

BLACK MASK



25¢



JAN.



RED CHRISTMAS BY GEORGE F. KULL



For once they actually agree!

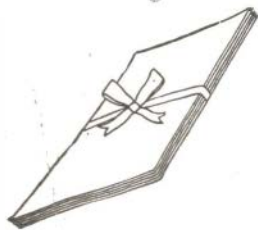
Hope and Crosby, in the movies, seldom see eye to eye.

But there's one thing they really do agree on —they both think U.S. Savings Bonds make wonderful Christmas gifts!

SAYS BOB: "They're swell for *anybody* on your list. You couldn't pick a nicer, more sensible, more welcome present. Even Crosby knows that."

SAYS BING: "I hate to admit it, folks, but Hope is right. And remember this—you can buy Bonds at any bank or post office in the U. S. A."

BOB AND BING (together): "This Christmas, why not give the finest gift of all—U.S. Savings Bonds!"



Give the finest gift of all ... U.S. SAVINGS BONDS

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LEAPING TARPON STARTS THINGS MOVING

THAT'S AN AWFUL LOT OF FISH FOR A GIRL TO HANDLE!

AND IT'S JUMPING MIGHTY CLOSE

JERRY CANNON AND HIS BROTHER KIP ARE RETURNING TO PORT FROM A LONG DAY OF TROLLING FOR SAILFISH IN THE GULF STREAM WHEN ...

HE'S LANDED IN THE BOAT! LET'S GET OVER THERE QUICK!

HE'S FOULED THE LINE AROUND YOUR MOTOR. WE'D BETTER TOW YOU IN

THAT'S OUR PIER

RESTING QUIETLY SHE'S A KNOCKOUT

HOW'S MY FISH?

PICTURES? TAKE KIP HERE, BUT LEAVE ME OUT. I LOOK LIKE "BLACKBEARD THE PIRATE"

WHY NOT CLEAN UP IN THE CLUBHOUSE WHILE I GET MY CAMERA

SAY, THIS BLADE'S A MONEY! I'VE NEVER ENJOYED A QUICKER, SMOOTHER SHAVE

LOTS OF OUR MEMBERS USE THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE REALLY KEEN

NEXT TIME YOU AND HELEN WANT TO GO TARPON FISHING, MY BOAT'S AT YOUR DISPOSAL

THAT'S A BARGAIN!

H-M-TALL, DARK AND HANDSOME?

MEN, THIN GILLETTES HAND OUT SHAVES THAT ARE CLEAN, COMFORTABLE AND GOOD-LOOKING. AMONG ALL LOW-PRICED BLADES, THEY'RE THE KEENEST AND LONGEST LASTING. THIN GILLETTES ARE MADE TO FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY, TOO, THAT MEANS YOU ARE PROTECTED AGAINST SCRAPING AND IRRITATION. ALWAYS ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES

THIN Gillette BLADES 4 for 10c



BLACK MASK

VOL. XXXI, No. 1

JANUARY, 1948

K. S. WHITE, Editor

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All Stories New
No Reprints



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On Sale January 21

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LIFTING THE MARCH BLACK MASK



THE girl had probably been very pretty. It was a little difficult to tell now though—since a heavy-caliber bullet had plowed into the back of her head and made a large and anything but glamorous third eye for a wound-of-exit. *The old badger game, with homicide trimmings*, Burnett thought, stepping around the corpse, *and the loogans want no squawk, that's for sure!* But then he began to wonder if there wasn't more under the blood than met the eye—for blackmailers usually keep their noses clean so far as murder is concerned. And you'll wonder, too—from the first paragraph of H. H. STINSON'S tense novelette, *No Substitute for Murder*, to the last lead-punctuated phrase. It's a smashing tale of big-city crimeways you can't afford to miss that leads off this big MARCH issue.

* * * *

And WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT brings back Mortimer Jones, the Dusy-driving dick whose brain purrs as smoothly as the sixteen well-oiled cylinders under the hood of his vintage chariot, to solve a thrill-girl kill and cool off an electric arm-chair that was already beginning to throw off sparks for the wrong sitter. *Baby*, as he told the Duesenberg, in the same tones a cow-country copper murmurs to his horse, *it's a pretty blunt thorn we've got to stick in the flesh of the D. A. and the cops if we expect to keep Tod Nelson from falling into the big sleep, but no one can say we didn't try. So giddap, Dusy. Let's go!* The whole mess was so blood-smeared the only place he could think of to drive was Party headquarters—and then he knew he was in for a *Red Runaround* and no mistake!

* * * *

Plus gripping midnight murder mystery novelettes by DONN MULLALLY and ROBERT MARTIN and smashing short detective stories by FERGUS TRUSLOW, CURT HAMLIN and others. This great MARCH issue will be on sale January 21.

BURY ME NOT

Anna Maria Zwanziger, the passionate poisoner, was quite a gal, and McGavock was determined to follow her deadly trail—but the fact that she was executed in Bamberg, Germany, back in 1811, didn't make things any easier.

McGAVOCK was walking down South Elm when a man came out of an alley across the street, carrying a gun and a billfold. He was dressed in stiff new overalls and his hair was shaggy and flaxen in the arc-light which filtered through the dusty magnolias; before McGavock could speak, he'd thrust the pocketbook into his shirt and vanished in the shrubbery behind courtsquare. Along the cracked sidewalk the dingy smalltown shops were blank and lifeless, closed for the night.

McGavock cursed softly. In town scarcely fifteen minutes and already he was watching the tail-end of a stick-up—with his gun in his Gladstone at the hotel. He crossed the street, hard-heeled and angry, turned on his pencil flash, and entered the alleymouth.

The alley was narrow and filthy, flanked solidly on either side by moldy shopdoors. As he advanced, the beam

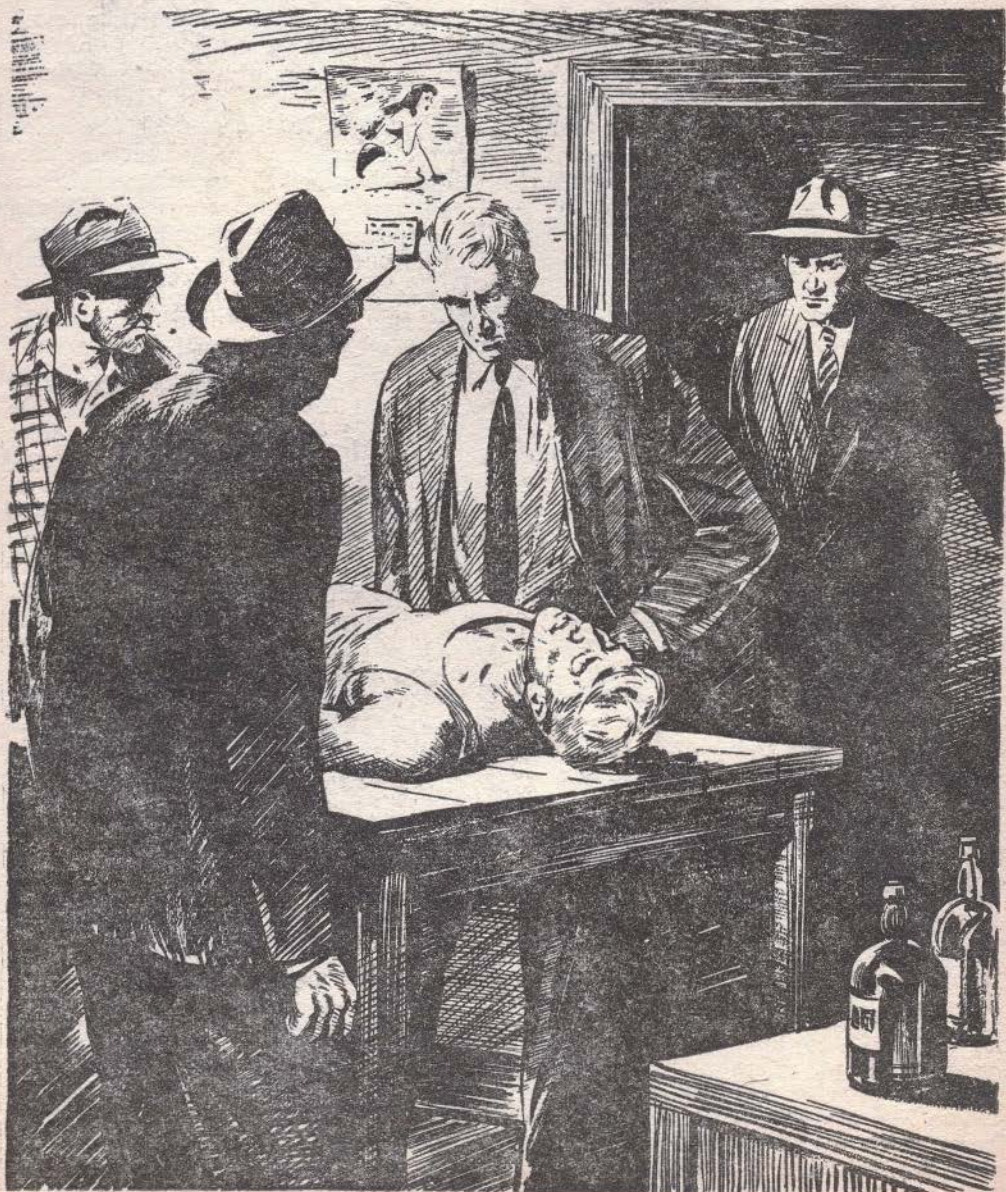


A little knot of citizens stood about a table on which lay the body of Railroad Brantner.

A Luther McGavock Novelette

By

MERLE CONSTINER



of his flash swept the rubbish and the rutted clay. After about a hundred yards he came to a little court, a dead-end. Moonlight penetrated here, silvery and nebulous, dusting the alley and the small shed which blocked it. The shed was a small blacksmith shop with a sloping sheet iron roof and a decrepit door. The door was chained. He called: "Citizen, are you hurt?"

There was no answer.

SUDDENLY the whole picture came back to him. And he didn't like it. He grasped the eaves of the shed and swung himself up onto the low roof.

The man in overalls had tucked the billfold in his shirt. A real stick-up man extracts the money, gets rid of the leather, and quick. The yellow haired man had saved it—because it was his own! The entire business was phony. A trap and a smart one.

A hot September breeze came down from the surrounding hills, sere and oppressive, and the metal of the roof was warm to McGavock's palms. For five long minutes he waited, searching the shadowed court below him; he heard no sound nor saw any movement. He inched his way to the rear of the roof, detached his penknife from his watch chain, and tossed it outward into the court. There was a tinkle as it struck a window.

Instantly, hell broke loose in the alley. Four crashing shots, hand-running, pounded the still, hot air.

McGavock dropped to the ground, found himself in a vacant lot, and came out again on Elm, a half block away. He waited in the darkened doorway of a grain and feed store. After a little, the overalled figure of the yellowhaired man appeared from the alleymouth and sauntered down the sidewalk toward Main Street. McGavock followed.

On the east side of courtsquare, just before Main bisected Elm, a huge hackberry made a canopy of dense shadow over the sidewalk. The man seemed to vanish at this point. Warily, McGavock investigated. There was no passageway

under the tree, only a small ramshackle shop with crooked, gaping clapboards and mossgrown shingles. A placard in the grimy, curtained window said:

T. J. Mapes

AUCTIONEER—BABY PHOTOGRAPHER
Attractive Rates

Without breaking his pace, he continued on to Main, made a loop of the courthouse, and returned to his original course along South Elm. When the overalled man had staged his act, he'd given McGavock a good look at him. That meant they'd expected to kill him. This business was for keeps. He didn't like any part of it. It had started off with that nutty zwanziger stuff, and now this.

He was still trembling with anger when he reached the home of his client.

The little cottage of white-painted brick sat at the end of the street, just as the hotel clerk had described. Beyond it, in the moonlight, was a silvery, rolling field and in the near distance against the blue night sky rose the black, wild hills. A block of orange light from the uncurtained parlor window fell across the cement porch, diffused itself in a porchbox of scraggly zinnias, and showed up the goodluck mule-shoe set in the cement steps. To McGavock, a student of homes and people, it seemed respectable, pleasant, and problematically prosperous. It didn't seem the sort of home whose owner would bring a detective all the way from Memphis on a whim. He knocked on the door, and waited.

The man who answered was younger than McGavock had anticipated, possibly thirty-five, and dressed in baggy flannels. His face was long-jawed and aristocratic and the irises of his blue eyes seemed embedded in wrinkled pouches of wet chamois. McGavock asked: "Mr. Tennant?"

The man nodded. McGavock said: "I'm Luther McGavock, from the Ather-ton Browne Agency. Did you send us this wire?" He made vague gestures of searching his pockets; the telegram, as

he well knew, was back in Memphis on file. Mr. Tennant said: "You mean about the zwanziger?"

"That's the baby," McGavock said coldly. "*Send best employee immediately. Believe things critical. Am convinced we have zwanziger in town. Signed, Littleton Tennant.*"

Tennant said gravely: "Come in, sir."

They went down a short hall and turned into a door at the rear. Tennant smiled modestly. "My playroom, sir, a sort of rumpus room. I live alone. Excuse it, please."

The room was small and crowded, tucked under the roof at the corner of the cottage; the ceiling sloped, following the roof-line, and everywhere there were books—stacked on the floor like pancakes, walling the room in from shelves on all sides. A green shaded student's lamp threw a disc of white light on a brokendown easy chair, leaving the upper reaches swimming in vague shadow. There were old books in a dozen kinds of leather, and new books in bright wrappers, all bookmarked with matchsticks, or merchants' bills, or paper clips. McGavock asked sternly: "Isn't this hoarding? What if they should spoil on you!"

Mr. Tennant wasn't amused. He smiled stiffly in polite response and cleared books from a bench by the wall. McGavock pivoted the gooseneck on the lampshade out of his eyes and sat down in the easy chair. He was a small man, wiry and tough, with tired, sharp lips. He was generally disliked on sight by strangers. He'd spent a lifetime in the business and had his own personal methods of getting results. He didn't like to be pushed around, and he didn't like fol-de-rol. He asked tightly: "What's a zwanziger?"

Mr. Tennant looked mildly surprised at McGavock's ignorance. "The German Brinvilliers," he said helpfully. "Executed Bamberg, September 17, 1811. Remember?" He paused. "Full name, Anna Maria Zwanziger."

"Of course," McGavock declared jocularly. "Now that you mention it. How memories get away from you! It was

a beautiful autumn afternoon and along about a quarter to three a man came through the crowd selling pretzels on a stick—" He changed the subject. "Who knew I was coming?"

"Only a few of my friends and relatives. They didn't know why I sent for you, of course—"

"Know a mean-looking fellow with high cheekbones and yellow hair? Wears overalls and carries a black billfold and a long-barrelled .38."

"About the gun and billfold, I couldn't say. The rest sounds like an unsavory native known as Railroad Brantner. If he's back in town you can find him at the Cloverleaf. That's a pig-joint down on Front Street, over the Acme Barber-shop. Why—?"

"I'm going to ask you why," McGavock retorted. "Why and what. Why did you bring me here, and what do you want me to do?"

FOR the first time, Mr. Tennant showed signs of nervousness. He seemed embarrassed. He leaned back against the wall, so that his face was in shadow, and said: "This is going to be difficult, but I'll try to get it over with. To make matters worse, I'm talking about a cousin and I have little to go on but logic and suspicion."

"And a long-barrelled .38. Let's hear it."

"I'll try to put it briefly. There's a man in town named Cushman Mapes—"

"Not T. J. Mapes, the well-known auctioneer and baby photographer?"

"No, indeed. Colonel Jimmy is his brother. They're as different as day and night. Jimmy scrapes along the best he can in that remodeled little cabin out by the trestle, and Cushman resides in that elaborate brick-and-stucco mansion just out of town on Oak Hill. Colonel Jimmy likes people, Cushman doesn't. Cushman is middle-aged, not wealthy but fairly prosperous. He's considered extremely rich, however, by local standards. No one seemed to wonder about his money, no one but me. Then I got to thinking about his peculiar housekeeper trouble."

"Housekeeper trouble? You mean he can't get housekeepers?"

"I mean he gets them, in a rather strange way, but can't hold on to them. They come from out of town, stay a few days at the most, and then leave. No one knows where they come from, no one sees them depart. They all appear to be fairly prosperous in their own right. The first came six years ago, stayed three days. The second showed up three years later; she stayed thirty-six hours. Just recently he's taken on a third, a local widow with a small income. That's why I called you."

"You mean Cousin Cushman is murdering and robbing his servants? That's a new one!"

"Not so new at that. And perhaps they weren't his housekeepers. Perhaps, actually, they were his wives!"

McGavock was thunderstruck.

"Poisoners are creepy people to have in the same town with you," Tennant said quietly. He fumbled around, produced a small brown book, weather-stained and old. "Harper and Brothers, 82 Cliff Street, 1846," he read. "Narratives of Remarkable Criminal Trials." He turned the crisp pages with the affection of a bibliophile. "Let me read you about a poisoner. Anna Maria Zwanziger . . . *Mixing and giving poison became her constant occupation, she practiced it in jest and earnest . . . with a real passion for the poison itself, without reference to the object for which it was given . . . She grew to love it . . .* That's what happens when a poisoner gets started. She had a rather impressive score, too. Sixteen known victims."

"You mean your Cousin Cushman is a male Zwanziger?"

"I don't know. Even Landru had to start in a small way, no doubt. Before it was over, he'd attracted two hundred and eighty-three women, by official count. Guillotined February 25, 1922."

"Is that so?" McGavock asked with interest. "I mean about the number of dames, not the guillotine-ending—?" He got to his feet. "Well, I'll take a look around tomorrow, and see what's what. And don't talk this over with anyone.

From here on in, give me an even break."

Outside, in the starlight, McGavock cleared his throat. "Watch yourself. And don't go down any dark alleys."

"I won't," Mr. Tennant replied amiably. "Goodnight."

The courthouse, in a grove of sparse magnolias in courtsquare, was of yellow brick, cheap and garish and harsh in the glare of the lonesome arclight; a frugal building, in a shabby town, in an impoverished county. A single light shone from a window at the rear of the ground floor. McGavock mounted the pink cement steps, his hand on the gaspipe railing, and strode down the echoing hall. The smell of sweat emanated from the plaster walls, the smell of whiskey and cut-rate cigars. He opened a door marked *OFFICE OF THE SHERIFF, Ogden F. Finney*, and entered.

The walls were immaculate in new yellow paint and the brown linoleum was scrubbed and gleaming. There was a new filing cabinet in the corner and a row of kitchen chairs just inside the door, by the window. A young man sat behind the desk taking apart and assembling a doorlock, instructing himself. He was tow-headed and slender, dressed in a quiet tropic weight gray suit, and his eyes, as he lifted them to McGavock's entry, were penetrating and thoughtful. McGavock with disbelief in his voice, asked: "Sheriff Finney?"

The slender young man nodded. McGavock introduced himself and pulled up a chair. He laid out his credentials. Sheriff Finney glanced at them, went back to his tumblers and bolts. McGavock said: "Sheriff Finney, about an hour ago a man who I've since identified as one Railroad Brantner lured me into an alley and took four shots at me. I'd never seen him before but he tried to give me the works."

Sheriff Finney laid down a tiny screwdriver. He laid it down very thoughtfully, very carefully. His pale eyes met McGavock's. He said: "Thank you, sir. I'll take care of it." The way he said it froze the blood in McGavock's veins.

After a moment, Sheriff Finney explained. "My father, the sheriff, died in

office. I've been appointed to fill his unexpired term. I'm trying to do the job the way he'd like it done." He smiled mildly. "I'm trying to discourage law-breaking."

McGavock gave him a long, hard stare. He said respectfully: "Well, son, you'd discourage me, if I was a law-breaker." He paused, asked: "Will you trust me, Sheriff?"

"Yes." He said it quietly, carelessly, without reservation. Sheriff Finney formed steel-spring judgments.

Painstakingly, and in detail, McGavock brought him up to date on the case. Sheriff Finney made no comment, he seemed hardly to listen. At last, McGavock asked: "What do you know about this Cushman Mapes?"

"Not too much." Sheriff Finney frowned slightly. "Ever since I was a kid I've known him as a man who stayed pretty close to home. I don't imagine he'd ever had any publicity at all if it hadn't been for that picture."

"Publicity? What picture?"

"About six years or so ago he went to Nashville and had a portrait of himself painted by a retired art teacher. It cost him seventy-five dollars, I hear. He's always fancied himself as an old-style Southern gentleman, and told the painter just how he wanted it done. It was fixed up to suit him, linen suit and shoestring tie and all, standing before an imaginary white-pillared old-style mansion, feeding a racehorse. All made up out of his head. The painting itself was godawful and childish but some newspaper caught scent of it and published a reproduction of it. Called it an American primitive. Then other papers began to carry it—"

"And then he got letters from women? Letters of proposal?"

"Possibly. There's no way now of our ever finding out."

McGavock arose and picked up his hat. "There's something pretty devilish going on in this sleepy little town, Sheriff. Will you do me a favor?"

"Yes, Luther." Sheriff Finney nodded almost imperceptibly. "Anything in reason, of course."

"First, keep this under your hat.

Second, pick up Railroad Brantner. Right now."

"I intend to, Luther."

"Wait a minute. I want it done a certain way. Pick him up with yourself and at least two deputies. Search him. You'll find a long-barrelled .38 on him. Pass it around among you, so each of you boys has a look at it, and then hand it back to him—"

"Hand it back?"

"That's right. Hand it back and say, 'There you are, Railroad, you're armed. If anything happens to you, it's all fair and square. You're armed.' Then laugh and walk away."

At the door, McGavock said: "Good-night, Ogden."

Sheriff Finney said: "Ogden was my father. I'm Ira." He smiled. "Good-night, Luther."

THE cabin was at the edge of town, as Mr. Tennant had said, just beyond the trestle. A small, trim four-room building with a field-stone chimney. Moonlight dusted its barked cedar logs to dove gray and an ancient trumpetvine, lush and tropical, arched the small dog-run porch. The building had been re-chinked, and re-roofed, and new porchboards had been laid, but it lay in a hollow hedged in by sumach and saplings, cozy enough but a little too fetid for McGavock's taste. Sagging telephone-wires ran to it through branches of surrounding trees, and marsh ferns grew beside the doorstep.

A small brunette answered McGavock's knock and invited him in. She was dressed in a navy flannel skirt, and white blouse, and wore flat-soled hide sandals. To the naked eye she was as sweet as a stick of peppermint candy but there was something about her that warned McGavock that he was in for trouble. She placed McGavock on a studio couch, seated herself across from him, and said: "I'm Cindy Mapes, the Colonel's wife. The Colonel's out in town somewhere. You're Mr. McGavock, the gentleman Mr. Tennant just mentioned over the phone. Can I do anything for you?"

The room wasn't too unpleasant, if you went in for pioneer effects. There was a big stone fireplace with a squirrel rifle above it, a kerosene lamp, painted with violets and roses, with an electric bulb, and bright rag rugs on the sanded floor. The furniture was antique, but rough: hickory rockers and ladderback chairs, and their kith and kin. McGavock imagined that Colonel Mapes had picked up most of the stuff at farm sales in his capacity of auctioneer. There were no baby photographs.

Mrs. Mapes, McGavock judged, was maybe thirty-two. She folded her arms decorously and waited. In the closeness of the hot autumn night she seemed all powder and perfume and starch. After an interval, she smiled. "Well," she said in a husky voice. "You made a long trip, all the way from Memphis, for nothing at all, didn't you?"

McGavock rested his back against the chair; he was tired and, surprisingly, the hard slats were comfortable. He cocked his eyebrow, said: "How so, Mrs. Mapes?"

"Coming here on Littleton Tennant's hallucination. He's a dear boy, and we love him, but if it isn't one thing with him it's another. He's great fun to be around but he's, well, trying on the nerves."

"He's educational. Did you know that Landru, the French bluebeard, had two hundred and eighty-three gals in love with him?"

Mrs. Mapes looked annoyed. "No, and I'm not interested. The whole thing's preposterous—!"

"What about these housekeepers? Where were they from, and what were their names?"

"I don't know."

"You mean you won't tell?"

"I mean nobody knows but Cushman. Especially us. The Colonel and his brother aren't too intimate, friendly, but not intimate. I've never been inside Cushman's house. The first one I just saw from a distance. A lovely little white-haired woman, picking flowers in Cushman's garden. The second, I just know from her general effects. The third

is Mrs. Kirkland, a local woman. I know her, of course."

"Mrs. Kirkland rich?"

"Oh, I wouldn't say so. She's a bit of a recluse and no one knows too much about her. Not rich, but comfortably well off, I should imagine."

"You say you just knew the second one by her personal effects. What in the world do you mean by that?"

"By her bric-a-brac. Sewing cabinet, vases, a few chairs and so on. You know, small furniture. I was on hand when my husband auctioned it off."

McGavock blinked. "For goodness sakes! Let's take this a little slower. You say Cushman turned over this stuff to your husband to sell? Did Cushman hold title to it?"

"It's nothing to get excited about." Mrs. Mapes spoke primly. "Here is the situation. Cushman is secretly very sensitive on the subject of his housekeepers leaving him. People began to think he was hard to get long with. The stuff was unpleasant to him, and, too, Mrs. Kirkland didn't like to see it around, so he lumped it all together and had my husband dispose of it. It had been around for years and he was pretty certain it would never be reclaimed. Personally, I think the idea was a very sensible one."

"Who bought this stuff?"

"Small furniture and bric-a-brac is generally sold in lots. My husband can tell you, I believe he keeps records."

McGavock shook his head, and got to his feet. "This is a wonderful town," he said affably, "—and full of wonderful people. Just one thing more. What was your husband's reaction, and yours, when Brother Cushman came out of his cocoon, after the last three years, and brought Mrs. Kirkland into his bachelor household. Did it seem like old times?"

At the door, she said: "To tell the truth, we were greatly relieved. It should completely disprove Littleton Tennant's wild nightmares. Mrs. Kirkland is a well-known, local woman. There'll be no nonsense about a mysterious disappearance here. If she leaves, she'll simply pack up and go home."

McGavock put on his hat, pressed it carefully to his head with the flat of his hand. He said: "We hope."

IT WAS a quarter to twelve when McGavock passed through the deserted business section and turned down Front. The buildings here were decrepit almost beyond description, two story structures for the most part, rickety and long neglected by their owners. There was no paving here, only a red clay road, and in the faint moonlight walking was precarious. In the murky illumination, along the row of sordid shop windows, McGavock made out the lettering, *ACME BARBERSHOP*, and sensed rather than saw the black entrance of a stairway beside it. He mounted creaking steps and came out into a dank, empty hall. A feeble, fly-specked bulb showed him lettering on a blistered door panel: *THE CLOVER-LEAF RESTAURANT*. He twisted the old brass doorknob and entered.

The room was small. In years gone by, it had once been an office. A milking lantern was set on a short counter and McGavock could see a half dozen homemade tables, covered with oilcloth, and beyond, high arched windows, once elaborate in magnificent molding, now like huge black mirrors in battered frames. The stained walls were covered with ancient farm sale bills and employment circulars from Northern factories. A greasy fat man in a dirty apron came through a door at the rear; he gave McGavock a long, hostile stare, and came grudgingly forward. He said: "We'uns is jest fixin' to close."

McGavock said: "Two pig sandwiches, light on the hot sauce but heavy on the slaw, and two bottles of home brew."

"You mean beer," the counterman said helpfully. "Hit's agin the law fer the laity to make hit's own brew sinst prohibition was takened off." He sounded sadly nostalgic. "Anythin' else?"

"Yes," McGavock said pleasantly. "I'm the man that Railroad Brantner was taking potshots at earlier in the evening. Tell him he's in a tight spot, but I can fix it up for him."

The counterman froze. At last he said: "I don't rarely see him to talk to him to his face, but I'll put the word around." He left the room and came back shortly with the food and a pitcher of beer. Instantly, he left McGavock alone.

The beer was lukewarm but high voltage and the pork, as he'd expected, was perfect. He'd half finished his sandwiches when the kitchen door opened and a man in overalls, with pale yellow hair, entered the room and pulled out a chair beside him. He said hastily: "I'm unarmed."

Railroad Brantner was a type very familiar to McGavock. The habitual smalltown criminal. Vicious, puffy-faced, sly. Now, he was plenty scared. He said: "Mr. McGavock, I wasn't tryin' to hurt you, in that alley. I was jest a-tryin' to prank you, to make a little noise and run you outa town."

McGavock said softly: "I ought to break a chair over your head. Right now."

Brantner said: "This is my town, Mr. McGavock. I come an' go, but I like it. I was borned and raised here. Now, unless you fix it up, I'm a-goin' to have to leave. The law's got some kinda plan up hit's sleeve to knock me off. They been actin' mighty, mighty funny. They searched me, give me back my gun and said fer me to remember I was armed should anything happen to me. That ain't no way fer the law to act!"

McGavock looked bored. Leisurely he finished his sandwich, and the beer. "Who hired you?"

Brantner took an envelope from the bib of his overalls. "I don't know much more about it than you do. Ever' day, fer the last few days I been gittin' a five dollar bill in the mail. Not a word o' writin' along with it. Somehow I got to a-lookin' forward to it. Well, this morning they was a ten dollar bill an' a letter."

McGavock drew out a sheet of paper and unfolded it. It said: "*Man named McGavock due on eleven-ten tonight. Give him the works. Fifty dollars in mail tomorrow.*"

The words were printed, in neat symmetrical letters, and each individual letter was composed of broken lines and dots. "He's printed it in pencil over a screen, like a door screen," McGavock decided. "He's one smart baby. He's made it impossible for any handwriting expert in the world to analyze the pressure of his strokes."

"That's all," the overalled man said grimly. "I figgered his credit was all right with me so I follered you from the train to the hotel, an' from the hotel to the alley—where we had our mixup. That's all."

McGavock pushed back his chair, laid change on the table. "If you hear from him again—which will be a miracle—look me up."

Brantner began to fawn. "I will, Mr. McGavock. You kin trust me, Mr. McGavock. An' tell that crazy sheriff I'm a-helpin' you out!"

The lobby of the hotel was dark but for the minuscule bedside lamp which burned bluely on the big, yellow varnished desk. It was as squalid a joint as McGavock had ever stayed at, and you run into some weird hostelries, he reflected, touring small southern towns. He wove his way through wicker, mail-order furniture, across the fibre rug. To the left of the newelpost was an old zinc water-cooler, a shelf of chipped water pitchers and barrel-shaped tumblers. He filled a pitcher, picked up a tumbler, in the self-serve style of the establishment, and climbed the stairs. He was angry and confused and out on his feet with weariness.

His room was at the front of the hall, to the right of the stairwell. It was shaped like an orange crate stood up on its end, about eight feet square and twelve feet high; the walls were papered with a pattern of brown bamboo shoots and green parrots. The September heat came in waves through the open window, from the metal and tarpaper roofs across the street, from the dark street below.

He placed the pitcher of ice-water on the table, took his revolver from his Gladstone and thrust it under his pillow.

He then stripped, slipped on a terrycloth robe, gathered up his pajamas under his arm, took soap and towels, and stepped out into the hall.

The bathroom was at the end of the corridor. He bolted the door, turned on the water and climbed into the claw-footed tub. The water was as cool as spring-water and after his bath he felt better. He reviewed the case three times carefully in his mind and all he could boil it down to was that someone wanted him out of the picture and had tried to kill him. Railroad Brantner had lied. That letter hand said—"give him the works"—and that was exactly what Brantner had tried to do.

Back in his room, he reached for the pitcher and tumbler—and then he noticed something. The water in the pitcher was half gone. Someone had swigged half of his ice-water while he was bathing.

He locked his door and put a chair under the knob. He went to the towel-rack, took down a large turkish towel and stuffed it into the pitcher. When it had absorbed the remaining water, he hung it wet and dripping on the rack with its fellows.

For a long moment he stood in the center of the room, rubbing the stubble on his chin. Finally, he climbed into bed.

He'd just had his second escape from death, and a close one it was. The water was poisoned, of course, and half of it had been removed to increase the poison's potency.

Sleep came hard. He kept thinking about Landru and his girl friends.

CHAPTER TWO

Water, Air, Earth, and Fire

THE courthouse clock, striking nine against his hotel window, awoke McGavock to a gray morning of sullen clouds and clean, cool mist. He caught a quick breakfast at a corner lunchroom and left his towel with an elderly druggist on a backstreet who promised to make a solution and analy-

sis. There was the promise of rain in the air and Main Street was deserted but for a few stragglers, hillmen in from the uplands and house-wives, in print dresses and carrying woven baskets, bent on their day's marketing. It was the kind of a day he liked; the colors were deep and soft and pleasant in the moist air, sidewalks shone like slate and the trees along the curb were beaded and dripping. He turned from Main onto Center and went out Center to Oak Lane.

Oak Lane circled Oak Hill and Cushman Mapes' big brick-and-stucco mansion was the first residence out of town.

He could see it through the tree boles, a huge cumbersome hulk on the hillside, with its gables and latticed trelliswork. Stucco was peeling from its face and rambler roses climbed the gingerbread scrollwork of the front porch, making a curtain between the occupants and the street. The grass in the yard was uncut; the place looked completely abandoned.

A little spray of rain rattled like buckshot through the dry oak leaves and splattered against the floorboards of the broad porch as McGavock yanked the T-shaped brass doorknob. He heard the sound of footsteps from within, echoing in a cavernous hall, and the door opened. To his surprise his summons was answered by two persons, not one, and they stood in the doorway, shoulder to shoulder. He realized instantly that he was being confronted by the entire household, by Mr. Cushman Mapes, himself, and by his housekeeper, Mrs. Kirkland.

Cushman Mapes was in his middle-sixties, slender and pale. He wore a black suit and Congress gaiters. His hair and eyebrows and imperial were snow white. A man doesn't wear a little goatee like that, McGavock reflected, without spending a good many hours before the mirror trimming it. He seemed actually relieved at the sight of McGavock; he said calmly: "Mr. McGavock, huh? The gentleman from Memphis? Step inside, please, we'd like a little talk with you."

Mrs. Kirkland smiled. First at Mc-

Gavock, and then at Cushman Mapes. She was a drab little woman with tousled gray hair; her bright little eyes were cheerful and inquiring and her spotted hands were hard calloused from years of work. She said shyly: "Oh, Cushman. There's no need—"

McGavock said: "The next time I come to town, I'll wear a disguise and bring a pair of clippers, good strong ones for telephone wires."

McGavock followed them into a bare, dim hall, past big panelled doors with china knobs, parlor, library, dining room, into a small music room.

If this was a sample of the rest of the mansion, McGavock didn't wonder that Cushman Mapes had difficulty in retaining female assistance. Light filtered grayly through the rosebushes which tangled the big bow window. A vase of wax flowers sat on an ancient piano. There were a few red plush chairs, mildewed and decrepit, a battered fireplace, and a Victorian rolltop desk. The place reeked with long imprisoned staleness and the green carpet on the floor was literally rotting to tatters and shreds. When everyone was uncomfortably seated, Cushman Mapes fiddled a moment with his goatee, said: "For some time there have been unpleasant rumors circulating about me. I understand you've come to town to prove, or disprove them. Right, huh?"

"Right, huh." McGavock nodded.

Mrs. Kirkland's dry, wrinkled face creased in a placid smile. She said: "I've heard those rumors, too, but I've got horse sense. I've always said it was a cryin' shame the way respectable folks scare themselves with crazy gossip."

Cushman Mapes leaned slightly forward and the chair springs creaked rustily. "At this time particularly, I'd like these vaporings exposed. I'd like the blackguard who has been slandering me identified. Mrs. Kirkland finds herself in an embarrassing situation among her friends. Everyone warning her, everyone whispering stories to her. Fortunately, she's a woman with a mind of her own! We'll be glad to co-operate, huh?"

"Fine!" McGavock exclaimed. "We'll

start off by prying into your past. Where did these gals come from?"

"Miss Leggett, the first, came from Little Rock, no street address, and Mrs. Dalton from Corinth, Mississippi. That's all I know, that's all I had time to find out. Once, through, well, curiosity I tried to trace Mrs. Dalton. With no results."

"They came and went, zippo, like that, eh?"

Cushman Mapes flushed. "Like that, suh. I'm not too hard to get along with. And I provide an excellent table."

Mrs. Kirkland put in a genial word. "He takes it too much to himself. I think they just got homesick. Some girls away from home get homesick, they say."

"I think they were scared of something," Cushman Mapes said quietly. "Each of them, Miss Leggett and Mrs. Dalton, just packed a few things in their pocketbooks and pulled out during the night."

"And left their furniture?"

"A few small things, yes."

"How did you happen to bring in out-of-towners?"

Mr. Cushman Mapes cleared his throat. "It's a long story, and I'm not sure it would interest you. However, about six or so years ago I had a painting of myself published in various newspapers. The news stories gave the idea that I was landed and very wealthy. I got a flood of letters, from women seeking marriage, and from women seeking employment. Foolishly, to while away the tedium of a bachelor, I answered some of these letters. Miss Leggett wrote me, rather ardently, from a general delivery address in Little Rock, and later, Mrs. Dalton likewise from Corinth. There was nothing unusual about this, many of my correspondents used general delivery addresses."

"They didn't take anything, when they left?"

"Of course not."

MRS. KIRKLAND walked to the desk and lifted its rolltop. The pigeonholes were literally jammed with yellowing letters. Mc-

Gavock sauntered over and leafed casually through them. These were the real thing, all right. Good old nutty crackpot letters. From female admirers all over the country, to Mr. Cushman Mapes. Begging letters, letters of proposal, letters asking for employment. Mrs. Kirkland said primly: "I'm goin' through 'em myself. I'm as far as that second pigeon-hole, yonder. It's company for me when I ain't busy. I swear an' declare, I'm gettin' to feel like I knowed all them sweet-natured ladies!"

Suddenly, McGavock asked: "What's this thing?"

From under a batch of envelopes he drew forth what he first thought to be a fisherman's float. An egg-shaped ball of balsa wood with a spindle running through it. The balsa center was about as large as a good sized hen egg, and the spindle, which struck out about three inches on each side, was a rod of tough hickory. He began to wonder. Attached to each end of the spindle was a rawhide bootlace. He raised his eyebrows.

"A fishing bobber," Mrs. Kirkland explained. "I found it out in the woodshed the other day."

"I can't figure how it got here," Cushman Mapes remarked. "Neither myself nor Mrs. Kirkland fish."

McGavock thrust it in his breast pocket. He'd never seen anything like it, had no idea what it was, but something told him to hang on to it. The light in the room had for some time been growing dimmer and he realized that soft, velvety rain was beating against the windows. The walnut wainscoting melted into shadow, and the piano and chairs and desk. The figures before him, too, blended into the dusk, little more than white hands and faces. He picked up his hat and they showed him to the door.

On the front porch, Mr. Cushman Mapes said: "I'll be deeply indebted to you, suh, if you can clear this business up." He paused. "This means more to me than my friends and relatives know. I'm going to ask you to keep this confidential—Mrs. Kirkland has almost consented to be my wife!"

Mrs. Kirkland said coyly: "If I don't

take a trip to Floridy first! I got a little travel folder in the mail yestiddy and I'd sure relish a trip to the beautiful scenery it tells all about!"

McGavock said: "Well, let me know before you leave," turned up his coat collar, and walked down the porchsteps, out into the drizzle.

He made a special effort not to look back over his shoulder.

McGavock made three visits to the auctioneer and photographer shop of Colonel Jimmy Mapes, and each time the proprietor was out. The Colonel, McGavock learned on inquiry in town, was an in-and-outer, a man of great activity but little business. There was a wooden washbench before the shop, under the tree by the curb, and McGavock at last settled down to wait. The rain had ceased but black clouds still hung heavy and curdled over the roof of the courthouse; the leaves of the magnolias on the square rattled and clattered in the breeze. About a quarter to four McGavock heard hoofbeats and glanced up the red clay road which was Elm Street.

A man and horse came down South Elm. The horse was moving in a sweet rhythm which had once been called, in days long gone, "a nodding fox trot"—now it was called a "running walk." He knew he was watching the gentlest riding beast in the world, a Tennessee Walking Horse. It came up to the hitching rail, neck curved, keeping time to the rhythm of its hoofbeats by a clicking of its teeth. It was a moving and beautiful sight. The rider swung to the ground, tied his mount, and came forward.

He was a portly man, about forty, plump cheeked and black haired, dressed in fine blue gabardine. He wore a broad brimmed black hat and his eyes were squinted and bleary with a nearsighted vagueness about them. McGavock introduced himself. Colonel Jimmy stared at him noncommittally, said: "Oh, yes. I've been hearing about you. Come in and have a drink."

There was an undertone of unfriendliness in the Colonel's voice. McGavock realized that it was put there intentionally, and deliberately half displayed, half

obscured. The shop door was unlocked and as they entered McGavock said, off hand: "Don't you ever lock up?"

"Never. Night or day. Countryfolks like to duck in off of the street when they're in town and use it as a sort of public waitingroom."

They passed through a small parlor, with an imitation leather couch and several shabby chairs. McGavock said: "I was tailing a guy named Railroad Brantner down Elm last night, and he turned in here."

Colonel Jimmy Mapes took it under advisement; after a moment he said: "I'll have to speak to him about it. I can't have Railroad sleeping in here at night, he's disreputable."

Colonel Mapes' private office was little more than a cubbyhole. It contained a golden oak desk, a filing cabinet stacked with dog-eared ledgers, and a calendar on the wall depicting a moose in a forest. A fancy shotgun stood in the corner and bridles and riding crops hung from nails on the door. Cracks branched the old plaster and the floor was bare and dirty. McGavock seated himself on a broken-down corsetback chair and Colonel Jimmy produced a bottle of red whiskey and two glasses.

"I wish to make my position very clear," Colonel Jimmy Mapes said at last. "If your client, young Tennant, wasn't a well-known local eccentric I'd consider his action in bringing you to town to be extremely precarious to himself. There are courts for slander, you know, suh. As I was just telling my brother Cushman—"

"You just came from there?"

"Yes. We love each other dearly but we've never been, well, too close socially. But in times like this, the Mapes stick together. He seems to welcome an investigation, however I wanted to make my position clear to him and to offer any help that I might—"

"But he's the one that has the money, isn't he?"

"I consider that remark offensive, suh." Colonel Jimmy's face lit up to apoplectic red and his jowls shook with suppressed rage.

MCGAVOCK felt better. He changed the subject. "Your wife was telling me that after the two housekeepers, Miss Leggett and Mrs. Dalton, departed, Brother Cushman turned their personal effects, and small furniture, over to you and you peddled it. I want to know who owns that stuff now."

Colonel Jimmy Mapes said: "I was only the agent. It was all perfectly regular. Cushman gave me the commission and I actuated it. He'd kept the stuff around until he was tired looking at it and then turned it over to me to dispose of. Cushman had taken out a very small insurance policy on the stuff, to protect it as time went by, and I considered the policy as title to the goods. It proved legally that he owned the stuff, you see. You can't insure chattels or anything else if they don't belong to you. Therefore an insurance policy is proof of ownership."

McGavock laughed. "That's what the courts call self service. Baloney. Ownership of a house, or car, is easier to establish, that I grant you, but a policy isn't a deed—and you know it as well as I do."

"It vindicates me," Colonel Mapes said carefully, "in case there is trouble. I just thought I'd make the point."

"And puts the blame on Brother Cushman, whom you love dearly. Well, who bought this stuff, and what was it?"

"Now let's see." Colonel Jimmy frowned and took down a ledger. "That was last May, just after Mrs. Kirkland came to work for Cushman. I took it out to a farm sale I was having on Purtle Pike, and pushed it with the farm goods." He leafed through the pages. "Here we are. I made it up into three lots. A bedstead, a set of dining room chairs, a trunk and a sewing cabinet."

"Do housekeepers hereabouts bring their own bedsteads? Who bought the trunk and sewing cabinet?"

"The bedstead, chairs, and sewing cabinet belonged, as I understand, to Mrs. Dalton. She'd shipped her furniture without saying anything about it. It came a day after she'd left. Cushman

had no alternative but to take it in and keep it until called for. It was never called for, of course. Who bought the trunk and sewing cabinet? Here we are. A hillman out beyond Shellbark Chapel, on Powder Ridge. A man named Francy Scoggins." He closed the book and made a little gesture to show that the interview was closed. "Glad to be of help, suh. I guess that fixes you up, eh?"

McGavock nodded and arose. As he picked up his hat, he asked intimately: "What's your theory on this? You must have given it a good deal of thought yourself. I like to know just how you figure—?"

Colonel Jimmy Mapes looked completely frustrated. Honesty seemed to creep into his voice. He said: "You're damned right I've given it a bit of thought. I've poked around a bit and asked a few questions, too. But I didn't get far. There's a long-haul Jackson bus that comes through here at three in the morning. Cushman says they left at night, so I figure they caught that bus. By the time I got interested the trail was too cold, five years for Miss Leggett and two for Mrs. Dalton."

"Nothing at all, then?"

"Nothing at all. Except distress for Cushman. He's my only brother and my wife and I feel sorry for him living alone, a bachelor, in that big old house. We're glad now that Mrs. Kirkland has come. Things'll be a little more cheerful around there now."

McGavock nodded absently. He waved goodbye with a waggle of his hand and went out onto the street. He wanted to make a report to his client. And he wanted to ask his client a question.

Mr. Littleton Tennant, dressed singlet, dirty ducks, and tennis shoes was in the side yard of his little whitepainted brick cottage, setting mole traps. His long, patrician face was pale and scholarly in the fading light and McGavock noticed with interest that he seemed quite capable with his hands. His pensive eyes lit up genially at the sight of McGavock and he asked: "Any news?"

"Plenty," McGavock said wryly. "Let's go inside."

Seated once more in the turbulent, book-filled study McGavock relaxed beneath the gooseneck lamp, in the easy chair.

After a moment he drew out from his pocket the balsawood gadget. "Take a look at this," he said. "What do you make of it?"

Tennant took it from his fingers. "A balsa center, about the size and shape of an egg, a hickory spindle through it. It looks like a fisherman's float."

"It does, in a way," McGavock said mildly. "But for those rawhide shoe laces tied to the spindle-ends. And why a tough hickory spindle, why not a light balsa spindle?"

Suddenly Tennant's jaw dropped. "Now I recognize it, McGavock!"

He reached into a stack of books, brought out a big green volume. "*Our Police Protectors*," he said. "Augustin Costello. Published by the author, New York, 1885. Here we are, page 422. Take a look at this." The picture was titled *A Burglar's Outfit*, and showed the various tools contained in an old-fashioned cracksman's kit. Tennant's finger pointed to an object exactly like that which lay on the table before him.

The object was Number One in the kit. It was marked *Gag*.

"A gag," Tennant said. "An old-style gag. The history of gags is very interesting, by the way. Every housebreaker always carried a gag such as that. Charlie Peace, the English portico thief, always had one with him, for instance. In the eighteenth century, a hundred years before Peace, gags were this same shape, and generally made of ivory. Where did you get it?"

"Mrs. Kirkland found it in the woodshed."

Tennant thought this over. "This complicates matters, doesn't it? Pretty obviously someone was planning to break into Cushman Mapes' home. You get the significance, don't you?" He waited a moment. "No one but a stranger would dare to use a gag. If your next door neighbor robs you, and gags you, to keep you from yelling, then when the gag's removed you promptly identify

him to the police. Can you figure it out?"

McGavock turned his gaze from the ugly looking object before him. "No," he said slowly. "But your reasoning's wrong someplace. There's no stranger involved in this." After a moment, he told his client about the two housekeepers, and the furniture which had been sold.

TENNANT pondered. "You've really been learning things, haven't you?" McGavock could almost hear the wheels clicking in his head. "Well, bless my heart. Now we're getting someplace. If this doesn't prove my theory about Cushman, it certainly partially confirms the crime pattern. Landru stole furniture and clothes from his victims. And you know about Dumollard, don't you?"

"I can't say I do. But I'm always glad to learn."

"Dumollard, like Landru and Cushman, murdered women for what money he could salvage, and for their personal effects. This is almost unbelievable but it's the gospel truth: when he was arrested they found one thousand two hundred and fifty articles of feminine attire in his dwelling. No one knows how many he killed, they could only pin nine actual murders on him. Executed Lyons, January 20, 1862."

McGavock was speechless.

Tennant said: "Cushman killed them all right. The trick is to find the bodies. Medieval scientists divided the world into four elements, water, air, fire, and earth. That covers a pretty big field of disposal."

McGavock said: "Colonel Mapes thinks there's a fifth element of disposal: bus tickets."

"Nonsense!" Tennant shook his head. "We'll find Miss Leggett and Mrs. Dalton right here in town. Dead!"

At the door, Mr. Tennant had a farewell injunction. "Murderers are smart, but very vain. John Paul Forster, the brutal bludgeoner, considered himself quite a personage. While in the fortress prison at Lichtenau, he polished his

chains until they shone like sterling silver."

McGavock put on his hat. "Executed—?"

"Died in prison."

McGavock said: "Oh."

A deputy at the sheriff's office told McGavock that he was mighty glad to see him. That Sheriff Ira had been searching for him. "He's been a-lookin' for you more ways than a skunk kin go into a henhouse fer eggs. He's at Hottman's Hardware Store, in the back room," the deputy said. "If you hain't busy, would you drop in on him, he wonders."

The backroom of Hottman's Hardware Store was the local embalming shop and a small group was assembled when McGavock arrived. It was a large, gloomy storeroom, smelling of machine oil and leather. A little knot of citizens, including Sheriff Ira, stood about a table on which lay the body of Railroad Brantner. His overalls, shoes, shirt, and billfold lay in neat piles on a packingbox. There was no wound on the body; Brantner's face, beneath its coarse topping of yellow hair, seemed relaxed and peaceful.

"Alcoholism," Sheriff Ira Finney explained. "Drink finally got him. Some kids found him about a hour ago, with his fruit jar, under the loading platform of the cotton compress, out on South Jackson Street." He pointed to the pocketbook. "And he was carrying fifty dollars in cash."

McGavock said: "Sheriff, may I see you a minute, alone? In the office? I want to make a phone call—"

Alone in the little office, Sheriff Ira looked inquiringly at McGavock, seated himself on a canebottomed chair. McGavock picked up the telephone and asked for the Owl Drugstore. "Mr. Marshall?" he asked. "This is Mr. McGavock. Did you make that analysis on my turkish towel yet? Swell. Barbiturate, eh? No, I'll tell the sheriff myself. He's right here with me."

Slowly, he replaced the receiver. "We've got a real killer on our hands, Sheriff," he said. "Order a test and you'll find Brantner was doped with poison,

whiskey loaded with barbiturate. An attempt was made on me with the same stuff last night."

The slender young sheriff listened silently. McGavock said: "Someone hired Brantner to shoot me on my arrival in town. He, or she, hired him by writing him a disguised note. This note promised fifty dollars to come. It was written through a piece of screen, was therefore conspicuous to mail at a country post-office. It was one of a series of notes to Brantner. He wondered how they were sent and finally figured out the answer. They were mailed late at night, in the mailbox before the post office. His curiosity and greed got the best of him. Last night he waited on the chance that the person should show up again. The person did."

Sheriff Ira made no comment.

"The employer showed up, Brantner accosted him, and the employer handed him the envelope containing the payoff money. There was no doubt a note enclosed to lure Brantner into just such a situation. Brantner was given his fifty dollars, a pat on the back, and a bottle of doped whiskey. That's all, brother."

Sheriff Ira asked carefully: "Why should anyone want to have you killed, why should—?"

"We'll find out. To tell you the truth I haven't the slightest idea to date. But I'll bet we'll know by tomorrow night. This case is a heller, and I'm not kidding! Do you know a hillman named Francy Scoggins, out on Powder Ridge?"

Sheriff Ira nodded.

McGavock asked: "Can you drive me out to his place tomorrow morning? Say about ten o'clock?"

Sheriff Ira nodded again.

McGavock said to himself: *I'd better be right. This baby is one tough sheriff.*

CHAPTER THREE

Near-Sighted Mrs. Scoggins

THE moon had climbed behind a reef of clouds and the big brick and stucco house was vague and black beneath the wet trees of Oak Hill

that night when McGavock returned to Cushman Mapes'. There was a time for everything and this, he decided, would be a good time to take a look at the famous portrait which had apparently started all this business. The huge old house was dark but for a weak yellow light which beat against the rose bushes by the kitchen window. The luminous hands on his wristwatch said ninety-two. His footsteps sounded hollow and bodiless as he crossed the rotting floorboards of the porch and rang the bell. Mrs. Kirkland, with a lamp in her hand, answered; she said: "W'y, it's Mr. McGavock! Mr. Cushman isn't at home. He's at lodge tonight. I'm dreadful sorry—"

"I'd like to take a gander at that portrait," McGavock declared politely. "It won't take a moment. You know, the picture that started all this—"

She smiled. He stepped into the cavernous hall and she led him into a great, dank parlor. She set her lamp on a marbled table. There were electric lights in this house but evidently they weren't much used. McGavock stared about him. It was a creepy house, and this was a creepy room. Here, too, as in the music room, there were gilt chairs, their red plush blotched and moth-eaten. On the mantel was a row of conch shells and a vase of cattails. Yellow varnished inside shutters were closed and latched over the windows, catching the light of the lamp, cutting out all thought and image of the world beyond. The portrait hung in an alcove,

above a rickety, red plush loveseat. McGavock approached it, took out his flashlight to increase the light, and examined it.

To McGavock's eyes, it was rather childishly done. He could well see how the newspapers had called it a "primitive." Cushman Mapes, looking like a millionaire landowner, the cream of old Dixie, dressed in a white linen suit and shoestring tie was standing in the foreground, feeding a spindly-legged race-horse; in the background was an imaginary super-elegant old-style Southern mansion, pillars and all, big enough to house the Confederate army. Down in the corner was the artist's signature in fancy curlicue letters, M. Dubois. Everything was flat, and out of proportion, and lifeless—but somehow there was an air of luxury and magnificence about it. McGavock asked incredulously: "You say this fellow Dubois is an art teacher?"

"Taught in the public schools, up to the sixth grade," Mrs. Kirkland announced proudly. "Could paint a masterpiece, they tell me, as quick as I could mix up a batch of biscuit dough!"

"We're gifted in different ways," McGavock said kindly. "Don't let it get you down."

There was an interval in which neither of them spoke. Silence filled the ancient mansion and McGavock, in his mind's eye, could visualize the tiers of empty rooms, upstairs and downstairs, the long, dark halls musty with Victorian memories. Mrs. Kirkland, frail and withered



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and bright-eyed, seemed almost spectral in the encircling shadows. Her eyes stared rigidly into his.

Finally, she spoke: "Mr. McGavock, I knowed 'em, both of 'em. That Miss Leggett from Little Rock, and that Mrs. Dalton from Mississippi."

He blinked.

"My little cottage is just down the hill, beyond the hedge," she said softly. "Both of 'em, each in her turn, seen me in my kitchen and come in and talked to me. Miss Leggett was a chubby little woman about my age but Mrs. Dalton was skinny and old and half blind. Later, after they left, Cushman give me Mrs. Dalton's suitcase, with some of her clothes. He kept 'em a year and she didn't come back so he gave them to me. Mrs. Dalton was skinny, like I am, but taller. I didn't have no trouble in cutting them down to fit. I didn't like the idea, but Cushman talked me into it." She hesitated. "I got money of my own, I wasn't starving, but they wasn't no real sense in throwin' them away."

McGavock was listening now, listening for Brother Cushman's returning steps on the front porch. He asked: "What did Miss Leggett and Mrs. Dalton talk about when they visited you in your kitchen?"

Fear crept into her eyes. "Well, they talked some of Cushman, and how wonderful-good he was to 'em. About how they seen his picture in the paper and wrote him and finally got off the train with their furniture and all, as a surprise to him. And how they talked him into hirin' them as housekeepers. Later, they talked of those telephone calls."

"Telephone calls?"

"Yes, Mr. McGavock. Each of 'em got a telephone call while Cushman was out of the house. A voice over the phone told them to get out of town, and quick."

"So they pulled out in the dead of night, leaving their possessions? I don't believe it."

They could hear a man walking up the driveway now. Cushman was returning from lodge. Mrs. Kirkland said quickly: "I didn't believe it either, then. But I do now. Now, I know the whole story.

I got one of them calls myself tonight."

McGavock waited. Mrs. Kirkland said: "A voice spoke to me and told me to go back home, to my little cottage. It advised me to take a nice pleasure trip to Floridy, or someplace."

"Threatened you?"

"Not me. Cushman. Said if I wasn't out in twenty-four hours, Cushman would be shot like a dog, in the back."

McGavock asked: "So you're leaving?"

She smiled. "Not me, Mr. McGavock. I'm not afeared of sneaky voices that come to you on a telephone."

The front door opened and Mr. Cushman Mapes, panting a bit from the uphill climb, pulled up in the hallway and greeted them. Mist still beaded the brim of his Stetson and glinted on his silvery goatee. He said enthusiastically: "Mr. McGavock, it's a pleasure to renew our acquaintance, suh! Mrs. Kirkland, take the gentleman's hat, ma'am."

"I was just leaving," McGavock said genially. "Thank you."

MCGAVOCK slept soundly that night, with the fatigue that comes from utter frustration. He knew, as he dozed off, that he'd assembled just about all the facts but somehow he couldn't dovetail them. He realized he was immersed in a vicious crime of some sort, he hadn't been twice put in peril and Brantner murdered on a passing whim, but further than that things simply couldn't add up. He knew, too, that the answer was a simple one—if he could only see it. Next morning, contrary to his custom, he ate a light breakfast. He was waiting in the hotel lobby when he saw Sheriff Ira Finney pull up in a station wagon.

Powder Ridge was ten miles out of town, deep in the wild, wooded hills and during the skittering, jolting trip McGavock went over his sojourn in town for the sheriff, from the beginning, carefully and thoughtfully, leaving out no detail. Sheriff Ira was particularly interested in personalities. "I've known these folks all my life," he kept repeating. Railroad Brantner had been poisoned,

all right. Test showed barbiturate. No one remotely connected with the affair had bought any, not recently.

"Poison will keep," McGavock declared. "Six, eight, ten years, till you need it."

The ridgeroad forked in a clump of pine and the sheriff took the left-hand trail; after a quarter of a mile they turned down a log-road, arched with gum and hickory and flanked with scrub, forded a clear, mirrored branch and came out into a small hollow. Sheriff Ira said: "This is Francy Scoggins' place."

The cabin, sheathed crudely with scrap lumber siding, sat on a shelf of shale, sunless and mossy, half-obscured by overhanging foliage. A man in black covert trousers and blue denim shirt sat on the doorstep, knotting a trotline; he was gaunt and weathered and the motions of his gnarled fingers as the measured and knotted the line were deliberate and accurate. Behind him, through the half open door, McGavock could see a section of the cabin's one room, earth floor, fireplace, bedstead. By the bedstead projected a corner of Miss Leggett's trunk, and beyond, a corner of Mrs. Dalton's sewing cabinet. The man arose courteously as they approached; Sheriff Ira said: "Howdy, Francy. Meet Mr. McGavock. He wants to ask your help."

Cautiously, Mr. Scoggins shook hands. "This is purely sociable, Mr. Scoggins," McGavock said calmly. "I want you to know that, purely sociable."

Mr. Scoggins nodded warily. "I shorely hope so. We'll see."

There was a little glint in the sawdust by the doorstep and as McGavock noticed it, Mr. Scoggins moved one brogan and covered it. Like a wisp of copper that might drop from tinsnips if one was, well, trimming down the copper worm to a still. McGavock averted his gaze and Mr. Francy Scoggins came close to winking.

McGavock said vaguely: "Live and let live. Now here's what we want to know, Francy. Last May, Colonel Jimmy Mapes held a farm sale on Purtle Pike. He brought some stuff out from town

and unloaded it at the same time. They tell me you bought a sewing cabinet and an old trunk. You bought it, it's yours. Nobody's trying to take it away from you. What was in that trunk?"

"Nothing. Hit was empty."

"Nothing at all? Well, was there any name on it, or in it?"

"Jest a ole trunk. No name, or writin'. My ole woman uses hit to store her quilts." Mr. Scoggins appeared genuinely regretful that he was unable to offer assistance. "Was you looking fer a name?"

"Any name in the sewing cabinet?"

"Doggone, no. No name nowheres, mister."

McGavock looked hot and angry. He said: "Well, thanks." As they started for the car, Mr. Scoggins stopped them. He seem embarrassed; he said: "Ary one of you two gentlemen know how to regulate a pair o' eye-specs?" He made a funnel of his hands, called into the cabin: "Mama, bring out them eye-glasses."

Mrs. Scoggins appeared and came toward them. Weathered and toothless, she seemed an exact replica of her husband but that she was dressed in a faded ankle-length floursack frock. In her hand she held an old-fashioned pair of shell-rimmed spectacles. Mr. Scoggins said: "Mrs. Scoggins, she's weak-sighted. When I got that sewing cabinet home from the sale and we went through it an' found these-here specs we was as happy as a judge at a fish-fry. But we never seen such specs. Can't nobuddy see nothing outa 'em!"

McGavock held the glasses up to the sky. He shifted them back and forth, to catch the light. After a moment, he said: "I want to buy these, Francy. How about ten dollars?"

Mrs. Scoggins smiled happily. Mr. Scoggins said: "Hit's a deal."

For a long time, on the trip back home, McGavock remained silent. The break had come quickly, and had been so devastating that he could hardly grasp it. Sweat circled the back of his neck and his shirt cuffs felt tight and confining. At last he spoke. "Well, Ira. That

does it. That will sew it up. That's all we'll need. The googs."

"Googs?" Sheriff Ira looked confused. "These spectacles."

Sheriff Ira's voice was laden with disbelief. "I know that lenses are ground by prescription. That if we can find the right optical house, out of thousands, we can find the owner. But bifocals are so common that I'd call it hopeless."

McGavock said tranquilly: "These aren't ordinary bifocals. I guess you didn't take a good look at them. The segment—you know that's the little part that's inset in the big lens, isn't down at the bottom where most segments are. Its up high in the lens, like a little window."

Sheriff Ira looked astonished. "Freaks?"

"Not freaks," McGavock answered. "But not common, either. It's all we need."

The car pulled up by courtsquare. McGavock said: "Keep this under your hat. And don't get out of touch with me."

He walked three blocks down Main, to the telegraph office, and sent a wire.

COLONEL JIMMY MAPES and his pretty brunette wife were ensconced in wicker chairs, waiting for McGavock in the dingy lobby of the hotel when he returned from lunch. He'd just polished off eight biscuits, mashed potatoes and giblet gravy, and a platter of fried chicken. Progress in the case, combined with the afterglow of fine food, made him feel topnotch. He tried to keep the glint of self-satisfaction from his eye as he approached. The Colonel and Mrs. Mapes were dressed to an inch of their lives, the Colonel in flashy tan gabardine, his wife in crisp white linen. McGavock sensed from their gravity that this was to be a highly significant conference. Mrs. Mapes smiled stiffly.

He said, "Hi!" and joined them.

The lobby was deserted. Outside, through the grimy window, a farmer drove his team of mules along the unpaved street; inside, there was the smell of cooking, and new paint. A finger of sunlight stretched across the fibre matted

floor, across Mrs. Mapes' perky high-heeled sandals, across the highly perforated toes of Colonel Mapes' large sport shoes. McGavock asked innocently: "Waiting for somebody?"

"We were waiting for you," Mrs. Mapes said solemnly.

Colonel Jimmy nodded ponderously. "Waiting for you, suh." He paused. "We'd like to make you this proposition. Are you ready?"

McGavock said, "Shoot."

"We'd like to retain you, that is we'd like a sort of option on your future services. If Mrs. Mapes should die, or if I should pass away, or both, we'd like you to come to town and investigate."

McGavock looked solicitous. "Aren't you feeling well?"

"Not too well," Mrs. Mapes said grimly. "If you know what I mean."

McGavock said curtly: "I don't." He gazed into their tense faces. "Yesterday everything was a big joke, and I was all wrong. Now you want to hire a detective."

"We've been thinking," Colonel Jimmy said. "Here are the facts. My brother Cushman has money, there is no need to gloss over that. If he should marry, that money would go to his wife. Say every housekeeper he employs is murdered. This is just a theory, you understand. Say they're eliminated before he gets a chance to wed them. You get the idea? To keep outsiders out of the family."

McGavock thought this over for a moment. "Who?"

"I'm not naming any names," Colonel Jimmy declared, "—but Littleton Tennant is Cushman's cousin. He'd fit the picture."

"If something should happen to Cushman," Mrs. Mapes said carefully. "If he should die, or if an out-of-town detective could get him falsely convicted of murder, that would release his money, wouldn't it?"

"Yes," McGavock agreed.

"There you are," Colonel Jimmy remarked. He clapped his big palms together. "There you are. We'd be next.

We're next in line. We block Littleton Tennant's chance of inheritance!"

McGavock shook his head. "I wouldn't worry on those grounds. This business isn't that involved. It's as simple as catching a mouse in a trap." He changed the subject. "How did Cushman and Mrs. Kirkland get together?"

"She's his nextdoor neighbor," Colonel Jimmy explained. "They've been casual speaking acquaintances all their lives, I guess. Years ago Mrs. Kirkland's husband worked for Cushman before he died. Then, when Cushman began paying Mrs. Kirkland little favors, people talked. He is president of the local flower club and he generally gives Mrs. Kirkland first prize. Mrs. Mapes, here, raises lovely peonies but she always refrains from showing them."

"I don't see how anyone raises flowers in this red clay," McGavock declared interestedly.

"That's the way Littleton Tennant feels about it," Mrs. Mapes put in. "He used to be quite a gardener but he's given it up. You should hear him talk about it!"

"You're fortunate in living out by the swamp," McGavock said. "The earth's rich there."

Mrs. Mapes nodded. "It's a pleasure to work with!"

"Flowers, flowers, flowers!" Colonel Jimmy stirred good-humoredly on the wicker settee. "I don't know a tulip from a parsnip. Shall we be getting along, honey?"

As they left, McGavock asked: "Did Mrs. Dalton bring a trunk when she came?"

Colonel Jimmy considered. "No, I believe not. As I got the story from Cushman, she just brought suitcases. Miss Leggett brought the trunk."

After they'd left him, McGavock sat alone in the lobby, thinking about his telegram, wondering if they would rush him an answer as he'd requested. Finally, he arose and went out into the town. On a backstreet, in a down-and-out neighborhood, he found the place for which he'd been searching. A weathered sign above an arched wagon gate said:

*Jno Halbruck
Lumber—Bricks—Roofing
Hauling & Trucking*

He went inside and asked to see the company records.

The answer to his wire came while he was eating supper. He phoned his client, and the sheriff, and asked them to meet him at Cushman Mapes' big brick-and-stucco house at eight sharp. As he replaced the receiver he realized that it was all over now, all over but for a few odds and ends. It had all been before him so plainly and simply from the beginning, yet everywhere he'd missed the point and taken the wrong turning. The truth had been staring him in the face, screaming at him, but he missed it.

All that was finished now. He phoned Cushman and made an appointment to take another look at that portrait, at eight o'clock.

CHAPTER FOUR

To Gag a Corpse

IT WAS late twilight when McGavock took the wooded lane at the base of Oak Hill and came out upon Mrs. Kirkland's tiny clapboard cottage. Above him was the shadowed hulk of Cushman Mapes' home, indistinct among the trees. Beyond the cottage, to his left, open fields, gleaming softly in the starlight, ascended to the nearby hills. A whippoorwill called listlessly and the air was oppressively hot and heavy.

The cottage sat alone, and dark, luminous and vague in the purple dusk. McGavock opened the low gate, passed a garden, and a hen house, and took the flagstone walk to the backporch. There was a cedar bucket and dipper on the washbench by the door, onions in braids, and gourds, hung from the porch rafters overhead. He peered through the slot in the dimity curtain, could see nothing, and knocked. There was no response.

After a moment, he unlocked the door

with a dimstore skeleton key, stepped into the kitchen and flipped on his flashlight.

The room was primitive, but neat. His flash swept across the bare floor to the cracker jar and butter plate on the table, to the battered corner cupboard by the sink, lingered on the glistening rows of canned fruits and jellies. He was wondering what could get into a woman to make her move from a comfortable little place like this to a hollow, dank ratnest like Cushman Mapes' old mansion, when the shot came.

It came with a bullwhip crack, vicious and sudden, blasting its way into the room through a tiny hole in the south window, exploding the green glass butter plate by McGavock's elbow to screaming dust and shards. McGavock cut off his torch, cursed, and dropped to his haunches.

He laid his gun beside him on the floor and waited.

A rifle shot, fired from the hillside, and all things considered it was damn good shooting. He figured it unlikely that the marksman would follow it up in person, yet he played it safe.

He'd waited possibly six minutes when he heard footsteps on the flagstone walk outside, and on the porch, and the door opened.

Littleton Tennant's scrawny form stood in the doorway, with the oblong of the pale blue night behind him. His hands were empty and he peered into the dark interior.

In a surprisingly powerful voice, Tennant called out: "Anybody here? Anybody hurt?"

"Come in," McGavock spat. "And close the door. What in the hell are you doing here?" He got to his feet. "You live across town."

Not across town, Tennant explained, but yonder, just over the fields. He'd been on his way to his appointment at Cushman's when he'd seen a rifle flash in a clump of holly on the hillside, and had heard a window or something break. "I thought Mrs. Kirkland had dropped in for a moment, and someone had shot her."

He paused. "And now I'll ask you a question. What are *you* doing here?" He closed the door.

McGavock flicked on his flash once more, shielded it with his handkerchief. He didn't answer. He said: "Let's get this over with," and went into the bedroom.

Client Tennant followed.

There were but two rooms in the cottage and Mrs. Kirkland's bedroom was scarcely eight feet square. In all his life, McGavock had never seen such jumble and clutter. Most of the space was taken up by a huge old walnut four-poster bed and around its sides were chairs, a claw-and-ball table, a dresser, and a cumbersome oak wardrobe. Crayon enlargements, in gilt oval frames, of Mrs. Kirkland's ancestors hung from the pine walls and pin cushions and doilies and antimacassars littered every square inch of space.

Tennant said: "I think I know now why the late Mr. Kirkland folded up his tent, and passed on. He felt crowded."

Wordlessly, McGavock began a search. He examined multiple drawers, looked under the mattress, under doilies and antimacassars. At last he found them, Mrs. Kirkland's private papers. He knew she must have some; she was the kind of careful old gal that stuck things away. They were in the false bottom of a mohair footstool, the deed to the cottage, a small insurance policy on Mrs. Kirkland's life, a recipe for goosegrease ointment, and a flat manila envelope.

McGavock opened the envelope. "Well," McGavock said with a grin. "A dossier on good old Cushman." Tied with a red ribbon were a half dozen mildly amorous letters signed by Cushman, a clipping of the news item showing the Cushman portrait and giving a flowery picture of Mr. Cushman Mapes' luxurious background, and a brief note dated six years previously, Nashville postmarked. The letter said simply, *Dear Mrs. Kirkland: Everything is going remarkably well here. I've cashed in the bonds and should be home soon. I see no reason why James should be*

given any intimation that I have temporarily on hand a fairly generous fund of cash. In closing, I would like to say again, as I've indicated before, that my deep esteem for you, Mrs. Kirkland, at times borders very nearly on marital affection. Very truly yours, Cushman Mapes.

On the back of the sheet was a row of pencilled notes, in what McGavock took to be Mrs. Kirkland's own handwriting:

Will be married in Chattanooga (I hope) Honeymoon trip to Mammoth Cave (1 day) then to Cincinnati (2 days) Cleveland (2 days) back home by way of Paducah. Arrive home two weeks later.

Little Tennant said quietly: "She's been planning on marrying Cousin Cushman herself. For at least six years. I'd never have guessed it!"

McGavock returned the papers to the footstool and looked at his watch. "They're waiting for us. In the big house, on the hill."

THEY were indeed. The atmosphere was predatory and hushed, engulfing McGavock and his client, as they followed Mrs. Kirkland into Cushman Mapes' great, dank parlor. Three kerosene lamps were going tonight and in the harsh glare the streaked, drab walls seemed shabbier than ever, and the gilt-and-plush chairs more funereal. Cushman Mapes, his little white goatee outthrust, his eyes sparkling hostilely, sat with Mrs. Jimmy Mapes, his sister-in-law, beneath his portrait on the mildewed loveseat. Colonel Jimmy, himself, stood talking, spluttering, to Sheriff Ira Finney. McGavock had rather expected the auctioneer and his pretty young wife to be on hand. Sheriff Ira said docilely: "Let's finish this up, and get out, Luther. I don't think we're much welcome here."

Littleton Tennant nodded pleasantly to his relatives, but they ignored him pointedly.

There was a long, tense moment of silence. Finally McGavock spoke. He

said: "You bet we'll finish this in a hurry, Sheriff. Arrest Cushman Mapes for murder."

Mrs. Kirkland gasped. "Not Cushman! You're making a terrible mistake!"

"And Mrs. Kirkland, too," McGavock continued. "This was a partnership in murder, Sheriff Ira."

Colonel Jimmy and his wife boggled. Client Tennant said ponderously: "History affords some extremely interesting joint crimes. One Joseph Antonini and his wife, early in the last century, murdered an English girl named Blankenfield in an inn near Augsburg. When the victim screamed a young brother-in-law named Carl covered up by running through the halls yelling that his father was beating him! I recall, too, another case where—"

But no one was paying any attention to him.

Colonel Jimmy Mapes finally regained his power of speech. "Explain yourself Mr. McGavock."

"I intend to." McGavock's face was bleak and pale. "Three times since I've hit town Brother Cushman has tried to kill me, too, and I'd like to express myself. First, I want to say that of all the cases I've ever worked on, this turns out to be one of the meanest and most vicious."

Sheriff Ira said: "So he and Mrs. Kirkland worked together, and killed the two housekeepers? Where are their bodies, Luther?"

"There weren't any housekeepers, Sheriff Ira." McGavock spoke slowly, softly. "That was the trick."

Colonel Jimmy Mapes looked bewildered. "I don't understand."

"Of course you don't. You weren't supposed to understand." McGavock grinned mirthlessly. "They killed Marie Dubois, and robbed her."

Sheriff Ira blinked. "Who?"

"Marie Dubois. The old gal who painted his picture." McGavock took down the portrait, examined it. Last night it had been signed in neat black letters: M. Dubois. Now the signature had been painted out with fresh green

paint which almost, but not quite, matched the color of the grass in the foreground.

Mrs. Kirkland's wrinkled face contorted in fear. "There ain't a word o' truth in it!"

He took a yellow paper from his pocket. "Here's the answer to a wire I sent to Nashville. *The spectacles you describe are similar to a pair made here for Miss Marie Dubois. Miss Dubois packed up life savings in cash and bonds six years ago and vanished.*"

Sheriff Ira smiled. McGavock said: "We found her googs at Francy Scoggins' cabin. I knew them as soon as I saw them. They make a special kind of bifocals for artists. A big lens for close-up work, for the painting, and a little distance lens set in like a little window, to see the model through. All we need to do now is to check on the prescription."

Cushman Mapes said weakly: "I deny it, every bit of it!"

"I don't know how you ran on to her, but when you did, you realized you had a good thing. An old gal, retired, who was a perfect setup for your dignified blandishments. I'll bet Mrs. Kirkland helped you work out the details. By the way, Mrs. Kirkland is a widow. The death of her husband might be worth a bit of investigation, Sheriff. Well, you married her—"

Cushman Mapes reared stiffly. "How ridiculous!"

"You married her in Chattanooga. I can tell you all about your honeymoon, if you wish. Mrs. Kirkland kept a record to hold you in line. You brought her here, furniture and cash, and killed her. You knew she'd been seen locally—she was here long enough to be seen before she was dispatched—so you made up the Miss Leggett, the housekeeper tale, to explain her. Later, you got worried and added a Mrs. Dalton. This extra touch turned against you in the long run. No one ever saw Mrs. Dalton, by the way, but your pal, Mrs. Kirkland." He addressed Mrs. Kirkland. "How about it, you want to tell your side of it first?"

She shook her head. "It's all a pack o' lies."

"You know that wooden fisherman's bobber you found in the woodshed?" McGavock asked her. "I hate to tell you, but that wasn't a bobber at all. It was a gag. Intended for you. Cushman was saving it for you, if pressure got too strong on him."

Tennant was interested. "But why would he gag her? You only gag strangers. An acquaintance can later identify you—"

"Just what Cousin Cushman was going to tell the sheriff, my boy, if he was ever questioned. But Mrs. Kirkland would never identify anyone when he'd finished with her. That gag was made to gag a corpse."

Lamplight shone on Mrs. Kirkland's evil, withered face. After a moment, she said, in a toneless voice: "I'll tell what I know."

Cushman Mapes said harshly: "Shut up, you fool. They'll have to produce a body."

"Mrs. Kirkland raises mighty fine asters," McGavock remarked. "I wondered about it. Six years ago, I learn, the John Halbruck trucking and hauling company, 12 East Market Street, hauled a nice big wagonload of fine black river-loam out to her place and dumped it on her red clay flower garden. Every year or so, they say, she calls them up, and they renew it."

Cushman Mapes said quickly: "Mr. McGavock, I'd like to talk. I'd like to give you my version of this tragic affair—"

"In the garden, eh?" Littleton Tennant frowned. "Fire, water, air, and earth. And it was earth. Just like the Bender family out in Labette County, Kansas, in 1873. They murdered travelers and buried them in the orchard behind the house. Ten to twelve victims, as I remember it."

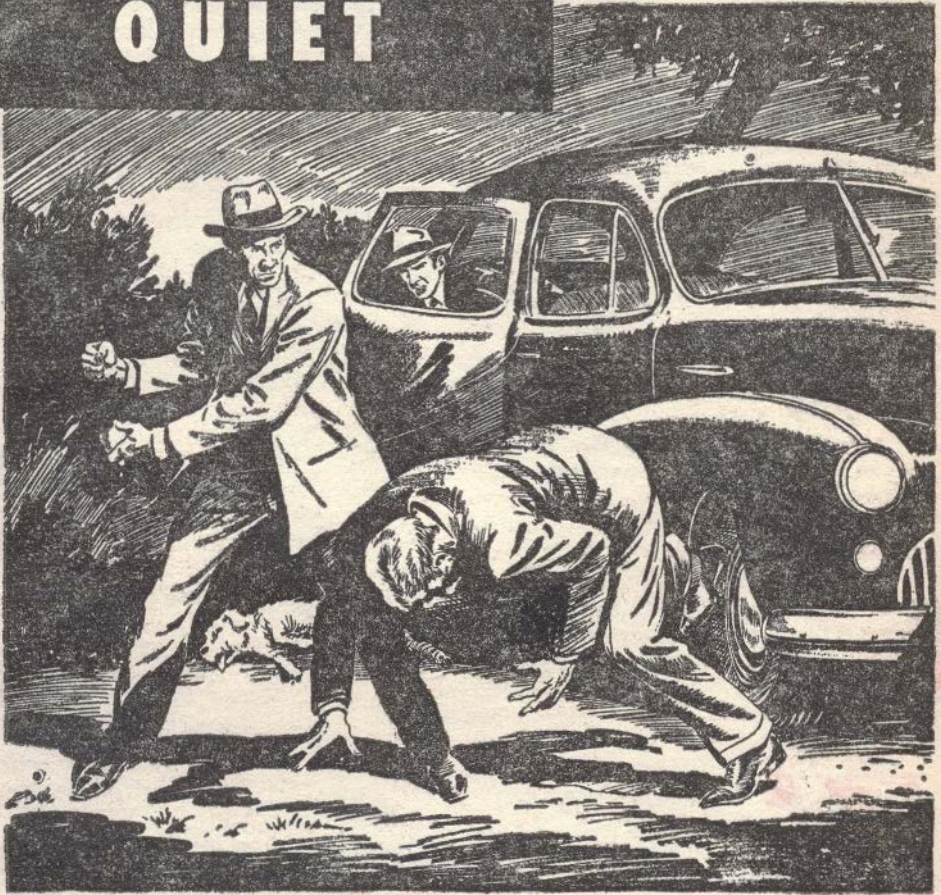
McGavock raised an eyebrow. "Executed, when—?"

"Killed later, according to rumor. But at the time they escaped."

McGavock said coldly: "Well, friend, here are two that won't."

KEEP THE KILLING QUIET

By
C. P. DONNEL, Jr.



I hit the blond man with the rock as hard as I could.

If that needle-nosed Sesame Warner had ever guessed that her quiet, self-effacing spouse Twiford held the key to the year's most sensational gang killing, her razor-edged tongue would surely have slashed him to ribbons.

ATENET of psychology is that when a man falls out of love with his wife, his next choice is almost certain to resemble her physically. I am forcibly reminded of this on the occasions when I see my ex-neighbor, Mr. Twiford Warner, out for an evening walk with his current poodle.

In the twenty years I have known Twiford, he has always owned a poodle named Molly. When illness or old age accounts for one, he buys another, as exactly like her predecessor as he can. Upon each he lavishes a grave, undemonstrative affection.

That Twiford's poodles invariably closely resembled his wife, Sesame Warner, there could be no doubt. Since it is obvious that no man could see Sesame Warner in a rosy light for many weeks after the honeymoon, I once suspected that Twiford's choice of pup was a cruel, sardonic lampoon of his wife's looks. When I got to know him better, I realized that I was wrong. Whatever obscure subconscious urge made him pick the first one, I am positive that he was not deliberate in his caricature of his spouse, however strong his dislike was.

Sesame Warner was a thin, acid woman, with a needle nose in a narrow face framed by drooping, untidy hair. Her tongue, too, was pointed and much feared in our quiet suburb. And her ambitions for her husband were selfish, unbounded—and unfulfilled.

Twiford Warner was quite content with his position as head of the book-keeping department of Miller's, Inc., a department store, and Sesame's vigorous, ruthless maneuvers to make a Man of Distinction of him—as when she plugged him for City Council, or her unseconded (even by him) fight to run him for state senator, or her ridiculous and shameless politicking to have him named president of Miller's when old Harvey Miller died—consistently came to naught. It is possible that Sesame knew, in her secret heart, that she was licked before she started. That, I have always believed, is why her bitterness nourishes itself on the sole occasion when Twiford achieved momentary notoriety, and inexcusably, to her way of thinking, muffed his chance to become nationally famous for a few days.

YOU must remember. The papers called it the most sensational gang-murder of Prohibition. It was Twiford who returned from a long

evening stroll with one of his Mollies to report that on a dirt road off Round Hill there was a bullet-proof limousine holding three bodies.

Once the bodies were identified as Dave "Speed" Oast, Chicago Lon Ucci, and Machine-gun Larkin, Oast's chauffeur, the lid blew off. Chicago Lon Ucci was Capone's sole rival in the Midwest. Speed Oast had reamed millions from the New York-New Jersey beer and artichoke rackets. Machine-gun Larkin had something over a dozen murders at his door, but no convictions.

Police ascertained that Oast and Ucci had met at a roadhouse on the Boston Post Road to cement a working agreement that would make them collectively stronger than any organization then operating. They were, the police decided, on their way to New York to celebrate the pact when, on a short cut that skirted the edge of our community, their car was forced to the side of the road—a mark on a telephone pole explained the dent in their bumper—by parties unknown who had then proceeded to crack their skulls with certain weapons never discovered and tried to hide the car and its cargo on a side dirt road. All three, the autopsies showed, had been drinking heavily, and Chicago Lon Ucci's pearl-handled revolver had one shot fired.

Police and reporters swarmed in on us, and as quickly departed when the investigation shifted to New York and Chicago. The Capones were questioned—as usual without result. The Detroit Purple Gang and the St. Louis beer crowd knew nothing. There were no arrests.

I even came in for a pinch of flash-powder myself since it was to my house that Twiford Warner came to call the police. For this, Sesame never forgave him, even though it was plain that he did it in what was generally regarded as a laudable effort to spare her frayed nerves.

Sesame did not fail to make a point of this neglect. Twiford, she informed all and sundry, had "calmly showed up" with his "damned dog on a string" and

never told her a thing until the police arrived.

Nor was Twiford's subsequent behavior calculated to sweeten her. Not only did he refuse to dramatize himself, but he also turned down a swinging offer to describe his experience on a national radio network. He refused, too, to address seven eager civic clubs on his feat, and when the mayor, carried away by excitement, offered to put him on the Police Commission, Twiford reasonably replied that a mere accident hardly qualified him for the post. Sesame raved, but to no avail. Even Molly the poodle seemed affected, for she turned churlish and howled for three nights in a row.

I don't know why at this late date the burden of Twiford's secret should nag at me so much. Maybe it was cumulative effect, but it was now actually interfering with my sleep and my piece of mind. Finally, in desperation, I looked up an old college friend, Dr. James Barrington, who had developed quite a reputation as an expert in criminal psychology. I begged him to come to dinner, but we had drifted apart years ago, and I must admit that it was not until I dropped a hint of what was on my mind that he rather reluctantly agreed.

During dinner, I led up to it slowly. Then, over the coffee, my wife said: "I'll never forget Twiford's face that night when he came to the door to ask to use the phone. And Molly the Third—how she growled. She was usually so friendly."

James said: "Molly the Third?"

"Twiford's poodle he had then. Harry, here, missed it. He was out in the back garden playing with his tomato plants, and then I think he took the car—didn't you, Harry?—and went down to the drugstore to get something to read."

I said: "Yes." Then: "James, there's still some light left. How would you like to leave the ladies to discuss nylons and meat prices, and stroll over to see the *locus criminis*?"

James agreed, so we went down the street to the dead end, to where the path cuts across the Higgins meadow to the road. On the way we passed Twiford

Warner with Molly the Sixth on a leash, and he flourished his cane at us as he turned in at his place.

Halfway up Round Hill I showed James the pole into which the police said Oast's car had been forced, and, a little further up, the dirt road where Twiford had come upon the car and bodies. Standing there in the twilight, watching James pull his lower lip and bring his judicial mind to bear on the problem, I had a very, very strange sensation, as though something inside of me, something alive, was trying to get out. It made me quite shaky, and my vision blurred. I seemed to be losing control of myself. Next thing I know, I was steering James to the dirt road, then down through the underbrush to Lost Creek. I peered about. The flat rock was still there; so large that I wondered how Twiford Warner and I had ever managed to lift it.

"That," I heard myself saying huskily, "is Molly the Third's grave."

Said James, in an odd tone: "Just when was she buried there?"

"That night," I said. And as I said it, I knew the live thing was going to get out.

"Is this Warner a close friend of yours?" asked James thoughtfully.

"Just a neighbor—an acquaintance."

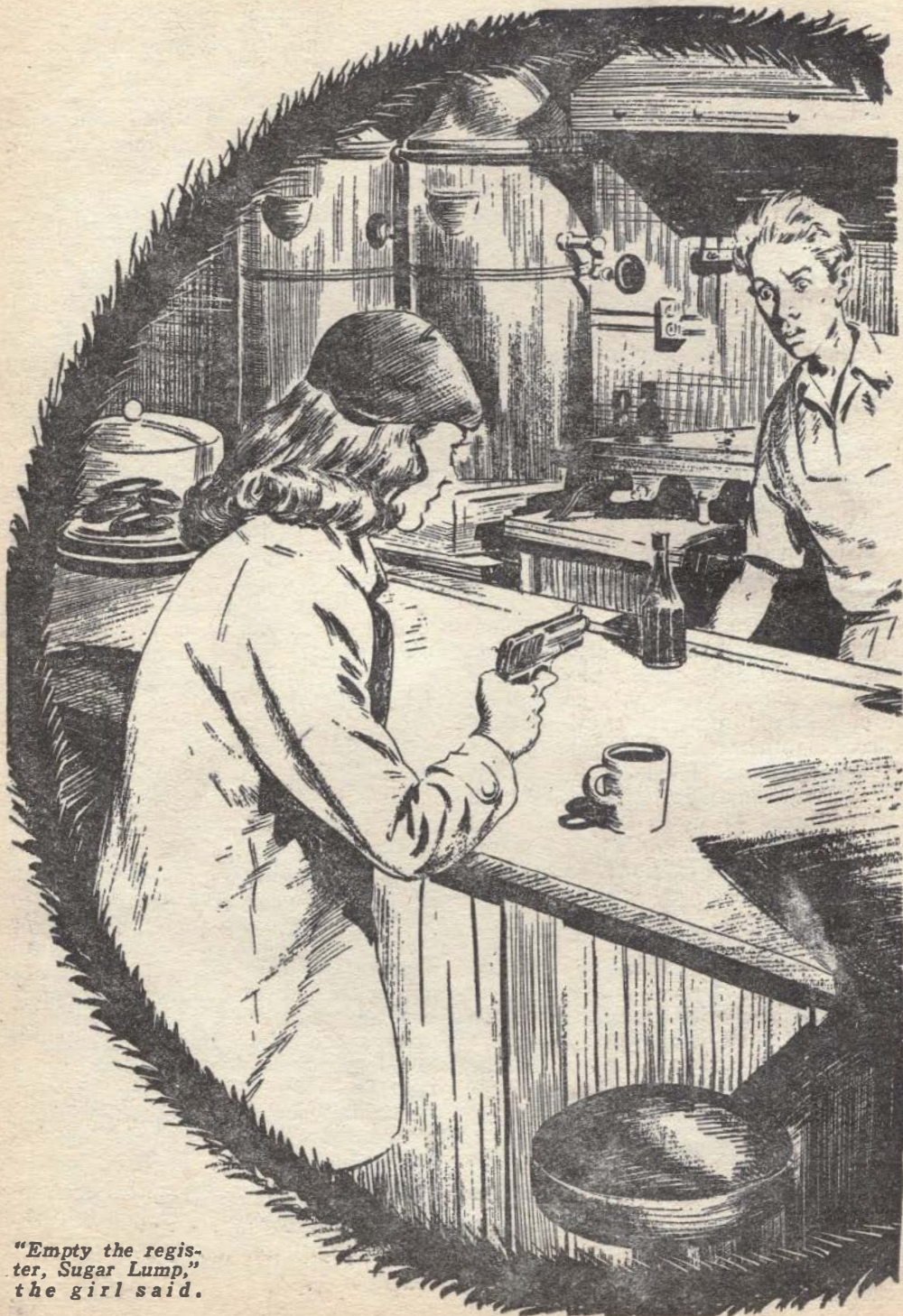
That was all a part of the unreality of the thing. As I began to talk, it all came back so clearly—why, I could even smell the warm, wet smell of the tomato plant around which I was rooting for cutworms at the moment when Twiford Warner called to me from the grape arbor. He had come in the back way. I could even see his white face, hear his voice as he said: "Harry, I wonder if you'd mind helping me clean up a mess?"

I said: "Sure, I'll help," and followed him, wondering what had got into the guy and where Molly the Third was.

Twiford led me across lots and up Round Hill to where the limousine stood sniffing the telephone pole. After a moment I said: "My Lord!"

"Yes," said Twiford, in a flat voice.

(Continued on page 129)



*"Empty the register, Sugar Lump,"
the girl said.*

RED CHRISTMAS

By
GEORGE F. KULL



IT WAS Christmas Eve in Reno. Soft fat snowflakes were coming down with little thuds. The Salvation Army Santas were just about through banging away with their little bells in front of the big department stores. Their iron kettles were pretty well loaded.

The attendant at the Silver City gas station on the corner of Arroyo and Virginia figured he was just about through too. There might be a few more customers straggling in, of course, but he wasn't going to wait for them—not on Christmas Eve.

He changed his mind abruptly as a battered old Chevy coupe lurched up to the pumps and came to a steaming stop. He grabbed up a clean rag and hopped out to the car.

"Yes'm," he said cheerfully, and swished at the windshield. He could see the woman in the car. She looked tired.

"Something's wrong," the woman said sourly. "Motor's hot."

He could see that without looking. He raised the hood and, with the rag wrapped around his hand, removed the radiator cap. It was steaming, but not dangerously so.

"Needs water," he said. He waited a minute while the steam spurted away.

The girl who walked into Carlo's Beanery on Christmas Eve was in a holiday mood. And she had a few love letters of the leaden variety for anyone who didn't share her festive spirit.

"C'mon, c'mon," the woman growled. "Shake it, will you!"

The attendant looked hurt. "I'm sorry, Miss, have to wait until the steam's gone. Guess it's O.K. now, though."

"Snap it up!" she said.

He picked up the small water hose at his feet and filled the radiator, replaced the hood. He went around and wiped the rear window and took a careless flick at the blob of snow that partially covered her California plate.

"Anything else, Miss?" he asked politely.

Her fingers prowled inside a worn looking handbag and then withdrew suddenly as another car slid to a stop on the other side of the pumps.

"No," she said hastily. Then: "Yes. Where can a gal get some food?"

The attendant took a good look at her rumped beret, her near-white wool shortie; her faded blue levis. He noticed her hands which looked like she'd done a few oil change jobs.

"There's a stand down the street a ways," he said. "*Carlo's Beanery*. You won't miss it. Neon."

She curled a lip in what might have been a smile and whined her skidding wheels out into the thin Christmas Eve traffic.

The neon was covered with lazy looking snow and for that reason she almost did miss *Carlo's*, but at the last minute she caught it out of the corner of one eye and slithered her coupe into the curb.

SHE got out, reached back in to yank out the key from the ignition, and entered the small restaurant.

There was just one customer at the long counter—a seedy character who sat hunched over a hot cup of coffee. He was blowing on it. The girl came in, stamping snow from her feet. He didn't bother to look up.

A young kid with chicken feathers for hair and a white apron three sizes too big was sweeping under the few tables in the place. He dropped the broom and

hurdled the low counter. He shook the chicken feathers out of his eyes.

"What'll it be, sister?" he wanted to know.

"Hamburger. No onion. And coffee."

The guy sipping the coffee down at the end of the counter looked over her way, looked back again. He took a wary gulp at the coffee, took another. The next try drained it. He put the cup down with a clatter, tossed a dime on the counter and shuffled out.

The kid flipped the hamburger, reached up a hand to push the feathers back over his forehead.

"Christmas Eve. Guess we're the only ones not home tonight. Me, I gotta work till ten."

The woman said nothing. The kid scooped up the burger, tossed it at a roll, placed it before the woman, and drew a cup of coffee. He slid that over and leaned his elbows on the counter.

She wasn't a bad looking gal, he decided. A little rough at the moment but clothes would fix that. Twenty-five, maybe twenty-six. Couple of years older than himself. What the hell?

"You could stick around I'll stand you to a couple of quick ones when I get off," he said, looking at her.

The woman raised her eyes, chewed for a moment. "You're sweet," she said.

The kid grinned. "You're kinda sweet yourself, sister. What's your name?"

"Call me Candy," she said.

"Candy? Haw, haw! Yeah, O.K., Candy. Call me Sugar Lump, I'm rationed."

The girl looked at him again. Longer this time. Finally she reached for the coffee. It was cool enough now. She drank it quickly. She reached in her faded black handbag, took out a dull, blunt .32 automatic, slid off the safety.

"Empty the register, Sugar Lump," she said, a half grin around her lips.

The kid's eyes owled at her. His mouth dropped open, closed again. "Huh?"

The automatic played little circles in the air. The half grin faded from the woman's lips. "You're taking awful chances, sad pants," she said coldly. "Empty the register!"

The kid gulped. "Look, lady, a joke's a joke, but that thing might go off . . ."

The gun flicked jerkily at him. It seemed to drive him to action. "Why you cheap . . ." he sneered, grabbing for the woman's wrist. He should never have tried that.

The automatic coughed once, twice. Then it was silent.

The youth slid down a little and rested over the counter. His right hand fell clumsily off the counter, dropped to the hot steam table at his side. He didn't seem to notice. His feathered hair fell over his face like a blanket. After that he didn't move again.

The girl stared at him. "Sorry as hell about that, Sonny," she whispered. "I was saving it for someone else, but you had to play smart."

She dropped the automatic into her handbag, went to the register. She poked the 'no sale' key and stood away to let the drawer spring out.

She stuffed her bag with a handful of silver dollars. Then she filled a red leather wallet with fives, tens and twenties. About two hundred dollars in all. She closed the bag, shut the register drawer.

On the way out she took a look at the kid. He hadn't moved. He never would again. "Merry Christmas from Candy," she said.

The woman slid her coupe around in a tight 'U' turn and headed out Virginia Street till she came to the row of motels just at the entrance to the city. The first one she looked at had a vacancy

sign on it—which was unusual at this time of night.

She removed two overnight bags from the coupe, entered cabin eighteen, grinning. She'd signed the register *Candy Smith*.

She stripped, took a hot shower and carefully scrubbed her hands. Removing a strawberry-red pleated wool suit from one of the bags, she dressed again. She took a neat black chesterfield from the coupe and put it on.

She locked the car, threw the key at a cluster of poplars, went back inside, wadded up the beret, shortie coat and levis, stuffed them into a corner and grabbed up her two bags.

She left the cabin, walked carefully out through the snow-covered court and down to the nearest corner. When the Virginia Street bus came along, she hailed it. The driver was a nice guy who'd been raised right. He politely got out from behind the wheel and helped her on with the bags.

"Name me a hotel downtown," the woman asked him.

PAUL BARDA put the whiskey bottle down on the small table with long tapering fingers—the fingers of a gambler.

"Soda?" he asked.

A girl on a big parrot-colored davenport across the room stared moodily at the fire. Her mouth pouted like a little kid's. "O.K.," she said.

Paul Barda brought over the two drinks, handed the girl one of them.

Edward Mann*

has switched to Calvert because
Calvert makes a lighter highball

*of 1522 Kelton Ave., W. Los Angeles, Calif.

CALVERT RESERVE Blended Whiskey—86.8 Proof—65% Grain
Neutral Spirits. Calvert Distillers Corp., New York City



"There's just one sensible way to look at it, Sherry," he said decisively.

Sherry Halloran raised her eyes to his. Her tapered red-lacquered fingernails clicked around the stem of the glass.

"Sensible," she repeated dully.

Paul Barda squeezed his white teeth together impatiently. "We've been over it before," he said in a bored tone. "Sooner or later your husband's going to fit the pieces together. Call it a Merry Christmas and forget me."

Sherry Halloran gasped and lurched to her feet. Her knee hit the small coffee table, upsetting her drink.

"Paul!"

"Oh, cut it out, Sherry! We've gone through all of this mess before. It's quits, understand? I was crazy to come here tonight anyway. Of all nights, Christmas Eve!" He shook his blond head. He was a little annoyed at himself.

The girl's eyes balled with dismay. She believed it now. She'd been believing it for some time, but not till now had it come clean in her consciousness.

"All right, Paul," she said quietly. She walked across the room to a tiny rosewood desk, opened the miniature drawer in its exact center. Then she turned again to face the blond man. Her hand held a .25 caliber revolver. She extended her hand.

"Remember the gun you gave me for my birthday, Paul?"

Paul Barda waved a careless wrist. "Keep it . . ." he started to say, then looked down at her hand unbelievably. The revolver was extended muzzle first. The hand that held it didn't waver, didn't shake. It looked like the hand of death itself.

"Sherry!" he exclaimed, shocked.

She pulled the trigger. The gun jerked insanelly, a thin criss-cross of smoke patterning its movement. It jerked again and again. Then she flung the gun at the davenport. "Goodbye, Paul," she said.

Paul Barda grabbed at his middle. He almost made it to the door. Almost but not quite. Then he slid down easily and crumpled up in a tight ball on the floor. He tried to get up once after that but

his outstretched hand hit against the door casing and remained that way.

Sherry Halloran sobbed once and faintly.

There were two doors leading into this room—one at which Paul Barda had fallen and one other at the back. This latter led to the bright kitchen. Doctor John Halloran had been standing in this second doorway. He had heard and he had seen.

The hair at his temples seemed to glisten from the reflected lights of the Christmas tree in the far corner of the room. He stepped inside and leaned over his wife. She was a buoyant feather in his arms. He carried her to the bedroom, went back for his bag from which he took a hypodermic needle. He injected something into her right arm.

"Sleep tight, honey," he whispered, "and don't worry. Maybe I can do something about . . . that."

Doctor Halloran stared around the living room. He righted Sherry's overturned glass, went to the kitchen for a towel and carefully wiped up the spilled liquor.

He took both glasses back to the kitchen and washed them. Then he returned them to the small table with the whiskey bottle on it.

He surveyed the room, straightened a small throw rug. His last job was the unpleasant one.

He knelt on the floor close to the body of Paul Barda. There wasn't much use in trying anything. Barda was as dead as last year's good resolutions.

He stood up, went to the front door, opened it and looked up and down the deserted street. The snow had blanketed everything with a soft white mantel and it was coming down now in a thick layer. It made the air smell fresh and clean. At the curb stood Paul Barda's convertible coupe where he had left it. Doctor Halloran spent some few minutes on the step, thinking. Then he went to the coupe, tried the turtle back. It was unlocked. He lifted it open.

Barda was slim, but solidly built. Doctor Halloran grunted as he carried the body out of the house and stuffed it

into the turtle back of the convertible. The deck came down with a little jar, disturbing the snow on the license plate. 40-241, he read. He looked inside the car before he returned to the house. Barda had left the keys in the ignition.

Doctor Halloran carefully picked up the small .25 caliber gun on the davenport. This he meticulously wiped with his handkerchief and dropped it into his coat pocket. The only thing remaining was to wipe up a small smear on the varnished, waxed floor. After that he took his handkerchief to the fireplace and tossed it in. It burned completely in a few minutes. He watched it burn, thinking.

THE blackjack dealer at the Marlo Club shuffled the cards, cut the deck, used a small stack of them to sweep a non-existent bit of dust from the green felt and looked out at the almost deserted club.

"Make your bets," he intoned to nobody.

The croupier at an adjoining roulette wheel grinned and tossed a silver dollar onto the other's felt.

"Things is mighty rough, pardner," the dealer husked. He tossed a silver dollar of his own over to the croupier. "Twenty-eight black," he said.

Then he began to shuffle the cards again. "Your first is a nine," he announced.

"Hit me," said the croupier.

The dealer threw down another, face up. "Ten."

The croupier smiled.

The dealer threw a card of his own. "Five." He threw a second. "Six." Another. "Nine." He held the cards spread widely. He grinned loosely, scooped the silver dollar with a card, stacked it neatly with a hundred others.

The croupier spun the wheel, tossed the ball in the opposite direction, waited. His mustache twitched. He reached up one slender finger and smoothed it. His eyes were impassive. "Seventeen red," he announced.

The ball lay as he had said.

The dealer shrugged. "Helluva night."

"It'll pick up. Me, I go at eleven. Just in time to watch the kids put up the Christmas tree." He looked at his watch. It was fifteen minutes before. He started to say something else, looked up and cleared his throat instead.

A small woman with a strawberry-red pleated suit and hair the color of an eight ball was coming their way. She made for the blackjack table.

The dealer smiled. "Merry Christmas."

The woman looked at his eyes briefly, took out a stack of silver dollars from a white plastic handbag, and tossed five on the table. The dealer gave her two cards, one down, one up.

"Again," she said dully. He tossed it to her.

She turned up her buried card. "Twenty-three," she said. The dealer smiled politely, scooped up the five dollars.

"Ever hear of a boy called Paul Barda?" the woman asked him.

"Paulie? Sure. Was in here this afternoon. Haven't seen him tonight."

"Where's he live, you know?"

The dealer shook his head and she turned to go.

"Try Joe over at the bar," he advised. "He might know."

The girl walked toward the bar.

The bartender finished shaking a cocktail, laid it on the tray at the end of the bar and nodded.

"Yes," he agreed. "I know Paul Barda. But I never knew where he lived."

The girl studied him. "Whiskey," she said. "Soda on the side."

He placed it before her and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. It gave him a chance to examine the woman. He decided to play it safe. "Haven't seen Paul in quite a spell," he offered tentatively.

"He was in here this afternoon."

The bartender's face reddened and he leaned over to grab at a bar rag. "That so?" he murmured.

The woman tossed off the whiskey, sipped a little of the soda water and threw a silver dollar on the bar.

"Put the change in the collection plate

Sunday if you can spare it," she told him.

She walked out. A tall, carefully shaven man who was sitting hunched up on a bar stool got up and followed her. He poked his head out of the door. "Lady!" he hissed.

The woman stopped, turned and came back. The man closed the door behind him.

"You're looking for Barda?"

"Maybe."

The man grinned a thin grin. "Sure. You come up to a bar, and ask for Paul Barda. But you're only looking for him 'maybe'."

"So I'm looking for Barda. You know where he lives?"

"Sure I know where he lives. But better still I know where he is right now."

"Talk to me."

The man looked up at the sky. A snowflake hit him on the nose. He blew it off again. "Let's say you're the recording angel and I'm giving you the dope. No motive. What's it matter if Barda messes around with my girl? He messes with 'em all. No motives, then. Just facts."

"Let's just say you're a pigeon," the woman bit off. "Who the hell cares? Give it to me straight."

The carefully shaven face cringed but the voice said: "Straight. He's up at 3232 Bret Harte Road with another guy's wife. If you act fast, you catch him."

"I'll catch him all right. Don't you lose no sleep over it, honey."

"Not that it matters," the man lisped, "but are you an 'ex', too? Not that it matters."

The girl dug into her handbag, pulled out a five dollar bill and threw it on the ground at his feet. "Not that it matters," she repeated. "If you're a sample of his friends, he must have been scraping the bottom of the barrel lately. Thanks."

THE big bronze door chimes struck the quarter hour. Doctor Halloran tensed, the blood vessels at his temples pulsing quickly. He took slow,

deliberate strides to the door and swung it open. A woman faced him.

"Maybe I'm wrong. If so, no harm's done. Back in!"

Her hair was ebony. She wore a pretty chesterfield over a strawberry-red pleated suit. Her voice sounded thin—ageless as the Sphinx, but thin.

He backed into the living room, keeping his hands well away from his sides. He didn't especially care for the automatic the woman held pointed at him. He stopped when his feet bumped into the green davenport.

The woman pulled the automatic back into her hip deeply where it would be safe. With her left hand she pawed his clothing, found Barda's gun, took it.

"Sit down," she said. "I'll like it better that way."

He did so slowly.

"Make me a story," she began, "a story about Paul Barda."

Doctor Halloran pulled his hands onto his knees, palms down. The fingers spread, stayed that way.

"Paul Barda," he repeated. "I don't believe I know him."

Something in the tone made the woman whip her gun up. "No mistake," she whispered. "This is the place all right. Talk!"

Doctor Halloran sighed. His fingers relaxed. His voice, when he replied, sounded tired and a little resigned.

"It seems to me," he said, "you have all the cards but one. On the other hand I have none—nor am I even interested in the game. Suppose you talk, instead."

"I've already burned a guy down tonight," she said. Her eyes glared, making his skin itch. "For nothing at all except I wanted a little money and he couldn't see it that way. What's more, I came here to burn another. One more added to the score won't matter."

He raised his right hand, halted it in mid-air and replaced it on his knee. He nodded. His eyes even seemed to light up in pleasant agreement.

"As you say. One more won't matter. It won't matter to me, either, for reasons you wouldn't guess."

The automatic was a tight black line

pointing straight at him. "Something tells me I'm wasting my time," she said. "But I'll give it a try. All right. Paul Barda used to be in love with me." Long eyelashes flicked toward the ceiling.

"Oh, it was an easy thing for him. He's had so much practice. But he got tired. Me, I didn't tire easy. And I thought maybe I could get him back by doing some dirty laundry for him. . . . A guy died in my apartment.

"Paul swore he'd never forget me and I got off easy with five years. Did you ever spend five years waiting day after day, night after night—in hell—waiting for someone you loved? Or waiting for a letter? A postcard, even?" Her lip curled. "That was me, brother."

Doctor Halloran dropped his eyes to his hands, studied them. He said nothing.

"I'd played it smart—if you don't use brains at all, that is. And when I finally got out I banged my head some more hunting around, finding out how Paul had spent those five years on the outside. It led me to Reno. And here.

"They said he'd be here with some guy's wife. It sounded like Paul. He can take any woman and do that to her. He did it to me. I used to be a good woman. Would you believe it?"

Doctor Halloran raised his eyes. They were tortured eyes, hot with the agony of something seen for the first time.

The logs in the fireplace stirred.

"You've wasted your time," he said slowly. "Paul Barda isn't here. You may search the place if you like. You may shoot me if you like. You may steal my car which stands at this moment outside with the keys in the ignition. You have my gun and you have your own."

The woman grunted. "You talk plenty, mister, but the words don't mean anything."

He sighed again, more audibly this time. "I've told you once. Barda isn't here. I don't even know the man."

The woman's gun faltered. Her hand began to tremble just the slightest. She breathed noisily.

"Your wife?" she finally asked. "It was *your* wife?"

"Yes." He got up, went over to the small table upon which rested the whiskey bottle. He poured himself a stiff drink.

"I'm sorry for you, brother," she said. "I can mean that from the heart. I can really mean that. And where do you think they'd go?"

Doctor Halloran raised the whiskey to his lips, let the fluid burn there a moment. Then the faintest suggestion of a grin crossed his eyes.

"They say Las Vegas is a winter playground," he murmured.

"Yeah. Vegas. That sounds like Paul. Anywhere just so long as there's plenty of gambling. I'll take you up on that car business. I'll ditch it somewhere to the south. Maybe Carson City. I can pick up another there. O.K.?"

"Carson City," he agreed.

"You want your gun? No, I'll take it along. It'd be a nice gesture in Vegas, wouldn't it? I think you'd like that."

Doctor Halloran watched the woman drive away with Paul Barda's convertible. He waited several minutes and then went to the telephone, dialed Police Headquarters. Outside a sleigh full of kids went by noisily. Christmas Eve carols.

"I'd like to report a stolen car," he said. The voice on the other end told him to hang on. Then: "Stolen Car Division. Avila speaking. What make? What's the license?"

The instrument seemed made of lead, it was so heavy. He shuffled it in his hand. "I . . ." he said hesitantly.

"Yeah? What's the dope. What car? You still there?"

Doctor Halloran dropped the phone in its cradle. "Never mind," he whispered to no one.

He went to the bedroom, looked down at his wife. She was sleeping the heavy relaxed sleep of a drugged person. He went over to the window, raised the shade and looked out at the thick glittering snowfall. It was going to be a beautiful white Christmas in Reno this year.

MURDER TOPS THE



**A Carmody and O'Leary
Novelette**

By

ROBERT C. DENNIS

CAST



If you think tackling a woman on a wet hillside with lead singing through the air is nice work, forget it.

THAT part of Hollywood Boulevard lying between North Ivar and Highland Avenue is either eight or nine blocks long, depending on which side of the street you're on. And there are, at any given hour of the day, three screwballs per block, either side of the street! I counted them once.

For instance, when I came around the corner from my office building—which is on Ivar—a silver-blonde girl wearing dark glasses, purple slacks and a mink coat sailed past behind two over-sized greyhounds in harness. I wondered why she didn't just get a cart and let those beasts work for her. They were as big as a team of horses anyhow.

Watching them I nearly ran into a small man who quacked at me like a real duck. It scared the hell out of me. You don't expect to encounter a duck on a busy street.

Before I'd recovered, a woman in a hand-me-down blue hat with cherries put a tract in my hand. "Peace, brother," she said, "Read this and awaken." The tract had a big heading: **THE TRUTH SHALL MAKE YOU FREE.** Deciding I'd read it the next time I had a free moment, I put it in my pocket. In the next block an uninhibited youth with rosy cheeks blew past me singing Italian opera, half in a lusty baritone and half in a very

It was old stuff for Carmody, the henpecked sleuth, to be part of a shadowing operation, but he was usually on the tail-end of the deal. It was a new twist to find his own tracks dogged—and by a beautiful blonde at that.

lovely soprano, all for his own amazement. Either way, he sounded better than my bathroom rendition of *Chloe*.

BROODING about this, I didn't pay much attention to the wiry little man who was planted in my path with a large camera. He leered at me. "Ya just been screen-tested, buddy."

The yellow card he pushed into my hand informed me that for fifty cents I could have an unposed candid photograph of myself, postcard size. The scarcity of film had kept the streets clear of this particular pest during the war, but now they were crawling out of their hollow logs. I dropped the card carefully into the gutter. I thought I could live without an unposed candid photograph of myself.

A little further on I saw a girl standing in a safety zone waiting for a street car. She wore very brief shorts and a peasant blouse that had slipped down off one shoulder. She was reading a magazine, oblivious to the traffic that swished past on both sides of her. For one reason or another, most of the drivers were missing the traffic lights at that corner and there were a lot of squealing tires. She wasn't anything you'd look at three times—on the beach.

I took one look at her legs and remembered I was on my way to the lobby of the Hollywood-Roosevelt to pick up Margaret O'Leary for lunch. It was nearly twelve-thirty then, so I gave up counting screwballs for the time being. At the corner before Highland Avenue I crossed to the south side of the Boulevard where there was a shoeshine stand in the vestibule of a building. I thought that Maggie, who was out of a job at the moment anyway, wouldn't mind waiting another five minutes in the interests of good grooming. I'd recently blossomed out as a well-dressed young man, including a pair of thirty-dollar shoes, due to a case which had paid off better than a thousand bucks.

A colored boy pointed me to the last seat away from the street. This stand was against the right-hand wall of the

vestibule, facing a long mirror on the opposite side. The angle of vision was such that I could see diagonally across the intersection of Hollywood and Highland. Without the mirror I couldn't have seen around the corner of the vestibule. Without the mirror I wouldn't have discovered I was being tailed!

There wasn't any doubt about it. That face had been in the background just a little too casually and a little too often during the last two or three days. I'd noted it unconsciously and then dismissed it. But this time there was nothing casual about it. My tail was peering intently across the intersection and nervously smoking a cigarette while waiting for me to appear.

Maybe it isn't such an unusual switch for a private detective to find himself being shadowed. I've had it happen to me before, once or twice. But never like this. This was one more screwball for my list. My shadow was about as gorgeous a blonde as you'll find, even on Hollywood Boulevard!

I thought it over while the boy put a high sheen on my new shoes, and decided I'd better look into this. There was something decidedly unfriendly about it, although I wasn't working at the moment. In fact my only prospect was a letter that'd come this morning from a doctor in East Peoria—and he hadn't said a word about luscious blondes. I wondered if somebody was fixing to get even with me for something in the past, but I couldn't think who or what. I'd just have to ask her.

When I emerged into the bright glare of the street I didn't look toward the blonde. I moved on to the corner and waited till the traffic light let me cross Highland. Now we were parallel, with the Boulevard between us, and, sure enough, the blonde began drifting along with me.

But I fooled her. I turned abruptly into the drugstore on the corner. Now I could see her through the glass door, out in the bright sunshine, while she couldn't see me in the comparative gloom of the store. She reversed herself, came back to the corner, then started across. She

wasn't losing any time either, in case I was trying to shake her. Little did she know.

When she was almost to the curb, I slipped quietly out the side entrance onto Highland.

That had her completely befuddled. When I walked in the front door again, she was standing about halfway back to the phone booths with a blank expression on her beautiful pan. She was trying to figure out where I'd vanished to. I came up close behind her and said brightly: "Here I am!"

She whirled around so suddenly she walked all over my brand new shoe-shine. "Oh!" she gasped. "Where—I thought—" Then she caught up with herself. "What in the world are you talking about?"

"It's been fun," I said. "Really it has. I always did enjoy this particular game but, honest, I'm in a hurry right now. Why in blazes are you following me around?"

"Following—*you*?" She laughed with a great and phony delight. She was a big girl, nicely proportioned, with large blue eyes in a face that had to be compared to an unusually beautiful cow. Bovine was the word, in the very nicest sense. "Why in the world would I be following you?"

"Now, that's just what I've been asking myself. But you were. You were in the lobby of my office building yesterday and I think the day before that when I came out at noon. You ate lunch at the same place—two different restaurants,"

I added quickly, to squelch any rebuttal on that point. "And you followed me back to the office both times. Today you've been sniffing my footprints all the way down Hollywood Boulevard. Sister, I give up, what is it that you want from me?"

She made a few dramatic gestures, strictly from Stanislavsky, to register complete exasperation, and looked around for someone to give her strength. But the only person paying any attention was a soda jerk, handsome enough to be a leading man. His interest was sincere, but academic.

"I'm sure," the blonde stated frigidly, "I don't know what you can be talking about. And I wish you would cease annoying me."

"All right," I said, "I'll cease. But let's find a cop and get this straightened out. I've got a jealous girl friend who takes a very dim view of my having blondes tail me around. Personally, I like it, but she's narrow minded. So let's get it settled right now."

I was bluffing with a busted flush, because no cop in the world would be silly enough to take my word against this doll's, and anyhow what did I have to complain about? But I just wanted to see how she would react to the mention of police. I found out. She shoved past me, in a slightly undignified rush, for the exit, stepping on one of my shoes again. And did I mention she was a large girl? The last I saw of her she was going out the front door, her blonde hair bobbing on her shoulders.



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THE handsome soda jerk clucked commiseratingly, "That's the way it goes, pal. Some days you just can't lay up a cent!"

"Ain't it the truth!" I agreed. I started to tell him I had something even nicer waiting for me in the lobby of the Hollywood-Roosevelt, but I saw it was now five to one, and I wasn't sure Maggie would be waiting.

Now that she was unemployed and couldn't afford to be independent about things like a free lunch, she had, of course, become very independent. I hurried outside and did the last couple of blocks to the Hollywood-Roosevelt at a modified dogtrot, causing two mid-western school teachers to stare down their noses at me and murmur something about, "These Hollywood screwballs!"

I found O'Leary sitting on a divan reading a newspaper. All I could see of her were her legs, but I'd know them any place, any time. Bar none, they are the most gorgeous legs in Hollywood. They are an argument for slacks on all other women. I ogled them fondly until a dowager sitting nearby cleared her throat disapprovingly. Maggie lowered the paper.

"Why, Margaret," I exclaimed. "I didn't know it was you behind that paper. I've been searching the whole lobby for you."

"Ever since twelve o'clock?" she said coldly. "You are a stinkin' liar, Willie. You've probably been chasing a blonde."

I had a fast answer for that one on the tip of my tongue, but I held it. It could only lead to trouble. I sat down on the divan beside her. "What's in the news?"

She opened the paper up again, cutting off the dowager's view, so I gave her a kiss on the cheek. She blushed all over her pretty Irish face. "Not here!" she said. "Behave, Willie. I want you to read about the burglary at Lida Randolph's."

"I read it," I told her. "For breakfast. What about it?"

"There might be a job for you!" she said impatiently. "Or have you quit

the detective business since you made a couple of hundred dollars?"

"Eleven hundred and eighteen dollars," I said indignantly. "The only thing I've quit is taking any business from movie stars. From here in I'm legitimate."

"Are you already working on something?"

"I've got a client—in East Peoria—but I need help on it. I'll tell you about it while we're having lunch." We got up and left the lobby, with the dowager shaking her head sadly at O'Leary for letting herself get picked up so brazenly.

While we waited for the waiter to bring our shrimp salad, I reread the letter from Doctor Henry Bressette. I'd given it only a glance when it came in the morning's mail because it didn't sound like a big fee, and anyhow it was more in O'Leary's line. The doctor wanted a confidential report on a Felix DeCoudre, a movie producer, and as O'Leary used to be a fan magazine writer, she'd probably know all about him.

It was an oddly worded letter, I noted now, reading it aloud to O'Leary, very guarded and reticent but with an undercurrent that I couldn't quite grasp. Or maybe I was imagining it all. One sentence seemed significant: *Anything unusual or questionable concerning this man I would like to have immediately, in advance of your complete report. Please contact me at once if you learn anything of a disturbing nature . . .*

He ended the letter with the explanation that he'd come across my name in a syndicated movie column. He said, too, that he would be happy to pay my regular fee for a job of this kind. That made us both happy.

"If he's connected with the movies," I told O'Leary casually, "you'll do a better job anyway. Why don't you rack your brain and then whip up a long report on DeCoudre. We'll charge the good doctor twenty-five dollars or so. You'll be doing me a favor, Maggie."

"Stop being subtle, Willie," she said. "You're trying to lend me money again. Are you afraid I'm not eating regularly?"

"Somebody has got to worry about

that," I said. "And if you won't borrow money, you can work for it. I can't stand skinny girls anyhow."

SHE got out a handkerchief and blew her nose. Her long black eyelashes blinked rapidly. "You'll have my mascara running, baby. It didn't occur to me you were really worrying. When I—I think of a big oaf who doesn't know enough to come in out of the rain worrying about *me*, I get all s-squishy inside!"

The waiter brought our lunch before she broke down and blubbered. I said kindly: "I do that to all women. Killer Carmody I was known as in my younger days. You either got it or you haven't."

"Like dandruff," O'Leary said tartly, her old sweet self again. "DeCoudre used to be a big producer with Coronet. He got into a mess two or three years ago and dropped out of the picture business. That's about all I know."

"What was the mess?"

She shook her head. "Something about a girl who died at a party—I never heard any of the details. It was hushed up . . . Give me a nickel. I'll get the details."

I gave her the nickel. "I'll put it on the expense account."

She was gone about ten minutes and she had a thoughtful look on her face when she came back. "This might be harder than I thought. The girl who died was named Elaine Jordan, but I couldn't find out anything more than that about her. DeCoudre's contract expired a few months after her death and Coronet dropped him like a bar of soap in a shower. I guess it took all his money to get it taken care of. There were no charges laid, but no other studio would touch him after that. He's supposed to be all washed up in this town."

"Supposed to be?" I asked.

"Well, there's been rumors of his making a comeback with an independently produced picture. Of course there're always rumors like that, but I think there might be something in it this time. It comes from a pretty good source. And recently he's opened an office on Vine Street."

"None of that sounds like it would interest a doctor in East Peoria," I pointed out. "He wouldn't have any connection with the Jordan girl or he wouldn't have waited this long to investigate it. What do you think?"

"I think you ought to forget it and go to work," O'Leary said flatly. "I got my information from Lida Randolph, and I casually mentioned the matter of the burglary. She wants you to get in touch with her."

"I wouldn't get close enough to the lady to touch her with a ten-foot pole. Figuratively speaking, of course. She's a well-turned bit of femininity."

"If you care for the middle-aged type," O'Leary said coldly. "The first movie I was allowed to see as a child, she was in it."

"She carries her age well. But I'll forget about her, if you insist."

"Well, I don't insist! It's a job, and a good one. She told me she'd lost two fur coats and a lot of other stuff. She'd pay plenty to get that back."

"Baby, I've already got more money than brains." I got up. "I just remembered—I've got to make a phone call, too." I knew that she'd browbeat me into taking the job unless I got busy on something else. And Bressette might consider this information disturbing enough to want to know about it immediately. Maybe I could promote the doctor into retaining me on something big that had nothing to do with movie stars. With that thought in my busy little brain, I put in a long distance call to East Peoria, Illinois.

CHAPTER TWO

Hollywood Headlights

DOCTOR BRESSETTE sounded like a nice, small town physician; in a quiet, grave voice he thanked me for being so prompt with my services and so thoughtful as to phone him. I told him what O'Leary had known about Felix DeCoudre.

After a moment's silence, he said: "I see. I was afraid it would be bad, but

not this bad. Mr. Carmody, I—I need some additional help. Would you consider handling another matter for me?"

I told him I thought I could.

"It has to do with my daughter, Laurie. She's in Hollywood now, has been there for seven months. Recently I learned she was employed by a concern with a very doubtful reputation. In her letters she said she was working for this man DeCoudre . . ."

Laurie, it seemed, had come to Hollywood to—naturally—break into pictures. Apparently, she was an adopted daughter, spoiled and headstrong, with a sure-fire device of always getting her own way. All she'd had to do was suggest that if she were their own daughter she would be permitted to go to Hollywood. Bressette didn't say that—in fact, I didn't think he was aware that she even used the gag. But Laurie came to Hollywood.

"Didn't you let her know about DeCoudre's reputation?"

"Of course, but it was a mistake. For the past three months we've had only brief notes from her, and she ignores any direct questions."

"What do you want me to do?"

Doctor Bressette sounded just faintly embarrassed. "I want my daughter to come home, Mr. Carmody. I don't know how that can be accomplished, but I wish you would talk to her. If that fails, perhaps a talk with DeCoudre will help."

I said: "It sounds more like a job for Dorothy Dix than for a private detective."

"I know it does, but somehow I feel you can do it." He said something to the effect that my fast work on DeCoudre's past had given him a great deal of confidence in me.

I made modest sounds into the receiver, but in the face of such faith I had to agree to hunt up Laurie Bressette and give her a fatherly little talk. The only address the doctor had was a P.O. number, but I knew I could get in touch with her through DeCoudre's new office on Vine Street. Then I thought of something. "What does your daughter look like?"

"She has dark hair and brown eyes. Small, around a hundred pounds. A very lively, reckless girl."

"O.K." I said. It would have been too good to be true. Even a Hollywood make-up man couldn't make a big blue-eyed blonde out of that. I told the doctor not to worry about a thing, I'd have a report for him in a day or two at the latest.

He thanked me and hung up. He sounded like a very nice guy. He'd talked for nearly fifteen minutes long-distance without worrying about the charges we were running up. That suggested he would pay my fee without quibbling . . .

I went back and joined O'Leary. "I just got hired to shepherd a wayward daughter back to East Peoria. She's under contract to DeCoudre and the family doesn't like the idea. That knocks out the Randolph job."

O'Leary said: "Why don't you go out and clinch Randolph's job first? Then you could let it slide until you had more time. She said she lost at least ten thousand dollars worth and you'd get ten per cent. That would be a thousand dollars."

"I've already got a thousand dollars." I reached for the check to show her that the subject was closed. I was *not* going to fool around with any more movie stars. I didn't see what I'd ever accomplish anyhow. Somebody had prowled Randolph's Beverly Hills' mansion one night when she was out and if there were any clues, the cops would have them. Besides, it was one of a long series of burglaries by the same gang apparently, and the police ought to be getting a pattern by now. They'd do Randolph a lot more good than I would. I said: "You dig up some more dope on DeCoudre in case I have to argue with him. I'll split the fee with you."

"I refuse to accept your charity," O'Leary said haughtily. "I have my pride." She left me standing in the bright warm sun on Hollywood Boulevard, scratching my skull. Now what had I done? Sometimes I find women, even Mrs. O'Leary's nice daughter Margaret, a difficult proposition.

Presently, I gave up and walked over to Vine Street to do some fast work on finding Laurie Bressette. I'd swallowed all the nice things her old man had told me about being a good detective, a human bloodhound. Ten minutes later I was William Carmody again, a second-rate private eye . . .

At DeCoudre's office a secretary, with shell-rimmed glasses and a coax-me-to-take-them-off look, said Laurie's option had expired months ago and she was no longer under contract to DeCoudre. Furthermore, she hadn't the least idea where Laurie might be now. With a little bit of urging she did hunt up the file and discovered that Laurie had gone to work in a film rental library on Selma Avenue. That was the best she could do. I said thanks, and left without coaxing her to take off her glasses. I wanted to talk to Laurie before she left for the evening.

I walked seven blocks to the address on Selma. I should have saved the wear and tear on my new thirty-dollar shoes. The Anselmo Film Library was out of business. The windows were covered and the furniture had been taken out. I stood there and muttered a few dirty words under my breath. Maybe there was a fast way of locating Laurie, but all I could think of was to cover the P.O. box in the Hollywood post office and that could turn out to be a very long and very dull vigil.

Not very hopefully I went next door, which was a bar. A fat, curly-haired barman said immediately and positively

that he knew nothing whatever about the Anselmo Film Library. I said: "Did a little dark-haired, brown-eyed girl ever come in here?"

"Yeah. At least fifty of them."

"From next door?"

"I wouldn't be knowing," he said. "Maybe she did. I just wouldn't remember. Care for anything to drink?"

I said no, and went back to the phone booth. The yellow telephone directory listed the Anselmo Film Library: *16 mm Sound and Silent—Travel—Educational—Religious—Operators Furnished With Complete Equipment.*

But Anselmo's first name wasn't given, so I couldn't get his home address. In disgust I went back to my office.

AFTER I had killed the remaining two inches of whiskey in a pint I kept stashed away in the file cabinet, my cares lightened slightly. I carefully set the bottle on the floor and debated the question of going out for another one and really latching on to a real binge.

Then the phone rang. I thought it was O'Leary calling to apologize for being so shirty with me. Instead, a voice as cold and implacable as a grave digger's spade said: "A word to the wise, Carmody. If you want to live, forget about Laurie Bressette. You can't do anything for her now!"

Then the phone started humming in my ear again. My hands were suddenly wet with perspiration, but the office was cold. I could have used another pint of



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liquor right then. That voice was straight out of my worst nightmare. I'd never before heard anything so menacing. Not that I was scared—I told myself. But when I stood up, my foot accidentally knocked the empty bottle clattering across the floor and I damned near fainted.

I spent the following forenoon in the United States Post Office, Hollywood Station, waiting for Laurie to show. There was a letter in her box—probably from Doctor Bressette—so she'd likely be in some time today. If she were coming. That voice on the telephone yesterday had given me a bad night.

What worried me most was how he'd gotten on to me so fast. I'd only taken the job a couple of hours before he called. There was a leak somewhere.

But all I could do was stand there in the post office and stew. I couldn't do anything for her now, he'd said. Maybe that meant she'd never come. But there wasn't anything I could do but wait.

At twelve o'clock she hadn't come, so I stepped out to a drugstore. I had a sandwich and a cup of coffee. All the time I was watching the post office entrance through the window. Nobody resembling Laurie Bressette's description went in. I took a chance and had a shoeshine in a barber shop before going back.

The moment I entered the P. O. again, my sixth sense told me I'd pulled a boner. Laurie had been there and gone, my bones told me. Mumbling some bad words, I went over and peered into Box 4972 . . . A sixth sense is a valuable asset to the successful private detective—if he has it.

I didn't have it. The letter was still there. I didn't know whether to feel relieved or scared.

A post office, I discovered, is not an entertaining place to spend a day. After awhile you get tired of watching screwballs; counting the number of boxes; or doodling on the backs of money order forms. Finally, to keep from jumping the rails altogether, I sat down at the United States Army Recruiting desk and let a sergeant give me his pitch. I still

think I'd have ended up back in the Army if the girl hadn't come for the letter in Box 4972.

And even then I nearly missed her. I watched her go up to the box, open it, take out the letter, glance at it, and start to leave. I'd been waiting for a small girl, with dark hair and brown eyes. This girl was a large blonde with the face of a beautiful cow. She was outside again before I realized it was my playmate of yesterday.

I got a lot of satisfaction out of following her this time. I was better at it, too. She took a couple of glances behind, as if to make sure no one was on her tail, but I made sure she didn't see me. I hung on behind like she was towing me, until she turned into an apartment house near Hollywood High School.

With my hat down over my eyes, I pulled up close enough to see what apartment she entered. Then I gave her five minutes to read the letter. When she answered my knock, I said: "Well, here I am again!"

I got the feeling she wasn't glad to see me; only fast footwork kept the door from being slammed in my face. And what that did to the new shine on my thirty-dollar shoes made me wince. She was a pretty husky gal but I outweighed her by fifty pounds. When I put my shoulder into it, the door came open. "What do you want?" she demanded indignantly. "Leave here immediately or I'll call the manager. Who do you think you are, breaking into people's apartments!"

"Turn it off, sister," I told her. "I followed you here from the post office."

She cringed away at that, eyes big, the back of one hand pressing against her mouth. Every gesture right out of the book, and not very good. Summer stock in a barn theater, I thought. I might have developed that line into something sharp, but she didn't give me a chance.

All at once she stopped retreating, took two steps toward me, and flung herself into my arms. I think she was portraying passion and abandonment, and with a good leading man, it might

have been effective. But I wasn't quite expecting it, and she damned near knocked me down. She was too big for that sort of stuff.

Back on my heels, all I could do was grab her and that really put us in a clinch. Her full lips mashed themselves against mine and like it or not, I got well kissed. I liked it all right. She had on enough lipstick to paint the side of a barn, and she was pretty awkward getting in close but after that she did all right. No complaints.

When I got my wind back, I said: "I don't want to appear ungrateful, but we've got to talk about it sooner or later. If you've got any more tricks for stalling, we'll rush through them and then get down to business."

"Won't you just go away," she pleaded. "Don't ask any questions, just go." Even her dramatics didn't hide the fact she was scared. I would have felt sorry for her, if I didn't have Laurie to worry about. And I was worried. I'd liked her old man's voice on the phone and he was worried, so I was too.

"There're questions that have to be asked," I told the blonde. "Either by me or the police, and I'm easier to get along with."

CHAPTER THREE

The Golden Dome

SHE let go of a long breath. I was better than the cops. "What do you want to know?"

"Where's Laurie Bressette?"

"I don't know."

"When did you last see her?"

"Three months ago." She got out a compact and a piece of tissue and wiped some of the lipstick off her face. It had gotten pretty well smeared around.

"Three months and a week."

"Did you know her well?" I asked.

She nodded, reaching for a cigarette. "We shared this apartment."

"Tell me the story," I said.

Without any more dramatics, she smoked and talked, and this was the gist of it: Her name was Eva Vaughn,

and she was a singer in a little night club on Melrose while waiting for the movies to discover her, just like Laurie Bressette. Laurie had been under contract to some producer for a while—DeCoudre obviously—but it had lapsed. Then she'd taken a job as a clerk in a film rental library—Anselmo's. She had a boy friend named Danny Lawson, a sometime radio actor. That was the background, and that was all.

Three months and one week ago, she hadn't come home. One small suitcase was gone. Eva hadn't seen her nor heard from her since.

"Her family in East Peoria have been hearing from her," I said.

Eva flushed and stared down at her cigarette. "I wrote those letters. I typed them on a machine in a typing class at Hollywood Evening High School and signed Laurie's name."

"Why?" I asked, not being very bright today.

She handed me the letter she'd taken from Box 4972 a few minutes ago. There were a couple of sheets from Laurie's mother, which I didn't read. From her father was a check for a hundred and fifty dollars.

"There's been one of these every month," she said. "I wasn't stealing the money. I was just borrowing. When the first one came I was out of a job and I couldn't meet the rent. I knew Laurie wouldn't want me to lose the apartment, no matter what. So—I endorsed the check and cashed it. After that, the checks always seemed to come just when I needed money . . ."

"But what about Laurie?" I demanded. "Didn't you wonder where she was, or if she was all right?"

"Not at first. It wasn't the first time she'd been away for a few days. I thought she was with Danny Lawson, her boyfriend. I'd cashed the first of the checks before I saw Danny."

A sick feeling was settling in my stomach. "What did he say?"

"He didn't know a thing. They'd had a fight and he hadn't come around for a couple of weeks, so he didn't know she'd gone."

"How about Lawson—could he have done something to her?"

She shook her head emphatically at that. "Danny is nuts about her and he's been worried silly ever since."

"But that's been three months!" I yelled. "Good Lord, didn't he do anything?"

"What could he do?" Eva shrugged her shoulders. "He thought she'd gone home to her family in Peoria. And he didn't have their address, so he couldn't write to them."

And as long as those checks were coming in Eva wasn't telling him. I made myself calm down. "Have you got Doctor Bressette's letters to Laurie?"

"Yes." She got them out of a drawer.. "Look, Mr. Carmody, don't think I haven't been worried silly about Laurie. She's kinda wild, but a sweet kid. But look at the position I was in—I could be arrested over those checks. I've been waiting until I could save up enough money to pay it back before I did anything. You see that, can't you?"

"Oh, sure!" I said. "I suppose Bressette mentioned me in one of his letters?"

She nodded. "I knew then I was in for trouble, so I thought if I went to you and talked it over, you'd give me a break. But—I lost my nerve every time and just followed you around. Then you caught me yesterday, and I was so scared I couldn't tell you."

She came up close and I braced myself in case she tried throwing herself again. I was relieved when she didn't. By this time I didn't like her very well. God knows where Laurie Bressette was now—probably dead in a ditch somewhere, taking the Voice's warning at face value—and all the blonde thought of was those monthly checks.

"What are you going to do, Mr. Carmody? Are you going to arrest me?"

"Not me." I said. "I'm going to find Laurie, if I can. What she might want to do, or her father, I wouldn't know." I took Bressette's letters and walked to the door. "Where can I find Danny Lawson?"

"I don't know where he lives," she said, in a subdued voice. "Maybe they'll

know at the Golden Dome. That's a bar they hung around a lot."

I said: "Don't cash that last check," and went downstairs.

I WALKED over to the Boulevard and got the address of the Golden Dome out of the phone book in a drugstore. It was just a saloon without any dome, golden or otherwise. The only other customer was a horse-player going over a form chart spread out on the bar. The bartender wore gold-rimmed glasses and looked like a book-keeper. I asked him if he knew Laurie Bressette.

"Little dark-haired girl?" he said. "Sure. Used to come in her a lot. She and a young feller named Danny something."

"Hasn't she been in recently?"

He shook his head regretfully, as if he'd missed her. "Not for months. Guess she went back home to the folks. Nearly broke Danny's heart, I guess. He used to get crying drunk telling me about it."

I ordered a beer and when he brought it I asked: "What is Danny like?"

"Mild little guy, works at NBC or CBS or one of the radio stations. He was crazy about that girl. She used to give him a rough time—not that she didn't seem to like him a lot! But she was always doing things that upset him." He leaned closer, confidentially. "One night a bunch of them were in here and somebody wanted to know why we didn't have a floor show. Well, do you know what Laurie did?"

"You better tell me."

"She put a nickel in the juke box and started to do a strip tease, right out there on the floor. Yessir! She got about half her clothes off before Danny made her quit. Of course, I was trying to talk her out of it," he added righteously, "but cripes, how do you handle a dame like that?"

"How did Danny handle her?" I asked.

"I dunno—just said, Please don't do that, Laurie. And right away, she quit it. She stopped for him. I could never figure out why she went away without telling him goodbye even."

"Does he still come in here?"

"Not so much lately. If he's coming though, it'll be just about now."

I thought I'd like to have a look at him, even though he didn't sound like anyone who'd be responsible for any harm coming to Laurie. I waited about ten minutes, but my patience had been used up waiting all day at the post office. I told the barman to tell Danny about me if he came in. I left my office phone number.

Then I started back to the office, too worried to pay much attention to the screwballs. They were out in full force though. In front of the Egyptian Theatre a couple of little newsboys were trading a lot of wild punches. Nobody paid much attention except a pair of sports who were putting their money down on the outcome. I circled around them and went on. A street photographer took my picture again and I carried the yellow coupon—that with fifty cents would get me an unposed, candid photograph of myself—for three blocks, without realizing it. When I got to the corner of Ivar I straightened out long enough to throw the coupon away.

In front of my office building somebody called my name and I saw O'Leary sitting in her car waiting for me. I motioned her to move over, and I slid under the wheel. She caught a flash of my face and said quickly: "What is it, Willie. What's wrong?"

"Trouble, I'm afraid," I said. "I'm looking for a girl who's been missing for three months. Nobody knows where she went, or why. Her roommate is the only one who knows she's missing, and she's so busy covering up for herself she hasn't had time to care."

I told her the whole story, and showed her the packet of letters from Doctor Bressette to his daughter. "This is all I've got to go on."

"Let's go through them," O'Leary said. "He might refer to something—or someone—that Laurie mentioned in one of her letters."

"That's what I had in mind." I split the pack in two and we started reading. The sun was warm on the back of my

neck, and it was no day for trouble. But I had it. . . .

O'Leary found the only important lead. In a letter dated about the time Laurie disappeared, the doctor had written:

. . . . had a letter from young Bill Phipps today. He's in the Navy, if you remember, stationed in Long Beach. He made an odd remark that has worried me quite a bit. He learned, somehow, that you were in Hollywood (although he said nothing about calling on you) and he says that the "outfit" you're working for has a very bad reputation. I've been wondering, ever since, if you wouldn't be wiser to find another job . . .

"That ties up one loose end," I admitted. "I wondered how he knew about DeCoudre. But I don't know whether he was referring to DeCoudre, the Anselmo Film Library, or someone else."

"I guess the next step is for you to get in touch with this Bill Phipps," O'Leary decided. "That ought to clear up some of the mystery. But it sounds to me like Mr. DeCoudre."

"He's got a very bad reputation," I agreed. I started to push my hat back off my forehead, when someone reached in and tipped it down over my eyes. I thought it was a wise guy, until something hard rammed into the back of my collar. I left the hat where it was. And I wasn't interested in the caliber of the gun.

And then a voice—that Voice—said: "You've had one warning, Carmody. You don't get any more. Forget about Laurie Bressette."

A LOT of things have scared me in my time, but I've never had cold chills from listening to a voice before. I swear I broke out in goose flesh, and it wasn't the gun in the back of my neck, it was that voice. At the same time I was aware of the incredible fact that this was happening on a busy street in Hollywood, with people stream-

ing by within two feet of us. From under the brim of my hat I could see O'Leary's face, as white as a cigarette paper, just staring at me. I found out later that she couldn't see him because of my head. He was carrying a top coat over one arm in such a way that it concealed the gun. And his mouth, just inches away from my ear, said: "Keep looking for her, Carmody, and you'll find her—a piece at a time. You'll get her ears in the mail, to start with!"

The gun went away from my neck. The icicles started melting on my spine. With a shaky hand I pushed my hat brim up and got my head out the window.

"My Irish grandmother!" O'Leary gasped. "That voice would scare Lucifer!"

The street was crowded. I caught a flash of his back, and that was all. It could have been anybody's back. Blue coat, gray hat. Then just as he swung around the corner I saw his hand go up and a piece of yellow paper flutter out. For a second that didn't register and then abruptly the ubiquitous past, the street photographer, crossed my vision. I gave a little yelp and lunged out of the car. Women and children were practically trampled in the rush. But I got the coupon. For fifty cents I'd soon have a candid, unposed photograph of the man with the voice.

On the way back to O'Leary's car I handed the photographer a dollar. He took it, but by the look on his face I knew he thought I was another Hollywood screwball.

"That's the second time," I told O'Leary bitterly. "He knows what I'm doing as soon as I do it. How does he do it?"

She looked just as white as I felt. "I don't know, Willie."

"Here," I handed her the coupon. "Send this in, so we'll get a picture of him. I want to know him if I see him again. I'm getting tired of this game."

She took the coupon and left. I went upstairs and started telephoning. Getting in touch with sailor Bill Phipps was involved, but not difficult. He was in

Los Angeles on a twenty-four hour pass. I called the service club in Pershing Square and got his buddy there. The buddy promised to have Phipps in my office in two hours, if he had to carry him.

I didn't get the significance of that until a baby-faced blonde girl showed up at three-thirty towing the Navy, which was obviously in distress. He was just drunk enough to be belligerent, a beardless, peach-skinned kid with unhappy blue eyes and nice teeth. He was all of nineteen. "Your name Carmody?" he demanded. "I'm Bill Phipps—Seaman First Class. My buddy says you wanted to see me."

"That's right, Bill. I—"

"Look," he interrupted with a serviceman's resentment of any civilian authority, real or fancied, "I got nothing to talk about. I never heard of you before."

I said: "It's about Laurie Bressette, Bill."

"Oh," he said. "That's different." He straightened up abruptly, not nearly as drunk as he'd pretended. He turned to the baby-faced blonde. "Look, sugar, take a walk around the block. I'll pick you up later."

She didn't like the idea so well, but apparently she didn't want to get involved with a detective of any kind. When she'd slammed the door behind her, Bill gave me a nod. "O.K. now. What's with Laurie?"

I told him about Doctor Bressette's letter and our phone conversation. He interrupted once to clear up one point. He'd never heard of Felix DeCoudre. All he knew was that Laurie was working for some wrong people and he'd tipped off the family.

"She's a nice girl," he explained. "I never knew her very well, but I knew she oughtn't be doing what she was doing."

"That's why I called you, Bill. How did you find out about her—and what?"

His fresh, clean face got red. "That's kind of a story," he said. "Maybe I'd better tell it to you from the start . . . Y'see, during the war I was on the

Saratoga and one of our petty officers was a guy who's in the movies. He never had such big parts, but I guess he did pretty good just the same. Well, me and my buddy got to know him pretty well before he got his discharge a year ago. He invited us to visit him in Hollywood some time, said he'd show us a good time. So about three months ago we did."

"What's his name?" I asked.

He looked embarrassed. "I guess I'd rather not tell you that. He doesn't have anything to do with Laurie. Not directly . . . Y'see when we went to his house one day, he threw a pretty good stag party for us. There were a half dozen other friends of his there. Well," he got red in the face again, "we all got pretty high and then—this actor—he had a movie for us. One of these home-sized jobs."

I thought I could fill in the rest, but I let him tell it.

"Maybe you've seen one of those films." He couldn't quite meet my eyes. "It was worse than any peep show or burlesque I ever saw and I've seen some hot ones! It was . . ."

"I know the kind," I said. "And you recognized Laurie in the particular picture."

He nodded. "She was the only one. A strip tease. . . ." He left that hanging. "It got me, seeing a nice girl from your own home town doing something like that. I couldn't go for that stuff." He must have remembered the baby-faced tramp he'd brought in with him then, for he burned like an electric heater. "You know how it is with sailors," he said defensively. "People expect that sort of stuff. But cripes, the Bressettes are damn nice people!"

He hadn't wanted to squeal on Laurie, he explained, but he felt he had to do something. So he wrote to Doctor Bressette and mentioned, casually, that he'd heard bad things about the outfit she worked for. That was how he phrased it, not knowing about the Anselmo Film Library—or DeCoudre either for that matter. But the doctor immediately assumed the reference was to DeCoudre,

because Laurie was presumably still under contract to him.

Well, that completed the circle eliminating DeCoudre, and pointing the finger at Anselmo. I thought I knew practically everything now—except where Laurie was.

I took a chance on Bill and told him about her disappearance. He couldn't give me the slightest bit of help.

"That sounds pretty bad, doesn't it?" he asked. "What can we do?"

I told him what we could do. "You've got to call your actor friend. He's the only lead we have on this Anselmo film place. We've got to locate the people who run it. Unless I've guessed wrong, your friend rented the film from Anselmo, so he might know where they moved to after they left the place on Selma. It's all we have." I pointed to the phone. "I'll take a walk around the block while you find out all you can about Anselmo. We'll leave your friend out of it."

"O.K.," he said, and I took a walk. I debated, briefly, going to the police. Then I voted against it. I had an idea Doctor Bressette would rather I handled the matter. Once the cops came into it, the story of that dirty film would come out. The doctor wanted his daughter back—but not with all the lurid details in every newspaper from Los Angeles dailies to the East Peoria Weekly Gazette.

CHAPTER FOUR

Black Line or White?

WHEN I walked back into the office, Bill had Anselmo's number written down on the desk pad. His full name was John R. Anselmo, and the number was unlisted, so I couldn't have found it in the phone book. I dialed and a man's voice—just a voice—said: "Yes?"

"Mr. Anselmo?"

"Speaking."

"My name is Carmody. There's something I want to talk over with you. Where can we meet?"

"Talk about it now," he suggested.

"It's very confidential. You name the time and place."

"In the Rose Bowl some New Year's." He hung up without waiting for the laugh. It was all right; he didn't get one. I dialed him right back.

"I'm not going to waste time with you, Carmody." He sounded sore. "I don't know how you got this number."

I said: "Laurie Bressette told me."

This time he didn't hang up. After a time-out, he said: "Just what did you want?"

"Not a home movie," I assured him. "Where do you want to meet me?"

"Will my shop on Selma be satisfactory?"

"Yeah. In an hour?"

He said: "I'll try to make it in an hour," and hung up.

Bill Phipps watched me with worried eyes. "What do you think?"

"He's scared. I don't know why."

He fidgeted, then blurted it out. "Mr. Carmody, do you think Laurie is—well, could this be a white slavery thing?"

I gave him a cigarette before answering. I thought I knew what bothered him so. Laurie didn't mean a thing to him, as a girl, and Doctor Bressette was probably just somebody he knew in his home town. But he was young enough to draw a broad white line between right and wrong, good and bad. The Bressettes, including Laurie, were good, decent people. He could console his own conscience that a sailor was supposed to act like the popular conception of a sailor. But having Laurie involved in something sordid was to have dirt seeping over that white line into the right and good. He wasn't a very complicated person; but he was a darn good kid.

"I don't know, Bill," I said. "But believe me, I'm going to find out. In any case it might be a good idea if Doc Bressette never does know all the details. I talked to him on the phone today and I know he's a nice guy. So if I can get Laurie on a train for East Peoria, that ought to be enough. Right?"

He nodded but he was still worried. "How about the film?"

"I think I'll be able to get that, too." I didn't know how, but it seemed as though it was the crux of the affair. It might cost some money—unless I acted fast and smart.

I looked at my watch. "I guess I'd better get moving, Bill, I have a date, you know."

"Want me to come?"

"I don't think so. Call me tomorrow and I'll let you know what happened."

He got up, and I swear, he looked at least three years more grown up. "If you need any help satisfying Doc Bressette, let me know."

He left then. I watched him from the window as he came out on the street. He headed directly for a street car going downtown. That's where the Sixth Street Terminal was, where he'd catch a train back to Long Beach. I wondered what his baby-faced blonde pick-up would think at being deserted.

I didn't lose weight worrying.

The Anselmo Film Library looked just the same. The windows were still fogged over and the door locked as tight as ever. I rattled the knob, but nobody answered. I smoked a cigarette while waiting out the hour. Before it was up, I spotted a shine stand half a block down and across on the other side of the street. Now seemed a good chance to repair the damage done by Eva Vaughn's door. And I could keep an eye on Anselmo's door from there.

The chocolate-colored boy with a magnificent smile and spring fever in his bones was just starting on my second shoe when a tall figure turned into Anselmo's doorway. I could only see his general outline but he looked well over six feet and, like six o'clock, straight up and down. He wore a long top coat without any drape to it, so that his length and thinness was emphasized. Under a dark hat, his head looked small. His jaw was square jutting with no suggestion of a double chin. The late sun was behind him, and the shadow he laid down was twenty-feet long and drawn with ruler-straight lines.

I told the boy to shake it up.

Anselmo emerged from the doorway,

looked both ways, hesitating a moment. Then he shrugged narrow, square-shoulders and started up the street toward me. I thought I could get my shine and still intercept him at the corner. He wasn't hard to keep in sight, towering above the other people on the street.

When he was almost to the corner, he came clear of the crowd for a moment and immediately pulled up short, as if he just remembered something. The thing I noticed most was the way the rigid, ruler-drawn lines of his figure held their form for so long. Then, looking for all the world like one of those tall thin smoke stacks you see being dynamited in news reels, he started to come down.

YOU'VE seen those shots, the base crumples out, and the whole thing settles down for an instant, still straight and precise. Then even as it crumples, it goes over sideways, majestically, maintaining its shape and form till the last final round. . . .

Anselmo was a crumpled heap on the pavement before somebody screamed high over the rumble of the traffic. Belatedly, I picked the crack of a gun-shot off the sound-screen of my unconscious. The shot and Anselmo's crumpling had seemed so unrelated I didn't for a second pay enough attention to realize I'd heard it.

I was down off the shine stand and unaware of it. I started to run, out into the flowing traffic, which had slowed enough to let me get across. The scream had done that.

I'd moved fast, but even so a crowd had formed a tight ring around the man on the street. Out of the babble of voices as I elbowed through I caught the insistent theme: *Nobody had seen where the shot had come from!* A passing car, a gun in somebody's pocket on the street, from a window. Nobody knew. I broke through to the front row then, and saw what was left of Anselmo.

Lying face down, he looked seven feet long, and just as thin and straight as I'd thought. One arm was under his forehead. The other was bent at the elbow, with the fingers digging into the concrete as if he were trying to pull himself along. In the V below his arm-pit, a tiny, red river was snaking a course through the dust on the sidewalk. It seemed to be racing for the curb, like something alive trying to get into the gutter and out of sight, shunning the clean light of day.

A cop came pushing through behind me, in the fastest time, I thought, that a cop had ever arrived, when he was needed. *Don't be so cynical*, my mind told me. Always criticizing the police department. They do a good job, considering.

And they were something substantial and reliable. They performed certain prescribed acts that had to be done. While other people just stood around and stared, the police proceeded with a time-honored routine. In a moment the cop would tell us to break it up.

"Awright, break it up," the cop said. I looked at him with an idiotic grate-

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fulness. I'd been waiting for him to say it, and he'd said it. Everything was going to be all right now. Except that Anselmo was dead. Stone cold dead, I thought. All seven feet of him.

"You, too, buddy," the cop said, giving me a shove.

It felt good. I beamed at him. I started walking away. I was all the way to Hollywood Boulevard before I knew it. There a nice motherly-looking woman was giving away religious tracts. She gave me one. It said, in neat blue print: *Ye Must Be Born Again.*

"I don't think he can manage it," I said seriously. "Not with a bullet hole in him."

I was not being smart or sacrilegous. I was just numb. I'd never seen a man get shot down in the street before. It wasn't good to see. I kept thinking of all the things Anselmo might have had to do before he died, the appointments he had to keep, the people he had to see. Now it was too late; he'd never do anything. He'd never tell me where Laurie Bressette was.

The motherly woman was staring at me as if I were crazy. Probably I was. Or maybe she thought I was kidding her about the tract, and I wasn't. I was worried about that. I took out a ten-dollar bill and handed it to her.

"A donation," I said earnestly. "For a good cause . . . But I just don't think Anselmo will ever make it. He was murdered."

Shot, I thought. Shot down a block off Hollywood Boulevard and nobody saw who did it.

O'Leary didn't know anything about Anselmo's shooting till she came to my office the next day at noon. I saved her a nickel for a newspaper by giving her an eye-witness account.

"And that," I said wearily, "is one of my two leads gone. The Voice is the other one. What did you do about the picture?"

O'Leary looked troubled. She made a couple of meaningless gestures. "I went down there this morning and gave them the coupon. I got the picture, all right. . . . Do you think he shot Anselmo?"

"Who else?" I said impatiently. "Let's see it."

She tossed it on the desk. "Have a look."

It didn't take long to see why she'd been so unenthusiastic. Just as the picture was snapped, the Voice had put his hand up so that the lower half of his face was concealed. It was strictly an accident because he wasn't looking at the camera, apparently didn't know he was being photographed. I could see a pair of eyes under the brim of his hat and that was all. I'd stand a better chance of recognizing him from a rear view. At least I had seen the back of his neck.

I said: "Well, that's that. Now I haven't got anything to go on! Maybe I'd better just hand it over to the cops and be done with it. They—"

THE phone started to ring and I waved at O'Leary to take it. "If that's the police, I was just kidding."

"Hello—well, hello, Lieutenant Kissinger!"

I thought she was kidding but she wasn't. It was Lieutenant Kissinger all right, from Homicide. He wanted to talk to me.

"He isn't in right this minute, Lieutenant," O'Leary said, holding up two crossed fingers for me to witness. "Shall I have him call you . . . Why, Lieutenant, what a thing to say! Of course, he isn't right here. That rather hurts me, Lieutenant."

She could have been an actress. She sounded so wounded, Kissinger apologized all over the place. He always did like O'Leary—in a fatherly way. He didn't care for me in any way. I think he wanted to, for Maggie's sake, but there were so many things about me he just couldn't take.

If I were anything but a private dick he might have been a little warmer toward me. But he was simply incapable of understanding any attitude except the police department's and so he could only believe I was deliberately wilful if we didn't see eye to eye.

Presently O'Leary finished off her conversation and hung up. "The things I do for you," she complained. "Telling lies to the police! What are you going to do, Willie?"

"Give up, I guess. I haven't a thing to work on."

"You can still get Lida Randolph's job. She called me again this morning about you."

I gave her a sharp scrutiny. "Just why," I asked, "are you so anxious for me to take that job?"

"Well—it's . . . it's a job. And you need—"

"Save your little white lies for the cops, baby," I said unpleasantly. "You're ears get as red as a neon sign when you're lying."

"They do not," she snapped . . . "Do they really, Willie?"

"Absolutely. You're doomed to a lifetime of telling the truth. Tell it now."

"All right," she grinned ruefully. "Randolph knows DeCoudre well. She will put in a good word with him for me to do the publicity for his picture if you go to work for her."

"Fine thing!" I said. "Working for a guy like DeCoudre. Have you forgotten about Elaine Jordan?"

"That happened at a party. I'm just going to work for him." She came around behind me, put her arms on my shoulders and her nose in my hair. "He's really starting a comeback, Willie. It's a big chance for me. What difference does it make if DeCoudre is an old lecher. I won't have anything to do with him directly."

"Anyway at all I can't see him."

"Maybe the president of Standard Oil is a wife beater," she argued, "but every employee doesn't walk out on his job, does he?"

I couldn't win an argument with her if I had a lawyer to help.

Finally I told her to tell Lida Randolph I'd investigate her burglary. But I had my fingers crossed too. I wasn't going near her. As soon as Maggie got her publicity job I'd call Randolph and say I was stumped, and there was no fee.

"I'm still working on the Bressette case," I growled at O'Leary. "The police will turn up something on the Anselmo shooting. Somebody must have seen who fired that shot. I figured it out—it had to be somebody on the street."

O'Leary was reaching for the phone to call Randolph. "Maybe one of the street photographers got a picture of him."

"Hey!" My yell scared the phone right out of her hand. "That's it. The street photographer. He was there in the crowd. I remember seeing him now. He could have done it."

She put the phone down. "You're just guessing, Willie."

"Sure, I'm guessing. But look at it: somebody on the street shot Anselmo from behind. Nobody was near enough to him at the time to be able to hit him without aiming. Yet nobody saw him. A street photographer could aim his camera with the gun held against the side, and nobody would ever notice."

"Well," O'Leary conceded, "if he was next to the building he would be covered on that side."

"Sure. And that guy has been under my feet for two days. He was always just a camera before. I didn't realize until now it was always the same man behind it. He's been following me."

O'Leary said: "Willie, I think you've got it! It has to be him. It fits too perfectly. I'll bet we can get his name from the picture company."

"You call 'em," I told her. "Get whoever you talked to this morning and have him look up the number on the card you turned in."

The man at the film company didn't like the idea of doing all that checking, but O'Leary could charm the rattles off a snake. She got the information.

"Marty Wensel. Hotel Junipero." She scribbled it down. "Between Fourth and Fifth, on Main. Thanks so much." She hung up, her eyes shining. "Do you know where that is, Willie?"

"I know. Let's go."

We went out and buzzed for the elevator. A big man stepped out as we were getting in. I paid no attention to

him but just as we sunk below floor level I saw through the glass door of the elevator that the man was trying my door. O'Leary looked at me. I said, with my lips: "Copper."

"One of Kissinger's men," O'Leary suggested silently.

I nodded. When we reached the ground floor we got the hell out of there before the dick realized he had bulled things up. Kissinger would have his heart on a salver for that.

CHAPTER FIVE

Frame for Murder

MAIN STREET in this city isn't what you might expect by the name. In the early days it may have been the heart of Los Angeles, but with time and wealth the city had spread out and away from the downtown section. Now Main Street was cheap, garish and loud. If your tastes were earthy, Main Street was the place to go. Burlesque shows, bistros, ten-cent movies, pawn shops, marihuana joints and flop houses. Whatever it was, Main Street had it.

The Hotel Junipero was one cut above a flop house. It was upstairs over a row of shops with the stairway just barely getting through to the street. O'Leary stayed close to my side as we mounted the dim, smelly stairway.

We came out in what had to be called the lobby. There was no one in sight. A small desk, fronting an alcove, held a hand bell and a sign suggesting we ring for the manager. Instead of ringing, I leaned over the desk and found the register on a shelf underneath. Together we went over it. There was no Marty Wensel registered for four months back.

"Either a phony name," I said, "or he just used this as an address. We'd better ring for the manager."

"Won't I do?" I didn't have to turn around. I'd know Lieutenant Kissinger's skeptical, slightly nasty voice anywhere. "Nice of you to come down, Carmody. Where's Packard?"

I turned around anyway. "Who's Packard?"

"The man I sent to get you." His sharp eyes got suddenly watchful. "He did bring you, didn't he?"

"No," I said. "We're down here on a personal matter. Maggie's Uncle Tim has been on a two-week bat and we're just looking for him." O'Leary kicked me neatly and unobtrusively on the ankle. "You remember Maggie, don't you, lieutenant?"

Kissinger said grudgingly: "How are you, Miss O'Leary?" He knew now that she had been lying to him on the phone, and he was hurt. "If you're all through clowning, Carmody, let's have the truth. What do you know about this shooting?"

"Nothing. I had an appointment with Anselmo," I admitted. "But he was shot before I talked to him."

"Anselmo?" Between the first and third syllable, his voice changed from bewilderment to casualness, but not quick enough for me to sense I'd pulled a bull myself. "Oh, yes. Anselmo."

"Then it wasn't the Hollywood shooting you wanted to see me about."

"No," he said. "Why did you think it was?"

I nonchalantly reached for a cigarette just to show him I wasn't bothered. I discovered I didn't have any left. It wouldn't have impressed him anyhow. "That's obvious. Every time somebody gets knocked off out there, you always think I'm involved."

"And I seldom go wrong! As a matter of fact, Carmody, I'm not on the case. I've got a murder down here."

O'Leary blurted: "Marty Wensel?" Without a word Kissinger dug out a notebook and a stubby pencil and wrote down the name before answering. "No. A little rum-pot named Pop Kurbee. That's the name he used on the register. You want to go over to the morgue, Miss O'Leary and see if he's your Uncle Tim?"

"No, thanks, lieutenant," O'Leary said weakly.

I asked: "What does Kurbee look like?"

"Thin, white-haired. Little man about sixty-five. Maybe a little older—he was

living on the old age pension." Kissinger regarded me thoughtfully. "Is that Marty Wensel?"

I shook my head. "Marty wasn't forty. About the same size as you described Kurbee, though. What's the story, lieutenant?"

"Somebody shot him through the window from the roof next door. That's all. No motive, no suspects."

"You must have been demoted, lieutenant. A nice, juicy Hollywood murder and here you are, stuck with a Main Street wino that nobody cares about."

"We're democratic, Carmody. We investigate whether it's a rich man or a beggar."

"Bull!" I said impolitely. "You wouldn't give a damn if all the bums on Skidrow got pushed off. You're in this case for some reason. What is it?"

"I asked to be assigned to it as soon as I saw what we had to work with." Kissinger didn't change expressions. "There's one little clue, Carmody. I'm going to let you see it."

He dug an envelope out of an inner pocket, opened it carefully and took out a picture. He gazed at it for a second, almost licking his lips, and I had a sinking feeling that Laurie Bressette had had some torrid photographs made. Then Kissinger held it up, and it wasn't Laurie. It was Mrs. Carmody's boy, William.

"That's cute!" O'Leary explained. "It catches Willie's personality perfectly. Stupid but rather sweet. Can I have it, lieutenant? I don't have one picture of him."

Kissinger shook his head. "I'll try to get it for you when the case is closed. It says here it's an unposed, candid shot." He put it back in the envelope. "I don't believe it. Nobody looks like this without an effort."

"You two could whip a very funny routine out of that," I said. "Where did you get it?"

"In Pop Kurbee's pocket. That's why I've been trying to get in touch with you, Carmody. I was worried about you."

"I just bet. It probably kept you

awake at the office just thinking about it. Well, you're on the case, what are you going to do?"

"Are you going to tell me how Kurbee happened to have your picture in his pocket?"

"I don't know."

"Then I'll tell you what I'm going to do," he said, almost happily. "Take you downtown and ask some questions."

"A piece of hose and some bright lights?" I asked. "A little rough stuff downstairs—"

"I don't operate that way, Carmody," he said indignantly.

"Oh, you don't knock any teeth out," I said. "You just loosen them. No bruises that show either. No broken bones."

"No!" O'Leary burst out. "Lieutenant, if you lay a finger on him I'll go right to the commissioner! I'll get your badge, lieutenant, if his hair is even mussed."

"Don't be ridiculous, Miss—"

"I can take it, Maggie," I said bravely. "I've been beat up before. The sight of blood doesn't bother me . . . even my own."

Kissinger yelled: "Carmody, stop it!"

"I'm warning you, lieutenant," O'Leary said, dangerously. "I've written some stories for most of the newspapers in this town and they'll back me up. I'll have pictures on every front page in every edition tomorrow if he isn't returned exactly as he is now. He may not be much of a catch, lieutenant, but he's my boy and there's no strong arm cop going to give him the third degree!"

KISSINGER was so red in the face I thought he was going to have a stroke. He thought of several answers but after opening his mouth each time he changed his mind. "Get him a lawyer," he snapped. "Come on, Carmody, you poor little thing. I'd like to work a few cross word puzzles with you—if you're sure it won't give you a headache!"

I had to wait till we got outside before I could laugh and then I couldn't stop, even when we got downtown. Every time Kissinger asked a question I'd think of the look on his face when O'Leary

started into him and I'd break out again. I didn't tell him very much. He finally gave up and told me to get the hell out before he did rough me up. He was almost on the point of taking a swing at me and the hell with the consequences. So I left.

I'd planned to exit laughing, but at the door, he called to me. He had control of himself again. "Maybe you'd like to know why I'm not on the Hollywood shooting, Carmody. Because it's out of my department. Anselmo isn't dead. All he has is a furrow across his ribs. Just a scratch."

Exit, Carmody—definitely not laughing!

An hour later, O'Leary and I pulled up opposite Anselmo's Film Library on Selma. "I really messed this up," I told O'Leary. "Obviously Wensel shot Anselmo yesterday and so this morning Anselmo returned the compliment—or so he thought. Wensel was bunking with Pop Kurbee and Anselmo shot Kurbee through the window by mistake."

"But what could you have done?" O'Leary asked. "The old man was probably dead before you figured out it was the street photographer who shot Anselmo."

"I didn't mean that. All the shooting must be over that pornographic film. Anselmo has it and Wensel wanted it. What else could it be? And it was probably in Anselmo's shop."

"And so?"

"So I should have shaken the place down yesterday. The cop wouldn't have any cause to open the shop with Anselmo alive. I had a sweet opportunity of getting that film."

"Maybe it isn't too late. We don't know Anselmo is out of the hospital."

I opened the car door. "I'll try to get inside and see. You sit here."

I didn't wait for her to tell me it was illegal. I knew it was—also practically impossible. First I had to break in—in broad daylight—then open the safe. There was bound to be a safe. Anselmo wouldn't leave anything like that film lying around for just anybody to pick up. I knew I couldn't open a safe—half

the time I can't open my own. But I didn't want to miss any bets that might find some lead to Laurie—or her remains.

I got some tools out of the rear of O'Leary's car and went up the alley behind Anselmo's shop. I intended to make like a workman doing a job. I might have bluffed it through, but it wasn't necessary. All I had to do was follow somebody else's path. The back window was wide open. So was the door of the safe. It had been souped off. The safe was as empty as Carmody's head.

I found nothing in the way of film that couldn't safely be shown to the East Peoria Ladies' Guild any Saturday morning.

I spent the next two days adding up what I knew and it came out zero. I'd started out to find Laurie Bressette, and after several brilliant strokes of detective work I was still trying to find her. I didn't know whether she was alive or dead. I didn't know why she was missing, and I didn't know who was responsible.

It could be Anselmo, or Marty Wensel. It could be the Voice—unless he *was* Anselmo or Wensel. And I couldn't eliminate Danny Lawson, the radio actor, or Eva Vaughn. Or it could be person or persons unknown. Laurie seemed the type who could get picked up by any good-looking male . . .

Anselmo had been my best bet—and he still was. So I called all the hospitals until I found the one he'd been in. Note the past tense. They had released him yesterday as out of danger. But if he went home, he was keeping it a secret. He didn't answer his phone. Maybe he wanted privacy.

Speaking of privacy, I wasn't getting any. Lida Randolph had informed the world that I had agreed to investigate the burglary of her house. That is, the papers, particularly the movies sections, carried a brief mention of it. I could have shot O'Leary. She was up to her old tricks of getting me some publicity. That girl has been in Hollywood too long.

My phone rang for two days. First it was Randolph's business manager invit-

ing me out to the house for a conference. He was a little hurt when I stalled him.

Next, Western Union had a telegram for me from East Peoria. Doctor Bressette, asking hopefully if I'd contacted Laurie yet and when was she coming home? I simply didn't have the courage to answer him. I had a sneaking suspicion that Laurie was never going home—except in a box.

A little later O'Leary called to say happily she had already signed to do the publicity on DeCoudre's new picture.

"In fact," she said, "I'm releasing our first big story for tomorrow."

"Which is?"

"Lida Randolph is going to star in the picture." She said it like she had achieved a personal triumph. "That's how she could get me the job. I mean that was the condition."

"I don't believe it," I told her. "Why should she make that a condition? DeCoudre might say no, and she'd be out too."

"I don't think that would worry Randolph. She owed DeCoudre a picture a year, dating from the time he was a big shot here. This is the last year, so he's anxious to have her."

"Well, I still don't like it," I said, but I didn't know just what it was I didn't like. It bothered me long after O'Leary hung up, but I couldn't quite nail it down. Then my phone rang again, and I forgot it.

It was Randolph herself this time and she tried to coax me out to see her. By this time I was beginning to wonder. Even on my good days I'm not *that* good a detective. And I wasn't having any good days these days. I tried to stall her, but she was insistent. "Can you meet me this evening?" she asked, in her lowdown, sexy voice that fills movie houses all over the country. "I'm doing a broadcast at nine at CBS."

"All right," I said reluctantly. "I'll be there."

When the phone rang again I almost didn't answer it. It was probably only the landlord. But a ringing phone is hard to ignore. I reached for it and as I was putting it to my ear my infallible sixth

sense warned that it was the Voice calling to scare the pants off me. Then I got mad. Nobody could do that with just a voice.

"Carmody?" It wasn't a voice I'd ever heard before. I stopped perspiring.

"Yeah."

"I been reading the papers, Carmody. I see you got a job with Lida Randolph." I decided I had heard that voice somewhere—but where? "I got something to sell, Carmody. You want to buy?"

"Not a pig in a poke," I assured him. "What is it?"

"I'll let you look. You want to meet me tonight—alone?"

I thought it over. "What can I lose? Where?"

He said: "There's a park off Western Avenue, north of the Boulevard. You cross a little bridge and go up a hill—"

"I'm supposed to do all that in the dark?" I demanded.

"All right," he said. "Just walk into the park at eight o'clock and keep your eyes open. I'll flash a light."

"O.K.," I said. "But you'd better have something good."

"It's hot, Carmody, it's hot." He chuckled hoarsely and hung up.

CHAPTER SIX

Hold-up Hill

WELL, I thought, *maybe there is something in this publicity business.* I had a lead anyway. If I could recover Randolph's property for not too much, she might be glad to deal. That would get it off my hands in a hurry. I left the office so I wouldn't have to answer the phone again. Next time it might be the Voice. He wasn't scaring me though.

I went for a walk among the screwballs to get my mind off my troubles. In front of the Paramount Theatre I saw, of all people, Eva Vaughn. I wondered if she was tailing me again. If she was, experience had improved her technique because she disappeared into the girle section of a department store when I tried to trap her again. I had some

dinner and went back to the office to sleep until time to go to the park. The phone didn't ring once.

I got off the street car at Western and started walking north, wishing I'd thought to borrow O'Leary's car. I had the distinct feeling I was being followed—my good old sixth sense again—and on foot I didn't stand much of a chance of hiding my trail. I forgot about it when, after climbing a grade about seven blocks long, I came to the park.

A dirt road wound into the park and crossed a small bridge. It was simpler than I'd expected. I found a path and started climbing a steep bank.

Presently, I picked out a blinking light up among the stars and nearly quit right there. It was so far up I'd need a helicopter to reach it in the dark, but neither heat nor cold nor dark of night could stay me in pursuit of my duty. For a small beer I'd have chucked duty on the spot!

The path twisted, up and up. And up. There was no doubt in my mind that it had been laid out by a mountain goat with the blind staggers. It was eight inches wide and during the rainy season it doubled as a drain. Before long I was on my hands and knees, clutching at shrubs and tufts of grass. I got so high I thought my nose had started to bleed.

But it was rain, a light, mean drizzle that was a cinch to soak me through in twenty minutes. And all this time that damn light was winking every now and then somewhere above me, and never any closer. Finally I just sat down and snapped on my cigarette lighter and winked right back at him. He came down to meet me.

"Carmody?" he whispered.

"I'm not a Swiss yodeler," I assured him. I was puffing so hard I could hardly answer. I thought he seemed vaguely familiar but it was so dark—and damp—I couldn't see him clearly. "What are you so cautious about?"

"Being cautious has kept me alive, Carmody," he assured me. "Right now I'm being so cautious that I'll shoot you dead if you reach for a cigarette." He snicked on the flashlight to let me see

that his hand was full. In the faint illumination I saw his face. "It's a gun, Carmody."

"I didn't think it was a camera," I said. "Or are you out of that racket now?"

He started. "You got that figured out, eh? Do the cops know?"

"No. I'm the only one." I wasn't smarter than the police, I just happened to have seen Wensel and his camera around Hollywood Boulevard once too often. "But I'm a little confused, Marty," I said. "I thought you were selling Lida Randolph's loot."

"Nah," he said. "I got a fillum. I'm going to have to frisk you, Carmody. Turn around."

"I never carry a gun." But I turned around and let him verify it.

"O.K.," he said. "You got this place staked out?"

"I'm alone," I said impatiently. "Where's the film?"

"It wouldn't do any good if you brought the whole police department," he said. "I know this park better than anybody. I played here when I was a kid. One funny move and I can vanish like a gopher."

Now that he mentioned it, he looked a little like a gopher. "Stop worrying," I said. "I'm getting wet."

He shrugged in the dark. "I got this here fillum to sell. I couldn't take time to talk on the phone because you might have been trying to trace the call for the cops."

"They aren't in on this at all. They don't know you exist."

"They don't think Anselmo killed himself!" he retorted.

"Anselmo," I told him, "isn't dead. You only grazed his ribs."

He took that hard. If I'd been planning to jump him, I could have done it then, the shock was that bad. "Not dead, eh?" he mused. "Then it was Anselmo who potted old Pop through the window."

"Who else? You should have worked that out before this."

"Well, he's got friends," he muttered. Then he got down to business. "Like I

said, I got this fillum and it's for sale. How much will her old man pay for it?"

"Not a nickel, if she's dead."

"She's—she isn't dead." I didn't like the way he stammered over it. He realized that he had to say Laurie was alive. But he hadn't sounded convincing. "How much, Carmody?"

"Five hundred," I said carelessly.

He laughed scornfully. "Just multiply that by ten and we'll go on from there."

"Where's a small town doctor going to get that kind of money?"

"He wouldn't want the fillum to be rented out some more!"

"At five thousand, he couldn't do anything about it. I think he might raise a grand. But I'm not sure."

Wensel was bitterly disappointed. He swore vigorously. "Well, how soon can you get it?"

"In a week."

"A week!" he screamed. "I got to have it tomorrow. Anselmo will find me in a week."

I shrugged. "Where's the girl?"

He got crafty again. "How much is that worth?"

"In dollars and cents about one Roosevelt dime. But I might get that thousand for you tomorrow if you steered me to Laurie—" I broke off.

WENSEL had stiffened and he was peering down the path. Even in the darkness I could see that he was no harmless little street photographer. The way he reacted told he wouldn't hesitate to shoot the eyes out of anyone who tried to come up that path. "No stake-out, eh?" he snarled at me, and tried to backhand me with the flat of the gun. I ducked; and then half way down the hill a gun exploded.

Wensel bleated softly and went down. He was hit, but not out. He fired from the ground, the muzzle blast almost scorching my face. Down the hill a woman screamed, and I thought: *What in hell is a woman doing here?*

But I was doing my thinking on the move. I wasn't hanging around between two gun fires. I dove sideways at what looked like a thicket. It was all right but it was also the edge of a ridge. I went over the side and down twenty feet in two bounces. I thought I was never going to stop rolling.

Then, suddenly, I came up on my knees and a shadowy form flashed across my line of vision. I was so dizzy and turned around I thought I was back in college playing left end. I reacted from instinct. The tackle I threw then was better than anything I'd ever done at

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Boston College. Simultaneously, I realized it was possibly not a very bright move. I might be tackling the guy who was doing all the shooting. But it wasn't; it was a woman.

If you think tackling a woman on a wet hillside, even with lead singing through the air is nice work, forget it. She might have been a big fullback. She was big, all right, and she was active. She struggled with a frantic strength that just sent us further down the side of the ridge. Which was all right too, because it took us farther from the firing.

I tried to get a gentlemanly sort of hold on her, and she tried to bite my wrist. The moment I felt her lips I knew who it was. Only one woman in this case wore so much lipstick it felt like a gob of grease.

I said: "Relax, Miss Vaughn. You're among friends."

She gave up then and she had no worse than a split decision due her.

In the meantime the firing seemed to have quit on the ridge above us. There was no sound except the rain falling on the leaves of the scrub trees around us. Then below us, heading down, we heard someone leaving the battle field. I couldn't tell whether he was staggering or just having trouble with that steep, crooked path. But he was making a lot of noise.

"Who is it?" I asked Eva.

"John Anselmo," she said sullenly. "He made me come with him. I didn't want to."

"You didn't want to follow me this afternoon either, did you?" I sneered. "You were better at it, anyway. Let's get up the hill and see how Wensel is."

He was there, not far from where Anselmo's first shot had dropped. At first I thought he was dead, but when I tried to turn him over off his face, he spoke.

"Don't move me, Carmody," he whispered. "The rat got me good." He seemed to be hurt along the spine because he couldn't lift his head to talk. His face was down in the mud and wet leaves, but he couldn't do anything about it.

I knelt beside him and put my face

close to his. "I didn't cross you, Wensel. They tailed me here."

"Don't make a hell of a lot of difference now. I got it good this time, Carmody." His voice got suddenly weaker. "Behind the trunk of a big tree up aways—the fillum. I been carrying it with me. That's all there is. You can have it. It's worth a grand."

"Where's Laurie Bressette?" I asked.

He didn't seem to hear me. "Don't let Anselmo have it," he breathed. "The double crossing rat! Fifty thousand dollars I had coming. Fifty thousand—that was my split . . ." His voice trailed away and I thought he was gone, but he rallied for an instant. "Ask Randolph—ask her what she'll pay to get back . . . everything that was stolen . . ."

He died then, with his face still in the wet cold leaves of that park he'd played in as a kid. Maybe since he had to go, dying here gave him a little comfort. I don't know. Nothing comforted me. I left him lying there for the rain to fall on.

I took his flashlight and I peered around until I found the film under a tree. Then with Eva Vaughn following I slipped and slid down the tortuous path to the foot of the hill. I didn't offer to help Eva, but she didn't seem to notice.

When we got to the little bridge we found Anselmo sitting there with his small neat head against the railing. He still wore that long, straight top coat. He'd stopped to rest, because he had been shot twice in the chest and he'd lost a lot of blood. He never got up again. He was as dead as Marty Wensel and I left him there too, with his long, thin legs stretched out half the width of the bridge . . .

In the beam of the headlights on his car I examined the film of Laurie Bressette. She'd been a pretty girl, with or without her clothes on. In most of the few frames I looked at she didn't have any on. It got better as it went on, but I guess I just wasn't in the frame of mind for that sort of stuff right then.

I put it in a brick picnic fireplace and touched a match to it. It was probably just my imagination that it gave off

more heat than any ordinary film would.

I got in beside Eva and drove down the slope of Western Avenue. In the glare of a street light Eva Vaughn looked like a sandhog. Her dress was torn and muddied, and half off her. Her face was smeared with dirt and wet leaves, and all her makeup was gone. So help me, she looked better that way.

I said: "Do you want to talk to me or to the Homicide squad?"

"I haven't done anything. I mean," she added, remembering those forged checks, "nothing more."

"I'm in no mood to humor you," I said. "Just tell me!"

"All right," she said. And she started to talk and when she finished I could see, a little foggily perhaps, the whole messy, complicated, blood-strewn picture. She asked: "What are you going to do?"

"There isn't much left to do," I said wearily. We always like to think of every case ending in a dramatic arrest, but it doesn't happen that way very often. After a time, enough blood is spilled, enough people are hurt for the hatred to fade out and the whole brutal business grinds to a dull, heavy stop. That's what had happened now.

I called CBS and Lida Randolph said she was meeting DeCoudre and O'Leary at Ricardo's for a drink and a discussion on how to break the news of her signing in his picture. That was a big, important event, and up on a hillside were two men lying dead in the rain. I told Randolph I'd join them in Ricardo's.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Photo Finish

I GUESS I looked to the headwaiter in Ricardo's as if I'd just climbed out of a muddy grave. The shine on my thirty-dollar shoes was gone forever this time, I thought. But I wasn't worrying much about appearances. I didn't even gape at Lida Randolph the way I usually do at a beautiful movie star. Felix DeCoudre seemed to be smelling something bad. O'Leary looked at me once and let me alone.

I said: "Miss Randolph, will you pay five thousand dollars for the return of your stolen property?"

"Why—no . . . No, I couldn't—"

"You said you lost ten thousand dollar's worth. What will you pay? One thousand? Five hundred?"

"Let's talk about it some other time."

"How much?" I snapped. "Ten dollars or ten cents? Or did you not lose anything at all?"

"My house was definitely broken into," she said, with mighty indignation. "The police know that. Even if they don't know who did it."

"I know who did it," I said. "A little, clumsy, frustrated second-story man named Marty Wensel."

Felix DeCoudre shifted nervously. His broad, ravaged face showed everything except his thoughts. "Then have him arrested," he said impatiently.

"It's a little late for that. He's lying on the side of a hill with his face in the mud. He couldn't lift it because a bullet broke his back. But he doesn't mind. Little things like rain and mud and cold don't bother him now. The dead don't care about things like that."

O'Leary moved up beside me and whispered: "Easy, Willie. Easy, darling."

I didn't look at her. "Anselmo did better, though. He's sitting up. He's just as dead but his face isn't in the mud. Not that it makes any difference to him, but I thought you might like to know."

"Who in the world is Anselmo?" Randolph asked, looking prettily puzzled. "Sounds like an Italian chef."

"You didn't lose anything when your house was broken into," I told Randolph. "Wensel bungled it. He didn't have the talent for the job. So why did you want me to take the case?"

Randolph didn't say a word.

"If I tell you that DeCoudre will never make his picture, does that answer my question?"

She looked me in the eye: "Yes, Mr. Carmody. That was the reason."

"Just what do you mean by that statement?" DeCoudre demanded. "Just why will I not make that picture?"

"Because if you attempt to, Mr. DeCoudre, I'll see that these facts are made public: first, you made a pornographic film, using Laurie Bressette, and rented it out to stag parties. You got Laurie to play along with you on the promise of starring her in your comeback picture, which you had no intention of doing even if you had hopes of making a picture. And that I doubt because you didn't have the money. That dirty film was the only way you had of making a living."

DeCoudre's glassy, bloodshot eyes were filled with hate and the first signs of fear but he didn't speak.

"Second, this John Anselmo, a second-story man pure and simple, made you a proposition. He was to be your film projectionist when the film was rented so that—with Wensel's help—he could make plans to burglarize the homes. You agreed to the scheme—on the provision that all proceeds were to be invested in a comeback picture for you. All you needed was about a hundred thousand dollars because you had a commitment from Miss Randolph for a picture. On the strength of her name the banks would lend you as much as you needed."

"You said Anselmo and Wensel are dead," DeCoudre was perspiring. "So how are you going to prove anything?"

"I'm not," I said. "I'm not even going to try. I'm just telling you the facts that I can and will make public unless you tear up Miss Randolph's contract."

"But Willie," O'Leary put in, "what caused all the shooting?"

I said wearily: "Anselmo made the mistake of not letting Wensel in on all the facts. Wensel didn't know he wasn't going to get his split of the loot. When he heard about the investment he refused to go along. He had fifty thousand dollars coming—more money than he probably ever dreamed of having. He wasn't interested in gambling for millions. He wanted his fifty thousand. When he didn't get it, he went into the burglary racket on his own."

"If you are insinuating," Lida Randolph said coldly, "that those men were

ever in my house with a dirty film, you're a liar."

I shrugged. "DeCoudre's been in your house, hasn't he? He could have scouted the place personally. That's a nice touch, isn't it, Miss Randolph? Planning to rob you to help finance your own picture!"

"You louse!" Randolph spat at DeCoudre. She didn't stop with that.

"Fact number three: Wensel tried it on his own," I said, "and made a mess of it—he admitted as much to me before he died. It made him a liability to Anselmo and DeCoudre. If he tried again he might get picked up and it was a good bet he'd sing. So Anselmo threatened him with the loss of his share of any profits from DeCoudre's film. Wensel, being a single-tracked person, laid for his partner and shot him—near the shop on Selma Avenue. He broke into the rental library and stole the dirty film, hoping to sell it for five thousand dollars. You made that film, DeCoudre."

DeCOUDRE tried one last bluff. "These facts," he said, "seem to me pure supposition. You can't prove a thing and if you make anything public, I will sue you for a million."

"You probably don't know just how funny that is!" I said. "I can prove you made that dirty film. Do you think Laurie won't testify against you?"

"Is she alive?" O'Leary demanded.

"She is. And that's the fourth fact."

I looked again at DeCoudre. "Her blonde roommate had a letter from her. Laurie got rumors of your new picture—the one she thought she was going to star in. She knew then that she wasn't going to be on hand for it, so she wrote to Eva Vaughn and told her enough to insure Eva a role in the picture. You had no choice but to sign Eva up. Anselmo immediately put her to work following me for the second time because I knew too much—even if I was smart enough to understand it.

"It was through Eva that Anselmo was able to know where Wensel and I were meeting. He suspected that Wensel would contact me when he got that film."

I didn't explain any more to him. Maybe DeCoudre already knew that An-

selmo had killed Pop Kurbee. I imagine that Wensel had been living with Pop at the Hotel Junipero at the time of his murder, and Pop was wearing some of Wensel's clothes. At least that would account for my picture being in the pocket of Pop's coat and also for Anselmo mistaking Pop for Wensel.

O'Leary was shaking my arm impatiently. "But where is Laurie?"

"In jail on a vice charge, a frame-up probably. When it came time to plan the new picture, Laurie had to be disposed of. Her acting was strictly from Stanislavsky and DeCoudre wouldn't have her in his picture. The safe way out seemed to be in getting her arrested. Laurie hid her real identity so her family wouldn't know of her disgrace."

"You louse!" O'Leary said, and then she called DeCoudre a name I didn't know she even knew. She should have had her mouth washed out.

Then Lida Randolph stood up and said venomously and profanely: "You're really done this time, Felix. You know that, don't you?"

DeCoudre just dumbly nodded.

"Send me your bill, Mr. Carmody," she said. "You were right—nothing was stolen. That was my agent's idea of publicity. I wanted to hire you the moment

Margaret told me you were investigating this rat. I wanted something to break this contract. This does it." She left.

O'Leary and I followed her, leaving DeCoudre alone, and he was to all intents and purposes as dead as his two pals up in the park. That night he shot himself . . .

Outside, O'Leary said sadly: "I can't be mad at you for ruining my boss but I surely would like to have had that job."

A little later she wondered out loud: "Which one of them was the Voice?"

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe we'll never find out." But we did. Two weeks later, we quietly sprung Laurie Bressette from jail and saw her aboard a train for East Peoria. At the station to see her off was a mild-faced, pipe-smoking young fellow. He was Laurie's boy friend. His name was Danny Lawson.

His pipe was the gun he stuck in the back of my neck that day on Cahuenga Boulevard. He was just putting it back in his mouth when Marty Wensel snapped his picture which was why he happened to have his hand up to his face. And that voice he used to try to scare me away from finding Laurie in jail was the same one he used as a maniac in a radio serial called The Mad Doctor. He was about as deadly as a bubble bath!



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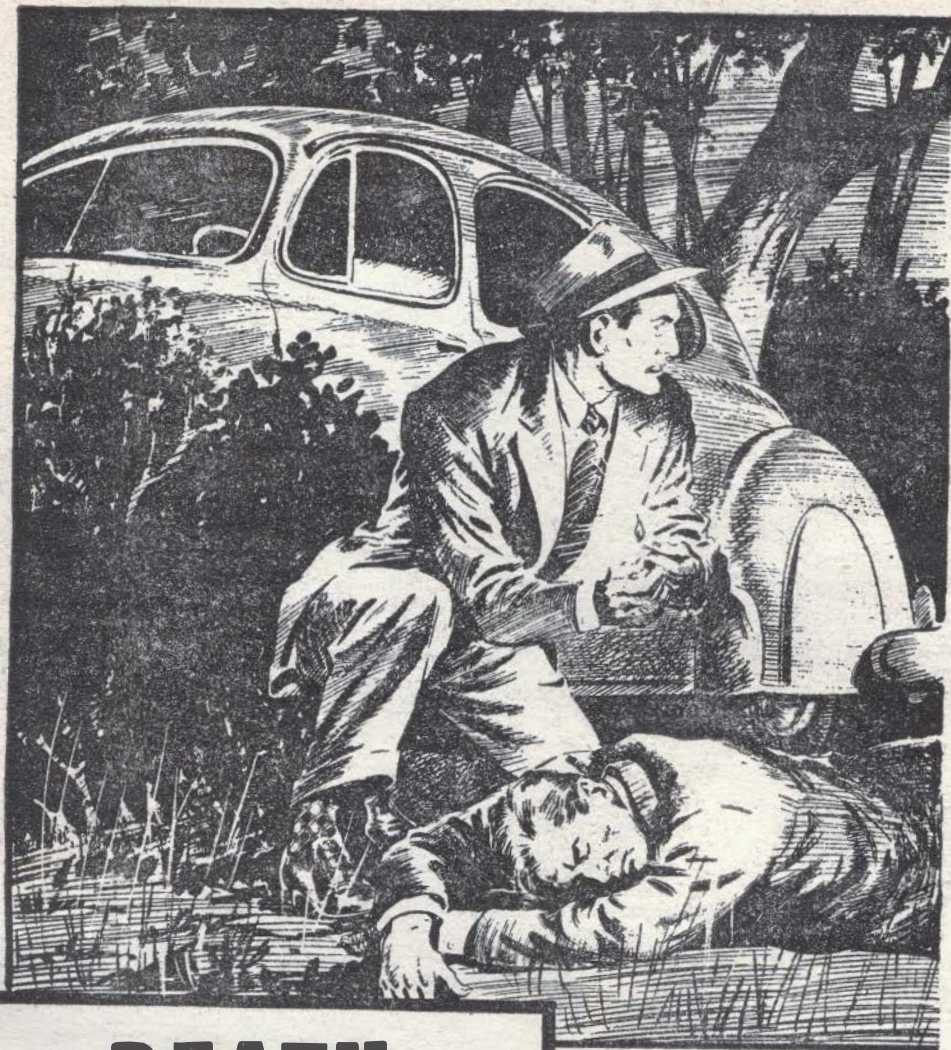
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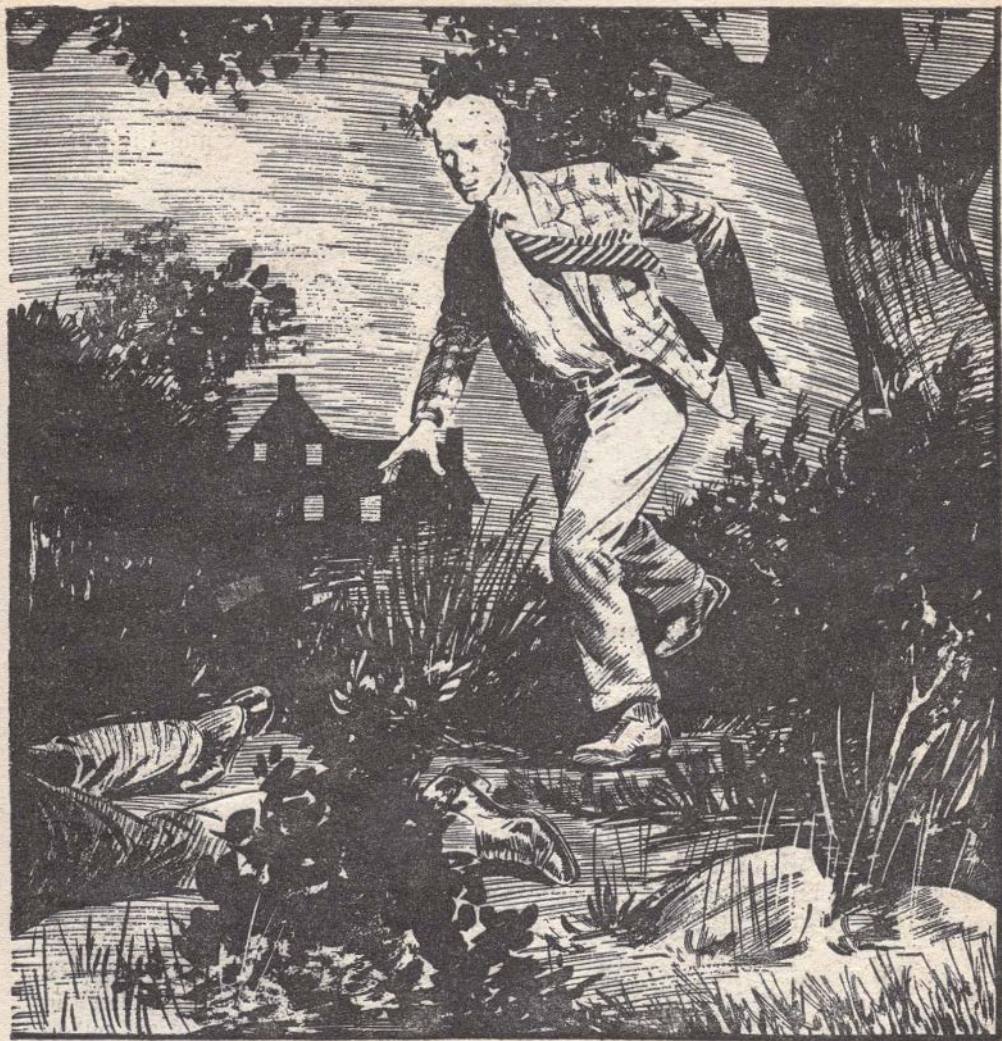




DEATH IS NO STRANGER

A Rick Trent Novelette





When Freddie reached me I was turning over what was left of Paul Manning.

Ex-con, ex-shamus Trent should have known better than to get tangled up with a slay sequence just to pick up a little scratch. Why worry about a few minor expenses? In stir, the groceries are for free.

YOU'VE seen those movies where a private detective occupies an office in a run-down building with the elevated rattling past the window, where the elevator is an open cage that creaks up and down and the corridors are ankle deep in cigarette butts? Gus Cooney didn't maintain an office like that. His suite was on the fourteenth floor of a very modern, centrally

By NORMAN A. DANIELS

located building. The corridors were marble and tile and neat as a hospital. There was a waiting room, done in jade green and empty now, for it was well after office hours. I walked through this outer room and banged on the door labeled *Mr. Cooney, Private*.

I'd known Cooney for some time. I didn't like him much and curiosity more than thoughts of profit lured me to answer his off-handed request that I visit him. He had a loud, brassy voice and I opened the door in answer to it. I stepped into what looked like the directors' room of some international corporation.

Cooney sat behind half an acre of desk and looked out of place there. I'd have managed to look the part much better. Cooney was fifty, paunchy and gimlet eyed. I would have trusted him loyally with no more than a nickle.

"Sit down, Rick," he said. "You look a little seedy."

I grinned at him. "That's what comes of success. You don't have to give a damn how you look."

"Let's cut the kidding," he told me. "I know you're down and out. You served a rap in prison and can't practice private detecting any more. You spend your time in Bryant Park behind the Public Library and number only the best pigeons among your friends. And I don't mean the kind that go into the park for necking. How do you live, Rick?"

"I got friends," I told him. "And a job of sorts."

"Sure, doing leg work for Stuart Sedley at about thirty bucks a week. You used to spend more than that taking a doll to lunch. How would you like to earn twenty bucks?"

"I'm not exactly averse to it," I told him. "Only when you broker a job, it's usually murder. I make it a point to get twenty-five for murder."

"Stop clowning," he said irritably. "I'll go to twenty-five and it ain't knocking anybody off. Job's really worth about ten bucks, but you need the dough. If you didn't, I wouldn't have you because the guy I need has to look like a bum."

"Thanks," I said and made up my mind that he needed me because nobody else would take the assignment. "Remember though, I'm limited. I can't do any snooping. The cops and the Parole Board no like."

COONEY opened a desk drawer and took out a newspaper photo. It was slightly yellow with age and it showed a young man—good looking boy, whose face looked familiar. The girl in the picture was a stunner and I'd have handled some of Cooney's lousey work just to meet her.

"Know either of them?" he asked me casually.

"The boy seems to register. The girl doesn't. Break the riddle, Cooney."

"That kid is Freddie Ogden. Now does he register?"

"Yes," I said slowly. "Freddie served time with me. On a manslaughter rap. I imagine he got out no more than a month ago."

"Six weeks ago. The girl is Lila Doane and her old man happens to be Ernest Doane who has three-quarters of all the money in the world."

"What's the pitch?" I asked him bluntly.

"Tonight, around eight-thirty, Ogden and the girl will step out of a car and enter the Elite Club. You're to be there. Before he reaches the club, you are to move up to him, call him by name, remind him of the fact he is an ex-con and ask him for a stake. All you get out of him is yours."

"And then what?"

"Nothing more. That's all."

I studied him for a moment. "There's more than that behind it, Cooney. Unbuckle your tongue. I'm not stepping into a set-up."

"It's no set-up. We're just trying to embarrass young Ogden. I can't tell you who my client is and I can't give you any other reasons for doing all this. Twenty-five if you make the kid turn pink."

"Fifty," I said. Me, the speculator. Fact is, I didn't care whether I got the dough or not. This sort of thing wasn't

the private detective work which ran in my veins instead of blood. I was merely interested to see how important the job was. If he paid out hard cash easily, then this was something big.

"You're a blood-sucker," he told me, "but it's too late to compromise now."

I still wasn't satisfied. I said: "At least I have time enough to shave and look more presentable."

He held up his hand quickly. "That's exactly what you must not do. I want you to look like a plain bum."

I leaned back and twiddled my thumbs. "In that case," I said, "my fee is a hundred bucks, Cooney. I'm the type who believes in getting paid for character work."

Sure, he paid it—after a suitable amount of cursing me. But I knew whatever I was meant to do was important and Cooney would profit ten times the fee he gave me. I was also determined to be very careful not to get myself gummed up in something Detective Lieutenant Westover could pounce on me for. Lieutenant Westover was beset with an obsession. He wanted me back in stir.

I had an hour or so to kill and an extra hundred bucks to help kill it. I drifted into a cheap eating place and ordered the works. I would have liked to patronize one of the more fashionable clubs or restaurants, but they sold liquor there and I couldn't be caught dead within a hundred yards of a bar.

At eight o'clock I was casing the vicinity of the Elite Club, looking for cops, crooks or other down-in-the-mouth snoops Cooney might have hired. The job looked too easy and Cooney had called my steadily rising ante too fast. I meant to find out what this was all about if I had to beat it out of Cooney. Which would have been a pleasure. . . .

At eight-thirty I was set with the doorman eyeing me in none too friendly a manner. Ten minutes later a cab pulled up and young Freddie Ogden got out. He didn't much resemble the con I knew in Sing Sing. Freddie wore a tux that fitted him perfectly, and the doll who got out on his arm had been

grossly insulted by the picture I'd seen of her. No camera could have done her full justice.

After spending two years in the pen, pretty girls still gave me the whims and this one raised my temperature an extra degree or two. She had the kind of legs Parisian style creators never thought about when they lowered skirts. She was as willowy as a sapling in the spring. Her eyes were smoky gray and she never had to shape her lips with paint. They were already perfect.

I turned my lapels outward, yanked the brim of my hat down and shuffled up. So did the doorman. I glanced at him and said: "Scram, pal. This is an old chum of mine."

Freddie gave me a quick look and then a double take. His lips almost smiled. The poor kid didn't want to recognize me, but he had enough spunk to know a friend when he saw one. Freddie motioned the doorman back.

"Hello, Rick," he said. "Look, why not come to see me later—at my rooms. . . ."

"Pally," I told him with both eyes on the girl, "I'm flatter than European treasuries. How about putting the bee on you for a ten spot?"

"Why—why yes, of course." He reached into his pocket. I had a job to do and carrying it out might mean an answer to this puzzle. I meant to do it no matter how Freddie felt about the situation.

I nodded at the girl. "Freddie's an O.K. guy, lady. Him and me met in prison. We used to have big long gab fests—when the screws wasn't too close."

THERE were other people heading for the club. Many of them stopped to watch this Manhattan sidewalk scene. There were a few snickers when I mentioned Freddie as a stir-pal. I expected the girl to either slug me across the puss or bust into tears. She did neither. She extended one slim hand in my direction.

"I'm glad to meet any friend of Freddie's," she said. "Especially one who

helped make his prison life a bit easier. I'm Lila Doane."

I almost forgot myself and tipped my hat. But Freddie thrust a twenty dollar bill at me. He wasn't embarrassed any longer. Now that Lila accepted me he didn't care a hoot in hell what the others thought.

"Thanks, pal," I said. "I'll be looking you up. And not for another touch."

I moved in very close and put on a little act. I talked out of the side of my mouth with grimaces for the benefit of the audience. But the act served two purposes. It also enabled me to give Freddie the low-down on as much of the situation as I knew.

"Watch yourself. I'm on a pitch and I don't know the score yet. When I do, we'll hash it over."

Freddie shook hands with me, Lila smiled and said, "Good night," and I shuffled away feeling like someone who just snatched a kid's ice cream dime. I was also more than a little sore about all of this. I'd expected things to happen and nothing had. Clearly my job was simply to embarrass Freddie and when a close fist'd monkey like Cooney shells out a hundred bucks for that, something big is brewing.

I decided to make him talk. It would be fun to see how much he could take. I knew he dished it out plenty, but that kind never do like being on the receiving end. Furthermore, I was perfectly safe. Cooney wouldn't be able to stage any yelps for the cops, not after pulling an angle like this.

I went back to his office building, figuring that although it was past office hours, he'd be there waiting for developments. The place was deserted and reminded me of a gigantic tomb which was, by no means, an error of thinking. I found Gus Cooney huddled behind his desk at the foot of that big leather upholstered swivel chair he filled out so well. Somebody had been very direct about it. The knife had gone clear through Cooney's fa' throat and then been twisted. I doubted that Cooney uttered much more than a gurgle, but I did wonder why he had permitted an

intended killer, with a knife in his mitt, to get that close.

Knives as murder weapons are usually used to stick a man in the back, and if used in a fight, there is always plenty of evidence of the scuffle left behind. Here there was none. Not even the rug was mussed and everything on the desk was shipshape. I walked around the corpse, after making sure Cooney was thoroughly dead. I stood a the back of the chair and studied it for a moment. There was just a tiny fleck of blood on the back of it and I thought I knew the answer.

Whoever had knifed Cooney had first moved behind him—an excellent indication that Cooney had no idea as to what was coming—and just reached over his shoulder to let the knife drive deep. Registering that much in my brain, I next searched him without moving the body at all. There was one hip pocket I couldn't reach, but I thought it held nothing except a handkerchief anyway.

Cooney carried the usual miscellany of junk but nothing that might furnish a lead. I put all the stuff back and tried his desk. There was nothing. His filing cabinets were locked and I guessed that if they contained anything detrimental to the murderer, he'd have made darn sure such evidence was no longer present.

It looked like one of those neat kills, without motive or clues. Even the murder weapon had been thoughtfully removed. I took out my own handkerchief and started wiping the desk top. I wiped the door knobs, inside and out. Then I locked up the place nice and snug.

About the time I hit the street I got my first attack of the shivers. I could be tied up with that kill. I was an ex-con, with plenty of cops for enemies and some cops—like Lieutenant Westover—take the easy way out. I was the easiest way possible. So I made up my mind fast and like all good little boys, I got away from there and went to see Stuart Sedley who was supposed to be my boss and who paid me a weekly salary for doing nothing. Stuart Sedley, you see, didn't like cops either.

CHAPTER TWO

Hand of the Law

SEDLEY was gray-haired, aristocratic looking and tough as redwood. He mixed a couple of drinks, knowing I liked the stuff and couldn't buy it openly without risk of being sent back to the pen. I told him the whole story while he listened attentively.

My association with Sedley began soon after I was paroled. A couple of fancy dans tried to involve his son in a murder and I got him out of it. Sedley was grateful—about as grateful as a man can be. He knew I was a private eye and even without a license I'd still operate after a fashion. So he gave me a job which stood up under the inspection of the Parole Board and the eagle eye of Lieutenant Westover. In return I was expected to do little for him, draw a week's pay and find my own cases.

I was an ex-con—with an explanation. I drew three to five on a manslaughter rap because when I'd had a license, a gun, handcuffs and everything including an office, I'd been a pretty good shamus. The pay-off came when I was retained to pay blackmail money. I met the blackmailer by arrangement and he did a neat double-cross. He accepted the money and tried to get away without returning his evidence. In the resulting melee I plastered him too hard and broke his neck.

The guy who retained me denied he even knew me. Why not? If he testified, the secret he was paying off to be kept secret would come into the open. Besides, I was paid a fee to take such risks and I had no real beef coming. I served my time and was one of the most obedient boys up the river. Most of it was spent being a barber and my last job was preparing convicted men for the chair.

Stuart Sedley said: "I can't help you much, Rick. I know the Doane family, of course. Ernest Doane comes of a long line of thieves, gamblers, industrial pirates and, I suspect, killers. Smart

people who never cared much what happened so long as they got what they were after."

"The daughter looked—damned swell," I told him in her defense.

Sedley chuckled and talked to me over the rim of his glass. "All girls look swell to you. They will for weeks yet—until you get used to seeing them around. Rick—if this has to do with the Doane family, it's big. Maybe something you should lay off."

"Maybe, but I won't," I told him. "Tell me more."

"Well, Ernest Doane is an off-shoot of this family. He's honest. He married his first wife years ago and they had a daughter. His first wife was the kind who played, I guess. Anyway he kicked her out and there was a divorce. Then he married again—Lila's mother, who died soon after Lila was born. Far as I know this tendency toward mayhem and assorted evils hasn't been passed on to Lila."

"The first wife and daughter," I mused. "Now would there be anything in it for them if the Doane family was cursed or something?"

"Might be. I wouldn't know. The only other member of the family is Kate Bradford, a beagle-eyed, hatchet-faced spinster who is a head nurse at Community Hospital. I understand the nurses regard her with affection—the same kind they have for rattlesnakes."

I put down my empty glass. "Thanks, anyway. I'm going to see Freddie Ogden. I owe him an explanation for the set-up in front of the night club anyway."

"Keep out of Westover's way," Sedley warned. "If you get tied up with with Cooney kill, I'll alibi you. You were doing some work for me tonight."

That was the kind of guy Sedley was. They came better, but way up in the sky, not here on earth. I walked to the bus stand and rode back to town. There I transferred to the subway and rattled my way down to where Freddie Ogden lived.

The kid had one room in a modest hotel. He put on a bigger front than he should, but that was his business. Mine

was murder and he could help me—I hoped.

Freddie wasn't in, so I hung around the lobby and got myself spotted by the hotel dick in about three minutes. He kept his eyes on me and just about the time Freddie sauntered in, the hotel dick was ready to run me off the premises. All he'd have had to do was whisper it and I'd have taken a powder. Guys on parole don't fight—not even with a hotel snoop.

I went to Freddie's room with him and had some more drinks. Freddie listened while I explained. He began shaking his head from side to side before I was through.

"Honest, Rick, I don't get it. In the first place you seem to think you embarrassed Lila and me. That isn't true. Neither of us gives a hang what others think. I'm an ex-con on a bum rap maybe—but still I wore numbers and I don't give a damn who knows it. Lila feels the same way."

"But there has to be something," I said. "After all, a man was murdered tonight. The only reason was because he knew too much. About what? That's what I want to know."

"I can't help you," Freddie said. "But I'm getting scared. Why should anybody be trying to upset me?"

"Talk about the rap that drew you a prison term," I suggested. "Might be something there."

"Couldn't be, Rick. Lila and I had been attending a dinner dance at a golf club. I got myself nice and plastered, as I usually did in those days. Lila and I had a fight about it and I went off in a huff, driving my own car. Last I could recall, the booze was getting me good. I kept falling over the wheel. When I woke up, there were half a dozen state troopers around me. Seems I hit a man walking alongside the road, kept going and then passed out."

"There was no question about what happened?"

"Not so far as I'm concerned. I recall weaving the car. If I hit anything, I didn't know it. There are vague recollections of pulling up because I was

afraid of getting killed—and then the cops."

"Nice and pat," I said without much assurance. "The kind of an accident that can be rigged best. I'm not saying it was rigged, but it could have been. Freddie, are you in the chips?"

"I can scrape up a hundred if you need it," he told me.

"No, no. I don't mean that. I'm working and everything is fine. What I refer to is motive. If there is no reason to put you on a spot, then what I was hired to do was aimed at Lila and her family."

"But why?" Freddie wanted to know.

SO DID I and I told him so. I also asked him about Lila's half sister. Her name, according to Freddie, was June. She worked in a night club. Her mother was a nurse and lived on her income from that and what old man Doane sent her. At least he stuck by one of his marriage vows. She was never in want.

I put the bottle down. "We're getting nowhere, Freddie. And I can't make a move. If I go to see Doane's first wife, or her daughter, one or both is apt to call the cops and that'll put me right back where both of us want to stay away from. Incidentally, you were in a cafe tonight. How come?"

"I'm not on parole," Freddie grinned. "I served my maximum. Got into a mess with a con named Hazy and I slugged him. That was just before my name was coming up for parole and it didn't come up."

"Believe me," I said, "serving the rest of your time was worth it. A guy on parole has both legs cut off and both hands in a vise. Freddie, I've got to talk to Lila and her father."

"O.K., Rick. We'll both go to the house tomorrow night."

"Two ex-cons? The old boy might accept one when his daughter shoves him down his throat, but two mugs . . ."

"Forget it, Rick. Ernest Doane is like Lila. He doesn't give a hoot what a man has been. If I say you're a friend of mine, that's it. See you about eight?"

I nodded and got up. "I'm going to my office where it's quiet and I can think. Some private eye—me. I have to do my work by sitting and thinking about it."

"Office?" Freddie asked. "But I thought you weren't allowed to practice . . ."

"The office," I said, "is in Bryant Park. The last bench in the direction of Sixth Avenue. For a secretary I've got a speckled pigeon by day; at night there's usually a few neckers around. That's my office. Drop in any time and don't bother to phone ahead."

I knew where June Doane worked and I sauntered to that neighborhood first. I wanted a look at her. The cafe was one of those side street joints where the food is bad, the liquor worse, and the check depends on how much like a sucker you look. In the lobby were some half nudes of June. I hung around until she came out. She wasn't bad—even with clothes on.

June looked a lot like Lila. They had the same father and that resulted in a similarity of chins, eyes and manner. There the resemblance stopped because June saw me eying her and in the dark she didn't know whether or not I looked like money. She gave me an open high sign and said something I couldn't hear when I turned away.

One A.M. is no time for an ex-con to be prowling around a public park so I changed my mind and went to the rat trap where I lived. They called it a hotel, but Sing Sing was a lot cleaner and had more service. When you yelled, a guard came—with a club in his mitt perhaps, but he came. In this fleabag you could scream your ears off for a maid to give you fresh sheets and you'd be as alone as if you were in the middle of the Gobi Desert.

The desk clerk was a pal of mine. He was off somewhere so I had no warning. When I unlocked my room door, Lieutenant Westover was sitting there and I didn't like the kind of a grin he was wearing.

Westover was taller than my six feet and he was built like a truck. Beefy,

with jowls, a double chin and a nasty disposition. He was on easy ground with me. A parolee isn't supposed to argue with anybody, let alone a detective lieutenant.

"This place," I said, "crawls with bugs. Big ones, and the biggest look copper to me. What's on your mind besides busting me, Westover?"

I started removing my coat and Westover waved his hand. "Keep it on, Rick. You're taking a ride with me."

"For what, I'd like to know?" I demanded.

"For panhandling, that's what. Even if the guy you panhandled is a stir-bug the same as you. Ex-cons are supposed to make their own way, not beg."

I sat down slowly. "Now look, Westover . . ."

"Lieutenant, to you," he snarled.

"O.K., Lieutenant then. It happens I loaned Freddie Ogden ten bucks while we were in stir. He promised to pay it back, but he couldn't contact me. I read where he often went to the Elite Club and I waited . . ."

"Save the wind," Westover advised with liberal sarcasm. "It was panhandling and the doorman witnessed it. He told one of my boys about a pair of ex-cons meeting in front of the place and that's how I tumbled."

I reached for the phone. Inwardly I was considerably relieved. Finding Westover parked in my room instantly made me think I'd been tied to the Cooney kill. It seemed Westover either hadn't made a connection between me and Cooney or the private eye's body hadn't even been found yet.

"Who are you going to call?" he demanded.

"My boss—Stuart Sedley. A panhandler has to be broke and I get paid regularly. Then I'll call Freddie Ogden and his girl friend. Then you can take me in and I'll make more trouble for you than you ever thought existed."

Westover arose and very carefully slugged me across the mouth. Then he started slapping my face and cuffing my ears until they burned like fire. That was the hand and majesty of the law—

as he saw it. I held my arms stiff, my palms flat and hard against the bed on which I sat. I kept telling myself not to take him. I could do it. He knew that and so did I, but Westover was only praying I'd take a poke at him.

He got tired of this after awhile, shoved me flat on the bed and then started frisking the room. He didn't find anything. I made certain not to keep any papers around, no extra money and nothing which could be construed as a weapon. He walked into the bathroom and washed his hands. He flung the towel into my face.

"Clean up your kisser," he growled. "You must have been drunk to fall on your face and muss it up that way."

He strolled out of the room, slammed the door and continued down the hall. I sat there, cursing him fluently for ten minutes while the pain went out of my face. But I'd won that round and I could be a trifle proud of it. Somehow I didn't feel that way. My head hurt too much.

CHAPTER THREE

Shadow Man

THE next afternoon the papers were full of Cooney's mysterious murder, but Lieutenant Westover didn't seem to be any part of the investigation. I read the details and, boiled down, they only stated that nobody knew a thing about the kill. It was funny, in a way, because I could have helped the cops, but if I did they'd heave me back to prison. This was one time I could laugh and enjoy it.

At eight that night I met Freddie Ogden and we walked to the triplex apartment where Ernest Doane lived. Lila admitted us. She kissed Freddie with a vigor that made me actually jealous, but she took my hand in both of hers and held it warmly. That was recompense of some sort.

"Dad so wants to meet you, Mr. Trent," she said. "But I'm going to call you Rick. Oh—my aunt Kate will be there too, but don't let her disturb you

though she'll growl and make faces at you."

Ernest Doane turned out to be a husky looking man with white hair and a pink face. His handshake was friendly. He had us all sit down and then he told a young man in one corner of the room to mix drinks. The young man I found out later was named Paul Manning and he was private secretary to the whole family. He was typical of his sort, graceful enough to be almost effeminate though I knew he was anything but that. He bowed at the right time, addressed Doane as 'sir' and treated Lila as if she were his sister.

Kate Bradford sat primly erect in one of the smaller chairs. She was skinny, thin-faced and wore plain brown hair pulled back severely. I guessed she was easily Doane's age, but she didn't show it. Her lips were tightly compressed and stayed that way most of the time. She didn't see my hand when we were introduced and I gathered the idea that she didn't even like Santa Claus when she was a kid. I could well imagine how the nurses at Community Hospital regarded her.

Doane said: "I'm glad to have you here, Mr. Trent. You probably believe that's rather odd in view of your prison term and the way you are probably treated by other people, but Stuart Sedley talked to me today. We happened to run into one another."

I knew how accidental that meeting was. About as accidental as a Joe Louis punch. Sedley had set the stage for me.

Doane went on. "Having been to prison is no honor, I admit, but that doesn't make a confirmed criminal of you. Matter of fact, I believe my own family is implanted with more criminals . . ."

"Ernest," Kate Bradford snapped.

He waved a hand at her. "Mr. Trent will understand, Kate. I have to tell him this so he will realize I'm quite sincere. My great-grandfather, Mr. Trent, murdered at least three men. They hung him eventually. My grandfather killed no one, but he drove several people to suicide when he swiped their money. Oh—most legally according to the books,

but those people were ruined just the same. My father once maimed a man for life during a college boxing exhibition. Dad wangled the fight because he hated this other chap. And after that Dad wasn't a saint. Like his father before him, he made money through other people's ruin."

"Some family, eh, Rick?" Lila winked at me and grinned. No wonder Freddie had fallen for her.

Doane said: "Trent is too polite to comment. Now here is what I'm after. Being the descendant of such an assorted bunch of murderers and thieves, I've striven to make up for their digressions. I've conducted my own life upon an exemplary plane. Now Lila has fallen in love with Freddie. Very good—I heartily approve because I like Freddie. He's sown a few wild oats and reaped them too. Should I, with my family background, take issue with that? You are following me, Mr. Trent?"

"I think so," I said. "You're satisfied with Freddie as a son-in-law. And you should be. He's no criminal. Spending a year or two in prison hasn't made him bitter or crooked. And I can tell you this—in prison I found him to be honest and friendly. There isn't a man up there who wouldn't say the same things about him."

"Except Hazy—a convict I belted because he pushed around an old man," Freddie cut in.

"Which is to your credit," Doane added. "Thank you, Mr. Trent." He bowed in my direction. "Learning how Freddie acted while in prison is the main reason I was anxious to see you. Now, perhaps, you will realize my motives. I'm trying to purify the family blood. I couldn't allow my daughter to marry a man who might revert to all those things my forebears were."

That was when I started to see daylight in copious quantities. What had happened wasn't aimed at Freddie, but at the Doane family. Freddie, publicly fingered as an ex-con by another ex-con who looked like a bum, wouldn't help his chances with Lila, nor improve her social or moral status.

I said: "Mr. Doane, I can assure you Freddie is O.K. in every respect."

He rubbed his hands. "Fine, fine. I'm a bit hipped on this subject, but I'd rather Lila died a spinster than continue a blood strain that results in nothing but an assorted pack of crooks and killers."

I wanted to ask him about his other daughter, June, but decided this wasn't quite the time for it. We chatted about various things for awhile, I was served two more drinks by the secretary, who also seemed to act as butler, and then excused myself.

Manning, the secretary, accompanied me to the door and handed me my hat. As I moved past him, he spoke in a whisper. "Stay out of it, Trent. You look healthy and why not remain that way?"

He pivoted and stepped away fast. I wasn't surprised. I had an idea all along he was listening too intently. Now and then I'd spotted his jaws working as if he had all he could do to keep quiet. As I watched him, Lila came into the hallway. I saw Manning's face clearly and I guessed the answer. The jerk was in love with her.

I WAS thinking about that as I walked away from the apartment. I tried to figure in Gus Cooney's tie with all this, but I couldn't. Except that he had hired me to make things tough for Freddie. Then I had something else to bother me. I was being tailed. By an expert at that, but I knew all the tricks and when the same man stays behind you for blocks, he isn't following his nose.

I couldn't get a good look at him so I kept going. A tail might be the answer to the whole affair. As a rule that kind can't take it and I knew how to dish out persuasive powers which induced a man to talk. I turned the next corner, found it to be a quiet street with no cops in sight. I put my back against the building wall where the shadows were thickest and waited.

He came around the corner cautiously, didn't see me anywhere and started moving fast. So did I. As he went by, I

stepped out and tapped him on the shoulder.

He swung, with one hand going toward his armpit and I let him have it right on the chin. Then I lifted the gun out of its holster, pushed him against the wall and grabbed his throat. He snapped out of it fast and his eyes burned into mine.

I said: "Who pays you to gumshoe around, chum?"

Just to make certain he'd answer, I bumped the back of his head against the wall. That didn't do the trick so I bumped his head again—harder. He clawed at my hands to break the grip on his throat. I yanked him forward again and this time I meant to rattle what brains he had. Rattle them good—and then a radio car lazied around the corner.

Its headlights swept toward us and I dropped my hands fast. I carefully began dusting off his shoulders, as if he was an old, old pal of mine. But he saw an out and took it. He shoved off, walking fast and passing the radio car. The cop at the wheel gave me a cold eye. I lit a cigarette with what I hoped wasn't exaggerated nonchalance and strolled away.

My man was gone, of course. I still had his gun in my pocket and the memory of it made me shudder. If those radio cops had ever decided to frisk me, I'd be on my way back to the pen for a long stay. I got rid of the gun at the next trash can and felt a little better.

Half an hour later I thrust the key of my room into the lock, stepped inside and turned on the lights. That rat wasn't as dumb as I believed. He'd beaten me home and he was sitting in the same chair that Westover had occupied the night before. With one material difference—he'd acquired another gun and it was pointed straight at me.

In the light I had a good look at him and something clicked. I said: "Well, well, Hazy, why didn't you tell me who you were back there?"

Hazy was the con whom Freddie had smeared up at the pen. He needed smearing again—though he held plenty of insurance against it in his fist.

He said: "Sit down, Trent. Take off your coat first and heave it into the cor-

ner. Then we're going to have a little talk. About busted heads."

"Hazy," I said quietly, "I thought you were a flatfoot. It was a mistake."

"Yeah—it was. And you're going to know it fast."

I sized him up as a brute—one of the kind who has fat inside his skull instead of brains. That made him even more dangerous. A guy without imagination makes the worst possible type of killer. I'd much sooner face a gunman who was intelligent and might think of the consequences.

He moved over toward me. I knew what was coming. The gun swung down and the muzzle clipped my forehead. It sent me back but I raised up quickly. A man who goes down is too open a target for more pistol whipping. Hazy grinned at me. The kind of a grin you see in nightmares. He let me have another swipe with the muzzle. This time I folded up, forward, letting my head fall onto my knees and my arms hung loosely.

I said: "You're making a mistake, Hazy. You won't get paid for this because Gus Cooney is dead."

He bit at it as I knew he would. "Cooney—dead?"

I stayed doubled up. "Somebody slipped a knife through his neck last night. The papers are full of it. Can't you read?"

Hazy gave a hoarse laugh. "So what? What's Cooney to me? This is a personal matter anyhow. You tried to smash my brains out and I'm going to put you in a hospital. And you won't talk either because if you do, you'll go back in stir."

I couldn't see him, except his legs from the knees down, but I saw them brace. He was raising the gun. It was now or never because the next blow would likely knock me cold and I might not wake up. I simply raised both arms and let myself fall out of the chair. My arms wound around his legs and threw him off balance.

He was a wildcat. As he reeled off, getting back on balance, I straightened and closed in. I grabbed his gun hand

with my left and kicked him in the shins. That didn't drive his foot from under him so I tried it again. He was made of cast iron.

His free hand punched me on the throat and I thought I knew how Cooney had felt when the knife went through him. I twisted his gun wrist hard. That turned him around and I threw one at the back of his neck. That worried him for he made a rumbling noise at the bottom of his lungs. I punched him again, somewhere. He let go of the gun and I let go of his wrist. I bent to pick up the rod and he did a sprint toward the door, got it open and went through.

By the time I was in the hallway, he had disappeared down the steps. I followed, encouraged by the sound of his pounding footsteps. I reached the lobby as he sent the revolving doors spinning. I saw him turn a corner down the street and when I took that same corner, I took it wide so he wouldn't be able to pull my trick by waiting for me against the wall. He wasn't there. He'd turned into a space between two buildings and that was where I lost him.

A five minute prowl showed me no trace of the guy so I gave up. I found I had another gun in my belt. Getting rid of them seemed monotonous and this time I merely wiped it clean and dropped it in the alley before I started back for home. I was half tempted to keep the rod but only half tempted—because if Westover ever frisked me and found a gun . . . well, I was determined to stay out of the Big House if possible.

One thing I knew. Cooney had hired Hazy. Possibly because he knew Hazy hated Freddie Ogden enough to kill him if necessary. Which might be the sum total of his orders, so I headed for a telephone and called Lila's home. I got Freddie and told him to keep his eyes batted. He was properly grateful and as I hung up, I guessed I might as well go whole hog for the evening and pay Doane's first wife and daughter a visit. I was in no shape to go to sleep anyway. My heart was still pounding too savagely.

CHAPTER FOUR

Two Smart Women

I FRITTED away a buck and a half on a cab ride to the address and found it was one of those semi-fashionable places. No doorman, but a self-service elevator and a certain amount of cleanliness. The halls didn't smell of cabbage and kraut, though somebody did like onions with their steak. I knocked hard on Anna's door.

She opened it and surprised me some because I expected to see a frilly fifty year old woman trying to act like sixteen. Instead she seemed mature and sensible. She was dressed in a nurse's uniform with white shoes and stockings that did nothing for her legs.

June Doane, in light blue pajamas with an overall pattern of dice on them, was stretched out on a davenport. One foot rested on the floor, the other leg was curled up under her. She looked up at me and said, "Hello," with interest. The dame was man crazy.

Mrs. Doane wasn't quite as impressed. She stepped in front of me. "Well, what do you want, busting in here like this?"

"Gus Cooney sent me," I said.

"Who the hell is Cooney?" she demanded.

That was that. If she'd known him, I'd have detected some slight sign of it in her eyes. "Maybe," I said, "I've made a mistake. You are Mrs. Dorne?"

And while I made up that name I knew I hadn't made any mistakes. I faced a small table on which was a photo in an imitation leather easel. Two people were in the picture. June—and Paul Manning, the secretary who kowtowed to Ernest Doane.

"The name," Mrs. Doane told me, "is D-o-a-n-e. Not Dorne. Haven't you eyes good enough to read? My card is tacked below the bell."

"I'm very sorry," I said.

"I'm not." June sat up and pushed back her blonde hair. "Ma—let him stay. He wants something. I saw him last night outside the club."

I sighed and nodded, then grinned

foolishly. "Some guys do all sorts of things to meet a doll," I told her. "Maybe you never noticed, but I've been at the table near the palms every night for the past week. I like your singing and—stuff. I wanted to meet you and last night I couldn't rake up the nerve."

"He's lying. He smells copper to me," Ma put in.

"He looks good to me, Ma." June came a little closer. She used too much perfume, but it was the right type for her, seductive—and I wondered what goofy name they had for it.

I wanted out. I said: "I've made enough of a fool of myself. I-I'll be going now. Maybe tomorrow night, outside the club . . . ? Supper and champagne, perhaps."

Ma was certainly no dope. "Champagne from a guy who wears thirty dollar suits and one buck ties? What's your angle, mister? Who are you? June, bring me that newspaper on the table."

June winked at me signifying we'd just made a deal, but she got the newspaper. Ma looked at the headlines and threw it down. "You mentioned the name of Gus Cooney when you came in here. Cooney is dead—murdered. I think the cops would like to talk to you. June—get on the phone."

"Oh, now look, Ma . . ." June pleaded.

"Call the cops. You heard me."

My departure didn't demand formalities. I did manage to scoop up my hat and make for the door. Ma threw something at me and it hit the door as I closed it behind me. No self-operated elevator ever went so slowly. I was afraid the precinct might happen to contact a radio car in the same block and I wanted no fuss with Westover. Not now. Things were too hot and so was I.

On my hasty way home I did some mental arithmetic and came up with a total that didn't mean a thing. June knew Paul Manning who worked for Ernest Doane. Manning had warned me to stay out of it. There was a hood named Hazy who liked me just enough to spill my blood in copious quantities. I had met Anna Doane, the first wife of Lila's father and she knew the ropes. Of

them all Anna was the most dangerous. What did it add up to? In my book, one nice big zero.

But there was something. Not much as yet. Somebody had hired Cooney and killed him because Cooney was the type to prowl and learn things and make a little blackmail touch. A private detective's normal and honest income wouldn't supply the kind of an office Cooney maintained. Whoever hired him was trying to get at me now, on the theory I was of the same stripe as Cooney.

And back of all this lay a motive. Ernest Doane was wealthy, so money probably was behind it. As potential heirs I had Lila, Anna Doane, June Doane and Kate Bradford, the aunt. I was one hell of a private eye. Without a license I was strictly limited. With three years in stir hanging over my head, I was in a straitjacket so far as carrying out an investigation was concerned. I did the only thing I could. I telephoned Stuart Sedley.

"Things are getting hot and confused," I said. "No beef on the Cooney murder yet, but if Westover gets the case he'll consider me as a suspect. He remembers me with every two-bit case that comes his way. I need help. Do you know who Ernest Doane's attorney is?"

"Yes," Sedley said. "All three of us belong to the Uptown Athletic Club where we meet often and exercise with glasses containing scotch and soda. Why do you ask?"

"I've got to see this lawyer and he must understand I'm on the level before I go there. He must also accept me at face value which isn't much. Can you fix it?"

Good old Sedley. He arranged things so that Attorney Thompson greeted me with an inhaler of old brandy which I needed. He listened to my story, by no means in full, but I convinced him Ernest Doane might be in danger.

THOMPSON stuck his nose in the brandy inhaler and sniffed generously. He didn't look like a Man of Distinction doing that, but I

knew you could get very tight inhaling the stuff. I preferred to drink it.

When he came up for air, he put the glass down and reached for a cigar. "I shall violate all the ethics of my profession," he said. "Because I think you're right and Doane may be in danger. For ten years his will left half the estate to Lila, a quarter to June and a quarter to Anna, his first wife. About six months ago he changed it. Lila gets the whole shebang. June and Anna get headaches."

"What about Aunt Kate?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Kate doesn't need any money and Ernest knows it. Grant that she-devil her due, she's a big shot at a hospital and the place runs like clockwork. She lives within her means. In fact I know how much she is worth and it's plenty. Every dime goes to the hospital at her death."

"Couldn't Anna, his first wife, break that will?"

"Not so long as I have a signed forfeiture of all rights to Doane's money. She signed it to bleed him for plenty when he divorced her. Anna can't get a thin dime. Have another brandy?"

With the news he gave me I needed the whole bottle. The only theory I had just blew up in my face. Doane's money wasn't behind the scheme and when money isn't back of murder, the real motive is always hard to determine.

That was the way the situation lay when I climbed into bed. No loopholes, no clues. The only man who might tell me anything was dead and my only rainbow was the fact that I was a hundred bucks ahead. I decided that with all this on my mind I'd never sleep and I conked off in two minutes.

In the morning I spent some time around the building where Gus Cooney had maintained his offices. I talked to people who worked in the building, but they knew nothing about his clients. He maintained a secretary who worked part time only. I knew the cops had questioned her and if I went over the same ground it would only result in my being tagged for making like a sleuth. That angle was too dangerous for me to tackle.

I was about at the end of my rope by

dinner, with every possible loophole in the case closed up tightly. I even gave way to reasoning that Cooney's murder might not be connected with this case at all, but the work of someone he'd blackmailed. When I start thinking in those weak terms, I'm really whipped.

At seven o'clock, right after dark, I was in Bryant Park. I didn't exactly know why I went there except that I'd become used to the place and I enjoyed this quiet oasis in a city teeming with noise. Here the traffic along Forty-second Street, Fifth Avenue and Sixth, seemed muted and far, far away.

I was seriously considering a movie about the time I heard those high heels chatter against the cement. They were the steps of someone who knew exactly where she was headed, for casual visitors to the park just stroll. Then she was close enough so that I recognized her. June slowed up, stopped and looked down at me.

"Hello, Rick," she said. "May I sit down?"

"Sure. I'm glad you came."

She sat beside me and I wished she wouldn't use that perfume. Whoever made it knew their stuff. She was close—very close and, I thought, she wouldn't mind being a bit closer. I didn't give her any encouragement. That's me—he man.

"You were very silly last night," she said. "Not that I minded, but Mom didn't lose any time checking up."

"In what way," I asked, "was I silly, as you call it?"

"Telling me," she said chidingly, "that you watched my show from a table near the palm trees. There aren't any palm trees in the club where I work. It happens you are Rick Trent, ex-convict, ex-private detective and you're working for my father."

"Guess again, sweetheart. I can't work for anybody as a shamus. There's a matter of a license."

"Poo," she sniffed. "A license wouldn't bother a man like you."

"Tell me, June, how you learned all this."

"There are ways." She was giving me the cute routine now.

"Such as telling Paul Manning about my visit?"

She smiled. "You saw the picture of us together. Well, suppose he is in love with me?"

That didn't jibe. A man can look with love in his eyes upon only one woman at a time and I'd seen that light in Paul Manning's when he watched Lila. June was playing second fiddle whether she knew it or not.

I HANDED her a cigarette, lit it and my own. I wondered what meaning lay behind her visit and I intended to let her bring up the subject. Instead she smuggled closer.

"You're not a bad sort, Rick. You and I could make music."

"Nuts," I told her. "I'm a broken down ex-con with hardly enough dough to eat let alone take around a girl like you. Not that I wouldn't like it, mind you."

"I've got money. I'm not as rich as my half sister, but I have money."

That one hit me hard. "As Lila, you mean? What are you talking about? Her money comes from her father."

"Oh no," June contradicted. "Lila's mother was wealthy and when she died she left it all to little Lila. But let's not talk about her. Just about you and me, Rick. We can see one another again?"

"Look," I said, "I can't take you anywhere because of parole rules. That means no clubs, no bars, not even a restaurant where they sell booze. I'm always being stopped by cops. Sometimes they frisk me for luck and they don't care who is around to witness the act. You'd have no fun with me."

"Oh-oh," she chortled, "that's what you think. I work in a night club. I hate them. I don't drink much. I'd be satisfied with a bus ride—and you, Rick."

I was really getting the business and there was some reason for it. She hadn't come here merely to throw herself into my arms. Not June! I remembered enough about women—her kind—to know that. If she had an angle, why didn't she spill it?

I decided to make her talk. "Sorry, June. I wish I could take you up on this. Right now I've got a date."

"Sit still, you fool," she snapped. Her whole attitude changed then. "Do you think I enjoy this? I came here to tell you that Paul Manning isn't quite as much of a fool as he seems. Something is up at my father's place. I don't know what it is or what is to happen, but there's trouble brewing. And when it breaks, I want to be right there, batting for my share of his money."

"Now you're beginning to make sense," I said. "What gives you the idea you or your mother would clean up if Ernest Doane—shall we say—died?"

"He's my father, isn't he? My mother was married to him once. That gives us some rights."

"Sure. About as much as I have under parole laws. June, before you start beating your brains out, check around and make certain you really can get something out of the estate. Talk to a lawyer . . ."

She looked at her wrist watch and jumped up. "I will, Rick. I'll let you know. Now I've got to run. My first show goes on in an hour. You'd be surprised how long it takes a girl to put on a costume that hardly covers her. See you later."

She barged off fast and I sat there trying to figure it out. June knew very well her mother had signed away all rights to Doane's estate. They were thick, those two, and Anna would have told her. So that wasn't the reason why she came here. And telling me about Paul Manning wasn't the motive either because she hadn't informed me of something I didn't already know. I recalled how she'd become so suddenly serious when I attempted to break away. Then I realized why she had come. To hold me here, on this park bench. To keep me from prowling while something went on. Something I might stop.

I got out of the park fast and whistled a cab. I rode to my hotel because if any messages came, that's where they'd be. The desk clerk was signalling frantically as I entered the lobby.

He said: "Rick, some guy has been calling you every five minutes for the last half an hour. He sounds like trouble. Last call was about three minutes ago. He'll be on the wire before you can reach your room."

"I'll stick here and take it," I said. "Didn't he leave any name or number?"

"The guy sounded too scared. Funny how it's so hard to disguise fear over a telephone. I remember when my old man died . . . Hold it, Rick. The board is buzzing and I'll lay odds this is your friend."

It was Freddie Ogden. He said: "Rick, listen carefully. I'm at 269 Carmody Street. Third floor, rear left. In a room where Hazy lived."

"Did you say lived? In the past tense?" I asked.

"He's dead, Rick. Somebody put a knife through his throat. I'm scared. Will you come here?"

"Stay in that room and lock the door," I told him. "I'll be there as fast as a hack can bring me."

CHAPTER FIVE

Frame-up For Two

HAZY was as dead as Cooney had been and the cause of his death was exactly like that which killed the private eye. I'm no stickler or stranger to blood, but I'll admit examining that wound made my stomach jump. The blade had apparently been thin and long. I say apparently because the killer had insured death by twisting the knife.

I arose from my kneeling position and went over to sit on the bed. Freddie occupied a chair and he was almost as gray as the corpse. I said: "O. K., Freddie, let's have it all."

"There isn't much to tell, Rick. I was getting dressed for a date with Lila. At seven the phone rang . . ."

"At exactly seven?" I asked him carefully.

"Yes. I remember because I was looking at the alarm clock to see how much time I had and when the phone rang, I jumped because I thought it was the

alarm going off. What's the difference anyhow?"

"Plenty, perhaps. A call precisely on the hour looks like a prearranged one. Go ahead."

"Hazy was on the wire. He said he'd made a terrible mistake about you and me too. That he'd been told both of us were out after him. He said ex-cons should stick together and that he had a lot to tell you. I promised to try and contact you. I did try and you were nowhere that I phoned."

"I was sitting in a park listening to a smart little doll soft-soap me into being scarce when you needed me," I said bitterly.

"Well, I called Hazy back and he told me if I came over, he could give me the story. That it was important, his life was probably in danger and I should leave at once. Also make certain I wasn't tailed."

"Or accompanied," I said. "What was the set-up when you got here?"

"He was—just like you see him now. The door was closed but not locked. He didn't answer my knock so I stepped in and—found him."

"You saw nobody you knew?"

"Not a soul—and I was careful not to be tailed."

I took his arm. "We're getting out. This has all the elements of a beautiful little trap. And if it is, the man who set it has had plenty of time to spring it. Go to work with your handkerchief and wipe every flat surface you might have touched, even remotely."

While Freddie did this, I searched the body, knowing very well there'd be nothing on him to give us any sort of a clue. After that we went away from there as fast as we could travel. Near Fifth Avenue, I drew him into a drug store with booths and we sat down in one. I ordered something — I don't remember what—as an excuse to stay there.

I said: "Listen, Freddie, you're in a mess. I don't believe you killed Hazy, but you'll have one hell of a time making the cops think you didn't."

"But why? I hardly knew the man."

"You know any man whose kisser you

push in and you banged Hazy up plenty while you were both in stir. It prevented you from getting a parole and that's motive enough. Besides, Hazy was making things tough for me. We're prison pals and friends outside too. It could be construed that you took it upon yourself to stop Hazy from bothering me—permanently."

About the time I was half through telling him how he stood, Freddie began sweating. He said: "Rick—if this is a frame, it's the second pulled on me. The more I've thought about it, the less I think I ran down that man three years ago. Now—this."

"Yeah—this, and it makes the other frame look like a traffic violation. They burn guys for murder. Take it from me, I barbered enough of those babies to know. You've got to get under cover."

"But where? Where can I go, Rick?"

I said: "Stay here and keep your eyes open. If anything that looks like copper comes through the door, you ease out. Never mind me. I can take care of myself and I've got me an alibi for the time of the murder. They may have kept me out of your reach, but they alibied me at the same time. I'm going to make a phone call."

There was a character known as Horseface—for no reason I could think of—who'd bunked with me in prison. Since his release, he'd settled down in Connecticut but he wasn't averse to helping an old friend. I got Horseface on the wire and gave him the story.

"Sure," he said quickly. "I remember Freddie. Nice kid and even if he knocked off Hazy, I'd still give him a hand."

"What we need," I said, "is a comfortable spot if possible. He may have to stay out of circulation a long time."

"I got me a little house near Wilton," Horseface told me. "You take the Ridgefield Road until you clock seven and three-tenths miles on your speedometer. Turn off there and the first place you come to will be it . . . A house far back where it can't be seen from the road. I'll have the pantry stocked right away."

"The people who own it won't be back unexpectedly?" I asked.

"Nix the idea, Rick. It belongs to my mother-in-law and I sent her to Mexico City for her health, she thinks. Freddie can stay there for six months."

I thanked him, promised to return the favor and went back to the room. Freddie had a car and he gave me the keys and a note to the garage people so I could drive it out. Brother, if Lieutenant Westover ever saw that note!

Forty minutes later I slid from behind the wheel and let Freddie take over. I'd left him in a cafe. The kid didn't forget me. He'd palmed a double rye and ginger and handed me the glass. Between sips I gave him explicit instructions.

"Another thing," I added, "nobody is to know where you are."

I WHISTLED softly and I knew what was coming. "I—phoned Lila while I was waiting for you to come with the car. Rick, I had to tell her."

"Sure—and whoever else might be listening or have Lila spotted so she can be trailed to the spot where you're hiding. The damage is done. Forget it. I'll keep an eye on Lila too and maybe turn up something—or somebody. Get going now—and drop me uptown near Community Hospital."

"You going to see Aunt Kate?"

"Yes. I think Anna and June are mixed up in this pretty deeply. Anna works at the hospital and Kate will know about that. All I have to do is worry whether or not she'll tell Westover I've been making passes like a sleuth."

"She won't, if you ask her not to," Freddie said. "Kate's an old war horse, but otherwise O. K. And Rick, thanks a million."

He let me off a block from the hospital. I'd never seen the place before. It was of moderate size and, I guessed, privately endowed. A nurse who looked glamorous even in uniform winced when I said I wanted to talk to Kate Bradford.

"You a friend of hers?" she asked.

I nodded. What the hell difference

did that make? I found out one hour and ten cigarettes later. About the time I began feeling like an expectant father, I saw that nurse stroll past the room where I was supposed to be waiting. I called her inside.

"Now look here," I said. "When I told you I was a friend of Kate Bradford that was a facetious statement. We don't happen to be friends. In fact, I hate her guts, but I've got to see her."

The nurse grinned. "Why didn't you say so before? We make a point of letting Kate's visitors wait around for four or five hours. Puts them in a nice mood when she finally shows up and believe me, mister, that kind of a mood matches Kate's as it is twenty-four hours a day."

"As bad as that?" I asked.

"Worse than that. This, my friend, has been a red letter day in Community Hospital. She tried to boss Dr. Harper. The poor old dear—meaning Kate—didn't know Harper was a big shot. He didn't take the bossing, but he did do some bawling out and when he finished, Kate was like a dishrag. We're already taking up a collection for Dr. Harper's Christmas present."

"So she runs the joint," I reflected out loud.

"She thinks she owns it. I'd better get her. At ten she's due to assist on a gall bladder operation. Once she's scrubbed, nobody can see her. Wait here."

Kate came down a few minutes later, stiffer and starchier than ever. For my money I'd rather see Old Man Death himself than her kisser if I was on my way out. I wondered what the mortality rate in this hospital was.

"Yes, Mr. Trent. You wanted to see me." She didn't ask questions. She stated them.

I had to carry on a campaign to convince her. "Before you have me thrown out of here," I begged, "keep in mind the fact that I am trying my best to help Ernest. There have been two murders already, perhaps more in the offing and one of them could be the death of your nephew. Aunt Kate, I need your help."

"My name," she told me in a voice she reserved for student nurses, "is Miss Bradford to you. How can I help? I'm a head nurse, not a policeman."

"Yeah," I said, "but you look and act like both. Now wait—this is important. Anna Doane—your nephew's first wife—works here, doesn't she?"

"She is a nurse. She was a nurse when she married Ernest. I saw nothing wrong in allowing her to work here."

"But she is involved, Miss Bradford, in these murders. Don't ask me how nor how much. I don't know yet. All I want from you is a statement saying that Anna was here tonight. Since six o'clock."

"To my knowledge she was. Good evening, young man."

"O. K.," I said and picked up my hat. "I'll send flowers to Ernest's funeral too."

She hesitated and curiosity got the better of her. She stood there, waiting for me to talk.

"Anna," I told her, "gets nothing if Ernest dies. That much I know. Neither does June. So they have no motive and yet I'm convinced they are mixed up in it. Could they hate Ernest sufficiently to take sides against him?"

"Ernest put Anna out of the house when June was less than a year old. I protested against it, but Ernest always was headstrong. Certainly they have reason to hate him."

"And will you keep watch on Anna? Tell me if anyone comes to see her . . ."

"Ordinary nurses are permitted no visitors while on duty. When they go off, they are no concern of mine. I refuse to be a—an eavesdropper for you. Now I have an operation to prepare for. If you must come here again, please remember that I am on duty from four until midnight or after. I am ordinarily not available during those hours for it sets a bad example to the others."

She stalked out of there on her skinny legs but boy, she had bearing in her shoulders. If the nurses had a nickname for her, it couldn't be anything else but Old Ramrod.

I had things to do and they wouldn't

brook any delay. I got myself over to the vicinity of the Doane's apartment as fast as possible and took up a position across the street. I had a feeling that Lila wouldn't let much time elapse before she went to Freddie.

CHAPTER SIX

Hideout

WHILE I stood there, I shook down my memory for all the facts which were part of this case. There weren't very many and predominant among them was the idea that whoever was behind this happened to be a past master at the art of the frame. I had few doubts but that the cards had been stacked against Freddie when he was convicted of manslaughter. It was all part of an unpretty pattern that spread over a period of years. The murderer was patient and cautious. Let a killer with average intelligence plot a crime and he leaves few, if any, clues. The best advantage cops have is that most murders are committed in a moment of intense hatred—by people who lose their heads and, consequently their lives or liberty. My killer wasn't that type.

At nine-twenty, Lila emerged from the building. She didn't look around, just walked as fast as possible to the nearest corner. I was tempted to go after her, but I figured if anyone wanted to get on her trail, the place to do it was from the starting point right here.

Sure enough, within the next three minutes a familiar person hurried out and went in the same direction that Lila had taken. Paul Manning, and he wasn't smooth and subservient. There was a look on his face akin to murder.

I tailed Paul Manning because where Lila went, he'd also go and I'd be right back of both. That was what I thought. Paul suddenly made himself scarce down an alley and I had to duck for the cover of a pole—a light pole at that, but not much of me could be seen, I hoped.

I knew why Paul had moved fast, too. There was a garage on this side

street and down the ramp slid a yellow coupe with Lila at the wheel. As she pulled away, Paul raced for the garage too, while I frantically hunted a cab without much luck.

I saw Paul drive out in a limousine which I took to be Ernest Doane's. Then they were both gone and I was left chewing my nails. I yapped senseless curses at all the taxi drivers in New York until it suddenly dawned on me that I had no reason to tail them. I knew where they were going. Two years in stir seemed to have done things to my so-called thinking apparatus.

But getting me a car was another matter. That particular garage gave me a cold eye and a sharp "No" when I asked to rent one. They must have thought I was on the lam for something. I started walking and tried another garage six blocks north. They didn't like me either, but the night manager had compassion enough to tell me where I might hire one.

Now, at long last, a cab wheeled by and I stopped it with a whistle loud enough to grace the Queen Mary. I had the driver take me to the third garage. There I was rented a car. All I had to do was leave twice what the car was worth, a pint of blood and slip the manager twenty bucks under the table.

But I had a car of sorts. I didn't look at the make and there was nothing on the dash to indicate it. I figured the manufacturer never had the courage to baptize the wobbly, weaving old crate.

It made more noise than a B-29 and had the speed of a tractor. If I never turned that car back, the garage was in money. My foot got tired being held flat against the floor board so I pulled out the dash gas control all the way, settled back and let her tear along at top speed. Something around thirty-two.

Curses didn't help. I was a whipped man the instant I got behind the wheel and once I realized it, things got better. The miles ticked off somehow. She kept going, I'll say that much—without further comment on how she went.

I figured about an hour had elapsed

before I hit the Ridgefield Road and then I found out the speedometer didn't work. Not the one that registered tenths of a mile, so I had to go by the big one and when it passed the allotted mileage according to Horseface's orders, I held her at thirty and counted off three-tenths of a mile. I made a turn, bumped over a deeply rutted road and heard the shots some distance away.

My estimation of time and distance was lousy. I'd taken the wrong road. I backed up, finally made a turn and streaked for the highway. Streaked, that is, like a tortoise. There'd been three or four shots. Fast ones, as if an inexperienced hand was around the butt of the gun. It sounded like an automatic.

I kept listening for more shots or the sound of another car, but my own Stanley Steamer made more racket than a roller coaster so I gave up. I found the right road at last. I spotted the little house Horseface had described. I saw the yellow coupe and the black limousine and—somebody lying face down in the path leading to the house.

I yelled to Freddie because if he'd done this, he might still have an itchy finger. Freddie recognized my voice and popped out of the house fast. When he reached me, I was turning over what was left of Paul Manning. I lit a match, cupped it and grimaced at the two wounds directly over his heart. And I'd thought the shooting had been done by an amateur.

"Is he—is he—dead?" Freddie asked.

"He won't say 'yes sir' to Lila's father again. What happened? Where's Lila?"

"In the—the house. Rick, I killed him. I had to. I thought he was a cop."

"Killed him with what?" I demanded.

"A—a gun I found in the house . . ."

"Stop it, Freddie." I grabbed him by both lapels and shook him until his teeth chattered. "Horseface wouldn't allow a rod in any place he or a relative owned. He's on parole too."

LILA came out then, striding along like a man, her hair loose and wind slashed from the fast drive. She didn't make any bones about it.

"Rick, I'm glad you came. I killed Paul Manning. He followed me. I didn't know who it was. Dad kept a gun in the coupe. I went back for it . . ."

"Went back?" I asked her quickly.

"Yes, Rick. You see, I thought it might be Anna or my half sister, June. Both of them hate me like poison. I thought all along they were behind this. I could handle both of them. I know I could, but when the driver of the big car got out, it was a man. I thought he had a gun too. I ran back to the coupe and got Dad's automatic."

"Where did you find it? In its usual place?"

"Why—no, Rick. No, it was on the seat. Had been there all the time, I suppose."

"People don't carry rods on car seats, Lila. Think—was it there during your ride here or wasn't it?"

"I—don't know. Maybe I unconsciously took it out of the glove compartment because I was scared. I don't know. Everything was hazy. I fired, I don't know how many times. Then I—I saw him lying there and I ran into the house."

"Lila," I said in as kindly a voice as I could possibly summon, "if you're pinched for this, don't get on the witness stand. You'll strap yourself into the electric chair as sure as little bullets killed Paul Manning. Now let's go into the house. I doubt anyone heard the shots. Horseface wasn't kidding when he said this place was isolated."

"Horseface," Freddie said very unnecessarily, "is a friend of ours, Lila."

I busted a dozen parole regulations then—and a couple of laws which apply to ordinary people. I pulled Paul's body out of sight behind some bushes. Then I went into the house and doused the lights. In the darkness, I let them have it.

"You kids just wound yourself in more trouble than you ever knew existed. Why didn't you ask who it was before you blasted him, Lila?"

"I—was scared. I told you. I was afraid for Freddie. I thought whoever it was had come to get him."

"The protective female," I sighed dismally. "Now what are we going to do about it?"

Lila began laughing hysterically. Between laughs, she said: "Think of it. I've reverted. I'm the descendant of killers and pirates and horse thieves and crooks. A real descendant now. I've become what Dad was always afraid he'd turn into. And I don't give a damn. Do you hear me, Rick? I don't give one good damn. Freddie . . . Freddie, sit beside me. Hold me. I'm scared all over again."

"Finished?" I asked. "Then listen to reason for a change. You two are going back. Freddie to his room, you to your apartment. You'll act as if nothing happened."

"Nothing happened!" Lila laughed hysterically again. I walked over and slapped her hard across the face. That did it. She began sobbing quietly for a change.

"Freddie, you'll probably be picked up," I told him. "You'll say you were at Lila's. You two had an early date. Aunt Kate can't deny that because she's been at the hospital and I promise Paul Manning won't testify against you."

"Picked up?" Freddie asked. "You mean I'll be arrested?"

"That's what they call it. Freddie, did you think for a moment the murder of Hazy was committed for the fun of it? That kill is framed on you right now. Oh sure, nobody saw you that you know of, but I'm betting a couple of people show who'll describe you to fit the rogue's gallery photo they carry at Headquarters."

Freddie had a pretty good grip on himself by then. "I'll do whatever you say, Rick."

"Lila is your alibi and you are hers. Maybe the death of Paul was a frame too."

"No! No, I killed him," Lila started all over again, but when I advanced toward her she stopped abruptly. She remembered that slap. I'd intended she wouldn't forget.

"Whether you did or not, Freddie will say he was with you in your apartment. Tell your father what happened. Every

last little detail and tell him I've got plenty of faith in both of you. Get him in on the twin alibis if you can."

"He'll do it—for me," Lila said. "But I'd almost rather be shot than tell him I-I killed Paul."

"You'll have to tell him," I said. "He'll protect you because he is your father. No matter how much the cops land on Freddie, stay with that story. He was with you. Now beat it, both of you."

"But-but there are three cars," Freddie said with rare good sense. I hadn't thought of it.

"Four," I said. "Yours, Lila's coupe, the limousine Paul drove, and that 1902 model I piloted. Take the same cars you drove here. I'll account for the other two, somehow. Get going—before the cops decide to hunt Freddie at your apartment, Lila. And listen—don't break any speed laws on the way back and watch the lights. If you're pinched tonight—say so long to freedom."

FREDDIE asked: "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know — yet. Maybe nothing. If Westover happens to land on this case, you haven't seen me since the time I panhandled ten bucks. Now beat it. Time is an essential element even if you two can't realize that."

I watched them drive off in their respective cars. Then I sat down on the doorstep to figure the next move. I'd have one hell of a time piloting two cars back to town, but something had to be done. If there was a sacrifice, it was going to be the quiver I drove up here, but I'd have to account for that too.

Finally I hit on a plan, a simple but effective one. I should have thought of it right off the bat, but sometimes I use sawdust for brains. First though, I hunted a flashlight in the house and did some detective work. It was hopeless. The drive was gravel which didn't take any footprints and heavy, close-cropped grass extended smack to the edge of the drive. I gave that up.

I went back to the house, stood near the door and visualized Paul Manning getting out of the car. It was dark as

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Workover

pitch. The limousine was even blacker and Paul was wearing a dark blue suit and a dark shirt. No part of him should have been visible. What was Lila shooting at, then? And I'd heard four shots. There were only two wounds in Paul. If Lila had plugged him twice through the heart, she wasn't missing with the other two shots by much of a margin.

With the flash, I checked over the car. Freddie had been standing right in front of it, but there were no bullet holes in it. At least, that was a consolation because when the cops found the car next day, I didn't want them to get excited about bullet holes.

I gave up then, climbed into the old hack and drove it to a garage I'd spotted some two miles down the road. It was closed, but the owner lived alongside. I found that out after I stopped just short of the place, raised the hood and did a few things to the motor of the rented car. It was a pleasure. I owed that crate some torture.

The garageman took one look and groaned. "Mister," he said, "I won't have this baby ready for two days. Your car is ancient. Hard to get the necessary parts."

"O. K.," I told him. "Take your time. I'll hike to the village and grab me a train. Be out in a couple of days."

I did start toward town too, until there was sufficient darkness between me and the garage. Then I doubled back to where Paul Manning's car waited for me. Paul waited, too, though not for me. All he needed was a medical examiner and an undertaker.

I drove that sleek limousine back to town. Compared to the nut and bolt job I'd driven out, it was like driving on a cloud. I actually enjoyed myself. I pulled up on a quiet side street, wiped prints off the wheel and door handles, made a check to see things were O.K. and then left the car there. The cops would wonder how it happened to be in this spot while its driver was plenty of miles away, lying behind a bush with his heart full of lead.

Cops are paid to worry anyway. I had no guilty conscience.

I PHONED Freddie's hotel ten minutes later and, surprisingly enough, he answered.

"Nothing has happened so far," he reported. "No news flashes of that certain affair . . ."

"Stay put," I told him. "And hang onto your nerve."

I hung up and spent another nickle calling Lila. She didn't sound much like the affectionate, friendly girl I'd met only a couple of days before. Her voice was weak and full of hopelessness. I tried to cheer her up.

"There's a chance neither you nor Freddie will be connected with this thing at all. How did your father take it?"

"He—agreed to provide Freddie and me with alibis. Right now he's locked himself in the study with a bottle. He—looked sick when I told him."

"He'd be sicker if the police pinched you for murder, Lila. Remember that. Keep in touch with Freddie. Act as if nothing at all has happened."

"Nothing—at—all," she laughed and made me shiver as she hung up.

I subwayed to the station nearest my hotel. This was the worst mess I'd ever been in, though my luck was holding so far as Freddie and Lila were concerned. I remembered I still had that automatic. Getting rid of guns was really becoming a habit. This one could be traced to Ernest Doane and there might be complications. Yet I couldn't go around with the thing on my hip.

I stopped off at a store and bought a box and some paper. I found an all night lunch room with nobody but a sleepy counter man in it. There I ordered coffee and a hamburger and while it was being prepared, I wrapped the gun into the box.

First though, I wiped it off carefully. There was plenty of cordite all around the butt and the trigger. I slipped out the magazine and counted three slugs. The load capacity was nine. Lila had

fired four times. What had happened to the other two bullets—if they'd really been in the clip?

I gave up trying to solve that and finished wrapping the gun. I addressed it to Ernest Doane at his office, marked it *Fragile* and from a book of stamps, I plastered what I thought was plenty to carry the thing. I mailed it at the next parcel drop and felt better. Much better.

But I was worried, too, because something should have happened to Freddie. If Hazy's murder was a frame, the real killer couldn't let much time lapse before his trap was sprung. I didn't know it then, but I was worrying about an item that was due to knock me into right field.

The desk clerk swore Westover hadn't been around. I telephoned Sedley then and asked him if he'd come to see me. He recognized the urgency in my voice and promised to leave right away.

I went to my room, cleaned up a bit and was putting on a fresh shirt when someone knocked on the door. Sedley, of course. He'd made very good time. I opened it and a big hand shoved me so hard I went backwards, and tripped.

Lieutenant Westover didn't laugh at me. He was beyond the laughing stage. There was savage determination in his eyes and I knew my goose was cooked.

Westover cocked one foot back. "Stay there, con. Stay there or I'll kick your jaw loose."

I let my full weight rest on the floor again. I didn't say anything. It wasn't necessary. Westover would spill his piece.

He went over to a chair, picked up my coat and turned it upside down. He shook everything out of the pockets and huffed a little because the contents were nothing by which he could put me back in stir. He took a pair of cuffs from his pocket and began twirling them.

"This time," he told me, "you really went over the dam, Trent. Where's the knife?"

"I swallowed it," I said.

"You're going to swallow a few thousand volts of juice. Get this, con. I'm arresting you for two murders. I can

bring you in half dead if I like and nobody is going to say a word. Not a single squawk. Now talk."

"Tell me what to talk about," I suggested. "Not two bodies, Lieutenant, because I only know one formally and I didn't kill Gus Cooney."

"You knifed him and you knifed an old prison pal of yours named Hazy with the same blade. Give up, con. You can't get away with it forever. Soon as we found Hazy, I went to work on it. Happens I met a couple of radio patrolmen who told me they had seen Hazy not so long ago and at the time they thought he was being worked over by another mug. So what happens? The patrolmen glance at the rogue's gallery and yelp when they see your puss. You roughed Hazy up then, but you had to let him go. Later you got him right. What for, con?"

I said: "If you're taking me in, take me in. I won't talk to you."

He raised his foot, kicked out and clouted me alongside the jaw. It hurt like hell and for a moment blind rage almost made me tackle him. I didn't though. He'd have a time proving me as the double killer. Otherwise there'd been no questions, just a straight hook to the jaw and a fast trip to the cooler.

HE KICKED me again and then unlimbered a blackjack. "I'm going to bat your ears off, con," he warned. "Talk!"

I didn't say a word. Not until the sap hit me across the back of the neck and then I only groaned. He shellacked me with the sap a dozen times, being careful to hold back the blows and all the while I was thinking of how I could get back at this overgrown ape.

He got tired after awhile and sat down again. I was lying on my face, tasting blood and hating the taste of it. Westover spoke, but he seemed to be a long, long distance away. Once he kicked me experimentally in the ribs, but I didn't even grunt. I was past the stage of making noises. All I wanted was a nice long sleep. Preferably in a cool hospital bed.

Hospital bed! That was it. The very thing. Westover didn't know it, but he was doing me a favor. I was laughing like someone in a padded cell. Laughing at myself because it seemed I did my best thinking when my brains were knocked loose. The laughing got him.

"This is your last chance, con. I'm going to kill you if you don't talk."

I spat a mouthful of blood in his face and started laughing all over again. He swarmed around the room, ripping stuff apart in his search for the murder knife. I wasn't worried about his finding it because I knew where the knife was and it wasn't here.

He came back to my side and poised the sap. "Here it comes, con. This one will split your skull open. You killed Cooney and you killed Hazy. Tell me all, if you want to keep your head."

Sedley knocked on the door at that moment. I often wondered afterward if Westover would have used the sap again. There was one man Westover feared and he stood in the doorway now. Sedley had power and authority. He wielded a big club and Westover was no match for him and knew it.

Westover lowered the sap, put it into his pocket, growled something and brushed past Sedley. He kept on going and I started laughing all over again.

"Damn that mayhem-mad cop." Sedley went for a wash cloth and a glass of water. I called him back.

"Don't clean me up. In about two minutes I'm going to collapse. Pass right out. You'll get excited and call for an ambulance and make sure that ambulance comes from Community Hospital."

"Of course," Sedley said. "Of course, Rick. Anything you say."

He was humoring me. I sat bolt upright to show him I wasn't finished—and fell back again. Passing out would be easy for me.

"I mean it, Mr. Sedley," I told him. "I've got to go to Community Hospital and this way nobody will be in the least suspicious. Later on, we can arrange to take care of Westover. Things never worked out better."

"You mean nobody was ever worked over better." Sedley went to the phone. "Some day I'm going to kiss that guy and embarrass both of us."

We had quite a wait for the ambulance. Sedley sat down on the edge of the bed while I stayed on the floor so when I collapsed for the doctor I wouldn't have far to fall.

Sadley was frowning. "An idea hit me not so long ago, Rick. About Ernest Doane. Keep in mind his family history—it smells. His family was full of the worst kind of people. Isn't it possible then that Ernest reverted?"

I said: "I know what you're going to offer. Ernest Doane wants the money his second wife left to Lila. I considered that for awhile. About ten seconds. No, Mr. Sedley, there's more than that to it. In a way you're on the right track though."

"Just how? I feel as wound up as a top."

"Someone is playing on Ernest Doane's reverence for the present. Doane felt he had licked the past—until Lila told him she'd knocked off Manning. That worked squarely into the scheme of things fashioned by this somebody."

"In what way?" he wanted to know.

"The murderer staged all of this for one reason. Put yourself in Doane's position. He'd licked the black strain in him. Prevented any of it from cropping out in the daughter he loves—Lila. Now she turns into a killer. What would you do in Doane's shoes? Defend her—of course. But after that? Would you want all that money he'd leave, to go to her and foster the continuation of this family of high class mugs?"

Sedley nodded. "I see. Ernest would prevent Lila from getting a dime."

"Certainly. So there's Ernest Doane without an heir and filthy with dough and—not in very good health. Nobody told me so but he's too flushed. I've an idea his blood pressure was bad and right now it's awful."

Sedley wagged his head. "For a theory it's not bad. The murderer now stands to get Doane's money. Very well, but—who the hell is the murderer?"

"Don't you know who?" I asked him. "Rick, there isn't anybody to inherit. Not a soul. I know Ernest well enough to guess he won't turn any of his fortune over to Anna or her daughter June. Manning, as confidential secretary, might have been expected to get a nice slice but he's dead. The only member of the family left is Aunt Kate. She's got money of her own and doesn't want any more."

I was slowly getting a bad case of the heebies because Sedley could be right and me all wrong. If that was true, I'd just pushed myself thirty miles further from the solution of the case.

The ambulance doctor and an orderly came in with a stretcher and just in time. I no longer had an opportunity to tell myself how wrong I might be.

The doc said: "How many people pushed him around?"

Sedley answered because I had my eyes closed and I was breathing hard, like a guy who might not breathe much longer.

He said: "Just one man with a badge. Look him over good, Doc, because the cop that did this is going on the carpet."

The doc applied a stethoscope and scared hell out of me. "He certainly does deserve to be broken. This man is in serious condition. O. K., Pete, help me slide him onto the stretcher."

I was limper than a soaked Christmas herring. And it wasn't all pretense. While the ambulance sired its way to the hospital, I began thinking of West-over in the chair. It made a very pleasant picture. I was wondering how I could arrange to shave that spot on his head for the electrodes when the ambulance arrived at the hospital.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Money and The Power

WHEN I opened my eyes again, I was tucked in bed and Anna Doane stood there looking down at me. She seemed worried.

I said: "How are you going to do it,

Anna? With a hypo of poison, an overdose of morphine or maybe—just a knife?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," she told me. "I'm here on routine work. This happens to be my floor and I've got to care for you. Don't expect too much."

"I'd prefer no care at all—from you," I told her flatly. "You were interested enough in me to have your daughter June check up with Paul Manning. Then you had her freeze me to a park bench while somebody tried framing Freddie." She put a hand against my forehead. "You're irrational. I'll have to order a sedative."

"Oh, no." I tried to sit up and didn't quite make it. The pillow felt too good. "From you I wouldn't take Scotch and I've never been known to refuse that before in any way, shape or form. Anna—what do you expect to get out of it?"

"I'll get myself a headache if Miss Kate ever sees you acting like this."

"Anna," I went on, "you signed away all right and title to Doane's estate when he divorced you. Neither you nor June can get a penny unless Doane changes his will. Do you think he can be persuaded to do that?"

"Keep quiet," she snapped.

"Think it over, Anna," I advised. "You've got brains. You know the score and when there's murder, you won't be batting up to par. Because there's been three murders, Anna."

That one shook her. "Three?"

"That private eye, Gus Cooney. He found out too much, intending to cash in, so he was knocked off. Hazy was just a poor sap who got himself bumped because he happened to be a handy stooge. But Paul Manning wasn't a stooge, was he, Anna?"

She walked away from the bedside and I stopped her with a few words. "I'm going to sing, Anna. I'm going to tell the cops. How do you think I got shellacked this way? They were trying to make me talk, but I wouldn't. Not then. They'll come here and try again. Next time I won't be able to evade their questions."

She gave an audible snort. "You're trying to pump me. You don't know anything and you think I do."

"I'm sure of it, Anna. And I know a lot. Like the fact that Paul Manning is dead and Lila is going to be blamed for it. That will bust her father's heart and close his purse strings to her. So maybe all his money will be left to June. But that isn't the way it's going to work out. Because Lila didn't shoot Paul."

"Shoot—Paul?"

"Sure. Paul was another stooge. A guy who was determined to take life easy in his old age. Only he didn't have any old age. He played up to Lila. Maybe he got somewhere before Freddie was sprung. Maybe not. Then he tried your daughter June. But it was Lila he went for. June just happened to be a prospect for Doane's money."

"You don't know what you're talking about," she said very softly.

"I do." I had her now, good and proper. "You helped with all of this because of the chance Doane would make June his heir. He won't and somebody else knows this too. Somebody else knows exactly what Doane will do with his estate because he's talked about it. You haven't a chance, but all along you've been told you had."

I'd have broken her in another five minutes, but it wasn't my lucky night. A nurse popped into the room and told Anna she'd better get to some other patient or Kate would raise hell.

This other nurse came over and took my temperature and pulse. When she got the thermometer out of my mouth, I said: "Who sent you down here? The old battle axe?"

"You know her too?" She laughed.

"Who doesn't? I thought Kate was on surgical duty tonight."

She shook down the thermometer. "Kate was—for better than four hours, but she came down a few minutes ago."

"Just what is Kate's position?"

"Superintendent of nurses. We have another name for her, but it isn't spoken in the presence of the male sex."

"She must be pretty good to get that high." I kept on with it.

"She may be a good nurse, but she's one heck of a boss to work for, Mister. And she didn't get to her position by showing exceptional talent. Look, I'm talking too much and I don't even know who you are. Be good and sleep."

"Uh-uh, not me," I chuckled. "If I ever do, it'll be my last sleep, baby. How about smuggling me in a shot of rye?"

"I'll smuggle you in a sleeping pill," she said. "Golly, the things that would happen to me if I ever gave you a drink. Or even took one myself for that matter. Will you go to sleep?"

I shook my head. I'd had enough sleep. The way I looked at it, I'd snoozed all through this case. With my eyes wide open I should have known all the answers. There'd been only one all the time, but I'm not used to running down greedy killers who murder without thought of money.

Five minutes later Aunt Kate came in.

"Mr. Sedley told me what happened to you," she said sympathetically. "I'm very sorry, Mr. Trent. Sorry, too, that I treated you the way I did. At the house, I mean."

WHATEVER Westover had done to my head didn't interfere with my hearing at all.

I heard the faint metallic rasp as the knob of the door to the adjoining room turned very slowly. The latch was going to click any minute. I started coughing. I had a regular spell of it, but I shook off Aunt Kate's attempts to pour water down my throat.

"Not that," I told her. "It's unhealthy stuff. I want something that bites."

"Perhaps, a bit later when the floor is quiet, I can bring you something. It's against the rules, but what's the sense being boss if you can't break rules."

"You like being boss, don't you?"

She smiled. "Naturally. It proves to me that I am competent. Now I'd better have one of the girls prepare you."

I lay back weakly. "Not yet, Kate. I feel terrible. How does a guy feel when he's going out for good?"

She put her hand on my forehead. I'd

been hoping for just that. I groaned.

"Don't leave me. Please! I'm scared. You're the only person I know in here. Kate—hold my hand. Hold it tight-ly . . ."

"Oh, now, you're just the victim of your own imagination," she soothed. But she took my hand in hers. I closed my fingers tight. "Kate, you're slipping," I told her.

She tried to pull free and didn't. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"You just came down from surgery. Only a matter of minutes ago. Nurses on surgical duty scrub just like the doctors and, Kate—you forgot to scrub away that dark stain of gunpowder and you forgot your hands might smell a trifle oily from holding Doane's gun."

I give her credit. The old girl had more spunk than I reasoned. Most women would have either begged me to shut up or promptly fainted. I hadn't been keeping track of Kate's other hand. Now I did. It held one of those surgical knives that are so long they must be used on horses, not people.

"Keep your voice low," she warned. "I thought you caught up with me, Trent. I was afraid of you right from the start. The others—they're stupid. Some of them I used. The others were too blind to see."

"All that money," I said with considerable apprehension. She held the knife like a veteran doctor. "All that lovely money of Doane's. With Lila the murderer of Paul—as you wanted Doane to believe—he'd do as he always said he would. Give his estate to charity. And what better charity than the hospital where his darling aunt works? Only you'd see that you controlled it and the staff of this hospital would do exactly what you said, including the doctors you haven't been able to boss so far. You'd be head man here, Kate. That's what you wanted. Money meant nothing, but power does. How am I doing, Kate?"

"You just talked yourself into the grave," she said quietly. The scalpel came closer.

I had to do something to hold her off. I said: "Sure—the same type of knife

that killed Cooney and Hazy. The kind that might leave an incision any doctor would recognize. That's why you twisted it and made the wound look bigger. How will you explain about me, Kate? Have you thought of that?"

"I've thought of everything—even that," she said. Right then I didn't feel very good and I kept getting worse. She went on: "You're a poor fool who is in trouble with the police and even suspected of being involved in these murders. You were horribly beaten, in danger of going back to prison. It's quite logical that you should take your own life. Snatch this scalpel from my pocket . . . I'm not afraid, you see. A knife really isn't a woman's weapon but to me it is fast and clean. Death is no stranger to me, Mr. Trent."

I'd been bringing up one knee slowly. I let her bend over the bed and then I raised it hard. That was perfect. The biggest dope in the world should have remembered that hospital beds are made with square corners that hold the sheets in place as if they were riveted there.

The knife was poised for a slicing blow. She was going to make it look as if I'd shaved—a bit too close. Then Anna Doane screamed. It had been she who'd opened the adjoining door to hear everything. I didn't figure on that, though I'd hoped. Along about the time that scalpel was two inches from my throat I was even hoping for miracles.

The scream did it. Kate, so intent on her gruesome little job, was startled out of her wits. She turned like a flash and I kicked the covers free.

For the next three minutes I had a wildcat on my hands. Kate didn't look strong, but there was power in her arms. I battled that scalpel while Anna yelled her lungs out in the hall. Sedley was one of the first to barge in. Then a couple of internes showed up, followed by nurses in starched uniforms and patients in anything they happened to have on.

I TOLD Sedley about it later. "Kate wanted the money to further her ambitions. She'd have bought her way to becoming super of the whole

damn hospital. She was obsessed with ambition and drunk with the desire for power. That can be a motive even stronger than hate sometimes."

"Anna Doane has been doing a lot of talking," Sedley said. "She realizes she was a dope. Kate never entered surgery tonight. Anna took her place. With those masks and the long gowns, you can't even tell a man from a woman, let alone distinguish two females."

"I know," I said. "She needed the time and alibi to knock off Paul Manning and blame the kill on Lila. Things worked as she planned. Paul, of course, was another of her little men, thinking he'd land Lila if he played his cards right. Lila shot at Paul—with the same gun which had already killed him."

Sedley nodded. "I know. Paul told her Lila was going to Freddie and she instructed him to pick her up. As they neared the spot, she shot him."

"What Lila saw was Paul getting out of the car, either still alive but dying on his feet—or Kate was in the car holding him up somehow. The luck of a killer like Kate! Lila ran to her coupe in which Kate had already ditched the gun. Kate knew Lila would fight like a wildcat to save Freddie. So Lila blazed away and hit nothing but a lot of scenery. She didn't even put a slug in the car. That was the giveaway so far as I was concerned. Of course I was hit on the head with the knowledge that she fired four times, but two bullets were missing."

Sedley lit a cigar. "What about Freddie? Was he framed for that first rap?"

"Sure he was," I said. "I haven't any proof, but Kate will furnish it. She wanted to get rid of him because Lila had fallen, and if they married, Kate's plans would go haywire because Lila would be protected and removed from a close association with Kate. She hired Gus Cooney to embarrass Freddie in the hope Lila might give him up. But Cooney hired me for that job and he did enough prowling to find out Kate had a money motive behind her scheme. Cooney always was a fool. He tried to blackmail her and she did some carving on his neck."

"She killed Hazy to frame Freddie again?" Sedley asked me.

"Of course, but things happened so fast then, Kate couldn't keep up with them. What did Anna Doane say about her own part in this?"

"Kate told her Doane's money should go to her and June. Anna fell for it. She admitted obeying Kate and having June keep you busy while the frame was set, though Anna swears she didn't know it was murder. Kate told her later on and convinced Anna she couldn't back out now. So Anna went on with it, taking Kate's place in the operating room. There would have been an alibi."

"Speaking of alibis," I said, "how about Westover?"

Sedley puffed contentedly. "I'm going to have him kicked off the force, Rick."

"Nix," I said. "Not that I wouldn't love it, but I was too mixed up in this. If I'm forced to testify, I'll talk myself right back into the can. This is the time Westover has it on me."

Sedley sighed. "Whatever you say, Rick. I guess you're right at that. But we'll let him stew awhile."

I swung my legs off the bed. "Let's get out of here, Mr. Sedley. I want to see Doane and tell him he's been betting against himself all the time and Lila is O.K. Somebody ought to feel good from this."

"Do you think you can?" Sedley asked.

I grinned at him. A rather lopsided grin because my face still hurt. "I've been pasted worse than this before. You know, in a way I'm sorry I had to spring it on Kate so quickly. In her own peculiar style she had a heart."

"You'd never know it from me."

"She was on the verge of bringing me a shot of rye, Mr. Sedley."

"Man alive, she'd have put a kick in it with arsenic or cyanide."

I winced. "Sometimes you break up the most wonderful dreams."

"Come on," he told me. "Doane will give you all the drinks you want and if he doesn't, I've a cellar full."

"Then what are we waiting for?" I demanded.



SNOW AT WAIKIKI



By CURTIS CLUFF

Snow at Waikiki? A strange phenomenon indeed, but it was there all right—half a million dollars' worth. And it made the Islands plenty hot for Johnny Ford.

THE NIGHT was hot and muggy, definitely not a night to make with the brain. The royal palms which usually kept up a rustling clatter outside my *lanai* were as lifeless as their potted brethren in the Waikiki Theater. My eyes were still tired from squinting against the glare all day and my shirt was sticking to my back. Each sip of my drink left an increasing aftertaste of

burnt celluloid. Somewhere in the distance a woman's voice sounded in high, mocking laughter. It seemed directed at me.

The envelope was still on the table where I found it when I came in. A plain cheap envelope with no address, no message, nothing—except five hundred dollars in ten dollar bills, all unmarked as far as I could tell. It meant that some-

grabbed his gun wrist in my left hand and butted him in the belly.



body was worried, but I had covered too many places and talked to too many people to know who it was. I reread the notes I had made in the vain hope that my eyes could make my brain work. It was no go. I crumpled the sheets in disgust. It was a cinch somebody ought to get in touch with me.

I got up, started toward the bathroom to destroy the notes and the telephone rang. As soon as the muffled voice spoke, I knew its owner was using the handkerchief trick on the mouthpiece.

"Mr. Johnny Ford?"

"Speaking."

"Did you get my message?"

"What message?"

"The five hundred?"

"I got it. Who's talking?"

"A friend."

"What do I have to do to earn it, friend?"

"Just spend it, Mr. Ford."

"Any suggestions as to how or where I should spend it?"

"Not as to *how* you spend it, Mr. Ford, as long as you spend it in California—tomorrow night."

"I'd have to catch the Clipper in the morning."

"That's the general idea."

"Suppose I'm not in a hurry to go?"

The muffled voice sounded apologetic. "The Tourist Bureau would be very annoyed if they heard me tell you this, Mr. Ford, but the truth is—the climate in the Islands is not healthy for everyone."

"I wouldn't want to catch anything serious."

The voice chuckled. "I think you can feel perfectly safe provided you catch the Clipper tomorrow morning. Good night, Mr. Ford."

I cradled the receiver and grinned. Somebody must have had things his own way too long if he thought that Fu Manchu act would scare anybody. Personally, I have never been accused of being the timid emotional type.

I WENT into the bathroom, set fire to my useless notes, dropped the ash into the toilet bowl and flushed it. It disappeared down the drain, but

the bowl didn't refill. There wasn't any sound of water coming into the tank. I lifted the top off the tank and looked inside.

A square tin, the size of a small box of tea, rested on the bottom. The brown paper in which it was wrapped had parted and a large fragment had floated in between the ball stopper and the flush valve. I rolled up my sleeve, removed the paper and the water flowed freely. I dried the box on a towel and carried it into the kitchen. The lid had been fastened on with what looked like sealing wax. I scraped it away with a kitchen knife and the lid came off easily.

I lifted out the top packet, opened it and stared down at the powder in the tissue. I touched the tip of my tongue to the white crystals and spat. It was heroin all right. The voice on the telephone wasn't taking any chances. Either I caught the Clipper in the morning or answered some unpleasant questions for the Feds in the afternoon. I put the packet back in the box, replaced the lid and carefully wiped the whole thing. The telephone rang again. I wrapped the box in the towel and took it with me to the telephone.

It was my client, Allan Norris, and his voice was as brusque and harsh as ever. He was a great guy for ordering people around.

"I want you to come up to my house right away."

"I thought we decided against that."

"Do you think I would call you if it wasn't urgent?" he demanded acidly.

I had my own ideas about that. I had learned that anything Allan Norris thought he wanted was urgent. I said: "I've got another tough day tomorrow. Unless you give me some idea of what it's about, I'm not coming."

"My daughter, Jennifer, has passed away," he said in a flat, dull voice.

I didn't believe it. "You mean she got out of the house?"

"She's dead."

I was jolted. "How did she die?"

"I don't want to discuss it over the phone. Are you coming?" The tough old buzzard's voice was actually pleading.

"Hold everything, I'll be right up." I hung up and got into my shoulder holster and coat. I eyed the towel-wrapped can. There was nothing to do but take it along. I shoved it down in my coat pocket, turned off the lights and went out.

My cottage was one of the detached group belonging to a glorified hotel known as the *Hanauma*. The cottages were just off the beach and so cunningly hidden amid the giant oleanders, royal palms, hibiscus, ferns, panax hedges and what not that it was a major operation to find one's own cottage after dark. It was an ideal spot for the well-heeled tourist who wanted privacy. For some reason, Allan Norris had decided I would need such privacy and since he was paying for it, I made no objection.

I found my way out of the jungle and moved along the shed garage until I came to my stall. The neat white sign dangling from the roof said, "Mr. J. Ford." Even if you only stayed the minimum, which was a week at the *Hanauma*, you rated a garage stall and a little white sign with your name on it. A minor exhibit in the psychology of tourist snobbery but I didn't sneer too much. As I said, Allan Norris was paying for it. I got my rented coupe out of the garage and headed for Makiki Heights.

It was my first visit to the Honolulu millionaire's big, Spanish-style town house. There were three cars parked in the semi-circular drive. I pulled in behind a medium-priced job whose rear license plate sported a medico's caduceus medallion. The second car was a sleek black sedan, and the car directly in front of the door was a special-built cream colored convertible. I decided again that there was plenty of ready cash here in Hawaii.

Three figures stood in the hallway inside the open door. Norris detached himself from the other two and came forward to meet me. He was a stocky erect man with a stern, tanned face topped by a shock of white hair. He looked as fit as a professional athlete but his face was tortured.

"Come in, Ford." He extended his

hand. "I called you as soon as it happened." He led me toward the other two men. He indicated a tall slender man with dark red wavy hair who looked to be about my own age, which is thirty-five. "I want you to meet Walter Kent." We shook hands and I turned to the other figure, a thin, balding, intelligent-looking man in the middle fifties. He wore a smart conservative business suit and rimless glasses. "This is Carter MacDonald, my lawyer." We shook hands. "Mr. Ford is a private investigator who is conducting a business investigation for me," he explained to the others.

"What happened?" I asked.

"The three of us were in the library when we heard the shot. Jennifer was dead when I got to her bedside."

I glanced briefly at the others. "Has anyone else been up?"

"No one but Dr. Wolsey."

MacDonald cleared his throat. "I think, under the circumstances, Allan, we had best postpone our business until another time. I'm sure Walter agrees." He nodded in Kent's direction.

Kent said: "Of course. Is there anything we can do before we go, Allan?"

Norris shook his head. "I'll get in touch with both of you tomorrow." He walked to the door with them. When they had gone, he returned and led the way up the broad staircase without speaking.

Dr. Wolsey was repacking his bag when we reached Jennifer's room. He was a dry little man in the sixties with dignified, unhurried movements and a low voice full of soft courtesy.

I PULLED back the sheet. Jennifer Norris had once been a very attractive young woman. I could still see indications of that. But the wreckage of dope addiction was all too obvious. Her hollow-cheeked face was gray and lined with anguish, and her skin had the clammy feel of putty. Dark blood clotted her hair and coagulated around the small hole in her right temple. I put the sheet back. A snub-nosed .25 caliber automatic lay on the floor beside the bed. I turned to the medico.

"Is this where the gun was found, Doctor?"

Dr. Wolsey frowned. "I presume so. That's where it was when I arrived."

"That's correct," Norris said sharply.

"Did the bullet in the temple kill her?"

"Yes."

"Was it suicide?"

Wolsey's tired smile held condescension. "What would you say, young man? The child was ill and despondent. She died with her own gun in a locked room."

I looked back at the sheet-draped "child" and shrugged. "I just wanted to make sure."

Wolsey put his arm around Norris' shoulders. "Perhaps it was for the best, Allan. Jennifer was having a hard time of it."

Norris nodded vaguely.

Wolsey patted his shoulder. "I'll have to comply with the law and call the police, Allan. I'll see that they are as considerate as possible." He turned to go.

As he reached the doorway, Norris called after him: "Oh, Bill!" Wolsey turned, inquiring, and Norris said: "Mr. Ford is a private investigator who has been doing some work for me, Bill. When you talk to the police, I'd appreciate it if you didn't mention his presence here. It would only cause confusion."

Wolsey looked at me with renewed interest, nodded and went out.

I looked at Norris. "Well, that's that."

"What do you mean?"

"Your daughter's death closes the case, doesn't it?"

"Why?" he grated.

"Look," I said, "I didn't have a chance in a thousand on this case from the beginning. You wouldn't see that and your stubbornness has ruined whatever chances I did have. I've been stumbling around in circles ever since you tricked me into coming out here."

"Tricked you?" Norris sneered. "Are you sure it wasn't the money I offered you?"

I gritted my teeth. "I'll admit that a five thousand dollar bonus is a lot of money," I said. "But if you will remember, your letter stated that you wanted me to 'conduct a little business investiga-

tion' for you. You hinted broadly that I ought to be able to clean it up in a week and I had nothing to lose. But for pete's sake!" I exploded. "A dope ring!"

I counted off on my fingers. "Mistake number one—the Feds. They've got a nationwide organization and they work at their business twenty-four hours a day. You won't even let me talk to their local agent. You read a news story about me in an L.A. paper and immediately decide that with your brains and my experience we can do a job the Feds can't do."

"Apparently I was mistaken about your contribution."

"You can save the sarcasm. I told you what we were up against before we started." I held up a second finger. "Number two—the Honolulu police. At least, they know the local situation. You've got one guy down here, the Lieutenant Chun I was telling you about, who's hotter than a dime store pistol. I'd like to meet the guy even if it was only to swap lies. But you didn't like the idea."

"Number three, and worst of all—your daughter. There was a chance I could have gotten a description of the guy who peddled the stuff to her. Maybe I could have slapped some information out of him, maybe not. But you thought you could handle that end. You didn't, and I never talked to her. It's a wonder you didn't make it really tough and not allow me to look at a map of the city."

Norris mumbled: "Perhaps I deserve all you've said."

He seemed to be apologizing. I said: "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to rub it in."

Norris waved that aside. "I've got an easier job for you now. I want you to find my daughter's murderer."

"Huh?"

He pointed to the automatic lying on the floor. "That gun is Jennifer's. But it wasn't in this house until the moment before it was used to kill her. She told me herself, months ago, that she had lost it. She didn't know where. When we first discovered her condition and called in Dr. Wolsey, I had this house searched from top to bottom. There were no guns

here. Furthermore, though Jennifer's condition had improved enough not to require the services of a night nurse, the day nurse searches this room carefully before she goes off duty. The main reason for the search was to see that Jennifer didn't have access to drugs other than those Dr. Wolsey was administering. But she was instructed to remove anything that Jennifer might conceivably use as a weapon against herself."

"How did you work that?"

"We made no bones about it. Jennifer watched and she approved. Thanks to Dr. Wolsey, she was on the road to recovery and she didn't want to take chances any more than we did."

I went over and tried the balcony doors. They were locked. I said: "Wolsey said the room was locked."

Norris nodded. "We always kept the doors locked from the outside when no one was in the room with her. If she wanted anything, she could ring. The nurse or the servants would hear it during the day and I would hear it in my room at night."

"When you came upstairs after hearing the shot, did you have to unlock the bedroom door?"

"Yes."

"But anyone else could have done the same thing before you did?"

"There was no one else in the house. And no one could have gone up the stairs without being seen by the three of us through the open library door."

"What about back stairs?"

"There are no back stairs leading onto that hallway."

I looked at him impatiently. "You still say it's murder?"

Norris turned and beckoned me to follow. He led the way down the hall and into the adjoining room. "My room," he said, "and the only other room opening onto this balcony." The balcony doors were closed but unlocked. We went out and along the balcony to Jennifer's room. I saw that the key was in the door on the outside. "I left it there for convenience," Norris said. "I had no idea her life was in danger." He leaned across the balcony rail and patted the thick

gray trunk of a coco palm which curved upward, grazing the balcony. "When Jennifer was in her late teens and retired to her room, ostensibly to study, she locked the door and scrambled down this tree to see her young men." His mouth twisted sadly. "Another of my failures as a parent. Any reasonably athletic youngster could reach the balcony by climbing that tree."

CHAPTER TWO

Makiki Mauler

I PEERED over the balcony and saw that it wouldn't be too hard to manage. "Maybe the cops can make something out of it."

"I am not going to tell the police. I am not going to do anything to jeopardize your investigation."

I looked at him. "You're crazy. If you suspect that a crime has been committed it's your duty to notify the police."

He smiled with stubborn ingenuousness. "How could I suspect anything like that? The room was locked."

I shook my head. He was probably wrong anyway. I said: "I'll tell you what I'll do. There's one chance in a hundred that something will break tomorrow and I'll stay with it until then anyway." I told him about the telephone call, the bribe and the heroin.

Norris nodded with excitement. "There's your lead!"

"Lead, hell, I'm in the middle. But I'll do it." I headed back toward the door. "Now I've got to get out of here."

Wolsey was seated in the library reading a magazine when I went down the stairs. He didn't look up.

I paused in the front doorway. "I still don't like it. I don't mind playing live bait so much as working against the cops. But I haven't got any choice." I patted the towel-wrapped box in my pocket. "I can't do anything until I get rid of this."

Norris smiled maliciously and nodded.

I scowled and went out to my coupe without saying any more. I felt like all

kinds of a damn fool. I don't like holding out on the cops and any private eye in the business would tell me I ought to have my head examined for playing tag with the Feds.

I backed the coupe out of the driveway and headed down the winding road from Makiki Heights. I hadn't gone far when I heard the wail of a siren below me. There were no side roads. I pulled into the nearest driveway and turned off my lights. Five minutes later the prowler car shot by, its siren tapering off to a sullen-throated growl.

The road from Makiki Heights winds around an out-cropping of rock halfway down and straightens out, going north-east for three or four hundred yards before making a sharp hairpin turn and heading south to intersect Nehoa Street. The strip between this junior-size cliff and the hairpin turn is narrow and can be dangerous if you are careless. There are no curbs, sidewalks or streetlights along the narrow asphalt strip, and the hillside drops away sharply. Cars have skidded over the edge, rolled down the fifty or seventy-five foot slope, taken the twenty foot drop to where the road winds back on itself and stayed there until the junk dealer, the ambulance and/or the morgue wagon came to take them away.

I rounded the jutting rock and was proceeding slowly when my headlights picked up a sedan parked cater-cornered across the road. The little fellow standing beside it held up his hand in the semi-helpless manner of a driver in distress. I couldn't have passed if I had wanted to, so I came to a stop and cut the ignition. He was a stranger to me, but as he stepped out of the glare of my headlights, I saw a look of recognition on his face and saw his hand go into his coat pocket.

I couldn't start the motor and back up the hill as fast as lead could fly, so I did the next best thing. I exited through the opposite door, getting my gun out at the same time. It was a good move except for one thing. A dark figure materialized out of nowhere on my side of the car and a brown hand holding a .45

smashed down on my wrist, sending my gun spinning. I half-straightened, saw that he was Hawaiian, about six-three, at least two hundred and fifty pounds. That gave him height, weight and reach over me, not to mention the gun or his little pal. Naturally I was supposed to lie down and roll over. He was still pulling his gun hand away from me when I dove out of my half crouch. I grabbed his gun wrist with my left hand and butted him in his big belly. We were on the dirt shoulder of the road a yard from the drop over the edge. He grunted, fell backwards, his feet reaching desperately for a firm footing, and toppled over the edge. I hung onto his gun arm and let him pull me over with him. I might as well get my neck broken rolling down the incline as stay at the top and get shot in the back.

We plunged in a tangle of arms and legs down the rocky slope. Once when I happened to be on top, the darkness was lit up as Shorty tried a shot. It went harmlessly over our heads. I remembered the sheer drop at the bottom of the incline. If I was lucky and the big Kanaka didn't fall on top of me, I could come out of it with a sprained ankle or a broken arm. If I let go now, I would be caught in the middle of that dark slope between two guys with guns. If he was too dumb to drop the gun and try to save himself, I was going to have to hang on and take that fall.

He must have gotten that idea about the same time. I felt him let go the gun, spread-eagle and brace himself. He was below me at that point and my hands and head were leading my feet down the slope. I saw what had given him the idea. The headlights of an approaching car were moving slowly up the lower portion of the road. After the car negotiated the hairpin turn and started upward, it would find the way blocked by our two cars. The occupants would no doubt be curious about what was going on.

I let go, threw both arms around a clump of *pamakani* and allowed my body to slide around below my head. The big Kanaka braced himself, rose and reached for my feet. I hung onto the bush, drew

my knees up and let him have both feet in the face. I have always heard that the Hawaiians are a noisy carefree race. This one didn't utter a sound and he had plenty of cares as he went backward head-over-heels and tumbled over the drop twenty feet below. I heard the grinding of gears and looked upward in time to see the sedan speed past the on-coming car near the hairpin turn.

Outside of a skinned nose and a big jump in blood pressure, I was all right. I scrambled back up the slope and reached the top just as the car which was probably responsible for saving my life went by without stopping. His lack of interest was all right with me. I found my gun, holstered it and got rid of the grass and gravel that had worked down my collar, climbed in the coupe and headed down the hill. The little guy in the sedan had not been interested in the fate of his pal. I was.

I found his body at the foot of the drop by the side of the road. By the way his neck was twisted he must have landed on it. I saw that I hadn't exaggerated his size. He was wearing a green sport coat over a canary yellow sport shirt. The tropical worsted trousers yielded a wallet with three dollars and a driver's license that said he was William Kahalawai and lived in the Hillside Hotel in the Kakaako district. He had a dime, a quarter and a room key in one pants pocket, and a pack of cigarettes and two packs of book matches from the Hobron Club in another.

The pockets of the coat yielded an item of interest—a pair of suede gloves. Hawaiians don't wear gloves. In fact, I can't imagine a reason for anybody in Hawaii wearing suede gloves except perhaps to pull a trigger on a murder gun. I looked down at his big feet. They were encased in soft woven-leather sandals with flexible rubber soles. Ideal for climbing a slanting coco palm. I got the towel-wrapped tin out, eased the box into his coat pocket. I got back into the coupe, shoved the towel in the dashboard compartment, and headed for Waikiki. A visit to the Hobron Club was indicated.

The lights were dim in the Hobron Club, the bar was bamboo and the walls were covered with *lauhala* matting. A row of booths lit by imitation fishermen's torches lined the long wall opposite the bar. Throw-nets and green glass floats were scattered here and there and the seven piece orchestra wore mess jackets and *pikake* leis. I climbed up on a bar stool and ordered a Scotch and water. The evening trade had packed the place. There were about thirty tables surrounding the medium-size dance floor and everybody seemed to be having a good time.

DIRECTLY across from me I saw a familiar face. It was my landlady—technically anyway, since she owned the *Hanauma*. She was the best-looking landlady I had ever had. Maile Sherrod was about thirty and had thick wavy brown hair down to her shoulders. According to Allan Norris, her father had been Scotch-Irish and her mother Hawaiian. The combination had worked out well. There was a warmth and richness in her coloring and the slightest tilt to the outer corners of her long-lashed brown eyes. She was wearing a flowing white evening dress with a lot of material in it below the waist. Above the waist, she could catch cold if the temperature dropped to seventy-five. According to Norris, she had a shrewd business head and was making money hand over fist at the *Hanauma*.

Her escort was a big fellow in a midnight blue dinner jacket and a red carnation. He was more than somewhat oiled. His head rolled on its axis as he leaned across the table to ask a question. Maile shook her head. He repeated the question and covered one of her hands with his. She withdrew her hand, laughing, and shook her head more positively. She looked slightly buzzed herself but I supposed she could take care of herself. I turned back to the Filipino bartender.

"Who runs this joint?"

"Sar?"

"Who owns the Hobron Club?"

"Meestar Jocko Vecelli."

"He around?"

The Filipino motioned with his head. "In the rear booth, sar."

I picked up my drink, slid off the bar stool and ambled through the crowd. Jocko Vecelli was seated in the rear booth, playing with a wine glass. He was a lean pocket-size Italian in the late forties, with sad liquid eyes.

I said: "Hello, Jocko."

He favored me with a slashing, mine-host smile but his voice was toneless. "Take a load off your feet, copper."

I slid into the booth and neither of us said anything. I finished my drink and Jocko beckoned a waiter. "Bring Mr. Ford another of whatever it is he's drinking."

I said: "Scotch and water."

Jocko studied his long tapering fingers. "I been hearing about you. What's the matter with California? Too small for you?"

"The Coast is all right. I'm taking a little vacation."

"For a tourist, you been asking a lot of irrelevant questions. Why don't you stick to the scenery?"

"I get bored."

"You'll get bored in the hospital. Besides, they're all overcrowded."

"You trying to scare away trade?"

"A little friendly advice."

The waiter returned with my drink. I started to pay for it and Jocko waved him away. I sipped it in silence. Finally, I said: "Who's Kahalawai?"

Jocko looked casually around the club, "I got a bouncer named William Kahalawai." His eyes didn't show much interest. "This is his night off."

"Big fellow, about six-three, weight around two-fifty?"

"Sounds like him. A bad man to cross. If you tried it, you made a serious mistake."

I shrugged and took another sample of my drink.

"You been—" Jocko changed the phrasing. "Has he been giving you any trouble?"

I grinned. "Not much."

Jocko dismissed the subject. "I'll ask him about it tomorrow."

"I heard," I said slowly, "that he

won't be in tomorrow. I heard he fell down and hurt himself."

The Italian's thumb and forefinger tightened on the wine glass. "I got no sense of humor, Ford. I don't like to kid around."

"What's the idea of sending that big hippo after me?"

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

"The hell you don't."

"I want you to get a few things straight." Jocko dropped each word out separately and deliberately. "Giacomo Vecelli keeps his nose clean. He likes everybody else to do the same thing. H doesn't like to see a Coast shamus coming out here and raising a stink. Go back to California."

"You haven't answered my questions," I said.

"Listen, shamus," Jocko's voice grated, "when I want something done bad enough, I don't have to send anybody. I take care of it myself."

"It's your move then."

Jocko's eyes grew heavy-lidded.

"Hello." Maile Sherrod smiled brightly down at us.

Vecelli made it out of the booth first because he was smaller. "Will you have a seat, Miss Sherrod?"

Miss Sherrod teetered uncertainly. "I didn't mean to interrupt anything."

"Not at all," Vecelli said. "Did you want to see Mr. Ford or me, or were you just visiting?"

"As a matter of fact, I wanted to see Mr. Ford, if you're sure I'm not interrupting."

Vecelli bowed. "I was about to return to my office. More tax forms." He shrugged helplessly and bowed again. "I'll see *you* later, Mr. Ford."

I grinned at the implied threat and slid into the booth opposite Maile. She took a compact from her bag and stared at her reflection.

"Very informal of me, isn't it?"

"I like it that way. Can I get you a drink?"

She nodded.

I signalled the waiter, ordered drinks and looked around the club. Maile put

away the compact and lit a cigarette. "What's the matter?"

"I was wondering about your boy friend."

"Would you be afraid of him, Mr. Ford?"

"I wouldn't be afraid and I wouldn't not be afraid. I don't look for trouble, Miss Sherrod."

Her eyes had a bit of difficulty in focusing. "Why don't you look for trouble?"

"I don't have to. It always seems to know where to find me."

She made a face. "I hope that remark isn't personal." She blew smoke at the ceiling. "You don't have to worry. I am a deserted woman."

"Is your friend crazy or something?" I inquired gallantly.

The waiter brought our drinks. Maile took a long pull from hers and put the glass down.

"He has a place on the windward side of the island and he insisted this was a nice night for a drive."

"Well, isn't it?"

Her lip twisted slightly. "Fundamentally, all men are alike, aren't they?"

I shook my head sadly. "So young and yet so cynical."

"Well, aren't they?" she demanded.

"I wouldn't say that about all the girls."

"The hell you wouldn't." She grinned happily.

"Well," I amended, "it's the superficial differences that interest me."

"Weasel," she said. "What were your plans for the rest of the evening?"

"This is so sudden, Miss Sherrod."

"Don't overestimate yourself. I want a ride home. You *can* have a drink if you take me home."

"Let's go." I threw a bill on the table and we worked our way through the mob. I bought Maile's jacket back from the check-room attendant and we went out to my car. I turned on the dashboard radio and Maile leaned her head back on the seat, apparently prepared to enjoy the music in silence. I tried to decide whether I was just lucky or this was part of somebody's plan.

CHAPTER THREE

Descent to Murder

MAILE'S house turned out to be in Kahala. I navigated the winding driveway and parked outside a three-car garage. We mounted a low stone terrace and entered a large living room through sliding glass doors. The room was apple green, the woodwork a darker hue of the same color. There were several good water colors on the walls, and over the broad stone fireplace was a large oil painting of a Hawaiian fisherman with a throw-net over his shoulder and fishing goggles raised above his eyebrows. It was good. The subject was a powerfully built man resting easily against an out-cropping of coral, his eyes scanning the water for signs of movement beneath the surface. The play of sunlight over his graceful flowing muscles was like early Greek sculpture.

We went into the kitchen and made drinks. Apparently the ride had gotten in its work because Maile no longer showed any signs of being tight—if she had been in the first place. We brought our drinks into the living room and settled back on the large *hiki*. Maile refused a cigarette, I lit my own and my eyes strayed to the oil painting. There was something familiar about it.

"Like it?"

I nodded.

"I'm glad you do."

I squinted at it. "The fellow who painted that knew his business."

"Thank you."

I turned to her. "You did that?"

She nodded, smiling. "Why not?"

"If you can do that—?"

"Why do I hang around nightclubs with overgrown male children?" She shrugged. "Painting is just a hobby. A girl can't spend all her time on a hobby." She stared at the picture. "Powerful brute, isn't he?"

"Did you exaggerate him much?"

"I didn't exaggerate at all."

"Where did you find the model?"

"I painted it several years ago, when I was still in school. Bill was a football star at the University while I was in prep school. He didn't turn out to be much good as a human being, but how he could run with a football!"

"What happened to him?"

"He was quite a campus hero. When college was over and the newspapers and the glory hunters had gotten in their dirty work, they dropped him. He wasn't news any more. Bill wasn't very bright and he couldn't take it. Anyway, he became a 'beach boy.' I suppose you know what that means?"

"Sort of a flunkey for wealthy tourists, isn't it?"

She nodded. "He was popular with the tourists for a while. But he took on more and more of the standard beach boy attributes and he began to get mean and ugly when he was drinking. Finally, he grew unpopular and the money stopped coming in."

"Where is he now?"

"He had several run-ins with the police and then he became a bouncer at the Hobron Club. He wasn't there to-night."

I thought that over. Bill had descended all the way down the ladder to murder. Thanks to a Mainland shamus who had never even spoken to him, Bill Kahalawai's troubles were over. I took another drink and turned my attention to the living. "Vecelli seems to be quite a boy. I imagine people who work for him have to toe the line."

"I imagine they do." She looked at me slyly. "How is the investigation coming?"

I looked at her ruefully. "There are not many secrets out here, are there?"

She smiled. "I check the register at the *Hanauma* regularly."

"What did you learn from that?"

"Enough to whet my curiosity." She tilted her head to one side critically. "You look presentable enough."

"Is something supposed to be wrong with me?"

Her eyes held secret amusement. "On the afternoon of the same day you got in, a check arrived at the *Hanauma* pay-

ing for your cottage and incidental expenses for one week. The check was signed by Allan Norris. I was curious to know more about the person for whom Norris would go to all that expense—rather than invite him to stay at that enormous house of his. We don't rent those cottages at bargain rates."

"I didn't know about the check. Sometimes I don't think Norris is very bright."

She shrugged. "By a strange coincidence," she made a little face, "I happened to be in Norris' office yesterday. His secretary didn't know much, but I saw the address of your Los Angeles agency. After tonight, I can guess the rest."

"What is the rest?"

"Allan Norris has a screwball daughter and Jocko Vecelli runs the Hobron Club." She smiled smugly.

I said: "I'll bite. What has the owner of a nightclub got to do with Norris' daughter?"

"It's the second floor of the Hobron Club I'm talking about."

I looked sheepish. "A guy can't find out everything in four days."

Maile was puzzled. "Didn't you know about the gambling on the second floor?"

I shook my head.

She laughed. "And I thought I was a detective. Well, what *are* you doing in Honolulu? You couldn't be loafing."

"Tell me about Jennifer Norris."

"You mean the 'try anything twice' girl?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Jennifer used to say, 'I'll try anything twice—I might have missed something the first time.' She usually lived up to it, too."

"How?"

"Oh, husbands, automobile accidents, impossible jumps with horses and week-long jags."

"You thought she had fallen into the foul clutches of Jocko Vecelli and I came out here to get back the I.O.U.'s which would ruin her reputation and her father's?"

"You make it sound silly but I did think something like that. About a year

ago, Jennifer went on a terrific binge and ended up by doing several hundred dollars' worth of damage in the Hobron Club. Jocko didn't press charges and Norris paid the damages. It was just before she divorced Walter Kent for the second time."

I GRIMACED inwardly. That was another item that Norris had failed to mention. I said: "She was married twice to the same man?"

"I told you she was the 'try anything twice' girl."

"What's Kent like?"

"Tall, red-headed, sort of dashing—a very complex person. You never know what he's thinking, yet he makes you believe you're the only other person in the world when he talks to you. He's a magnificent horseman, one of the best tennis players in the Islands and a superb swimmer. I seem to be using a lot of superlatives, don't I?"

"What does he do for a living?"

"You'll never believe it, but he runs a bookshop."

I frowned. "You gave me the impression he was the athletic type."

"I know. That's what I mean. You just can't pigeonhole his personality. He owns 'The Bookshop', which is all the name it has, incidentally. Have you noticed it on King Street?"

I shook my head and remembered the custom-built convertible I had seen Kent drive away from Norris' house. "Book stores don't pay very much as a rule."

"This one does. He has an extremely attractive house on Wilhelmina Rise and a little place he calls 'Pali House' over on the windward side. And the Pali House, my son, is really out of this world!"

"Fancy?"

"Well, out of the ordinary. It's just the other side of Kaneohe, perched on a sheer cliff three hundred feet above the water's edge. The house is built on two levels and he used glass wherever possible. Both bedrooms and a large living room have glass ceilings covered by steel shutters. If his guests want to, they can get into bed, press a button and sleep

under the stars." Maile's eyes travelled to the clock on the mantle. "And speaking of sleep, it's almost two o'clock. You've got to run."

I said: "Isn't that kind of abrupt?"

She got off the hikie. "You forget I'm a working girl, Mr. Ford. I've got to get my beauty sleep."

I got up. "Are you suddenly sore about something?"

She laughed. "To tell you the truth, I'm furious. I thought I was going to find out all about you and instead you've had me prattling on about nothing ever since you got here."

"Will you answer one more question before I go?"

"What is it?"

"Was that damsel in distress act real, or did you plan it?"

She pushed me out of the door, laughing. "Let's leave it the way it is. Maybe you'll find out before you go back to California." Her hand brushed the bulge under my left armpit and she stopped laughing suddenly. "I overlooked something, didn't I?"

"Meaning what?"

Instead of answering, she linked her arm in mine and walked beside me to the driveway. We stopped at the car and her head came up. "You think I'm an awful fool, don't you?"

Since that is a leading question which has trapped better men than I am, I was smart enough not to answer it. I waited.

"You're not exactly like other people, are you? There is always something in the back of your mind and you're always watching and waiting, aren't you? There's something hard and menacing about it." She paused. "I'm not sure I like you," she said slowly. She moved up close to me, her eyes open wide, searching, as though trying to read my face in the darkness. She shivered.

I put my arm around her bare shoulders. "You've got too much imagination."

She reached up and pulled my head down to hers. Her lips parted and I kissed her. We stood together for a moment and there was no sound except the murmur of tiny waves curling on the

beach and the gentle rustling of palm fronds overhead. She broke away. "Call me tomorrow," she muttered and turning, walked slowly back to the house, her head bowed, the white evening dress flowing like a graceful caress about her body. I watched until she went inside and the terrace light went out. I mopped my perspiring brow with my handkerchief and got into the coupe.

It had been a busy day. Even for a shamus.

I had hoped that whoever checked the California-bound Clipper might be tempted to pay a later visit to my cottage when he found I wasn't aboard. But nobody had come to see me and it was almost ten A.M. when I pulled into a parking space across from the post office. I pocketed the keys and walked down King Street.

The Bookshop was air-conditioned, quiet and a little on the arty side. There were no other customers. An attractive young Japanese clerk approached me.

I said: "I'd like to see Mr. Walter Kent, if he's around."

She flashed me a smile. "I'm sorry, sir, but Mr. Kent just stepped out."

"When will he be back?"

"I don't know. Would you like to speak to the manager, Miss Seccombe?"

I said I would like to speak to Miss Seccombe.

She led the way to the rear of the store where a slender, dark-haired girl in the late twenties sat at an executive-type desk. The sign on the top of the desk said: "Miss Anne Seccombe, Mgr." The clerk explained that I would like to see Mr. Kent. Miss Seccombe gave me a flat, appraising glance. It was supposed to be an impersonal look but it had something of the stock-breeder in it and it reminded me sadly that some women, like some men, ruin a swell avocation by making a vocation out of it. I kept my face a blank and when Miss Seccombe's voice came out, it was crisp and business-like.

"I'm not sure that Mr. Kent will be back this morning. Is there something I can do?"

"I wanted to see Kent personally.

Mind if I wait around for a while?"

"Not at all. Perhaps you'd like to look at some books." She waved a hand around the store.

I thanked her and said I'd look around. I moved away and picked out a spot beside a table of best sellers. The two girl clerks chatted in low voices as they dusted off the shelves and rearranged books. Occasionally they threw a covert glance at Anne Seccombe. I gathered that they weren't talking about her but were just a little afraid of her disapproval. Then I learned something else about Miss Seccombe.

It was costing her a great deal of effort to look cool, calm and efficient. She initialled some invoices, made notes in a little cloth-bound ledger and apparently she had finished her work for the day. She stacked the invoices neatly, put them to one side on her desk. As she placed a paperweight on top of the pile, I saw that her hands trembled involuntarily as though she had the palsy. This puzzled me. I was sure she had never seen me before and reasonably sure that I had never been described to her. I have looked into enough faces to be able to tag a look of recognition when I see it. I decided she had a hangover.

I MOVED along the wall to a section of shelves labelled "Rental Library." I was closer and could see that beneath her make-up her eyes were slightly red-rimmed and gave the impression of being on the verge of tears though her features remained glacially calm. She sneezed. She sneezed again. I pulled a book down at random, turned and peered over it as she sneezed a third time. It could have been hay fever or the dust the clerks were stirring up. But I knew it wasn't dust or hay fever and she didn't have a hangover. Miss Seccombe was a junky. She needed a shot and she was trying desperately to control herself. She opened a book on her desk and tried to read. She held the book in both hands and twice, as the minutes ticked by, I saw the book tilt slowly downward only to be snapped back into position. The third time it

happened, she put the book down with a show of briskness, open the top drawer of her desk and took out her bag. She opened it, peered inside and darted a look at the clock on the wall. With an air of reassurance she closed the bag, placed it on the corner of the desk and picked up her book. She could have been peering at the mirror in her bag, but I had an idea that the look of reassurance came from the sight of a small packet of white powder that she was going to permit herself to take as soon as the hand of the clock reached a certain position. Her self-control was winning a small victory over her craving and she was pleased with herself. Then we began to get a flurry of trade.

A young sailor came in and made for the shelves of Modern Library books. One of the clerks joined him. Then three girls came in together, hatless and chattering. The other clerk joined them. Next came an old gentleman wearing a white Van Dyke, and Anne Seccombe rose to wait on him. She greeted him with a smile and apparently knew him. They chatted for a few moments and moved over to the biography section. Aside from the way in which she rid her palms of excess moisture with a casual, skirt-smoothing gesture, I would never have known that she was about to jump out of her skin. The old gentleman selected a book, Anne took it back to the rear of the store, wrapped it, rang up the sale on the cash register and the old man bowed and departed.

Anne cast an indifferent glance around the store, looked at the clock, picked up her bag and started back toward the closed door of Kent's private office. She was stopped by a woman who had just entered the store, forced a smile, dropped her bag back on her desk and led the way into Kent's office and closed the door. The newcomer had been about forty, with a hard flat voice and smug-looking pug face. I was sure Anne's face had held ill-concealed dislike of the older woman.

Almost at the same moment they disappeared into the office, the two clerks headed for the wrapping room with

books under their arms. It was too good a chance to miss. The only other occupants of the main part of the store were the three girls at the opposite end and the sailor who was squatting with his back to me, examining books on the bottom shelf. I moved over to Anne Seccombe's desk, fumbled her bag open, reached inside with my middle and index fingers, got tangled up in a handkerchief, got free again and came out with the little envelope. I snapped the bag shut and pocketed the envelope. The whole operation had taken about forty seconds. I was getting slow. I moved back to the rental shelves and picked up the mimeographed catalog of rental books and thumbed through it idly. By the time the girls had returned from the wrapping room and made the correct change, more customers had drifted in.

The door to Kent's office opened and the hard-faced woman came out, followed by Anne Seccombe. Her mouth was slack and her eyes were warm, blank obscenities. I saw the book in the plain wrapper under her arm and the twenty dollar bill she handed Anne Seccombe. There was no change. As she hurried out, she cast a fleeting sly look about the store. I buried my face in the catalog—and read the secret of The Bookshop's financial success. It was on the last page of the catalog and the notice read: "Qualified customers are invited to inspect our rental collection of valuable technical works. Ask for Mr. Kent."

When "technical" volumes rent for twenty bucks a throw and go out in a plain wrapper under the arm of a woman like the one who just left, it is a fairly safe bet that the owner of the store keeps his head above the water by renting a particular kind of book. I caught Miss Seccombe as she almost escaped again into the privacy of Kent's office with her precious bag under her arm.

"Oh, Miss Seccombe!" She turned with a slightly wild-eyed look of frustration. I said: "I don't think I'll wait any longer for Mr. Kent. Just tell him that Mr. Ford called and will call back later."

She nodded and hurried into the office

almost before I had finished speaking. I felt sorry for her. I went out of The Bookshop, crossed the street, bought a paper and entered the drug store. I selected a seat at the end of the fountain where I could watch the book store and sat down to wait. I ordered a coke and unfolded the paper.

Both Jennifer Norris and William Kahalawai had made the front page. Jennifer's story was complete in five paragraphs, three of which told what a great guy Allan Norris was. The other two gave little information other than the fact that she had attended Sarah Lawrence in the East, was thirty-one and her death was very sudden. There was no mention of guns or suicide or murder. Allan Norris had taken care of that. Kahalawai rated a two-column headline and three paragraphs at the bottom of the front page and a whole column continued on the sport page where there was a picture of him in football uniform. His athletic prowess was played up and no mention made of his scrapes with the law or of a box of heroin being found on his body. Death was described as due to an accidental fall and there was no hint of foul play. I was worried. The local gestapo was not dumb enough to think that he had fallen while picking wild flowers in the moonlight.

I looked up in time to see Anne Secombe come out of the book store and strike out determinedly along King Street. She was agitated and she looked neither to the right nor to the left. I flipped a nickel on the counter and went out. At Richards Street, she turned to the right, walking rapidly. I stepped off the curb to cross and got caught by the traffic light. I stood in the swarm of pedestrians and watched her cut across Richards and hurry up the short walk to the post office arcade. The light changed and I moved fast.

She disappeared around the corner to the right. I moved after her and paused at the blind Hawaiian's newsstand at the turn. The arcade ended a short way down and Anne was in line at the far stamp window. I moved into a knot of idlers of both sexes and examined the

magazines on the rack. In a few minutes high heels clacked past my back. I waited for the sound to reach the entrance to the arcade, turned—and was in time to see it take place.

Anne swerved sharply toward the exit and bumped into a man who was just entering. Her pocketbook went spinning and the man went after it. He handed it back to her and raised his hat. She thanked him briefly and hurried out. He had handed her the purse with both hands and as he stepped away from her his right hand went into his pocket and her right hand went under the flap of her bag. The money and the merchandise had changed hands. I lost interest in her.

CHAPTER FOUR

Pali House

THE man who had rescued her bag was the short, rodent-faced character who had been William Kahalawai's companion last night. He took a newspaper from his pocket and pretended to scan it. He gave her time to round the corner of the Hawaiian Electric Company building, going back along King. Satisfied that no one was following her, his beady little eyes flicked over the loiterers in the arcade. I turned my back and tried to read my horoscope on a booklet in the newsstand.

When I looked around again, he had traversed the short length of sidewalk and was heading for the row of parked cars facing King Street. It was a happy accident that my coupe was in that line. Rat Face got into a 1947 station wagon and wheeled out into the King Street traffic. We turned left on Punchbowl and left again into Beretania. Soon we swung right toward the *Nuuanu Pali* and the windward side of the island. Once on the other side, we headed for the little town of Kaneohe, but Rat Face continued through the town and rapidly increased his speed as he left it behind.

Ten minutes later, he suddenly jammed on the brakes and turned off the road to the right. I lifted my foot from

the gas but I was doing at least thirty-five when I slid past. I got a brief glimpse of a narrow overgrown trail winding between tall stands of *kamani* and eucalyptus trees. A hundred yards farther along another overgrown trail appeared. I parked in the bushes at the side of the trail, hurried back to the highway, took about three loping steps and did a slow double-take in the opposite direction.

Beginning inland, a low hill rose on a gradual incline toward the sea, sheered off abruptly at what I knew to be the water's edge. At the very top of the cliff was a house, mostly of glass. It was this reflection that had caught my eyes. For whatever it was worth, I now knew the location of Walter Kent's *Pali* House. I ran for the lane where the car had disappeared. There was no station wagon in view. I moved along the winding trail cautiously until it ended abruptly in a little clearing. The station wagon was parked in the center of the clearing, its dead motor still making tiny explosive snapping sounds from the heat. But Rat Face had disappeared.

A footpath led away from the clearing in the general direction of the ocean. I struck out through the underbrush at right angles to the path until I thought I was far enough away not to be heard, then swung parallel to the path and headed toward the ocean. I didn't have far to go. The trees and underbrush ended abruptly in a short steep slope. At the foot of the slope the land flattened out into irrigated taro fields as far up and down the coast as I could see from my cramped position. The irrigated rows ran parallel to the coastline and the individual fields were separated from each other by wider irrigation ditches running at right angles to the rows. On the far side, a windbreak of bushes and stunted trees separated the fields from the brief, sandy beach and the ocean. Below me, two bent figures moved at a snail's pace in mud and water up to their knees, between the luxuriant green rows of taro. I remembered from somewhere that the famous Hawaiian *poi* was made from the pounded roots of taro. It didn't

really seem to be worth all that effort.

I spotted the point where the trail path emerged into the fields. It led to the mounded bank of an irrigation ditch and proceeded along it in the direction of the ocean. Through the trees and bushes that made up the windbreak at the far end of the path I saw a small unpainted frame building. I guessed it to be an abandoned boathouse. Then I saw the third figure.

He was dressed like the others in straw hat, faded workshirt and dungarees, and he was standing motionlessly in the shade of the boathouse. He moved casually and the sunlight glinted on a metallic object in his hand. He was concentrating on the two figures in the field. He was an Oriental.

I looked back to the field. The two men had moved to a position opposite each other, working the same row. Something bothered me about the picture and I finally caught on to what it was. They had remained opposite each other much too long to be working, and yet, they couldn't just be batting the breeze. If they were, it was the first time I had ever seen manual laborers anywhere remain in a cramped position to chat when they could be standing erect, giving their back muscles a rest. They moved apart and one of them worked back in the direction of the path. He moved faster now. When he reached the end of the row, his head bobbed up and he took a leisurely look around. He rose and made his way unhurriedly to the path and disappeared. But not before I had recognized his rat face in spite of the coolie get-up. It had been a smooth act. But I had learned how the dope changed hands.

The second man slowly worked his way back along the row, stepped onto the path and headed for the watcher at the boathouse. The two men spoke briefly and disappeared around the building.

My legs were beginning to protest against my heel-squatting position. I lowered myself to the ground and tried to massage some circulation back into them. Fifteen minutes went by and the pair didn't reappear. I cursed the wind-

break that hid the narrow beach from my gaze. Farther down the beach, two husky Orientals in bathing trunks and carrying fishing spears, with goggles dangling from their necks, crossed a sandy spit going away from me. They would have had to pass the boathouse. I wondered if they had seen my field workers. Then it dawned on me. They *were* the two field workers! The wind-break had screened their departure and the difference of attire had almost fooled me. I could have kicked myself. I should have been able to tell that they were phony field workers when they were right under my nose. It was a small thing but it was the kind of mistake I get paid for not making. It was simply that their backs were too straight and they carried themselves with an arrogance that was not natural to the older and eternally weary field worker. I waited to be sure. Nobody appeared and I had the vast expanse all to myself.

I found the two coolie outfits, plus a .38 Smith & Wesson and a shiny Yale padlock key, stuffed in the hollow trunk of an ancient *hau* tree. The heavy padlock yielded easily. I swung open the wide door of the boathouse, slipped inside and lowered the patented latch. The dark interior smelled strongly of brine and creosote. A pile of dry-rotting throw-nets were heaped in a corner near the door. An inverted dinghy hung under the darkened rafters, its paint and seams in good condition. A pair of collapsible aluminum oars leaned in one rear corner, there was a barrel with a lid on it in the other. I lifted the lid and discovered an outboard motor inside. Its tank was full of gas and it was ready to go. I pulled the pile of rotting throw-nets out of the corner. Nothing was concealed either in or under them.

I got down on my hands and knees and worked my way across the slatted floor. My bruised knees began crying for mercy almost immediately, but it wasn't until I reached the rear corner with the barrel in it that I found what I was looking for. I rolled the barrel aside, slipped my fingers through the slats and

heaved. The corner section of the floor came up easily. Instead of an expanse of sand that one might normally expect to find beneath the flooring of a boathouse, there was a zinc-covered trap door about a foot beneath the floor level. I lifted the rope handle and looked down into a square concrete well. I could not tell how deep this pseudo well was because from wall to wall to within a couple of feet of the surface were duplicates of the little sealed tin that had been planted in my cottage.

I HAD what I wanted. At current market prices there was at least half a million dollars' worth of heroin in the cache. I wiped the nervous sweat off my face onto my coat sleeve, let the trap door fall, put back the floor section and rolled the barrel back in the corner. I arranged the throw-nets in their original position and took a last look around. I lifted the latch, slid outside and made the padlock fast. Back at the *hau* tree, I put the key back in the dungarees, replaced everything as I remembered it, covered my traces as well as I could and headed for my car. Except for making an accurate mileage check back to the township limits of Kaneohe, the ride to Honolulu was uneventful and my mind was free to speculate.

Anne Seccombe wasn't in evidence when I got back to The Bookshop. I asked the little clerk if Walter Kent was around.

"Yes," she smiled. "He just came in." She went back to his office, knocked and went inside. She came out in a moment and beckoned me in.

Kent's lean flushed face had a drawn look but his smile was affable enough. He waved me to a chair. "I hear you came to see me this morning. Sorry I wasn't in."

I nodded slowly, examining his face.

"Well," he raised his eyes quizzically, "what did you want to see me about?"

"You know I'm working on a job for Allan Norris, don't you?"

"So Norris said last night."

"There are some things about the job

that have turned out to be pretty screwy," I said, "and I need some help. Naturally, since I can't tell you anything about the case, I couldn't blame you for refusing to answer questions. I hope you will answer them, though."

Kent's eyes narrowed and his face grew thoughtful. "Ask the questions and then we'll talk about the answers," he said.

"What were you and the lawyer, Carter MacDonald, doing at Norris' house last night?"

He smiled slightly. "It was a minor business matter of no concern to anybody but Norris and myself. It couldn't possibly have any bearing on your investigation. Unless, of course," he grinned, "you're investigating my credit standing?"

I shook my head. "It's funny though," I mused out loud, "that you and Norris should . . ." I trailed off.

Kent's face clouded over. "That Norris and I should be on speaking terms after my somewhat involved marital mix-ups with his daughter?"

I nodded. "Something like that."

"Jennifer and I both were very strongly individualistic," Kent said slowly, "and that's about all we had in common." He shrugged. "It would take a psychiatrist to tell you what was really wrong with Jennifer, but a lot of the blame can be laid at her father's door. Norris is a swell person and high-minded as hell but, as you've probably noticed, he likes to be the one to give the orders. I wouldn't say he wholeheartedly approves of me but he's too intelligent to blame me strictly for the mess we made of our marriage. Or maybe I should say 'marriages.'" He grinned.

I grinned with him and asked: "You still won't tell me about the business matter you discussed with him?"

"Hell, yes, I'll tell you." Kent was irritated. "Norris owns some land. I want to buy it. Does that have anything to do with your investigation?"

"Where is the land?"

Kent continued to look exasperated. "All right, here's the whole story: I own a little hideaway on the other side of

the island. It's surrounded by fertile taro fields which Norris owns and rents much too cheaply to small farmers. I want to buy it up, drain it and plant papayas. There's a good market for canned papaya juice and it's getting bigger all the time."

I looked around. "You going to be a papaya farmer and run this place, too?"

"I want to give up the bookstore. I've done well with it in the past, but I believe that money is going to get tight in the next few years. When it does, the first thing people are going to stop buying is books."

"Sounds logical." I got up and wandered over to the sectional bookcases lining the side wall. They were glassed-in and each section had a separate lock. The titles of the books were innocuous enough and the subjects ranged from ballistics to sugar technology. But most of the books had dust jackets. I turned back to Kent. "I can see why you want to get out of such a precarious business as this."

"I wouldn't say that it was precarious. Business has been rather good lately."

"But it could suddenly get very bad—any day, any hour—couldn't it?"

Kent eyed me speculatively. "What do you mean by that?"

I shrugged. "Just observant. There's a dust jacket in there with the title, *Hawaiian Salads and How to Make Them*, but it doesn't seem to fit the book very well. And it's the first time I ever saw a cookbook with a morocco leather binding, printed on thin paper with gold edges."

"Oh, that! I wanted to protect the leather binding from the sun and that paper jacket happened to be handy."

"What about this one—*Kings and Chiefs of Old Hawaii*? The jacket doesn't come within an inch of covering the book, the binding is cheap cloth and the pages are the poorest kind of pulp. You trying to protect that binding, too?"

"What are you trying to prove anyway?" Kent rose. "Those are rental library books that are not for the casual reader—expensive technical books. They're not on general display because

we only lend them out to qualified customers who are seriously interested in the technical aspects of a subject. What about it?"

"Would you be willing to say that eighty per cent of the books in those cases are pornography?"

"I most assuredly would not be willing to say that." Kent grinned shamelessly. "But what the hell if they were? Who am I to dictate to people's tastes? I just rent books—and at very fancy prices, too. It pays the overhead and helps me make available the best supply of books in town to legitimate customers."

I grinned. "That argument made just as much sense when black market operators used it during the war. To hear them talk, they were misunderstood public benefactors."

Kent shrugged, still grinning. "Put it down to pure personal pleasure, then. If you knew the ironic satisfaction I got out of seeing Mrs. Gotrocks or some other pillar of society come in and plank down twenty bucks for a piece of elegant filth, you wouldn't have the heart to deny me that pleasure."

"Your office manager is a junky, isn't she?" I asked quietly.

Kent paled. "What was that?"

I studied his face. "You did know Miss Seccombe was a drug addict, didn't you?"

His face hardened. "I didn't, and I don't believe it either."

But he did believe it. He couldn't have looked worse if I had kicked him in the belly. His reaction was obviously sincere. How she had managed to keep it a secret from him was something I would have to find out from her. Kent sat down. "Ford, are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

He ran his hand through his hair. "I've known Anne Seccombe since she was knee-high to a grasshopper."

I stared at him. "I gathered that she was a friend of yours but I thought you knew about it. I brought it up to throw your argument back in your face—about how much fun it was to stand by and watch a fellow human give in to a weakness he doesn't know how to con-

trol. I didn't know it would be such a blow to you."

"You made your point." Kent shook his head dumbly.

A knock sounded on the door.

"Come in!" Kent called.

The little clerk opened the door. "Mr. Kent, the driver is here with the books that came in on the *Lurline* and I don't know where Miss Seccombe wanted them stored." She stood in the doorway helplessly.

Kent sighed and stood up. "I'll be right out." The girl bowed and exited. Kent turned to me. "You want to stick around for a drink? I won't be more than five minutes. And I need one."

I shook my head. "I'm bushed from lack of sleep. I'm going back to the cottage and take a nap."

Kent stared at me reflectively and shrugged. "Suit yourself." He held the door open for me.

CHAPTER FIVE

Four-way Gunfight

BACK at the *Hanauma*, I detoured through the main office to see if there were any calls. The clerk handed me a brief telephone memorandum: "I want to see you. Important.—Maile S." I waited until I got back to the cottage before dialing her Kahala number.

The maid who answered the phone said that Miss Sherrod was out and hadn't left word when she would be back. I left my name and hung up. I checked the latches on the outside doors and searched the cottage from top to bottom. Nobody had planted any more heroin on me. I took a warm tub and climbed into bed, intending to sleep until supper.

I don't know how long I slept. I was dreaming about a four-way gunfight with Norris, Kent and Vecelli when a little dark man crept up behind me and I woke up suddenly. The guns were still firing.

By the time I had recovered my wits enough to leap out of bed, all was silent again. Outside the bedroom window I

saw that night had fallen. Maybe the shots had been in my imagination. Then I heard a scratching sound against the front screen. As I piled into my clothes in the dark, something metallic thudded on the floor of the *lanai*. I crouched low, flipped on the light in the living room and, gun in hand, threw open the front door.

Anne Seccombe lay in the pool of light, her head toward the door. She struggled to her hands and knees and stared at me with the dumb, incoherent look of approaching death. I knelt and saw the crimson splotch beginning to spread across her back. I put my arm around her for support and felt the stickiness dribble down my fingers. Apparently she had been on the point of knocking at my door when she was shot in the back. Her jaw worked with difficulty and tears formed in her eyes. She uttered the one word, "Ruiz—" and died in my arms. I lowered her gently to the *lanai* and looked around.

A few feet away lay a Japanese officer's pistol. There were hundreds of such souvenir weapons in Honolulu. I rose and started toward it. There was a rustle of movement. I ducked and caught a glancing blow over the temple. I went down to my hands and knees, rolled my head groggily and tried to bring the gun up. The light went out in the living room as a heel ground my wrist into the floor, and the feeling went out of my arm. My fingers relaxed and I didn't have the gun as I rolled to a sitting position. The sap crashed down again and I went over on my back. Instead of being unconscious, I floated in a slug-drunk realm where I could hear perfectly but couldn't make my eyes focus and had no control over my movements. There was a shuffle of feet and I heard a Kanaka voice remonstrate: "Don't slug him again. Waste-time trying to carry such a big fella. Make him walk."

A strong pair of hands lifted me to my feet. My knees tried to buckle, my eyes came gradually into focus and I found myself staring up into the dark face of a grinning Kanaka. I say "up." I'm six-

one and this guy was a giant of at least six-four or five. Rat Face stood beside him, holding my .38 in one hand and a Colt Woodsman in the other. The Kanaka continued to grin. "You understand what I say?"

I nodded.

"O.K., we're going for a little ride. You be good and nobody gets hurt. You make trouble and we make you very unhappy." He held a big fist under my nose.

"Where are we going?"

"We go see a fella. No more talk now. You be good?"

I was in no shape to take on the big lug and I had no desire to argue with Rat Face's guns. "Let's go," I said.

We walked through the shrubbery to the garages without attracting attention. Two solicitous friends helping a drunk on his way. The station wagon I had followed earlier stood waiting. The Kanaka drove and Rat Face sat beside me in the rear with the Colt in his lap. The ride was brief and didn't take us out of Waikiki. It ended in the parking lot at the rear of the Hobron Club. Rat Face addressed the Kanaka: "I'll do the talking to the boss, Malo. You keep your yap shut."

Malo looked hurt. "Sure, sure, Ruiz. Don't I always take my play from you? Do I make mistakes?"

"Just do what I tell you and shut up," Ruiz snarled.

"Sure, leave it to Malo. We take him upstairs?"

"Come on."

We walked across the lot and up to the rear door. Ruiz knocked and the door was opened by an aproned Filipino who recognized Ruiz and walked away paying no more attention to us. We were in the nightclub kitchen with all its attendant noises and clattering confusion. We walked through and came out in a narrow hall on the opposite side. Directly across from us were the swinging doors leading to the nightclub proper. At one end of the hall a red exit light glowed dimly. We turned in the opposite direction and mounted the stairs.

There were swinging doors on the sec-

ond floor in approximately the same place as those below. We had to step back as they swung inward on us and Jocko Vecelli came through. I caught a glimpse of a wide, low ceiling room, not too fancy. A black cloth cyclorama hung in folds around the circumference of the room. It was a neat idea for killing several birds with one stone. It centered attention on the gaming tables, acted as a blackout curtain, deadened sound and probably saved Jocko a lot of money in decorations. There were about two dozen players in the room and the low hum of conversation blended with the hollow rattle of the ivory pellet whirling in the roulette wheel and the soft voice of the house man calling odds at the crap table. There were other seated games and I already knew enough about Honolulu to know that monte, fantan and the inevitable black jack would be among them.

VECELLI gestured silently toward the door in the opposite wall. Malo started to haul me forward, but I suddenly dug my heels in. As my eyes had roamed the big room I had caught a glimpse of Maile Sherrod standing at the roulette table talking animatedly to the croupier. He was smiling and shaking his head at whatever she was saying. The swinging door blotted out my view, Malo tugged again and I allowed myself to be dragged into Vecelli's office.

Jocko had apparently had too much experience with short-memored politicians and crooked vice squad cops to splurge on an expensive layout. The office walls were stained plywood paneling, the floor was covered with maroon carpeting and the desk was a good efficient metal one without adornment. The only wall decoration hung behind the desk—and proved that Vecelli had a sense of humor of sorts. It was a large framed, signed photograph of Honolulu's Chief of Police, an estimable gentleman who undoubtedly would have blown his top had he known where it was hanging.

Vecelli crossed the office ahead of us

and opened a door in the side wall. "Take him in here."

It was a small storeroom with a single unshaded light bulb hanging down from the ceiling. Broken chairs were piled in one corner, a battered crap table with one leg missing leaned against the wall and old menus, poker chips and odds and ends of junk were scattered on the floor. The room was on the corner directly over the kitchen. The windows on both sides had been painted black.

Vecelli closed the door and turned to me. "I warned you to stay out of my affairs, Ford."

I grinned. "You also said you could take care of your affairs personally."

Ruiz pulled my gun out of his pocket. Vecelli spoke to him without taking his eyes off me. "Put the rod away. I don't want any shooting here."

Ruiz continued to hold the gun on me. "I'm not gonna plug him—yet." He turned to Malo. "Tie him up."

Malo went over to the corner, picked up a dirty length of clothesline and proceeded to tie my wrists behind me. Ruiz stepped to one side and inspected the knots. He nodded in satisfaction and moved around to face me. Suddenly he reached up and slammed the barrel of the automatic against my jaw. I staggered back and fell against the wall. Ruiz shifted the gun to his other hand and drove his fist into my stomach. I jackknifed and went down to my knees. Ruiz leaned forward. "The boss don't like wisecracks, shamus. Be respectful."

Vecelli pulled him aside. "Get up," he ordered.

I got slowly to my feet, resigned to the fact that I was going to get a good going over. Vecelli grasped my shirt front. "Tough guy!" He spat full in my face. "Here's a guy thinks he can bump off one of Vecelli's boys and come around to brag about it. 'At's the trouble with you Coast punks. You get one block off the Strip and you think you're pushing around a bunch of hayseeds."

I said: "What did you have to kill Anne Seccombe for?"

Vecelli turned slowly on Ruiz. "What's he talking about?"

Ruiz looked sullen. "We're in kind of a jam, boss."

"What kind of a jam are *we* in?" Vecelli asked ominously.

"I had to plug the Seccombe dame. She was going into Ford's place when she spotted us."

"You gun-crazy fool!" Vecelli exploded. "Who gave you any orders to kill a dame?"

"She spotted us, boss," Ruiz whined. "Besides," he added reproachfully, "Ford ain't a tourist. He don't have no social callers."

Vecelli considered this and nodded slowly.

"The way I figured it," said Ruiz, gaining courage, "if a local girl disappears, people ask questions. But if she gets plugged at Ford's cottage and Ford disappears, everything still gets taken care of."

Vecelli was still sore but his mind began to examine the idea. "You kill her with your own rod?"

Ruiz grinned. "I used a souvenir Jap pistol I carry for emergencies."

"Where is it?"

"Beside her body. No fingerprints." He grinned wolfishly. "If the punk disappears off Makapuu Point tonight, he'll be halfway to California tomorrow."

Vecelli came to a decision. "It was a dumb play but it can't be helped. Leave him in here and we'll take him for a ride after we close."

Ruiz moved in on me again. "I'll fix him so he won't make any noise." He drew back his gun hand.

Malo grabbed Ruiz's arm. "One minute. 'Scuse me, boss," he said apologetically to Vecelli. "More-better not to mark him up so much. Might be, we change our minds again." He grinned wickedly. "All we want is make him sleep till time to go, huh?"

Vecelli nodded.

"O.K." Malo pushed Ruiz aside, rolled his shoulders once and with a look of childish glee, smashed his big fist into the point of my jaw. Stars did pinwheels under my skull and then a red wave was succeeded by a black wave and I was falling through space.

I HAD no idea of time. When I came to, the room was dark and the pain in my jaw swept over me in sickening waves. I struggled to a sitting position, started to topple, threw out an arm and caught myself. My hands were no longer tied! I fumbled around in the darkness, found the rope, felt the ends. They had been cut through sharply. This was no time to go around looking for somebody to thank. I tiptoed across the room and raised the rear window. It gave onto a sloping roof over the kitchen door.

I lowered myself from the window and let go. My feet went out from under me, I clawed frantically at the edge of the roof, missed, and tumbled unceremoniously to the ground.

I got up and dusted myself off as a sedan eased into the parking lot. I backed into the shadows and watched two laughing couples get out of the car and head toward the front entrance of the club. They paid no attention when I moved in behind them. They turned in at the entrance, stopped and chatted with the doorman. I hurried on. I hailed a cab on Kalakaua and directed the Filipino driver to the tan tile and brick edifice that housed Honolulu Police Headquarters.

Lieutenant Walter Chun was a slender broad-shouldered Chinese in the middle thirties. He was wearing civvies, had shining black patent leather hair and hard intelligent eyes that gleamed like black enamel. He appeared to be satisfied with my credentials and showed neither surprise, suspicion nor any other emotion at my story. But when I had finished, his lips were thin.

"You should have come to us in the first place."

I shrugged. "I told you why I didn't. I was just going through the motions to prove to my client that it wouldn't work. I couldn't know I was going to get the breaks beforehand."

"You knew last night."

"O.K., maybe I played it wrong according to you. But I'm bringing you a lot of information tonight. Are you willing to go along with my plan?"

Chun eyed me expressionlessly. "You know if your scheme doesn't work, that won't be the end of it. *You* won't see California again for a long, long time."

I didn't want to think about that. I brushed it aside. "If it does work?"

Chun smiled slightly. "Then I think the haul will be big enough for us to overlook your somewhat unorthodox behavior."

"What are we waiting for?"

Chun rose to his feet and indicated the desk phone. "You can use that phone. I'll get a car and a driver." He moved swiftly and silently out of the office.

I reached for the telephone book and located Allan Norris' Makiki Heights number. Norris himself answered the phone.

"Ford speaking. Do you want to clean up that business tonight?"

There was a pause. Finally Norris said: "Do you mean you've really found something important?"

"More than that. I think I can wrap the whole thing up."

"Well—" Norris hesitated. "Do it then. That's what you were hired to do, isn't it?"

"I think you ought to be in at the kill."

"Is that really necessary?"

"I think so."

"Very well, what do you want me to do?"

I looked at the map of Honolulu under the glass top of the desk. "Be on the corner of Nuuanu and Iolani in fifteen minutes. I'll pick you up there."

"Can you tell me anything now?"

"I'm pressed for time and there are too many angles."

"Very well—oh, by the way, Carter MacDonald is here with me now. May I bring him along?"

I grinned into the phone. "Sure, bring him along." I hung up and reached for the directory.

I located Walter Kent's Wilhelmina Rise number and dialled. I made my voice hurried and business-like when Kent answered the phone. "I haven't got much time to talk. You remember

that business we were discussing today?"

Kent's voice was surprised. "We talked about a lot of things."

"The book business?"

"Oh." There was a pause. "The books in my office?"

"Right. There's a chance you may not be in that business unless you act fast."

"What's happened?"

"I'm on my way to the other side of the Island. If you could be at that *Pali* House of yours about an hour from now, I could stop in."

There was another pause. "Couldn't you stop by here first?"

"My business across the Island is urgent. Listen, Kent, I'm doing you a favor. Nobody's forcing you to come."

"I suppose there's no other way," Kent said dubiously. "All right, the *Pali* House in an hour."

"Or thereabouts. I'll see you then. So long." I hung up as Chun returned, loading an extra police revolver. I got the number of the Hobron Club. A voice I didn't recognize answered the phone.

"Get Jocko Vecelli on the phone."

"Who's calling?"

"Get Vecelli."

"He's busy now and don't want to be disturbed."

"Tell him Johnny Ford wants to talk to him."

"O.K."

Vecelli's urgent business didn't keep him from getting to the phone in one minute flat. "Ford?"

"Yeah. Sorry I had to run out on you but I had some things to take care of."

"Where are you?"

"I've got some information you want."

"I'll settle for you telling me where you are."

"Skip it. A certain party doesn't think the Hobron Club is a good influence on the community, Jocko. I think you're going to be closed up."

"Nuts."

"Maybe. We're having a little meeting. You want to join us?"

Vecelli cursed. "Who is 'we'?"

"You want to come or not?"

Jocko paused. "What about the girl over at your place?"

"We can take care of that, too."

"Where's the meeting?"

"You know Walter Kent's place on the other side of the Island?"

"Is he in on this?"

"Don't waste time. If you're interested, be there in an hour and a half."

"Say! Wait a minute!" Jocko's voice was suspicious. "This is no long distance call."

"Did I say it was? You've got your choice: be at Kent's place in an hour and a half—or else!" I slammed down the receiver and winked at Chun.

He tossed the revolver to me and nodded. "He'll come. Let's get going."

"What about Anne Seccombe's body?"

"I've already dispatched a car."

CHAPTER SIX

Heroin Hideout

WE HURRIED down to the big basement garage where a wiry young uniformed cop of Japanese ancestry stood beside a purring sedan. Chun said his name was Matsu and introduced me. Matsu climbed under the wheel and as Chun and I settled ourselves into the rear seat, Chun grinned at me. "By the way, you know who owns the Hobron Club, don't you?"

"Giacomo Vecelli."

"I mean the physical property—the building and the lot it stands on."

I looked at him. "Not my client?"

Chun nodded. "Allan Norris."

It gave me something else to think about as the police car howled out into Bethel Street.

Norris and MacDonald were waiting as we slid to a stop at Nuuanu and Iolani. I introduced Chun to them while he climbed into the front seat beside Matsu, and Norris and MacDonald got into the back with me. As soon as we were rolling, Matsu opened the siren and we wailed up Nuuanu Valley. The few cars we encountered on the lonely road darted over to the side like unprotected infantry under the onslaught of dive bombers. I'll never know how we man-

aged to stay on the road when we skidded around the top of the *Pali* and twisted down the treacherous turns on the other side of the mountain. Once, Norris jerked out a nervous, "Where are we going?" over the screaming complaint of the tires.

I grunted noncommittally and didn't answer.

We made it to Kaneohe in nineteen minutes and it was an experience I wouldn't care to repeat. A few brief minutes later, Matsu slammed on the brakes, threw the wheel over and we bumped up the dirt trail. Then we were skidding to a stop in the clearing. Chun turned. "This it?"

I nodded. "This is it."

Chun, Matsu and I piled out hurriedly. Norris and MacDonald were getting out when Chun stopped them. "I think it would be best if you gentlemen waited here." They sank back into the car, MacDonald silently, Norris muttering. Chun took Matsu to one side.

"You stay with them, Matsu."

Matsu showed his teeth. "Am I protecting them or guarding them?"

Chun's eyes glinted. "Both."

Matsu nodded and I led Chun off down the path. We paused at the foot of the slope to reconnoiter. The flat taro fields were bathed in the light of a fat oversize orange moon that looked more like Culver City corn than the real thing. When a low-lying cloud drifted across its face, we bent low and took the irrigation path on the double. I found the hollow *hau* tree, knelt and reached inside. The hollow trunk was too hollow.

Frantically, I reached around inside and grabbed fistfuls of air. I stared stupidly into the beam of Chun's flash. Maybe the whole thing had been a dream. I got up and hurried to the boat-house. The padlock was gone and the doors hung open dispiritedly. Chun came up behind me and played his light over the interior.

The dinghy was gone from the rafters, the oars and the barrel with its outboard motor were gone. Nothing was left except the pile of throw-nets in the

corner. I knelt and lifted the slatted floorboards. The trap door was still in place anyway. I grasped the rope handle and heaved. The concrete well was filled with sea water. I threw off my coat, rolled up my sleeve and fished beneath the surface. I could have saved myself the trouble. I let the lid fall into place, rolled down my sleeve and picked up my coat.

"This makes it look like I made up the whole thing."

"Not so good," Chun admitted, and I noticed he moved away from me.

"You don't have to use that tone," I said.

Chun shrugged. "You admit fighting with Kahalawai; you admit planting the dope on him and you admit Miss Secombe died in your presence. Norris has got some questions to answer about his daughter's death, but you were in on that, too."

"Would I have gone to all this trouble to attract attention to myself?"

Chun smiled. "You did."

"Look," I pleaded, "we've still got a chance if we play it out. At least we can go to Kent's place and see what happens."

"Whatever happens, can happen to me," Chun said softly.

I grinned. "You hope I'm right or you'd be running me in instead of arguing. Plant Matsu outside while we go in. There's only one way down from that place."

Chun said: "Let's go."

We went back to the car and got in without explanations. Actually, it wasn't until Chun gave Matsu the directions that I felt reassured about the remainder of what I laughingly call the best years of my life.

Kent's garage was some thirty yards down the slope from the house. Matsu eased the car to a stop and cut the lights. We got out and Chun turned to Matsu.

"Stay out of sight and don't come unless I call you personally. Anything funny happens, give us a horn."

Matsu nodded and drifted away into the shadows. The rest of us trudged

single file up to the house. As we reached the doorway, lights blazed and Walter Kent stood grinning in the entrance. "Welcome to the *Pali* House, Hawkshaw." He looked at Norris in surprise. "Hello, Allan. Is this your party, too?"

Norris shook his head. "Don't you know what it's all about either?"

"I'm afraid I don't." Kent shook hands with MacDonal and looked at Chun. "I don't believe I've met this gentleman."

"His name is Chun," I said. "Let's go inside."

The wide hallway led to a dropped living room running the width of the house. The ceiling-to-floor drapes were pulled back, revealing a solid window across the front of the room. The indirect lights were low and I had the feeling of walking out into the night as I entered the room. The window was like a huge mural with its high moon and millions of stars suspended in the velvet blue-blackness of the Pacific night.

I moved over to the big window with something like awe and looked down at the reflected starlight on the water. The ocean was barely stirring except directly below us where the breakers rolled in majestically but futilely, to spend themselves on the scattered rocks at the foot of the cliff.

Kent busied himself pouring drinks. "You'll have to excuse the looks of the place," he apologized. "I just got here myself."

I LOOKED around the room. There was nothing to apologize for. Fine Oriental rugs lay scattered on the *koa* wood floors. The furniture was low and comfortable. Richly bound books lined the walls and added a final touch of luxurious ease to the scene. Kent finished handing out the drinks and for a moment it was like the awkward silence at a party where the guests haven't been introduced. Then light sprayed across the side windows and the rattle of gravel on the drive announced the arrival of another car. Everyone re-

mained silent and I felt the tension begin to mount.

Footsteps sounded and Kent opened the door.

Jocko Vecelli came in warily, followed by a silent and watchful Ruiz. The big, moon-faced grinning Malo came in last. Kent greeted Jocko familiarly, nodded to Ruiz and Malo and led them into the living room. He looked at me ironically. "Have I any more guests coming?"

I shook my head and watched the new arrivals. Jocko looked at me coldly and turned his attention to the rest. Ruiz fastened his little cobra-eyes on me with a noticeable lack of affection.

Malo beamed at me. "Hi, Mac. We been looking all over for you."

Kent spoke to Vecelli. "What will you have to drink?"

Vecelli looked around. "You got any wine?"

Kent looked apologetic. "I have a little White Burgundy but it isn't chilled. Would you prefer whiskey?"

"Burgundy."

Kent turned to the others.

"Got rye?" Ruiz asked.

"Of course."

"I'll take rye."

"Me too," Malo grinned. "Make mine double. I'm big fellow."

When they had their drinks, Vecelli raised his glass. Everybody drank and as if at a signal, the glasses were lowered and all eyes turned toward me. All but Ruiz. He was looking at Chun. "What's the copper here for?" he demanded.

Kent turned to Chun. "Are you a policeman?"

"I am," said Chun. "Let's get on with it, Ford. Who's who and what's what?"

I faced the others and started in to stir up the most trouble in the shortest amount of time. "First," I said, "I'll begin by saying that everybody in this room with the exception of Lieutenant Chun is guilty of some criminal action, and I may add," I said pleasantly, "that I don't like any of you and I'm sure that your collective mothers bayed at the moon."

There were several growls at this and Carter MacDonald spoke up. "Apparently, I am not alone in taking exception to your remarks, Mr. Ford. You have been a focal point of irritation ever since you arrived in the Islands. It may interest you to know that I've tried to persuade my client to dispense with your services before you involve him in any further trouble. I may also point out that your rather childish invective lays you open to libel charges."

"We'll begin with you," I said coldly. "You are Norris' business and legal adviser, aren't you?"

"I have that honor."

"Then I may point out," I said ironically, "that when you O.K. a deal whereby Allan Norris rents out his property to a known gambler, you sure as hell are guilty of criminal behavior even if there's no law against it. The fact that you're too good a lawyer for anybody to be able to prove that you had knowledge of the gambling is beside the point. Everyone in Honolulu knows about the Hobron Club. That rent is just as much a part of the house take as the money Vecelli pockets." I turned to Norris. "We won't waste time talking about morals and ethics. My client, besides being guilty of criminal behavior, is guilty of actual law-breaking in withholding facts of a crime in the death of his daughter. Vecelli is guilty of running a gambling house and probably of bribing vice squad cops. Our host," I grinned at Kent, "is able to furnish a layout like this at least in part from the rental of obscene books. The two stooges," I nodded at Ruiz and Malo, "are guilty of assorted crimes including kidnapping and murder. Modesty forbids a listing of my own crimes," I said shyly.

"Get down to business," Chun said impatiently. He was grinning.

I nodded. "A drug ring in Honolulu is anxious to see me get out of the Islands. They tried to encourage me with a bribe and planted dope in my cottage in case I didn't take the hint. Jennifer Norris was murdered last night and I was waylaid by her murderers. I was lucky enough to get the guy who did the actual

killing—William Kahalawai. Today I spotted his pal and followed him. He led me to a cache of over half a million dollars' worth of heroin. It was hidden on property also belonging to Allan Norris. It's obvious that a man as well known as Norris couldn't run around peddling dope but—"

MacDonald squeaked out again. "I protest against your continued libels against my client's character."

"Shut up!" I snarled. "I'm stating facts and I'll do it my way. I said Norris didn't run around peddling dope, and he didn't. But the punk I followed works for a man who has got the organization to handle it. Ruiz works for Jocko Vecelli."

I got all the action I wanted in the next few moments.

"I knew it was a frame!" Vecelli spat. He went for the gun in his shoulder holster. Guns appeared in various hands and I beat Vecelli to the draw but didn't fire. Because Vecelli crumpled to the floor with a slug through his head.

The smoking .38 was in the hand of Walter Kent whose elbow still rested on the open top drawer of his desk. Malo stood by the door, a .45 in his big mitt, not smiling now, and looking to Ruiz for his cue. Ruiz covered the room with his Woodsman and backed toward the fireplace. Kent's face creased in a hard grin.

"I'm sorry, Ford," he apologized, "you could have used his testimony."

"Drop your guns and raise your hands." Lieutenant Chun spoke to Ruiz and Malo.

Suddenly, outside the house, three shots rang out in quick succession. All of us were startled but nobody took his eyes off anybody else. A twisted grin curled over Ruiz's face. Chun turned his gun on him.

"It's three to two. You want to shoot it out?"

Ruiz continued to grin. I looked around unhappily. Norris was out of line of fire, staring uncomprehendingly at the scene. MacDonald was down on his hands and knees, blinking owlishly over the top of his glasses. Perspiration stood

out on his pale forehead. I wanted to tell him to move over and kneel down beside him. I spoke to Chun.

"You got the odds right but on the wrong side. It's three to two against us. Kent was running a bluff."

Malo darted a quick look at Ruiz, whether for confirmation of my statement or for instructions I didn't know.

"I don't get it," said Chun without taking his eyes off Ruiz.

I tried to relax my tense muscles. "Ruiz and Malo are both rodded. Why didn't they cut Kent down as soon as he plugged Jocko?" I took a step backward. "There seem to be three guns pointing at us."

Chun looked around slowly into the barrels of three guns.

I SAID: "These two boys officially worked for Vecelli but they ran dope for Kent and took orders from him. Vecelli didn't know that." I turned to Kent. "That was a dumb play of yours—giving yourself away."

Kent grinned: "On the contrary, there was a possibility you wouldn't spot the contradiction in which way the guns pointed. But you would never have been suspicious if you hadn't already discovered other evidence. I seem to be in the driver's seat, Lieutenant. Do you still want to shoot it out?"

"So it's you," Chun glowered. "We can take at least two of you with us."

"I'm afraid that won't be sufficient," Kent said. "We most certainly will take both of you. Take their guns, Ruiz." Ruiz slid behind us while we stood there like dopes, and the game was up. We handed over our guns.

"Now," Kent said, "I don't want you to have any false hopes. From the number of shots outside, I would say that you left one policeman on guard. I assure you that he has been taken care of."

"How do you think you're going to take care of all of us?" I inquired.

"Simple." Kent grinned slyly. "You and the lieutenant will die from each other's guns and in the melee Norris and MacDonald will crash through the front

window to the rocks below. It's a bit melodramatic but when you remember that I and my friends will be the only surviving witnesses, it ought not to be hard to put over."

I stared at the guy. He didn't seem to be a bit nuts. I said: "Since you're crazy enough to think you can get away with that, maybe you're crazy enough to answer a question that's been bothering me."

"What is it?"

"How did you get mixed up in this racket anyway?"

"Accident." Kent smiled. "Purely by accident. One day while walking on the beach, I discovered that old boathouse and explored it. I came across the cache of heroin. It had apparently been smuggled into the Islands before the war and of course, December 7th put an end to dope traffic from the Orient to the Mainland. I don't know what happened to the original owners. Perhaps they were interned at the outbreak, perhaps they were killed. At any rate, I set my two servants on watch and when nobody showed up within a reasonable time I took over. I found the man I needed to distribute it in Ruiz, who was working for Vecelli. I might mention that Ruiz didn't know where the cache was located. No one knew that but me and my two Chinese boys. Also, I knew nothing of the identity of Ruiz's clients. That was his responsibility. And he hired his own assistants. Kahalawai was one such assistant and this chap, Malo, helps him at present."

I said: "Ruiz and Kahalawai planted the dope and the money in my cottage and you telephoned me. Right?"

"Of course, and from Allan Norris' house." Kent grinned. "So you see the 'dope ring' you spoke of actually consists of me, my two servants and these two. Amusing, isn't it?"

"Yeah," I said. "About as amusing as Anne Seccombe's death."

Kent's face clouded. "That was one of the unfortunate weaknesses of our system. I would certainly never have permitted her to get the habit through any action of mine."

"You sentenced her to death."

"Unfortunate," Kent said coldly. "There was nothing else to do. I went to her apartment after you left this afternoon and stupidly tried to warn her by telling her that you, a private detective, had discovered her habit. She became despondent and decided to expose Ruiz to the authorities before going to a sanitarium. Then she decided to go to you instead. I couldn't dissuade her. Naturally, she had to be stopped."

"Like your ex-wife had to be stopped," I said.

Kent looked tired. "Jennifer discovered the truth some time ago. She was loyal and kept her mouth shut. If she had been sent to a sanitarium I wouldn't have worried. But when Norris sent for you and continued to hold her incommunicado at home, I was afraid she would crack. I was not happy about it."

"Very hard on you," I sneered.

Kent came to life. "All right, Ruiz, let's get it over. Mr. Ford may have the honor of dying first. Use the lieutenant's gun."

Ruiz put the other guns on the desk, moved to the center of the room with Chun's revolver. In the shadow of a moment that followed I wondered inanely if my secretary back in L.A. would have trouble finding another job. Ruiz's hand tightened on the trigger and my eyes closed instinctively. A gun roared and my ears rang, but I didn't feel any pain. I opened my eyes in surprise.

Ruiz wheeled in the center of the room clutching his arm. Slowly the gun dropped from his hand. Every face in that room wore a look of surprise—except Malo's. As Ruiz whimpered and sank to his knees Malo grinned. "More-better we do it this way."

Kent started to rise. "You fool!"

"Sit down, Mister Kent."

BUT Kent continued to rise and that was the last I saw of him for a moment. Ruiz scrambled for the gun on the floor and Chun and I dove for it at the same moment. Mrs. Ford's little boy, Johnny, came up with

the gun in time to see Kent whirl and fire at Malo. Malo went down on one knee and put another shot where it would do the most good, in Kent's arm. Kent dropped his gun, cast a wild look around the room and raced toward Norris and MacDonald who were rooted to the floor near the window. I tried a wing shot, caught Kent in the thigh. His leg buckled but he kept going. I threw another shot and Kent's other leg buckled. But it was too late. Norris made a half-hearted attempt to grab him as his body pitched forward and crashed through the window. There was no sound after the smashing of the glass. Just silence.

Suddenly the front door banged open and a Chinese raced in. "Everything O.K.?" He stopped, surprised. "Where's Mr. Kent?"

"Quick! Where's other fella?" Malo shouted.

"Damn cop got him," the Chinese said. "I winged the cop. What am I supposed to—?" Suddenly an awful suspicion crossed his face and his gun came up. Malo and I cut him down at the same moment.

Malo turned to the rest of us. "And that ends that," he said, without a trace of pigin.

The clock in my cottage living room said three A.M. and I was on my fourth drink and couldn't even feel it. I was still wound up. Maile Sherrod sat across from me doing very well on her third drink.

". . . That about winds it up," I said. "This big lug wasn't Hawaiian at all but Samoan. The Federal Narcotics Bureau needed an undercover man and they wanted somebody with a Polynesian background who was unknown. So they borrowed Harry Malo from the Samoan police. Malo had found out that the Hobron Club was a distribution point and had gotten a job there as dishwasher. He got on to Kahalawai and Ruiz, and he thought Vecelli was the boss but he didn't have any evidence to prove it. He spent six months working his way into Ruiz's good graces and when Kahalawai went out of the picture Ruiz took him on."

"But he was with Ruiz when Anne was killed."

"There wasn't anything he could do about it. He didn't know what was up until they spotted Anne at my door and Ruiz had fired. Malo had to string along. He did make it easier for me though. Twice he stopped Ruiz from working my skull over and he cut the ropes that allowed me to escape from Vecelli. He did everything he could do without giving himself away."

Maile still looked puzzled. "What happened to all that dope?"

I shrugged. "We don't know for sure but we think that Kent had given up the game rather than take any more risks. He was a gambler but he was no fool. If we're right, he probably dumped it somewhere off the reef, possibly when Ruiz and Malo were supposed to be taking care of me. The cops, the Federal boys and the Coast Guard are going to start dragging for it this morning."

Maile sighed. "It's as wild a story as I ever heard."

I thought about Norris' folded check in my wallet and it didn't seem so wild to me. "Well, it's practically finished," I said.

"Practically?"

"There's one more thing to clear up."

Maile looked inquiring.

"What were you doing on the second floor of the Hobron Club tonight?"

Maile blushed. "Looking for you."

"You left a telephone message for me in the afternoon. What was the important thing you wanted to talk to me about?"

"It was just a wild idea I had."

"What was it?"

"It sounds foolish."

"What was it?"

She blushed to the roots of her hair. "Well, I—kind of wanted to see you again so I conceived the bright idea of suggesting that you stay out here a while and maybe open a branch of your agency. It was just a gag." She stared at me defiantly.

I put down my drink and got up. "O.K.," I said, advancing on her, "I can go along with a gag."

CAN YOU TAKE THE WITNESS?

Or Can He Take You?

By

JULIUS LONG

1

Sometimes we suspect that the highly technical nomenclature of many trades and professions has its chief reason for existence in the confusion into which laymen are thrown by its incomprehensibility. Perhaps the legal profession is more careful than any other in clinging to abracadabra often as puzzling to lawyers as to laymen. As most legal terms are in Latin and French, two languages few lawyers can pronounce, let alone understand, the use of such terms in court by learned counsel would frequently put scholars in stitches. For example, your author has heard lawyers ask the court for "voyer dyer" examination of the jury. What two French words was learned counsel trying to say, and what is their meaning in legal parlance?

2

Almost every time you pick up a newspaper and read the criminal court

news, you find that the district attorney (or county attorney or county prosecutor, as the case may be) has "nolled" some case or other. If you have heard lawyers use the term, they pronounce it "nollied."

You probably know that when this happens it means some accused person goes free, but just what does take place when a criminal case is "nolled?" Does this mean that a grand jury has refused to indict the accused man?

3

One of the questions most frequently asked is the meaning of the term, *nolo contendere*. It frequently pops up in federal cases, especially when thirty or forty defendants are on trial for selling fake cemetery stock or shares in some Arizona copper mine that has been flooded with water since 1880. Does a plea of *nolo contendere* mean that the accused man has pled guilty or not guilty?

4

If there is any class of professional men which buys more detective story magazines than doctors, it is lawyers. Yet lawyers sometimes gnash their teeth when they run across uninformed use of legal terms in everyday parlance. It would be interesting to compile the statistics on how many times private ops arrested for murder by hostile headquarters men cry out in rage: "Book me on this one, you lousy flatfoot, and I'll sue you and your bondsman for false arrest!"

Now, as a matter of fact, if the headquarters dick hauls the shamus down to the cooler, files a murder charge against him and tosses him inside, can the shamus collect a dime from the dick or his bondsman for false arrest? We are assuming that the shamus is innocent.

5

The terminology of criminal law is sometimes confusing when it pertains to a classification of crimes themselves. Everybody knows there is a distinction between felonies and misdemeanors, and that the felony is the graver offense of the two. But do you know if a misdemeanor is a crime or an offense?

6

All crimes are divided into two classes, felonies and misdemeanors. A felony, of course, is a more serious offense than a misdemeanor. Generally in the United States, the distinction between felonies and misdemeanors is made by statute; that is, by law passed by the state legislature of each state. Which of the following tests is employed by such state statutes?

- 1) The amount of the fine for each violation.
- 2) Whether it is the first or second offense.
- 3) The length of the term of imprisonment on sentence.
- 4) Whether the crime is one defined as *mala in se* or *mala prohibita*.

- 5) Whether all the jurors voted to convict or only nine of them.

Answers to Preceding Questions

1

Learned counsel was attempting to say *voire dire*, pronounced, "*v-voir deer*." This legal term simply means the preliminary examination of jurors appearing for duty; sometimes but rarely, it is applied to the examination of witnesses. Translated literally as "to speak the truth," the term implies that on such preliminary examination a truthful verbal statement is to be made by the person examined. The usual questions asked a jury on a voir dire examination concern their personal interest in or knowledge of the case, whether they are represented by any of the lawyers concerned, whether they have prejudices that would prevent their impartial consideration of the case at hand and their capacity in general to arrive at a fair and impartial verdict.

Whether the juror answers in the affirmative or the negative depends frequently on whether or not he wants to escape jury duty.

2

No; a criminal case is "nolled" after indictment. If a grand jury failed to indict an accused man, a nolle would be superfluous. The term as popularly used in the press and by the lawyers themselves derives from the Latin term, "nolle prosequi." It is pronounced, "nol-y pross-e-kwi," the accent being upon the first syllable of each word.

A nolle prosequi is entered in a criminal case when the district attorney is convinced of the futility of attempting to convict the accused man. If there is so little evidence against the man that to put the county to the expense of a trial would be absurd, the case is simply dropped.

In many jurisdictions a district attorney may not nolle a case without securing the consent of the trial judge. Even so,

CAN YOU TAKE THE WITNESS? 127

the nolle of a case does not mean that the accused may not be indicted all over again and brought to trial, as a nolle is not equivalent to an acquittal. The accused has never been placed in jeopardy; he may not invoke the defense of double jeopardy if he is again indicted. However, few accused men are ever brought to trial after the nolle of their case. Because of this many district attorneys and judges of the Prohibition era were able to retire to palatial homes in Southern California where they might enjoy the society of former police captains, inspectors, etc.

3

The plea of nolo contendere means neither that the accused man has pled guilty or not guilty. It means merely that for the purpose of the case the accused has admitted guilt. He says in effect: "I do not plead guilty, but I will not contest the charges made in the indictment against me."

An interesting question arises: "How may a man be neither guilty or not guilty?"

Actually he must be one or the other, but extenuating circumstances may induce a judge to give a lenient sentence after he has heard the entire history of the case.

The plea and lenient sentence are certainly justified where some well-meaning individual has run afoul of one of our myriad criminal laws and unwittingly violated it, never dreaming that he was doing anything wrong, which probably he wasn't.

4

No, the private op can't collect a dime from the headquarters dick who arrested him, even if he turns out to be as pure and innocent as the driven snow. So long as a charge is filed against the arrested man within a reasonable time, he has no grounds for a suit charging false arrest.

A valid false arrest case arises when the arrested man is detained unreasonably without charges being filed against

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him, whether the detainer is a duly appointed law enforcement officer or a private individual.

Now, if it should turn out that the headquarters man maliciously arrested the innocent shamus and maliciously filed charges against him well aware of his innocence, the shamus has grounds for a suit for "malicious prosecution" against him.

This particular fact is probably all that prevents many malicious creeps from having their next-door neighbors arrested on one pretext or another. If it were not for the fear of being sued for damages, they would throw affidavits like confetti.

5

A misdemeanor, as well as a felony, is classed as a crime. These terms, crime, offense, and criminal offense, are all interchangeable.

6

The test as to whether a crime is a felony or a misdemeanor as established by statute is whether the penalty calls for imprisonment of less than a period of one year.

If such is the case, the crime is a misdemeanor. If the penalty is one year or more of imprisonment or capital punishment, the crime is a felony. The size or absence of a fine is immaterial. Whether the offense is a first or second one may make a difference in the penalty and thus cause a second offense to amount to a felony where the first offense was only a misdemeanor, but the controlling element remains the length of the imprisonment.

Though most crimes *mala in se* are felonies, some are not, and *crimes prohibita* may be either felonies or misdemeanors.

As to whether all twelve jurors or only nine voted to convict, we thought that everybody knew that a unanimous verdict is, of course, required for the conviction of crime.

THE END

(Continued from page 31)

THE whitish object crushed between bumper and pole was Molly the Third. Across the ditch, a man lay on his back, his head against a rock. That, I learned later, was Machine-gun Larkin. Beside the car, one arm on the running board, was a big, blond man who later turned out to be Speed Oast, and the body subsequently identified as Chicago Lon Ucci was half in the ditch—a chunky man, face masked with drying blood.

"The car wasn't damaged?" asked James in that same voice.

"Not a bit, outside of the bumper." I had my eyes shut. I could hear Twiford Warner's voice again; no inflections: "They swerved at Molly and me—just for fun, to make me jump into the ditch, I suppose. I jumped. Then I heard brakes. Molly got caught. I went up to the driver and told him to get out, that I was going to have the lot of them arrested. I was extremely angry.

"The driver got out and said, 'The hell you are, buddy,' and smacked my face. I hit him with my cane—it's pretty heavy, you know—and he fell across the ditch and hit his head on that stone. When the blond man got out with a gun in his hand, I picked up a good-size rock. He shot—he must have been quite drunk, because . . . Here Twiford showed me a rip along the collar of his coat. "Anyhow, I hit him with the rock as hard as I could while the third man was climbing out. The third man"—Twiford pointed to Chicago Lon Ucci's body—"said he was going to kill me. He quite obviously meant it. I was still terribly angry and more than a little frightened, and I still had the rock, so . . ."

I swallowed hard. "You asked me to help you clean up, Twiford. Just what . . .? That is, the police . . ."

"I've thought it all over, Harry. No."

For a second I thought Twiford was going to add me to this massacre. This queer little man, killing these three brutes . . . Then I realized he was quite calm and sane. "These three men," he said, "are obviously criminals of some

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sort. I acted in self-defense, of course. But think of the fuss. And Sesame. Life with Sesame is difficult enough now, Harry. I don't think I could bear to have her lionizing me as a hero, or playing the martyred wife, or—worst of all—going moral on me. Besides, I might lose out at Miller's—the publicity, you know. No, Harry. I'm sorry to drag you into this, but I can't lift this blond man . . ."

He was quite right about Sesame and Miller's. Looking at him there in the deep gray dusk, spare, precise, controlled, I heard myself saying: "O.K., Twiford, what do we do?"

"Besides," he said, as though he hadn't been listening, "they killed my dog." The words dropped heavily.

So that (I told James) was why we loaded them into the car. Twiford backed it into the dirt road. We washed his cane, threw the rock away, and buried Molly the Third by the creek. Then I went home and got the car out and made a record trip to the kennels and came back with Molly the Fourth. She was a shade lighter than Molly the Third, but Twiford said Sesame wouldn't notice—she wouldn't allow the dog in the house anyhow. He said this there on the road while he was snapping the leash on Molly the Fourth.

Then he said: "Thanks a lot, Harry. Good night." And I said: "Oh, that's all right, Twiford," and went on home and fiddled in the garden, although it was just about dark. And a little later he showed up at the house and asked Amy if he could use the phone . . .

James said: "Very interesting, Harry." That's all he ever said on the subject. So we went on home. As we passed the Warner house, we could hear Sesame in the living room lecturing Twiford about something, and Twiford—he's quite white now; must be near sixty, I guess—was looking up from his magazine and nodding vaguely.

Twiford's heart isn't too good, he told me the other evening. Some day, shortly after he dies, I'll take my revenge on Sesame. I'll tell her all about it.

THE END

SEND FOR THIS

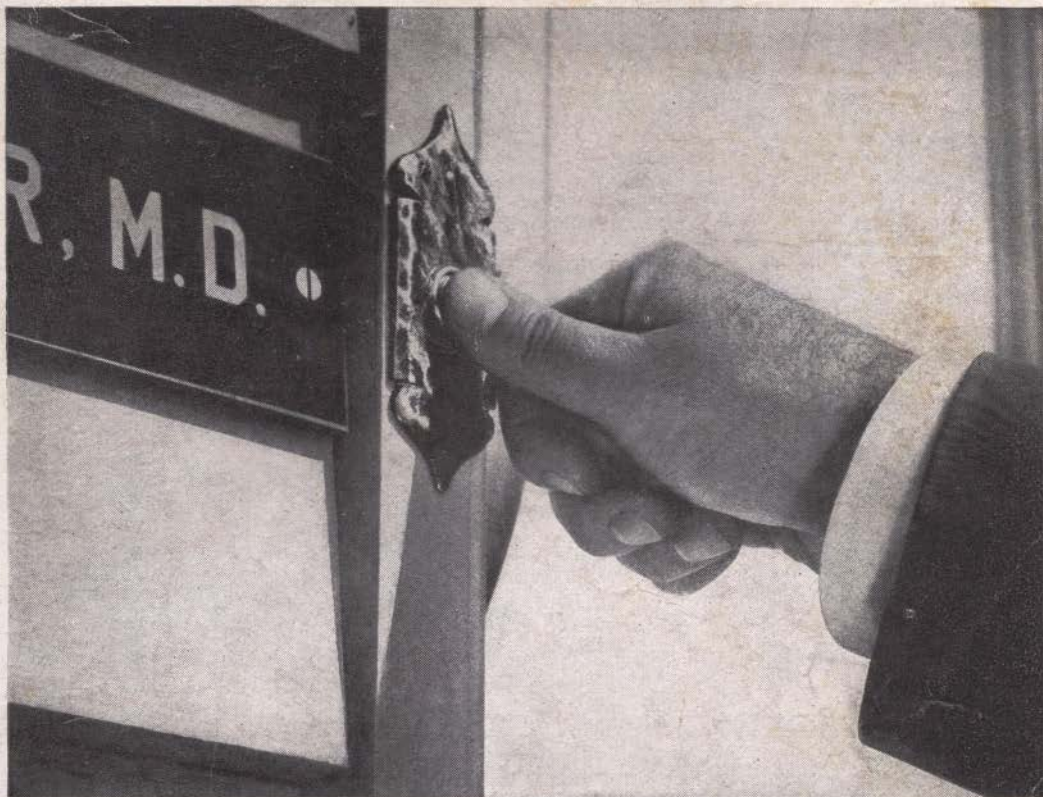
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1. Any sore that does not heal, particularly about the tongue, mouth or lips.
2. A painless lump or thickening, especially in the breast, lip or tongue.
3. Progressive change in the color or size of a wart, mole or birthmark.
4. Persistent indigestion.
5. Persistent hoarseness, unexplained cough, or difficulty in swallowing.
6. Bloody discharge from the nipple or irregular bleeding from any of the natural body openings.
7. Any change in the normal bowel habits.



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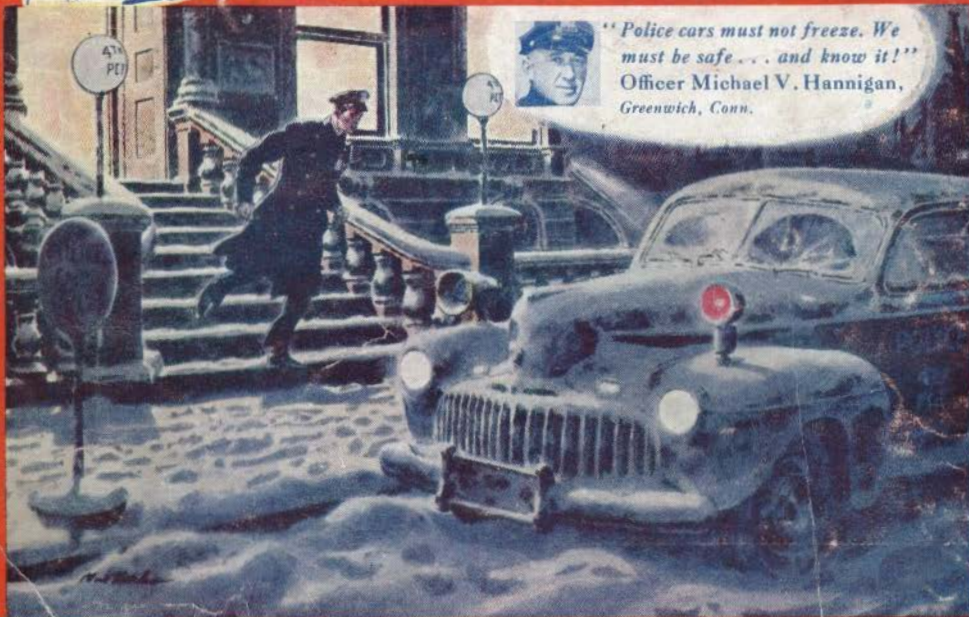
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