

THRILLING DETECTIVE

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SEPT.

MURDER'S MANDATE

A Mystery Novelet

By W. T. BALLARD

LOOK HOMEWARD, KILLER

A Crime Frame Novelet

By KEN LEWIS

DEATH OF A DEAD MAN

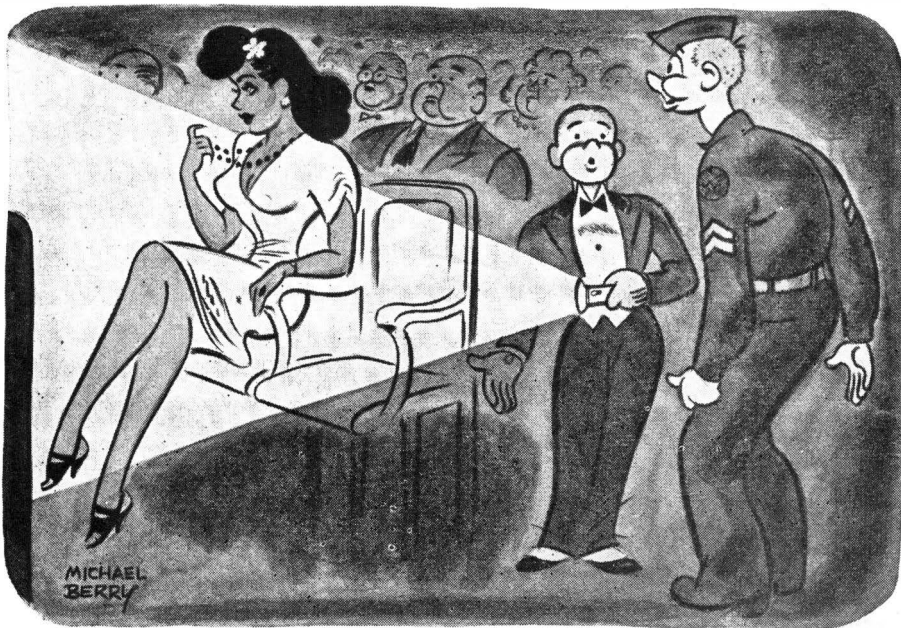
An Exciting Novelet

By WAYLAND RICE

A THRILLING
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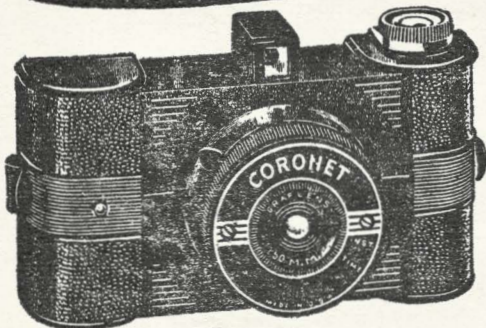
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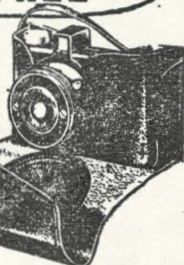
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THRILLING DETECTIVE

Vol. LVI, No. 3

EVERY STORY BRAND NEW

September, 1945



Featured Mystery Novelet

MURDER'S MANDATE

By **W. T. BALLARD**

Private Sleuth Sam Boyd plays for high stakes in a western gambling town when he puts his chips on a scheme to prove his own innocence of crime—and solve a grim death riddle! 11

Other Exciting Novelets

DEATH OF A DEAD MAN Wayland Rice 28
Clint Byron, tyro attorney, tackles his first case—and finds a picture of guilt to fit into a sinister murder frame!

LOOK HOMEWARD, KILLER Ken Lewis 54
Sergeant Shane Bannon comes back to Caryville on a furlough and lands right in the middle of a grim, baffling murder mystery!

Thrilling Short Stories

ORDEAL BY OSWALD Hal K. Wells 42
The corpse was lashed to the back of an alligator!

ONE SHOT TRICK Benton Braden 49
Farmer Jim Turner thinks swiftly to outwit a masked stranger

DEAD MAN'S NERVE Jack Bradley 67
Old Jimmy Cantrell runs into murder on his last tour of his beat

And

HEADQUARTERS A Department 6
Where readers, writers and the editor meet

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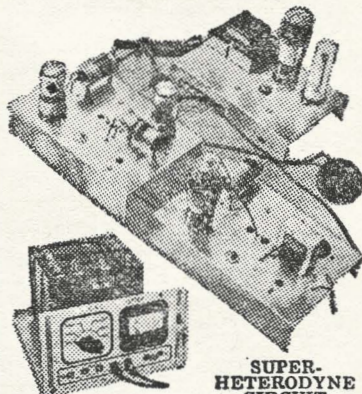
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HEADQUARTERS

Where Readers, Writers and the Editor Meet



THAT skilful weaver of intricate detective mysteries, John L. Benton, who has given us such spine-tingling yarns as "Clue of the Clever Corpse" and "A Touch of Sherlock Holmes," reaches the apex of his story-telling talent in a gripping complete novel entitled **THE MAN FROM ALCATRAZ** coming in our next issue. Get ready for thrills—it's a grand yarn, start to finish!

It concerns Inspector Nixon of Homicide, who has made up his mind that, as far as chasing crooks is concerned, enough is enough!

He has a pension coming and a strong desire to grow oranges in Florida. Private Detective Martin Blake raises his glass in salute to the retiring inspector, for a job well done. They are seated comfortably in the lobby of a swank hotel.

As the inspector arises to leave, he notices that a young man seated at a table under the balcony, an empty glass in his hand, has slumped forward in his chair. Examination proves that he has been doped. Furthermore, the narcotic has been dropped into the glass from the balcony above!

It turns out that the young man's name is Briggs. Inspector Nixon and Detective Blake suspect a girl known as "Red Ann," whom they have just seen coming down the steps. In Briggs' pocket they find a note, merely signed "Law and Order," which indicates a big crime is to be committed, unless the writer of the note is met at 6 P.M. on the morrow, in a certain designated office on Maiden Lane.

Enter—a Masked Man!

Blake, at the inspector's request, gets there

first and hides in a closet. Blake sees Inspector Nixon enter, followed soon after by a masked man. The masked man pleads with the inspector for the pardon of an unnamed criminal.

Before the perplexed inspector can answer him, the glass panel of the locked door, there in the deserted office, is smashed. A shotgun is poked through the aperture and a blasting shot blows the back of the masked man's head off!

By the time the inspector and Blake, in a pellmell rush, reach the street, their quarry has disappeared. Returning to the office, they find someone has bashed the masked man's face into an unrecognizable pulp. Even the hardboiled detectives feel their insides crawl at the sight.

Some Haul!

The scene shifts sixty miles from the city, to Bridgeport and the Narley Plane plant. It seems the owner of the plant is about to pay a bonus to his many thousands of employees. The sum of \$400,000, divided into neat little packets, will lie in the safe in the office overnight. Some haul!

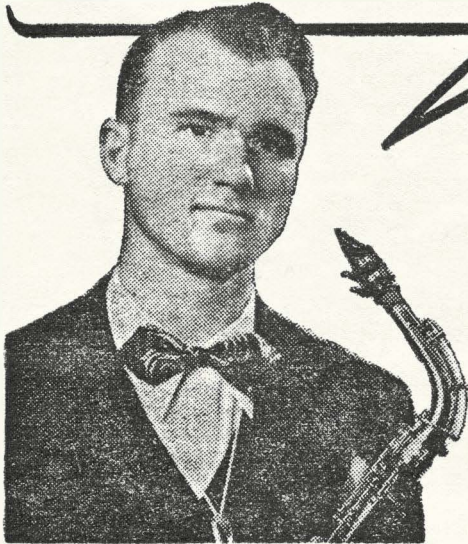
The fact of the matter is, that old man Narley isn't any too well. The presentation of the money on the morrow therefore, is to be made by his son. Young Marley, incidentally, has become enamoured of a chorus girl known as Eileen Dexter. What is more natural therefore, than that said Eileen should wheedle the smitten young man into taking her out to the plant?

Of course all this has been cunningly arranged by a gang. This lure, Eileen, has particular orders to find out about the safe, the workings of the alarm system and any

(Continued on page 8)



Three months after beginning your lessons I STARTED PLAYING IN A DANCE ORCHESTRA



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writes Bert Magyar of Barnwell,
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take up more difficult pieces. And almost before you know it, you are amazed to find that you can take many popular numbers and play them by note.

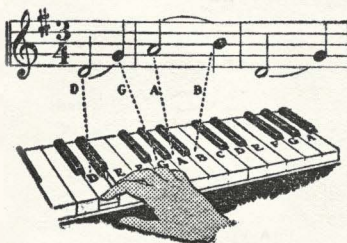
What's more, you'll be thrilled to know that you can learn your favorite instrument this simple, home-study way for less than 7c a day. That covers everything . . . printed lessons, pictures and diagrams, valuable sheet music, and our Personal Advisory Service.

If you've always wanted to learn to play but hesitated because you thought it was too difficult or too expensive, here's your chance. Send for Free Booklet and "Print and Picture" Sample. You'll see at once how easy it is to learn this quick, low-cost way. U. S. School of Music, 2949 Brunswick Bldg., New York 10, N. Y.



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The ROSICRUCIANS

San Jose

(AMORC)

California

HEADQUARTERS

(Continued from page 6)

other essential details that will help the gang of international crooks with whom she is working. The gang expects to commit one of the biggest and most daring crimes in their history!

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THE MAN FROM ALCATRAZ, by John L. Benton, is a corking, fast-moving yarn, with gangsters, gunfights and thrilling action galore all the way through! It's a humdinger that will keep you reading on with bated breath!

A Johnny Castle Thriller

We always listen to the demands of our readers. Like the Governor of North Carolina purportedly said to the Governor of South Carolina, about the length of time between drinks—our readers claim it's been a long time between Johnny Castle stories.

So, since so many of you have set up a howl for another one, we proudly present C. S. Montanye's latest opus of the *Orbit's* reporter-detective: MURDER OFF THE RECORD.

Of course, the story starts on Broadway, as most of Johnny's stories have started. The young reporter knows it as "The Only Street." No one knows it any better than Castle does.

Right at the very beginning, Castle is having a bite and a bit of a chat with Detective Larry Hartley, sometimes his pal and sometimes his bitter foe in stories past. They notice a chap at a nearby table, with a bad case of the jitters. Said chap is accompanied by a brassy blonde. Hartley tells Castle that the jittery chap is Cliff Mabie and maybe it might be worth-while for Johnny to know him.

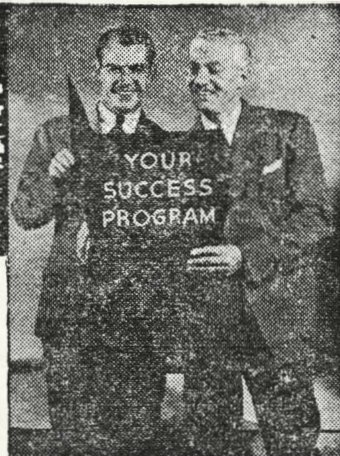
Later, Johnny Castle is on his way to keep a date with his girl friend, the effervescent Libby Hart. She is working as assistant manager of the Purple Moon, a dancery near the old Hippodrome. Johnny is on his way there, when he finally recognizes the blonde who was with Mabie.

Castle now recalls that she is Olive Orth, erstwhile chorine. She sees Johnny and begs him to help her trail Cliff Mabie, as she knows he is being trailed by a couple of gunsels. We all know Johnny Castle and what he'll do when an appeal like that comes along. They hop a taxi.

They reach a shoddy apartment over by
(Continued on page 79)

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Even as the little gun exploded, Sam Boyd was in action

MURDER'S MANDATE

By W. T. BALLARD

Private Sleuth Sam Boyd plays for high stakes in a Western gambling town when he puts his chips on a scheme to prove his own innocence of crime—and solve a grim death riddle!

CHAPTER I

BLOND MENACE

SAM BOYD was sitting in Tony Foster's law office when Roger Bowman was ushered in. He made no effort to lift his big shoulders away from the leather chair back. A slight motion of the lawyer's hand told Boyd that Foster wanted him to remain.

Roger Bowman paused, staring at Boyd. Bowman was a thin man, in his middle fifties,

with a tight-lipped mouth that was only partly screened by a close-clipped mustache. "I want to speak to you alone," he said to Foster. "This is highly confidential." His tone was pointed.

"Boyd's my confidential man," said Foster. "Sit down."

For an instant it seemed to the watching Boyd that Bowman would refuse, then with a slight shrug to express his anger, he eased himself onto the edge of a chair.

Boyd appeared half asleep, but he was studying Bowman's face, thinking that here

was a bad man to anger, and it seemed that Foster was angering him unnecessarily.

"You're the Norcross lawyer," Bowman said to Foster sharply. "I'm here to warn you."

"Warn me?" Foster made his voice surprised.

"Warn you," said Bowman, keeping his tone level with visible effort. "Norcross and I owned Western Chemical together and I bought his share in Nineteen-forty-two for seventy thousand dollars. In return he was to stay out of the business."

Foster nodded. "And I advised him not to sell. Your price wasn't enough, counting the good will after fifteen years of operation."

"That wasn't for you to say," Bowman sounded bitter. "Frank Norcross made the deal. He's dead, and now this daughter of his, with you as her lawyer, files suit, claiming that her father was not physically fit to transact business—that I took advantage of him."

Foster showed no feeling. "We've two doctors ready to so testify. Are you here to settle out of court?"

"Settle?"

Bowman lost control for an instant and rose from his chair. Sam Boyd rose also. That was one reason he was there—to see that visitors behaved.

BOWMAN looked at the still seated lawyer, at the standing Boyd.

"Hiding behind a strong-arm, huh?" He sounded contemptuous. "Well, here's something your strong-arm man can't help you with. Read this! You'll forgive me if I keep hold of it. I don't trust you, my friend."

He drew a piece of paper from his pocket, circled the desk and held it so that Foster could read.

"You should recognize Frank Norcross' signature. If you doubt it's his, we'll try a handwriting expert."

Foster was not even looking at the paper.

"What is this?" he asked.

A mocking note came back into Bowman's voice.

"Only a letter, signed by Frank Norcross, admitting that he had a secret agreement with the German Dye Trust in direct violation with the trading with the enemy act. I gave him the choice of signing this when I bought him out, or of being exposed. I should have exposed him, but we'd been partners for fifteen years, and he was an old man. I bought him out instead.

"I broke the German connection, I straightened out the business and made it pay, and I'm not going to have his daughter step in and grab the results of my hard work. Either you withdraw this recovery suit, or

I'll publish this letter! I'll take it into court and explain why it was necessary for me to force Norcross out in the first place."

"Blackmail," Foster said softly. "You forced him to sell for peanuts, knowing that he wouldn't dare refuse, and now you are trying to blackmail us."

Bowman shrugged. "You can't anger me," he said, returning the letter to his pocket. "I just wanted you to know I had a little ace up my sleeve that you hadn't heard about."

Foster didn't answer. Instead he reached for the phone and put in a long distance call for Ann Norcross at Las Vegas, Nevada. It took five minutes for the call to be completed, and no one in the office spoke during the interval.

When the connection was made Foster said, tightly:

"Listen Ann, this is very important. Roger Bowman is in my office. He has a letter that your father signed, a letter which states that your father had a working agreement with the German Dye Trust and that he maintained the connection even after we entered the war. . . ." He listened a moment. "That's right, it's dynamite. We wouldn't have a chance if he tells the story in court and makes the jury believe it. . . No, I don't know what to do. It's up to you."

He was silent for a few minutes more, his hand over the phone's mouth-piece, listening to the girl at the other end of the wire. Then he turned to Bowman.

"She wants to see that letter, the original."

"Not a chance," Bowman told him. "Is she trying some of her humor? That letter doesn't get out of my hands. If she wants to see it, tell her to come here. I certainly won't take it to Vegas just to give her a look."

"But this is important to her," Foster said. "You can't blame her for wanting to see the original. A copy wouldn't mean anything. She'd want to check her father's signature."

"Tell her to come here."

Foster spoke into the phone, then turned back.

"She can't this week, and the case starts next Tuesday."

"That's her worry."

"Didn't either of you fellows ever hear of a photostat?" Sam Boyd said in a lazy voice.

They looked at each other. Foster seemed to be asking Bowman a silent question. Finally the man shrugged.

"Okay, but who will take it over there?"

"I will," said Sam Boyd. "There's a place in this building that will photograph your letter. Come on."

An hour later he had the photostat and his instructions. Bowman had tried to back out. Foster hadn't seemed anxious himself. **The**



Boyd swung Dillon in a circle, and let go

fight seemed to have gone out of the lawyer. He seemed ready to quit. That wasn't like him, and it worried Boyd.

Not until after his boss had gone for the evening did he remember that he had never seen Ann Norcross. It would be too bad if he gave the photostat to the wrong person.

There should be some way to identify her. He thought of one and went whistling to the files. Under "N" he found two files on the Norcrosses. There was a letter bearing the girl's signature on top. Carefully he studied it before closing the drawer.

Boyd took a plane for Las Vegas the next morning. Arriving there, he drove to the address that had been given him as Ann Norcross' home, asked for her, and was admitted.

THE girl who came to the room in a few moments was blond, and cool-looking. The coolness impressed Boyd more than anything else about her. For outside it was hot. The desert sun had roasted him on the long drive from the airport, despite the fact that the calendar said spring.

"You're Mr. Boyd?" she said. "You have a copy of the letter?"

"The photostat," he corrected her, drawing the envelope from his pocket. "You won't mind signing a receipt. It's for your own protection, Miss Norcross."

He produced the receipt and handed it to her. She hardly glanced at it. Turning to a small desk, she scrawled her name at the bottom of the paper.

Boyd accepted it, glanced at the signature, and a tiny frown was the only indication he gave of his surprise. Then he looked up.

"There's something wrong here," he said. "You're not Ann Norcross!"

The girl had been waiting, one hand extended, the other hidden by the edge of the desk.

"No," she said shortly. "I'm not Ann Norcross. But I want that photostat." She brought her other hand into sight, exposing the small gun which it held. "Shall we argue, or do I get it?"

He glanced from her face to the gun.

"I never argue with guns." He was being distantly polite as he passed the envelope across the desk.

Outside the house a car made noise in the driveway. The girl backed away, still holding the gun. She opened the envelope with her free hand, drew out the photostat and glanced at it for an instant. Then her lips curved in a smile.

"Very nice, Mr. Boyd," she said. "There's a closet over there, on your right. Open the door. I'm going to lock you in. I trust you won't smother. But first—shall I take charge of this?"

She had stepped up behind him, poking the hard nose of her gun against his spine. With a deft movement she reached around and got the small bankers' special from under his arm. Then with an extra shove she hurried him to the closet and locked the door. He could hear the faint click her heels made on the red tile of the floor outside.

The closet was small and dark and close, and Sam Boyd was big. It was a tight squeeze for him even to turn around. The walls were thick and muffled sound, so he could hear nothing after the closing of the other door.

But, hearing that, he waited no longer. He put his shoulders against the rear wall and, using his left foot, proceeded to kick out one of the door panels. The wood split under the third kick and he managed to reach through the resulting hole, turn the key and unlock the door.

He pushed it open and stepped into the room. His small gun lay in the exact center of the desk. He picked it up, breaking it and noting that the cylinder was empty. Gaining the entrance in a dozen running steps, moving fast for a big man, he pulled the door open.

A yellow roadster was just turning from the long drive into the main road beyond. He had a glimpse of two people in the car and thought that one was the blonde, but could not be sure.

The cab which had brought him from the airport was still parked at the edge of the drive. The driver, hunched under the wheel was eyeing him thoughtfully.

Boyd watched the yellow car angrily for a moment, then turned and walked toward the cab.

"Did you see the driver of that roadster?" he asked.

"Yeah." The driver shifted slightly and squinted after the speeding car.

"Know him?"

"Yeah!"

Sam Boyd lost patience. "Look, friend. I'm not playing guessing games. If you know the character, tell me who he is. If not, get out from under that wheel and let me punch your nose."

The driver took a look at Boyd, at the heavy shoulders, the lean waist, and the gray-blue eyes that glittered a little under the edge of the snap-brimmed hat. He grinned a trifle weakly.

"No offense, pardner. The driver's name is Bowman, Roger Bowman. He's some kind of big shot from Los Angeles. His outfit built a plant at Vegas a couple of years ago."

NOT a muscle of Sam Boyd's face showed his surprise, and he wasted no time trying to guess why Roger Bowman should

have given him the photostat yesterday and gone to the trouble of having the blonde steal it back today.

"This is the Norcross ranch, isn't it?"

The driver nodded.

"Know Ann Norcross when you see her?"

He got another nod.

"Was the blonde who left in Bowman's car Miss Norcross?"

The driver shook his head. Boyd decided that it hurt the man to talk.

"Any idea where Bowman hangs out when he's around Vegas?" he asked.

"Yeah. He rented the old Barber place, over on Mountain View Road."

"Supposing," said Boyd, opening the car's door, "you take me there. And don't kill yourself gossiping on the way over."

When Boyd finally reached the house on Mountain View Road, after a long drive, he saw that it was surprisingly large. It stood back in a grove of cottonwoods which marked the course of an underground river. Telling his driver to wait, he went up the path toward the porch. There was no sign of the yellow roadster, but there was a small coupé parked in the drive.

There was no response to his knock so he tried again, glancing at his watch. It was almost an hour since he had left the Norcross place, and Boyd had a suspicion that his driver had purposely taken him all over the desert before coming here.

Still no one appeared and Boyd walked back down the path to where the small coupé was parked. There was a California registration slip strapped to the steering post as he bent in, trying to read the name.

The car was registered to Ann Norcross.

Boyd swore under his breath. As a general thing, he liked trouble, for it made things more interesting. But there was something going on here that he didn't understand, and he did not like mystery.

He went back to the porch, conscious that his driver was watching him. The door was fastened and he went over to one of the windows, trying the screen.

He heard a call, and looked around. The driver had his head out of the cab.

"Hey, you can't do that!"

"Who says I can't?" Boyd said.

With the help of a knife he managed to work the screen loose. There was a fairly wide crack between the upper and lower sash, a crack which would admit his knife blade. He thrust it in, reached the catch and managed to turn it. Behind him, he heard the sound of a motor. He spun around, yelling, but it was no use. The cab was already in motion, and Boyd's yell merely seemed to increase its speed.

Boyd started to swear, then grinned wryly.

"Guess the jockey doesn't care for house-

breaking," he muttered. "Well, there was four dollars on his meter. Let him try and collect."

Boyd turned back to the window. It went up easily, now that the catch was free. He stepped over the sill into a long room.

The Venetian blinds were three-quarters closed, making the place shadowed, but he could vaguely see the book-lined walls and the heavy furniture of a library.

He had pushed the blind aside to enter, and he reached backward now and tugged at the cord to flatten the blades. Light came through to show him something which he had not seen before. A man lay on his side on the floor near the hall door, his back toward Boyd.

CHAPTER II

IN CUSTODY



OR an instant Sam Boyd did not move. Every nerve in his big body was alive, tense. The gun came out from under his arm as if by instinct to nestle so deeply in his big palm that its snub nose hardly showed beyond the curving edge of his big fingers.

Then he remembered that the blonde had removed the shells from the cylinder, and with a little grunt of self-disdain he shoved the gun back into place.

Carefully he moved forward as if fearing that his soles would slip on the thick nap of the blue Chinese rug. His eyes were intent on the figure, watching for motion, for sign of life. There was none, and Sam Boyd understood why as he bent forward to give the body a closer inspection. There was a deep scalp wound from which blood had leaked down through the hair to the rug, so deep a wound that there could be no question but that the man was dead.

But Sam Boyd gave the wound only a passing glance, for his eyes had locked on the dead man's face. It was Roger Bowman, the man who had given him the photostat, and then sent the blonde to take it away, the man who had driven the yellow roadster away from the Norcross ranch only a little over an hour before.

Sam Boyd didn't like death and he liked murder less. There was something about murder that demanded action. It imposed a mandate upon the living, forcing them to take action, to do something.

Sam Boyd didn't want to do anything. He hadn't liked Roger Bowman and the man's death left him utterly unmoved, but there was Foster to be considered. Foster had given him a job to do, a photostat to deliver.

The photostat had no commercial value—or did it? Certainly it had had value to Roger Bowman, or rather the letter which it reproduced had had value.

And Ann Norcross. What about her? Where was she? Her coupé was parked in the driveway. Was she somewhere in this house?

Boyd turned, scowling, and pulled open the door into the hall. The whole business was a mess. The temptation was to get out of here, now, to get back to Los Angeles and forget the whole dreary business.

Boyd soon found Ann Norcross. Though he didn't know who the pretty girl with tape on her wrists and tape across her lips was until he freed her. All he knew was that some pretty girl had been bound and left sitting in the corner of the pantry.

Her reaction was hardly what he had expected. He had hardly freed her mouth when she said angrily:

"Perhaps you'll tell me the meaning of this?"

"I'd hoped that you could tell me," Boyd said. "You might start with your name."

She gave him a long, steady, questioning look. Her eyes were brown and large and level. There was no fear about her.

"I'm Ann Norcross," she said finally. "I suppose you aren't the man who tied me up?"

He shook his head and, somehow, she believed him.

"What happened?" he asked her.

"I came out to see Roger Bowman," she explained. "He phoned me this morning. When I knocked, the front door opened and I stepped in. It was dark in the hall, coming out of the light. I thought the man I saw was Mr. Bowman, but I couldn't be sure. Whoever it was grabbed me before I knew what was happening and held a cloth with some sweet smelling stuff over my face."

"Chloroform," Boyd guessed.

She ignored the interruption. "When I came to, I was bound, gagged, in that pantry. I don't know how long I'd been there. A long time, I guess."

Boyd nodded. Bowman had evidently lured the girl here to clear the way for his blonde to receive the photostat. But who had killed Bowman?

"Bowman's dead," he said, and told her who he was and what had happened.

She listened, her face not changing expression, even when he mentioned the photostat. But when he mentioned the blonde who had impersonated her, she spoke all right.

"That's Laura," she decided without hesitation.

"Laura?"

"Jack Dillon's girl. Laura Bingham, I've

heard her name is, but she is known only as Laura—and she's the star of the show at the Horseshoe."

BOYD nodded slowly. He had heard of the Horseshoe, a night-club and gambling place, but he had never seen it. The place had opened since his last visit to Vegas.

"This doesn't help us," he said. "We—"

He stopped short as from without came the sound of several cars turning into the drive.

"Visitors!" he muttered.

He thought of the dead man in the library. This was going to be bad. Very, very bad. He took the girl's arm and hurried her across the kitchen to the porch beyond. Several khaki-clad men were coming up the walk and the one in front carried a heavy service gun.

"Hold it, you!" he ordered.

Sam Boyd held it, but the girl with him pushed forward.

"What's the matter, Al?" she asked.

The man with the gun stopped, staring at the girl.

"Why, Miss Norcross, what are you doing here?"

"It's a long story," she said. "But you—how did you happen to show up here?"

Sam Boyd already knew the answer for he had spotted his cab driver at the edge of the driveway. The uniformed man confirmed his guess.

"That lug,"—he indicated to the cab driver—"came bursting into the office and said that somebody was crashing into the Bowman place." He looked at Sam Boyd. "Know this man?" he asked the girl.

She surprised Boyd by nodding. "He's a friend of mine," she said. "He works for my lawyer. He came over from Los Angeles to see me."

"But what's he doing here?" The khaki-clad man was still suspicious, although he had replaced his gun in its open holster.

"He came to find me," she said. "I've been held a prisoner here since before noon."

"A prisoner?" They all stared at her. "By Bowman?"

She shook her head. "I don't know, and we'll never find out from Roger Bowman. He's dead."

The policeman, a sergeant, looked at Sam Boyd with angry bafflement.

"I don't get it," he said. "This Roger Bowman was a big shot. Why, he owned that new plant out on the road to Boulder. Why should he want to tie Miss Norcross up, and how did you know she was here anyhow?"

Boyd shrugged. "I'm psychic."

The sergeant scratched his head, showing

his uniform cap back to expose a shock of thick black hair.

"The Chief is going to want a better story than that," he said. "Suppose you come down and tell him. You too, Miss Norcross."

"Do we ride with you?" Sam Boyd asked, elaborately polite, "or will we be allowed the luxury of this cab?"

"Take the cab," the sergeant told him. "One thing about this country. You aren't going far unless we want you to."

Sam Boyd, gazing at the wide expanse of sweeping desert agreed sadly. That was the trouble with this country. In early days, its remoteness had made it a perfect hiding place for outlaws. But times change. The very remoteness, the few main roads, made it a place from which escape was almost impossible. A phone call or a wire, and officers would be waiting along each of the main highways to pick you up.

He turned without a word and piloted the girl toward the waiting cab. The driver lounged beside his vehicle eyeing Boyd uncertainly.

"Hope you ain't mad about me going for the cops," he said tentatively. "But a man's gotta be careful, and when I see you prying at that window, I says, 'Herbert, this is no place for you.'"

"I should forget the four bucks I owe you," Boyd told him sourly, "but I won't. The police station, my man, and don't spare the horse-power. . . ."

The Police Chief was small and old, and tired-looking. His white hair needed cutting. His mustaches drooped a little and had a brownish stain at the ends from contact with the cigar which he held clamped between his thin lips.

He listened without comment to the sergeant's report, then ignoring Boyd, looked at the girl.

"Well, Ann?"

The girl moved a little uneasily under the stare of his level blue eyes.

"That's about the way it is," she said. "This man"—she indicated the silent Boyd—"was sent down here with some papers for me. He didn't find me at my place so he went over to Bowman's."

"Why?" The chief's voice was soft, but the question had the effect of a pistol shot.

WHEN the girl fumbled for words, Boyd picked it up. He was used to thinking on his feet, used to matching wits with some of the smartest lawyers on the Coast.

"Bowman was a former partner of Miss Norcross' father," he said easily. "I knew that. I'd also seen him drive away from the Norcross house with a girl in his car. I thought it might be Miss Norcross, so I had the taxi bring me over to Bowman's. The

driver will bear me out."

"That doesn't explain why you should pry open a window." The Chief's voice was chilly.

"Doesn't it?" Sam Boyd sounded surprised. "Miss Norcross' coupé was parked in the drive. I figured that if she was with Bowman she would most certainly come back after her car. I wasn't going to sit down in the sun and wait—not when there was a nice comfortable house handy."

The Chief's voice was heavy with irony. "I suppose you always break into houses, merely to wait?"

"Why not?" said Boyd. "I knew Bowman wouldn't care."

"Maybe he did," said the Chief softly. "Maybe he met you inside the house, objected, and you killed him. He hadn't been dead long when my men got there."

They stared at each other. Sam Boyd's lips twisted a little.

"Maybe," he said. "I never argue with cops. If that's what you think, Chief, lock me up. But you'd better make it good because I don't think my boss will like the idea, and my boss is one of the best lawyers in the world."

Anger brought a dull flush up into the Chief's sallow cheeks.

"I don't like smart people either," he warned.

"And I don't like being accused of murder," Boyd said levelly.

"Then tell the truth!" The Chief had come out of his chair. "Tell the truth or maybe we'll pound it out of you!"

Boyd grinned. This was the kind of language he understood, the kind of people he was used to doing business with.

"I can save you trouble," he said softly. "Call up L.A. Ask the boys down at Headquarters just how far you get, pounding information out of Sam Boyd. It's been tried, my friend. A lot of people have split knuckles from pounding against my hard head."

"Think pretty well of yourself." The Chief had dropped his voice. He settled back in the desk chair, his whole manner changing.

"No," said Boyd slowly. "Matter of fact, I don't. I'm probably something of a heel when you come right down to it, but calling me that is a privilege I reserve for my friends."

The Chief chuckled. "I almost like you," he said, "but that doesn't mean that I'm going to let you get away with murder. I don't think that either of you are telling the truth—at least, all the truth. I can't beat up Miss Norcross, and for the moment I'm willing to take your word that a beating wouldn't make you talk. You can go now, but don't leave town until I say the word."

Boyd's mouth twisted. "I'll bet I'd have a swell chance," he said bitterly. "Come on, Ann."

Silently the girl rose and followed him to the door. When they reached it the Chief's voice stopped them.

"When your conscience begins to hurt I'll always be here, ready to listen to your confession."

Boyd shut the door quietly. He didn't speak, all the way down the dirty hall, nor as he held the door for the girl to pass outside.

But as they walked toward the gaudy lights of Fremont he said softly:

"That old devil's smart. He knows that something is going on, and he's bound to find out sooner or later about that photostat. Have you mentioned it to anyone?"

She shook her head.

"When he does," Boyd went on, "he'll be sure you hired me to kill Bowman to keep him from showing that letter in court and exposing your dad. You didn't by any chance kill him at that, did you, chick?"

She turned, startled. "What are you saying? You saw me tied up."

He nodded. "What am I saying? But then, I'm a heel, as I told the Chief. I think of things like that. You might have had help, a friend who tied you after you bashed in Bowman's head."

"You're crazy!"

He nodded. "It helps, this is a crazy business. You didn't know about your father's tie-up with the Germans, did you? If you had, you'd never have started that suit to recover his share of the company."

"My father wasn't tied up with Germans!" He could tell by her tone that she was suddenly and deeply angry, although he could not see her face in the darkness. "My father was one of the most patriotic men who ever lived!"

Boyd sounded mocking. "I suppose he signed that letter I saw from patriotic motives."

"I don't know what he thought he was signing," she flashed. "You see, my father was so nearly blind that he could barely find his way around a room alone. Roger Bowman tricked him. We knew it then, although my father refused to believe it. Dad thought the company was in a bad way, due to the war. He sold out because he felt that his blindness made him a hindrance rather than a help."

Boyd whistled softly into the darkness. "A nice man, Bowman. I'm almost sorry I wasn't the one to slam in his head. A shame Foster didn't know this."

She nodded. "I told him, on the phone, yesterday. He was much surprised."

Boyd thought Foster was in for more

surprises. He meant to wire him as soon as they got back to town.

CHAPTER III

DEAL FOR HALF A MILLION



THE big horseshoe sign above the door glittered as if it were studded with real diamonds instead of light bulbs. Boyd took a look at it from the far side of Fremont before crossing the crowded street.

The town had grown since he had been there last. Two or three big stores gave it a really businesslike look in spite of the string of gambling clubs, saloons and restaurants.

The Horseshoe Club was something different. Vegas had had night-clubs before, mostly beyond the limits of the dusty town, but this was a night-club in the center of the city, a club patterned after the early concert saloons of Frontier days.

Boyd crossed the street and pushed open the door. To the right was a long bar, flanked by two roulette wheels and a crap layout, for even here gambling held sway. But it was not the main attraction. The room was filled with small tables, and at the end there was a stage.

A modern swing band filled one end of the platform and the leader acted as master of ceremonies for the show. It was strictly modern, and a burlesque was on the boards when Boyd walked in.

The place was crowded. Smoke made long heavy bluish layers beneath the ceiling. Hurrying waitresses kept the beer mugs on the crowded tables filled.

The noise of the place was almost deafening, but before Boyd had reached the bar, it died away to a mere murmur. Even the waitresses stilled the clinking of the glasses on the trays as the master of ceremonies stepped toward the center of the stage.

"All right, boys and girls! What do you want?"

"We want Laura!" It was a shout which shook the blue layers of tobacco smoke and threatened to lift the ceiling. "Give us Laura!"

"You've got her!"

The announcer spread his hands. The drums roared and a slide man went after a high note as the band swung into the "Trolley Song."

Laura appeared suddenly from the wings. She was riding on a child's toy street car, the bell clanging loudly. The customers took up the beat with the heavy glass beer mugs. The place was bedlam. Then all was still as the girl swung free of the toy and sang.

She could sing, and she could dance. Sam Boyd had seen a lot worse acts along the strip in Hollywood. The crowd loved it. They loved her, and let the world know it.

There must have been five hundred in the room. Workers, soldiers, tourists, all mixed up and yelling for the blonde who had stopped the show, the girl who had just danced off into the wings.

There was a door at the end of the bar which evidently led back stage. Sam Boyd set his glass on the bar and made toward it. Inside the door was a man. He was young, dark-haired. He sat on a tilted chair, his feet propped against the opposite wall so that his legs blocked the passage.

He looked up, saw Boyd in the curtained entrance and failed to smile.

"Wrong door, Mac. Beat it."

Boyd looked at him and decided he didn't like what he saw. He took a step forward.

The seated man tried to reach under his coat and get up at the same time. He could have been reaching for a match. Boyd had no way of knowing, and he wasn't one to take chances. His big hand shot out, caught the man's right foot before the fellow could lower it to the floor and heaved.

The man stopped reaching under his coat and clawed the air in a desperate effort to save his balance. He failed, landing against the dirty floor on the back of his neck.

Boyd knelt on his chest, found the gun which the man's groping fingers had failed to reach and transferred it to his own pocket. Then he rose, watching his victim climb slowly to his feet.

Most of the fight had disappeared from the dark-haired man, but he tried to bluster.

"Say, what are you trying to do?"

"I did it," said Boyd gently. "Next time a gentleman comes calling on a lady, don't play tough, chum. Someone might misunderstand. Someone might feed you your gun and make you like it. Now, where's Laura's room?"

THE man hesitated and Boyd raised a big hand for a backward cuff.

"Remember, Cousin," he said.

The man remembered. "Orders are she ain't to be bothered," he said sullenly.

"I'm giving the orders." Boyd sounded like a patient man about at the end of his forbearance. "Where's the room?"

The man told him and Boyd pushed on down the passage with never a backward look.

He paused before the door of the girl's dressing room and his big knuckles beat out a steady tattoo.

"Come in, Jack." Her voice was not distinct.

Boyd opened the door. "It isn't Jack," he said, and stepped in, shutting the door behind him.

Laura had been standing with her back to the door, staring through the dark window. She turned now and there was no surprise, no expression of any kind on her face.

"Hi, Mac," she said. "I've been expecting you to show up?"

"Have you?" said Sam Boyd. He was thinking she was one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen—beautiful and dangerous.

She nodded. "Sure, ever since I heard Roger Bowman got bumped. How come you didn't tell the cops about the little act I put on for you this afternoon?"

"Maybe I liked the color of your eyes."

She gave him a long, careful look.

"Sing another tune, mister. Little Laura's been at this racket a long spell now. You aren't the type to go soft for a dame."

"Maybe I thought they wouldn't believe me."

"Sure, and maybe you thought you'd get the little photostat back and that no one would find out your girl friend's dad had played a double game with the Nazis."

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"You guess too well," he said.

Her laugh had the tinkly sound of breaking glass.

"Now you're getting smart. Play it straight with little Laura and we'll all live long and be healthy. How much is the little piece of shiny paper worth?"

Sam Boyd stuck one hand into his pocket. He drew forth some change—a quarter, two dimes and several pennies. He considered them carefully, then selected one of the dimes and extended it toward the girl. Her blue eyes glittered a little.

"Look, Mac. You think you're a rugged character, but you aren't rugged enough to play games with little Laura. I know my cards, Mac. I'm holding them in this and I'm going to cash in."

"Are you?" he said. "What would the cops do if I told them about the photostat, if I suggested that maybe you killed Bowman to get possession of it?"

"That's silly," she said. "I didn't kill Roger Bowman. I rode home with him and he loaned me the car to come back to town."

"And you've got the photostat. It seems a little strange that Bowman would go to all the trouble he did to get it and then leave it with you."

She smirked. "That's what he did though. He was going to meet someone at the house and he didn't want to have it with him. He gave it to me for safe keeping."

Her words still didn't make sense and Sam Boyd said so.

"I think I'll tell the cops," he said. "It will be hard on Miss Norcross but better that the world find out about her father than that the cops stretch my neck for a killing I didn't do. Who did Bowman meet at that house? Do you know?"

"Sure," said the girl, and smiled thinly. "He met his murderer. All you've got to do is decide who that is."

"It isn't my business," Boyd said. "I'm going to spill to the cops."

He started to turn, but even as he did, the door behind him opened.

"You ain't going to tell the cops one thing," said a voice.

It was a high voice, a little shrill, but it matched its owner perfectly. He was a little man, barely five feet, yet so well-proportioned that he looked like a bantam fighting cock. Black hair, heavy beard, so that although he had shaved closely only a short time before his cheeks were blue black.

ONCE seen, no one ever forgot Jack Dillon, and Boyd had seen him any number of times. Dillon had played many small roles in pictures, had at one time led a band composed of men not much larger than he was, but Boyd had not associated him with

the name of the Horsehoe's owner until Dillon came into the room.

"So, it's you?"

"It's me."

There was a full foot difference in their height. Dillon would almost have had to stand on a chair to reach Boyd's jaw, but nothing in the man's attitude showed that he was conscious of the difference in their size.

"I had a hunch it was you when Laura spoke about a Boyd," Dillon said. "You always managed to get yourself in trouble."

"Am I in trouble?" Sam Boyd managed to sound faintly surprised.

"Mister," said Dillon, "you never knew what trouble was until you came to this town. You're in to your neck now and unless you get some help, you'll be in over your ears."

"Help, from whom?"

"Me," said the little man, and expanded his chest until it seemed to gain a good two inches. "I got this town right where I want it. When I snap my fingers, it rolls over and says uncle."

Sam Boyd looked impressed. "You don't say! You mean that if you gave the word, the murder rap the cops are holding over my head would be fixed."

"Like that." The little man was certain of himself. He winked at the blonde when he thought Sam Boyd was not looking.

"Swell," Boyd said. "I always knew you were my pal. Just call that old Chief up and fix things, will you?"

"Not so fast."

Dillon drew a long, ivory cigarette holder from his breast pocket, fitted a smoke into its end and lit it carefully. The holder was so long that Boyd feared it might over-balance the little man who held it up at a cocky angle and surveyed Boyd through the smoke.

"You think we're dumb," he accused. "Oh, don't bother to deny it. I know how your mind works. But we aren't. We realize that the company Roger Bowman controlled is worth a great deal of money. It wasn't such a large company before the war, but now it's expanded so that it's one of the big three or four in the industry."

"So," said Boyd. He stole a glance toward the blonde, but her full attention was on the little man.

"So," said Dillon. "And Miss Norcross has a good chance of winning her case in court, of getting back what Bowman took from her father—if we don't tell what we know about that photostat."

"Fine," said Boyd. "But you're over-looking one thing, my miniature friend. What about the original letter?"

Dillon stopped him by raising both hands.

small palms outward.

"We thought of that." He smiled. "Even now my men are taking steps to get it."

"You know where it is?"

Dillon gave him a thin-lipped smile. "Laura here was a friend of Mr. Bowman's. He told her things which he told to few people. You see, we have things under control, very good control. All you have to do is to make your deal with us."

"And the deal is?"

"Half a million dollars," said the little man. In spite of his composure, his tone quavered a little as he mentioned the sum. "A mere half million."

"Fine," said Boyd. "Do you want it in dollar bills?"

Dillon got mad. "You think you're humorous!" he yelled. "You think you don't need us, but you'll find out, you and that high and mighty Norcross dame! You'll come to us, both of you, crawling on your knees. I tell you, we got things arranged!"

"You wouldn't have had a hand in arranging Bowman's death, would you?" Boyd said softly. He was no longer smiling. "You wouldn't have figured this all out and then rubbed Bowman, just to put yourself in a trading position?"

"Why, you—" Dillon clawed at his coat. "I'll—"

BOYD reached out a big hand. He brushed the cigarette holder out of the way and seized Dillon's lapels, lifting the man until the small shoes were clear of the floor.

"Stop reaching. If you get that gun out, I'll make you eat it."

He turned suddenly, swung Dillon in a circle and let go of his hold so that the small man crashed into the blonde, just as she straightened from the dressing table, a gun in her hand. Both of them went down in a tangle of arms and legs. Boyd stooped and picked up both guns.

He made no effort to assist either of his victims to their feet.

"You two have the wrong slant." There was a trace of bitterness in his voice. "Maybe you can do business with Miss Norcross. You'll have to talk to her. But I don't enter into it, not at all."

He turned and walked out. The same guard was seated beside the entrance, his feet blocking the passage. When he saw Boyd coming he leaped up. Boyd half-expected trouble, but the guard made no effort to block his progress. After Boyd had passed he paused in the doorway, hesitated for an instant, then drew the man's gun from his pocket.

"Here," he said. "I didn't mean to keep this so long. You may need it later—need it bad—to put a bullet between my shoulders."

He thrust the gun into the startled man's hands and left the place.

CHAPTER IV

LAURA SPRINGS A SURPRISE

BACK at his hotel the clerk stopped Sam Boyd.

"There's a man waiting in your room, Mr. Boyd," he said. "He seemed to think it was all right if he went up."

Boyd nodded and walked across the lobby toward the elevator.

The man awaiting him in his room was Lawyer Tony Foster, his employer. Foster was sitting in the easy chair in the corner of the room, his feet on the bed.

"I got a plane as soon as your wire came," he said. "I was lucky. I got here twenty minutes ago."

"You'd have been lucky if the plane had taken you the other way," Boyd grunted.

The lawyer became concerned. "As bad as that?"

"Worse," said Boyd, and slung his hat on the bed. "The cops can't make up their minds, but they have a sneaking hunch that I did for Bowman and that Miss Norcross hired me to do it. She's sweet."

"Who?" The lawyer seemed amused. "The case?"

"The girl," said Boyd. "She's living back in the Dark Ages when women were women and didn't carry welding torches, but nothing breaks her nerve. Even being tied up for hours in that closet didn't seem to faze her, but there's a lot of things I don't get. Why did Bowman give us that photostat and then take all the trouble to make certain Miss Norcross didn't see it?"

"Only Bowman could answer that."

"And he's dead. We've got other little playmates taking a hand in the game too."

The lawyer straightened with interest. "Who?"

Boyd told him about the blonde and Dillon. "I don't know whether you remember the little runt or not," he added. "He was around L.A. up until a couple of years ago. He's a bad hombre for my money. If he saw a chance at a dishonest dollar, he wouldn't have hesitated to beat in Bowman's head."

Foster was interested. "Think he did it?"

"The best we've got so far," Boyd admitted. "He's got kind of a warped brain. Might have figured that with Roger Bowman out of the way, he could cut in on this Norcross deal. Even offered to sell me the photostat and the original letter."

Foster seemed startled. "You mean he has them both?"

"He's got the photostat," Boyd said, "and he claims that he has one of his men out picking up the letter." He took a restless turn on the room. "Tell me," he went on, "how much chance would the Norcross girl have of upsetting the sale, of getting back part of the company, without that letter?"

"Before Bowman died, I'd have said she had an excellent chance," Foster said. "Her father was in poor health at the time he signed that letter."

"And almost blind," Boyd cut in.

The lawyer nodded. "And almost blind," he repeated, showing no surprise at Boyd's knowledge. "Besides which, Bowman had Norcross out at his ranch at the time of the sale. Ann was in Florida, doing war work."

"And you? How come you weren't around to protect their interest?"

"I was in Washington," Foster explained. "I didn't know anything about the sale until months after it happened. By then, there wasn't any use in saying anything to Norcross. He was a sick man."

"The girl doesn't believe her father ever knew what was in the letter he signed," Boyd pointed out. "How blind was he at the time?"

Foster snapped his long fingers. "I never thought of that," he said. "Of course she's right. Let these people produce their photostat! Let them show the original of the letter if they can. We'll call Norcross' doctor, we'll laugh their letter out of court. The fight won't be as hard as it was before Bowman died. He didn't have any heirs."

"Oh, yes he did."

Both men had been so intent on the conversation that they had not been conscious that Boyd's door was not quite latched, that someone was standing outside it.

Boyd crossed the room in three strides and jerked the door wide. Laura was standing in the hall, her white dress covered with a short mink coat.

She looked more beautiful than ever, in fact as beautiful as any woman that Boyd had ever seen.

FOSTER'S eyes widened as she came in. She might have been a queen, or a top-flight movie star, from the way she looked around casually.

"Who's this?" Foster said.

"This," Boyd said, "is Miss Laura Bingham—known better as simply Laura. Laura—Mr. Foster, the Norcross attorney."

The girl inclined her sleek blond head, looking at Foster's heavily lined face with interest.

"He's cute," she said.

Boyd would hardly have termed his boss cute. He could think of a number of adjectives which would have fitted the lawyer

better, but Foster did not seem to mind. He grinned at the girl, but his eyes were cool and watchful, and not smiling.

"So, Roger Bowman left an heir," he said. "Would you mind telling us who?"

The girl did not smile. "Me," she said. "How do you like those apples, uncle? I'm his wife."

"His wife?"

Both stared at her. But if she was conscious of their stares, she gave no sign. There was a hand-bag under her arm. From it she extracted a folded paper which she handed to Foster.

He opened it wordlessly and, peering over his shoulder, Boyd saw that it was a marriage license. Subconsciously he noted the date. It had been issued that morning.

Boyd sensed Foster's surprise. It wasn't anything that the lawyer did, or said. He said nothing. He merely folded the paper carefully and passed it back to the girl. She seemed a little disappointed by his reaction.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" she asked.

He shrugged. "What's there to say, as far as that license and the fake ceremony are concerned?"

"It wasn't fake!" she flared. "Roger had been after me to marry him for a long time."

"So you chose the day he died to say yes?" There was a tinge of sarcasm in Foster's voice.

She was sullen. "I didn't know this ape,"—she indicated Boyd with a nod of her blond head—"was going to bash Roger's brains out, but since that happened, I'm not going to let some little chick go into court and do me out of my rights. I am Roger's widow, and what was his is mine."

"That is for the courts to decide," said Foster. "Good night, please."

She bit her lower lip. It was evident that she had expected a much different reception.

"When you change your mind," she flashed, "I'll be out at Roger's—my ranch. You can come to me next time."

The door slammed and Boyd and Foster looked at each other.

"See what I mean?" said Boyd.

The lawyer nodded thoughtfully. "They move fast," he said, more to himself than Boyd. "Do you suppose she was really married to him?"

Boyd shrugged. "From what I've seen of this country, they could probably fake the license, get some snide justice of the peace to say that he married them, and make it stick."

The lawyer shrugged, glancing at his watch.

"I've got a date to meet Ann Norcross in the lobby in ten minutes," he said. "As far as I can see, there's no use us poking into the

Bowman murder. It isn't our business."

Boyd's mouth was bitter. "It's not your business," he said as they moved toward the door, "but the Chief of Police is making it mine. He's trying to put me right in the middle and, for my money, he's making a good job of it, a very good job indeed. . . ."

The airport was long, and windy, and deserted. Sam Boyd had taxied to the field and asked for the pilot who had flown the special plane in from Los Angeles an hour ago. The pilot was long and thin and bitter. He wasn't bitter at Boyd, merely at age which put him to piloting pleasure craft while other men flew fighters.

Boyd had not finished talking to the pilot when a shadow moved across from the operations building and joined him. The man was not in uniform, but he had no need to be.

"Your name Boyd?" he snapped.

Boyd's impulse was to tell him that the name was Knopke. That the K was silent, as in cat. He liked the name Knopke and had always meant to use it, some time. But this time didn't seem to be just right. This cop looked smart.

"Yes, I'm Boyd," he said, instead.

"And what would you be doing out here?"

Boyd spread his hands. "Trying to talk this gentleman into giving me a ride to L.A. Anything wrong with that?"

"For you, yes." The cop found a tooth pick in his vest pocket and used it thoughtfully. "There's a little bit of murder you're concerned in. The Chief wouldn't like it if you went around taking plane rides before it's cleared up. Wouldn't you like to ride back to town with me?"

BOYD said that he wouldn't like to, but that he would.

"I'm an agreeable fellow," he added, as they reached the squad car and climbed in. "My friends all call me Sunshine. You wouldn't care to call me Sunshine, would you?"

The cop didn't answer. It was obvious that he considered his passenger a screwball and he was a little leery of screwballs.

Fremont Street was ablaze with lights as they drove along it, and Boyd glanced at his watch. It was after twelve. That was the one thing he liked about this town. It never went to bed.

He said good-by pleasantly to his driver before the hotel and was warned to keep out of trouble. Boyd nodded. He intended to do just that.

He walked into the hotel lobby, and he halted at sight of Ann Norcross, huddled in one of the leather chairs. She rose and met his questioning look.

"I'm waiting for Mr. Foster," she said.

"And I'm beginning to worry."

Boyd showed his surprise. "I thought Foster was going to meet you here?"

"He did," she explained. "An hour and a half ago. He told me what had happened and we agreed that if this man Dillon would listen to a reasonable settlement, we'd better deal with him. Whether my father knew what he was signing when he put his name to that letter or not, it still would arouse suspicion with some people."

"So you're going to buy Dillon off?" Boyd was disappointed, and let the disappointment show in his voice. "If you have money to throw around—"

"Oh, but I haven't." The girl shook her head. "I hardly have a cent. All the money we had went for doctors, to try and save Dad."

"But it costs money to sue corporations."

"Mr. Foster took care of that," she explained. "He took the case on a contingency basis. He gets half of everything we recover. But I'm worried. I'm afraid that Mr. Dillon has done something to him."

"Let your Uncle Samuel worry about that," Boyd said. "You wait right here—or better still, go on home. I'll phone you when I find out anything."

"No," she told him. "I'm coming with you."

He started to argue, but Sam Boyd was used to reading people and one look at this girl's eyes told him that argument wouldn't do any good. Tiredly, he shrugged. It was bad enough to go up against the midget gunman without having a girl on his hands to worry about.

Boyd was not kidding himself. Dillon was tough, and he had a lot of men around the Horseshoe, men who would be as tough as he was, but facing them would be easier than handling this girl. Once and for all, Sam Boyd decided that he did not care for women.

When Boyd and Ann Norcross reached the Horseshoe, the place seemed to be doing more business than it had been earlier, if that were possible. It was so jammed that it was almost impossible for them to force their way through the press.

Boyd used his big shoulders and elbows and the girl hung on to the tails of his coat. He got a lot of dirty looks from people whom his elbows thrust out of the way, but he was too big for anyone to want to argue with him.

They gained the door leading behind scenes, to find the same guard barring the passage. He started to jump up, recognized Boyd, and took his feet out of the way.

"Okay, Mac, she's all yours."

"Where'll I find Dillon?" Boyd asked.

The guard shrugged. "In his office, I guess. It's on your right as you go back, but he's sore as a boil."

At the moment, Sam Boyd was a little sore himself. Like most even-tempered men, he was slow to anger, but this had been building up all day, ever since the blonde had locked him in the closet.

He went on, conscious that Ann still followed, still had hold of his coat tails.

They must have made a humorous picture but the guard did not smile. Evidently he'd had enough of Sam Boyd earlier.

It was not hard to find Dillon's office. They could hear the man's squeaky voice long before they reached the door. Dillon was bawling someone out and making an elegant job of it.

Boyd didn't knock. He twisted the knob, shoved the door wide, and was in the room before Dillon realized he was there.

A MAN faced the little gunman across the desk—a tall man in a dinner jacket. Evidently he was one of the employees and he'd done something to arouse Dillon's wrath. The little man was cursing him in three languages.

He stopped in the middle of a word as he saw Boyd and thrust one shaking finger toward him.

"Get out and stay out!" he ordered the detective.

"No," said Boyd, and the muscle along the side of his jaw corded a little. "Not until I've talked with you, Jackie boy. Not until you've told me a lot of things."

Dillon seemed to forget the man he'd been bawling out as he focused his full anger on Boyd.

"Get out!" he repeated. "You've caused me nothing but trouble. I hope I go deaf before I ever hear your name mentioned again!"

"Me cause you trouble?" Boyd was surprised.

"Look," said Dillon. "I got a nice quiet, respectable business here. I'm minding my own affairs, staying out from behind the eight ball. I've got an entertainer, the best in the business, and a looker that doesn't have to give nothing to any movie star that ever lived. So what happens! She meets this Roger Bowman and he makes a play. Now she tells me they're hitched, and walks out. So where am I at? My customers are yelling for Laura, and there ain't no Laura."

"Was she really married to Bowman?"

"How the devil do I know?" The little man was practically beside himself with anger. "Does it make a difference whether she'd married the lug or whether she got one of her pals to fix her up with a fake license? I lose her, which is all that matters."

"You change quick," said Boyd. "The last time I saw you, you were backing up her game."

"That's your fault!" Dillon was savage. "You got tough. You let her see you weren't afraid of me, so she washed me out of the deal. She flashed the marriage license she'd been holding out. She said she didn't need me any more, and walked out."

"Did you tell Foster this?"

"Foster?" Dillon stared. "What's this Foster got to do with it?"

"Miss Norcross' attorney," Boyd said. "He came over to see you an hour or so ago."

"You're crazy!" Dillon told him with conviction. "I ain't seen any Fosters, or any other attorneys for that matter."

"But he did come over here," Ann Norcross spoke for the first time. "He told me he was coming to see you."

"He didn't," said Dillon, and Boyd couldn't tell whether the little man was lying or not. He stared at Dillon for a full minute, trying to decide. Then he said, "Grab your hat. You're coming for a ride with us."

"A ride?" snapped Dillon. "Who do you think you are?"

"You're coming," said Boyd, and brought the banker's special into sight. "Better have your friend here come too. He might stir up trouble if we left him behind. He indicated the silent man in the dinner jacket.

Dillon started to argue, but Boyd moved the gun suggestively.

"You know me, Jackie. It would give me the greatest of pleasure to shoot off a couple of fingers. Your customers are making so much racket out front that no one would ever know the difference."

Dillon wilted. "Okay, Sam, okay." All the fight seemed to have gone out of him. "This is one day they can tear out of the calendar and throw away. I hope I never see another day like it so long as I live."

"Got a car?"

The little man nodded. "Out back."

"Then come on."

"Where are we going?"

"Roger Bowman's ranch, and you might as well make it quick."

CHAPTER V

FINGER OF SUSPICION



LOT of lights were on in the rambling ranchhouse when Sam Boyd and his companions turned into the grounds, and a coupé was parked in the drive. As they pulled up behind it, Ann Norcross gave a little cry.

"Why, that's my car! I lost it to Mr. Foster."

Boyd didn't answer. He was too busy herding his charges onto the wide porch and across to the front door. The door was not

locked and, at Boyd's orders, Jack Dillon pushed it open.

"Call Laura," Boyd directed, moving his gun for emphasis.

The little man raised his squeaky voice. It echoed back to them through the house—the only answer. Boyd swore softly under his breath. He started to tell the little man to call again, but there was no need, for the squeaky voice once more filled the house, and now there was a note of urgent nervousness in it. Still there was no answer.

Ann Norcross pushed closer to Boyd as if she found comfort in his nearness.

"What's it mean?" she asked.

Again he didn't answer because he was not sure. Instead, he told Dillon:

"Go ahead. Let's have a look at the joint."

They had a look, and they found Laura in the same room that Roger Bowman's body had occupied earlier that afternoon. She was dead. Boyd judged that she hadn't been dead long, and she had died in the same manner that death had reached Bowman. Someone had hit her on the top of the head. Hit her hard.

Ann Norcross showed emotion that she had not shown that afternoon.

"I didn't know her," she said, "but she was beautiful. It was a shame for her to die!"

Sam Boyd had his own ideas about that. Laura had been beautiful, yes. But the old saying was running through his head—"Beauty is as beauty does," and Laura had used her beauty not wisely, but too well.

Dillon hadn't spoken since they had found the girl's body. He stood looking down at her, his small face chalk-white, his fists clenched.

"If I ever find out who did this—" He let the words choke off as if they caught in his throat. "Come on! Let's look around the house."

Boyd offered no objections. All he did was to manage to keep Dillon and the man in the dinner coat in front of him.

They searched the place, but it was not until they opened the door off the kitchen behind which Ann Norcross had been hidden that they found Foster.

There was tape over the attorney's lips, tape around his ankles and wrists, and a swelling blue bump on his forehead. He groaned weakly as they dragged him out into the light, and Dillon's man in the dinner jacket unfastened him and freed his mouth.

Dillon pounced on Foster like a striking snake.

"Who did it?" he demanded. "Who killed her, and tied you up?"

Foster shook his head as if to clear it.

"Is she dead—the blonde, I mean?" He struggled to his feet, stood swaying for a moment, his eyes settling on Dillon. "You

ought to know," he said to the little man on a different voice. "You hit me on the head. You probably killed her after you tied me up and stuck me in the same cupboard you put Ann Norcross in this afternoon."

"I?" Dillon stared at him.

"You came in while we were arguing," said Foster. "I told you to keep out of it, and you hit me on the head."

"He's crazy!" Dillon appealed to Sam Boyd. "I haven't been out here all evening! I've got witnesses to prove I didn't leave the place."

"Then you've got a double." The lawyer felt his head tenderly. "A striking double. We'll let the police decide."

"Wait!" said Sam Boyd. "Wait a minute. Did you tell Foster about your being tied up in that cupboard, Ann?"

"Why no. I—"

"Then how'd you know, Foster?" demanded Boyd. "How'd you know she was tied up in that cupboard, unless you put her there yourself? How'd you know anything about it?"

Foster laughed, a twisted, nasty sound.

"Just who are you working for anyhow?"

"I thought I was working for you," Boyd said slowly. "But I didn't count on murder. Murder is something that has to be straightened out."

"Are you trying to say that I murdered that blonde? That's ridiculous! And naturally you have no proof. As for Bowman, I wasn't even here when he was killed. I didn't fly up from Los Angeles until evening."

"YES, you did," said Boyd.

He felt weary, depressed. He had worked for this man for three years. He supposed he should feel some loyalty, some regret, but he didn't. He didn't seem to feel anything at all where Foster was concerned.

"You flew up early this morning just after I left L. A.," he accused. "You arranged for someone else to fly up this afternoon, in your name, just in case of a slip. I talked to the man who was supposed to have flown you this afternoon. He described his passenger, it wasn't you, nor anybody like you. And that business of knowing where Miss Norcross was tied up. You couldn't have known unless you had been here. I think you planned to kill Bowman. As for the blonde, she cut herself in and you had to get rid of her."

"But I was tied up—hit on the head!" protested Foster.

"That's an old stunt," Boyd said. "You were trapped here. You had Miss Norcross' car parked in the drive. You heard us coming and you couldn't get out. It was easy

enough to stick the tape on your mouth and ankles. The way it was wrapped on your wrists wasn't so hot. You could have worked loose if you tried."

He was watching the lawyer as he spoke, but he didn't see the gun until it showed in Foster's hand. It was a little gun with two barrels—a museum piece called a sleeve gun.

"All right!" said Foster. "You asked for it. You had to be too smart and make this your business. The local cops would never have figured it out."

"You can't kill all of us with that pop-gun," Boyd told him.

"I can kill the first one who moves!" said Foster. "I hope it's you."

It wasn't. It was Jack Dillon. He had been standing off a little to the right. He took a step forward.

"You killed Laura," he said in his squeaky voice.

"Stand still, you fool!" There was panic in Foster's voice.

"No," said Dillon, and took another step.

The little gun spat. It was hardly an explosion. Even as it sounded, Sam Boyd was in motion. One hand pushed Ann Norcross out of the way. The other made a sweeping arc, driving for Foster's chin. His knuckles hit. The force of the blow drove Foster's head backward so hard that his neck almost snapped.

He went over as if Sam Boyd had used an ax.

Dillon was sitting on the floor, his small arms clasped around his stomach.

"Hurt?" Boyd asked. He was beginning to like this little tough.

"He killed Laura," said Dillon. He pulled the little double-barreled gun toward him with his foot and picked it up, staring at the curious mechanism. "To get shot with this!" He sounded disgusted. "Let's see if it works."

Before Boyd could stop him, he reversed the gun and put a bullet into Foster's stomach.

"I hope that hurts," he muttered, dropping the empty gun. "Hurts like the devil!"

He bent forward and kept bending until he was almost double. Boyd jumped toward him, grabbing his small shoulder, straightening the little man. He was dead.

Foster moaned and tried to move. He couldn't, and his eyes got scared.

"A doctor," he mumbled.

"A doctor isn't going to do you any good," Boyd told him, "although there'll be one on the way with the cops in a minute. Ann is calling them. He shot you in the middle, pal. Know what that means?"

Foster knew. It showed in his eyes.

"Might as well talk," said Boyd. "You won't feel like talking before long."

"Nothing to talk about." Foster was gasping a little. "You haven't got a thing on me."

Boyd shrugged. "You killed Dillon. We can all swear to that, and the little fellow didn't even have a gun. They'll execute you for that, pal, if by some miracle you should recover from that stomach ache, so why not be right for once in your worthless life and admit that you were in with Bowman in an effort to rob Ann's father of his share of the company."

"But that doesn't make sense!" the girl protested.

"Sure it does," said Boyd. "He's a smart lawyer, too smart to let a deal like that pass unless he was in on it. Anyhow, I'm guessing that after the steal, Bowman didn't come through with a fair share. Right, Foster?"

THE man's eyes were beginning to glaze with pain. He nodded weakly.

"The rat!"

"So," said Boyd, "Foster gets the idea of putting the pressure on Bowman by getting you to sue to recover the company."

"He did talk me into it," Ann said. "I'd never have thought of it myself."

"Sure," said Boyd. "The suit was a good idea, but one thing Foster didn't know was that Bowman had played a cute trick. Taking advantage of your father's blindness, Bowman got him to sign that letter. I was in the office when Bowman brought it in, and I'll vouch for Foster's surprise."

"Doctor!" the lawyer moaned.

"Look," said Boyd, "there's a doctor coming, but when the cops get here, they'll waste time, questioning you. Tell us now, and the sawbones can go right to work on you."

There was a little foam on Foster's lips. Boyd wiped it away.

"Am I right?"

The wounded man nodded. "Right," he whispered. "Norcross was a sick man. We told him that the expansion of the company was hindered by his condition. He was a trusting old soul. He took my word. I was to get half of his share in the company, but Bowman never paid off."

"So?"

"So I started this suit. Then Bowman produced the letter and we had it photostated. Last night we got together and made a deal. He'd settle with me and I'd advise Ann to take a small sum. Only we didn't want the photostat floating around. If the FBI ever heard of it, there would be an investigation and the whole business might come out."

"Well?"

"Bowman got his girl to pose as Ann Norcross and steal the photostat. He came back to the house here, but he didn't bring it with him. He let her keep it. That made me sore. He acted as if he didn't trust me."

"Tell it straight," said Boyd. "You mean that when Bowman came back, you thought he had the photostat and killed him. You meant to go ahead with the suit all the time. You didn't know until after you'd killed him that the photostat wasn't there. When you found it missing, you didn't know what to do, so you laid low until time to meet me, and then when the blonde stuck her little oar in you followed her out here and killed her. With her and Bowman dead, you had a fair chance to win the suit, and you'd get half."

"You suspected him from the first?" Ann asked soberly.

Boyd shrugged. "No one but Foster and Bowman knew I was bringing that photostat down here, and Bowman didn't know what time I'd arrive. Yet he and his blonde were at your ranch, waiting, while you were tied up at Bowman's. It was all too pat unless Foster was in on the deal. Then Foster, being a smart lawyer, should have

blocked the original sale. I can't say that I suspected him, but I was suspicious. That's why I went out to the airport to check up with the pilot."

"You're smart," she said. "I want you to handle the suit for me."

"You need a lawyer—not a roughneck."

"We'll get a lawyer." She nodded. "But I need someone to tell me what to do."

"I'd go to the FBI," he said. "I'd tell them about the letter, about your father's blindness. They'll investigate—don't worry. If they find out that your dad was not trading with the enemy, you're a cinch to win your suit."

"I said you were smart," she said.

Sam Boyd grinned. He knew that he wasn't so smart, but it was nice that Ann thought so.

"Here come the cops," he told her, as cars made noise in the driveway. "At least, chick, I'm smart enough to know that."

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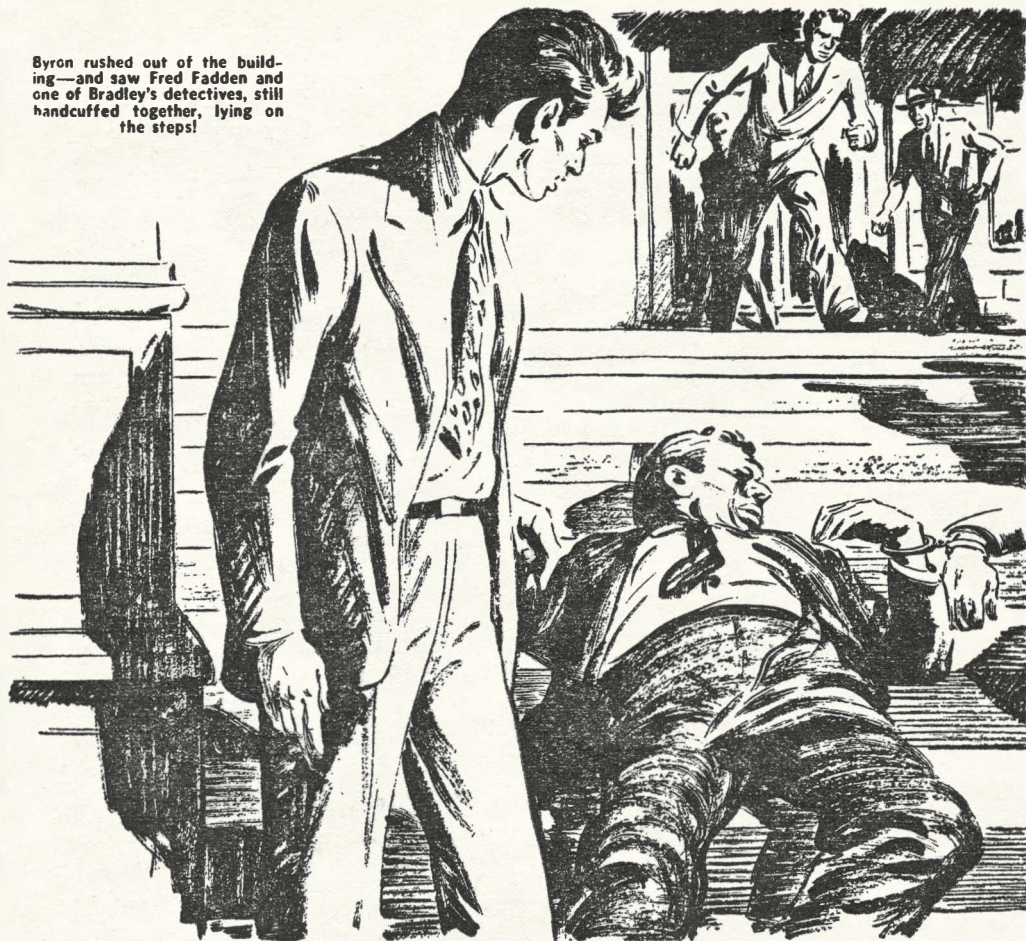


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Byron rushed out of the building—and saw Fred Fadden and one of Bradley's detectives, still handcuffed together, lying on the steps!



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DEATH OF A

CHAPTER I

THE CONDEMNED

CLINT BYRON, attorney of some eighteen hours now, glanced up at the imposing court-house and smiled. He knew that building. As a police detective-sergeant, he had testified there before various judges and juries many times. And through those years he had studied law during every available spare moment he could find.

Now he no longer wore a badge, but there

was a framed diploma from law school in his room. That was even better.

Clint Byron didn't think the change-over from the art of nabbing crooks to prosecuting them was much—and his one ambition was to get on the district attorney's staff. He had been half-promised such a post.

Clint Byron was exactly thirty and he was enjoying this birthday. He was dreaming of other birthdays too, in the future. Some day he wanted to hear Lieutenant Bradley of Homicide say "sir" to him when he was on the D.A.'s staff. Bradley had been the bane

Tyro Attorney Clint Byron Finds a Picture



A detective pointed his gun at the thin-faced, red-headed young man

DEAD MAN

By WAYLAND RICE

of Byron's existence during his years as a detective-sergeant.

Byron started to climb the big, wide steps to the court-house entrance. There was some work going on. A scaffolding was being erected and a dozen men were working on the job. Apparently the old building was about to get some kind of a face-lifting operation.

He also saw a slim, thin-faced young man who was slowly backing down the steps, apparently counting the stairs as he did. He had a wild shock of auburn hair, and a tight

expression was around his mouth when he turned around. Byron had to sidestep one of the metal scaffolding supports and the two men bumped into one another.

"Look where you're going," the young man snarled.

Clint Byron hesitated just a bare fraction of a second. His first impulse was to take the young man by the collar and shake him until his teeth rattled. But he gave up that idea. It was a cop's method and he was an attorney now, with a reputation to acquire. He just stepped aside and kept on going.

of Guilt to Fit into a Sinister Murder Frame!

The cops inside the building greeted him with hoots and jibes. He had expected this and countered the joking as expertly as he could. Then he saw Lieutenant Bradley. Bradley was red-faced, big and burly. He had no hair at all, and the disposition of a wild bull with a toothache.

"Well, well, if it ain't Barrister Clint Byron," Bradley said. "You better be faster on the draw in the legal racket than you were as a cop, Clint. And if I ever catch you chasing ambulances it'll be too bad—for you."

"The only ambulance I'd chase would be one going to pick up what was left of you, Lieutenant. And my sole reason would be to gloat a little. If you don't mind, I want to go into the court room. Has Fadden been sentenced yet?"

Bradley grimaced. "No. You can go in like a good little Boy Scout, sit down and hear Fred Fadden sent to the chair where the rat belongs. I sent him there, and I wish to heaven he was a client of yours."

Byron grinned. "He'd be walking out of here by now if he was. See you later, Lieutenant. If you should happen to break your neck and want to sue someone, I'd be more than glad to represent you—gratis."

HE ELBOWED past Bradley, and shoving that big hulk around was a symphony to Clint Byron's elbows. Bradley always insisted his men salute and step aside when he approached.

But Byron did not underrate the detective-lieutenant. Bradley was as astute a cop as they come. He dug his nose into a case and kept it there until someone paid the piper. Byron respected him for that, but disliked the man personally.

Byron nodded to an assistant D.A. He greeted a bailiff and shook hands with him, smiling appreciation of the elderly bailiff's wishes for good luck. The D.A. himself hardly deigned to speak to a mere attorney—especially a brand new one who had once been a cop.

Clint Byron sat down. He knew the Judge and drew a nod of recognition from him. Judge Fowler had been his father's friend, too, and had helped young Byron tremendously in gaining admittance to a law school.

There were two men lined up before the Judge. One was a beefy individual with a crew-cut haircut, wrinkled clothing and a wholly aggressive attitude. Beside him was his attorney, noted for trickiness, but in this case outwitted by the D.A. and the air-tight case he had presented.

Byron heard Judge Fowler solemnly intone the death sentence. Red-faced, beefy Fred Fadden sneered openly. This killer was not afraid. He was aware that the death sen-

tence would never be carried out, because he knew too much.

The Judge and the D.A. were aware of the reason for Fadden's open derision. They knew Fadden was in a position to bargain for his life, and possibly cheat the chair because of what he knew. There was hardly an angle in which Fadden didn't somehow figure.

Lieutenant Bradley swept into the court room with two detectives. Fadden was handcuffed to one man and they led him out. Another case began promptly, for Fadden's sentencing had been only a mere interlude. Clint Byron stayed where he was and studied the actions of the lawyers on the new case.

No more than three minutes had gone by before there was a single shot, a shout, and then pandemonium.

Byron leaped to his feet, the cop instinct still strong within him. He raced into the corridor, down it, and to the big entrance of the building. There he saw several things simultaneously. Fred Fadden lay on the steps, his face an unrecognizable blood-stained mass. Beside him, and still chained to the dead Fadden, was one of Bradley's detectives. He was groaning and seemed to have been hit.

The other detective, with drawn gun, was menacing the skinny-faced red-headed young man who had bumped into Byron a few moments before. Nearby lay a nickel-plated revolver of huge dimensions. A veritable horse pistol.

Some men were scrambling down from the scaffolding. Patrolmen were rushing up the steps. Byron stood there and gaped. Instinctively he knew just what had happened.

Lieutenant Bradley barged past him, arousing Byron who followed the big detective. Perhaps Bradley was so accustomed to having Clint Byron present at a scene like this that he temporarily forgot the man no longer was a cop. The detective with the gun did some quick explaining.

"McCarthy and I were walking down the steps with Fadden. We were taking him to the car at the curb for a quick trip to the death house. This lug starts coming toward us. As he got close, he whipped out the gun that's lying there at his feet. I started to close with him, but he tripped me and I went down in a heap. There was a shot. Just one. Fadden went down like a log, but the slug must have hit Joe too."

"Fool!" Bradley said through his teeth. He swung toward the skinny-faced young man. "Want to talk?"

"I killed him!" the redhead said. "Sure I killed him."

Bradley took his arm. He glanced at the detective.

"Take care of the gun. Don't smear the prints. Watch McCarthy too. There's an ambulance on the way. Anybody else witness this?"

A man in work clothes approached.

"I did, Lieutenant. You know me. I'm Allison—Ross Allison. I was on the scaffolding. A regular box seat. It happened just as this detective explained it. The young sap must be out of his head."

"All I want is justice," the redhead said.

Bradley propelled him up the steps and away from the gathering crowd.

"You'll get the swiftest taste of justice any man ever got," he promised. "You admit you killed Fadden. Will you make a signed confession?"

"I killed him," the redhead said stoically.

Bradley pushed him through the court-house doors and dragged and shoved him down the corridor toward the court room in which Fadden had been sentenced to death.

OUTSIDE, Clint Byron moved a bit slower. He knelt beside the wounded detective and assured himself the man wasn't critically hurt. The bullet seemed to be lodged in his neck.

As Byron started to arise, he saw a bit of waxed paper, crumpled and partially burned. He picked it up. Nobody was watching him and he tucked the thing into his pocket. He hadn't the vaguest idea as to just what it meant, but automatically he kept it. Things like this might become a clue. The old cop instinct was still strong.

He turned back into the court-house and hurried to the court room where the regular case now being tried had been interrupted. The red-headed young man, with Bradley beside him, stood before the bench.

Judge Fowler looked down at him.

"You admit shooting Fadden," he said. "You are formally confessing to murder in open court. The case is quite clear-cut, apparently, but this court must abide by precedent. You will be placed under arrest, held without bail and brought before the grand jury for indictment. I can't allow you to plead guilty to murder. Mr. Clerk, enter a plea of 'not guilty' on behalf of the accused. Now, young man, who are you? Why did you do this ghastly thing?"

"I won't give my name or my address," the defendant stated promptly. "Fadden deserved to die. Everybody hated him, but I hated him a little more than the others. that's all I'm going to say."

"He'll talk," Lieutenant Bradley promised.

Judge Fowler cleared his throat. "This young man presents an odd case, but apparently he has no money with which to retain an attorney. Perhaps he doesn't even

want one, but in cases of murder, an attorney must be furnished. The court will appoint one."

Judge Fowler's eyes lifted and began to sweep the court room. Clint Byron pressed himself back against his chair so hard that he hoped he would merge with the wood. He knew what was in Judge Fowler's mind, and wanted none of it. He didn't want to defend a surly fool like this nor even take a meager part in such an open-and-shut case. His dreams were of prosecuting someone like the redhead; not defending him.

"Attorney Byron," Judge Fowler called. Clint Byron reluctantly got to his feet. "Attorney, the Court appoints you guardian pro-tem if this accused is under age. Otherwise, you will provide for his defense to the best of your ability."

Lieutenant Bradley smirked happily. The D.A. rubbed his hands. Judge Fowler was smiling expansively and Clint Byron glared at everyone in the court room, especially at the redhead he didn't like anyway.

"Thank you, Your Honor." He bowed toward the bench. "I'll do my level best for him. But, as you stated, this is a homicide case. Perhaps an attorney as young and inexperienced as I am cannot do justice to such a case."

Judge Fowler waved his hand.

"Think nothing of that, Attorney. I am sure you will do what you can for this young man. . . . Court is adjourned for twenty minutes."

CHAPTER II

THE CLIENT WANTED DEATH



CLINT BYRON sighed deeply and walked over to where Lieutenant Bradley was putting handcuffs on his prisoner. Bradley was enjoying himself hugely and was none too gentle about the way he handled that young man.

Byron studied the redhead's face intently, then looked at his hands and wrists.

"Look here," he said sharply, "I'm your lawyer, whether you want me or not. As far as that goes, whether I want to be your lawyer or not. Have you any bruises on your body? Any bruises at all?"

"No," the young fellow said sullenly. "I'm okay."

"What's the idea?" Bradley demanded. "You going to turn copper again and solve this case against me? Maybe make it out as not murder at all? That Fadden had a heart attack and my detective just suffered a stroke out there on the court-house steps?"

"Hardly." Clint Byron smiled. "But if my client signs a confession and there are any marks of violence on his body after that, I'll know who to hold responsible." He looked back at his client. "Now see here—what is your name?"

"I'm not talking," the redhead snapped.

"Okay," Byron replied. "Don't! Not one word. You've said enough already. I'll come to see you later, in your cell. You can take him away, Lieutenant."

Bradley snapped to attention and saluted.

"Yes, sir. Anything to oblige. Boy, what a case you got! A lemon if I ever saw one. Come on, Mr. Anonymous."

Clint Byron closed his eyes in resignation as the prisoner was led away. He turned and walked toward the Judge's chambers. Fowler was waiting for him.

"I knew you'd come to see me, Clint." The Judge offered his hand. "Now don't start bawling me out for appointing you as that young man's attorney. I know exactly how you feel. You want to prosecute. Naturally, having been a detective, you would. However, as an attorney, it's best that you see things from both sides of the fence. As I must do when I'm on the bench. Accomplish what you can for your client. I know it can't be much."

"Judge," Byron said wearily, "I was going to refuse openly to take the case. That redhead needs an undertaker, not a lawyer. He's as good as dead already, even if he did murder a rat like Fadden who was already a dead man. What can I do for him? What does he deserve to have done for him?"

"Perhaps nothing," Judge Fowler said slowly. "And yet he must have possessed a horrible will to kill Fadden. There is a great reason somewhere in the boy's background. Perhaps sufficient to cause a withdrawal of the murder charge. And, Clint, impress the jury with the idea that Fadden was a condemned man—as good as dead already."

Clint Byron smiled. "All right, I'll do my best. Personally, I think my client should go to the chair, and for my first case as an attorney, I'm none too proud of it."

"Now, wait," Judge Fowler broke in quickly. His voice grew stern. "An attorney, Clint, takes an oath to help people in trouble. That's your job. A hopeless case like this one should be a challenge to you. Accept it as such and remember you are now a lawyer, not a detective. You will work in complete opposites to the way you formerly did. Come to me if you need any help. I'm automatically disqualified anyhow."

"Thank you, Judge," Byron said, but there was no enthusiasm in his tone. "I'll see the redhead as soon as Bradley will let me. . . ."

Bradley sent word, via a patrolman-clerk, that Byron could see the prisoner in twenty-four hours and not before. The new attorney felt his Irish rising. He proceeded to the first open court and asked for a writ. Furthermore, he was eloquent enough to get it, and he took savage delight in waving the writ in front of Bradley's face.

The detective-lieutenant scowled. "Okay, so you win the right to see the killer. What's it going to get you? He wrote out a full confession in his own hand and without any prompting or intimidation. Get around that if you can."

"Maybe I will," Byron snapped back. "Have him brought out to the visitor's room."

Bradley shook his head. "You know better than that. Murderers are kept in their cells and you'll be locked in with him. Let me give you a friendly tip. The redhead is an oyster. He won't even tell you what time it is. I intend to have him burned and you can't do a thing about it."

BYRON didn't reply to that, because Bradley's intentions were exactly proper. The prisoner didn't have a chance.

Clint Byron sighed and followed a patrolman to the cell block. He stepped into the cell, sat down beside his client, and offered him a cigarette—which was refused.

"Now look here," Byron began, "you can trust me. I want to help you."

"Sure you do." The prisoner looked up with a lopsided grin. "You used to be a cop. You'll be working right with that big gorilla who questioned me. Anyway, if you were the best friend I had, I'd still refuse to talk. Don't waste your time on me. I'm a dead pigeon, and it doesn't make any difference to me."

Clint Byron was studying the boy. He had dropped his attitude of arrogance and surliness now and showed vague traces of worry and fear. He was clean-cut. His hands were smooth, and his words those of an educated man.

"You positively refuse to tell me what your name is or why you shot Fadden?" asked Byron.

"I positively do. Honest, Mr. Byron, I feel sorry for you. I know you didn't want to handle my case. Just go through the routine and let it go at that. I haven't got a chance anyway."

"Where did you get the gun?" Byron asked.

"I'm not talking, I said."

"Who paid you to kill Fadden?" Byron persisted, and this question drew a quick response. Too quick.

"Don't get ideas like that," the redhead said. "Nobody paid me. I killed him because he—because he deserved to die. There is no

one else mixed up in this, so keep that straight. Now you can ask questions all day and I won't say another word. Go away and leave me alone."

"Sure." Byron arose. "Here, take this."

He thrust a metal cigarette lighter at the young man who automatically accepted it. He handed it back with the observation that he didn't smoke and had no use for it. Clint took the lighter daintily and wrapped it in his handkerchief.

"All I wanted was your prints," he explained. "I'll help you even if you don't want me to."

"The cops took my prints," the redhead observed laconically. "They're not on file. I was never fingerprinted before."

"Maybe not," Byron agreed. "But with these prints I may be able to get a line on who you are. I'm beginning to get a few ideas. You see—Fadden did deserve to die. He was legally dead anyway, and while I know I can't get you off, I may be able to convince a jury you had good and sufficient reasons for shooting Fadden. That means the difference between life and death to you. So long. I'll drop in again when I feel like talking to myself."

Byron hammered on the cell door until a patrolman let him out.

He left Headquarters and headed for a small public park across the street. That would have to serve as his office, temporarily. Anyway, he had no need of law books in this case. What he required was some cooperation and a certain amount of solid brain work.

He thought about Fadden first. The ex-gangster and present day political crook had had enemies galore. Perhaps a score of important people would sleep more easily because he was dead. Yet Byron couldn't bring himself to believe that the anonymous killer had been paid to shoot Fadden. The manner in which the killing had been done smacked more of a personal motive. If he could determine that motive, he might be able to trace the red-headed young killer and puzzle out some sort of a heartrending motivation for his crime.

Fadden, he was well aware, had always delegated someone else to do his dirty work, but the murder for which he had been sentenced to death had been that of Tony Page, a mild-mannered clerk in a wholesale house. Witnesses had seen Fadden cut the man down with four slugs.

Fadden wouldn't talk about it, and police opinions indicated that Tony Page must have witnessed some crime Fadden was engaged in, or had stumbled upon information which meant ruin for the ex-gang boss. The D.A.'s office had another theory, developed out of

blue sky only, that Page had been a petty crook in Fadden's pay and had somehow double-crossed him.

So far as Byron knew, Fadden hadn't personally killed any other person. Quite logically, he assumed that the young man he represented had been inspired to kill Fadden by some potent, irresistible urge. Most killers who committed crimes in such cold blood were exacting the ancient eye-for-an-eye. Therefore, it was possible that Fadden had killed someone this client of Byron's loved.

Tony Page? Why not? He was the only man Fadden had been known to have murdered.

WITH the development of that idea, Clint Byron turned to another motive—that of the redhead having been paid to commit the crime. Fadden's enemies had been numerous and among them were half a dozen men who toed the mark because Fadden could have ruined their careers and businesses.

There was Eddie Conlon, for instance. Conlon had been a detective, taking bribes and generally doing Fadden's bidding until he became too ambitious and Fadden cracked down. Conlon had been fired, but the full story of his wrong-doing had not been brought to light. Fadden knew. Fadden might have sent him to the chair with that knowledge.

Then there was Alan Drake, one of those shadowy politicians who sits well back, persuades others to do the actual running while he pulls the strings and fattens his purse. Fadden knew all about Drake, and more than once had made the man cringe by threatening to expose his activities.

There were a number of minor individuals who would gloat—city inspectors, engineers, crafty real estate holders, grafting officials of the type with which any large city is ridden. There were too many of them. Byron couldn't sort them out. He decided to work on the theory that his client was somehow related to Tony Page and because Fadden had murdered Page, had taken justice into his own hands.

Clint Byron found out, quickly enough, where Tony Page had lived. It was a little bungalow in a suburban area where the man had stayed on after his wife's death some years before. Byron developed a certain degree of hope when he learned that Tony Page had had a son named Harry, whose present whereabouts were unknown.

Byron rode the subway and then a bus to reach the vicinity of Tony Page's bungalow. It was dark now and the little house, unlighted, had a deserted look. The lawyer stepped up onto the porch and tried the door. It was locked. He moved over to a

window, and shrugged.

"Why be orthodox about it?" he asked himself, and smashed the window with his foot.

No alarm was raised, and after he was sure of this he pried away the broken glass, raised the window and slipped into the house. Quite boldly he turned on lights.

There was dust over everything. The little possessions of a man of moderate means were neatly placed, but the house had not been lived in for weeks. Perhaps since Tony Page's death.

Byron found the kitchen. It was provided with a medium-sized electric refrigerator which he opened and found to be fairly well stocked. An open can of beans attracted his attention. Half the contents had been removed. The remaining beans were fresh and soft, without any hard film over the surface.

A quart of milk was sweet and there was even a package of cold luncheon meat which couldn't have been sliced any more than a day or two before. The kitchen was reasonably free of dust too, showing it had been used recently.

Byron wandered through the other rooms. He found one where the walls were decorated by a couple of college pennants, and some high school and college prom dance cards. There had been pictures on the walls also, for the paper was faded, but the pictures were gone.

On the bureau lay a set of silver-backed brushes. Clint Byron purloined a couple of handkerchiefs from a drawer and wrapped the brushes in them. He had an idea he was getting somewhere.

CHAPTER III

MOTIVE FOR MURDER



BACK in town, Clint Byron visited Police Headquarters again, kept out of Bradley's way, and went to the police laboratories. He was well-known there and nobody objected when he commenced pattering around. He provided himself with a comparison microscope and a fingerprint develop-

ing set, which he took to the corner of the lab where he would not be bothered.

In twenty minutes he knew who his client was. The son of Tony Page, whom Fadden had shot down. There was no arguing about those sets of prints, one from the cigarette lighter the prisoner had handled, the others from the silver-backed brushes.

Byron wondered what to do with his information. Proving his client's identity didn't help things. It only served to establish cold

premeditation of his crime. But there was a certain amount of elation in the fact that he had progressed further than Lieutenant Bradley.

The lawyer toyed with the idea that the young redhead had been talked into committing the crime. That wouldn't help either, unless there was out-and-out intimidation involved. Yet Clint Byron could not quite imagine young Page as the type to sit down and calmly plot a murder like this. Fadden was going to pay the penalty for his crime anyway, and would probably suffer a great deal more than he would from the pain induced by a bullet that plowed through his head and killed him instantly.

Byron went over to one of the lab technicians.

"Bob," he said, "you know I've been appointed counsel for that young fellow who killed Fadden. He's a rat and doesn't deserve any help, but I'm making a routine examination of the case. Can I see the gun he used? And maybe the bullet?"

The technician shook his head. "No soap, Clint. You work against the cops now. Bradley would have my scalp if I helped you in any way. Sorry."

"But you do have the gun?" Byron asked. "And the bullet?"

The technician nodded. "Sure. We've already tested it. The gun fired that bullet. No question about that. You see, the slug went straight through Fadden's skull and hit McCarthy in the neck. The doctors dug it out. Maybe I shouldn't be telling you even this—but what the heck! The case is practically closed anyhow."

"It certainly is." Clint Byron groaned, for he fully believed that.

Yet it galled him to give in like this. If there was only something he could do! Perhaps, by prying deeper into young Page's background, he might learn a few facts. He couldn't possibly save him from meeting the justice he deserved, but Clint Byron was suddenly intent upon saving his client's life.

It was an odd feeling. As a detective, he had been solely concerned with exacting punishment.

There was little he could do that night. When he went to his home in a residential hotel it was late, and the only person in the lobby was a girl who jumped to her feet as he entered. As she approached him, he stopped dead in his tracks. She was that kind of girl. Lovely with the freshness of youth, brown hair skillfully arranged, cool blue eyes that were a trifle red from weeping. Curved lips, and two provocative dimples which intrigued him. He had never seen her before in his life.

"Mr. Byron," she said, half breathlessly,

"has he—talked to you?"

"Young Page, you mean?" Byron asked.

She bit her lip. "He must have, because you know his name. He—he isn't bad, Mr. Byron. Just hot-headed and full of grief that almost made him go crazy."

"I know," the lawyer conceded. "Suppose we sit down and talk it over. I'm trying to help him. He won't let me do much, and I need all the information about him I can get. Is he your boy friend?"

"Well—not exactly." She colored a trifle, and attempted a smile that was a distinct flop. "We just know one another. I knew he was going to do something. He changed so since—since his father was killed. But I never thought he could take a man's life."

"What's your name?" Byron asked.

She shook her head. "I won't tell you. If Harry had wanted my help, he'd have sent you to see me. I only came because I was worried so about him, but he made me promise that—that if anything happened, I would stay out of it. I've got to keep that promise, Mr. Byron. I know he was arrested. I was in court with my uncle when he was first brought in. I saw you there and heard the Judge appoint you as his attorney."

"But you won't talk." Clint Byron arose abruptly. "All right. I think that's about everything, Miss Whatever-your-name-is. Good night."

HE LEFT her sitting there and walked rapidly to the staircase. This led into a corridor ending at the rear door of the hotel, and he was out of it like a shot. When the girl emerged from the front door, he was ready to follow her. Once more he put into practice his training as a detective. It was coming in handy.

She walked rapidly north. Byron was a full block behind her, but always ready to act if she hailed a taxi, or suddenly vanished into some doorway.

Twenty minutes later she turned into the entrance of a four-story private dwelling, obviously the home of wealthy people. Byron made no move to stop her. After the door opened, she went in as if she belonged there.

Clint Byron waited a minute or two, then stepped to the door himself. The name plate startled him. It read, "ALAN DRAKE." Drake, the politician who feared and hated Fred Fadden and could have logically been his murderer! If Byron's client hadn't done the job first.

But the idea of someone attached to Drake's household being a friend of young Page's was intriguing. It aroused the no longer latent detective instincts which had controlled Clint Byron's life for several years. He determined upon boldness, and rang the bell.

A trim maid answered the ring. He gave her his widest smile.

"A friend of mine—Miss Janice Johnson—just walked in here. At least I'm quite certain it was Janice, and I want to see her badly."

"I am sorry," the maid said. "There is no one by that name here. No guests either. You must have seen Miss Nancy come in, sir."

"Nancy?" Byron frowned and made that one word a leading question.

"Yes, sir. Miss Nancy Drake. This is the residence of Alan Drake, sir."

"Oh!" Byron started backing away. "Oh, I must have been mistaken. I'm very sorry. Pardon me, please."

He was on the verge of making a successful escape when a man stepped out of a room and glanced toward the open door. Byron was framed in it, and he knew this man. It was George Conlon, ex-detective. Fired because of his association with Fred Fadden.

What was worse, Conlon knew him, and instantly came forward. Alan Drake came out also and, much later, the girl who had approached Byron in the hotel lobby.

"Well, it's Clint Byron," Conlon said. "What the devil do the cops want. . . . Oh, oh—my error. You're a lawyer now."

"What do you want?" Alan Drake demanded.

Byron went into his song and dance again, hardly expecting to be believed, but he obtained help from an unexpected quarter. Nan Drake stepped forward. She laughed lightly.

"That's the man," she said. "He looked at me so strangely. I was sure he thought he knew me—or he was trying to flirt."

Conlon wasn't to be put off quite so easily. "Maybe," he admitted. "But when Clint Byron pulls something like this, it's rarely a mistake. Clint, aren't you the public defender appointed for that young fellow who killed Fadden?"

"It happens I am," Byron answered readily. "Why? Know something, Conlon?"

Conlon shook his head vigorously.

"Nothing. Except I'd like to do something for that fellow. I'd give a million dollars if I had that kind of money. Look—you don't get paid for this job except a few bucks the court grants. How about taking a retainer from me?"

"And from me," Alan Drake said quickly.

Byron shrugged. "No, I don't think so. Unless you two men are actively interested in my client. For himself, I mean. Not just because he shot a man both of you hated and feared."

"We don't know who Fadden's killer is," Conlon said. "Haven't the vaguest idea. We were just making a friendly offer. It's okay

if you don't want to take it."

"I don't," Byron said. "Well, I guess that's all there is to it. Good night. Sorry I mistook you for someone else, miss." He smiled at the girl.

CLINT BYRON turned and walked to the street. He headed south and proceeded slowly. He half-expected that girl would try to meet him somehow, and he was not wrong. When he reached the next corner, she was waiting for him.

"So you finally decided to talk," he said in a friendly voice.

"You frightened me into it," she chided. "I slipped out the back door, came across the court and through a gate leading to this side street. My uncle doesn't know I left and you mustn't tell him. Why did you follow me?"

"To find out what you know," Byron answered simply. "It would be better if you talked. For all three of us—Harry Page included."

"I met Harry when we attended the same college," she explained. "It was almost all the way across the country. He was always good. He worked hard, so his father would not have to send him much money. Then he received a letter saying his father was in trouble. It seems his father saw this—this crook who was killed, choking a man to death. Mr. Page didn't say anything, because he was afraid to."

"Then Fadden came to see him with open threats. Mr. Page knew he would probably be murdered anyhow so he started for the police station. Only Fadden guessed he'd do just that and—waited for him. Harry swore he'd kill Fadden for it, but I thought that was only a lot of talk induced by his grief. He seemed half dazed from the shock."

"No telling what a hot-headed young fellow will do." Byron felt like groaning. "What you have told me is obviously the truth, but it doesn't help Harry. In fact, you'd dust off the electric chair if you got on the witness stand with that story. You'd establish premeditation."

"That's why I didn't want to talk," Nan admitted. "Even to you."

"What's Conlon doing at your place?" Clint wanted to know.

"I haven't any idea," she replied. "He's a friend of my uncle. . . . I've got to go back now. Please try to help Harry. I can't make myself think he'd turn into a murderer. Even when he made all those threats, I never thought he'd go through with them. He isn't a killer, I tell you!"

Clint Byron sighed. "But witnesses prove he is. So does a gun and a bullet—and Harry's own confession. I'll try to save him

from the chair, but he'll most certainly be handed a stretch. Thanks for telling me this, anyway."

He watched her hurry down the street and envied Harry Page. It must be pretty nice, he thought, to have a girl like Nan. But there were even more weighty matters on his mind. He lit a cigarette and strolled casually along, thinking deeply.

What if that girl was lying? What if she urged Harry Page on, to kill Fadden? What if she was like her uncle and that ex-cop, Conlon? They were smart, convincing men. The type who might have talked Page into this crazy act of revenge. Perhaps Nan was just a pawn in the game, knowingly or unknowingly.

"What the devil am I thinking of?" he derided himself softly. "I'm actually trying to get on the track of someone else as the murderer. Of course young Page did it. I'm being foolish."

At any rate, he managed to get rid of the idea that someone else had committed the crime, or had spurred Page on to do it. The evidence was all against the redhead. Byron's only aim was to save him from the chair.

Nothing could prevent a verdict of guilty, but if it was in the second degree, he would be satisfied. If it was manslaughter, he would be elated.

CHAPTER IV

NOT A CHANCE



HE next morning Clint Byron attended the indictment proceedings. They were brief and could have only one result. His client, still anonymous, was held for trial.

Lieutenant Bradley was there, of course, with the horse pistol introduced by him as the weapon of murder. Byron had a legal right to examine it. He did, quite thoroughly, and when he handed it back, he was palming one of the remaining five big slugs.

He talked briefly to the redhead and learned nothing. He didn't admit he knew who his client was. For once Lieutenant Bradley fastened on that kind of information, he would have his case complete. And the lawyer knew that Bradley was resorting to every trick at his command to learn the identity of Fadden's killer.

Ross Allison, the engineer in charge of the work in front of the court-house, took the stand and gave concise testimony that unerringly pointed an accusing, convicting finger at young Page. Byron asked none of

the witnesses a single question. A matter over which Lieutenant Bradley gloated.

"Why don't you tear into Allison?" he asked. "Why not try to rip my testimony to shreds? What's the matter, Clint? Lost all that push and vigor you used to have? Or is it because you know darned well we've got that killer on a greased walk leading straight to a death cell?"

Clint Byron's ire was up, but he controlled it.

"You're right, Lieutenant," he agreed with disarming frankness. "I just haven't got a case, that's all. For my first assignment, this one is certainly a honey. Have you found out who he is yet?"

"I will." Bradley grinned happily. "He won't talk, but there are ways of tracing a man's identity. This is one of them."

He handed the lawyer a folded newspaper. In a boxed item was Harry Page's picture. Byron knew his client would be recognized now all right—unless he had been away for three or four years when, in his age group, his appearance could have changed.

"We'll hold the trial in a week or two," Bradley said. "That's time enough for us to make the identification. A waste of taxpayer's money, if you ask me. The trial won't last two hours and I'll make you a little bet right here that the jury won't even leave the box."

"I'm no sucker." Byron shrugged. "See you later, Lieutenant."

That bullet, now in Clint Byron's very pocket, was burning a hole there. He wanted to examine it—another symptom of his highly developed detective instinct. He still wouldn't believe the evidence against him.

He went to his small suite at the modest hotel, locked the door, and sat down by the window. Taking the bullet out of his pocket, he rolled it between his fingers. The maker's name and the caliber were printed on the end of the shell.

Clint Byron picked up his telephone and asked to be connected with the manufacturer. He identified himself and asked about both the gun and the bullet.

"Yes," the man at the other end of the wire said, "we made both the gun and the ammunition. They were special slugs. The gun never was a seller and we discontinued making it a long time ago."

"How long?" Byron asked.

"Why, I'd say all of thirty years."

"Thanks," Clint Byron said. "That gun packed a pretty big wallop, didn't it?"

"Too big," the gun factory representative replied. "That was the trouble. It kicked too hard and the ammunition was too expensive. Glad to help if there is anything else."

Byron hung up and searched for a pen-

knife. With the large blade, he set up and set about prying the heavy lead bullet out of the shell. Carefully he poured the powder charge into the palm of his hand. There wasn't much. The powder seemed to have deteriorated during all those years since it had been manufactured.

Suddenly Clint Byron gasped and jumped to his feet. How could such a meager charge of powder have sent a bullet ripping all the way through Fred Fadden's skull and still carry force enough to have penetrated the detective's neck?

Then the lawyer sat down again, slowly. Just because this slug happened to have a charge of powder made small by deterioration didn't mean that the bullet which killed Fadden had carried a similar charge. Bullets, he knew from experience, are as individual as human beings. The lethal slug might have been backed up with plenty of powder to perform its bloody mission. At any rate, there was no proof it had not.

Then, too, the bullet had been fired from the gun. Ballistics proved that beyond the slightest doubt. If he tried to dispute the testimony of the police experts, they would throw comparison images of the bullet on a screen for the jury to study. There just wasn't a chance of proving that Harry Page hadn't murdered Fadden—because he had.

ON A HUNCH, Byron decided to see Page again and try to make him talk. Try to convince him that if he didn't he probably would get the chair. Endeavor to get young Page's cooperation in making the case into one motivated by logical sympathy for the killer.

He had to do that because he owed it to young Page. Byron was suddenly aware of the responsibility that had been thrust upon him. It was different now—trying to save a man's life. If he wore a badge, he would be going all out to take that life instead of preserving it. The idea of what he actually was trying to do gave him a warm feeling.

He put on his hat and, still occupied with these new thoughts, he walked slowly down the corridor toward the elevators. He didn't see the cleaning woman's pail of water in the corridor until his foot struck it. The pail went over, showering him with dirty water until his trousers were soaked around the cuffs.

He muttered something uncomplimentary about his own stupidity and went back to his apartment. There he proceeded to lay out fresh clothes. Cleaning out the pockets of the suit he wore, he came upon the wad of waxed paper he had automatically picked up from the court-house steps soon after the murder. He had forgotten all about the

seemingly innocent paper wad.

Now he opened it and spread it flat on a table. He felt his throat go dry and his heart began to pound. In a moment he was on his way to Police Headquarters.

There he had to put a damper on his new-found enthusiasm because Lieutenant Bradley was astute enough to sense that something was going on. He gave the lawyer permission to visit his client in his cell.

Harry Page was not especially interested. "You're wasting time, Mr. Byron," he said. "No matter what you do, I'll insist upon taking the witness stand and admitting I shot Fadden. In a way, I'm sorry I did it, but I did, and that's that."

"Look here," Byron said, "you're being an idiot. You got that gun from someone. Who?"

"I don't know," Page shrugged. "I met a man who had the gun to sell and I bought it. I'm not going to involve him, even if I could."

"You talked to someone about killing Fadden though," Byron persisted. "And maybe I know who it was. Never mind about that. Tell me exactly what happened on the court-house steps."

Page hunched himself well back on the bunk and drew his knees up to his chin.

"I planned to kill Fadden for days," he said. "I knew when he was going to be sentenced. I knew they'd take him out the front door and down those steps. I figured out that if I accosted him at a certain step, I could shoot him and maybe get away. Or get a bullet in the back from one of those detectives. It really didn't matter."

"But you pointed the gun and pulled the trigger?"

"Of course I did."

"After that, what happened?" Byron asked.

"Why, I—I'm not too certain. Things happened so fast. I remember standing there with the gun in my hand, still leveled at the spot where Fadden's head had been. One of the detectives was drawing his gun and I suddenly didn't want to die, so I dropped the gun. That's all."

"Did George Conlon tell you on which step to stand and do the shooting?" asked Byron suddenly.

"Why, he—" Page stopped abruptly. "Who is George Conlon?"

"Just a pal of mine," Clint Byron grinned. "So you don't know him. My hunch must have been wrong. Listen, my unknown client, I'm going to ask for trial at once. Tomorrow, if possible. You'll have to agree, but I imagine you want to get it over with as soon as possible."

"Why not?" Page shrugged. "I'm just taking up your time. It isn't that I don't

appreciate what you're trying to do for me, Mr. Byron. Things are just so hopeless it doesn't make any difference."

"That's right," Byron conceded. "I'll see the D.A. at once."

He left the cell and went straight to the D.A.'s office. There he used considerable guile in asking for a quick trial.

Ordinarily, it took weeks before a case could be heard, particularly a murder case. Attorneys for the defense and the prosecution both benefitted by this arrangement for it took plenty of time to organize a case properly. So Byron had to forestall this possible objection.

"After all," he pointed out, "my client hasn't a chance. I don't want to fool around with the case any longer and he's quite ready to face the consequences. Besides, you're campaigning for reelection, and a quick conviction—fast justice—wouldn't hurt your record any. Do this for me and I'll find out his identity for you."

The D.A. was impressed. "All right, I'll do it. You may be right, and the whole thing is cut and dried anyway."

BYRON felt like cheering when he headed from the D.A.'s office to City Hall, where he spent two hours examining certain records in various departments having to do with city work. Next, he visited the court-house and had a talk with Judge Fowler.

"I may be letting myself in for contempt of court and a lot of other things," he said, "but I have to take the chance. Judge, this trial must be held in Courtroom C on the third floor. Can you arrange that?"

"I can," Judge Fowler nodded. "And I'm glad to see you interested in your client. Even if there isn't a chance to save him."

Byron chuckled. "Try to be in court, Judge. You'll see a brand new way of trying a murder case, and ethics are going to be thrown right out the window. Stand by to bail me out if things go haywire—which they probably will."

That night Clint Byron visited the court-house again. He only prowled around the outside of the building, but when he went back to his hotel, he was thoroughly satisfied. For one thing he was sure that Harry Page knew George Conlon and that the ex-detective was implicated in the case.

Harry Page would have to be made to talk in order to prove this, but the lawyer had a rapidly developing idea that young Page would open up. He simply had to—or one brand new attorney was going to face disbarment proceedings. If that happened, they wouldn't even take him back on the cops. And Lieutenant Bradley's gloating would be unbearable.

CHAPTER V

LETHAL BULLET



IN COURT the following morning, Clint Byron lounged in his chair while the jury was being selected. He showed no particular interest in the jurors, made no objections when the D.A. asked pointed questions of them and, as a result, the jury was sworn in about an hour after court began. The case started at once.

The medical examiner gave testimony as to the cause and manner of death. The detective told how the still unnamed defendant accosted them, fired the shot, then dropped the gun. Byron asked the detective one question.

"The defendant pointed the gun, fired, and stood there with the weapon still pointed? Is that right?"

"Yes, sir," the detective agreed. "He looked as if he had been paralyzed by the realization of what he'd done."

"You saw smoke and flame come out of the gun?" Byron queried.

"Well, I'm not so certain of that." The detective frowned. "Things happened so fast."

"That's all."

The lawyer sat down and fiddled with a pencil while depositions from the wounded detective, still confined to the hospital, were read. His testimony tallied exactly with that of the other detective.

Lieutenant Bradley took the stand and told what he knew. Byron waved dismally at the witness when the D.A. finished his questions. Bradley came over and sat beside the lawyer.

"You should have raised the devil," he whispered. "After all, a defense attorney

without a case always yells and waves his hands a lot."

"I'm very tired this morning," Byron said. "Besides, you know all the tricks and you might have made a fool out of me."

"That," Bradley agreed, with a smirk, "was what I had been hoping for."

Ross Allison was on the stand giving a terse eye-witness story of what he had seen. It didn't take long and Byron watched the jury fidgeting in their seats. They were becoming bored already and that meant each one's mind was made up. Clint Byron arose.

"Mr. Allison," he said, "I won't question you about your testimony. It is obviously the truth, because even my client admits it. However, I should like to know what you were doing on the scaffolding your men were erecting in front of the court-house that morning."

"Working," Allison said. "I'm short of men just like everyone else and I have to pitch in."

"How many men did you employ before the war, Mr. Allison?"

"One hundred and sixty-five."

"How many are on your pay-roll now?"

Allison stirred uneasily. "Why, about the same number. Yes, I'm sure I paid off one hundred and seventy-one men last week."

"Then you actually have more men than you did before the war?"

"Well—yes," Allison admitted. "But more work too."

Byron turned away. "Odd, but I thought contracting engineers like you were having a difficult time of it because of shortages in material. You must be the exception. That's all, Mr. Allison."

The D.A. rested his case. Byron turned around in his chair and eyed the spectators. He saw George Conlon, Alan Drake and Nan seated well to the rear. He called Nan to the stand. [Turn page]

"Don't Move! I'll Plug You If You Do!"

DETECTIVE Martin Blake gave the order crisply—like a man accustomed to being obeyed. He'd just seen two glittering eyes above a trap door. The newcomer clung precariously to the trap, his face smeared with mud and his hair matted with water. But Blake had a pretty good idea who it was—and Blake wasn't taking any chances!

He moved warily toward the trap. Suddenly he heard a woman's shrill voice from below. Blake steadied the trap while he kept the crook covered. Suddenly something crashed on his skull and he felt as though a ton weight were falling upon him. He woke up to find himself in the hands of his foes!

That's only one of the exciting episodes in **THE MAN FROM ALCATRAZ**—a gripping detective novel by John L. Benton in which Detective Martin Blake takes the dangerous trail of a grim crime conspiracy! It's packed with action—suspense—surprises!

COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE



"You know this young man," he said, indicating his client. "Tell us about him."

Nan paled and young Page was squirming uncomfortably and softly cursing his lawyer under his breath. Nan told her story, the same she had told Byron that night when she slipped out of her uncle's house. Lieutenant Bradley beamed.

When Clint Byron sat down again while the D.A. drew out even more pertinent facts from Nan, Bradley whispered to him:

"Clint, you're worse than I figured. I'm not proud of you. After all, you trained under me and while you never were a really good cop, I thought you knew better than to put a witness on the stand who furnishes the premeditation and even tells us who the prisoner is so as to bring out the motive."

"Me," Byron said, "I'm dumb. That's from working with you. Excuse me, Lieutenant."

He arose and went to the table upon which lay the huge revolver. He paid no attention to Nan who was still in the witness chair, but picked up the gun and faced the jury.

"This, ladies and gentlemen," he said, "is the murder weapon. With it my client firmly believes he shot and killed Fred Fadden. It is a big gun. It kicks like the very devil, when the cartridge explodes. You will all agree to that, I'm sure. However, the cartridge must contain its normal amount of effective powder. I shall give you a demonstration."

HE TURNED quickly and pointed the gun at a big upholstered chair. He pulled the trigger. There was an explosion, not too loud, and the smack of the slug against the upholstery. Byron waited until the hubbub died down and then, before the Judge could call him before the bench for this unethical procedure, he dug the bullet out of the upholstery. He held it between his fingers and turned the big chair around so the jury could see the back of it.

"Fred Fadden was killed by a bullet that crashed through his head and went on to wound the detective. It was a bullet fired from this gun. Yet I ask you to note that the bullet I fired couldn't even go all the way through the padding of that chair. Why? Because I am prepared to prove that this bullet was manufactured more than a quarter of a century ago and has lost much of its power."

The D.A. was on his feet.

"We have proven the murder bullet came from that gun. Because one slug doesn't contain much powder doesn't mean another will act in the same manner."

Clint Byron smiled. "I think I'm right. Yet I concede that the murder bullet did

actually come from this gun. But not at the time of the murder. The bullet was fired to get the barrel impressions on the lead retrieved, and used in another type of weapon. I'm not sure just where that weapon is or what it is like, but I think we owe it to my client to have this angle investigated."

He turned to face the spectator's gallery. He saw Alan Drake's set face. He saw George Conlon heading for the door.

"Stop that man!" he called out peremptorily. "Stop him, I say!"

Conlon was seized, despite his protests. Byron saw that the Judge was about ready to explode. With a low bow to the D.A., Byron clambered onto the bench and whispered in the Judge's ear for a moment. The Judge looked startled.

"Bailiff," the Judge called, "lock the doors. No one is to leave this court room. Mr. Byron, you may proceed and, Mr. District Attorney, I want no interference from you."

Byron grinned at the startled D.A., walked over and faced the jury.

"I ask that the jury leave the box and assemble near the large windows overlooking the front of this court house," he said. "You will be able to see the scaffolding erected there and watch murder evidence revealed before your eyes. While you watch, I'll tell you a story."

The jury didn't move until the Judge ordered them to do so. Clint Byron warned them to be careful and not be seen through the window. With the jury kneeling and peering out, the Judge, the D.A. and Bradley crouched beside another of the four big windows. All riveted their eyes on the scaffolding, in plain sight below.

"My client did not murder Fadden," Byron said. "He had the motive, he premeditated the crime and he actually went so far as to try and carry it out. The gun was furnished to him by George Conlon. Conlon was the go-between. He talked my client into committing the crime. My client, armed with the gun, did aim it and probably pulled the trigger, but the gun didn't go off because there was just an empty shell under the hammer. He was naturally excited, but if that gun had gone off, the kick would have caused him to remember it. The explosion and the prepared bullet came from another source. Look closely now. My client believed the explosion came from the gun he held, but it did not. He was in a half-daze during all of this. His confession was made on the basis of honesty, but it is wrong. Watch now."

They all saw Ross Allison, without bothering to don work clothes, clamber onto the scaffolding and set to work with a huge wrench. He was uncoupling a piece of

steel pipe with an open end that was pointed at the spot where Fadden had fallen.

Clint Byron nudged Lieutenant Bradley.

"Go get him, Lieutenant, before he hides or destroys the evidence. That pipe is really a shotgun. He wadded the bullet into it, holding it in place with a wad of waxed paper. The bullet, with the characteristic rifling of the big revolver, was discharged without being marked any further. Allison wanted to kill Fadden because he hated him so—and to be absolutely certain he would die. . . . Go on, Lieutenant. Snap out of it."

Bradley made a fast exit. They watched him approach Allison and saw the engineer reach toward his hip pocket. A service pistol appeared in Bradley's fist, and that was all there was to it.

The jury filed back to its box. The Judge resumed his seat on the bench. Young Page was alternately turning pink and white.

"That's correct!" he shouted suddenly. "Conlon did give me the gun and encouraged me to kill Fadden. He said I could get away with it and he'd have preparations made to help me escape. I was to do the shooting on the eleventh step from the top. He just wanted me to stop Fadden so that improvised shotgun would be pointed at him. I never was sure whether or not I'd fired. When the time came, I suddenly didn't want to become a murderer!"

CCLINT BYRON faced the bench.

"Your Honor, I ask that the charge of murder against my client be dismissed. I ask that if the District Attorney wishes to charge him with intent to murder, the court will accept plea of guilty under extenuating circumstances and extend leniency. My client has suffered greatly."

The D.A. cleared his throat.

"The State, Your Honor, withdraws the charge of murder against the accused. The State asks time to prepare a warrant charging him with intent to kill and agrees that

if he cooperates against Ross Allison and George Conlon, the State will readily accept a mild penalty."

Byron nodded in satisfaction.

"Your Honor," he said, "Ross Allison was afraid of Fadden. Possibly he wanted to murder him himself or, at least, insure his death in the event that Harry Page balked when the time came. Therefore, he rigged this improvised shotgun containing the marked bullet. Ross Allison is a grafter. With Fadden's help he has cheated the city out of many thousands of dollars and Fadden would have talked about it. I suspected him when I realized he never did any manual work himself.

"Then the wad of waxed paper, perforated with powder, added to the evidence. Next, I discovered that Allison had been cheating and then, to top it all off, I found that Allison did not have a contract for the work he was doing on the outside of the courthouse. He simply went ahead as if the job had been ordered so he could rig his shotgun in the scaffolding. When I exposed the trick, Allison left the court room because he knew he had to get rid of that evidence. I hoped he would do that so you might watch him at it. That's all, ladies and gentlemen. I'm grateful. To you also, Your Honor."

The D.A. sidled over to Clint Byron. "I intended adding you to my staff one of these days, Clint, but after that dirty trick you can go hang."

Byron sighed. He stopped young Page, walked over and grasped his arm. He piloted him into the Judge's chambers. In a few moments Page came out, his face beet-red. Clint Byron emerged too, and he was limping. Once he stopped, raised his right foot and gently massaged it through the shoe.

Then he saw Nan Drake walking in his direction. She passed right by young Page and kept on coming. Byron automatically straightened his necktie and smiled. Being Attorney for the Defense wasn't so bad after all.

Now She Shops "Cash and Carry" Without Painful Backache

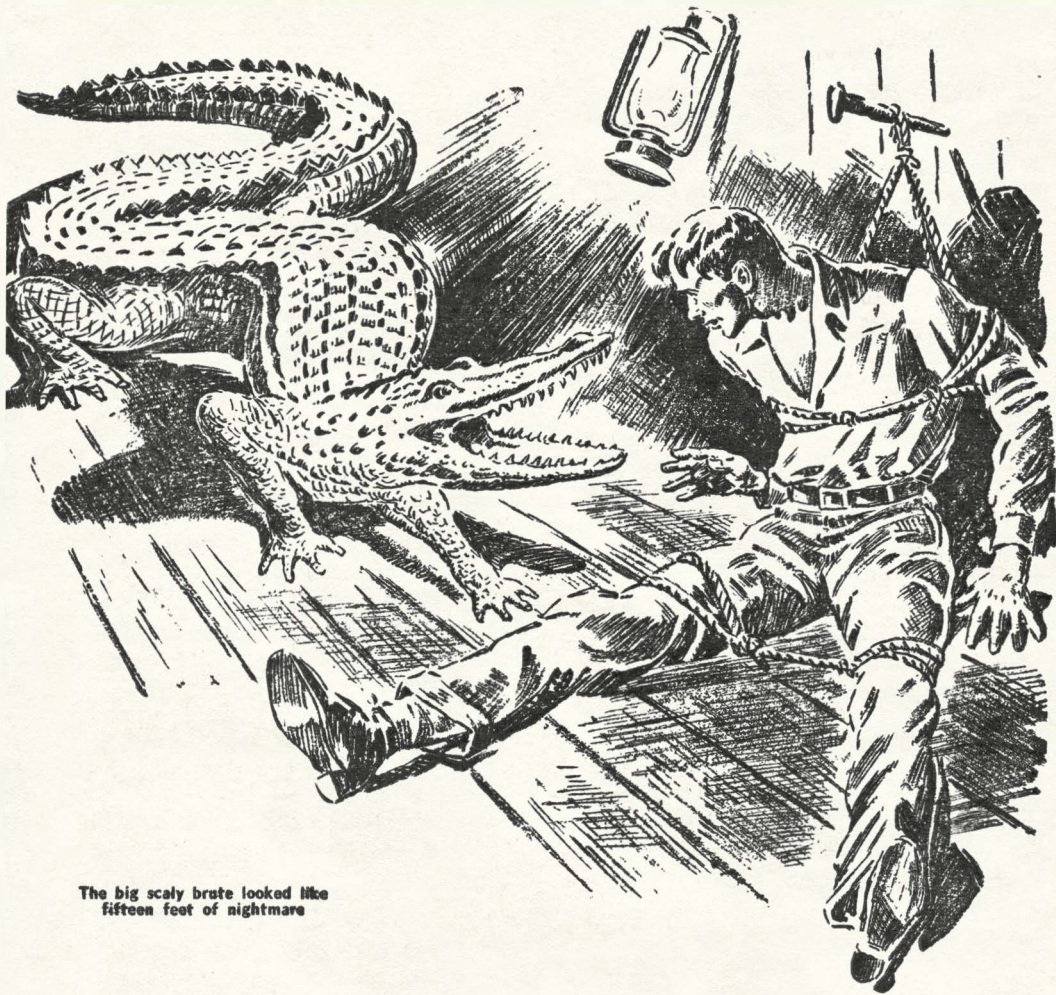
Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

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nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. (Adm.)



The big scaly brute looked like fifteen feet of nightmare

ORDEAL BY OSWALD

By HAL K. WELLS

A corpse lashed to the back of an alligator and a beautiful girl in evening clothes give Bill Cory the shock of his life!

THE old codger's name was Eph Carson, and he was looking for a general handyman to work on a small mountain ranch out in the high country north of Los Angeles. I met him at the United States Employment office in town.

Our little talk was going along just dandy when suddenly the old man dropped a blockbuster out of a clear sky.

"I hope you ain't got anything against

lizards, son," he said casually.

I couldn't have straightened up in my chair any quicker than if he had given me the hot-foot with a flame-thrower. I was just back from a three-year hitch with the Marines in the South Pacific. Most of that time had been spent in places where the principal kinds of animal life are lizards and more lizards.

You find the scaly little varmints in your morning cup of Java. You find them nibbling

your K-rations at noon. And after you have hit the sack for the night, you find them snugly parked between your shoulder blades.

"Mister," I said, "if it is a choice between a lizard and a slight case of double pneumonia, I will take the pneumonia."

The old man grinned.

"Take it easy, son," he cackled. "I was just funnin' you. The only lizard around the ranch is Oswald, and you won't have to do no takin' care of him. Oswald's my baby.

"I think you'll like the job, son," he continued. "Big Mike Murphy is a little peculiar, but Mike's a right good boss to work for. It's Mike that owns the place, you know. I just do the hiring."

There was a funny something away back in the old man's eyes that gave me the idea he was laughing at some very good but highly secret joke that nobody knew but him. I didn't get it.

I WAS still wondering about it when I tooted my jalopy over the mountain roads that night. One thing sure, I was going to get firsthand knowledge on the matter pretty soon. There was a USES paper in my pocket, stating that William Cory, ex-sergeant, U.S.M.C., was now in the employ of Michael Murphy, ranch proprietor.

Old Eph Carson had headed back to the ranch that afternoon, but I didn't start till evening. It was ten o'clock when I got to the foothills. Two hours later, I was still looking for the big cottonwood tree that Eph had said marked the side road through a canyon to the ranch.

The gasoline gauge was hovering just over the zero mark when I finally spotted the big cottonwood looming ghostly white in the brilliant light of a nearly full moon. I left the main highway and turned into a narrow hard-surfaced road that led back through a high-walled canyon.

About a hundred yards from the intersection I came to a station wagon parked beside the road. I slowed down with the idea of asking if I were on the right trail. There wasn't a sign of anybody around, so I drove on.

The road climbed for another hundred yards, then started downgrade toward the canyon floor. By that time, the needle of my gas gauge was as low as it could get and still stay on the dash. I tried to conserve what little fuel I had left by shutting off the engine and coasting. The car dropped on down the winding road as quietly as a ghost tiptoeing across a feather bed.

It was the utter silence of my approach that caught the weird cavalcade completely by surprise. The car glided around a sharp curve in the road, and there they were!

They were in the middle of the narrow

roadway, not over twenty feet ahead of the car. The glare of the headlights spotlighted them with a brilliance that brought out every fantastic and incredible detail.

Named in the order in which they registered in my startled brain, there was a large gun, a pretty girl, a very large alligator and a corpse.

The gun was one of those colossal six-shooters with which our grandpappies used to knock over buffaloes. It would have looked big enough in the hairy paw of Gargantua. In the hand of the girl who toted it, it loomed like a siege howitzer.

The girl was not taller than five-feet-one, but she was sixty-one inches of as gorgeous pulchritude as I have ever gazed upon. Her dark hair was set in a rippling coiffure that looked as if it had been varnished. Her high-heeled slippers sparkled with rhinestones. The part between the coiffure and the slippers was occupied by about equal parts of shimmering white satin evening gown and creamily tanned skin.

The sight of a beautiful damsel in formal evening togs roaming this isolated mountain district at midnight with a frontier model six-gun would have been disconcerting enough, but when I looked at her companion I completely forgot the girl.

It wasn't enough that the brute happened to be about fifteen feet of live alligator. It wasn't enough that the bench-legged monster was toddling docilely along beside the girl like a pet dog. No, there had to be a final and utterly insane detail in the fact that the brute was carrying, lashed by ropes to its broad scaly back the body of a man.

The man's face was frozen in a grimace of contorted agony, but I recognized it. The man was old Eph Carson. I recognized something else, too. I've seen it too many times in foxholes and on jungle trails ever to be mistaken about it, even in the brief flash of headlights on a canyon road. Eph Carson was dead.

The jalopy shuddered to a back-breaking stop as I jammed on the foot brake and the emergency. For what seemed a full minute, and probably was about five seconds, stark surprise kept everybody as rigidly motionless as some weird group carved out of ice.

Then everything started happening at once. The 'gator's ugly snout opened to show a vast expanse of tooth-lined red mouth that looked only one size smaller than the Grand Canyon. It emitted a grunting roar that boomed like distant thunder. The girl's gun-hand raised, and there wasn't anything distant about the thunder that came from her over-sized piece of ordnance. One of my headlights went out in a crash of shattered glass.

I went over the side of the car without

bothering to open the door. While I was still in the air, I heard the crash of another shot, and the remaining headlight vanished. Two more shots whistled over my head as I landed in the ditch. I couldn't have rammed my nose any deeper into the dirt had a couple of Zekes been strafing the canyon.

There was a short period of silence. Then I finally heard what sounded like the girl and her scaly little pal beating a retreat. I lifted my head and took a cautious look-see. The road stretched clear and deserted in the bright moonlight.

There was the acrid smell of burnt powder in the air and a musky odor that was singularly disagreeable. I'd loafed around Florida some before the war, so I recognized that scent. It was the battle perfume of a bull alligator.

AS I started to climb up out of my improvised foxhole, a rock about the size of a coconut gave way beneath my weight, and went sliding down into the ditch with a noise that sounded like a young avalanche.

Orange-red flame spurted twice from the brush about thirty yards away. The big alligator's booming roar blended weirdly with the six-gun's thunder and the banshee wail of ricocheting slugs as I nose-dived back into the nice cozy shelter of the ditch.

I heard sounds retreating through the brush again. I waited until they had faded out completely. Then I picked up a rock and sent it bouncing along the road. The noise didn't bring any gunfire this time. I cautiously got back up on the road and took a look around.

There was the sound of a stream somewhere to the right. To the left there was a flat, brush-covered space about a hundred yards across, and on the far side, the yellow glow of a lighted window. It was across that brush-covered meadow that the gal and the 'gator had retreated.

I promptly followed them. The brush was tough, thorny stuff growing nearly shoulder-high. But there were open lanes that made it possible to travel a fairly direct course toward the distant light.

I was halfway there when I rounded a heavy brush clump and came to a halt so suddenly that I nearly pitched on my nose.

One step more and my foot would have come down squarely on Eph Carson's dead face.

The ropes that had bound Eph to the alligator's back were in loose coils around him. It looked as if the flight through the brush had scraped the old man's body off the big 'gator. The brute and the girl had gone on, leaving the corpse where it had fallen.

I knelt beside the body for a quick examination.

Eph had been shot in the back. There was no trace of an exit wound, which meant that the bullet must still be somewhere inside the body.

That was all that I had a chance to notice before a curt command came from close behind me.

"Take it easy, mister. You're covered."

I got slowly to my feet and turned around.

The girl was standing about eight feet away, with the muzzle of the big six-gun pointed at my midsection. There was about a yard of alligator snout sticking out from behind a bush beside her. The two of them had apparently been waiting for me to come along.

I kept my eyes on the gun and started to take a slow, easy step forward.

"Oswald!" the girl called.

The remaining four yards of bench-legged scaliness emerged from behind the bush and opened its jaws till they yawned like an LST about to disgorge a load of tanks. I stepped hastily backward. The Marine Corps had taught me various ways to disarm gun-toting adversaries, but had never taught me any practicable method of defanging a fifteen-foot bull alligator.

The girl pointed toward Eph's body.

"Pick him up, mister," she ordered. "We're going to the house."

There didn't seem to be anything else to do. I picked Eph's body up and started off through the brush. The girl and the 'gator came along behind me, so close that I could almost feel the brute's hot breath on my heels.

So Oswald was Eph's "lizard," I remembered grimly. The old boy had certainly had a genius for understatement. Anybody who would call that thing a lizard would probably call a full-grown boa constrictor a caterpillar.

We came out of the brush, crossed a truck garden and passed stables and outbuildings. Then we came to a low wooden shed. The musky aroma told me that it was Oswald's happy home, even before the girl ordered him into it and bolted the door behind him.

The main house was a one-story Spanish-type affair. We passed through the back door into a large, well-lighted kitchen and then went on into a hall bedroom. The girl ordered me to put Eph's body on the bed.

Then she herded me back into the kitchen.

"All right, mister," she said coldly, "before I lock you up and go for the sheriff, fork over that money."

"What money?" I asked.

"The money you took from Eph, of course. I don't know how you found out that he habitually packed his life's savings around on his person, but you stumbled onto it some way. That was the reason you came

sneaking around here tonight and killed him."

I took a long breath.

"Listen, lady," I said carefully, "I didn't kill Eph Carson. he first and only time I ever saw the old man was in Los Angeles today, when he hired me to work on the ranch here. I suppose this is the ranch of Big Mike Murphy?"

She nodded.

"It is. And you may be the new hand Eph went into Los Angeles to hire. But that doesn't prove you didn't kill him tonight. You could easily have found out he was carrying a roll when you talked with him in L.A. Come on mister, empty those pockets, and *my pronto*."

WITH a shrug of my shoulders, I unloaded my pockets on the top of the kitchen table. The girl fumbled my wallet open with her free hand.

She looked disappointed when she found only four dollars in it. Then she fished some ribbons out of one of the compartments. There was a Purple Heart, a Pacific Area Ribbon with some bronze and silver battle stars on it, and a couple of others that I'd just as soon not talk about.

She studied them for a minute, then glanced at the papers that were with them.

Her face lost its taut hardness. She put the gun down on the table.

"I'm afraid I owe you an apology, Mr. Cory," she said contritely. "A man with these credentials is not likely to be a thief and a murderer. he job here is still open if you want it. I'm Mike Murphy."

"Not 'Big Mike' Murphy?"

"The Big Mike was just one of Eph's jokes. My name is Michael, though. My dad picked that name for the son he was expecting, and Dad wasn't the sort of person to change his mind just because the boy happened to be a girl."

I started putting my stuff back in my pockets.

"Just what happened here tonight, anyway?" I asked. "Were you here when Eph was killed?"

She shook her head.

"There was no one here with Eph at the time, except the killer, of course. Our only help consists of a Mexican and his wife. he went down the valley to visit relatives overnight. I spent the evening at a party at the Everly ranch, about ten miles east of here on the main road."

"Ranch parties must be formal around here," I commented, glancing at her fancy get-up.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Madge Everly likes to put on the dog, even for a hen party like tonight. If it hadn't

been for these glad rags, I'd have fixed the tire myself when I had a flat just after turning into the ranch road. As it was, I left the station wagon there and came on in, intending to send Eph back to take care of it. But when I got here, I found that Eph was dead."

"Where did you find him?"

"In a small tool shed out back. His body was on the floor. Somebody had started to pile gasoline-soaked rags around him. My arrival apparently scared the murderer away before he could finish the job."

"Trying to hide the murder by making it look like Eph lost his life in the fire when the shed burned," I said.

"That's the way I figured it," Mike agreed.

"I tried to phone for help, but the phone was dead. hat left me really on a spot. I had Dad's old six-gun, but I didn't want to spend the night standing guard over Eph's body. And I didn't dare leave him while I went for help, because the killer might come back and finish the job of burning him. The only thing I could think of was to take Eph's body with me to the station wagon. I couldn't lift it up on a horse, but I managed to get it on Oswald's back."

"Smart idea, at that," I said. "But what is that scaled monstrosity doing around here, anyway?"

"He was Eph's pet. Eph used to work on an alligator farm down around San Gabriel. He wouldn't come to work for me until I agreed to let Oswald come with him. Oswald looks ferocious, but he's really as gentle as a kitten."

"Maybe so," I said, "but he certainly didn't purr like any kitten when I ran into you down there on the road, and you started target practice on my headlights."

"I'm sorry about that shooting business," Mike said, "but you startled me. I thought you were the killer coming back to dispose of Eph's body."

"That's just what he was doin', Miss Mike."

It was a man's voice. It came from the back door. As Mike and I turned, the speaker stepped into the kitchen. He was a tall, loose-jointed specimen, wearing a battered, felt hat and dirty Levi's. He had a narrow, small-eyed face that would have looked good on a gopher.

"Who is this character?" I asked.

"Pete Ruhl," Mike answered. "He has a little place up the canyon. What did you mean by that crack you just made, Pete?"

"Just what I said, Miss Mike," Pete answered doggedly. "This fellah didn't just get here, like he claims. He was here 'bout an hour ago. I was goin' by and I saw him when he come. A little later I heard a shot, but I didn't think nothin' of it. Then I got to figurin' maybe I'd better see. No doubt about it, Miss Mike. He's the fellah that plugged

poor old Eph in the back and took his roll."

MIKE snatched the six-gun from the table. I looked into its yawning muzzle again. "Could be," she said, half to herself. "The money might be hidden in your car. And those ribbons and things of yours might be phony."

"Listen, Mike," I said wearily, "let's not go through that artillery routine again. You're too pretty a girl to be waving a gun around all the time. Or you would be pretty if it weren't for that smudge of dirt on the end of your very cute nose."

There was a looking glass on the kitchen wall opposite us. Mike promptly did what any woman would have done. I grabbed the gun from her hand and tossed it on the table.

I did it as gently as I could, but I couldn't avoid twisting her fingers a little. Mike gave a sharp little gasp of outraged pain, then pivoted and threw a left hook at my chin that would have done credit to a ranking featherweight. I dodged it and grabbed her wrists.

There was a *click-click* from behind me, then an exclamation of disgust. I turned my head.

"That six-gun is empty, Pete," I said.

"Empty?" Mike gasped. "How did you know?"

"Because you shot at me six times, which is all the shells that cannon will hold. You certainly didn't have any extra ammo with you, because you couldn't pack a .22 cartridge in that evening gown without the bump showing. And you didn't have any chance to reload after we got to the house."

Pete scowled and tossed the empty weapon back on the table. I grinned at him.

"You don't think I'd have been sap enough to put a loaded gun in your reach, do you, gopher puss?" I asked.

Mike's eyes were puzzled beneath the finely arched line of her brows.

"I don't get this," she said. "You knew that gun was empty, yet you came meekly along when I ordered you to carry Eph's body to the house."

"Maybe the gun was unloaded," I said, "but Oswald wasn't. Anyway, I wanted to see what it was all about."

"And then you deliberately put the gun in Pete's reach. Why?"

"Just a hunch. I thought he might grab it and try to plug me. I was doing a little wrestling with you, and he might have made out a plausible story of shooting to save your life. With me dead, his yarn about Eph's murder would stand up without argument."

"But why would he want to frame you for Eph's murder?"

"Because Pete is the man who did murder Eph," I answered. "He as good as admitted

it in the course of his conversation a few minutes ago."

"What do you mean?" Pete exploded. "I did no such thing."

"You said that I was the one who plugged poor old Eph in the back and took his roll," I answered. "How did you know Eph was shot in the back?"

Pete hesitated.

"I heard one of you folks say it."

"You did not," I said flatly. "Neither of us ever mentioned it."

"That's right," Mike seconded me. "We never said a word about it at any time."

Pete licked his lips nervously.

"I was just guessin' when I said that."

"You're cock-eyed," I retorted. "You knew Eph was shot in the back because you shot him. You took his money, then started to burn the body to hide the fact that he had been murdered, but Mike came along and scared you away. You've been hanging around ever since, trying to find out what was going on. You heard enough while you were bending an ear outside that door, to give you the bright idea that you could hang the killing on me. So you came barging in and spoke your little piece."

Pete's face set stubbornly.

"You can't prove any of what you're sayin'."

"Maybe we can," I answered. "The bullet that killed Eph is still in his body. It will be an easy matter to see if you own the gun that fired it."

"I ain't got no gun."

Mike's brows arched ceilingward.

"Since when?" she demanded. "You've been packing an ivory-handled .38 around this canyon ever since I've known you."

"I lost that a coupla days ago back in the hills," Pete said defiantly.

"You don't expect anyone to believe that, do you?" Mike turned to me. "It looks as if I'm fated to spend the night apologizing to you. There's no longer any doubt about who killed Eph, of course. It was this gopher-faced baboon. He probably has Eph's roll in his pocket right now."

"No, he wouldn't be quite that dumb," I said. "I imagine he hid the roll and the gun out somewhere around the place."

"You can't prove it," Pete said sullenly. "You can't prove nothin'."

I STUDIED Pete's face in silence for a long minute. You don't get sergeant's stripes in the gyrenes without picking up some savvy about human nature. Pete wasn't a particularly hard book to read. He was both ignorant and dumb in a good many ways, but he had enough animal cunning and sheer stubbornness to make him a plenty tough nut to crack. I doubted if you could beat the

truth out of him with an axe handle. There was a chance, however, that it could be scared out of him.

"I don't know, Pete," I said slowly. "You might be able to lie your way out of it if we hauled you into court on a murder rap. I don't think I'll take that chance. I'm going to put you on trial right out here tonight. And the judge, jury and maybe executioner is going to be Oswald."

Pete's eyes went jittery. I pressed my advantage.

"That big alligator was Eph's pet and pal for years," I said. "He loved the old man like a dog loves its master. Alligators are like dogs and other animals in their strange sixth sense about certain things. Maybe Oswald didn't actually see the man while he was killing Eph, but I'll bet my last two-bits that Oswald's instinct will tell him who the murderer was. We'll put you out there in the shed with him and see what happens."

As I took a step toward Pete, he started backing away. I had him cut off from the back door, so he retreated toward a corner of the kitchen. His narrow face was a dirty gray.

"You ain't gonna put me in with that brute," he protested vehemently.

He reached the corner and made a sudden jump for a cupboard. Before I could get to him, he opened a drawer and grabbed out a butcher knife with a twelve-inch blade. That was a mistake. Situations of that kind have been covered very early in the practical education of all little boys in the Marine Corps.

I made a left-handed feint at the knife. Pete's eyes followed my hand. He didn't notice my right foot until it cracked viciously into his shin. He yowled in agony, and his knife-hand dropped.

My right hook to his jaw was a fraction of an inch off the button, but his head slammed back into the wall hard enough to finish the job. He was out colder than an Aleutian icicle when he hit the floor.

I knelt beside him to search his pockets, but I came up empty.

"What if he hasn't got the money on him?" Mike asked. "We've got plenty of other proof that he killed Eph."

"We haven't got a doggoned thing that would stand up in court," I said flatly. "The only real proof would be to find Pete's gun and to prove that it fired the bullet that killed Eph."

"But how can we find it?" Mike asked hopelessly. "He could have hidden it anywhere within a radius of a square mile."

"We'll make Pete tell us where it is," I answered. "Or rather, Oswald will make him."

She shook her head.

"You can't do anything with that big, scaly clown. If you put Pete in the shed with him, Oswald will only open one eye for a minute, then calmly go back to sleep again."

"Maybe you overlook some of Oswald's possibilities," I said. "I've got an idea."

Some of the skepticism faded from her eyes as I told her about it.

"It might work at that," she said thoughtfully.

After tying Pete hand-and-foot, Mike and I went out to set the stage for our little experiment.

Pete was still unconscious of the world when I returned to the kitchen.

I slung him over my shoulder, and toted him out to Oswald's cozy little nest. Over in the far corner of the long, low shed, there was a big spike driven into the wall about two feet above the floor. I sat Pete on the floor in the corner with his legs sticking straight out in front of him, lashed his bonds to the spike so that he couldn't move, and started massaging the base of his skull.

He grunted feebly, shuddered, then slowly opened his eyes. He took a short look around him, a longer smell, and panic flooded his close-set eyes.

Mike had Oswald outside, but Pete didn't need to see the 'gator to know where he was sitting. The smell of musk in the shed was so strong you could have hung your hat on it. Pete's face shone wet and sticky with sweat in the light of the single lantern that was hung high up on one of the walls.

"This is it, Pete," I said. "The old-time boys used to call it trial by ordeal. Oswald will be your ordeal. If you're innocent, you haven't got anything to fear. They tell me that Oswald ordinarily wouldn't hurt a fly. But if you're guilty, if you are the rat who shot old Eph in the back, then heaven help you. That big 'gator is going to come swarming all over you. When he gets through, there won't be any need for court action, because there won't be any pieces left big enough to try."

PETE set his lips stubbornly. He remained silent as I walked across the shed to where Mike was waiting just outside the door. The door was one of those two-section things, with the top half nailed permanently open. Oswald's monstrous body was standing beside Mike, nuzzling his ugly snout against her like a big pet dog.

"Okay, Mike," I said, "put him inside."

Mike opened the door. Oswald hesitated for a moment, then slowly slithered into the shed. Mike closed the half door behind him. We stood with our elbows on top of it and waited.

Oswald gave Pete's bound body a brief and utterly unconcerned glance, then turned

away and yawned. For a minute I was afraid the whole thing was going to prove a bust. Then Oswald took another look at Pete, and this time he kept on looking.

Sweat streamed down Pete's face as he stared into Oswald's extremely unattractive puss.

But he managed to choke his panic back for the moment.

"You—you can't bluff me," he chattered.

"We're not bluffing," I said grimly. "See if you can bluff Oswald."

The big alligator took a slow, tentative step toward Pete, then another one. I felt the hairs raise on the back of my neck. In the dim yellow light of the lantern, the big scaly brute looked like fifteen feet of nightmare straight from some particularly gruesome Hades. I could imagine how he must look to Pete, sitting there on the floor helplessly watching the monstrous body come slithering toward him.

Pete's nerve started to break.

"You can't do this to me!" he choked huskily. "It's murder!"

"Look who's talking about murder," I said. "We'll give you just one more chance, Pete. Tell us where you hid the gun with which you killed Eph, and we'll call Oswald off."

Pete started to answer, then stubbornly pressed his quivering lips together again. Oswald swung his long tail from side to side, hitched his enormous body ponderously along on his wide-spread legs, and headed for Pete in a straight and inexorable line.

"Better not wait too long, Pete," I warned him. "If he once gets hold of you, I doubt if even Mike can call him off."

Oswald's snout reached Pete's outstretched feet. The 'gator hesitated for a brief second. Then his incredible mouth opened to show long rows of white-fanged death, and he went scrambling squarely into Pete's lap.

Pete broke then.

"I'll tell you!" he screamed. "Get him off me! I shot Eph. I hid the gun and the money

in the irrigation ditch at the far corner of the alfalfa patch."

"Know where that is, Mike?" I asked.

She nodded. I flung the door open, and we raced for the corner where Pete's body was now almost completely hidden under the squirming alligator.

We were still six feet away when Pete gave a final choking scream and slumped in a dead faint. Oswald's open jaws reached at an object above Pete's head. They snapped together again with the click of a giant steel trap.

Then Oswald squirmed down off Pete's body with something firmly clamped in his mouth.

I picked Pete up and we headed for the door. There wasn't any doubt in either of our minds about whether he had told the truth or not.

He had been too mortally scared even to think of lying.

His confession by itself wasn't worth the wind that uttered it under the circumstances, but finding the gun and Eph's money would give us all the evidence needed in any court in the country. All we had to do now was go and get them.

I turned at the door and waved a hand at Oswald.

"Nice going, pal," I said gratefully. "You were perfect."

Oswald looked up lazily, then resumed his chewing upon the five-pound dressed chicken that we had taken from the kitchen refrigerator and hung up on the shed wall just above Pete's head.

Any alligator loves a chicken dinner. Oswald was no exception. He had headed for Pete and had climbed up over him for the excellent reason that that was the only possible route to get to the fowl.

It was probably the first time in the history of crime that a murderer was trapped by a combination of five pounds of dead chicken and fifteen feet of live alligator.

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"Just sit right where you are!" said the masked intruder

ONE SHOT TRICK

By BENTON BRADEN

When a masked stranger threatens to torture his wife, farmer Tim Turner rapidly puts his wits to work!

SHERIFF Jim Gaynor was walking down the main street of Amesville with his distant cousin, Ed Gregg, when he spotted Tim Turner. Tim Turner was a farmer. He was about fifty, slight in figure but lean and Hardy. Most people in Amesville thought Tim was somewhat of an eccentric.

"There's Tim Turner, Gregg," the sheriff said in an undertone. "Been wanting to have a little talk with him. Guess I'll tie into him now."

The sheriff increased his pace and caught up with Turner before he had taken more

than twenty steps from the hardware store from which he had emerged. Ed Gregg sauntered along behind, stopped about ten feet short of the pair.

"Hello, Tim," the sheriff greeted. The little farmer turned and grinned. "Haven't seen you for quite a spell. Don't come to town very often any more, do you?"

"I come about the same as usual but I don't stay any longer than I have to," Turner answered. "Can't get any help on the farm and it keeps me goin' about sixteen hours a day."

"Guess you're doing pretty well now, Tim."

"Can't complain," Tim Turner said cheerfully. "Prices are good and I'm layin' by a little for a rainy day."

"I heard as much," the sheriff said. Then a note of severity crept into his voice. "I've heard you've done pretty well in the past three or four years. Heard you've saved several thousand dollars. That's why I'm gettin' just a little worried about you, Tim. A lot of people know you've got that money. They know too that you don't put your money in the bank."

"A lot of people would be better off if they attended to their own business and left mine alone," Turner returned. He chuckled as though he were amused.

"You're right about that, Tim. But the answer to the problem is, that a lot of people make it a point to take a hand in other people's business. A lot of people know that you've made a little money lately. They know that you don't do business with a bank. They know that you have your money in cash right out there on that farm of yours. Now I'm beginnin' to get a little worried, Tim."

"Shucks, Sheriff," Tim Turner grinned. "There's nothin' to worry about at all."

"You're just like a lot of folks, Tim," the sheriff said soberly. "There's never anything to worry about—until something happens. Then it's too late to do anything about it. Even around a little town like Amesville there are a few crooks who would take a chance for a few thousand dollars. I'll speak plain, Tim. Somebody is going to come out to that farm of yours sooner or later and take that money away from you."

"They'd never find it, Sheriff," Turner said confidently.

"They wouldn't even try to find it, Tim. They wouldn't waste a minute lookin' for it. They'd just work on you. They'd beat you up, torture you, make you tell where you've got that money hidden."

"They wouldn't get anywhere at that."

"They might if they worked on your wife, Tim. You couldn't stand to see her tortured, could you?"

Tim Turner winced at that idea as the grin faded from his face.

"You're actin' mighty foolish, Tim." The sheriff followed up quickly. "Takin' unnecessary chances. Why don't you put that money of yours in the bank, Tim? Why are you so set against banks?"

"Got a good reason, Sheriff," Turner said, his blue eyes hard. "When Martha and I were first married we worked like slaves for several years. We just had sixty acres and we had borrowed quite a bit. We finally got eight hundred dollars in the bank. Then the bank went broke. It just ruined us. Took us four

years to get our heads above water again. If you'd gone through what we went through you wouldn't have much love for a bank, either."

"I can understand how you feel about it, Tim," the sheriff nodded. "But things are a lot different now. That must have happened twenty years ago. Banks are run differently now. They're all closely supervised by the government. Bank deposits are insured up to five thousand dollars. You put that money of yours in the bank, Tim. Do it before something happens."

"I'll think it over, Sheriff." Tim Turner's eyes twinkled again. "But I don't think I've got much to worry about. I think I can take care of any situation that comes up."

"There's the danger of losing your money in other ways, too," the sheriff reminded him. "Your house or barn might catch on fire and—"

"Haven't got my money in the house or barn," Tim interrupted. "Haven't got it buried either. Anybody that tried to find my money would have a hard time locating it. I figure it's safe enough where I got it."

"It ain't safe if a couple of tough guys walk in on you and work on you," Sheriff Gaynor said sharply. "I guess if somebody started torturing Martha you'd produce that money for them quick enough. Well, it's your funeral, Tim. But I thought it was my duty to warn you what might happen."

WITH a non-committal shrug, the sheriff turned away rather abruptly. He rejoined Ed Gregg and they walked back up the street together. "Never saw such a hard-headed man as Tim Turner," the sheriff muttered. "You'd think a man would have more common sense than that, wouldn't you?"

"I wasn't close enough to hear what you was talkin' about," Ed Gregg replied. "But that old farmer you was talkin' to was kinda crazy, wasn't he? He was a funny lookin' old coot."

"He's smart enough. Just a little off on one subject," Gaynor said shortly.

That was the truth of it. Many people thought Tim Turner was thoroughly queer because he was hipped on the subject of banks. Some of them said he was a miser. But Turner wasn't a miser. He was a generous man in his own little country community. He was always good-natured and cheerful and everybody liked him. His hard-working wife too, was a model for the wives of other farmers.

Tim Turner didn't seem to be greatly disturbed by the sheriff's words as he climbed into the seat of his light truck that was parked near the end of Main Street. He was in a hurry to get back to his farm and get back to work again. The sheriff was out of

his mind before he cleared the edge of the town.

But Sheriff Jim Gaynor had been right.

Tim Turner knew it the minute the man with the black mask walked into his house. It was in the evening, just about a week later. Turner and Martha had finished with their chores at dusk, eaten a late supper, then sat down in the living room for a few minutes relaxation before they went to bed. It was a small living room. The furniture in it however, was almost new. In these last few years of prosperity Turner and Martha had spent some of their hard-earned money for a few home comforts.

They never locked any of the doors until just before they went to bed. It was a simple matter for the intruder to open the front door quietly and step into the room. The faces of Tim and Martha showed surprise at the intrusion. But there was no question in their eyes.

The man wore a coat over blue denim overalls. His black felt hat was pulled well down. The mask that almost wholly covered his face was evidence enough of the purpose of the visit. The mask was a large piece of cloth in which thin slits had been cut for the eyes.

Turner and Martha didn't move from their chairs. They just sat and waited. They didn't have to wait more than five seconds. The big revolver in the right hand of the intruder swung menacingly from one to the other.

"Just sit right where you are! I'm going to ask some questions and I want straight answers. I won't hurt you if you give me straight talk. But I'll work on you if you try to stall or lie. Understand that?"

The man spoke in a voice that was guttural, keyed very low in an obvious intent to conceal his true tone. Still Turner and his wife didn't say a word. They sat still and waited for him to speak again.

"It's the dough I want!" the man snapped. "The cash! Don't try to tell me you haven't got any money. I know better."

"I'm not denyin' it," Tim Turner said mildly. "I guess I've got seven or eight dollars in my wallet. I'll get it out of my pocket if you—"

"I'm not after any seven or eight dollars! It's seven or eight thousand that I want. I want the dough you've been stowing away for years. Where is it?"

"I've got just that little in my wallet," Turner said evenly. "You could search the house from cellar to attic and you wouldn't find—"

"I won't waste any time looking for that dough, Turner!" the grinding voice cut in. "I been workin' on this job a long time. Everybody knows you don't do any business with banks, that you hide the money out here

somewhere. I already sneaked in here and searched the house when you were out. I combed it from the roof down.

"I know the money isn't in here. I searched your barn too and the other outbuildings. I looked all around your yard and lot and I'm pretty sure you haven't got it buried somewhere. So don't waste my time with any stalls. I know you've got a good hiding place for that dough. You've kept your cash hidden all these years. Where?"

"There wouldn't be much use of havin' a good hidin' place if I told folks where it was, would there?" Turner asked with a hint of a sly note in his tone.

The intruder gripped his gun tightly. He took a step toward Tim Turner, then squared himself. "You'd just as well find out the score right now, Turner!" he lashed out. "I'm not going to stand here and argue with you about that cash. Or where it's hidden. You're going to tell me where it's hidden. You'll either tell me right now or I'll tie you both up.

"I've got a big box of matches in my pocket. I'll use those matches, Turner. Use them on your wife. You want to see her burned? Burned inch by inch? I'll gag her so she can't yell or scream when her flesh burns. How long will you stand that, Turner?"

Turner's face twitched a little. "I guess I couldn't stand that at all," he admitted.

"Of course, you couldn't. You love your wife too much to see her hurt. So come through and save yourself the grief. Where's the hiding place?"

"In a stump," Tim Turner sighed. "I cut my own wood that we burn—in the timber east of the house. Lot of stumps there. So I just cut a big piece of bark off the stump. Then I cut out a place large enough for the waterproof steel box I got.

"I put the box in the place I cut out. Then I put the piece of bark back in place and the stump looks just as it did before. You could look that stump over close and not spot it. Of course, stumps rot out. So I have to use a new stump every two or three years."

Even beneath the mask the elation of the intruder was apparent. His voice showed that elation when he spoke. "You're smart to take the easy way out, Turner. Now we're going out there to that stump and get the cash. I'll have to tie your wife up while we're gone. I can't take the risk of letting her run down the road to a neighbor's while we're gone. You get over and stand against the wall with your hands up, Turner, while I tie her to her chair. I brought some cord along for that very purpose."

TIM TURNER held up a halting hand. "Just wait a minute, stranger," he said

quickly. "You asked me where my hiding place was and I told you. That's where I kept my cash all these years. In a steel box in one of those stumps. But it ain't there now."

"Don't try to lie to me, Turner! And don't try to stall! I'll either leave this farm with your cash tonight—or I'll kill you both. If you haven't got the cash in that stump—where is it?"

"It's in the bank," Turner said evenly.

"You lie! Everybody in this part of the country knows that you hate banks, that you've never put a cent in the bank. You keep that cash right here on your place!"

"That's partially right, stranger." Turner's voice was calm. "I don't like banks because one of 'em went broke a long time ago and put me in an awful hole. So I always kept my cash on the place. But about a week ago Sheriff Gaynor stopped me on the street on Amesville and gave me a talkin'-to.

"The Sheriff told me what a chance I was takin' in keepin' cash out here. Reminded me that the banks have government insurance now for depositors. He got me to thinkin' and I got scared about it. Two days later I took my cash in and put it in the bank. Eight thousand, seven hundred and fifty dollars. That's the amount I had and that's the amount I put in the bank."

"You're lying!" The heavy figure was shaking with sudden rage. "You're stalling! You never put your dough in the bank. You hate banks. Everybody knows it. You haven't been near a bank."

"If you'd talk to Henry Weatherford, the president of the Amesville National Bank, he'd tell you different," Tim Turner said. "When I went into the bank I went to him. I told him the sheriff had thrown a scare into me and that I wanted to put my money in the bank. He took my money and gave me a receipt for it. A duplicate deposit slip I think is what he called it. I got that slip right in my wallet. I'll show it to you if you think I'm lyin'."

Tim didn't wait for a demand. He slowly moved his right hand toward his hip pocket and took out his wallet. He opened it and took out a slip of paper with his thumb and forefinger. He held it out for inspection.

The masked man took a step forward and snatched it from Tim's hand. His shoulders slumped with disappointment as he looked at that deposit slip of the Amesville National Bank. In the blank space was written "cash." In the column for figures was inserted "\$8750.00." The bottom of the slip was initialed, "H.F.W."

"If I had a phone you could call up Mr. Weatherford and he'd tell you all about it," Turner continued. "But we've never had a phone here. I wouldn't have put our money

in the bank if the sheriff hadn't jumped me about it. But after he talked to me and I thought it over I decided that, with the United States Government backin' up the banks now, it was kinda foolish for me to keep that cash here on the——"

Tim Turner didn't seem to notice that the man in front of him was shaking with rage as he spoke. The man suddenly cut Turner's words off, cut them off with a blow. His big left fist swung without warning and caught Turner cleanly on the right side of his jaw. The wallop lifted Tim off his feet for a fraction of a second. Then he dropped to the floor without a sound.

When Turner came to his wife was kneeling beside him, bathing his head and face with cold water.

"Are you hurt bad, Tim?" she asked anxiously as his eyes opened. "The robber turned and ran out right after he knocked you down. Are you all right? You want me to run down the road to Halford's and call a doctor?"

Tim Turner shook his head and sat up. "Now you ought to know me better than that, Ma," he said with a wry grin. "I never had to have a doctor when that mule kicked me in the head, did I? And I reckon a mule packs a heap more of a wallop than any man's fist. Give me a couple of minutes to get the cobwebs out of my head and I'll be as good as ever."

Turner got up, took a couple of unsteady steps, sat down in a chair. "You think we'd better call the sheriff right away?" Martha asked.

Tim shook his head. "No hurry. It'd take him a while to get out here and that feller would be miles away by the time he got here. Guess I'll wait and go into Amesville in the morning. That feller said he searched this house before he came to rob us, Martha. You think he really did?"

"He did not!" she declared positively. "No one could have ever pawed through my things without my knowing it."

"That's just what I thought," Tim chuckled.

Sheriff Jim Gaynor was sitting at his desk in his office the next morning when Tim Turner walked in. Ed Gregg, the sheriff's cousin, had his chair tilted against the wall. They listened attentively as Turner told his story.

"You should have come right into town and reported it last night," the sheriff said critically. "What little chance we had to catch up with this man is almost gone. That man had had you spotted a long time if he had previously searched your place, trying to find your cash."

Turner smiled a little. "I was just getting around to that, Sheriff," he said. "That man

lied about that. He never searched my place at all. Martha is a mighty neat housekeeper. Stacks her stuff up just so. Nobody could have even looked over a closet shelf in her house without her noticing that stuff had been moved. And I looked up in the attic. Dust on the trap door where we get into the attic from the upper hall hadn't been disturbed. Nobody's been up in that attic."

The sheriff looked a little puzzled. "But why would he lie about that?"

"Because he knew that I didn't have the cash hidden in a building. He knew I didn't have it buried. He cut me off the minute I mentioned searching the house. He wasn't going to let me stall a bit about having the money hidden in a building or buried."

"Just what are you driving at, Tim?"

"When you talked to me on the street a week ago, Sheriff, I told you that I didn't have the cash hidden in the house or barn or buried. And you are the only person I ever confided in to that extent in all these years. Nobody else knew that. So it occurred to me that the man who tried to rob me last night must have overheard the conversation I had with you on the street."

"But there wasn't anybody else around when I talked to you, Tim," the sheriff objected.

ABSENTLY, Tim Turner rubbed his stubbled chin. "You're wrong, Sheriff," he said firmly. "I distinctly recall that there was a man standing about ten feet away from us at the edge of the sidewalk. He had his back to us. He was a heavy-set man and he—"

"That was me!" Ed Gregg blurted out the words as the front legs of his chair thumped to the floor. "I was with the sheriff. I stepped aside when he talked to you. I didn't hear a word."

Tim turned and stared at Gregg, stared at him until many seconds had ticked by. Gregg squirmed a little. "Rats!" he exploded finally. "You ain't got the crust to hint that I might have tried to rob you, have you?"

"I was just looking you over," Turner said steadily. "You're about the same build as the man who tried to rob me. And your voice has a familiar tone. At the last when the man got excited he forgot to drop to the guttural tone he used as a disguise."

"Why, you little runt! I ought to smash in your face for popping off this way," Gregg rasped.

"And the man lost his head and socked me on the jaw at the last," Tim went on imperturbably. "He hit me plenty hard. Cooled me. But I've got a tough jaw. Wouldn't be surprised that the knuckles on his left hand would show scratches or bruises."

Gregg involuntarily lifted his left hand and

looked at it. Then he put his left hand down on his thigh and glared at Tim.

"But I'm not accusing anybody," Turner said. "If Mr. Gregg is innocent we can prove it absolutely in five minutes. The robber threw down the duplicate deposit slip on the floor as he hit me. It just happened that there was a little wax on the back of that deposit slip. I'm sure you can get some good prints off it, sheriff. Here's the slip in this envelope. Now why don't you just take Gregg's fingerprints. Maybe you have them already. You can compare them and prove one way or the other."

"You little hick!" Gregg leaped to his feet and fumbled for the gun in his holster. "I'll fix you right now if it's the last thing I ever do."

The gun showed in his hand and came up. But Sheriff Gaynor had moved as Gregg had moved. The sheriff's left hand struck Gregg's arm. The gun thundered but the bullet thudded into the ceiling. The sheriff followed up with his right with a haymaker. The gun dropped from Gregg's hand as he reeled back, lost his balance, and fell to the floor. Sheriff Gaynor picked up the gun and looked down at his cousin.

"Not much doubt about what those prints will show, Gregg," he said. "You've got a bad temper. You wanted to kill him because he had the right angle on you. The only reason I let you hang around here and let you run errands for me is because you married my cousin, one of the Holbrook girls down in the south part of the county. The whole Holbrook clan demanded it. You're only my cousin by marriage."

"Not even they could tell me much about you back of the last two or three years. You never held a steady job. That's what a man gets when he lets family politics influence him too much. You always had your ears open. When you overheard me talking to Tim the other day the criminal in you came to the top. It looked like an easy job for you to grab Tim's money. It's lucky for you, Tim, that you took my advice and put your cash in the bank. I don't doubt that Gregg would have even been brutal enough to torture Martha until you told where the money was."

That easy grin returned to Tim Turner's face. "I'm taking your advice now, Sheriff," he said. "Martha is over at the bank right now, putting all our cash in the bank. I had a pretty good trick. It worked once but now that the story will get around it will never work twice."

"You mean," the sheriff gasped, "that you tricked Gregg? That you had all that cash on your place when he was there?"

"Sure, I did. When I first started keeping

(Concluded on page 78)

Look Homeward, Killer

By KEN LEWIS

Sergeant Shane Bannon comes back to Caryville on a furlough and lands right in the middle of a grim murder mystery that ensnares him in a perilous airtight trap of crime suspicion!

CHAPTER I

STRANGER AT HOME



SERGEANT SHANE BANNON stood in the dusk, watching the lights wink on along Mangan Street, and there was a look of remembered ghosts in his eyes—a bitter, ironic look. "Home was never like this!" he murmured.

It was a line from the past, he knew. An old line, and corny. But it certainly fitted the present situation. According to the map, this was Caryville, all right. He even recognized some of the buildings, the old street names. But aside from these superficial resemblances, this bustling war-swollen city as little resembled the quiet, Midwestern town he had left three years before, as the old Caryville had resembled Timbuctoo.

He ran blunt fingers through his close-cropped thatch of sandy hair and grinned wryly, remembering the tightness behind his eyes when the transport had docked and they had handed him his leave papers. It had meant a lot to him then, he thought—this chance to come back. And now, six hours after his arrival, it seemed incongruous that even the name of the place should be the same.

Old Cyrus Alton, who had sort of taken the kid Shane under his wing when Bannon's folks had been killed in that car smashup, was gone now. Dead. The pressure of wartime deadliness had taken its toll of the lean, grizzled Old Man of the *Courier's* city room.

A flock of magpie girls, fresh from journalism school, now pecked at the battered type-

writers, chattering about dates and hair-dos instead of pipe tobacco and Pimlico. The old gang was gone—scattered to the four winds, in service and out.

So maybe it didn't matter that a hundred trailers, housing workers for the new rubber plant south of town, now filled the infield of the Fair Grounds track. That Filker's Woods, site of the old weiner roasts and beer busts, had been cut down and cleared to make room for the new bomber base across the river. That there was a different look from that of the people Shane remembered on the hard-bitten faces of the new people who now thronged the old brick sidewalks.

Bannon shrugged and headed for one of the glittering bars that had mushroomed up in the business district. There seemed to be only one thing left for a stranger in town to do.

GEOGRAPHY apparently meant little to the interior decorator of the Zanzi-Bar. Petty-type hula girls shimmied from the murals above the bar, bamboo booths half-circled the tables along the wall, and drooping leis overlapped the starched, white shirt fronts of the harassed gentlemen presiding behind the mahogany counter.

Even at 7 p.m. the place was jammed, and the swirling pall of cigarette smoke made it faintly reminiscent of a South Pacific atoll, which has just undergone Allied Naval bombardment. Bannon found a place to stand at the end of the bar, ordered a bottle of beer, nursed it morosely until it was half gone. He shook his head as a second gleaming steinie joined its mate before him.

"Not mine."

The barkeep grinned.

"Sure it is, soldier. Compliments of the gent on the end stool."

Bannon's brown eyes followed the barkeep's thumb, settled on a short, red-faced man who looked something like a cross between Hugh Herbert and one of the Seven Dwarfs. He had to grin in spite of himself

A COMPLETE CRIME FRAME NOVELET



Driscoll took the chair facing them, angling his revolver at Laura

at the friendly twinkle in the little man's watery blue eyes. When presently the man pointed to a just-emptied stool beside him, Bannon picked up the two beer bottles and ambled over.

"Hate to drink alone," the little man said huskily. "Stranger in town, son?"

Bannon grimaced. "You can say that again."

The little man nodded lugubriously.

"Son, you can say it for me, too, I guess. I've lived here three years, but heck, people ain't got time to be friendly no more. Make it ale this time, huh?"

Bannon shrugged and clinked silver on the bar. At least the man hadn't asked him what the ribbons on his chest stood for, or where he had picked up the six battle stars spangling them. And that was something, these days.

They spent the next two rounds discussing the Cards' chances in the next series. Then Bannon stood up, rubbing his forehead.

"Numb, already." He grinned. "Now I know why they call this stuff 'Green Death.'"

His companion nodded philosophically.

"Gonna be around long, son? Where you staying?"

Bannon grinned.

"You tell me," he suggested. "I found out this afternoon that every hotel and rooming house in town's booked solid for the next two months. But I'll get along. A park bench would be a luxury compared to some of the places where I've slept the past three years."

The short, red-faced man thought about that while he drained his glass. He eyed Bannon speculatively, then nodded.

"No need for that, son. I won't be usin' my place tonight. Gotta catch a midnight bus for K.C. On business. I'll write a note to the landlady."

Bannon hesitated.

"Look, little chum," he said at last. "You're not just doing this to be a good sport, are you? Turning your room over to me, while you sleep in the park?"

The little man laughed throatily.

"Don't be silly. The room's got a double bed. If I was going to be here, we could both sleep in it. What's your name?"

He fished out a fountain pen and crumpled piece of notepaper from a pocket.

Bannon told him, watched over his shoulder as he wrote in a round, flowing hand:

Dear Mrs. Rothwaite: In view of the housing shortage, I have authorized Sgt. Shane Bannon to occupy my apartment tonight. Please make him as comfortable as you can.

S. J. Driscoll.

Bannon grinned his thanks.

"You're swell, Driscoll. I won't forget it."

The little man grinned back.

"Forget it. Apartment Three-o-three, Sheriton Arms, Twenty-seventh and Plass. Get a good night's rest, son. You'll probably need it."

Bannon remembered the general locality—a middle-class apartment area centered about a neighborhood shopping district—but not the exact building. It turned out to be a three-story walk-up, finished in yellow stucco and dark brick veneer.

Climbing the half dozen steps to the entrance, he realized how much Driscoll's offer meant to him, after the two previous nights in a crowded chair car. The light, false buoyancy of the ale had worn off and he was ready for only one thing now—bed.

He knuckled the first door to the left of the foyer, labeled, "Manager", waited impatiently till a slender girl in a tight-waisted, flaring blue housecoat poked her head out.

"Sorry, soldier"—and something about the way she said it made him believe her—"but we have no vacancies tonight."

He nodded, conscious of an unbound wave of shimmering chestnut hair, a pleasant, faintly angular face touched by caramel freckles. He liked the startling blue of her eyes, he decided, in a complexion that seemed to call for brown. It kept her from being just another ordinarily attractive girl.

SILENTLY he handed her the note. Any other time he might have tried to prolong the conversation. But tonight he was in no mood for idle chatter, no matter how charming the conversationalist might be.

She glanced at the note, inhaled sharply, then let the blue eyes search his face.

"Um—just a minute," she murmured.

The door closed and he heard the sound of papers being rustled behind it. When it opened again, her blue eyes were puzzled.

"Well, I guess it's all right," the soft voice said. "Aunt Millicent isn't here right now, but—won't you come in while I see about getting the apartment ready?"

Bannon shook his head.

"Look, lady," he said. "I'm tired, and not too particular. If the place is all right for Driscoll as is, it's okay for me. I'll be leaving first thing in the morning, anyhow."

The blue eyes widened, studying him.

"But you don't seem to understand. That apartment's been vacant for months—maybe years, for all I know. Unless Aunt Milly herself has cleaned it, it'll be filthy!"

It was Bannon's turn to widen his eyes and stare.

"You mean it isn't this Driscoll's after all?"

The blue housecoat shoulders lifted delicately.

"Oh, it's his all right, I guess. At least the

handwriting on that note seems to check with the five-year lease he signed. But the place has been locked at least since I came here last June. Probably the bed isn't even made up."

Bannon massaged his forehead reflectively. "You mean he pays the rent but lives somewhere else? Why?"

She shrugged.

"I don't know. Aunt Milly thinks maybe there's a sentimental reason. Maybe he and his wife lived here and then she ran away but he wants to have it ready in case she decides to come back. Something like that."

Bannon thought about that. It didn't make sense to him, but he was too worn out right now to worry about the love life of the gnomelike little man in the bar.

"Well," he said, "as long as it has a bed in it, it'll be okay with me, Mrs. Rothwaite."

"Thomas. Laura Thomas—Miss. I'm Mrs. Rothwaite's niece."

He nodded. "Has it got a bed in it?"

Miss Laura Thomas smiled suddenly—a funny, elfin little smile which crinkled her small straight nose.

"You know," she whispered conspiratorially, "I've always wondered about that myself! Let's find out."

CHAPTER II

DEAD BLONDE



THE door marked 303 opened right at the head of the third floor stairs. The girl stepped past Bannon, moving eagerly with lithe, unconscious grace, and fitted a pass-key in the lock. The panel swung back on silent hinges, and a stale whiff of air too long confined, oozed into the hallway

as she snapped a wall switch.

Light from a reading lamp showed them a combination bed-and-living room containing a faded overstuffed suite, built-in dresser, and a sheeted bed pushed against a wide dormer window in the opposite wall. Two doors on the right opened respectively into a bathroom and a tiny kitchenette. The kitchenette had a second door leading to a small service porch and wooden stairs outside.

"Well!" Laura Thomas breathed. "It looks as though Aunt Milly has been lavishing her loving attention on this place all these months, after all! I wish her interest extended to some of the other apartments. But those, it seems, are *my* job!"

"This should be the clothes closet," she added, tugging at the lone door in the left wall. "But it seems to be locked. Want me to hunt up a key?"

Bannon shook his head.

"Never mind. It's probably just stuck—but

I'll hang my clothes on the chair, anyway."

She nodded absently, biting her lip. "Well, here's the key to the hall door, Sergeant."

"Keep it." He grinned. "I want to make a morning train. I wonder if you'd call me by eight."

"Certainly. I'll knock on the door."

The grin broadened.

"I've learned to sleep through lots more noise than you could ever make," he told her. "You'll probably have to come in and slap me with a wet towel."

She laughed.

"That'll be *fun!* Sleep tight, Sergeant. . . ."

Bannon had learned to sleep through noise, all right. Plenty of it. But not the kind that awakened him the next morning. It wasn't the quantity of the sound that snapped him erect in bed, but its quality. The quality of sheer, naked shock that an almost soundless scream can assume in the throats of some women.

He pulled the sheet around him blindly, opened one eye at the girl standing just inside the hall door. Laura Thomas's right hand was still poised stiffly on the door knob. Her left, palm outermost, hid her half-open mouth. The incredible blue eyes were fastened hypnotically on the rug before them.

Bannon followed the direction of her gaze, and saw what the excitement was all about. He had a room-mate. A pretty fancy one, too—if you went for blondes. She lay on her back, her black chiffon dress pulled primly about nyloned knees, her feet hidden by the now open closet door.

"Well," he grunted. "I didn't know the housing shortage was *this* acute."

Then the words stopped while his mouth stayed open and his brown eyes bulged. Someone, he thought weirdly, had painted a mustache on the blonde. A red one, streaming down her upper lip from either side of a small black hole just beneath her right nostril. It had not been penciled there with lipstick.

Bannon was more or less acclimated to corpses. He had seen a good many in his sojourns during the past three years. But not blonde female corpses. And not in his own bedroom—before breakfast.

"Lock the door and get into the bathroom while I put on some clothes!" he snapped.

Amazingly, Laura Thomas did exactly as she was told. She did it quickly and silently, without asking questions. After that first thin shriek of astonishment, life had come back to the blue eyes, and with it some measure of control. Horror was mirrored there, certainly—along with something else. The girl, Bannon realized was just genuine enough to be thrilling a little, involuntarily, to the excitement of the situation, too. He grinned bleakly.

"All right. You can come out now."

The bathroom door opened. "You—you don't seem very sympathetic."

He nodded. "If I knew something about her—who she is, what she stands for—maybe I could work up more emotion," he admitted. "But at the moment she's just somebody I never saw before. How do I know if she deserves mourning or not? Do you?"

The chestnut hair glistened almost red in the light from the dormer window as Laura shook her head.

"No, I—I never saw her before, either. But you'd better get out of here! Down the service steps out back. If the police come, and—find you here, they'll think you did it."

He studied her speculatively.

"Don't you?"

"But you couldn't have! You were alone!"

"How do you know I didn't have a date to meet her here, later? That she didn't sneak up those same outside service stairs after you left? That I didn't let her in and then give it to her?"

"Did you?"

He flushed.

"No."

"Then why discuss it? No one knows you've been here at all, except me. If you leave now, no one else need ever know. But I'll have to call the police at once."

HE thought about that.

"You're forgetting my little ale-drinking friend, J. J. Driscoll," he told her. "I wonder what he knows about this."

"I don't know. I've never even seen him."

"Besides, if I run now and you tell the cops about me, it'll be the same as admitting my guilt."

"Do you believe that? Do you think I will tell the police?"

He looked at her—long, hard—and slowly shook his head.

"No," she said. "I'm blamed if I know why, but I don't believe you would. There's other ways they might find out, though. I'd like to know what they do find, how they figure the thing, before I decide whether to take a powder or not."

She nodded.

"I'll meet you. As soon as they've left and I can get away. At a drug store at Twenty-fifth and Center. I'll let you know what I've found out, and then you decide whether to come forward and offer your testimony or not. Will you wait for me?"

He crossed to the open closet, sniffed.

"Do you smell something burning?"

"Why—why, yes. When I first came in, I thought I did, too."

He nodded, pointing to a black smudge on the inside of the door.

"Scorched varnish. It looks like somebody

wanted our little blonde to stay nice and warm while she was locked in the closet. There's no bulb in the closet socket, either."

Laura gasped. "Then you—you think the b-body was in there last night, when I tried to pull the door open and couldn't? But how did you finally get it unlocked?"

He moved to the kitchenette, unbolted the rear service door.

"I didn't," he called back. "And I'll wait for you."

Tiptoeing the three flights to ground level, Bannon reached the narrow side yard separating the Sheriton Arms from the rambling old-style frame rooming-house next door before he realized that someone had thoughtfully provided him with a sidearm. He pawed irritably at the bulge in his hip pocket, came up with a flat blue .32 automatic.

The murder gun, he thought, wondering if Laura Thomas had slipped it there before she awakened him, if she had also let the corpse out of the closet before she screamed. Somehow, he doubted it. If she was in on the frame, why insist that he leave before the cops arrived?

He reached the building front in time to see a tall, pallid youth lugging a scuffed brown valise through the foyer door. Cops already? Unlikely. The valise looked more like a bona fide traveling bag than an equipment case. He shrugged and headed for Twenty-fifth.

The Silverman Pharmacy had a lunch counter in the back. Bannon finished hot cakes and coffee, had eighteen free games rung up on a pinball machine, when he felt a hand on his sleeve. He turned to find Laura Thomas's bewildering blue eyes regarding him. He piloted her to a corner booth, from where he could keep an eye on the street door.

"It's all right, Shane," she murmured. "They found some fingerprints in the bathroom, but they don't know whose they are yet."

He grimaced.

"They will when they check with the War Department. Were you followed?"

"I—I don't think so. I don't seem to be much of a suspect. They took my statement about finding the body, then I just hung around in the corners with my ears open."

He nodded, squeezing her hand. "About the blonde—when was she shot?"

"The medical examiner wasn't very definite. He said there seemed to be some contradictory evidence, and the best he could say without an autopsy was some time between six-thirty and nine o'clock last night."

He frowned.

"I got there about eight-thirty, so that margin would include me. Didn't anyone hear a shot?"

CHAPTER III

INTO THE NET

"No. But they found powder traces on some furniture covers in the closet. They think the gun was fired through them to muffle the sound. They didn't find any gun, though. Just three empty whisky bottles and the slip covers."

He eyed her oddly, reminded of the weight in his hip pocket.

"Who was she?"

"Her name was Myra Cornish. She was a hostess at Danny's Place, on the river road. Lieutenant Hillebrand—he seemed to be in charge—recognized her right away. She was a witness in that Watson murder next door three years ago. She was living at the Sheriton Arms, in Two-o-three on the second floor, then. Aunt Milly said she moved away right after the trial and hadn't been back since. I wonder if Eddie's coming home this morning has anything to do with this."

"Eddie?"

"Aunt Milly's stepson. He came back this morning. They only sentenced him to five years, you know. Temporary insanity—but then he was only seventeen at the time. Yesterday he got out on parole."

BANNON remembered the thin, pallid youth he had seen entering the Sheriton Arms two hours before. He groaned and palmed his forehead.

"Let's take it again," he suggested. "You mean this whole thing goes back to that Watson killing three years ago?"

"I . . . Oh, I don't know. I was still living with my folks in Oak Hill then. But it seems this Janet Watson was a beauty operator who lived in Mrs. Meek's rooming-house next door to the Sheriton. She found out about the ten thousand dollars insurance Eddie's father left him, and let poor Eddie make love to her until she could get her hands on the money."

"And when Eddie found out about it, he blew his top and shot her?"

Bannon's mind struggled foggily with the details. The story had broken right after he had enlisted. He had been doing basic at Fort MacArthur at the time, and the Coast papers had regarded the case as a small and unimpressive murder, a long way off.

"Yes," Laura said. "Eddie went to the house to see her, but she'd told Mrs. Meek not to let him in. So he went back to Aunt Milly's, got the gun, and went into the side yard. It was a hot, moonlit night and this Janet Watson had a room on Mrs. Meek's second floor, opposite Myra Cornish's bedroom window. Eddie threw a pebble into Janet's open window, and when she looked out to see what was going on, he shot her. They found her lying on her bed, with the bullet in her heart. She never regained consciousness."



BANNON smelled a rat. His sandy brow corrugated.

"Wait a minute," he told Laura Thomas. "You say the kid was only seventeen. Then how could this gold-digger get her hands on his money without the connivance of his guardian or administrator?"

"Oh, Eddie never had any! He and Aunt Milly didn't get along too well, I guess. When the insurance came due, Eddie got some of his father's relatives to vouch for him, and went to Probate Court and got himself declared legally of age and responsible, so he could control the money himself."

Bannon nodded. It was an unusual, but by no means rare procedure, he knew.

"Then how does this dead blonde, Myra Cornish, come into it?"

The blue eyes widened.

"Oh, she was the key witness! She testified that after she heard the shot outside, she ran to her window and saw Eddie standing in the yard with the gun. At first Eddie wanted to plead innocent. He admitted being mad at Janet and throwing the pebble. But he claimed that before she could look out, he heard a shot and a noise on the ground behind him. That he turned around, saw the gun lying there, and picked it up."

"But the fire angle showed she'd been shot from below, instead of by someone in the room with her, so finally his lawyers persuaded him to cop a temporary insanity plea," Bannon nodded. He was beginning to get the picture. "So it was this blonde's testimony, coupled with the fire angle, of course, that really cooked Eddie's goose?"

"Yes, but—"

"And the blonde turns up dead, the day after Eddie gets out on parole!"

"But, Shane! Myra Cornish was shot hours before Eddie reached town! He came in on this morning's train!"

"Can he prove it? Can he prove he didn't really come back last night, make a date with the blonde in that vacant apartment, gun her, scam, and reappear formally this morning?"

The blue eyes darkened with dismay and the color drained from Laura Thomas's face, emphasizing the caramel freckles.

"Oh, Shane! You mustn't suspect poor Eddie! He's been through enough already. He did intend to get in last night. Aunt Milly went to the station to meet him—that's where she was when you arrived with the note from Mr. Driscoll—but the train was so crowded out of Leavenworth that he decided

to wait for one this morning. Aunt Milly swears he wasn't at the station last night!"

Bannon frowned, realized he would get nowhere further along that line, decided to try another tack.

"Which leaves us the mysterious Mr. Driscoll," he said sardonically.

She nodded, the blue eyes brightening impishly.

"Oh, yes—Mr. Driscoll! The things a murder investigation will bring out! Shane, I think my Aunt Milly has a secret love in her life—someone who is anxious for her not to worry about money."

The sandy brows arched.

"Who?"

"Your precious Mr. Driscoll, no less! She practically admitted it when I asked her about the lease!"

"Lease?"

"Certainly! The one your Mr. Driscoll signed three years ago. Shane, do you know how much he's paying for that dinky little single apartment, which he isn't even supposed to occupy?"

Bannon palmed his forehead again, groaning.

"Guessing games it gives—at a time like this! All right. How much?"

"Only a hundred and fifty per month—four times what the others like it rent for! No wonder Aunt Milly keeps that apartment clean. I think they've most likely been meeting there!"

Bannon's brown eyes narrowed.

"Then she must know his real address."

"She says not! She says he just phones when he's on his way over . . . Why, Shane, what's the matter?"

His eyes had moved absently to the front door. Now they held there, rigid and alert, remembering the man they had just seen passing along the sidewalk outside. A red-faced, gnomelike little man, with a preference for ale.

"Hold tight," he murmured. "Be back in a minute. I've got to see a man about a blonde. A dead blonde."

The little man had turned the corner, left, when Bannon reached the street. Bannon turned too, saw his quarry half a block ahead. He debated the advisability of calling out, decided that actions spoke louder than words. He began to run.

The little man began to run, too. Without turning, without glancing back. Like one of those mechanical ducks with six feet around an axis, one foot coming down in front as another disappears behind. Only the little man was surprisingly fast, for a mechanical duck. He darted under the wheel of a green sedan, parked at the curb with its doors open, while Bannon was still ten yards behind.

THE car jerked forward, turned right casually, at the next corner. Bannon looked about hastily for a cab, found none, and raced after the sedan. It played with him, keeping just a few yards ahead down the block.

At the next corner he began to shout. Hoarsely, futilely. Once the little man stuck his head out the window and grinned back at him. Two blocks later, with a sudden *whoosh*, a blue veil of fumes sprouted from the exhaust like gauze from a magician's wand and the car was gone around the next corner.

Bannon sat down on the curb and began to curse.

The corner booth at the Silverman Pharmacy was empty when he returned. A scrap of blue notepaper, redolent of face powder, lay under the ashtray. On it had been written:

Dear Shane:

Your Mr. Driscoll came while you were gone. Aunt Milly sent him. He said she needed me at once. Sorry. Love.

Laura

The Sheriton Arms was murmurous with the echoes of recent excitement when Bannon arrived. He shouldered through a covey of chattering tenants in the hall, punished the door labeled "Manager".

A statuesque, distinguishedly graying brunette in a gray satin dressing gown looked out, dabbing a wisp of silk at her perfectly dry eyes.

"No vacancies—" she began.

He pushed past her, slammed the door brutally.

"I think you have," he said. "I think you still have a vacancy in Apartment Three-oh-three. Or has Eddie taken that one over?"

The brunette played drop the handkerchief and regarded him inscrutably through the gray veil of her eyes. He could see that, even at forty, Millicent Rothwaite might be interesting to a red-faced, frustrated-looking little gnomelike Mr. Driscoll.

"Who are you?" she asked coldly.

"Friend of Laura's," Shane said. "By the way, where is she?"

"She went to the drug store for aspirin. She hasn't returned."

"And Eddie?"

"The police took him. For questioning. They wouldn't believe me when I said he wasn't on the train last night. Who are you?"

"I'll bet they wouldn't. And Driscoll?"

"Driscoll? Oh—yes. There was a Mr. Driscoll, a tenant here. But he moved away three years ago. Is that who you're looking for?"

"No forwarding address?"

"No."

He nodded, glancing absently at a small electric heater which stood, unconnected, in

a corner behind the desk.

"The police don't know about the lease yet, do they?"

The gray eyes ignited suddenly. The wax-like precision of her features turned to putty, then hardened again, rigidly.

"They're going to know about you, young man—right now!"

Tapering fingers speared toward the phone on the desk.

"Never mind. I'm on my way to Headquarters now. So you can tell Laura to come out of the bedroom, or the closet, or wherever she's hiding." He glanced back at the heater. "By the way, Mrs. Rothwaite, do you find it uncomfortably cool here—in August?"

* * * * *

Lieutenant Nathaniel Hillebrand, Homicide, had bland blue eyes in a tan, moon-round face, and straight brown hair of the type described as "patent leather" by the hair oil ads. A physiognomist would have classified the receding button of his chin as definitely weak.

But Bannon was no physiognomist. The chin didn't fool him. He had covered too many of Hillebrand's cases in the old days. He grinned across the Headquarters desk.

"I'm your answer to prayer, Hilly," he said. "The unexplained factor in the Myra Cornish case. Laura Thomas wasn't alone when she found the body. I was there, too—in bed. I understand you picked up some of my prints."

Utter lack of expression left the lieutenant's face unmarked.

"Thanks, Bannon," he said genially. "You've saved me a lot of trouble. Wanta make a full confession now? I'll ring for a steno."

"No, thanks." Bannon grinned. "I'll let Eddie do that. You've got the layout, haven't you? The kid got out yesterday, took the first train here, lured the blonde to the apartment and made her pay for his three years behind bars. His stepmother found out and sent him packing, with instructions to show up this morning as though he'd just hit town. Then she locked the corpse in the closet and called in her boy friend—one J. J. Driscoll—to go out and rustle up a patsy.

"Driscoll's job was to find some stranger in town with no place to sleep, get him soused, then offer him the apartment for the night. With the stranger—it happened to be me—safely tucked in and snoring, the old dame sneaks back in, lets out the corpse, and otherwise sets the stage for this morning's discovery."

HILLEBRAND beamed fondly across the desk.

"By golly! And what motive did they hope to hang on this poor innocent stranger?"

Something about the way he said it made Bannon frown.

"One of those drunken party murders," he said. "The girl was a roadhouse hostess—just the type for the part. All you've got to do is round up Driscoll and the Rothwaite dame and play 'em against each other, and you'll find out for yourself."

Hillebrand chuckled.

"Very pretty! I might even buy some of it, except for one thing. Eddie Rothwaite got on the train at Leavenworth at five p.m. yesterday. He got off at Caryville at seven-fifteen a.m. today. He was on that train all the time these amazing events you've just described could have taken place."

Bannon snorted.

"He grabbed a bus out of town after the killing, boarded the morning train at some station up the line, and got off again here at seven-fifteen, sure! Don't tell me you boys go for anything that corny!"

"And last night? The Leavenworth station agent says Eddie bought a ticket there at four-forty-six. According to your time table, the kid would have had to be in Caryville, four hundred miles away, about that time."

Bannon shrugged.

"The kid had somebody else buy that ticket in his name. As long as the other fellow was dressed like him, it would probably work. Ticket agents are too darned busy to pay much attention to their individual customers these days."

Again Hillebrand beamed.

"We got a witness," he said casually. "The man who shared Eddie's seat with him all the way from Leavenworth. He was on his way here on business, and they already knew each other. I talked to him just before you came in."

"Another phony."

The detective shrugged.

"You'll have one heck of a time proving it. He happens to be the new warden of the state penitentiary!"

Bannon gulped. Something began to finger the fringes of his brain. Something with ice in its touch.

"Driscoll!" he barked. "For gosh sake get on the ball and find Driscoll. He's got the girl!"

"What girl?"

"The niece, you dope—Laura Thomas! She knows too much!"

Hillebrand's sleek lips pursed with faint derision.

"Ah, yes. The mysterious Mr. Driscoll. Describe him."

Bannon did, tersely and profanely. The lieutenant seemed pleased.

"So you ran across the old con man here

in town, and decided to drag him into the mess as a red herring."

"Con man?" Bannon snapped.

"Don't worry. We know all about your so-called Driscoll. He's been retired for years. In view of the prints you say are yours, and your own admission that you were there last night, I'm going to hold you, Bannon, for the murder of Myra Cornish?"

"Motive?"

"You gave us that, too. A drunken party brawl."

Bannon stood up, breathing hard.

"Okay," he said tightly. "If this is how you want it."

His hand dipped into his pocket, came up with the little automatic. Hillebrand's bland eyes flickered.

"The murder rod?"

"Maybe," Bannon admitted. "But I'm using it now only to prevent another killing."

The blue steel barrel chunked into Hillebrand's patent leather hair while the detective's stubby finger was still inches short of the bell button under the desk. Bannon was glad Hillebrand rated a private office.

The stenographer at the desk outside smiled sweetly at Sergeant Bannon as he crossed to the corridor beyond, headed for the street entrance.

CHAPTER IV

A BARKEEP'S MEMORY



STANDING across the narrow sodded courtyard from its brick and stucco neighbor, Mrs. Meek's rooming-house seemed dowdy and misshapen, like a once-imposing dowager who has simultaneously lost both her figure and her fortune.

The woman who answered Bannon's knock went perfectly with the house. A faded print housedress, covered her lumpy figure. Her white hair had been knotted hastily at the back, and her round, lumpy face peered up at him suspiciously.

"No vac—"

"I know," he soothed. "But I'm not hunting a room, Mrs. Meek. The United States Army has sent me here on a very confidential mission." He paused, leered theatrically, and hoped he was right in tabbing Mrs. Meek as a lady with a sentimental imagination.

"The fact is," he whispered, "that Edward Rothwaite, the young man next door, has applied to us for voluntary induction into the Armed Forces. His prison record stands against him, of course, but as you know, the Army reserves the right to differ with the findings of civilian courts when it feels justified in so doing. In short, I've been commis-

sioned to determine whether or not young Rothwaite actually did commit that murder!"

Bannon had guessed right. There was a definitely sympathetic light in Mrs. Meek's birdlike, black eyes as she clucked and pushed wide the screen.

"Eddie ain't a bad boy," she chirped. "I never did believe so. Just hot-headed, that's all. The Army'd be good for him! But I'm afraid he shot that Watson woman, all right—for good cause, mind you. That was brought out pretty obvious at the trial, wasn't it?"

Bannon narrowed his brown eyes mysteriously. "Perhaps too obviously, Mrs. Meek! It all depends on the part a certain former tenant of the place next door may or may not have played in the murder." He described Driscoll. "Now then, can you recall whether this man ever visited Janet Watson?"

Mrs. Meek suddenly looked worried and a little frightened. The black eyes flittered uneasily about the room.

"I run a roomin' house, not a YWCA, Sergeant," she declared. "So long as my folks keep to theirselves and don't bother the others, I don't pry too close into their private affairs. But—well, there was a man like that visited Janet Watson regular. He always come in the back way, through the kitchen. But I didn't think *he* had anything to do with her murder."

Bannon nodded understandingly.

"Of course not. That's all I—"

The dying wail of a police siren outside drowned his words. He stepped quickly to the door, peered out, his face bleak. Apparently Lieutenant Nathaniel Hillebrand had returned to consciousness with a headache.

The squad car ground to the curb and two uniformed patrolmen spilled out, leaving a third behind the wheel. They headed for the Sheriton Arms. Bannon decided to take shelter at Mrs. Meek's a while longer.

"I guess the police are still working on that unfortunate business next door this morning," he said absently. "As long as I'm here, maybe I'd better see this Janet Watson's former room."

Mrs. Meek nodded avidly.

"Miz Morris—she lives there now—won't care," she said quickly. "Besides, she ain't here this afternoon."

Bannon followed her up a wide-mouthed semicircular staircase opening from a shadowy hall parlor, down a varnish-chipped second floor corridor to a room on the left. Frequent repartitioning had reduced the room to little more than a large closet. A low-slung bed was pushed against a broad window opening onto the side yard. There was a straight chair at its head, and a marble-topped dresser was jammed into the narrow passage between bed and right wall.

"The room was arranged this way when she was found?"

Mrs. Meek nodded.

"She was sprawlin' back on the bed, with her right leg trailin' over the side and her kimona on," she said. "They figured she'd staggered back and fell that way after she was shot."

"The light was on?"

"Yes."

"Covers on the bed?"

"It was August, Sergeant. Just a sheet and mattress pad underneath her."

Bannon moved to the window, stared out at the second floor window of the Sheriton Arms opposite—the one to which Myra Cornish had gone when she had seen Eddie below with the gun. He glanced down at the first floor window below it, up to the dormer window of Apartment 303 where he had spent the night with Myra's corpse. His sandy brows knitted.

"What happened to Eddie's money?" he wanted to know. "Did the court requisition it to hold in trust for him, or did Janet Watson's heirs get it?"

Mrs. Meek grunted.

"Hmph! Neither one, far's I know! They never found hide nor hair of it. He give it to her to buy a beauty parlor of her own with. But nobody ever admitted sellin' her one. And she only had fifty dollars on her when she died."

His eyes narrowed.

"The Army thanks you very much, Mrs. Meek," he said solemnly. "Of course, you mustn't mention this visit to anyone."

"Oh, no! Sure not—I wouldn't do that!"

HE NODDED. The squad car, replete with driver, was still parked outside when he reached the front door. He grimaced and decided to follow in Driscoll's three-year-old footprints, through the kitchen to the alley out back. He had meant to pry Driscoll's whereabouts from Millicent Rothwaite, via strangulation if necessary. Now he'd have to take the less certain alternative. He headed for the Zanzi-Bar.

The Zanzi-Bar by day was a pale and haggard wraith of its evening identity. Only two customers mourned at the bar, the lone bartender had discarded his faded lei and opened his collar, and even the hula girls on the wall looked worn out after a hard night.

Bannon recognized the bartender as the one who had poured libations of ale the night before.

"That red-faced little fellow I was drinking with last night," he ventured. "See him often?"

The bartender snapped a fingernail at a blue-bottle fly on his nose.

"Yeah. He comes in."

Bannon nodded.

"Funny thing. He asked me to look him up today, but I can't remember his address." The bartender cursed the fly.

"Try the phone book."

"That's the devil of it. I can't even remember his name."

The bartender was bored.

"Yeh. I got a bad memory, too."

Bannon carefully extracted a five-dollar bill from his wallet and spread it on the bar. The bartender eyed him with renewed interest.

"What'll it be?"

"Water."

The man moved a hand toward the bill. Bannon anchored it to the bar with apparently casual fingertips.

"It all comes back to me now," the barkeep said. He's always tryin' to trade us eggs for drinks."

"Eggs?"

"Yeah. Sounds like he might be a grocer, don't it? Or maybe a chicken rancher."

"Maybe."

"Most of the chicken ranches around here are out north, along the river road."

Bannon waited.

"There's one I remember special. Every-time I drive past it of a Sunday afternoon, I say to myself how nice it would be to have a little place like that."

"Well, I'm not going to buy you a whole chicken ranch," Bannon told him.

"Yeah. Sure. Of course not. This particular one's got a name on the mail-box. I'm tryin' to remember."

Bannon began to withdraw the bill with his fingertips.

"Yeah. I got it now—J. J. Driscoll."

Bannon drank the water and left. The bartender pocketed the bill.

Bannon signed the major portion of his life away at a Drive-It-Yourself garage on Sixth Avenue, left his leave papers and most of the contents of his wallet as security, and eventually emerged with a brown 1933-Model, Nash phaeton.

He tooted the jalopy through afternoon traffic to the town's edge, turned east on a gravel road threading between high bluffs to the left, sandbars to the right. Five miles past the city limits, the bluffs flattened out and the road began to wind through gentle, rolling farmland margining the river.

The twelfth roadside mail-box he examined bore neat black script against a white enamel background. The script read:

J. J. DRISCOLL

Bannon turned right into a rutted drive, saw a small square white frame cottage and garage, with two tiers of chicken houses

stretching out behind. The agitated squawks of a dozen barred rock hens announced his arrival to whoever might be inside the cottage.

The small red-faced man met him at the door. A gnarled revolver of museum-piece vintage dangled incongruously from one pudgy fist, and the watery eyes twinkled a trifle too cheerfully at sight of him, Bannon thought.

"Well, hello, son," the mild, husky voice said. "Shucks, you didn't have to come clear out here just to thank me for lettin' you use my apartment in town last night. I told you then it was nothing."

"Nothing but murder," Bannon said. "Put it away, Fats. I've got one, too. And I've had a lot of practise on live targets lately."

The eerie, elfin grin grew even broader.

"Ah, but mine's bigger. Besides, it's loaded!"

FOR the first time, Bannon had a nasty suspicion that maybe the one in his pocket was not. And that, if so, the little man before him would be just the one to know about it. He tried not to think about that.

"Where's the girl?" he demanded.

"Oh. Yes—of course. I should have known you wouldn't come clear out here just to see me. Right this way, please. And watch that first step—it's a dinger!"

Bannon stepped in, warily. Something in the red-faced man's eyes warned him of danger. Bannon looked quickly about, but there was nothing in the ordinarily-furnished room to suggest what J. J. Driscoll had in store for him.

Driscoll motioned with his gun, gesturing him farther inside, and there was nothing to do but obey.

Bannon felt the small throw rug between them give way as he stepped forward. Instinctively he grabbed for the gun in his pocket, banged his elbow instead on the living room floor as he fell through it. J. J. Driscoll and the room shot over his head, disappeared. He found himself, still incredibly upright, on the floor of the basement below, the throw rug tangling his ankles.

Now he knew why concrete floors are supposed to be hard on the feet. His hurt, clear to his clavicle. He glanced at the open trap-door through which he had plummeted, gingerly stretched his hands above his head in an effort to unscramble what felt like at least a dozen telescoped vertebrae.

He heard a chuckle above him, saw the little man's face grinning down. So he pulled the automatic from his pocket, pointed it deliberately at the grin, and pulled the trigger. He heard the hollow click he had expected and, having satisfied that formality, put the gun back in the pocket.

CON MAN'S EXIT



THE small red face disappeared. Grimly Bannon examined his shadowy cemented prison. A fifteen-watt bulb burned from an extension cord above a fat asbestos-covered furnace, in which fire was burning, and a flight of concrete steps led to a door at the far end of the place.

"Hel-hello, Shane," he heard a frightened voice say. "I didn't know whether to be afraid you'd come, or afraid you wouldn't."

He stiffened, made out Laura Thomas, sitting in a rocking chair in a corner. Two wicker porch chairs stood near the rocker. He thought at first that she was unbound. Then he noticed the padded strands of chicken wire shackling each slim, bare ankle to a front rocker shaft, and he bent swiftly to paw at the wire.

Before he had managed to do more than puncture the ends of two fingers on the wire, the door at the head of the steps opened and Driscoll entered, clucking reprovingly.

"Mustn't touch!" The old revolver backed up the words.

Bannon cursed and subsided into the wicker chair beside the girl. Driscoll took the third chair, facing them, angling the revolver at Laura. No one seemed in any hurry to get the impending slaughter over with.

"I—I guess I overestimated Aunt Milly's interest in your Mr. Driscoll, Shane," Laura ventured, after a while.

Bannon nodded inscrutably. He was talking for his life now—his and Laura's.

"Yes," he said cryptically. "I'm afraid the only love they share is the one for a quick dollar. At first when I got back to that drug store I thought you'd merely grabbed an excuse to take a powder on me. I'm sorry."

She nodded glumly.

"Maybe it would have been better if I had, Shane. At least we wouldn't be here now. You know, sitting here I've had the strangest feeling that whoever murdered Myra Cornish meant merely to get poor Eddie into more trouble."

Bannon sighed.

"Woman's intuition. I wish you'd loaned me some of yours this morning. Yep, I'm afraid Cousin Eddie was all slated to get the business again, just like three years ago."

Through the basement murk, he watched her blue eyes widen incredulously.

"Then—then you mean—?"

He nodded.

"That's just what I mean. Eddie didn't shoot Janet Watson at all."

"But Shane! The direction of the bullet!"

"Sure. The direction of the bullet. If she'd been shot from below while she was standing in the window, the bullet would have travelled up through her chest at, say, a forty-five degree angle."

"But didn't it?"

"Sure. But suppose she *wasn't* standing in the window? Suppose she was lying flat on her back in bed?"

"But that would mean she was shot from above!"

"Right. Through the window—but from above. From the third-floor dormer window of Apartment Three-o-three in the Sheriton Arms across the court!"

He paused, listening to the creak of Driscoll's chair in the gloom. The man's face was twisted into a grin, a set caricature of amusement which had nothing to do with the mind behind it. Abruptly, Laura Thomas began to shudder.

"Oh, Shane!" she moaned. "I can't keep it up any longer! I—I can't help it—I'm scared stiff! He's kept peering down at me like he did a while ago, and coming down here! Once he opened the furnace door and I thought he was going to throw me into the fire! Why's he got a fire anyhow? I'm scared, I tell you!"

A nerve in Bannon's temple had begun to twitch with the strain. He hadn't liked the idea of a fire burning in the furnace at this time of the year himself. It would be a good way of disposing of a couple of unwanted bodies—a fire.

"Sure," Bannon said tightly. "So am I scared. And so is our friend here. He's wondering how much I've told the cops. Let's make him guess a while. Shall we?"

Her fingers tightened on the rocker arms and she nodded. A smile twisted the faint pattern of freckles on her face.

"Yes, Shane," she said quietly. "I'm all right now. So Eddie was telling the truth, when he said right from the first that he didn't kill the Watson woman?"

"Of course. But because of the evidence against him, his lawyers had him cop a plea."

"But, Shane"—she bit her lip—"why should Mr. Driscoll shoot Janet Watson?"

He smiled grimly.

"Partly to shut her mouth. He was afraid Eddie might bang the whole story out of her if he got a chance. But mostly to keep from divvying up the ten grand. Once he got Janet to turn it over to him for 'safe keepin', why keep her around any longer?"

HE TURNED to the little man with the big revolver and the phony grin. If the two had been alone, Bannon would have taken a chance on jumping the gun right then. But they were not alone, and the gun wasn't pointed at him—it was pointed at Laura. Laura, who couldn't duck if Bannon started

anything, because she was wired to the chair. Bannon cursed.

"Hillebrand said you were a retired con man," he spat. "Mrs. Meek said that before Janet Watson died you had been seeing her. In other words, you were the brains of the clip—she was the gimmick. After you shot her from your bedroom, you dropped the gun out the window knowing that Eddie, in the side yard, would pick it up."

"Then Myra Cornish—" Laura broke in.

"I was coming to that. Myra, remember, was the chief witness against Eddie. Maybe she saw what she said she did; maybe her memory was refreshed on certain points by our little friend here. Anyway she must've guessed enough of the truth to put the bite on him regularly these past three years."

He turned back to Driscoll.

"When you learned from Millicent Rothwaite that Eddie was expected home last night, you decided to get rid of Myra and hang that frame on the kid, too. While Milly met the train, you made a payoff appointment with Myra in Three-o-three, gunned her and stuffed the body in the closet. The plan was to install Eddie in that apartment, then have him discovered with the corpse the next morning. Aunt Milly would have sneaked in and set the stage during the night."

"Oh, Shane! Not Aunt Milly!"

He grimaced.

"Aunt Milly. You didn't much like her anyway, did you?"

"No-o. But—"

Again Bannon turned to Driscoll.

"You must have darned near had the meemies when Milly phoned back that Eddie wasn't on the night train. You told her to keep looking, that she must have missed him in the crowd. Then, just on the chance that Eddie really wasn't on the train—and could prove it later—you went out to rustle up another patsy. That's where I came in."

The little man nodded woodenly.

"Remarkable, my boy! If Millicent had found Eddie and brought him back, I knew she would merely have to refuse to honor that note I gave you. On the other hand, if there was no Eddie—well, a slightly inebriated stranger would be better than nothing."

Bannon's grin was frosty.

"Only I got there before Milly did. You hadn't counted on me hunting the hay that soon. You don't know what it's like, spending two straight nights in a chair car these days." He turned back to Laura. "Well, I guess you know the rest."

The blue eyes were clouded with bewilderment.

"But I don't Shane. I don't understand Aunt Milly's connection at all. Why couldn't Driscoll have handled everything himself?"

He shook his head.

"There's the lease. I imagine that was Aunt Milly's method of collecting her share of the blood money. Besides, the gremlin here was probably plenty glad to have that apartment kept vacant for a while, so no future tenant would have a chance to look out that dormer window and guess the truth. Anyone lying on the bed in Janet Watson's old room, with the light on, made a perfect target from there—and that was the only window the shot could have come from, at the proper angle.

"I don't know whether Aunt Milly was in on the thing from the beginning, or not. I'm inclined to think that she was, that she brought in Driscoll to wangle the dough from Eddie; and that Driscoll, in turn, brought in Janet Watson. Anyway, Milly had no reason to shield her stepson from either of the frames against him. When he went before Probate Court and won the right to administer his dad's insurance himself, it probably caused plenty of bad blood between her and Eddie."

His eyes speared derisively at Driscoll.

"Remember that, little chum. Millicent Rothwaite's your big danger. She'll sing like a lark to keep from taking the full rap herself. It won't do you any good to rub us, as long as she's alive."

The little man's smile was bleak.

"Just so, my boy. Why do you suppose I've postponed the—uh—inevitable unpleasantness here so long? I expect Millicent at any moment now. I believe I can arrange it to look like an—uh—shoot-off between you."

Bannon cursed him.

"Then, by shifting the blame for all four killings on her, you figure you can slide out with only a light accessory rap!"

"Quite so. And now, if you'll just toss me the little gun from your pocket, son, I have use for it."

BANNON was shaking with rage now. His slitted eyes flashed venom.

"Come and get it!" he suggested thickly. Driscoll shrugged.

"Very well. I can use the revolver on you two, then retrieve the automatic and turn it on Millicent. It doesn't really matter."

Bannon watched the watery eyes congeal for the kill, saw the pudgy finger contract inside the ancient trigger guard. He tensed himself for the lunge, then jerked as an icy voice echoed from the stairway beyond:

"You're quite right, Jerrold. It doesn't really matter. In fact, it's a little late for any of that, now!"

Hunched in the chair with his back toward the steps, Driscoll froze. Bannon's eyes darted past him, saw Millicent Rothwaite's stately figure silhouetted in the gray light from the open door behind her. Her patrician features were chiseled in living marble, and

a nicked purse gun glinted in her hand.

The precise voice was hoarse with fury.

"You're a slick little rat, aren't you, Jerrold? After what happened to Janet and Myra, I expected something like this. When I got your summons this afternoon, I came prepared. Drop it, Jerrold!"

The little man's eyes slid sideward like pennies on a tambourine, as he hesitated. That was his undoing. The purse gun spat once, and an overripe strawberry bloomed on his gnomelike forehead, began to drip.

As he crumpled, Bannon moved, upsetting Laura's chair bottom up, toward the doorway. Then he snatched the modified horse pistol from clammy fingers. He had heard the crunch of tires in the drive outside, so he fired—not at the woman on the stairs, but at the lone light bulb above the furnace.

When the galvanized belly of the burner stopped kicking the sound around in the sudden darkness, he called sharply:

"Now you drop it, gorgeous! There's still enough light from the door to make *you* a good target!"

Aunt Milly, too, hesitated. And that was her undoing. Rough arms seized her from behind, knocked the gun spinning down the cellar steps. Bannon knelt beside Laura, righted the overturned chair.

"Sorry, darling," he murmured. "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"I—I'm all right," she whispered. "Oh, Shane!"

He straightened, wiping lipstick from his face as he turned to face the probing flashlight from the stairs.

"So you finally got here," he said tiredly.

Behind the flashlight, Lieutenant Nathaniel Hillebrand nodded sourly.

"When you told us the girl lied this morning, we dropped around for another chat."

"And when you couldn't find her, you decided to keep an unobtrusive eye on Aunt Milly," Bannon nodded.

"Yeah. Drop the rod, Bannon. I'm taking you in for the murder of Myra Cornish."

Bannon blinked.

"Oh, brother!" he groaned. "Not again!"

Laura Thomas hitched her rocking chair into the flashlight's glare.

"I guess I've got something to say about that, Lieutenant!" she said indignantly. "After all, Sergeant Bannon is my guest. I saw him first, and I mean to hang onto him! Besides, I just heard this little man on the floor admit both killings—" She turned to Bannon. "Poor Shane," she murmured. "It hasn't been much of a homecoming for you, has it?"

Bannon thought about that, searching the blue eyes and liking very much what he found there. "Oh, I don't know." He grinned. "It isn't over yet."



Suddenly the man swung a right hook at Cantrell's jaw, and it landed

DEAD MAN'S NERVE

By JACK BRADLEY

Old Jimmy Cantrell of the Force starts off on the last tour of his beat—and runs smack into a gruesome case of murder!

THEY had all been nice down at the station house before he set out. Everyone had been careful not to notice that his shoes were unshined and his shabby old uniform unpressed. And, above all, they had been careful not to notice the smell of liquor on his breath. Some of the older cops, whose lives he had saved during the wild raids and gunfights of the crazy Prohibition Era had come up to grin embarrassedly and shake his hand. One of the police reporters had even done a brief article about him with the headline:

VETERAN PATROLMAN TO RETIRE

Old Jimmy Cantrell's Last Tour Tonight

The article was a brief sketch of his twenty years as patrolman in Hell's Kitchen. It told of innumerable fights and raids in which he had taken part. The time he had shot down three of the Krumer mob. Of a night when he had walked into a hail of lead, his own gun shot out of his hand, to smash down an escaped convict with his nightstick.

It was a nice story and old Jimmy Cantrell

rather enjoyed being the center of attraction for once. If only it hadn't been for that talk with Captain Marvin.

Marvin had called him into his office just before he left.

"So this is your last tour, eh, Cantrell?" he had asked quietly. "You're letting your application for retirement stand?"

Cantrell turned his head a bit so the Captain wouldn't smell the liquor on his breath.

"Yes, Captain, I'm letting it stand. I—well, I guess I'm getting a little too old to pound a beat, sir."

Marvin looked at him somberly for a moment.

"All right, Cantrell," he had said then. "That's your privilege. Only we do need cops pretty badly these days, you know."

Before Cantrell could answer, young Lloyd Marvin, the Captain's son, had walked into the office. As always, Cantrell had felt his heart leap at the sight of the trim, athletic young cop. He was so young! So young and clean-looking!

If only things could have been different and he could have had a kid like that on the Force! His fingers had tingled with desire to muss that mop of unruly blond hair, and he had tugged embarrassedly at his tunic, ashamed of the wild intensity of his emotion. It was plain Hades to love another man's son like that.

"I just wanted to speak to Jimmy before he left," Lloyd had said easily.

"Save it until he comes off duty, Lloyd," his father had said curtly. "We'll both see him then. Right now, I'm talking to him myself."

"Okay, then. See you later, Jimmy." Lloyd had grinned and gone out.

WHEN he had left, Captain Marvin had cleared his throat uncomfortably a couple of times before he could blurt out the question he wanted to ask.

"Uh—that trouble you told me about that time—you know. That still as bad as ever?"

Old Jimmy had looked stonily at a map on the wall.

"Yeah. Just the same as it has been ever since that fight with Tiny."

Marvin nodded understandingly. "I see. Well, then, maybe it's better this way. It's just that I'm worried about Lloyd. He's been seen going into Tiny's club a couple of times lately, and I can't understand it. I know the boy's ambitious and it might be that he figures Tiny can help him get ahead. That no-good is swinging a lot of weight in the precinct, lately."

"I know," Cantrell had said. "I tried to speak to Lloyd about it a couple of times but I didn't get far. Lloyd hasn't got much use for sloppy cops."

"He's too young to understand, Jimmy, and he doesn't know about your trouble. Anyway, there's probably nothing you could do about it. So, we'll just forget the whole thing. And tonight, when you come off duty, you're coming home with us for a bit of supper. Good luck, Jimmy!"

He had pressed Cantrell's hand quickly and turned back to his desk. . . .

Old Jimmy Cantrell was making his last tour! All over the grimy, ancient neighborhood the word had spread and he had to stop a score of times to pass a few words with friends. The long years of exposure to wind and rain, plus the oceans of whisky he had consumed, had given him a bad case of arthritis. And now his stiff, bent figure in the faded old uniform and his slow, steady "harness bull" walk made him look, for all the world, like an aged beetle, as he plodded through the littered streets.

On past Mike's Lunch Room, where he always stashed his raincoat when a storm threatened. On past Kiernan's—a moment's stop at Klotz's Liquor Store, to try the door. Old Man Klotz had been yammering about that bum lock for five years and hadn't done anything about it. Another stop at Tony's fruit stand, where Tony was waiting breathlessly to make him a present of a huge basket of fruit.

Cantrell began to feel a warm glow in his heart because of the grand friendliness of these people. He knew them so well! Twenty long years of looking after them, keeping their kids out of trouble, giving them advice. Why, that warehouse down the street—that was where he had taken the escaped convict the police reporter had written about. But he, himself, thought of it as the place he had caught Tony's oldest boy breaking into.

He had grabbed the kid by the scruff of the neck that night, and whaled him plenty with his night-stick. Tony had never known about that night. The kid was now a foreman in a war plant.

Yes, it was going to be tough leaving these people. He almost wished—

He snapped out of it abruptly. He had run into trouble and it was the kind of trouble he dreaded most. Nothing more than a bunch of longshoremen gathered around a sidewalk crap game, but he knew only too well what could happen. He forced a tolerant grin on his weather-reddened face as he came up to them.

"All right, boys. Break it up. Break it up. You can go into the alley, back of Hannegan's and shoot craps all night, for all I care, but not out here in plain sight of everybody. Come on, now, break it up."

Most of the men in that crowd were the old-timers he had known for years and they moved back at once. But there were a couple

of strangers to him and one of them had the dice. That one faced about hostilely.

"Say! Why don't you go take a walk for yourself, copper? We ain't botherin' you!"

It started to come up, the way it always did, that old feeling of sick panic. Jimmy Cantrell swallowed the lump in his throat and pushed forward calmly.

"I wasn't kidding you, fellow. I said to break it up and I meant it. Come on, now!"

He prodded the stranger lightly with the tip of his night-stick. And that touched it off.

"Who are you pokin' around, flatfoot?" the man snarled.

Suddenly he slapped the night-stick aside and lurched forward, swinging a right hook at Cantrell's jaw. And it landed. Landed so clumsily that it was almost harmless, but it landed.

And, as always, the panic changed to an insane red haze, and through the haze Jimmy Cantrell felt himself moving forward, his stick poised in cold, murderous readiness. He heard a voice within him shrieking:

"Careful, now! Don't cripple him. Don't get yourself into another jam!"

EVEN as he started to swing, it was all over. Two of the old-timers had grabbed the stranger and yanked him back out of reach of that club.

"All right, Jimmy!" one of them yelled sharply. "Don't hit him! We'll take care of it! Easy, now!"

Between them they hustled the man off down the street and as they went Cantrell heard one of them saying breathlessly:

"Don't ever do that again! Don't ever lay hands on old Jimmy Cantrell. I've known that cop for the last fifteen years and I bet he's been up on charges a dozen times or more for half killing fellers that laid their hands on him. He's funny about that. He just can't stand it when you put your hands on him."

The stranger growled something in reply and then they were out of hearing down the street. Cantrell turned and went on down his beat. He was shaking like a leaf and the sweat was pouring out of him. All of the warm, pleasant feeling he had had was gone.

Suddenly he looked up sharply. Young Lloyd Marvin was standing across the street, looking at him. Just standing there looking. Cantrell wondered how anybody could put so much searing contempt into a look as Lloyd was doing.

He started to raise his night-stick in half-hearted salute. Abruptly Lloyd snapped about and strode away, without returning Cantrell's wave.

Far down the street, Jimmy Cantrell saw
[Turn page]



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him turn in at the entrance of Tiny Anderson's club. He started after him, then gave it up. That would involve explaining about "that trouble", and Captain Marvin was the only one in the precinct who knew about that.

It had happened during the second year Cantrell was on the Force. Prohibition was in full swing and the mobs were riding high. Night after night big black sedans roared in from sheltered coves on Long Island, their tonneaus piled high with liquid platinum. Gangsters swaggered through the streets of Hell's Kitchen, their pockets bulging with money, their guns for hire to the highest bidder. Money, money, everywhere to the man who was willing to take a chance.

Jimmy Cantrell and Joe Marvin, himself a patrolman at the time, had been sent to arrest a cheap hoodlum named "Tiny" Anderson. It was a routine arrest, a matter so unimportant that Joe Marvin had stopped off to make a phone call while Cantrell strolled in alone to make the arrest. They had forgotten that the man they were after hated cops more than anything else in the world.

"Tiny" Anderson had been a promising heavy-weight prizefighter before he lost his license for crooked fighting. He had always blamed the cops for the loss of his license and when Cantrell came in, he had seen his chance.

He had taunted the green young bluecoat into laying aside his gun and night-stick, and then had gone to work. Slowly. Carefully. Jimmy Cantrell had never had a chance, from the first, against those trained fists. Tiny could have knocked him out any time he wished.

But he hadn't wanted to knock out the young cop. He had wanted to hurt him. Dancing around Cantrell, he had bored in again and again, planting his skilled hands like a medieval torturer planting his knives.

Old-timers in Hell's Kitchen still talked about that fight, but Jimmy Cantrell never remembered much of it afterward. To him, it had been only an eon-long nightmare of getting up off the floor to face that bullet-headed figure with the broken nose boring in—always boring in.

He had been out on his feet toward the end of it, and only dimly aware of Joe Marvin rushing in past him, of Joe's night-stick

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smashing across that broken nose. Later, in the hospital, they told him that Marvin had beaten the big ex-prizefighter to a pulp, but that hadn't changed things for Jimmy Cantrell.

A week or so after he had left the hospital and gone back on duty, he had had to break up a fight between two drunks. There had been a brief tussle that another cop would have forgotten in five minutes. And afterward Joe Marvin had found him crouched over in an alley, shaking, sweat pouring down his face. He had straightened himself shamefacedly as his fellow officer had come up.

"I'm all right," he had said shakily. "Just a touch of nerves, I guess." He told about the brief tussle he had just had. "I've been that way ever since the fight I had with Tiny. Soon as anybody lays their hands on me, I simply go to pieces. Looks like I'll have to get off the cops if this keeps up."

"Aw, forget that stuff," Marvin had said heartily. "Give up your job when you've got a sick father to look after? You can't. Why, anybody's liable to be a bit jumpy after a fist fight that's put him in the hospital for two months. But you get over things like that after a while."

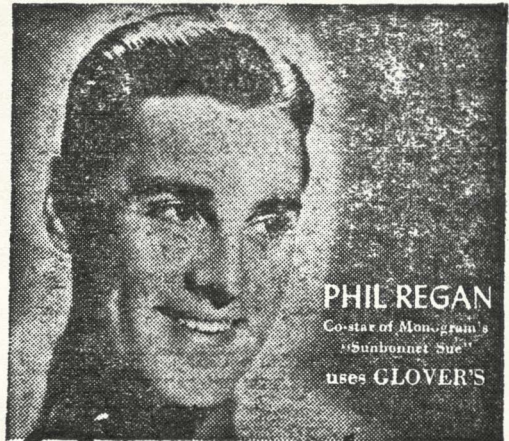
OH YES, you get over things like that after a while, old Jimmy Cantrell was thinking now. For the first few weeks you walk your beat with your heart in your throat at

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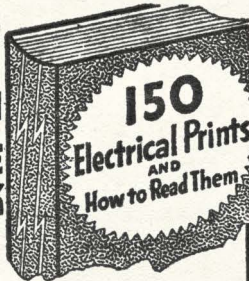
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Oh yes, you get over things like that after a while.

Cantrell was snapped out of his painful reverie by a voice calling him.

"Hello, Jimmy!" It was old man Klotz, hurrying toward his liquor store, a huge cardboard sign under his arm. "I hear this is your last night?"

"Yup. Through tonight, Mr. Klotz."

"Well, I'll be down at the store, working late. Stop off on your way home and I'll have something for you. One of these." He held out of sign for Cantrell to see. It read:

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Old man Klotz chuckled. "Limited amount, it says. I got my whole cellar full of it—every bottle the ABC board will allow me. What that stuff would bring on the black market! And me selling it at ceiling price! Anyway, I'll have a bottle for you. Just rap on the window and I'll let you in."

"Okay, Mr. Klotz. I'll be seeing you."

Cantrell nodded as pleasantly as possible and walked on. His mind was a seething turmoil as he remembered the look of utter contempt on Lloyd Marvin's face and realized that he had to find some way to warn the boy about Tiny Anderson's crowd. The big expug had risen a lot since the old days, but

he was still a mobster. And nothing but trouble ever came when a cop started getting chummy with that sort.

Down at the waterfront, Cantrell swung around, and hurried back to cover the rest of his beat. There was only one way to go through with a fight. Get in and get it over with. When he passed Tiny's club, he would go in and have it out with the kid.

He stopped at the Jerome Street box to ring in, then cut across past Klotz's Liquor Store. Abruptly he stopped. There wasn't anything wrong that he could see. It was just that sixth sense that any cop develops that had made him stop. He looked inside cautiously.

There was a dim light burning over the cash register and the stock on the shelves seemed in order. Then he saw what it was that had made him stop. The small cabinet Klotz used for special displays had been pulled aside. And that cabinet usually rested over the trap-door leading to the cellar. The special trap-door old Klotz had had made, so he wouldn't have to go out on the street in rainy weather to get into his cellar.

Even so, Klotz was probably working down there. He had been headed for the store when Cantrell had last seen him. Jimmy Cantrell tried the door cautiously. It swung open at once. He stepped in and snapped on the light.

[Turn page]

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Old man Klotz was lying sprawled out on the floor, behind the counter. His bald head rested on the new sign and the lettering was blotted out in one place by the blood from a hole over his right eye. Beyond him, Cantrell could see the open door of the cellar. Somewhere old man Klotz had bragged to the wrong person about that cellarful of Scotch.

CANTRELL walked over to the telephone unhurriedly and dialed, his keen, old eyes going over the place, while he waited for Marvin to answer. There was the alcove where the look-out had stood, watching the street both ways. It hadn't been too difficult, nor was it difficult to figure out who had pulled this job. This was strictly neighborhood stuff, and it fairly shrieked of Tiny Anderson and his mob.

"Hello!" he heard a rasping voice over the phone. "Captain Marvin speaking."

"Jimmy Cantrell, Captain. Somebody's knocked off Klotz's Liquor Store and killed old man Klotz. And I'm pretty sure I know who done it. It's—"

He stopped short as though a gun had been jabbed into his back. He knew police procedure only too well. One minute after he mentioned Tiny Anderson, a squad car would be roaring through the streets to Tiny's club. And if they found Lloyd Marvin in there, it would mean a terrific black mark against Lloyd's record at the least. At the worst, Tiny might have planned some way of involving Lloyd in this job.

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Old Jimmy Cantrell sighed jerkily and hung up, his face a sickly gray. Well, then, this was it. The one thing he had dreaded more than anything else, during the long years. He would have to face that broken-nosed figure again.

For a long moment he stood there beside old man Klotz's body, feeling himself go weak with fear. Then he turned and went out of the door, closing it behind him.

A fire-escape led up past Tiny's club and Cantrell climbed it as quietly as possible. A window slid up without too much noise and he stepped into a dark back room, his Police Positive held alertly in his hand. A connecting door, leading to the front room was closed but a glint of light showed under it. Old Jimmy Cantrell tiptoed over and put his eye to the keyhole.

Lloyd Marvin was sitting alone at a table, a half empty whisky bottle before him, his blond head on the table on his arms. Even as Cantrell looked, he heard the door open and two of Tiny's hoods came into his view. They were the Marino brothers, Phil and Danny. They started slipping out of their topcoats at once and, at the slight noise, Marvin raised his head groggily.

"Hey! Where you been?" His voice was thick.

Danny Marino laughed harshly. "Where have we been? Why, we've been right here with you all the time, chum. We was just going out for some fresh air. You want to go ring in? Come on, I'll give you an arm."

Lloyd stumbled to his feet and rubbed his eyes. "Don't tell me that I passed out on two drinks."

So that was it. Lloyd was to be their alibi, and they had pulled the job on old Klotz. Cantrell raised up, shoved the door open and stepped into the room, his gun held steadily on the Marino brothers.

"You passed out, all right," he told Lloyd. "Your whisky was doped, you fool."

Danny Marino spun about, his hand starting toward his shoulder.

"Go right ahead, Danny," Cantrell told him genially. "You might make it at that."

The hood dropped his hand sullenly. Back of him, Lloyd Marvin looked at them, bewildered, but Cantrell knew there was no time to explain.

"Where's Tiny?" he snapped. [Turn page]

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"Right here behind you, Cantrell," a voice said placidly. "I got here a little ahead of the boys and stepped behind the door when I heard you open the window."

Tiny Anderson stepped out, holding a heavy automatic in his hand. The big expug was smiling a little as he came forward on the balls of his feet, as lightly as a cat. He waved the big gun at Cantrell.

"All right, Jimmy. Drop your gun and night-stick. This little visit of yours is going to change our plans a bit but it won't make too much difference. It just means that we'll have to go to the trouble of getting rid of you punks, that's all."

Cantrell let his gun and night-stick fall to the floor and just as Tiny picked them up, young Martin went for his gun. Even in that blurry moment, old Jimmy had time to feel a kindly contempt for the young fellow's rash clumsiness.

He saw Tiny Anderson step aside and swing the big gun—almost leisurely it seemed—and saw Lloyd's face turn to a bloody smear as he went down with his nose crushed.

"That's the first payment on what your old man did to me once, punk!" the big man snarled. "You been hanging around my boys for a long time now, trying to get a line on them, so how do you like it now that you got what you were after?"

HE STOOD above the unconscious young cop muttering oaths, but Cantrell did not hear them. He stepped forward and lifted a heavy oak chair. As calmly as a boxing instructor planting a punch he meant to explain later, he swung the chair against Danny Marino's skull and knew the man was dead before he hit the floor. The chair swung back and there was a dull snap as Phil Marino's neck broke.

And then he felt the chair snatched out of his hands, caught one flashing glimpse of that broken nose boring in again as he crashed back against the wall, blood spurting from his split lip. Tiny Anderson stepped back, rubbing his skinned knuckle, his eyes raging pools of madness.

"Before you go out of here in a box, I'm going to give you a taste of what I gave you twenty years ago!" he snarled.

His left slashed out and Jimmy Cantrell felt the searing pain of the blow, knew that his nose was broken. Then his eyes widened with surprise. And suddenly he laughed!

He was not afraid! For the first time in nearly twenty years he was facing the hands of a man without that sick feeling. And why not, he thought briefly. He was as good as dead, already. What was there for a dead man to fear? It didn't make the slightest difference how much he was hurt. The only

thing that mattered was to hold this murderer long enough for that fool young cop to come to and take over.

Tiny came in with a rush, hooking those hurting fists into his stomach, and that was all that Cantrell needed. He knew, of course, that he could never land one punch on a trained fighter and he did not mean to try.

He simply reached out and grabbed Tiny's coat lapels, yanking the big man off balance for the one moment he needed. Then those rheumatic old fingers closed around Tiny Anderson's throat and stayed there.

It was really a lot like that other time he had fought Tiny. There was a great roaring in his ears and he was only dimly aware of what was happening. There were terrific flashes of pain, as Tiny's fists landed time after time against his unprotected face, but somehow he managed to keep his jaw close enough to the big man's chest to keep from being knocked out.

Then the flashes of pain stopped and he felt Tiny's fingers tearing frantically at his hands, realized with a thrill that the big man was going mad with terror. After that, there was a long period of just holding on against those tearing fingers. Until he realized that there was more than one set of fingers tearing at his. From a long way off, somebody was shouting at him and he realized that it was the voice of Joe Marvin. Then he sighed a little and let the grateful blackness roll over him. . . .

He must have been out quite a while, he thought, because the grimy clubroom was full of people when he opened his eyes. Doc Raymond was sponging away the blood from Lloyd Marvin's face and a couple of plain-clothesmen were going through the pockets of the dead prizefighter. He struggled to sit up and Joe Marvin came over to him at once.

"Are you all right, Jimmy?" he asked anxiously.

Old Jimmy Cantrell grinned weakly through his battered lips.

"Sure I'm all right," he said. "May have to ask for a couple of days off, on sick leave, but I'll be right back on my beat in less than a week."

Captain Marvin looked at him sharply. "Oh. Then you're . . . you want to withdraw your application for retirement?"

"That? Sure I'm withdrawing it. The only reason I ever made the application, in the

[Turn page]



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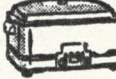

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first place, was that trouble we talked about. And I got over that tonight."

Joe Marvin grinned and ducked his gray head closer to old Jimmy's.

"Sure you did, you big fool. I told you that night, twenty years ago, that you get over things like that after a while."

ONE SHOT TRICK

(Concluded from page 53)

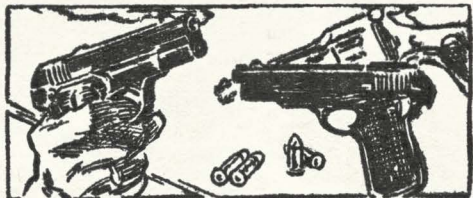
cash at home I didn't worry about it. But one day Martha and I counted up and found we had saved exactly one thousand dollars. I knew someone might try to take the money away from us because it became pretty well known that I didn't do business with any bank.

"So I decided then that if anybody ever did walk in on us and demand that money I'd have a deposit slip ready to show that I had lately put the money in the bank. I've made out a new slip every month for years now. Made a new one out a couple of days after I talked to you on the street. I've always rubbed a little wax on the back of 'em ever since I read an article on fingerprints in a magazine. Figured it might come in handy some time."

"You had the money hidden in a box out in one of those stumps all the time?" the sheriff blinked.

"Sure. I figured it was safe enough there when I could produce a deposit slip to show that it was in the bank. I lost eight hundred dollars in a bank failure once, Sheriff. Guess the bank can't object to me pinching a few deposit slips from the counter once in a while when I went in to endorse or cash other folks' checks."

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HEADQUARTERS

(Continued from page 8)

the East River. Castle trying to shorten his little visit, for there's that date with Libby, remember. She doesn't like to be kept waiting. But blonde Olive insists that Johnny hang around.

Finally, Cliff Mabie lets himself into the apartment with a key. Almost immediately, the two gunsels, known only to us as Andy and Patsy, ring the bell. Furthermore, their hardware is extremely persuasive.

While one of the gunsels is ransacking the apartment looking for an unknown something, blonde Olive suddenly decides to go to work on the other one with her red fingernails. Mabie gets ideas too. So does Johnny Castle, until someone conks him on the bean.

When he comes to, he doesn't know how much later, the blonde has disappeared. On the bed is Cliff Mabie, quite seriously dead. On the floor is an open wallet and protruding from it, an I.O.U. for \$65 signed "Charles Sherman." That's the name of the victim of a recent unsolved killing!

Heigh-ho—nothing for Johnny Castle to do but visit the police, particularly Captain Mullin!

"In it again, Castle?" that worthy sneers. "What do you do—follow lads around and watch them get bumped?"

"It's a gift," Johnny Castle wisecracks back.

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—Samuel Lord, New York City

Our compliments to you, Sam, as well as a pat on the back for your very good judgment. We liked that story particularly ourselves. Also, and by the same token, we can take a first-class slam on the chin without forgetting to duck, as Mr. Dempsey said. Here's a bit of a peeve, from a gentleman who lives in that busy little port on Lake Superior:

In your March **THRILLING DETECTIVE**, "Clue of the Clever Corpse," by John L. Benton, there is one part that seems a little far-fetched. If a bullet entered Keene's back, lodging in his heart, he probably would have been instantly killed. How then could he have had time to grab up a glass of bicarb? The build-up was fine, but no like solution!

—J. A. Montgomery, Duluth, Minn.

Thank you, Mr. Montgomery, we appreciate your criticism. However, with all due respect to any medical knowledge you may have, we do not agree with you. People not only can, but have lived for a considerable length of time with a bullet in the heart. Records have proven that actual operations have been made on the heart—stitches have even been taken in the organ and the person so operated upon has gone on living for varying lengths of time.

Keep those letters and postcards streaming in, folks. We wish we had the room to quote from all of your many splendid letters—but we must content ourselves with an excerpt or two. However, every letter and postcard received is carefully read and considered, and all suggestions and opinions are taken into account when we plan future issues. The more letters, the better the magazine—so let's hear from you!

Please address all communications to The Editor, **THRILLING DETECTIVE**, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Thank you! See you next issue.

—The Editor.

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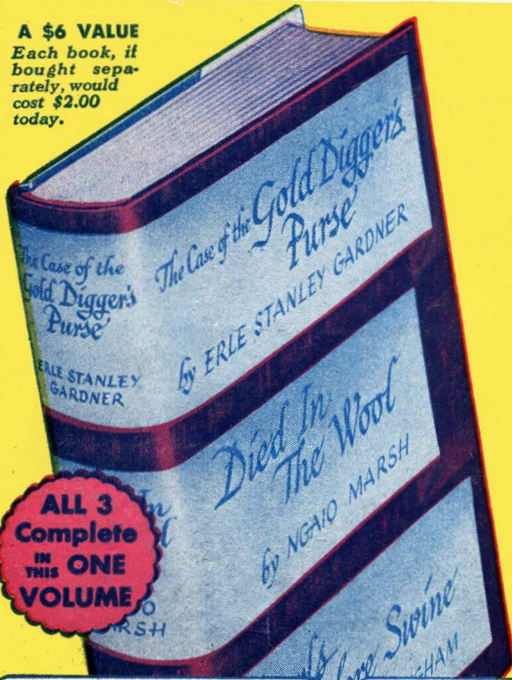
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