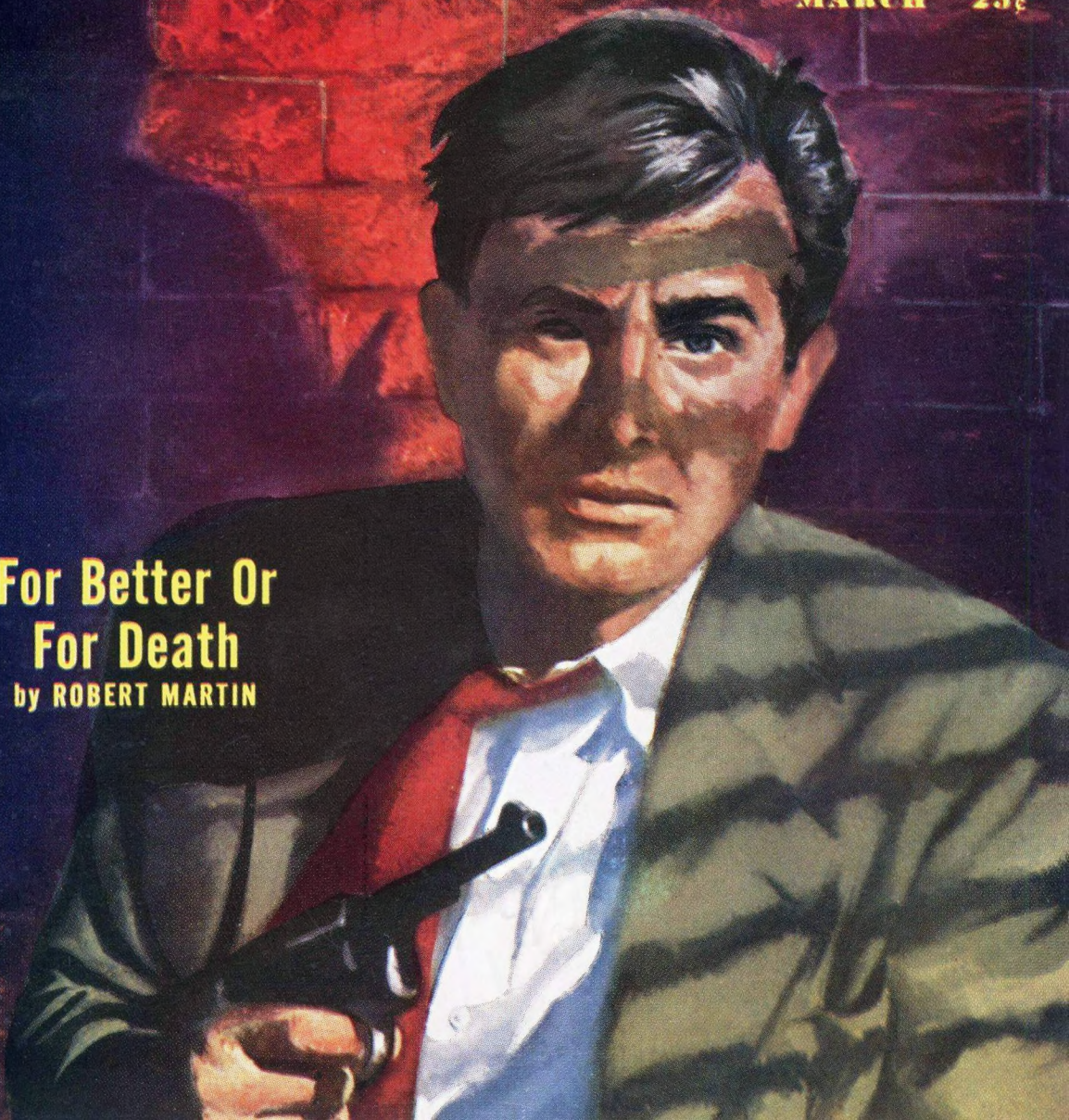


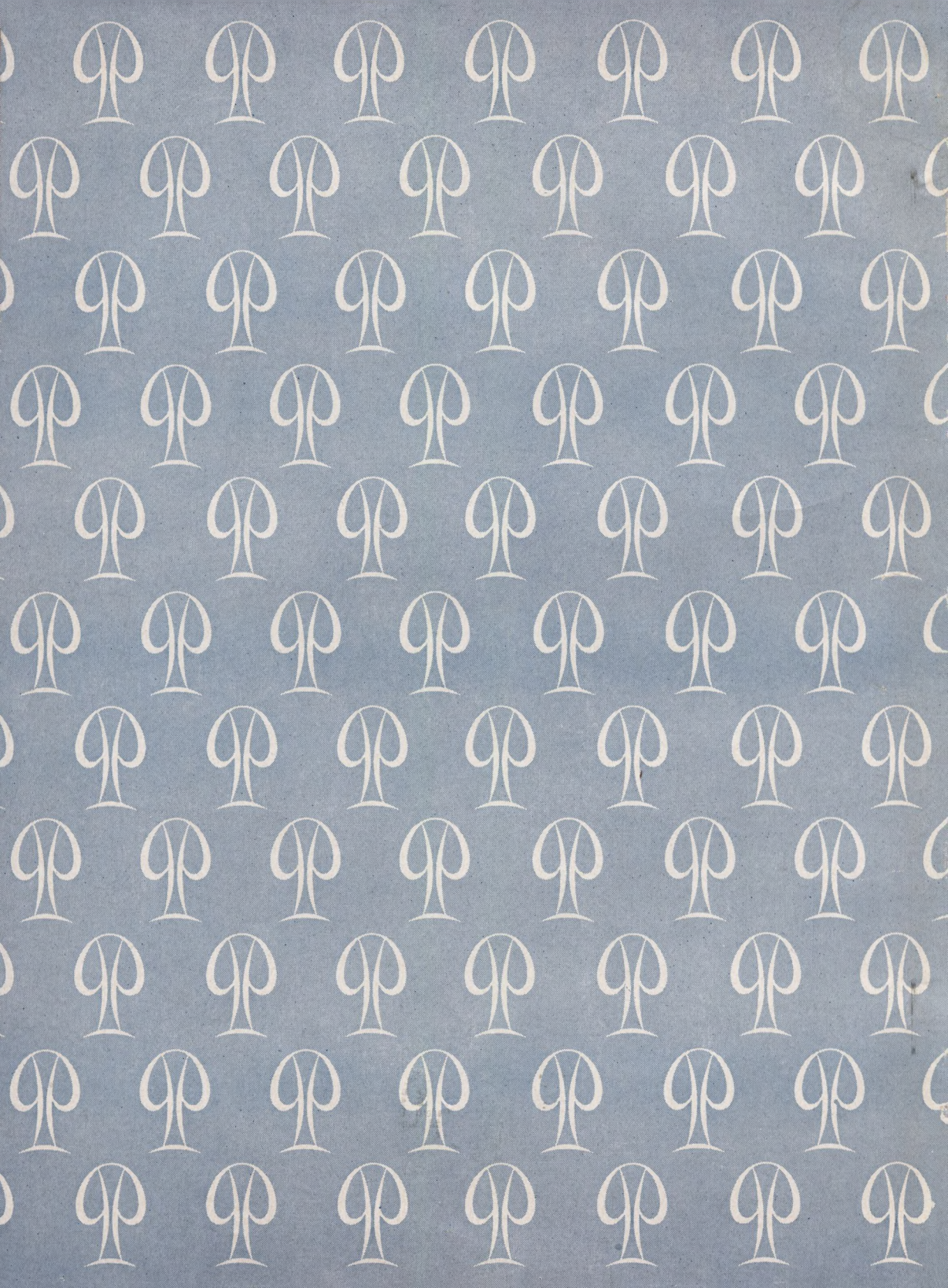
BLACK MASK

DETECTIVE

MARCH 25¢

**For Better Or
For Death**
by ROBERT MARTIN







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It has often been said that there is no better way of getting material than by dealing with people. Robert Martin is a firm advocate of this rule, as attested to by his job as daytime personnel executive of a manufacturing company in Ohio. The deftness and smoothness with which Martin has learned to handle human relations is ably demonstrated in "For Better or for Death," a story of crime as it chills the marriage vows of love and romance.

For Better or For Death

by ROBERT MARTIN

THE MAN'S muscles moved smoothly beneath his bronzed skin as he walked across the deck toward the woman. She was sitting in a canvas chair beneath the awning in the stern of the cabin cruiser. The sun was hot and yellow, the sky a deep blue, and a warm breeze blew her tawny hair back from her tanned face. Her brief white two-piece bathing suit accentuated the golden tan of her long slender body. She held a long-stemmed cocktail glass in one hand, a cigarette in the other. Her finger nails and her toe nails were lacquered a bright crimson.

She was close to forty years old, but an easy life and much money had helped her to preserve a convincing illusion of youth. Her chin was firm, her mouth full and red, and her body slim-waisted and shapely. On her left cheek, just below the eye, there was a

tiny attractive mole. Above the waistband of the white bathing shorts, on her right side, was the beginning of a thin white appendectomy scar.

She smiled as she watched the man approach, and her strong teeth gleamed white in the sun against her red lips. The man swayed easily on his bare feet as the boat rolled gently in the off-shore swell. From the stern the exhaust made a soft throaty purr above the blue-green water.

The man was tall and powerfully built, with broad thick shoulders and heavy arms. His only garment was a scanty pair of green bathing trunks. He was fairly young, perhaps ten or twelve years younger than the woman. He had a handsome, arrogant face, with rather thick lips and a jutting chin. His hair was thick and black, worn a little too long, and it curled over his small flat ears. Heavy black

eyebrows almost joined at the bridge of his short straight nose over deep-set blue eyes. He carried a silver cocktail shaker. It was covered with beads of moisture, and as he moved ice tinkled inside with a musical sound.

He stopped beside the woman's chair and smiled down at her. "Darling," he said, "I forgot the olives. Do you mind?" He had a deep rich voice.

"Terribly," she said. "How can one drink a martini without an olive?"

He turned and pretended to pour the contents of the shaker over the side.

"You dog!" she cried in mock terror, and she held up her glass. "Pour."

Grinning, he filled her glass, and his. The clear amber fluid glinted in the sun. He held up his glass. "To us."

"For me," she said, "six months of complete, heavenly happiness. How about you? Want to trade me in on a new model?"

His white teeth flashed. "I'll never trade you in—not with your money."

She said mockingly, "So at last you confess that you married me for my money."

"Of course, darling. Why else would I marry you? I can't think of another single reason."

Her long body stirred in the chair, and she gazed up at him through half-closed lashes. "Think hard, my dear," she said softly.

He touched her bare shoulder. "I can't think when I'm near you."

She laughed deep in her throat, and raised her glass. They drank, and the

boat purred lazily through the rolling water. It was a beautiful boat, all varnished mahogany and polished brass, with a glass-enclosed wheel house and a tiny cabin. The wheel was lashed, and the gleaming prow was headed due north across the lake.

The late afternoon sun slanted beneath the awning and cast a mellow glow over the woman's body. Standing beside her, the man's tall figure was etched in blood-red, and he seemed like a black giant standing on the deck with a vast horizon fire behind him. He gazed down at the reclining figure of the woman, and there was a spark in his blue eyes. He poised the cocktail shaker. "More?" he asked softly.

She drained her glass. The movement made a clean line of her throat, and her tawny hair fell back from her head and over her tanned shoulders. "Of course, darling," she said. "I can't fly on one wing."

He gazed out over the stern of the boat. The water was rolling in long swells, dark green now in the fading sun, and to the south it seemed almost limitless, with only the smudge of the mainland twelve miles away. Ahead of them, and slightly to port, maybe a half mile away, was a rising projection of rocks and stunted pines which he knew to be a small barren saucer of land called Snake Island on the Great Lakes charts. Its only purpose, as far as the charts were concerned, was to mark the beginning of the Canadian reefs.

He filled the woman's glass, and smiled down at her. "To get ashore from here," he said, "you'd have to

fly, darling, since you can't swim."

She pretended to pout. "Swimming isn't everything even if you were king of the water carnival at the yacht club."

He grinned. "Swimming is one thing I can do that you can't. In everything else I bow to your superiority—golf, tennis, dancing, bridge." He paused, and then asked curiously, "Why are you afraid of the water? You've lived around it all your life."

She shivered a little. "When I was twelve years old I almost drowned. I never forgot it. Out here, with you, I'm not afraid."

"Didn't you ever try to learn to swim?"

She smiled up at him. "Why should I? If I fell in, you'd save me."

"Sure. But maybe I wouldn't be around."

"I won't go near the water unless you're with me."

"Don't forget," he said, and he drained his glass with a quick backward toss of his dark head.

Across the thick undulating water Snake Island was receding slowly astern. The boat purred steadily along, its propellers barely churning the water. The man placed the cocktail shaker carefully on the deck and moved close to the woman.

She nodded at the small rocky island. "Let's anchor over there, and eat our lunch. I'll get it ready while you stir up some more martinis. Want to?"

"Sure," he said, staring down at her.

She smiled at him. "I've got a surprise for you."

"What is it?"

"You'll see. Happy?"

"Surely," he said. "And I have a surprise for you."

"Oh, good. Are you glad you married me?"

"Sure."

"You don't mind being my fourth husband? My *last* husband?"

He shook his head slowly. "No. And I *am* the last, darling." He didn't smile.

A small frown marred her smooth forehead. She said quietly, "What's wrong?"

He leaned down, and the muscles of his body rippled in the yellow sun. He placed his hands beneath her elbows, drew her to her feet, and pulled her to him roughly. Her drink spilled over his bare chest. She laughed a little breathlessly, and tried to pull away from him. "Be careful, darling. Wait. . . ."

He lifted her, and her glass fell to the deck with a tiny tinkling sound. She lay quietly in his arms, and gazed at him with eyes suddenly soft and half veiled. "Going to carry me across the threshold?" she murmured.

He gazed out over the water. Snake Island was a good quarter of a mile away, and no other boats were in sight. The lake was desolate, empty. The only sounds were the waves slapping against the hull, and the muffled coughing of the motor. Abruptly he swung around, and moved swiftly to the side of the boat.

She saw the look in his eyes then, and she cried in sudden panic, "Dirk! Put me down!"

He reached the low rail, and he flung her violently over the side. She screamed once, a piercing sound of terror. She struggled in the water, and for an instant her tawny hair floated on the surface. She tried to scream again, but it was only a liquid gurgle, and then she sank beneath the white-flecked greenish water.

The man turned and entered the wheel house. Savagely he released the wheel and opened the throttle. The boat swung in a wide arc, her motor roaring. Her graceful varnished prow lifted, and the water churned white in her wake. She sped southward toward the mainland, away from the nameless spot where a tawny-haired woman had sunk beneath the surface.

The man lifted a bottle of gin to his lips and drank deeply. Then he wiped his mouth on a bare arm and slid into the padded seat behind the wheel. He sat quietly, one hand resting lightly on the wheel, the other holding the bottle. The sun dipped low in the west, and its dying glow glimmered like blood on the water. A cold breeze sprang up, and swept through the open wheel house windows. The man shivered, reached behind him, picked up a dark blue gabardine shirt and put it on. It hung loosely, unbuttoned, over his wide shoulders, his brown naked chest exposed.

Presently it was dark. The man kept the boat's nose on a tiny beacon of light marking the harbor far across the dark water. From time to time he took a drink from the bottle. Once he lit a cigarette. He didn't look back.

MORTIMER WADE, insurance salesman, telephoned Dr. Clinton Colby from the pay booth in the bar of the Lake Shore Tavern. "Doc!" he cried excitedly, "we got a gal who's in pretty bad shape, and—"

"Where are you, Mort?" Colby asked sharply.

"At the Lake Shore Tavern, but the gal's in my boat. Lew Spang and Ralph Yundt are with her. We were trolling for pickerel out on the reefs, and we spotted her lying on the rocks of Snake Island. She's pretty far gone, and she—"

"All right," Colby cut in. "I'll be right there." He hung up, and turned to Celia Brooks, his pretty dark-haired nurse. "Call Lee Hoyt and tell him to send an ambulance to the docks to where Mort Wade keeps his boat." He jerked his head to the door leading to his waiting room. "How many out there yet?"

"Six."

"Tell 'em I'll try and get back."

"Right," Celia said. "Will you want me?"

"I don't know. Sounds like a near drowning. I'll call you from the hospital." He put on his coat, picked up his bag, and left by a rear door behind his drug room.

Mortimer Wade waved at Colby's coupe in the drive in front of the Lake Shore Tavern. Colby stopped, and Wade got in beside him. He was a short chubby man with sparse blond hair and a red face. "You got here fast, Doc," he said. "After we picked her up, we didn't know what to do. It was a little closer to the Canadian

side, but we didn't know if we could get a doctor right away. So I pushed that tub of mine wide open all the way from the reefs. Stop here, Doc."

Colby braked the coupe and followed Wade out on a cement pier to where a thirty-foot white-painted launch was tied up. Two men were standing in the stern. One of them held a bottle of beer in his hand. They both nodded gravely at Colby. He jumped down to the deck of the boat, said, "Hi, boys," and stooped to enter the small cabin. Mortimer Wade followed him.

A still form lay beneath a soiled blanket on the narrow leather seat extending along two sides of the cabin. Wade said apologetically in a hushed voice, "We didn't have anything but that old blanket as a cover. All she's got on is a skimpy bathing suit."

Colby nodded, and stared down at the face of a woman. Her wet tangled hair had dark streaks in it. She opened her eyes, and stared dully up at him. He placed his fingers on her throat, over the carotid artery. Her pulse was slow and feeble, and her skin was cold. Her lips were pale and withered-looking. She attempted a smile, but it was weak, and it died instantly. Colby pulled back the blanket, and his trained gaze flicked up and down her slender body. She was covered with mud and dried sand, but except for several scratches and bruises she appeared to be uninjured. On her abdomen he noted the thin scar resulting from the removal of the vermiform appendix. As he gently replaced the blanket, her eyes closed.

From out on the pier a siren wailed and died. Colby said to Mortimer Wade, "That's Lee Hoyt with the ambulance. We'll get her to the hospital. It looks like fatigue, hunger, maybe near-drowning. Do you know how long she was on Snake Island?"

Wade shook his head. "She didn't tell us anything. When we found her, we thought she was dead."

Lee Hoyt, mortician and owner of The Hoyt Funeral Home and Ambulance Service, poked his head into the cabin.

"Somebody drown?" he panted.

"That's just a five-dollar ambulance job," Colby said. "No funeral for you."

"Aw, Clint."

"Bring in your stretcher," Colby said. "I'll help carry her out."

Hoyt disappeared, and Colby said to Wade, "Any idea how she got on Snake Island?"

"No," Wade said, and he added wryly, "This is the first time I ever caught a blonde on a fishing trip."

Hoyt came in with a rolled-up stretcher and peered down at the pale face of the woman. "Hmmm," he said thoughtfully. "She looks pretty far gone to me, Clint."

"Shut up," Colby snapped. "Let's get her out of here."

At the Dixie Memorial Hospital Colby gave swift instructions. Warm bath, plenty of blankets, intravenous feeding, then warm liquids in small quantities—milk, clear soups. Watch her pulse.

As he left the hospital an hour later, he found Lee Hoyt waiting for him.

Hoyt said plaintively, "Who is she, Clint? How about my fee?"

"I don't know who she is, and she's in no condition to talk. And she hasn't any money unless it's in a secret pocket of her bathing suit."

"Now, look here, Clint, you ordered the ambulance."

"Send me a bill," Colby said. "If she can't pay, I'll turn it over to the county relief agency."

"And wait six months for my money?" Hoyt cried.

Colby grinned at him. "What's the matter, Lee? Business bad? Aren't there enough people dying?" He walked to his coupe.

Behind him he heard Hoyt's whining voice. "Aw, Clint. . . ."

AT ELEVEN o'clock that night Celia Brooks ushered the last of Colby's patients out of the office. Colby ran his fingers through his short black hair and lit a cigarette. "Another day," he said wearily.

"Go home and get some sleep," Celia said. "No babies due tonight for a change. This is your chance."

Colby smiled at her. His dark face looked drawn, and there was a faint black stubble on his lean cheeks. "All right. But first I'd better have a look at the mysterious lady from the lake." He stood up, took off his white jacket, put on his coat, and picked up his bag. "Lock up, will you?"

"Sure, Doc. See you in the morning."

The hospital was quiet, hushed, and the lights were dim. Miss Martha Jones, the head night nurse, smiled at Colby from her desk in the corridor as

he moved past. The door to the tawny-haired woman's room was ajar, and he stepped inside. A subdued light burning beside the bed revealed the tubes and other apparatus for the intravenous feeding, and the pale face of the woman on the bed. She lay still, her long slender form outlined beneath the blankets. Her yellow hair had been combed, and it lay smoothly on the pillow. She was breathing quietly and easily.

Gently Colby placed a hand on one limp wrist. Her pulse was steady and strong, and he smiled in satisfaction. She stirred, and opened her eyes. Colby smiled down at her.

She stared blankly, and then her smooth brows came together in a puzzled frown. "Who—who are you?" she asked in a low voice.

"I'm a doctor," he said quietly. "Colby is my name. You're all right now."

She turned her head on the pillow and gazed at the white walls of the room. "What is this place?" Her eyes were suddenly frightened, and her fingers plucked nervously at the blanket.

"This is a hospital."

Her eyes widened. "Hospital. But—but why?"

"You've had a bad time. Try and get some more sleep," Colby said, and he made a mental note to leave instructions for a sedative at the desk.

"Why am I here?" Her voice was stronger, insistent, and a little color was in her cheeks. "What's wrong with me?"

"Nothing that food and a few days rest won't cure," Colby said, smiling. "Try and sleep now, and I'll see you in

the morning. You can talk then."

"I want to talk now. How did I get here?"

"Some fisherman found you on an island in the lake. You were unconscious. They brought you in, and called me. You . . ."

"Island?" she broke in. "What island?"

"Snake Island, near the Canadian reefs."

She stared up at him, and her lips began to tremble. "I never heard of Snake Island. Doctor, I—I'm scared. . . ."

Suspicion plucked at Colby's brain, and he said sharply, "What's your name?"

She opened her mouth, as if to speak immediately, and then she stared at him in dumb bewilderment. "Name? I—I'm— My name is. . . ." Her voice faltered, and she gazed at Colby in sudden fear.

He patted her arm. "Never mind." And then his gaze fell on a gold wedding ring on her left hand, and he said casually, "Where's your husband?"

"Husband?" she whispered with a rising inflection. "Do I have a husband?"

Colby nodded at the ring.

She lifted her hand and stared silently at the thick band of gold on her finger. Her shocked gaze shifted to Colby's, and she whimpered, "Who am I? Why am I here? Tell me, tell me!" She closed her eyes, and tears ran down her cheeks.

Colby stepped to the door and beckoned to the nurse at the desk. She came over to him swiftly, and he said in a low voice, "Amnesia. Temporary, I

think. Induced by shock and fatigue. Give her bromides as needed. I'll see her in the morning."

The nurse nodded silently and entered the room.

Colby drove across the dark town to his big lonely house, the house in which he had been born, and which had been left to him by his parents. Mrs. Symes, who cleaned and did his laundry, had left one of her notes on the table in the big hallway.

Mr. Ed Malone called. He said he thinks Mrs. Malone will have her baby tonight. Maude Symes.

Colby sighed. According to his calculations, Mrs. Malone wasn't due until the following week. But Ed Malone should know, as this was their ninth child. He grinned to himself, climbed to his big high-ceilinged bedroom. He turned on a radio and undressed, wondering how much sleep he would get before Ed Malone called again. As he put on his pajamas, a late news broadcast droned from the local radio station. . . .

This afternoon three men fishing off the reefs discovered an unidentified woman clad only in a bathing suit lying close to the water on the shore of Snake Island. She was in an exhausted condition and unable to tell how she came to be there. She was brought to the Tenth Avenue dock in a boat owned by Mortimer Wade, and a local physician was called. The woman was taken to Dixie Memorial Hospital where she is reported to be recovering from fatigue and shock. She is described as blonde, about forty years old, and. . . .

Colby switched off the radio, turned

out the light, and got into bed. In five minutes he was asleep.

CHAPTER TWO

ED MALONE telephoned Colby at twenty minutes past four in the morning. "It's time, Doc."

"Okay, Ed. Can you get her to the hospital?"

"I always have before."

"I'll tell 'em you're coming."

"Thanks, Doc."

Colby hung up, and then picked up the phone again. He called the hospital, and spoke to Miss James. "Dr. Colby, Martha. I'm sending Mrs. Edward Malone out. Maternity."

"Right, Doctor. By the way, we moved your patient—the woman they found on Snake Island. We had her in a front room, you know, number 59. She said the traffic noise bothered her. So we moved her back to the new south wing, room 112."

"Okay," Colby said.

"Old Mrs. Henderson is room 59 now," the nurse went on. "Dr. Conner sent her out shortly after midnight. Her condition is very bad, and she's scheduled for surgery at seven o'clock. Dr. Conner has ordered morphine whenever she wants it."

"I know," Colby said. "I'm assisting Dr. Conner at seven o'clock but I'm afraid there isn't much we can do for the poor old lady. But it's the only chance she has, and a slim one at that. After all, she's ninety-two years old. But we can try. Tell Maternity to call me when Mrs. Malone is ready."

Miss James sighed. "Yes, Doctor."

"What's the matter, James? Tired?"

"Kind of. It's this night shift, I guess. I can't seem to sleep well in the daylight."

"You'll get used to it," Colby assured her. "Chin up." He hung up, went down to his kitchen, and made a pot of coffee. He had faith in Ed Malone's experienced timing, and he was sure that Maternity would call him shortly. He had time for two cups of coffee and a cigarette before his phone rang once more.

"Mrs. Malone is ready, Doctor," a crisp female voice told him.

"I'm on my way. Take her to Delivery." He gulped the rest of his coffee, picked up his bag, and went out to his car.

The summer dawn was merging into sunrise when he parked his coupe in the space reserved for him behind the hospital. He entered a door beside the emergency ambulance ramp, went up a short flight of cement steps, and emerged into the main corridor of the sprawling one story building. He grinned at Martha James as he passed her desk.

She yawned, and said, "A quiet night, Doctor—thank goodness."

Ed Malone sat in the waiting room, a thick black cigar between his teeth. He was a tall lean man dressed in a flannel shirt and blue jeans. "Hi, Doc."

"Hello, Ed. Take it easy." Colby swung into the doctor's dressing room, swiftly changed to hospital whites, scrubbed his hands, and stepped across the corridor into the clear white light of the delivery room. A dark-eyed nurse gazed at him over her mask, and Colby

held out his hands for the rubber surgeon's gloves. . . .

Twenty minutes later Colby stepped once more into the corridor. Ed Malone was waiting for him. Colby touched the man's arm. "Relax, Ed. Everything's fine."

"The Missus all right?" Malone asked anxiously.

"Sure. You've got another boy."

Malone's lean face cracked into a broad happy smile. "That makes four girls and five boys, Doc. I'll have me a family yet."

"You will, at that," Colby said, grinning. "You can see him pretty soon and your wife, too."

Silently Malone grasped Colby's hand, and the doctor saw the relief, and the happiness, and the admiration in the man's eyes. He knew that look. It was one of the intangible things in a doctor's life which partly compensated for the inevitable times when all his skill and training and knowledge were not enough to prevent tragedy and heart-break. He turned away from Malone, slightly embarrassed, and moved quickly into the dressing room.

The morning sun was slanting brightly through the window at the end of the long corridor as Colby stood by the desk and left instructions for the post natal care of Mrs. Malone. Miss James had gone off duty, and in her place was Mrs. Ethel Tucker. She was middle-aged, plump, pleasant, gray-haired, and efficient. She smiled at Colby. "You look tired, Doctor."

"I had a full four hours' sleep last night," he said, grinning. "I think I'll go back and have a look at the woman

they found on Snake Island yesterday."

"That's quite a mystery, isn't it? She's been moved to 112, you know."

"Yes, I know. Martha James told me." He started to move away.

A brisk red-haired nurse moved up swiftly on noiseless rubber soles. She smiled at Colby and Mrs. Tucker. "Will you send one of the aides to 59?" she asked the latter. "I've got to prepare Mrs. Henderson for surgery."

Mrs. Tucker nodded, and pressed a button on her desk. The red-haired nurse said, "Thanks, Tucker," and moved down the corridor to room 59.

Colby moved away. Behind him a scream shattered the early morning quiet. It started on a low note, and climbed swiftly to a shriek. He swung around, stared dumbly at Mrs. Tucker, and then moved swiftly toward room 59. All along the corridor doors were opening, and heads popping out. Several white-clad nurses ran in from other wings and stood staring. The scream came again. Colby pushed open the door of room 59.

The red-headed nurse stood pressed against the far wall. Her hands were behind her, and her eyes were glazed with shock. She was staring at what lay on the bed. Colby's quick glance followed her stare.

Old Mrs. Henderson, her gray hair spread over the pillow, lay on her side beneath the white sheet, her face turned away from the door. The knife had gone in between the old lady's thin shoulders, pinning the sheet like a shroud to her frail body. There wasn't much blood—just a small damp circle of red around the firmly buried blade.

Colby stepped quickly to the bed. The red-headed nurse began to move slowly around the wall, her gaze riveted on the dead woman.

"Close the door," Colby snapped at her.

"Yes, Doctor." The girl moved to the door and closed it.

Immediately someone started knocking. "Dr. Colby." The voice of Mrs. Tucker was sharp. "What's wrong?"

"Don't let anyone in," Colby said to the red-head. His fingers closed over the old lady's thin, bony wrist. *No pulse, of course, you fool. Stop obeying reflexes. Eyes open and glazed, pupils a little off center. Rigor mortis already in progress. Died almost instantly. Maybe an hour, maybe three hours ago. Knife entered the cardiac region. Murder. . . .*

He breathed a long sigh, straightened up, turned to the red-head, and said quietly, "You okay?"

"Yes, Doctor. But—"

"Out," he said. "Outside." He opened the door, pushed her gently into the corridor, followed her, closed the door. He turned to face a small sea of silent questioning faces.

Mrs. Tucker said quietly, "What's wrong, Doctor?"

"Lock this door," he said.

She moved quickly to her desk, returned with a ring of keys, and locked the door. Then Colby took her arm. "Come on, Tucker. To the office." He turned to the persons gathered in the corridor. "All right," he said, smiling. "Nurses back to stations, patients back to bed."

Slowly the crowd dispersed. They all

knew Dr. Clinton Colby, physician and surgeon, county coroner, and chief of staff of the Dixie Memorial Hospital.

In the glass-doored hospital office, Colby said to Mrs. Tucker, "Mrs. Henderson's suffering is over. Sometime during the night she was stabbed to death as she slept. Don't ask me who or why. Right now I've got to notify the police." He picked up a phone, and glanced at a clock on the wall. Ten minutes until six on a bright summer morning.

He reached Chief of Police Chad Beckwith at his home. Beckwith's voice was thick with sleep. "Dammit, Clint."

"Murder, Chad. Murder in the hospital. Get out here." Colby hung up, and gazed bleakly at Mrs. Tucker. "Call Dr. Conner. Mrs. Henderson was his patient. We won't operate at seven."

He went down to the hospital kitchen, drank two cups of black coffee, and smoked a cigarette. . . .

CHIEF OF POLICE Chad Beckwith chewed stubbornly on an unlit cigar and glared at Colby across the desk in the hospital office. All the routine of the law had been finished. The nurses and other hospital personnel had been questioned, including head night nurse Martha James, who had been aroused from her morning slumber. She had not noticed anything unusual in connection with Mrs. Henderson in room 59, nor had any of the other night employees. One frail old lady, mortally ill, had been murdered. Her body was now in the Lee Hoyt Funeral Home being prepared for burial.

The immediate cause of her death

had been obvious, and Colby, as county coroner, had waived his authority to do an autopsy. No persons but the nurses on duty had entered Mrs. Henderson's room, and as murder suspects Beckwith had dismissed them with an impatient shrug. "Somebody from the outside sneaked in here," he declared. "But who in hell would want to murder old lady Henderson?"

Colby, suddenly remembering, said quietly, "Maybe the killer wasn't after Mrs. Henderson. Maybe he was after some one else." He stood up and moved to the door. "Come on, Chad."

Beckwith followed him to the new south wing, and Colby stopped before room 112. He rapped once, waited a few seconds, and then opened the door. The bed was empty, and the room was empty. Colby stepped quickly to the window. The screen had been removed, and it lay on the grass five feet below. He turned, and said to Beckwith, "She's skipped."

Beckwith eyed him narrowly. "Who?"

"That woman Mort Wade brought in from Snake Island yesterday. She was in room 59 at first. Last night they moved her back here, and put Mrs. Henderson in 59." He moved to the dresser, pulled out all the drawers. Empty. The closet, too. Then he glanced at the bed. He saw that a light blue blanket, standard equipment in all rooms of the hospital, was missing. "All she had on was a bathing suit," he told Beckwith. "She left here in a bathing suit and blanket and maybe a hospital gown."

Beckwith said, "I heard on the radio last night that she couldn't talk. Don't

you fellows here know who she is?"

Colby shook his head. "She couldn't remember. Amnesia."

Beckwith said harshly, "Well, this is the way I figure it, and it's a hell of a mess. Poor Mrs. Henderson gets stabbed in the back. Only the killer didn't want to kill Mrs. Henderson. He wanted to kill this dame they found on Snake Island. Only we don't know who she is. And now she's gone." He gazed at the ceiling, and flung out his arms in a hopeless gesture. "I wish to hell I'd stayed on the farm, like my poor old pappy wanted me to."

Colby said, "I'm wondering how the killer knew that the Snake Island woman was first put in room 59? He'd have to know exactly where to go, sneaking in unobserved, as he apparently did."

Beckwith fixed Colby with a beady eye and applied a match to his cigar. "That's a good question, Clint. A very good question. And I'll answer it." He paused, chewed on his cigar, and added darkly, "An inside job. Somebody in this hospital is a murderer."

Colby shook his head. "I think you're 'way off the track, Chad."

"Like hell I am," Beckwith said bluntly. "It has to be that way. Somebody in the hospital had a reason to kill that woman they found out in the lake. They knew that she was put in room 59, but they didn't know that she was later moved. They wait their chance, sneak into 59. It's dark, and as far as they know the woman in the bed is still the Snake Island dame. So they stick her with a knife, and beat it. How does that sound?"

"I don't know," Colby said. "All I know is that I've got sick people to see this morning." He moved to the door. "You'd better alert your boys, and the sheriff's department, to be on the lookout for my missing patient."

"She won't get far," Beckwith grunted. "Not dressed in a bathing suit and a blanket. We'll pick her up."

"You'd better and pronto," Colby said. "The killer may have found out by this time that he knifed the wrong person, and make another try at it."

Beckwith smacked a fist into his palm. "By gum, that's right! I gotta get to a phone." His big body shouldered past Colby into the corridor. Trailing cigar smoke, he moved toward a phone booth.

Colby stopped at the desk in the main corridor, and said to Mrs. Tucker, "Our Snake Island lady has skipped. Chief Beckwith is calling the station. They may pick her up."

Mrs. Tucker looked horrified. "But she didn't have any clothes!"

"She took her bathing suit, and a hospital gown."

"But those gowns—they're so short!"

"She also took a blanket."

"W-what's going on, Doctor? Mrs. Henderson dead—murdered in her bed. Right here in the hospital. And now this. I—I feel sort of responsible."

"It's not your fault, Tucker," Colby said. "Don't worry about it." He picked up his bag and went out.

He made house calls until noon. As he was having lunch in the Buckeye Bar and Grille, he listened to the twelve o'clock news broadcast from the local station. The announcer devoted much

time to the murder of Mrs. Henderson, and stated that Chief of Police Beckwith, and County Coroner Dr. Clinton Colby, were conducting a thorough investigation of the crime which had shocked the entire county. He then reported the disappearance of the strange blonde woman found on Snake Island, and requested his listeners to report to the police immediately if they learned anything of her whereabouts.

Colby finished his lunch, and drove across town to his office. As he got out of his car, a man moved up and spoke to him. "Dr. Colby?" He had a deep rich voice.

Colby nodded. The man was young, between twenty-five and thirty, and was dressed in gray flannel slacks and gray tweed jacket. A pale blue gabardine shirt was unbuttoned at the throat. He was tall and powerfully built, with a darkly handsome face. His rather long hair was thick and black, curling a little over his small flat ears. Heavy black brows almost joined at the bridge of his short nose. "Can I speak with you for a few minutes?" he asked.

"Go ahead," Colby said.

THE MAN shot a quick glance over his shoulder, and then began to speak swiftly. "I don't want to impose on your time, Doctor, and this will take only a few minutes. My name is Andrew Beck, and I live in Cleveland. Three days ago my sister, Mrs. Dirk Barry, left the dock of her home in a cabin cruiser. She hasn't returned. Her maid telephoned me when she didn't return for dinner. I chartered a boat and searched the lake in the immediate area, but I

didn't see any sign of her. I notified the police, and the Coast Guard.

"Late last night I happened to hear a broadcast from the station in this town telling of an unidentified woman found on Snake Island. The description answers that of my sister. I immediately drove down here, and went to the hospital. The nurse on duty told me that the woman had disappeared from her room last night, and suggested that I see you, since you had treated my sister—I mean, the woman whom I'm sure is my sister. You had just left the hospital when I arrived, and I've been trying to locate you ever since. Did she tell you what had happened to her?"

Colby shook his head. "No. She was suffering from shock and exhaustion, and she couldn't remember her name."

"Didn't she tell you *anything*?" There was a desperate glint in the man's eyes.

Colby shook his head again. "Nothing. She didn't even remember that she was married. By the way, where is her husband? Isn't he interested in finding her, too?"

"Dirk Barry was in Nevada. I telephoned him yesterday, and he's due to arrive at the Cleveland airport sometime this afternoon. Don't you have any idea as to why she ran away from the hospital?"

"No."

Andrew Beck's eyes narrowed, and he said softly, "Is that the truth, Doctor?"

"Of course," Colby snapped.

"What time did she leave the hospital?"

"I don't know. She was gone when I entered her room at seven this morning."

There was sweat on Andrew Beck's tanned forehead. He lit a cigarette with a hand that trembled a little. "Is that all?" he asked. "Is that all you have to tell me?"

"That's all," Colby said shortly. And then he saw the stricken look in Beck's eyes, and he added in a softer voice. "Maybe your sister—if this woman is your sister—went home. Where does she live?"

"At Erie Cliffs in the summer, Cleveland in the winter. Would—would you describe this woman to me?"

"She was about forty years old," Colby said. "Blonde hair, with dark streaks in it. About five foot four, slender. Mole on her cheek, an appendectomy scar, and—"

"What did she tell you?" Beck blurted.

"Nothing," Colby said patiently. "The police are looking for her now. If you'll give me your address, I'll—"

"Never mind." Beck said abruptly. "I'm afraid it wasn't my sister. She didn't have a mole on her cheek, and she never had an appendicitis operation. Thanks anyhow, Doctor." He moved swiftly away.

Colby watched him cross the street and get into a pale blue convertible. The license number was YT-482-S. The convertible drove away, and Colby entered his office. Celia Brooks was not there, and he decided that she was still at lunch. The phone on his desk jangled, and he picked it up. "Dr. Colby."

A woman's voice said, "Doctor, this is Martha James. I've been trying to reach you all morning. Something has

been worrying me about last night. I should have told you, or Chief Beckwith, before now, but it didn't occur to me. I haven't been sleeping well lately—I guess I told you—and I forget things. I wanted to tell you that a man telephoned the hospital late last night and said he understood that we had an unidentified woman who had been found on an island in the lake. He said he was calling from Cleveland, that his sister was missing, and that the description answered her description. He was driving down here, he said, and he asked for her room number. I told him she was in room 59. Of course, we moved her later, but I thought you would want to know, and maybe talk to the man when he arrives since you told me that the woman was an amnesia case."

"Thanks," Colby said. "Anything else? Did you see the woman last night?"

"Just once, Doctor. She wasn't in my section, but I found her wandering about the corridors. She borrowed fifty cents from me. She said she wanted to make a telephone call."

"Did she?"

"Yes. I watched her. She went into one of the pay booths, and then came out and returned to her room. I'm sorry I forgot to tell you. It occurred to me later that if she knew somebody to telephone, she must have remembered *something*, and. . ."

"Thanks for calling me," Colby said. "I'll see you later." He hung up, and glanced at the clock on his desk. One o'clock. Time for Celia to be back, and time for him to be seeing his afternoon

office patients. He could hear them talking and moving about in his waiting room. The back door slammed, and Celia Brooks poked her head into his office. "Hi, Clint. Be ready in a minute." The door closed, and he knew that she was changing into her white uniform.

He lit a cigarette, and gazed thoughtfully at the far wall. Abruptly he picked up the phone and called the police department. When the desk man answered, Colby said, "Chief Beckwith, please. Hurry."

"Sorry. The chief isn't here."

"Captain Franz, then."

"Franz is gone, too."

"Who's there?" Colby asked impatiently.

"Just me, mister. Everybody's out looking for that dame who skipped the hospital last night in a bathing suit. Nice work, huh? But me, I gotta stay on the desk."

"Doctor Colby speaking. Put this on the radio. Pick up a man in a new blue convertible, license number YT-482-S. He just left my office, heading west."

"What's the charge, Doc?"

"Never mind," Colby snapped. "Pick him up."

"I'll send it out, Doc. You're the county coroner. But the boys are scattered all over hell, and—"

Colby slammed up the phone and drummed on the desk top. Celia Brooks came out of the drug room looking pretty and fresh in a crisp white uniform. She nodded at the door leading to the waiting room. "Shall I start sending 'em in?"

"I should have hung on to him when I had him," Colby muttered.

"What?"

Colby looked up at her. "Never mind. Anybody very sick out there?"

"I don't think so. I just peeked out. It's the usual for Tuesday afternoon."

Colby stood up and moved to the rear door beyond his drug room. "Tell 'em I've been called out on an emergency. I'll be back as soon as I can. If you get a really serious case, call Dr. Conner."

Celia Brooks gazed at him thoughtfully. "Would it be asking too much for you to tell your loyal colleague and assistant where you are going?"

"Haven't time," Colby said. "Hold the fort." He went out quickly, got into his coupe, and headed west, in the direction the blue convertible had taken.

CHAPTER THREE

TWELVE BLOCKS away at the edge of town, on the lake road, Colby spotted a blue convertible stopped at a traffic light ahead of him. The license was YT-482-S. The light went green, and the convertible moved ahead. Colby stayed a half block behind. Outside the city limits, the convertible picked up speed, and Colby was forced to prod his coupe to seventy miles an hour in order to keep in sight. Four miles from town it swung off the highway and stopped before a tourist cabin at the Melody Motel. The ten neat white cabins at the Melody bore individual names. The name of the cabin before which the convertible stopped was Waltz Time.

Colby swung his coupe across the road onto the cement apron of a gasoline station and stopped beside the

pumps. He got out, stood beside the car, and peered through the windows at the Motel. A kid with a sun-burned face and a crew haircut left a grease rack and came up wiping his hands on his blue jeans. "Hi, Doctor Colby."

"Hello, Lester," Colby said, without looking at him. "Fill it up."

Across the road a girl ran out of the Waltz Time cabin. She was small and slender, with hair so blonde that it looked almost white in the sun. She was wearing a dark brown silk blouse, and a tan corduroy skirt. The man who had called himself Andrew Beck got out of the convertible and held out his arms. The girl ran into his arms for a kiss. Presently they parted and walked hand in hand toward the cabin.

The gas station kid said, "She took five and a half gallons," and he began to vigorously wipe the windshield.

"Can I use the phone, Lester?"

"Sure, Doc."

Colby went inside the station and called the home of Nurse Martha James. "Now, listen, Martha. Do what I tell you. Call the Melody Motel on the lake road and ask for Mr. Beck, in the Waltz Time cabin. When he answers, listen very carefully, and try hard to remember if you've heard his voice before."

"I—I don't understand, Doctor."

"Never mind. Just do as I tell you."

"All right, but what will I say to him?"

"Anything. Ask him the time of day, ask him how he likes the weather, or if he's been reading any good books lately. Just get him to say something and *listen*."

She laughed a little uncertainly. "It sound crazy, but if you say so . . ."

"As soon as you talk to him, call me at the White Flash Gas Station across the road from the Melody Motel. I'll be parked by the phone."

"All right, Doctor."

While Colby waited, he kept his gaze on the cabin across the road. The kid came in and said, "That'll be a dollar thirty-two, Doc. She didn't need any oil."

Colby paid him, and resumed his watch. The kid went back to the grease rack. Presently a stout woman in a flowered house dress left a small white building labeled *Office—Information* and walked to the door of the Waltz Time and knocked vigorously. Andrew Beck opened the door, and the stout woman spoke briefly to him, and pointed toward the office building. Beck nodded, and disappeared. The stout woman walked slowly back to the office. Beck appeared in the doorway again. The blonde stood beside him. He pushed her gently back into the cabin, walked swiftly to the office building, and entered.

Colby waited and watched.

In exactly two minutes Andrew Beck burst out of the office building, ran across the grass to the Waltz Time, and went inside.

The telephone in the gas station rang shrilly, and Colby picked it up. "Yes, Martha?"

"Doctor—that voice. I knew it right away."

"Who? Quick."

"It was the man who called me at the hospital last night."

"About the woman found on Snake Island?"

"Yes. The same voice. Deep, and low—the same man, the one I told the room number to. When I recognized his voice, I asked him if he had called the hospital last night. He said, 'You've got the wrong number', and he banged up the receiver."

"Okay," Colby said. "Thanks, Martha. I'll explain all this later." He moved swiftly out to the kid at the grease rack. With his gaze on the cabin across the road, he said, "Lester, I need a gun. Got one?"

The kid turned to look at him with big eyes. "A gun, Doc?"

"Yes. Any kind of a gun."

The kid shook his head. "Gee, I'm sorry, Doc. Ain't no gun here. I got me a .22 rifle at home."

"Never mind." Colby got behind the wheel of his coupe.

The man called Andrew Beck came out of the cabin carrying two traveling bags. The blonde girl followed him. Beck threw the bags into the rear of the convertible, and got behind the wheel. The girl climbed in beside him, and the car swung out onto the road with a shrill whine of gears. Colby started his coupe, circled the gas pumps, and followed. But already the convertible was far down the road. Traffic was thin, and by holding his coupe close to seventy he managed to keep the blue car in sight. Then the road began to curve, winding upward through rolling hills, and he was forced to slow down. He lost sight of the convertible, but still he drove on.

Presently the road straightened once

more and slanted upward to the summer residential section on the lake shore known as Erie Cliffs. Far ahead, close to the top of the slope overlooking the lake, Colby caught a bright glimpse of blue in the sunlight. He prodded his coupe, and drove swiftly through a park-like area, with green lawns and pine trees all around him. The road began to curve again, gentle curves, with lanes leading off to sprawling summer homes above the beach. Colby saw bright awnings, tiled terraces, the white nets of tennis courts, and gay umbrellas over outdoor tables where people could sit and drink pre-dinner cocktails in the cool breeze from the lake.

He saw no more of the blue coupe, and he drove slowly, peering up the lanes leading from the road. Out beyond the pines was the blue of the lake, rolling and glinting in the afternoon sun. Narrow lanes, wide black road, green lawns, station wagons. No blue convertible. He rounded a gentle curve, and came to a section where no houses were visible. Just green grass and pine trees. Then he saw an open iron gate at the end of a drive curving back through the pines. He stopped, and peered up the drive. The rear of a car protruded from behind a hedge. A blue car, a convertible. License number YT-482-S. He pulled the coupe to the side of the road, got out and moved to the gate.

A SMALL BRONZE plaque was set into the grill work. *DREAM-TRUE COVE, Mr. and Mrs. Dirk Barry.* Colby walked slowly past the gate and up the drive. Chipmunks chirped and

scurried in the grass, and birds sang in the branches above him. The trees thinned out, and he saw the blue of lake and sky. Then the roof of a house, shining in the sun, and a wide lawn sloping down to a beach. The drive curved down to a three-car garage, and where it curved the blue convertible was parked behind a hedge, out of sight from the house.

Colby stepped to the grass, to deaden his footsteps, and moved swiftly to the car. It was empty, the door on the driver's side standing open. On the rear seat were two leather traveling bags. On the front seat was a woman's handkerchief, tiny and crumpled. Beside it was a booklet of matches. Red, with silver embossed words. *The Last Chance Casino, Las Vegas.* Colby stood up straight and gazed toward the big house. No movement, no sign of inhabitants. A peaceful summer afternoon quiet pervaded the scene. Colby moved along the drive, following the hedge. It was then that he discovered that he was carrying his medical bag, and he smiled faintly. The habit was strong. He didn't remember taking it from his coupe.

The hedge ended at the garage, and he paused and looked around. A shiny black sedan was in one of the stalls of the garage. Beyond the garage the lawn rolled away to the white beach. The blue water slapped lazily at the sand. He saw a wide terrace, gleaming French windows, a flower garden, a sun dial. Crickets droned from the garden. There was no other sound. Colby hesitated. Then he moved quickly and silently across the stone terrace

and turned the latch of one of the French doors. The door opened and he stepped cautiously inside.

Cool, dusky silence. A thick sand-colored rug, gleaming mahogany tables and a huge mirror over a fireplace containing the black burned ember of a log decorated the room. A faint smell of wood smoke hovered in the air. On a low glass table beside a tomato-red divan was an ash tray filled with cigarette stubs stained with lipstick. He moved slowly across the big room. An archway opened into another room, smaller, with bare gleaming floors partially covered by shaggy white rugs. A long wide window overlooked the lake. On a chair lay a pale blue blanket. Colby stood frozen and stared at the blanket. Then he picked it up. Sewed to one hem was a small linen label printed in waterproof ink. *The Dixie Memorial Hospital*. He replaced the blanket on the chair.

At the far end of the room a silent shadowy movement caught his eye. A thin wavering column of smoke trailing upward into the still air. A cigarette, burning itself out on the edge of a glass ash tray. He moved slowly over to it, all his senses alert. The cigarette was almost burned out, but he saw the traces of lipstick on the tip.

Behind him a woman laughed softly, and a voice said, "Dr. Colby—how nice."

He turned swiftly.

She appeared to have stepped inside from a small porch overlooking the lake. The sun behind her shone on her tawny hair, and made dancing lights in her gray eyes. She wore the brief

green bathing suit, and in one hand she held a delicately flared brandy glass. The sun glinted on the contents of the glass, and it sparkled like liquid gold. Colby's gaze flicked over the tall slender form, and he saw the beginning of the appendectomy scar above the waist band of the green bathing shorts. He said, "So you remember me?"

"Of course, Doctor. I remember everything."

"You couldn't remember at the hospital last night."

She gave him a slow smile. "Of course not, Doctor. It was easier to pretend to forget, than to try and explain."

"Why did you sneak out of the hospital?"

"I was bored and I felt fine." She smiled brightly. "Thanks to your excellent care. So I borrowed some money from that night nurse and telephoned my maid to come after me. I intended to send the hospital a check—and you, too."

"Where's your maid now?"

"Gone. This is her day off."

"And you are Mrs. Dirk Barry? And this is your home?"

She nodded, and brushed a lock of yellow hair back from her cheek. "My summer home—I mean, *our* summer home. Mr. and Mrs. Dirk Barry." She took a swallow from her glass, and added bitterly. "Dream-True Cove." Suddenly she smiled, and with a faint motion of her hand she indicated her bathing suit. "I'm sorry I'm not more presentable, Doctor, but my friends tell me that I look nice in bathing togs."

"I talked to your brother a while ago," Colby said, ignoring her remark. "He

was in town trying to find you."

She stopped smiling. "I don't have a brother," she said coldly.

Colby said, "He told me that his name was Andrew Beck, and that your husband was in Nevada. He said you left in a motor cruiser three days ago, and didn't come back. He heard on the radio about the fishermen finding you on Snake Island, and he came to the hospital to see if you were his sister. But you had skipped."

Her body stiffened. "What did he look like—this man who said he was my brother?"

"Young, tanned, heavy black brows, long black hair. Deep voice, blue eyes."

She shot a frightened glance out of the wide window. "Where—where did he go? Where is he now?"

Colby said evenly. "I followed him here. His car is parked in the drive, down near the gate."

Her face was pale beneath the tan. "Here?" Her voice was a hoarse whisper. She began to tremble, and a little of the brandy spilled from her glass.

"Didn't you see him?" Colby asked softly.

She shook her head, and he saw the naked fear in her eyes. She whispered, "He came back here, after. . . .?"

Colby thought, *Call Chad Beck with, or the sheriff, somebody. Get the law up here. Something screwy is going on, and I've got patients waiting in my office. But where is the guy who called himself Andrew Beck? And the blonde babe with him? What happened to them?* He said to the woman, "Where's a telephone?"

"W-what?"

"Telephone," Colby snapped.

She pointed across the room. "In the hall, beside the stairs."

Colby was about to question her, and then he thought, *To hell with it. The law first.* He turned and moved swiftly away. She placed her glass on a low table and followed close behind him, moving silently over the rug in her bare feet. They came to a small hall at the foot of a stairs, and Colby saw a telephone on a small lacquered table. It was dusky here, and the sun glowed redly through stained glass windows high in the wall. Colby reached for the telephone. And then he stood rigidly.

From the partly opened door of a closet across the narrow hall there protruded a man's foot and leg. The woman behind him saw it too, and he heard her sudden intake of breath. He crossed the hall, jerked the closet door wide open. Coats and other garments hung from hangers, but the lower half of a man's body was visible. One leg was stretched out, the other bent beneath it. Gray flannel slacks, blue shirt, tweed jacket. Colby pushed back the hanging garments. The dull filtered light from the stained windows fell on the open glazed eyes of the man who had called himself Andrew Beck. There was a small circle of blood on the front of his blue shirt.

CHAPTER FOUR

BEHIND HIM Colby heard a low moaning sound. He turned. The woman in the green bathing suit stood shaking, her eyes big and staring. Abruptly she turned, and began to run. Colby leaped after her, caught her by one

wrist. She struggled silently, but he pulled her to him. Her body went limp against him, and he said harshly, his lips against her ear, "Who is he?"

"My husband," she whimpered. "Dirk, my husband. . . ."

He led her into the brightness of the big sun-filled room and pushed her gently into a chair. She sat huddled, her long bare legs drawn up, her face in her hands. The tawny hair fell in profusion over her smooth bare shoulders.

He said, "I've got to call the police. Do you want to tell me anything first?"

She said in a muffled voice, "He tried to kill me—to drown me. Dirk did. He thought I couldn't swim, and he threw me out of the boat. But—but I had learned how to swim, while he was away in Las Vegas. I—I wanted to surprise him, to please him. I—I would have done anything to please Dirk. A week ago he telephoned me, and he said, 'Freda, Darling, I miss you. I'm coming home.' He told me not to tell anyone that he was coming, that he wanted to spend a day with me alone. Just the two of us. So we made a secret date to go out in the boat together. Just we two, a picnic on Snake Island, where no one would bother us." She paused, and her body trembled.

Colby said, "Why did you pretend that you couldn't remember?"

She lifted a tear-wet face. "I didn't want anyone to know who I was, and what had happened. I didn't want him to know that I still lived. I—I wanted to find him, to learn why he wanted to kill me. And I was afraid if—if he knew he hadn't succeeded, he would try again. He—"

"He did try," Colby said harshly. "He killed an innocent old lady by mistake. He got into the wrong room at the hospital."

"But *why*?" she asked in a pleading voice. "Why did he hate me so? I gave him everything. When I met him in Las Vegas he was tending bar at The Last Chance Casino. I fell in love with him. I thought he loved me. We were married, and we came back here. I—I thought he was happy. I was. Three weeks ago he said he wanted to go back to Las Vegas, to visit friends. I told him to go. I've never denied him anything he wanted. He had always teased me about being afraid of the water—he was a superb swimmer—and so while he was gone I learned to swim. Not very well, but—"

"But well enough to save your life," Colby broke in grimly.

"I managed to make it to the island, and the next day those men found me."

"And so you sneaked out of the hospital, came here to wait for your husband, and then you killed him," Colby said.

"No, no. I didn't know he was here. But I thought he would come here. I was afraid to see him, and yet I knew that I *had* to see him, talk to him. I wanted to know why he—"

"That was foolish," Colby snapped. "If he tried to kill you, don't you know that he couldn't let you live?"

She smiled sadly. "Not my Dirk. He was so impulsive. It was just something between the two of us, and I would have forgiven him if only I could have talked to him. . . ." She began to sob brokenly.

Colby sighed. *You did better than that, baby*, he thought. *You stabbed him to death with your little knife, your darling husband.* He said to Freda Barry, "I'm sorry, but I'll have to call the police." He moved to the hall once more and stood by the telephone.

Suddenly his body stiffened. Had he heard a slight rustling sound from the closet? Had he seen a faint movement of the hanging garments? He stood staring intently. No more rustling, no more movement. The garments were as still as the dead man lying beneath them.

Colby moved slowly across the carpeted hall to the closet. The big house was very quiet, and he realized that Freda Barry had stopped sobbing. He turned to look at her. She was watching him intently with bright wet eyes. He had a queer uneasy feeling as he turned once more to the closet. He leaned over the body on the floor and began to spread apart the hanging clothes.

There was a quick blurred movement behind the garments, and a small wicked glitter of slashing steel in the gloom of the closet. Colby leaped backward, aware of a stinging pain in his wrist. A small figure in brown silk blouse and a tan corduroy skirt burst through the clothing, stumbled over the body of the dead man, and ran frantically for the door. It was the bright-haired girl from the tourist court, running like a young doe. A small sharp blade was clutched in one hand, and her silvery hair flowed back over her shoulders.

Colby jumped for her, reached her as

she grasped the door knob. She swung on him viciously, and the little knife went back and flashed downward. Colby caught her wrist and twisted. She uttered a small sharp cry of pain, and the knife fell to the carpet.

"Relax," Colby grunted, feeling the hot blood on his wrist where her knife had grazed him.

She twisted violently, and he had a quick glimpse of her small round face contorted in rage and fear—red lips drawn back from white teeth, eyes narrowed beneath heavy dark lashes. She clawed for Colby's face with her free hand, and each lacquered fingernail was a tiny red dagger. Colby grabbed for this hand, too, but she was quick as a snake, and the nails tore into his cheek. He flung her away from him then, and slammed his open palm against the side of her face. Her eyes glazed, and she started to fall limply. Colby caught her in his arms, carried her into the big living room, and laid her on a divan.

Freda Barry stared dumbly.

Colby dabbed at his cheek with a handkerchief and gazed moodily at the girl on the divan. Her cheek was red with the print of his hand. He sighed. It was the first time in his life that he'd struck a woman. From force of habit he felt her pulse. It was fluttery, but strong.

Behind him, Freda Barry said in a choked voice, "Who—who is she?"

"I don't know," Colby said, without looking at her. "She was in the car with your husband."

The girl on the divan sighed and opened her eyes. She stared up at Colby

calmly. Her eyes were a clear pale blue, like the eyes of a child. She smiled faintly, "All right," she said in quiet husky voice. "You got me. What now?"

Colby jerked his head toward the body of the man in the hall closet. "You killed him?"

She closed her eyes, and her small body trembled for an instant. "I—I had to," she whispered. "I couldn't do anything else. He tricked me into a murder deal, and I wouldn't hold still for it. He got rough, and I . . ." She averted her face.

Colby heard a faint sound behind him. He turned. Freda Barry was on her feet, her body tall and slender in the brief bathing suit, her gray eyes staring at the girl on the divan. She took a slow step forward. "*She* killed Dirk!"

"Sit down," Colby said harshly.

"But I loved Dirk," she said plaintively. "I still love him. I don't care what he tried to do to me. He was like a little boy, all mixed up." She paused and pointed at the blonde girl. "And now she's killed him. I remember her. She was a cigarette girl in the Casino in Las Vegas. She tried to keep Dirk from marrying me. She's evil. I see it now. She lured Dirk back to Las Vegas. He would not have tried to kill me if it had not been for her. And she was with him—while I died a thousand times trying not to fear the water, learning to swim—to please Dirk. She got him all mixed up. But in his heart he loved me, his Freda. I know it. Of all my husbands, he was the nicest, my Dirk. . . ." She moved closer to the divan, and there was murder in her eyes.

Colby stepped in front of her and placed his hands on her bare shoulders. "Never mind," he said quietly, and he pushed her gently into a deep chair. She sat still, but her hot eyes never left the girl on the divan.

COLBY SWIFTLY crossed the room to where he had left his bag. He opened the bag, and from a glass vial he shook two green capsules into his palm. He turned, and he saw Freda Barry leaning forward in the chair, her slender body tense, like an animal preparing to spring. As Colby started for her, she leaped for the divan, her hands in front of her like claws. Colby grabbed her by one wrist, roughly swung her around. She struggled, but he held her tightly.

The girl on the divan watched the scene calmly.

"Let me go," Freda Barry panted. "I'll kill her!"

Colby pushed her roughly into the chair, and held out the capsules. "Take these."

She looked up at him, and he saw the beginning of hysteria in her eyes. "Why?" she said plaintively.

"Because I say so," he snapped.

She took a deep shuddering breath. "Will they help me to—to forget?"

Colby nodded silently.

She picked up the glass from the low table beside the chair, and smiled at him archly, "Do you prescribe brandy with them, Doctor?"

He nodded, watching her carefully.

She took the capsules, swallowing them with the brandy. "There," she said brightly. "Aren't I a good girl?"

Colby sighed in relief. Now he had only one woman to handle. The drug he had given her was powerful, and as he watched her he saw the dullness of sleep creep into her eyes. She laid her head back, and whispered, "I want to forget."

You will, Colby thought grimly. He turned to the divan. The blonde girl was sitting up, watching him intently. She said, "She called you 'Doctor.' Are you?"

Colby nodded.

She laughed shortly. "She needs a psychiatrist." She gazed up at Colby, and asked curiously, "How did you get mixed up in this rat-race?"

"It's a long story. Do you want to tell me what happened?"

She shrugged. "There isn't much to tell. The old story—I loved a guy, and he got me into a mess of trouble."

"Why did you kill Dirk Barry?"

She shrugged again. "I went a little nutty, I guess. But I couldn't help it. Out in Las Vegas I was Dirk's girl. Then that dame came out, and flashed her money around. She took a shine to Dirk, and he took a shine to her money. So he brushed me off, and married her. They came east. That was six months ago. Three weeks ago Dirk showed up at the Casino. He said he couldn't stand to live with her any more, that he had been crazy about me all the time, and that he had divorced her. He asked me to come back here with him. Three days ago we arrived, and he left me at the tourist cabin. He said he had to take care of some business—winding up the divorce. I waited until this afternoon. When I saw him, I knew

he was worried about something. He wouldn't talk, and he started to drink. Then he got a phone call. After that he went kind of crazy. We packed in a hurry and left the cabin. He wouldn't tell me anything. All he said was, "They're after me."

"I began to get scared. We drove here, and parked in the drive, behind the hedge. He took a gun from his pocket, and began to talk. Crazy talk. He said he'd tried to drown his wife for me, so that he would get her money, and so that he could marry me. But something went wrong. His wife hadn't drowned, and she was still alive. He kind of babbled. He said he had to find her, kill her for sure, so that she couldn't tell what he'd tried to do to her. He mumbled something about a hospital, about killing an old lady by mistake, about his wife sneaking away from a hospital. He said I had to help him, stick by him. If I didn't, he threatened to kill me. I tried to get out of the car, but he grabbed me, and slapped me."

She paused, and shivered. "I was too scared to talk. I wished I was back peddling cigarettes at the Casino. By the way, Doc, how about a cigarette?"

Silently Colby gave her one, and lit it for her.

She inhaled deeply. "He forced me to sneak into the house with him. We didn't see his wife. Then through a window we saw you coming up the drive. Dirk pulled me into the closet, behind the clothes. He had his hands on my throat, and he whispered that if I made a noise, he would strangle me. I struggled with him. He began to choke me. Then I remembered the

little knife in the pocket of my skirt. It was a souvenir of the Casino. They pass them out to good customers. I managed to get it, spring open the blade. Dirk kept on choking me—I couldn't breathe. I struck with the knife. He let me go, and he fell down. I fell down, too. Maybe I passed out—I don't know. Then I heard voices, and I stood up. I kept very quiet. . . ."

Colby glanced at Freda Barry. She was sleeping quietly, her head slumped sideways in the chair. He said to the blonde girl, "Dirk wanted his wife's drowning to appear as an accident if they found her body?"

She nodded. "That's what he told me. He was supposed to be in Las Vegas, and no one knew that he had come back. After he threw her over, he took the boat close to shore, chopped a hole in the bottom and sunk it. Then he swam to where he'd left his car and some clothes. Oh, he told me all about it." She crushed out her cigarette, and covered her face with her hands. "I—I just want to go back home," she said in a choked voice.

Colby stepped into the hall and picked up a small knife with a spring blade. Embossed on the metal handle were the words, *Compliments of The Last Chance Casino, Las Vegas*. Carefully he wrapped the knife in a handkerchief and put it in his coat pocket. He went back and stood by the divan. He saw ugly blue bruised marks on the blonde girl's throat. They bore out her story of self defense.

Colby telephoned Chief Beckwith. "You can stop looking for the woman in the bathing suit," he said. "I've found

her." He gave the Chief a quick report of what had happened.

He hung up, and called The Hoyt Funeral Home. "Lee, I've got a job for you at Erie Cliffs."

"Erie Cliffs?" He could almost hear Hoyt smacking his lips. "Well, now, that's the type of business I like. I presume they'll want our super deluxe service, with our special bronze casket, and organ music at the grave, and—"

"I afraid you won't get the funeral, Lee," Colby broke in gently. "I just want you to embalm the body, and probably ship it out to Nevada."

"Aw, Clint."

Colby hung up and looked at Freda Barry. She was slumped lower in her chair, and sleeping soundly. The blonde from Las Vegas said, "Doc, do you suppose I could have a drink?"

"Sure," Colby said. "Me, too."

Colby was wrong. Lee Hoyt got Dirk Barry's funeral after all. Freda Barry gave her husband the fanciest burial service Lee Hoyt could offer. She sobbed all through the services, and had to be forcibly pulled away from the grave.

Watching the scene beside Colby at the edge of the crowd, Chief of Police Beckwith muttered, "Women! He tries to kill her, and there she is, crying her heart out for him." He shook his head.

The blonde girl's story of self defense couldn't be disproved, and she was acquitted. As coroner, Colby was satisfied. He felt that justice, in rather a cock-eyed way, had prevailed, and he bought the blonde a railroad ticket back to Las Vegas. ◆◆◆

The small boy never lived who hasn't delighted in drawing a toy gun and shouting that wonderful cry of triumph, "Bang, bang, you're dead!" Cops and robbers is so universal a part of growing up, in fact, that you and I would never be able to see a story in it. Luckily, Edward S. Williams is more perceptive. The result is an unusual and powerful crime story about a man who had to learn that valor is not a game.

For Valor

by EDWARD S. WILLIAMS

STEVE DOUGLAS parked his car at the curb, tonight, instead of turning into the gravel drive that led past his white Cape Cod cottage to the garage in back. He got out: a lean, long-limbed young man in a tweed suit, with clear gray eyes and a forceful mouth. He had the evening paper, folded, in his hand and he slapped it thoughtfully against his thigh as he jogged up three flagstone steps to the flower-bordered walk in which he took such pride.

He didn't see that tonight. He didn't see the perfect, velvet lawn, or the banked evergreens on either side of the small front stoop. The red Japanese maples, the graceful, arrow-shafts of Lombardy poplars that lined the drive went equally unnoticed tonight. Steve Douglas went in and Marty met him at the door, as usual. He kissed her.

"Hi, Snooks," he said. "Have a good day?" It was all pretty much as usual, except for the distant, preoccupied look in Steve's eyes.

Marty said, "Yes," and then, "You're late, Steve," but not reproachfully. She looked at him, her eyes warm and quiet, and Steve shrugged.

"Yeah, I know. Sorry, hon. I was detained, and I may have to go out again later on. But that's the way it goes, huh? Dinner ready? I'll clean up."

"Yes," Marty said, "All ready, Steve . . . Was it—something special?"

He made a motion with the paper in his hand, stopped it and put the paper behind him on the table by the door. "Well," he said, "in a way. You never know how these things are going to turn. Probably nothing to it. But I'll go wash." And he went upstairs rapidly.

He left the paper on the table and after a moment Marty unfolded it and stood looking a long time at the black headline: MUNGO BELIEVED HID-ING IN CITY. Then she put the paper back and went through the dining room into the kitchen. She turned the water on, letting it run until it was

cool, to fill the pitcher. And then letting it run on while she stood there doing nothing.

That was why, of course. Mungo—Tiger Mungo, they called him—had escaped day before yesterday. He'd killed a prison guard and wounded another, with a gun that had been smuggled in to him, and vanished. But now they thought that he was hiding in the city.

She'd been almost expecting it, dreading it—how much she hadn't realized until now. That was why Steve was late, why he might have to go out for a while this evening. Mungo was hiding in the city. Marty Douglas stood at the kitchen sink, gripping the rounded edge of it and stared out through the window into the Melvyns' back yard, next door.

Paul Melvyn came out while she stood there. He had a bucket of water and a pan of feed for his chickens. And Marty thought suddenly, fiercely: Why isn't it Paul? Why isn't it Lee Scarborough—or anybody else but Steve? Oh, why does it have to be Steve? And her eyes turned bitter as she watched Paul Melvyn. She thought: After he feeds his chickens he'll go in and eat dinner, and he and Mary can go to a show or read or sit on their porch in the quiet warm dark. And Lee Scarborough will be down in the cellar, in his workshop, making some little thing for his boys or perhaps for the house. But Steve—

She heard him on the stairs and turned the water off, turned quickly to the refrigerator and took out butter and cream. She put those on the table, not

looking at Steve as he came into the dining room and sat down. But she needn't have bothered hiding it. Steve wasn't looking at her. Automatically he shook out his napkin and reached for the serving fork. He hunted around on the platter until he found the best, the thickest chop, and put that on her plate.

"Mrs. Douglas," he said, and smiled when he handed her the plate. But it was only his mouth that smiled; his eyes didn't change. He still didn't see her. He didn't see anything, she knew, except Mungo.

Quickly she said, "The Melvyns' chickens got out again today, Steve. They were over in our yard."

Steve said, "Huh? Oh, Paul's chickens. They scratch up any of my zinnias?"

"No. I saw them in time. I shoed them out. But we really ought to get that new fence. Paul tried to keep them out, and he's offered to pay half, you know."

"Um-mm," Steve said. "Yeah. Sure. Good idea, hon." But he hadn't really heard what she'd said, and Marty knew it.

He ate swiftly. He didn't know, Marty thought, what he was eating; he was hardly chewing it. He'd have indigestion again. Indigestion! If only that were all. . . .

Her fingers shook as she set down her coffee cup, but she kept the trembling out of her voice.

"Steve," she said, "did you have the oil changed today? I noticed last night that we're way over the mileage marked on the tag. But if you didn't I was thinking that I could have it done to-

morrow. I'm going over to Laura Andrews' bridge party and I could stop on the way. Of course if you're going to need the car . . ."

"Yeah," he said, "I'll need it, hon. Must have forgot to tell you, I'll have to go out tonight. But you can have it tomorrow. I'll go in on the train. And while I think of it, Marty, have the oil changed, will you? It'll be a good chance, if you have time."

She said, "Yes, Steve," and there was silence between them.

OUT FRONT the Scarboroughs' twin boys were playing noisily. Their voices were shrill, excited. They yelled, "Bang! Bang!" and the small thud of their running feet on the turf receded. Marty's hand in her lap clenched tightly over the rolled-up ball of her napkin.

"Steve," she choked, "Steve, one of the faucets in the laundry leaks. Could you fix it sometime? Or shall I get the plumber?"

"Sure," he grunted thickly. He drained his cup. And the Scarborough boys came running back.

She could tell by the sound of their running that there was one on each side of the house, and that they would meet in front. The hand in her lap was so hard a fist that her arm ached. Her throat ached. She sat with every muscle of her body taut, waiting, hardly breathing. And Jimmy Scarborough's voice rang hot with triumph, with what she knew was coming.

"Bang, bang! You're dead, Bobby—I got you! I got you like Steve Douglas got Johnny the Greek! You're dead!"

Marty looked at Steve finally. He hadn't heard. He sat staring into his plate, and the sob that was choking her could be denied no longer. Marty ran into the living room and Steve sat twisted in his chair looking at her over his shoulder. Then he pushed back his chair and rose swiftly; he was on his knees beside the divan, his arms holding her.

"Marty!" he whispered urgently. "Sweetheart, what is it? What's the matter?"

"Nothing," she faltered. "Oh, it's nothing, Steve." She tried to pull his head down to hers, to get his cheek against her face, but he wouldn't let her. And when she couldn't meet his eyes he said with sudden self-accusation:

"I know. Forgive me, Marty. I've sat there through dinner not listening to a thing you've said. I've made an awful mug of myself. I—Marty, I just don't know how lucky I am to have you. I don't know how to appreciate anything so lovely, so beautiful as you. I'm just a dumb cop and I ought to be taken out and shot!"

And shot . . .

Her arms about his neck tightened convulsively. Her breath caught. He kissed her cheek, her ear, whispering to her softly. Marty clung to him and shut her eyes to keep back tears. She bit her lips to keep back sobbing. For a long time. And then she said huskily:

"No, Steve, it isn't that at all. I'm just not feeling well. I'm acting silly, I expect."

"Did you go see Doc Collins," he sat up suddenly, "like I told you? Marty, you haven't been yourself for almost a month. Did you?"

"Yes," she said, "I went today, Steve. It isn't—anything. I'm all right now. Turn on—"

The Scarborough boys were back playing again.

"I won't!" It was Bobby. "I won't!" he screamed hysterically. "I'm gonna be Steve Douglas now an' you gotta be Johnny the Greek. I'm gonna shoot you like—"

"Turn on the radio, Steve!" Marty pleaded.

The half-proud, half-apologetic grin faded slowly as he got to his feet. He'd heard this time, she knew. He looked at her, puzzled, and her eyes were bleak and stricken. She lay motionless, staring up past his eyes to the ceiling. Steve crossed slowly to the radio and turned it on in the middle of a sentence.

". . . hidden somewhere in this city. Captain Torrance states that Mungo's presence is no longer conjecture; it is a certainty. And the net tightens hourly. All the resources of modern police techniques are being used to the utmost. Highways, railways, airways are being guarded closely. Tiger Mungo can no more escape than could his brother rat surrounded by an ever-narrowing ring of hunting terriers. But in the end it will be man to man, gun to gun. Mungo has sworn that he will not be taken alive. And if—"

Hands to her ears, Marty whirled past him to the stairs. "Turn it off, Steve!" she cried desperately. "Please turn it off!"

He stared after her, standing in the middle of the room, his eyes startled, worried.

He was alone in the kitchen. He sat in

a kitchen chair, hunched over, forearms resting on his thighs, with the gun in his left hand and a cleaning rod in his right. He ran an oily rag through the barrel, the cylinder chambers: over and over, careful, obvious. A can of oil was on the table beside him, a small screwdriver, an unopened box of .38 bullets.

Steve finished the cleaning and flipped the cylinder back into place. He wiped excess oil meticulously away with a cleaning rag and laid the gun down on the table. Then he slit the seal of the box of shells with his thumbnail and took off the lid.

MARTY WATCHED him, unobserved. She stood in the dining room doorway, in the dark, and watched him through the half-open kitchen door. She saw his face clearly; all tenderness, all softness gone out of him. Steve's mouth was a tight line. His thin, straight nose looked thinner with the flare of his nostrils as he drew each breath. She saw the strong, even ebb and flow of pulse in his throat.

Steve emptied the box into his hand and laid the bullets on the table. He spread them out with a careful forefinger, so he could see all of them at once, and for a while he sat looking at them all. Then he began to choose.

One after another he picked them up, weighing each in his hand as though he could feel the absence of a grain of powder; his fingers touched them as though he could sense the slightest deviation from perfect in the ellipse of lead. One after another he fitted them into the chambers of his gun, rejecting

this one, keeping that, until he had six bullets lined up by themselves on the table away from the others. He put the others back into the box.

Marty watched him, and her eyes were dark with fear and with something else—something unfathomable—that went beyond fear.

Steve took up his gun again. He opened the cylinder and began to fit the bullets he had chosen into the empty chambers. His hands were steady, deliberate, sure. There was no tremor visible anywhere in him. He placed the gun beneath his coat, sliding it into the clip that held it under his left arm, and rose.

He drew it once, as though to test the tension of the clip. His hand flashed up across his body to stab beneath his coat and reappear gripping the gun. His eyes leapt involuntarily in the direction of his draw, toward the kitchen door.

Not empty, he realized after a moment. Marty stood there and slowly the muzzle of the gun lowered until it pointed at the floor. He looked up at her, remembering her slowly. It took time for his mind to come all the way back, to readjust itself to kitchen, and kitchen doorway, and to Marty, his wife, whom he loved. He laid the gun on the table, hiding it, standing between her eyes and the gun.

"Marty. I thought you were lying down."

She shook her head. "No, Steve, I—I couldn't."

He took two quick strides and caught her in his arms, and she stood clinging to him while he kissed her bright hair and murmured, "Oh, Marty, I know it's

hard on you. But I'll be all right. I'll be back before you know it and everything'll be all over."

"You're going after Mungo, Steve?"

"Yes," he said. "You know how it is, Marty."

"Steve," she said. "Steve, dear, it isn't often that I ask big favors. But this once I've got to. I've got to, Steve! Please don't go!"

He felt her trembling against him, felt her arms tighten about his shoulders. The urgency of her plea was like some strong current transmitted from her body to his. And dissipated against the insulating wall of his inexorable patience. He said patiently:

"But don't you see, Marty, it's my job? Don't you see that I've got to put my work first—that any man has to? That I can't let anything come between me and my duty? I'm paid to fight criminals."

"No, Steve!" she cried. She pushed him away, stood with her back to the wall, hands clenched at her sides. "Steve, listen to me. There's something I've got to say.

"Do you remember how you came home that night—the night you killed Mike Ryley? Oh, Steve, darling, I remember if you don't! He was your first. You were as white as death. I don't believe you knew me when you came home. We'd only been married a few weeks, and you didn't kiss me when you came in. It was the first time.

"Don't you remember, Steve? You couldn't sit still. You couldn't rest, or read, or even tell me how you felt. And later, when you went to fix the furnace for the night, and when I came to look

for you, you were standing with the shovel in your hands, just standing, staring at the open furnace door."

He stared at her, now, hardly breathing.

"I can remember, Steve, if you can't, how you couldn't sleep. You lay beside me and maybe you thought I was asleep because you tried so hard to lie still, and you couldn't. Maybe you didn't know I watched you at the window, sitting there on my dressing table stool smoking cigarette after cigarette. And I know you went downstairs, time after time. It was the whiskey that put you to sleep finally, wasn't it, Steve? That drugged the picture of Mike Ryley out of your mind and let you sleep. And you can't remember this, but I can: how you cried—yes, cried—in your sleep because you'd had to kill a man! You told me, Steve, in your sleep."

"Marty!" he said hoarsely. "You don't . . ." but she stopped him, more with the thought that she was evoking, with the thing she was leading up to and he saw now, partially, than with the quick gesture of her hand.

"No, Steve, don't stop me. Let me tell you why you mustn't go out tonight, or ever, to kill another man. You forgot, and they never knew about the night after you'd killed Mike Ryley. The medal they gave you later, that the mayor pinned on your coat in front of everybody—the medal didn't say, 'To Detective-Sergeant Stephen Douglas, for Killing a Man.' It said, 'For Valor!'"

STEVE SHOOK his head. "Marty, don't," he said. "You just don't know. You just can't understand."

"Wait, Steve, I'm not finished. There was Red Vargas, too. You came home that night and Captain Torrance was with you—and it was almost like a celebration. You didn't forget to kiss me then, when you came in, but afterward I wished you had!"

"Maybe you felt the difference in me. Maybe you hadn't forgotten Mike Ryley utterly, because when Captain Torrance asked me how it felt to be the wife of a hero—and I disgraced you by having near-hysterics—you said it was a rotten way to be a hero. You tried—oh, Steve, you tried so hard to feel the same about it as you had the night you killed Mike Ryley. But you didn't! Something was gone out of you. I found three different newspapers in the car, next day. You'd clipped the accounts of your battle with Vargas. You hid them in your handkerchief box. I found them there, later.

"And there was John Athens, Steve. Johnny the Greek. You hunted him down when everyone else had failed. You wouldn't give up, not even after everyone else was satisfied that he was dead or gone away. You found him in spite of the plastic operation that had changed his face. But you'd forgotten Ryley and Vargas then—entirely forgotten. You came home, Steve, and do you remember what you said? 'I got him, Marty! I got Athens. I'm a Lieutenant, now, Hon!' . . . A Lieutenant—for killing a man."

She stopped, but there was no downward inflection to her voice. Steve's eyes were wide, looking at nothing. Marty caught his arm.

"Oh, Steve, darling, I can stand the thought that sometimes your life is at

stake. I love you and I can sit here and wait for you to come, not knowing if you're alive or dead, and stand it. But don't you see what's happened to you? It's there, it's in your eyes. Go look in a mirror and see. No. Not now. It's gone. But if you could have seen yourself when you were cleaning your gun and when you were choosing those bullets to go in it. Please, Steve, don't go! Please try to see what you're doing to yourself—to us—and let somebody else kill Tiger Mungo if he has to be killed."

The phone in the living room rang.

He brushed past her to answer. She knew then that Steve was going. Knew before he came back and swept his gun off the table. Before he said in that strange, strained, metal-hard voice:

"I'm going now, Marty. I've got to go. You don't understand, women can't. There isn't anything—not anything I wouldn't do for you—but this is my job whatever happens. I can't quit now." And he bent to kiss her, his mouth hard and cold, his hands like steel clamps on her shoulders, and he was gone.

For a long time Marty stood against the kitchen wall, leaning against it wearily. Like dope, she thought, or liquor: he couldn't help himself, or wouldn't. He'd go on believing it was his job, peculiarly his duty, and never really know why, or what it was doing to him. The medal said, *For Valor*, and Steve believed it.

He was Lieutenant Douglas, who had killed three enemies of Society and Society would never let him forget it. Society didn't know that one killing was enough for any man. He'd gone out to kill again, but she couldn't tell

him that after this time—that tomorrow and all the rest of their tomorrows—things could never be the same for them. She couldn't tell him that the baby that was coming mustn't be born and grow up with a killer for a father.

"Now I'm gonna be Steve Douglas," the shrill voice of little Jimmie Scarborough echoed again in her ear, "and you gotta be Johnny the Greek. I'm gonna shoot you like . . ."

But she couldn't tell all that to Steve. He might have gone anyway, and worrying about it might destroy the fine balance between nerve and hand and eye that is necessary in order to kill a man before he kills you. Finally she turned out the light and went into the living room.

She stood there, at the window looking blindly out. It was quiet. From next door she heard the muffled, faint running of water in the Melvyns' bathroom. She heard Paul's voice raised in a shout. "Hey, Mary! Where's the soap?" And then there was Mary Melvyns' barely audible reply.

Across the street she saw light in the Scarboroughs' basement. Lee was down there, in his workshop, with his boys. She heard one of the twin's shrill laughter. And all at once Marty thought that she could stand no more of it, no more waiting, no more thinking. She flung open the front door and hurried over the flagstone walk to the street . . .

THE WOMAN had turned him in. Steve Douglas sat with his arms tightly folded, with his right hand under his coat gripping the butt of his gun. He looked straight ahead, his eyes wide and

fixed, but not seeing anything of the traffic that flowed past. He sat with Captain Torrance, and Myers, Renny, Doyle, all grimly silent.

The suck of tires at the asphalt, the purr of the motor were the only sounds as the car took them swiftly toward their objective. There were no sirens, no radiocars converging upon the squalid street where Tiger Mungo was known to be hiding. Only a carful of armed men answering a woman's harsh bitter, inexplicable, "Sure, I'm the one that got the gun in to him. I'm the one that had the car waiting, that out-smarted you smart cops all the way. And now I'm telling you where he is. You can have him now."

But it wouldn't add up, Steve thought. His mind returned to that over and over again. Mungo had come back, perhaps to the rat-hole that had bred him, to the woman who must have loved him. She'd admitted smuggling in the gun with which Mungo had fought his way out, with which he'd killed a guard. She said she was the one who'd had the getaway car in readiness. But then, tonight, she'd turned him in.

Torrance said suddenly: "I don't like any part of it. There's something phony about it—phony as a glass eye. Why should the dame, after arranging the break, suddenly turn around and rat on him?"

Sergeant Ed Doyle smiled thinly. "Why not?" he said. "It wouldn't be the first time in the history of the world a woman's pulled the double-cross." His eyes were dark, sardonic in the gleam from his cigarette.

Myers said quickly, "Sure, Ed's right,

Skipper," and added: "Funny, ain't it, how it's always a woman gets 'em in the end. Ask John Dillinger."

He laughed nervously, but no one else laughed. Torrance muttered, "I still don't like it." And Steve thought, always a woman that gets 'em in the end.

That jerked his mind back into an old channel while he sat tense, his hand unconsciously stroking the gun butt under his arm.

He thought of Marty again, waiting home for him. Not understanding, because a woman couldn't, that a man's duty had to come first. Not realizing that a man changed, grew until he was equal to his job without infantile heroics. To Marty he was still the emotional kid he'd been that night when it had fallen his lot to kill a murderer named Ryley. She couldn't seem to grasp the fact that he was a Lieutenant of Police, now, that he was Lieutenant Steve Douglas whose job it was to fight criminals. But the memory of what she'd said still burned in his mind.

And suddenly he thought, Suppose she isn't there waiting this time? Suppose she meant that this time she wouldn't wait for him to come back?

The sound in Steve Douglas' throat was hoarse, an audible denial. Captain Torrance's head jerked toward him. He said, "What?" and when Steve answered, "Nothing," Torrance stared ahead again. After a moment he said irritably to the chauffeur, "Slow down, Thompson. No need to run right up to the front door. We'll park in the block this side of it. Understand?"

"Sure, Cap," the driver said, "I got ya."

The silence between them was intensified. The imminence of whatever it was that was going to happen held them silent again, and Steve felt the hard constriction at his heart relax slowly. He was a heel for even thinking it. Marty was no gun-moll. Treachery was as far from her as dark from light. Marty'd be there, waiting, when he got home.

Torrance said, "Here. Park."

The black sedan rolled to the curb and they got out without a word. For a long time they stood scanning the street that was silent, deserted. Mungo might be asleep; it might be a quiet arrest. Tiger Mungo might still die in the chair if they were careful. But that irritable, peevish doubt persisted in Torrance's mind, was reflected in his voice, as he assigned them to their stations.

"Renny," he said, "it's the third house on the right. There's an alley through the center of the block, in back. You take the rear."

"Yes, sir."

Torrance glanced up at the serrated roof-line. "Myers, you go in next door and get to the roof, just in case he tries to break that way. And go easy!"

"Sure, Skipper. You bet."

Torrance turned to look at veteran Ed Doyle and young Steve Douglas. He looked at them both and said grimly, "One of you, I guess, ought to stay here."

And Steve said thickly, "Okay. Let's go."

HE SWUNG around, his hand reaching under his coat lapel, fingers closing again over the butt of the gun that made

him forget everything but that Mungo was hiding somewhere in this silent house. In a few moments he would face another man who had a gun. A man other men feared, but him, Steve Douglas. A murderer—like Mike Ryley and Red Vargas and Johnny Athens—who deserved to die swiftly, surely. He took a step toward the house but Doyle's voice stopped him.

"Wait!"

Steve half turned to him.

"What for?"

Doyle's tone was clipped, flat, sullen. "Because I'm going this time, Steve. Because I want a little credit for a change! Because I'm forty-two years old and still a sergeant, and I'll never be anything else in this cock-eyed town as long as you keep on—"

Steve blazed, "And until you are something else, Doyle, I'm still your superior. I'm going in with Captain Torrance, and you—"

He stopped suddenly as though he'd been hit. He was aware that Torrance had looked at him strangely, and shrugged and turned toward the entrance of the house. Aware that Renny and Myers were gone, and Doyle was following them up the street. And Marty's face returned to haunt, to accuse, to come between his eyes and the dirty front door, the dirty vestibule, the creaking dirty stairs ahead.

"Don't you see what's happened to you?" Marty was asking again. "It's there. It's in your eyes. Go look in a mirror and see."

He was looking into that mirror now. He was going to kill another man, he saw—not because it was his duty and his

job, but because he wanted to kill him! He'd been offered a choice and he had refused it. He was going up to face Mungo because that's what he wanted to do more than anything else—to kill him and watch him die.

They were on the stairs, Steve leading, and Torrance was cursing in a harsh whisper behind him. Torrance muttered, "It's the door at the head of the stairs, Steve. The first door on the left, she said. If this is a trap . . . Steve! Wait a minute. I think . . ."

But Steve Douglas couldn't wait. He had to go on, now, trap or no trap. He had to show Marty that he saw what she'd meant, and that she was right. That he'd had enough of killing.

Torrance said, "Steve, wait. There's something we ought . . . What's the matter with you, Douglas? What ails you?" He caught Steve's arm.

Steve hit him, hard, and with a grunting sob Torrance's big body sagged. His knees hit the floor with a jarring thud. Steve whirled to the door. He kicked it in . . . the door swung wide.

Mungo's voice was curiously light and bodiless. His laugh seemed no more than a low guttural whisper, so faint that Steve could not locate it in the dark. He could not see Mungo, but he knew Mungo could see him against the lighter oblong of the open door. He knew that Torrance's premonition was good: it was a trap. Mungo was waiting, alert for them to come. It didn't seem to matter to Steve Douglas. He had to show Marty that she was right.

He moved forward and Mungo laughed and said, "So you fell for it. I hoped you'd come, Douglas. I'm gon-

na croak, see? I've got a slug in me that's gonna take me, but I've got another one for you, first. Come on, Douglas. Why don't you shoot now?"

And Mungo laughed again and shot, and Steve knew where he was then. Flame from Mungo's gun slashed the darkness. Steve saw him, dimly, slumped in a chair against the far wall, holding his gun in both hands while he fired. But Steve Douglas didn't fire. Weaving, crouching, he lunged toward that dimly seen figure across the room. The gun hung lax in his left hand. His right was a fist, sweeping powerfully, reaching, desperate. . . .

The house was dark when he stopped the car and got out. He'd waited for his corner—their corner—with his heart pounding, scarcely able to wait, wanting to get out and run.

He didn't put the car into the garage. He got out and slammed the door, hurrying across the lawn, trampling flowers unheeding in his haste to reach her.

"Steve," she whispered. "Steve, you're home again, you're not hurt!" And she was in his arms.

Steve Douglas felt as though a hand were at his throat, choking. But even if he could talk he couldn't tell her, now, that she was right. He couldn't tell her how he'd tried to show her that she was right, because that didn't seem to matter either. Because it seemed so childish, now, so anti-climactic beside what she was doing.

She'd waited. She'd met him at the door, unquestioning, only glad to have him back. And for all she knew he'd just killed another man. ♦ ♦ ♦

Though travel folders and hucksters are prone to ignore it, the Connecticut River Valley has been a fertile field for tobacco farms. David Crewe, one of our top-ranking detective story tellers who has filled many a slick magazine page, has given us the benefit of his travels there to write of an "experiment in rats" which both the city slicker and his country cousin can enjoy with equal zest.

Guilt Powder

by DAVID CREWE

HARRY MUST be called a genius. The genius expands with discrimination and keeps out of the red. With this in mind, Harry betook himself diligently to a scientific survey of fields fertile for cultivation. The traffic in hot cars seemed the most promising for his talents. And one of the indirect results of that decision was to bring Ellery Perkins into a brief blaze of prominence and prosperity—the first and last he was ever to know.

To a less discerning eye than Harry's, Ellery Perkins might have passed for just one more good looking young animal, with the hay seeds of the Connecticut River farming lands behind his big red ears. A good lad, somewhat wild perhaps, keen for his liquor, and alert when a pretty girl passed by.

But Harry saw more than these things. He noted the thin tapering fingers, so deft at pool—or changing number plates in a hurry; a square jaw that could give orders—and close tight

over secrets; narrow eyes, which could raise particular havoc with the ladies—or hold a motor at an even seventy over the state line in the foggy dawn.

He had first run into Ellery at the tag end of a Thursday night poker game up in Pearl Renslow's nest at the Hamilton. Pearl knew her clientele as intimately as Harry knew his. To meet a stranger there didn't of necessity mean that he was right, but to Harry it saved a lot of preliminary qualms. Pearl didn't draw on a sucker list. Ony big shots had the entree.

The big rube had been tight as a goat that night, but it didn't cramp his style any with the cards. He had talked a lot, too—foolish, yokel patter—but no one seemed to be inclined to resent him for it. Harry noted all these things and made discreet investigation. He could always use a good man.

And in due time he made a working arrangement to finance Ellery's particular penchant for hot cars. It was a mutu-

ally profitably tie-up, which enabled several little girls to migrate to modernistic suites, buy all sorts of cute feminine frivolities, and write their folks that their artistic careers were assured.

But the kid wasn't really smart. In the first place he was expanding too rapidly when he crashed into big business. Secondly, he underestimated Harry. Wiser men than he had made similar errors in judgment—but only once.

During the first few months of the combine, the books showed a gratifying upward trend of accrued dividends and rolling stock. Then one August day Ellery met a young lady who knew the goods and how to acquire it, and he forgot to put a grand on the right side of the ledger. It was easy. Too easy. He got into the habit of salting a little on the cuff from week to week, and banking it back home, in the bottom of the old man's grain bin in the red barn. Sometimes he stopped off and passed the time of day with the old codger; more often he stole secretly in the back way through the unused hen coop in the small hours of the morning. Quite a little nest egg reposed there now—almost enough to get him that little showgirl, who was only awaiting the glad word to give her current boyfriend the swinging gate.

Harry was soft, like downy goose feathers—sculptured in white marble. His peculiarly effective accounting system had spotted the first shortage, but he had said nothing. The kid was one in a thousand, and business was good. So he made a small, distinct check in the mental niche labeled "to be dis-

posed of" and played blandly at being a sucker, which was a new kind of sport for him.

But the keen edge of novelty became blunted in due time, and Harry's admirably controlled emotions registered successively boredom, distaste, and finally, annoyance. All of ten grand, he mused. It was too much. For less than a hundredth of such a sum his forefathers had earnestly promoted many a gory and diverting vendetta.

So one fine night he audited Ellery's books—before the customary fiscal period. It was cold turkey, sour apples, and bad medicine for Ellery. Let it be said at the outset that Harry advised him in his most fatherly manner to tell where he had cached the dough. He had many persuasive little schemes which were calculated to make the most incorrigible defaulter see the error of his ways.

But Ellery was of very rugged mould. The big crag of a jaw, Harry discovered with chagrin, could seal a secret in spite of all his blandishments. It was less the victim's conscious self than wild delirium giving utterance when he finally muttered something which sounded like "grain bin—ol' man's barn." Then he spitefully expired, thus depriving Harry of the pleasure of helping him over the border.

Harry was annoyed. It had been a long, tedious, and he feared not very artistic bit of work. Still, he had something to work on—the lead about the barn.

So he pulled certain strings, and friends of his saw certain friends of theirs, and in due time the hearse

wherein Ellery's soul had abided was dispatched in elaborate funeral array up the winding Connecticut River trail to Hadley Falls, Massachusetts. A mortician had managed to erase the more tangible evidences of late discomfort, and the youngster rode in solemn state from the city he had loved to the bare farm he had hated. All of which was made possible through the purse of Harry, who thus must have modified the cynical reader's previous estimate of him.

Two days later Harry, with Dopey Jo and Ed Carey, two of his most promising lieutenants, crowded into a sharp tan roadster and set out over the same trail.

EZRA PERKINS sat alone on the porch of his trim white cottage in Hadley Falls, Massachusetts. His three in help, state wards who took the place of hired men, had been given a day of freedom because of the funeral. He gazed bleakly over the heaving green sea of prime tobacco filler crop, which met the skyline over the crest of the south hill, and his gnarled old hands, cross-mapped with protruding blue veins, dangled limply over the arms of the weathered pine rocker.

It was, he told himself, the last straw. First the impending foreclosure sale of his lands, then Ellery. Pretty damn fierce about the boy. With all the trouble the lad had given him, there had lurked in the back of his consciousness the faint conviction that in time, when Ellery had raised his hell for a season, he would come back to follow the furrowed trail blazed by three generations

preceding him. Now that hope was gone. Things would never seem quite right again. A drop overbalanced slowly under the corner of one eye, and gaining momentum, slid unheeded down his seamed countenance.

He rose, shielding his eyes from the glare of the setting sun. Then he stiffened slightly. A car was thundering up the road past Jo Whalley's place. Dratted fools, he fretted, pull the settin' hens off their boxes. Still, he liked to watch 'em whizz along. Reminded him of those the boy used to have—neat contraptions. He stood still for a moment to watch the monster roll by.

It didn't. Brakes screamed; it stopped. Three strangers—city folks—jumped out. The smallest, a peaked little feller, was addressing him, speaking out of the corner of his mouth, like the store keeper's fool boy, only this one looked right smart. He cocked a tremulous hand over his more serviceable ear. "Eh? Speak perter, neighbor. I'm a leetle deaf—from the neuralgy," he volunteered with dignity.

The effect of this perfectly downright and concise statement upon the men was stunning, to say the least. The little one nudged his companions, who were similarly agog.

"Wow!" he observed with awe. "I never thought they was real outside the comics! But ain't he the spittin' image of the kid!" He continued in a louder voice. "You Mr. Perkins?"

"I be."

"You-be? Er—or, yeah. This your place here, I 'spose. We're just looking over the country. Friend of ours may buy a piece of land." His eyes sought

and found the small red barn which loomed at the end of the dirt drive.

"So? Wall, Widder Smart down the crick might be willin' to dicker with ye. I—" he waved an expressive arm across the sky—"I ain't got nawthin' for sale."

"Okay, Dad, just wondered. Nice place you got here." His beady eyes had now sized-up the barn. It would be, he reflected, a cinch. No rough stuff. He had had his fill of killing for a time. They would get a few beers in Northampton, come back during the night, park the car about a mile down the road, and be back in the Big Town early the next morning with the dough.

"By the way," he observed nonchalantly, "they was telling me your boy came home from the city." He nudged Jo. "This ought to be hot!"

The other's eyes widened a trifle, and some of the color faded from his cheeks, but the voice was as calm and impersonal as before. "Y-yes. Boy came back to me come two days. He's restin' now. Hev you come to see about the boy, stranger?"

"Er—no. Just riding by." Somewhat let down by the failure of his jest, he managed to mimic the twang of the elder Perkins with fair success as he hopped into the car with his companions. "Wall, 'pears to me you better keep your kin to hum tendin' the caows—it's smarter." Their laughter sounded over the roar from the exhaust as the roadster leaped forward.

SUPPER THAT night was a lonely meal. The state boys wouldn't be back before morning—gallivanting with the

girls over to Hamp, he opined. Well, he used to do his share of that too, before Mary came along. He ate his frugal repast swiftly. Then he went to the barn.

First he removed Kit and Tom, the heavy-rumped work horses, and led them over to Whalley's farm. The cows, he decided, would have to stay in pasture for the night. Finally, frisky Fred, the light roan who pulled farmer Perkin's buggy to the post office and general store daily, cavorted down the same road. In all, it took an hour. He'd have to hurry to get the milking done before dark.

All this was in the nature of extra work. A special reason lay behind it. For some time his out buildings had been over-run with vermin. Fleas, roaches and field mice had raised havoc in the barn, tobacco sheds, and pig pens. The horses had been stamping restlessly nights, kicking around so they were full of temper the next day from insufficient rest. It was high time to do something about it. Tonight he was going to do it. First, though, he supposed he would have to spend half the night reading that pesky paper from Washington.

He lit the kerosene lamp in the sitting room, under the painting Mary had made of some strawberries, and gave his close attention to a yellow folder bearing the seal of the United States Public Health Service—Reprint number 343. It had cost him fifteen cents, but these government fellers knew their jobs. Yes, here it was—"for the destruction of insects, fleas, bedbugs, rats, and roaches." Wall, that

ought to take care of about everything. . . .

An hour passed, then two. He was figuring, and figures never came easy to him. Let's see, back in '17 he had tried a similar procedure, using sulphur dioxide. It hadn't been entirely satisfactory. This time the pesky buggers would curl up, or he'd know the reason why. He turned to the section headed "Cyanide Gas." 'Peared to him like that might do the trick. That's what he had bought, at any rate. Let's see—"strength of gas 0.8 ounces potassium cyanide to 1000 cubic feet"—allowing seventy-two thousand feet in the barn, that'd take roughly sixty ounces. Well, he had bought six hundred ounces, and blamed if he wouldn't give them a thumping good toasting. He took three large cans under his arms, and went out into the darkness of the yard.

Within the barn, nestled away back in the hay, Harry sighed contentedly. From time to time he snickered at the ludicrous impersonations Dopey Jo was giving of hayseeds he had known. The boy was a card for sure. Then he looked toward the house and frowned. Why didn't the old fool go to bed! He had thought rubes turned in with the sun. Ah, well—He started. What was that?

Slow footsteps crunched in the gravel walk. Peering through a knot hole, he saw a lank, spare figure approach, ghostly and grotesque in the black waving shadows cast by the lantern he bore. He cautioned Dopey and Ed. Burrowed deep in the sweet smelling hay, they watched.

The old man entered. He hung the lantern on a hook by the door. Under

his arms he bore cannisters, which he deposited with care on the floor by his feet. Then he pulled a huge red bandanna kerchief from the pocket of his overalls and held it carefully to his nose, only he didn't blow—just held it there as though he had forgotten why he took it out. Dopey snickered softly. "Old geezer's got hay fever," he whispered.

They silently watched the old fellow scatter a powdery substance with a trowel all over the floor. He emptied the three cans rapidly, casting the material at random. "Feedin' the chickens," whispered Dopey Jo importantly. "He most like turns 'em here in the morning," Harry's eyes narrowed. Lots of waste, it seemed to him. Pretty careless the way he threw the stuff about. Well, every man to his trade.

At last Ezra left; they heard him bolt the door. Silence reigned. The three men slid down the vent into a pile of hay, and Harry walked gingerly to the grain bin. Ten grand should be there, by his reckoning. And it wasn't worth a cent less to put up with the smell in this place!

He'd heard of barnyard smells before, but this was worse—much worse—than he had imagined. Fair turned his stomach and made him feel funny inside. Well, to work— The three bent over the bin, stifling coughs. . . .

EZRA ROSE at four, an hour earlier than his customary time during the slack season. He hoped that this fumigating business had been worth the trouble and money—dratted nuisance at best!

He stretched painfully, and stepped

out in his bare feet across the woodshed to the barn. Kinda anxious about it—curious, like he had been over the first setting hen his father had given him as a kid. He unbolted the heavy door, and swung it open. Whew, what an infernal stink! He hoped the grain wasn't spoiled. . . .

The grain wasn't, but Harry and his playmates were. The three figures sprawled grotesquely in the cow dung, with golden grain spilled all about them. Their eyes were wide and staring in death, their mouths gaped like ugly fishes, and their faces registered various degrees of agony.

Perkins stared aghast; then he opened all the doors and windows, so the wind could sweep the place free from the noxious fumes. The little feller! He had something in his hand. A thick roll of bills. He counted it with shaking fingers. Ten thousand dollars! But it had to be returned to the little feller's heirs, of course. And he was to lose his farm for a paltry sixteen hundred! Well, no one could ever call a Perkins a thief, thank goodness. And what was this? His foot had kicked a notebook which was almost buried under the grain. Might give the runt's address.

He went out into the barnyard with the money and the notebook, and examined the latter more closely. Why, consarn it, this was Ellery's writing! And the numbers listed in his scrawling figures—these were the numbers of the bills he had just taken from this stranger. Then the money was Ellery's. And these critters had been after him for it!

He began to understand, now, the

queer marks on his son's face, and the funny look. They had tortured him—killed him trying to make him tell where the money was. And he had saved it for a surprise for his old man—had died like a dog rather than betray its whereabouts. Like a Perkins, he amended, straightening his back with pathetic pride.

An hour later a triple funeral procession took place. Strictly speaking, it wasn't a procession, since it was all comprised in one vehicle. Nor could the hearse hold a candle to that in which Ellery had ridden. As a matter of fact it was a hayrack, and Harry, who had known and loved luxury intimately, bumped along the bottom under the hay with his associates, as Ezra guided the team down the road. At the end, close by the widow's cranberry lands, was a swamp, which presently would serve as a permanent though inconspicuous mausoleum. Green slime and black oozing mud would mark the spot.

As he passed Whalley's place, a voice hailed him loudly. He stopped the team, and cupped the usual hand to the good ear. "Eh? Shout it, neighbor—the neuralgy, you know."

"I said," shouted the other, "how wuz the fumigatin'?"

"Oh, fair, fair," remarked Perkins. "Some lice still there. But Joe—" he leaned from his seat, as his cracked voice held something of an exultant note—"there's nawthin' better for killin' rats!"

He waved a switch, and the cart creaked slowly down the road towards the swamp. ◆◆◆

Devised by Melvil Dewey and used in most libraries in the United States, the Dewey decimal system "classifies books and other publications into ten main classes of knowledge." This definition is Webster's but the Editors of Black Mask have recognized a glaring omission. No mention is made of its use as a crime detector. A fact which Richard L. Hobart has artfully weaved into an unusual and provocative tale; for rare is the instance when a counterfeiter has to protect himself against a mental file case.

Penny Pim— Accidental Detective

by RICHARD L. HOBART

PENNY PIM was startled by the sound that blasted at his eardrums from around the corner on Pennsylvania Avenue. It was a new sound to him, yet curiously enough, it deeply stirred something in his subconsciousness. The sound came again and Penny Pim struggled desperately in an effort to classify and allocate it.

It annoyed Penny Pim. Not the sound itself, of course, but his inability to marshal his thoughts concerning it. It chagrined him to discover in his mind a bit of vague information which was filed away in a disorderly manner.

Brrrrrrrrrr!

Again the sound came and Penny Pim's face crinkled as his brain jostled similar and related sounds into memory cells. A fast train crossing rail joints? No, too rapid for that. A ball-peen ham-

mer striking repeatedly upon a sheet of steel? That was closer. A series of torpedoes being exploded? No, not loud enough and the sounds were too regularly spaced.

Brrrrrrrr!

A yearning to catalogue the strange sound decided him. Momentarily, he erased all thoughts of Naomi Goode, someday to be Mrs. Pennington Pim. She would be waiting for him in front of the *Potomac Theater*, up near the White House. But a minute or two delay to see what was happening here could do no harm. At that, he could almost hear her say: "Pennington, you must be ill. You are three minutes late!"

Brrrrrrrr!

A terrible thought came to Penny Pim's brain as he hesitated at the corner

of the Commerce Building before turning into Pennsylvania Avenue. He knew that sound now—a machine gun! He had read of machine guns. He never before had heard the growl of the weapon. But it *had* to be that.

Long training forced Penny Pim to snap a glance at his strap watch. It was 6:32 P.M. Then he looked west on Pennsylvania Avenue.

Penny froze. His serious, pale blue eyes widened and his lower jaw, just a bit on the receding type, hung. A Coldstream Guards mustache, as blond as his sparse hair, dangled on his upper lip.

He was too frightened to run. His knees were jelly beneath him. But his keen eyes took in everything. Each of the dozen or more sights was immediately indexed and cross-indexed—he used the Dewey decimal system for filing all mental pictures—and then painstakingly, but with incredible speed, tucked away for future reference.

Penny Pim had a system. It wasn't mnemonics or anything like that, and he didn't recognize it as an occupational disease, which it was. For Penny Pim could no more keep from seeing things, both large and small, and storing them away in his memory than an adding machine operator can help getting the correct total of a string of figures if the right keys are pressed. Penny saw everything and retained those items he wished to remember.

Sometimes merely seeing and remembering things bored him, so then he would add the numbers on the automobile licenses that passed, or some other simple task like that. He could

easily keep a running total of them, no matter how swiftly they sped by. At times, the result ran up into hundreds of millions.

The machine gun sputtered once more.

Then, with the speed of a battery of candid cameras with lens set at 1/300, Penny Pim's amazing brain began to file away pictures. He ran forward, bent down over the figure on the sidewalk.

ITEM—Dead man's face unrecognizable because of bullets. Tall, gray hair, white linen suit spotted with blood, cream-colored summer felt hat off to one side. Something shiny dangling from right wrist. (Filed in mental drawer G-0013, given over to gruesome sights.)

ITEM—Man's leg from thigh down disappearing in rear end of black sedan. Dark blue trousers, white shoe. The man in hurry. Shoe either freshly polished or new as it was gleaming white. (Miscellaneous file P-2169 devoted to unknown but interesting people.)

ITEM—Black sedan, 1949 model, just gathering speed. Virginia license plate, HR-1,016,538. Tag bent at lower left corner. Rear curtain down. Scratch at edge of right rear fender. (Filed where other mental pictures of fine automobiles were placed which he desired for his own.)

ITEM—Tires: new Goodyears, chain style tread. Spare a bit dark with road wear. Patent lock open on spare. No tire cover showing. Tires apparently a bit under-inflated.

ITEM—Car turned south off Pennsylvania Avenue. Probably headed for

Potomac River bridge and a Virginia hideout.

ITEM—Taxicab driver, Mike Duffy, Cab Drivers' License No. 490, first on scene after himself. Time: 6:33:09 P.M.

"Gads!" gasped Mike Duffy, cab driver, in wide-eyed excitement.

"I—er—believe he—he's dead," Penny Pim choked. It was the first time he had seen horrible death from so close a vantage point. As excited as he was, his twenty years of training at occupations necessitating careful observation did not fail him. He had seen times of stress before, always mental of course, and each time he had come through with flying colors, even if weak-kneed with excitement.

PENNY PIM turned in some anger as he was unceremoniously jostled aside. He saw a park policeman, Shield No. 3192, take over. Other people pushed into the horrified circle. Cars stopped on the avenue, their occupants rushing to join the morbid and white-faced throng around the dead man.

A squad car with two policemen squealed to a stop. The uniformed men shoved the crowd back, leaving the first policeman, Penny Pim and Mike Duffy closest to the dead man.

"What'd you see, you?" the park policeman snapped at Mike Duffy.

"I—I ain't seen nothin', Officer. I had to put on brakes to keep from havin' a red sedan run me down. Musta been the—the murder car. I turned the corner, sor, an' seen the poor dead man. This gentleman," Mike Duffy pointed at Penny Pim, "was bendin' over the

dead gentleman when I stopped at the curb, sor."

The park policeman wheeled on Penny, eyed him with an expression on his face that showed he wasn't pleased. "Well," he snapped, "what did *you* see?" He said it in a way that told he didn't expect a great deal in the way of helpful information.

"I—I don't know who killed him, sir, but I've a description of the car." Penny was a trifle embarrassed at the attention.

"You have?" The park policeman was frankly astonished. "Well, you're the first witness I ever had with sense enough to look around. Say-y-y!" The park policeman pointed to the shiny thing dangling from the dead man's right wrist. "This guy must've escaped from the law! He broke his handcuff, and . . ."

"Ridiculous!" Penny snorted. "The man must have been carrying a brief case of some kind with something important in it. Anyway, that half a handcuff on his wrist doesn't look strong enough for police work, does it?"

"Did you see a brief case?" insisted the amazed policeman.

Penny admitted he hadn't. "But I can easily reconstruct the scene and see one," he said quietly. Penny had control of himself now. "If you'll look closely you can see where the chain had been freshly cut with heavy wire pliers. People don't chain things to their wrists unless they're valuable. Therefore, what the man had in the brief case must have been worth a lot of money."

"Pretty good figuring, mister!"

Penny swerved as the new voice came

from behind him. The policeman stiffened, snapped a quick salute.

"Captain Linn, sir," he said, respect and relief in his tone.

Penny Pim blinked. He had heard of Captain Linn, ranking detective of the Metropolitan Police of Washington. Linn was tall, had a thin and cynical face, keen gray eyes.

An ambulance gong clanged harshly. Under cover of the confusion of picking up the dead man, Penny Pim mopped perspiration from his high forehead. The handkerchief slipped from his hand, still a bit shaky, and fell to the spot on the sidewalk just occupied by the dead man. He shivered a bit as he retrieved it, gingerly folding and replacing it in his coat pocket.

"I think," Detective Captain Linn said, "it might be a good thing if you came along with me to headquarters and told what happened. You apparently kept your eyes open." His smile was a trifle taut.

Penny nodded. He didn't know what he'd tell Naomi, but this was a case of necessity. Detective Linn ushered him into a squad car and it sired its way clear of the machines pack-jamming the avenue.

CHAPTER TWO

WELL," CAPTAIN LINN said pleasantly, a long blank of paper before him on the desk, "we'll start by asking your name."

"Pennington Pim, sir," Penny said.

"Now," Captain Linn went on, "what were you doing at the scene of murder?"

"I was walking from work. That's at the Government Printing Office near the river, lower Fourteenth Street. I always walk as the exercise is beneficial."

"No doubt," Linn said drily, looking over Penny's pale face, his soft body. "What do you do there?"

"I'm chief inspector. I look for errors in the printed currency. I've been there ten years. Before that I was in Commerce as head of the file room. I was in charge of all filing," Penny said proudly. "Millions of filing compartments. Well, almost." He grinned. "Actually, 978,023. I was sent to the Treasury Department to get the files in shape. Liked the work there and stayed on as an inspector."

"Ever see the dead man before?"

"No, sir. I know where he works, though."

"You know where he works!" shrilled the amazed detective. "How do you know where he works if you never saw him before?"

Penny Pim blushed. "W-well, I made a slight misstatement there, Mr. Linn. I should have said I know the work he's engaged in."

"And that is?" Linn snapped.

"He an engraver, sir. If you'd noticed his hands you would have seen they were discolored, the fingernails particularly. They weren't the same color of a photographer's fingernails who does his own developing, so I assumed he must be an engraver."

"You're pretty observant, aren't you?"

Penny blushed again. "I—I've just been trained to look at things. My work, you know." Penny smiled as if that explained everything. He smoothed

his Coldstream Guards mustache with thumb and forefinger.

"You got the number of the license plate?"

"Oh, certainly. It was almost the first thing I did. But I'll have to do a bit of figuring first." He motioned to a pad of paper. "Mind putting down two numbers as I call them?"

Brows curved into a puzzled frown, Linn nodded.

"Put down 931,738,206," Penny Pim instructed evenly.

Detective Captain Linn growled, but he put down the long figure in blunt numerals.

"Now," Penny said thoughtfully, "take it from 932,754,744. The remainder will be the number of the car."

"What are you handing me?" Linn snarled, his thin face blazing angrily. "I've a good notion to send you to St. Elizabeth's. You're completely nuts! What you need is a mental check-up."

"I forgot to explain," Penny apologized. "You see, when I walk down the street I add automobile license plates as a—a sort of pastime. The last license I added today brought the total to 931,738,206. After I saw the plate on the sedan I subconsciously added it to the total I already had and got 932,754,744. Naturally, the difference between the two numbers would be the license number you wanted. Quite simple, eh? Er—have you subtracted yet?"

"You mean you can carry figures like that in your head!" the detective shrilled, mouth hanging wide.

"Oh, certainly," Penny shrugged. "That really is nothing. Wait until you try to add all the numbers on an hour's

run of twenty or fifty dollar bills. Now, *that* calls for concentration!"

Detective Linn busied himself with his subtraction, finally looked up. "I get the number as 1,016,538."

"Exactly! Only it's 1 dash 016 dash 538," Penny explained. Then: "Now put House of Representatives in front of it."

Linn asked, frowning.

"I mean the initials HR," Penny explained, again apologetically. "As initials in front of the license number were R and H and this is the home of Congress, I put the name of the House down in my memory for association. That's pure mnemonics and a rather amateurish method of memory."

"I see," Linn sneered. "A new type of guide to Washington?"

"Precisely, sir." Penny beamed happily.

THERE WAS a knock at the door and Detective Linn pressed a button on his desk and a uniformed policeman came in. "We've found out who the dead man is, Cap'n," he said. "It's a guy by the name of Carveth. He's an engraver, has a small plant in Baltimore. Used to be with the Bureau of Engraving here in Washington."

"Engraver—*engraver!*" Linn flashed a look at Penny Pim, who nodded brightly. "Well, I'll be damned!" Then, brusquely: "Take this number, Brophy, and see who owns it. It's a Virginia license." Linn tore the sheet from the scratch pad and handed it over. The policeman nodded and left the room. Linn rubbed his pointed chin, eyed Penny. "Let's have the rest of it, Pim."

Penny nodded and talked while the detective put it down on the report. Across the room from him, Penny saw six rows of license tags on the wall. There were eight tags in each row, forty-eight in all, and each was from a different state. Penny assumed they were samples of the tags from every state in the union so that the Washington police could keep a check on the style and coloring used by each. Penny was always soothed by numbers, especially when they were neatly arranged in rows and readily seen. As he talked, Penny added the first row subconsciously. It took longer than ordinary, about ten seconds, because a part of his brain was talking to the detective about the murder.

He finished, sat back. Detective Linn nodded. "So you like to look at things, eh? Count 'em, too?" His eyes went for the first time to the forty-eight license plates. There was a triumphant look on his face as he snapped his gaze back to Penny Pim.

In one flash of his eyes, consuming only four seconds of time, Penny added the final rows of numbers of the license plates.

"Suppose," suggested Linn, a wise smirk on his face, "you tell me the total of those license plates on the wall. I'll give you five minutes, but no writing on paper." He sat back, well pleased with himself.

Penny grinned to himself. He already had the correct total firmly fixed in his mind. But he wanted Detective Captain Linn to be more amazed than he would have been had the total been given at that instant. He nodded,

flashed a glance up and down each row of figures, turned to the detective.

"The correct total is 5,121,952," Penny said evenly.

"I'll be—"

The door opened and Brophy came in. He shook his head. "No such number ever was issued in Virginia, sir."

"I thought so," Linn snarled. He swung on Penny Pim. "You're just a show-off, Pim! You didn't remember that plate number. You're just one of those smart guys who forever run to the police when anything happens. You're full of theories, know more about detective work than Sherlock Holmes. Just one of the mugs filled with melodrama who has to be in the limelight and get their names in the the paper. Bah!" He savagely tore the end from a slim stogie, held a match to the tip. "I'll show you up, you little punk!" He snapped up at Brophy. "Take down the numbers of those license plates and then add 'em on the machine in the outer office. I want this squirt made as sick as he looks."

"But, sir," Penny protested, "that *is* the number on the license tag! I *couldn't* be wrong! I've never made mistakes with small numbers like these. It's impossible!"

"Shut up!" roared Detective Linn, sitting back in his chair. He snapped: "Just because you happened to guess Carveth's occupation doesn't mean you're not a show-off."

He frowned and smoked his cigar in silence while the puzzled Brophy laboriously took down the numbers, walked from the room. In five minutes he was back, excitement showing on his

face. He handed the long strip from the adding machine to his superior.

DETECTIVE CAPTAIN LINN looked at the total, compared it with the one he had jotted down on the pad. He frowned, blinked, let ash from the stogie dribble to his coat without notice. He looked across at Penny Pim.

"You're right, by thunder! The total is 5,121,952!"

Penny Pim nodded, vastly pleased. "I can give you the total of each row, sir, or call out the individual numbers if you wish, without looking. That isn't difficult at all. It should prove I didn't make a mistake on the license number of that black sedan."

"Maybe," Linn nodded, but there was a hard look now in his keen eyes. He looked up at Brophy. "You got something to tell me?"

"Yes, sir," Brophy said. He stepped close to Penny, said: "The boys've been questioning that cab driver, Mike Duffy. First thing he said was the murder car was a *red* sedan. Then he saw something on the ground after the dead man, this Carveth, was moved."

"Yeah, Brophy, I know," Detective Linn said from lips that did not move. "I was waiting to see if this Pim would come clean." He glared at Penny. "I saw you wipe perspiration from your face at the scene of the murder, Pim, saw you *accidentally*—" he emphasized the word—"drop that handkerchief over something on the ground. That something under the dead man was a crumpled piece of paper! You tried to hide it. You gathered it in your handkerchief and put it in your coat pocket!

You're good at adding, Pim, so add *that* up for me! It's all a stall to try and throw the police off the scent. You got your facts *too* good, my buckaroo! You're in with the gang that bumped Carveth! Why, I don't yet know." Linn got to his feet. "Pim, I arrest you as an accessory to the murder of Carveth! Give me that handkerchief in your coat pocket!"

Face pale, mouth wide and blond little Coldstream Guards mustache trembling, Penny pulled the handkerchief from his coat pocket. First of all, he knew the sedan was *black*. Yes, he knew there was something in the handkerchief, all right, but he'd wanted to see it first. On the spur of the moment Penny had concealed evidence from the police. He didn't know why he had done it. He only knew some strange reason made him want to run down the murderers of the man who had lain bleeding at his feet.

And now he was jailed for murder! What would Naomi think? She'd never speak to him again. And tonight, a beautiful proposal of marriage filed word for word in Drawer M-A-1 in his mind, he had intended asking her that all important question.

He put a white hand to his chest, felt his thumping heart. He always had led a quiet and sedentary life. The excitement of the machine-gunning, the kaleidoscopic sequence of events, his misjudged motive on the note all contributed to the weak feeling that filled him. He felt as if he was about to faint.

"Ah-ha!"

Detective Captain Linn held a square of crumpled paper in his hand, waved

it triumphantly before Penny's startled eyes.

"Ah-haaaa!" repeated the detective, face flushed. "You *did* have something to do with this murder, Pim! Listen to this, Brophy." Linn read slowly:

Got word from Pim. Tonight is best time. Pick him up front Government Printing Office, lower 14th Street, about 6:25. Party will be in front Commerce Building about 6:30. Don't worry about Pim. All alibis worked out and no need worrying about the dumb police.

"No name signed to it," Linn snapped, "but I'll guarantee to sweat that out of you!" He stepped forward, caught Penny by the shoulder. "Pennington Pim," he rasped, "I arrest you for murder . . ." He stopped, stared in amazement at his suspect.

Penny Pim had fainted.

CHAPTER THREE

NAOMI, I LOVE YOU! I want you to be my wife, to share my life. I have money saved up, own a lot over in Alexandria where we can have a little cottage. I only make a small amount each year, dearest Naomi, but we can live well on it. I love you, my dear Naomi. . . ."

The proposal of marriage Penny had painstakingly composed and written down so as to be more readily remembered came easily from his lips. He knew every word of it, knew where each comma, semi-colon and period was placed. He often recited it backwards to himself so as to prove he knew it perfectly. It went like this:

"Naomi dear my, you love I. It on well live can we but, Naomi dearest, year each amount small a make only 1."

It was childishly simple.

Penny Pim opened his eyes, saw a laughing guard looking through the cell bars at him. Raucous sounds came from either side up and down the cell block. The sounds came from prisoners watching him wake to consciousness. Penny blushed. He knew he'd been proposing to Naomi in his dreams. That he was proposing aloud to the edification of a group of bums surrounding his cell was apparent and embarrassing.

"Thinkin' of the girl friend?" sneered the guard. "You'd better shut up. My boarders don't like too much noise." His laugh was echoed by the frowsy prisoners.

Penny looked at his wrist watch. He groaned. He knew Naomi long ago had left for her apartment. And he was in jail! He had tried to aid the police. He couldn't help it if he saw things, remembered them. It was part of his makeup. His job depended upon his keen eyes and a prodigious memory. And he was *chief inspector*.

When he was with the Department of Commerce he had kept hundreds of thousands of things in his incredible brain. Now, with the Treasury, he must scrutinize every bill coming from the tiers of presses, immediately recognize a hairline smudge, a microscopic blob of misplaced ink or hundreds of other minute errors. And while doing that he had learned to add the serial numbers on the bills. It made the hours pass quickly, gave his brain as well as

his eyes something absorbing to do.

Another thing Penny Pim knew was hot money. There were thousands of bills throughout the country listed as "hot." These bills had been stolen or paid out as ransom in kidnap cases, and the numbers recorded. But often the money got back into circulation because bank clerks would fail to note the numbers. The bills would become worn, eventually to return to Washington for redemption and to be destroyed.

It was also Penny's job to look over this worn and tattered currency to see if any of the numbers were "hot." If hot money was found then it was traced back to the bank sending it in and an effort made by the FBI-men or T-men to see if the crooks were still in that locality. Penny Pim had helped capture several criminals in that manner for he had memorized all the vast series of numbers on the hot bank notes. It was an exhilarating task for his peculiar type of brain.

Penny looked up as he heard footsteps coming along the corridor. He saw Detective Captain Linn motion to the jailer, heard keys jangle. The next instant the door swung wide.

"I don't know how I ever can apologize, Mr. Pim," Detective Linn said seriously. "I made a mistake, that's all. I've been looking you up, have checked your superiors with the Treasury. By checking the time you left the printing office against a normal rate of walking, I find you could not possibly have been in with that gang. Everything you've said is true. You're free, Mr. Pim." He grinned.

"All right," Penny grated out. He

was very angry and the laughter of the jailer and the prisoners a while before hadn't helped him. "It's easy enough for you to say that. But what about my girl friend who waited for me? How about her? She's mad now, probably went off with—with—" Penny was making it harder than he knew it was, "with some other fellow! And all on account of your stupid police just as it said in that note!"

"Yeah," Linn snapped, angry now. "I still don't understand that note. It's got your name in it twice. You should feel damn' lucky to get off at all. You're still under suspicion, my buckaroo! Now beat it before I change my mind."

"I don't know anything about that note, Linn," Penny snapped, pale face taut. "I—I did see it on the ground, wondered why you or that park policeman didn't see it first. I wanted to help solve the case, pull the note out here at headquarters and show it to you. I suppose it looked like I *was* in with the gang, for you saw the note after all. And the color of the sedan was black, not red like that dumb cab driver says! Now that you've treated me as you have I'll just let you work the rest out for yourself. I'm pretty sure I could lead you right to the murderers, but—"

Penny turned sharply on his heel, walked out. Strangely, his brain now was clear, was racing along with blinding speed. He knew exactly what procedure he was going to go through to find the murderers of Carveth!

TWO BLOCKS down the street he saw a pay station in a cigar store. He walked in a booth, got long distance.

Penny Pim—Accidental Detective

A minute later he was talking to the warden in charge of the Virginia State Prison.

"I—er—I'm calling for Detective Captain Linn, Washington Metropolitan Police," Penny lied easily. Then: "I believe you make all the automobile license tags in your state? I thought so. Give me the name of the last man released from the stamping department. Ummmm. Home in Alexandria, eh? Kiki Mawson, eh? Owned a garage there, did he? Thanks a lot, warden." Penny hung up.

His first deduction had turned out splendidly. He hadn't been fooled by that license tag. It was of authentic manufacture, he had been sure. He also knew Virginia state convicts made the tags. It was as easy as adding ten six-place figures together. That tag must have been manufactured by a convict in the state stamping factory, smuggled out to the gang! And it was natural to suppose the last men leaving the factory was the one responsible.

The police could look up the number of that tag as much as they pleased; it wasn't even on the records. Yet it would never arouse suspicion as it was authentic down to the last detail, was made like all the rest of the Virginia tags, on state machinery and with the real dies! It was pretty clever, Penny thought.

That the last man released from prison who worked in the stamping department lived in Alexandria, just across the river from Washington, was a stroke of luck. His name was Kiki Mawson and he had been paroled two weeks before, had reported each Satur-

day night to Alexandria police as required. And Kiki Mawson was a mechanic, had a garage when he was caught receiving property. He also had been mixed up with a wire-tapping gang operating out of Pimlico, the race track . . .

Pimlico—PIM!

That's where that name of his had come in! Penny saw the words of the note as if they were in front of him. "Got word from Pim." Also further along in the note: "Don't worry about Pim." The note referred to some person the writer had met in Pimlico! The name of the track had merely been abbreviated into "Pim."

Penny Pim grinned to himself as the taxicab turned right off the bridge on the far side of the Potomac, headed for the river drive leading to Alexandria. Penny paid off the driver at King Street, walked to the drug store on the corner and made for the phone booth.

He was taking a chance on the Southern R. R. freight office being open, and it was. In a minute he had the night freight agent on the telephone. "Who's talking?" Penny asked softly.

"This is Holland, night freight agent, sir."

"Oh, yes, Holland," Penny said, now making his voice gruff. "By the way, how many pieces of sheet steel were in that last shipment I got from you?"

"Just a minute, sir. This is Mr. Rawson, isn't it?"

"No. Name's *Mawson*," Penny corrected with an excited grin.

"I meant Mawson," the freight agent said. There was a pause for a minute and Penny dimly heard the rustle of

papers. Then: "There were eighteen pieces, Mr. Mawson. You got all of them?"

"Yes," Penny said quickly, "but there seems to be some mistake. I got a bill for them this afternoon, but the address was wrong. By the way, what address have you on the waybill?"

"At the garage, sir. Let's see. The address is Gem Garage, 8418 Ort Mill Road. That's you, isn't it?"

"Yes," Penny said, voice shrill with excitement. "That's all."

Ten minutes later, behind the wheel of a Drive-It-Yourself coupe, Penny Pim was headed toward the Ort Mill Road. According to the way the numbers ran the garage must be several miles out. Penny guessed it was a combination soft drink spot and garage, possibly with living quarters attached.

Penny came to the crest of a hill, stopped the car. Facing him at a turn in the road below was a cluster of lights. He took a knife with a long blade from his pocket, got to the road and walked to the rear of the car. After a minute of sawing with the blade he managed to get the point through the casing. There was a sharp hissing of air. Penny got back into the car, released the brakes and coasted toward the cluster of lights in the little valley and the electric sign which read *Gem Garage*.

CHAPTER FOUR

THERE WERE three men in the room. Two of them looked at the third, a man wearing a cab driver's badge on his shirt. The number was #490.

"Go ahead, Mike," one of the men prompted.

"Well, like I said, Mawson," Mike Duffy began, "I filled the police full of wrong info just like you told me to do. I told 'em the car that almost runs me down is red and they believe that. I says it has a District license. Gunner," he nodded to a youth with burning black eyes sitting opposite him, "happens to drop the note from his pocket, I suppose, because when they picks up the stiff I sees it.

"Then this guy, Pim's his name, who comes running up makes like he was wiping sweat. He drops his handkerchief and picks up the note. Pim is the sort who likes to shoot off his face, knows everything. I knew he'd tell the coppers about the note. Well, I goes on down to headquarters, as was planned, and tells the dicks about seeing this Pim palm the note. I tells it before he gets a chance to, and it sure gets him in bad.

"The door is open four-five times and I overhears him telling everything he knows. And, Mawson, it was puh-lenty! That guy sure uses his eyes. But when I tells 'em Pim picks up the note and was hidin' it they locks him up. He'll be in there from now on. They'll throw the key away. I—"

"Wait a minute," Mawson interrupted. Kiki Mawson was a big man, had a bald head, small eyes' set close together in a prison-gray, puffy face, a cruel mouth. "You say this guy's name is Pim?"

"Yeah," Duffy nodded, "something Pim. Didn't get his first name, but his last name is Pim."

"I'll be damned!" Mawson laughed. "That note has the word 'Pim' in it twice! Only it refers to Gunner here." Mawson jerked his thumb at the little man with the burning eyes. "It was from Hugon and he's referring to the man from Pimlico, Gunner Wry! Hugon, by the way, is due here tonight with the jack. We picked Gunner up down in front of the Government Printing Office on lower 14th Street. I let him see the note and he must've stuck it in his pocket, then dropped it when he made a dash for the brief case after tommy-gunning Carveth. Jeeze," his laugh was loud, "it's a good thing he *did* drop it. This Pim punk will take the rap for us!"

"But he got all the dope on the car, this time, the fact that Carveth had a brief case chained to his wrist!" Duffy shrilled.

"Yeah, but that note'll put him in the chair, Mike," Mawson laughed. He lit a cigarette. "He's nice and safe behind bars now."

"Maybe so," Duffy worried. "But he saw the kind of tires, the bent place in the fender, knew the car was armored—"

"How'd he know that?" Mawson asked incredulously.

"Well, he saw it was mighty low on the rubber and guessed the rest, I suppose. Those steel plates weigh down on the tires pretty heavy, you know. Hell, he even saw Gunner's new shoes!"

"Uh?" Gunner looked up, then at his spotless shoes.

Mawson laughed. "Don't you worry, Gunner. Mr. Pim will have nice board-

ing for a long time. What if this Pim did see you? That was a good guess about the car being armored, though. He's a smart guy at that." Mawson nodded.

THERE WAS a knock at the door and Mawson growled: "Come in," and moved his hand near his left armpit. A man dressed in dirty coveralls entered the room. He was short, heavy, had a tanned face with an oil smudge across the chin. Mawson grinned. "Oh, it's you, Scotty. How's the gas and oil business?"

"Rotten," Scotty said, face in a frown. "I gotta guy out there in a push-it-yourself who's got a flat. Looks like the damn tire's been sliced with a knife. Looks phoney to me."

"You guys got a case of the heebie-jeebies," Mawson jibed. "Go ahead and fix the tire and get him out of the way. You won't have to play garageman after tonight, Scotty. But what's the guy doing now? Suppose he'd followed you in here?"

"This guy!" Scotty laughed. "Don't be silly. He ain't got sense enough for that. I left him out there with a soda pop and he's—"

The telephone jangled and Mawson reached for it.

"Yeah, Mawson talking," he said. He listened for a few seconds, said: "Naw, I didn't phone you about steel plates. Sure, I got my shipment the other day. Oh, the second shipment's in, eh? What the hell! Don't you think I'd know if I called you? Oh. Oh-h-hh, I see." Mawson slowly cradled the receiver. His face was pale, taut. His

hand flipped to his left armpit and an automatic showed. When he spoke the words were low but the others could not mistake the urgency in them.

"It was the freight agent in Alexandria. Said when I talked to him a while ago he forgot tell me the second shipment of plates for the other armored car was in. And I didn't phone him! That shows someone's on the trail! The coppers may be surrounding us right now!"

"Maybe this little guy with the yellow mustache is spying things out, Mawson," Scotty said excitedly. He felt of his pocket. "Hell, I left my gat in the drawer of the desk. It was so heavy—"

"Yellow mustache!" Mike Duffy shrilled, face strained. "Has he got yellow hair, a big forehead?"

"That's the guy!" Scotty yelled. He turned toward the door.

"Golly, how'd he get outta jail?" Duffy shrilled.

"Wait!" The command snarled from Mawson. He held up his hand, motioned the others to gather around. "Listen, you guys. Scotty, you go back and stall with that puncture. We'll slip around back and all jump him at once. Then we'll take that baby for a nice buggy ride—"

"I don't think so, Mawson!"

Penny Pim stood in the doorway. In his hand was an automatic which he held in a steady grip.

"Cripes, my gun!" Scotty snarled.

"It'd be too bad to get killed with your own gun," Penny said with a hard smile.

It was all incredible to Penny Pim. He couldn't quite understand it. Here

he was holding up a gang of desperate criminals and he was cool and collected as if he were inspecting ten-dollar bills as they came from the presses. But he was angry. Detective Linn had made him that way with his derisive laughter, his sneers and jibes.

"How the hell did you find us?" Mawson asked, pale face working. "I thought everything was covered."

"Just a matter of thinking things out and keeping my eyes open," Penny said modestly. He saw Duffy for the first time. "Ah, Duffy, eh? I had more than an idea you were mixed up in this. I saw you eyeing that note and ready to pick it up. I managed to beat you to it. Then, at headquarters, you saw a chance to frame me because my name was used in the note. Out in the garage I saw the black sedan and the counterfeit license tag is exactly as I gave it to Linn." He looked at Mawson. "Imagine the note referred to someone coming from Pimlico."

"Yeah, Gunner's from Pimlico," Mawson snarled. "It was pretty clever figuring that out and I don't see how you found me."

"Really rather simple, Mawson, and I'll tell you just to show how all crooks are caught." Penny explained about the automobile license and his deduction that it had been made by a convict working in the state stamping factory. "Now all the items of which I made mental pictures check." His grin was triumphant. "Even to the killer's new shoes!"

"Jeeze!" Mawson looked at Penny and there was awe in his close-set eyes. "I oughta have a punk like you tied

up with me. I sure could make a place for a guy with your head!"

"You'll do the tying up, Mawson," Penny said sternly. "Start in right now with Mike Duffy! There's some wire over there in the corner. Duffy, put your hands behind you. And, Mawson," there was no mistaking Penny's meaning, "don't make the mistake of doing a bad job of it."

"Damn, caught by a punk!" Mawson groaned as he tied up the taxi driver and turned toward the others.

"I imagine it's plates for a ten- or twenty-dollar bill that's behind all this," Penny offered in a casual tone.

"Well, you seem to know everything so I might as well tell you," Mawson growled, busy with the wire. "Yeah, a twenty. Carveth, the engraver, made 'em. They're photo-engraved with the blurry lines tooled out by hand. Carveth used to be in the Bureau of Engraving."

"And your machine-gunner killed him so there'd be one less to divide with," Penny stated. Then: "You're going to jail, Mawson, and I'm doing my best to see that all of you get the chair! And at the same time I'm showing up that hick of a detective, Linn! Yes, Mawson, you and the others will burn—"

"No, Mr. Big Talk, *you're* going to burn unless you drop that gat!"

Penny Pim froze. Something very hard was jamming into his backbone, pressing inexorably and menacingly. A gun!

"Hugon!" Mawson cried excitedly.

"Hugon!" Mawson again yelled relievedly. "Boy, am I glad to see you!

Wait, I'll just get this punk's gun."

He snatched the gun from Penny's lax hand and pocketed it. Then, close-set eyes wild with rage, gross face flushed, he slammed out with his fist. The hard knuckles connected with Penny's mouth, cut both lips. He tasted salty blood on his tongue and his knees began to melt beneath him. He groped out with both hands in an effort to catch hold of something. Again Mawson's knuckles slammed his face and he fell backward into merciful unconsciousness.

CHAPTER FIVE

PENNY OPENED his eyes to find his head was pounding like the automatic stamping machine that turned out half-dollars as if they were so many links of sausage. His shoulders ached; in fact, he felt bad all over. The men Mawson bound had been released and were glaring at him with cruel eyes from across the room.

He didn't like playing at detective. He wished he hadn't been so short with Detective Captain Linn. Right at the moment he would have welcomed Linn with open arms—no, that would take a lot of physical effort and he ached in every joint, felt as if many bones were broken.

A kick from Mawson's big foot brought Penny back to life. He sat up, wondered what the big red things were that he could see just by glancing downward. He decided after a moment that the red things were his swollen lips and the blood clotted on his Coldstream Guards mustache. He also decided he

was in something of a tight spot.

A man he had not seen before was eyeing him keenly. Penny decided it must be Hugon. The man nodded. "Yeah, he's a punk, all right. Better get rid of him and *quick!*"

Hugon was a tall man, with red hair and strangely light blue eyes. He wore a perpetual frown on his face, and his mouth was so thin-lipped as to appear only a gash across his narrow face. He turned to Mawson, tapped a brief case he carried in his hand.

"Here's the fifty grand, Mawson. What you told me of this punk makes me want to close the deal in a hurry. He's smart and the way he worked things out is better than the lousy cops could've done. Maybe he found some way to tip 'em off. By the way, I brought the jack in fives, tens and twenties. My collections in New York have been pretty good the past few weeks so I got the jack in small bills and saved it for you. That's better than big money on a deal like this and you can get rid of it quicker. Suppose you count it up, give me the two sets of plates for the phony twenties and I'll shove off."

"That's the stuff," Mawson nodded. "We're blowing too. Miami on the five-ten plane in the morning. I've already reserved seats and was just waiting for you with the jack before sending Scotty for tickets."

Penny watched Mawson as he counted the stacks of neatly banded currency. He saw the plates on the table. He got slowly to his feet. Plates for printing currency were something he knew a lot about. He moved closer, looked them over with a critically appraising

eye. They were masterpieces, all right. He saw they were a photo-engraved job but the blurry lines had been hand tooled so as to make them sharp.

They would pass an expert's eye—almost.

"Well, punk, what do you think of 'em?" Mawson rasped.

"Only fair," Penny managed to say through his split lips.

"Whatcha mean?" Hugon snarled, thin gash of a mouth straight across his face. He looked at Mawson. "You trying to put something over, Mawson? The deal was that the four plates were to be perfect."

Penny Pim laughed, his pale blue eyes sparkling with excitement. "If they're perfect why should he be selling them? Why shouldn't he keep them and turn out the counterfeit twenties himself. Ever think of *that?*"

"Say!" Hugon was instantly suspicious. He looked keenly at Penny. "From what Mawson says you're a real expert on this kind of stuff. Suppose you look 'em over. I brought a magnifying glass along so's to look at the plates myself. You take it." He reached into his pocket and handed over a large reading glass.

Penny took the glass and studied the plates for long minutes. They were good, very good, but he found a dozen minute places where mistakes had been made. A part of a decorative wreath that had stems shorter than the original, thirteen and a half lines in one place instead of fourteen long ones. Little things, yes, but glaring errors when the T-men and FBI-men got on the trail.

"The best way to do, Hugon," Penny said, "is to compare the plates with the real money here." He motioned to the stack of currency Hugon had brought in the brief case.

"Go ahead," Hugon snapped.

Penny reached for a stack of currency, riffled it through his fingers until he came to the twenty dollar bank notes. Suddenly he was very excited and his fingers trembled a bit. As he handled the worn bills a vague plan was taking shape behind his bulging forehead. He came to a bill, nodded for Hugon to look through the glass.

"Look at this corner decoration on the original, Hugon, and then at the plates. See how thick the lines are on the plate? Too thick. A Fed would spot them at once. Let me show you some more bad engraving. I can best point them out by using some of these five and tens." He reached for a stack of them.

Penny arranged a number of the bills, one on top of the other. As he did so he pointed out where errors occurred on the plates. "Even though these are fives and tens, Hugon, they're engraved just like the twenties. Here is the same type of line and corner arrangement on this ten as you'll find on the twenty. See where the plate is wrong? You'd have a Fed on your trail . . ."

"That's enough, punks!"

PENNY PIM and Hugon looked up in startled surprise. Across the room Mawson stood tense with his three men. All had guns ready.

"Why—why, what's this?" Hugon shrilled, red face flaming.

"A stick-up," Mawson spat out, cruel lips twisted. "We're getting the jack *and* the plates! We were doing it anyway, Hugon. You came here by yourself. You and this punk, Pim, will take a ride together just before we leave for the Miami plane." He stepped forward, face taut, snapped: "Scotty, get some jack and drive over after the tickets. You can get to the airport and back in thirty minutes. Here's the jack."

Face white, Penny handed the stack of money he held in his hand to the raging Mawson. "T-T-There's j-just six hundred d-dollars there, M-Mawson," he said haltingly, voice hollow with foreboding.

"And that's just enough, punk," Mawson snarled savagely. His fist *spatted* to the side of Penny's face as he grabbed the money. He handed it to Scotty, who nodded and raced from the room.

"Now," Mawson said nastily, "we've got a nice little wait. Punk, you and Hugon get across the room and sit on the floor. Gunner, take Hugon's gat." He looked at his watch. "It's twelve-thirty now. We'll sit up the rest of the night. We gotta leave here about quarter of five in the morning. There's too many people on these roads now to try a rub-out. We'll wait. It's still dark at five and we can get rid of these punks on the way to the airport."

It was a long night! Penny Pim sat against the wall, his sore and protesting muscles screaming in agony whenever he moved. If there was only some way to be *sure!* He certainly was through playing detective. It wasn't the life for a—for a man who had a girl like Naomi

waiting! He wondered what she was thinking. Was she very angry? Or just hurt because he failed to show up for the movie date?

A battered alarm clock on the table ticked off the long seconds, each one bringing him closer to eternity. There was no way out now. The chance he had taken was a big one, the—

"Boss, I'm getting the heebies. Let's take these punks out and get it over with." Gunner Wry jerked to his feet, eyes dancing crazily.

"What time is it?" Mawson asked with a yawn.

"After four," Scotty said sleepily. "I'm damn' tired of holding this gat on these two punks. My wrist feels like it's breaking. I'm with the Gunner, Mawson. Let's find a nice big ditch for these guys and then ride around a bit before the plane leaves."

"Well, okay," Mawson agreed. "You got the tickets? Each of us take one, see? We won't speak to each other on the plane." He looked across at Penny and Hugon. "All right, punks, hop up! We'll take a little ride and then—"

Dazed, body and head aching, Penny got slowly to his feet. If there was only some way he could gain time. His plan *had* to work, simply had to! If he had just another hour. . . .

Then Penny Pim threw back his head and laughed. It was a cackling, creaking sort of a laugh, but it expressed a sardonic mirth that was grating, almost hysterical.

"What the hell?" Mawson yelled, pasty face angrily red.

"The money!" Penny shrilled. "You—you think—you're getting away with

it! Fools! You utter damned fools!"

"For a plugged copper I'd chop this guy in two!" Gunner Wry raised his tommy-gun, scowling.

"Wait!" Mawson ordered. He swerved on Penny. "What do you mean?"

"You fool!" Penny croaked. "Don't you realize all that money is hot? Sure it's hot! Stolen money, ransom money! The number of every bill is on record in every bank and police department in America! They'll catch you before you even get to Miami!"

"Damn you, Hugon!" Mawson swerved, jerked up his gun.

A wild scream came from Penny's bruised lips. The grating keening of his shriek made Mawson jerk. The next moment Penny had the gunman's arm in both hands. He twisted, pulled. Somewhere he had read that *ju jitsu* was done by pulling and twisting. By an incredible piece of luck he did everything just right. Mawson parabolae'd over Penny's hunched-up back, crashed to the floor. Just before his body hit Penny jerked once more and a bone cracked.

HUGON, FACE red and eyes flashing, jumped for Gunner Wry who was trying to raise his machine gun in the cramped room. The red-headed man got the gun. Gunner, body and muscles set for a terrific jerk, braced himself. Instead, Hugon pushed the gun and the butt of it got Gunner Wry in the throat. He fell back, gurgling a strangled scream.

Scotty and Mike Duffy converged on Penny for a quick kill. Hugon turned, panting hard, at Penny's wild scream

of alarm. He jumped forward, made for Duffy. The taxi driver pulled trigger and the bullet caught Hugon in the center of the forehead. Duffy yelled, turned the gun on Penny Pim.

Penny saw the man's finger tighten on the trigger, saw the flesh whiten. He threw himself forward the instant the shot sounded. Something terribly hot flashed through his shoulder. Then unconsciousness again swooped down and enveloped him. . . .

Penny Pim awoke to a feeling of oppression. He couldn't breathe, couldn't suck enough air into his straining lungs.

"Take it easy, fellow."

Penny opened his eyes, looked up. Staring down at him, keen blue eyes understanding, was a man. The clean-cut face relaxed into a smile. "I'm Grant, Treasury Department," he said. "It took us three hours to get the message, Mr. Pim."

"M-message?" a voice croaked.

Penny turned his eyes with a mighty effort, saw Mawson staring at him.

The T-man grinned. "Sure, a message. Mr. Pim recognized at once that all the money Hugon was giving you for the plates was hot. Hugon collected it from fifty or more different cases in the New York rackets." He flashed an admiring look at Penny Pim. "Maybe you're feeling well enough to tell it, Mr. Pim," he suggested.

Penny nodded. "Sure, Mr. Grant. I—I knew it would get into circulation tonight as Scotty was going to pay for the plane tickets. I managed to have just the right amount ready for Mawson when he sent Scotty for them. While I was comparing the money with the

plates I arranged the bills to spell out a message. A certain bank note's number told me it was from the Apperson extortion case, in New York. Another number was one I remembered from the Halpern kidnaping case.

"All banks, ticket offices, and places where there is a big turnover in currency, have orders not to disturb the *order* in which hot bills are placed, but to call the FBI or T-men at once. The ticket seller apparently kept his head and did just that. I spelled out, using the numbers on the bank notes in a special case as the key, the words: HELP—8418 ORT MILL ROAD—HELP T-MEN. The "H's" were bills from the Halpern case and whose numbers the T-men had on file, the "O's" came from the Offenburger case, in Newark, and so on. I picked an H, D, A and H for the address of the Gem Garage, as they are the 8th, 4th, 1st and 8th letters of the alphabet."

"You're a real detective, Mr. Pim," Grant said softly. "I wish I had some men like you in my division!"

"Just an accidental detective, Mr. Grant, and—and really rather interesting work," Penny Pim said weakly. He smiled with strained effort, whispered: "But I showed up the great Detective Linn, my buckaroo!" His head lolled back. Before his dazed eyes materialized the features of Naomi.

"Naomi dear my, you love I," Penny Pim whispered. "It on well live can we but — Naomi dearest — year each — amount—small—a—make—only—I—"

"Poor fellow," T-man Grant said gravely, "he's completely out of his head!"

A fortunate man is one who can emerge from a variety of experiences with a fuller life. Such has been the case of Jackson Gregory, reporter, cowpuncher, press agent, teacher, principal and . . . free-lance writer. Perhaps that is why he can treat, as he does in "Indian Gift," the seriousness of the young which is so often overlooked or underestimated. His Chuck is a kid with the wrong dream in the right heart. We have all been guilty of hero worship. In many instances, we have termed it friendship. But how many of us have been asked to kill for it!

Indian Gift

by JACKSON GREGORY

THE SOCIETY POOL HALL is way out on Ninety-fifth. When you enter it, there is first a magazine stand and a cigar counter. Then you go back to the pool room. There are six pool tables and two snooker tables. Except for them and for the few chairs and the cue-racks along the walls there isn't any other furniture. But it's a popular place and somebody is always in there.

This night it was crowded. All the tables were busy and ten or fifteen men who weren't playing were standing around watching. All day it had been sweltering, and now in the big room tobacco smoke hung in flat clouds in the hot, dead air. The blended murmur of voices was lifeless, sapped of energy.

Two men were at the third table. The one whose turn it was, stood back chalking his cue and studying the balls. He

was tall and lean and the front of his face was a flat plane broken by the beak of his nose. His coat was off and the blue of his shirt was dark with sweat.

As he set the chalk on the edge of the table, he growled: "This is a lousy setup." He wiped the fingers of his left hand on his pants, leaned over the table. His shot missed. He stepped back in disgust, weighted his cue in his hand as though it were to blame.

The other man at the table was a silk-stocking salesman. He was short and fat and too uncomfortably hot to take any interest in the game. He shot carelessly. Then he asked: "Going upstairs tonight, Nick?"

"I am like hell!" the fat-faced man snapped. "That louse Moxie is sitting in. You don't catch me in a game with a chiseler like him."

At the next table Chuck Daly was leaning over to shoot when Nick said that. Chuck was big and husky and to hear him you'd think he was a tough guy. But, underneath his bigness and his toughness he was just a blond kid seventeen years old. He should have been out trying to find a job instead of spending his time there in the pool hall where he got ideas.

When Nick said that about Moxie he straightened up and turned around. His face had lines in it that you wouldn't look for in a kid seventeen years old, and now those lines were harsh, angry. He stepped over to Nick, spun him around.

He looked straight into Nick's eyes and said: "What're you blowing off about sour-puss?"

Nick couldn't figure it out. "What's got into you, kid?" he snapped.

"You were shooting your mouth off about Moxie!" Chuck crowded the flat-faced man back against the edge of the table. "Maybe I didn't hear right—what was it you said?"

Chuck was big and very husky, even though he was only a kid. It was plain enough to see that where he was concerned this guy Moxie was tops. Nick should have seen that, but he was hot and irritable and he didn't like being pushed around.

"If it's any of your business," he snarled, "I said that he was a stinking rat and that . . ."

Chuck dropped his cue to the floor. He reached up with his left hand and took hold of the front of Nick's shirt. Nick tried to slug, but he couldn't do anything. Chuck bent him back over

the table and then reached up with his right hand and slapped Nick's head from side to side on the green felt.

Pop is the guy who owns the Society Pool Hall. Pop is sixty and bald, and he learned a very large number of years ago how to handle men. He came back and dragged Chuck off of Nick, shouldered the two of them apart. He kept them that way until they had cooled down enough to listen to him, then he said:

"Okay, boys, what's it all about?"

"That punk!" Chuck glowered past Pop at the flat-faced man. "He thinks he can go around cracking his face about Moxie behind Moxie's back. If he had the guts . . ."

"I got a pool hall here," Pop said. "I don't run it for guys to fight in. You started the rough stuff, Chuck, so you're going to beat it out of here. You don't come back at all tonight."

"You think that breaks my heart?" Chuck grabbed up his cue, strode over to the wall with it, slammed it in its rack. He went toward the door without even looking back at Nick.

Pop followed after him, stopped him when he reached the counter up front.

"Wait a minute, Chuck," Pop said. "Don't get sore about me running you out of here. You get in a fight and I got to do that. It's business."

Chuck shrugged his shoulders. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. Now look Chuck, I know it's none of my business and I'm not trying to butt in but . . ." Pop leaned one elbow on the cigar counter, looked narrowly at the blond boy. "Nick Alisino is pretty big stuff in the policy game.

He's not the kinda guy I'd want to be smacking around."

"That guy!" Chuck knew that he had made a damn-fool play, and it scared him a little, but the sneer he put on his face hid that. "I'd like to see him try something."

"Okay," Pop shrugged. "I don't think he will try anything."

If you'd been going by outside on the sidewalk then and had looked in through the window that had Society Pool Hall written on it in white letters, you probably would have stopped for a minute to watch those guys in there. You would have seen that it didn't matter that one of them was old and the other just a kid—you would have seen that each one of them really had something on the ball. But you wouldn't have heard Pop say in his soft voice:

"You think Moxie's a pretty swell guy, don't you, Chuck?"

Chuck's answer was: "So what!" No kid seventeen is going to admit that everything he does, he tries to do just the way he thinks Moxie would do.

"Moxie's okay." Pop knew better than to come out and tell the kid that Moxie was a rat. "But Moxie's not the kinda guy to tie your kite to. He fights his own fights, and don't give a damn for me—or you, Chuck. He's not a guy that's going to do you any good."

Chuck looked pityingly at Pop. He liked the old guy but well, that was it. Pop was old, and what did he know about the things a guy had to face today? Now Moxie was different. He wasn't old, and he was on his toes.

Chuck said: "Don't go worrying yourself about me. I can take plenty

good care of myself in this town."

"Sure," Pop nodded. "Now you can beat it on home and next time you come in here don't go starting no fights."

CHUCK DIDN'T go home. He went to a joint across the street and half way down the block where they would sell him beer without asking how old he was. The bar was crowded so he took his beer across the room and watched a guy playing a pin game. There were six racing cars lighted up on the board at the back of the machine and every time the ball hit a spring one of the cars jumped ahead.

By stringing his drinks out, Chuck made the thirty cents in his pocket stretch out for almost two hours. All that time he kept glancing at the door of the pool hall. Moxie was in a poker game on the third floor up above Pop's place, and pretty soon he'd be coming out.

It was one-thirty when Moxie came out. Chuck set his empty glass on the bar, went out of the joint, crossed the street. He pretended he didn't know Moxie was there, and that he hadn't seen him.

Moxie was slender and dark and dressed like he had his own tailor. He had a thin line of a mustache on his lip and he was very good-looking—like Ronald Colman. Chuck knew that, because he could never look like Moxie no matter how much he tried.

When he was ten feet away Chuck looked up and like he hadn't seen Moxie before, said: "Oh, hello, Mr. Harper."

"Hello, Chuck." Moxie's voice was

low and smooth. "The boys inside were telling me about you and Nick."

That made Chuck feel good and at the same time uncomfortable. He said: "Aw, that wasn't anything, Mr. Harper."

"My friends call me Moxie, Chuck."

"Yeah, sure—Moxie."

The gambler took a thin silver cigarette case from his pocket. He opened it, held it out toward Chuck. Then he lighted his and Chuck's cigarettes with his silver lighter.

"Guys like Nick . . ." Moxie studied the tip of his cigarette. He knew the blond kid in front of him thought he was just right. "You don't pay any attention to what guys like him say. He's small stuff. I'm betting that you're going to be a big shot one of these days, Chuck, and then you'll have a lot of guys like Nick that are jealous of you."

"Yeah, that's right." Chuck blew a cloud of smoke at the top of his cigarette. Moxie was smart. He knew just how to handle a punk.

A taxi came by then and Moxie flicked his hand at it. When it pulled to the curb he said: "I got something here, Chuck. I'd like to give it to you." He reached in his pocket, took out a rabbit's foot. It was about an inch and a half long set in an ivory cap. Moxie held it out.

"This has brought me plenty of luck in the last ten years." That wasn't true because Moxie had bought it for a quarter a couple of days before. "I'm giving it to you because you've got the sort of stuff in you I like."

When Moxie went away in the cab, Chuck stood there turning the rabbit's

foot back and forth between his fingers. Inside he was hot and excited and more sure of himself than he had ever been. Moxie had said that some day he would be a big shot, and then Moxie had given him this rabbit foot, Moxie's own lucky rabbit foot.

Chuck went on down the sidewalk with his hand in his pocket and the rabbit's foot tight in his hand. He thought about Pop and that gave him a laugh. At lot Pop knew about Moxie! Or about anything else.

Half the summer went by before Moxie stopped again to talk to Chuck. Whenever he saw the blond kid he'd say, "Hello, Chuck, how goes it?" and Chuck would answer: "Swell, Moxie!" but it was never more than that.

Two or three times Chuck saw Nick in the pool hall, but he remembered how Moxie had told him: "You don't pay any attention to guys like that." He had pretended Nick didn't exist, and Nick hadn't come over to try and start anything.

That rabbit's foot was one thing Chuck had with him all the time. He knew that one of these days he was going to be a big shot like Moxie. When he didn't have anything else to do, he'd shove his hand in his pocket and roll the rabbit's foot back and forth between his fingers.

The night that Moxie stopped him, it was along toward the last of August. Chuck was over on Seventy-ninth and Moxie pulled up alongside of him in a cab and got out.

"Hello, Chuck," Moxie said. He came over and put out his hand.

"How are you, Moxie." Chuck tried

not to let it show on his face that it was something special for Moxie to shake hands with him.

Moxie started up the sidewalk. "If you're not busy how about having a drink?"

"Sure."

The gambler led the way to a beer joint and to a booth in the back. He ordered two whiskeys from the waiter.

When the waiter brought their drinks, Chuck raised his, said: "Here's mud in your eye."

Moxie nodded absently. He turned his drink around on the table, frowned at it. After a couple of minutes he asked softly: "You're not working, are you, Chuck?"

"No," Chuck said. "There's not a thing a guy can make any money at."

Moxie looked up, studied the kid. "You could use a little money?"

"Could I?" Chuck leaned forward to say how much he could use money. Then he saw that would be blowing off his face, so all he said was: "Yeah, I could use a little money."

"I've been thinking about you," Moxie told him. "You look like the right kind of a guy to me—a guy that's got guts. Maybe you'd fit in on this little idea I got in mind."

"Try me," Chuck said.

Moxie lifted his drink, sipped at it. "Maybe you wouldn't like this job. If we get caught at it, we'll either get a slug in the back or a stretch up the river."

"So what." Chuck shrugged. "Maybe even that'd be better than sitting around. What's the job?"

"You remember Nick Alisino?"

"Sure, but don't tell me that guy's in on it."

"He's in on it, all right," Moxie said. "He's the guy we're going to take. That's what guys like him are for—to keep you and me in the dough."

Chuck was puzzled. "How?" he asked. "What can we get out of that guy?"

"Plenty!" Moxie's voice was very low now, so that Chuck had to lean over the table to hear. "Nick's the boy that picks up the numbers racket dough. He collects from the spots this side of Sixtieth every Thursday. This is Thursday, Chuck, and he's walking around with five or ten grand in his pocket. I know a spot where a coupla guys with enough guts could take him easy."

"Yeah?" Chuck felt down into his pocket. The rabbit's foot was there and it looked like it had brought him his break. A job—a big job—with Moxie. "Sounds okay."

The gambler smiled. "I knew you were the guy I wanted in on this with me." He looked at the watch on his wrist. "Nine now, nearly. Alisino collects at the hash houses across from Murchison's warehouse at about eleven. You meet me there in the alley at thirty. That'll give us plenty time."

"Swell." Chuck's eyes were shining. "I'm going to get a kick outa that mug's face when we take him."

BACK IN the alley at the side of the warehouse it was dark. Chuck, waiting there against the loading platform, could see out the mouth of the alley to the cheap little restaurant across the Wilton Street. In there, a woman

was waiting on a guy at the counter.

Chuck was scared. He kept taking the rabbit's foot out of his pocket and rubbing it between his hands. If anything went wrong . . . It wasn't the cops he was scared of. It was Nick Alisino and the gang Nick worked for that made his stomach feel heavy and sick. If they found out that he and Moxie had taken Nick. . . .

Moxie came. Chuck didn't hear him until he had come all the way from the back of the alley and was there at the loading platform beside him.

Moxie whispered: "Okay, Chuck?"

"Sure, Moxie, sure."

"Good." The gambler pressed a revolver into Chuck's hand. Chuck slipped his finger around the trigger. Somehow he felt better, safer, with that gun. He felt a lot better with Moxie there. They stood side by side in the dark, waited.

Nick Alisino drove up in a big black sedan. He parked it in front of the hash house, got out, went inside.

Moxie nudged Chuck with his elbow. "Okay. We're going to get in the back of that car. Follow me and keep down low. It's a cinch, Chuck."

They went out of the alley. The street was empty. Crossing it they crouched low, kept the car between them and the restaurant so that Nick couldn't see them. Moxie opened the back door of the sedan, motioned Chuck in. Then he slid in, eased the door shut.

Nick stayed in the restaurant about ten minutes talking to the woman. When he came out he was humming tunelessly under his breath. He got into the car, started it rolling down the

dark, deserted street in second gear.

Moxie nudged Chuck in the ribs. They raised their heads above the level of the front seat. Moxie had an automatic and he slid it over the seat until its blunt muzzle pressed the back of Nick's neck.

When Nick felt the pressure of the gun, his foot jerked off the throttle. The car, still in second, bucked.

"Easy, lug." Moxie's voice was a tight hiss. "Keep moving."

Chuck was kneeling there with his revolver centered on Nick's head. There was something strange about it all, as though he wasn't there, as though he was someplace else watching Nick and Moxie. It was sort of like he was just something extra and didn't belong there at all.

In that unrecognizable hissing voice, Moxie directed Nick down Wilton, then right into an alley that ran through for three blocks. When they stopped they were between two dark, bulking warehouses. Ahead of them half a block was a streetcar line.

"Take it easy!" Moxie warned. "If you're good you might live through this."

Nick sat with both his hands high on the steering wheel. He was so stiff and motionless that the only sign of life in him was the heavy breathing.

Moxie, without moving its snout from the back of Nick's neck, transferred his automatic from his right to his left hand. Chuck noticed then that the gambler's hands were gloved. He should have thought of that for himself. It made the sweat come out on his body wondering if he had left his prints any-

where on the car. What a dumb trick!

Moxie reached over with his right hand, took hold of Chuck's revolver. Not understanding what he wanted, the kid kept his hold on the gun. Moxie tugged at it once, then jerked it out of Chuck's hand. The kid couldn't see Moxie's face, but he got the feeling that something was wrong.

Moxie pushed the revolver against Nick's back, dropped his own automatic into his pocket. Then he reached over the seat, groped in under Nick's coat, fished out the automatic that was there in its shoulder clip. He set that down on the back seat of the car.

"Okay," Moxie grated. "Let's have the dough."

Nick's voice was flat. "What dough?"

Moxie didn't say anything to that. He just pushed Chuck's revolver hard into the back of Nick's neck, twisted it. The skin on Nick's neck twisted with it. Nick grunted, then said: "Okay."

He handed the fat roll of money back over his shoulder. The noise of a streetcar, out on the street ahead, rumbled back into the alley. Moxie took the money, shoved it into his pocket. Then he slid back onto the seat.

"Okay," he said. "Turn around, Nick."

WHEN NICK turned, Chuck could see his flat profile outlined against the light from the street. Nick's nose was big over the thin line of his mouth. The streetcar was opposite the mouth of the alley and its noise was amplified by bouncing echoes.

"That's right, Nick," Moxie said. Then he fired the revolver. He fired it

just once and the slug smashed in through Nick's upper lip. Chuck saw Nick's mouth fold into a gaping hole. The shot was loud in the car, but outside the streetcar swallowed it up.

"Yike!" Chuck said. Right away his body was shaking all over. Nick's head had slid slowly out of sight down onto the front seat. "You killed him, Moxie!"

"Had to, Chuck." Moxie's voice was soft and low. "He saw us. He got a good look at both of us in the rear mirror."

"I . . ." Chuck kept seeing the hole in Nick's face, where his mouth had folded in. He grabbed at the car door, swung it open, stumbled out. Leaning against the side of the warehouse, he vomited.

Chuck didn't hear the second streetcar coming. He was still too sick. It was Moxie's voice that he heard, saying sharply: "Chuck! Chuck, turn around!"

Slowly the kid lifted his head, turned, Moxie fired out through the car door. He had Nick's automatic now, and he fired it four times. The slugs hammered Chuck back against the warehouse, held him there until he slid down to the cobbles of the alley.

The rest was easy for Moxie. He dropped Nick's automatic, up front on the floor next to Nick's hand. He left the revolver that had the kid's prints on it out next to Chuck's body. Peeling a couple of the bills from the roll, he shoved them in under one of Chuck's legs.

When that was finished, he stepped back from the car, surveyed what he had done. The bodies wouldn't be found until morning. Then it would look like the kid had held up Nick and

the two had shot it out. There'd be plenty of people to tell about the fight those two had had in the pool hall.

If any of Nick Alisino's gang got to wondering what had happened to the numbers money, there were those two bills crumpled under Chuck's body. That would make it look like the kid had spilled the money on the ground and then that somebody had happened up the alley during the night and picked up all the dough—all except those two bills that Chuck had fallen on.

Moxie turned and went back down the alley. He had a fat wad of bills in his pocket and . . . he was in the clear.

Moxie Harper sat in his apartment the next morning, and, over his coffee he read the paper. He didn't like it at all, what he read there. The eleven o'clock edition, it carried a brief article on the second page about the finding of Nick's dead body in the alley.

There wasn't anything at all in it about Chuck. All it said was that Nick Alisino's murderer had been wounded, for the police had found a pool of blood, not Nick's blood, alongside the sedan.

When he finished reading that, Moxie got up and walked back and forth across the carpet in his apartment. He didn't know what to do. Chuck wasn't dead, and he didn't know what Chuck would do. . . .

After a while Moxie went over and got his automatic and put it in its shoulder clip. Then he went out to call the places where the kid might be, but he didn't find him.

At the end of a week he still hadn't found Chuck. He asked around quietly

but nobody had any idea where the kid was. The cops were still looking for the guy who had killed Nick Alisino—for a guy who was badly wounded. Yet, even with Chuck missing nobody got the idea that he might be the man the police were looking for. Moxie didn't do anything to give them this idea.

When three weeks went by, Moxie began to hope and maybe to believe a little bit that the kid had crawled off somewhere and died. So Moxie went back to gambling with the thirty-six hundred dollars he had taken from Nick's body. He began to think about the kid less and less, but he always carried his automatic in its shoulder clip.

During the first part of September the weather was very nice, and then a hot spell hit. On the second night of this hot spell, Moxie was in a game on the third floor above the Society Pool Hall. Because he was still wearing his gun he kept his coat on, and it was sticky and uncomfortable. The curtains in the open window behind him hung lifeless. Smoke in the room rose slowly through the hot, dead air, mushroomed out into the flat clouds.

Moxie had been in luck for the past few weeks and he had more money than he had taken from Nick Alisino's body. Tonight he was riding his luck, bucking the pots hard. When the door to the room opened, he was busy studying his hand.

IT WAS Pop's voice that brought his eyes snapping up. From the other side of the doorway Pop said: "Go in there, Chuck. Moxie's in there."

Chuck came in through the door. He

looked like hell. He looked like a twisted old man, not like a kid of seventeen.

He had on the same suit he had been wearing the night Nick was murdered. The stains of his own blood were hidden by the filth that covered it. The way it hung in folds showed how his starved and pain-sickened body had sunk in. His whole left side was twisted and paralyzed—one of the slugs Moxie had driven into him was still lodged in the flesh near his spine.

It was his face that was the worst. It was gaunt and white and covered with the dirty blond stubble of his beard. A scar that had healed in a puffy red welt ran back from his left eyebrow across his cheek bone to the tip of his ear. From the side of it his eyes looked out, round, blue, staring.

His twisted lurch carried him a few feet into the room. There, with his right hand jammed deep into the pocket of his coat, he stopped. With a slow, blank lack of expression he looked at the face of each man at the poker table. His eyes traveled as far as Moxie's face, stopped there.

"Chuck!" Moxie stood up, pushed his chair behind him with his knees. His clenched fists lay on the table before him. His eyes kept jerking from Chuck's face to Chuck's right hand jammed in his pocket. "Chuck!" Moxie cried. "What the hell's the matter!"

"It was you . . ." Chuck shook his head heavily.

"It wasn't me, Chuck!" Moxie's voice began to rise, to grow like a woman's scream. "I didn't do it to you. It was Nick. He wasn't dead! He did it to you, Chuck!"

"You gave it to me," Chuck said dully. "I gotta give it back."

Moxie was sobbing: "Listen, Chuck! You got to listen to me. Nick wasn't dead when I shot him. It was him that got you. I wouldn't of shot you like that. Gee, Chuck—listen!"

"You gotta take it." There was a bewildered look about Chuck. He lurched forward toward the table; he began to pull his hand out of his pocket.

"No!" Moxie shrieked. For an instant he was as though paralyzed with the fear inside of him. Only his mouth moved, twitching so that the black line of his mustache crawled on his lip.

Then he grabbed for his gun, tore it out from under his coat. Without even aiming, he jerked the trigger in a frenzy of terror. The gun banged again and again, sent its bullets ripping wildly at the air.

One of the slugs hit Chuck but he felt the shock of it hitting, no more. That side of his body could feel no more pain. Like a bewildered animal in the face of that blaze of gun fire, he kept coming toward Moxie, crowding against the table.

The gun bucked itself empty. Twice Moxie jerked at the trigger, then hurled the useless weapon at the white, round stare of the kid's eyes. The gun missed and Chuck kept coming. Moxie screamed, stepped backward.

The chair was there 'behind Moxie. His legs struck against it and he tripped, sprawled backward toward the open window. He grabbed at one of the slack curtains and it ripped loudly between his fingers.

Then, silently, his throat choked with

terror, Moxie went backward through the window, fell three floors to his death.

Chuck shoved at the table, pushed past it and went around to the window. He stood in front of it, staring out, with his back to the room.

Pop had come into the room and was standing still, watching Chuck's back. When one of the men who had been at the poker table said: "Hell, Pop! What was that about!" he shook his head.

"I don't know," Pop said. "The kid there is nuts. I found him walking up and down outside. He didn't know who I was. Didn't even know his own name. He was just walking up and down staring into people's faces—like he was looking for somebody and could never find him. I thought maybe he'd remember Moxie because he always liked

Moxie. That's why I brought him . . ."

Chuck turned from the window. His eyes were frightened, uncomprehending. He lurched back around the table. His lips were moving.

"Wait a minute, kid." Pop put out his hand to stop him. "Where are you going?"

"I knew he needed it." Chuck's words were heavy, unsteady like he was crying inside. "I got to give it to him."

"You already have, kid. He's got his! No matter what he did to . . ."

"No. It's his." Chuck shook his head heavily. He had to make these guys see. He raised his right hand slowly, opened it, showed them the rabbit's foot. "It's Moxie's," he said. "It's Moxie's good luck. I got to give Moxie his good luck back. Let me go. I got to give it to him." ◆ ◆ ◆

—NATURE LOOTERS—

◆ An animal's home, like man's, is his castle, and it's against the law to interfere with the sanctity of either. That's what a Nashua, N. H., judge ruled recently, as he fined two men \$246 for trying to break into a chimpanzee's cage at a wild animal farm.

◆ Add to your collection of odd lawsuits: In Oklahoma City, a farmer sued a telephone company for \$500—for the loss of two shadows. He claimed the concern chopped down two, large cottonwood trees on his farm, depriving his hogs and cattle, thereby, of beneficial shade from the hot summer sun.

◆ In Detroit, thieves sneaked into the Warren Valley Golf Club one night and filched the #5 green from the course. 225 square feet of expensive bent grass around the cup had been expertly cut, rolled up, and carted away by them. "About all these thieves neglected to take," revealed investigating police, "was the hole."

The art of characterization is a difficult but a fascinating field for a "pen toiler." Each person prides himself on his own individuality and growth of personality. William E. Barrett is to be congratulated for his success in capturing this transformation for his readers. For Barrett, a story is sterile if it has not effected a change in its characters. We feel that there is a treat presented here for the connoisseur of crime-adventure stories, as his fictional menu will include both the turmoil of action in a rough Texas oil town and the inner conflict of a young wrestler in its midst.

Snatch as Snatch Can

by WILLIAM E. BARRETT

IT is a long journey from the fertile fields of Iowa to the sprawling plains of west Texas; it is a longer journey from a position as junior partner in a contracting firm to the dirty canvas of an oil town wrestling mat.

Chris Hansen made both journeys. He was wrestling in a carnival against all comers within a month after he left home to escape his father's contracting business; it took him ten months longer to reach the point where he crawled under the rope at the edge of a boom town for the unpleasant task of engaging in a fixed bout.

Beside the ring where the flaring torches outlined his sneering face in bold relief sat Brock Weeden, the promoter. He was the symbol of the youngster's degradation. Chris looked at him and then looked away. The gong sounded and everything faded except

the broad, flat face of his opponent.

As his shoulders touched for the first fall, Chris tried to wave the "fixed bout" idea away. He told himself that he was not hurting anybody; that he had to eat; that he was giving the crowd a good show and the bout would look as well from out front as if it were on the level.

His opponent, Clancy, was rising to his feet. Chris got up slowly and went to his corner. It was to be the best two out of three. Best! Chris shrugged at that. Clancy didn't belong in the same ring with him and he knew it. The farmer boys whom Chris had been wrestling for the carnival every night had been better opponents. They had been in condition at least; this big oil field husky was not.

Hidden in the darkness about the raised ring was a howling mob of boom

workers; men who had flocked from all corners of the map at the news that a new field was opening here at Cross-forks. They were roaring and joking and fighting for places of vantage.

There was no arena in this new town. The bout was being staged in the open without any seating arrangements except for carelessly piled stacks of lumber about the improvised ring. With no ticket gate, the crowd had been allowed to flow in. After they had assembled, men had gone around to collect.

Men who had places that they had fought to gain and hold did not evade payment. It was a better system than gate admission.

Bong! The timekeeper sounded the call to action by beating a tin pan with a screw driver handle. Chris crouched and came out fast. They were taking the wraps off him for this round. He had been told that he could take the second fall. O.K.! He'd show them some wrestling this time.

He was across the ring like a flash; his one hundred and ninety-five pounds launched from his leg muscles as though hurled from a catapult. Scorning orthodox holds, he made one swooping grab for the legs of the slow and startled Clancy. The oil man's body whirled through the air, turned and came crashing to the mat. Chris straddled him and laid him flat; jumping up with a grin as the referee tapped him on the shoulders. Fall, one minute and forty-five seconds.

"What are you trying to do, pull a cross?" Brock Weeden was waiting in his corner, his eyes narrowed, snarling mouth pulled down.

"You're making it look bad. Miss a few fancy dives next time and miss 'em hard. These saps have bet their heads off and they'll take you apart if you flop easy."

With that the promoter turned and wormed back to his place. Chris stared after him, his jaw dropping. "Bet their heads off?" That explained a lot of things. Weeden wasn't interested in a return bout, as he had told Chris; he was taking the crowd's money, now. It was a gyp.

The sudden revelation made Chris shaky in the knees, but he turned to his second, a hanger-on of Weeden's. His voice cracked with authority.

"Never mind the mop off. Chase after Weeden and tell him to take my hundred bucks and light a cigar with it. I'm cleaning the ring with that phony 'hope' of his."

The second threw him one startled glance and dropped down from the ring. Chris spat angrily and glared across the ring. Weeden had lied to him, double-crossed him; but Chris was giving him all the warning he could.

The crowd was impatient and Chris stretched his muscles. With the smell of oil in his nostrils and the howl of the mob in his ears, his mind unwillingly flashed back to Iowa and the office with the big sign that was his father's symbol of achievement in a land far from his native Norway:

CHRISTIAN A. HANSEN
GENERAL CONTRACTING

Chris shook his head to shake off the

memories of his father's pride in him, memories turned to shame by his present predicament. He had never wanted his father's kind of success; he had always felt the need for adventure, for travel and for the thrill of combat. Well, he had what he wanted—a little more than he wanted.

Bong! The timekeeper hit his tin pan once more. As Chris started eagerly forward, he heard a sharp cry that carried through the sudden roar of the crowd. His eyes traveled to the ring-side and he had a swift vision of Weeden's savage face. The promoter snarled at him and his hand came out from his armpit. Chris caught the glint of steel. It looked like a gun, and he knew what that signified.

The man was warning him of what would happen if he failed to go through with the frame-up.

With a thud, Clancy hit him. Taking advantage of Hansen's momentary hesitation, the oil man had dived. As they went to the floor Chris rolled over. Clancy grunted and applied a vicious wrist lock. The quick defeat on the second fall had been a blow to his pride and he was evidently out to inflict punishment on his opponent now if he could.

Chris Hansen's mind was on Weeden rather than on his opponent, but he didn't want any more of that wrist lock than he had to take. Squirming into position, he clamped his legs about the oil man's head and bore down with the head scissors. The yelling of the crowd was annoying him now. He wanted a chance to think, to figure a way out.

"What do these guys mean to you? Forget the suckers, take your flop, collect and get out of Texas," something within him seemed to be arguing.

Clancy wiggled to the ropes, the referee broke the two men and they arose. That inner voice seemed to whisper that Weeden's gun was a clinching argument.

Clancy was crouching. With a snarl, Chris flung all argument aside. His perfectly trained body dived forward, fainted to the right, plunged to the left and up under the bewildered Clancy. High in the air, Chris held his man; then he spun him and hurled him to the mat.

It was not necessary to fall on him. The palooka was out cold and Chris knew it. The referee's eyes were wide and he licked his lips nervously. He knew that the scenario had gone wrong, but he did not know what he could do about it. He tapped Chris Hansen's shoulder.

"The winnah—last fall, fourteen minutes, twenty-three seconds."

IT is one thing to feel brave and to act on a decent impulse during a dramatic few minutes of action; it is another thing to retain the feeling through a hungry, uncomfortable night. Chris Hansen met the morning as he had met the night; with empty pockets and a body that demanded' food. At best, it is not easy to get food in a new oil town; without money it is next to impossible. Crossforks was only three weeks old.

Seen in daylight, the town was just a wide place in a corduroy road. A half

dozen well built frame buildings comprised the more pretentious section. Flanking them was an array of hastily thrown together shacks of unpainted pine. The discovery well that had boomed the county was on a rise just out of town. Already there were other rigs rising about it. Between the well and the "town" was a disorderly collection of tents, lean-tos and upended crates; the hastily assembled habitations of people who build their towns where they find their work.

With his hands in his empty pockets, Chris started down the drag. He had evaded Weeden on the night before and had made no attempt to collect the hundred dollars that he knew he would not get. He didn't feel at ease in the same town with the man who had flashed that gun at ringside, but starvation loomed up as more painful than bullets.

The odor of cooking food came to him and he stopped dead. A long, roughly constructed counter ran at right angles to the street and a perspiring man in a khaki shirt trotted back and forth behind it while his customers sat on upended boxes and offered profanely good-natured advice. There was no roof above the counter, but behind the loaction was a pile of well worn planks that gave testimony to past use in some other structure. Evidently the owner intended to have a roof over his establishment when he got around to it.

Drawn by the tantalizing odor, Chris stepped forward. A sheet of paper stuck on an upright challenged his attention and he stopped. It bore a message lettered in pencil and, despite the serious-

ness of his own food problem, Chris grinned as he read it:

DENVER DAN'S PLACE

Menu

Ham and eggs.

You'll take them

or else.

Below this brief statement of boom town menu limitations there was a hastily scrawled addition.

Terms—pay in advance.

*No dishwashers, waiters
or porters wanted.*

Dan.

Chris pulled his belt tight and shrugged. His eyes scanned the lumber pile and he stepped up to the counter.

"Say, settler," he asked, "how many meals do I get for building you a shack around this counter?"

Denver Dan wiped his hands on his trousers. "Depends on the job," he said shrewdly. "Most drifters couldn't earn an egg with a hammer."

"I can. Show me some tools." Chris was turning to the pile. He had had hopes that he could prolong negotiations and draw a meal in advance, but Denver Dan, turning back to his cooking with a snort, had not encouraged the hope. The huge pile of second hand lumber was not inviting to a hungry man who has the smell of ham in his nostrils; but he waded in with a will.

Two hours later, he had the whole pile sorted out. His head swam from weakness and he was beginning to ache at the waist line, but he forced himself grimly. He raised his head at a hail. Denver Dan was beckoning.

"Straddle the counter, boy, and grab

what I throw. You're all right. A bluffer never would have unscrambled that stuff. I knowed you were hungry when I first set eyes on you, but I never was one that encouraged easy eating for humans. It plumb ruins 'em."

Chris made no answer. He was already too busy with the big plate of food that the eating house man had set before him. Trade had fallen off momentarily and there were no customers but himself. A shadow fell suddenly across the counter.

"You the owner of this dump?"

A rasping, unpleasant voice growled the question. Chris looked up. A man with the battered face of a palooka prize fighter was leaning on the counter, his eyes on Denver Dan. The restaurant man flipped an egg over with a deft motion of his wrist and looked up.

"Yeah, I own it. You collectin' such information?"

"No. I ain't collectin' information." The pug stuck his jaw out aggressively. "I'm from Brock Weeden. It's going to cost you twenty-five bucks a day to operate an eating house in this town."

"Yeah?" Denver Dan seemed unimpressed. "Taxes, I suppose, from a town that ain't old enough to have a government yet. Huh! Well, I ain't paying. I've been in boomer country before, fella."

"Oh, you have, have yuh? Ain't that cute?" The intruder moved swiftly forward and a long arm reached across the counter. A gnarled hand gripped Denver Dan's collar band and jerked the old man across the counter.

"Well, you listen, crow-bait! We don't take no lip from you old boomers that

know it all. You'll pay me or else."

"Else what?" Chris kicked away the box that he was sitting on and rose to his feet. His two hands moved at once with a speed possible only to a professional wrestler. Before the startled thug knew what had hit him, Chris had plucked him away from his grip on the old man and had spun him around.

"If you're getting rough, bozo, try me," he growled. "I'd love it."

"Let go o' me a minute and I'll try you, yuh big stiff." The pug's jaw jutted like granite.

Chris grinned. "O.K."

He released his grip and the pug whipped his right from the chest line. Chris caught it in mid-air, turned the man around and booted him beyond the counter into the crowd that had stopped at the chance of excitement.

"I'm not a boxer," he said easily, "but only a dub leads his right. What else can you show?"

WITH A growl of rage the man picked himself up. His hand darted to his armpit and then, as though just aware of the number of possible witnesses, he let his hand drop away. His narrow eyes darted from Chris to Denver Dan and back again.

"You two guys made one helluva big mistake," he said. With a quick twist of his body, he turned and plunged through the jeering crowd. Chris righted the box he had been sitting on and resumed his attack on the "ham-and". Denver Dan had picked up his pan again and was staring at it gloomily.

"What's the matter, settler? Do you figure that guy can do anything?"

"I know he can." The old man sighed heavily. "This wouldn't be the first boom town that fellas like that got a hold of. Towns that they grab never grow up." He flipped the egg into a plate dejectedly, laid a slab of ham beside it indifferently and came around the counter to eat it.

"Son," he said, "a fellow just can't quit booming from one place to another once he starts. I was figgerin' that this town would be the last. Told myself I'd stick and grow along with it. Gettin' a mite old, but I reckon now I'll be packin' along to another."

"What can those tin horns do?" Chris felt a prickling under his skin, a quickening of interest. There was danger and excitement in the air; something of the feeling that accompanies a bugle call at night.

Denver Dan shrugged. It was evidently a subject that he did not care to discuss. "Twenty-five dollars a day just ain't reasonable," he said gloomily.

With a good meal under his belt, Chris found himself surprisingly eager to get at his job. As the work progressed and the shell gradually grew around the counter, his interest increased. He found himself whistling and that inner voice of his jeered.

"Huh, Smart Guy!" it seemed to say. "If you had to rely upon carnivals and wrestling now, you'd be starving to death. You're eating because you learned something worth while back in Iowa under that sign of your father's you ran away from."

Chris growled and the whistle stopped. He didn't want to agree with that line of thought. It threatened his

freedom. He wanted excitement and the thrill of a vagabond existence.

By evening the job was finished. The completed building was just a wooden shell, an ugly cover for a greasy counter and two tables; but it represented achievement of a sort, and Chris felt a glow of pride that he could not explain. He had created something with his hands, a part of a new town. Somehow the completion of that job seemed to link him up with the noisy bustle about him. He was no longer an alien. He belonged.

After his evening meal, Chris lounged at the counter with no definite plans for the future in his mind. Dan was busy with a rush of customers, but, with a deft movement, the old man flipped a package of the makings from some hidden store. "Tobacco," he said gruffly. A fifty cent piece followed the sack. "There's a dance or two with the girls if you've a mind. Yuh can sleep here tonight."

That was all. There was no praise for the job, no mention of the afternoon's encounter and no discussion of terms. Chris had done his work and the old man was taking responsibility for his welfare indefinitely. Chris sensed that and he felt a glow of warmth go through him. He rose to his feet.

"I don't want to dance," he said. "You wrestle with the pans and I'll sling grub. Give the boys better service that way."

He was slipping behind the counter as he spoke.

By nine thirty the population of Crossforks had left the eating houses and the shacks for the entertainment

afforded by the Silver Fork, a big barn-like structure halfway down the drag. Traditionally, an oil town is only as old as its dance hall. Crossforks lived up to that tradition and the Silver Fork had gone up while men were still looking for a place to eat on the site of the latest strike.

For the first time in hours, Denver Dan's place was without a customer. Chris threw himself down with a grunt, and the old boomer gave a sigh of relief, but groaned and started to his feet as the door opened. Three men filed in and the leader waved his hand.

"Don't get up. We're not buying. We came for a powwow."

Chris slid to the end of the box upon which he was seated and his muscles tensed. Dan was poised, too. The leader, as though sensing the tension, pulled a box over and straddled it, a friendly smile on his broad, homely features.

"No call to be alarmed, boys. We ain't hooked up none at all with that Weeden crowd. This here is a citizens' committee and we're come together for mutual protection. Here, have a smoke. My name's Edwards, Pelt Edwards from the Panhandle."

Good will simply oozed from the man and Chris fingered his cigar dubiously. He had seen barkers and come-on men in the carnival who used the same technique.

Edwards waved a big hand: "These two gentlemen have been getting the same kind of demands you got. Nate Katzman here runs the supply wagon down the street. The other gentleman is the original settler of Crossforks, Cal

North. Cal ran a halfway house, gasoline and such, before they hit oil here."

"Yes, and now a bunch of dirty gunmen from some place tell me I have to pay them to keep open on my own property." North, a wiry little redhead, pounded his fist on the counter. "Now, if we'll all stick together—"

"Sure. That's it." Katzman was rubbing his hands nervously. "Should there be no law where there is business? We must organize."

"Right. We've got to start in by appointing a constable and a mayor and then getting the county seat to appoint a deputy. If we get law here—"

"Yeah! What if you do?"

THE DOOR opened with a bang and the five men spun around to meet the coolly contemptuous eyes of Brock Weeden. Behind him were two men—the pug who had tangled with Chris and another husky of the same type.

"Nice little meeting you're having here." Weeden pulled a box away from the counter and sat on it. His henchmen remained standing. "Figuring on a double-cross, all of you guys, aren't you? Think you're good enough to give me the runaround!"

"You're dang blasted right we do!" North was on his feet, jaw outthrust and fists clenched. "This is free country down here, and there's nobody coming in and living off our earnings."

"No?" Weeden's lids drooped and he leaned slightly forward. "You seem to have pretty definite ideas. You've been ignoring our modest demands for three days. Three days is the limit.

Now, damn your hide, what do you say?"

The red-head's fist came up from his waist. Weeden kicked the box away and came to his feet with his hand darting on a fast arc. There was a flash of flame and then another which merged into a third. Chris, shrinking a bit from the menace of something he had never faced, saw that third shot plainly; a shot that was fired at the roof by a man behind Brock Weeden, using a .44.

For a horror-struck fraction of a minute no one moved, then all eyes turned to the limp, sprawled body of Cal North. On the floor beside the body lay a .44, smoke still curling faintly from the muzzle. Weeden wiped the barrel of his own gun and dropped it back in its holster. His eyes swept the paralyzed group.

"Too bad he tried to gun me that way," he said easily. "He's been a disturbing influence right along."

The color had drained from the face of Pelt Edwards, but he had risen to his feet at the first shot. He ran his hand through his hair now in a nervous gesture. "Hell!" he said, "the man didn't have a gun. One of your—"

Brock Weeden had tensed. He threw a command over his shoulder to one of the men behind him. "Watch that door, Taylor. Give the rush to anybody that stops. Tell 'em to beat it." His eyes continued to bore into the big man from the Panhandle. "Now what were you saying about guns, Edwards?"

The big man's courage seemed to melt out of him. "My mistake," he said. "I was excited. I didn't know. I . . ."

"All right. You'll get out of town within twenty-four hours." Weeden dismissed him with a shrug and turned to the others.

Denver Dan was puffing hard at his cigarette and staring at the floor. Katzman was rubbing his hands together nervously. Chris was sitting hunched, his eyes on the inert lump that had once been a man. Seeing a man killed was a new experience to him, and his mind refused to accept the stark drama as real. Weeden's eyes swept the group and his jaw set hard.

"A town has to be run. It won't run itself," he said. "No one else has a better right to run this one than I have and I'm running it. Get that and get it straight."

He paused. "My deputies have called on you and told you what I want. Government costs money, and if you want to do business here, you'll come across with what it costs to operate." His lips curled. "Or else!" he added ominously. His head nodded almost imperceptibly toward the body on the floor.

Katzman rose to his feet with a shudder. "Tomorrow," he said, "I will be over early." His haste to escape from the place was almost ludicrous, and Weeden let him go. Pelt Edwards stumbled after him and Weeden made no effort to stop him. It was all too evident that the man was beaten and that he would not be in the town at the end of his twenty-four hours of grace.

The black-eyed thug who had tested Chris Hansen's strength early in the day leaned forward and whispered to

his chief. Weeden nodded and turned to Chris.

"You're leaving town the same time as that yellow stiff Edwards, who thought he could open a gambling house here and get backing that would make it okay. I don't like you and never did. You crossed me up, and if you weren't a kid you'd have got the slug you asked for. Don't let me see you again. I might change my mind."

The smell of powder was still in the air and there was a dead man on the floor. Chris could find no words to reply to the blunt command and, while he was trying to rally his bewildered senses, Weeden rose, his eyes on Denver Dan.

"Better have your money ready tomorrow," he said. "In the meantime, you and the kid can haul that guy back to his dump. I'll 'tend to the funeral later."

Denver Dan dropped the butt of his cigarette and stepped on it. As Weeden and his two bodyguards left, the old man shook his head slowly.

"Somebody's got the organization," he said, "and it sure as blazes isn't the business men. It hardly ever is."

CHRIS HANSEN started a new day with his mind in a turmoil. He had tossed through a long night without arriving at a solution to the problem that faced him. With nothing at all holding him in Crossforks except his own stubborn will to stay, he was still undecided about obeying Broock Weeden's command.

The cold-blooded brutality of last night's killing had shocked him. He

had lived hard and dangerously without any undue worry, but facing the guns of men who killed unarmed foes wantonly was a far different matter than taking risks where the odds were somewhat even. He had seen the clumsy planting of that gun beside Cal North and he knew that the man had been unarmed when he crumpled under Weeden's gun. The same thing could happen to him. Common sense dictated a quick departure from town.

His jaw set stubbornly at the thought. He would be leaving Denver Dan behind him and he would be quitting under fire. The memory of Brock Weeden's sneering, triumphant face infuriated him. Still, pride is hardly sufficient incentive for a man to pit muscle against bullets.

As though he divined something of the struggle going on within the young man's mind, Denver Dan shuffled down the counter. The early morning rush was over and there were only a few customers in the place.

"Kid," he said, "here's twenty-five bucks. It's a little better than day wages, even in an oil town, but you did more than a day's work. If I was you, I'd pull my freight and get out of here fast."

Christ pocketed the money and his eyes searched the old man's face.

"Would you really pull freight if you were me, or are you just talking?"

Denver Dan looked away. "Texas is a big state. You'll make out. Top o' the ground is always better than the bottom."

"I know. But what are you going to do?"

"Me?" Denver Dan still seemed to be able to find things of interest anywhere but in the young man's face. "That's different, kid. I've got roots here, sort of. You've got nothing to fight for. You're a drifter, and it's time to drift. That's all."

"What'll happen after I drift, if I do? Here, I mean." There was a crease of indecision on the young man's face.

Dan shrugged. "The same thing that happens everywhere, kid. The people that work and run business places will try to bring law in; the people that won't work and that want to live off other people will fight the law. For a while, Weeden may be top dog. If he lasts a long time, he'll ruin the town and trade will go somewhere else; then this will be just another wide place in the road where a town might have been."

"Suppose those that own business here get together and run him out?"

Denver Dan grinned wryly. "They won't. They'll wait till somebody licks him and takes the brag out of him, then they'll all jump on the bandwagon and they'll all be bigger than the guy that made it possible."

Hansen ran his hand through his thick mop of hair in bewilderment. He had never been in on a new town's birth before and he was baffled by the intricacies of law, business and crime as viewed up close in their very beginnings.

"Settler, are you scared of this Weeden cookie?"

Denver Dan shook his head slowly. "No, sir, son. I've seen too many like him." He shrugged his shoulders. "No

difference. I'm not a fighting man."

A sudden commotion outside drew the attention of both men to the door. It opened suddenly and Weeden's collector entered.

He had a gun in his hand and he waved the two remaining customers out of the place. "Outside, you guys. The law's closing this joint."

With muttered exclamations of alarm, the two men dusted for the door. Denver Dan took a step forward and found himself looking into the gun muzzle.

"We gave you till this morning to bring that fifty bucks around. It didn't get in? Got it?"

The eating house man was fumbling with the makings. His hands trembled, but his chin came up. "No, I ain't," he said. "That's only the half of it."

"All right. That's your tough luck. If you want to know what's going to happen, you'll have to step outside."

The man whirled and ducked through the doorway, holstering his gun as he went. Denver Dan started forward and Chris grabbed his arm. "How do you know that they aren't waiting for you to come out so that—"

"I don't, kid. That's what makes it exciting." There was a grim set of lines about the old-timer's mouth and he shook the restraining hand loose. Chris followed him through the door; his jaw set hard.

Outside a crowd had gathered and Brock Weeden was standing in a little cleared space. His two henchmen stood to either side of him and a group of four huskies, evidently laborers, stood behind him. Curiosity had drawn an audience from all corners of the grow-

ing town; tradesmen, workers and the drifting element.

Weeden looked about him, evidently enjoying the sensation that had been created. In a gray shirt, black breeches tucked into officer's boots, and with two guns hanging at his waist, he made a picturesque figure and he knew it. As though sensing that he would be the source of whatever drama might lurk in the present situation, the crowd jostled about him and left the space clear before him. As Denver Dan emerged, Weeden raised his hand.

FELLOW CITIZENS," he said, "this town has got to have law. Until we have an election I hold an appointment as marshal, which I intend to fill with the aid of my two reliable deputies here."

He waved to the two thugs who flanked him, perfectly aware of the fact that he was not deceiving this crowd, but defying anyone there to challenge him.

His voice deepened. "We are instituting condemnation proceedings today against that place over there. The man who calls himself Denver Dan has been warned that his place is a fire menace and that it is built on property that is not his, in defiance of an owner's property rights."

The last statement was true, as it would have been true of nearly any of the new store buildings. Boom town custom was to build first and find the owner afterward, if any.

A groan went up from the crowd and one hoarse voice shouted. "Hey, governor, that ain't so good. Ain't enough eating places as it is."

"There'll be more." Weeden shrugged the objection off and let his hands drop closer to his holsters. "I just wanted you gentlemen to know that the law is being enforced. If any of you intend to do business here, you better drop down and see what the law is so you'll keep out of trouble."

A stunned silence greeted the statement, although Weeden himself tightened and rested his hands over the butts of his guns. It was a bold challenge to the whole town, and boom towns are as tricky as dynamite. For ten seconds, Weeden battled silently against the force of the town and, when nothing broke, he knew that he had won.

His lips curled back from his teeth and he waved to the four huskies behind him.

"Take that place apart," he said, "and dump the lumber in back so it can be hauled away!"

The wrecking crew moved forward and something seemed to happen in Chris Hansen's brain. They intended to tear down the thing that he had built, and he knew suddenly that he was not going to let them. Denver Dan's words came back to him in a flood: "You've got nothing to fight for. You're a drifter and it's time to drift."

A whole year unrolled in one tick of the clock. The oldtimer had been right. Drifters never had anything to fight for; they left the fighting to men like Denver Dan who built a business and fought to keep it alive, like the elder Hansen who came from Norway and wrested success out of a strange land. Through a whole long year of his life, Chris Hansen had drifted, had built

nothing but that flimsy ramshackle eating house in a new town. *But he had built that*—and he knew that he was going to fight for it.

Before the wreckers had taken two steps, Chris Hansen was barring the way. "Beat it, you guys. This party isn't coming off."

The firmness of his own voice surprised him. It was as though another person had spoken. He waved the startled laborers aside and stepped lightly forward with his body poised and his narrowed eyes fixed on Brock Weeden.

"You, Weeden," he said, "have bitten off a lot of territory. This town don't want your brand of law."

The banked fires of his hatred for the man blazed now. The crowd gasped and moved back. Chris didn't notice. He was moving toward the self-appointed boss of Crossforks and watching the nervous fingers caress the butts of two guns.

Weeden was hard hit by this sudden defiance. It was one thing to shoot Cal North where a few witnesses could be intimidated and fake evidence planted; it was a different thing to face a test of power out here in the open with a man who was unarmed and unafraid. Weeden had not figured that into the possibilities and he knew the temper of oil crowds. He didn't dare weaken.

"You're resisting an officer in the performance of his duty," he barked. "Men have been shot for that." He gestured to the two tense gunmen who stood to either side of him.

"Arrest that fellow. He's either crazy or drunk."

The crowd shuffled uneasily. Chris balanced on his toes as he had done many times against opponents in the arena. As the so-called deputies took a couple of steps toward him he uncoiled like a striking snake. The muscles rippled down on his back and his arms came up. In one swooping movement he swept the two men off the ground and cracked their heads together. Flinging them aside without a waste motion, he leaped for Brock Weeden.

There was no time now for Weeden to weigh the crowd's reaction. His hands flashed down and the twin guns leaped from his holsters. The muzzles spat lead and flame as the big figure hurled down upon him. It was impossible to miss with two guns at that range.

Something smacked into Chris Hansen's side, but his body left the ground in a long flying tackle leap and his fingers reached for the man behind the guns.

One hundred and ninety-five pounds of muscle and sinew, propelled by a fierce and vengeful will, hit Brock Weeden amidships and folded him where he stood. Taking him to the earth with him, Chris banged him against the hard ground. Somebody jumped on Chris's back and he reached over his shoulder with one hand. The hand closed about the back of a man's head and Chris pulled him over. As the body arced downward he recognized the man he had thrown out of Denver Dan's. His lips curled and he gripped the man, smashing him twice into Brock Weeden and hurling him to one side.

THROUGH A roaring red fog in his brain he was dimly aware of many things besides the fast action of the moment. He knew that he had been shot and he knew that another assailant had been plucked from behind him while he was banging Weeden and his man together. The crowd was milling about him and cheering him—but letting him finish what he started. It was an ancient oil country custom, and he appreciated it.

The roaring in his head increased in volume and he knew that he was going to pass out of the picture in a very short while. Sucking air into his lungs in short inhales and puffing it out again to clear his head, Chris fastened his grip on the erstwhile bully and swung him up over his head at arm's length. He was conscious of an agonizing pain in his chest as he did so and of the fact that Weeden was conscious and hitting at him frantically. The man's guns had been lost in the struggle.

For a red second, Chris lost consciousness of time and place; then his senses came back and it was as though cotton plugs had been removed from his ears and a bandage from his eyes. He heard the startled cry of the crowd and looked up into the white face of Brock Weeden.

When a sense of shock, he came to the realization that he had been about to hurl the man into the milling masses of humanity that surrounded him. He shook his head; then he grinned. This gun dummy was such a poor excuse for a man that the wrestler would be ashamed of himself if he had not spotted the fellow two guns to equalize matters.

In a half a dozen long strides he brought up sharp at the entrance to the eating house, his powerful arms still supporting the squirming Weeden, who, terrified at some unknown fate, was calling to the crowd for rescue from this madman.

With a deft swinging motion, Chris lowered the man and wiped his body across the front of the building with an unmistakable pantomime of mopping. Somebody in the crowd laughed. That was all Chris wanted. Out of the mist that was rising once more about him he saw Denver Dan's face emerge, and he dropped Brock Weeden.

"There's the boss of Crossforks," he said. "Take him."

The red mist came up to him then and he passed out . . .

Chris Hansen was in bed when he came to, and there were a lot of people in the room. Denver Dan was leaning over him and Chris grinned, stifling a groan as he became conscious of a vast ache in his body.

"Hi, Settler," he said. "How hard am I hit?"

The old man shrugged. "Not bad." He seemed to be struggling with a life-long habit of casual indifference to things. He didn't make a very good job of it. His hand reached out and closed on Chris's wrist.

"Kid," he said, "that was the damndest thing I ever seen. And if you didn't have what the doc called the greatest chest he ever saw on a human you'd have been planted. Two slugs at short range and they stuck right in those muscles of yours. You moved so fast that they didn't get stiff till later."

Snatch As Snatch Can

Chris grunted. "Making up for it now. Where's Weeden?"

Denver Dan grinned. "Laughed out of town," he said. "You busted him up a lot, but he'll recover. His gang got away first like rats off a sinking ship. He went out on the same truck with the guy he scared out of town; that big gambler, Edwards. After you folded Weeden the other guy reckoned he'd stay a spell, but the town reckoned different and both of those chisellers pulled freight."

The old man cleared his throat and fumbled with the collar of his shirt. "Another thing, kid," he said. "I sort of need a partner. Fifty-fifty split on it all, such as it is. You're in."

For a long minute Chris looked into the earnest, if embarrassed, face of the man who didn't believe in giving things away; then he stretched out his hand.

"Thanks for that," he said, "but I

can't take it. I've got another plan. Tell you about it later."

He was feeling tired again, but through the mist that kept coming up around him he could see that long street back in Iowa. It changed gradually and became the main drag of Crossforks, Texas. At the end of the drag was the office of Brock Weeden, tenantless now, and abandoned. He could visualize it as it would look with a big sign over it and he smiled.

CHRISTIAN HANSEN, JR.
GENERAL CONTRACTING.

"It would look swell," he murmured. "And I guess I've got a right to it. That old chiseler owed me a hundred dollars—and down in this country almost everybody plays 'snatch as snatch can.'"

The mist came up around him and he went to sleep. Denver Dan tiptoed carefully out of the room. ◆ ◆ ◆

POOR LOSERS

◆ In Baltimore, Md., burglars took it hard when they learned that their victim, a shop president, had taken pen in hand and literally kidded the pants off of them—via a poem—for stealing a mere \$100 while stupidly missing the shop's \$1000 payroll. The burglars took it so hard, in fact, that they broke into his car one night and filched the manuscript of the poem; then they broke into his shop again and made off with his fountain pen.

◆ A Dover-Foxcoft, Me., fish and game official, and a Denver, Colo., traffic instructor (both of whom should have known better) got into law trouble recently, and were fined \$10 and \$15 respectively. The fish and game official—for breaking a State fishing law; the traffic instructor—for breaking a couple of traffic laws.

Readers of the medieval historical novel as well as the atomic detective tale boast of their mutual friend, Donald Barr Chidsey. Strokes from the pen of Chidsey have always meant many hours of thrills and excitement to them. "Let Me Tell It" does not deviate from that high standard. This tale is an absorbing contradiction of a youth whose attempt at a good deed backfires into death.

Let Me Tell It

by DONALD BARR CHIDSEY

CAPTAIN MITCHELL threw down his cards.

"Something like this would happen, just now. Look! Four spades to start, with a good chance to take Joe's pile."

Joe said: "I got ace, queen and two other diamonds."

Mitchell put on his hat sadly, slowly, using both hands. He was groaning. The desk sergeant, hurrying back to the switchboard, called over his shoulder a reminder that this was, after all, murder. Mitchell glared at him.

"I heard you. And don't think that the moisture in my eye's for Willie Walker, either."

As they were passing the desk the sergeant waved. "Wait a second! He says there's a suspect already!" He scribbled notes for a time. Presently he clapped a hand over the mouthpiece and recited a description. Nineteen-twenty, five-ten, about 140, medium, light brown hair, kind of long, blue eyes or maybe gray,

dark pants, white shirt, no coat, no hat, carrying an old worn-out brown brief-case . . .

"What name goes with all this?" asked Mitchell.

"They don't know. This is Master-son I got here. He says he never saw the guy before tonight. Says he came in an' asked—"

"Don't tell me about it. Send it out! And then call up the morgue, and then get O'Neill. He's over on Fifth on something." Mitchell turned. "Come on, policemen! We can't be standing here all night. We got a big underworld murder to solve."

They piled into a department car, all but Mitchell, who paused, one foot inside, one on the running-board. Mitchell's eyes grew big and very serious. He shook his head wonderingly, blinked. "Hold it, Joe. Do you tramps see what I see, up the corner there?"

It was a thin young man with longish

brown hair, hatless, coatless, in dark trousers, a white shirt. . . . He had paused under a street lamp, panting, seemingly frightened. He carried a brown brief-case, very old.

Mitchell walked to him, stopped in front of him, fists on hips. The young man gasped.

"Going somewheres, buddy?"

"I was just going—I was looking for—"

"Just come from Willie Walker's, did you? Two-two-two Meserole?"

"Why, yes!" Mouth open, eyes too very open, indeed, the young man gaped up at Mitchell. "How did you know?"

"My Gawd!" Mitchell muttered. "This's like shooting fish." He spun the lad around, felt the hip pockets and the loose of the shirt, snatched the brief-case; he shook the brief-case. "What's in here?"

"Pictures."

"Pictures?"

"Yes, drawings and sketches."

"Oh, that's nice. Maybe that's why you've been running, huh? Chasing a wall to hang them on, huh?"

Mitchell took him by the arm, pushed him into the back seat of the car Joe had driven close to them. The sight of the uniforms appeared to increase the young man's astonishment. Were they, he asked, policemen? Mitchell assured him that they liked to kid themselves into thinking that they were, anyway. The car roared away. The young man, stuttering with excitement, tried to explain something; but Mitchell shushed him. "Lots of time for that, buddy," he muttered, opening the brief-case. "Lots and lots of time."

About a dozen sheets of white drawing paper, all spotless besides a thin wood drawing-board, some soft black pencils, and a few chunks of charcoal wrapped in a piece of waxed paper which looked as though it had recently enclosed a drug-store sandwich. There were also four sheets of paper covered with miscellaneous pencil sketches—hasty things, but obviously from life.

"You draw these?"

The youth nodded.

"They're pretty clever," Mitchell said. "You ought to take up art, if you can draw pictures like that."

"I'd like to," the youth said.

"Who the hell are you, anyway?"

"Just a bum. Just another man who's out of a job."

"Even guys like that got names," Lucas reminded him.

"Albert Washman's my name. And I come from Kansas City, originally. But I've been hitch-hiking the last couple of months. I go around making sketches of people and selling them for whatever I can get. Got to live somehow."

Mitchell held up the portrait of a bartender. "Taverns?"

"Yes. Best places to sell stuff."

"I don't know this guy. He's not from this town."

"No, that was back in the roadhouse. I only got here a little while ago. I was going to give a man named Walker a tip, but when I got there I found—"

"Just a tip, huh? Save it," Mitchell suggested.

THE CAR screeched to a stop in front of Willie Walker's place. It was a se-date, rather imposing establishment,

except to the knowing eye a highly respectable stone residence in the middle of a highly respectable block filled with just such. There was a dim, purplish glow in the first floor windows, from behind stately curtains, but no porch light, no sign. Walker had designed a modern type of speakeasy for its novel appeal. Even the taxicabs were kept a half block away, though now the drivers were churning around a policeman at the front door and being told repeatedly to get the hell back where they belonged and stop asking so many questions.

Mitchell had Albert Washman's right arm as they walked upstairs together. "Just a tip, huh?" he was muttering. There was another soft-babbling crowd on the second floor—waiters, two bartenders, a porter, a half dozen customers, all male. Not even Masterson, the doorman-host, or Matt Healey, the head barman, had advanced more than a few steps into the large square living-room of the owner's apartment.

"Everything's just like it was when we come up, Mitch. Didn't disturb a thing. Didn't even touch anything!"

Just inside, Mitchell paused, nodding thoughtfully, pushing his lower lip far up over his upper lip. Suddenly he yanked Albert Washman over the threshold, shook him, pointed to what once had been Willie Walker. "Is that what you call just a tip?" he snapped.

He released the artist, and without a backward glance strode across the room. Then with little, cat-like steps, his fists on his hips, his hat tipped well back, he walked slowly around the corpse.

"That's the guy there!" Matt Healey cried. "That's the guy! Boy, what I mean that's fast work, Mitch!"

Frank Masterson nodded, narrow-eyed and grim. "That's the guy, all right. I showed him the way up here myself."

"That's him!" Healey cried.

Albert Washman's face went white as the paper he did his sketches on, and his eyes grew enormous. He staggered sidewise two steps, hit a chair, sat down. He didn't aim at it: it just happened to be there. He began to cough quietly, jerkily.

Lannie Lucas growled: "Swell act, kid. But if you think you're good enough to finish it off, for gosh sake go out in the hall first! You might spoil some prints for us in here."

Mitchell was mumbling to himself. "One awful poke, all right. . . . Must have been that ashstand. . . . Must have slammed his head up against that door there. . . . Looks like he was standing facing that door. . . ."

"Looks like he never knew what happened, huh?"

"He might even have been in the doorway." Mitchell turned. "Where's it lead to?"

It led, he learned, to a stairway, which went to a back door. It was a private stairway, a private doorway, too. Willie Walker had always kept both keys himself, and sometimes received by this route visitors he didn't care to have seen by his paying guests.

Mitchell asked quickly: "How did he know when somebody was there to see him?"

"There's a buzzer. From the back

door. Then Willie'd go down and let them in, whoever they were. Not many people knew about it."

The door was ajar. Mitchell pushed through, stepping over a Walker shoulder, and descended to the back door. It was locked, bolted. He returned, sighing, and examined the buzzer wire, which passed through the floor of the false hall. Back in the Walker living room, he found Lucas squatting beside the ashstand.

"This's what did it, all right. Landed right back in place again afterwards, too. But this is it all right. See—you can even see some blood on the underneath side there."

"Sure," said Mitchell.

The ashstand was small, but very heavy—one of those boxing dummy things, round-bottomed, unknock-overable.

"I supposed he just grabbed the nearest thing he could lay his hands on," Matt Healey growled. "The rotten kid!"

Albert Washman just sat there staring at the Walker mess. He still looked as though he might be sick at any moment.

"Sure," Mitchell said, and sat in a chair on the other side of the room. "And now suppose you tell us what the hell happened, anyway?"

MATT HEALEY started: "I was standing at the end of the bar down there, where there's a little sort of opening so you can look out into the hall for a breathing spell now an' then, when along comes Mastey with this kid."

Masterson went back a little: "This kid came here about eleven o'clock,

and I answered the ring. I never saw him before in my life, and you can see for yourself he don't look like the kind of a guy we'd have coming here ordinarily. I wasn't going to open up for him, at first. Said he wanted to see Mr. Walker, and I said Mr. Walker was busy, and he said it was important as hell and please. Seemed all worked up about something. All nervous.

"I was going to slam the door on him, and then I thought oh, what the hell, it might really be important, after all, and if Willie wanted to kick him out once he got up there—well, Willie could do it just as good as I could. So I let him in. I took him to the foot of the big stairway. Matt here was leaning out watching us. I told him to go on up and knock on the first door to his right. Then I walked over to Matt here, and we talked for a little while until some customer inside began yelling for a drink, so then I walked away.

"But I began to get worried about it. I kept wondering why a kid like that was ever coming to see Willie. He looked so nervous and everything."

"He certainly did look nervous," Healey said. "I saw him when he came in. I was standing there."

"Then I thought I heard loud voices up here, as if somebody was sore about something. And a few minutes later I heard what sounded like a bang, like a big bump. They must have heard that even in the barroom, because anyway Max and Matt here stuck their heads out a few minutes later and asked what was that? I said I didn't know but it sounded like something up where Willie was. I was going to come up-

stairs then and see if everything was okey. Don't know why I didn't. . . . Anyway, what I did do was walk down to the back end of the hall, downstairs there, and take a squint out the back window. You can see part of this room from there."

"Did you see Willie, then?"

"No, I couldn't see Willie. But what I did see"—Masterson glowered at the motionless Albert Washman—"was a guy that looked exactly like this guy hanging from the ledge just outside the window."

"Hanging from the ledge?" Mitchell walked to the back window.

"Yeah. Only not there. Nearer this way. It was right next to the bathroom window. And just as I looked, he let go and dropped to the yard. Landed on his hands and knees and jumped up right away and ran down the alleyway there. He was carrying that briefcase all the time. I saw it."

Mitchell looked at Washman. They all looked at Washman.

Washman whispered: "That's right. I did climb out that window and drop from the ledge. But if you'll just let me tell you—"

"Lots of time," Mitchell soothed. "What'd you do then, Masty?"

"Ran back to where Max and Matt were standing and told them there was something wrong, I was sure, and they climbed out to the hall fast and we all three ran upstairs here."

"Who got here first?"

Masterson shrugged, glanced at the two bartenders.

"I guess we all got here about the same time," Healey said. "We all kind

of crowded through the door at once. It wasn't locked."

"Masty," Max offered, "was saying something about seeing somebody jump down to the yard a minute before. I didn't get just what it was. But we didn't touch anything."

"No, we didn't touch a thing."

"We just took one look," Masterson added, "and I went right downstairs and gave you a ring. There wasn't any use working over Willie, we figured. You can see for yourself he's dead all right."

Mitchell nodded. "Yes, he'd dead all right!" He rose, strolled around the room. He clicked the back of his right thumbnail against upper front teeth, and his eyes, hard gray, moved back and forth all the time. He walked once more around the body, looked once more at the ashstand, peered again into the false hall through which Willie Walker had received quiet guests. He wandered into the bathroom, nodded at the open window, looked closely at the shiny, recently painted sill.

ALBERT WASHMAN sat up suddenly. "Will somebody for pity's sake listen to my story?" he yelled. "After all this talk, will somebody listen to me, please?"

Mitchell, returning to the living-room nodded affably. "Sure. Let's hear it." He sat down again.

Lucas growled: "Got it all ready now, have you?"

O'Neill entered, with his assistant. Mitchell rose. "We ought to clear this crowd out first. Everybody downstairs except O'Neill and Lannie and the kid

here. Joe, take all the names and addresses and phone numbers and let them all go, except the ones who work here. I want them to hang around a while. Want their prints. Your boy friend can fix that up downstairs, can't he, O'Neill? What I want you to do is powder this joint. Most of all that ash-stand and the window sill in the bathroom."

He sat down again, facing Washman. "Okey, kid. Turn it on."

Washman stared at Mitchell all the time he talked.

"When I had to give up my art studies in Kansas City, I started going around to restaurants and roadhouses making sketches of people for whatever they wanted to pay—fifty cents, two bits, a dollar, anything. I may not be much good, but I can hit a likeness fast. Sometimes I'd pick up ten or fifteen dollars in one night, but more often I wouldn't make a cent. I could buy some clothes and get a haircut—I got a few bucks—but I want to save every cent I can and go back to art school, and besides I think it all helps the act.

"Well, this afternoon I was dropped at a roadhouse somewhere out towards Columbia. About eighteen-twenty miles from here, I'd say. Stonybrook, or Meadowbrook, or something. The proprietor let me hang around, and I ate dinner there. Then after dinner I got pretty tired, and I thought I'd grab a little sleep until things began pepping up. So I went to the back of a row of booths. There's a little sort of half-booth there, where some kind of temporary wall has been built out. I don't know just how to describe it. . . . It isn't

really a booth. There's no table, and you wouldn't even notice the place if you didn't happen to be looking. I went in there because it was the only spot I could find where the light wouldn't shine in my eyes.

"I guess I slept a while. Or kind of half-slept, anyway. When I woke up I heard two men talking in the next booth. They didn't know I was there, of course. They must have thought nobody was around. One of them was fairly drunk, and the other was bawling him out. I couldn't hear all they said but I could hear enough! I thought for a minute that I'd fallen asleep in some movie house. That's what it sounded like. Like a couple of gangsters in the pictures. Scram and sez-you and all that stuff. And yet I'm sure they really were tough gangsters."

Mitchell smiled. "Some of them do talk that way."

"When I got what they were saying I was scared. They were talking about a murder they were to commit, here in Waterson. They were professional killers! The one who was getting drunk was complaining that it was a lousy job to send a man out on when they didn't even know who they were after. The other one said he was getting his half grand, wasn't he? and they knew the name and address of the guy, didn't they? and they'd seen a picture of him, hadn't they?"

"But the other one said it was a hell of a way to do business: give a guy a name and address and send him out to a strange town. It was all stuff like that. Then the drunken one complained that they weren't even permitted to write

the name and address down on a piece of paper, in case they should forget it, and the first one got sore and asked him if he'd forgotten it already, and the drunk said, hell no, it was Willie Walker, 222 Meserole Street."

Lannie Lucas sighed gustily. He snapped a lighter on, shut it off, snapped it on again, shut it off, snapped it on. . . . But Washman continued to address himself exclusively to Mitchell.

"Don't think I was half asleep and got all worked up about nothing! I lay there in the dark for at least twenty minutes listening to this talk, and I was too scared to be sleepy, believe me! I was scared sick! After a while they both got up and went over to the dining-room. I had my first look at them then. But they didn't see me, thank goodness!"

Mitchell took a sheet of paper and a pencil from the brief-case and without a word handed it to the youth.

"Sure! Don't worry, I'm not likely to forget those faces, ever!" He began sketching rapidly, surely. "I got up and went outside. I was so scared I was dizzy! I didn't know whether to run, or go inside again and tell somebody what I'd heard, or phone the police, or what. Telling somebody might get me into a flock of trouble. And the police, I figured, would laugh at me."

"They are now, anyway," Lannie Lucas said.

THERE WAS a gas station there, and a fellow was tanking up, and I guess more or less without stopping to think I asked him for a ride. He said okey, and he drove me here. I didn't say any-

thing to him about it. I didn't even take a good look at him. By this time I'd cooled off a little and I was thinking that here was a chance to do somebody a big favor and maybe get some money. After all, this is one awful life I'm leading, and naturally I'm anxious to get back to the art school as soon as I can. I wasn't going to *ask* for anything. Just *hope*."

O'Neill said: "Not a thing on that ashtray."

"I got dropped a couple of blocks from here. What that guy told you about stalling, and finally showing me up here, was all right as far as it went. I met Walker, and I told him exactly what had happened. At first he seemed to be sore, and I thought he was going to toss me out on my back. Then suddenly he began to get good-natured, thanked me, shook my hand, offered me a drink. Asked me if I could describe those two men. Well, I can talk best with my pencils, so I drew their pictures just like I am now. Here's one of them. . . . This fellow was kind of short, and had heavy, high shoulders. I'll have the other for you in a couple of minutes."

Lucas said: "Don't hurry."

"This Walker was all excited. Said I'd saved his life, and he wasn't going to forget it. I asked him whether he oughtn't to call the police, and he said no, and I asked him whether he had a bodyguard then, and he said he had two of them. Just then the buzzer sounded, and he went through that little door and downstairs, and a minute later he came back saying: 'Here's my two bodyguards, see?' And they were

the two men who'd been in the next booth to me at that roadhouse!"

"How much more of this is there?"

"Shut up, Lannie. Let the kid tell his story."

"Well, it may seem funny to hear it, but believe me it wasn't funny when I saw those two men again! Maybe if you could see them, too, you'd understand! These pictures—here's the other one—make them look like angels to what they really are. I was three times as scared as I'd been before! Because now, all of a sudden, not only from looking at them but also from the expression on Walker's face, I realized what a fool I'd been. Knew it instantly. Walker was practically telling me, anyway, with that look in his eyes when he came back.

"I'd heard the name and address of Walker, and I'd taken it for granted that it was Walker they were after. And here I'd come and told him all about it! Even drawn him pictures! If I hadn't drawn those pictures maybe I could have said no, I never saw those men before.

"You see, those are my bodyguards," Walker said, giving me that look, 'and thanks for reporting that they were on the way.' Then he turned to the other two and started bawling them out for taking drinks and for talking like that in a roadhouse. He told them just what I'd told him. 'See,' he told them, 'what a break you got because this punk was dumb enough to come here to me? Look at these pictures! He's a regular camera! What a bright shipment I got for this job!' He kept bawling them out like that.

"They couldn't figure what had happened at first, but when they did they were sore, too. One of them came over and smacked me in the mouth, and I lost my head and started to take a swing at him, but Walker grabbed my arm and twisted it behind me and pushed me over on the floor. 'I'll take care of this punk,' he yelled, 'and you two false alarms better get out to where I sent you and see if you can't finish up the job better'n you started it.'

"They got sore at him, too, after a little of this, and began to yell back at him. I went into the bathroom. Nobody seemed to be paying much attention to me, maybe because they were so busy scrapping or maybe because Walker figured nobody'd be skinny enough to get through that window, anyway. I wasn't really thinking of the window.

"I just wanted to wash my mouth where I'd got hit. But when I got in there and saw it I tried it, and it opened without a sound, so I climbed through. It was right where that guy said he saw me, too. I fell on my hands and knees and then jumped right up again and beat it down that alleyway. I had the brief-case with me all the time. I don't know why."

"Neither do I," said Lucas. He tilted back in his chair, shaking his head. "Boy, you *are* an artist all right!"

Mitchell asked: "What time was this?"

"I don't know. I think it was about eleven o'clock when I got here, but I'm not even sure of that. But I *am* sure," the youth said *determinedly*, "that I didn't hit Walker or anybody else."

"One of your models socked him, I suppose," said Lucas. "Then they jumped out the window, too? Particularly the one with the big shoulders you told us about. Or else maybe they went out past Masterson and the bartenders and nobody saw 'em? Or did they walk out the back door and then lock and bolt it from the inside afterwards?"

O'Neill emerged from the bathroom. "Prints all over that windowsill. Look like all one man's. Want me to take this lad's?"

Mitchell nodded, and O'Neill got busy with pad and roller.

LANNIE LUCAS rose, pocketing his lighter. "You certainly was wasting time on this, Mitch! We ought to be getting set to finish that game by now." He yawned lustily.

Mitchell shook his head gently. "Shouldn't jump at conclusions, Lannie. Look at what happened to this kid when he did." Then he turned to the youngster again.

"How long was this before we ran into you, Washman?"

"I don't know. Maybe ten minutes, maybe half an hour. I'd run, and then I'd stop and walk a while, and then I'd start running again. Finally I had sense enough to stop and ask somebody the way to the nearest police station. They told me, but I couldn't seem to find it. I don't know this town. There weren't many people around the streets, and I probably would have got lost even if I hadn't been so terribly nervous and excited."

"Same prints," O'Neill said.

"Let's go downstairs," Mitchell said.

Joe Hirsh was at the door, talking with another uniformed man. The customers had been cleared out, and the waiters and porter and bartenders were in a whispering group in the middle of the enormous hall, with two detectives and O'Neill's assistant.

Mitchell walked to the back end of the hall, and glanced through the window. Lucas followed him, dragging Washman. "See," said Lucas, "it's just like Masty said. You can see that window from here."

"Sure," said Mitchell. He was walking towards the front of the building, his gaze upon the ceiling. "Sure, I never doubted that." He opened a closet door, peered in and up. It was a linen closet, and he poked around in there for a while. He tried to climb some of the shelves but they wouldn't bear his weight. He came out, looked around the hall, saw an umbrella behind the foot of the balustrade. "What's that doing there?" he asked Matt Healey.

"Masty keeps it for rainy nights. Goes out with it when he sees a good customer pull up."

"Funny place for it. Why doesn't he keep it near the door?"

The big bartender shrugged. "Haven't had any rain lately. I suppose he just likes to keep it out of the way."

Mitchell took the umbrella into the closet. He borrowed a flashlight and directed its beam towards the ceiling, discovering a pair of wires which cut a corner of the closet.

"I'm taking it for granted that those are the wires from the buzzer at the back door. They ought to be right about here. Matt, go on upstairs and

listen if that thing sounds, will you?"

He poked at the wires with the metal ferrule of the umbrella, and presently there was a spark. He smiled, returned to the hallway.

"Insulation's worn away in one place. Or else cut away. The wires are spread a little."

Matt Healey came downstairs, looking excited.

"It buzzed, sure enough!"

Mitchell stared ceilingward, tapping his upper front teeth with the back of a thumbnail. He moseyed into the bar-room. Lannie Lucas trailed him, puzzled, stubbornly dragging Washman.

"Where's Masty?" Mitchell asked suddenly.

"I think he went out," said Healey.

"Went out!"

Abruptly this mountain of a man got busy. He dashed to the door, grabbed Joe Hirsh by the front of the tunic, shook the man violently.

"Did you let Frank Masterson go out of here, you palooka!"

Joe blinked, gasped.

"Why, yeah, as a matter of fact I did. Just a little while ago. He'd been printed, and he said he was tired, and since I knew you knew him and he had nothing to do with the whole thing, and anyway he gave me his address and—"

"You—"

He slammed Hirsh against a wall. He flung open the door.

"Was that wrong, Mitch? I knew you said to keep 'em all here, but you was busy up there an' Masty wanted—"

Mitchell was quitting the house. Lannie Lucas sprang after him, still clutch-

ing the unresisting Albert Washman.

"Hey, wait for baby! What'll I do with this guy?"

"The hell with him!" Mitchell was getting into the car.

"The hell with him, *hell!*" Lannie tumbled down the steps, and Albert Washman tumbled perforce with him. "If you're going somewheres I go with you, and if I'm going somewheres this guy goes with me! Get in there, artist!"

THE CAR jerked away from the curb, whirred down Meserole Street toward West Branch Park. Mitchell slapped it into high, pushed the accelerator to the floor. Lucas, troubled, leaned over the front seat. "Beter let me punch that siren, Mitch."

"You push that thing," Mitchell said grimly, "and I'll push you the hell out of here!"

They made a right turn. It was a heavy car, and two of the wheels stayed on the pavement, more or less.

"What's it all about, Mitch? You don't mean to tell me you believe there *are* two muggs like this guy says?"

"I don't mean to tell you anything. It wouldn't do any good anyway." Mitchell made a left turn. Again two wheels stayed where they belonged, though Lucas and Washman were hurled into a heap in the back seat. "But you might at least try to remember that everybody's been wondering why Willie Walker kept Masterson on there all this time, when he hated the guy's guts. You can't get that on paper, and you'll never get anybody to tell it on the stand, but everybody knows it just the same, don't they?"

"You mean Masterson had something on Willie?"

"Bright boy! Bright boy!"

"And Willie imported the muggs to chuck a few cannonballs into him, to keep his trap shut?"

"Some day, Lannie m'lad, they'll be giving you a gold star on your report card to show your mother!"

"But if Masty knew—"

"He didn't know it! How could he? They came in the back way, and he never saw them. But when he saw the kid hop through the window, he thought fast. Two guys saw the kid go in, but only Masty saw him go out. So Masty decides it's the chance of a lifetime. If he didn't give it to Willie soon, Willie was going to be giving it to him one of these nights. He knew that much!"

They roared up Esterley Avenue, swaying dangerously close to the car tracks. They were near the *Esterley Arms*.

"So that's why Willie was over near that door?" Lucas murmured, getting it. "There'd been a buzz, *after* the kid left?"

"Sure. That ashstand never did look right to me. It should have been near the hall door, almost the whole width of the room away from where Willie was. There were two burned-up matches there somebody had chucked at it and missed. And there were ashes in the middle of the floor, on the way over. Cinch. Masty'd turned it upside down while he was crossing the floor with it to wait for Willie to come up from the back door."

"Oh," said Lucas. Then: "But if he's

lamming now, he certainly wouldn't make for his own apartment house?"

"He isn't lamming. He's just plain going home. He doesn't think we even suspect him, or otherwise he wouldn't take the chance of talking his way past Joe like that. And remember, he never knew about those torpedoes. How could he?"

"Oh," said Lucas.

A TAXICAB WAS drawing away from in front of the *Esterley Arms*, and Frank Masterson was just opening the vestibule door. He got the door open, but he never got inside. The whole place seemed to explode, and his hand fell from the doorknob as though it had met an electric shock. He whirled once, twice, stumbling towards the curb, and then fell face down. His chin slapped against the curb itself, and his eyes stared into the gutter—but they didn't see it.

The men came out. One of them fired twice more into Masterson's body before he saw the cops. Then he dropped his gun and ran back into the apartment house. Mitchell, bellowing, ran after him.

The second man made for West Branch Avenue, where there was a car parked under the trees. Lucas, scrambling out, fired twice after him. The man turned and fired once. Lucas was hit in the right calf, and he went down, the pistol springing from his fist. He scrambled for it, wriggling, trying to get up, trying to get his knees up. He stood, swaying dizzily. He couldn't find the pistol. He looked up.

The mugg was in the middle of the

street, limping badly, firing without looking back. Suddenly he collapsed. Albert Washman, a guinea pig gone berserk, was directly in front of the department car, in the full glare of the headlights, shooting and shooting; his mouth was open, and his eyes glittered with strange excitement; he kept shooting until Lucas' pistol clicked again and again in his hand.

Lucas took it away from him. It was hot.

"Hey, don't you know you shouldn't fool with things like that?"

Lucas hobbled towards West Branch Avenue, keeping in the shadow of the trees. The man was in the middle of the pavement, motionless, his gun arm grotesquely twisted underneath him.

"I wonder which one of us hit him," gasped Washman.

"It was probably you," Lucas grunted.

Mitchell came towards them, half dragging, half carrying the second gunman, a little fellow. Mitchell was grinning now.

"Guess I picked the easy one, at that." He tugged two folded pictures from a coat pocket, shook them open, stared at them and then at the gunman. He jerked an approving head towards Albert Washman. "Same guys, all right. You'd know them anywhere, wouldn't

you? No question about it, the boy can draw!"

"He damn' near drew a couple of slugs just now, standing in front of them lights! Nothing but beginner's luck," grumbled Lannie Lucas. "That's all it is. . . ."

At the station house, after some questions and answers, Captain Mitchell told the youth he wouldn't be needed for the night.

"We'll want you here about ten o'clock tomorrow morning, but right now you look as if you could use some sleep. The *Roberts* is about the best place. Only a little distance from here. Joe Hirsh'll run you over." And when he saw the lad hesitate, Mitchell produced two tens and a five. "Say, I forgot to mention this. Standing reward of fifty from the Police Benevolent Association fund for every cop that clips a known torpedo, and since we don't know whether you or Lannie got that guy I guess you better split it, huh?"

Lannie Lucas said, when he'd been bandaged, and when Joe Hirsh had returned: "Why all that baloney about a P. B. A. reward?"

Mitchell shrugged, picked up his cards. "Well, he's a good kid. . . . Hell! I would get a hand like this, now! Who dealt?" ♦ ♦ ♦

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233), of Black Mask Detective, published bi-monthly at Kokomo, Indiana, for October 1, 1950. 1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Managing editor, None. Business manager, None. 2. The owner is: Fictioneers, Inc., 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York; Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York; Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York; Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York; Shirley M. Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. 3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner. Signed, Harold S. Goldsmith, Publisher. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 2nd day of October, 1950. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, State of New York, Qualified in New York County, No. 31-9506800, Certificate filed with: City Register N. Y. County, Commission Expires March 30, 1952. (Seal)—Form 3526—Rev. 2-49.

Though sunning himself in Venice, California, Mel Colton has not allowed 3000 miles to dim his description of the havoc and hecticness which envelops Mid-Manhattan. Your pulse will begin to beat in tempo to this fast-moving and emotional yarn of a tough private eye who becomes trapped in a net of circumstantial evidence labeled murder because he had one weakness . . . a love for his ex-wife.

Win, Lose—or Kill

by MEL COLTON

THE WORLD was running on flat tires, and I was in the driver's seat with a glass of cold beer in my hand.

I shook my head. It was heavy with headache drops. I looked at my watch. The hands spread a thin, blurry eighteen. A.M, that is. Early morning. Blue morning. Hangover hour.

So I waited for the world to quit wobbling on its pins and settle down. I gulped a fast beer, foam and all, and said, "Okay, you're kidding."

She sat between the cushions on a low couch, legs cuddled beneath her skirt and she was looking at me with eyes that knew their business and lips that told you things. She was tall and gammy as most models are.

You think it's easy talking with your first wife, long since removed by judicial authority, in a lush apartment which you had always promised her and never quite succeeded in obtaining; and here she is, lounging between blue cushions and in front of a case-ment window with a two hundred

buck a month view of the East River? Try it!

It's rough because you thump and thump inside where the ticker operates and all the time you got as much chance of recouping your big loss as bucking Broadway traffic with a kiddie-car.

Win her back to a three room deal with the radiator sticking out like a mashed thumb at a cocktail party, with steamed windows and a clothesline view of the Bronx plus a private peeper's hit and miss salary to boot? From this to that?

So I quit day dreaming. The place had Manhattan Serenade all over: from the wall to wall, embossed wine-colored rug to the fancy frilly lamps and curved furniture to the crazy painted oils on the dull stucco walls; from the low-beamed ceilings for cozy soirees to the built-in bookcases and the shimmering chrome bar, the gold accessories on the kidney-shaped table and to the other gadgets that cost and stood there and

yelled it at you in case you might have overlooked it.

She got up and knotted her hands into small knuckles pushing white skin and said: "No, Johnny, I'm not kidding." She went to the other side of the room by an ash-blonde console, opened the doors and switched the radio on.

"I got drunk," I muttered.

"You got drunk. Real drunk. And abusive."

I watched the foam in my beer glass pucker and dribble down. "So I kill a guy?" Big question. Too big and heavy for a guy with a wobbly head and a thick mind to handle.

She kept flicking the dials until she got the morning news that bellowed out like a hog caller on lower forty. I jerked up. Maybe she wasn't kidding?

"What are you trying to do?"

"News. I want to hear if he's been found."

"Been found?" I jumped to my feet, spilled the beer glass on the rug, pounded over to the radio and turned it off. I grabbed her wrists and glared. She turned away. My breath wasn't exactly from the perfume counter at Saks. "Okay, honey, give. And give straight to papa. No curlicues."

She twisted away and walked back to the couch but stood over it and looked out to the river. "You had too many drinks. You hit him and he fell against the bar-rail."

"Who? Who fell against what bar-rail?" I got a little panicky in the upper story and went over to her. "Ruth, make sense. What? Where? How?"

She turned. "Go away. Keep your breath to yourself. It stinks. Positively."

"You seem to be very calm about this," I said. "Unless it's one big gag."

"Gag?" Her eyes widened. She was trying to be very sophisticated and womanish about it but it didn't quite come off, because the blood had drained from her cheeks and she looked pale and sick, although she managed calmly: "You need another beer to clear the cobwebs, Johnny."

"Gimmie another beer. Never mind. I'll get it myself." Over to the shiny portable bar, into the iced section and out with a pint bottle of beer. I clipped the top and drank from the bottle neck.

Ruth winced. "There's a glass you can pour it in."

"The hell with the glass. I always was too basic for you, kid, so let's not play games." The beer hit cold and struck hard going down but it cleared my mind like a shot of ice water on the head. "Okay, honey. I'm going to sit down and you're going to tell me, nice and slow and clear. I'm shaky but I got ears."

I sat down but she remained standing, washing her hands like she was trying a Lady Macbeth. Her breath came in short, jerky spasms. She was upset and, I hoped, for me.

"Johnny, try to think back—"

She sounded like she cared a little. Maybe. When I'm woozy I get sentimental. But I settle and think. My head was a yard wide and ten high. Vacuum, plus.

"Yetserday afternoon," I said slowly,

"you came prancing into my two-by-four office all pretty and worried and needing help from an old pal, me." I looked up. "Right?"

She nodded. A small, questioning frown playing the bridge of her nose. The cutest nose ever on any dame, so help me.

"You gave me a song and dance about playing the nags and taking a beating to the tune of ten G's," I added, "and the bookie, a joe named Boley, was threatening to tell that jerk of yours—"

"Johnny! Danny's my husband and he's no jerk."

I blinked and my lids had pins in them. I waved a hand and to her disgust sucked the rest of the beer out of the bottle. "To me, he's a jerk. Whatever you saw in that wavy-haired model's boy beyond his money, I'll never know."

Like Mother scolding. "Johnny!" Sharp, cold and reprimanding.

"Okay, okay, honey. So this Boley threatens that unless you pay off quick-like—" I stopped. "Did I really conk Boley?"

A very soft, "Yes."

"Good." I rubbed my hands together, reached for a pack of cigs, shoved one in my mouth and scratched a match off my shoe. I laughed a little crazily. "So you got nothing to worry about. Johnny Batkins plays Galahad for the fair . . ."

SHE WAS shaking me and slapped a hand across my face. My cig dropped to the floor and I picked it up, mashing the ash into the rug as I did

so. Gutter boy, Johnny. Always. Why'n the hell didn't I forget her and play ball in my own league? The minor league. Bush-league. Way down. Double D?

But there was murder. Murder! It woke me up. The full realization slammed into my face like a wet towel and then lay flat in the pit of my stomach.

"Johnny, listen to me, please." She was pleading, her smooth face, tired and dark around the eyes from lack of sleep. "I needed help. Boley wanted me to introduce him to money people to build up his business. Otherwise he would go to Danny and tell him. I didn't want Danny to know about the debt, about how I gambled. I've always gambled, Johnny, you know that."

She came up and kneeled down by me and placed a hand on my arm. "Remember, Johnny, the cocktail party in his apartment? You came with me as a friend. You were going to get something on him?"

"Yeah, yeah." My head was still a load of tacks. "What happened?"

"You got in an argument with him when the party broke up and you slugged him. He fell back and his head hit the small bar-rail."

I tried to figure it out. I remembered hitting somebody, but when I get drunk I have that habit. But a bar-rail? Old. Very, very old gag.

"What makes you think I killed him?"

She took a deep breath and got to her feet. "Charlie said he was dead."

"And who'n the hell is Charlie?"

Ruth pressed her lips with impatience.

"Listen. You went up with me. I invited Shirley and Charlie. Shirley's a model friend of mine who plays occasionally and Charlie's her husband."

"Nice," I muttered. "And where's friend Danny, the spouse, all the time? Watching shows at the Rialto?"

"Don't be funny. Thursday night is Danny's club night."

I rubbed my eyes and got up and walked to the window and gave the East River a play myself. I saw a tug pull a long freight flat behind it, and I saw a bridge and smoke.

"So you took me home here, with you? That's kind of asking for trouble if Danny finds out. First husband with former wife. Torch stuff—"

She bit into her lip. "I had to take care of you, Johnny. You were out."

She looked like she meant it and I said I was sorry. I got back to the subject at hand. "This Charlie. He a doc?"

"An auditor. He listened to his heart and he felt his pulse. He said he was dead."

I shook my head. "I don't buy it, sweetheart."

"You don't buy what?"

I tried a grin but it was sick and slobbery. "I don't buy a guy hitting his noggin on a bar-rail. I don't buy this Charlie, a bookkeeper, playing doc and saying he was dead. I just don't buy that, today."

"Then you don't buy the fact that all three of us lifted Boley up and seated him on a stool and bent his head over like he had fallen asleep, all for your protection. You don't buy that, either?"

"You and Charlie and Shirley did that?"

The phone rang and she grabbed it. She listened and her face blanched as she muttered: "Police. Why, yes . . . send them up."

"You better get out of here, Johnny," she said.

I made a quick look-see around the room for my belongings, then dashed to the kitchen, out into the corridor and down the stairway, through to the rear exit. I knocked over refuse cans in an effort to get going, and fast.

CHAPTER TWO

I HALF-RAN, half-trotted to the nearest subway, sidled between the morning jam, fought to slip my dime in a busy turnstile and walked to the far end of the platform. Getting lost in a morning rush in a sub was duck soup but I couldn't stay lost all day.

I was on the fringe of the pushing, hasty crowd of office workers hurrying to beat the clock when the train came snorting and groaning through its private tunnel and rolled in. I stepped forward—rather shoved, pushed and stumbled. I got dizzy and I began to fall . . .

I heard a scream and I felt heavy and slammed against iron railings and my hands were out grabbing. Then hands dragging me back, laying me down, and I felt the cold platform on my back. I saw women's legs and men's trousers and people, lots of them.

I got up, wiping my wet, prickly scalp and I was looking up into the questioning face of a cop. Big, six feet

and two hundred pounds of disgusted law.

"Suicide," the cop said. "Against the law."

"I saw him!" A feminine voice piped up. "He deliberately—" Her voice tightened up.

I shook clear and glared. The motorman opened his side and came out shaking his head at me.

"Just dizzy," I managed. "Be all right, copper." I turned to the motorman. "Thanks." Then I turned to the crowd. "Thank you, too."

The cop ran a hand over his chin.

The motorman looked at his watch and got back in his cab. The train moved on with faces pushing noses against the windows to get a look at the would-be suicide.

Another train was coming in and the crowd began to move again for entrance. I lost the cop easily in the mob, crossed to the other side and got into a local going uptown.

At the next station I stumbled out, up the stairs and into the first drug-store and sat at the fountain. A red-headed waitress with a humorous mouth asked me if I wanted an aspirin.

I looked in the mirror behind the counter. I could use a dozen of them. My eyes were glassy with red lids in a dark, unshaven face. My hair was wet with sweat and my tie was hanging off the collar, a damp, slept-in collar.

I got three aspirins and a cup of black coffee and I got privacy. I didn't smell so good, either.

The aspirin set and the coffee began

to liquidate and I began to think; easy at first and then hard. I get a bookie named Boley dead. I get too many drinks and I clip him and he hits a bar-rail in his apartment. I get a joker named Charlie telling Ruth and Shirley that he's dead. And I get suicide in a subway. But I don't get suicide, I get a push, a well-timed shove. I get, but I don't like.

A guy with a good-bye complex doesn't take a leap and then bounce against a train. He leaps in front of the train. I got dizzy but I wasn't train-bait.

A kid came in with papers and I bought two. Nothing about Boley.

A quarter got me change. I left two dimes on the counter and dropped a nickel in the phone and called the *Record* and asked for the city desk and a friend, Ned Clark.

Ned's voice was like a carpet tearing.

"Me, Johnny Batkins. A favor, Ned. I got a new case and it deals in a Boley, a bookie. Know anything?"

That carpet voice got real rippy. "Boley? Whose leg you pulling, son? Boley was found dead this morning. Hasn't hit the press yet. Cops asked us to lay off for a few hours."

A lot of surprise. "Yeah? Bumped off. Big crime spread for you guys."

"Nothing like that. This one's cute. He's found hanging over his little bar like he's asleep. But he's got a small pen knife stuck into his heart. Cute."

I almost swallowed my tongue getting it out. "Pen knife?"

"Why, you know something about it, son?"

“No, and thanks.” I hung up and stood in the booth and wondered if a good stiff drink would upset an aspirin and coffee breakfast.

I TRIED the subway again and took an Uptown. The few passengers, maids and shift workers glanced at me like I was something the night left over for the morning to clean up. And I felt that way.

The train went up at a hundred and sixty-first and by Yankee Stadium where some of the boys were batting balls and chasing them around the smooth grass. You gotta be in condition for that. I got off a couple of stations farther down, walked to the Concourse, entered an apartment building and finally opened my apartment door. The old three room deal with the radiator and the smudged windows.

Visitors. Not very gay but rather gloomy and set, stiffly like bankruptcy. As I opened the door, something big came from behind it and poked something small between my ribs with expert care. And seated in the one overstuffed chair was a sleek, carefully dressed character. His skin was olive on the muddy side and he had enough black hair to cover up thinning spots on an egg-shaped dome. His eyes were like dying ashes, thin and crisp greyish-blue.

I had seen the guy somewhere before and it wasn't at a fancy arts ball.

He turned slightly with a cold, competent look. He said nothing. The man behind me closed the door and his breath was shuttling down my neck like warm air pressuring through a

vent. His breath came tense and jerky as a yo-yo string.

I took a deep inhale. “Look, characters. I'm not a Tenth Avenue bum. I don't like this silent treatment. I don't like flukies behind me with pull-motor breaths. Now spit your little say and scam. I'm tired.”

Wrong thing. The silent boy sucked his thin lips and his eyes raised. A hand whirled me around and turned into a fist that crashed my mouth and me against the wall. I bounced and settled.

It looked serious. I took out my handkerchief and wiped blood from my mouth. I faced the big guy with a flat face and a nose to go with it, but he had a gun pointing at me and I slowed up.

The man in the chair said: “I'm Moretti.”

So he's Moretti. I didn't salaam four times nor jump up and clap my hands. I knew the guy. A contact boy for the racing syndicate. The runner. The leg man. The boy with the finger that spits and marks and makes headlines with bodies sprawled under Sixth Avenue awnings in early morn.

Maybe I was a little too tired to show the proper respect.

“Boley's dead,” he said.

“I know. I got a friend who tells me these things. So what cooks? I'm a shamus with a two-bit bank account and Boley's a book with ambition. Or was. Mind giving me a connection?”

He had a small set smile that didn't tell you anything. “Boley owed the syndicate fifty grand. And we don't like that kind of debt to be erased by a guy croaking.”

I leaned against the wall and counted my fingers. Moretti reached in his pocket and pulled out a gold cig case, took a cig and lit it with the gadget end of the case. Very expensive, very smooth and very effective, period. Like he'd seen too many movies.

"So why pay me a social call?" I asked.

"You killed him."

I played it long and silent.

"Why not?" he added and blew smoke and fascinated himself with the way it ringed to the ceiling. "You carry a torch for a dame that lights up Times Square. A dame that was in the kicks to Boley for Ten G's."

It gets around. A bookie's marker's more public property than a courtesy Dunn report on a skip.

"But Boley's croaking don't erase that," he warned. "I want you to know that, shamus."

I shook my head like I was making a note of it.

"And we've been casing Boley. We know you and your dame and a couple of nifties went to his apartment last night. We know you came out loop-legged and they pushed you into a cab with a lotta worry. And we know Boley got rubbed last night." He got up slowly and flipped his cig on the floor. "And we want you to know that, too."

I said nothing. I was so tired an energetic ant could have walked all over me.

He was by the door with the big guy. "So stay healthy, shamus. I've seen guys fry either way." He stuck a pinky up. "Ten G's the dame owes us. Tell her. Don't let her get the

wrong idea. It wouldn't be healthy."

They slammed the door.

I FINALLY put on a pot of coffee, swallowed a few shots of bourbon and showered. The telephone rang and I counted the number of rings before it gave up and died; and then I shaved and became alive again.

I wrapped a dressing gown around my body and was nibbling toast and sipping coffee a la eleven in the morning like society, when a knock on the door broke it up.

I opened to Shirley. Shirley something or other. Ruth's model friend, no less. Vaguely I remembered her blonde top and saucer blue eyes and lips that gave cheer, bright, like a Christmas card. I remembered her saffron strapless dress.

But she was in a blue business suit now, tailored to fit the curves, and the Christmas cheer on her lips was dragging a bit. She held a make-up kit in her hand.

Vistors' day at the Batkins. Ladies, free.

She came in and closed the door, let her eyes crawl over me, robe and all, and then said: "I want to talk to you."

Everybody wanted to talk to me.

She sat down on the cushion still warm from Moretti's occupation, and crossed her legs. She kept watching me with those saucer eyes like playful spots trying to catch up with an acrobat's flipping.

She moved her head slowly, keeping those eyes pinned on me. "You didn't kill Boley with that punch, Johnny."

I smiled for the first time in so long

that my cheeks cracked from the exercise. "Thank you, very much."

"It was a knife in his heart. He was bending over it."

I looked at her and her eyes picked out a spot on the rug and glued to it. I fumbled for a cig, nervous as before a first-time kiss, and sat down.

"It means one thing," she managed, and then did a fast play of teeth biting knuckles. "Charlie—"

I leaned over. "So I clip Boley. Charlie bends down and say's he's dead. We take his word for it. But Charlie knows differently. So he picks him up and sticks a pen knife in the heart as he does so, and nobody's the wiser. Is that it?"

Those eyes came off the rug and they had water in them. "I don't know," came hard. "But what else? You were reeling around swinging at lamps and drapes and Ruth and I helped Charlie pick him up."

"Sounds good," I said. "Where's Charlie?"

"I don't know. He took me home—you see, we're separated—and I haven't seen him since."

"Charlie play the nags?"

She nodded. "He owed Boley. And being an auditor . . ."

"Did Ruth know about this? About Charlie owing Boley?"

"No. I don't think so. Ruth said she was in a jam and asked me and Charlie to come up to a little party. It all happened after everyone left except us." She hesitated, then said: "You see, Charlie works for Danny Marlin."

Two is two and four is four and

Charlie's the butcher boy. "Have you called the Marlin agency?"

She said no. She said she tried to get in touch with Ruth but Ruth said she was busy and hung up fast.

"The cops were there," I said.

And we batted silly questions and answers around for five minutes, both of us challenging each other with our eyes; mine a murky brown like sun-baked mudpies a week old, and her eyes, a sky-blue inviting as a barker's spiel.

Then she said: "Oh, I'm sorry to barge in. You were eating—"

I got up. "How about lunch?"

She hesitated the proper amount of time. She looked at me, at the robe and at the kitchen. None too inviting.

"Downstairs. Nice and quiet and cool. We talk about Charlie, maybe?"

She pouted, "To hell with Charlie."

So I excused myself and got dressed and added a dab of cologne for the trade and kept thinking of Charlie.

I came to the same conclusion. To hell with Charlie!

CHAPTER THREE

WE DIDDLED over fresh beer in cold crockery steins and we smoked cigs and hunched shoulders and whispered like a three yard touchdown huddle; and I ate liverwurst and she had a grilled cheese and she kept insisting that Ruth made a mistake in leaving a guy like me.

It was pleasant and very cosmopolitan and all that, but I had Charlie on my mind and cops and a syndicate with a black-haired finger man.

I dropped ashes in the coffee and pushed the plate away. "Shirley," I said, "I was pushed against a subway train this morning."

She opened her mouth and small white teeth glistened.

"Now why should anyone push me against a train?" I asked.

She kept staring and breathing through her mouth.

"Suicide," I said. "Why?"

She whispered one word and it came out clear with the edges curling up. "Charlie?"

I said nothing. Either she was glad it was Charlie getting the nails or sorry for him. Dames are hard to figure; like horses you need a form chart on past performances so you can be fooled more scientifically.

Then she took a quick look at her wrist watch. It was a jeweled-decked affair worth about three grand that didn't come from posing for mag covers or from Charlie's handouts. She grabbed her make-up kit and I laid a tip on the cloth and paid the cashier. The horse-faced cashier gave me a dirty look, thinking I had just made a conquest. Nice place.

I hailed a cab and got in with her.

"I'm going to work," she said, frowning.

"Agency?"

"First."

"I'll ride down with you."

"But it won't be necessary. And thanks, Johnny. And I hope you and Ruth—"

"Whoa."

"Whoa?"

"Yeah, whoa. I'm going down to

the agency. I want to talk to my successor."

"Danny?"

"Danny."

The cab scraped a curb along fifty-seventh and we parked in front of a studio-looking brownstone building with a small scripted sign that said: Marlin-Models.

Shirley with her kit and me with bright eyes climbed newly washed steps, allowed a shiny doorman to open a glass door and smile and we were in a hush-hush carpet with paneled walls and seats and a dozen gorgeous dames with crossed nylons. A neat, serious-eyed receptionist sat behind a glass window and a desk with a switchboard.

The gals' eyes climbed on me like ants rushing a sugar cube and I stood in the middle, nonchalantlike, with the bases loaded and nobody out. Shirley checked in at the desk. Then I checked in. "Mr. Marlin, please."

I get a so-sorry smile and a routine application form appears before my eyes. I smile back and get giddy and sweat a little and said: "Marlin, business. The name's Batkins, Johnny."

She looks like she thinks Batkins is a very funny name, and then plugs in. We wait. I turn my head like a slow moving turret on a tank's top and I get legs, brother, like a Music Hall line-up, only closer. Tall, thin, curved and shapely. A wonderful mess of them. I never did get up to the faces.

"Mr. Batkins, Mr. Marlin will see you. Last office down the hall, please."

She released the catch on the small

wooden gate and I entered, pranced down the hall and knocked, but hard, manly, on the heavy oak door.

Mr. Danny Marlin, the tall, wavy-haired impresario of the form and figure brigade, threw out a hand like he was grabbing a Tuna. "Come in, Johnny. Nice to see you. Busy as hell, but glad to see." All in one powdered breath. I shook his hand and went in and sat down in a leather chair, and he slid a panel and fixed me a drink and there I was, cool and comfortable.

It was a big room, with photos of dames ten feet high and head to head, legs to legs, faces looking out at you and winking, smiling, posing, and cute. There's Ruth looking down at me from a top spot and I get shivers.

His desk was elephant size. Everything on it was copper and polished.

DANNY MARLIN was strictly pretty boy, a former model himself, well over six feet with greyish dreamy eyes on a smooth baby-face. He wore expensive tweeds and brogues that cost fifty a pair. He carried a lot of weight around his shoulders and it was beginning to slip a little toward the belt-line.

He went over to the blinds and let some clean air sluice through the strips. Then he leaned against the wall and said: "Nice seeing you, Johnny. Why?"

Real, smart, New York approach had this boy with the Athletic Club look.

I took the drink in one helping and it was smooth and went down without crying. Then I said: "Danny, let's cut the fodder. You hate me and I loathe you. Okay?"

He smiled and waited. He was probably looking for a spot to throw me because I was concentrating on a spot on his chin that a few knuckles wouldn't help away. A dame can do that to a couple of usually acceptable guys.

I said: "There's a guy named Charlie who audits your books."

He cocked his head. "Charlie Pope. What about him?"

"Are they in good shape? The books, that is."

"What are you trying to tell me?" he snapped.

I got up. "All right, it's this way. Last night a bookie named Boley was murdered. It was at a party. I was at that party and so was Charlie, your auditor, and so was his wife, Shirley and your model." I stopped and his face was as expressionless as suet. "And so was Ruth."

He jumped at that. When I mean jumped, I mean he came from the wall and threw a leg over his desk and leaned forward, in one concentrated action.

"And that involves you," I continued. "I clipped this Boley and he does a head roll on the bar-rail. So he's out, but not dead as first believed, because this morning the cops find him bending over, crying on a knife in his heart. You just don't knife a dead man. No percentage."

"Very lovely," Danny said. "But what involves me?"

"Ruth and Charlie. Charlie was caught by Boley for plenty."

His eyes were full of questions. "What about Ruth?"

"I don't know about her play in

this," I lied. "But I gotta find Charlie. The cops can pin it on me unless I find him."

He grinned. "I'd love that," he admitted, and then his jaw lumped and he picked up the phone and asked for an outside line. Then he dialed quickly as if the number were in his mind. He listened and then hung up.

"Not home. You want his address?" I nodded. Then he tore off a piece of desk pad and wrote a number down and handed it to me like a disinterested physician giving a sugar water prescription to a hypochondriac.

I took the paper and looked at the address. It was on Shakespeare Avenue in the Bronx. Near me. "In the Bronx," I said. "Cozy."

He didn't like the crack. Why, I don't know, but he got red and mad and suddenly lashed out and caught me on the jawbone and I rambled back against the wall like a drunk on roller skates.

"Just a reminder," he snarled. "Keep away from Ruth."

He shouldn't have said that because it told me things. But I was winding up to throw a hard fast one at him, when the door opened and the receptionist screamed a short one. I saved my swing, half way.

"Mr. Batkins is leaving," Danny said calmly. "Please show him the way out."

It was all so pat. The quick dial, the hangup on the phone, the address and the punch.

Anyway the girl showed me the way back to the reception room and opened the small gate for me. I think with proper atmosphere and attitude I could have got a smile out of her. Her eyes

were seriously considering a wink.

Or maybe I was just fuzzy from the blow?

But the board buzzed and she answered: "Yes, Mr. Marlin, here's your outside line."

So he was making a quick call. To the cops, maybe?

THE SUBWAY again and the Yankees were in batting practice. I got off at 167th and walked over to Shakespeare and looked for the address. A cavern of apartment buildings, side to side, one massive canyon of brick and casement windows and narrow walks with garbage cans lining the curbs.

But it was no good. A car was parked in front of the apartment house I wanted, and Moretti was getting out followed by big stuff and they were entering and paying Charlie Pope a visit.

I ducked into the next apartment building, took the self-elevator up to the last floor, walked around and went up to the roof. A roar hit me. I stopped, then grinned. Someone had hit a homer a mile away at the Stadium.

I crossed the roofs where the buildings met when the other roof door banged open and Ruth came running out, head down, gasping for breath. She landed in my arms.

She came up struggling and flaying away with her arms but I held tight. She was exhausted, scared stiff and gasping. Then she recognized me and laid her head on my chest and sobbed.

"He's dead too," she managed, "stabbed!"

"Charlie?"

She moved her head in affirmative.

Between breaths: "I tried to call you this morning but no answer. The police told me Boley had been stabbed by a pen knife. I knew you didn't do it. So I wanted to tell Charlie. I called him but no answer. So I came over . . ."

And we stood there, arm in arm, amid the guide wires and the clothes lines and the impromptu scattering of applause from the Stadium.

"Don't—don't let Danny know."

I took a beating on that. "You still care for that—" I left out 'jerk'.

Through the roof entrance came the heavy pounding of the big guy, eyes wild as he spotted us. He came too fast for himself. I whirled Ruth aside and caught him coming in. I felt my wrist dig into his stomach and my left toppled off his head as he went to the tar roof and rolled over and let his eyes climb up into his head, out cold.

Moretti was standing in the doorway, fingering a gun, confidentially. His eyes roamed from the prone figure of big guy to me. Then he stepped onto the roof and around the vents.

"Where's the dame?" Moretti asked.

I looked for Ruth, but she had escaped down the way I had come up. I was glad of that.

"It's getting monotonous," Moretti added. "Another fifteen blows."

"That leaves twenty-five on the Boley welsh," I mentioned, intelligently.

"Right." He stepped closer. I think I could have taken him then but I didn't try it. "The dame. She stabbed him."

"You saw her do it?"

His eyes squinted from the sun and his lips curved. "She was in the apartment bending over him when we

busted in. What else could it be?"

I shook my head. "I don't think so."

"Sure. Your torch. Smart shamus, so smart. A pen knife's a women's weapon, strictly." Then he turned and watched big guy squirm and blink his eyes and shake his head. Moretti grinned: "No good. He's timber, all wood up to the top."

And then, amid the roar of the baseball crowd and the stretching of big guy and Moretti's remarks, it hit me all at once and started to make sense. Not all of it, but enough.

"Who gave you Pope's address?" I asked Moretti.

He stared at me, puzzled.

"You expected to find me here and not the dame, right?"

He said nothing, but his mouth started to clinch at the ends and the gun tightened in his hand.

"Moretti, you're playing patsy. The cops have been notified, too, I'll bet a new hat—"

I stopped and both Moretti and I looked to the entrance. Like on cue: Lieutenant Rhodes. Thin, lanky and rough and sucking his lips like he had sore gums.

"You boys through playing?" he said sarcastically. "I'd like your advice on a dead body downstairs."

Another heavy cop stood beside Rhodes and that cinched it. We marched down like kids at a fire-drill; Moretti, big guy and me, quiet-like and orderly.

Charlie Pope lay between the living room and the small foyer that separated the bathroom from the bedroom. It was an ordinary, well-kept flat with moderate

furniture and neat, clean floors. All except the spot where Pope lay like a fallen hero, arm across his body and hand to the knife's handle.

I gave Moretti a dirty look signifying his deductions that Ruth did it was strictly for the birds.

Rhodes looked at me. "Know him?"

"Charlie Pope," I said. "Met him at a party."

Rhodes kept sucking his lips. "At Boley's shindig?"

I nodded.

"What makes this guy commit suicide?"

Suicide? I frowned at Rhodes. "You're reaching?"

"Why?" He made a nod with his head. "You think Little Ceasar here did it?" Meaning Moretti. "Or are you ready to break down and confess all?" he added.

I liked Lieutenant Rhodes and he liked me—that is when we didn't step on each other's toes, like right now.

"That's a woman's weapon," Moretti spoke up again. "They get real close, see, and whang."

"Why not suicide, Johnny?" Rhodes looked at me carefully. "This guy owed Boley I understand, was separated from his wife, and was at the party when Boley took a dive. Your girl friend by the way went to bat for you. Said you only hit him, couldn't have knifed him, too."

I felt better, a lot better. As if that flatness in my belly had gone. "It looks like suicide, but it isn't. A guy doesn't plunge a knife into his heart. A small one. Too much possibility of pain and hanging on too long. You make sure

it's quick and sure—without pain."

"Thank you," Rhodes said sarcastically. "Now you and Moretti here can come down and play patty-cake at the jail. This guy was dead last night. Or early this morning. There's a possibility both of you jokers could have done it."

I didn't want that. I needed time. I shoved Moretti into Rhodes who wobbled with him. I ducked back, away from the other cop and big guy and hit the door. I opened it, hit the stairs and took one landing in two leaps. Outside the ambulance and police cars were gathered and a crowd covered me just right.

I grabbed a cab and took off for town. I looked back and didn't see Rhodes come out. I guess he didn't care one way or another about me. He knew he could pick me up anytime he wanted if he was serious about it.

I sat back, caught my breath and then took out the address paper Danny Marlin had given me on Pope's number. I turned it over and carefully scrawled Moretti's syndicate telephone number.

I was doing a little framing on my own.

CHAPTER FOUR

I TRIED THE Marlin Models again and I got my eyes and legs and oomph sitting, waiting, but no Danny Marlin. He was gone for the day.

I tried a Park Avenue abode, with the doorman by the small switchboard and the 'this is a reserved section' air. But I knew the apartment on the fifth floor; with patio and glass doors and indirect lighting, soft, cool and greenish, and it

belonged to Danny Marlin for his out of town clients and other things too, maybe, like Thursday nights at the club.

I flashed by the doorman with the upraised hand and the gesture to stop. "Mr. Marlin's expecting me," I said throatily. "Don't bother to ring."

The elevator attendant hesitated, then shrugged and shoved me up to five with a silent whomp. I got out, nodded like I was going to pick up a French model and sneak her into Mexico, then knocked on five C.

Danny opened the door and surprise mixed with pain as I let go and caught him on the pretty chin and back he went, rolling, stumbling, very awkwardly through the small reception foyer and against and over a Louis Sixteen couch, and onto the carpet, sprawled but beautifully. Wavy hair to the rug, hands grabbing and clutching at Louis' wooden spindle legs.

I closed the entrance door and entered, rubbing skinned knuckles and grinning, happily. "That's for playing around on Ruthie," I said, with a naughty-naughty expression. I was going to like this, because he was picking himself off the floor and taking off his smoking jacket with lovely DM initials on the pocket.

The smoking jacket was a blue velvet affair and he threw it at me. I caught it wrong. The coat blocked my view and I felt his fist come through and slide off my jaw. Then a quickie into the stomach and I finally got rid of the damn coat.

I was smashed to the floor with a good right. A heavy brogue came

swishing my way but I turned and twisted the leg belonging to same and we both were on the carpet. Then we got up like wrestlers, slow but sure and went at it again.

I swung and missed. He connected, not hard, but enough to break a lamp as I went back. He was good, but not that good. So I quit warming up.

I jabbed short lefts just to watch his face wince and mark up and then rammed a hard belly blow. He obliged by bending down and throwing protection to his midsection, and I threw a grande finale off his chin again and he folded up like a tent and sat down, his mouth sucking in breath.

I looked around the joint. Strictly mid-Manhattan with the modern cushions and low couches and some Louis stuff to add dignity. There were two doors other than the entrance one, leading to a kitchen and one to a room in the rear.

"You owed Boley twenty-five G's," I snapped down at him.

He looked up at me with eyes a million miles away, friendly at that distance, and then he gently rubbed his chin. Blood began to trickle down his collar. He glanced at his hand and saw the blood. He got up slowly and staggered to a small barette, opened it, and fumbled with a bottle.

He poured himself a fast shot, then turned at me, holding onto the barette for support.

"You're crazy . . . you gutter hood—"

I looked at the gold ash trays and I saw cigarettes, some with lipstick red on the tips, some not. I knew I was right but it was just a matter of timing.

"Moretti," I said. "Bang-bang boy. Finger man for the syndicate. How'd you get his phone number?"

His eyes were still distant, but coming brighter. He ran a hand through his wavy hair and back over his ear. "Don't know what you're talking about."

"You called up Moretti when I left your office. Why? Because he was just getting out at Charlie's when I arrived. I took the subway and he had a car. But he didn't expect to find Charlie stabbed and Ruth there—"

"Ruth?"

"Yeah, Ruth. Because Ruth wanted to talk to Charlie and she couldn't get ahold of him by phone. So she went over to find him dead, stabbed in the heart."

Danny took a couple of gulps with his adam's apple and then hit another drink. He wasn't passing them out. The drink hit him like a bolt, and he coughed some of it back and sprayed the rug with some bonded rare stuff.

I dug in my pocket and brought out his address paper. "Your desk pad." I waved it at him. "You wrote Pope's address on it." I turned it over. "What Moretti's phone number doing on the other side?"

He broke a little. He stared at it and twisted a lip and took a deep breath. He was tearing apart, piece by piece, but he was still thinking.

"Charlie was my auditor. He had borrowed money from the books and confessed to me."

"I don't think so. That is, he probably caught you conniving the books. So being smart, he held that over you

and tried a little fling at the nags himself."

No answer. So I tried the slow teaser. "But if he had been really smart, he would have known about you and Shirley."

He hopped on that one. He clenched his fists then thought better of it. His jaw still hurt and I was caressing my knuckles again. I had a Tenth Avenue style with a Hell's-Kitchen background for training, and there was a slight subway fracas that burned me.

"Shirley lied to me," I said. "She said Charlie stabbed Boley when they picked him up. She said he owed Boley money. Shirley can lie easy. A three grand wrist watch with things to come can make any one lie easy. It can make one murder."

That blew the lid, steam high and sizzle, because the inner door banged open and Shirley, framed in the doorway, was wrapped in a very endearing green gown, strapped high and bunched tight in the middle with a gold-yellow sash.

A nice tableau. Act Three, Scene Three.

DANNY STOOD hard against the barette, legs wobbly and eyes strained hard on Shirley with my accusations dripping through his mind like a leaky faucet. And Shirley, her saucer eyes taking in the situation, wide and then spreading thinly across her face, cautiously as a cat going to sleep.

I turned to Shirley. "Somehow you knew too much about it, bright eyes. You knew Charlie used a pen knife on Boley. Why did you know? The news-

desk just got the info a few hours before, and the cops were holding it back. Maybe you saw Charlie use the knife and maybe you didn't. If you didn't, then you used it. Because you were too anxious to pin it on Charlie. Because Charlie was already dead himself and it looked like suicide!"

She looked at Danny and said: "Is he nuts or something?"

That didn't stop me. I kept pitching. "You wanted to get rid of Charlie because he was in the way for you and Danny-boy. So you separated, but Charlie had books against Danny. That hurt. You like diamond wrist watches and Park Avenue roosts.

"Then I oblige at the party by getting stinko and clipping Boley. Maybe Charlie did think he was dead. A lot of commotion. You pick him up and a swell chance for Shirley to stick a knife into him and blame Charlie. What a swell deal she was doing for Hotsy-Totsy lover-boy, Danny."

Shirley's face was tight and bunched. Danny's eyes were crawling around, first on her and then to me. Then he straightened.

"Assumption. You can't prove a thing."

"Maybe not. But that subway deal I will take out personally on you, Danny-boy, because Shirley must have told you I was taken home by Ruth. That don't set with you at all. Danny Marlin, the models' delight. All the dames in the world but ego won't let him lose even one to a guy like me. Especially to a torch affair. So you case me out and see me leave.

"The old ego flares up and a slight

brush off in the subway and it's suicide. Suicide because you think I hit Boley and killed him."

Danny said nothing but a funny expression was crowding his face as he looked at Shirley.

"But I don't suicide and you don't know about that knife deal in Boley until I tell you. Then you get frightened and call Moretti to see Charlie before I get to him and squeeze out the info on the books and the nags. But sweet little Shirley's done that for you. She said Charlie took her home. But did he? With eyes like Shirley's it looks like a reconciliation for Charlie so they go back to his apartment. She gets close enough and wham—the old knife." I grinned. "A knife's strictly a woman's instrument. Moretti says so and he's an expert."

Shirley stepped close to me and played it dramatic. "Who'd you think you're trying to frame?" She was mad, real mad.

"When the cops ask questions," I snapped, "you gotta have good answers. I was with Ruth, out cold, but accounted for. Did Charlie take you home? Prove it. Especially when Charlie's been dead since early this morning. And what about you and Marlin?"

"Danny!" She ran to him, throwing her arms around his neck like a hungry Octopus. She broke and bad. Danny squirmed and took her arms from his neck and pushed her away.

She came back, sobbing and reaching and he slapped her hard across her cheek. She stopped and puffed and choked.

"Danny! You don't believe him. He lies! Don't stand there and look at me that way—Danny . . ."

His face twisted into a mess of pulled muscles and bad temper. He slapped her again and she wobbled and fell, sobbing. She made a feeble stab at his leg but he walked away toward the phone.

"We should have the police," he said harshly.

Good, clean, upstanding young man, this guy. I felt like polishing him off again, when there was a sudden cry from Shirley, as she picked herself off the floor and crashed through the window before we could stop her. She went hurtling five floors to the street.

We were a couple of tired, dumb boys watching the crowd suddenly gather around the poor kid's body. And when we looked at each other, it was a weak, faded, sickly look.

So it cleaned up. Danny talked fast but good enough to keep himself clear

of jail. Moretti took a powder to the west and Ruth's ten G's became drain-pipe material.

And me; I was cooking a steak, medium rare, when the phone rang and this time I answered it.

"Danny and I are getting a divorce," Ruth's voice was merry as the first drink on New Year's Eve.

I said: "Mmm."

"And, well, you remember those Hansom drives in Central Park, Johnny?"

"Mmm," I answered, with rising inflection.

"I'd like that, Johnny."

"Mmm," with enthusiasm, much, and I quickly forgot the steak, dashed down to the cleaners and had my suit pressed and then bought a bottle of drug-store cologne, the ultra smelly kind.

I had a date to go buggy riding in Central Park with a very high class dame.

Yes, sir. ◆ ◆ ◆

LAW AND DISORDER

◆ In Parran, Md., burglars who attempted to gain admittance into a building via a shuttered window found themselves routed by a force they least expected. In prying open the shutters, they disturbed a hornet's nest and fled—a swarm of very angry, and stinging, insects hot in pursuit.

◆ It isn't only the automobile and truck drivers who get arrested for speeding. In Los Angeles, a man was pinched and fined \$10 for speeding with a trolley car.

◆ Police recently found two guns, a pair of brass knuckles, a dagger, and 60 rounds of ammunition in a New York City man's abode. When asked as to where he'd gotten all the "deadly items," the man revealed, "I inherited them from my mother."

*Fiction of Quality in
a Quality Presentation*

**DETECTIVE TALES
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FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES
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