of taste."

Patterson was at my side by then.

"Suppose we go upstairs and finish our little talk, Reid?" he said.

I stood up, overturning my chair.

"The devil with you and your little talk. I'm fed up with you. What d'you think of that?"

He shrugged. "Let's go into the other room and talk it over, Reid."

He put a hand on my arm. I pushed him back.

"Keep your paws off me!"

He gripped my arm again. "Now see here—"

"That'll be enough from both of you," Stuart Ames said, stepping between us.

I threw a wild punch at him, missing intentionally. As I floundered to regain my balance, Ames put his thick arms around my chest and literally carried me out of the dining room. Of course, everyone followed.

Ames slammed me against a wall and stepped back.

"Be quiet now!"

Emory Weir and Sid Kirby and Lyman Phelps were standing behind him. Mrs. Phelps was with Bonnie in the doorway. Patterson had stopped to speak to them, and was walking toward me.

"All right," I said, "but it'll be a different story when the police get here and I give them this!"

I jerked the envelope from my pocket and waved it.

"What's that?" Ames asked.

I shook it so they could hear the button inside.

"Hear that? It's something I picked up in Babs Royce's room this noon while you fellows were so busy making accusations! And when I give it to the police, somebody's going to jail—and it won't be me!" I shook the envelope again and put it back in my pocket. "Wanted me to make explanations, didn't you?" I laughed, looking at Patterson. "Wanted me to answer a lot of questions. Well, I've got all the answers. And when I tell the police what I know, what Babs told me last night—"

Sid Kirby moved forward, just one quick step, and smashed his fist into my face. Fortunately, I had seen the blow coming in time to roll my head enough to break most of the jolt. I wanted to strike back. Instead, I forced myself to sag against the wall, one hand on my jaw.

Then Ames and Patterson were holding Kirby, and Kirby was shouting:

"You dirty, rotten—"

EMORY WEIR had not moved. His bald head was filmed with perspiration, glistening beneath the lights. Lyman Phelps was smiling thinly, nodding his head.

I straightened, mumbling: "That's okay. That's all right, Kirby. No hard feelings,

Kirby." Then I pushed past them and went up the stairway.

I was at the mirror, examining a slight cut on my lower lip when Bonnie entered our room. She closed the door and leaned against it, watching me. I faced her, grinning.

"Made a fine spectacle of myself, didn't I?"

She didn't answer. Her eyebrows were drawn together, her eyes narrowed.

"Throw a few things into a bag and go down and tell Ames to give you another room for the night," I said.

Bonnie came toward me, slowly. "What are you up to now, Andy?" She was staring into my eyes. "You aren't tight. You were putting on an act down there. I know it now. What are you—"

"Don't ask questions," I told her. "See Ames and get another room for the night."

"I won't do anything until you've told me what's going on," she said.

"For Pete's sake, Bonnie!" I put my hands on her shoulders and shook her gently. "Do as I say, please! And don't even hint, to *anyone*, that I'm not staggering."

There was a knock at the door. It would be Patterson. It had to be Patterson.

I stepped away from Bonnie and took the liquor bottle off the stand.

"Fine!" I bawled. "That suits me fine! Get another room. Go on—clear out!"

The knock was repeated. I winked at Bonnie and went to the door, carrying the bottle.

It was Patterson all right. He thrust the door wide open and stepped inside before I could speak.

"I want to talk with you, Reid," he said.

"Well, I don't want to talk to you," I sneered, and sprawled in a chair.

CHAPTER X

MAN IN THE DARK



BEYING my instructions, Bonnie had thrown a Gladstone on the bed, and was hurriedly gathering a few things from the dresser.

Patterson watched her for a moment, then faced me.

"This won't do."

"The devil it won't," I cut in, leaning forward. "You mind your own business. I'll handle mine."

"This is my business, Reid," he said, and sat down on a straight chair near me. Bonnie was closing her bag. "I thought we reached an understanding this evening."

"Rats," I said.

Bonnie was at the door now. She looked at me and said:

"I'll see you in the morning, Andy."

Patterson was hunched forward, staring

at the floor. I winked at Bonnie and motioned her out of the room.

"Sure, sure." I laughed. "Drop in anytime."

Then she was gone, and Patterson had not said a word to stop her!

I put the bottle on the floor.

"Well, that's that," I said.

"Why don't you lie down and think it over?" Patterson asked.

"There's nothing to think about," I said, trying to sound weary. I rubbed my forehead. "Beaut of a headache."

Patterson took the glass vial from his pocket and shook three pink pills into my hand.

"This'll fix you up," he said.

Yes, I thought, they'll "fix me up"—for about twelve hours!

"Thanks," I said, and went into the bathroom.

"Warm water," Patterson called.

I gave him plenty of sound effects—the rattling of glass and the gushing of water—and dropped the pills into a pocket. Then I stepped to the doorway as I lifted an empty palm to my mouth and followed it with a drink. I walked into the bedroom and set the half-empty glass on the stand.

"Lie down and you'll soon be okay," Patterson said, standing up.

I nodded. "All right. Guess I made a fool of myself downstairs, didn't I?"

"Nothing of the sort," he told me, going to the door. "Now lie down."

I did, and he left the room.

It was almost eight o'clock. And I began to question the wisdom of my plan. I got up and made the rounds. The windows were locked, and there was no way anyone could get up to them from the outside without a ladder.

I took an orange stick from Bonnie's manicure kit and propped it almost upright against the unlocked door. Then I sprawled on the bed in the dark, without removing my clothing, and with the liquor bottle in my right hand.

He came at 1:20 A.M.—much later than I had expected. My legs and hips and shoulders ached from lying motionless in my still-damp clothing. I had not shifted my gaze from the door for more than a few seconds at any time except to glance at the clock.

NEVERTHELESS, I almost sprang from the bed when I heard the faint click of the orange stick falling to the floor. I had not seen even a thread of light from the corridor to indicate that the door had been opened. I thought, for the space of several pulse beats, that my anticipation, my imagination—

Then the door closed with an almost in-

audible click, and I realized that he had switched off the corridor lights to prevent them from betraying his entrance. But had he come into the room, or had he suspected my wakefulness and gone away?

I lay there rigid, holding my breath, trying to hear something—to hear anything but the slam of my heart and the moan of the wind. The dark wood of the wall would provide perfect background for anyone standing near the door.

No, he hadn't gone. He was there in the room with me. I heard him breathing, slowly, deeply. And strangely enough, it occurred to me that he should be able to hear my breathing.

I sighed, and forced myself to breathe as I knew a sleeping man would—a sleeping drunk, thoroughly doped.

He came toward me. I couldn't see him, couldn't hear anything except his breathing. I gripped the liquor bottle and waited. He would bend over the bed—I was sprawled in the exact center—and put the gun almost against my right temple. That would carry out the suicide angle.

He was beside the bed now, suddenly, as though he had shot up from the floor. I could see his bulk against the grayness of the window—too much bulk to be Patterson.

His right hand touched mine, removed the bottle. Then, when I showed no sign of being awake, he chuckled softly. I don't know why I didn't move, why I didn't do something. I felt as though my mind had moved out of my skull and left my body a helpless shell. I had intended to brain him with the bottle when he bent over the bed. Instead, I had let him remove my only weapon!

He was putting something in my right hand, closing my fingers around it.

The gun!

That was it. I would actually be holding the gun when he squeezed the trigger. And my hand would show powder marks and be clamped tight about the gun butt in the grip of death! No one would be permitted to touch my body, and the police would say, "Suicide!"

He was bending my arm at the elbow, slowly, gently, bringing the gun muzzle nearer my head.

I ripped my hand from his grasp and rolled to the left. There was a startled grunt, a curse. I was on my back then, on the floor beside the bed. He dived almost entirely over the bed, and for one heart-stopping moment was directly above me. I could even see that he was wearing a hat, jammed down over his ears.

I lifted the gun and squeezed the trigger and he came down on top of me. I don't think he moved, but I'm not sure because I kept on squeezing the trigger after he landed on me. I twisted from beneath him

and realized the gun was empty. My hand touched his head and I used it as a finder, striking with the gun again and again.

THEN, the lights were on and big Emory Weir and Sid Kirby were pulling me away, to my feet. My hands were flecked with blood, and there was blood on my face. I saw it on the sides of my nose—the blood of Stuart Ames.

He was crumpled beside the bed. Part of his face was gone, and his shirt was smoldering from the flame of the gun. Kirby stooped and pinched out the sparks, and then the room was suddenly filled with gabbing people.

Patterson gave a sharp exclamation and pushed past us to kneel beside Ames' body.

One of the women—Mrs. Weir or Mrs. Phelps—began crying and somebody led her from the room.

Bonnie was there, too, with her arms tight around me.

It wasn't too difficult to figure out, when Patterson and Lyman Phelps and Emory Weir and I went to Stuart Ames' rooms in the Lake Wing. The explanation was there in a bureau drawer—snapshots of Ames and Babs Royce with their arms about each other.

"Ames told us that she was up here last summer," Patterson said. "They got together then."

I faced Emory Weir. "She told you about this lodge, didn't she?"

He nodded. "Yeah. She told me that, but she didn't say anything about Ames. I wanted a rest, and the first place that popped into my mind was this lodge. So I brought the wife up for a couple weeks."

"And you phoned her from here," Patterson said.

"That's right," Weir admitted. "But I didn't ask her to follow me. I just—just called her up."

I think we all believed him.

Phelps had been watching me. He ground his cigarette stub into a tray and said:

"Maybe I ought to apologize for making things look bad for you, Reid."

My heart leaped. Had he lied about seeing me enter Babs Royce's room?

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Heck," he said, "I knew that you were just helping her after that tumble. Sorry I tried to make it look like something else."

Patterson and I traded glances.

"What tumble?" he asked.

"Miss Royce was coming up the stairs ahead of Reid," Phelps said, "when she tripped and twisted her ankle and fell. Reid gathered up her things—her handbag had popped open—and helped her to her room. That's all there was to it."

Which explained the compact in my coat pocket!

"I'm beginning to get the picture," I said. "She followed Weir, probably intending to play him against Ames. It didn't work. Ames was too shrewd. Yesterday morning, he went to her room and they argued. He struck her. Remember the blood on her lips? They struggled then, and Ames strangled her.

"When he saw that Weir and Kirby and I were in difficult positions, Ames decided to kill one of us and make it look like suicide. He stole the gun from your room, Patterson. This evening I forced his hand by pretending to have evidence in that envelope which would point to the killer. Ames feared that he had dropped something during the struggle with Babs Royce."

"I saw him after I left your room tonight," Patterson said. "I told him that I'd given you a sedative."

"And he knew Mrs. Reid wouldn't be in the room," I said, "so he came up to get that envelope and close my mouth."

"But what about those screams we heard yesterday morning?" Phelps asked. "Who was that?"

I HAPPENED to be looking at Emory Weir.

His face flushed.

"It was Mrs. Weir!" I blurted. Weir looked as though he were going to protest, but I went on: "Yes, Mrs. Weir was the one who screamed, and you, Weir—you came out and helped me investigate!"

Weir rubbed a huge hand over his perspiring bald head.

"That's right. She has nightmares. Sometimes she screams like that, and even when I wake her she always screams again. Something like having a dream about a dream." He smiled wryly. "I came out and went with you because—well, I didn't want

you people to think I was beating my wife."

We went downstairs to the lounge, where Kirby was sitting with Bonnie and Mrs. Phelps and Mrs. Weir, Patterson stood with his back to the fireplace and told them what we had discovered, and what we believed was the answer.

Later, I motioned Patterson aside.

"Want to apologize for—well, for the way I've acted."

"That isn't why you want to apologize," he said, and there was laughter in his eyes. "You expected me to visit you tonight to finish the job I muffed in the woods."

I managed a feeble nod and felt just a bit silly.

"Forget it, Reid," he said. "I'd have been suspicious, too. Anyway, that was a fine piece of bluffing at dinner, and in your room."

"A darned fine piece of shooting, too," Bonnie said from behind me. Her cheeks were a bit pale, but she was smiling as she slipped her arm through mine.

"Excellent—for a man with a serious nervous condition," Patterson said. His voice dripped sarcasm.

I smiled. "I think I like the cure you suggested."

"We can't stay here any longer, Andy," Bonnie said. "Let's try the Pictured Rocks."

"Impossible," I cut in. "We're leaving for Detroit as soon as possible. There's a war being fought, my good woman, and boats to be built, and motors to drive them. And I've a few ideas I've wanted to try—revolutionary ideas. Now I'm going to try them. One is a motor—"

Bonnie clamped a hand over my mouth. "Sh-h-h-h! It's a naval secret!"

Patterson snapped his fingers and said, "Bingo, goes another patient," and walked away laughing.



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MEMPHIS BLUES

By FRANK JOHNSON

A corpse, a hand grenade and a blood-stained rose!

JOHN NELSON hesitated at the door of his hotel room, key in hand, and frowned. He was sure he had closed and locked the door less than an hour earlier before going down to dinner. But now it stood ajar. Of course, there could be a dozen legitimate reasons for the door being open, but Nelson knew there was no maid service at this hour and he didn't



JOHN NELSON

believe in any other possible explanation. Not with his set-up.

He stepped warily into the room and looked around sharply. Nobody there. He closed and locked the door from the inside intending hastily to search the place. As he turned something slipped from under the edge of his sole and rolled across the rug. He stared down. Then his eyes widened incredulously.

Reaching down, he picked up the object. It was a black pearl. Which was ridiculous, of course. So he slipped a jeweler's eyeglass from his pocket, fitted it to his eye and examined the lustrous pebble. It was

a genuine black pearl, all right—one of the largest and most perfect he had ever seen.

"So my room is somebody's oyster, eh?" he reflected grimly. "And I don't know a soul in Memphis, Tennessee. Thorne will be interested in this."

Pocketing both pearl and eyeglass, Nelson proceeded to examine the room. As he went to open the door of a closet he noticed a foot protruding from under the bed. Instantly Nelson's hand snatched out an automatic from his shoulder holster. At that moment John Nelson looked like a well-dressed, dark-haired and very dangerous man.

"All right, guy," he said in a hard, flat voice. "You can come out now. Your street car is waiting at the corner."

There was no reaction from the man under the bed. Nelson promptly reached out with one muscular leg and gave the side of the bed a vigorous thrust. The piece of furniture rolled away, revealing the supine body of a man. That empurpled, congested face and a slightly protruding tongue told a grim story. He was dead.

The corpse wasn't a pretty object. A thin silver wire had been used to garrote him. Sunk almost to invisibility below the skin surface, enough of it showed at the side where it was wrapped and twisted around a satiny cylinder of black wood to apprise Nelson that the wire was a string from a musical instrument. It looked like a string from a tenor banjo.

But that wasn't the crowning horror and shock of the discovery for Nelson. John Nelson had said he didn't know anybody in Memphis. He had been wrong about that, for he recognized the dead man. It was Harold Thorne, the jewel collector. Thorne was supposed to be in St. Louis. And he was never going to be interested in anything on earth again.

"Everything happens to me," muttered Nelson as he reholstered his gun. "Even if Thorne didn't like me, getting himself killed in my room was overdoing it."

NELSON knelt down. He felt the corpse's forehead and found the flesh was just beginning to cool. So Thorne had been neatly dispatched here in this Memphis hotel room within the last hour. Which

brought on a whole of a lot of complications that placed John Nelson in a very nasty situation.

He walked over and sat down in an easy chair near the open window. It was a warm, balmy night but Nelson wasn't paying any attention to the weather. He had to do some quick and heavy thinking.

First, there was his connection with Thorne. Next, there was the handle used on the garroting wire. While he couldn't be sure without a thorough examination, Nelson was almost positive it was the ebony case which had contained the Black Dragon pearls he was supposed to get from Jacques. And finally there was the item of the black pearl he had found on the floor.

A rapid knocking sounded on the corridor door. Nelson listened, thought of the police, then looked at the corpse and felt quite unhappy about the whole thing. While he was debating whether or not to lie doggo, the knock was repeated, and a lovely feminine voice spoke from outside the door.

"Mr. Nelson!" it called. "Please let me in. I've got to see you. It's terribly important!"

Rolling the bed back over the gruesome object on the floor, Nelson walked over and opened the door. A decidedly pretty girl, with neatly coiffured black hair, stood there. In her hand she held a dark red rose. Nelson decided that evidently he was all kinds of a liar. He knew a lot of people in Memphis—at least, they knew him. For the girl's eyes lighted up with recognition, and she stepped quickly into the room. She was dressed in a white evening gown that revealed she had a nice figure.

"Mr. Nelson," she said, her anxious brown eyes fastened on his rugged features, "you've simply got to help me."

"No doubt you want a vase for your American Beauty," he said ironically, as he glanced at the rose in her hand.

"This is not an American Beauty," she said slowly. "It is a Marechal Niel."

"Most Marechal Niels are yellow, I thought," Nelson said.

"This one is yellow. It's—it's covered with blood!" she whispered.

She shuddered violently and simply wilted where she stood. If Nelson hadn't reached out and caught her, she would have crumpled to the floor. He lifted her in his strong arms, saw that she had honestly fainted and placed her gently on the bed. The rose she still held made a dark smear on the counterpane.

"Nice going, Mr. Nelson," he said softly. "Your dead employer under the bed and a strange girl with a blood-stained rose on top of it. A black pearl in your pocket, and you without the slightest idea what it's all about. All you need to complete the nightmare is a Molotov cocktail."

Then he started violently. For in her other hand, the unconscious girl gripped a Russian hand grenade! And that often had been ironically called a Molotov cocktail.

"So she came looking for you, Nelson," said a suave voice from the open door of the room. "I wondered where she had gone."

Nelson whirled, hand reaching for the gun in his holster. Despite its smoothness, there had been a nasty note in that voice. He relaxed as he recognized the man who stepped into the room. The visitor closed the door quietly behind him.

It was Henri Jacques, amateur musician, and owner of the Black Dragon pearls. He was a small man with bright dark eyes and a neatly trimmed goatee. He walked over and seated himself in a chair not far from the bed.

"Who is she?" Nelson nodded to the unconscious girl. "Where did she get the rose and the hand grenade?"

"A Miss Peggy Morton," said Jacques. "I saw her come rushing out of her room a few minutes ago with the rose and the hand grenade." He glanced at the pineapple-shaped object in the girl's left hand. "For our sake I hope that thing is a dud."

"Good gosh! I never thought of that."

Nelson leaped to the bed and picked up the hand grenade. It was surprisingly light and apparently unloaded. Nelson took it to the table lamp and examined it carefully.

"This is harmless," he said.

"I feel much better." Jacques was staring at the floor. "Does the gentleman under the bed happen to be dead?"

Nelson nodded. Just then the girl moaned and opened her eyes. Henri Jacques raised his eyebrows.

"Why did you kill him?" Jacques asked.

"I didn't," said Nelson. "And I'm no oil painting waiting to be framed either."

"Oh, I'm sorry." Peggy Morton sat up and looked at the two men. "I must have fainted." She glanced at the rose that she still held in her hand, shuddered and dropped it. "I found the rose lying on the floor of my room covered with blood."

"So you grabbed it and the grenade and came looking for me," said Nelson. "Why, Miss Morton?"

THE girl looked at him in surprise. "Someone told me you were a detective. I thought the bloodstained rose and the hand grenade in my room were mysterious. It struck me you might be able to help me, Mr. Nelson."

"Who told you I was a detective?" asked Nelson. He did not look at the girl. He was staring at what appeared to be chicken feathers on one of Jacques's neatly pressed trousers legs. "Do you remember?"

"Why, yes." The girl nodded. "It was

this gentleman here, Mr. Jacques."

"I see," John Nelson smiled. "Suppose we talk things over and find out just what this is all about, Jacques. Why are you here now?"

"As I understand it you are here in Memphis as Harold Thorne's representative," said Jacques. "Thorne hired you to come to this city because he was going to be busy in St. Louis. Am I right?"

"You are so far," Nelson said. "I was to see you and offer you fifty thousand dollars for the Black Dragon pearls. Mr. Thorne wanted them for his jewel collection. I phoned you before dinner tonight and told you why I was here. You agreed to see me in the morning."

"That's true," said Jacques. "But when I discovered that the pearls were missing—"

"Missing!" interrupted Nelson. "You mean someone stole them?"

"Someone did," said Henri Jacques. "And even though they are insured for full value I dislike having them stolen. So I came to see you."

"That's interesting," Nelson frowned. "You mean you suspect me of stealing the pearls?"

"I haven't said so—yet." Henri Jacques' expression was not nice. "But since you murdered Thorne I wouldn't put it past you, Nelson."

"Murder!" exclaimed Peggy who had been listening tensely. "Who was murdered?"

"The man lying under the bed," said Jacques coldly.

Peggy barely managed to suppress a scream. She leaped to her feet and hastily moved away from the bed.

"Thorne didn't like me," said Nelson. "I was surprised when he hired me to try and buy the pearls from you, Jacques."

"Which was why he must have come here himself," Jacques said. "Evidently he decided he preferred to deal with me direct. He came to your room here in the hotel. Perhaps he fired you. Or he may have discovered that you stole the pearls from me and accused you of it."

"And then?" asked Nelson quietly as Jacques paused.

"Then you murdered him," said Jacques. "It seems to me it is time we sent for the police."

"You're right." Nelson looked at the girl. "Would you mind going to your room, Miss Morton and phoning for the police from there? I want Mr. Jacques to have a look at the body before the police arrive and it will not be a pleasant sight."

"Of course," said Peggy as she walked to the door. "I'll call the police at once."

She left the room, closing the door behind her. Nelson pulled the bed aside, revealing

the body. Henri Jacques sat staring at the corpse. Nelson spent some time searching around the room, but did not find what he was looking for, so he stopped and spoke.

"You are quite right, Jacques," said Nelson. "Obviously Thorne came here to the hotel tonight looking for me. When he discovered I was not in my room, he must have had a bellboy bring him up here and let him in with a pass key. Then he probably phoned you and had you come to see him here."

"Go on," said Jacques. "I'm interested in your alibi, Nelson."

"You brought the Black Dragon pearls along with you," went on Nelson. "But Thorne was smarter than you'd thought he would be. He discovered that the pearls were artificial, with the possible exception of one or two which were real."

"Pure guesswork," said Jacques coldly. "Your alibi sounds rather weak."

"When Thorne discovered you were trying to trick him, the two of you got into a fight. You found a chance to slip a banjo string around his throat and strangle him. Then you tied the empty case that had contained the pearls to the end of the wire. In the struggle with Thorne you dropped one of the real pearls on the floor. I found that one."

"You're very clever, Nelson." A gun suddenly appeared in Jacques' hand covering the other man. "In fact, you've guessed too closely to the truth! But what about the girl and the blood-stained rose?"

"That was pure hokum on your part." Nelson grinned ironically. "You told her I was a detective. Later you planted the blood-stained rose and the hand grenade in her room hoping she would ask me to investigate—just as she did. You wanted her to come barging in here and find me alone with Thorne's body."

"Nonsense," said Jacques. "Thorne didn't bleed. Where did I get the blood?"

"Evidently from a chicken you killed," said Nelson. "The feathers are still on your trousers leg."

"You've been too smart, Nelson." Henri Jacques got to his feet. "I killed Thorne. The whole thing happened just as you have said. But I am the only one who will ever know it. When the police arrive you will be dead!"

NELSON was still holding the hand grenade in his fingers. He suddenly flung it. The missile caught the little man squarely in the face and knocked him flat. Jacques' gun roared harmlessly; the bullet plowing into a wall.

John Nelson had his automatic out and was covering Jacques with the gun as the door opened and the police walked in.

"There are times when you can learn a

lot by listening outside of a door," said the police lieutenant in charge. "We have been out in the hall for quite a few minutes and we heard Jacques admit he was the murderer."

"Good!" said Nelson. "Jacques evidently had already sold most of the Black Dragon pearl collection and had substitute imitations made. He planned to claim that I killed Thorne and stole the real pearls. He hoped to collect the insurance on them that way."

"And you didn't let him get away with it," said the lieutenant as two of his men grabbed Jacques. "Is that it, Mr. Nelson?"

"That's right," Nelson nodded. "You see Jacques was right when he told the girl that I am a detective. I'm the investigator

for the company that insured the pearls. Thorne hired me to buy the pearls for him and I came here to do that."

He reached down and picked up the hand grenade. The lieutenant frowned.

"What's the idea of that thing?" asked the police official.

"You'll find the imitation pearls in this," said Nelson, as he unfastened the top and shook out a bag containing the black pebbles. "Jacques had to have some place to hide them after he showed them to Thorne. So he placed them in the grenade, which he'd probably been using for a paperweight. He didn't think they would be found there." Nelson smiled. "If he had succeeded in framing me I sure would have had the Memphis Blues!"

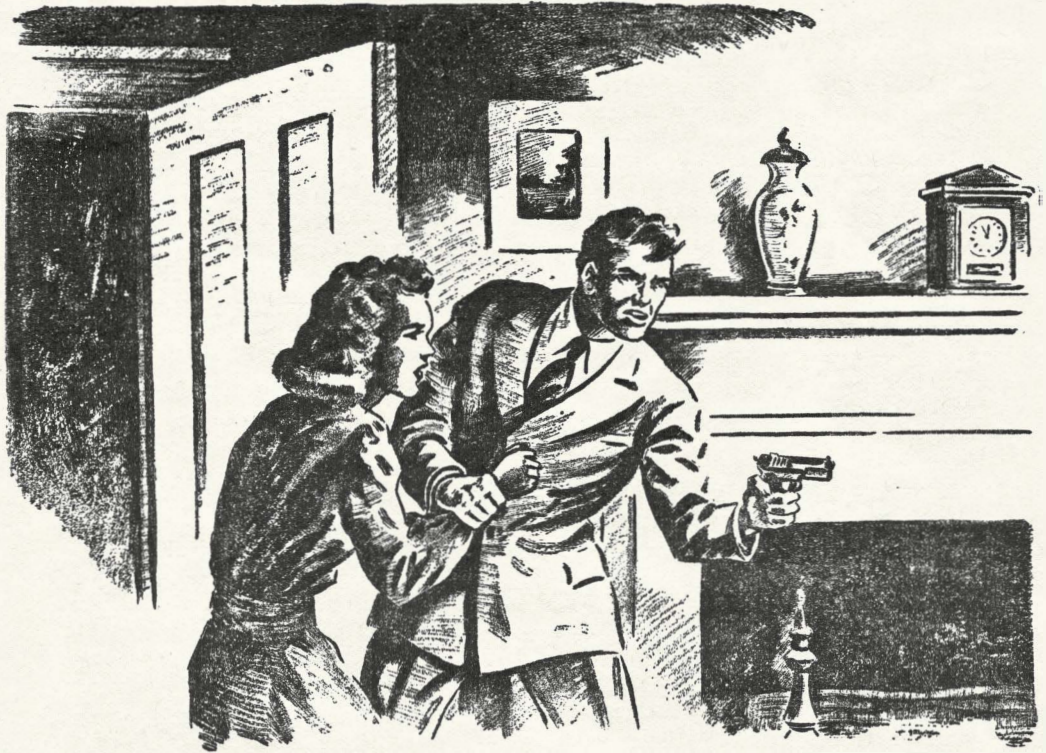


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Death Before Defense

By W. T. BALLARD

CHAPTER I

No ROUGH STUFF

THE Fellowship party was in full swing as I turned from the elevator and left my coat and hat at the checkroom. If you've never been to a party given by a defense manufacturer for his employees, you have no idea what it was like.

You meet all kinds of people at these parties. Anyone who punches a time clock on any of the three shifts is invited, and most of them come.

Manpower is hard to get, and you find everyone from actors to rag peddlers working in war factories. Some good shows have been put on at the parties by workers whose names are well-known in the entertainment field.

Edmonds was in charge of the entertainment for this one, and she had roped me

in as magician. Not that I'm well-known, but I used to play the carnivals at one period in my career.

As a matter of fact, I've done about everything you can name, at one time or another. My personnel file at the plant mentions acting, truck driving, newspaper work, construction work and a hitch as a cop. After that, they got tired of writing.

Edmonds met me just inside the wide door of the big warehouse loft that was being used as a ballroom. She was watching the milling mob on the floor and a worried frown clouded her usually smiling face. She turned as I stopped beside her and looked straight into my eyes. She was that tall.

"Hello, beautiful." She stole my greeting neatly. "Dance with me, Mr. Wilson."

I groaned and put my arms up. "Take me away for a dime, honey. I'm all yours."

She did just that. I didn't have a chance to lead her. She swung me into the moving

A SMASHING COMPLETE MYSTERY NOVELET

A killer may make use of card sharps and mobsters in carrying out his grim murder plans—but what chance has he against an impromptu sleuth who has magic in his bag of tricks!

I made a lunge, got the gangster's neck in my hands, and Elmer couldn't shoot for fear of hitting his boss.



crowd and started in a purposeful way through it.

"Hey!" I laughed. "I thought you said dance."

"Quit griping, Ronnie," she told me, "and watch her. The little fool."

I tightened my arms around her. "I'd rather watch you. You're beautiful. Who you talking about?"

"Myrna," she said. "That little red-headed idiot mooning at the Caesar Romero over there."

I leaned forward and kissed her. "My, my, could this be jealousy?"

Suddenly she looked at me with the direct stare that always made my heart act like a block buster.

"Come out of it, Andy. Be serious for a minute. Myrna's the girl I told you about, my roommate, and what she's dancing with is that oil slick from the drafting department. Now, what are you going to do about it?"

IT WASN'T that I'd forgotten. I just liked to rib Edmonds, she was so lovely to look at when she was mad. I turned so that I could see the redhead and deForest. A glance was enough. He was tall, too well-dressed, and he handled himself with the sureness of a cat. Phony was written all over him.

I whistled a low wolf call. "So you want him taken apart? Have you got anything definite on him?"

Edmonds nodded and fished in the pocket of the dirndl she wore.

"I found these cards in his overcoat," she said, completely unashamed of having gone through it. "They're marked, and the seal was fixed back. Doesn't that tab him as a crooked gambler?"

"I guess it does, honey. Have you showed them to Myrna?"

"No," said Edmonds. "She hasn't spoken to me tonight. She's sore because I told her to be careful."

"Okay," I gave her a little pat. "Go get your show started, and put me on first. I think I've got a little magic that will impress the lady. Wait, give me the cards."

She handed the deck to me, and I made my way to the little stage that had been built at one end of the hall. I'd been a dealer for a while on one of the gambling boats out West, and marked cards I didn't like.

I started my spiel, and did a few tricks to pull the crowd in, watching deForest follow the redhead toward me. When he was close enough, I called to him.

"You there, Mister. Come on up here. I need an assistant in this next exposition of the amazing fact that the hand is quicker than the eye. Step right up—that's right. Now, stand right here while I—"

I reached over and fanned a handful of

cards out from behind his ear.

The crowd laughed. They were in a gay mood, and deForest was looking a little sulky. He was perfect bait. I gave him a couple of glasses of water to hold on the backs of his hands, and went into the old undressing act. I got his tie off, and the crowd giggled. I pulled out the front of his shirt, and there were guffaws. But when I pretended to reach for his trousers, he couldn't take it any longer.

He jumped back, and the glasses went where they always do. I swept my hand forward through his hair and left it sticking on end. The crowd went wild, and deForest stood raging, not knowing quite what had happened.

"It's okay," I said. "Everything's okay. All in the spirit of fun." I brushed helpfully at his coat, then stopped. "Oh—oh, what's this? You're a card fancier yourself? Well, well, let's look."

Apparently I had taken his own deck from his pocket. I broke the seal so that everyone knew it, pulled out the cards and started to shuffle them. Suddenly I laughed.

"Hey, gang, look. Another magician. It's a shaved deck." And I held the pack so that the trimmed cards came loose with a little shaking, and fluttered in sudden silence to the floor.

I was watching the guy closely. I'd seen his kind before and they can be dangerous when cornered. I wouldn't have been surprised if he'd had a knife in a little case at the back of his neck.

His face lost all color and his black eyes burned.

"I'll remember this, Wilson," he said, then he turned and pushed his way through the crowd.

Someone at my elbow let out a lot of breath with a whooshing sound and I turned to see Edmonds at my elbow.

"What's the matter, hep-cat? Strangled?"

"DeForest's treacherous," she said. "And that ain't good. The guy's been using the Fellowship Society to promote card games, and he's taken the boys for plenty. He isn't going to thank you for showing him up."

I used a finger to poke against her nose. "Think nothing of it, chick. The little deal hasn't come along that's too rugged for Ronald Wilson to take care of, himself. But tell me, is there enough dough around the plant to interest a good card man? I might get out my case and deal a few myself."

"Ixnay," she told me. "Try that and I'll make you over into a permanent Four F. Come on, dance with mamma, and remind me sometime to say thanks for what you did."

"Look," I said. "You've got your platter playing on the wrong juke box. I did it for the little redhead. Where is she?"

I turned and pretended to be looking around the hall. Actually, I didn't care what

happened to this Myrna. She wasn't even a telephone number in my life.

I caught a glimpse of her anyhow. She had been leaving the floor, but before she reached the entrance a man came through the door and stopped her.

I couldn't hear what was said. The band had started up again and the whole mob was dancing. I couldn't even see her face plainly, but I could see the man she was talking to, and I recognized him. It was Bill Drew.

NOT that I knew young Drew, you understand. He was the boss' son, and as such I'd seen him around the plant. He had some sort of a job up in the front office, and I'd have suspected that it was a soft-cushion affair, except for the long red scar which marked one side of his face.

A piece of Japanese flak had given him that, and it was only a few months since the Army had pinned a medal on his chest and given him an honorable discharge. You've got to respect a man who can bring home a burning bomber and set it down in a three-point landing.

"Brother!" I said, fastening my fingers on Edmonds' arms, "Maybe I should better hold onto you, my sweet, even if you are not no lady."

"I am a lady," she insisted. "I wear slacks to work. But what brought on this sudden surge of affection?"

"Competition," I explained. "I had a yen for Myrna, but I can't play in that league. I'm no hero. The Army didn't give me any hardware for dropping that concrete block on my foot."

Edmonds wasn't listening. Instead she had turned and looked around until she had found Myrna, and I watched the frown crease the smooth forehead.

"What's the matter? Do you think your girl friend is too good for the Drew millions?"

"What do you mean, millions? The kid makes thirty-five a week. Haven't you heard about the Golden Rule Policy this shop is run under? Young Drew sold the idea to his dad. Not one cent goes to him or his family. All of it is being put aside in a fund to keep the company going after the war, so there will be jobs for all."

"I'd take him with no dough at all," I told her. "That is a good boy. So stop mothering the redhead. She looks like a big girl now. Besides, she's gone."

Edmonds started for the door, but I dragged her back. "Look, woman. Let's get this straight. You can run my life. You can even run your own, if you ask me very nicely every time you want to do anything. But I will not have you mixing in the neighbors' business. Right?"

She looked angry for a moment, then she smiled.

"Okay, short, light and scrawny."

"I'll show you who's scrawny," I said. "Come on, let's see how my bruised foot can stand up."

We started to dance, but I wasn't so good, and after half an hour I was ready to call quits.

Edmonds turned the show over to her committee, and we ducked.

Outside it was cold, with a spring wind blowing that must have come directly from the North Pole.

I turned up my collar and took Edmonds' arm.

Maybe if my collar had been down I would have seen him, but I doubt it. It was pretty dark along that section of the street. As it was, I had no warning until the club fell. It struck me on the point of the shoulder, numbing my whole arm. Then, before I could do anything, he bounced it off my head.

I went down, and he proceeded to give me a lovely beating. I think he'd have killed me then and there if it hadn't been for Edmonds.

She started to scream, and lit into him like a wildcat who sees someone making off with its dinner.

He probably could have handled her. I was helpless. My arm was still numb and my head felt like a planetarium, there were so many stars. It was her yells which scared him, and well they might, for the whole crowd came tumbling from the dancehall.

DeForest dropped his club, turned and ran like the devil. Edmonds took two steps after him, changed her mind, came back and helped me to my feet just as the first of the dance crowd reached us.

They were full of questions and Edmonds answered them. She told them it was deForest. I was too sick to care or to try and shut her up.

"Wait till we get our mitts on that rat." I heard a man back in the crowd say. "He took me for twelve bucks in the game last night."

There was a general rumble from the crowd and I got the idea that deForest had clipped them all at one time or another and that it wouldn't be too healthy for the gentleman if he showed up at the plant in the morning.

The cops arrived. Some fool had put in a riot call, and I had the devil's own time to keep from entering a charge against deForest. Edmonds thought I was nuts. But then, she usually does.

"I'll take care of him myself," I told the cops. "Just skip it."

"They stared at me. 'No rough stuff, cousin.'"

"I'm not crazy," I said, and took Edmonds' arm to steady myself. "Let's get away from here. I need a drink."

CHAPTER II

A TORN NOTEBOOK



WAS dreaming that my head was a bronze bell and that deForest was beating it with a club. Then I came awake and realized that the ringing I heard was the telephone.

With a sigh, I dragged myself out of bed and found the light before I answered. There was a protesting squeak from Little Henry, the tail assembly midget who shared the apartment with me.

"Shooshoo, Ronnie, why don't you pick on women that sleep at night? Why the—"

"Shut up," I told him, and reached for the phone.

Edmonds' voice blasted at me. "Andy, what do you think that crazy kid has done now?"

"Stow it, honey." I said. "This is not the riddle hour."

"No, wait, Ronnie. Listen. Bill Drew brought her home early, and when I got in, she was packing. She said she was going to marry deForest, to show us all how wrong we were about him. She thinks you planted those cards on him. She won't believe he's a crook. She's gone. I couldn't stop her. She's gone to his apartment. Oh, Ronnie, help me! She's such a fool kid, she doesn't know what she's doing."

I sat down and tried to argue that it wasn't any of our business. If Myrna was that stupid, I said, let her go. But Edmonds had sold herself that the kid was just too young to think straight, so I finally gave up.

"Okay," I said. "I'll go pin his ears back and carry the gal to safety. You go to bed."

I stumbled into my clothes, still half asleep, and still sick from the beating deForest had given me. As I started for the door, Little Henry appeared, fully dressed. "Where are you going?" I said, startled.

"With you. You'll need protection if you are gonna tangle with that sharp again."

I almost laughed. He was a lot under five feet tall.

"You have a plan in mind?" I asked him.

He shrugged and opened the door. "I can anyways drive the get-away car, in case you have to murder the guy."

"It'll be your car then," I told him.

He had fixed his coupé up with trick pedals and a short seat, and I didn't quite believe it, watching him as we rode over to deForest's apartment hotel.

It was quite a way over, and when we pulled into the curb I yelled at Henry to wait there, and ran for the door. Edmonds had said it was Apartment Twenty-one, and I took the stairs two at a time.

There was a thread of light under the

door, and I knocked. A man's voice told me to come in, and I turned the handle and pushed the panel inward. Then I stopped.

DeForest was there all right. He lay on his back in the exact center of the floor, with a neat, blood-rimmed hole over his heart. Detective-lieutenant Tom Corker stood over him, watching my face as I took in the scene. There was another cop with him, and a third person, a girl, sitting in a chair by the window. I did a double take, and my stomach fell heavily. The girl was Edmonds.

Corker gave me a wolfish grin and nodded.

"Come in, Ronnie, and tell us how you just happened to come calling at this time of night." He made a point of emphasizing the "you," and I glanced at him, but my attention was on Edmonds.

I took a step forward and shut the door.

"What's she doing here?" I jerked my thumb at Edmonds.

She looked me straight in the eye. "I came over to see if I couldn't straighten out the—" she hesitated, and her voice fell to nearly a whisper—"the trouble he had with you tonight, Ronnie."

Somehow I managed to keep my face straight. Corker's unctuous voice cut through my daze.

"That's what she told us, Ronnie. And she says the man was dead when she got here. But she hasn't yet explained why she was searching his desk when we came in."

I didn't know where to start. I couldn't imagine Edmonds shooting the lug, but what if she had? If she had come looking for Myrna, it was conceivable that she'd had to defend herself against deForest, but why hadn't she said so? And by the way, where was Myrna? I didn't dare say anything until I knew what this was all about.

I turned to the big detective. "You didn't just happen here yourself. What brought you?"

He smiled at me. "A muffled voice on a telephone, which told me where to find the body. Look, Wilson," he said, turning brisk. "I heard about your beating. What did you do, come over here and kill him, and then have to come back for your gun?"

"My gun?" I said, and almost slapped my pocket to see if it was gone. "What gun?"

"He didn't do it," said a high voice from the doorway. "He's been in bed since an hour after the beating."

I SWUNG around, and at the moment I could have gladly choked Little Henry, for all he was trying to help me.

"I told you to stay in the car!" I shouted at him.

Corker chuckled, very pleased with him-

self. "My sakes, such a temper. Well, I guess that brings us back to the lady."

"No," I said. "It doesn't. You can't—"

"Can't what? Arrest her for murder? Just you watch and see."

I watched them take Edmonds down to the patrol car parked in front of the building. On my way in, I'd been in such a hurry that I hadn't even noticed it, and I cursed myself for an idiot.

Little Henry trotted sheepishly downstairs after us, but just as the cop who had hold of Edmonds' arm opened the car door for her, he ducked around and came up beside her, grabbing her hand.

"Gee, Miss Edmonds, I'm sorry. This is rugged, I mean. If there's anything I can do for you, lemme know, will you?"

Edmonds managed to smile and say "Thanks," before the cop blocked Little Henry off and herded her inside, then Henry bounced for his own car and kicked the motor to life. I ran for it, and managed to make the door just as he pulled away.

Little Henry gave all his attention to driving for a couple of blocks.

"You're not getting away from anything," I finally told him. "You've got a tail; you know."

He flashed me a grin. "So I've got a tail. So what? He's not in the car with us. Here, take a look at what the gal gave me, and find out why she didn't give it to the cop."

I accepted a tiny notebook from him, and held it close to the dashlight, flipping through the pages. What I found made me whistle.

"Brother!" I said. "This takes you out of the doghouse, but how. I think it'll even get Edmonds off the spot."

Most of the pages had been torn from the little book, and only one had any writing on it. But that one was dynamite. According to the notation in my hand, young Drew was in deForest's debt to the tune of twenty-five thousand dollars, and he only made thirty-five a week.

I guessed that it was a gambling debt, that deForest had taken the kid in his crooked game. It was easy to picture Drew boiling mad, seeing me expose deForest, and then having his redhead go rushing off to marry the crook. It was no trouble at all to imagine him going up to the apartment for a showdown with the gambler, and killing the man who had made such a fool of him.

I held the book up in front of Little Henry, and it was then I saw the patrol car cruising along beside us. I pulled my hand down hurriedly, but I was too late. The cop car nosed us over toward the curb, and Henry had to stop. A hard-looking guy in uniform stepped out, unclipped his gun, and took his time coming around to my side. He held the door open and motioned me out.

"All right, bud. Let's have it."

"Let's have what?" I said.

I wasn't trying to stall, but I wanted to find out how much the guy knew. He shook his head.

"You tell me. All I know is, it come over my radio that the gal palmed something to the little punk here, and I'm to get it. I saw you hold something up for him to see. Come on, give." He held out his hand.

I got out of the car and lifted my arms. "If there's anything you want, chum, help yourself."

The cop's face tightened. "Don't play games with me, brother. I ain't got the patience."

I started to say something else, but I only got the first word out. The cop's arm swung, and his gun struck me across one cheek.

"Give."

I hit him instinctively, but he was ready for it, and while I was still off balance, he slammed me again, and again with his other fist. Crazy lights spun behind my eyes, and I sat down hard, cursing him through the blood in my mouth. The last thing I remember was Little Henry trying to scramble out of his seat after the big cop.

WHEN I came to, the patrol car was gone, and Henry was trying to haul me into his coupé.

"The lunk!" he was saying. "The slug-crazy lunk!"

I opened my eyes and fought for footing.

"Did he touch you?" I asked.

Henry spat. "Did he have to? He just grabbed my collar and held me off while he went through your coat. He got it." He added that so miserably that I felt sorry for him.

"Forget it," I told him, dragging myself into the coupé.

He scurried around and scrambled into the driver's position. The pedal extensions came up so far that I could reach them with my arms. You had to give Henry credit. He lived in a big man's world, and there wasn't a thing in our apartment that he didn't have to climb onto a chair to reach, but he never asked for help. In fact he'd have been plenty sore if I had offered it.

We drove home in silence. My lips were so puffed from the cop's knuckles that it would have been hard to talk and my head, which had ached from the beating deForest had given me, was starting afresh.

"I wonder who tore out the pages in that notebook?" Henry said.

I hadn't been thinking about it, but I started now, and it made my head worse to try. "I don't care," I said. "That book will probably clear Edmonds. What they do to young Drew is none of my affairs. I'm not his guardian."

"Tish, tish," said Little Henry. "Is that an attitude for a gentleman to take?"

"I'm no gentleman," I growled, and lapsed into silence.

CHAPTER III

THE LOCAL BAD MAN



UNTIL I pushed open the door, I didn't realize that the apartment light was burning. Even then I didn't think much about it. We'd left so hurriedly in answer to Edmonds' call that for the life of me, I didn't know whether we'd turned off the lights or not. I didn't even know whether we'd closed the door.

I went down the hall and into the little stuffy living room with Henry at my heels, thinking that this had been the devil of a night, and that I wasn't going to want to get up and go to work.

Sudden movement in the room made me stop, and then I saw Bill Drew stand up from the davenport and start toward me. There was another man with him, a fellow who took time to crush out his cigarette before he rose.

Drew's eyes were dark with worry, but he smiled apologetically.

"Sorry we crashed your place, Wilson," he said. "But your door was open and the lights on. We thought you'd just stepped out for a second. My name's Bill Drew."

He held out a broad, capable-looking hand, and we shook.

"I've seen you around the plant," I told him. "But I didn't know you knew me."

My mind was racing, trying to figure out what this visit meant. It was a little too much for coincidence to find Drew's name in a notebook in a dead man's apartment, and then find Drew himself here, without any connection. His next words didn't solve anything for me.

"Matter of fact, I didn't know you. And I can't tell you yet just why we're here. Oh, by the way, this is my brother, Carl."

The other man came forward. He was slighter than Bill, and dark where his brother was light. His face had the sensitiveness of an artist, and at the moment it seemed pained.

"Please pardon my brother's ambiguity," he said. "He's rattled. His girl called him up awhile ago and said she was in some terrible trouble, and wanted help. It seems that she rooms with a Miss Edmonds, a friend of yours, and she took the liberty of asking us to meet her here."

I shook my head, trying to clear it. It seemed to me that I wasn't getting a clear picture of what was happening.

"Myrna?" I asked. "When did she call you?"

Bill Drew spoke eagerly. "About an

hour ago. It took us some time to find your address in the phone book, but then we came right over." He glanced over my shoulder toward the doorway, anxiety strong in his face. "I can't imagine why she hasn't arrived. Forgive me, Wilson, if I act cockeyed, but I'm worried."

"Sit down," I told him, "and I'll get a drink. Henry, how about some ice?"

My visitors sat down while I went to the little barrette and filled four glasses. Nobody said anything until I handed the drinks around. I guess we were all waiting for Myrna.

"What kind of trouble is she in?" I finally said. "And how come she picked my place? I've never even met her."

Bill Drew ran his hand through his hair nervously.

"I don't know, Wilson, what it is. She didn't say, but it's not like her to ask for help unless she's up against something pretty bad. I guess she was afraid to go home, or come to my place. Curse it, I wish I could think."

Carl put his hand on the big man's shoulder.

"Take it easy, kid. Whatever it is, you won't help her by getting all wound up." He looked at me with uneasy eyes. "I think we'd better wait downstairs, and let you go to bed. We can take her somewhere else when she comes."

I almost said that was a swell idea, but something kept bothering me, something I wanted to know. If Myrna had killed deForest, why should she want to come here afterward? It would make better sense if Drew had killed him, and she'd found out, but that wouldn't mean that she was in trouble. I decided to take the direct way.

I watched Drew carefully and asked:

"Did she have anything to do with deForest's murder?"

He raised his head and looked at me blankly.

"DeForest? You mean he's—dead?" He was either a good actor or—

I nodded, and Drew stood up as if he had been shot.

"When—who—?"

Carl looked up at him, puzzled. "Who's deForest?"

Bill Drew moved his shoulders and spread his hands.

"A guy at the plant. A guy I played cards with. I lost some dough to him, and tonight at the party, Wilson here found a shaved deck in his pocket." He looked wildly at his brother. "That's where I went tonight. To deForest's, to beat the living daylight out of the crook."

CARL let a low whistle escape him. He rubbed at his face as if the skin were suddenly too tight.

"Bill, you didn't—"

"Kill him?" He gave a harsh, ugly laugh. "I'd have liked to, but I didn't. He had a night chain on his door, and I couldn't get in without waking the whole house up. All I could do was tell him to get out of town, that if I ever caught him, I would murder him."

"But he was alive when you left?"

Bill stopped, and then went on in a low tone:

"I—I don't know. His door was unlatched, and I opened it against the chain. I called to him, but he didn't answer, but I saw his coat and hat on a chair, and figured he was there. I didn't see him though."

His brother groaned and glanced at me.

"Bill, did anyone see you there? Did anyone hear you threaten him?"

"I don't know. They could have." He didn't seem interested. He seemed to be thinking of something else.

"Listen to me, Bill, and think before you answer." Carl's voice was intense, fighting for his brother's attention. "Does anyone know you lost money to this guy? Think, man. You may be in a bad spot."

Young Drew looked from one to the other of us, but his eyes were withdrawn, and he kept silent.

"The police know," I said. "They found a notebook of deForest's, with your losses entered."

Carl looked at me suddenly. "How come you know all this?"

I told part of the truth. "They arrested Edmonds. They found her searching deForest's apartment." I didn't say anything about the little redhead.

Bill Drew looked at me. "Edmonds was there, too?"

Carl took a deep breath. "You and Edmonds, and maybe—"

He didn't finish. Bill turned on him viciously.

"Don't say it. Don't ever say it, to anybody. Understand?" He got a fistful of his blond hair and tugged at it distractedly. "Maybe I did it. Maybe I killed him, and didn't know it. Ever since I got back from the islands, I—I get blank spots. I was mad." Abruptly he turned to the smaller man. "Come on. We're wasting time."

Carl's eyes got wide. "Where you going?"

"To the police. They'll be looking for me by now."

His brother put out a hand. "Wait a minute. What about Myrna? Where is she?"

Bill Drew made an impatient gesture. "Something's happened. God knows what. I can't do anything sitting here. Let's go. I've got to get this straightened out."

He started down the hallway toward the door, and after a minute's hesitation, Carl followed him.

I sat looking at the empty arch for a

while, and then shrugged. I couldn't do anything for Edmonds until morning, or I told myself that I couldn't, to get away from the nagging feeling that somehow she was safer with the police. I didn't know what was going on, or how deeply she might be involved, but of one thing I was certain. I didn't want Edmonds hurt.

"Well, I guess the show's over for tonight," I told Henry. "Suppose a nightcap would help us sleep?"

The little man made a wry face. "The nightcap is a good idea, but don't get icky and go to bed. The cops haven't called yet, and something tells me that drip, Corker, will be around wanting to know all about how you happened to show up over there."

I raised my glass to Henry. "There's once you're wrong, pal. Corker will be too busy sweating Drew to remember me tonight."

There was single knock on the door, then I heard the hinges give, and heavy feet on the carpeted hallway. Little Henry put his thumbs in his ears and wiggled his fingers at me. He formed soundless words with his lips.

"An elephant never forgets."

But it wasn't Corker who stepped into the room and stopped, spread-legged before us. It was "Sorry" Ricco, and behind him, his man, Elmer Lutz. I began to get sore. "What in thunder is this—the Victory parade?" I demanded. "Who invited you?"

Sorry's smile was twisted by the stiff scar that gave him his sad expression, and his name.

"Don't get tough, Ronnie. He knocked."

"Well, knock yourself out," I told him. "Come back some time when I'm not here, and you can have the joint. I've been pushed around just about enough for one night."

SORRY pulled his round head into his thick shoulders and bounced his short body on his heels a couple of times.

"Quit eating your sleeve, boy. You and me used to get along all right, remember? I come here to do you a favor."

"Like cutting my throat for free?" I asked him. "If there's one thing I don't need tonight it's the local bad man in my parlor."

Elmer stepped out from behind the short man, his pale eyes glowing, and his right hand leveling a gun on my wishbone.

"Shut up and listen to the boss," he growled.

Sorry nodded. "Yeah, shut up and listen. I come here to play nice. All I want is a square deal, see? I want my dough, that's all."

I waited for him to go on, and when he didn't, I shrugged.

"Okay, I'll bite. Who's got it?"

"You probably. If you haven't, you

know who has. Understand, I ain't blaming, you yet. You maybe don't know the set-up, but believe me, it's mine, and I want it."

"This set-up," I said. "Maybe it would give me a clue to what you're talking about."

Sorry hesitated, studying me, trying to figure if I was telling the truth.

"It's like this," he told me. "I staked deForest to his working capital. He'd got him a job in the factory, and there was plenty dough floating around there. He had a nice game going, and he was supposed to split with me. I had a guy in his department, so I know what he took. For one, he had young Drew for twenty-five gees. Then tonight, you had to stick your nose in and queer the play, and Drew knocked off deForest."

I started. "Drew? Are you sure?"

The gangster looked disgusted. "Who else? My plant called me up when you pulled out that shaved deck, and I told him to keep an eye on deForest. He was outside the apartment when Drew got there."

I began to get interested. "Was Drew the only one? Did he see anybody else?"

Sorry laughed. "Huh! It was a whole parade. Drew was there a long time, then he left and this red-headed chick come blowing in. Beedee had a hunch, and trailed her upstairs. When he looked in deForest's door, the guy was on the floor, and she was going through his pockets. She saw him, and scrambled. Beedee chased her downstairs, but he tripped, and she got away, so he went over to the drug store and called me again. I told him to hang around, and started over there. We drove past just as you and that blonde and the shrimp here and the cops come out of the place. Gosh, what a lot of people."

"So what makes you think I've got your dough?" I asked.

"Don't be droopy, Ronnie. We beat you home. Beedee recognized Drew's car out front, so we pulled around the corner to wait and see what happened. The dough was in that apartment. Either he gave it to you or he told you where it was."

I shook my head. "Wrong both times. How do you know he didn't take it with him?"

Elmer made a sound that was supposed to be a laugh.

"We looked. Both guys were clean. We didn't want to mark them up, asking questions, so we thought we'd talk to you first."

"And the redhead?" I said. "She could have taken it."

"No," said Sorry. "Come on, you've stalled long enough. I don't want to get rough, but keep on and I will."

"I haven't got it," I told him.

"One more chance," the gangster said. He came forward on stiff legs and planted himself in front of me. "I'll make a deal.

The dough for the redhead. Drew wants her."

I must have looked incredulous. Sorry raised his voice.

"Beedee," he called. "Bring that babe in here."

A second later Myrna was pushed down the hall, the door slammed and an ugly brute followed her into the room. The girl's face was blanched white, and her eyes were enormous, but her little chin was up defiantly.

I gasped, and Sorry poked a finger at me.

"Your turn to deliver, pal."

There was no use telling him again that I didn't have the money. I shook my head.

"The cops must have it, Sorry, and they won't trade. The girl's a liability to you."

The gangster brought one up from the floor. I wasn't watching him, and it struck me squarely. I staggered back, and the girl caught her breath. Before I could move forward, Elmer had stepped in, his gun raised warningly. Sorry's face was contorted with rage.

"Talk."

He swung again, for my chin, and this time something snapped in my brain. I didn't care who had a gun.

I made a lunge and got the gangster's short neck in my hands, and I think I'd have choked him to death. Elmer couldn't shoot without hitting his boss, but he swung the gun butt like a club. I managed to duck, so that it struck the point of my shoulder, and then I saw Little Henry. He took a couple of running steps and sent the hard toe of his little shoe crashing into Elmer's shin.

Elmer yelled and lunged for the midget. His eyes shone like a hungry cat's, and he caught Henry by the coat and flung him against me. I had a glimpse of the big guy, Beedee, holding both of Myrna's hands in one of his, and leveling a gun with his other, waiting for a chance to shoot.

Sorry had his own gun out now, and was clubbing at my wrists. Elmer limped back a step and aimed his barrel at Henry.

CHAPTER IV

DISAPPEARING REDHEAD



WITHOUT guns of our own, Little Henry and I were licked, and I knew it, but I didn't care. Sorry broke free, and I stood bracing myself for the shot I knew was coming.

It didn't come. Outside a horn began to blow and all three of the gangsters turned their ears to the sound.

"Cops, Boss," Elmer whispered. "Hurry! Cops, now."

Sorry rubbed at his neck and looked at me.

"Okay, wise guy. We're gonna blow. I don't like cops. But I still want that dough. Maybe you're telling the truth. I'll find out, and I'll get you if you aren't. And in the meantime, spill what I told you to the cops, and I'll personally take care of the blonde."

He turned and started for the archway, then hesitated and came back.

"You got a back way out of this joint?"

I nodded toward the kitchen door and watched the three of them file out. Sorry cast a speculative glance at the redhead, then shrugged, and let the door swing behind him. I couldn't have held them if I'd wanted to, and I didn't want them found in my apartment, yet.

Sorry might have been telling the truth about his plant and the people he saw go into deForest's, but then again, it could be a neat way of blackmailing Drew, with the real facts a lot different. I had to talk to Edmonds, to find out where she stood, before I stuck my oar in.

The redhead cut into my thoughts by coming forward. She was still pale, and her hands trembled visibly. She looked like a scared kitten.

"Please!" she said. "Get me away from here before the police come. I can't be mixed up in this. I can't."

If it weren't for this girl, and Edmonds' insistence that I show up deForest to her, the cops wouldn't be coming up my stairs now. I had plenty of reason to be sore at her.

"It seems to me that you're already in it, up to your neck," I told her. "Remember, Beedee saw you in that apartment."

Myrna closed her eyes and tilted her head back. I thought she was going to faint, but she didn't. Her voice almost choked with intensity.

"Please, believe me!" she whispered. "I'll tell you all about it, later. But don't let them take me now."

A heavy fist pounded on my door, and the girl's eyes flew wide, terror-filled. I took hold of her shoulders and gave her a little push.

"Okay, get in the bedroom, and keep quiet. I'll talk to you when they leave, but it had better be good."

I waited until she had closed the panel behind her, then I went down the short hall toward the pounding that had begun again. I opened the door in Lieutenant Corker's face.

"Tear it down," I said. "I don't need a door anyway."

Corker didn't answer. He came in past me and went on to the living room. His shoulders drooped, and he looked old and tired, but I only wasted a glance on him. Over his shoulder I had caught sight of a blond head, and suddenly my throat was tight.

Edmonds stood in the hall, holding me at a distance with a cool stare, but looking so lovely that I wanted to take her in my arms and kiss her. She looked fresh and calm, with no indication of the grueling hours she had just been through. The uniformed man behind her spoke, and she moved gracefully forward, giving my arm a little pat.

"I hope you got some sleep, Ronnie, after the Drews left."

Those were the first words I'd heard from her since she phoned me, and they had to be a signal. She must have known or guessed that Myrna was supposed to come to my apartment, and was trying to tell me to keep still about the little redhead, but I didn't have much time to think about it. Corker faced me as I came into the room.

"All right, Ronnie. Let's have your reason for going to deForest's tonight." As an afterthought he waved a hand at Edmonds, saying in an ironic tone, "She's been released. You can tell the truth now."

Bill Drew had given me an idea, and I used it.

"I went over to tell the lug to get out of town."

Corker ran his hand across his mouth. "It seems to me that a lot of people did the same thing. How well do you know young Drew?"

Edmonds dropped her purse, and leaned hastily to pick it up. I shrugged.

"I work in his father's plant. Bill's been there several months."

I held my breath, but Corker didn't press that any further. I wouldn't have known what to say if he had. Suddenly the big detective pulled off his hat and slapped it against a chair.

"Curse it," he exploded. "I hate to pin a murder on a man who's spent the last year and a half shooting Japs. What's this all about, Wilson? I keep feeling that there's a piece missing. I keep . . . Say, you didn't have that lump on your jaw before. Where did that come from?"

I HAD an answer for that one, and I grinned sourly.

"Courtesy of the police," I told him. "One of your boys gave me that when he took deForest's notebook."

Corker looked at me steadily. "That wasn't here, Wilson. There's blood on your shirt, and blood on that couch. Who was here?"

I shook my head. "You're nuts. I cut it on a glass."

Corker snorted, and turned to the uniformed man by the door. "Herbert, take a look around this place. This guy's got too many answers.

"No," I said. "I'm tired of playing games with you. If you want to search this apartment, go get yourself a warrant, but you're not tearing up my stuff without one." The

hardest thing I ever did was keep my eyes off the bedroom door.

Little Henry had sat perfectly still all through the interview, but now he shifted to get up. I risked a warning glance in his direction, and he subsided.

Corker was watching me closely. "I think you know something, Wilson, and I'm going to give you until tomorrow to tell me of your own accord. In the meantime, think about Bill Drew, booked for murder, with a medal on his chest for fighting your war. Good night." He let his bitter eyes bore into me a moment longer, then turned to Edmonds. "You coming with us, Miss?"

"I'll take her home," I said. "I imagine she's seen enough of you for a while."

Corker took one long look at my closed bedroom door, and I began to sweat. Then he whipped me with an icy smile, and strode out of the apartment.

My knees got watery as soon as the door closed and I sank into the nearest chair.

"Boy, that's too close for me," I muttered.

"It was getting rugged," Little Henry admitted. He drew a red silk handkerchief from his breast pocket and dabbed at his small forehead.

Edmonds looked from Henry to me, and back. "What is this double talk?"

"Your girl friend is in there." I jerked my head toward the closed bedroom door. "All I needed was for Corker to walk in and find her. If he learns she intended to marry deForest, Drew's cooked."

Edmonds hadn't waited for me to finish the sentence. She was across the room in two seconds, pushing the door inward.

"Myrna!" she called. "Myrna, darling."

There wasn't a sound, and I caught myself looking toward Henry.

"Maybe she fainted." The little man's voice was hopeful but lacked conviction.

I rose and moved to Edmonds' side. From where I stood, I could see the whole room, even under the bed, and the closet door was open.

Myrna wasn't in that room, but the window in the opposite wall was open, and I had forgotten it opened directly on the stairs which led downward from the small back porch. An active girl wouldn't have had any difficulty in reaching them. Apparently she hadn't, for she certainly was no place in the apartment. . . .

It was five o'clock the following afternoon before I came to. I hadn't got to bed until daylight, and then I couldn't sleep, so Henry had dosed me with a sleeping pill.

I rolled over, so stiff and sore that it was hard to move. Then I saw that the little man's bed was empty.

I dragged myself out, found slippers and padded into the front room. Just as I got there I heard sounds from the hall and Henry came in, sailing his hat toward me and dropping into the nearest chair.

"Good morning, merry sunshine, and how is the Head that stopped a thousand clips? How long have you been awake? And please can I have a drink, quick? You fix it."

I wasn't quite awake yet, and I blinked at him.

"You're stiff now. Where have you been?"

"Stiff, yes. Drunk, no. Just a little light-headed from an overdose of insomnia, and I've been to the salt mines, Pappy. Somebody has to build the planes and tanks and guns."

"Yeah," I said. "And you've been working on a tank."

"No, honest. Only java every half hour. The cafeteria made me a special boilerful, and I think I drank it all. Well, maybe Edmonds helped some. She's been squeamy all day, trying to run down her redhead."

LITTLE HENRY was wound up like a top, running on his nerves, and I wanted to get something in him that would quiet him down. I went into the kitchen and put some milk on the stove.

"Myrna hasn't showed up yet?" I asked.

"Nor you, nor young Drew, nor deForest, and is that plant buzzing. You're the murderer-elect as of quitting time, palsy, in spite of the cops have still got chains on the boss' son. Seems he's too popular a guy to get hung. It was him that put over the Golden Rule policy, just after he went to work there.

"Papa Drew wasn't at all sold on the idea, but the kid kept punching. He sold his step-brother, and then the two of them ganged up on the old man, and how you going to tell those grease monkeys their hero's a heel?"

I stepped to the kitchen door. "Step-brother?"

Henry nodded. "Yeah, Carl's the son of a second wife, but he took the Drew name when he was still a kid. Boy, I got the low-down on everybody today. You should have been there. Myrna was Bill's steady girl until this deForest wolf came around, and then she played the two of them against each other. The talk is that she probably thinks Drew killed the guy over her, and she's afraid to show. But they say no, because the two guys played cards all the time, and would they do that if there was girl trouble between them?"

"Oh, and here's a present for you. Maybe you can make something of it."

I handed him a cup of hot milk, and took the card he extended toward me. It was deForest's personal card, from the plant.

"Where'd you get this?" I asked, surprised.

Henry winked at me. "I got a tomato in the office."

I raised an eyebrow. "What's she do—collect miniatures?"

Henry was indignant. "I'll have you know, Sirrah, that it isn't what you've got but how you use it that counts. My head may be close to the floor, but I have the grand manner."

DeForest's file told me a lot of things about the man that I could have guessed for myself. Never in one spot for long, never long at one job, and I suspected most of them were faked. The references were all out-of-town, and were probably faked too.

"Hey," I said, looking up. "Here's something that—"

I didn't get any further, because the phone rang just then. I wasn't too surprised to hear Edmonds' voice, but it went through me like an electric current anyhow. It always did.

"Ronnie," she was saying, "what shall I do? I can't find Myrna. What's the crazy kid doing? Do you suppose those gangsters have her again?"

"Shut up," I told her. "You're on a telephone."

"Well—well—you know . . . Ronnie, I'm scared. You've got to do something. If you don't find her, I'm going over there and find out."

"You will not," I yelled. "I'll try something, but only on condition that you promise to stay in your apartment."

She promised, and I went back to Little Henry. He looked like he was propping his eyes open by main will power.

"Why don't you turn in?" I told him. "I've got to go on a treasure hunt for the lost Myrna."

The little man waved a hand at me. "Why don't you sit down and master-mind it, like they do on the radio? You should be able to solve the whole ridiculous riddle right in your own chair."

"You're sitting down," I said. "You solve it."

He chewed on his lip while I dressed. "How do you start?" he asked.

"Well," I said, "it's nice to start with a motive, which we don't have. Try a recapitulation of the facts as we know them."

"A what? Oh, a recap. That's easy."

He held up a hand, fingers spread, and counted them down one after the other.

"Starting with last night. Edmonds sics you on deForest. You expose him, you get beat up. Scene Two. Edmonds calls up, says Myrna's gone with deForest. . . . Hey, that's like gone with de wind! We plunge over and find the guy dead and Edmonds in the clutches of the cops. Maybe she was telephoning from there. Maybe she killed him."

I THREW a shoe at him, but he ducked it and went on placidly.

"She gives us a book. Book gets taken away from us. We come home, we find the Drews here looking for Myrna. They go

away, and the underworld appears. They've got a story. Beedee saw Drew go up to deForest's, and leave, then he saw Myrna go up, and followed her. Then—"

"Hold it," I told him. "You're skipping. You're as dumb as I am. What did Drew tell us he did there?"

"Hammered on the door and cussed his lungs out."

"And the door?"

"Was on a night chain. He couldn't get in."

I nodded. "But when Beedee followed Myrna upstairs, what did he find?"

Henry let his mouth drop open and stared at me. "Well, I'll be blowed. Right under our noses all day. Myrna was in the room, searching deForest's body. How?"

"Somebody's lying," I said, and scratched my ear with the toe of the shoe I held in my hand. "Or . . . There are these possibilities. Drew lied, and was in the room, or he didn't lie, and the murderer was in the room at the time. Or deForest was there alive, and let Myrna in to kill him, or—"

"Or," Henry repeated, nodding from his waist, "or Beedee was lying. Of the choices, I prefer to believe Beedee was lying. Even if everything does point toward Bill Drew as the killer."

I put on my shoe. "Let's go talk to Beedee," I said.

CHAPTER V

A SHREWD LITTLE GUY



SORRY RICCO'S headquarters was an old four-flat brick building.

"Just how do you plan to get Beedee out of this hive?" Henry asked as we pulled up in front.

"Sorry will let me talk to him when he hears there's a hole in the story," I said, and hammered on the door.

There was no answer, and after a moment I tried the door, just out of habit. It wasn't like Sorry to leave his place open with nobody there, but the handle gave, and the door swung inward.

I called, but still there was no answer. I was about to turn around and leave when a heavy thud sounded from somewhere in the rear of the house.

We went toward it cautiously. You never knew what you'd find in one of Sorry Ricco's rooms, but I was a long way from prepared for what I saw in the back bedroom.

Beedee was on the floor, like a hen with her head on a chalk line, only his was in a red pool, and his face was smeared. He was trying to get up, but as we came in, the knee he was rising on slipped, and he collapsed heavily and lay still.

Behind me, Henry swore, and I stepped forward quickly and knelt at the man's side. "Beedee," I said, "what happened? Who did it?"

The man writhed a little and mumbled something. His mouth was so broken and swollen that I couldn't tell what he said. I shook his shoulder slightly.

"Beedee, listen. This is Ronald Wilson. Tell me who did it?"

For a moment he slid his head painfully against the boards, his lips working but no sound coming. Then he pulled his outstretched arm in until his finger touched the red pool, and with this finger he scrawled the word "Drew." As he finished, his hand twitched spasmodically, and went limp.

I waited a second longer, then stood up. "Hang it," Henry said. "You shouldn't have said who you were. He thought you meant who killed deForest."

I looked up, and into the rage-twisted face of Sorry Ricco, standing in the open doorway.

With a bull-like bellow he charged at me, but suddenly Little Henry was in the way. Sorry tripped on the small figure and sprawled across Beedee's still body. Elmer came running then. He snapped a shot at me, and then Henry had jumped and caught the gunman's arm.

Sorry was up instantly, yanking at the gun in his pocket, but he didn't get it out soon enough. I closed with him, and we fought wildly for the weapon.

I heard a yell from Henry, and had a glimpse of him sailing through the air, and of Elmer raising his gun hand. I put all my strength into a heave that brought Sorry around between me and Elmer, and at the same time managed to wrench Sorry's weapon from him. I couldn't do it again in a million years, but I shot at Elmer, and grazed his arm. He yelled and dropped his gun, and I shoved Sorry away from me.

"Cool off, you two, and listen to me," I told them. "I didn't beat up on Beedee. He was that way when we came in. But I think I know now who did it, and who killed deForest, too."

"Yeah," said Henry. "Maybe I know, too." His voice was low, and he stooped and pulled a strand of curling red hair from Beedee's limp fingers.

Sorry let out a long hissing breath.

"The dame! But how? She must have caught him from behind. Beedee was a big guy."

I looked at the hair, and I guess my voice shook when I said:

"Henry, call Edmonds and see if her girl friend has turned up."

I herded the gangsters into the front room while the little man phoned. After a moment he held the receiver to his chest and nodded.

"She's there now."

"Okay," I said. "Tell Edmonds to take her down to Headquarters, then call Carl and tell him to meet us there, that I've got something that ought to clear his brother."

Sorry and Elmer didn't want to go, but I was holding the cards, and half an hour later they walked ahead of Little Henry and me into Lieutenant Corker's office.

Edmonds was already there, sitting close to the redhead, holding her hands. Both of them looked as if they'd seen a ghost. Edmonds looked up and smiled at me wanly, but Myrna nearly screamed.

Sorry Ricco snarled and started toward her, but Corker stood up from behind his desk.

"What goes on here?" he demanded.

Before I could speak, the door opened again, and Bill Drew's brother strode toward me.

"Wilson!" he exclaimed. "What have you got, man? What—"

MYRNA gave a little cry and ran across the room into the man's arms.

"Oh, Carl!" she sobbed. "I'm so glad to see you! I was afraid . . . I'm sorry I did it, but I couldn't help it."

He held her away from him and looked at her intently.

"Couldn't help what, Myrna?"

"Running away," she choked. "I didn't mean to. I was just so scared that I—bolted."

He helped her back to her seat.

"Forget it," he told her. "You did just right."

Corker hit the table with his fist.

"If you don't mind telling me what this is all about?"

Sorry growled in his throat like an animal, and I cut in quickly.

"I've brought you another murder, Lieutenant, and the murderer."

There was a second's silence before Sorry poured forth a stream of profanity.

"That little red-headed hell-cat killed my chauffeur Beedee!" he ended.

"No," I said. "It wasn't Myrna. It was Carl."

Myrna began to laugh hysterically until Edmonds shook her to silence. Carl looked at me and smiled coldly.

"He died, did he? Then I guess I killed him. I beat him to within an inch of his life."

Corker exploded. "Why? When was this?"

"He telephoned me and said he was holding Myrna for ransom," Carl said, as he turned to the big policeman. "He said he knew my brother loved her. I pretended to agree to pay off, and went to the address he gave me. He took me to a room where he had Myrna gagged and tied to a chair. I gave him the money, and he untied Myrna, and while he was doing it, I hit him. He

was a big devil, but I had Bill's brass knuckles, and I beat the devil out of him. I untied Myrna and told her to run, and she did."

That set me back on my heels. For a moment I wasn't sure, but I had to be right. It couldn't be any other way.

Corker looked at the redhead. "Is that right?"

She nodded at him. "He saved my life. If the man died, he certainly deserved to."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Carl, wasn't it this way? You had Beedee pick up Myrna to find out if she had seen you at deForest's last night? If she had, you'd have to kill her, too. If she hadn't—well, you had to kill Beedee, anyway, because he knew you had murdered deForest. You'd

do something else. You switched to his side, agreed to the policy, then set about to discredit Bill, to ruin him in his father's eyes, hoping to be able to get rid of him and the policy too.

"You hired deForest, knowing Bill's weakness for gambling, and that deForest could trick him into losing a fortune he didn't have. It was of no concern to you that deForest got his stake from Sorry Ricco, on a deal.

"When I exposed deForest last night, he knew he was through. He probably called you and demanded the money Bill owed him, knowing that Sorry was having him watched, and would be around to collect, now that the game was over.

"It ruined your plan, but you made a



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COMING NEXT MONTH

bought him to lie to his boss, but you couldn't trust him to keep quiet later on."

Carl stared at me for a moment, then turned to Corker, a corner of his mouth quirking up.

"I suppose he really thinks he's a detective?" He looked again toward me. "And why did I kill deForest?"

I continued his sentence for him. "And make everything point to your brother as the killer? I'll tell you. Because you never expected Bill to come back from the war. With him out of the way, you were your step-father's heir. The factory was making a lot on defense contracts, and you were getting yours. Then Bill came home and promoted this Golden Rule policy. You fought it at first, because it meant that all the profits would be kept in the business for after the war. Then when you saw that your brother was going to win, you had to

try at hanging your brother anyhow. You killed deForest, left the notebook with Bill's name in it to be found by the police, and have generally aided in putting a rope around his neck. Is that enough?"

Carl looked at Corker. "With an imagination like that, he should be a writer. Only he forgot one thing. I never heard of deForest until Bill told me about him last night. A stupid lapse too, because as I recall, I had to ask Bill who deForest was when this man told us he was dead."

I smiled grimly. "A stupid lapse, all right, but it was yours, not mine. Take a look at this, Lieutenant."

I PULLED deForest's personnel file from my pocket and put it in Corker's hand. The detective glanced at the line I indicated and looked up at the man before him.

"DeForest's personnel card," he ex-

plained. "It says he was recommended for employment by you."

Carl's mask broke. He had made a good try, but he couldn't think fast enough now. He stepped back, snarling, grabbing for his pocket, but he never had a chance. Sorry Ricco made one leap and landed hard against the slight man, carrying him backward to the floor beneath him.

Carl fought wildly, swearing at me shrilly, but the door was flung open and cops boiled into the room. They glanced at Corker, then hauled Ricco off the struggling figure, and dragged Carl Drew, still kicking, down the hall toward the cells.

I helped Sorry to his feet. "Eeny meeny, who's got your money?" I said.

Sorry shot a look at Corker, frowning at him from behind the big desk.

"I ain't seen any yet. But if he's got thirty grand, it's mine. And I don't want it. Split it up with the guys deForest got it from."

Edmonds got slowly to her feet, and we started to leave, but Corker halted us.

"Just one minute. If I'm not too curious, where does this red-headed kid fit into this picture?"

I couldn't answer that, but she did. "When Bill started losing money, I thought I knew what was going on," she said. "I tried to make Bill stop gambling, but he lousy cards. So I started going out with deForest. I knew he was crooked, but I also suspected that there was another reason behind his card playing than the obvious hope of winning money from Bill. I

tried to find out, but deForest was close-mouthed. I learned little, but last night he called me as soon as I got home.

"He said that since Wilson had exposed him, he dared not go back to the plant. He wanted me to leave town with him. I wouldn't. Then he threatened. He told me that he knew I was in love with Bill and that he would ruin Bill with his father unless I went with him. I almost went crazy. Finally I agreed and was packing when Edmonds found me. She tried to make me stop, but I wouldn't listen.

"When I got to deForest's apartment and found him dead, I was certain Bill had killed him. I was searching for clues which might implicate Bill when Beedee found me. I ran, getting away from him, called Bill from a drug store and asked him to meet me at Wilson's apartment. Then I started over there, but outside the apartment house, Sorry Ricco saw me and forced me into his car."

Her voice died and I looked at Corker. "Okay, wise guy. Satisfied? Little Henry and I had it about figured out, didn't we, Junior?"

There was no answer and I looked toward the big chair where the midget was sitting. He was curled up in a ball, fast asleep. The poor little guy had been working at the defense plant all day. In the last hour, death had seemed more important than defense. Evidently it wasn't for Little Henry had slept through the entire explanation, and for my money, he was a pretty shrewd little guy.

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(Adv.)

"I'll bet you could get me a few sheets of this fabulous paper, couldn't you, lovey-dovey?"



Genuine Banknotes

By SAMUEL MINES

The counterfeiting career of engraver James Griffiths!

THE man who came closest to producing foolproof counterfeit notes was James Griffiths, an English engraver of the last century.

Any engraver or printer with a touch of larceny in his soul must, at times, have flirted with the idea of printing up some of his own money.

It looks like such a nice clean way of making a fortune!

To a highly skilled engraver like Grif-

fiths, making perfect plates was not difficult. The stumbling block came, he found, in duplicating the paper on which the Bank of England notes were printed.

This paper was made by the world-famous Laverstoke Mills, in Hampshire. The mills made nothing else but note paper and because of the risks of duplication, the most elaborate methods were used to make and keep its formula a secret. So unusual was the texture and the watermark, that no

AN AMAZING TRUE STORY OF CRIME

counterfeiter had ever been able to produce a passable imitation.

James Griffiths determined on doing this quite early in his career. He made several sets of engraved plates which might have defied exposure even by experts. But although he studied paper-making and the chemistry of paper for years, the secret of the Bank of England notes was beyond his grasp.

Good, For Bad

In five years, Griffiths destroyed about \$1,500 worth of genuine Bank of England notes, extracting the ink, reducing the paper to pulp and analyzing the ingredients. But though he could determine what went into the paper, he could not discover how it was done, or how the baffling watermark was produced. Of course, he managed to create some pretty good imitations. But Griffiths was not looking for trouble. He knew he would have to make something better than pretty good, to keep the Bank experts off his neck.

To prove this point, he took some of his best paper, printed a few notes from his plates and got an innocent stooge to try and pass them at the Bank in London. The messenger was promptly arrested.

Griffiths had left no trail to himself and satisfied that he would have to do better, he went back home to Birmingham to continue his work.

Then he came to a decision. It was impossible for him, working in the dark this way, to hit by accident upon the exact process used in making the paper. But there was, perhaps, a simple way out of this tangle. Suppose he could steal some of the genuine paper?

At this point he got a lucky break. He saw an advertisement in a London paper of a lecture on "some curiosities" of paper-making. He went to the lecture and was much gratified when the lecturer described in detail the vast precautions taken by the Laverstoke Mills to keep a single sheet of their paper from going astray.

Painstaking Plans

Knowing the enemy's set-up, Griffiths made his own plans. He at once contacted a lady and gentleman of London's underworld and enlisted them as partners and emissaries in his plan.

Thus, presently a new couple appeared to take up their residence in Whitchurch, the village where the Laverstoke Mills were located. The man was a white-haired, aristocratic old gentleman, who gave his profession as artist. His name was Harold Tremayne.

The girl was an appetizing and luscious young thing of about twenty-four. Her

name was Ruby Tremayne and she was supposed to be the niece of the artist.

Small towns are not notoriously cordial to newcomers, even when they seem of the better class and have plenty of money. The older folks cast a skeptical eye upon Ruby, for that young woman exhibited too frank an interest in the young bloods of the town.

But the young males of Whitchurch promptly became wolves. There was one young fellow by the name of Brown who shortly seemed to have the inside track with Ruby. And it was no coincidence that he worked in the paper mill.

Ruby gave him the works. She told him she was an heiress and that when she became twenty-five, which would be in less than a year, she would inherit \$150,000. This she said, would be all his when they were married and they could live happily ever after on the interest without ever having to do a stitch of work again.

Brown was more than a little dazzled by this unexpected good fortune which had come up and nudged him. He was putty in Ruby's capable hands. He agreed at once to her request for complete secrecy, since, she said, "If you tell anyone at all, it may get back to my uncle who would be very angry."

Woman's Wiles

Then as they got on better terms, Ruby professed feminine curiosity about the big paper mills.

"Such secrecy!" she gushed. "A woman never can resist a secret. I'll bet you could get me a few sheets of this fabulous paper to see, couldn't you, lovey-dovey?"

Lovey-dovey was horrified.

"The pup-paper?" he gasped. "Not me, Ruby. We'd go to gaol!"

Ruby was not discouraged. Brown was so infatuated that she knew it was just a matter of time and work. And sure enough, pretty soon she wore him down and he agreed to try and steal a few sheets.

And now comes a curious twist in the plot. Brown was caught in the act by another employee, a man named Brewer. But instead of reporting him, Brewer at once saw the possibilities of the plan. Where Brown was a silly, love-struck kid, Brewer was a shrewd and calculating individual with a streak of larceny in him a foot wide.

He got the whole story out of Brown, sized up the situation accurately and paid a call on the Tremaynes. The result was a new member of the gang.

In the next few weeks, Brown and Brewer stole more than two dozen reams of the note paper and managed to get it safely out of the mill and deliver it to Tremayne. Nobody became suspicious and there was still no suspicion when the Tremaynes

packed up one day and vanished from Whitchurch.

A Million Dollars' Worth of Notes!

Shortly thereafter, the most beautiful forgeries of Bank of England notes began to show up on the market. There are always ways of telling forgeries, even when the plates are perfect—the serial numbers don't tally with the genuine and so on. But what scared the Bank green was the fact that these counterfeit notes were printed on genuine Laverstoke paper.

Immediately they burned up the wires to the mill and the owners got busy and made a rapid inventory of their stock. To their horror they discovered there was enough paper missing to allow the forger to print millions of dollars' worth.

Scotland Yard was called in and two detectives sent down to Whitchurch. In the process of grilling everybody in the village, they naturally ran across the trail of the Tremaynes. The descriptions sounded familiar, and a little checking in the Rogues' Gallery turned them up. The man was Edward Burnett, a well-known convict, but lately released from the jug. The girl was a babe known as "Flash Emma," who specialized in working with counterfeiters.

One thing was obvious about this robbery and that was that inside help must have been needed to get the paper out of the mill. Since Brown's association with Ruby Tremayne, alias Flash Emma, was common knowledge, the Scotland Yard detectives went to work on him.

Under the constant grilling his nerve broke and he did a characteristic and foolish thing—he took a run-out powder and

fled to London. However, he was unable to hide there. He was arrested, then he broke down and spilled the beans.

Set a Thief—

Now Scotland Yard had part of the story, but they didn't have Burnett and Flash Emma. In this situation they did what isn't, perhaps, done often in fiction, but in real life is usually done. They tipped off the underground that there was \$5,000 waiting for anyone who put the finger on Edward Burnett, with protection guaranteed. There was \$2,500 for the same dope on Flash Emma.

Within twenty-four hours both rewards had been collected and an easy bag too, for they were living together right in London.

They were not arrested. Scotland Yard knew the rest of the case was just a matter of careful waiting and shadowing. Burnett was followed to a butcher named Buncher, who was trailed to a woman named Campbell, known to the police as a fence. Campbell was picked up with some of the phony notes on her. Buncher was let alone, and followed back to Burnett, to whom he went for another batch of the notes. Burnett went to Birmingham for a new load and the detectives, following him directly to Griffith's shop, found for the first time, the completely unsuspected source of the whole business.

In Griffith's workshop they found the unused paper, the plates, presses and a nice shiny new batch of freshly printed currency. Also, a much embarrassed Griffiths.

And that wound up the case of the only perfect counterfeit money that ever scared Scotland Yard.



FIND THE BODY

The True Story of a Famous Murder Case in Which There Was a Conviction Without the Evidence of a Corpse

By SAMUEL MINES

COMING NEXT ISSUE



"Stand back!" Logan
yelled, tugging at
his gun

THE BLIZZARD BLOWS DEATH

By JASON LEE

In search of his kidnaped wife, Rancher Jerry Long suddenly finds himself battling a mighty surprising sabotage scheme!

THE driving snow clogged thickly on the windshield and froze slowly, finally balking the wipers. For the third time in two miles, I got out to break away the ice.

Before getting back in, I glanced over my shoulder into the seething darkness of the narrow pasture lane. Why I did, or what I expected to see, I don't know. Ordinarily I like snow. But tonight there seemed to be something evil about the swirling, beating mass of jagged flakes.

It had been a bad day all the way around. I was glad it was over, glad to be going home to Judy and the hot dinner I knew she would have for me. Going home to Judy always gave me that quick, warm feeling of excitement.

Ranching at best was no easy job. But working short-handed and in the face of a fifty-mile blizzard all day had been one tall chore. I had lost three calves. Several more were in bad shape.

But I forgot the cattle as I came around

the barn and drove on down to the back door. The house was in complete darkness. I couldn't understand it. It was past seven, and Judy usually came in by five-thirty. Of by six at the latest.

For the past month Judy had been working as temporary secretary to Frank Burke, superintendent of the Ridgeland Refinery. Judy had been his secretary before we were married, and Burke had asked her to take the job again until he could find someone suitable to hire permanently. Since the refinery was filling Government contracts, the work was of a confidential nature.

Kate Moore, whose place Judy had taken last month, had been fired after two oil trains from the refinery had been wrecked and destroyed. Three trainmen had been killed in one wreck, four in the other. Of the latter, two had died in blazing oil. Horrible, brutal deaths.

Seven murders in all, not to mention the loss of the vital oil and gas which the trains carried.

Railroad and Government investigators had believed the leak on the train schedules had been at the refinery, and that the leak was Kate Moore, although conclusive evidence was never produced.

I hadn't much wanted Judy to take the job. We didn't need the money, but she felt it would help a little toward the war effort since help was so scarce. So I hadn't said anything.

I stamped the snow off my boots and went in, feeling a surge of peculiar uneasiness. The house was cold and silent. My uneasiness increased. Then I shrugged, ripped off my leather jacket and went about the business of building fires.

THERE was no point in getting worked up. Judy had probably had to work late. She would either call or come in shortly.

When I had the fires going, I went to the bedroom, set out fresh boots to warm in front of the fireplace, then bathed and put on clean clothes. I kept listening for the phone to ring.

It didn't.

I went back to the kitchen, peeled potatoes, cut lettuce and tomatoes for a salad and got two chops ready to broil. I opened a can of peas, put them on the stove to simmer. Then I wrapped my long legs around the tall kitchen stool and waited.

Judy didn't come. The phone remained silent.

After three cigarettes, I went out in the hall to call Judy at the refinery. But the phone was dead. The blizzard had no doubt blown the line down. I got my hat and coat and headed for town.

Little waves of fear ran up through me as the car plowed sluggishly through the

snow. I told myself there was no reason to worry about Judy. Any number of harmless things could have caused her delay. She could have had car trouble, tried to call me and couldn't since the line was down. She might have decided to stay in Ridgeland because of the storm. Or as I had figured before, she could be working late.

Nevertheless, my fear stayed with me, put a chill in me that had nothing to do with the weather.

Frank Burke's house was on my way to town, so I stopped there. Two or three cars were in the drive, but they barely registered with me. That the Burkes probably had guests was their only significance.

At the steps, I met Paul Krebs coming down, smoking, as usual, one of his nearly cigar size cigarettes. Krebs was a burly six-footer, and his big hat, heavy clothes, plus high-heeled boots gave him an almost giant appearance.

"Hello, Long," he said as he perceived me. "Rough night, eh?"

"Rough as a boot," I agreed and went on up the steps.

I didn't have much use for Krebs. Like me, he was a rancher. But he had the reputation of being a crooked trader. The reputation was well-earned too. He was a brand artist and most of the stock he handled was stolen stuff. Furthermore, it was pretty well known that Krebs sold cattle to Black Market packers.

I punched the door-bell and wondered what business Krebs had with Burke. It must have been important to get him out on a night like this. And Krebs had been there on business since the Burkes and the Krebs family didn't travel in the same social sets.

Lucille Burke, a rather faded and plump brunette on the wrong side of forty, opened the door. She seemed surprised to see me.

"Oh, it's Jerry!"

She smiled and motioned for me to come in. The sound of voices and laughter came from the living room off to the right.

"Judy didn't come in tonight," I said. "I thought maybe you could tell me if she had to work late."

Lucille Burke's hearing was defective, badly so, and she always cocked her head sideward in an oddly annoying manner when someone spoke to her.

"I don't think so," she said, frowning slightly. "But go on back to the fire in the den. I'll call Frank. He can tell you."

In Burke's den, I pushed my hands toward the crackling blaze in the stone fireplace, and again felt that intense wave of fear about Judy. If she hadn't worked late, then what had kept her?

"Well, Jerry," said a quiet voice from the doorway, "what's this about Judy not coming home tonight?"

Frank Burke was a tall, spare man with an air of distinction and quiet efficiency that demanded respect. His crisp black hair, tinged vaguely with gray, was brushed carefully from a wide, deep forehead. He had direct, steady gray eyes and walked with a peculiar grace, like a cat, putting his feet down noiselessly.

"No, she didn't," I said. "Our line's down, so I came in to find out what had happened to her."

BURKE cupped his slender, strong hands to the fire.

"I don't understand it," he said uneasily. "She left the office about five-thirty, or possibly a little later. But wait—you said your line was down? Well then, she's probably here in town some place waiting for the storm to let up and couldn't let you know."

"I suppose that's it," I said. "Mind if I use your phone to call around and see where she is?"

"Go ahead," Burke said cordially, waving his hand toward the hall. "I'll mix a drink while you're calling. You look as if you need one."

He wasn't wrong about that. I did need a drink. But I needed one much worse after I had finished calling. I had called all our friends to whose houses Judy might have gone. I had even called the hotel. She wasn't and hadn't been at any of those places.

I felt sick. Not nauseated, but weak and cold and afraid. I went back in the den.

Frank looked up from the table where he was mixing drinks. "Did you find her?"

I shook my head.

He brought the drinks over to the fire, handed me mine. I could see he was worried now.

"Look here, Jerry, I don't like the looks of this. Sit down and let's talk it over."

I sat down, although I didn't want to. I felt I ought to be out looking for Judy even though I didn't know where to look.

"Did she seem worried or anything when she left the office?" I asked.

"No," replied Burke thoughtfully, then he smiled. "Just her usual cheerful and lovely self."

I gulped part of my drink.

"Do you suppose she could have been kidnaped by someone who wanted information about the oil train schedules?"

Burke's eyes sharpened at that. "I hardly think so," he said finally. "Still—"

He got up, began to pace up and down with his hands folded behind his back.

"There has to be some reason for her disappearing," I pointed out. "That's the only thing I can think of."

"Maybe you're right," Burke admitted slowly. "But I'd hate to think—"

He broke off and picked up his drink. But I know what he meant. Judy in the hands of saboteurs was no pleasant thought.

"You'd better go to the sheriff," he advised after a moment. "If you don't find her shortly, let me know, and I'll get in touch with the FBI in Mason City."

I nodded and got up quickly, anxious to get away and do something. I didn't expect much from Sheriff Judd Logan, but these things had to be reported. And Logan *might* help.

Burke put his hand on my shoulder. "If there's anything I can do, Jerry, let me know."

I thanked him. At the door, he said:

"Jerry, I'm sure this has nothing to do with Judy's disappearance, but did you know that Mark Bannon is working at the refinery now?"

I turned, stared at him. "No," I said stiffly. "No, I didn't know that."

Burke looked uncomfortable, as though he wished he hadn't mentioned it.

I said good night and left, wishing he hadn't mentioned it either. It turned up some more ugly possibilities. I wondered why Judy hadn't told me about Mark working at the refinery.

Had Burke been trying to imply or suggest that Judy might have run off with Mark? If he had, I didn't believe it. Judy wouldn't do that. We had been too happy together, loved each other too much.

Something had happened to her. I knew it; I felt it.

Judy had been engaged to Mark Bannon before I met her. When she broke her engagement to him, Mark hadn't taken it gracefully. He had made some pretty violent threats. He had continued to make them after we were married a year ago. He had bragged, too, that I couldn't hold Judy, and that he would get her back.

Was it possible that Mark had forced Judy to go away with him? I felt my scalp prickle, tiny beads of sweat broke out on my forehead.

I found Sheriff Judd Logan in his stuffy little office at the courthouse. As I walked in, Logan shoved one of his desk drawers shut. I guessed he was hiding a bottle of *tequila*, for fumes of it were strong in the thick layers of smoke that hung heavily in the overheated, unventilated hole.

SITTING opposite Logan at the battered, untidy desk was his deputy, Bill Samson, a hard, wiry little man with unmatched eyes and a bald, too narrow head.

Logan leaned back in his chair, let his strong, white teeth take a more secure hold on a frayed cigar that nestled damply in the corner of his small, thick-lipped mouth.

"Well, well, if it ain't Long," he said in an unpleasant voice. "What do you want?"

I wished that I hadn't bothered to stop. I had never liked Logan. He fairly oozed his overbearing self-confidence, and actually all he possessed in the way of intelligence was a bunch of general ignorance. He was fat and lazy, drank too much. His eyes were sullen black marbles, set deeply and closely in his broad, swarthy face. His coarse black hair was greasy and unkempt.

"My wife has disappeared," I told him. "I want you to help me find her."

A malicious grin spread across Logan's face. He looked at Samson and winked. Samson grinned back obediently. He was Logan's yes man.

"So she finally left you, did she?" Logan said to me. "Well, that's out of my line. If a woman wants to leave her husband, there's nothing I can do about it."

"She didn't leave me!" I denied angrily. "She's been kidnaped, or killed or something. It may be a case for the FBI. Frank Burke and I think her disappearance may be on account of the oil train schedules at the refinery."

"He wants the FBI yet!" Logan scoffed and a deep chuckle jolted his stomach up and down. He leaned forward, pointed a fat finger at me. "Listen, you dope, just because you think you look like Gary Cooper don't mean you can hold your women. Judy's most likely out with Mark Bannon or off on a party some place else. So you get out of here and quit wasting my time!"

Anger flooded through me in a hot surge, and for a minute I thought I would have to hit him in spite of myself. But I realized in time that beating the living daylight out of Logan wouldn't help me find Judy. That could wait until later. Finding Judy couldn't.

"All right, Logan," I said, "I'll get out, but when I have time, I'm going to take you apart, piece by fat piece. And don't forget it!"

Most of his confidence vanished. His marble eyes wavered and he gnawed nervously at his cigar. He began to bluster.

"Attacking an officer of the law is—"

I didn't hear the rest of it. I whirled around and slammed out of the room.

As I crawled in behind the steering wheel, I felt a cold vacuum of bitterness at the pit of my stomach. What to do? Where to go? Should I call the FBI?

Then it occurred to me that it was a hundred and ten miles from Mason City to Ridgeland. Some of the highway might be blocked off to traffic as it often was during a bad storm. In any case the drive from Mason City would take eight or ten hours at best. In that time anything could happen to Judy.

Besides I had no proof that her disappearance was an FBI case. As a matter of fact, I had exactly nothing to go on.

I headed for Mark Bannon's house. The storm had died down a little, but the slush and snow on the street had turned to solid rough ice. Even with chains, it was slippery going. About two blocks from Logan's office, a pair of lights edged up behind me, then slanted out to pass.

I didn't pay much attention until the car began to pace me. I glanced over in time to see a flash of orange split the snow, and the steering wheel was jerked through my hands. The bullet had slashed the top of the wheel. The next shot tore my hat off and parted my hair. My head felt like a piece of hot iron was lying on top of it, but I didn't give it much thought.

I was fighting the wheel, trying to keep the car under control. In spite of my efforts, the rear end took a right-hand slide and one rear wheel hung itself helplessly over a street crossing culvert. The other wheels spun vainly, their traction not strong enough to budge the machine.

I peered through the windshield and saw the gunner's car pulling away. It was a station wagon. I couldn't see the license, but I did see a "C" gas sticker on the rear window. A vague mark of identification, but something. Several people around Ridgeland owned station wagons, but most everybody displayed gas stickers on their windshields.

CUTTING the front wheels sharply, I shifted to reverse, raced the motor and let the clutch fly. The car lurched inches, but that was enough. The rear wheel began to tract, and after a little more twisting and turning, I was out of the stall. But too late to follow the station wagon. The storm had swallowed it.

My breath was a ragged whistle. In the first place, I didn't like for somebody to be shooting at me. But that wasn't what turned my insides to water. It was the motive behind the shooting. Somebody wanted to make sure I didn't find Judy. And whoever it was, was willing to kill me to make certain I didn't.

The moment I stopped at Mark Bannon's house, I had a feeling I was going to find more here than I had bargained for. Every window in the small house was lighted. The front door was open, banging against the hall wall. And it must have been open for some time for an inch or two of snow had drifted in on the hall floor.

I knocked, called out Mark's name. There was no response. Just the steady rattle of the windows and the howling moan of the wind. I walked in and stopped abruptly inside the living room door. Needles began to crawl along the back of my neck, then spread swiftly all over my body.

Mark Bannon lay in a grotesque sprawl on the floor, his handsome, curly blond head

no longer handsome or blond, but reddish brown from the blood that had gushed out of the deep gash in his throat.

I stepped closer. The wound was more than a gash. Two inches deeper, and Bannon would have been decapitated. The blade of a bone-handled knife with which he obviously had been killed was buried in his stomach. Somehow it looked as though the killer had plunged it there as an afterthought.

A queer, sick feeling congealed in me. Ordinary death is unpleasant enough. But this butchery gave me a jolt that would have cost me my dinner, had I eaten any.

How long I stood fascinated by Mark Bannon's slim, death-twisted body, I don't know. At last I realized I was trying to moisten my stiff lips with a dry tongue. At the same time I realized it wasn't just Bannon's body that held me in stunned fascination. It was fear. I was afraid to move, to look farther, for fear I would find Judy here—and dead!

I drew in a deep breath and let my eyes rove over the room. Its modest furnishings were in complete disorder, as though there had been a terrific struggle.

On the floor to the right of the fireplace lay a thin silver cigarette case. Feeling nothing but numb disbelief, I walked over, picked it up and slid it into my pocket. The case was Judy's. No question about it. I had given it to her.

And that was not all. Behind a chair was Judy's small envelope purse. Its contents were spewed across the rug. In about the center of her things was a roll of tobacco ash, too big for an ordinary cigarette ash, not big enough for a cigar ash. Quickly, I stuffed everything back in the purse, then put it in my coat pocket.

Forcing my feet to move, I walked through the rest of the house. I didn't find Judy. My relief was so great that I went limp. Not that I didn't want to find her. I did, but not in this house.

In the kitchen I stopped and stared absently at the dirty dishes piled in the sink and tried to figure out what it all meant. The presence of Judy's cigarette case and purse doubtless meant someone had deliberately left them there in order to put the blame of Mark's murder on her. Leaving the idea that in her hurry to make a getaway, she had left them.

Even without the planted evidence, Judd Logan would love that theory. I could just hear him say Judy and Mark had quarreled. Result—Judy had killed Mark.

Or more likely, Logan would say I had killed Mark Bannon over Judy.

However, I knew none of these things were true, so they didn't worry me a great deal. What did worry me was that Judy was obviously mixed up some way in this

gruesome mess, and the killer probably had her some place. What had happened to her by now—well, I didn't dare let myself go into that.

The wind had risen again, the force of its fury arousing an almost deafening roar. That's why I didn't hear Judd Logan and Bill Samson come in. They stepped into the living room as I walked out of the kitchen.

LOGAN stared hard at Mark Bannon's body for a minute, then looked up at me, an ugly grin spreading across his face. Bill Samson didn't pay any attention to me. He let out a shrill whimper, twisted back into the hall and was sick.

"A-a-h, killed him, didn't you, Jerry?" Logan said. "I thought we'd better follow you."

He was fumbling for his gun, but his stiff leather coat and heavy gloves hampered his draw, delayed him long enough for me to get to him.

"Stand back!" he yelled, jerking frantically at the gun, but I had no intention of spending the night in one of Logan's cold cells while heaven alone knew what had happened to Judy.

My knotted fist came up smoothly from my boot tops and struck Logan's jaw savagely just as he freed the gun. He slumped to the floor, the gun spurting from his limp fingers. I picked up the gun and moved into the hall.

Samson had just about recovered. I started to hit him, but he was such a little shrimp I couldn't. I took his gun, hustled him along to the bedroom and locked him in the closet. He was too weak to offer any resistance except to shrill over and over that I couldn't do that to him.

A sick, gnawing anger throbbed through me as I pushed out into the biting storm. I was no nearer to finding Judy. I didn't know what to do. I recalled the time I had seen a man sobbing hysterically because his child had been kidnaped. At the time I had looked at him in disgust, wondered why he didn't stop his silly weeping and do something.

Now I knew how that man had felt. When someone you loved was in danger and your hands were tied, when you could do nothing, or didn't know what to do, it was enough to drive a man to hysteria, or anything else.

I turned over to a back street, driving slowly and pulling deeply on my cigarette in an effort to calm down so I could think clearly. From an impersonal point of view I knew it was possible that Judy had killed Mark Bannon and then run away. That would be one explanation for her disappearance. But knowing Judy as I did, I knew that one was out. There had to be another!

The only one I could think of was some-

thing connected with those train wrecks, or with the train schedules. I recalled that both those trains had been derailed within fifteen miles of each other on a long deserted strip of land up beyond Elena.

I had gone through two cigarettes when I pointed the car toward Wilson Taylor's home. Taylor, who had his office in his home, was a geologist and I knew he would have a plat of Ridge County as well as surrounding counties.

Taylor was a slim, fair man in his late forties, with clever, alert eyes. I had half expected him to be in bed, but he was up working and seemed anxious to help me when I told him what I wanted and why.

However, I was due for a disappointment. The land plat showed that the strip of land through which the railroad ran and on which the two oil trains had been derailed belong to Frances Schmoker. The name was remotely familiar, but so far as I knew, didn't have the vaguest connection with this middle.

I felt that surge of bleak, numbing fear again as I left Taylor's house. I had just one more small thing to go on. The station wagon with the "C" sticker on the rear window.

I drove around to a big service station where most everybody traded. Although no gas was sold at night, the place remained open for repair and wrecker service. Clem Smith, the owner, limped out when I tapped my horn.

"Hi, Jerry. What can I do for you?"

"I need a little help," I told him. "Know anybody who has a station wagon with a C sticker on the back window?"

Clem's broad, pleasant face became thoughtful. "Nope, sure don't, Jerry," he said finally.

"How about Paul Krebs?" I asked. "Does he have a station wagon?"

"Yes," Clem admitted, "but I don't know whether he has his gas sticker in front or back. Say, wait a minute. The kid inside goes around with Frances. He might know."

"Frances?" I repeated quickly. "Who's she?"

"Paul's girl. Named her after his old lady, I think."

Then I got it. Krebs' wife had been Frances Schmoker before she married.

The thin, pimpled-faced youth who slouched out at Clem's call knew nothing about the stickers on Krebs' station wagon. That didn't matter much now though. I had enough to go on without that.

FRANK BURKE'S house was in complete darkness, or at least I could see no lights. I drove on past for about a hundred yards and stopped. Taking a thin tire iron from the floorboard, I walked back to the

house and stopped at the window to Frank's den. Under cover of the roaring wind, I pried the shutter loose with the tire iron, then worked the window catch open with my knife. The window raised smoothly, noiselessly.

I lifted my legs over the sill, slid inside and shut the windows. I waited a little in the brittle darkness, then struck a match. The hall door was closed so I snapped on the desk light.

The desk drawers were locked but it wasn't much of a job to force them open with the thin end of the tire iron. I worked through the desk quickly, carefully, and found nothing in Frank's papers which would indicate he was involved with Krebs or in any sort of sabotage activities. I let out a soft whistle of exasperation, feeling that I had guessed wrong about the whole thing after all.

I was placing some papers back in the middle drawer when I noticed the small bank book under a box of paper clips. It had "Mason City State Bank" stamped on the cover, and contained only two entries, both for five thousand dollars. The account was in the name of F. J. Bronson. One deposit had been made on January 6, the other on January 28.

I was trying to match these dates with the dates on which the oil trains had been derailed when I felt a draft on my back. Then there was a breath of movement, faint, almost soundless.

Slowly, I turned toward the door. Frank Burke, a snub-nosed automatic in his hand, stood there. His eyes were as cold and sharp as new gimlets. The safety catch was off on the gun, a slender forefinger was curved snugly around the trigger.

I closed my right hand over the tire iron which I had left lying on the desk, my body covering the movement. I knew better than to try to draw the gun in my belt.

"Where is Judy?" I asked through stiff, dry lips.

"You won't live to see her," Frank promised me in a calm deadly voice. The tip of his tongue slid across his upper lip. "Just how much do you know? Or how much have you guessed, Jerry?"

I felt a little better. Frank was going to let me live until he learned what I knew. And I might live longer if he thought I had told somebody else what I knew, or rather had surmised.

"I know several things," I told him grimly, hating him. "You and Paul Krebs were responsible for those oil trains being destroyed, for the brutal deaths of those seven trainmen. You supplied Krebs with the train schedules. He had to know the exact schedule, otherwise the mines he set on the track might have derailed a passenger or an ordinary freight. Somehow, Judy

found out about it, and Mark Bannon did, too, I suppose. You or Paul killed Bannon to shut him up. You tried to kill me tonight to keep me from digging into this."

Frank Burke laughed, and the skin on the top of my head quivered. Sweat broke out in the edge of my hair.

"You're a pretty fair guesser," he said. "But what proof do you have for any of it?"

With my left hand, I waved the bank book at him.

"This bank account in a phony name for one thing. The dates of the deposits coincide with the train derailments. Also the land on which the trains were wrecked belongs to Krebs, although it's still listed in his wife's name.

"Another thing, you were the only person who knew I was going to the sheriff's office tonight. You got hold of Krebs after I left here, then you all followed me when I left Logan's office, tried to knock me off.

"Something else—Krebs got careless over at Mark's and left his thick cigarette ashes around. After you'd killed Mark, you planted Judy's purse with the idea of fixing Bannon's murder on her, or me, or perhaps on both of us."

The slim forefinger turned white on the trigger. I pulled in a silent breath. And waited. The finger relaxed. I breathed again.

"Who knows this besides you?" Frank asked, his eyes narrowing to dark, brooding slits of cunning evil.

I grinned. "Several people."

The pink tip of his tongue made the trip across his upper lip again.

"There are ways to make you talk. And I—"

FRANK stopped as the doorbell in the hall began to squall. Automatically his head turned for an instant toward the door. I lifted my right arm swiftly and threw the tire iron. It caught him a glancing blow on the side of his head with enough force to knock him off balance. His automatic blazed out, but the bullets went wide by inches.

I lunged at him, but the snow on my boots had melted, causing me to slip, and the lunge fell short. Cursing bitterly, I caught his gun hand with my fingers, secured barely enough grip to turn the gun to one side. My feet were slipping fast now. Frank, quick to take advantage, brought his knee up, crashed it into my chin.

I thought every tooth in my head had been jolted loose, and I was falling, falling. The floor hit me squarely in the face. I was not quite out, but I couldn't make my muscles function. Through a haze I saw the varnished toe of Frank's pointed shoe coming at my head. I tried to dodge it, and couldn't. . . .

When I came to, Paul Krebs was in the

room. I didn't see him. I recognized the harsh, abrupt tone of his voice. I kept still, hoping I might learn where Judy was, and given a little time, I might catch them at a disadvantage. Besides the blazing pain in my head was so fierce that I couldn't have slapped a puny kitten down right then.

"Why in thunder didn't you finish Jerry off?" Krebs demanded. The nearness of his voice told me he was standing close to me.

"Don't be stupid, Paul!" Frank snapped irritably. "He knows too much. We'll have to find out who he's told and how much."

"Don't call me stupid," snarled Krebs. "If you hadn't been so careless and left that inner office radio thing on, his wife wouldn't have got wise and we wouldn't be in this mess."

So that was how Judy had found out, I thought.

"Anybody can make a mistake," Frank replied sullenly.

"Nobody makes mistakes in this business," Krebs came back in a dangerous, unpleasant voice. "What did you do with the girl?"

Frank's voice was strained, tight now. "She's still upstairs with Lucille."

"You mean you haven't killed her yet?"

"Now listen, Paul, she's still under the chloroform. Besides, before we—er—kill her, we've got to find out if she talked to anyone besides Bannon."

Judy was alive! Judy was alive!

That pounded through me, put new life in me. It even pushed some of the pain out of my throbbing head. I slitted my eyes open, saw Paul Krebs' big, snow-caked boots pointing toward the door, Frank Burke's polished oxfords pointing toward the window. The oxfords were only a foot from my right hand.

A smoldering silence ticked away, and when Krebs spoke, his voice was a low, threatening growl.

"Still under the chloroform? Why, you fool! You stupid fool! She's faking. She couldn't have stayed under this long!"

"Well, maybe not," Frank admitted, his voice almost a whine now. "Is it—well, is it absolutely necessary to kill her? Couldn't we buy her silence?"

"You yellow pig!" Krebs roared, his breath coming in a rasping whistle. "I'll give you exactly twenty minutes to go upstairs and get whatever information we need out of her. Just twenty minutes! Understand? Then get rid of her. I'll take care of Jerry here. Now get up there, and no more of your stupidity and squeamishness or I'll give you some of what I gave Bannon!"

The oxfords began to turn. I shot my hand out, grasped a slender ankle and jerked with all the force in my body. Frank Burke plunged back, his head striking the

open door with a sickening thud, then he crashed on down to the floor.

I twisted over and up to a half-sitting position and went after the stocky legs over the big boots. Krebs let out a surprised oath, tried to step back, but that melting snow was working two ways tonight. One boot slipped, then the other and Krebs hit the floor with a thunderous thump.

Then I was up and crawling on top of him just as he brought his gun around. I shoved it aside with my left elbow and smashed my right fist into his thick face. I kept on smashing it there until I felt his body go limp. To be sure he gave me no more trouble, I lifted his head, bounced it down against the floor a couple of times.

AS I got up, Frank Burke began to groan and come to life. I walked over to him, swung my foot back and put the toe of my boot behind his ear.

"That's for the one you gave me a while ago," I said.

Burke didn't hear me, though. He was deathly still now.

I raced up the steps, taking them two at a time. Upstairs, I looked up and down the hall, and at the back saw a slit of light beneath a door.

I flung the door open, walked in. Judy, bound and gagged, was lying on the bed. Her lovely dark eyes stretched wide when she saw me. Lucille Burke was sitting by the night table at the bed, a cigarette in one hand. She turned as I came in, and I knew by the expression on her face that she had expected Frank. And due to her deafness, she hadn't heard the brawl downstairs.

Her hand flew to a little pearl-handled revolver on the night table. She was too late. I was there in two steps and slapped it out of her hand. But she turned out to be a handful. I had always thought her quiet and on the weak side. I was entirely mistaken.

She bounced out of the chair, clawing, kicking and screaming things that made my ears burn. Woman or no woman, I had no intention of being stopped now. I shoved her away from me and clipped her neatly on the chin. And I didn't bother to catch her as she slumped heavily to the floor.

I turned to Judy. With shaking hands I tore the gag off.

"Hi, slowpoke," she said.

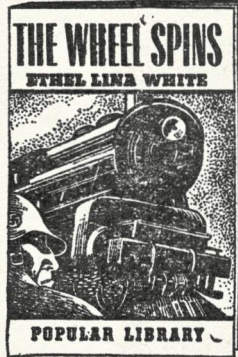
I swallowed. "Hurt much, hon?"

"No, just mad—and thirsty," she said as I untied her hands and feet. Then she laughed. "But honestly, Jerry, seeing you bob Lucille was worth the whole thing."

Only I knew she was putting on a front. Her slender, lithe body was shaking all over as I held her closely, tightly for a long moment. Then I rubbed her wrists and ankles to get the blood to going again.

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Name

Address

City State

I guess I'd never known how lovely she was until now. I couldn't look at her enough. Her feathery black hair was all mussed up, her finely-chiseled face was white and strained, but I'd never seen anything in my life so beautiful, so infinitely dear. I got all choked up and couldn't say anything.

"Idiot," she said gently, and pulled my head down.

We tied up Lucille Burke, and I toted her downstairs over my shoulder as I would have carried a sack of meal. We found some more cord in the kitchen and fixed Frank and Paul. Then I backed the car into the drive. We loaded the two men in the back and decided to let Lucille ride up front with us.

Down at the sheriff's office, I let Logan curse himself out, then told him that he could have all the credit for taking the saboteurs. I reminded him that election time wasn't far off, and a haul like this wouldn't do him any harm.

He forgot all about me hitting him, and listened real nice as Judy told him about hearing Burke and Krebs make plans to derail more oil trains. They were also planning to dynamite some of the refinery storage tanks.

Burke was to tell Krebs when the tanks were filled to capacity. Krebs was to have the dynamiting done.

"Why didn't you call me or the F.B.I. immediately?" Logan asked politely.

"I didn't call from the refinery," Judy explained, "because I was afraid Burke might come in before I'd completed the call. Then Mark Bannon came in the office, and while we weren't too friendly, I knew he could be trusted with something like that, so I told him what I'd heard. Although I wish I hadn't now. He might be alive if I hadn't.

"Anyway, Mark was telling me that he'd go to an outside phone and call you or the

F.B.I. when we heard Burke say something like, 'Oh, no, you don't!' He was standing in the door with a drawn gun. I suppose he had noticed his set was open. How long he had been listening to Mark and me, I don't know, but he'd been there long enough to know Mark and I were onto his plans.

"Then Krebs came out, and he and Burke decided it was too risky to kill us there, so Krebs forced Mark to go with him. Burke made me drive him to his house. When we got there, some of their dinner guests had already arrived, so he chloroformed me in the garage. I came out of it sooner than they thought, but realized the longer I pretended to be out, the longer I'd live. Then finally, this big lug"—she motioned toward me—"showed up."

LOGAN waddled around his desk, actually preening himself. I knew he was in a hog's heaven, seeing mental pictures of himself in the papers. He complimented Judy profusely, telling her how she had saved the nation no telling how many thousands in oil, no telling how many lives, and so on and so on. He, personally, would see that she got the proper credit in the proper places. He grasped her hand, pumped it up and down. I shuddered.

Later, as we drove home, and after we had seen Frank Burke, his wife and Paul Krebs to three of Logan's best cells, I looked down at Judy.

"War or no war," I said sternly, "I still think the woman's place is at home!"

Gosh, but I was glad to have her back with me. Safe and as good as new. There would be no more working for my wife. No, sir!

Judy hugged my arm against her cheek. "Now that Burke is gone," she said dreamily, "the refinery owners will probably make me superintendent."

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COMING NEXT MONTH

McClain unleashed a thunderous right hook and sent the gun whirling from Bristol's fingers



Shoulder Straps

By C. S. MONTANYE

Assigned to a war-plant payroll murder, Detective Dave McClain goes to work on a hunch—and lands in the middle of dynamite!

BIG DAVE McCLAIN, of Homicide, rode the prowl car to the scene of the crime. It wove in and out of the Bronx traffic, sirens screaming. McClain, one of his inevitable cigars tucked in the corner of his wide mouth, watched the streets go by.

The radio flash said it was a payroll stick-up. Out at the Hubbell-Whitcomb plant. That was where they made electrical gadgets for submarines on Government contracts.

A humming war factory. Thousands of workers. McClain stretched his loose, large frame and shifted the cigar from one side of his face to the other.

Sergeant Peters, driving the car that had picked McClain up at Times Square, gave it more gun when they reached the open spaces of the long, cement boulevard.

Five minutes later they were at the wire gates of the plant.

Captain Fred Mullin, McClain's boss, gave

him a nod and the big detective followed his superior into an office in one of the buildings to the left of the entrance.

A middle-aged man lay on the floor in the center of the room. McClain gave him a gander. The man was completely out of the world and would never come back.

"Eighty thousand bucks," Mullin said shortly. "That's what they scooped after plugging this party!"

McClain shrugged and went about the routine business of the holdup.

Gradually, he lined up the facts. The dead man—a John Peterson—together with a younger assistant, a Harry Clement, had gotten the payroll money at the Tremont branch of the bank the plant deposited with.

The eighty thousand was in bills of all denominations.

Half a mile from the plant a green 1936 sedan had cut in on them from Throggs Neck Road. Clement, to avoid a collision, had jammed on the brakes. The next minute he had found himself looking into the ugly end of a tommy-gun. There were three men in all and they didn't waste time.

One, opening the door, had snatched the satchel from between Peterson's feet. The paymaster, evidently an employee with courage, had tried to get his shooter out.

It was a wrong move. The party who reached for the dough bag let him have it. Two shots, either one sufficient. Then all three had piled back into the green heap and disappeared.

Clement had driven Petersen to the plant. The paymaster was alive until he reached the middle of the office. He collapsed there and hadn't been touched since.

"Think you'd recognize any of 'em?" McClain asked Clement. "Stick around, I'll take you downtown and let you look at the photos later."

THERE wasn't much to work on. Mullin threw McClain a nod and he took Clement down to the Gallery.

In less than five minutes the assistant paymaster had identified two of the bandits.

"Simm Yellen and Hooker Bristol," McClain told Mullin, when the hard-hitting, cold-eyed captain finished at the plant and got back to Headquarters.

"Go out and bring them both back." Mullin rubbed his lantern jaw on the back of a hand. "Eighty G's. War contracts. I want to bust this wide open and show the Federal Bureau we've got some brains down here, too."

McClain nodded.

"Yeah? Where?" He grinned, one of his slow, lazy grins. "Funny. I saw the Hooker last night—with a doll. Uptown, dancing his feet and head off."

"Bring 'em in!" Captain Mullin repeated.

McClain filled both vest pockets from a box of fifty cigars presented him by a grate-

ful admirer who operated a hotel tobacco concession. The man had been troubled with petty larcenists stealing his stock whenever his back was turned. Mac had solved his problems by installing two things—a small mirror in the rear of the stand and a large mouse-trap concealed among the culprits' favorite brand of cigarettes.

The mirror had turned up one of the hotel bellhops and the mouse-trap had sent the lad howling through the lobby.

They were pretty good smokes. McClain smelled one appreciatively, sighed and went on uptown to level on Hooker Bristol and Simm Yellen.

Both had records. Both were tough hoodlums. Both knew their way around and were expert with firearms. With eighty thousand dollars, to be split three ways, it didn't seem any too likely they'd be hanging around the usual stamping ground.

McClain shook his head and got out of the subway at Times Square.

He walked two blocks up Longacre, turned east and went into the Mirador. That was the creep where he had seen the Hooker the night before. By daylight the place was pretty sad. Shabby and tarnished around the edges. McClain went on up to the second floor and rapped on the door of the owner-manager.

"Come in."

Phil Bimber, a typical Rialto sharpshooter, sat in his shirt-sleeves, going over the books. He was a middle-aged man with a thin, shrewd face and not much hair. McClain admired his sleeve garters and sat down.

Bimber gave him an expressionless glance. Evidently having the law drop in was no particular novelty.

"How's business?" the detective asked affably.

He always found it better to attract his answers with honey rather than barge in and bulldoze.

"Wonderful. War, taxes, headaches. Yet there's more lettuce on the loose than I've ever seen in twenty-seven years running joints. They want to spend. They want to chuck it around. They want fun and they're over-anxious to pay for it."

"So I understand."

McClain settled further back in his chair. He teased a spiral of fragrant smoke from the gift cigar that was like a candy stick between his thin lips. He saw Phil Bimber sniff and grinned again.

"Tell me something, Phil. Who was the little bundle the Hooker was doing the heel-and-toe stuff with last night?"

Bimber's blank face went blanker.

"You mean Bristol? Was he here last night?"

"Who was the dame?" McClain's easy, pleasant tone disappeared.

"I wouldn't know."

"Okay." McClain, in sections, began to get up. "Just as you please, Phil. Funny," he added softly, "about those fancy draperies you're featuring downstairs. I kept looking at them last night and wondering if they're fireproofed. I kept thinking about that big blaze, a couple of years ago, in Boston. I've been wondering if the Fire Commissioner has ever stopped in here for a drink—"

"Sit down." Bimber's thin face cracked in a smile. "The dame's Dovey Penfield. A little cutie from Maxie Wilden's barbership."

McClain made a note of that.

"Anything else on your chest?"

"You might," Bimber added, as an afterthought, "check on 'Humpty' Keller. He's around again—in from Chicago."

McClain passed over one of the aromatic perfectos and went down to the street.

The Wilden Tonsorial Parlor was almost diagonally across from the old Palace Theater. McClain shuffled in and hung his dicer on the chromium hat-rack. A glance showed him the manicurist in the rear of the shop was sitting cross-legged, reading a flamboyantly covered detective story magazine.

Mac pulled out the chair opposite and dropped into it. The girl shut the magazine, put it in one of the lower drawers of the table and looked up inquiringly. She was a pretty little thing with starry brown eyes, glinting curls and a smooth, young skin.

But hard, McClain saw. Wisdom lay in the depths of her soft brown eyes. It was in the lip line of her red, pursed mouth. In her expression, her way of talking.

"Hello," McClain said.

"Hello yourself."

Her voice was fascinatingly husky, as if she had a cold.

"The works," Mac requested, passing over his right hand.

Except for himself there was only one other customer. A man with a face full of lather, being shaved by Maxie himself.

Dovey Penfield looked at his nails and then up at him.

"What am I supposed to do—trim 'em? I haven't got an ax in my kit."

"Burn them off." McClain laughed. "I know they're pretty terrible, but work on an assembly line all day, putting thingamajigs together, and see how your nails come out. Do the best you can."

"Okay, but there's no guarantee."

SHE went to work. McClain's lazy glance wandered over her. After awhile he sent out a feeler.

"Look, babe. I'm on a two-day vacation with a roll of cash crying for a good time. Believe it or not, Arthur Murray's my ideal. I'm a fiend for a waxed floor and a gal to hoof with. Busy tonight?"

The brown eyes studied him. McClain was sure of her type. She was one of those Broadway workers who loved to make dates with lads whose leathers were well lined. She wasn't particular, either. She wouldn't go out with the Hooker if she were.

"I don't know." She frowned a little. "I had sort of a date, but—"

"You name the place and I'll take care of the overhead."

Mac made it sound alluring. He added a few details, bringing in the word "champagne" and let it rest and simmer while she dug and ground with orange stick and file.

When she was all through he draped a ten-dollar bill gracefully over her celluloid-topped buffer.

"Yes or no?"

She reached in the bottom drawer, tore the blank margin from one of the pages in the magazine, scribbled her name and address on it and passed it over.

"Come up around seven."

In a corner drugstore the big detective talked with Captain Mullin for several minutes, hung up and wandered into a convenient beer-stube. He took a flagon to a compartment table and nursed it along while he thought about Phil Bimber's tip. Humpty Keller, as his name implied, was a hunchback who had been around the mazda thoroughfare for a long time before he had gone West to try his luck in the windy burg.

Keller had always been a stooge for crooks and shufflemen. Never directly tied in with any rough stuff, more than once he had been suspected of gun-toting for trigger addicts and playing bank with stolen funds. Mac remembered that Humpty Keller had, in the past, been more than friendly with Hooker Bristol and Simm Yellen.

It began to look as if maybe Bimber knew what he was talking about. It all depended, McCain decided, with another dip into the suds, more or less on what he learned from the girl he had the seven o'clock date with. . . .

The address tied in with a frowzy apartment house in the upper hundreds, a nod in from the avenue named after America's discoverer. Two blocks beyond a brewery perfumed the evening air with its day-long scent of hops and malt. A couple of stoop-warmers moved languidly to let McClain's flat feet in their number twelves go past them when he mounted the steps and consulted the mail boxes in the vestibule.

Dovey Penfield opened the door of an apartment on the third floor.

"Oh, hello," she said. "Come on in."

"Thanks."

McClain eased his big frame into a cheaply furnished living room. A not-too-clean, shabby room. The windows looked out on an airshaft. It was rather dim. But there was enough light for Mac to see the

sporting edition of the evening newspaper on a littered table.

A page had been turned so the full details of the Hubbell-Whitcomb payroll snatch faced upward for anyone to read. And, Mac decided, the girl had transferred her literature from make-believe cops to the genuine article.

He sat down on a mangy couch. Broken springs hummed and vibrated under his weight. Dovey Penfield wore the same black rayon dress of the barber shop, but minus her apron. McClain smiled amiably up at her.

"Figured where you'd like to feed, baby? You pick the trough and I'll keep my promise."

"I know a dozen wonderful places."

"There must be a band and there must be a dance floor."

"I'll think them over while I'm changing." Dovey's ruby-tipped fingers strayed to the fastenings at her waist. "You park here and puff on one of those nice-smelling weeds. This dump needs fumigating. I won't be long."

"Put on something pretty," McClain murmured coyly, wincing a little at the corn.

She went into an adjoining bedroom. McClain heard her humming under her breath. She left the door ajar a trifle, as if the room were too warm for comfort with it closed. He heard her opening and closing bureau drawers. Then the whisper of silk and the tiny thuds made by the slippers she took off.

He distributed his weight more evenly among the springs, jerking his head up when, abruptly, the doorbell buzzed.

"Be a good boy and see who it is."

Dovey looked out through the crack in the door.

"Sure."

McClain got up and walked out to the two-by-two foyer. The front door had a patent burglar-proof lock on it. He solved it and pulled the door open.

It was pushed wider.

"Dovey home?"

"Yeah, but—"

"I just want to use the telephone."

McClain stepped aside and Humpty Keller walked in.

"Who is it?" Dovey Penfield's voice came from the bedroom.

"Me, honey. Mind if I use your phone a minute? I'm temporarily out of slugs."

"No, help yourself. But make it fast."

MAC shut the front door and walked back to the living room. Humpty Keller stood near the table. Bound for the telephone on a stand in the corner, he stopped for a look at the open newspaper on the table. When McClain went in he glanced up.

"Hope I'm not jamming you and Dovey. I'll only be a minute."

"Okay," Mac said, reseating himself on the sofa.

He watched Keller lift the telephone from its black bakelite cradle. The other was not much taller than a jockey. Short, wizened, malevolent-looking. The physical disfigurement that had given him his nickname rose from between his hunched shoulders like a good-sized watermelon.

Keller stood in front of the phone so the number dialed couldn't be checked. There was a minute's wait and then he said:

"Humpty. . . . Absolutely right. . . . Nothing else new. . . . I'm at Dovey's, but moving on. . . ."

McClain couldn't hear what the person at the other end of the wire said. Humpty grunted and rang off.

"Stick around and have a drink with us. I'll be out in a minute. By the way, meet my friend. Mr. Parker. Isn't that right?" Dovey said from the crack in the door.

"Right." Mac nodded at the little man. "Glad to know you Mr. —"

"Mutual. The tag says Gleason." Humpty dug a loose cigarette from his pocket and hunted up a match. "New around town?"

"Fairly so. I work in a munitions plant."

Humpty's muddy gaze darted to the newspaper on the table. "The big dough. Me, I couldn't stand that grind. Where's your oil?" he called in to the girl.

"Look in the top of the ice-box. There should be a couple of bottles of ale there. I couldn't get any Bourbon anywhere," she added.

Keller went out, making a face. McClain finished his cigar and put it in a high-heaped ash-tray beside him. He stretched, smothering a yawn. Warmth always made him sleepy and this room must be around eighty degrees.

"Be a pal and hook me up, Mr. Parker."

Dovey stood before him. She wore a green near-silk dress. It had a frilly neckline, bows at the waist. She must have sprayed lacquer on her brown hair. It looked stiff and frostily glazed. She laid her make-up on with a heavy hand; the pursed, hard mouth was caked with lipstick.

Clumsily, McClain went after the fastenings on the green dress. The perfume she used was a trifle overpowering at close range. Automatically he stuck a dry cigar in his mouth in self-defense.

"I'll be glad when zippers come back—if ever." She twisted around and smiled at him. "We'll have a beer with my friend and then duck. It's early yet."

They sat around and killed the quart of ale she opened. The room got hotter. Keller slipped his coat off. Under it he wore a very thin white shirt. McClain looked at the shirt slowly, his gaze focusing on its shoulders whenever Humpty's own eyes

were busy with Dovey Penfield.

She must have gotten a message across to the little man because, McClain saw, Keller hadn't had his coat off for more than a minute or two before he put it on again.

All at once the detective began to be aware of a certain growing tension. It was in the air, in their conversation, in Keller's restlessness. Twice, McClain saw the brown-haired girl look at the cheap watch on her wrist.

HE PLAYED along, drinking the balance of the brew, content, as usual, to let events shape themselves. He had made one discovery which might, or might not, be of some importance. It concerned Humpty Keller's thin white shirt, the shoulders. He turned it over in his mind, toying with the significance of it until, after more desultory conversation, there was another buzz of the bell.

"Looks like it's my busy night," Dovey pouted. "Answer it," she directed Humpty. "I'll take these glasses away."

She gathered them up and went in the kitchen while Keller ankled to the foyer. McClain slipped his police gun out of its holster and planted it under one of the three seat cushions on the lumpy sofa.

He was standing at the window, peering idly into the dusk of the airshaft when Humpty came back with the new caller. Turning slowly, McClain felt his nerves telegraph a swift and sudden warning.

The man who came leisurely in was the same party Mullin had told him to go out and get!

"I want to introduce you to Dovey's friend." Keller waved a hand. "Mr. Parker."

Hooker Bristol's seamy lips went back over his prominent gums. He was well-built, wide-shouldered, well-dressed. But crime was etched indelibly into his close-eyed, twisted-lipped face. The mark of the killer was in his tightly drawn, unhealthy skin, in the brooding, colorless eyes, the gummy smile.

McClain got it without any trouble.

It wasn't likely the girl had known him. It wasn't likely that Phil Bimber had notified either Humpty or the Hooker. Bimber had too much at stake to risk putting his nose into what didn't concern him. McClain thought back.

He remembered the man in the barber-shop, the one with the lather-smear on his face. He must be the one who had tipped Dovey off. Humpty had dropped around to make the identification sure and his telephone call, naturally, had been to the Hooker.

"Naturally!" Mac thought.

"Name is Parker?" Bristol shook his head. "This week mebbe. Last week it was McClain. Dovey, your friend's a flattie."

"No!" the girl exclaimed, giving a cred-

[Turn page]

Today's Thinkers
will become
Tomorrow's Leaders



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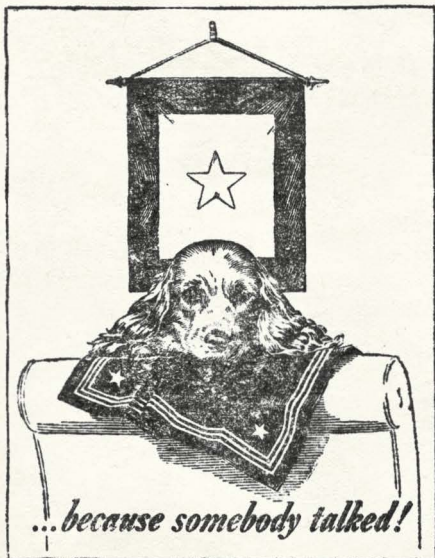
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itable impression of real surprise. "Why, he told me he was on the assembly line—"

"We assemble a lot of characters. I line them up and look them over. Same idea. So what?"

Bristol, stepping in close beside Mac, while Keller made a show of reaching for a rod to distract the detective's attention, drew with lightning speed.

"Freeze, copper!" Bristol ordered.

McClain lifted both hands. The Hooker's gat was planted directly over his heart.

"I'll get his steel." Humpty felt around with small, grimy hands. He said, "Cut me down and call me Shorty! No iron!"

"Look again!" Bristol directed.

"A cop!" The girl's voice was full of scorn. "Trying to get next to me to learn something! A dirty, low copper! I can't get over it!"

"Neither will he." Bristol laughed curtly. "What's the snoop, McClain?"

"What do you think?"

"I'll guess. The Bronx job this morning. Who identified me—the lug that was driving?"

McClain looked at the couch. It didn't sound good. Hooker Bristol wasn't admitting things unless he was pretty sure that he, McClain, wouldn't be around to use them.

"That's right. Where's Yellen?"

"Why don't you keep in touch with Mullin?" Bristol sneered. "Simm's been down at the main office for the last two hours—getting worked over."

"Don't talk to him!" Humpty grated. "Let him have it and let's get out of here!"

"You're not going to shoot anyone in front of me," Dovey Penfield said emphatically.

BRISTOL reached in his pocket with his left hand. He produced a round, numbered check. He tossed it over to the girl.

"You beat it down to the Grand Central and get the baggage. We'll meet you by the information booth in twenty minutes."

"Go on," Keller said, when the door closed behind her, "get it over with! I'm sweatin' like a bull."

"How do you want it?" Bristol's colorless eyes were alive with sparks. "Through the heart or head—"

"Let me sit down and think it over," Mac laughed. "What's the matter with you kill-crazy mugs? Knocking me off won't help your score any. You—"

"Fry for one, fry for two! What's the difference?"

"Get it over with!" Humpty insisted.

Perspiration dripped from his forehead. His hands had begun to tremble.

McClain leaned a little forward. He could feel the hard outline of his gun under the cushion he sat on. It might as well have been a thousand miles away.

He glanced down at Bristol's well-polished shoes. Like a couple of mirrors. McClain moved his own brogans. He pushed them out to within an inch of the Hooker's glimmering booties. Then he up-ended his feet, resting on his heels.

He straightened and bent backward against the cushions.

Inch by inch he raised his feet from the floor. Both of them. He couldn't see his target now, he had to gauge and guess. Humpty was pleading with Bristol to go on and do the job. Bristol, his gun outstretched and ready, moved slowly in an arc while he made up his mind where to aim and trigger the slug.

With all the power in his long, heavily muscled legs, McClain brought both heels down like trip-hammers on Hooker Bristol's shined shoes!

It worked as Mac hoped it would.

Bristol yelped in pain and started to double up. McClain had his pistol wrist the next split-second. He was on his feet, slugging Bristol with a bunch of knuckles. The Hooker was important stuff with a weapon in his hand but putty without one. He wilted under the thunderous right hook, the gun whirling from his opening fingers.

Mac hit him again and stooped to pick up the gat. As he did so Humpty made a flying leap and landed on his back.

Keller was different. Keller was like a live, sinuous wire, surcharged and full of high voltage. His thumbs dug into McClain's windpipe. The big detective couldn't get at him to dislodge him. Like a monkey, Humpty clung to his back, the small hands throbbing unmercifully.

The room began to swim around McClain's head. The furniture grew large and then small, coming close and fading away. Rage set the blood pumping through him. A fine state of affairs! He could knock Bristol out with one punch, but he had to fold up because a little man was on his back, using a couple of tiny thumbs on his throat!

Something had to be done and done quickly.

Bristol was snapping out of it. McClain could feel the Hooker tossing around on the floor. Another minute and Bristol would have his gun back and then it wouldn't be funny. Another minute and Hooker would ventilate him with hot lead.

Mac sucked in a breath through what opening was left in his windpipe. He began to back up, gathering speed as he went. He aimed himself at the nearest wall. He'd crush Humpty between himself and the plaster, flatten him out like a pancake.

But Keller sensed it and acted. The thumbs left McClain's throat. Keller unfolded his arms and slid off.

He tried to duck but McClain was too
(Concluded on page 80)



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ORDERS FROM THE BOSS

By JAMES HARRY MARTIN

Big Mike Gilfoyle is a cagy gent, but he's no match for a couple of racket-wise mugs like Tony and Butch!



TONY and I had both seen the headlines in the morning papers. That's why we played both ends against the middle when the boss called us up to his office and fingered big Mike Gilfoyle who looked like he was sliding from under for the works.

"This Gilfoyle guy isn't a chump, Chief," I said. "He's shown everybody that he knows all the angles. And it looks like he generally has a bodyguard tagging around with him."

"Better count on two, three or maybe more guys with him all the time," Tony said, helping me put the idea over. "And don't forget, they're the same huskies that helped him get everything started out on the West Coast."

The boss grunted and reached for the heavily inlaid cigar box on the center of his flat-topped desk.

"You two guys scared?" he asked, looking pointedly at Tony and me. "Is that it?"

I tried a grin, as I casually fingered two of the fifty-centers out of the inlaid box.

"A guy can be careful and still not be scared," I said, passing Tony his cut of the cigar steal. "You know that, Chief."

It was the old malarkey, but the boss grunted again. Then he slapped the cigar box shut, picked up his gold-plated desk lighter, and flicked it aflame.

"I could pay maybe two hundred bucks for a good clean job on Mike Gilfoyle," he softly suggested, through about ten cents worth of heavy blue cigar smoke. "Fifty bucks extra if you have to polish off bodyguards."

Tony and I both knew the way the boss worked. He seldom actually fin-

gered a job himself. But when he did, he always hung the cross on some character like this Mike Gilfoyle, and paid for the job out of his own pocket.

He always stood behind us after a job, too. In case of an accident, he paid hospital bills. And on occasions when we had to hide out until the cops were cooled, he spotted us in his home up in the mountains, or sent us out of state for a couple of weeks—all expenses paid. Nice clean work was all he ever asked, with no slip-ups and no bungling.

I SHOT a quick glance at Tony, saw that he was looking at me. Both of us grinned and nodded at the same time. "Okay, Chief," I agreed. "We've practically got big Mike Gilfoyle set up and knocked off right now."

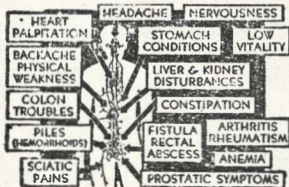
Mike Gilfoyle had worked himself up quite a rep, and everybody knew that he never strayed far from the three new airplane factories on the outskirts of town. So Tony and I used up our ration card for gas for the long, low black sedan we drove on a risky work.

We had both been in the racket a long time, so we had it all planned. We figured to check on Mike's habits and knock him off in some nice quiet spot where he couldn't protect himself.

But two hours later, after we had mixed about a dozen dry Martinis with the two straight whiskies we had downed in the first joint on the outskirts of town, we decided that Mike Gilfoyle didn't have any habits. Like the morning papers said, he was always on the go, and according to rumors he spent at least fifty hours a day pushing, pulling, pounding and talking work out of the gals and guys employed in all three of the new airplane factories. But he still didn't move around on a schedule, and nobody knew where we could find him at any given time.

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I didn't think the wise-cracking guy was funny.

"Okay! Okay!" I said, because I got a little hot-headed. "But you can also bet he's done working in the dark, fella. And you can give odds on the bet!"

About ten minutes later, playing a hot hunch, Tony eased our black sedan to a stop directly opposite the front entrance of United Aircraft. And that was when I saw big Mike Gilfoyle's gray-rimmed bald head glistening in the hot sunshine. He and two other guys were pushing into a hot dog joint, the three of them dressed in khaki-colored coveralls.

We couldn't have caught Mike Gilfoyle in a better spot, and Tony grinned as he carefully parked our sedan for a fast getaway, the nose pointed out from the curb and the motor running.

"I'll try getting him from the front," I said, feeling for what I always carried on such jobs as I crawled out of the car. "You try from one side, and don't worry about the guys with him. They're set-ups."

"Okay, Butch." Tony nodded and followed me into the hot dog joint. I headed straight to where Mike Gilfoyle sat hunched over a cup of coffee at the counter.

"Okay, Gilfoyle!" I said, without any build-up. "This is it, fella!"

MIKE GILFOYLE was smart, and he turned fast. But I jerked back three paces just as fast, taking three quick open shots at his grease-streaked, fat-featured red face as I moved backward. And while I was giving him the works from the front, I heard the dull boom from where Tony stood, and I saw a bright blue flash off to one side as I ducked and upset a guy that got up to grab me.

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Mike Gilfoyle lunged at Tony and yelled twice. But I was all set for that play, too. I pulled Tony out of his way and turned a couple of chairs over behind us as we both headed for the doorway.

Slamming past a guy that got up and tried to stop us on general principles, we fought out to our car and got it away from the curbing before the bunch in the hot dog joint even got out on the sidewalk. But then, looking back through the rear window to where Mike Gilfoyle stood on the sidewalk yelling and waving his arms, I knew that Tony and I were done working in the factory district for a while.

"Take a look!" I said, grinning at Tony. "Right now that Gilfoyle guy's got us classed with Hitler and the Japs. Boy! I've never seen a guy get so mad so fast!"

Tony grunted, wheeled our crate around a corner and stepped on the gas as we headed for the office.

"So what!" he finally snorted. "We got his picture for the evening editions, and that's what the boss wanted."

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SHOULDER STRAPS

(Concluded from page 75)

quick for him. Mac socked him with the muzzle of the gun, full in the face. Humpty shrieked, spit out teeth and fell over a chair.

Bristol, climbing to his knees, came forward to try a football tackle. McClain let him have a number twelve in the chest and for good measure hammered the butt of the gat directly down on top of the paymaster killer's skull!

Then, still in a blind, cold rage, he repeated the operation on Humpty and was whaling Hades out of him when the door opened and Mullin, Lantry, Ed Wheeler and Peters burst in.

"Okay, okay!" Mullins said brusquely. "Nice going, Dave. Everything's nice. Everything's just swell. We've got three killers—we've got everything—except eighty thousand dollars!"

"That's right." McClain explained briefly. "The dame!" Mullin cleared his throat. "What did you let her walk out for? Grand Central package room check! The dough's in the luggage and she's on her way!"

"I don't think so." McClain walked over to the bumpy sofa. Humpty, sprawled on it, whimpered like a dog in pain. Blood was all over his face, dripping from the side of his head. McClain, who hated to see all the plasma going to waste, hauled the little man to his feet.

He stripped off his coat, yanked Keller's tie loose and glanced up at the interested Captain Mullin with a faint smile.

"I might be all wrong, but I think I know where the dough is. It didn't walk out with the babe! It's right here!"

Mac ripped the thin white shirt off the trembling Keller, revealing what he had seen when the other had first taken off his coat, earlier that evening.

Two slender leather straps circled each shoulder, disappearing under the man's armpits. While Mullin and the others stared, Mac spun Keller around.

"Well, I'll be—"
There was another thin strap, around Keller's midriff. McClain unbuckled all the straps and lifted off the smooth wooden hump that had nestled so convincingly between the stooped shoulders.

"No wonder he made a swell bank for stolen goods! Let's see if my hunch on the hunch is right or wrong!"

With the air of a prestidigitator, McClain set the wooden hump on top of the newspaper on the table, found the catch that fastened the two halves together, slid it back and opened the thing.

Captain Fred Mullin whistled. "Eighty thousand bucks! All wadded in together! Well, I'll be—"

HEADQUARTERS (Concluded from page 8)

up the quality we mean. Leigh Brackett, by the way, isn't a fellow, but a gal. Miss Brackett is rapidly advancing as a yarn-spinner. She also writes scientific stories for THRILLING WONDER STORIES and STARTLING STORIES, if you are interested.

A flash from Texas:

I don't usually write letters to editors because I figure they have plenty of troubles without reading what some pinheaded reader wants to gripe about. But I noticed an almost Western detective yarn in THRILLING DETECTIVE, and I just want to tell you that I think that is a good idea. All crime does not take place in penthouses or in big city alleys. Mix up the locales of detective stories. How about a yarn about who murdered the cook on a cattle round-up?—*Ted Fehrling, Waco, Texas.*

Thanks for your nice letter, Ted, and your interesting suggestion. What do the other readers think about it? Let's hear from some of you. And now, from upstate, we learn:

I have been reading THRILLING DETECTIVE Magazine for almost two years. Although I read all the detective books I can get my hands on, I find your stories far more interesting and harder to solve. In short, your stories are darned good. I like them hard to solve, makes your brain work harder.

Keep up the good work, and keep printing stories such as HOMICIDE SANITARIUM—and I defy almost anyone to solve them before they get to the end—*Miss Florence M. Eisla, Buffalo, N. Y.*

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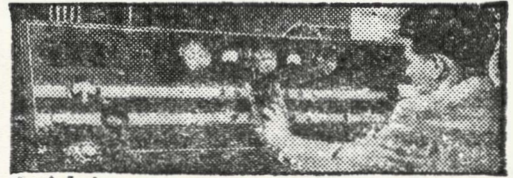
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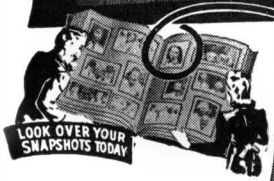
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