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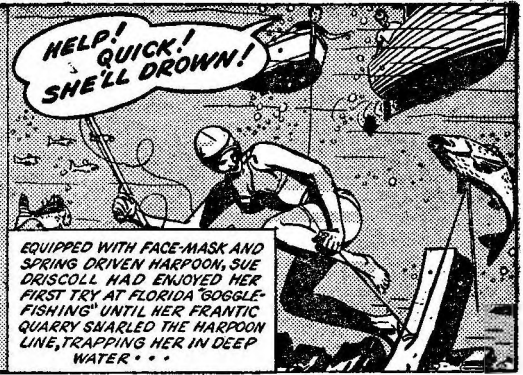
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WHAT HAPPENED, SON?

SIS ALMOST DROWNED, BUT THIS MAN SAVED HER



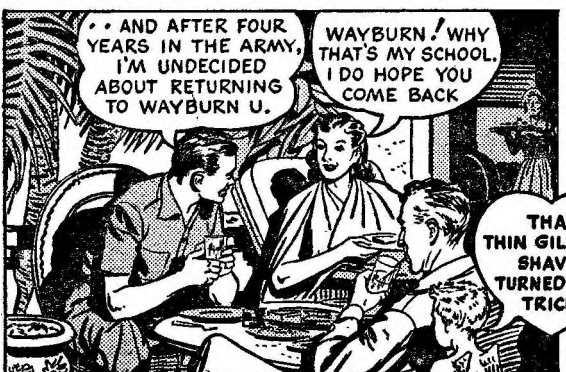
I APPRECIATE THE INVITATION, SIR, BUT I'VE BEEN ROUGHING IT AND...

AS A GRATEFUL FATHER, I INSIST. LET'S GET YOU FRESHENED UP...



SHAVING'S A CINCH WITH THIS BLADE, SIR! MY FACE FEELS GREAT!

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BLACK MASK



K. S. White, Editor



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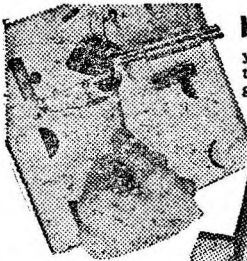
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Cover painted for Black Mask by Rafael De Soto

Black-and-white illustrations by Peter Kuhlhof

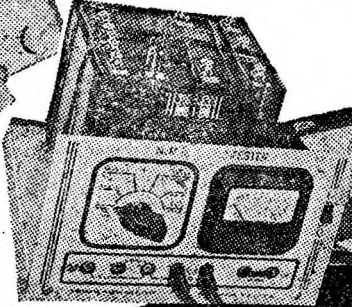
Every story in Black Mask is new and, to the best of our knowledge, has never before been printed in any publication

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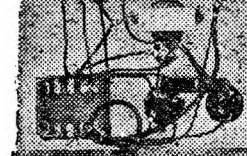
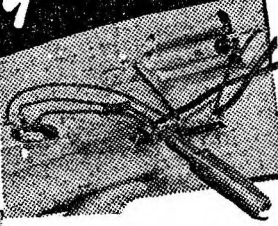


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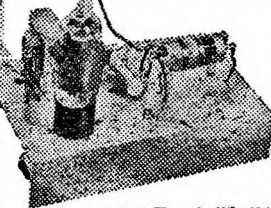
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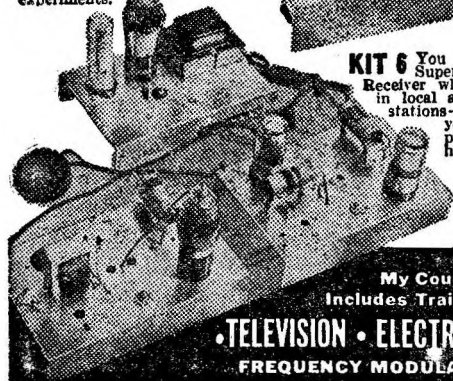
KIT 3 You get parts to build Radio Circuits; then test them; see how they work; learn how to design special circuits; how to locate and repair circuit defects.



KIT 4 You get parts to build this Vacuum Tube Power Pack; make changes which give you experience with packs of many kinds; learn to correct power pack troubles.



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LIFTING THE MARCH BLACK MASK.



LOOK who's back—MERLE CONSTINER, bringing you the great McGavock, as skillful and silent and quick on the trigger as ever. The trouble was that everyone else in town had gone a-sleuthing, too. The mayor, the marshal, all the first citizens were on the prowl—it got so you couldn't even uncover a corpse without someone looking over your shoulder. Luther McGavock didn't object to amateur assistance, but just when he was ready to crack the case, one of the would-be shamuses reverted to type—took up his pistol and started in business for himself. Then poor Luther spent a bad couple of hours in the Southern swamps with the lead-loving killer sending him mementoes of his affection all through the long, long summer evening. That murderer's heart was in the wrong place . . . and McGavock just hoped his bullets would be, too, so they wouldn't label him, like so many others—

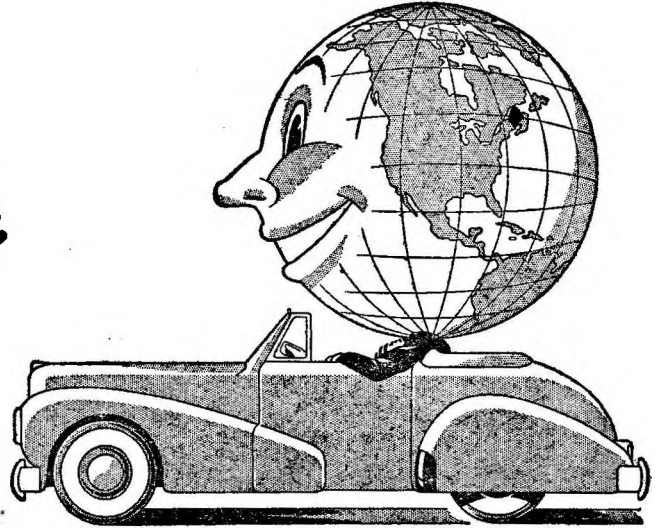
DEAD ON ARRIVAL

Rex Sackler had been famous for years as the peep with the padlocked pockets, but that irresistible force of frugality finally met his immovable object in the form of William Harrison Teviz. He never really stood a chance—from the first major issue (the check for a cup of coffee) Sackler was a beaten man. In comparison with the greatest miser of them all, the famous nickel-nurser began to look like a wild-eyed playboy. Misery made him so careless that once he even paid his own subway fare! D. L. CHAMPION does it again with *Too Mean To Die*.

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THE COLD, COLD GROUND

By **WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT**

A Mortimer Jones Novelette

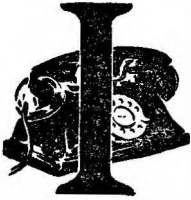


The Moose wasn't seeing me. He wasn't seeing anything. Somebody had done a big job with a small gun.

The man who put lovely Flame Harlin out of the way made a serious mistake—but it was his last. Flame was true to her name—a cookie who could never be cold. And after she was dead she fixed it so her murderer would be nice and cozy too—in a special chair that was wired for warmth.

CHAPTER ONE

Chills and Thrills



IT WAS early fall, and faintly chilly, outside. In my office, the thermometer was well over seventy, but Miss Townsbury had brought some chill with her.

Make no mistake, form no mental picture because of the 'Miss'. She was between forty and fifty years of age, dressed in some brown and eye-repelling type of ribbed silk. An iceberg, in brown silk. Blue eyes, blue as frozen sea water, and features sharp as icicles, with an icicle's thinness to her spare figure. There was nothing about her to indicate that she had ever melted or would ever melt.

She was telling me about the girl named Flame. Flame was the daughter of her brother's second wife—if you follow me. That is, her brother had married twice. For his second wife, he had married a divorcee. This divorcee had a daughter by her first marriage. This daughter's name was Flame. I hope it's all clear.

Flame was missing.

Miss Townsbury had begun to suspect something was amiss when she wrote to Flame (Miss Flame Harlin) at her apartment in town, inviting her to come up and spend a weekend at the Townsbury country place. There had been no answer.

Miss Townsbury had phoned, twice, without success. This morning, she had come to town to do some shopping and had dropped in at the girl's apartment. The accumulation of newspapers and mail at the front door, the accumulation of milk bottles at the rear door, had convinced Miss Townsbury that things were not as they should be.

I asked her if she had gone to the police.

She shook her head emphatically. "I didn't think it wise to bring them into it, Mr. Jones." She paused. "Not until we are sure that Miss Harlin is—really missing."

If she wasn't sure, why had she come to me?



At twenty dollars a day (and expenses), I thought it best not to ask that question.

I asked some other questions.

Miss Harlin was an entertainer, a comedienne.

Did she sing? Did she juggle? Did she crack jokes?

She sang. "Though her voice wasn't anything extraordinary, you understand. That doesn't seem necessary, today, however. She had—whatever it is the public wants, today. Her songs were very well received."

I knew what the public wanted, today and every day, and so did she. She was being genteel. I asked: "She isn't married, of course?"

A thin, cool smile. "No. She was engaged, at one time, to a Mr. Rodney Carlton. There's a possibility . . ." She stopped.

I said: "You think there's a possibility they may have eloped?"

"Eloped?" The gaze came up to meet mine, then moved away. "Eloped? No. I suppose that *could* be a polite phrasing." The gaze direct again. "Miss Harlin, I might remind you, is an entertainer. She has always lived an undisciplined life. Her standards of conduct are theatrical standards. Am I being clear?"

I gave her a reproving glance. I said softly: "You're being completely frank, Miss Townsbury. Have you any reason, other than those, to believe that Miss Harlin might have done what you're suggesting?"

The figure stiffened in my leatherette chair. "None. However, under the circumstances, you can see why I came to a *private* detective."

"The police," I told her, "are very discreet in matters of this kind. You wouldn't need to fear any unpleasant publicity." *Not much*, I thought, *not much*.

The cold eyes surveyed me haughtily. "Are you telling me, in your indirect way, that you don't *want* this case. Mr. Jones?"

I hastened to correct her on that. I explained about ethics, and the necessity for private operatives to cooperate with the police, and the rest of the blarney that gives my work its high moral tone.

She relaxed again, with a rustle of heavy silk. She answered all the rest of my questions quickly and competently. When she rose to leave, she said: "I do think, if you don't discover anything in a reasonable length of time, we should go to the police."

I told her I thought that would be best.

She left, and I went to the window, as is my fashion. There was a Mercedes town car parked at the curb. As she approached it, a tall and dark man in a chauffeur's uniform stepped out of the car to open the door on the curb side. I watched, until the Mercedes moved around the corner with a contemptuous snort from its tail pipe.

Such high-class trade I get in my shabby

office. Was it my reputation? The penuriousness of my clients? What it was in this case, I didn't find out until later. Anyway, I decided that I would go and see this Rodney Carlton, first.

Downstairs, I stood on the curb a minute, watching a kid punt a football. It kept sliding off his foot wrong—he wasn't getting directly behind the ball. Well, he had a lot of years ahead of him.

I walked up two blocks, to where the Dusy was parked. I started her elegant motor, and headed her east.

The very-near-east, where the rooming houses are, I passed through. The upper-east, where the fine apartments are, I also passed through. In the far-upper-east, the neighborhood can't make up its mind. There are some new apartments, and some fine old homes. There are some cottages, new and inexpensive, but pleasant and in good taste.

This Rodney Carlton's address was one of the cottages. A low white place, with red shutters, with a red door. With a man in the front yard.

THE man had a golf club in his hands. It looked like a nine iron. He was trying to chip some balls he had into a washtub in the middle of the yard. He'd play each shot carefully and easily, with fine form, but they were all short.

"More wrist," I said. "You're not getting enough wrist into them."

He looked up at me and out at the car. He studied me. Then: "You can't be a collector, not with a Duesenberg. Are you selling insurance? Who the hell are you, anyway?"

I shook my head. "My name is Jones, Mortimer Jones. I'm looking for a girl named Flame Harlin."

He stood frozen a moment, a thin, good-looking young man with dark hair, with apprehension in his dark blue eyes. "Flame—she's missing? You—expected to find her here?" He was staring now, and his voice roughened. "Who the hell are you, anyway?"

"I'm a private investigator," I told him quietly. "Miss Townsbury has hired me to locate Miss Harlin, whom she has reason to suspect is missing." What a hell of a sentence that was.

He was still staring. "That old battle-axe hired you? Why should she care? She doesn't give a damn for Flame, either way."

"I wouldn't know about that," I said. "I thought, perhaps, you—"

"Come on in," he said, and started for the door. I followed.

Rodney Carlton indicated a chair, and took one himself. He said: "Miss Harlin and I were engaged, at one time, you understand. But I haven't seen her for a month. How long has she been—been missing?"

"A week," I said, "at the least. I'll know more later." I told him about the papers and the milk, about Miss Townsbury's phone calls and her letter.

When I had finished, he was thoughtful. He was considering something, I could tell. Finally, he said: "I've—" He was blushing. "I've a key to—Miss Harlin's apartment, if—" He paused. "Could I go along, if we took a look in there?"

"I don't see why not," I said. "It's just as illegal for two to enter as for one. I'd be breaking the law, either way."

He rose. "I guess you private detectives don't worry much about breaking the law. I'll get a coat."

The movies, I thought. It's the movies that give people those kinds of ideas about us.

While he went to get his coat, I went quietly on my rubber heels to the desk. He was a poet, I saw. There was a half-born child of his mood this moment in the typewriter. I read:

*Deep, where the ground is cold,
Deep, where the sun never shines,
Deep and cold and all alone,
Bury them,
Bury them deep.*

Then he was standing beside me, blushing again. "Bad?" he asked.

"I'm no judge," I said.

"I have a small income," he explained.

"Thank God I don't need to depend on that stuff for a living."

"I've seen worse," I said, "in print," and hoped he wouldn't ask me where

When we went out again, the sun was shining, and what had started as an early fall day was now a late summer day. Bury them, bury them deep . . . It stuck with me, for some reason.

The upper east side was where Miss Harlin lived. In a small and neat four-apartment building of stone and frame on a quiet, elm-shaded street. Her apartment was on the second floor.

I saw the papers, there. I pawed through them, and discovered that the earliest was eight days old. You'd think the paper boy would—But that was neither here nor there.

Eight days, then . . . Rodney Carlton handed me his key, and I fitted it, and the door swung open with a slight squeak.

The sunshine was slanting through the tall windows in the high living room. It was an expensively furnished, spacious and definitely feminine apartment—off-white and pastels the basic motif.

There was a faint and lovely fragrance haunting the air.

Everything was in order, everything shipshape. I asked him: "Did she have a maid? Wouldn't the maid bring in the milk and the papers and pick up the mail downstairs?"

"She has no servants," he said. "She can afford them, all right, but she claims she'd be bored silly all day, if she couldn't clean house."

We went from there to a bathroom in peach, to an ivory dining room, to a bedroom in orchid.

Nothing in the place. No exotic girl with a dagger in her throat, no distinguished gent with a neat hole in his aristocratic forehead, no blood, no mess, no clues at all.

The kitchenette was white tile, with a black rubber tile floor. Not even one dirty dish in the sink, nor one spilled grain of sugar. It was like a display home, all the way through.

I opened the back door and brought in the milk and put it in the refrigerator. There was some cheese in there, some wine, some butter, some cold meats.

There was nothing in the apartment to indicate a hurried trip, to indicate violence. It was as though she was gone for the day. But she'd been gone for eight.

I looked through some drawers. I looked through a scrapbook she kept, of newspaper items about herself. There might be something there. I took it along with me when we left.



RODNEY was quiet, in the car. He was looking sick.

I asked: "Do you have a picture of her?"

He nodded.

"Could I borrow it?"

"Of course." His eyes were straight ahead, on the road.

His poet's imagination would be working now, thinking the unthinkable. I said: "Everything may be all right. We're not sure of anything so far."

"Sure," he said. "Sure, of course."

The Dusy made no comment, purring softly under her hood, moving quietly through the upper east side to the far upper east side, to the cottage of Rodney Carlton.

I waited in the car while he went in to get the picture. When he brought it out, it was wrapped in brown paper. I didn't open it, but put it on the seat beside me.

"Don't think about it," I said. "We don't know anything."

"Don't think about it?" His voice was ragged. "She was my life, that's all. She was all there is in the world for me."

A typical poetic exaggeration, I thought. He hasn't even seen her for a month, I thought.

I drove from there down to headquarters. I went in and up to the second floor, to the Missing Persons Bureau. Old Pop Delaney was behind his mission oak desk in there, manufacturing cheap cigar smoke.

"What d'ya know?" he said. "It's been a long time."

He had a round head, topped with snow-

white hair. He had a smooth face, unwrinkled, though he was crowding seventy. But perhaps he'd never worried—he had always worked for the city. So had I, for a while.

I told him about the need for discretion.

"You get all that carriage trade, don't you?" he asked. "How do you do it, Jonesy?"

I ignored that. I showed him the picture, and looked at it myself for the first time.

A tinted picture. A girl with jet hair and Pacific-blue eyes and with that challenge, that bold and alluring something that makes men aware of the person possessing it, that something more than beauty.

"Hey," Pop said. "All right, huh?" Then he frowned. "This the best you got?"

"It's good enough for me" I said.

"Yeh, but for reproduction, a glossy print would be better. You got any others?"

"Just that," I said.

He rolled the cigar in his mouth, studying the picture. "O.K., I'll do what I can. You can pick this up this afternoon." He continued to roll the cigar and study the picture. He shook his head sadly. "I'm an old man, Jonesy," he said, "an old, old man."

I left him with his dreams.

I was just going through the big entrance door downstairs, when I heard a voice. *The* voice. My worst friend and unkindest critic, the boss of Homicide, Devine.

"What's your hurry, Jones?" he wanted to know.

"No hurry," I said. "That was my usual gait. How are things with you?" As though I cared, as though he couldn't be dying, right at my feet, without my caring.

"O.K.," he said. "No murders, no important ones, anyway. Got a vacation coming up, end of the month." He smiled. "In on business?"

"N-o-o," I lied. "Just dropped in to say 'hello' to some of the boys. I'm glad everything is quiet."

"You never drop in at Homicide any more," he said. "Not mad at us, are you? No hard feelings? We work together, don't we, Jones?"

"Always," I said. "Cooperation, as the Chief says."

"That's right," he said. "Be good, boy."

"I will," I promised. "I'm going to cut my cigarettes down to two packs a day, any day now." I left him, and went out into the sun.

He'd be checking now. He'd be prowling the department, trying to find out my business. He didn't like me. He knew I could have his job, any time I wanted it, and he would never like me. But Pop would tell him nothing. Everyone at the department disliked him as much as I did.

The Dusy chuckled, when I kicked her into life.

Back at the office, I went up the stairs slowly, mulling over all I had seen and heard this

morning, searching for a thread to untangle, searching for something that didn't fit, some piece out of the proper focus. I found nothing.

I opened my door quietly. It's never locked.

There was a man sitting in the leatherette chair on the customer's side of my desk. A beefy man with a broad placid face, and eyes without expression. Wearing a cheap blue suit and a blue shirt with a brown tie. Wearing a tough expression he'd seen somewhere. A private operative we're not too proud to have in the trade, a gent named Moose Lundgren.

"What's cooking, Jonesy?" he wanted to know.

"Nothing much." I went over to sit in my mahogany swivel chair. "Murder or two, couple of bank robberies—you know how it is."

He smiled genially. "And hotel skippers and jealous husbands or wives and labor trouble—that's how it is, huh?"

"Not labor trouble," I said. "I leave that alone."

He shrugged his bulky shoulders. "Maybe you can afford to be particular."

I lit a cigarette out of the new pack, and offered him one, which he refused. I asked: "Something on your mind, Moose?"

He expelled his breath through his flabby mouth. "Well, that Harlin dame—"

I tensed, waiting. He seemed to be hesitating. I said: "What about her?"

He smiled. "I saw you leave her apartment. I was watching it, at the time, and I wondered—" Again, he stopped, in his hesitant way. "What you got on her, Jonesy? What's the angle?"

"What's yours?" I countered. "You were watching her apartment? Why?"

He smiled expansively. "Why? Why would I be? For pay, of course. A party hired me to do it."

"How long ago?" I asked him. "When did you start watching it?"

He froze up. That stubborn look came to his pig eyes, and he shook his head. "You ask too many questions."

"You started it," I told him. "I've got more questions than answers—I guarantee you that."

He pulled a cheap cigar out of his breast pocket and took some time biting off the end. He lighted it slowly.

I thought, *he's going to get pompous now. He's going to sound important.*

He said: "This guy I'm working for is a pretty big operator, Jonesy. Kind of short-tempered, too. You and I would work better together."

I laughed. I said: "I'll decide that. Don't try to scare me."

He shrugged, a la Greenstreet. He studied his cigar. Then his muddy eyes met mine. "Val Every," he said, and nothing more.

I was supposed to be impressed. Val Every

had grown big with prohibition, and grown no smaller in the years since. I didn't believe he'd need to hire a third rate shamus like Lundgren. He had enough guns of his own.

"He a friend of Miss Harlin's?" I inquired pleasantly.

Moose nodded. "He'd like to be more than that. She worked for him, sang at the Pheasant. He wanted to marry her, Jonesy."

"Marry?" I said, doubtfully. "He wasn't a marrying man, the last I heard. Though he always did all right with the ladies, for a man his age."

"He's only forty-five," Moose said. "I'm telling you, Jones, for this Flame Harlin, he'll go all the way. He's been a sick man since she left. He's nothing to fool with, right now."

"Since she left?" I said. "And when was that, Moose?"

He looked at me quietly a moment. "Week ago. Those papers up in front of her door are eight days old."

"Well," I said, "you know more about it than I do, probably. Or at least as much. What do you want from me?"

"Just who you're working for."

"A client," I told him. "A client who prefers to remain anonymous for the moment."

He rose slowly, and stood regarding his hat. "Are you sure that's what you want me to tell Val, Jonesy?"

"You can tell him anything you want," I said. "He's your client."

Again that shrug, and Moose was walking toward the door. About halfway there, he turned to look at me. He opened his mouth to say something, and then evidently decided against it. I heard his big feet going down the stairs.

THE mail wasn't much, just some bills. I put them carefully with the others, and went over to Mac's.

I had a beer, first, a small one. I drank it slowly, thinking all the while.

Deep and cold and all alone, I thought, bury them, bury . . .

I didn't realize I was thinking aloud until I saw Mac staring at me.

"Bury who?" Mac said.

"The Dodgers," I said. "Why not?"

"Like hell," Mac said. "Bury the rest of them, instead."

"You got a small steak?" I asked.

He nodded. "Stringy and small, and I don't think it'll have much flavor, but you could call it a steak."

"Cut-rate, no doubt, if it's that bad."

"The standard price."

"Fry it," I told him, "in your inimitable way. Garnish it with onions, and serve it deftly. Then chat with me while I eat it."

"Sure," he said, "I got nothing else to do. I

can make a living off you, alone. My other customers don't matter, only to me."

I yawned, and sipped my beer.

When he brought it over, he brought another small beer along. There was only one other customer in the place, and he was nursing a Tom Collins.

"You know Val Every, don't you?" I asked Mac.

"I guess everybody knows him."

"Sure," I said. "But you know him pretty well, don't you? Didn't you buy beer from him, during prohibition?"

"During prohibition," Mac said stiffly, "I sold roofing."

"Days—and hooch in your blind pig at night. Who you trying to kid, Mac?"

He said nothing, looking haughty.

"All right," I said. "The Dodgers are fine. I hope they always win."

"I had some dealings with Every," Mac admitted. "If you got any with him, talk soft, Jonesy. Don't irritate him."

"I'll try not to. But what I want to know is—would you figure him for the kind of guy who'd want to marry some girl who worked for him?"

Mac shook his head. "I wouldn't figure him to marry *anybody*. With his money, why should he get married? He never has, and he's known some lulus. Why should he change now?"

"Love," I said softly. "The great, basic urge, maybe."

"We weren't talking about love," Mac corrected me. "We were talking about marriage, weren't we?"

"A terrific love," I went on, "for the first time in his life, probably. Would he want to marry the girl?"

"Not Valentine J. Every," Mac said flatly. "No. He wouldn't marry a girl. He wouldn't want to, either. He's very set on the subject. With Every, girls are eighteen cents a dozen, ceiling price."

I ate the rest of my steak in silence. As Mac had prophesied, it was stringy, small and unpalatable.

I ate it like a little Spartan, washing it down with beer.

Mac went down to the other end of the bar and explained to the man behind the Tom Collins why Ruby Bob Fitzimmons would have licked any living heavyweight.

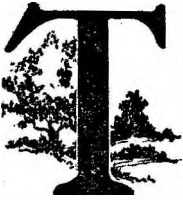
I went back to the office, and phoned the dairy that kept delivering milk to the apartment of Flame Harlin. I told them to stop it until further notice. I did the same with the paper.

When I went out again, the kid was back in the street, and still trying to straighten out his punts.

He was doing a little better.

CHAPTER TWO

Jones on the Job



HE day was warm, still, a lovely Indian Summer day. The Dusy's tires sang on the hot asphalt, as I drove over to headquarters. Pop had my picture, ready and waiting.

He also had another customer, so I didn't stop to chat. I could have gone back to the office, to comb through that scrapbook, but it was too nice for that.

I decided to run out and tell Miss Townsbury about the Every angle.

The home that housed Miss Townsbury was a weatherdulled gray stone affair, in a stand of virgin timber near the bay. There was a rolling, tree-studded lawn sweeping down from the front of the house. There were tables under these trees, and chairs. There were people, of both sexes, sitting in the chairs around the tables. Miss Townsbury must be having a party.

The Dusy's big tires crunched the gravel as we rolled majestically up to the front door.

The man on the porch hadn't been there when I drove up. But he was when I stepped from the car.

He was the tall and dark and hard-looking chauffeur. He examined me with a scrutiny I thought out of place. It was a police line-up type of examination.

"Your name?" he said, just like that.

I handed him one of my cards.

"Oh," he said. "Oh, yeah, sure. Didn't mean to be rough, Mr. Jones, but we had a kidnaping scare here, last week, and—" He tried a smile. "Miss Townsbury will see you, all right." He started to walk away.

I said: "Did you notify the police about this attempted kidnaping?"

"I don't know. You'd have to ask Miss Townsbury." He was looking out at the Dusy. "That's a lot of car you're driving."

I admitted it was, and he went around the side of the house.

The door was opening now, though I hadn't pressed the bell button. The butler stood there, looking more like the standard type of servant, or what I think of as standard. I gave him my card.

From the lawn, I heard the sound of laughter, both sexes. The butler came back, and said Miss Townsbury would receive me, and I followed him into the pleasant, dim coolness of the house.

Right off the entrance hall, there was a small, high-ceilinged room, furnished and decorated in a sort of pastel green. Miss Townsbury was in

here, knitting. She still wore the heavy brown silk. She had added a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles.

"Trouble, Mr. Jones?" she asked mildly. She indicated a chair.

"Information," I said. "Maybe trouble. There's somebody else looking for Miss Harlin."

The knitting needles stopped for a moment, then continued. She said. "The police?"

"No," I said. "A man named Val Every, a racketeer."

The needles stopped again, and this time she looked up. "Val Every? He's looking for . . . Isn't he her employer? Isn't he the former bootlegger?"

"The same," I said. "He's got a private operator working on it. This operative came to see me this noon."

The needles went back to work. "You didn't disclose my name?"

"No. I wondered, though, if we might not offer this detective some money for what information he's gathered. He can be bought. I'm sure of that."

She nodded, not looking up. "I'm willing to pay anything within reason, of course, Mr. Jones, but do you think he would have come to you if he had any information we don't have? He may have come to you for the same purpose."

"He did," I said. "But I've uncovered nothing. I went through her apartment. I talked to Rodney Carlton, and—"

"You talked to him?" There was a harsh note in the muffled voice. "And what did that young man have to say?"

"He knew nothing. He hasn't seen her for a month, he claims."

"He's lying." The needles were resting in her lap, and her frozen blue eyes were glaring into mine. "He knows. He's got her, somewhere. You concentrate on him, Mr. Jones."

"I'll learn all I can," I said. Then: "The chauffeur tells me you almost had a kidnaping here, Miss Townsbury. Do you think it might have anything to do with—"

She shook her head vigorously. "Nothing, Mr. Jones. It was the daughter of one of my guests. It wasn't an attempted kidnaping, it was a threat. Some crank, I'm sure. It's being taken care of."

She evidently didn't want any more conversation on that topic. She went back to her knitting, and I promised, before I left, that I'd keep her informed of all developments.

Outside, the hostless guests were doing very well, merrily enjoying Miss Townsbury's absence. On a bench near the drive, a slim red-haired girl was sitting, regarding me openly and genially.

"Hello, handsome," she said.

I looked around, but there was no one there. *Me*, she meant.

"Don't be coy," she said. "You are handsome, you know. It's nothing to be ashamed of. Even though you're not tall, you're handsome."

Drunk, I thought. "Thank you," I said, and climbed into the car.

She came over, to stand near me. Her eyes were a clear, bright shade of green. I saw the dilated pupils. Not drunk, I thought, no, no, no.

"Are we going for a ride?" she asked. "Shall I get a coat?"

From the porch, the butler's voice cut in sharply. "Telephone, Miss Smith. It's long distance."

Without another word, she turned and walked toward the porch. I started the Dusy, and got out of there.

Going out, I noticed for the first time that the fence around the estate was high, and topped with barbed wire. And that there was a heavy gate, now open. The poplars flanking the fence screened it from casual notice.

I STOPPED to see Rodney Carlton on the way back. He was out in front again, with the nine iron. He had more wrist in them, now. They were landing in the tub. He didn't look as if he were mourning Miss Harlin's absence much.

He looked up when I got out of the car. "This national detective week, or something?"

"You'll get used to me," I assured him.

"You, maybe, but not that lard-beam that just left. Somebody should tell him about soap."

"Lundgren?" I said.

"That's the man."

"What'd he want?"

"Information. He working for the old girl, too? Isn't one of you enough for her?"

"He's not working for her," I said. "Did you mention Miss Townsbury's name?"

"I did. Let her get a whiff of him. It'll show her how the other half lives."

If Lundgren knew that somebody as wealthy as the Townsbury maiden was interested in Flame Harlin, he'd get ideas. I asked Carlton: "Could I use your phone?"

He nodded toward the door, and went back to his chipping.

I phoned Miss Townsbury. I told her what had happened. I said: "Let me know if he bothers you. Let me know as soon as he does."

She promised she would.

I noticed, on the way out, that there was nothing in the typewriter.

"Drop in again," Carlton told me when I left. But I'm not sure he meant it.

I went back to the office, and studied the scrapbook. It was filled with clippings that may have held memories for her, but were meaningless to me. Just the story of her triumphs, large and small—the story of her climb. Up until

eight days ago, she had been the featured attraction at Val Every's elegant and expensive Golden Pheasant Club. There was nothing in there about her background.

About four, Miss Townsbury phoned. She said: "That Lundgren person phoned me for an appointment. I told him I'd send someone over to meet him at his office. You go over and find out what he wants."

"Was he threatening in any way?" I asked.

"He wondered why I hadn't gone to the police."

"Hmmm," I said, in my thoughtful tone. "Well, I'll run right over and set him straight."

I ran right over in the Dusy. It was a grubby building near the warehouse section, containing (on the first floor) a harness maker's shop and (on the second) the office of Elmer E. Lundgren, known in trade as 'Moose'. I hadn't, as a matter of fact, know until this minute that his first name was Elmer.

I went up the worn, wooden steps to the second floor and down a short and cheerless hall to his door. The door was open.

Moose Lundgren was sitting in a huge chair behind his desk, facing the door. His eyes were wide open, and he was staring at me. But he wasn't seeing me. He wasn't seeing anything.

He was dead.

His short thick neck was so heavy that his head hadn't drooped backward or forward. It stood squarely on the big neck. The chair in which he sat had a high back which effectively supported his bulk. There was a small hole, a very small hole, in the center of his forehead—it looked as though it had been made with a .22 caliber shell. Somebody had done a big job with a small gun.

I kept my eyes from Moose while I phoned the police.

"Who is this calling?" the voice at the other end wanted to know.

I hesitated. Devine will be here, I thought. He'll want to know what I was doing here. He'll want to know the name of my client. He'll be nasty. But I hesitated only a moment. "Mortimer Jones," I said.

"You again," the voice said, and some other things, not printable. "I hope they nail you this time."

I told him about a nice hot place he could go to for the winter, and hung up. I went out into the hall to wait.

Finally, there was the sound of sirens. I was almost happy to hear them, even knowing they meant Devine.

Doc Walters, the M.E., was the first to arrive. There was an interne with him. I nodded toward the door and they went through it.

Then Devine's right hand, Glen Harvey, was there. Glen tried a smile of greeting, but it was pretty sad. "You're always in the middle of these things, aren't you, Jonesy?" he said

sadly. "No wonder you give Devine the willies."

"I wasn't going to wait, just for that reason," I told him. "I was going to give a phone name and get out of here, but I thought there might be something I could help with."

Glen nodded toward the office. "Got an angle on this?"

"Only that he was on a job for Val Every. There could be any number of angles on a deal like that."

"Hell, yes," Glen said dismally. Then casually: "How'd you happen to find him?"

"He owed me a sawbuck. I came over to collect it. The door was open—"

"Uh-huh. How'd you know he was on a job for Every? You guys talk over your clients like that?"

Tricky, Glen was getting. I said evenly: "No. I knew it, because he happened to tell me, last time I asked him for the sawbuck. He said that as soon as Every paid him for a job he was doing—"

"Don't you guys work on a retainer?"

"Yes," I said wearily. "We do. Anyway, I do. Try not to sound like the D.A., Glen. It's been a bad day."

"Well, well," somebody said. I knew who it was without looking around. "If it isn't Mr. Jones. Always, at the end of a hot day, just before I'm going to knock off, something'll break. And Mr. Jones will be right in the middle of it."

I turned to face Devine. "We were such friends, this morning," I reminded him. "You're not growing tired of me? I hope there isn't someone else, now."

Glen said: "Easy, boss. Jones has been giving me the story."

Devine was white. He likes people to cover in front of him, to speak quietly and respectfully. He said hoarsely: "He's been giving you the story, all right. He's probably been giving you the business." He was talking to Glen, but looking at me. "Wait right here," he told me. "Right in this spot until I come out."



OME reporters came, the print man, another interne, the man on the beat. Harvey was in with Devine and I had the hall to myself, more or less. I smoked two cigarettes. When the reporters came out to get my part of the story, I repeated what

I had told Glen. Then, as I was finishing, Devine came out.

He heard the end of it, and drew me to one side. "You tell them about the Every angle?"

I hadn't, and I shook my head.

The reporters were waiting. Devine said: "That's all, boys. If anything breaks, you'll get it. That's all we have now."

How he kowtowed to anyone who might do him good. I took my arm out from under his hand. I said: "You won't be needing me right away, will you?"

His thin face was hard. "I will. You in a hurry?"

"I can think of a better place to spend my time," I told him.

"Sure, but I want you now. You can come down to headquarters with me and dictate a statement. What happens to you after that would be up to the Chief. You're his boy, aren't you?"

"I'll ask him," I said. "I'll tell him you think so." Which was baby talk. But he brings out the worst in me.

"You can tell him any damned thing you please," Devine said. "Just come along with me, now."

I went along with him. Outside, the sun was setting fire to the west, and some of the afternoon's heat was gone. The wholesale houses were closing up for the day. People were going home.

And Devine's day might just be beginning, for all he knows, I thought. He's overworked and over-bossed and underpaid. Maybe he's earned his bad disposition.

But how about this servility in high places? my less tolerant half argued. How about his whining when things get rough? How about that, Mortimer, you damned sissy?

"Shall we go down in my car?" I asked. He nodded.

We climbed in, and I started the motor. There were no words, going down, either pleasant or otherwise. Devine was smoking a cigar and scowling. I kept my eyes on the traffic.

At headquarters, I dictated a statement while Devine went in to see the Chief. When I'd finished, when it was typed and signed, he told me: "The Old Man wants to see you." He didn't look at me.

The Chief was looking out the window when I entered his office. I waited respectfully, making no sound. There would be a speech, in a moment, and I'd listen to that respectfully, too. For he was a good, capable, honest man—if a little verbose.

Then the big, white-thatched head turned toward me. "This is a big town, Morty, a very big town."

I agreed that it was.

He indicated a chair, and I took it. He offered me a cigar, which I refused. He put the tips of his fingers together, and studied his desk top. "If you won't work for us, you should work with us. We need all the help we can get in a town this size."

"I work with you," I said. "I think you'll remember all the times I've worked with you."

He pursed his lips, and nodded. "Well, yes, when there's a pinch to be made, you call us.

But you're working around us, now, aren't you? You won't reveal all you know about this."

"I've told you all I know, Chief."

"Who's your client?"

"That I can't tell you. There's no reason to think it has anything to do with Moose Lundgren's death. His death was overdue. Devine's probably told you why I went over to see Lundgren."

The Chief looked annoyed. "Sure, sure, sure . . . Even if it's true, it's a hell of a story. I think you went over there to make a deal with him. Maybe you even know who killed him. I'm not believing a word of that fairy tale you told Devine. I want the facts."

I looked down at my hands. "You've got all the facts I can give you," I told him. "Talking won't get us anywhere."

There was a silence. His voice, when it came was low. "I've never threatened to take your license away from you, have I? Never?"

"I hope you're not threatening it now," I said. "You've got Every to work on. I gave you that. Would you rather have someone a little easier to crack? Is that why you want my client?"

"You know me better than that," he said.

"O. K. I shouldn't have said it. But old Pop Delaney was in on my current deal *this morning*, as soon as I got it. I could have called from Lundgren's office, and then taken a powder. I've been working with the department all day. I've kept one thing secret, the name of my client. The Marines couldn't get that, not from me, on this case, or any case, unless I want to tell them. That's my stand, and that's the way it'll always be."

"Delaney?" he said. "Somebody's missing? You might have told me that before, Morty."

"I thought you'd know," I said. "A girl is missing. A girl named Flame Harlin. She was the featured attraction at Val Every's Golden Pheasant. That I know. That's all I know."

I didn't tell him about Rodney Carlton, because Rodney would lead them to Miss Townsbury.

"O.K.," the Chief said. "We'll go ahead on that as far as we can. If it isn't far enough, I'll be calling you in again. Cooperation is what we want here, boy."

"It's no one-way street," I said, "this cooperation. It works both ways. You might mention that to some of the gang."

He smiled. "Like Devine? He getting in your hair again? Devine's a hard worker, Morty. He puts in a lot of hours."

"All right," I said. "As a taxpayer, I'm not kicking. But if you could just keep him out of my cases. His touch is too heavy."

The Chief smiled again. He'd had a change of mood. "We can't all have your touch," he said. "Some of us are more serious. Some of us work for a living."

GLEN HARVEY was out in the corridor, talking to Doc Walters, and I stopped. Glen told me: "It was a .22, all right. What would that spell to you, Jonesy?"

"Some guy had a lot of confidence in his shooting," I said. "Or maybe he was too lazy to carry a heavy gun. It could spell anything."

"Like a woman? That could be a woman's gun, huh?"

"Right. But not between the eyes. A woman who could shoot like that could give exhibitions. You ever meet a woman who could place one like that?"

"Not lately," Glen said. "What'd the Old Man want?"

"Just my views on how to improve the department," I said. "Homicide stinks, to hear him tell it." I left them with that.

I went back to the office, but there was nothing there. I went over to Mac's and had some meat balls with spaghetti. Mac watched me anxiously while I ate it.

"Something wrong?" I asked.

He watched me put the last mouthful away. "I guess not," he said, "by the way you ate it. I kinda thought that meat was spoiled."

Nice guy. "The Dodgers stink," I said, "and Mickey Walker couldn't punch his way out of a paper bag."

"Hah-hah," Mac said. "Your opinion, just your opinion."

"Besides which," I went on. "You run a crummy joint. The only reason I come here is because it's handy."

"The only reason you come here," he told me calmly, "is because no other joint in town would let you in. A gum-shoe, a shamus—they ain't so democratic, them other joints."

"Tonight," I told him, "I'm going to the Golden Pheasant. I'll bet they let me in. I'll bet I get a ringside table."

"That I want to see," Mac scoffed. "You should live so long."

"You should see me with my new suit on," I said. I paid him, and left.

The new suit was a dark blue cheviot, looking like more than it had cost—I like to think. With it, I wore one of my two remaining white shirts and a blue and silver striped tie. I hoped that this Pheasant wasn't one of those snobbish places where formal clothes only are admitted. Maybe the Dusy would impress them.

This Golden Pheasant was one of those snobbish places. The doorman looked down his nose at me, while he told me this. It was a long and thin and haughty nose. He didn't even glance toward the Dusy, parked just across the street.

"It's business," I assured him. "It's urgent business with Mr. Every and I'm sure he'll fire you if he hears you've kept me out."

"I'm sorry, sir," the doorman said. "I'm very sorry. Perhaps it would be better if you were to go some place and phone Mr. Every."

"O.K.," I said. "It's about Miss Harlin. You tell him that when you see him." I turned and started to walk away.

"Just a moment, sir." There was some urgency in his voice.

I waited.

"You didn't give me your name, sir. Mr. Every will want to get in touch with you, I am sure."

"I'm glad to hear it," I told him. "He seemed to be a hard man to approach. Tell him I might drop back. Or I might not."

He was worried, I could tell.

He said humbly: "Wouldn't you care to wait inside?"

"In these clothes?" I said wonderingly. "In these old rags? Jeeves, I'm disappointed in you. Just tell him I *might* drop back."

"You could wait in the bar, sir," he suggested. "I'm sure there'd be no complaint. I'll explain it to the bartender."

I appeared to consider this. I pursed my lips and wrinkled my brow. "They have whiskey in there?" I asked him finally.

"Of course, sir. Including some bonded whiskey."

"Well," I relented, "in that case, I might wait around for a while."

We went in together, and he went down to the end of the bar to explain it all to the bartender.

It was quite a place. There was silver in the decorating, and some pale blues. There was a misty, romantic quality in the atmosphere. All women would look glamorous in this light, all men interesting.

It was early, and there wasn't much of a crowd. Through the archway, I could see that most of the tables were empty. The bar was semi-circular, attended by five men in white. Only two of them were busy at the moment, the others stood around in a sort of parade rest position. They looked well-disciplined.

One of the men in white was standing before me now.

"Scotch," I said, "with seltzer." I examined my nails and pretended that I wasn't more at home in a spot like Mac's.

It tasted like all Scotch tastes—like liquid smoke, but I drank it manfully, while I surveyed the place.

Whoever said crime doesn't pay? He must have meant small crime doesn't pay much. Val Every had made the money for this joint in a variety of ways, all of them dishonest. He was probably making money here—just meeting the payroll would be big business. And Val wasn't the biggest operator in this town, not by a long, long way.

From the dining room, now, I could hear the sound of a violin—softly muted music, sad music.

It dug into me, inside, where I live.

CHAPTER THREE

No Logic in Love



THEN a feminine voice brought me back to here and now. "Were you waiting for Mr. Every?"

A blonde. She'd been some places and seen some things, I would guess. That was in the dark blue eyes. She wasn't hard. She was dressed daringly in a sheath of black satin, but she was dressed expensively. The humorous slant to her full mouth saved the face from being just another blonde's face. She had all she needed.

"I am," I said. "Has he come in yet?"

"Not yet." She climbed up onto a stool next to me, and gestured the bartender over. "Rye," she told him, "with a little water, Jim."

"Right, Miss Meredith—same as always."

She turned to me. "My first name is Judy, if you're interested. Did you bring some news about Flame?"

I shook my head. I told her my name. "I just wanted to talk to Every about it," I explained. "You work for him?"

She looked at me doubtfully. She smiled. "Work—why, yes, I guess it's work. You might say I watch out for his interests."

"Miss Harlin would be one of the interests?"

"Yes, damn it." Her drink came, and she studied it. "Yes, she would be the big interest. I was hoping she was dead."

I said: "The venom clamours of a jealous woman—poison more deadly than a mad dog's tooth."

"Was she poisoned?" Judy asked. "Tell me she was poisoned."

"No," I said. "At least, not to my knowledge. It's the music. I always quote the bard when I'm emotionally stirred."

She sipped her drink. "It shows, doesn't it—my jealousy? You noticed it."

"Nothing shows that shouldn't," I assured her. "But wishing her dead—that's a little rough, don't you think? Why don't you just wish she would fall in love with someone else?"

"Love?" she said, as though it were a foreign word. "Love? She's not in love with him. She's played him for a sucker ever since she started to work here."

"And him? He's in love with her, isn't he?"

"Hmmm. He could be. He wants her badly enough. I—it's hard to think of him in love with anything but money or power. If you know what I mean?"

"Just vaguely," I said. Her glass was now empty. "Could I buy you another drink?" I asked.

She shook her head. "It would bring me

down a grade. My drinks are all free. If customers start buying them for me, well, you know—"

I ordered another Scotch, and she a rye. The violin had stopped and somebody was getting hot with a piano. Right out of the jungle, this piano, all left hand.

"What is she like?" I asked Judy.

"Flame? Like her name, sort of. I mean, there was fire there, there was a burning. Maybe it was just ambition, maybe it was just—greed."

"And maybe you're prejudiced."

"That could be." She looked at my glass. "You're a slow drinker."

I finished it in a swallow. "I think I'll have rye, too, this time."

The bartender filled mine up without comment. But he said to Judy: "Mr. Every isn't going to like this, Miss Meredith. You remember last time—"

"To hell with Mr. Every," Judy said. "If I can't get it here, I'll go somewhere else. Mr. Jones will take me, won't you, Mr. Jones?"

"Gladly," I said, and meant it. She was a comfortable girl to be with. Not quieting, but comfortable.

The bartender shrugged, and poured out the whiskey.

There was a silence, and then she looked over at me. "You know where she is, don't you? That's what you came to tell Val."

"I don't know where she is. I'm looking for her."

"You're working for Val, aren't you? He'd be afraid to have one of his own boys look for her." She stopped then, and I looked over to find the bartender glaring at her.

"I'm not working for Val," I said. "The guy who was is dead. He was killed in his office, this afternoon."

I scarcely heard the guarded intake of her breath. Her face was set rigidly, her eyes were blank, staring at the backbar but not seeing it. "Dead," she said in a whisper. "That fat man is dead?"

"That's right." I moved my glass around the circle of moisture on the bar. I kept my eyes from her stricken face.

Her voice was just above a whisper, now. "That's what will happen to Val. He's just like her—ambition is eating him up. He'll get in over his head on this."

"You love him, don't you?" I said, looking at her.

She met my gaze blankly. "Is that bad, Mr. Jones?"

"Maybe, for you," I said. "I don't know him very well."

The bartender was back, the man called Jim. He said firmly: "You'll get one of your headaches if you have any more, Miss Meredith."

She smiled at him. "One more headache

won't even be noticed, Jim. Another rye, please."

He looked doubtful.

"Or I'll take Mr. Jones away. And you know how Mr. Every will feel about that. You wouldn't want to be on the wrong side of Mr. Every, would you, Jim?"

His face colored. *No man, I thought, should ever need to be humiliated like that.*

I said quietly: "I'll be responsible, Jim. Don't worry about your job."

"O.K.," he said, and thanked me with his eyes.

It wasn't, I knew, his job he was worrying about. But I had let him think it was.

I said to Judy: "That rye's a man's drink. You should treat it with more respect."

I never heard her answer, if there was one. At that moment, a quiet voice at my side said: "You were looking for Mr. Every?"

THE man who spoke was short and round, dressed in beautifully-tailored dinner clothes. His face was round. It would have been a jovial face, excepting that his eyes were stone, just gray stone.

"I've been waiting for him," I admitted, "for some time. Though it has passed very pleasantly."

No expression in the gray eyes. "He's here, now. He'll see you. If you'll follow me?"

I followed him. Along the bar, and through a hall, past the lounges. A door at the end of a short hall, here, and we went through it.

It was a big room. There was a mammoth desk in it, and one file cabinet, but it wasn't properly an office. There was a fireplace, with a long, low coffee table perpendicular to that, and davenport, a pair of them, flanking the coffee table. Heavy burgundy drapes and a wine-ish rug. Some leather overstuffed chairs.

This Val Every I had seen before. I tried to remember where. He was fairly tall, and immensely wide across the shoulders. He had a square, masculine face which contrasted with his black, curly hair and the soft brown eyes.

He was sitting behind his desk, and he didn't rise when I entered.

"I've seen you before," he said.

I remembered, then. A punk who'd held up a grocery store on the west side. I'd been on the force, then, in my first year. I'd nailed him at his rooming house.

"Sure," I said. "I'd forgotten your name. It was a long time ago."

"Where was it?" he asked me.

"In a rooming house, on Vine. It was about that business on 12th and Vine, that grocery."

"I'll be damned," he said. "You—" He used some naughty words. "How I used to hate your guts. And I'd forgotten. . . ."

I said nothing. Stone-eyes said nothing. We both waited.

"That was the only time." His voice was

reminiscent. "The only time I was ever nailed." He studied me like a specimen in biology class. "What do you know about Miss Harlin?"

"Nothing," I said. "That's why I'm here."

There was some sound from Stone-eyes, and Every's face seemed to freeze. He asked quietly: "Who you working for, chum? The city?"

I shook my head. "I'm a private operative."

His laugh was nasty. "That's a hell of a word for a shamus. Plumbers are sanitary engineers, and drummers are sales engineers. And you're a private operative. I asked who you were working for, laddy."

"My name is Jones," I said. "You can call me Mr. Jones. Who I'm working for would be my business. I'm looking for Miss Flame Harlin. I thought you might have something I could use." I turned to go.

"Just a minute, Mr. Jones." It was Stone-eyes' voice. It was gentle and quiet.

I turned to face him. He had a gun in his hand, a small gun. A Colt Bankers' Special, the kind that handles a .22 caliber long rifle cartridge.

It was a silly little gun, a toy, and I might have laughed. Only Moose Lundgren had been killed with a .22.

"Mr. Every wasn't finished talking to you, Mr. Jones."

Val Every nodded his head toward one of the overstuffed chairs. "Sit down—Jones."

I went over and sat down, trying to look more casual than I felt. I hadn't brought a gun in with me. My .38 was locked in the glove compartment of the Dusy. It had been parked there for some time, and I wondered if there was a parking limit. The damndest things went through my mind.

Val Every rubbed his hands together and then studied the palms. He expelled his breath, and looked at me. "Miss Harlin worked for me. I took a personal interest in her career, you understand. Lot of people getting mixed up in this lately."

He stopped and I waited.

"Including the cops," he went on. "They were just up at my place. Two of them. One named Devine. I forget the big guy's name. I'll have to fumigate the place, now. I haven't had any trouble with the law for a long time. You tell them about me?"

"I told them what Lundgren had told me. I don't want any trouble with the law, either. I usually tell them all I can."

"Once a cop, always a cop," Every said.

I made no comment.

"You're pretty solid with the boys downtown, aren't you, Jones?"

"We get along. I know most of them, the ones that matter, anyway."

"You and the Chief, huh?"

I said nothing.

"O.K.," he said. "I don't want any trouble

with the law, not right now. And I don't want any trouble with you, not tonight. But stay out of my business, Jones. Keep your nose clean."

"I'll continue to look for Miss Harlin," I told him. "So long as my client wants me to. When she tells me to quit, I'll—"

"She?" Every said quickly. "You said 'she.' It's a woman?"

Quiet, again. Every looked over at Stone-eyes, and back at me.

I cursed myself silently. I said: "No. I didn't say 'she.'"

He was smiling. "Never mind. That's all for now, Jones." He turned to Stone-eyes. "When you go out, tell Judy I want to see her."

Stone-eyes walked with me to the door. I stopped, while he opened it. I said: "That Lundgren was killed with a twenty-two. You'd better have a good story, when the time comes."

"Wait," Every said.

I turned and waited. He had risen, and was walking towards me. Stone-eyes closed the door quietly. The gun was again in his hand.

Every came close enough to breathe in my face. "Lundgren was killed with a twenty-two? How'd you know?"

"I found him. I was with the cops all day."

Every looked at his boy. There was no expression in the gray eyes that looked back at him. "You know where I was, boss. You were with me, all the time."

"Not all the time."

"This guy's a cop, boss. This is what he wants. They'd rather lie than eat."

"If you guys can read," I said, "it'll be in tonight's late edition. Or whatever they call the sheet that's on the stands now. If you want me to hang around, I'd just as soon do it in the bar. That's good rye out there."

"A comedian," Stone-eyes said. "We'll tell you where to wait, gumshoe."

Every said: "Wait out in the bar."



LEFT them and went out into the bar. There was a bulky, well-fed-looking man sitting on a bar stool, drinking a beer. I didn't need to see his face to tell it was Glen Harvey. His suits are even cheaper than mine, and fit worse.

He grinned when he saw me. "Have a drink on the taxpayers," he said. "This all goes on the swindle sheet."

Stone-eyes came out and walked down along the bar to where Judy Meredith was still sitting. She followed him back to the room.

"Whose idea was this?" I asked Glen. "You don't look any more like a cop than if you were wearing the blue. What do you hope to get out of this, except a hangover?"

"On beer?" Glen said. "I'm just sitting here.

It's Devine's idea, and Devine's my boss, and you hadn't oughta run him down. If he wants me to sit here and drink beer, I will."

The bartender, not Jim, came over, and I ordered rye.

"You should have a tuxedo," I said, to Glen. "I'm no waiter," Glen said. "I'm a guest." He sipped his beer. "You know, that Moose Lundgren didn't have enough to get buried on. And not a relative. They're planting him in Potter's Field tomorrow, Jonesy."

The cold ground, I thought. *Deep and cold and all alone.* The violin was back, crying in its throaty way, making the bartenders look unhappy again.

"That fiddler gives me the willies," Glen said.

Miss Judy Meredith, that lovely gal, would now be hearing the riot act. And from a joker like Every. There was no logic in love.

Judy came out after a few minutes looking no less happy than when she had gone in. She came directly over to where I was sitting, and climbed onto the adjacent stool.

Glen lifted his eyebrows, and coughed quietly, but I ignored him.

Judy said quietly: "Your friend's from headquarters, isn't he?"

"You'd have to ask him," I said.

"Val," she told me, "is burning out a bearing. He's not fit company for man or beast."

"Wait'll he sees the papers," I said. "You'd better find a place to hide, after that."

She ordered a rye and water. She said: "Mr. Every won't mind. He just said I could have one or two."

He went to get it, and she turned to me. "What's in the papers?"

"Lundgren was killed with a twenty-two," I said.

"So—"

"So that's what his boy carries, the little round man with the slate eyes."

"Don't others, too? Is that so unusual?"

"It's very unusual. At least, among torpedoes."

The man in white set her drink down in front of her. Glen coughed again, and I looked over at him, and then looked away.

"Do we have to stay here?" Judy asked. "We could get drunk anyplace, though it might cost you a little more."

"Every wants me to wait," I said.

"Oh. Then—you are working for him?"

"Let's go," I said. "Let's find some place where the lights are dim, and the music soft. Let's go some place and dance."

"I'll get my coat," she said.

She left the bar. Glen said: "You're rude. You know that, I guess. You should be more familiar with Emily Post."

"She knows you're a cop," I told him. "I didn't want her to get the idea we were too thick."

He made no comment. He looked at me as though I had just crawled out from under a stone, and then looked away.

Judy came with her coat, and we left. The doorman looked surprised when he saw me leave with the boss's girl, but he made no comment.

We went to the Grotto, a fairly quiet spot on 41st, where the band is more concerned with danceable rhythms than trick arrangements, where there isn't any floor show.

We danced and talked and drank. We didn't get drunk. We didn't talk about Every, or Flame or Stone-eyes.

About eleven-thirty, we left, and drove out the drive, way out beyond Brown Deer, beyond the hills, to the bay. There, on a high point, overlooking the water, I parked.

I was aware of her, you can bet. I was ready to sign on the dotted at the moment. But I just lit us a pair of cigarettes, and turned on the radio, and we sat, looking out at the water.

There wasn't much conversation, and what there was I can't remember now. All I remember is the perfume she wore, and the way her voice seemed to match the quiet of the night.

Then she said: "You might as well kiss me. I've been kissed before I met Every, and I'll be kissed after he finds the grave he's headed for. There's no reason we should think of him."

I kissed her. And for the moment, I know she wasn't thinking of Every.

She sighed, as we drew apart again. She said: "You're all right, Mortimer Jones. You're the first man I've wanted to kiss in a long, long time. Maybe I ought to tell you about this."

"You don't need to," I said. "Every wanted you to go, didn't he? He sent you?"

"That's right. He wanted me to find out who you were working for."

"Do you want to know?"

"I don't give a damn, personally," she said. "And if Val wants to know, he can ask you himself."

I didn't kiss her again, though it was a struggle. We sat quietly listening to the radio and smoking, and about one o'clock we started back to town. We took our time, going back, and it was about two when I pulled the Dusy up in front of her apartment building.

It was a tall building, set back on a wide, deep lawn. Up around the seventh floor, there was a light burning in one of the apartments.

"That's mine," she said, "the one where the light is burning."

"You leave it on?" I asked.

"No," she said, "I didn't."

"Must be the maid," I said.

"No." She was getting out of the car, before I could get out to open the door. "No. It's not the maid. She comes in by the day."

"Look," I said. "You think—"

"There's nothing wrong, Mr. Jones," she said.

"Nothing at all. Goodnight—and thanks. Thanks for the lovely evening." Then she was going up the walk, between the shrubs that bordered the lawn.

IT WAS bright the next morning. The sun, undimmed by clouds, ran the mercury up into the eighties. It felt like summer again.

Even Mac looked chipper this morning, when I ordered ham and eggs. "This is more like it," Mac said. "This is a day I might close up and take a drive out in the country."

I knew he wouldn't. He worked all the time, early and late. He would probably die with more hay in the bank than I'd ever seen. With no one to leave it to.

I finished my coffee, ground out my cigarette, and left. Sunshine flooded the street, and the kid was there, again, with the football. He still didn't have it.

I went out there. "Look," I said, "it's like this."

I took the ball from him, and took just one step, and put my foot into it. I could feel it was going to be all right, I could feel the solid impact of it. It went soaring, high into the cloudless sky, and dropped way down the block.

"See?" I said. "You've got to get behind the ball. You've got to get the feel of it."

"Thanks," he said. "Thanks a lot, Mr. Jones."

I felt pretty good. If the detective business fell off, maybe I could sign up with the Packers or the Bears. Or some college.

I walked back to the curb before I noticed the car that was parked directly in front of my office. It was a Mercury club convertible, a trim and sleek piece of fine merchandise.

There was a man behind the wheel. A neat little, round little man with stone-gray eyes. The window was down on his side, and he was looking at me.

I walked over there. "Quite a punt, wasn't it?" I asked him.

"You're cute," he said evenly. "You're quite a comedian."

"How's Every this morning?" I asked. "You two haven't been squabbling, have you?"

"Some day," he said, "I might put a hole in you. Just to see what comes out."

"You'd better get more gun, if you do," I said. "A guy with a twenty-two needs a lot of luck."

I was feeling rough after that punt.

He was getting out of the car, now, on the curb side. We went up the steps together, Stone-eyes in front. I didn't want him behind me, even packing a .22.

Up there, he sat in the leatherette chair and I sat in my swivel chair. He looked at me gravely, rubbing his upper lip with the inner edges of his lower teeth, looking undecided. Then he said: "We got the papers last night, and we got them this morning. There was nothing in none of them about a twenty-two."

"What caliber did it mention?" I asked.

"It didn't mention any, none of the papers mentioned any."

"So?"

"The boss is unhappy. We're not as chummy as we were. I'd hate to think you'd lied about that. We'll find out, understand. The boss has got contacts. He don't have to read the papers. But I keep remembering you said that at the wrong time."

"I was in a pretty hot spot," I said. "I wasn't worried about anybody but me at the time. I can't think of any reason I should worry about you."

His face hardened faintly. "When they figure out the hour it happened, the boss will be checking me against that, too. It might be rough, after that."

I wondered why he was telling me all this, so I asked him.

"Because I figured maybe you were a little smarter this morning. I figured if you'd tell me who you're working for, I could get things straightened out before the boss got any hotter. I could sort of wrap this up, and hand it to him."

I shook my head. "No soap. Judy tried to get that out of me, last night, and missed. You haven't got even half her charms."

"No," he said, "maybe not. But I've got a gun."

He wasn't lying about that. For it was in his hand, now. It was leveled toward a spot I estimated as right between my eyes. I didn't flinch, or move my head.

I said: "That would be dumb. The kid saw you come in with me. The cops have been watching this place since yesterday morning. All kinds of people may have seen you come up here."

He smiled a strange smile. "You wouldn't be afraid of a twenty-two, would you, Mr. Jones?"

I had no answer to that.

It was then the phone rang. I started to reach for it, but Stone-eyes shook his head. He kept the gun trained on me, as he went over and lifted the receiver.

"Hello," he said, "yes, this is Mr. Jones."

Then he smiled, a happy smile. "Of course, Miss Townsbury," he said. "I'll be out there right away."

He pronged the receiver. "Townsbury," he said. "That's the dame that runs the cure, isn't it? That's the old hag who cures the luses."

"I don't know the name," I said. "It must be a wrong number."

"Sure," he said. "Of course. We'll probably meet again, shamus."

I nodded. "I hope so. I certainly hope so."

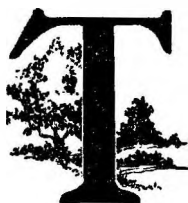
He stopped at the door. "You scare me," he said, smiling. "You scare the hell out of me." Then he was gone, and I heard his small feet, his light tread on the steps.

I phoned Miss Townsbury immediately, and told her what had happened. There was no answer from her for a few seconds. Then: "Perhaps you'd better run right out here. There are some things I had better explain to you."

I agreed that might be a good idea.

CHAPTER FOUR

Knit One, Kill One



HERE were no guests on the front lawn this morning, but I heard the sound of laughter from the rear of the house.

The Mercedes town car was near the entrance, and the tall dark chauffeur was dusting it leisurely. He nod-

ded at me as I got out of the car.

"Miss Townsbury around?" I asked.

"In that same room. You can go right in."

The front door was open. I went through, and down the dim hall to the pastel green room.

Knitting, again. "Close the door, Mr. Jones," she said.

I closed the door and came over to sit in a frail-looking rocker.

"Who was that man who answered the phone in your office?"

"I don't know his name," I said. "He works for Val Every. He had a twenty-two on me, when the phone rang."

"A twenty-two on you?" She looked up from her knitting. "You'll have to be more explicit, Mr. Jones. What did you mean by that?"

"I mean this man had a gun pointed at me. The gun was a twenty-two caliber revolver. The same caliber that killed Lundgren."

The needles stopped. "Lundgren?"

"The detective Every hired. He was killed yesterday. Didn't you read about it in the papers?"

She shook her head. For the first time since I'd known her, her ice-blue eyes held apprehension. "Are we getting mixed up in this, in—murder?"

"I think we are. The police have been after me to reveal your identity. I'll hold out as long as I can."

She looked down at the floor, and up at me. "You're on good terms with them, aren't you? You can protect me in this?"

I had no answer for her, and said nothing. I had only questions.

Maybe she realized that, for she said: "You must be rather puzzled about this place. I feel that I should be frank with you."

"You can rely on my discretion," I said, in my smooth way.

"This place is used for curing alcoholism," she said, and the needles were back at work.

"Our patients are wealthy, all of them. We use a cure that might be frowned on in some medical circles. It's a—*a shock* cure. We have had exceptional success. But, of course, publicity would destroy any hopes we might have for continuing the work. You can understand that, Mr. Jones?"

I said I could. But I asked: "The fences, with the barbed wire? The heavy gate?"

The needles never stopped. "There is a period in the cure when they want to quit. Despite the solemn promises they made, before they were admitted, they try to run out during that period. They try to leave at night. We can't permit this. You may have wondered at Carl's vigilance. Carl is my watchdog."

I asked if Carl was the chauffeur, and learned that he was. I asked. "Is alcoholism the only thing you treat here, Miss Townsbury?"

"It is." She put the needles in her lap, and looked at me with eyes that were suddenly, surprisingly soft. "There's another story I've never told others, Mr. Jones. I'd like to tell you. I want you to understand that money doesn't motivate me in this work. I have all the money I'll ever need."

I waited, wondering at this new softness.

"There was a man," she said, "a young man, back when I, too, was young." She hesitated, smiling faintly, sadly. "He was gifted, Mr. Jones, a man of promise, of talent and breeding. He could have been one of our great composers. He was headed for the stars. Until that vile alcohol ruined him, dulled that brilliant mind, blunted his sensitivity." She paused. "It—killed him, finally."

There was some more conversation, after that. I promised her I would protect her as well as I was able, that I would contact the Missing Persons Bureau confidentially. I didn't tell her I already had.

I left her then, with her knitting and her memories.

Outside, the sun was hiding behind a cloud. I looked over at the stand of virgin timber, and over at Carl, still fiddling with the Mercedes. I heard the voices in the back, quieter, now.

Carl came over to stand next to the Dusy. "Everything's going to be all right, isn't it?" he asked me. "Miss Townsbury isn't going to get into any trouble?"

"Time will tell," I said. "Where's the red-head this morning?"

He smiled. "She's cured. She'll be all right, now."

"She was all right yesterday," I said. "She'll always be all right in my book."

His smile was still there. "Well, that's something else."

He went back to the Mercedes, and I started the motor. The Dusy went murmuring down the drive, talking to herself.

So the bootlegger and the lady in silk were

at odds. One who had made his fortune selling it, and one who was using her fortune in curing it.

That's the way it looked, but there were so many angles, so damned many angles . . . And there was always Devine in the background, itching for my scalp.

Why couldn't I get Stone-eyes off somewhere, and work him over a little? He was the small type I could handle, if he didn't have the .22. But I was no longer with the department—I would need to use considerable finesse, instead of force.

And this Rodney Carlton, the poet with the nine iron? Who loved Miss Harlin desperately, but hadn't seen her for a month. He struck me as being a trifle on the phony side. But I could be wrong—I'd been wrong before, on lots of people.

I decided to go to Mac's first, to see if he had anything edible. There was a faint hollowness in my stomach. I upped the Dusy's pace a bit, and let my mind wander where it would while I kept my eyes on the road.

I can be wrong, all right. I'd been wrong about Mac. There was a crudely penciled sign in the glass of his locked front door. *Gone for the day* it read. Out where the grass was green, where the wind swept the hills, my Mac would be now. Sans apron, sans dialogue, sans frown, out where it might already be raining.

For there was thunder in the north.

There was dampness in the air, here on my poor street. There was that quiet that precedes a storm sometimes. And there was a Chrysler Highlander sedan parked at the curb in front of my office.

THE girl behind the wheel got out when she saw me, and stood waiting. She was wearing something simple in a printed blue, some draped material that did her proud.

"Good morning, Hawkshaw," she said.

"Hello, Judy." I feasted my eyes a while. "Won't you step into my parlor?"

"Let's sit in the car and watch the storm come up," she suggested.

She climbed back in, and I followed her. "Every send you again?" I asked.

"Mmmmm. He didn't disapprove." She looked at me and smiled. "I think you did me some good, last night."

The first drop of rain hit the windshield, and there were others, on the metal top. "The kiss?" I asked. "Or the dancing, or the brightness of my conversation? Or just my generally seedy appearance? That could be good for your ego, in a comparative way."

"Just you. Just Mortimer Jones, that easy, gallant, good guy."

"Enough," I said, looking into the dark blue, the knowing eyes. "I'm blushing. I'm no ladies' man."

"I wouldn't know about that," she said. "I'm no lady. But for a while, last night, I could have been. You treated me like a lady, Jonesy. It's kind of early to tell, but you might even have cured me. Wouldn't that be fine, wonderful?"

I said: "It could be temporary. Nobody's ever confused me with Tyrone Power."

Her laugh, a low musical chuckle from her lovely throat. "No, your charm isn't that tangible. Don't be frightened, Philo. It's not only you. There must be lots of other wonderful guys like you."

I said stiffly: "I don't remember coming off a production line."

"Jonesy!" Her hand found mine. "I didn't mean that. I meant, there must be other tolerant, gentle, decent men who'd find me attractive. I'm not hopeless, am I?"

"You could do all right," I assured her, "in any league. If you really think this stupid infatuation of yours with Curly is finished, you could do all right."

"It could be," she whispered. "I'm hoping it is. Will you hold your thumbs for me, Jonesy?"

"I will," I promised. And then the thought hit me. "Do you know Miss Townsbury? The nice little old lady who runs that place for alcoholics?"

"Know her!" Her laugh was short and sharp. "I was up there for treatment. Why do you think—" And she stopped. She stared at me. "Never mind," she said. "I'm no stool pigeon, whatever else I've been."

I said: "How would you like to take a drive with me out to a poet's house?"

"Is he interesting?" she asked. "Is he handsome?"

"He's handsome," I said. "I think he might prove interesting."

We drove out in the Chrysler, slowly, over the wet streets, the wipers working diligently to sweep the torrents of water flooding the windshield.

There was a riot car parked in front of the cottage. There was the meat wagon, and a department coupe, and a cop standing up on the porch, out of the wet. The Chrysler braked to a halt, and I got out. I told Judy: "I'm going in there. If I'm not out in three minutes, you'd better take off. That'll mean I'm right in the middle of it."

She looked at me wonderingly.

"Something," I said, "must have happened to the poet."

I closed the car door, and ran.

The man in uniform, on the small porch, stopped me. I told him who I was, and that I wanted to see officer in charge.

I got in, finally. Harvey was there, but not Devine. Adams was there and an assistant M.E. Rodney Carlton was there.

There was a small but bloody hole in the side of his neck.

The assistant M.E. thought it had nicked the jugular, and he had died within a very few minutes.

Harvey nodded. "He was alive when I got here." Then he saw me. "Well," he said. "You're in this, too, aren't you?"

"I was going by," I lied. "I saw the wagon out front."

"You're a liar," he said. He was glaring at me. "This guy talked to me, before he died. Most of it I couldn't understand, but your name was clear enough."

"All right," I said, "I'm a liar. You want to run me in?"

Some of his quick anger was melting, and he looked uncomfortable. "Just hang around," he said. "I'll see you later."



I WALKED leisurely over to the window, and saw Devine step from a department car. I saw Judy ride off in the Chrysler. Devine looked wet and miserable as he came scurrying up the walk, his head down.

He didn't look any happier when he saw me. But he ignored me, at first, while he got the story from Glen. I listened.

Somewhere, Devine had got a lead on this Carlton, and he had sent Glen over. Glen had got here in time to hear a shot, a sharp little spat like a .22 makes. He had opened the door, when he heard that, and found Rodney Carlton on the floor, the hole in his neck.

Devine said: "Nobody in the house? Just him?"

"That's all."

"Somebody must have been here," Devine said. "Somebody shot him."

My eyes measured the distance from Carlton's body to the kitchen arch. I saw the line of blood-drops leading from there. At least, it looked like blood, though it wasn't very noticeable on that rug.

I went out into the kitchen. There was blood, a mess of it, on the floor near the door in here. I called them out.

"How's this?" I suggested. "Somebody rings the doorbell in the rear. He goes to the door, and—"

I looked from Devine to Harvey.

"Let's see what it looks like out there," Devine said.

There were a pair of trellises flanking the doorway, back here, effectively screening the view of the door from the neighbors. There was a small back yard, which was bordered by an open alley.

Devine looked at Glen Harvey. "Whoever it

was," he said quietly, "he could be in Hoboken, by now. He could be in Paducah."

"Sure," Glen said. "I called the Doc, after I got the guy's story. He was still alive. I wasn't chasing out, while he was still alive."

"And what'd he tell you? Did he give you the murderer's phone number, too, so we won't have to go and get him, so we can just call him and have him drop down to the station? You're armed, aren't you? You got any reason for not going out that back door?"

Devine's face was red, and getting redder. He would probably work himself into a frenzy, the way he was going. I said mildly: "He did tell Glen something. He mentioned my name, for one thing."

Devine looked over at me, in his nasty way, and then looked at Glen. "That right? Jones in this one, too?"

Glen said evenly: "Carlton mentioned his name. He said something about putting her on a train. I don't know who he meant by her. He said I should tell Jones that. And tell him she never came back from up there. The way it sounded, he thought, at first, that Jones was working for Every. That's why Carlton told him he hadn't seen her for a month." Glen was looking at me, though he was talking to Devine.

"All right," I said, "here's something for you. This Carlton was engaged, at one time, to the girl Val Every's looking for. Every's number one torpedo carries a little Bankers' Special, a Colt twenty-two. That could be a twenty-two hole in his neck. And Lundgren was killed with a twenty-two. What more do you need?"

"Just your part in it," Devine said. "What about the train? And not coming back from up there. What's that mean?"

"Nothing to me," I lied. "The man was probably in a delirium."

"And you're not working for Every?" Devine said.

"That's right."

"Who are you working for, then? Now would be the time to open up, Jones. With two murders in two days, you could start playing it smart about now."

I looked at him, and away. I said: "Grab Every. Keep him on an open charge. I think I got something."

Devine said: "We'll take care of the law, in this town. If you've got something on this, I want it."

"What about Every?" I asked. "You've looked up all the files on him, haven't you? What's his big number, now?"

"Dope," Devine said.

That tied it up. It was beginning to make sense. I said: "Grab him. Somebody'll talk. Hold him. And I'll want four men, maybe more. More would be wise. Two of them can ride in the back of the Dusy, under cover. The rest, I'll place."

"You?" Devine asked. "You giving orders, Jones?"

"Not if you don't want me to," I said. "You can take it from here, if you want."

They were taking out the body of Rodney Carlton. Devine looked at Glen, started to say something, and then changed his mind. He looked at me quietly.

Finally, he said: "We'll talk this over down at the station."

I agreed to that, and I rode down there with him in the department car. We had no dialogue, on the way down.

While he went in to see the Chief, I phoned Judy Meredith. I hoped she had gone right home.

She had. I asked her: "Would you mind answering just one question, one very important question?"

"Try me," she said, "and see."

"Did you ever take dope?"

It was a hell of a question, and put very bluntly. But I think she understood there was no malice in my asking it. I heard no sound excepting the rumble of thunder, outside, and the clack of a typewriter from somewhere inside.

And then she said: "Not for long. I found out, in time."

Only that, and the click of the phone on her end as she hung up.

I phoned Miss Townsbury. "Something's come up," I told her. "I must see you, right away."

She would be at home all day, she informed me.

Devine was still in with the Chief. I told Harvey: "I'm going across the street and get a sandwich. I'll be back."

I was still there, in the counter lunchroom, when Devine came in. He said: "The Old Man said O.K. Who do you want?"

"You and Harvey in the tonneau," I said. "Melkins, Red Small, Jackson and Schulte. One of the M.E.'s, prepared to make an examination right on the spot. I think we can forget the warrants."

"What's it all about," Devine said, "or am I being personal?"

I told him what I thought, and why, and he looked skeptical. But he didn't discourage the trip. He would have liked to see me miss this one—the stage was properly set for me to look very silly if I missed.

WE RODE up that way, three of us in the Dusy, the others following in a squad car. I moved along at a smart clip. Without conversation, it was a boring trip, and neither of my riders seemed to be very much interested in conversing.

I put Schulte at the gate. We rode around the entire estate, and I put the others where I thought they should be, though only the gate

really needed watching. But I hadn't known this before coming up. Then Devine and Glen ducked down in back, while I drove up the gravel drive.

Carl wasn't in sight this afternoon. Miss Townsbury herself came to the door. She was wearing the steel-rimmed glasses again. We walked back together to the pastel blue room. There was no knitting in sight.

I sat in the same rocker, and she in her knitting chair. I told her about the death of Rodney Carlton.

She showed no emotion at the news.

I said: "He didn't die right away. He talked, before he died."

There was emotion now—fear in the cold eyes, and a stiffening of the spine. "To—whom did he talk, Mr. Jones?"

"To me," I lied.

There was some relaxation in her posture, some relief.

"Miss Harlin is dead, isn't she?" I asked her suddenly.

Again, the stiffening. "Are you insane, Mr. Jones? If I knew she were dead, would I have engaged your services?"

"You might. You knew I was in with the department. You could do that to make the police think you were worried about her, as a sort of advance alibi. If you went directly to the police, they'd be coming up here. They'd be nosing into your business."

"That's ridiculous," she said, without expression. She was only mouthing words.

"Maybe. Or maybe you wanted Every to think you were worried about her. Is he getting out of hand, Miss Townsbury?"

"I don't know the man," she said.

"You knew he was a bootlegger, though he was never well known by anyone outside of the department. You knew him, all right. He worked for you. His little fat friend knew you, too, though he tried to pretend in my office that he'd only *heard* of you. And Miss Meredith knows you, too. The tie-up's there, all right. It's clear enough."

Light glinted off the lenses of her glasses. She was studying me, all pretense of indignation gone, sizing me up. She said: "You've managed to put quite a few unrelated facts together, haven't you, Mr. Jones?"

"A few," I admitted. "That redhead was the tip-off. I could see you had her well on the road. You bring the wealthy drunks up here, and cure them of their alcoholism. But you start them on something worse. Is it morphine? Opium?"

"And why would I do that?"

"So you can sell it to them. Or so Every can, through your cooperation. They aren't likely to talk, your customers, are they?"

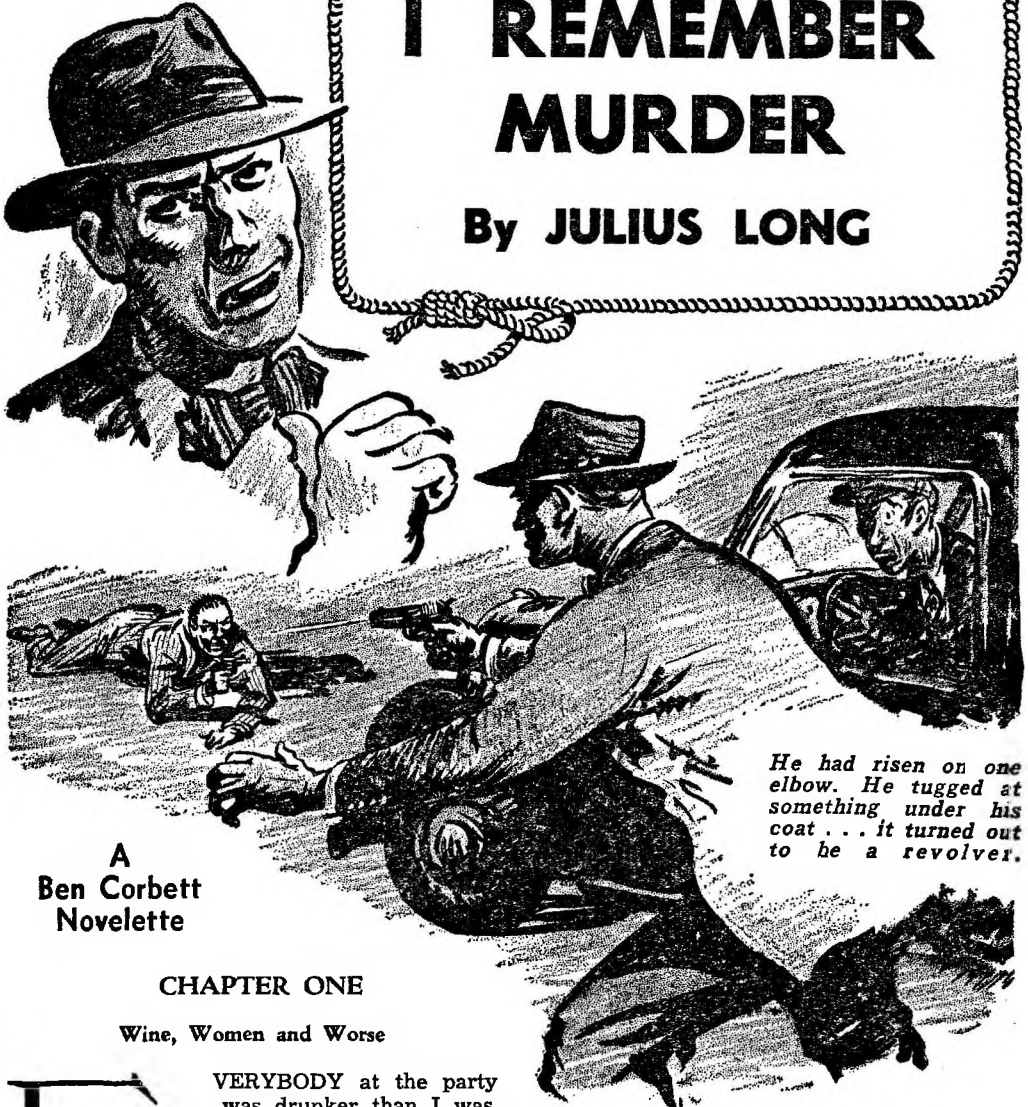
"Talk to whom?"

(Continued on page 98)

What a lovely party! Everybody high as a kite, nobody knew anyone else and a riotous time was had by all. All, that is, except the blonde they left behind them. She was very shapely and very young—and she wouldn't be getting any older. Not with that bullet-hole through her pretty head!

I REMEMBER MURDER

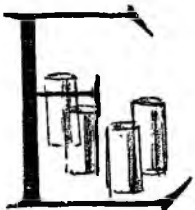
By JULIUS LONG



A
Ben Corbett
Novelette

CHAPTER ONE

Wine, Women and Worse



VERYBODY at the party was drunker than I was, and I was afraid to stand up from fear I'd fall down. I just sat there staring into space, trying to figure out whose apartment Phil Sutton had brought me to and where it was.

My watch was still running, and I knew it

had been two hours since Sutton had come upon me in a south-side honky-tonk and insisted that I go with him to a "swell party." If I hadn't been three sheets to the wind I'd never have walked out of any public place with Phil Sutton.

There were plenty of people willing to asso-

ciate with him since he'd organized the Acme Auto Insurance Company, but not me. I'm funny about respecting people just because they have money and even funnier about the way they got it. I knew how Sutton had got his.

A couple of weeks before Pearl Harbor he had gone into bankruptcy and stuck his creditors for a hundred thousand dollars. By the time the Nips took Bataan he was riding around in a black Cadillac with white sidewall tires, and a year later he was so rich that when he bought a new fur coat for his secretary he even bought one for his wife.

If you wanted a case of Scotch, Sutton wouldn't sell it to you, but if you wanted a truck-load of it and were willing to pay a hundred thirty-five a case, he would. He wouldn't sell you a set of tires, either, but if you had a place for a gross, he was your man. There is a popular notion that the federal boys always get their man, too, but when they finally put the pinch on Sutton he walked out none the worse for it except what it had cost for lawyers.

After that he was a bigger shot than ever, and you never saw him without a whole gang of stooges. They weren't always poolroom punks—sometimes it was amazing to see who traveled around with him.

Of course this was in a large part due to the fact that Sutton provided plenty of free liquor and girls.

That was why I was here tonight at this apartment. Sutton had cracked about a swell girl I'd like to meet, and though I knew what his idea of a swell girl was, at the moment, the idea suited me fine.

I felt that I had a right to pitch a wild party, and I wanted more than anything else to convince myself that I didn't care about Kay. I mean Kay Kennedy, the beautiful creature who is private secretary to my boss, the Hon. Burton H. Keever, attorney general of our fair state.

She'd given me plenty of trouble before, giving dates to a heel named Curtis T. Durbin. This Durbin is a reformed college professor trying to go straight on his salary as "State Criminologist" in the office of the attorney general. Keever imported him from a cow-patch college, thinking a Ph. D in the joint would give it class. It took Keever only a few months to get his belly full of Durbin, but by that time the drip had put himself in so solid with the ladies' reform leagues that Keever was afraid to pitch him out.

I could never understand Kay's interest in the guy, and I didn't try very hard, for I never considered him serious competition. Then Shellie had come along.

His real name was Preston P. Shelton, but everybody called him "Shellie." He was just

out of the Army, where he had distinguished himself with a .45 Army Automatic, blasting no less than eight little brown brothers with as many slugs. He was a sleek twenty-five, smart as a fox and Cary Grantish. And, he was strictly . . . swell guy.

I couldn't blame him for moving in on Kay, for she has everything a gal should have. She'd been dating Shellie about twice a week, which was bad enough, but tonight it was the third time in a week, and that was why I was knocking myself out in that honky-tonk when Sutton walked in.

I thought I would go along and meet this dame he was telling me about and show myself no woman could really get me down. The idea had sounded good until I met the dame.

HER name was Millie Martin, and she was a travesty of Kay. I'd be willing to bet that if anybody had taken a tape and measured both girls their measurements would have been identical. They even had the same hair and the same complexion. Millie's clothes fit her about like Kay's, and even I could see that they were more expensive. But everything else about Millie was five-and-ten.

"Oh, Mr. Corbett," she said, "I'm so happy to meet you! I told Philly he just had to introduce us some time."

Sutton put an arm around my shoulders and said: "I told you she was a honey, didn't I, Ben? I sure can pick 'em, can't I, boy?"

I said he sure could pick 'em, but I didn't mention what kind. He went off to a corner to his temporary heart-throb, a plump blonde who would be a fat one with about a year's more boozing. There was plenty of booze, and it was good booze, so I made for it, trying not to notice Millie Martin.

I'm not a guy to nurse a drink. I was lapping the stuff out of tumblers after the first hour, and Millie had to lead me over to a chair. She sat on the arm a while, handing me a line of chatter that had something about going to her apartment in it. So, as I sat there staring, I knew the apartment wasn't Millie's, only I couldn't just remember when she'd moved off the chair arm and mercifully gone away.

An automatic phonograph had long since got to the top record and was now playing it for the twentieth time. A couple stood in front of it, jiggling as if in a trance, apparently under the delusion that they were dancing to the music. The record was "Rollin'"—no bad tune, but pretty sour after twenty times in a row. It was just starting all over again when a skinny guy with a pasty face walked into the room, looked at me and asked: "You Corbett?"

I managed to nod.

"Phone."

I let that soak in a little while, then pulled myself to my feet and managed to walk, jost-

fling the dancing couple only slightly. I didn't fall down until I was in the next room, and then I caught myself on a table, for it was a dining room. The phone was there for some reason, and I dragged a chair over and answered it.

Kay was calling.

"You're drunk," she said.

"Yep."

"Well, you've picked a fine time! Keever's tearing his hair out trying to find you. All hell's popped loose."

"Let 'er pop."

"Can the wisecracks. This is serious. Governor Patterson's going to remove Keever from office the first thing in the morning!"

I held the phone about a foot away, thinking there must be something the matter with it. Then I drew it closer and said: "Will you please say that again."

"You heard me. Keever's in a jam—a bad jam. It's the worst in his career. It's got him licked. You've got to chase over to the State House Annex and pull him together before he blows his top."

I hesitated, then said: "It can't be that bad. Why does he need me when he's got a great genius like Curtis T. Durbin? And Shellie's on the job, too, isn't he, or is he sitting in your lap?"

Kay's comment would justify the telephone people removing her phone. "Listen, you lame-brained lug," she said when she had cooled down, "this is no time for a comedy act! I'm telling you the boss is in the grease, but bad! You've got to chase right over to the Annex and take over."

"Are you there, too?"

"No, I'm at my apartment. I didn't find your call until I got in a minute ago."

"My what?"

"Your call. The night clerk said somebody'd called and left this number. I supposed it was you."

"Well, for your information, I didn't call you tonight. So quit handing me that line."

"It's no line. How do you suppose I located you? Do you think I dreamed up the number?"

I kicked that one around a few seconds and decided I must have called Kay after all. That burned me—I didn't want her to get any wrong ideas.

"All right, let's skip that. Just tell me what kind of jam Keever's in."

"Not over the phone. You'll find out fast enough once you get over there. Better not use your car—you'll get pinched before you get there."

"I don't have my car—I don't even remember where I left it. I'll take a taxi. Find out where I am and send one over, will you?"

"Are you kidding? Don't tell me you don't know where you are!"

"I am telling you. Use your drag as Keever's secretary and get the phone company to give you the address of this place. Then send a taxi over."



KAY promised disgustedly that she would, then I hung up and sat there a while. I was worried. Kay is not a gal to cry wolf. The odds were that this time Keever was in a real jam. The going had been getting increasingly tough,

what with the governor and nearly every other state official of the opposite political party. Added to that, the other gang had a majority in both houses of the state legislature. Keever had been flies in their soup ever since his election, and they were all lying in ambush awaiting his first slip.

I didn't want to see it happen. He wasn't really a bad guy at heart. And besides, if the governor gave him the old heave-ho and made it stick, I was through as his chief investigator, and there are lots of worse jobs for cops.

So I sat there brooding over what the gov-

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ernor could possibly have got on Keever this time. I wasn't worried about anything crooked—Keever was always scrupulously honest. Sure, when he'd been D.A. of Capital County there'd been a few gambling joints running wide open, but that was because Keever had sense enough to know you can't change human nature with a night-stick. I mean it hadn't been because he had his hand out.

I was still racking my brain over what the jam could be when the same skinny guy with the same pasty face walked into the dining room and said: "A taxi guy here for you."

I managed to get on my feet.

"Thanks, pal. Mind telling me whose scatter this is?"

The pasty face looked puzzled.

"Damned if I know. I'm a stranger here myself."

I made it out of the place, not even trying to find my hat. The cab driver wanted to give me some help, but I shoved him away. It's the Corbett pride.

I noted that the apartment number was 4B, and when we got downstairs I saw that it was in a six-story apartment house on the corner of Elmhurst and Arlington Road. I meant to ask the driver whose apartment it was, but as soon as the cab started rolling I lost all interest in questions. I told the driver to drive slower or he'd have cause to regret it.

IT WAS after midnight when he dumped me out at the side door of the Annex. When I paid him I discovered I still had most of my roll, which was some consolation, for I had an idea the gal Millie wasn't above a little larceny. I wondered vaguely where she'd got to as I opened the door with my key. I walked through the dimly lighted, deserted corridor to the wing housing Keever's offices, and Shelton let me in there.

The kid looked worried.

"I'm sure glad you've come, Ben. It's been awful."

I crossed toward Keever's office. Curtis T. Durbin was seated glumly outside. He usually had a sneer for me, but this time I thought I detected an actual expression of relief as I showed up.

"Go right in," said Shelton. "We'll wait outside."

My first impression when I saw Keever slumped over his desk was that he had gone to sleep. Then he straightened at the sound of my footsteps, and I saw that the man had been crying. He tried to get control over himself and even grin, and it was a sight I thought I'd never see.

The Keever I'd known had always been possessed of perfect poise, armed with an almost arrogant nonchalance. It's an act that any good lawyer has to put on. A lawyer runs into

so many surprises and has so many rugs pulled out from under him that he becomes an expert at landing on his feet and coming up with a smile.

Keever was especially adapted to this, for he had a postage-stamp face, commanding, with a fine-line mustache that impressed even judges. But now he was all in pieces. His face was flushed, and his eyes were bloodshot. I hate to think of any man crying, even Keever.

"It's all over, Ben," he said. "I'm ruined."

It was enough to sober me, and it did. I sat down across the desk from him and said: "Let's have it, boss. It can't be that bad."

"But it is, Ben. It is. That rat Patterson has got me where he wants me, and he knows it. After all these years of faithful public service I'm about to be disgraced! I'll be disbarred, Ben, perhaps even sent to prison!"

"Why?"

"'Cause I've been a stupid fool! Believe me, I wasn't dishonest—I was just dumber than hell!" Tears welled in his eyes again.

"Listen, boss, we're getting no place fast."

"You've heard of Phil Sutton?"

I caught my breath. "Go on."

"Then you know what a crook he is. Nobody has any less use for him than I have, but when he organized the Acme Auto Insurance Company there was nothing I could do because his lawyers incorporated the concern properly and complied with the law in every detail. That was six months ago. Last week the state insurance department asked for a ruling on whether they should take over the concern. I went into the matter thoroughly.

"Perhaps you know that every automobile casualty insurance company must file an estimate of the amount of liability of every claim filed against its assured. Sufficient collateral in government bonds must be held in escrow to cover twice the amount of all the estimated claims.

"The insurance department had cheeked the Acme claims and turned in a report that they were underestimated. They demanded that Acme put up collateral commensurate with their own estimate of the claims. Acme refused. The insurance department asked for a ruling on whether it should close up Acme and liquidate the assets.

"Last week, the tenth of the month, I gave a ruling. After a careful examination of the insurance law of this state I saw that a loophole protected Acme. Their own estimate of the liability of outstanding claims was final unless suit had been filed against them. I reported this to the insurance department and recommended reform of the state law.

"Governor Patterson himself stormed in and said I was letting Phil Sutton get away with murder. He said Sutton ought to be run out

of the state. I agreed with him, but said it was going to be done legally if I were a party to it. Patterson accused me of fronting for Sutton, and I lost my temper and ordered him out.

"Tonight I got a phone call from Lew Brown, an old law school pal of mine in the D.A.'s office. He said a warrant had been issued for Phil Sutton. The charge was bribery of a state official. The official was me. Brown said that Gordon Kress, the D.A., had got the warrant after Governor Patterson had produced a photographic copy of a check for ten thousand dollars.

"The check had been issued by Sam Price, one of Phil Sutton's lawyers. It was Price who organized Acme Insurance. He's still their chief counsel. The check was made payable to cash. There was no endorsement. The photostatic copy was also accompanied by an affidavit signed by one Lester Toland, a teller at the Second National. Toland stated that a man he did not know had presented the check for payment and had refused to endorse it. He phoned Price, and Price said it was O.K., he could cash it. So he cashed it. Later he learned the identity of the man to whom he had paid the ten thousand."

"Don't tell me," I said. "It was you."

KEEVER nodded, dropped his eyes, and I thought the tears were going to come again. I said: "What are you up in the air about? It's the teller's word against yours! Besides, you were right when you ruled in favor of Sutton's insurance company."

"Yes, but Patterson will still argue that I took the ten thousand to rule the way I did. If I accepted a bribe, it would make no difference whether I was right or not. He's probably arrested Sutton by now, and Brown says he's going to remove me from office in the morning."

"Can he do that?"

"Temporarily, until the state legislature hears the charges. It's packed with Patterson's pals. Unless I can come up with positive proof that I had nothing to do with that ten thousand, I'm through!"

"Have you contacted Sam Price?"

"No. I've tried my best to locate him, but I can't. The fact that the D.A. hasn't got a warrant for him is an indication that Price is turning state's evidence."

"Against his own client, Phil Sutton?"

"No, with his own client. My bet is that Patterson made a deal with Sutton. Sutton has ambitions in this state. By turning state's evidence and claiming I forced the ten thousand out of him for a favorable opinion on the Acme deal, he'll avoid prosecution and reap a huge reward from the governor's office."

"What about Price? That's an awful chance for a lawyer to take."

"No, Price is in the clear. Lew Brown tells me that his story is that he gave the check to Sutton in settlement of a claim he'd collected for him and made it to cash on Sutton's request. He'll say he knew nothing about why it was given to me but told the teller it was O.K. because he figured Sutton knew how to take care of his money."

"And you haven't talked to Sutton?"

"No. I've had all six of my investigators out trying to find him. They haven't turned in even a trace."

If the situation hadn't been so serious, I'd have laughed in his face. The idea of Kever's six "investigators," known in the newspapers as "Kever's Keystone Kops," finding their way around the block was funny to me. To a man they were poor relations of country politicians. Kever hired them for political patronage reasons only, and if they had all been turned out in a cloudburst they couldn't have found a drop of rain.

"It looks like Sutton's in hiding," Kever moaned. "If you can't crack this thing before morning, Ben, the fat will be in the fire."

I said: "Kever, you're a shrewd cookie if ever I saw one, but the heat has been too much for you. You think Sutton's in this deal against you. Yet the D.A.'s office is after him with a warrant. I can't buy that. Besides, I happen to know that Sutton isn't hiding at all. I was with him a couple of hours ago."

Kever bounced out of his chair, his face livid with rage.

"Now you've done it, Ben! Now you've tightened the noose about my neck! When it gets out that my chief investigator was with Sutton on the night a warrant was issued for bribing me, not even my own wife will believe I'm innocent!"

I didn't feel so bright then, for I hadn't thought of that.

CHAPTER TWO

Dead to the World



AFTER Kever had finally cooled off, I said: "Maybe it's not so bad that I should have been with Sutton this evening. Maybe that'll give me a lead on finding him before the D.A.'s boys do. You're sure they haven't nailed him already?"

"Yes, but it's only a matter of time until they do. Even if Sutton isn't conspiring to ruin me, I've got to find him first."

"Why is finding him so important, boss?"

Kever looked pained. "Even you should be able to figure that out, Ben. What's Sutton's main racket?"

"The black market, of course."

"All right. The odds are a thousand-to-one that the check Price gave him made payable to cash was to pay off a black market operator. So what can Sutton say when the D.A.'s boys ask him who really cashed that check?"

"I see your point." I was beginning to think I hadn't sobered up much, missing one like that one. A black market pinch is a federal rap. Bribery of a state official is only a state rap. It was a lead-pipe cinch that if Sutton had to take a choice between the two he'd clam up about the black market deal. So it was plain that Keever's only chance to make him talk was to grab him first.

"That's your job, finding him," Keever told me. "If it ever gets out that you, my chief investigator, were at a drunken brawl with him the same night the D.A.'s office was after him for bribing me, I'm through. And so are you."

It looked that way, for a fact. I got up. "Give me Shellie," I said. "He's waiting around outside. As for Durbin, why don't you send him to bed?"

Keever sneered. "At least Durbin doesn't carouse around with black market crooks!"

I couldn't say a word. I went out, motioned to Shelton that he was to come along, which he did with alacrity. Durbin eyed us suspiciously as we left.

"We'll take a cab to the south side," I told Shelton. "I left my car at a honky-tonk down there—I hope."

Shelton was full of questions. "Do you think Mr. Keever's really in as serious a jam as he thinks he is?"

"Worse. There's nothing more dangerous than being an honest politician, and Keever's just that. All the rest of the politicians resent his honesty, and even if they weren't his political enemies, they'd try to grease the skids under him just on general principles."

Shelton looked away, and I guessed it was because my breath, not my answer, reeked. I didn't particularly like the idea of the kid seeing me with a flushed face and bloodshot eyes, especially as he had been the indirect cause of it all. But I was coming around pretty fast by the time we got to the honky-tonk, and it helped my morale quite a bit to find my car there.

I realized, though, that I wasn't as sober as I thought I was after we'd gone ten blocks and Shelton wanted to know when I was going to shift out of second gear.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"To a party. Sutton took me there tonight in his Cadillac, and then he came up missing. It could be that he got wind of the D.A.'s warrant for him and lit out. Maybe somebody there will have an idea about that or even tell us where he went."

It took only about fifteen minutes to get to the corner of Elmhurst and Arlington Road. I came in on Arlington, which skirts that end of town, because it was the quickest way from the south side. Elmhurst led straight downtown. I noticed there weren't any cars parked around the apartment house, though an apartment on the fourth floor was all lighted up. I guessed that this was 4B.

The card in the mail box said the apartment belonged to a guy named George Cranston, and the name didn't mean a thing. The foyer was deserted, and we used the automatic elevator, which was on the main floor. When we reached 4B I wondered if somebody had wrecked the phonograph, for it wasn't playing.

I tried the door, and it opened. I entered, and Shelton followed. There wasn't a soul in the living room, where the phonograph was. There wasn't even a sound in the house. I went on into the dining room, through it and into the kitchen without finding a sign of life. One thing I thought was odd.

The gang had taken the trouble to wash every glass in the place and stack them up in neat rows. There wasn't a bottle, even an empty one in sight. I looked in the trash basket beside the electric range, and there wasn't a bottle in it, either. I thought it was really remarkable for a gang of drunks as knocked-out as that bunch had been to be so neat and tidy and even carry away the little dead soldiers.

"Where is everybody?" asked Shelton.

"They probably moved on to some other apartment," I guessed. "It's only two o'clock now, and that would be the mere shank of the evening for that gang. But let's look in the bedrooms just for luck—maybe somebody's passed out in there."

THERE were three bedrooms, and the first two were vacant. The girl lay stretched out on the bed in the third one, and she looked dead to the world. Which is exactly what she was, for somebody had shot her under her left eye.

Shelton froze in the doorway, though he has seen much more death than I have. The difference was that I'm accustomed to seeing it in unexpected places, and Shelton wasn't.

I went over to the girl, looked down at the ugly little wound and said: "The dirty skunk. From the powder marks it looks as if the guy held the gun about a foot from her face and let her have it. He must have been shooting at her eye. The only reason he didn't hit it was either because he was a bad shot or under the influence. Come over here, Shellie, and get a look at this babe. Ever see her before?"

Shelton came diffidently over as if invading the privacy of an undressed woman, though

this girl was fully clothed. Her dress had been drawn up to the tops of her nylons, which gave me the idea she had been lifted onto the bed. Another thing that gave me the same idea was the bruise on her chin. It seemed pretty plain that her killer had clipped her first, carried her to the bed and let her have it.

"No," said Shelton. "I never saw her before. Have you?"

"Yes. She was the girl who was so friendly with Phil Sutton tonight."

It was the blonde, all right, the plump blonde that Sutton had evidently come here to meet. I turned to Shelton and said: "Look around for a cartridge case. It'll be either a .22 or a .25."

It was a small wound. While Shelton looked I took the girl by her hair and turned her head. The slug hadn't gone out the back, which convinced me that it was indeed of small caliber. A moment later Shelton said he'd found it, and I turned about.

The little brass case lay in a corner. I went over, got down on my knees and looked at it without picking it up. It was a .22 Long Rifle with the U indentation which the Remington people put on such cartridges. There was also the indentation of an extractor bar, visible in bad light and to the naked eye. There was a good chance that the cartridge case could be used to identify the killer's gun—if the killer was ever found.

"Hadn't we better call the city police?" Shelton asked.

I got up and shook my head.

"Not unless you want to quit your job with Keever. If I'm ever connected with this girl's murder, Keever might as well go to China. Don't you get the idea, Shellie? She was Sutton's girl. Sutton's bound to make the headlines. If I, as Keever's chief investigator, make the headlines with him, it will be too much on top of the bribery charge already filed. Everybody in the state will be convinced that Sutton and Keever are thick as thieves."

"But what are we going to do?"

"Get out of here. But first I want you to look into all the bureau drawers of the other bedrooms, along with the closets. Tell me what you find there."

Shelton left, and I gave the room the once-over. I couldn't find a thing. The girl's handbag was missing, and I didn't even have an idea as to who she was. When Shelton came back he looked puzzled.

"I don't know what kind of person this George Cranston could be—or anyone else who'd live here. There isn't a thing in those rooms. Every drawer is bare."

I nodded. "This room's the same way. So that can mean only one thing. George Cranston is a phony name used by somebody who's

rented this apartment solely for the purpose of giving such parties as the one thrown here tonight. Nobody lives here at all!"

Shelton looked dubious. "Maybe Cranston moved everything out—like those bottles."

"Nix. The bottles were carried out by the guests in their inside pockets. It was the guests who washed the glasses. They were liquored up enough to think they were doing something real cute, getting rid of fingerprints like that. There must have been a hell of a busy time around here after somebody found this dead girl."

Shelton frowned. "You haven't told me much about what happened at the party. Where was Sutton by then?"

"He'd gone when I left. That is, I'm sure he wasn't in a bedroom, especially this one. My hunch is he was the first to discover the body and he got out as fast as he could."

Shelton mused: "I wonder where he could have gone?"

"Where does any man go when he gets into bad trouble?"

"To see his lawyer. But would Sutton go to Price? Price made an incriminating statement to the D.A. about that check."

"Not incriminating—except in connection with other circumstances to be proved. Price was on the spot—the check spoke for itself. It showed that he, Price, had written it to cash. Either he told the D.A. to whom he'd given it or he'd have been indicted himself. As a lawyer you know that a lawyer doesn't have to keep his mouth shut about his client's affairs if doing so incriminates him."

"You think we'll find Sutton with Price, then?"

"If not, Price will know where to find him."

We had just reached the main floor again when the siren sounded. We sprinted to my car, and I got away fast. I didn't see the approaching police car, for it evidently was coming up Elmhurst. I kept on going out Arlington Road, then cut back downtown.

"Well," asked Shelton, "what do you think?"

"Somebody's phoned the cops about the body, of course. Maybe one of the guests got conscience-stricken. I don't really think anybody was trying to nail us there before we got away. If that had been the case, they could have had the place staked out."



MADE another turn and drove toward the north side, where Worthington Heights, a swanky new addition, was located. Sam Price had sunk about seventy grand in a big house out there, and I had an idea he'd be at home rather than at the office. I also had

an idea that the D.A.'s boys would have the

place staked out, so I took it easy when I got there, driving by slowly.

Sure enough, a little blob of light was extinguished as I went by some shrubbery—one of the D.A.'s trained seals was right on the job. I turned a corner and got out of the car.

"Go back to Keever and report," I told Shelton. "I'm going to pay a little visit on Price via the back way."

Shelton didn't like the idea, but he obeyed meekly enough. I legged it through some back lots, hoping I wouldn't be shot at for a snooper and finally got in back of Price's big stone house. No light had shone from the front, but there was a light in back, all right, and a Cadillac parked there. I couldn't be too sure, but I was betting that it was Sutton's Cadillac.

The light came through French doors opening on a terrace. One of the doors was ajar, and I heard a voice. By the time I had reached the doors I knew it was Price talking and that he was using a phone. I paused to listen, but all I heard was: "O.K., Brocky, I'll call you back."

Then Price hung up. I tried to remember whom I knew named Brocky, but I couldn't think of anyone. I stepped into the doorway and said:

"Hi-ya, Sam. What's new?"

Price jumped a foot. He whirled and said angrily: "What the hell you doing here? I've seen enough cops for one night!"

"I'm different." I walked into the room, got out a cigarette and lighted it, looking over the room. It was a sort of combination office, library and den. There was a walnut table in the middle and built-in bookcases on the side walls. The ends were variously adorned with gun racks and flashy nudes. The guns were trap guns, expensive English importations, and the nudes also looked expensive.

"O.K.!" Price snapped. "What the hell are you doing here? I told Keever over the phone I had nothing to say."

I regarded Price before answering him. People credited him with a lot of legal brains because of a ferret-like face and a pair of shifty eyes.

Price had the reputation, anyway. He was the kind of lawyer Sutton would take to, and though Sutton used several lawyers, Price was far ahead of the field in the enjoyment of his patronage. That was the main reason why I thought Price was my best lead to Sutton.

"I don't care what you told Keever," I said. "I want Sutton. Tell me where I can find him."

Price gestured with his hands and gave me what he intended to be a look of despair. "I wish to heaven I knew! This thing broke before I could contact him, and I've turned the town upside down!"

"Isn't that Sutton's car out there?"

"No. That's my daughter's car. I wish she would put it up. She leaves it out every night because she gets home too plastered to drive it into the garage. I hate to say a thing like that, but I'm getting desperate about that girl. I guess a father can't bring up a girl the way she should be."

I remembered that Price's wife had died years before. He had never remarried, and he had a reputation for getting around. I didn't know the daughter; she would run with a lot younger set than I did and a lot more expensive set, too.

"Come on, Sam," I said. "Stop stalling. If you don't know where Sutton is, nobody does."

"It looks as if you're right—nobody does. Why wouldn't the fool phone me before this? I suppose he's out drinking his head off again. I never saw a man lap up as much booze as he does."

"I wish I knew where he gets his booze. Maybe it would make me smart, too."

Price deprecatingly waved a hand. "You don't have to be smart to make money. You just have to not give a damn what you touch."

I thought Price would be an excellent authority on that.

"Look here, Sam, you're handing me a whale of a line, and you know it. I'm going to find Sutton. You can slow me down, but you can't stop me. You won't do yourself any harm showing a little co-operation to the attorney general's office."

Price's face became slightly pink.

"Is that a threat? If it is, you can get the hell out!"

I wasn't getting anywhere. The closest way to a man is usually through his hobbies, so I pretended just to notice the trap guns, and said: "Say, that's a fine collection there. Mind if I have a look?"

"I do mind," said Price, but I crossed over toward the guns anyway. I never completed the distance because I stopped short when I noticed the photograph on one of the bookcases.

I asked: "Who's that?"

"Patricia, my daughter." Price's voice had softened at the mention of her name, but he quickly added: "You heard me—get out!"

"Sure, only, tell me—where were you when your daughter came home?"

"Right here, of course."

I turned and faced Price. "You're lying, Sam. You weren't in the house when she came home. Admit it."

"Damn you. I don't have to be called a liar in my own house! Not that I care what you think, but I never left this house this night!"

I sighed and walked to the French door. When I reached it, I turned back. "You'll regret your attitude, Sam. Remember—I could

have made it a lot easier for you if you'd leveled with me."

I think he realized that I was telling the truth—though of course he couldn't know what I meant. I felt sorry for him. He was in for a terrible shock when he was told, as eventually he had to be, that his daughter Patricia lay shot to death in an abandoned apartment at the corner of Elmhurst and Arlington Road.

CHAPTER THREE

Homicide Hangover



I KNEW that I couldn't be mistaken about the girl's identity. The photograph had been a perfect likeness of Patricia Price. Her father took for granted that she was upstairs in her bedroom because her car had been brought home.

I wondered if Sutton himself had delivered it. I looked it over carefully as I left the grounds. I was positive that it was the same car Sutton had used. He had been driving it when he had picked me up at the south-side honky-tonk. I kept on going, reaching the street and walking towards the center of town.

Sam Price didn't know Patricia was running around with Phil Sutton. Or did he? Perhaps it was anger that had made him so quick to make a statement about the check he had given to Sutton. Perhaps he had never given the check to Sutton at all. Perhaps the whole plot was the work of an enraged parent bent on wreaking revenge.

I had gone upon the reasonable assumption that the plot had been cooked up to ruin Keever. Now it seemed altogether possible that any inconvenience caused him was merely incidental to the main purpose, the ruination of Sutton himself.

I had to find Sutton. If the check was a plant, he would know. He would also know about the Cadillac being delivered to Price's home. It was no pretty picture that I had of Sutton, running out on the party after discovering the girl murdered and returning her car to fool her father.

"Want to ride, or do you like walking?"

I stopped and turned. I had been so preoccupied that I hadn't noticed the parked car. It was my own. Shelton had been sitting in it with the lights out. He slid out from under the wheel as I crossed and took the driver's seat.

"I told you to report to Keever."

"I did—by phone. I thought you might need me. If you hadn't come pretty quickly I was going after you."

"What did Keever have to tell you?"

"Nothing. The D.A.'s office haven't found Sutton. But neither has Keever. He's counting on you."

"I'm flattered. Tell me, do you know anybody named Brocky?"

"Brocky? Brocky who?"

"That's what I want to find out. Price was concluding a phone call to him when I walked in. By the way, I've learned the identity of the murdered girl—Patricia Price, Sam's daughter."

Shelton whistled. "You didn't tell Price, of course."

"Hardly. Though I would have, if he'd leveled with me. He's playing some kind of game. I'm not sure whether it's for or against Sutton. You can guess why he might be against him."

"I'll say! If I had a daughter running around with Sutton, I'd fix his wagon, one way or another."

I nodded. I was heading downtown at a pretty good clip. I told Shelton about the Cadillac. He said: "The house was watched. The odds are that whoever returned the Cadillac didn't know that. So it couldn't have been Sutton who returned it—the cop on the job would have nailed him."

I hadn't thought of that, and I said so. Shelton seemed pleased. I didn't unbend much—I couldn't forget that a few hours ago Sutton had been out with Kay. And just thinking about Kay made me remember a detail I'd overlooked.

Somebody had given her the phone number of that apartment. Somebody had known I was there. I gave the wheel a jerk, and Shelton was startled.

"What's the idea?"

"We're calling on Kay. She's going to tell us how she happened to have the phone number of that apartment."

"Well, I can answer that," Shelton said sheepishly. "When I took her home tonight the old boy at the desk had the number. She asked him who'd given it to him, and he said he didn't know. Some guy had phoned it in and said to give it to her."

I didn't look at Shelton. I turned back into the main drag and continued on downtown. When we came to a bar that was open I parked in front of it.

"I can use a shot," I told Shelton. "I'm getting a headache."

He joined me. When the barman brought our drinks, I asked casually: "Brocky been in tonight?"

The barman looked me over.

"Brocky who, pal?"

"I don't know the guy's last name. What is it anyway?"

The barman looked me over very thought-

fully, and said: "I don't know what the gag is, pal. I don't know no Brocky, and I don't know you. Shall I set up another round?"

"No, thanks."

WE LEFT. We stopped at the next open bar, which was blocks away, for it was so late that only those with night club permits remained open. We got about the same kind of response from a barman there. After we had visited three more bars and almost reached the center of town, I knew I couldn't keep it up without getting drunk all over again. Shelton had been pouring them down right with me and he didn't show it a bit. Of course I had been in a hell of a shape to begin with.

"Look here," I told him, as I drove away, "we'd better contact Keever and have him turn the entire staff loose looking for this guy Brocky instead of Sutton. My hunch is that if we find Brocky, we'll find Sutton."

Shelton was looking into the mirror, which he'd adjusted so that he could see through the rear glass.

"Maybe we won't have to find Brocky. Maybe Brocky is looking for us."

I reached up and adjusted the mirror so that I could have a look. There was a car half a block behind. I made a couple of turns, and the trailing lights stuck there. I felt relieved.

"Well, if you want to get off, it'll be all right with me. There may be some shooting in about a minute."

"If there is, I want to do some of it."

I was glad he felt that way about it. He carried a .45 automatic that wasn't noticeable because his chest was so thick that even a hand-me-down suit wouldn't show a bulge. I carried a gun on the same kind of frame, only it was a Super .38 loaded with Super-X cartridges that push a bullet through eleven pine boards. I had an idea we could take care of whoever wanted to play rough. So I jammed on the brakes and turned the car across the center of the street.

The other car's tires screeched, and it stopped only a few feet short of us. I was out on the pavement by that time, and Shelton made it even faster than I did. He took one side of the car, and I took the other. We reached the other car just as the driver was slamming the gears into reverse.

"Hold it!" I snapped to the driver, and he did this, for the muzzle of a Super .38 looks as big as a cannon. Shelton on his side was doing all right—the other guy in the car seemed to be trying to shrivel down into the seat. The car was stopped now, and I asked: "All right, boys, who sent you?"

The driver gave me the silent treatment. He was a smarty, I could see at a glance. His hair was rust-colored, and his face was florid. He had a quick temper, but he was holding it

in because he wanted more than anything else to be smart. He was going to make an issue of not answering me.

His pal looked too small to be in such a game. He was still shriveling down, looking terrified at the gaping muzzle of Shelton's automatic. Fortunately there was no traffic in the side street I'd turned into. So I jerked open the door, reached inside with the Super .38 and slapped the smart guy's temple with a back-handed blow of the slide. He went out like a light, and I dragged him out from under the wheel and shoved him unconscious into the street. Then I turned to the little, shriveling guy.

"All right, jerk, do you want some of the same?"

He began to whimper.

"Don't hit me, Mr. Corbett! Brocky only wanted us to find out why you were asking about him!"

"Now we're getting somewhere. Brocky who?"

The little man looked puzzled. I got it then. I was supposed to know Brocky. I said gently: "Just come with us and take us to Brocky. We'll tell him what we want."

The little fellow looked terrified at the thought of being dragged in before his boss, but when Shelton opened the door he got out after one gesture from the .45. Then I heard a scraping noise behind me and whirled.

At the same time I cocked the Super .38, for I'd carried it hammer-down. It's a good thing for me that I did, for Smart Guy had risen on one elbow. Blood was streaming from his temple and getting into one eye. He was giving me no pleasant look as he tugged at something under his coat and in the region of his belt. It turned out that the something was a snub-nosed revolver.

Smart guy was mad enough to use it. I saw no reason whatever to let him take the first shot, so I put a slug through his right shoulder. The revolver rattled on the pavement as Smart Guy screamed and cursed. Then he passed out cold.



HE little fellow on the other side of the car was crying like a baby. Shelton had run around to help me out and left him standing there. He suddenly realized nobody was watching him, so he sprinted away from the car. Shelton was after him in a flash and easily overtook him before he had gone sixty feet. He led him back and asked nervously: "Now what?"

"We're lammung out of here."

"But the guy you shot is badly hurt. He'll bleed to death!"

"No, somebody will come running any minute. See—there's a light on in that house over there."

I started for the car, and Shelton dragged his little captive along with him. We got moving just as a man in a dressing robe rushed out into the street. I doused the lights so he couldn't catch my number, and didn't put them on until I'd turned off the street. Then I looked side-wise at the little fellow sitting between us and said: "You tell us where we're going."

Very meekly he named the south-side honky-tonk where Sutton had picked me up in the first place. I made it there in about twenty minutes, for there was no traffic. It was after closing hours, though, and the place looked deserted. The little fellow nevertheless insisted that Brockley was there.

"You go first," I told him when I'd parked. "Remember that we'll be right beside you."

He went to a side door, and Shelton and I stood at each side. So when the door opened, we just gave the little fellow a push and followed through, gun muzzles pointing in the direction of the skinny, pasty-faced man who had opened the door.

He wasn't much more startled than I was. He was the same guy I'd seen at the party, the man who had told me about Kay's phone call. I turned to the little fellow, who was quivering like a sick kitten and said: "This Brockley?"

He nodded and began to cry again. Pasty-face tried to put on a bold front.

"Say, Corbett, what's this all about?"

"You tell us." I looked around the room. The door was a private one in what seemed to be a pretty large office for a honky-tonk. The place was empty. "You can begin," I told Pasty-face, "by telling us your name."

Pasty-face was trying to be pleasant. "You got me all wrong, Corbett. Don't get any ideas just because I had the boys pick up your trail. When the barman at the Hoot Owl phoned me you was in asking for me, naturally I got curious."

"Naturally. What did you say your name was?"

"Joe Brockley. Everybody in town just calls me Joe, but people I used to know when I lived in Cincinnati call me Brocky."

"So you knew Sam Price in Cincinnati?" I asked.

Brockley paled. "I don't get it, Corbett. I don't even know Sam Price to speak to."

"Take it easy," I assured him. "It's all right. I was with Sam when he talked to you on the phone. I knew your name all right—I was just curious about your being called 'Brocky.'"

Brockley didn't buy that one, but he was plainly impressed about my knowing Price had called him. So I said: "Sam even told me you were the guy that cashed the ten grand check, the one that teller said Keever cashed."

Brockley's eyes popped, and I saw that my shot in the dark had scored a bull's-eye. But Brockley shook his head as if in dumb wonder. "I don't know what you're talking about. I never saw no check for ten grand."

I was satisfied I had the right man, so I didn't argue. I looked around the office. There were cardboard cartons stacked along one wall, and when I saw the label of the printing concern on them I knew I had Brockley's right number.

He pushed tickets.

That accounted for the size of the office and the two low-budget tough-guys he had put on my trail. They weren't real gunsels, just punks whose regular job was pushing tickets. The tickets, of course, were the kind sold in cookie jars, five for a quarter, with prizes running from four bits to three bucks.

It's quite a nice thing if you have a small bar and slow hours during the day. All you need to show a nice profit is a couple of drunks. They see the cookie jar sitting on the bar, and they have a quarter change which they think they'll blow on some tickets. What's a quarter?

BRIGHT STAR BATTERIES

GIVE MORE
BRIGHT LIGHT LONGER
FOR YOUR 10¢

BRIGHT STAR BATTERY CO., Clifton, New Jersey



TO PROVE IT, laboratory tests were conducted under government standards. The results of these tests are illustrated by stacking 10 pennies for each of the three leading brands. Here's what happens:



RESULTS:

BRIGHT STAR	BATTERY A	BATTERY B
7¢ Very Bright Light	3¢ Very Bright Light	4¢ Very Bright Light
2¢ Good Light	5¢ Good Light	4¢ Good Light
1¢ Fair Light	2¢ Fair Light	2¢ Fair Light

So maybe they hit for fifty cents or maybe they don't—it makes no difference. They try again, and they keep it up until the bar is cluttered up with tickets. If they were sober they'd know the odds are hopelessly against them, but they're buzzed up, and they keep on fishing tickets out of the jar until they're breaking big bills.

It's a poor bar that can't push a couple of jars a day, and that means a net profit of sixty dollars, even though the tickets cost from six to ten dollars a jar, depending on how much the fix costs.

SO THAT was Brockley's racket. The quivering little fellow and Smart Guy whom I'd shot were "salesmen." Brockley saw that I was taking the whole set-up in, and he shrugged.

"If you're here to put the bite on my racket, say so."

"I don't give a damn about your racket. I don't want much—just tell me who shot Patricia Price."

Brockley said slowly: "If I'd known, I'd have told Price."

"Oh, so you told him about it over the phone?"

"I thought you said you was there."

"I was, but I got in a little late. Price pretended to me that he didn't know."

"Well, I don't know who rubbed out the girl—any more than you do." Brockley seemed to have a brainstorm then. His eyes narrowed, and he said meaningly: "Maybe you're the guy that knows all about it. Maybe you done the job yourself!"

"Skip it, Brockley. I didn't bump the girl—I was buzzed up all evening."

"You could of knocked her off and forgotten about it."

"Nix. I could have forgotten a lot of things that happened at that party and a lot of people who were there. But I remember murder. So let's begin at the beginning. You spotted me here earlier in the evening and phoned Sutton that I was here. Why?"

"I didn't phone him—about you, that is. I had a little business deal on with him, and when he called me I mentioned that you were here. So he said he'd come over and get you and take you to a swell party. He told me to come along too and told me where it was."

I thought it sounded plausible that Brockley would have "a little business deal" with Sutton. It was an open secret around town that Sutton was sitting pretty with two thousand cases of black market Scotch.

"All right, take it up from there."

"Well, I finally made it to the party, and you know how it was. Everybody was fried, and I started getting fried, too. But I didn't see Sutton. I asked about him, and a guy said he

and the Price girl was in that room. I didn't want to bother 'em, so I stayed away from that door. That's why nobody tumbled to what had happened till maybe half an hour after you left."

"Who found the body?"

"I don't know the dame's name. She was falling down drunk and thought the room was the bath. When she seen the girl was dead, she liked to raised the dead."

"So everybody tidied up the joint and sneaked out?"

"Why not? Nobody wanted to be mixed up in a murder case. They was some pretty nice people at that party."

"Of course you can give me the names of all those nice people."

Brockley assumed what he thought to be a noble expression.

"I ain't no squealer!"

"Then you didn't phone Kay and give her the apartment phone number?"

Brockley frowned. "Kay who?"

"Skip it." I turned to Shelton. "I think he's telling the truth. He's not a crook, just a cheap chiseler."

Shelton eyed Brockley, who slowly reddened.

"Why did you phone Price?"

"Why, because I got to thinkin' he should oughta know about his girl layin' there dead. I think he appreciated it, too. It don't do a guy in my racket no harm to be in right with an important man like Price. Just bein' seen with him helps out."

I went over to a chair, sat down and held my head in my hands. I began to laugh a little helplessly.

"What's the matter?" demanded Shelton.

"Are you having a laughing jag?"

I stopped laughing and looked up.

"No, I'm just laughing at myself. I should hire out as a ventriloquist's dummy. It just now dawned on me who's behind the frame-up to smear Keever. And I think I know who killed Patricia Price, too!"

CHAPTER FOUR

D. T.'s for the D. A.



I GOT up, walked over to Brockley and slapped him off his feet. He got up, shaking with anger.

"What the hell was the idea of that?"

"Just to give you a sample of what you're going to get if you don't give me a list of the people at that party. There's pencil and paper on that desk. Start writing."

Brockley hesitated, then I took a step to-

ward him, and he went to the desk. He began to write. When he stopped there were only five names on the paper.

"Go on, write all the names. There must have been twenty people there at one time or another."

"Honest, Corbett, that's all the people I know. There was people there that was total strangers to me, and I didn't get introduced."

I looked at the names, which meant nothing to me. "Pick out somebody who was there at the beginning of the party and stayed till the end."

Brockley studied the names and finally said: "Of course, I ain't sure, but I think this guy Jervis was there as long as anybody was."

I looked at the name. "Who's Jake Jervis?"

"He's a big shot ticket operator. He's the guy I get all my tickets from. Please, Mr. Corbett, don't tell him I squealed, or he'll stop doing business with me!"

"Where do I find Jervis?"

"The Wedgewood Hotel."

The Wedgewood was the swankiest hotel in town, located opposite the State House. It had the town's biggest cocktail lounge, and your elbow was always in the ribs of either a state senator, a lobbyist or a pickpocket. I reached for the phone and dialed the office.

Keever seemed to be in the last stages of hysteria.

"They've got Sutton!" he screamed. "Ben, why did you have to let me down this time, when it means everything!"

"How long have they had Sutton?"

"Half an hour. My man in the D.A.'s office hasn't been able to find out a thing! The D.A.'s got Sutton in a locked room with a stenographer and a recording machine. God only knows what he's telling them! I'm ruined, Ben, I'm ruined—and all because you couldn't even find Sutton!"

"Calm yourself, Keever. I've got this thing sewed up in a bag. I even know who killed the Price girl."

"What? What do you know about that? Durbin just told me the girl'd been murdered. My God, don't tell me they can tie up my office in that!"

"I was there when it happened, boss. But keep your shirt on—I'll bust the case wide open to the greater glory of the attorney general's office. I'll show them how we crack the cases that take in the D.A."

Keever began to talk, but I couldn't make any sense out of what he was saying. He seemed to be talking to himself. When I finally got him to listen, I said: "Round up some of the Keystone Kops and have them drag Jake Jervis out of bed over at the Wedgewood. Have him at your office by the time I get there. Maybe you'd better get Kay, too, to take down some statements."

"Jake Jervis? That racketeer? What's he got to do with this?"

"You'll find out. I also want you to locate Sam Price. He'll either be at home or at police headquarters. Get him, too."

Keever had started to talk to himself again when I hung up. I turned to Brockley and said: "Come on, Brockley—we're going to the A.G.'s office and make some phonograph records."

Brockley groaned, then sighed resignedly and got to his feet. Shelton asked: "What do we do with this punk?"

He indicated the little fellow, and I said: "We'll take him along just in case the cops ask any embarrassing questions about the street shooting tonight."

I knew something was wrong when we pulled into the Annex parking lot. Two police cars were there, also a Buick that belonged to Gordon Kress, the district attorney. Shelton and I walked in with our reluctant companions.

And the sight that met my eyes when I opened the door of the big reception room in Keever's suite was one I'll never forget.

THE first faces I saw were those of the city police, in uniform and out. They stared pop-eyed as I entered, then their eyes narrowed. They reminded me of an alleyful of cats coming across an astigmatic mouse.

They converged upon me.

"You're under arrest!" said Lew Kaverman, a city detective captain.

"For what?"

"For shooting down Waxy Walters in cold blood! He came to at the hospital and told us who did it!"

Keever's private door opened, and he appeared therein. He looked as if he were in the last stages of delirium tremens, and he had to brace himself against the door jamb to stand up. Fatly gloating, Durbin peered over his shoulder.

"Tell me!" screamed Keever. "Tell me it isn't so! You didn't shoot that man Walters, did you? Tell me that it wasn't you!"

"Why, I couldn't do that, boss—that would be telling a falsehood. Sure I plugged the guy."

Keever collapsed. He fell backwards against Durbin, who lost his balance and fell down, Keever on top of him. Kay appeared then with a wet towel. I went over to help, but Kay stopped me with the most venomous glare I ever saw outside a zoo.

"You've done enough damage around here!" she said. "Why did you have to shoot somebody, tonight of all nights?"

"All in the line of duty," I said, but not smartly. Kay's look had seared my insides. I let Shelton pull Keever off the squealing Dur-

bin, who got to his feet with the assistance of two cops. Beyond, in Keever's private office, District Attorney Gordon Kress watched gloatingly.

He was accompanied by Phil Sutton, Sam Price and a man I vaguely remembered from the party. He would be Jake Jervis, I knew, the large-scale ticket operator.

Keever's blood pressure finally went down to a point where he could stand up. Shelton helped him to his desk. He also helped me, explaining that Waxy Walters had tried to shoot me first. But Keever's glare in my direction was still murderous. It took extra chairs to provide seats for all of us, including Brockley. He was getting his own share of dirty looks from Jake Jervis and Phil Sutton.

"Maybe we can get somewhere now," said Gordon Kress, who obviously regarded the affair as his own show. "I brought Sutton over here to give you a chance to make a statement in his presence, Keever. Did he or did he not give you that check in consideration for your favorable opinion in the Acme Auto Insurance matter?"

Keever was beginning to regain his composure. He eyed Kress in deadly earnest. "I never saw a check for ten thousand, much less one given me by Sutton. How about that, Sutton? What have you got to say?"

Sutton seemed to enjoy being the center of attraction. He took his time before he said: "Sure, sure, Mr. Keever, you never saw the check!"

Then he deliberately winked.

Keever paled. Sutton had sealed his doom as surely as if he had said: "Sure, I gave you the check, and you cashed it!"

I thought for a moment Keever was going to have a stroke. I didn't want that to happen, because that would mean my job for sure. So I spoke up.

"Sutton, you're putting on an act. You know Keever didn't cash the check. Brockley here did. Isn't that right, Brockley?"

One thing is certain—I had put the fear of God in Brockley. He was afraid of Sutton, of Jervis, of his shadow, but most of all he was afraid of me. Maybe the news of my shooting Walters accounted for it. Anyway, he said meekly: "Yes, I cashed the check, all right."

The district attorney didn't believe him. He asked coldly: "Why?"

"Because Mr. Sutton told me to."

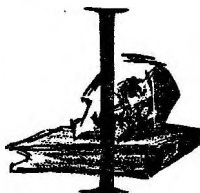
"And why did he want you to cash the check?"

"To frame Mr. Keever, I guess. The teller at the bank was in on it, too. He'd lost some dough at a gambling joint Sutton owns a piece of, and I guess he had to do it, like I did." Brockley looked to me and said almost tear-

fully: "I had to do what Sutton said. He really owns my place, not me!"

"Sure. And he owns the ticket business, too."

Brockley nodded. Sutton was very red in the face. He snarled: "The man's lying! Why would I frame Keever? Why, that would be framing me, too!"



TURNED to Jake Jervis. He had been almost dead drunk at the party, but he was cold sober now and studying Sutton intently.

"Mr. Jervis, I won't ask you to incriminate yourself. I know what your racket is. Let's just say it's a business, and let's also say that Mr. Sutton wanted a partnership in your business. Is that right?"

Jervis eyed me perhaps ten seconds, then he nodded almost imperceptibly. "That's right. Sutton wanted to buy a partnership in my business."

"I was sure of that. But you didn't want to sell any part of that business to Sutton, did you?"

Again Jervis eyed me several seconds in silence. Then he said: "No. I didn't need Sutton, and I didn't need his capital."

"Of course you didn't. You own one of the best rackets—let's say most profitable businesses in the state. There was no point in sharing it with somebody else. Unless you had to, for some reason."

"That was to be Sutton's big argument. He had to convince you that you couldn't operate without him. He had to convince you that he and the attorney general, Mr. Keever, were like that." I held up my crossed fingers. "Of course that would take a lot of doing. Every crook in the state knows that nobody can get to Keever, that he's perfectly honest."

"So Sutton had to blast his good name and connect himself with him in the eyes of the whole state. He took advantage of the favorable opinion rendered by Keever in the insurance case. So he framed the check deal. He was careful, not going too far. The thing was to be a nine-days' wonder, not a frame for keeps."

"After Keever's reputation was thoroughly ruined, the teller would suddenly remember that it wasn't Keever at all who cashed the check. The teller's identification was the only thing against Keever—nobody could ever prove he got the money, for he didn't."

"Sutton would dramatically end his damning silence. He would admit that Brockley cashed the check, and Brockley would come forward to testify. Other people in the bank at the time would remember Brockley and Keever

would be cleared. In the meantime, Sutton would have managed to close his deal with Jake Jervis.

"Everything was done to impress Jervis. That explains why Sutton drove over to Brockley's place to pick me up. He wanted to impress Jervis by bringing me into his party. I was Keever's chief investigator—didn't it all go to show? As an added inspiration, Sutton phoned Kay's apartment house and left the apartment number.

"He knew she'd be trying to find me as soon as the scandal broke. And he knew I'd want him to go and talk with Keever. He pictured us going out in great haste together, Jervis taking it all in and believing the charges against Keever when he read the papers the next morning.

"Jervis would yield and accept Sutton as a partner because the public scandal would convince him that Sutton was right with the attorney general's office. Jervis would be frightened by the prospect of having attorney general heat put on him and baited by the prospect of wider operations owing to co-operation from Keever." I turned to Jervis. "I'm asking you, Mr. Jervis, if that isn't what happened?"

Jervis gave me another long stare.

"Son, I won't say another word without my lawyer."

"You don't have to. The entire scheme's plain once you see through it. I got the idea from a remark Brockley made, that he phoned Sam Price tonight because it helped to be on friendly terms with a big shot. Even being seen with Price, he said, made him look important.

"Of course Brockley's just a little shot. But the same thing applies to the big boys. They're always trying to compromise the public officials they've bought or want to buy. For a long time I thought it was stupid of racketeers to be seen publicly with politicians. Now I know their game. They want to scare off all the possible competition by flaunting their protection that way."

Gordon Kress said slowly: "You have an interesting theory, Corbett. But, as a lawyer, I'm telling you that it's only a theory. Brockley has admitted that he cashed the check. That clears Keever, but it doesn't prove Sutton conspired to frame Keever. You can't prove that."

"Oh, yes, I can!" I looked across at Sam Price. The little lawyer had sat absently through the dialogue, apparently oblivious to it. I knew that he was torn with grief over his daughter's death. I tried to ease up a bit as I spoke to him.

"Sutton couldn't have planned a frame as clever as this one all by himself. It would take a lawyer to tell him just how far to go.

Otherwise the frame might back-fire. How about that, Mr. Price?"

Price eyed me dully.

"You don't think that I would admit that, do you?"

"Yes. You wouldn't protect your daughter's murderer, would you?"

VERY pale, Price said calmly: "If you think Sutton killed her, you're mistaken. He couldn't have. It was Sutton himself who called me and asked me to meet him at a bar on the outskirts of Worthington Heights, I met him there, and he told me Pat was at the apartment he'd rented under the name of George Cranston. He said she was terribly drunk and wouldn't leave when he'd tried to persuade her to.

"He wanted me to ride back with him and pick her up. He said she was too drunk to drive. But I'd done such a thing once before, and Pat had never forgiven me. She said I disgraced her, treating her like a child. So I phoned the apartment and talked to her. I asked her to come home at once, and she said she would.

"Her car was in the drive when I got back. I supposed she was safely in the house. Anyway, Sutton couldn't have shot her. We had a couple of drinks at the bar before I went home. It was eleven o'clock when I phoned Pat. The coroner says she died between eleven and eleven thirty. It would be a half-hour's drive from that bar to the apartment. Sutton couldn't have gone back there and shot her, for it was nearly eleven-thirty when we left the bar. I know that."

"But he could have shot her before he left the apartment and got a girl to impersonate her on the phone."

"But the coroner said she was alive at eleven. Sutton was with me then. He couldn't have shot her before he came to the bar."

"Oh, yes, but he could have! You're going on the assumption that your daughter died *instantly* after she was shot. You know that she was shot under her left eye and that the bullet lodged in her brain. So you've taken it for granted that she died *instantly*. You're forgetting that many brain wounds, especially those made with small-calibered guns, don't produce death for days. Some even fail to be fatal." I turned to Kress. "Isn't that right, Mr. District Attorney?"

Kress nodded. "Sutton could have shot the girl, all right, but what about the voice on the phone? A father should be able to recognize his own daughter's voice!"

"Not when she's as drunk as this girl was supposed to be. Sutton knew the girl would die—he got another girl to impersonate her on the phone. I think I know who the girl was.

(Continued on page 97)

HOT ICE

A Detective Slabbe Novelette

By
WILLIAM ROUGH



Tommy Rex was the best-dressed jewel thief in seven states, but like many a smoothie, he caused a lot of trouble. He left a trail of blood on the boulevard and a corpse in every closet. Four detectives, including that beer-drinking behemoth, B. Slabbe, found that he was an easy man to follow—but a hard one to get away from.



Slabbe pulled both feet up, knees folding into his chest, then snapped them straight and stiff again.

CHAPTER ONE

Rubies on the Run



BOUT ten minutes after the two-thirty train from Philly whistled behind Slabbe's office building that September afternoon, his telephone rang.

He was tilted back in his chair, a quart bottle of beer to his lips, and he hauled in the phone without missing a swallow.

"Yeah?"

"You Slabbe?" a man's voice asked.

"Yeah."

"Gage is the name, Al Gage. I'm a Zenith op. Just got off the train from Philly."

"That so?" Slabbe murmured. "How's my friend, Mr. God Almighty Enoch Oliver?"

"Oh. You know the boss?"

"By long distance," Slabbe said. "He told me how slick you Zenith guys are and how dumb us guys are when I was protecting you slick guys on the Max Lorenz thing, last month."

Gage made a deprecatory sound over the wire. "The Old Man's O. K. It's just that he expects results and chews you till he gets 'em."

"You getting some?" Slabbe asked.

"M'm," Gage murmured guardedly. Then he sighed. "Well, hell, I guess I have to tell you if I use you, huh?"

Slabbe agreed placidly: "And you knew before you rang me that I'd done a chore for Zenith, and so had been checked up."

Gage said, without apology: "Yeah. I wanted to hear the sound of you, though."

"I sound O. K.?"

"Sure. You got a man's voice and you don't soft soap me right off or get excited. You know Tommy Rex, Happy Lado and Silk Flaim?"

"We got newspapers and radios in the town," Slabbe replied.

"O. K. Don't ride me, pal. I've been up all night a couple of nights now. One of the reasons I want you quick is I'm so damn tired. I just put Tommy Rex in your town. He's in the washroom down here at the station. He'll be on the move again in a couple seconds and I'll stick along; but I want you to be handy for me to call back to when I put him down again. O. K.?"

"Check. You want me to line up a cop to make the pinch?"

"It ain't going to be a pinch right off," Gage said. "We want Tommy to connect with somebody, first. You can tell your cop pal to be handy, though, when we want him, and while you're waiting for me, you can put out a line to see if there's any other new arrivals in your hunting grounds."

"Like Happy Lado and Silk Flaim, huh?" Slabbe mused. "You think they're coming together here in our peaceful metropolis to cut the cake?"

"Maybe," Gage said cautiously. "We'll see. There was a girl working with 'em, too, when they heisted that jewelry store in Philly last month. At least, she was Tommy Rex's girl, and she dropped out of sight about the time the others did. Pola Velie. Get a lead to her and I'll kiss you."

Slabbe made a "phlutting" sound with his lips. "Any other little thing I can do for you, cousin?"

"Well—" Gage broke off. Then he hissed: "Here comes Tommy out of the washroom. I'll call you back."

The line went dead and Slabbe knuckled an itch somewhere in the quarter-inch-long gray bristles that grew on his head. He finished the current quart of beer, deposited the empty in a desk drawer and got another one going, out of the refrigerator conveniently near his desk. His ample poundage was not distributed at all awkwardly on his six-one, but sitting down made his thick shoulders all the bulkier. He telephoned Homicide Lieutenant Carlin, over at the City Hall.

"Got something, Pat," he said. "A Zenith op just put Tommy Rex down here on the two-thirty from Philly. He, the op, wonders if Happy Lado or Silk Flaim are slumming around. See 'em?"

Carlin cursed, said no, he hadn't seen 'em and hoped to hell he didn't, and cursed some more.

"Don't bust," Slabbe advised. "I'd say they'll be good boys. They're not here to turn anything, just to divvy up the stuff they heisted out of that jewelry store, last month."

"Oh, sure!" Carlin spat. "They'll be good, eh? Guys like that have a habit of making nasty remarks to each other with forty-five's."

"Tommy Rex's girl friend, Pola Velie, might be around, too," Slabbe continued. "Just letting you know, is all. I'll call you back when and if."

"When and if what?" Carlin demanded.

"When and if anybody makes any nasty remarks to anybody." Slabbe chuckled, and hung up. He held his hand on the receiver while he squinted thoughtfully, then he called four numbers rapidly, said each time that a grunt responded: "Tell Whitey Fite I want him." This

done, he tilted back again and waited. Once he slid his .38 out of its rig under his armpit, checked it and eased it back.

THE time elapsed since Al Gage's first call and his second was no more than twenty minutes. This time the Zenith operative said: "I'm at the Carleton Arms Hotel. Tommy came straight here, looked over the lobby like he was expecting somebody but didn't get his expectations and went into the dining room and ordered. He'll be set here till he wraps around a steak. Step over."

"Five minutes," Slabbe said.

"How will I know you?" Gage asked.

"I look like a mucker," Slabbe said. "Wearing gray tropical worsteds, green sports shirt and white Panama hat."

He finished his beer with a gulp that wouldn't have dropped the Pacific ocean more than an inch, tossed a handful of chiclets into his mouth and used ten minutes to walk over to the Carleton Arms Hotel. Barney McPhail, the head houseman, spotted him coming into the luxurious lobby and looked less happy. "Now what?" he said.

Slabbe murmured: "The guy must be good if you didn't spot him."

"Who?" McPhail sighed.

"A Zenith op," Slabbe explained. "He's waiting for me here somewheres."

McPhail bristled and scanned the lobby. "Don't tell me I can't spot a dick."

Slabbe felt a touch on his arm, turned and saw an inconspicuous man at his elbow. "Gage?" he said, and when the man nodded briefly, Slabbe said to McPhail: "That's right, Barney, you can't spot a dick. Let us be, now, and you won't have any headaches."

He followed Gage to adjoining chairs which commanded a view of the dining room entrance. Gage passed over his wallet. Slabbe looked at a card in a celluloid protector that informed whoever it concerned that Albert Gage was an operative of the Zenith Detective Agency. The description on the back of the card fit the man in the chair: five feet eight, one hundred sixty-five pounds, brown hair, green eyes, pale complexion, no distinguishing blemishes, age 44. It did not mention the fatigue that deepened the crow's feet around Al Gage's eyes and the tired lines beside his mouth.

"Boy, am I pooped," Gage groaned. "In case I fall asleep while I'm talking, Tommy Rex is a husky good-looking blond guy about six feet, a hundred and eighty pounds. Blue eyes, small tight mouth, small ears close to his head, wearing a tan gabardine sport jacket and brown slacks and brown and white shoes. He's still in the mess hall. He isn't walking so chipper. He just got out of a Philly hospital this A.M."

"That where you picked him up?" Slabbe asked.

"Uh-huh." Gage closed his eyes wearily for a few seconds, rubbing his forehead, then smacking it with the heel of his hand to zip up the circulation.

"Keep your eyes closed if it'll rest 'em a little," Slabbe said sympathetically.

"Thanks. I was doing some stuff upstate the last couple days and nights and just got back to Philly this morning and heard Tommy was being discharged from the hospital, and got right on him. He and Happy Lado and Silk Flaim knocked off a jewelry store last month in Philly and picked up eighty thousand in un-set stones. You know that. What you maybe don't know is that since Pola Velie, Tommy's lady friend, dropped out of sight along with Happy and Silk, she was in on it. How we figure it is that she was outside of the jewelry store and they passed her the stuff on the way out. She'd be supposed to meet them later for the split."

"So close to Philly as here?" Slabbe objected. "It's only an hour on the train."

"Well, they might've changed plans some on account of Tommy going to the hospital for a month," Gage explained. "See, he cracked up in the getaway car. That was how we got onto him in the first place. The job went smooth: Tommy and his buddies slugged the clerks in the jewelry store from behind just when they were ready to close the vault for the day. No pedestrians outside the store noticed nothing fishy, and nobody could identify nobody. Tommy and his pals would have been away clean except they cracked up. We knew right away when they cracked up in the neighborhood five minutes after the heist that it was them that done it, but Happy and Silk got clear anyhow. Tommy was pinned behind the wheel but he didn't have no evidence on him, not even a rod, and even the car wasn't stolen but borrowed from a guy dumb enough, or maybe smart enough, to lend his car to a guy like Tommy."

Slabbe nodded. "So Tommy went to the hospital and you waited for him to get out and tailed him."

"Right."

"And the change in their plans might be that since it's a month old and Tommy might be weak and not in shape to travel a long ways, they'd come back this way and meet him here?"

Gage shrugged tiredly. "It depends on how good of guessers we are on Wednesdays. Maybe we're wrong. Maybe Tommy's here for another reason and the others are out in Frisco. Did you check any place to see if Happy or Silk or the babe showed up here?"

"The cops say no," Slabbe said. "I'm contacting another guy who might know."

"Stoolie?"

Slabbe nodded. "He'll be sliding into my office any time, now. Would Tommy meet Happy

and Silk right out in the open, like here?"

"I'd say no," Gage admitted. "But he might meet Pola and she'd take him to them, on account of she's a dame that can get by in ritzy places like this: tall, built, black hair and eyes, white skin, smooth dresser. Tommy don't look no worse than a young lawyer hisself. They'd just pick a place like this to come together."

"Well, we wait and see," Slabbe shrugged. "Suppose I jingle my office and see if my boy checked in yet?"

"How good is he?" Gage asked.

"Whitey gets around," Slabbe assured the tired man. "Tell you in a second."

He started for the phone booths across the lobby, fishing a nickel from his wrinkled gray trousers and juggling it on a palm that made it look like a pinpoint.



HESS said: "Hey, Slabbe!"

Nothing altered in Slabbe's face as he saw a wisp of a man dart from behind one of the lobby's huge marble columns and flit into the men's room. He plodded after the man, found him inside and

handed him the nickel.

"I was going to use it to call you, anyhow, Whitey," he explained. "How'd you know I was here?"

Whitey Fite, adequately nicknamed because he was an albino, whined: "How do I ever know anything, huh? What you want?"

Slabbe held up a hand and ticked off three names. "Silk Flaim, Happy Lado, Pola Velie," he said. "How about it?"

Whitey's knowing eyes were no more furtive than a gopher sizing up the situation outside its hole. He used a finger with a thick black half-moon of dirt under the nail to dig at an itch on his white hair thoughtfully. "How much?" he said.

Slabbe chewed gum easily, deciding to handle it by needling the shabby little man. He sneered: "How much? What do you mean? For what you got or for what you think you can get?"

Whitey took the bait. "For what I got!" he bristled.

Slabbe put a fatherly arm over Whitey's skimpy shoulders, ruffled the white hair fondly. "You wouldn't hold up an old pal, would you? It ain't worth nothing, really, 'cause I could find out myself by making a call here and there. You're only saving me a half hour's work. Say a finif, huh?"

"Go to hell!" Whitey responded promptly.

"Ten."

"Fifteen!"

"Ten!" Slabbe repeated sternly.

"Fifteen!"

Slabbe sighed. "You're a tough cookie." He got out his wallet, leafed off three five-dollar bills. Whitey's grimy hand flicked out, enveloped them.

"I dunno where Happy and Silk are now, but you can get to them mebbe through the dame."

"Did you see them?" Slabbe asked quickly.

"Yeah. They blew in this morning around ten on a rattler from St. Louie."

"How'd you spot 'em?"

Whitey leered. "I'm giving you fifteen bucks worth, not how I work. The dame is at 5502 Emerald Avenue in an apartment where a girl named Nikki Evans lives. That's your money's worth, ain't it?"

"For now," Slabbe said thoughtfully. "5502 Emerald, hey? Be seeing you, kid."

He left the men's room and made his original destination, the phone booths. He rang a number. A quiet, unexcited man's voice said: "Hullo."

"Abe, it's me," Slabbe said. "Took a chance on catching you at home. Got a job in your neighborhood there: 5502 Emerald Avenue, apartment under the name of Nikki Evans, only she's not your party. Who you want is Pola Velie, girl friend of Tommy Rex who pulled a jewel heist in Philly a month back. She's tall, black eyes and hair, built, white skin, smooth dresser. Take a plant on the place. If you can find out if Pola is inside, call me here at the Carleton Arms. But don't be cute. Happy Lado and Silk Flaim might be in and out—they play rough."

"Check."

"If Pola leaves, it might be to meet Tommy down here. If she's alone, stick along. If she's with somebody else and seems to be heading here to the hotel, but they split up before she gets here, stick with whoever she's with."

"Check."

"Don't be cute, remember."

"Check."

Slabbe clicked off, then phoned another boy who took his money on occasion, Charlie Somers. He told Charlie to come to the Carleton Arms, fast. He hung up and returned to Al Gage. The Zenith op hadn't moved a muscle, he was so tired. Slabbe flopped beside him, saying: "Tabbed the girl. 5502 Emerald Avenue. Told a boy of mine to take a plant on the place and call me back if she's there. Got another boy coming here to take over in case the girl's up there and we want to go calling."

"You don't do bad." Gage sat straighter, green eyes speculative. "Yeah, I'd say we should go there if she's in. Tommy don't have the stuff, and that's for sure, but she might, and getting it back is my bread and butter."

"There he comes," Slabbe murmured.

"I see him," Gage said, though his eyes did not seem to be anywhere near the tall, blond man who had come out of the dining room and

was trotting down the stairs to the lobby proper.

Slabbe noted that Tommy Rex was quite at ease, not hurried at all. He looked more like a young man about town looking for his date than a heist artist. He selected a chair and sat down leisurely.

"He's still going to wait," Slabbe said. "I'll drift over and pick up my phone call if it comes. If I go out then, and a little fat-forty guy comes in, it'll be Charlie Somers and he'll take care of Tommy. You meet me outside and we'll meet the lady."

Silence gave Gage's consent. Slabbe went over to the registry counter and talked to McPhail, the house man, about inflation until the switchboard girl murmured: "Mr. Slabbe? Call for you, sir." Slabbe took it.

Abe Morse's quiet voice said: "I'm in a drug-store across the street from where I'm supposed to be. Nobody in or out since I got here. Radio playing loud, though, and people moving around inside. Heard a man's voice."

"Be right there," Slabbe said.

"Check."

Slabbe went out a side entrance, waited till Charlie Somers got out of a cab, described Tommy Rex to him, then got in the cab himself and waited till Al Gage trudged out of the hotel, yawning.

"Fifty-five hundred block on Emerald Avenue," Slabbe ordered the hacker. They rolled.

IT WAS a wide, tree-lined residential section, quiet as they came into it and then, a moment later, full of kids racing home from school.

"Drive around the block till these kids scam," Slabbe told the driver.

Al Gage sat up. "Hey! What—"

"My plant said he heard a man's voice inside the apartment," Slabbe explained. "You can't tell how things will go when there's eighty grand worth of stuff involved."

Gage groaned wryly and wiped his palms on his knees. "I thought there'd only be the girl to go up against."

"Happy and Silk wouldn't let her get too far away if she's got the stuff," Slabbe reminded.

Gage grunted, spying a slender, blue-serge-suited man loafing along the sidewalk. "Is that your boy?"

"That's Abe," Slabbe admitted, letting his head swivel in a slow arc as the cab passed Abe Morse, then an apartment house which bore the number 5502. "Suppose I drop off at the alley and go in through the back," Slabbe suggested. "You and Abe can—" He stopped. "Hold it!" he called to the driver. "Slow-w-." He nudged Gage. "They your people?" he asked, nodding through the back window at two men who had left the apartment house, one tall, one stocky.

Gage's green eyes glittered. "That's the pair, Happy Lado and Silk Flaim. They ain't got a car handy. They're gonna walk a little and pick up a cab. We should—"

"Stop!" Slabbe yelled at the driver. "Dam' Abe!" he swore. "I told him not to get cute!" His hand caught the door lever, which fortunately worked easily, or it would have been ripped away. He crowded out of the cab, Gage's curses hard behind him. Abe Morse had stopped the pair who had come from the apartment house. He'd apparently asked for a match, having spotted Slabbe and Gage passing, trying to detain Happy and Silk for a second till Slabbe's driver could turn around to keep the pair in sight, but at once Happy and Silk had deployed on either side of Abe and were now hustling him along. There were school kids in front of them and behind them, and romping on the street and lawns around them.

They were a good hundred yards away and Slabbe's long legs pumped to close as much of the distance as possible before they glanced around and saw the score. But it was inevitable that the heist men should look around. They did so simultaneously. Slabbe saw Silk Flaim's dark, thick features freeze into a stolid killer's mask. Happy Lado's knife-scarred lips, permanently twisted into a grin from which he'd derived his nickname, pulled back on his teeth.

Both men let go of Abe Morse and clawed at their armpits. Abe dived headfirst into a hedge. Slabbe saw Al Gage going for a gun.

"No!" he bellowed. "The kids!"

He put on a burst of speed, a hand out to knock Gage's gun down. He saw Silk Flaim's hairy hand kick, and gun thunder drowned a child's shriek. Gage went down on a knee. He snapped two shots. Happy Lado returned one. Slabbe hit Gage. There were no further shots from Silk Flaim. Slabbe didn't notice exactly: he and Gage were tangled together on the sidewalk. Gage was cursing obscenely, trying to scramble for his gun, which had been knocked free.

Slabbe clawed at him, grunting. "The kids, you dam' fool! They'll get hurt!"

Gage went on his face again as Slabbe's paw slapped on his rump. Slabbe looked down the street to place Happy and Silk so he'd know which way to roll out of the line of fire. Silk was easy to place, and would be from then on. Gage's shots had been centered.

Happy was away, though, legs scissoring. Abe Morse was scrambling out of the hedge, ready to give chase, but Slabbe saw that it would need a sprinter now and Abe was no chicken. Happy rounded a corner and was out of sight. Abe made a beautiful try by charging unerringly across a lawn to cut into the next street and head Happy off, but Slabbe knew Abe didn't have the moxie to overcome the heist man's start.

He heaved to his feet, dusted his knees and helped Gage up. The Zenith op's green eyes were bitter. "I would've got Happy, too, you dam' fool!" he grated.

"And maybe Junior Smith or Mary Jones!" Slabbe snapped.

"I shoot where I aim! Look at Silk!"

Slabbe growled: "I wasn't worrying about *our* shots—I was worrying about theirs. If you hadn't zeroed in on Silk, he'd have kept shooting wild." He turned from Gage, sang out: "Beat it, kids! Go home! We're truant officers!" A beat cop's whistle shrilled somewhere.

Gage wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, spat, picked up his gun and started for the dark huddle that Silk Flaim made on the sidewalk. He was muttering to himself, and Slabbe slung an arm over his shoulders, saying: "Lookit those kids scatter. Suppose one of them was keeping Silk company?"

"All right, all right," Gage rasped. "You were right, I was wrong! I got one of the sons, anyhow!" He bent over Silk Flaim and started to rifle the man's pockets. Slabbe stooped beside him, bumped him a little. Gage sprawled again and roared: "Watch what you're doing, you big tank!"

"Simmer down," Slabbe said easily and searched Silk. He found no jewels.

Gage punched the sidewalk. "It would happen like this! I get the guy who *don't* have the stuff!"

Slabbe snapped his fingers, whirled toward the apartment house. He said: "If the dame is there and heard the shooting, she's gone now!"

Pola Velie was in apartment 2-A, however, though she hadn't heard the shooting or anything else for some time. She'd been tortured and killed.

CHAPTER TWO

One Good Burn Deserves Another



SLABBE looked at the tall, black-eyed, black-haired girl tied hand and foot in an overstuffed chair beside the blaring radio. She was dressed smoothly in lime-green gabardine and a yellow silk blouse, and her skin was very white: so white that it made the angry rosettes on her long arms and soft throat uglier and crueller by contrast.

"They worked on her with lighted cigarettes," Slabbe said, deep in his chest. Gage, beside him, gave no sign of having heard. He simply stared at the dead woman and breathed heavily.

Slabbe reached out and snapped off the radio. The volume had been turned full on to drown

out Pola Velie's cries. She had been gagged, too, but the wadded handkerchiefs which had been used had been torn out of her sensuous mouth, as if the killer had tried to get a last word out of her before she died.

Al Gage said thickly: "Happy and Silk did it to her. You should've let me blast Happy, too."

Slabbe straightened his shoulders and his jaw took up its normal rhythm on his chewing gum. If his granite-soft face had shown anything, it did so no longer. It was set, and his gray eyes were opaque. He glanced around the room. It was ripped and stripped, and a bedroom beyond had received the same treatment.

"It shapes up different than we figured," he murmured. "They weren't coming together to divvy up. Looks more like Pola ran out on Silk and Happy, maybe to meet Tommy here, and they caught her."

Gage agreed: "They give her the business to make her say where she hid the jewels, only she don't talk. So they strip the place and kill her."

"How?" Slabbe asked. "How'd they kill her, I mean? No marks of gun or knife. She wasn't choked, and poison doesn't fit their style." He bent over the girl and probed spatulate fingers into her thick dark hair, exploring the skull thoroughly. "She wasn't slugged," he decided. "We'll have to wait for an autopsy."

Gage flopped into a chair, pinching and massaging the back of his neck wearily. "Maybe I ain't sorry at that. It's cops' work now. I can get some sleep."

"I wonder if Happy got the jewels," Slabbe pondered.

Gage waved at the ripped upholstery and broken furniture, the wallpaper stripped here and there. "If Pola had them, Happy got 'em," he said. "Nothing's been missed."

"Yeah, but maybe she *didn't* have them," Slabbe reminded.

"She could have them stashed somewhere else," Gage admitted, "but it ain't likely. If she was crossing Happy and Silk by running out on them to meet Tommy, she'd have the stuff right with her. Happy got it."

"Maybe."

Gage scowled. "What do you mean?"

Slabbe chewed placidly. "I wonder is Nikki tricky."

Gage jerked. "Nikki? Oh, the babe who rents here?"

Slabbe nodded. "Who is she? Where is she? Why did Pola come to her? If Nikki knew that Pola was connected with the heist, then she might know, or figure, that Pola was packing the jewels. Maybe Nikki tied into Pola."

The Zenith investigator's lips moved in tired swear words. "Let's just keep it simple. Let's just drag the town for Happy Lado."

"We'll do that," Slabbe soothed, "but until

we get the loot right in our hands we can't be sure just what happened. How close we are to right depends, like you said, on how good of guessers we are on Wednesdays."

He cocked an ear. A siren's whining was dying in the street. Slabbe took three strides into the bedroom, eyes cruising one quick trip around the room. The mattress had been ripped, the drawers pulled out. The only thing that looked as if it hadn't been upset was a small framed picture of a man on the dresser. There was handwriting on the picture. Slabbe swept it into his pocket and was back in the other room beside Gage when police brogues rumbled on the stairs and Homicide Lieutenant Carlin's long, bony nose appeared in the doorway. His dark eyes flashed hotly.

"Now, now, we didn't do it," Slabbe clucked. "Gage here is the Zenith op I told you about. He potted Silk Flaim out on the sidewalk. We got the tip to come here from Whitey Fite." Slabbe went on, explaining.

Carlin heard him out, said sarcastically: "Real open and above-board today, aren't you?"

"Well, there ain't nothing to be close about." Slabbe shrugged. "Tommy Rex ought to be still down in the Carleton Arms Hotel lobby. I got Charlie Somers on him, but you can't figure Tommy did this. Gage just put him in town at two-thirty and had an eye on him all the time."

Carlin leered at Gage. "You've got a crust, blitzing in our town. Gimme your gun."

Gage handed it over. Carlin broke it, looked at it, swung the cylinder back into place, put it in his pocket.

Gage said mildly: "I'll take a receipt for it, Officer."

Carlin's eyes glittered on Gage, taking him in piece by piece. Slabbe pushed Gage into a chair. "The guy's pooped, Pat," he told Carlin. "He'll stick and make his statement. I'll make mine later, huh? I gotta see a guy."

Carlin's lips twisted. "You gotta see a guy," he mocked. "Did I ever see you right after a kill when you *didn't* gotta see a guy!"

"I'll level," Slabbe said openly. "I'm going to look up Whitey Fite again. How he got to know that Pola Velie was here didn't seem important before, but now it does. Who he saw her with and when is important, too. When she was killed might mean something. Who this Nikki Evans is we gotta find out."

"Finished?" Carlin purred. He said over his shoulder to the assorted cops who had accompanied him: "Everybody understand how this investigation is going to be run, now? Inspector Slabbe will be glad to answer your questions."

His dark eyes pinned Slabbe. "Siddown!"

SLABBE blew a bubble with his gum that burst with a flat little cracking sound, sat down on a chair by the telephone, looked at the instrument speculatively, then put it to his ear

and gave the number of the Carleton Arms Hotel. He asked for the house man, McPhail.

"Barney," he said, "is Charlie Somers still there?" Then he jerked the phone away from his ear, held it at arm's length—it was spitting furious static. A word here and there remotely resembled McPhail's normal voice and said: "No headaches, you promised . . . guy pulled a gun right in our lobby . . . shot at the guy your guy was watching . . . hell to pay . . . my job . . . just lucky they didn't kill somebody!"

Slabbe shot questions sharply, listened, hung up again. Lieutenant Carlin hovered over him, challenging him to hold anything back. Slabbe didn't. He tongued his gum out of the way into a cavity and explained: "Happy Lado, it looks like, went straight from here to the Carleton Arms lobby and took a potshot at Tommy Rex. He didn't connect and Tommy sloped out with Happy still chasing him."

Carlin's thin nostrils flared. "My God, the Rotary and Kiwanis and the Citizens' Committee use that hotel for meetings and dinners. They'll crucify the whole department! Gimme that!" He snatched the phone, called the radio rotunda at the City Hall. "Railroad stations, airport, ferry slips!" he barked. "Get the staties to bottle the highways! I know you already done it! Do it again!"

Al Gage hissed at Slabbe. "How good is that Charlie Somers you have on Tommy?"

Slabbe winked. "He didn't pull any miracles this week, but he gets by. Catch yourself forty winks, cousin. Carlin's got great faith in letting guys loose and shadowing 'em. He'll do it to us when his fuse burns out. While we're waiting we can learn something, maybe."

Slabbe waited till Carlin was dealing out orders to his squad, then slid out of his chair as unobtrusively as a man of his bulk could do and stepped into the kitchenette of the apartment. He scowled when he saw that a cop was posted there, but grinned when he saw that there was beer in the refrigerator. He uncapped a couple of bottles and went back and gave one to Carlin. Al Gage had closed his eyes and was breathing heavily.

Carlin took the bottle Slabbe proffered, sneered at Gage: "These slick Zenith guys! Gotta sleep on schedule or they're no good."

Slabbe said: "Whitey Fite will talk to me, Pat."

"He'll talk to a hose, too."

"So maybe he will, but that'll take longer. Lemme go to work." Slabbe put the telephone to his ear, gave the same four numbers he'd given earlier at his office and said the same words four times: "Tell Whitey Fite I want him." He hung up, warned: "Don't horn in now and scare the kid. I gotta hunch he might know something about this Nikki Evans' connections. He said he saw Happy and Silk and Pola get off a train from St. Louis at ten this morning,

and if he knew Pola came here, which he did, it must be he tailed her from the station. He gave me the information pretty cheap, too, so maybe it was because he figured I'd be back for more."

"Just the same, stick around," Carlin ordered. "When Whitey gets to your office, if he does, I'll want to be in on it. Here comes the M.E."

Slabbe thought that the medical examination was worth something, and he hovered beside the medical examiner interestedly. "What killed her, doc?"

"Have to post her to be sure," said the man with the black bag. "Heart conked, probably."

"Uh-huh," Slabbe mused. "How long ago?"

"Two hours at least. It's four-thirty. She was dead at two-thirty for sure, maybe earlier."

Slabbe looked at Carlin's brooding eyes. "Put that in your pipe and smoke it," he said.

As if this remark reminded him of it, Carlin probed a vest pocket for a long, thin cigar and canted it under his bony nose, waited for Slabbe to continue.

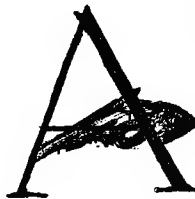
Slabbe said: "Happy and Silk were coming out of here when Gage and I arrived. If they killed Pola and she's been dead at least two hours, that means they hung around that long after giving it to her. I don't buy that. It wouldn't take 'em two hours to case this apartment, so they weren't here that long. They didn't kill her."

Carlin's angry teeth on the cigar told that he was thinking this over, though he protested: "It don't follow. They could have killed her, beat it, and then come back for some reason."

"Name it," Slabbe requested.

"Go 'way," Carlin growled.

Slabbe said, "I'll just do that," and strolled out into the kitchen again. The cop was still on the door, but now he'd seen Slabbe take beer to Carlin once and talk chummy, so when Slabbe casually uncapped another bottle of beer and said, "Convoy this to the Lieutenant," the cop practically touched his visor and did so. Slabbe rambled on out the back door.



HE'D expected, Abe Morse was in the vicinity waiting for him, but making himself inconspicuous. The slender little man caught Slabbe at a corner, trotted along like a blue-serge-clad terrier beside a gray mastiff.

He said in his quiet voice: "Happy caught a cab while I was chasing him. I got the number and—"

"No good now," Slabbe cut in. "Happy went to the Carleton Arms and blasted at Tommy Rex and they both chased off. Our hope is that Charlie Somers sticks with one of them. Take a look."

Slabbe fished in his pocket, brought out the photograph he'd snicked off Nikki Evans' dresser. The man in the picture was short of forty, with a high forehead, even teeth, small ears set a trifle high, sleek black hair with touches of gray at the temples. The flourishing handwriting at the bottom of the picture said: "To Nikki, one swell kid. Max."

Slabbe asked Abe Morse: "Make him?"

"Gimme a second," Abe said, and took the photograph from Slabbe, held it at his side as he walked, and from time to time jerked it up in front of his gimlet eyes as if it were a shot glass. He looked at the street, at the sky, at the sidewalk. Then he'd try to catch himself un-awares and jerk the picture up again. His quiet, narrow face registered nothing, but he muttered: "I seen this guy somewheres, and in town. He ain't been around long or a lot or I'd have him right off."

"Maybe the girl clicks with you," Slabbe murmured. "Nikki Evans. Theatrical name, huh?"

"Dames I don't remember so good," Abe confessed. "This Max now . . ." He jerked the picture up again, quickly dropped it. "He's a big operator, I'd say," he went on, struggling with the thousands of mugs filed under his neat, dark hair. "He's got money. Yeah. He goes for night spots, too. I betcha I seen him at Fudge Burke's place, playing roulette, I betcha."

"Give it a rest," Slabbe suggested. "Charlie Somers will call in at the office as soon as he has something. You better be there to catch his call, only dammit, don't you go getting cute any more, understand?"

"I only do what I think is right," Abe said, hurt.

"Sure, sure." Slabbe staggered the little man with a clap on the shoulder. "That guy I was with, Al Gage, is a Zenith op. Good man. If he buzzes down to the office, tell him I said he should sleep on the couch till I contact him. If Whitey Fite comes in, tell him to wait for me somewhere where Carlin won't spot him."

"What you going to do?"

"Talk to this Max guy," Slabbe said and added casually: "What did you say his last name is?"

"Terazzo, or Tezzaro," Abe said absently. He stopped dead. "Yeah! That's it: Tezzaro! You joggled it out of me. Nice going."

"Nice going for you." Slabbe chuckled. "What about him?"

"A smooth cookie," Abe said, talking easily now. "He's from Philly. He's only been in town here since about the middle of the war. Hell, I got him now. He fits right in, too. You know this gang of refugees that come to town about forty-three and started up that diamond factory or mill, or whatever you call it over at Eighth and Green Street? Well, Max Tezzaro promoted them."

Slabbe's jaws stopped their steady motion for a second, then went on a little faster. "Uh-huh," he said. "The Chamber of Commerce gave the outfit a big hand, figured they'd employ local talent and make jobs, and so on."

"Well, they didn't," Abe Morse said. "The only thing they used local boys for was labor, because a first-class diamond grinder and cutter's gotta be trained for years. These refugees were all from Antwerp and Amsterdam, brought up in the trade. They did a good business through the war. Lately, they've been starting back home to Europe."

"And Max Tezzaro was boss," Slabbe mused. "Beat it down to the office now. Don't be cute."

IT WAS a two-story building of cement block, cheap, hastily constructed with banks of factory type windows. A sign over the double doors on the street said: ACME RAYON COMPANY, First Floor. AMERICAN DIAMOND COMPANY, Second Floor. The rayon company's looms were clacking at top speed making a noise like an elevated train charging full blast, but the second floor was dim and quiet. As he turned right into the office on the second floor, Slabbe glanced into the long room which housed the diamond grinding and polishing machines. There were two rows of them, but only a half dozen were working.

Slabbe opened the office door and said to a middle-aged woman in horn-rimmed spectacles: "What's the matter? Is your help running out on you?"

The woman glanced up from her desk, saying automatically: "Yes, I'm afraid that's true. You can't really blame people for wanting to return home, now that the war is over, but it leaves poor Mr. Tezzaro holding the bag. He has all this equipment but just can't find men experienced enough to operate it profitably."

"So he's trying for profit in other ways." Slabbe nodded sympathetically.

"Yes, he's doing his best to replace these machines with something more practical, like looms. Of course they're hard to get and it takes money and—" The secretary, for she was obviously that, stopped suddenly, snatched off her thick-rimmed glasses and peered at Slabbe. "Excuse me. I didn't get your name, sir."

"Not important," Slabbe waved. "Where's Mr. Tezzaro?"

"Why, he isn't here just now, sir."

"How long ago was he here?"

"Just a few minutes ago, sir. I expect him right back, too."

"I'll wait," Slabbe decided. "Was he here all day?"

"Well, in and out."

"Is he married?"

"No, sir."

"Does his girl friend, Nikki, ever stop in here?"

"Why, occasionally she—" The secretary put her glasses on again. "I don't understand, sir. May I ask why you're asking these questions?"

"Just being friendly," Slabbe said pleasantly.

He drifted over to a side window. He was just in time to see the rakish hood of a shiny black sedan peek out of a garage below. The driver of the car strained forward over the wheel and reconnoitered warily. He was short of forty, with a high forehead, even teeth, ears set a trifle high. He was the man in the photograph which Slabbe had snatched from Nikki Evans' dresser. He fed gasoline and the car glided out onto the street—and Slabbe glided out of the office.

He knew only the one way down to the street, the way he'd come up, and this put him in front of the building again. Max Tezzaro's car, if it cut out to this street, would appear at the intersection to the left. Slabbe pounded that way.

A battered, mud-streaked jalopy rattled past Slabbe and a voice yelled: "Duck, willya! I'm onna job!"

Slabbe didn't actually see the man who'd yelled, but he recognized Charlie Somers' voice and veered into the nearest doorway, pondering. Charlie had been at the Carleton Arms Hotel and should, by all rights, have tailed either Happy Lado or Tommy Rex when the pair had run from the hotel lobby.

Slabbe looked up and down the street. He grunted. "Good boy Charlie!" A car had stopped in front of the office door and a tall blond man was slinging his gabardined legs to the sidewalk—Tommy Rex.

Slabbe realized that Charlie had been tailing Tommy cart before the horse. Slabbe peered at the man with Tommy, the man who was driving, and then he said a man-word quietly but emphatically and chewed his gum with short, snappy bites. The man with Tommy was Happy Lado!

Slabbe shook his head. Happy Lado had taken a shot at Tommy when he'd first caught him in the lobby of the Carleton Arms, but now they were together. Howcome? Why?

There was no time to figure it. It looked as if Tommy were going to duck through the door into the factory building, but he'd taken only a step or two when a bark from Happy Lado stopped him. Slabbe saw Happy pointing through the windshield of the car he was driving and swiveled in time to see Max Tezzaro's black sedan tooling down the street.

Tommy leaped back beside Happy and they rolled after Tezzaro's car. Slabbe scanned the street, grimaced. There wasn't a taxicab in sight. He'd have to trust Charlie Somers to handle it alone. He stepped out of the doorway and started up the street. He could see Tezzaro's car about two blocks ahead, followed by Tommy and Happy. Slabbe watched them with the interest of a professional, shook his head at

their lack of finesse. They were gunning to get close behind Tezzaro. They'd give themselves away. Then Slabbe got it, snapped his fingers and started to run.

Tommy and Happy weren't merely tailing Tezzaro—they were gunning for him!

Slabbe was running while it all happened. The two cars rocked even for a second as Happy and Tommy caught up, then Happy swung his wheel right, bearing down in Tezzaro's path. Tezzaro's rubber squealed as he cut off to the side and suddenly jammed on his brakes.

Tommy Rex was out of the car again, but this time he moved fast. He wrenched open the door of Tezzaro's car. Both his hands jumped at Tezzaro, the left to clutch the man's lapel, the right to strike a piston blow to Tezzaro's jaw. Then Tommy was dragging Tezzaro out of the car. He hit him twice more when he had him on the street, and the man sagged.

Tommy caught him. Happy Lado put out a helping hand and dragged Tezzaro into their car. Tommy slammed the front door, yanked open the back one and jumped in. They rolled again.

Slabbe, still running toward them, looked ahead anxiously for Charlie Somers' jalopy. If he hadn't seen it, he would have jumped into Tezzaro's car and followed, but Charlie's old mud-streaked heap was idling along, still a block ahead of Tommy and Happy's car. Besides, there was something in the back of Tezzaro's sedan that made Slabbe lick his lips. Something wrapped in a big maroon auto blanket. Without even looking, he could tell what it was from its unmistakable shape. But of course he looked anyhow to make sure. It was the body of a blond woman.

CHAPTER THREE

Nikki Wasn't Tricky



HE had been stabbed to death and not by an amateur, Slabbe saw. The knife had been slid home with a swift upward motion under the girl's left shoulder. Guided smoothly by the killer's thumb and forefinger, it had been

necessary to use it only once.

The girl's purse, a drawstring thing that matched her tailored gray suit, was wrapped in the blanket, too. Slabbe avoided the staring blue eyes and opened it. A compact and cigarette lighter bore the initials N. E., and a letter was addressed to Nikki Evans.

"Nup," Slabbe grunted. "Nikki wasn't tricky." He noted that the letter was postmarked from St. Louis two days earlier and stuffed it into

his pocket. A beat cop was lolling along down the street. Slabbe went to him, told him to get up to the shiny black car and do his stuff. He went on back to the building that housed the American Diamond Company, rounded it and entered the garage from which Max Tezzaro had driven. There was no one else on hand.

The letter to Nikki was signed "Pola." It was a friendly letter that told that the two girls had been friends. The last paragraph was the most important. It said: "This boy friend of yours sounds good, but the boys want me to meet him and size him up before we meet Tommy. We three will arrive Wednesday morning, and Tommy will come down as soon as he gets discharged from the hospital the same day. I'll come straight to your place and look over your friend, then go and meet Tommy and take him to the other boys. We'll talk over your proposition then and let you know."

Slabbe blew out his gum. The pattern seemed clear.

Nikki Evans and Pola obviously had been friends from away back and had kept in touch with each other. Nikki had picked herself a boy friend, by accident or design, who had connections in the diamond market. Lately, the boy friend's business had been going to pot because his trained help were scooting back home to Europe. Nikki would have seen that her Maxie was ripe for a deal that would make him some cash to reconvert and, being friends with Pola, she'd have figured that Pola would be looking for a way to get rid of the stolen jewels.

So far so good: Nikki had broached the proposition to Pola. Pola had come here to look Max over. But then what had happened?

According to the letter, there had been no hint of double cross among the original heisters. Pola, Happy and Silk had arrived together this morning and Pola had come to Nikki's apartment. Then something had happened and she got killed.

The theory that Slabbe liked was this: Pola undoubtedly had told Happy and Silk that she was going to Nikki's place to look Max over and that she'd contact them and tell them how she'd made out. When she didn't do this, Happy and Silk had got worried and had come to Nikki's apartment to check up. They'd found Pola dead, they hadn't killed her at all.

At first they'd suspected that Tommy had double-crossed them all, killed Pola and grabbed the stones. This was the only explanation to account for Happy chasing straight to the Carleton Arms Hotel and shooting at Tommy. Happy had been hot, looking for revenge. The answer to how he and Tommy had teamed up together again could only be that after they'd pounded out of the hotel lobby they'd come together outside and Tommy had convinced Happy that he had no part of any

double-cross at all, and that if someone had pulled a fast one it must be Max or Nikki.

Tommy was in the clear for the simple reason that he hadn't got to town till 2:30, and Pola had been dead by then.

Tommy and Happy had then come after Max. Slabbe licked his lips. He could imagine the shellacking Max was in for.

"If they don't kill him, he'll fry anyway," Slabbe grunted and prowled the garage. If Max had had Nikki's dead body in his car and was going somewhere with it, he was their boy. He was the one who'd done the double-crossing. He'd killed both girls. His plan undoubtedly was to dispose of Nikki's body, so that it would look as if she'd killed Pola and had lammed with the jewels.

Slabbe found corroboration of his theory in a trash barrel—bloody automobile seat covers. The amount of blood on them, still sticky, showed that Nikki had been knifed as she sat in the car.

Slabbe locked the garage and peeked up the street to where a couple of dolly cars had parked beside Max's shiny black sedan. He saw nothing of Carlin's squad car. Probably the lieutenant wouldn't come up on this one, since he couldn't know that there was a connection yet. It would be quicker to head to the City Hall and see Carlin in his office, then get set for when Charlie Somers called in to report where Happy and Tommy had taken Max.

WAITING for a street car, Slabbe glanced at his railroader's-type watch. It was a quarter after five and had been a tolerably busy afternoon. Slabbe crossed the street to a drug-store and telephoned his office. The phone rang a dozen times, but no one answered. Slabbe grimaced. "Dam' that Abe. He's supposed to be there. If he got eute again, I'll mobilize him!"

It called for a change of plans, however, for someone had to be on hand at the office when Charlie Somers reported. Slabbe went straight there. A headquarters dick was lounging outside. Al Gage was asleep on the couch. Slabbe shook him. The Zenith op struggled awake, green eyes bleary.

"Where's Abe Morse?" Slabbe growled.

"Should I know?" Gage yawned. "He wasn't here when I came in. Nobody was."

"When did you come? How'd you get away from Carlin?"

"Like you said, Carlin is a great believer in letting a guy go and shadowing him. He let me scam right after you walked out over at the girl's apartment. I came straight here and flopped. A dick followed me. Didn't you see him outside?"

"Whyn't you answer the phone?" Slabbe snapped, but his eyes were cloudy. Abe Morse wouldn't have left the office voluntarily with-

out making arrangements for someone to be on hand.

Gage rubbed his eyes. "It'd take more than a telephone to snap me out of it. I could sleep for a week."

Slabbe sandpapered his jaw with the back of a hand, strode out of the office to the elevators. He talked to one of the elevator boys, learned that Abe Morse had certainly come into the office, though he hadn't been seen leaving. Ditto for Whitey Fite.

Slabbe went back to the office, muttering. He complained to Gage: "Abe only does what he thinks is right, he says. The little monkey! Whitey Fite came here and spilled something, it looks like, and Abe and him went somewhere."

"Is that bad?" Gage yawned.

"I dunno," Slabbe confessed. "I don't see how anything new could have cropped up if I got it figured right. The only way Abe could get in trouble would be if he somehow finds out where Happy and Tommy took Max, and goes there and sticks his neck out."

Gage stifled his yawning, looked alert. "What's this? Who's Max? How would Happy and Tommy get hold of him, and why?"

"He's the guy who was going to fence the stuff," Slabbe explained absently, "only he crossed the gang up and knocked off both those girls, Pola and Nikki. Tommy and Happy got together again and came at him. They're working him over right now, I'd say."

"Well, let's get on it, bo!" Gage exclaimed. "Get your friend Carlin to get a squad together and—"

Slabbe grunted. "There's only one small point yet—I don't know where they are. Charlie Somers is still tailing 'em and will call in first chance—if things break right. But until then, we sit and sweat."

Gage cursed softly. "This game is like war."

Slabbe nodded. "Ten percent action, ninety percent waiting."

He scooped a couple of quart bottles of beer out of the refrigerator by his desk. Gage shook his head sadly. "Not for me. It'll only make me groggier. How about a sandwich? Besides not sleeping, I ain't et since breakfast."

"Get me four pickled tongue," Slabbe said. "There's a delicatessen around the corner."

Gage stretched and plodded off. Slabbe sat in his big chair looking happy as the beer made his Adam's apple bob, then scowling between swallows. He hauled in the telephone, started calling his four numbers again. His question this time was: "Did you send Whitey to my office?"

The second party, a female, said: "I told you twice already I ain't seen him today. He went up to Philly this morning and he must still be there."

Slabbe's eyes flickered. "You didn't tell me

before that he went to Philly. When did he go?"

"The ten-thirty train this A.M. I had a date with the little squirt and he phoned me and said he couldn't make it until late this aft'."

"Thanks, dream girl," Slabbe said softly. He called another number. "Did you send Whitey to my office?"

"Yeah."

"When?"

"Lessee. You called the second time about four-thirty, ain't it? It's going on six now. It was around five when I told him to see you again. He oughta be there."

Slabbe hung up, started to put in some chiclets, then remembered that they'd spoil the taste of the beer. Whitey had told him that he'd seen Happy and Silk and Pola get off a train that pulled in at ten today. At ten-thirty, according to the girl friend, Whitey had taken the train to Philly. What had the little information huckster gone there for?

It might have no connection whatever, Slabbe realized. Whitey might merely have been going to Philly for personal reasons. In fact, if he'd been waiting for a train himself at the station, it would account for him being on hand to spot Pola, Happy and Silk.

Slabbe peered at his potato. Enough time had elapsed since Happy and Tommy had snatched Max for them to have got where they were going. Charlie Somers should be calling any second.

"Unless he tries to be cute, too," Slabbe grumbled.



HEN the phone rang.

Slabbe said: "Yeah."

"It's me," said Charlie Somers' voice.

"Where are you?"

"In a gas station on Highway 309, just outside of town. Maybe I done wrong, but you can't let a

guy die, can you?"

Slabbe groaned. "What happened?"

Charlie said: "I stuck with Happy and Tommy right along from the time they chased out of the Carleton Arms lobby. What happened was that Tommy lammed after Happy shot at him in the hotel, only outside he laid for Happy in a doorway and jumped him. They both got into a cab, rode a while and then got friends again."

"That's what I figured," Slabbe said.

"Yeah. Then they stole a car and headed up where I saw you and snatched that guy, Max. I figured they'd take him somewhere, but they worked on him right in the car while they kept rolling. Brother, did they work on him! Even if he lives, his old lady'll never recognize him again."

"Can he talk?"

"Well, he makes noises which if you listen you can figure out, but his brain ain't working. Tommy and Happy must've busted something in the poor mugg's head. They shoved him out along the highway finally. If he'd have been dead, I wouldn't have stopped, but I seen him twitching and Tommy and Happy headed back into town, so I figured we could catch 'em by bottling the place."

Slabbe growled: "What did Max say?"

"Him and his girl friend Nikki met a girl named Pola this morning at Nikki's apartment, just after Pola got in on a train, see? They talked over fencing some hot ice and made a deal. Then Pola says that she's going to meet her boy friend Tommy this afternoon and Max goes about his business and Pola and Nikki sit around chewing over old times. About one-thirty this afternoon a guy comes to the apartment and says he's from Tommy who's still in the hospital and wants to talk to Pola alone. Nikki leaves them there, not thinking anything wrong about it, and meets Max again and after a drink or two they go back to the apartment to see if this guy who says he's from Tommy said anything which changed their plans. They were changed, all right."

"Yeah?" Slabbe pressed, jaws going on gum again.

Charlie continued: "They found that the guy had worked on Pola with lighted cigarettes and she'd conked off. She had a bad ticker to begin with and the pain and excitement loaded it too high, so it doesn't look like the guy who done it meant to really kill her, huh? Just the same, after she was dead it was pretty clear Nikki had to go, too."

"Uh-huh."

"She had seen the guy and could tab him again, see? Anyhow, when they find Pola like that, Max says maybe she didn't tell where the ice was after all and that Nikki should beat it back to the car and be lookout while he cases the apartment. Nikki does this and Max searches the place. He don't find nothing, he says."

"Can you believe him?" Slabbe grunted.

"Lissen, Benjy, this guy is just screeching it out. He don't even know what he's saying, so how can he be lying?"

"Check," Slabbe said.

"When Max goes back to the car, Nikki's shivved. How d'ya like that? The guy which was working on Pola must have still been there or have been hanging around when Max and Nikki come in. He figured Nikki could tab him and when she went back to the car, he slid a knife into her."

"What did Max do next?" Slabbe pressed.

"He was stuck with Nikki dead in the car, see, and all this killing was out of his line. He got the shakes and drove the car to his garage

and then went out and drank till he got up some more nerve, then went back and took off the seat covers, wrapped the girl up and started off to drive her out in the woods somewheres and plant her. This was when Tommy and Happy caught up with him. Does it check? Was there this Nikki girl's body in his car?"

"Yeah, there was, Charlie. Did you call an ambulance for Max?"

"Uh-huh. What next?"

"How long ago was it that Happy and Tommy headed back to town?"

"Ten, fifteen minutes," Charlie judged. "They were sailing, too, going somewhere in a hurry. Cripes, if I should've stuck with them I'm sorry, Benjy."

"No, you couldn't let Max die, I guess," Slabbe agreed without enthusiasm.

"But he probably will, anyhow," Charlie repined. "And now we lost Happy and Tommy."

The office door opened and two men stood in it, looking at Slabbe. Slabbe stopped chewing for five seconds, felt the phone in his hand getting slippery from sudden sweat. He started to put it down. Charlie's voice said: "Maybe we can pick them up again, huh?"

"We did," Slabbe said.

SLABBE for the gum in his hand and the somewhat glassy set of his blue eyes, Tommy Rex still looked the man about town. His natty gabardine jacket, slacks and brown-and-white shoes hadn't been dirtied at all. He looked sharp. Happy Lado was different, dumber, duller, without imagination. He was the type to beat to death anyone who got in his path, figuring that if they died they couldn't have been important anyhow.

Tommy ordered gently, "Get behind him," and stood flat-footed in front of the desk. Happy Lado's permanently grinning lips tightened, and he glided out of Slabbe's line of vision. Slabbe felt the displacement of air. A hand came delicately over his shoulder and whisked away his .38. Very carefully, he picked up his quart of beer and swallowed. As he was taking it away from his lips, Tommy nodded and Happy's hand licked out in a slap that put the beer into Slabbe's lap. Slabbe jerked instinctively.

Tommy leaned over the desk and casually moved his gun barrel four inches to Slabbe's left temple. Pain bludgeoned in Slabbe's skull and the nerves of his eyes, disorganized for a second, registered bright red. A choking sound started down in his chest and he heaved up.

"Shoulder!" Tommy Rex barked at the man behind Slabbe. Slabbe felt Happy's gun barrel bite deep in his shoulder.

"Nah-h-h," Tommy spat. "The collarbone."

Happy Lado's gun rose and fell again, this time on the muscles sloping down from Slabbe's

neck. Slabbe felt pain scream through his arm and shoulder, then they were numb.

"The other one," Tommy ordered.

Slabbe bellowed, "I'll be damned if you do!" and threw himself backwards against his chair. He hit it and carried it four feet into the wall behind him. He knew he'd missed Happy as his head hit the wall and the red blaze engulfed his eyes again. He tried to fight to his feet again, but was vaguely aware that both men were now in front of him, slashing with their guns.

The first half dozen blows laced Slabbe's head and torso with agony. Then his nerves went numb and he felt only the push, not the cut, of the gun barrels. Tommy and Happy seemed to be dancing around him, though he knew they were planted solid. He could hear the thick sound of their breathing and smell the stench of their sweated bodies. He remembered what Charlie Somers had said about Max: "Even if he lives, his old lady'll never recognize him again!" He started to pass out.

The blows stopped.

Slabbe felt blood trickling down his face. His mouth was suddenly liquid, and he knew he was retching. He tried to turn his head, felt it sag laxly. The heel of a hand snapped his chin up.

A snarl said: "Where's the stuff, peeper?"

"Give him a second; he can't hear yet. Case the place."

Desk drawers rasped out and hit the floor. The filing cabinets clattered. Bottles clunked out of the refrigerator. Slabbe kept his eyes closed tight, playing possum but not needing to act much to do it. He tightened the muscles in his stomach, released them, tightened them again and again. Pain came back dully throughout his thick torso. He ground his teeth but welcomed it—it takes strength of a kind to feel pain.

He could recognize Happy's voice now when the twisty-lipped man rasped: "They ain't here—but they gotta be!"

Tommy said: "There's still the other guys that were with him. We only came to him first because it was easy to find out who he was when you described him around."

"Yeah," Happy replied hungrily. "There was two other peeps with him outside the apartment. The one guy tried to stop me and Silk; the other guy shot Silk. They're next!"

"Maybe he'll tell us where to find them," Tommy said wolfishly. "Go to work."

Slabbe's eyes swam open. They were bearing down on him again. Somehow they'd got it into their heads that Slabbe or Al Gage or Abe Morse had glommed the jewels. There'd be no talking Happy out of it. Tommy had a bit more imagination, though.

"Tommy—" Slabbe coughed. "Look, you're clean on everything that happened today,

You're alibied on the murders because you were tailed down from Philly and we know you couldn't have done them. That ought to mean something to you, boy."

"Nuts!" Happy grated.

"What are you getting at?" Tommy asked softly. "Nobody tailed me on the train. You think I'm an amateur?"

SLABBE rasped the back of his hand over bloody lips. Even though Charlie Somers would realize from the way Slabbe had ended their telephone conversation that Happy and Tommy had barged in, it would be another quarter of an hour before he could get here. And Lord help Al Gage if he came back with the sandwiches and waltzed in half asleep.

Slabbe swallowed mightily, tried to focus a steady glance on Tommy. "All I'm trying to tell you is that it ain't just larceny now. Somebody's gonna fry for Nikki and Pola. You couldn't have killed 'em, because you were tailed whether you know it or not, but every step you take now is making you an accessory."

Happy Lado cursed and slashed Slabbe's cheeks.

"Cut it!" Tommy ordered lazily.

Slabbe said thickly: "You're stuck for the jewels, I'd say. I haven't got 'em. The two guys Happy saw with me don't have 'em—the one guy works for me regular and is O.K., the other guy couldn't have 'em because I happen to know he came down on the same train from Philly as you."

Tommy scratched one of his small, close set ears with the sight of his gun barrel. "So?"

"Look, I'm telling you you're just stuck for 'em," Slabbe said. "None of the people we know about in this got 'em, that's all. Somebody else must have."

"Who?"

"How the hell do I know?" Slabbe swallowed. "Don't you think anybody else in town knew Pola was here and was packing the stuff? She had it, didn't she?"

Tommy nodded. "She kept it on her every second since the heist. Happy here and Silk were with her in St. Louis. When I was due out of the hospital, I passed them the word to meet me. They got it back to me that they had a guy who'd handle the stuff and I should meet Pola at the Carleton Arms Hotel here."

"And she had the stuff when we got in, today," Happy leered. "She had it when she went into that apartment, and some wise guy went to her and said he was from Tommy and got rid of Nikki, then worked on Pola."

"I'll give you that," Slabbe said. "But it wasn't anybody that we connected with yet. What you don't get is that other people could have known you were in town and made a play for the stuff."

Happy moved his twisted lips over closer to Slabbe.

"Who else knew it? How could anybody else find out?"

"Why, you were seen getting off the train, you cluck," Slabbe said. "A stoolie saw you right off. How do you think I found out where Pola was? If the stoolie told me, Lord knows how many other parties he told, too. Figure that, will you?"

Tommy and Happy looked at Slabbe, then at each other, then back at Slabbe. Slabbe held his breath. He'd given them something to think about. Maybe—

Happy snarled: "It don't change nothing! We just go after that stoolie and beat out of him who all he told about us. Isn't that right, Tommy?"

Tommy Rex nodded evenly, pointed his gun at Slabbe. "And we still find out from him where to go." He nodded to Slabbe, "O.K., peeper, who's this stoolie and where do we find him?"

Slabbe tried to figure out how much time had passed since he'd hung up on Charlie Somers. It must be ten minutes, but he couldn't be sure. It hadn't been time enough for Charlie to get here, anyhow.

Slabbe stalled: "I already dropped word for him to come here. He ought to pop in any minute. Take a seat."

"Work on him," Tommy said thinly. "He's trying to slow us up."

Happy Lado moved in eagerly, gun cutting up under Slabbe's jaw. "Who's the stoolie? Where is he?"

Slabbe had been snapping out of it a bit, feeling his normal strength return but he'd needed a couple minutes more grace to be in shape to make a move.

There was no help for it, though. The first slash of the gun told him that it would take only another one like it to jelly his muscles again. This time his chair was back against the wall. He heaved back, pulling both feet up, knees folding into his chest, then snapping straight and stiff again.

Only one foot caught Happy's body and that not too solidly. But it was enough to throw Happy off balance for a second. Slabbe rolled forward out of his chair, hit the floor with knees and elbows.

A quick sidewise glance showed him that Tommy had stepped back to let Happy close again. Tommy thought it was between Slabbe and Happy for a second and had foolishly dropped his guard.

Happy shuffled in, setting himself. He expected Slabbe to swing up from the floor and meet him. Slabbe came up, all right, but he fooled Happy. Instead of closing with the man, he turned his back full in Happy's face—and dived at Tommy.

CHAPTER FOUR

Finders Losers



VEN a man who had been expecting it and had braced himself couldn't have taken Slabbe's hurtling two hundred and twenty pounds without folding. Tommy wasn't braced, and he'd just got out of a hospital that day.

He crumpled like a ping pong ball under an elephant's heel.

But he still had enough moxie to roll and bring his gun around. Slabbe clawed at it, expecting a blow from Happy any second. When none came, he sprawled on top of Tommy and glanced around. Happy was darting to the window. The sound of a whining siren in the street finally filtered to Slabbe's ears. At the same instant, Happy whirled, took a step toward Slabbe, gun cocked.

Slabbe was a contortionist, hauling Tommy around so that he formed a shield. The siren screamed again. Happy spat an obscenity and ran from the office. Slabbe saw him dart toward the rear of the building. The elevator doors clanged and Al Gage's tired face was pop-eyed for a second as he saw what was cooking. Then he dropped the bag of sandwiches and coffee container he was carrying and took off in the direction Happy had gone.

Slabbe grunted happily, now able to give his full attention to Tommy Rex. He did this lustily. Tommy had just been discharged from a hospital, true, but Slabbe figured that the beating he'd taken himself made them even. At that, it wasn't much of a contest. Slabbe hit Tommy only a half dozen times before he sighed disappointedly. Tommy was out.

"Easy now! What's going on here?"

Slabbe grimaced at the two radio car cops who skidded in, guns out. "Happy Lado's lamming out the back way," Slabbe told them. "For crissakes don't shoot the guy who's chasing him, he's a Zenith op."

The cops piled out again. Slabbe wrinkled his nose, muttered: "If they didn't always play cop with that damned siren, we'd have taken 'em both."

He hefted to his feet, staggered, caught at the desk. He recalled times when he'd felt better. He navigated to the washbowl, sloshed icy water over his face and neck, blowing like a whale. Finally he grabbed a quart of beer, bit the cap off with his teeth and drank.

There was no noise in the corridor now. Slabbe took a pair of handcuffs from his desk and fastened Tommy Rex to the radiator. Then he went into the corridor and turned toward the fire escape at the rear. He saw what he

expected to see—nothing. Happy Lado, Al Gage and the two prowler car cops had charged through the alley, it looked like, for garbage and trash cans had been knocked over. But there was no one now, or no one alive.

Slabbe didn't get it for quite a while. He was seven floors above the alley and his eyes still weren't working normally, and he wanted beer more than anything else. He held onto the fire escape railing and drank. Each time he lowered the bottle, his chin dropped with it and his eyes focussed on the cans below, but it wasn't until the third or fourth time he did this that he really saw much. Even then, it didn't look like anything but a man's battered hat in one of the larger cans.

Slabbe finished his beer, hefted the empty bottle, then sighted on the can and let the bottle go. It scored perfect and Slabbe took a breath. His coordination wasn't too bad at that. He turned back into the building, did a double take and froze. The bottle hadn't clanged in the can. They made futile noises and motions.

Footsteps were sounding in the alley again when Slabbe turned back and looked down. The two cops were coming back. Slabbe rubbed his eyes and looked at the can. The bottle had hit the battered old hat and knocked it aside. There was dirty white hair underneath it.

Slabbe croaked: "Hey, you guys! Am I seeing things? Lookit that ash can!"

The cops followed his gaze, stepped over to the can. They made futile noises and motions. Slabbe started down the fire escape, reeled a little and decided the trip wasn't necessary. He recognized Whitey Fite from here, anyhow.

He yelled: "How'd he get it?"

"Knife," replied one of the cops.

"I'll get Carlin," Slabbe said. He shook his head ponderously, went back into the building. The elevator boy had said he'd seen both Whitey and Abe Morse come into the building but hadn't seen them leave. Till now, Slabbe had thought that Whitey had told Abe something and they'd gone off together; but if Abe had been with Whitey he wouldn't have let Whitey get killed. Slabbe had faith in the men he worked with.

He growled at himself: "And Abe wouldn't have left the office, either, when he was supposed to be on the job. I bet he didn't, not under his own power!"

Slabbe stopped dead in the corridor, eyes clear again, glittering. He saw the door of the mop closet, went to it and jerked it open. He cursed softly at the motionless heap of blue serge, then bent swiftly and ripped the gag from Abe Morse's mouth. The little dick was conscious but too weak to move.

HE GAGGED, tried to lick his lips, gagged some more. Slabbe picked him up as he was and carried him into the office, put

him on the couch and tore off the twine that bound him hand and foot. He recognized it as the very twine he kept in his desk.

Abe croaked: "I got slugged. I was only here twenty minutes and blooie. I didn't see nothing."

Slabbe gave Abe beer, got on the phone, called Carlin's office. He said to Abe: "Then you didn't see Whitey Fite, either?"

"I was slugged," Abe repeated earnestly. "And, honest Benjy, I didn't get cute or nothing like that."

Slabbe got connected with Carlin, told a terse story, ending with: "Happy's the only guy unaccounted for now and Gage is on his tail—I hope. Let's all be set this time. We won't muff it again." He hung up before Carlin started in on his ancestors.

Charlie Somers came panting into the office. "Wow! They worked you over, too!" he exclaimed. He saw Tommy Rex handcuffed to the radiator. "You hit back, though, huh? When you made that crack on the phone and then hung right up, I knew what was up. I didn't figure I could get here fast enough, so I called the radio rotunda and told 'em to get a prowler car here on the double."

"Thanks, cousin," Slabbe said. "You did fine, but it might have been worth taking a couple more pokes if you'd have come yourself. The prowler car cops had to use their siren, the dopes, and Happy lammed. We got to sweat it out again and hope Gage sticks to Happy."

But there wasn't much waiting this time. One of the prowler car cops came back up from the alley, then Lieutenant Carlin arrived with a squad and started to instruct Slabbe, Charlie Somers and Abe Morse on how private investigators' licenses were forfeited. It didn't last long.

The telephone rang and Slabbe answered. Al Gage said: "Gage talking. It's washed up."

Slabbe gaped. "Huh?"

Gage sounded very pleased. "I'll see that you get all the credit that's coming to you and your expenses taken care of, but don't forget I took Happy by myself."

Slabbe bellowed: "Will you tell me what the hell you're talking about?"

"Sure thing. I got Happy. That's it, isn't it? I chased him down the fire escape, tailed him to this hotel I'm at now. He come in, took a room, went up and I went up after him. I knocked on the door. We both had guns out, only I shot first. He's meat, and he had the jewels on him."

Slabbe uttered a string of words, the mildest of which was: "Goddam!" He took a breath and yelled: "What hotel?"

"Uncas Hotel, just around the corner from your place," Gage said.

The procession that left Slabbe's office and marched to the Uncas hotel included Slabbe,

Charlie Somers, Abe Morse, Lieutenant Carlin and four plainclothes men and three harness cops.

The desk clerk marveled. "My God, you cops move fast these days! I just hung up from calling City Hall, Room 307. The man just came in and registered and went upstairs and the next thing I knew a woman came screaming down that there was shooting there."

The last harness cop in the procession might have heard the desk clerk, but the others had already crowded into an elevator.

Al Gage was sitting at the writing desk in room 307, talking on the telephone. On the green blotter in front of him lay a gun and a chamois bag. The drawstring of the bag was loose and glittering stones had spilled out of it: diamonds, pearls, an emerald or two.

Gage looked around at the sound of feet, held up a hand for silence, then waved at the bent-over heap which was Happy Lado. Happy was doubled up on the floor, resting on his knees and forehead, both arms clasped about his mid-section as if he'd tried to hold pain down or his guts in. Gage had obviously shot him in the stomach. Happy's gun was under him, just the butt visible, as it would naturally be if he'd dropped it after collapsing.

Everybody started talking, and Gage held up his hand again, said into the telephone: "Mr. Oliver? Gage talking. I've recovered the jewels. Satisfactory? . . . Yessir, my lead worked out fine. I'll get some sleep and come in."

Slabbe had been staring woodenly at the chamois bag of jewels beside the gun on the desk blotter. He recognized the gun as one of his own, one that he kept in a desk drawer in his office.

Gage started to hang up, noted the direction of Slabbe's stare and said apologetically: "I didn't think you'd mind if I borrowed it. Remember I gave my own to the lieutenant after I shot Silk."

"Wait a second," Slabbe said and took the telephone from the Zenith op. He said, "Mr. Oliver?" and when Enoch Oliver's dry voice purred, "Yes?" Slabbe put a lash into his voice and said, "A fine outfit you got, sending a man on a job like this when he's half dead for sleep!"

Mr. Oliver gasped, sputtered. Slabbe railed at him some more, his voice dripping sarcasm.

"Now stop that!" Mr. Oliver burst. "We *did* have other operatives set to follow Tommy Rex from the hospital today, but Gage picked up a better lead and wanted to handle it himself."

"That would have been about noon today, huh?" Slabbe said. "He told you he had this tip down our way, right?"

"Naturally. Of course. And I authorized him—"

Slabbe needed no more. He hung up, looked

at Gage. The fatigue lines about the Zenith op's eyes had deepened and tightened from more than weariness.



LABBE said: "Honest to God, I'm sorry, Gage. I kind of liked you. You know the job and you got guts, and you like your work. Yeah, maybe you like your work *too* much. You got too enthusiastic with Pola, huh?"

No one had to hold up a hand for silence now. The room was packed with cops. Someone shut the door. The air in the room was suddenly hot and still. Al Gage's green eyes were sinking back into his skull. A weary muscle in his cheek twitched once and was still.

Slabbe tongued his gum into a cavity and spoke without relish. "Tommy Rex was right when he said he'd have spotted anybody who tailed him down on the train. You *didn't* tail him, Al. You knew he was coming here and you got here first. I'd say you got here about the one-thirty train, not the two-thirty."

Slabbe's words hung in the air tightly. Someone shuffled, coughed. All eyes were on Al Gage.

Slabbe wet his lips. "Whitey Fite saw Pola and Happy and Silk get off a ten o'clock train today. Then he took the ten-thirty to Philly. That would put him in Philly at eleven-thirty. He was a stoolie, Whitey was, and his business was knowing who was wanted and for what and who was interested. He knew the Zenith Agency protected the jewelry store that had been heisted. He knew he'd get paid more for his information by a Zenith op than by anybody else. Did he come straight to you, Al? Your boss just admitted that other arrangements had been made, but you picked up a better lead and were authorized to handle it."

It didn't look as if Gage were going to say a word. It didn't look as if he had the strength to. His face was shriveled, his green eyes dull. Normally inconspicuous as a successful dick should be, he now stood out above anyone else in the room. He was branded.

His lips scarcely moved, and his words were very low. "It was the breaks all through," he said. "It was a fluke that Whitey picked me. He was waiting in the corridor outside the boss' office about noon today when I was leaving. I'd just checked in from a job up-state and was going home to bed. Whitey must've figured I was the boss and braced me, asked me what it was worth to get a line on Happy, Silk and Pola."

Slabbe nodded. "It was worth plenty and you paid Whitey. He told you he'd seen Pola, Happy and Silk get off a train in our town and

had tailed Pola to Nikki Evans' apartment, right? Was it just a fluke, too, that Whitey was on hand at the railroad station and spotted 'em?"

"Fifty-fifty, I guess," Gage said. "A guy like him hangs around railroad stations off and on, but I think he was coming to Philly for a personal reason today. What's the difference? He spotted them and passed the dope along to me."

"And you told your boss you'd picked up a lead and he should call off the ops who'd been supposed to tail Tommy from the hospital," Slabbe filled in. "You figured that with Pola, Happy and Silk here and Tommy due to be discharged from the hospital, he'd sure make a beeline here, right? You didn't have to tail him. Maybe you didn't even want him at all. You knew where Pola had put in, at Nikki's apartment. You figured she'd be packing the jewels. You've got guts. Maybe you could get them back."

"So you hopped the very next train down, the twelve-thirty, I'd say, and it put you here at one-thirty. You went straight to Nikki's apartment, told her you were from Tommy and wanted to talk to Pola alone. The girls accepted you and Nikki left and . . . like I said, you got too enthusiastic about getting the jewels back, Al."

Gage's voice was hollow. "I didn't know she had a bad heart. I was fagged out, too. Excited, yet tired. I talked to her. She gave me a song and dance. I started to burn. I hate crooks, anyhow. I started to search the apartment. She laughed at me, lit a cigarette and blew smoke in my eyes. I socked her and her cigarette fell down. I picked it up and her eyes popped out. I didn't have any intention of

using it, then. But when I saw her get scared, I figured she'd crack easy. I turned up the radio and . . .

"All right! Go ahead!" Gage cried suddenly, voice rising. "Look at me! All of you! I guess no other guy here would do such a thing!"

"Easy," Slabbe said.

"Like hell you guys wouldn't do such a thing!" Gage panted. "I've been in the racket a long time! I know what goes on! I've been in some back rooms at police stations myself! I just got a tough break 'cause this Pola twist had a bum heart. If she'd have lived and I'd've got the jewels off her, you'd have all been rooting for me. You'd have held her in the tank till her burns healed, say you wouldn't, you damn lousy creeps!"

Not a man spoke.

SLABBE pressed: "But you got the jewels. Happy didn't have enough imagination for this run-around. If he'd had them, he'd have lammed right off, not gone gunning for Tommy."

"Sure, I got them," Gage snapped. His lips quivered. "Pola cracked. She yelled: 'My heart's bad! Don't burn me again! I'll die! I'd sooner give you the stones! They're hidden in my hair!'

"And there they were, too!" Gage said. "She had the bag flattened out and fastened on her skull with adhesive tape and her hair combed over it sweet. I got them. I set out to get them and I did!"

"But you couldn't just turn up with them now," Slabbe said quickly. "Even if the cops never guessed, your boss Mr. Oliver knew you'd come down here on a lead. If you turned up

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with the stones and Pola was found dead, he'd guess the score. Being the kind of guy he is, he'd have at least fired you and black-listed you.

"You had to do something. Why couldn't you make it look as if you'd come to town later than you actually did? Why not play it just like you would if you'd tailed Tommy here? You could pull it if you got to the station and picked Tommy up when he arrived. You did that, then called me."

Slabbe shook his head. "But you don't make me your alibi, cousin. In fact, I gummed the works. You intended to plant the stones on Silk's body this afternoon after you shot him, but I bumped you and searched him myself. You didn't care about the jewels—you weren't out for profit. It was the thought of being disgraced in your profession that pushed you. Hell, I know guys like you," Slabbe said tiredly. "Your job is your life."

Gage was an old man, face lifeless, shoulders sagging. "Nikki was the only one who'd seen me. I waited around the apartment till she and Max came back. When he sent her down to the car to be lookout, I did it. Then I went to the station and saw Tommy getting off the two-thirty train, called you and made it sound as if I'd tailed him directly from the hospital."

Slabbe sighed. "But then you had to get Whitey Fite, too. He was the one who had tipped you in the first place. Maybe you both came down here on the same train, anyhow Whitey was tailing you when you went to Nikki's apartment. He would have guessed that you'd killed Pola and he'd have seen you step into the car with Nikki. Maybe he didn't see you actually put the knife in her, because he'd have kept out of sight as much as he could. But he was there."

Gage scowled. "How do you know that?"

"Because Whitey met me in the lobby of the Carleton Arms just after I got there," Slabbe said. "I asked him how he knew I wanted to see him, but I didn't think much about it at the time. But Whitey couldn't have known I was going to the Carleton Arms. So what was he doing there? The answer is that he was following you. And whether you knew he was tailing you or not, you knew he worked for me off and on and would finally figure out that you were the only one who could have killed the girls and sell me the dope."

Gage shrugged fatalistically.

"So when Carlin let you go today, you came straight to my office. You'd heard me call around and tell guys that I wanted Whitey, and you figured he'd come to my office. You slugged Abe and shoved him in the mop closet, tying him with twine from the same desk drawer where you picked up that gun. Then you waited."

Slabbe went on, voice flat and monotonous, doing something he had no stomach for. "When Whitey came, you gave him what you'd given Nikki and took him down the fire escape and stuffed him in a trash can. You could have got rid of his body later if you didn't want it found right near my office, but first you had to locate Happy and Tommy, get to them, take them, and claim they'd had the jewels. You have the guts for it, I'll give you that, and you knew that I had Charlie Somers tailing Tommy and Happy and that he'd be sure to call the office first chance."

Slabbe wiped his mouth. "It would have been one on you if Charlie had called while you were out on the fire escape with Whitey. The fact is that he didn't, Al, but I did. I rang the office and nobody answered. It was a give-away on you, kid. You tried to cover up by saying you'd been asleep and the phone hadn't awakened you; but a guy like you sleeps like a cat no matter how tired he is. I knew that if you had been in the office, you'd have answered my call. If you didn't answer, then you weren't there."

"Then why were you lying by saying you were there but asleep? I figured back over it and you gave me the clincher when you claimed to have recovered the jewels from Happy just now. You're licked, kid. You know how we can work back, now that we've got the thing figured. We'll find somebody on that one-thirty train that saw you. We'll—"

"Cut it! Cu-u-u-t it," Gage blurted. "I'm in the game myself. I know you can do it. You think I'd be singing if I didn't know it?"

He looked up. His green eyes went from face to face, slowly, carefully. His lips tried to sneer but were too tired.

He said ever so wearily: "If I was a grifter, I'd get a better break, wouldn't I? But I'm supposed to be on the right side, so you guys can't let me get away with a thing. Maybe you're right. I'd figure that way, too, was I in other shoes. O.K., then."

Without haste, Gage reached out and lifted the gun from the green desk blotter. He didn't put it to his head clumsily. He simply turned it into his chest. He held it so tightly against himself that there wasn't much noise at all. Then he sagged back.

His lips moved. "You don't have to blacken Zenith's name on this, do you?"

"Sure not," Slabbe said thickly. "You shot it out with Happy. Both of you got killed in the fight."

Gage was going to say, "Thanks," but he couldn't get it out.


Slabbe looked at him. He shook his head. "He was all tired out," he said. "He can rest now."

He turned and pushed through the cops and left the room.

HEAVENLY HOMICIDE

An O'Hanna Novelette

By
DALE CLARK



O'Hanna took a page of crumpled paper from under the corpse's limp hand.

CHAPTER ONE

Crime in the Sky



PICA ZANE was tall, blond, and curved. She said: "You'll love the Palomar Room, Uncle Charley. It's astronomical."

Charley Zane was short, bald, and shrunken. He said: "I haven't time for lollygagging. I've got to set up my telescope for Professor Martin."

"We'll just stop a wee little minute. I want you to see this," she persuaded. She led the way into the Palomar Room, told the head-waiter: "A table for two, please."

Moonless dark had closed on San Alpa, the million-dollar luxury hotel on the privately owned southern California mountain top. The resort's clientele of West Coast socialites, Hollywood week-enders, and platinum-pocketed tourists had swarmed in from the colossal golf course and the miles of scenic trails.

Naturally, Manager Endicott had foreseen

Grand larceny was nothing new at luxurious San Alpa, but O'Hanna had to admit he was startled when one of the guests put in a claim for a stolen comet. That innocent astronomical phenomenon became the cause of two very un-innocent deaths. Not bad, from a distance of three hundred light-years!

that golf courses and hiking trails were strictly daylight attractions, so he'd installed some night-time play life in the form of a big city style, de luxe night club. He'd named it after the well-known mountain observatory, and the interior decorator had gone to town with this idea.

Spica Zane sat down at the table for two, smiled at her uncle, and said: "I bet you feel right at home here."

The little man revolved a stare around the room. He peered at the electric moon burning above the bar. It had an electric star caught between its horns. Other electric stars glowed in the curved ceiling. They were reflected in the glass dancefloor. Signs of the zodiac gleamed around the walls.

Charley Zane said: "Bah! It's a mess. It's all wrong. That moon is too big. The actual apparent diameter of the moon is only one-half a degree."

The blond girl gave the head-waiter a disarming smile. "Uncle Charley is an amateur astronomer," she explained.

Charley Zane said: "A star stuck between the horns of the moon is impossible. The space between the horns is filled by the moon itself."

The head-waiter hastily back-pedaled, beckoning a white-jacketed waiter to take over.

Charley Zane went on criticizing. "The stars are all wrong, too. The pointers of the Dipper always revolve about Polaris. They never aim at Orion. Orion is a southern constellation."

The waiter shrugged. "Maybe you're right. But after a couple of drinks, the customers don't seem to notice anything wrong."

Spica Zane smiled at the waiter, too. She said: "My uncle isn't an ordinary customer. He's an expert on astronomy." She toyed with the wine card. "I think I'll have one of those Saturn Slings. Look, Uncle Charley, isn't it cute? They've even named their drinks after the stars."

The little bald man scowled: "Saturn isn't a star. It's a planet—"

He broke off. He craned his bald head forward, his shrunken neck out of its collar. His tensed, thin form rose partly from its chair. His voice, too, became tense. He said: "Waiter, call the house detective in here right away!"

The waiter said: "What do you want of—"

"Shut up," the small shrunken man snapped. "Get the house officer in here quickly, and do it quietly."

"Yes, sir. Of course, sir."

The waiter glided toward the sidewall, eased out through a side door. He crossed a passage-way off the main lobby, hinged open another door, and said: "Hey, Mr. O'Hanna!"

Mike O'Hanna was the house dick. He didn't look like one. He was six feet of Irishman, dressed up to look like one of the paying guests among whom he circulated, without most of

them guessing there was a house dick at their elbows.

O'Hanna dropped aside a hotel protective association bulletin, swung his feet off his desk. "It isn't nine o'clock. You got drunk trouble already?"

The waiter said: "We got a sun, moon, and star specialist. He don't like our decorations."

O'Hanna headed out into the passage. "What's he doing about it? Tearing them down?"

"Nah. He's a quiet little guy." The waiter opened the sidedoor into the Palomar Room. "There, that old geezer with the blonde."

The house dick sauntered up to the table for two, made it a table for three by pulling up a chair. He peered into Charley Zane's tight, shrunken features. "I'm it. Now, what?"

Charley Zane said in a low, metallic whisper:

"That man in Aries!"

"That how-much?" O'Hanna asked blankly.

"Aries," the little bald man repeated. "The first sign of the zodiac."

The blonde smiled and said: "My uncle is an amateur astronomer."

"I'm not," the house dick denied. "I've seen those signs a thousand times, but I've got to admit I've never met up with 'em by names. Which one is Aries?"

"The end of the bar." Charley Zane jerked his head.

O'Hanna turned a seemingly casual glance toward the end of the bar. His glances slid over a drinker nursing along a highball that'd been mixed long enough ago for the ice to have mostly melted.

"The fat man with the glasses?" O'Hanna asked. "What about him?"

Charley Zane grunted. "Nothing. I'm not making any charges. I just want you to remember I pointed him out to you."

O'Hanna said: "Uh-huh? By what name shall I remember the guy?"

"His name's Joe McGuffey," Zane said. Abruptly, he pushed back from the table. "Come along, Spica. It's high time we were getting back to the chalet."

The chalets were the hotel's California-style, glorified bungalows, and they tabbed Charley Zane as no mere minimum rate tourist. The fifteen-dollar-a-day minimum applied to the single rooms, whereas the chalets began at a cool fifty.

The blond girl said: "Oh, but Uncle, I ordered a Saturn Sling. We can't run off without paying for it."

Charley Zane said to O'Hanna: "You take care of it. Have it put on my bill. The name's Zane."

O'HANNA watched them go. The fat man at the end of the bar didn't. The fat man's eye-glassed gaze stayed moodily on his unfinished highball.

The house dick sauntered over, parked himself on the neighboring stool. The fat man didn't notice this, either. O'Hanna gave the bartender the brush-off sign. The bartender wasn't supposed to recognize him.

"Draw one," O'Hanna said. He hung an elbow on the bar, collared his fingers around the bar glass when it came, and asked: "What's that supposed to stand for, huh?"

The bartender asked: "What's what supposed to stand for?"

O'Hanna said: "That sign at the end of the bar. The Indian good luck charm, or whatever it is."

Beside him, the fat man aroused from his reverie. "It's a Chaldean symbol," he said. "That's Aries, the first sign of the zodiac."

O'Hanna wasn't surprised to hear this. He stared at the fat man, and made his voice sound startled. He said: "I'll be damned! You must be a regular professional astronomer, huh?"

The fat man looked complimented. He blinked behind his eyeglasses, parting his fleshy lips in a flattered chuckle. "Oh, no. You couldn't call me that. I'm afraid I'm just an amateur."

The house dick swung on the stool, said brightly: "Well, what a coincidence! It's funny, but you're the second amateur astronomer I've encountered today. The other was a chap named Zane. You two ought to get together, probably you have lots in common."

Joe McGuffey's fat face lost its look of innocent pleasure. His pale eyes stormed behind the curved panes of his spectacles. His lips writhed, and his words came out hotly. "I've already met Charley Zane! He's a damned crook! He's trying to steal my comet!"

O'Hanna was astonished. "You mean a real comet? One of those fireballs with a tail on it? Up in the sky?"

"Naturally," Joe McGuffey stated.

It didn't seem natural to O'Hanna. The house dick shook his head.

"I never even knew they belonged to anybody in particular."

"They belong to whoever finds them first," the lardy man explained. "As soon as you discover a new one, you notify an observatory. If you're the first finder, they name the comet after you."

"Yeah? And what do you do with one after it's registered in your name?"

McGuffey peered at the house dick. "I'll put it this way. What's your name, sir?"

"O'Hanna."

"O.K., O'Hanna. Now how many people do you suppose are going to remember *your* name a thousand years from now?"

The house dick sighed. "Come to think of it, I guess nobody. Come to think of it, I won't be here to care."

The fat man said: "A thousand years from

now, they'll remember me. Because astronomers will still be studying the heavens with their telescopes. They'll see my comet, and they'll say to themselves: 'Hello, here's McGuffey's Comet, rising three degrees ahead of *A Cygni*, right where Joseph J. McGuffey first located it away back in 1946!'"

O'Hanna raised an eyebrow. "The thing becomes a kind of traveling tombstone in the sky with your name engraved on it?"

McGuffey saw no humor in the suggestion. He said solemnly: "Yes. And that isn't all. It's a great feather in an amateur observer's cap to have a comet named after him. Many a man has spent a lifetime without ever making such a discovery. I've been watching for twenty-five years myself. Charley Zane is a newcomer and a novice. He only took up this hobby in the last few years, and I'll be damned if I'm going to let him steal this comet from me!"

The house dick nodded: "I see how you feel about it. By the way, how does a guy go about hijacking somebody else's comet?"

The fat man tossed down the last swallow of his highball, slid his plump legs from the bar stool. He said grimly: "I don't know how the damned crook is going to try it, but I'm sure as hell going to stop him."



'HANNA stepped into the manager's teak-paneled office, picked out a World Almanac from a pile of books on Endicott's desk.

The thin-faced, graying Endicott peered up, puzzled.

O'Hanna said: "Coincidences are beginning to pile on coincidences. I've been doing a little research in astronomy. It turns out that Spica is the name of a star three hundred light-years distant from us. Now, isn't that fascinating?"

Endicott didn't think so. He said: "Good Lord, Mike, that's probably the most trivial detail you ever wasted my time telling me."

O'Hanna protested: "Where's your imagination, man? Just think of it. Three hundred light-years means a ray of light started on its way to us when the pilgrim fathers were still alive. It was still umpteen billions of miles away when Mr. McGuffey took up the hobby of star-gazing. It must have been just about that time that Spica Zane was born and named after the same star, because Spica is a name her parents couldn't have picked out of religion, history, or thin air."

Endicott blinked. He frowned. He said: "Well, what of it?"

"I'm asking myself." O'Hanna frowned, too. "McGuffey says Charley Zane is a mere newcomer and a novice in the game. For my money, though, there's a tie-up going back to the time that girl was born. I'd like to dig into

the family history of the McGuffeys and the Zanes. I'm boiling over with questions to ask those guys."

Endicott took alarm. He cried: "Mike, you mustn't! I absolutely forbid it!"

"You don't want me to unveil the family skeleton?"

Endicott said: "Certainly not. It's preposterous. Our guests' private affairs are none of our business. People come to San Alpa for pleasure. They won't stand for embarrassing questions about their pasts, and I don't blame them."

O'Hanna's Irish-gray eyes narrowed. "That's how you talk now. You'll talk different when hell boils over on the premises. You'll say then it was my job to head off the trouble before it could happen."

Endicott sat back, straightened his spare shoulders. "There isn't going to be any trouble. From what you've told me, this is merely a case of a couple of old fools squabbling over a silly comet. You're acting as if some horrible crime had been committed."

The house dick said: "No. I'm acting as if some horrible crime was going to happen. I've got a black Irish hunch there's more to this set-up than comet, comet, who's got the comet."

The manager scoffed. "Ridiculous! You're being as absurd as those two idiots themselves!"

"You won't back me up, then, if I ask them some personal questions?"

Endicott said: "I certainly will not. I'll discharge you if I hear of you carrying on in any such high-handed fashion. It's my duty to the stockholders to draw patronage to this hotel, not to annoy folks so they leave."

O'Hanna was used to it. He said: "O.K., I just wanted to get it in the record. You're telling me to lay off. It's in your hands, and if it blows up, it's your fingers that get burned."

Endicott took fresh alarm. He said hastily: "Wait a minute, Mike. If you're expecting trouble, naturally it's up to you to keep an eye on developments. But you'll have to work under cover. You mustn't ask any bothersome questions of these folks."

"Yeah? I'm supposed to go read the answers in the stars." O'Hanna snapped his fingers. He said: "Hey, that might work. I'll go ask Zane to show me his comet."

He headed through the lobby, down the front steps across the landscaped grounds. Tonight was the kind of night Endicott's publicity pamphlets boasted about—cool enough to sleep under blankets after the daytime California sun.

As O'Hanna blinked the lobby lights out of his eyes, the stars showed up like lamps over the pine and black oak treetops. O'Hanna came to a stop, legs braced wide, chin tilted high. Thinly, behind him, came the sounds of piano and saxophones in the Palomar Room. The music brought a picture of the crowded bar under the artificial moon, the dancers circling

in the smoky haze under the electric, indoor stars. The Palomar Room seemed far away, and no great bargain.

Irish-gray eyes widening in the dark toward the great, jeweled constellations over his head, O'Hanna mused: "Zane's right—that layout in there is phony. I'll be damned if those amateur astronomers haven't got something on—"

The shot tore his thought in two.

AT THE flat, wicked report, O'Hanna's head came down, his stare raked toward the chalets scattered in the concealing trees.

Window-light glowed from a dozen different chalets down the slope. The shot might have sounded from any of them. It might have been out under the trees.

A woman's scream sliced off a cut of shrill, high-pitched fear and horror.

O'Hanna's bent elbow came up. Luminous hands on his stopwatch registered 9:20. He was coming up on his tiptoes, running, as the elbow pumped down. Footpaths looped and veined through the landscapery. O'Hanna took the bee-line route toward the scream, as straight as the trees would let him travel.

He didn't see the other man in time. It was doubly dark under the trees whose boughs blotted out the starlight. O'Hanna hadn't heard any warning, either. His own sprinting feet kicked up too much disturbance as they crushed pine needles and oak leaves.

The other man hadn't seen or heard O'Hanna for the same reasons. He was just there in the way, squealing affrightedly, as the house dick came bearing down on him.

They crashed. O'Hanna skidded a yard, jumped up, dropped handfuls of pine needle and leaf mold. The other man lay still, whooshing for breath.

The house dick stooped, fanned the fellow's angular form. He didn't find a gun.

The man wailed: "D—don't shoot again! My money's in my hip pocket! Don't kill me!"

O'Hanna yanked the other to his feet. He hadn't brought a flashlight, and in the dark the man's face was a long, narrow blur that didn't add up to recognizable features.

O'Hanna said: "Relax, I'm the house detective. What happened here?"

"I—I don't know! I heard a shot! Then a man came running at me with a great big shiny gun in his fist. I ran for my life."

O'Hanna said: "Come on. Show me where."

The man quavered: "Straight ahead—there."

Straight ahead was a clearing, the silhouette of a swiss-roofed chalet, and a lighted window with a telescope barreled up out of the opening and aimed above the tree tops.

O'Hanna went ahead and looked in through that window. His eyes were on a level with the polished brass rods, graduated hour circles, and ball-and-crank mounting of the telescope. His

glance raked down through the gleaming brass-work and the outspread wooden legs of the 'scope's tripod. The glance became a fixed stare—fixed on the small, shrunken corpse of Charley Zane. He'd been shot dead center through the bald top of his head. There wasn't much blood, and there wasn't any powder burn at all.

The set-up looked as though somebody had stepped up to this window, aimed a gun, and fired as Charley Zane bent his head down over the telescope's eyepiece.

O'Hanna closed a hand on the narrow-faced man's arm again. "Come on. Inside." They toured the building, went up natural stone steps to the rustic door. O'Hanna thrust the door open, was face to face with a red-haired young woman at the entry hallway phone.

The redhead was saying: "Notify the manager immediately. Mr. Zane has been murdered," and broke off as she glimpsed O'Hanna.

O'Hanna said: "I'm the house officer. How'd it happen?"

The red-haired young woman said: "This way. I'll show you."

CHAPTER TWO

Clues and Comets



HIS way led through the front room where a hearth fire snapped at its task of taking the chill off the night air. Somebody had dropped a poker in the middle of the peasant-style braided rug. Spica Zane was a huddled figure in a corner of the

divan. She held a handkerchief balled against her mouth. The hands that held the handkerchief were tense, white-knuckled fists. Her eyes were clenched shut, too.

The red-headed girl went on ahead. She said: "I'd just got here a minute before. I'd barely taken off my coat." She pointed at a tan cloak draped across a chair. She said: "Miss Zane was poking up the fire when we heard the shot. She ran across the room and opened this door and switched on the lights. She screamed when she—"

O'Hanna cut in: "The guy was sitting in here in the dark?"

The redhead said: "Oh, yes. His comet was barely visible through a low-powered telescope. Darkness helped his eyes focus on a barely distinguishable object."

O'Hanna was inside the murder room. He went down on one knee beside Charley Zane's body. He'd seen it right the first time. Burning powder hadn't reached the dead man's bald scalp. O'Hanna muttered: "You can say that again, sister. It worked both ways! This wasn't

a point-blank kill. The murderer did some mighty fancy focusing in the black-out, too . . . What's this?"

The house dick extricated a page of crumpled memorandum paper from under the corpse's limp hand. He puzzled over the find:

"Twenty-three hours and thirty nine minutes point five minus thirteen hours and six minutes flat leaves ten hours and thirty-three and one half minutes? Minus thirteen minutes more amounts to ten, twenty and one-half?"

The girl said: "Oh, that's perfectly elementary. The first figure is the comet's right ascension. The second figure is the sun's right ascension. Deducting one from the other leaves the hour of transit, which, corrected to standard time, means the comet would be highest in the sky at ten hours, twenty minutes, and thirty seconds P.M. this evening."

It came out Greek to O'Hanna. He peered at the redhead. "You sound like you're another amateur astronomer yourself!"

Her smile was mock-demure. "I'm Professor Inez Martin, of the staff of Mt. Yarrow Observatory."

O'Hanna's astonishment widened the redhead's smile. She said: "Gracious, don't be so upset. Women do go in for higher education nowadays, you know. Some of them study medicine. Others practice social service or law. I can be an astronomer, can't I, even without a long white beard?"

"You've got something there," the house dick conceded. For one thing, Inez Martin had a figure there. She was the long-legged, graceful type. Her eyes were feline, her lips sultry.

He asked: "Where was the killer by the time you girls switched on the lights?"

"I've no idea. We saw no one at all."

O'Hanna turned back into the front room, to the narrow-faced man. Electric illumination showed that the face wasn't just narrow, it was knobby, too. The cheeks were sunken under knobby cheekbones. The eyes were uneasy gimlets under bony crags of brow. The nose had a bump halfway down its length.

O'Hanna asked: "Your name, sir?"

"It's Frank Kigel." The man's knobby face worked. He said: "I'm a nervous case. I'm here at your hotel for a rest cure. I was merely out for a quiet stroll before bedtime. I heard that shot, so close it almost made me jump out of my skin. Then I heard the scream. It raised the hair on my head! After that, I saw a man come running at me—a great huge monster of a man with a big shiny gun in his fist! My nerves couldn't stand any more. I turned and ran for my life!"

Footfalls at the front doorway announced that manager Endicott had arrived on the murder scene. Lighter footfalls behind him belonged to little Doc Raymond, the San Alpa house physician.

O'Hanna said: "O.K., Doc, take over and see nobody touches anything. I'll call the sheriff and get busy running down the mysterious monster."

Endicott quavered: "Good heavens, Mike, the man with the gun is no mystery at all. It was McGuffey, and all you've got to do is arrest him without bothering anybody else at all!"

O'HANNA was used to this. County Sheriff Ed Gleeson was headquartered sixty miles away. It would take him an hour to motor up the hairpin-curved, San Alpa mountain road. When crime occurred at the hotel, O'Hanna was supposed to use that hour to wrap up all the clues so the paying guests wouldn't be annoyed by the sheriff asking them questions.

The desk clerk said Joseph J. McGuffey was registered as of Pasadena, and registered in room 234.

"Come on," the house dick told Frank Kigel.

He didn't get any answer, though, when he knocked on 234's door. He fed a passkey into the lock, stepped inside. As he pressed the wall switch, ceiling light fell down onto the mounded bed coverlet.

The mound changed shape. Joe McGuffey heaved his pajamed shoulders up from the pillow, rubbed his eyes. He mumbled: "Huh, what's the matter? I've been sound asleep for an hour! Is the hotel on fire or something?"

O'Hanna circled the bed, found the fat man's garments shed on the far side. He stooped, retrieved a shoe, ran three fingers inside the foot-gear. He said: "The hotel isn't on fire, but your shoe's still warm inside. You're a liar!"

Frank Kigel popped his narrow head around the door, pinned his gimlet gaze on the fat man, and said: "He's lying, all right! He's the man! I'd know him anywhere!"

"It's a frame-up," the fat man said. He waved off the bed coverlet, slid his stocky legs from the bed. "Charley Zane hired that guy to tell falsehoods about me."

O'Hanna waved Kigel outside. As the door closed, he queried: "Oh, so you weren't anywhere near the spot?"

"Certainly not! I've been right here in bed for the last hour."

"You're a low-grade liar, McGuffey. If you'd been asleep, you wouldn't know whether it was one hour or three. If you were in bed, you wouldn't know something wrong happened during the hour, either."

McGuffey flushed. He said: "Why wouldn't I know? You break into my room. You wake me up from my sleep. You call me a liar. You have another guy put the finger on me. I'd be dumb if I thought such goings-on meant everything was hunky-dory. I'd be still dumber if I didn't realize Charley Zane put you up to all this. I'm going to hand that little guy a good swift poke in the nose—"

O'Hanna stemmed the tirade. "Cut out the kidding, McGuffey. You know damned well a poke in the nose won't hurt Zane a bit. He was shot dead tonight, and an eye-witness saw you running away after the killing."

The fat man blinked. He said: "Zane was killed? Hell, I never knew that. I ran away because I thought that was Zane shooting at me!"

"Now it comes out. Now you admit you were there."

McGuffey said: "Yeah. Sure. I told you why. I was going to keep that crook from stealing my comet. I crawled in a back window and went through some papers in his suitcase. That's why I quick crawled in bed here. I thought Zane saw me crawling out of that window, took a shot at me, and was going to have me arrested for stealing his will. That's what I figured you was after when you came in here."

O'Hanna asked: "His will?"

The fat man said: "Yeah. I found a copy of a brand-new last will and testament in his suitcase. He was leaving a hundred-thousand-dollar bequest to Mt. Yarrow Observatory."

O'Hanna brightened. "Now you're getting down out of the stars to something I can understand. Let's see the document."

"I was afraid to bring it here to my room," McGuffey said. "I hid it in the fork of a tree down there."

"Pull on your pants. Show me where."

Five minutes later, Joseph McGuffey slowed to a stop under the trees. He pointed his arm and said: "That's the back window I used. It leads into Zane's bedroom. His suitcase is in the closet there. I hear the shot just as I crawled out of the window, and I headed straight for the lights of the hotel."

He'd brought a flashlight with him. He aimed the light on the ground and said: "See? There's my footprints."

The leaf mold and pine needle carpet hadn't taken any clear footprints. There were vague marks that might have been left by striding shoe leather.

The fat man said: "That's my trail. I remember it was about the third oak tree I passed." He swung, pointed his light. "Why, that's it right there. I remember the fork—I remember I had to stand on tiptoe to reach up there—"

He walked to the tree, threw the flashbeam up into the crotch. The light showed oak bark, and that's all.

McGuffey made swallowing sounds. "I guess it must have been the next tree."

It wasn't the next tree, or the one after that, or the one on either side of these trees. The fat man complained: "It's mighty funny. I can't understand this at all!"

"Maybe it wasn't a last will and testament

you had to hide. Kigel says you were toting a gun in your fist." The house dick's tone hardened. "If it was a gun, no wonder you don't want to locate it."

"I was toting a flashlight," McGuffey protested. "You're not playing fair, O'Hanna. You're believing everybody but me."

"I don't trust you, that's a fact. I'm going to let you help Doc Raymond sit up with the corpse." O'Hanna decided, "while I sashay up a few clues on my own."



HE lobby clerk said Professor Inez Martin's room number was 312. O'Hanna eased the passkey into the lock, gingerly twisted the knob. The red-haired lady astronomer was at home. She'd pulled up a chair to the room's writing desk,

was brooding over a sheet of San Alpa stationery. Drowned by her own thoughts, she didn't hear the sleuth enter.

O'Hanna stared at the sheet of hotel paper on the desk. He asked: "More mathematics? What's the answer add up to this time?"

"Why—why—!" She gasped, came to her feet. She said furiously: "Do you make a habit of marching into the privacy of a lady's room without so much as knocking?"

O'Hanna said: "Only when I'm solving murders." He tapped a finger on the page of figures. "What's all this mean? Ten twenty equals zero, so nine twenty equals plus fifteen degrees, or nineteen degrees equals nine zero four?"

Professor Martin nibbled her underlip. "I'll try to make it simple for you. In order to place a location on earth, it's customary to use latitude and longitude. Those are the lines you see crisscrossing a map. In the heavens, we use the corresponding lines of ascension and declination. I'd been invited to see that comet tonight, so earlier tonight I calculated its declination. Now, are you satisfied?"

The house dick shrugged. "Frankly, the answer is no! I don't savy this business of amateurs like Charley Zane and Joe McGuffey finding comets at all. I don't see how they can compete with you professionals with your fifty and hundred inch telescopes."

Inez Martin sat down again, crossed her shapely knees, tugged her skirt into place. She said: "Oh, dear, you really are an ignoramus. In the first place, it'd take the largest telescope in existence two hundred years to completely map the stellar universe on film. In that time, literally scores of comets could appear and disappear while the telescope was pointing somewhere else. In the second place, the large observatory telescopes are used for specialized scientific research. We concentrate on studies of the component stars, the hydrogen carbide

theory, and so on. Actually, it's the amateur astronomers with the low-powered glasses who make most of the comet discoveries."

"Yeah?"

The lady astronomer said: "It's like the difference between a famous banker and a sharp-eyed newsboy. The banker knows all about international finance, but the boy is more apt to find a dime on the sidewalk."

"O.K., let's suppose I found a comet myself. Would you name it after me? So a thousand years from now, my great-great-grandchildren could point up in the sky and say there's the comet their great-great-granddaddy discovered?"

Inez Martin thought this was funny. She giggled. "I wouldn't want to bet on it. Your comet probably wouldn't be a periodic one."

"A how-much?"

"Periodic comets, like the famous Halley and Donati, return at stated intervals. The others are mere wanderers which flash through our solar system once, and may never be seen again."

O'Hanna asked: "What about this one out there tonight? Who were you going to name it after—Charley Zane or Joe McGuffey?"

The lady astronomer hesitated, smoothed her fingers over her auburn hair. "That's the sixty-four dollar question. It's the queerest mix-up! You see, those men are practically next door neighbors in Pasadena. Each has an observatory fitted up over the garage at the back of his property. Each insisted he saw the comet first. Each rushed off a telegram the same night, at almost the same moment, a week ago. Ever since, they've been bombarding the observatory with threats of lawsuits to establish their claims. Then Mr. Zane mailed a check for traveling expenses, inviting a representative of the observatory to come to Pasadena and settle the matter. I can't imagine why, but the staff decided I was the one to go."

"They probably figured you could soothe the situation with some sex appeal," the house dick flattered. "So what did you find out in Pasadena?"

Inez Martin shook her head. "Oh, I never went there. Mr. Zane wired that his plans had changed, and I was to meet him at San Alpa, instead. I had a suspicion he didn't want me to hear Mr. McGuffey's side of the story, so I telegraphed Mr. McGuffey to meet me here, too."

She shook her head again. "I'm sorry I did. Mr. Zane turned out to be an entirely different sort of man than I'd expected. He proved to be deeply interested in pure science. He was making arrangements to bequeath a large sum of money to the advancement of scientific research."

O'Hanna grinned. He braced back his shoulders, bent up his left arm, made cranking motions with his right hand.

Professor Inez Martin widened her greenish eyes at the Irishman. "What on earth is that supposed to mean?"

"It's sign language. It means fish-hooked and being reeled in," O'Hanna interpreted. "Charley Zane baited you with a hundred-grand hook so you wouldn't offend him by naming the comet after Joe McGuffey."

He crossed to the door. Behind him, the lady astronomer became haughty. She said: "I couldn't be bribed like that. You forget I'm a scientist."

Hand on the doorknob, O'Hanna said: "You're a scientist interested in component stars and hydrogen carbide. As far as you're concerned, comets are just amateur, dime-on-the-sidewalk stuff. To you, this particular fireball is a mere wandering pinpoint in the universe, and it wouldn't make the slightest scientific difference whether you named it after Charley Zane, Joe McGuffey, or Joe Palooka. That's how Zane figured. You wouldn't kick away a hundred thousand dollar bequest by deciding the wrong way, especially when the evidence wasn't conclusive for either man. It's the answer to the question of how Zane could steal a comet."

Inez Martin watched him open the door. She moistened her lips. "Wait a minute . . . Where do you think all this leads you?"

O'Hanna said meaningfully: "I'm a periodic fireball myself. I keep making my rounds. I'll be seeing you some more—next round."

DOWNSTAIRS, Manager Endicott's teak-paneled office was deserted. The house dick snatched the almanac from the mahogany desk, flapped through its pages, ran his forefinger down the *Star Tables, 1946*, until he reached *A Cygni*.

He read aloud: "Declination, forty-five degrees and five seconds." Then he said, softly: "I'll be damned!"

Orchestra music still flooded the Palomar Room, couples still circled on the glass floor, unaware of violent death on the premises. O'Hanna beckoned to the head-waiter, to the waiter who'd called him earlier in the evening. He asked: "Just what happened when the Zanes walked in here tonight?"

They told him.

O'Hanna's lips were thinned as he started across the San Alpa grounds. Overhead, the stars were as gorgeously bright as before, and a little higher in the heavens. O'Hanna headed downslope toward the chalets. Whispering, rustled sound under the trees stopped him short. His eyes strained. A blurred, ghost-shape moved. The house dick's hand fanned in fast between his coat lapels.

He snapped: "Hands up! Who's there?"

"Don't shoot. It's me." The ghost shape materialized into slim, blond femininity as Spica Zane emerged from under the trees. She said

shakily: "I was coming to the hotel to find you! The others don't know. I pretended I had to lie down. I slipped out of the back window secretly. There's something important I have to tell you!"

"I'm listening with both ears."

The blond girl drew a deep breath. "I think Uncle Joe killed Uncle Charley!"

This was probably expected to startle the hell out of O'Hanna. It didn't. He murmured: "So the Zanes and the McGuffeys are blood relatives?"

Spica Zane said: "My mother was a McGuffey. My father was Uncle Charley's brother. The two families were in business together years ago. Some money became missing, and Joe McGuffey managed the evidence so my father was sent to prison. He died there. Uncle Charley never forgave McGuffey after that." The girl's voice sharpened. "Joe McGuffey's a hateful old man! He's done everything he could to ruin our lives. This comet trick is merely the last of a long string of episodes."

O'Hanna said: "Family feuds can be furious, I'll grant that. But if your two uncles hated each other so, how come they remained next door neighbors?"

"Uncle Charley was too proud to move out of the neighborhood. It'd look like running away. It'd be like admitting my father was guilty. Don't you see, we had to face the scandal with our heads high—"

A gun talked out loud, right in the middle of what she was saying.

Spica Zane wailed, flung herself against the Irishman's chest. She moaned: "No! Don't go! I'm afraid he'll kill me next!"

O'Hanna thrust free of her arms. He started running toward the chalet. He damned near stepped on the body, before he glimpsed the spectral whiteness of the face and of the shirt-front.

The house dick skidded to a stop, fumbled for a match. From his cupped hand, the yellow light flooded out over the narrow, knobby face. Frank Kigel's rest cure had become permanent. He was dead of a hole through his heart without benefit of any powder burns.

CHAPTER THREE

Murder, My Stars!



COUNTY SHERIFF Ed Gleeson came into the chalet, peered at the company. Relief softened his features as he counted out O'Hanna, Endicott, and little Doc Raymond. That left only Spica Zane, Professor Inez Martin, and Joseph J. McGuffey.

Gleeson hiked up the belt which supported

his hip-holstered Frontier six-shooter, and said to O'Hanna: "Good going, Mike. I see you've got it trimmed down to three possible suspects already."

Joe McGuffey waved a fat hand. "You can count me out, Sheriff. Lucky for me, the house dick here tabbed me for a suspicious character early in the game. He left me right here in Dr. Raymond's custody."

The lardy man appealed to Endicott and Doc Raymond.

"I'll just leave it to you guys. I was right here in this room, wasn't I, when somebody killed Kigel outdoors. So consequently I guess that leaves it up to the ladies."

Professor Inez Martin said: "Thanks for the compliment! But it happens I was right here in this room with an eye-witness when somebody killed Charley Zane."

Ed Gleeson peered at the blond girl.

O'Hanna said: "She was the eye-witness with the other lady the first time. At the time of the second shot, she was talking to me about her family."

Sheriff Gleeson absorbed this and said: "Well, hell, what are we waiting for, then? If they've all got alibis, you haven't rounded up any suspect at all. Let's get busy tearing the joint apart until we come onto the killer. What d'ya say, Mike?"

Bleating sounds came from Endicott. The manager choked. "Sheriff, you can't! You mustn't! Why, ninety-nine out of a hundred of our guests are absolutely innocent. You can't line them up like common convicts and give them the third degree. They'd check out in droves, and they'd probably never come back as long as they live."

Endicott's graying face was haggard. He had nightmares like this one—had them every time crime cropped up at San Alpa. He wheeled to O'Hanna, said desperately: "Mike, you gotta do something quick!"

The house detective reminded: "Yeah, that's what I said before all the shooting started. I told you I had a black Irish hunch. You jeered at—"

Endicott cut in. "Well, have another hunch now! And have it quick! There's no time to waste!"

O'Hanna said: "O.K., I got a hunch. Let's all adjourn to the next room, everybody. I want to show you something."

He opened the door, disclosed Charley Zane's sheet-covered body.

Doc Raymond asked: "Do you want me to uncover it again?"

O'Hanna said: "No, this is one of the higher hunches. It has to do with astronomy. It involves higher mathematics of right ascension and declination. It's based on the theory that a comet rising three minutes ahead of the star *A Cygni* has a right ascension of thirty-three

hours and thirty-nine minutes point five, from which we deduct the right ascension of the mean sun."

He paused, shook his head. "That's what the almanac calls it. I don't know why it's a mean sun instead of a friendly one."

Professor Inez Martin laughed quite unmeritorily.

"You're not the least amusing. Furthermore, those aren't your figures, and you didn't look them up in the almanac. Mr. Zane had all that figured out on a piece of paper."

"I looked it up in the almanac to make sure," O'Hanna said. "Zane's arithmetic was right. His comet would have been on the meridian at ten hours, twenty minutes, and thirty seconds P.M. Now, does any astronomer in the crowd care to explain just exactly what the meridian is?"

The redhaired lady professor said, "I've already explained it to you. It's the point where the comet would be highest in the sky."

The house dick peered at the other girl. "Is that all it is, Miss Zane?"

Spica Zane said thinly: "I don't know. I never pretended to understand anything about these things."

O'HANNA's Irish-gray glance ranged on to Joseph J. McGuffey. The fat man cleared his throat and said: "Well, technically speaking, the meridian would be an imaginary line through the heavens from north to south. It's also the point where any celestial object is highest in the sky."

O'Hanna's tone became careful.

"At ten-twenty P. M., the comet would appear due north?"

"Yeah. Sure."

"But an hour earlier—at nine-twenty—the telescope would have been pointed somewhere else to see this fireball?"

"Yeah. Sure."

"Where?"

McGuffey said: "It'd be slightly east. The stars rise in the east like the sun. They move around a complete circle in a day, which is fifteen degrees in an hour."

"O. K. Now, take a look at this telescope. Can you tell if it's pointed fifteen degrees east of due north?"

The fat man said obligingly: "That's no trick at all." He aimed a plump finger at the brass-work mounting. "That's what we call an equatorial telescope. The degrees are marked off in the hour-circle." He craned forward, narrowed the eyes behind his thick-paned spectacles. He said in vast surprise: "Nope, something's wrong. It's aimed almost exactly nineteen degrees east of north . . ."

O'Hanna said: "Let's work out the answers in our heads. Fifteen degrees equals one hour, so nineteen degrees must equal one hour and

sixteen minutes. Subtract it from ten-twenty P. M., and you get four minutes after nine. Correct me if I'm wrong."

The house dick turned to Inez Martin, watched color flood the redhead's cheeks. He asked: "Why don't you tell the folks—those aren't my figures, and I didn't get them out of the almanac! They're *your* mathematics, and they don't mean declination, or whatever you called it." His voice boomed. "Nine-oh-four is the time Charley Zane stopped focusing on his comet because that's when he got a bullet through his bald spot!"

Inez Martin's greenish eyes chilled. "That's ridiculous!"

O'Hanna said, "Come, come, where's your scientific spirit? Those stars have been running on schedule for thousands of years. Mere man-made clocks and watches are regulated by comparing them with the stars. You don't think the heavens overhead suddenly clicked out of line sixteen minutes tonight?"

The lady astronomer said: "Of course not. But Miss Zane and I heard the shot—"

"You heard a shot. It wasn't necessarily the shot that killed the guy."

Spica Zane gulped, put her hand to her mouth. O'Hanna swung to the blond. "Well, what?"

"I—I didn't think it was important. That's why I didn't tell you before. But it was such a nice night, I went out for a short walk. That was about nine o'clock. Uncle Charley could have been killed while I was out. That's possible, isn't it?"

Professor Inez Martin said sharply: "Nonsense. If the man had been dead for a quarter of an hour, why didn't you notice it right away? Why didn't the doctor suspect anything?"

Little Doc Raymond eyed the young woman sternly.

"Good heavens, Professor Martin, corpses aren't comets. Corpses are peculiar! Rigor mortis can begin to occur anywhere from two to six hours after death. Anyway, it's beside the point. A bullet in the brain isn't necessarily instantaneously fatal. Abraham Lincoln remained alive nine hours after he'd been shot. Of course, this was a modern, powerful bullet. It undoubtedly destroyed the brain's function entirely. But a feeble spark of life may have remained for five or ten minutes—"

O'Hanna cut in. He said: "But let's not go into that. Let's turn to pleasanter topics we can all understand. I refer, of course, to the hundred-thousand-dollar will."

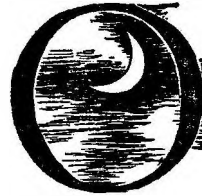
Leather creaked as Sheriff Gleeson tugged at his belt. "Now you're getting somewhere. This stuff about comets is so educational it goes completely over my head. I'm afraid the idea of two guys being murdered over a comet that's invisible to the naked eyes wouldn't go down

with a country jury. What can you tell us about the will?"

The house dick shrugged. "It was the cheapest bribe on earth, and Professor Martin knew it."

He turned toward Inez Martin. "After you named the comet in Zane's honor, you knew nothing could keep him from tearing up that will and making a brand new one. Your observatory wouldn't get a thin dime—unless he died immediately."

The lady astronomer stormed: "You're accusing me of murder?"



'HANNA brooded: "A jury could get to like the idea. Look at you—a beautiful creature, abnormally obsessed with a passion for component stars and hydrogen carbide! It's obvious you're a crank. The natural feminine instincts

have soured in you. You're a cold-blooded example of a scientific fiend, to whom the ordinary human values of life mean nothing."

He grinned wryly. "That's why you kept quiet about the telescope. Charley Zane's niece might contest that will. A smart lawyer could make it look bad for you, if the truth came out you had no alibi for the actual time of the shooting. Even though you were perfectly innocent of any crime."

Manager Endicott was astounded. "Mike! You mean you don't think she did it?"

"I think she's too cold-blooded to be guilty," the house dick declared.

"Too—huh?"

"She's too scientific to overlook a clue like a telescope pointed at the wrong angle. Besides, if she'd killed Zane, she'd have known when it happened—she wouldn't have had to figure it out by subtracting nineteen degrees from the meridian." O'Hanna formed a smile. He said: "Also, her eyesight's O. K. Joe McGuffey's isn't. He had to bend over close to read off the nineteen degrees. Working by flashlight and in a hurry, he might have overlooked that detail entirely."

McGuffey made fat fists. Behind them, he blustered: "Hell, you can't pin anything like that on me!"

"On you, it looks pretty good. You'd hated Charley Zane for years. You'd sent his brother to the penitentiary. Since the feud started over finances, and you were the prosecuting witness, I assume that you lost a sizable chunk of money."

The fat man said: "That far you're right. The Zanes swindled me out of a cool twenty thousand dollars."

"He's lying!" Spica Zane's voice broke. "My father was innocent!"

Joe McGuffey glared at the blonde. "Your father was a dumb crook. Charley Zane was a smart one. The dumb one took the rap. The smart one took my dough."

The fat man pivoted to O'Hanna. He said: "I'll prove I didn't kill Zane. I wanted him alive. I wanted to see him squirm. I was in a position to show him up for the double-crossing crook he was. That comet was the chance I'd been waiting for the last twenty years. I had him where I wanted him."

"Do tell. Do tell."

"You can't hurt a man like Charley Zane by showing him up as a financial highbinder. He thinks that's just smart business. The crowd he runs with think it's smart business. But if they caught him playing poker with marked cards, they kick him out of every club in town. If they caught him turning in a phony score-card in a golf tournament, he'd be an outcast for life. That's why I took up Charley Zane's hobbies—cards, golf, and star-gazing. I figured sooner or later his crooked streak would show up in a spot where it'd hurt him, where he'd be ashamed to show his face in front of his own friends."

McGuffey snaked his tongue across his thick lips. His eyes glistened behind the curved lenses.

He announced gleefully: "Finding that comet was the break I'd been waiting for. You'll die laughing when I tell how I pulled it. I've got one of those home recording outfits, and I hooked that up onto my phone. Then I called operator instead of dialing and asked for Charley Zane's number. Spica was out that night, and he answered, himself. I pretended I thought I was calling Western Union, see? I read off a telegram about locating this comet. Then I had him read it back to me. I felt sure he'd do just what he did do—rush off a wire to claim the discovery himself. I was going to give him another week for the build-up, and then I was going to spring that recording of his own voice on him."

The fat man's stare dropped down to the white sheeted form on the floor. He said softly: "Charley, I'm sorry you're dead. Now I'll never get to see the look on your face when the bad news hit home!"

Endicott gagged. "That's awful! You should not talk to the dead like that!"

"Mr. McGuffey doesn't really mean it," O'Hanna offered. "Not twenty thousand dollars worth, anyhow! He only told us how it all started. How it ended goes like this."

The Irishman's gray eyes bored. "Charley Zane was worth more dead than alive to you, McGuffey. Dead, his will became effective. With that document in your hand, you could deal with Spica. She could pay you twenty thousand dollars and destroy the will—or she could let you hand the will over to Inez Mar-

tin, and it'd cost her a hundred grand. That adds up to a swell motive for murder and for stealing the will. Throw in Kigel's death, and the measure runneth over."

The fat man's face soured. "How come Kigel?"

"Kigel is why you couldn't find the will where you hid it. He lied to me, of course. He heard a shot and saw you running into the trees. He followed. When you stopped and hid that piece of paper, he naturally picked it up. He was making off with it when I ran into him out in the woods."

McGuffey bared his teeth. "Why, that—" He stopped. He gave a jowl-quivering headshake. "I told you before. I was right here when Kigel was shot."

"I told you before, too. A shot isn't necessarily the shot. Kigel, like Charley Zane, might have been killed a little earlier in the game." The house dick glanced around. "What's wrong, Spica?"

The blond girl dropped a balled handkerchief from her lips. She said: "I just thought of something! I didn't realize it was important before. Don't you remember, I told you I excused myself by telling the others I had to lie down?"

"I heard you with both ears."

"Mr. Endicott kindly assisted me into the back bedroom. Dr. Raymond was placing a sheet over Uncle Charley's body. That's when McGuffey could have slipped out secretly to kill poor Mr. Kigel." The blond girl caught fresh breath. "Mr. Endicott stepped into the same room with Dr. Raymond. That's when I crawled out the window. There were two men out there in the dark. I didn't see their faces. But one of them was a tall, thin man like Frank Kigel, and the other one was a big heavy man—"

Joe McGuffey blurted: "Spica, you're lying your damned head off!"

The girl said: "They were arguing. I heard one of them say: 'It won't make a bit of noise, you damned fool!'" She blinked at O'Hanna. "Now, what on earth could that remark have meant?"

The house dick looked suddenly satisfied. He intoned: "It's the reason nobody heard the actual murder shots. It's why neither victim was powder-burned. The killer used a gun equipped with a silencer."

The fat suspect's jaw unlatched. His eyes bulged behind their glasses. He said: "That's silly! That's comic cartoon stuff! There really isn't any such a thing!"

O'Hanna said: "There's a Federal Law against them. That's why silencers have been practically unknown in the U.S.A. They were fairly common in Europe. The Nazi Gestapo used them. A lot of our men picked up souvenirs Lugers overseas. A gat with hushworks may

well be in our midst. I'll say this much—I'll believe it when I see it!"

He gestured to Endicott. "You take charge of the meeting. The sheriff and I are going exploring."

ED GLEESON wasn't happy. Outside, he said: "You're overlooking one thing. McGuffey was indoors when the last shot was fired."

"You can tie that part with a piece of string. Just remove the silencer, tie the string to the trigger of a cocked gun, and feed the string through a slightly raised window. That puts your killer indoors, and the shot outside," O'Hanna said. "You look under the windows while I take to the woods."

Tree boughs blotted out the stars, but the flare of a match showed the spot where O'Hanna had first run into Frank Kigel. Handsful had been scooped where O'Hanna skidded into the leaf mold and pine needles. He turned to the nearby spot where the narrow-faced man had pitched headlong. O'Hanna's shoe furrowed through the decaying leaves with his toe.

He said to himself, "Smart—like a dog with a bone," as his toe suddenly turned up a folded foolscap paper.

He figured Kigel had been carrying it in his hand, had the animal cunning to shove the paper deep down into the leaf trash and pine needles.

The house dick cupped another match over it. He said, "Hun-h-h?" as he saw the document lacked the necessary two witnesses' signatures.

Sound came softly, rustlingly, behind him. He waved out the match, whirled around. A soprano voice said: "Don't shoot. It's me again—Spica Zane. I had to tell you. I just remembered something!"

O'Hanna was getting used to it. "I bet you just realized it's important."

The blonde gulped. "Yes. You see, I don't know what a silencer looks like. But lots of Uncle Charley's employees were drafted. Some of them brought back war souvenirs. It's one way to get in solid with the boss. Well, Uncle Charley had a funny little tube packed in his suitcase. I thought it was some part of a telescope. Maybe he was killed with his own gun and silencer!"

O'Hanna said: "Hubba-hubba, I'm glad you told me. I just remembered something too. I didn't realize it was important at the time. I mean the way you dragged your astronomical uncle into the Palomar Room tonight. It was a mighty clever dodge to throw him and McGuffey together in public just before killing him."

The blond niece gasped, put her hand to her mouth.

O'Hanna said: "They might have got into a public debate about their comet. Or Uncle Charley might have made some nasty crack the waiter would overhear, especially with you there to lead him on to saying it. A very cute trick indeed."

Spica Zane backed away a yard. She said: "But he called you. He warned you Joe McGuffey might start trouble!"

"He suspected the wrong relative. You walked into that dark room and put the gun's silencer against his bald spot."

The girl shrank.

O'Hanna said: "Professor Martin was due any minute. The minute she arrived, you reached for the fireplace poker. At the same time, you grabbed a piece of string. The gun was on the other end, outside, with the silencer removed."

Spica Zane kept walking backwards. O'Hanna followed her. He said: "The reason you sneaked out the bedroom window was to get rid of that gun outside. By that time Kigel had come back nosing around for the will. He caught you redhanded with the gun. So you gave him the silent slug treatment. Then, to cover up, you repeated the string and gun stunt, this time using me as your alibi's eye witness."

The girl whirled. O'Hanna caught at her shoulder. It wasn't there. She dropped to her knees. Her fingers clawed frantically through the leafmold and pine needles.

O'Hanna shouted: "Hey, Ed! She hid it here! She—"

He saw something in the blonde's hand. He put out his foot. He didn't put it there easy. The thing stopped flying when it hit a tree trunk.

O'Hanna sprang, and scooped it up. He said, as Ed Gleeson dashed up with a flashlight: "I'll say somebody gave Uncle Charley a war souvenir." It wasn't just the silencer. A hunk of Waffenfabrik shooting iron went with it.

Manager Endicott's eyes bulged as they steered the tousled, weeping blonde into the chalet.

He prattled: "Mike! You mean—she—"

"Yeah. She didn't know her Uncle Charley was a two-timer. She thought he was actually going to give away a hundred thousand bucks she'd hoped to inherit herself. She framed the kill before he could make it legal with witnesses' names."

"Good God!" Endicott said. He shook his head. "A lovely young lady like that killing her own flesh-and-blood just for money. It makes me shiver!"

O'Hanna looked around at everybody.

"That's what murder does," the house dick opined solemnly. "It leaves you just naturally cold."

THE DOUBLE-CROSS



By

DONEGAN WIGGINS



O NOW," quoth the lean man with auburn whiskers and a star on his vest, "just shoot the works. I gamble you know what and why."

"Well, there isn't much to tell," stated the fat clerk behind the revolver case in the mountain city store. He seemed vastly amused at something. "But here is what I know, and all of it.

"Woman of around thirty came in here early this morning just after I opened up the place. Easy to see she came from over on Skid-road. Very jumpy, face twitching, hands jerking at her coat buttons, and she talked a bit strangely.

"Mister, I want some hulls for a pistol," was her order. I asked her for what sort of a pistol she wished them, stating that there were many sizes of pistols. Then she opened her handbag and jerked out an old Smith & Wesson .38 double action, the sort that police records claim have killed more men in civilized places than any other hand gun ever did.

"You know, some bum's been bothering around my house. I want to be ready if he tries to break in," was her story. Somehow, it didn't ring right, but my business was selling goods to customers so I didn't question her. I loaded the revolver for her, collected a quarter for the five cartridges and oiling the revolver and out she went in a mighty big hurry. Now, you tell me the rest of it."

"Well," said the chief, "I was pretty sure you had a hand in this, being the best man I know here on the firearms end of things. She went in to old Highjaw's office about half after ten, at a time when clients weren't there, and brushed right by his stenographer like she wasn't there at all. She was on the peck, all right.

"She pranced right into the old boy's private

office where he cooks up all his swift deals, parked in front of his desk before he could get out the door and demanded that he 'do the right thing by her.' Yelled that her reputation was ruined, and that he had to marry her pronto—or else.

"Well, the old codger refused, and I guess did it pretty rough. Told her his wife might object to his getting married again and kicking her out in the cold. Anyhow, he guessed he'd paid her off plenty as it was, dames like her being a dime a dozen anyhow.

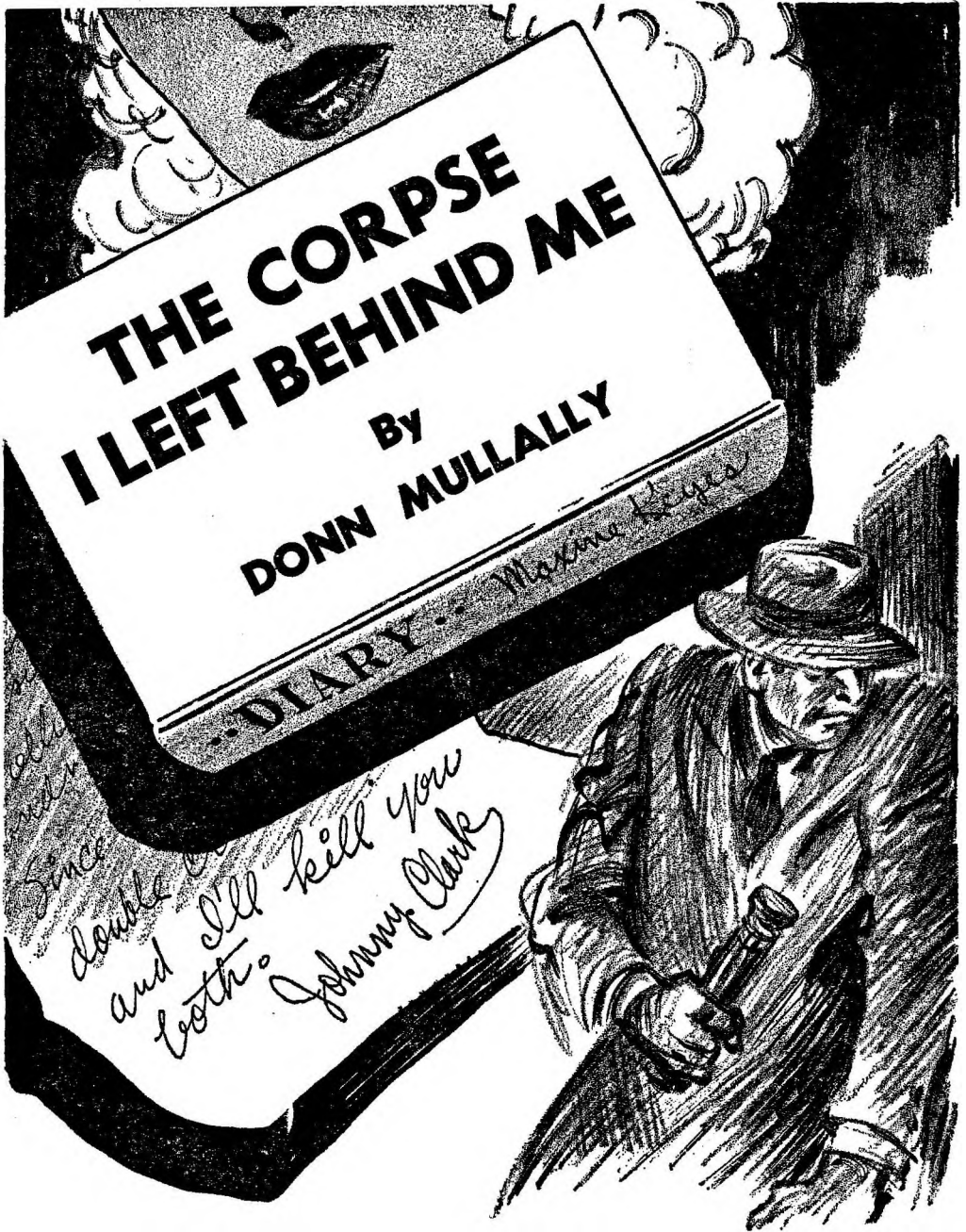
"You've ruined an innocent girl!" she squawked, and with that she jerked this gun out of her handbag, and right over his desk-top she jabbed the muzzle close to his vest and pulled that trigger five times. She sure aimed to get her man. So now," continued the chief, "how come you did what you did?"

"Well," stated the chubby man seriously, "you see, I felt pretty sure from the way she talked and acted that she was under some very severe nervous strain. I didn't know if it was a hang-over, hop, or just one of those things they tear off on once in a while when something irritates 'em.

"I was afraid she was planning on 'doing the dutch' or killing somebody else. And I knew if I refused her cartridges, she would go right around the block to the pawnshop or a hardware store and get all the cartridges she was willing to pay for and not a single question asked. So, I did the thing I believed best under the circumstances."

The chief opened the revolver and both eyed the copper cartridges as exposed. Each bore, directly in the center, the imprint of a firing pin, deep and effective. Eloquent tribute this, to the anger of a woman scorned.

"I reckon," stated the chief slowly, "you saved the old boy's life and no mistake. If you hadn't put rimfire cartridges in a centerfire gun, she'd 'a' killed him deader'n hell."



It's good business to keep extra stock on hand, and the gendarmes loved Martin Fowler because he kept them so well supplied with fresh corpses. However, when they found they couldn't keep up with the influx of new business, they commenced to be annoyed—even suspicious!

CHAPTER ONE

The Chivalrous Shamus



I STUCK my head in the door and looked around. The scene was not unfamiliar to me, but it was always interesting. If there'd been a cover charge I would have felt right at home. Too many lights, of course, but the bar of justice is funny that way. They want to see the people. Why, I can't imagine.

They all were pasteboard cut-outs to me, until they moved. Then they scurried like something under a log. Dim lights and a juke box would have helped this bar, too.

What was I doing there? An hour ago I had been sitting around my own apartment having a bull session with Iggy Friedberg, my attorney. His wife was out of town, and we'd

had dinner and meant to spend a quiet evening lying to each other.

Then Iggy's office found him and he had to go to work. A client of his had just gotten himself thrown in the Lincoln Heights cooler over a slight difference with the law. As Iggy told it to me on the way out to the Heights, his boy had slugged a cop.

While Iggy did his stuff, I wandered around and decided to take in this side-show. It beat standing up. But a little of what was going on in there went a long way. I was about to shove off, when the bailiff chirped a name that pasted me to my seat.

It buzzed the other "fans", too. A year ago we'd have paid good dough to see Maxine Keyes in the flesh.

This was off the cuff, and the casting seemed cockeyed. She wasn't exactly the lush type, although she must have been working on the



I found a back window unlocked and eased into the house. I explored until my flashlight found the room I was looking for.

part for a long time. Her famous blond hair looked as though it had been slept in. Her face was drawn, her eyes puffy, and her clothes were as immaculate as a bar towel.

She was charged with being drunk while drinking. She said she was guilty.

This was something His Honor could get his teeth in. Apparently he fancied himself something of a crusader against the vices of the West Coast Sodom. Miss Keyes was the horrible example. He gave her hell. He chewed out the whole movie crowd, and he finally wound up with the assessment—ninety days or ninety dollars.

Miss Keyes tugged at the handkerchief she had been shredding during the judge's big scene, and whispered she would have to take the ninety days. She didn't have ninety dollars.

His nibs blew up. I never knew it before, but I guess it's a crime to be broke. Anyway, the judge thought so. He told the police matron to take her away. Some newspaper flacks got in their licks before she left the courtroom.

If the judge had skipped his chance to be a heel, I don't think I would have done it. But he'd touched me off. I paid the ninety bucks.

There was a ripple of applause when we left the court room. I took it for sarcasm. Miss Keyes took it on the lam. I trailed after her, caught her outside, and started her toward my car.

"I'll take you home," I said.

She stopped and looked at me. "What did you think you were buying?" Her eyes were hard.

She had me there. I'd been about to ask myself the same question. I took her arm and turned her so she could see her reflection in a darkened window.

"Not this, baby," I told her. She let me put her in my car.

I left word for Iggy that he'd have to take a taxi home. She waited for me. Frankly, I was surprised.

She gave me her address, and we started back to Hollywood. She was silent for a few blocks. Then she bummed a cigarette. She smoked for a moment, then: "I haven't thanked you."

I kept my attention on the Los Angeles drivers. "Forget it."

She took my advice and was silent again. Then she asked: "I don't believe I know your name?"

I told her: "Martin Fowler."

"What do you do," she asked, "when you're not rescuing ladies in distress?"

I smiled and told her I was a private investigator, and I was a little green at this Galahad role, this being my first offense.

She finished her cigarette. "I realize this is neither the time nor place, Mr. Fowler," she said, "but I need a drink."

I glanced at her. In the dim glow of the dashboard she got a better break than she had in court. There was a resemblance to Maxine Keyes—a little beat up, but there. I could also see she wasn't kidding. Nobody was going to have to hold my nose to get a drink down me, either.

SHE borrowed my pocket comb and went to the tavern's little girls' room. It helped. So did a couple of drinks. Or maybe I was getting used to her. One thing to her credit, she didn't attempt any bum alibis for what had happened. When she felt up to it, I drove her home.

She lived in the Outpost Section of Hollywood, in a shack which didn't look like ninety bucks would make any difference to the owner. It didn't. Maxine explained it now belonged to the Bank of America. She was getting the old heave-ho any day now. In the meantime, I was welcome.

What I could see of the inside looked blitzed and looted. No rugs, damn little furniture, and faded spots on the walls where she'd had pictures. The living room was just one size smaller than the Legion Stadium. A davenport and a cocktail table were camping out over by the fireplace.

Maxine looked at me and laughed. "Don't run, Mr. Fowler. It's not haunted. Kick some of the stuff off the davenport and sit down, while I get some glasses."

I took her advice, but kept my coat on. In a minute she was back with glasses and a pitcher of water, which she somehow placed on the cocktail table. She borrowed a match and lighted the newspapers in the fireplace. It gave off one warm gasp and quit.

She sat down beside me and poured me a drink.

"No gas." She explained the cold. "Next week no water, and, barring miracles, no Maxine."

As the fifth I'd brought diminished, I tried to remember my manners and not pry into her affairs. I'm not much of a gentleman. Anyway, Maxine wasn't touchy on the subject.

"After all," she said, "you do rate something for your money. I just wish the story was more original."

It was a little shopworn. Husband trouble and work trouble ganged up on her. She started drinking to keep going. When she had no husband and no work, she had more time to devote to it. Her money didn't last forever. She'd put everything in hock. Now that was gone, too.

"I wish I could be cavalier about it," she said, helping herself to another drink, "and say it had been fun and I had no regrets, but it stunk and I'm lousy with regrets."

She killed her drink in one pass. She looked

at me and smiled. "You're having a hell of a time, aren't you?" She patted the back of my hand. "Thanks anyway for not trying to save me with kind words."

She excused herself and left the room. I marvelled at her control. I was beginning to feel slightly boiled, just keeping up with her the last couple of hours.

She was only gone a minute. When she dropped down beside me again, she tossed a leather-bound book in my lap. She was smiling. "Now you'll know I'm drunk. I don't know why I should want to inflict it on a decent guy like you, but that's my diary. I want you to have it."

I tried to give it back to her, but she insisted: "Please. Please keep it. I always wondered why I bothered to write all that stuff. Now I guess it was because I wanted somebody to understand me."

She made a drink while I kicked it around. It whipped me. What was I supposed to say? I don't think it mattered.

It might have been the cold, or maybe it was just the best thing I could think of right then. I took Maxine in my arms. I brushed her hair and cheek with my lips—her eyes. Then she looked up at me and kissed me like she meant it.



HE next morning I wondered about it. I'm inclined to think of myself as an independent operator. In this business, ladies in distress are a dime a dozen, but I try to keep my interest in that type of woman strictly professional.

And now I had this Maxine on the brain. I'd heard about cures for the booze habit. But even if it worked, that wasn't the whole answer to Maxine's problem. I'd kept my nose out of her diary up to now. I didn't need it to tell me she wasn't on the lush just because she liked the taste of hooch. Maybe a psychiatrist was the answer. I meant to call Iggy and ask him what he thought. As I said, I was worried—about Martin Fowler.

The morning papers made quite a thing out of Maxine's bout with the law. They published the scolding the judge had handed down almost verbatim, with a few dim-witted comments of their own. All around I had one hell of a morning.

Then about one o'clock, Maxine called me. For a wonder, she sounded sober: "Surprise," she said, "they haven't cut off my phone."

I laughed. "How do you feel?"

"Wonderful," she replied. "Are you sitting down?"

"Naturally."

"Well, hold on, darling. This will be a

shock." She announced happily: "Maxine Keyes has a job—believe it or not!"

"On the level, that's terrific!" I told her. "Tell me more."

She was, she explained, getting the lead in a roadshow company. It wasn't a lot of money, and she fully expected to have her creditors put the grab on most of it, but at least it was a start.

I congratulated her and told her we ought to have dinner and celebrate.

Could we make it the following night? She had to see some people about the play tonight. It was a date.

I wished her more luck and told her to be good. I felt a little better when I hung up.

BY THE following afternoon, I was as nervous as a madam at confession. I went rushing up there about four o'clock. I gave the doorbell a play to no returns.

That should have satisfied me Maxine was out. I wasn't due there for at least a couple of hours. For some reason it didn't.

I scrambled down the side of the hill to get around to Maxine's back yard. The whole joint clung to the slope by its fingernails, so this yard wasn't much more than a sodded patio built up behind a retaining wall. The grass, the trees, and the ragged ornamental shrubbery were burnt brown, the few pieces of garden furniture weatherbeaten to the same indefinite color.

On the table was an empty gin bottle, and across the back of the chair, Maxine's coat. My first thought was that she had been out there having a drink, heard me ring, and had gone to the front door while I was coming around the house.

I went to the door to sing out and let her know I was there. It was locked.

I picked up her coat and fumbled through the pockets. I found a handkerchief soiled with lip rouge, and her keys. There was nothing else to do. I forced myself to look over the retaining wall.

Jackpot!

She was lying about sixty feet below me, crumpled against the yellow clay. Beyond the wall, I found a place where I could get down to her.

I could've spared myself the trouble. She was dead—her neck frozen at a crazy angle, her face scratched by the crumbled granite.

I climbed back to the house, let myself in and called the police. Then I lit a cigarette and started looking for myself. Ever since I met this dame I had been building up to this. Nobody had twisted my arm and said I had to answer for her. It hadn't been love, either. Then what was I doing there, tangled in the mess that a neurotic, dipsomaniac ex-movie queen had made of her life?

That was where the doorbell caught me.

Sammy Hillman was the inspector in charge of the homicide detail. He and I had chewed over several bones together. For a cop, he wasn't a bad guy. He came in smiling and looking around as though he thought I might have a drink waiting for him. "Hello, Fowler," he said. "Can't you let us drum up our own business?"

"You'd go broke in a week, Sammy, and you know it."

Hillman took in what he could see of the house from where he was standing. "Nice creepy little cave this is," he commented. "What've you got?"

I took him out back and showed him.

His gang spread out and went to work, while I told him what I knew. After I finished my recitation, we went down to view the remains. He didn't say so, but I gathered he was satisfied it was just a case of too much grog and too little guts.

We were standing by the table in the back yard. I looked at the empty gin bottle Maxine had left behind. It hadn't given anything to the fingerprint boys. It was just standing there like a tombstone.

Suddenly I wanted that bottle. "Look, Sammy," I said, "don't think I've gone completely nuts, but if it's O.K. with you, I'd like to take this bottle—for a souvenir."

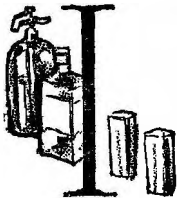
He snorted. "Help yourself. One bottle more or less around this place can't make any difference."

I tucked the prize under my arm and said goodbye.

Sammy nodded. "This'll last us a couple of weeks," he said, "so take it easy."

CHAPTER TWO

Husbands and Homicide



'D FORGOTTEN about eating. I went home and gave Maxine's bottle the place of honor in the center of my cocktail table while I hustled a drink for myself in the kitchen. I brought it back and toasted my final link with Maxine.

I had another drink and started to get poetic about Maxine, life, and empty bottles. You don't have to be boiled to get the connection, but it helps.

I remembered Maxine's diary, still in the pocket of the coat I was wearing the night I met her. I got it, and another drink.

I spent the next couple of hours getting stewed and wondering at the junk a woman will immortalize in her diary. I could follow the general outline of her life, but mostly it was devoted to personalities and sounded pretty

shallow. It made a good companion-piece for the empty gin bottle.

I killed the fifth and made a pass at going to bed. I got one shoe off before I went under. The bed pitched a couple of times when I shut my eyes, and I felt I was being shot through space. It was broad daylight again before anything bothered me.

The little men woke me up. I sat up on the edge of my bed and wondered what would ever become of me. I managed to totter out to the kitchen and try some ice water. It felt good in my mouth, but raised hell in my stomach. I made some hangover soup with tomato juice, worcestershire, and a shot of bitters. With that rumbling around in my guts, I went in and took a hot shower, brushed my teeth and got into some clean clothes. I decided against risking a shave right then.

While I was waiting for the coffee to run through the silex, I cleared away some of the debris from my contest with the demon rum, emptied the ash trays, threw out the dead fifth my hangover had come in, and picked up my heritage from Maxine.

In the cold light of morning, keeping that gin bottle lost some of its enchantment. Maybe some relatives would turn up for her diary. But I was certain that nobody, including me, had any use for that bottle.

I was in the act of tossing it in the trash can with the other dead one, when it happened. Nothing lethal, just an idea. I noticed for the first time that the bottle wasn't just empty. There was a fine layer of dust in it!

I've had a lot of experience with emptying bottles. Nobody could sell me the story that this one had only been standing around some forty hours. The label was still fresh, which ruled coincidence out of its being at the scene of the suicide. But why would Maxine set the stage with a prop bottle?

Something smelled.

Until now I had taken it for granted that her bum publicity break in the papers put the fritz on her comeback chance, she got boozed up and jumped. This dead gin bottle said it didn't happen that way.

I had my coffee and set out to prove he was a liar.

The Screen Actors' Guild informed me that Maxine had been represented by an agent named Mitchell Kasch. He was in one of those colonial cheese-cakes that line the strip section of Sunset Boulevard. It was upstairs, a cute little joint. The outer office was done in knotty pine and a nyloned secretary with a stagy accent and a peek-a-boo blouse that was more peek than boo.

Kasch turned out to be a stocky young guy with woolly black hair and a pipe. He acted a little nervous at the prospect of talking to a private detective. I promised to make it quick.

He held up his hand. "Please, Mr. Fowler," he said, seriously, "take as long as you want."

Then in the same gesture he picked up his phone and told dream boat to get him some casting director or other. He turned to me and smiled: "That's the agency business, Mr. Fowler. Never a moment to myself. You were saying, Mr. Fowler?"

It looked as if I should have brought Iggy along to talk to this character. However, I gave it to him fast. I wanted to know if there had been talk of cancelling Maxine's contract.

The phone cut me off. Kasch excused himself and helloed into it. I gathered he was talking to some executive's secretary, and was pitching her to let him talk to the boss. He finally broke her down. The boss came on the line. Kasch asked him one question and got a "No!" shouted at him I could hear across the room.

Kasch hung up, smiled sheepishly at me, buzzed his girl again and gave her another call. He turned to me. "A devil of a way to make a living, Mr. Fowler."

I repeated my question about Maxine's contract—apparently a tender spot with Kasch.

"Definitely not," he assured me. "There wasn't a whisper of breaking the contract."

I asked him if it wasn't a little unusual. It was my understanding that producers fought shy of people with a rep for boozing.

The telephone again, and Kasch lost another skirmish. This was obviously one of his bad days. He put in another call and came back to me. "Where was I, Mr. Fowler?"

I told him he was about to explain why the manager of this road company was willing to take a chance on Maxine.

"You've got me, Mr. Fowler," he admitted. "To be honest with you, when the call came in, I was so glad to make a deal for her I didn't hand them no argument. But they knew about her drinking, because they asked me if I thought she could pull herself together and do the part. I said I personally guaranteed she would."

I asked him if he didn't think he was taking a chance making such a guarantee.

He laughed. "Just a figure of speech, Mr. Fowler. Just a figure of speech."

Between telephone conversations, I managed to satisfy myself that Kasch knew very little about his client's personal life and even less about her past. He had, he explained, only been her agent for about six months.

"That's this business," Kasch remarked sadly as I stood up to leave. "They come to me when they're flat. I get them a break, and look what happens!"

The telephone buzzed again and he reached for it with one hand, extending his other to me. He was deep in his line when he nodded good-bye.

I WENT out and sat in my car. This round would have to go to the gin bottle. I had kicked the props out from under my pat little assumption of Maxine's motive for taking her life. So what? She probably had a dozen better reasons.

Besides, what was this getting me? Suppose this hunch was on the level and Maxine wasn't a suicide, but a smart piece of murder. What business was it of mine? I wasn't on the city payroll. I was working for a guy named Fowler, who could spend all the dough I could make for him.

I drove down to my office and started to put in a dishonest day's work. I dictated about a dozen letters, read off a client who wanted me to suppress some dope he'd paid me to dig up on his wife, and in general gave everyone a bad time. I was feeling pretty rugged—a set-up, to get bumped.

My girl announced there was a Mr. Clark to see me, and I told her to let him wait. She said yes sir, and broke the bad news.

The door to my office was closed, but I could tell it hadn't gone over with Mr. Clark. He let out a roar, and I heard Miss Wheeler squeal: "Mr. Clark, please! I said he would..."

The door crashed open, and Clark thundered in with Miss Wheeler hanging on his coat. "Fowler," he roared. "I don't know who the hell you think you are..." He turned on the terrified girl, jerking at his coat. "Let go of me!"

I nodded and she retired, looking as if she were about to cry. I switched my attention to Clark, and wished for the ninety pounds I would have to spot him if I tried to heave him out. "Don't you think you're a little big to be pushing secretaries around?" I demanded.

He took off his coat deliberately, folded it, tossed his hat on top of it, then leaned on my desk with a pair of hairy fists. "Fowler, I didn't come up here to trade wisecracks with you, or sit in your outer office while you play hard to get."

I picked up his coat and hat and threw them at him. "I don't know who you are, or what's on your mind, but you're wasting our time. Get out."

He lateraled the coat and hat to a chair behind him. "Just like that, he tells me: 'Get out.'" He cooed: "Aren't we being a little hasty, chum?"

He grabbed me by the lapels and tossed me into my chair. "I said I wanted to talk to you. Now where's your manners?"

I had a choice. I could swing on him, and get killed. He was a lot of man—not just big, but built. Good-looking, dark hair, heavy eyebrows, a Gable type without the cute mustache.

"All right, talk."

"That's better," he said.

He relaxed and picked himself out a chair. He lit a cigarette. Clark was smiling. "I don't suppose you're in any mood to hear what I've got to say?"

"It better be good."

"My name doesn't mean anything to you?" he asked, and I shook my head. "I'm Maxine's first husband. She told me about you, said you were O.K."

I let him talk.

"Fowler, what's your angle on what happened to Maxine?"

"It's none of my business."

"Do you believe it was suicide?"

I repeated I was not concerned with what it was. I was leaving it up to the proper authorities.

"How about your thinking, do you leave that to the proper authorities, too?"

"Look, Mr. Clark. You're a big guy; you can muscle your way in here, and make me listen to you, but if I've got to think—it costs money."

He curled his lip like he was going to spit. Out came his wallet and he dropped two one hundred dollar bills on my desk. "Think," he said.

We blinked across the desk at each other. The big boy got impatient. "Well?" he demanded.

"I'm thinking," I told him, and stretched it as far as it would go. "I'm thinking you're the biggest jerk who ever sat in that chair."

He didn't like it. He spread himself over the top of my desk. "One more crack like that, Fowler, and I'm going to start bouncing you off the walls."

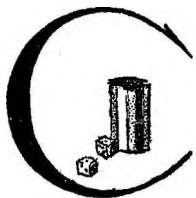
"Sit down," I said. "Let's get this straight—just as if you'd walked in here like a normal person. I'd as soon take your money as the next guy's, but I want to know what it's supposed to be buying."

He sat. Then he smiled. "I think we're going to get along, chum."

I let it pass.

"If I seem a little anti-social, skip it. I just wound up five years at Quentin."

I nodded, and extended my hand. "Welcome, brother." I told him about being sent up there for a year on the bum manslaughter rap in the de Spain case. We gabbed like a couple of old grads at homecoming. We hated some of the same people.



LARK explained he'd been out a couple of months when he heard Maxine was on the rocks. He wanted to do something about it. He still had some dough and some connections. Things broke just right and he was able to get her a part in

a road company by spending a little and put-

ting a bit of pressure on the right people.

"I'm a gambler, Fowler," he explained. "You'd be surprised at some of the people who are into me for different things. Everything was all set. The night Maxine was supposed to have pulled the dutch act, I saw her, and we talked over the whole thing. That's when she told me about you. She thought you were a pretty good egg. What I'm getting at, Fowler, is there was no reason for her to commit suicide. I'm willing to bet those two Cs and whatever more it takes to prove it wasn't."

I said O.K., I'd take him on. "Now how about cutting me in on all the details of Maxine's past?"

He told me what he could. She had started in show business as a kid in New York, around the nightclubs. She was mostly a showgirl, occasionally stepping out of the line to do a specialty—nothing very startling.

During that period she met Clark, and it was love. They got married and Maxine put away her dancing shoes and became a housewife. Part of being wife to a gambler was providing a little sex appeal to all night poker sessions. Clark didn't say so, but I gathered she was used for sucker bait.

Then one of their customers, Jake Reed, a Hollywood producer, took an interest in her and talked Clark into letting her sign a contract. They moved to California and Maxine surprised everyone by registering a hit in her first part.

It looked permanent, so they bought a home in Brentwood and settled down. From Clark's point of view, it was a good deal. He found plenty of men around the picture colony who liked to gamble, and Maxine's position in the industry gave him almost amateur standing, which didn't hurt the take.

Everything was wonderful until the story started making the rounds that Jake Reed and Maxine were double-crossing him. Clark ignored the gossip until one night at a party he got too heavily loaded and put an end to the story by punctuating Mr. Reed with a .38 slug.

Clark was tried for second degree murder. Maxine stood by him all the way, but when he went north, the studio said get a divorce or get out of pictures. And that was that. She got the divorce.

The rest of Clark's story was only things he had heard while at San Quentin. She had married again—an actor named Wally Burke. It hadn't lasted. Then the fadeout on the picture career.

I asked him if Maxine had always been a heavy drinker. He was emphatic in stating that as long as he knew her, she had done very little drinking.

"There's just one more thing, Clark," I said. "I might want to talk to some of Maxine's old

friends to get their slant on her. Have you any ideas on who I might look up?"

About the only one he could think of was a girl who used to be her stand-in and secretary, a girl named Marion Trenton. He didn't know where I'd find her.

I said thanks, I'd manage, and he'd hear from me.

MARION TRENTON was in the phone book. Finding her was that easy. I called and found her at home. I explained I was a private investigator interested in the Keyes suicide. I'd like to talk to her about it.

She was most obliging and had a very pleasant voice. I might come right over.

She lived in an apartment just north of Hollywood Boulevard. It was a proper arrangement for a working gal—about fifty bucks a month, one room and kitchenette, in-a-door bed. She had it dressed up with lamps and books.

She went with it—vaguely resembling Maxine, I think mostly in build and coloring. She had something of the same kind of turned-up nose. Her eyes were almost as large, and her mouth had the same interesting pout. I was making the comparison with Maxine at her best. This kid didn't have quite as much, but she'd taken care of it. She was a very modest, quiet girl and spoke with what I suppose was an interesting sort of whisper.

I qualified her right away. She had been Maxine's closest friend all the way. Her death had been a shock, but not particularly a surprise to Miss Trenton.

"She kept on saying it was a waste of good liquor for her to go on living."

"Tell me," I said, trying to keep my eyes off her legs, "was she always a heavy drinker?"

"No. No, she always drank a little, but it didn't get serious until a couple of years ago," she replied, plucking at the hem of her skirt.

"About when would you say she began to lose control?" I concentrated on the cigarette in my hand.

Miss Trenton thought a minute. "Just before she and Mr. Burke were divorced."

"Before?"

"Yes. I recall it was one of the things which broke up their home."

"There were others?" I asked. "Such as . . ."

"I'd rather not . . ." she said, and I let it drop. She wouldn't be any good to me hostile.

"Look, Miss Trenton," I urged, "you probably knew Miss Keyes better than anyone else. Would you mind giving me a thumbnail sketch of her life, while you knew her?"

She was sweet about it. In general, Miss Trenton's story up to the time of Maxine's divorce from Johnny Clark was a rehash of what he had already told me.

Shortly after the divorce, she made a couple

of pictures with a leading man named Wally Burke. The studio publicity department rigged up the usual phony romance, only this time it took. When her divorce was final, she married Burke. They bought a house in the Outpost, and for a time it was love in bloom.

There was, Marion recalled, some whispering at one time that Maxine was falling for her director, a Hungarian named Andre Zolta. But Marion discounted this. They were just good friends. Zolta's manner might have appeared strange in America, but it was, she assured me, simply continental.

Then Zolta was killed in a hunting accident. He jumped up in Wally's line of fire when a six point buck crashed out of the underbrush. It happens a hundred times every deer season. That didn't make the Burkes feel any better about it.

Their marriage started to go to pieces. Maxine was drinking too much. Eventually there was a divorce, and Maxine blew up in the middle of a picture. That cooked her with the industry.

Marion had kept in touch, watched her drink herself destitute. It wasn't pleasant, but as Marion told me: "Someone had to stand by her, and we had always been such close friends . . ."

Maxine's situation had the same appeal to me. "There's just one more thing." I asked: "Did she have any enemies? I mean people who really hated her?"

Marion considered for a moment, then tossed me a joker. "There's only one person I know of who might have felt that way about Maxine," she replied in her even, husky whisper. "Johnny Clark was terribly bitter when she divorced him. When she remarried, I understand he wrote, threatening both her and Wally."

Now how was I doing? I started out with a paying client and wound up with an ace suspect.

"Just a minute, Miss Trenton. Did you see that letter?"

"Why yes, I did."

"When it was received—or recently?"

I was overplaying my interest a little. Miss Trenton's frown tripped me off. It wasn't a mean expression, just perplexed.

"When Maxine received it," she replied, "but I can't imagine what difference it can make now. She took her own life. It can't matter what people thought of her."

She'd figure it out for herself anyway, if she hadn't already. So I took her into the firm. "Unless," I suggested, "it wasn't suicide."

Her reaction was standard enough. "I didn't know there was any question about it."

"When a person dies violently," I explained, "there's always a question." I stood up to leave. "Thanks a million, you've been very helpful."

We said goodbye at her door. She said she

would be glad to do whatever she could. I thanked her again and said I might take her up.

CHAPTER THREE

Corpses, Corpses, Pretty Little Corpses



ITROTTED out to my car, feeling I'd been had. What kind of routine was this? Only one thing was clear to me. I could see now why Clark wanted a murderer found—before his letter turned up. But why hadn't he told me about it? I won-

dered what I would do, if it developed my client had killed his ex-wife.

It looked as though the best move I could make in Clark's interest would be in the direction of finding the letter before the police did. So I drove to the Outpost and added housebreaking to a growing list of minor crimes I have committed in the line of duty. It was a good night for it.

Like most hillside homes, Maxine's was built upside down, the bedrooms being below the main floor. I found a back window unlocked and eased into what must have been a guest room—it was unfurnished. I explored until my flashlight found a room with a bed in it. That had to be the one I was looking for.

If she'd kept the letter at all, I reasoned, it would probably be somewhere around her bedroom—a dressing table drawer, or a hat box, anything she could stuff old letters in.

I wasn't being particularly cautious, which makes a sucker out of my intuition. It cost me a lump on the head. When I stepped into Maxine's bedroom, someone took a swipe at my skull. Fortunately, it was a glancing blow, but just the same it knocked me across the room. I hit the bed and kept going. There was room for me under the bed, and that's where I got. Like the other man in a boudoir comedy.

For several minutes, the only thing I heard was the numb throbbing of my head. Then my chum moved. He came over to the bed to see if there was anything left of me. A board creaked by my hand.

It was my turn to get cute. Lunging out, I got both of his feet and heaved. He came down fighting, but I was on top. I hated to see him quit—I can't slug an unconscious man.

I tossed him across the bed and felt around the room for my flash. When I illuminated his face, I was ashamed of myself. I had made an awful mess of what must have been a simply dreamy profile. The Wally Burke fan club would boycott me.

I lit a cigarette and sat down beside him to wait. Smearing glamor-pants hadn't stopped my head from throbbing, but it made it endurable. While he was out, I went through his clothes and satisfied myself that he was unarmed.

His flashlight was on the floor. My head had put a dent in it—just call me Iron Skull Fowler.

He came to with a classic: "Where am I?"

I grabbed his collar and jerked him to the edge of the bed. He was comically terrified.

"What's the idea of slugging me when I came in here?" I demanded.

"I . . . I didn't know it was you."

"You're a little nervous, aren't you? Who were you expecting?"

"No one. That's why I . . ."

"Skip it. You're just lucky you haven't got a murder to answer for. Or doesn't that make any difference to you?"

I had my flashlight in his face. He wasn't having anything to say about my last question, so I asked him another: "Suppose you tell me what you were doing here. What did you want?"

He clammed.

"Now it couldn't be," I said, "that you were after Maxine's diary?"

He didn't comment, but I felt him stiffen inside his coat. I shook him. "No, you wouldn't want the truth of the Zolta affair aired—even after all this time. It wouldn't do to let a diary brand you as a murderer."

He tried to squirm out. "That's a lie! There isn't anything like that in Maxine's diary."

"That's what you think, buddy. I know better."

"But there couldn't be. She wasn't within a mile of the accident."

"Right," I acknowledged, "but she had binoculars, didn't she? She saw the whole thing."

I shook him once more for luck, then let him wilt back on the bed, moaning it wasn't true. I got disgusted. We weren't getting anywhere.

"All right, shut up!" I told him. "If it'll make you feel any better, I'll admit I was lying about the diary. There isn't a word in it about the Zolta accident. That's what makes me think she saw you shoot him. She wouldn't skip the whole thing unless she was protecting someone."

I told him to relax, while I took a look around. We were leaving there together.

There wasn't a word or a whimper out of him while I searched for Clark's letter. If it was there, I satisfied myself, it would only be found by taking the house apart, plank at a time.

I took Burke out to his car, and handed him his flashlight. "Next time," I advised, "pick a guy with a thin skull, and then start running like hell."

MY ROMP with "Kid" Burke had put an edge on my appetite. So I cleaned up at my apartment, then went down to Tip's and put away a steak and some french fries.

Except for a headache, I was as good as new and ready to tackle Mr. Clark. I thought it was time I heard about that letter from him. I called and got the office to come up.

Clark was sitting in a friendly little game of Red Dog—no deadly weapons showing on the table. I watched a couple of hands while he dropped about five hundred bucks and made back seven-fifty. He got out and took me in the bedroom.

"O.K., Fowler," he said, sprawling across his bed, "what's the scoop?"

I told him I had a hot lead, but didn't know quite how to handle it.

He said: "Yeah? Let's go after the guy."

"I don't think you'll like it."

He sat up. "Can the double-talk."

"You really want to know who it is?"

"Don't be a dope," he snapped. "Sure I want to know."

"All right, don't get sore. It's you." I hope Miss Post will forgive me—I pointed.

He looked at me for a minute, his eyes narrowing. "Fowler, you're nuts! D'ya think I laid out two hundred fish to have you tell me I killed Maxine? Hell, if I'd done it, don't you think I'd know it?"

"But would you admit it?"

"I damned sure wouldn't hire a shamus to prove I had!" he barked.

"Now that's how I figure it," I admitted, haively. "But what about the letter?"

"What letter?"

"A letter you wrote to Maxine when she married Burke. You said you'd get both of them."

He leaned back against the head of the bed and smoked. "Fowler, you've been a con. You ought to know how it feels to be in lock-up and see your dame go for another guy. I was sore then, sure. I sneaked a letter out, and I guess I did say a lot of damn fool things. But it was strictly wind."

"Good enough," I conceded. "But what if the letter turns up in some of Maxine's effects? Can you make the cops believe it was wind?"

Clark's reaction was surly. "What is this—a shakedown?"

"What do you mean—shakedown?"

He sat up and snarled at me. "If you want to sell me the letter, why don't you say so?"

I shook my head. "Clark, I think you'd better get yourself another boy. This is no dice."

He grabbed my shirt front and rattled me around in the chair. "No dice!" he roared. "I'm the guy who'll say when it's no dice! Now get this, Fowler—you took on a job you're damned well going to finish. You can write your own ticket for dough. All I want is the guy who killed her!"

"I'll find your killer," I told him, when he let go of me. "And I hope it turns out to be Joe Louis!"

He laughed and went back to his game.

I straightened my tie, picked my hat off the floor and went home. How I loved that man!



THE next morning, Sammy Hillman dropped in on me. I knew his visit wasn't purely social. He wasn't in any hurry, so I pushed him a little. "By the way, what are you selling these days? The Annual Police Benefit doesn't happen for months yet. What's the pitch, Sammy?"

He smiled. "I've got another sideline. It isn't much, but it takes up the slack between murders."

"Vacuum cleaners, insurance?"

He shook his head. "Candid camera stuff. I've been experimenting with infra-red night photography. It's amazing what you get. No light shows, the subject never knows a picture has been taken."

I knew this was no good. He wasn't passing the time of day. "Yeah," I said, "I can see where that'd be quite a hobby."

He smiled again and dug in his pocket for an envelope which he handed me. "Here's a couple of shots I got last night with an automatic rig."

There were three prints, to be exact. I recognized the setting at once—the guest room window of Maxine's house. One picture showed Wally Burke climbing in, the other was me, ditto, and the final one was of Burke and me climbing out. The prints were stamped with the time the film was exposed.

I returned them to Sammy. "A very nice likeness."

The envelope went back in his pocket. He continued to smile. He was enjoying this a lot more than I was.

"I don't suppose you would object to telling me what you two gentlemen were after?" he asked.

"Not at all, Sammy. Just a second." I pulled Maxine's diary out of my writing desk drawer and handed it to him. "Here it is."

His face fell a little. It was too easy. He scanned a couple pages of the diary. "What was there in it for you?" he asked.

"What difference does it make? You've got the book."

He was very patient with me. "It makes a lot of difference, Marty. If I've got to catch a murderer, I'd just as soon it wasn't you."

"Who's been murdered?" I asked.

"Maxine Keyes," he said quietly.

"How do you figure?"

Sammy puffed, marched his cigar from one

side of his mouth over to the other. "Simple. Where she landed, there was plenty of loose dirt. She lit face down. If she'd been alive at the time, she'd have snuffed up a lot of dust. There wasn't any in her nasal passages."

"So it's murder. Well, what d'you know?"

"Of course, you're surprised as hell. You only wanted that prop gin bottle for a souvenir, I recall. And now the diary. Was it the same thing?"

This wasn't funny. I couldn't tell him the truth—that I burglarized Maxine's house looking for a letter in which a client of mine threatened her life. And it wasn't going to be easy to convince him I had been after her diary in the spirit of Hallowe'en.

"All right, Sammy. You win," I said. "You're going to give me hell for this, but I might as well get it over. I was on the level when I said I wanted the bottle for a souvenir—just a goofy idea. But when I got home, I noticed something we'd both missed. It was bone dry! I was afraid you'd bounce the bottle off my nut, unless I could find something else to back me up when I hollered murder. So that's what I was up to last night. I found her diary, but I'm just as glad I can turn it over to you."

Sammy looked blank for a minute. "O. K., Junior G Man," he growled. "I'll buy it. But I'll take it from here, if it's all right with you."

I MADE a date with Marion for Maxine's funeral. Shortly after twelve, I picked her up and we drove down to the Hollywood Cemetery on Santa Monica Boulevard. The services were being held in the chapel.

As far as I was concerned, Maxine's funeral was a waste of time. The flowers were pretty, Maxine made a lovely corpse, the music was moving, and, I thought, the eulogy was just corny enough to give the girl a last laugh before they covered her.

Marion identified the principal mourners for me but I was too thick to make anything of it. Except for one thing—Wally Burke was not among those present.

I wanted to have another talk with this Burke, so after we'd done all the public grieving we could for Maxine, I asked Marion if she would mind riding out to his place with me. The idea was, she knew where he lived. Besides, keeping Marion around for the rest of the afternoon wasn't exactly unpleasant. She wasn't my type—too pure. But I could dream.

Burke lived in one of those white ranch house mock-ups like no ranch outside San Fernando Valley. But it was all right, if you like that sort of thing—nice lawn, trees, and pansy beds beside the walk.

Marion and I couldn't raise anyone inside. In the back yard, a dog barked and was an-

swered by several hounds in the neighborhood.

So it wouldn't be a total loss, I walked around to see Burke's dog. He was a big, rust-colored collie. He knew Marion at once and jumped around, inviting us in. While Marion was mauling his ruff, I noticed his water pan was turned over. So I bought him a drink. He slurped it dry in twenty seconds Mex and woofed for more. It had been a long time between drinks. He acted hungry, too. I scouted the porch to see what I could find for him.

The back door was unlocked. I asked Marion if she thought it would be O. K. if we raided Burke's ice-box—for the mutt, of course. She thought so, and while she was poking around in the frigidaire, I helped myself to the rest of the house. I got my money's worth.

I found Mr. Burke hanging around in his closet—by his neck. He was wearing white silk pajamas, and his little blue toesies dangled a few inches off the floor. A small stool was kicked over behind him. He'd been there long enough.

I went back to the kitchen for Marion. "Come here a minute. I want to show you something."

I took her to Burke's bedroom. She looked, then buried her face in my shoulder. I could feel a shudder run through her. I led her to the living room, got a chair under her and helped her with a cigarette. Her eyes were large with fright, or shock, or something, but quite dry and clear. If she was having hysterics, they were all inside.

I located Burke's telephone and had about half dialed the police, when I changed my mind and put in a call to Johnny Clark.

"Look," I said, to his gruff hello, "what kind of an alibi have you got for your time last night?"

He laughed. "Part of the evening I spent with a dopy detective named Fowler."

It wasn't funny. "I'm serious, Clark. What time did the game break up?"

"About four o'clock."

"You were there all the time?"

"Right. I wasn't out of the room, except to talk to you," he replied. Then he got curious. "Hey, what's up?"

I told him. Then I said: "It's another phony suicide—a hanging. This would be a good time for that letter of yours to stay lost."

"Yeah," he growled, "it better."

I called the police in Hollywood. I knew this was out of his jurisdiction, but I wanted Sammy Hillman in on it.

"You're going to hate me for this, Sammy," I told him, "but I've found another stiff for you. Put away the crib board and come on out." I gave him the address.

Since the homicide squad from North Hollywood was officially stuck with this one, Sammy and I were on our own, once I had explained how I found the body.

I drew Sammy aside. "I might as well volunteer this information," I explained. "It's going to come out sooner or later, and I owe you something for not springing those pictures of Burke and me."

I told him about our brawl over the Zolta hunting accident: "Last night, I didn't give a damn how Zolta was killed, except for its bearing on Maxine's death. I thought if Maxine knew it was murder, and Burke knew she did and might use it on him, he might be our cookie. I know this much for sure: I had him plenty worried last night. If he had killed Maxine, he might have decided the game was about up."

"He might have," Sammy conceded, biting into a fresh cigar. "Except that somebody garroted him with his bathrobe cord and hung him up like a Virginia-cured ham. The Zolta angle is interesting, but I'd rather hear about someone who had a good motive for killing Burke and Miss Keyes. Well, let's go see how the boys from the branch office are doing."

CHAPTER FOUR

A Dog's Life



I WASN'T getting anywhere, so I took Marion and Burke's collie home with me. He whined and acted a little jumpy when we drove away. He missed Burke, but hadn't figured it out yet.

After he had cased my apartment with his nose, he flopped down on

the rug in front of us and tried to study out the whole situation.

I fixed a drink. "Anything you want to tell Daddy?" I asked, as I handed Marion her highball.

Her eyes widened. "What do you mean?" she countered.

I sat down and took her free hand. "It might be easier to talk to me than to a police inspector."

She nibbled at her drink, then shook her head. "There's nothing I can tell you. I . . ."

I tightened my grip on her fingers until she winced. "Don't," I told her. "Don't expect me to believe that." I nodded toward the dog, who had laid his nose across her feet. "It's pretty obvious you're old acquaintances. Burke's friends, his housekeeper, will drag you into this mess. Sammy Hillman is no dope. He'll want straight answers for a lot of questions."

She started to cry. It wasn't a big boo hoo, just tears and silence. She didn't shake or sob, and her nose didn't run. It was very different crying. Finally she said it: "Wally and I were going to be married."

Then she shut up again. I dropped her hand and walked the floor for a few minutes. She kept spilling out at the eyes.

"You realize," I explained to her, "that from Hillman's point of view, your conduct this afternoon was a little screwy. I don't suppose he's met very many girls who would take it like that."

Marion dabbed her eyes, and took a big slug of her drink. "Don't you see? I couldn't—I couldn't make a scene. It wasn't easy, but I couldn't let myself go."

The Long and Short of Murder

I knew something was up when Joe Franzoni's Number One muscleman wanted *me* for *his* bodyguard, but the fee was so fat I took it. Right off, Frazoni showed up with a blood-etched cravat, and from then on in, a mad midget named Claude, his giant gal-friend—and I—were certainly meant for mayhem's meat! Don't miss D. L. Champion's thrilling new novel, *DECOY FOR MURDER*.

"Dear Butch,
My 9th wife is driving me nuts already, and it's only been a month. Is that about my record?"

Please change your mind and handle the divorce for me, will you? I think *this* babe is trying to poison me—"You'll want to finish this thrill-packed novel of mystery and murder, *Crazy to Kill*, by Earl Peirce. . . ."

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TALES** 15c

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I called Burke's house and caught Sammy still there. I told him I had a new angle for him, and put Marion on the phone. She explained about herself and Wally, I guess he believed it. I did.

We had another drink and I assured her she had done the right thing. She smiled at me around the edges of her mouth. Her eyes were still moist, but under control now.

I made a small fuss over the mutt. He loved it, sat up and waved a paw at me like he wanted to fight. He was leading with his nose.

"I wonder what's going to happen to this character?" I asked. "Can we pawn him off on any of Burke's relatives or friends?"

"I wish I could take him," she said, "but I'm afraid if I moved him into my apartment, I'd have to go. I'll see what can be done in the morning."

The mutt had me by the wrist and was growling as if he meant to keep it. "How about Burke's housekeeper?" I asked. "He had one, didn't he?"

Marion nodded. "I saw her at the funeral this afternoon. I suppose Wally gave her the day off. She worked for them, Maxine and Wally I mean, before the divorce."

I oh'd and pinged my four-footed friend on his schnoz. He sneezed and let go of my wrist. "Do you suppose she could look after Junior?"

She thought it might be worth a call. She had the fun of breaking the news to Burke's housekeeper that she was out of a job, and why. I gathered this party was pretty completely floored. But she would make a home for our orphan.

I offered to drive Marion home, then take the dog to Mrs. Andersen. I had myself a deal.

This Mrs. Andersen turned out to be a pleasant little widow lady, old enough, and wrinkled enough, to be safe working for an actor. She had been crying, and it was my guess she was about to cry some more, when I brought Burke's dog in.

Rover and I were stuck with a very wet scene. I changed my mind about her being old enough to be safe working for Burke—I guess they never get that old. Give her a break, say it was mother love of some kind. Whatever it was, there was hair down all over the place—some of it Burke's.

I asked her what her angle was on the Burke-Keyes marriage. What broke it up? I got a small rise out of her and choked off some of the tears.

"It was her fault—her drinking and carrying on!"

"Did you ever witness anything between Miss Keyes and another man?"

She shook her head. "I didn't have to. Everybody knew. Everybody was talking about it."

"How about Mr. Burke—did he know?"

"Not at first. We kept it from him the best we could. We knew it would hurt him."

"We?"

"Miss Marion and I," she replied. "We tried to protect him from her."

I said: "Oh."

"She was living with us then," Mrs. Andersen explained. "She was so fond of them both. She did everything to keep them together."

I oh'd again. "But Mrs. Andersen, I understand Burke and Miss Marion were engaged."

She smiled. "That came much later, Mr. Fowler—after the divorce. It was really the best thing that could have happened to Mr. Burke. Marion is such a lovely girl."

I knew when I was at the end of the line. So I got off.

WHEN I pulled up at my apartment house, there was a police patrol car parked in front. Some of my neighbors were probably throwing bottles, furniture, or themselves out of the windows again, I thought. That was a bum guess.

I found a cop leaning against the desk in the lobby. The clerk looked up, brightened. "Here's Mr. Fowler now."

The cop got off his elbows. "You Martin Fowler?"

I nodded.

"You're under arrest."

I turned to the flustered desk clerk. "Call Iggy Friedberg for me, Charlie. Tell him I've done it again."

We went out and got in the police car. I knew I wasn't being taken in for jumping a traffic light. I just wondered how good a case my friend Sammy Hillman had against me. It was no joke, son. They booked me for murder before I found out.

I was plenty hot when Sammy finally got around to seeing me. Sweating it out in a cell for a few hours hadn't sweetened my ever-loving disposition a bit.

There was a room full of guys on his side. I was dropped in a chair and lighted up like the Smiling Irishman's Corner. Hillman came out of the shadows.

"I told you I didn't want to do this, Fowler," he said, by way of introduction.

"What am I expected to do, apologize?"

He extended a package of cigarettes.

"Aren't you pampering the prisoner?"

But I took one. I needed it. He lighted it for me and permitted me a couple of drags in peace, before he opened up. "We decided you were in this thing too consistently, Fowler. So we decided we ought to have a talk. Of course, you know your constitutional rights—"

"I was wondering if you boys had ditched that old scrap of paper," I remarked.

"—but it would be a lot better if you talked," he continued.

I laughed. "Sammy, I'm touched. The interest my friends take in my welfare."

He let it pass. "Incidentally," he remarked, "I imagine Friedberg is going to have a little trouble getting a writ. You're apt to be with us for quite a time. So let's be pleasant about it."

"O. K. Heard any good stories lately?"

"You'd be more amusing, Fowler," Hillman commented drily, "if you'd tell me why you killed Maxine Keyes and Wallace Burke."

"Is that all you need to know?"

He nodded. This guy had even less sense of humor than I thought.

"All right, I'll tell you." I paused to set up the gag. "I murdered them because I can't stand actors. I'm going to kill them all. Blood will run in the gutters of Hollywood—blood and greasepaint!"

Hillman wasn't amused. That hurt. "You're a very funny fellow," he said.

"What's funny about it?" I asked. "It's the best reason I can think of for killing a couple of strange people."

After that we had at it for more hours than I ever thought there were. But it could only end one way. Hillman's a stubborn guy, but even he knows you can only twist the truth so far. I think he was finally convinced he had pulled a wingding—that I was innocent. Anyway, he let me go.

As I was getting into my coat, he said, "I'm sorry we had to put you through that."

"Don't mention it, Sammy," I shot back at him, "just stand by for a false arrest suit that'll curl your hair."

Hillman shook his head sadly: "Sue me if you want, son. But you'll have to wait your turn."



SCORNFUL Hillman's free ride home and took a cab.

I paid the hack-driver, and took two steps at least before I realized I was being convoyed right past the door of the apartment house by two of Johnny Clark's men. My client wanted to see me.

Johnny had moved from his hotel. He'd become exclusive. He was in the hills off Beverly Drive. A real estate agent would have called it a "secluded private estate". To me it looked like a hideout.

He was waiting in the living room. I started to ask him what it was all about. His fist looked like a basketball when it exploded in my face. I seemed to remember him spitting out a name for me, but the room was moving too fast and I piled up hard against the wall and slipped to the floor.

I didn't get up for a minute, but when I did, I came up fighting. I knew it was nuts to take on a guy this big, but I go kind of screwy when anybody hits me.

He wasn't much of a boxer, but when he landed he made the lights dance for me. I kept running into the walls. That's what whipped me.

I came to with a fire raging in my mouth. My tongue and lips were swollen and cracked, and someone was forcing brandy down my throat. I gagged and thought I was going to be sick. Then I saw Johnny. He'd been feeding me the brandy. His face was marked up, too. That made me feel better right away. I pushed the bottle aside with my arm and sat up.

"Nice work," I commented. My voice sound-

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ed as if I was talking through a catcher's mitt.

Clark smiled and wiped a trickle of blood off his upper lip. He took a slug at the brandy bottle.

I looked around the room. Three of his boys were standing by for when the boss got through with me.

Clark put down the bottle, after having offered me another drink. "For a guy your size, you're a pretty good man," he conceded.

I said thanks and left it up to him.

"I always figured you a smart guy, too," he continued, "but I don't get you trying to ease a bum rap off on me."

I propped a cigarette between my swollen lips and got it lighted. "I don't know what you're talking about, Clark. But this is straight dope—if I knew anything to hang on you, I'd do it now."

His eyes narrowed. "I suppose next you'll tell me you didn't square yourself with the cops by giving them the letter I wrote to Maxine?"

I was brave. I guess I didn't think he'd hit a man in my condition. "Look, Clark. If the police have that letter and can prove you killed those people, they're doing it without any help from me. But more power to them."

Johnny snorted. "You're a helluva detective!"

I laughed. With my mouth it hurt me more than it did him. "You're no prize yourself. Incidentally, where are you getting all this bum dope?"

"I got a telephone call," he explained. "Some dame said you were going to turn a letter over to the D. A. to clear yourself—"

"A dame?"

"Uh-huh."

I got it.

"Come on, Johnny." I grabbed his arm and dragged him to the door. "I want you to meet a lady!"

THE clerk behind the desk at Marion's apartment was a highly nervous little guy with a marcelled blond toupee. When Clark and I ground our elbows into the desk, our battle-scarred pussies upset him frightfully.

"Inform Miss Trenton she has guests," I told him. "Mr. Clark and Mr. Fowler."

He complied and turned to us triumphantly: "Miss Trenton says she can't see you gentlemen right now."

Clark reached across the desk and thumped his narrow chest with a forefinger the size of a small salami. "You call the lady back and tell her to expect us."

We started for the elevator, but the Filipino boy slammed the doors in our face. There was nothing to do but take the stairway. Marion lived on the fourth floor. Jumping up those stairs two at a time was no casual sport for a couple of guys who kept in shape by resting

one foot on a bar-rail. When we levelled off on her floor, my head felt as if I was caught between a benzedrine and a bromide. Clark wasn't any better off. We reeled down the hallway to her apartment.

The door was slightly ajar, so we didn't wait for an invitation. That was more than just a social error. If I hadn't been so damned light-headed, I don't think I would have been sucked in. But I was, and there we were, stranded in the center of Marion's living room. The lady herself was between us and the door with a .32 that made the idea of trying our entrance over again sort of silly.

She closed the door quietly. "So nice of you gentlemen to call," she said. "Please be seated—on the davenport, if you don't mind. And keep your hands in sight—on your knees, I think would be fine."

Marion was standing with her back to the door. She acted as if she knew what she was doing. She wasn't going to come close enough for one of us to jump her, and at that range she couldn't miss. The chips were very definitely down, and we all knew it. It was her play.

"To what am I indebted for this charming visit?" she asked, adding, "As if I didn't know."

I smiled, or tried to. "We thought you might be a good kid and tell us about Maxine and Wally."

She thought about it for a minute. Her gun didn't waver. Neither did Clark or I. "Wally killed Maxine, then lost his nerve," she said, calmly. "I had to kill him."

"Why did Burke kill Maxine?" Clark found his voice.

Marion shrugged. "I asked him to—she'd done enough to spoil our lives."

"You lying devil!" Clark exploded, half-rising.

The muzzle of Marion's gun pin-pointed the second button on his vest and he sank down beside me. He was very mad, very dangerous, but he knew he was on the wrong end of the gun.

"So what are you going to do about us?" I asked.

"Anxious, Marty?" she chided.

"No, just curious," I replied. "I don't suppose you can get any more for killing four people than for two, but up to now you've been a pretty smart baby about these things. I just wondered how you'd figured this one out."

"Well," she said, "there's really no point in keeping you in suspense. I'm going to shoot you with Clark's gun, which he is going to toss over to me in a minute. Then I'll shoot Clark with this one."

"I suppose I'm thick, but I'm missing the point. It's an interesting switch, but what does it accomplish?"

"I'm disappointed in you, Marty," she re-

plied, "but I think when the police find a certain letter Clark wrote to Maxine in your pocket, they'll believe you and he got in a row, he shot you, and then in self defense, I shot him."

"Good, good. Then you've had the letter all the time?"

"Naturally."

If I had to be in this kind of a jam, Clark was a good man to have on my side.

"What if I don't toss my gun over, lady?" he asked. "I hate to spoil your act, but I think you're taking a lot for granted."

"Don't worry, Clark, you aren't crabbing the act," she replied, without even a trace of annoyance. "It doesn't matter really who is shot first. Now, do you want to throw your gun over to me—carefully?"

Clark looked at me and winked. "It looks like we'll be seeing a lot of each other, chum."

He withdrew a .38 from his shoulder holster, butt first, and tossed it toward Marion. "Here it comes, sister."

It was a good throw, a little short. I got the idea.

Marion moved to get it, keeping her own .32 on us. As she stooped for the gun, we both took off. Marion fired and I heard Clark yelp as we hit her. She went down under us—her gun flying out of her hand.

Clark and I were concentrating on the main chance. I went after her gun, and Clark was busy collecting his own. In the scramble, Marion somehow got off the floor and escaped into her bathroom before we could stop her.

We looked at each other foolishly. Clark had a bum wing, where her bullet had taken him, but nothing dangerous. The next thing was to pry her out of the bathroom. With some dames that's a big proposition.

I beat on the door. No response. I told her to stand clear, I was shooting the lock off the door. Still no sound from the bathroom. A couple shots for the lock and we walked in—just in time to see her jump from the tiny bathroom window. It was four flights straight down to a cement driveway. She spread herself on the yell going down.

I turned away from the window, and for the first time saw what she'd written in lipstick on the mirror. It was for me:

I hope I can do this one authentic enough for you, Marty.



GOT to the telephone and called the inspector. "Hillman," I said, "it's that man again. Yeah, Fowler. Look, Inspector, I hate to do this to you, but I've got another dead body on my hands and don't know what to do about it."

I gave him the address and told him I'd

hang around until he arrived. Then I called the desk and told them they'd better send someone around to keep the souvenir hunters from walking off with Marion's body.

Clark was standing in the center of the floor. He looked a little green around the gills. I pushed him into a chair. "Relax, Johnny. The rest of this is strictly for laughs."

Hillman arrived in a covey of subordinates and police reporters. He eyed Clark and me sourly. "I knew it was a mistake to let you out," he commented.

The docs couldn't do anything for Marion, but they put a dressing on Clark's arm. By the time they finished, Hillman was back from viewing the body. He nosed around the apartment, then turned on me. "I imagine I might just as well hear your version of it."

I told him all there was to our little rough-house with Marion. Clark backed me up.

"What about the note on the mirror?" Hillman asked. "What's that mean?"

I smiled. "Of course, I didn't discuss it with the lady, Inspector," I explained, "but it would seem a couple of other suicides she staged didn't hold up so well."

"Keyes and Burke?"

"Isn't that what she's telling you?"

Hillman thought about it for a couple of minutes while he chewed his cigar. "Maybe," he conceded, "but I still want to know why."

"The Inspector," I explained to Clark, "has a complex about these things. He spent hours today asking me: 'Why did you kill Keyes and Burke?' Now he wants to know why Marion killed them. Don't ever let him start on you."

I thought Hillman's complexion was a little unnaturally ruddy. "As a comedian," he growled, "you stink!"

I laughed. "That's not nice, Inspector. I think you're a swell comedian. But just to show there's no hard feelings, I'll give you a tip—Marion was jealous."

"Jealous?" he echoed.

"You know, the green-eyed monster. Look, two lovely young ladies reach into the Hollywood grab-bag. For one there's stardom—for the other, crumbs as her stand-in. That was pretty rough for a girl with Marion's ambition."

Hillman shook his head. "So she decided to kill off the competition. I can't buy that, Fowler."

"Naturally, it didn't happen quite that way," I explained. "At first it was just a matter of sniping at Maxine's reputation. She was clever about it. She always planted her lies, while seeming to defend Maxine. Everyone knew she was her best friend. I imagine the first time she really felt her power to destroy Maxine was when she sold Johnny here on the idea his wife was playing around with Jake Reed. Reed was killed and there was one helluva scandal that just about wrecked Maxine's career. But not

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quite. Maxine pulled out of it, and Marion had to start from scratch.

"This time, she played Maxine's director, a bird named Zolta, off against husband number two, Burke. Zolta was killed in a hunting accident and Marion was the only witness. My guess is she let Maxine in on the fact that it was really murder. At least something happened to come between Burke and his wife, and start her boozing.

"That wrote finis on Maxine's career and gave Marion the go sign. Incidentally, she picked Burke up on the rebound, so she was really filling Maxine's shoes. Then when Marion is just getting her own career under way, she's engaged to Burke, and Maxine is flat on her fanny. That's the time my friend Johnny Clark blows into town with a part for his ex-wife.

"She is thrilled and naturally tells her best friend all about it. Marion gets panicky. If Maxine makes another comeback, everything she has accomplished will be ruined. She knows there isn't room for both of them in pictures—they're too much alike.

"So she pumps Burke full of poison to the effect that Maxine knows about the Zolta incident and is going to talk. They plot Maxine's death to look like suicide. Only it doesn't quite come off that way.

"I run into Burke and give him a pushing around on the Zolta affair. He goes to pieces on Marion, she garrots him while he's asleep and hangs him in the closet. Also to look like a suicide. But again nobody's fooled.

"All this time she's holding an ace—a letter Clark wrote to Maxine when she married Wally Burke threatening to kill them both when he got out of poky. If it gets too hot, she figures she can always produce this letter and Clark will take the rap.

"There's only one little thing wrong. She figures I'm having hunches about her. She's working on that, when you pick me up and charge me with murder. It looks good, but when it doesn't take, she calls Clark and tells him I gave the police his letter to shift suspicion to him. She's counting on Clark killing me. Then she can play her hole card—turn the letter over and let Clark collect for killing Keyes, Burke, and me.

"Well, that's about all there is to it. Clark only half-killed me. You know the rest."

Hillman smoked it over in silence for a minute. "Kid," he said, at last, "I don't know what kind of a detective you are, but you've sure got a talent for slinging the bull."

I turned to Clark and offered him a cigarette. "You see, that's the thanks I get. He sits around smoking two-bit cigars while I solve his case for him, then the joker turns on me!"

THE END

CAN YOU TAKE THE WITNESS?

Or Can He Take You?

By JULIUS LONG



1

You are defense counsel for Joe Roe, accused of murdering Hughie the Hermit for his hidden hoard. The D.A. produces witnesses to testify that they heard an unidentified child fleeing in terror from the scene of the crime and crying: "Joe Roe just killed Hughie!" The D.A. also produces witnesses to testify that they heard the president of the local bank remark as follows a few days before his death: "I was hunting in the woods a month ago when Hughie was murdered, and I saw Joe Roe running away from the cabin. At the time I thought nothing of it, but I now realize Joe had just murdered Hughie." You object to the introduction of testimony as to both statements on the ground that such evidence is hearsay evidence and not admissible against the defendant. Will the judge sustain your objections?

2

You represent the plaintiff in a suit for damages for personal injury. The plaintiff, the man bringing the suit, has alleged in his petition (the written statement of his case) that he will be permanently crippled because of an injury to his back. The defendant, the person alleged to have caused the injury, has replied in his answer to the petition with a denial that your client suffered any injury whatever to his back. So you produce Officer Hanratty and Doctor Dorsey as witnesses. You expect Officer Hanratty to testify that upon seeing the accident he ran at once to the aid of your client, who screamed: "My back! It's killing me!" You expect Doctor Dorsey to testify as to what statements your client made a week later as to the condition of his back, when he sought professional aid from the doctor. Counsel for the defendant objects to the admission of such evi-



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Julius Long

dence on the ground that what your client said amounted to self-serving declarations and testimony by both the officer and the doctor would be hearsay testimony. Will the objection be sustained, that is, will the judge agree that the testimony of your witnesses is inadmissible?

3

You are a district attorney trying Clux Clunk for armed robbery. Clux denies that he had any part in the robbery and that at the time it occurred he was at home reading Marcel Proust to his wife, Clara. You produce an innocent bystander and ask him to repeat what he heard immediately after he saw a man with a gun flee from the scene of the crime.

Your witness says: "I heard that woman sitting there"—he points to Clara Clunk—"yell out: 'Hurry, Clux—the cops is coming.'"

The defense counsel pops to his feet and says: "Your Honor, I move that the witness's statement be stricken from the record and that the jury be instructed to disregard it on the ground that no wife can testify against her husband. Any statement Mrs. Clunk is alleged to have made at the time of the robbery is inadmissible because she can't testify against her husband."

Will the judge grant the motion and exclude the evidence for the ground stated?

4

You are defense counsel for Gabbo Geezle, on trial for conspiring with Basle the Bum to hold up a bank messenger. The D.A. says Gabbo was planted outside the bank to signal Basle down the street when the messenger made his appearance. Gabbo admits that he was standing outside the bank, but states that he was merely waiting for a street car and had no idea that Basle was in the neighborhood. Not only that, he simply loathes Basle and wouldn't think of robbing a bank messenger with him.

(A) The D.A. then produces a witness who testifies that he heard Basle say after the robbery that he couldn't have pulled it off without Gabbo's cooperation. You object that the testimony of such a witness is inadmissible on the ground that it is hearsay and that the testimony of one conspirator can not be introduced against another.

(B) The D.A. produces a witness who testifies that before the robbery he heard Basle and Gabbo talking in the back booth at a bar, and that Basle said to Gabbo: "I won't make a move until I get your signal that the bank messenger is on his way." You ask that this testimony be stricken for the same reasons given in (A), that is, that it is hearsay and inadmissible as the statement of a conspirator.

Can You Take the Witness?

How will the judge rule on each request, for you, or against you?

5

You are defense counsel for Jack the Gripper on trial for murder. You have two alibi witnesses. One is an illiterate hillbilly who once let a rattlesnake bite him to prove his religious conviction. The other is a Ph. D. who is a professor of philosophy in a famous university and whose books on ethics have made him famous and respected throughout the world. He is also an atheist. Which witness will the judge bar from testifying as incompetent and unbelievable?

6

You are a district attorney trying John Jones for manslaughter. The evidence shows that Jones beat up his pal, Pete Smith, and that Pete died as the result of the beating. But Jones hires a smart lawyer who talks the jury into acquitting him. This burns you up. You decide that if you can't convict Jones for manslaughter, you'll at least convict him for assault and battery. So you have him indicted for assault and battery. The case comes to trial, and Jones' smart-alec lawyer moves the court to throw out the case.

"Jones has already been tried for manslaughter and been acquitted," argues the lawyer, "therefore, he's been placed in jeopardy once and can't be placed in jeopardy again for the same offense."

So you leap to your hind legs and tell the judge: "True, Your Honor, Jones has been tried and acquitted for manslaughter, but this is a different offense. It's assault and battery this time, so Jones can be tried again."

Will the judge permit Jones to be tried again, or will he dismiss the case against him?

7

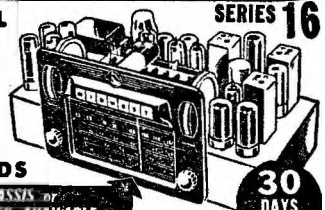
As district attorney you have tried poor John Jones for both manslaughter and assault and battery and convicted him of neither. You belatedly discover proof that Jones was actually attempting to kill Pete Smith at the time when he beat him up. So you have Jones indicted all over again for murder. Again Jones' lawyer asserts the plea of former jeopardy. Jones has been acquitted of both manslaughter and assault and battery, he argues, therefore he can't be placed in jeopardy again for his offense. He moves the court to dismiss the case against Jones.

Will the judge sustain the motion and dismiss the case on the ground that Jones has

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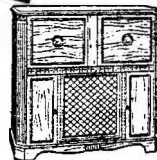


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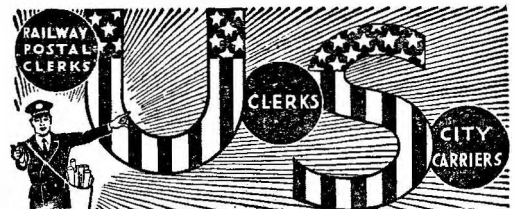
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Julius Long

already been placed in jeopardy for the same offense?

8

You are a district attorney, and you have tried Joe Dokes for receiving stolen goods. The trial has lasted several days, and the jury has been out almost that long. The jury finally reports that it cannot agree to a verdict. The judge discharges the jury. You ask the court to set down the case for re-trial. Joe's lawyer says: "You can't do that to my client! He's already been tried once, and you can't try him again for the same offense!"

Will Joe have to stand trial again, or will the judge turn him free on the ground that he has already been placed in jeopardy for the same offense?

Answers to Preceding Questions

1

The judge will admit testimony as to the statement of the unidentified child but sustain your objection to testimony as to what the banker said. Testimony as to both statements is hearsay evidence, but the child's statement was spontaneously made a few seconds after the commission of the crime, and evidence about it is admissible even though the child cannot be found or identified. The statement is *res gestae* and an exception to the hearsay rule. (State v. Lasecki, 90 O.S. 10.; 106 N.E. 660.) The banker's statement, however, was made a month after the crime and constituted both narrative and opinion, so testimony as to what he said is inadmissible.

2

No, the judge will overrule the objection and permit the jury to listen to both Officer Harratty and Dr. Dorsey. The exclamation of pain uttered by your client at the time of the accident is part of the *res gestae*, that is, matter so closely connected with the accident that they constitute a circumstance of it. (The term is pronounced: rēz jestē.) Dr. Dorsey's testimony as to what his patient said is admissible because he was a *patient*. If your client had visited the doctor only to qualify him as an expert on his condition, then the doctor would not be permitted to quote any of his statements regarding that condition. (Circleville v. Throne, 1, O.C.C. 359.)

3

No, the judge will not strike the testimony from the record or instruct the jury to dis-

Can You Take the Witness?

regard it on the ground that the statement of a wife is incompetent against her husband. It is not Clara Clunk who is a witness against Clux Clunk. Her remark is part of the *res gestae* and not to be excluded because she herself would be incompetent as a witness against her lawfully wedded Clux. The same rule prevails with respect to *res gestae* declarations of other persons who would be incompetent as witnesses by reason of idiocy or habitual drunkenness.

4

The judge will rule in favor of you with respect to testimony as to what Basle said after the commission of the crime, but against you with respect to what Basle said in furtherance of and during the pendency of the crime. Anything said by a conspirator, once the existence of a conspiracy is established, may be quoted by any witness who heard the statement. However, anything said about the commission of the crime after its commission may be used only against the person making the statement, not against a co-conspirator.

5

The college professor, of course. No matter what a man's religious belief may be, he will not be barred as incompetent to testify in a court of law. As long as he believes in a Supreme Being it is assumed that he will fear punishment in the hereafter for falsehood under oath. But the rule is clear that our college professor is not fit to be believed.

6

The judge will not permit Jones to be tried again, he will dismiss the case against him. It is true that assault and battery is a different offense from manslaughter, but it is a lesser offense incorporated in the greater one. The



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Julius Long

jury could have found Jones guilty of assault and battery as well as manslaughter, therefore he was placed in jeopardy for that offense as well as manslaughter. (The contrary is true in a very few states in which the statutory form of indictment for manslaughter does not include lesser offenses.)

7

Yes, the judge will sustain the defense counsel's motion and throw out the case against Jones. A conviction or an acquittal for a lesser degree of homicide is held to be an acquittal for the greater degree, so Jones was placed in jeopardy for murder when he was tried for manslaughter, for both are homicide charges.

8

Joe is out of luck. He'll have to be tried all over again. Though Joe was in fact placed in jeopardy the moment the jury was impaneled and sworn, the discharge of the jury because of manifest necessity nullifies the jeopardy. Joe could assert his first trial as a defense against a second only if he could prove the judge was not justified in dismissing the jury.

THE END



I Remember Murder

(Continued from page 41)

Millie Martin's her name—she looks a lot like Kay."

Kay looked up then. She was taking this all down. I went on. "Sutton palmed Millie off on me. That must have been for effect. He didn't want Patricia to think there was anything between himself and Millie. But she must have found out the truth. She threatened to tell her father how many times she'd visited that apartment. Sutton got frightened. He thought Sam Price would kill him if he found out the truth. So he lost his head and shot the girl. While she lay dying he and Millie improvised an alibi. Millie drove the Cadillac to Price's house immediately after her act on the phone. I'm gambling, Mr. District Attorney, that the man you planted at Price's house will identify her."

Sutton gambled the same way. He got excitedly to his feet and tore at his collar as sweat streamed down his face.

"I didn't do it! I tell you Sam, it wasn't me! It was Millie! Yes, that's right, it was Millie! She was jealous! She did it. Don't believe anything she tells you!"

Price said very quietly. "You've got it wrong, Phil. I'm not to believe anything you tell me!"


He got out a small automatic and shot Sutton. The funny thing was, he got Sutton right under his left eye. It had to be accidental, for it turned out Price had never fired a pistol before in his life.

Of course I could have cut Price down, but I might have killed him, and I wanted him to confirm my story of how he had worked out the frame on Kever. He did this very satisfactorily.

At least Kever was satisfied. He was so grateful for the way I cleared him that it was pretty close to a full week before he called me an idiot.

THE END

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William Campbell Gault

(Continued from page 26)

"To the police."

"No," she admitted. "They aren't likely to go to the police. And neither are you, Mr. Jones. This place is well guarded."

There was somebody else in the room. The chauffeur, Carl. The gun he had in his hand was a Colt Camp Perry model, a single shot pistol with a long barrel, a hell of a long barrel. It was a .22.

"That's the gun that killed Lundgren and Carlton, isn't it? Is that the one that killed Miss Harlin, too?"

Carl said nothing, the long barrelled gun held unwaveringly in his hand.

Miss Townsbury said: "All three of them made the mistake of trying to blackmail me. Is that the mistake you were trying to make, Mr. Jones?"

"No," I said.

"Both Lundgren and that poet," she went on, "knew that Flame came up here. That poet put her on the train that took her up here. Both of them know that was when she disappeared." She looked down at the floor. "That's why they died. They tried to blackmail me. That's why she died, too, that night—" Her voice trailed off.

"Carl took care of them?" I asked. "All of them?"

Carl said: "What difference does it make to you, shamus? What difference is anything going to make to you, where you're going?"

There was a sharp intake of breath from Miss Townsbury.

I said: "The man in the doorway will take care of me."

Carl's laugh was low. "That's a pretty dusty gag, Jones. That's a little old for me."

From the doorway, Devine said: "You'd better put that toy away, big boy. This thing in my hand is a man's gun."

Carl never even turned before he dropped the gun to the carpet. It would be a long time, I knew, before Devine would let me forget this.

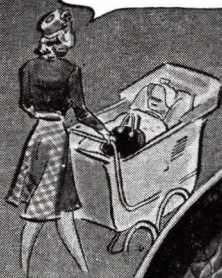
THE department built up a case, all right. Some of Miss Townsbury's patients talked, and after that, some of her former patients. Some of the organization's small fry talked enough to sew all of them up—Every and Carl and the old girl and her staff. Judy wasn't in on any of it. Carl's gun had killed Lundgren and Carlton, but not Flame.

They found Flame the next day. In a shallow and poorly concealed grave in the woods. No coffin. In the cold, wet ground, with a knitting needle through her left eye, embedded in her brain . . .

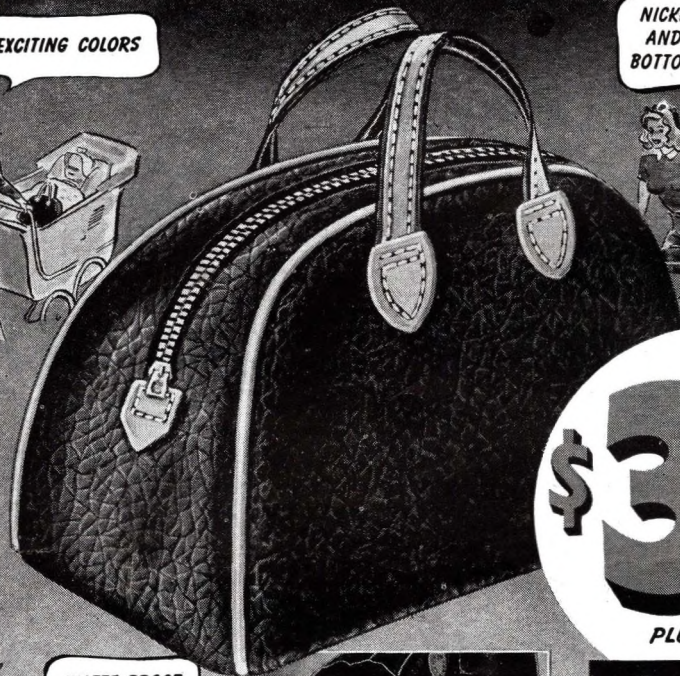
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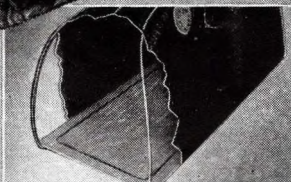
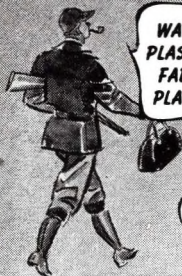
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BOTTOM CONSTRUCTION



\$3.29

PLUS FED. TAX

WATER-PROOF
PLASTIC COATED
FABRICS AND
PLASTIC WELTS



★ REPLACEMENT OR REFUND OF MONEY
**Guaranteed by
Good Housekeeping**
IF DEFECTIVE OR
NOT AS ADVERTISED THEREIN.

**PATENTED NO-SAG
AERO-FRAME***

Par-Pak



**PADDED HANDLES
WITH GENUINE
LEATHER SUPPORTS
AND PULL TABS**



You can no more help "going" for these many big Par-Pak features than the whole family can help going for its "1000 use" versatility. Built *roomy* with *plus* smartness... plus durability... plus value... by the makers of the unique and famous Val-A-Pak. Stays in shape *permanently* because of the patented NO-SAG AERO-FRAME*... Ideal for overnight trips and "gadabout" activities the year round, Par-Pak is available in brown, blue and sand duck—and black or brown simulated leather.

ATLANTIC PRODUCTS CORPORATION, TRENTON 5, NEW JERSEY

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Put  in your 
 when the  fall—and
forget it till the first  F C



● You don't *guess* with "Prestone" anti-freeze; you *know* you're safe from freeze-ups, no matter how suddenly the thermometer dives. There's no boiling away or foaming off . . . no constant adding and testing. It prevents rust and corrosion too! Because there's not enough "Prestone" anti-freeze for everyone this year, you'd better get yours early . . . see your dealer on that first chilly day. You'll have never a care till the warm days of spring—with "Prestone" anti-freeze.

The words "Eveready" and "Prestone" are registered trade-marks of

NATIONAL CARBON COMPANY, INC.

30 East 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y.

Unit of Union Carbide  and Carbon Corporation

SORRY— there still isn't quite enough "Prestone" anti-freeze for all who want it, because—

1 "Prestone" anti-freeze, like most other products, depends on the utilization of raw materials and equipment drawn from many fields. Recent industrial dislocations have affected our plant-expansion program, which was not authorized during the war. Planned for years, it is well advanced; but the real benefit will not be felt in 1946.

2 "Prestone" anti-freeze must be produced and *packaged* long before cold weather. Last spring and summer the food shortage diverted packaging materials to the need of starving millions, and adversely affected our ability to meet 1946 requirements. So your dealer may be selling "Prestone" anti-freeze from 5-gallon cans in addition to the familiar 1-gallon cans.

SAME PRODUCT
 \$ **2.65**
 PER GALLON
 SAME PRICE

PRESTONE ANTI-FREEZE

TRADE MARK

"YOU'RE SAFE AND YOU KNOW IT!"—ONE SHOT LASTS ALL WINTER