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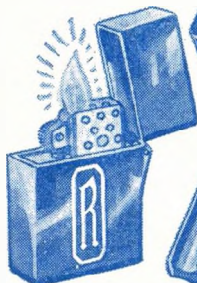
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CRACK DETECTIVE STORIES



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Robert W. Lowndes, Editor

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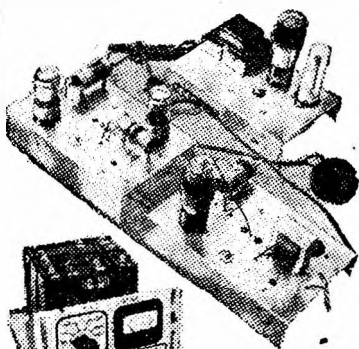
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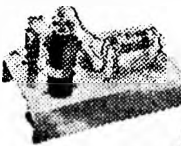


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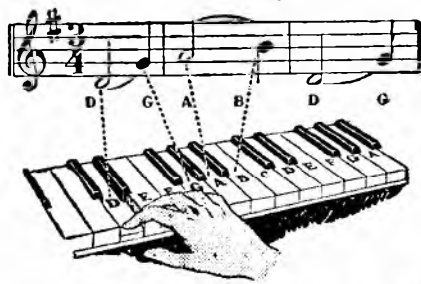
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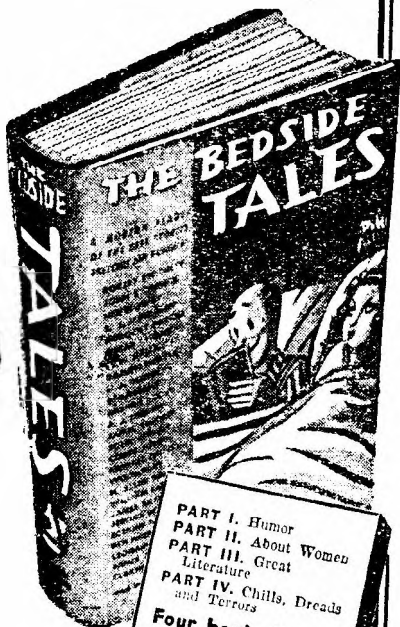
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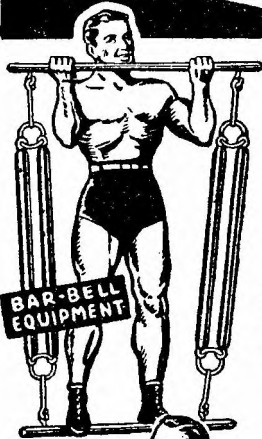
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Murder Bait

By T. W. FORD

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N. Nickleby Dickens didn't want any part of protecting the new Western movie-sensation, Elbert "Bucko" Whickers, from unspecified perils. But when the incredible Dr. Okram entered the case, obviously buying Dickens off, things looked as though it might be interesting after all

ROLLING the Fernet Branca around in his capacious mouth, he swallowed it reluctantly, then smacked his lips with all the gusto of a pistol crack. Two femme patrons of the Cocktail Lounge Intime of the exclusive Hotel Orinocco glared at him as if he were a strayed denizen of a pigsty. N. Nickleby Dickens bent his oversized, red-rimmed eyes into a coffee cup. Some people simply failed to

appreciate the originality of a man who conducted his business from a bistro instead of the mundane confines of an office. When he ponderously raised his great head again it was his turn to recoil. Somebody had sneaked in a clothing store dummy beside him at the bar.

Then the dummy spoke. "Pretend you don't know me. I—I've got to see you somewhere in private, Mr. Dickens. *Most urgent, really!*"



Complete "N. Nickleby Dickens" Novel

The world was going completely cockeyed, that was all; no sense to anything any more. Maybe the whole damned thing was a mirage. Maybe he wasn't here in the Orinocco Bar. But there was Martinez across the counter, Latin brows forming delicate question marks as he awaited the new customer's order. Yes, it was all too real. Dickens stealthily used his eye corners to make a further reconnaissance on the clothing store dummy.

It was simply incredible. There was a mop of wavy red almost-orange hair. There was a pair of smoked sun glasses like black demitasse saucers pasted over the eyes. There was a violent robin's-egg blue sports jacket so padded it seemed as if the dummy were wearing a full-back's shoulder harness beneath it. And below, clothing the legs of the six-foot-four apparition were beige-hued slacks. N. Nickleby Dickens fumbled for his Fernet Branca. The next instant, the stem of the tiny glass snapped in his fingers.

For the freak had croaked dramatically, "I'm incognito, you see, Mr. Dickens."

"Dickens—that big slob," Nick Dickens said in the deep half-hoarse voice that was still somehow gentle, "will not be in here for weeks. Months, perhaps. He owes me a fine—and that thief never pays. Never!"

The flaming-haired freak nodded. "Good, you're discreet too, Mr. Dickens. . . . Of course, I'd know you by that crutch. I am Elbert 'Bucko' Whickers, new Western star of Monolith Pictures."

N. Nickleby Dickens lowered his fresh glass of Fernet Branca. "You are forgiven, my dear fellow. I never go near the cinema."

Elbert Bucko Whickers let that one go by. Dramatically he shielded his profile with a wine card as an entering patron glanced at him casually. "I am in great danger, Mr. Dickens."

"Undoubtedly. Some scorned woman—a bobbie-soxer, probably—with murder in her heart." As he fired up a cigaret with a deluxe mono-

grammed-in-jewels lighter, he produced a business card and tapped it with a thick thumb. "Please to notice. It says, 'N. Nickleby Dickens, Public Relations Counsel.' Yes, I am not a private eye; so you, my friend, are in the wrong pew. Good day!"

"But wait—please. This is no matter of murder: it is my career that is at stake, Mr. Dickens. You see, I am to be the new romantic interest in colossal epic dramas of the West. I will replace the gunpowder of the range with male glamour." Ignoring the choking sound of the ponderous Dickens, Whickers proceeded to explain in a few hundred well-chosen words. Boiled down, it came to this: plucked out of nonentity, launched with a publicity campaign, Whickers was on the verge of going before the Kleigs for his first big picture under the aegis of Marko, self-alleged genius and organizer of the new company, Monolith.

DICKENS made mental note of that. If Monolith was tied into this thing and footing the bill, they could go for plenty. Dickens had already decided that, provided he accepted the case, his retainer would be upped a cool hundred just for taking this ear beating.

"So you see, Mr. Dickens, as America's new heart throb, I cannot afford a scandal at this moment. Not so much as a whisper."

"Then why don't you change your clothes?"

Whickers creased his noble forehead perplexedly. "This is so important that I even risked slipping away from my bodyguard to see you privately."

"Bodyguard?" Dickens' pricked up his ears.

"But, of course," purred the star-to-be of the rough and ready horse operas. "The great Marko has insured the production against any accident preventing its completion for some terrific sum—a million dollars or something. So—a bodyguard for me, naturally. But—I gave them the slip."

Dickens rolled a dyspeptic eye

over that violent-hued outfit again and wondered if the bodyguard were luses or had lost their Seeing Eye dogs. "You could sue those guards, Bucko, old kid!"

"I gave them the slip—because of this." And he palmed out a bit of newspaper, slid it before Dickens as if it were some secret code. It was an ordinary clipping from the classified personal column of a newspaper.

"Relatives, or anybody possessing information concerning one Stuckney Whickers, last residing at 318 Whitehead Street of this city, will find it to their advantage to contact Raley Realty Office, 45 Bridgeton Avenue." Dickens flipped it back negligently after reading it aloud. "Scandal? Or are you Stuckney Whickers, too?"

Elbert Whickers' delicately curved mouth curled in disgust. "Hardly. . . I—"

"Then why is Monolith Productions interested?"

Whickers' eyebrows climbed in horror above the sun glasses. "They aren't! I wouldn't have them know of this for anything—not for anything! You see, Stuckney Whickers is my uncle." He just whispered the last.

N. Nickleby Dickens shrugged. "Plenty of people have them, they run in families. All right." He yawned prodigiously, quite bored with the whole thing. "Go up to the Raley Realty Office and see what the score is. You're a relative, perhaps and heir, and—"

THE flaming head began to go from right to left in a negative shake. "Uncle Stuckney isn't dead. But he has disappeared from his Whitehead Street address; I've already been down there."

Dickens rattled his big crutch against the bar. Was the freak an imbecile as well? "All right. Go up and see Raley anyway! That's all."

"And risk scandal-1? Uncle Stuckney went on periodical drunks. He got in all kinds of jams—especially with cheap women. And if that Raley should find out that I, Elbert 'Bucko' Whickers, the new sensation of the screen, was *his* nephew. . . .

well, you can see the possibilities. Mr. Dickens. . . . A scandal, maybe. . . . Now if you—"

Something in Dickens' oversized beefy face halted "Bucko," and Dickens permitted himself a luxury he seldom indulged in: emotion. Lord alone knew what had happened to poor old cockeyed Uncle Stuckney; and this conceited prig sitting here was afraid he might get his hands dirty if he—N. Nickleby Dickens drained off the Fernet Branca in a tasteless gulp and swivelled his big head negatively once. "Not interested. Good day."

But the rumbling frigidity of his tone failed to put the chill on the embryonic film star. "You've got to handle it, Mr. Dickens," he pleaded huskily. "My career. . . . Think! You've got to. You see Raley and—" He was clawing at Dickens' arm.

Nauseated, Dickens gave a signal. The suave Martinez back of the bar got it and approached. "Your phone, Mr. Dickens. Yes."

Heaving up his carcass like some sea cow about to break surface, Nick Dickens hooked his crutch. The white furrows from his broad nose to the mouth corners were the danger flags bespeaking the state of his temper. His left leg dangled uselessly, stricken by infantile paralysis. Yet with an unbelievable grace he swung quickly down to the back end of the bar, the crutch sweeping swiftly and silently. It was a doubly reinforced thing to support his great heft.

DOWN there were two phone instruments, both the cradle type. One was in maroon to match the decor of the establishment. The other, chromium, had "N. H. D." initialed in black on the base; Martinez had meant it when he said "your phone." Actually it was a private line, an extension from his office across the street. The cradle was off now. At the other end, Miss Irma-down Blithers, his secretary and "personal shrew" as Dickens dubbed her, would be waiting. There had been no actual call for him of course; Martinez had simply gotten the signal.

Dickens enveloped the combined mouthpiece and receiver, then paused to rake fingers through his mop of black hair. He would feign a melodramatic conversation with Irmadown, then return to "Bucko" Whickers and insist an important thing in a case he was handling made it impossible for him to consider any other matters at the present. It worked with the most persistent would-be clients.

"Don't tell me *that*, Miss Blithers!" Dickens let go with a roar that made several patrons jerk around. "No-o? Really. . . . Passed away less than an hour ago? Great Jehovah! Yes, yes. . . . But, of course. . . . Make a reservation for me to fly to the Capital immediately!" Then he lowered his voice confidentially. "Don't blow a gasket, Irmadown. This is merely an act. I—"

It was then he realized for the first time that there was nobody at the other end. He scowled, fumed over the wire, jiggled the hook with a slow heavy anger. "Irmadown, you wench! This is going to cost you. Deserting your post. . . . probably out in the powder room choking down your infernal vitamins and—" Then he thought he heard scuffling sounds, a muffled scream, and the crash of a chair.

And Irmadown was panting at the other end of the wire. "Oh, Mr. Dick-ens, hurry, hurry right over! . . . A terrible creature has been up here making passes at me! *Mis-ter* Dickens, he tried to—*to n-neck* with me! It was awful. He was a little blond beast with a monocle and a beret and—"

"Tut-tut. . . . Poor devil, probably out of his mind. I'll have the Pschiatric Ward send somebody right over. . . . New—"

"Mr *Dick-ens*, he wasn't crazy. He—he's a doctor. Dr. Okram, his card says. He was here to see you on business. And he left five hundred in cash though I told him—then he told me I was a p-passion flower and grabbed me and—"

"In cash," echoed Dickens reverently. "Lovely. . . . What was the

fine fellow's business? Irmadown, please, no more heroics!"

I RMADOWN mastered her sniffles. "Well, it—it was something about a classified advertisement from the paper. He left it here—that little blond—well, anyway, he wants you to get in touch with the Raley Realty Office regarding somebody called Stuckney Whickers. It seems an insignificant—"

"Bucko" Whickers came bolting around the corner of the bar to cower behind Dickens' great frame. "There he goes now, Mr. D-Dickens. The great Marko himself. He—he just came out of that office building across the street. If he sees me here, he'll want to know why I gave the bodyguard the slip and—see him?" "Bucko" pointed out through the front window. "That's him—standing on the curb. . . . the man in the beret. . . . wearing the monocle. M-Marko!"

One of Nick Dickens' eyes seemed to bulge out. He saw Marko all right—an undersized figure, glaring from behind the glass pane in his eye, pompous, seeming to vibrate in his tracks as he signalled a cab. One of the latter swung up and blotted Marko from view.

"Don't worry, Irmadown," Dickens said into the phone. "I'll handle the matter. . . . But your love life is your own private affair." He hung up and dropped a massive hand on "Bucko" Whickers' shoulder. "I have just made arrangements to handle your case. Bucko, my friend. We shall strangle scandal before it can so much as rear its ugly head. . . ."

CHAPTER II

"CURIOSITY, mankind's besetting sin and threshold to the chamber of sorrows, as my reknowned ancestor, Charles Dickens, so aptly put it," mused Nick Dickens aloud as the car moved uptown through the cool evening.

"Dickens said that in a pig's eye," calmly retorted "Baron" Watsicki from behind the taxi-cab wheel. "In fact, it stinks so, I think ya just made it up yourself!"

Dickens inhaled, purpling before he remembered his high blood pressure. Swiftly the tip of his crutch moved up past the framed hacky's license on the back of the front seat. "Ignatz Watsicki" was the name beside the photograph of the cowed furtive-looking face on the license. And with incredible accuracy, the tip of the crutch shot forward through the aperture in the glass partition and almost snapped one of Watsicki's batlike ears from his head.

There was a bleat of pain from the tiny driver in the ragged coat. Involuntarily his foot trod down on the accelerator. The cab with the wreck of body flashed ahead like an unflushed greyhound, and Watsicki wrestled madly with the wheel in traffic, flicking leftward to avoid rear-ramming a little roadster and then knifing practically under a truck's bumper, as the special power plant camouflaged by that decrepit hood threatened to become a juggernaut. Watsicki finally brought it under control.

"There was a fly on your ear, Baron," Dickens purred, lounging against the rear cushions.

Watsicki was half choked with rage. "Next time you wanta turn this into a hearse, lemme get out first. . . Maybe I move to another corner stand, anyway. Why not?" Watsicki's cab always appeared to be a stationary permanent adornment at the corner of Dickens' office street. Few people had ever seen it move except when Nick Dickens in person found it imperative to transport his mound of flesh. Some hinted Dickens was the actual owner of the Watsicki hack. "Why not?" demanded the Baron irately as he moved westward across the upper part of the city.

But there was no answer from the rear. Nick Dickens had retreated into that mood when he seemed to exist on a private planet, completely divorced from life on the one about him. Mentally he was berating himself for his insatiable overweening curiosity. He was taking this case because he had, simply *had*, to find out why film genius Marko thought

that innocuous seeming classified ad was so important. Important enough for Marko to use a false name, Dr. Okram, his own backward, and punk down five hundred smackers blind to send one N. Nickleby Dickens on a child's errand.

DICKENS had already been in action. After getting rid of the jittery "Bucko," he had called the Raley Agency, claiming to have known Stuckney Whickers. A sultry female voice at the other end called him "Mr. Diggings" and said Raley wouldn't be in till after six. Dickens could call then to make an appointment. Then he spoke to somebody off the wire.

"You are no relative, is that right?" she'd said when she came back. "Well, as a matter of fact, Mr. Raley has all the information he needs."

"Smoke screen," Dickens had opined as he hung up.

Then he had made one of his rare visits to his office to pick up the so-called Dr. Okram's card. It was a plain cheap calling card, obviously knocked out at some street stand, and minus any address. Beneath the name had been scribbled in "Hotel Belgard," which was a very second-rate midtown hostelry for the great Marko to be patronizing. According to Irmadown Blithers, "Dr. Okram" wished Dickens to present himself at the Raley Agency, posing as an acquaintance of Stuckney Whickers, and discover why they wanted information on the man. The doctor said he would phone the office the next morning.

Dickens, instead, called the doctor at the Belgard immediately and drew a blank. Likewise on three successive attempts. So Dickens had hoisted the carcass into the Watsicki hack and proceeded to the Belgard. A little greasing of palms and Dickens was standing before Okram's door on the fifth floor rear. But there had been no response to his insistent knocking, even when he applied the crutch as a battering ram. He had departed hence, deciding that Marko was very careless about how he threw five hundred smackers around.

And now, as he headed for the Bridgeton Avenue address of the Raley Agency shortly after six, he had come to another decision. This Raley didn't want information regarding Mr. Stuckney Whickers. For some particular reasons of his own, Raley wanted to see a relative of poor Stuckney's. "And, for some particular reason," Dickens added aloud, "Marko is sufficiently interested to be working behind 'Bucko' Whicker's' back on the proposition. . . . Baron, I was under the impression this was a wheeled vehicle, not a bullock-drawn sledge!"

While travelling, Dickens was notoriously impatient. Any period in which he was not in action on a case or "thinking" at the Orinocco over Fernet Brancas and coffee he considered wasted.

"Turn a block downtown, then go across town again, Baron," Dickens threw another order. Obediently little Watsicki made a lurching left turn in the speeding hack, and then took the next westbound street. The apparently somnolent Dickens stole another surreptitious glance out the rear window as the cab screeched to a halt on a red light. "A certain cab behind seems very interested in our destination, Baron. I will depart your company as the light changes. Lead them on a nice goose chase and then call it a day. . . ."

THE traffic light went to green. And with the lightness of a ballet dancer, Dickens was swinging his massive hulk through the door, onto the running board, wrenching open the rear door of the chauffeur-driven sedan-limousine alongside, and swooping into it as the two cars moved off together in the traffic press. The Baron never even gave a backward look; he was inured to the incredible Dickens.

The white-haired old lady in the back of the limousine gave just one scared squeak. And Dickens was leaning close with a finger across his lips and a Peter Lorre look. "Please, dear madam, no outcry. My life is nothing—but the State Department

documents I am carrying—well, that is a far different matter. . . ."

The grande dame almost lost her upper plate but halted the scream to her chauffeur. "State Department? . . . Why—now see here, my—"

"Call me 'Mr. South' for now, madam. The F. B. I. doesn't permit us to use our real names when we are on official business. And please tell your driver to continue as if nothing were wrong." She waved to the chauffeur scowling in the rear view mirror.

"Don't be afraid, madam," Dickens continued glibly without giving her a chance to get in a word. "I don't think the pursuers will open fire with a woman in the car."

"Some-somebody is after you to kill y-you?"

"Agents of the Underground, madam!"

"The Underground? See here—uh—Mr. South, this is America, not a conquered country. We have no Underground and I am beginning—"

He smiled saccharinely into her frosty glare. "The Nazi Underground, dear lady, that has gone underground in *this* country since the close of the European war. Please tell the driver to make the next right and halt after one block." He tapped an envelope half-drawn from his pocket as she gave the order. "If they get me, drop this in the nearest mailbox. Take it off my body and—"

"'Off your body—'"

Then they had made the turn and were slowing for the stop a block away. N. Nickleby Dickens swept himself out onto the curb on his crutch and bowed. "Dear lady, J. Edgar Hoover shall hear of this." He whipped into the corner cigar store, bowled over the clerk with "Give me ten cartons of Camels" and went out the other door to the taxi stand.

Within a matter of moments he was on his way once more toward 45 Bridgeton Avenue. "Considering, Nick Dickens," he told himself, "that this is no matter of murder or threatened matter, you are going to a deuce of a fuss.

"And so is somebody else," he added, thinking of that trailing cab.

WHEN he had the taxi cruise slowly past 45 Bridgeton Avenue, he saw a narrow hole of a real estate office with some potted plants behind a dusty window. Behind the plants, in the lighted office, he picked out a woman and a lank, bald-headed man. It seemed innocuous enough, the setup of a shabby second-rate outfit. Some blocks further along, certain he was not being shadowed now, Nick Dickens quit the cab and looked around.

That part of the city was one of the older sections, steadily cheapening as the better families moved out and homes settled into disrepair. Along Bridgeton Avenue the old brownstones had been converted into little stores and rooming houses. With a shrug, Dickens turned off the avenue under the gloomy maples of a shabby sidestreet. Little bungalows with handkerchief patches of lawn were wedged in between the sad-looking old relics. One of them was empty with a "For Sale" sign on its lawn. But it was being handled by an agent called Bascom Sinnott, not the Raley Agency as Dickens had hoped.

Dickens turned a corner and queried another pedestrian; no luck. He kept turning and working through the residential section, clumping along on his crutch. The sweat began to boil from his beef-chunk of face and he was fuming under his breath. But some twenty minutes later he accosted a man who had the answer.

"House the Raley Agency has to rent up this way? Oh, you must mean the old Cogshell place over on Vines near Bease Place. You go up here one block and turn left. . . 'S right in the middle of the block . . . Can't miss it."

When Dickens heaved himself to a halt opposite it, he saw that the man's final words were an understatement in spades. You couldn't have missed the old Cogshell place any more than you could have a

drunken hag sprawled in the gutter. A cupolaed product of the early nineteen hundreds, it crouched back in a big yard, rearing its paint-peeling head to peer through a tangle of weeds with empty windows like bleary eyes. A weathered sign called it a bargain offered by the Raley Agency.

"Vines Street near Bease Place," Dickens muttered, pigeon-holing it mentally. He wasn't really interested in the place; he simply wanted it as a talking point to make a convincing entry on Raley. But something about the hunk of architectural wreckage held him. What anybody would want of the place he could not imagine. It was a white elephant if he'd ever seen—His eyes had strayed to that part of the driveway beside the curving veranda. The high grass there had been broken down in parallel ruts. . . tire tracks.

In the softening veil of twilight, Dickens went swinging in there on his crutch. And then he saw. The Cogshell property ran straight through the block, the driveway bending past a one-time stable and disappearing in a broken down orchard. And somewhat recently a car had entered and left by that route. Dickens threshed his way through the undergrowth to a side window. All the first floor windows were like blind eyes, heavy inbuilt shutters on the inside closed. But several splints of the one at that window had fallen out at one end from decay. And then Nick Dickens, straining on one toe and the crutch, almost popped his red-rimmed eyes. For—the house wasn't empty!

IN THE bare room with the peeling wall paper, on a fixture on a side wall, a low-turned gas jet burned steadily.

Dickens strained and craned and cursed at the narrow aperture in the break of the shutter. Desperately he strove to see more of the room. As far as he could tell, it was vacant. But the light. . . somebody was in the house, no doubt of that; lights didn't light themselves. He pawed at the

window pane to clear it, then twisted one eye till he could see the doorway in the corner giving onto the hall. A shadow fell along the hall floor, moved, halted. Somebody was coming along the hall. In another moment, they would appear.

Grass swished up the driveway. Dickens' head jerked around in time to see a vague figure, crouched, moving in from the front of the place. Swinging around, Dickens grabbed for the pocket where he had the .38 when he carried it. Then he remembered he had had no occasion to get it from Watsicki who toted the arsenal. He tried to duck behind a bush but a piece of dead wood cracked like a pistol snap under his big crutch.

And then there was a shot.

The advancing figure in the drive leaped clear of the ground, straightening with a ripping scream of pain. Then he went crashing full length into the grass, thrashing around and moaning. Dickens hurled himself out from the side of the house, bellowing like a stuck bull.

"Stop, murderer!" he bluffed to protect the wounded man though he saw nobody. "Stop—or I'll shoot! I'll—" A figure raced by the ragged fence at the front of the property, down the shadow-dimmed street; seconds later, a car roared away. . . .

CHAPTER III

THERE was nothing Dickens could do about it though he had gone swinging halfway along the drive. He turned back in time to see an orange-hued head poking cautiously out of the grass. It was "Bucko" Whickers.

"Great Jehovah! You! What the devil—" Nick Dickens reached him in a couple of tremendous hops on that crutch. "Where are you hit?"

Holding the back of his pants, Bucko Whickers rose on one knee. He gazed around wildly as doors began to fling open along the street and people's excited chatter rose. "Lord help me if my public ever sees me like this," he groaned.

"Where are you—" Then Dickens saw. There was a tear in the seat of the would-be film star's beige sports slacks, and a slight red stain around it though no blood ran now. The bullet had grazed him across the buttock, barely scratching him.

"Boss, boss! Are ya all right?" And round-shouldered "Baron" Watsicki came loping across the front yard, a gun gleaming in his hand.

Dickens was actually damned glad to see him but wouldn't show it. "Great Jehovah, you here, too! What is this, a convention of the better class half-wits?" Then he remembered the gaslight inside the house. Back through the tall grass, he waded to the window.

But, as he expected, the light had been doused. Only the vague ghostly outlines of the room met his eye as the evening shadows purpled. It seemed as if the place never had been occupied. And whoever was in there had had plenty of time to pull his freight, Dickens realized.

"Any idea of who took that shot at you?" Dickens demanded of Bucko when he went back.

The latter shook his head. "G-get me out of here, please."

In the distance a police prowler's siren wailed catfashion. Out in the street, people were advancing cautiously in the dusk, asking each other where the shooting had been. Dickens himself had no desire to be connected with the affair; he didn't want Raley to hook him into the picture.

"This way," he ordered Watsicki. With the "Baron" helping the shaken Bucko, they went on past the house and into the gloom of the orchard behind, emerging on the next street. Watsicki had left his hack down at the corner of Vines and Bease. Dickens and the limping Bucko moved over a couple of blocks further from the scene and were picked up by the "Baron."

DICKENS' acute mind was revolving factors rapidly. "And just what were you doing in the picture, Bucko?" he demanded sternly.

The young man went sullen. He mumbled something about having come out to that side of the city to see what kind of a layout this Raley had. "Nuts," snapped Dickens. "Baron, I think we'd better go down to police headquarters."

"What f-for?" cried Bucko.

"Because, my dear fellow, you were involved in a shooting incident, and as a law-abiding citizen, it is my duty to report the matter to the proper authorities. Of course, if I understood more. . . ."

Bucko Whickers gave. "I was following you. . . I—I thought you were double crossing me, Mr. Dickens, when I saw you up at Marko's room." He had been coming around a corner of the hotel corridor when he saw Dickens rapping at Dr. Okram's door and had ducked back out of sight.

"Did you give your bodyguard the slip again?"

Bucko shrugged helplessly. "They weren't back at my place when I returned there after seeing you. They seem to have disappeared."

Dickens tapped the crutch handle thoughtfully as they swung onto Brington Avenue with its glaring neon signs. "Hmmm. All right. Let me out here, Baron. . . Take Bucko on and put him up in a room at the Orinocco; if he gives any trouble, work him over. And you, Bucko, stay there till you hear from me—even if you rot! Don't—and I'm quitting the case!"

Dickens was already swinging himself onto the sidewalk as the embryonic idol of the horse opera bleated assent. Dickens went down bustling Brington Avenue till he was opposite the Raley Agency. It was still lighted up. Dickens went by the plate glass window with "Otho Raley, Pres." lettered in a lower corner and turned in. It was about what he had expected: a narrow little slot of place with a railing running across and a couple of shabby desks plus a filing case and water cooler on the other side. A plump, voluptuous brunette wriggled from behind one of the desks where a cigaret curled

smoke from an ashtray and came over. Dickens beamed and said he wished to see Mr. Raley with regard to some property. The brunette pouted, over-rouged lips of a bee-stung mouth while she ran over him with blue eyes. They were so hard they positively seemed to scratch.

"About some property," she repeated, plainly suspicious. "Well, I'm not sure Mr. Raley'll be back tonight. He—"

A DOOR opened in the rear and the lank, halfbald man Dickens had seen in passing before, came out. The fringe of black hair at the sides of his head was freshly slicked down with water, and he was in the act of drying his hands as he appeared. But he remained silently, giving no sign to indicate he was Otho Raley.

"Ah, Mr. Raley," sang out Dickens. "You were pointed out to me going down the street just as I started to come in here earlier today."

Otho Raley blinked quickly under bristling black eaves of brows and came forward. His long-jawed sawtooth face was guarded. "I am about to close up. It's rather late for business now," he said brusquely.

Dickens took in the dingy, unpressed gray suit and the well-worn shoes. One of the lank man's shirt cuffs was frayed too. Strange he wasn't eager for some business. "I was looking over the old Cogshell place up at Vines and Bease Place, Mr. Raley," Dickens continued expansively. "It's just what I've been looking for."

"What could you want with that old—" Then Otho Raley seemed to realize his attitude was hardly natural. He swung open a gate in the railing and waved Dickens inside. When they were seated at a desk, Raley said, "I don't know about the Cogshell place. A parking lot concern has been speculating on taking it over and demolishing the house."

Dickens made a well-feigned gesture of alarm. "But they can wait—a few days, anyway—perhaps a week or so. It won't take me long to get

my cameras and mikes rigged up there for shooting."

Raley came away from the back of the swivel chair. Dickens decided he had a face like one of those slightly dyspeptic-faced saints on a church window. The kind that scrambled for their turn to work the old St. Catherine's wheel at Inquisitions.

"You mean—to make movies?" Raley queried.

Dickens nodded with a genial beam. "The Cogshell place almost fits the description to a 'T' of a mansion in our shooting script. We—"

"Inside—or outside shots?" cut in Raley harshly.

"Why both, naturally. I'd like to go up there now and take a look around inside. The sooner we can start shooting and clear the way for the parking lot concern."

"No lights. We couldn't go through it now."

Dickens looked through the flame of the lighter he held to his cigaret. "Strange. . . . When I was up there before, I could have sworn I saw a light in the place."

THO RALEY'S long eyes froze expressionlessly in their sockets. "Perhaps it was the potential buyer taking a look around. . . . a flashlight, no doubt. Did you give him the keys, Miss Morley?"

Miss Morley uncrossed shapely calves quickly as Dickens glanced around and picked up a shorthand pad. "Oh yes, yes—yes, Otho. He was in before and asked for them. I meant to tell you."

Dickens hadn't missed the fact she had obviously been listening in carefully to their conversation. "I guess there is nothing we can do tonight then," he said regretfully.

Raley rose to signify the interview was closed, making a helpless gesture with his hands. "Call around tomorrow—say, about noontime, Mr. Dickens. I'd be delighted to show you through then." It was the first enthusiasm he had evinced.

As Raley swung the railing gate for him, Dickens noted the fresh grass stains on a leg of the man's

gray suit. "Oh, by the way, there was some commotion up there a short while ago. . . . A shooting or something. . . . Though nobody seems to have been shot."

Raley's face betrayed as much as a closed trap. "Really? That's a very quiet neighborhood."

"Well, it's just the kind of a house I need. . . . the very place you'd expect to find the skeleton in the closet, a ghosts' paradise, as my old friend, Marko, would say."

"Marko? You know Marko?" Raley's voice was suddenly tight.

"Worked on a couple of lots out on the Coast with him," Dickens said as he headed for the door. "I'll see you at noon tomorrow."

AT THE corner he found a phone booth and dialed his office. The faithful Irmadown would be there, he knew. She was, coming on with a quavering voice. That "little blonde beast" had been calling in, claiming it was most imperative to hear from Mr. Dickens regarding his investigations at once. Threatening to come over.

"If he comes in this office, Mr. Dick-ens, I—"

"Be sure you have your lipstick on straight," Dickens finished for her. "Remember, Irmadown, the firm comes first! I want to see Dr. Okram very very badly. *Keep* him there. You can put any damage on your expense account." Hanging up, he dialed the Belgard. As he expected, Dr. Okram did not answer.

"Please give him this message; it is most important. Mr. Dickens called. He said that unless he hears from the doctor within the hour, he will be forced to put the matter in the hands of the police authorities." Then Dickens lumbered out and took a cab down town to the Orinocco bar.

"Two Fernet Brancas—and two cups of coffee, black, Riley," he ordered the suave Martinez as he settled his massive bulk on a bar stool with a sigh. After he had dipped into one, he called Bucko Elbert upstairs in his room on the house phone.

Bucko came through on the wire with the jitters. "Mr. Dickens, you better get somebody to protect me! I just called my own hotel. Those bodyguards of mine never did return there. Marko hinted there was somebody out to ruin his production and—"

Dickens smiled into the mouth-piece. Now the little pieces of the puzzle were drifting closer together. "If you should see that bodyguard again, cut them dead, my dear fellow . . . Now, at just what business did that lush of an uncle of yours, Stuckney, labor—if any?"

"Why, he was a rent collector, when he worked. Now, Mr. Dickens, after all, somebody took a shot at me tonight! I think I'm entitled to police protection or—or something."

"And perhaps you'd like to explain what Lone Ranger Whickers was doing prowling around a deserted house up at that end of the city. Bucko. Would you? Listen. . . . Have you ever had any experience in the role of a decoy, Bucko?"

"The role of a what? A decoy? Why, I don't know exactly what you mean, Mr. Dickens! I, of course, have a natural talent for—"

"You will understand, Bucko—later."

Dickens cradled the instrument. He had hardly done so when his own private wire buzzed. It was Irma—down with Dr. Okram on the other end of the wire. Dickens didn't give him a chance to get in a word.

"Doctor, unless I confer with you at once, I shall be compelled to turn one Bucko Whickers over to the police! Needless to say, the story will make every newspaper!"

"Really?" Okram's sharp biting voice cried out. And then he used that word that had fallen from Bucko's tongue so repeatedly in the first interview. "A scandal? A scandal! . . ." Only Dr. Okram, Marko, rolled the word deliciously on his tongue. . . .

CHAPTER IV

IN WATSICKI'S battered hack, Nickleby Dickens rolled toward the Belgard. The Baron interrupted his meditations with a cackle.

"Feelin' better now that there was almost a corpse in the pitcher, ain't ya, boss?" cracked Watsicki.

Dickens snorted. But, it was true; he was. The Baron deftly and nonchalantly almost forced another hack up onto the sidewalk and took a turn on two wheels. "Me, I'm wonderin' why that Raley wanted to shoot up Fancy Pants, meanin' Whickers. Maybe Fancy Pants stole his doll and—"

Recalling the icy-eyed Miss Morley, Dickens decided she wasn't the type to waste any time on a whacky crackpot like one Bucko Whickers. "Sa, how did you learn so much, Baron? I hire you to transport me—in the ghastly way you do—not to—"

Watsicki frankly admitted he'd gotten the scared Bucko to talk. "It was easy as cutting a brick of ice cream with a can opener—once I told him I was your silent partner!"

"What? See here—well, Watsicki, suppose you act like one. With the accent on the 'silent' part!" Dickens belched heartily and leaned back to mentally tinker with the pieces of the puzzle again. That had been a gaslight, no flashlight, out in the Cogshell mansion. Yet Otho Raley had asserted there were no lights working in the place. Dickens' mind leapfrogged back to Dr. Okram, Marko. The instant he had received the message the thing could become a police matter, the elusive doctor had reached him. And yet when Okram heard Bucko Whickers, his star, might become a guest of the police, he had evinced no disappointment. Far from it.

At the Belgard, Dickens went up to the fifth floor and turned down the ell to the rear. When he saw the middle-aged man who looked like a banker knocking on the door of 517, Okram's room, Dickens kept right on coming to halt beside the man. The latter shook his head.

"No answer, again. He's never in . . . You wanted to see Marko too?"

Dickens gave a nod that meant anything and nothing.

"Perhaps you're another of the stockholders in Monolith?"

Again Dickens inclined his head slightly. "Well, shall we say I am

involved in Marko's business affairs."

They were heading back to the elevator bank. The other presented a card that read, "Dennison T. Young, Attorney." "Frankly, my suspicions are aroused. Marko got a number of us here to back him heavily. As we understood it, the stock of Markolith had been totally subscribed. But within the last forty-eight hours, I find Marko is back here from the Coast and has made attempts to raise more money for his company." Down in the lobby, Young suggested Dickens might care to get in touch with him at his office tomorrow. "I am rallying a group to demand a showdown. I want to pin Marko down on a financial statement."

DICKENS went into the cocktail lounge, out another exit, and returned to the fifth floor. At 517, he whistled a bar of "Rum and Coca Cola" in signal as Marko had suggested on the phone. The door swung back immediately to reveal Marko in a maroon silk dressing gown laced double-breasted across his trig body with a black leather belt.

"Come in, my dear Mr. Dickens! Come in. Pardon the juvenile signal code. But a man in my profession, he is continually harassed—ah, yes, harassed," he tossed his close-cropped head expressively. "There are the ones who *feel* they are the Lord's own gift to the thespian's art. And writers—would-be writers—with scripts—and—but com. in!"

Dickens was already well into the living room of the second-class suite. Marko was just what he had looked like on the curbstone across from the Orinocco Bar, small, dynamic, eternally dramatizing himself. Beneath the dressing gown, he wore navy blue pyjamas though it was still early in the evening.

He set up two brandies from a bottle of Courvoisier on a coffee table, turned on the radio to muted classical music, and draped himself over the arm of a divan across from Dickens. "Now tell me about that lad, Bucko. What harum-scarum fuss has he gotten into now?" He brandished

an eighteen-inch cigaret holder, head tilted questioningly with the monocle aglitter in his eye.

And then Nick Dickens had him pigeon-holed. The man was only *playing* the role of a conceited, pompous fool. Back of the mask he was keen and hard-boiled, alert as a hawk behind the screen of verbiage.

"There was a shooting out in the Bridgeton Avenue section earlier this evening, doctor."

"A shooting? Really? But dear benighted Bucko, he is—"

"Yes, doctor. Guns going *pop-pop*. You know. Your young star, Bucko Whickers—" Dickens paused purposefully. The director - producer only waited in silence. "Somebody shot at him—tried to kill him, I imagine."

Marko blew out a thin ribbon of smoke. "Mr. Dickens, I understood you to say over the phone that you would have to turn Bucko over to the police, not that—"

DICKENS smiled inwardly from the armchair. Marko was a good actor, but Dickens had seen the way the unexpected news had caused Marko's fingers to tighten till they whitened around the fragile brandy goblet. Dickens moved his own beneath his heavy nose so the bouquet wafted upward.

"The police would undoubtedly like to ask Mr. Bucko some questions about why he was shot at. He wasn't hurt—seriously. And I thought you might be curious, inasmuch as you had contracted for my services, as to what Mr. Bucko Whickers was doing in the vicinity of the Raley Agency, the name in that classified advertisement, doctor."

They sat in silence for some moments, Marko with eyes bent downward. "Acting as your agent, doctor," Dickens continued, "I hesitated to make any overt move without consulting you."

Marko jerked his eyes, up suddenly. "Did you get any leads on the Raley angle, Mr. Dickens?"

Dickens shrugged the massive shoulders. "It seems one Stuckney Whickers, an uncle of your star's, a down-at-the-heel lush, may have

worked for the Raley firm in the capacity of a rent collector."

"Oh."

With a scarcely concealed grimace of disgust, Dickens replaced the empty brandy goblet on the table. After all, there was nothing like one of his favorite Fernet Brancas. Or, perhaps, upon gala occasions, a Tangerine toddy. "Perhaps this kind of publicity would be excellent for the career of a Western star, doctor."

Marko jumped up. "Mr. Dickens, I think the matter is closed. I was interested in the Raley angle because I wished to protect Bucko Whickers. After all, he represents—you might say—a heavy investment on my part. But now, there seems nothing to fear. Nothing, really. Young Bucko himself is not worried in the least."

"He isn't?" Dickens was wide-eyed as a naive baby.

"No-o. I was talking to him at his hotel just before you arrived. It was possibly a carekeeper who mistook him for a trespasser. I warned Bucko to let me handle the matter. And now, shall we say it is dropped? Will you have a drink before you depart, Dickens?"

Nick Dickens ignored the cue. "Well, you've already paid me in advance. So I'll follow up the Raley angle and see what I can learn further."

Though he continued to smile, Marko's popping eyes were like agates. "The matter is a closed incident. . . . Keep a hundred dollars of the fee for your trouble and return the balance tomorrow."

Dickens had risen. "Well, I don't know now-w. . . . I—"

MARKO, shifting slightly, slid a hand under one of the cushions of the divan. Sweat globules glittered on his almost hairless head. Then Nick Dickens' crutch, with several ounces of lead inset in the lower end, whipped sideward and up from the floor in a short arc and went *smack-k* down across the cushion. Marko jerked sideward, jerking out his numb hand.

"I wouldn't try to get that gun again, doctor," Dickens said with a

you-naughty-boy shake of his head. "After all, you did hire me. The police—"

Marko was a cool customer. "The police might be interested to hear it was a form of blackmail, Dickens. I have the reputation of a valuable star to protect. You make money from clients afraid of unpleasant publicity. I left five hundred dollars at your office—without even seeing you. Understand? And now when I discover the scandal you warned me against does not exist, why—" He said the rest with a shrug. "But, speaking of the five hundred, inasmuch as you have proven the threatened scandal is nonexistent, perhaps you have earned the—complete five hundred. Yes?" He rose, half bowing with a toothy grin.

As N. Nickleby Dickens rode back to the Orinocco Bar, he fully appreciated the fact that he had been bribed not to report the shooting to the police. . . .

CHAPTER V

WITH his elbows propped on the counter of the Orinocco once more, Dickens dipped into a fresh Fernet Branca. Beside him, little Baron Watsicki drummed impatiently on the bar top. They were the only patrons; the evening was getting old. Watsicki snapped a greas.-stained nail against a glass of water the while he surveyed the serried ranks of bottles on the back shelf.

"Oh, you. . . ." Dickens looked up annoyedly. "I am trying to think, Baron. Riley," to Martinez, "serve my ill-visaged friend with a beer—a full-sized one tonight."

"See here, boss! Scotch is my drink and you know it!"

"Tut-tut! Baron, I may have to use that horrible conveyance of yours once more this night. And I would hate to feel obligated to turn you over to the authorities while driving while under the influence of alcohol. . . . Anyway, get on a house phone and bring your pal, Fancy Pants, down here!"

Bucko Whickers came in by the rear door, pale and very furtive look-

ing. He also limped. Dickens didn't even bless him with so much as a glance, merely pushing a bar pad with a phone number on it to him.

"Call that number and—"

"My God, that's the Raley Agency, Mr. Dickens. I—"

"I know that. Do you think I'm a blasted idiot? . . . Call Otho Raley. Tell him who you are. And—"

"Tell him who I am? Why if he knew—"

"Listen, fly bait, you hired me to be your brains! Do you think Raley would be interested in the dog-faced boy? Phone him. Tell—him—who—you—are. . . Got that? Then say that yo. want to see him but that you are being watched. Then—"

Bucko Whickers' orange-thatched head began to go from right to left. "I c-can't do that, Mr. Dickens. My career. . . If—"

"There is that little matter of the shooting in which you happened to be involved. The police. . . Dickens beamed smugly.

And Bucko came back with one to the teeth. "And at which you were present too, Mr. Dickens. Have you reported to the police on it yet?"

Watsicki let go with a mocking cackle. Dickens' big chunk of face quivered a moment. Then he was wagging a finger admonishingly. "And there is also a little matter of the disappearance of Uncle Stuckney, Bucko, my friend. You did not inform the proper authorities on that. And they might just get the idea you had personal reasons for not wanting dear Uncle Stuckney found. You see?"

Bucko went from blanched white to a dirty gray, "All—all right," he choked out. "I want to see him. . . But, hell, Dickens, I hired you to protect me from—"

DICKENS nodded wearily. "Yes, from scandal. And when we find Uncle Stuckney, I believe you'll be out of danger. . . Now, you want to see Otho Raley about that advertisement, but the only time you'll be able to slip away is at four-thirty this morning. You'll meet him at his office. Go and call him."

Watsicki sneered down the bar at Dickens. "Boss, I think you're slipping. Looka the clock. Ya oughta know that real estate office will be closed. You're getting soupy 'tween the ears, Dickens."

Dickens looked pained. "Closed, perhaps—but the phone will be answered. Would you care to get yourself another beer by betting on it?"

Watsicki nodded eagerly. From the phone booth in the rear they heard the clatter of returned coins in the slot, Bucko pushed his head into sight and Watsicki gurgled off his beer to be ready for the fresh one. "Wrong number," said Bucko weakly. "I'll try again."

When the door of the phone booth next opened, Bucko swayed into sight, nodding as if his neck would unhinge. "Y-yes. He'll meet me then, he s-said."

Dickens raised a finger to Martinez. "A Tangerine toddy, if you please, Riley."

"Holy cripes, boss, them drinks cost dough. You said a beer—"

"For you, if you had won, Baron. Don't be a welcher. Ah, this carries me back to the Cafe Creaux at Point-a-Pitre in dear old Guadaeloupe. . . And speaking of that, you can carry little Rubber Knees back up to his room. He'll need some rest. Around about dawn, he's going to be one busy decoy. . . ."

AT DICKENS' command, Watsicki flashed ahead of the cab bearing Bucko Whickers and signalled it to draw in. They halted before an all-night drugstore midway uptown to Bridgeton Avenue. It was now what Nick Dickens liked to call the "last lap." He had probed around, put out his feelers, exerted certain stimuli to see which way various characters in the plot jumped. Then he had returned to the Orinocco to weigh and cogitate and prepare his last act like a puppeteer gathering the strings of his marionettes to jerk them into action.

"If I was Fancy Pants, I'd feel like a clay pigeon now," opined Baron Watsicki as Dickens levered his huge form from the car. "Sendin'

the poor dope out ta meet that killer, Raley!"

"And just what advantage would accrue to Otho Raley by having Bucko dead, eh?" He crossed the sidewalk and headed for the phone booths inside the drugstore. Dickens cheerfully admitted Alexander Bell was the greatest inventor in the world in his estimation. He got the Belgard Hotel and insisted on being put through to "Dr. Okram" when the operator said the room did not answer.

"Send a boy up to the room. Tell him I said it is a life-or-death matter." And after several minutes, Marko's voice, sharper than ever with irritation, came over the wire.

"See here, Dickens! I told you the case was closed and—"

"Sure, sure," Dickens, with mock meekness, mollified him. "I wasn't exactly working on it. You see, I had dated Raley's stenographer. She's one cute little pash number—and she let something slip. Since you were so decent about that five hundred fee, I thought I'd let you know."

Marko broke in, swearing hoarsely. He was really worried. It came out. "See here, Dickens. I'm not interested in the Raley matter any longer. But maybe I can use you on a new assignment. That crazy young Bucko seems to have strayed off."

DICKENS chuckled mentally. Marko couldn't have fed him the lines any better if he himself had written them for the bogus doctor. "He is just who I was going to talk about, doctor. The steno let drop that Bucko Whickers had a date to meet Raley at the old Cogshell mansion where the shooting was earlier tonight. . . . They're to meet a little before five a. m."

For a long moment, the line seemed to have gone dead, then Marko came through again, voice carefully controlled, tight against emotion. That emotion, if Dickens had computed correctly, would be one of delight. "That is most interesting, Dickens. Extremely so. What is your idea?"

"Perhaps you would like to see what Whickers is doing."

"Yes-s, that is an idea. . . . Yes. Where did you say they were to meet?"

"The Cogshell mansion. . . . But you wouldn't know where that is, doctor. Suppose you grab a cab, meet me here, and we can go out together." He gave him the address of the drugstore. "Yes, of course I'll wait for you here, doctor." Then he wedged himself out of the booth and back into the car and signalled Watsicki to proceed. There would have been no sense in waiting, anyway. Dickens knew the self-dubbed Dr. Okram had no intention of wasting time on a stop at the drugstore en route to his destination.

Up on Bridgeton Avenue, Watsicki drew up his hack before an all-night Coffee Pot a few hundred feet from the Raley Agency. Bucko in his cab went on to Raley's place. The black tide of night was ebbing. There was a faint haze that hung in yellowish halos around the street lights. They saw Bucko get out and walk stiffly across the street and into the entrance. Then there was no way of telling what was happening because the Venetian blind was down across the front window.

The minutes slipped away. A drunk pushed his owlish face against the cab window and surveyed Dickens as if he were something inside a fish bowl.

"If Raley has a silencer, Fancy Pants may be in bye-bye land for keeps by now." remarked the Baron cheerfully.

Dickens was beginning to sweat: then there was motion in front of the Raley Agency. One of the figures down there cupped a match to a cigaret. The glow revealed him as the lank, half-bald hatless Raley himself.

And it showed the carrot-topped Bucko right beside him. They turned after a moment in which Raley held the lighted match in plain sight and went down to the left away from the waiting Dickens.

A CAR door thudded shut. The lights of a sedan beyond the real estate office flickered on. Watsicki had his motor already turning

over. The other car flipped into a quick U-turn and started away from them, accelerating hotly. The Baron's hack rolled forward.

"Easy," cautioned Dickens. "Keep the lights out and don't get too close, Baron."

"You want me to tail that guy or let him lose us?" Watsicki snarled. "It looks like a snatch to me and—"

Raley's sedan screwed sharply to the right some distance ahead, blotted from sight in one of the tree-shadowed residential streets.

"Turn here," snapped Dickens at a corner a block from the other. "Now step on it enough to parallel him at the next crossing!"

When Watsicki nosed onto the intersection of the next cross street, they saw the sedan flashing across a block down to the left. It was the same story a block onward. With a satisfied sigh, Dickens sat back and put lighter to a cigaret. "Now head for that Cogshell mansion, Baron. The front entrance; I desire to arrive there before they do."

It was like putting the spurs to a high-spirited steed. The Watsicki gas wagon bolted ahead, still with no lights. They shot through the next intersection, screamed around corners careeningly, almost climbed up the back of a bakery truck, and finally sneaked up purringly toward the old Cogshell place. Dickens let him go several hundred yards beyond it before he called a halt. They got out and moved back down the street that was as silent as a graveyard.

"I wanta see Fancy Pants' pan when we walk in," Watsicki whispered. "I'll bet he—"

"You'll wait out here, Baron," Dickens cut him off flatly as they came to the drunken-leaning fence of the old estate. "I expect dear Dr. Okram along shortly, and I don't want to be interrupted. Marko may be in a—uh—nasty mood, too." He swung through a gap in the fence where he sighted a faint path running toward the rear. It was on the opposite side of the house from the drive.

"See here," Watsicki whined, "I always miss the fun! Sides, I can't let you go in there alone, Boss. Why ya might get—well, anyway, I ain't

been paid this month, anyway. So—"

From the street behind the house came the faint squeak of brakes. "Hold the fort—and Dr. Okram when he comes along—Baron." And Dickens' massive form was enveloped by the gray gloom as he made his way rearward.

HE GOT around a rear corner where a glass-paned conservatory bulged and almost plunged headlong over a broken flower box in the high grass. Then he saw the thin thread of the pencil flashlight moving along the drive past the old stable. Dickens strained his eyes; it was Bucko Whickers leading the way with the flashlight, and the lank Otho Raley following him.

They turned in toward the rear of the edifice. "Be verry careful, Whickers," Raley's voice came through the grayness. "I have an extremely nervous finger on this trigger." The automatic in his hand glinted faintly. There was no answer from Bucko; a key rasped in a door lock and the creak of old hinges followed it. They vanished inside, the door closing after them.

As he advanced, Dickens gloated. The door hadn't been relocked. When he got to it, through a cracked pane, he could see the glow of a light down a small rear hallway. Dickens worked the door open and eased in, then cocked an ear.

"You will now have a look at your uncle," came Raley's voice dimly.

Dickens smiled smugly and drifted a hand to his topcoat pocket. Before he reached it, the smile froze into a grimace of shock. He remembered. He had forgotten to pick up a gun from the arsenal, Watsicki. . . . He decided it was too late to go back for it then.

There was the sound of feet ascending a stairs, Bucko's stumbling and hesitant. Passing a kitchen, Dickens moved up the hallway, his crutch tip leaving long skid marks in the heavy dust. Through a swing door propped halfway open he entered a pantry, galvanizing as a rat jumped into a pile of debris in the corner. The pantry was L-shaped.

When he made the turn, Dickens saw a gas jet burning at the rear of the main hall. And off to the left of it was the broad main staircase, curving from a landing a couple of steps up.

With surprising lightness for a crippled elephant of a man, Dickens began to climb the stairs. It seemed completely dark on the second floor. But when Dickens got within a few steps of the top he saw the faint crack of light running like a yellow seam down the hall to the left. And simultaneously he caught the cackle of crazy laughter.

"Hullo, Elber', ol' boy, ol' boy! He-he. Guess you're shurprised to shee me, huh? He-he, have a drink, Elly!" It was Uncle Stuckney, and it was plain he was in the throes of one of his alcoholic bouts.

Dickens advanced over the creekino floor of the hall. The light came from an open door around a corner, and Bucko's voice came from there, quavering and unsure.

"Wh-why are you keeping my uncle h-here?"

"I'm going to let him go now," said Raley.

"Oh-h. I—I'll t-take him with me and—"

"And you're going to stay in his place!"

Bucko's voice leaped shrilly. "Why, that's kidnapping! You can't do that! I'll—" Feet shifted.

"Be careful—the gun!"

Dickens came around the corner fast. He had a glimpse of a disordered room, of a little beard-stubbed gray-headed man staring with a foolish grin from a chair, a whisky bottle in a shaky hand. A few feet inside the door was Bucko, hands clenched as he moved on Raley. Raley was further in, off to the right.

As he unloaded a punch, Bucko stepped on an empty bottle and plunged down. Raley, sidestepping behind a chair, sighted Dickens and whipped his gun around frantically.

CHAPTER VI

BUT Dickens' crutch scythed out and around; before Raley could get the gun muzzle around, the lead-loaded end of the crutch slashed his left leg from under him. As he tottered, screeching in agony, the shot plowed into the ceiling. Bucko Whickers leaped off the floor and fired a round-house punch; Raley bounced off the wall, dropping his gun.

"Stop, Bucko! Don't kill him!" snapped Dickens.

With one hand pinning Raley's throat, Bucko obeyed, looking

Cotton Drennan didn't like the setup at Jackson Malloy's spread, but when he found that Malloy's longriders were murdering innocent nesters, he knew the time had come to buck the outfit.



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around. "Gosh, Mr. Dickens, I'm glad you came."

"Hello," said Uncle Stuckney from his chair well flanked with empty whisky bottles. He bobbed his head but he wasn't looking at Nick Dickens.

"Yes," said Dickens, half yawning. He regretted that the thing was solved and closed so simply. "Otho Raley was using Stuckney as bait to get you, Bucko, and—"

"Hullo," said Uncle Stuckney again. "Come in and have a lil' drink, he-he." And again he wasn't looking at Dickens.

Dickens noted it then and twisted a look his way. And then Nick Dickens caught that gun barrel blow over the back of the skull. He went pitching forward like some great animal stricken in its tracks, crutch thumping crazily. Only the fact that he had turned his head at the last moment saved him from the full crushing force of the blow.

There was a bellow from Bucko Whickers. A bellow engulfed in the spitting of an automatic whose crash thundered deafening in the room. The dazed but still erect Dickens came around to see Marko standing in the doorway as he shot. And the charging, fighting-mad Bucko staggered back from him, hit in the left arm.

"Marko!" the kid cried, aghast, but he rocked forward to try to close in again.

LITTLE MARKO, monocle glittering in his eye, deliberately drew bead again. It was plain he meant murder. The lurching Dickens tried to get set to launch his crutch desperately, and the right side of his swinging topcoat struck against his hand. Something hard struck Dickens' hand. He rammed the hand into the pocket on that side. And then he was shooting twice with the .38 he found in that pocket. The second bullet took Marko full in the chest, blasting it wide open. He was dead even as he tilted backward to crumple in the hall.

Dickens' breath came out in a long whistle of relief. "Great Jehovah, I didn't know I had the gun on me!"

He looked down ruefully at the bullet holes in his coat from having shot through the pocket. "I—" His eyes had travelled to drunken little Uncle Stuckney in the chair. The man sat doubled over peculiarly. And then they saw the red splotch on the side of his begrimed shirt beneath the heart. One of Marko's shots had struck him fatally.

Dickens had jerked his right hand from his pocket to lift the elderly man's head, and another figure appeared in the doorway.

"Get the gun on the floor—and any they have, Otho. . . . Quick!" It was Miss Moley, Raley's voluptuous stenographer. She stood back in the dimness out of the glow of the little oil lamp on the low sill of the curtained window. The revolver in her hand swivelled slowly, steady as a rock, as she covered them.

Raley leaped into action, snatching his gun from the bare floor, then coming over and tearing Dickens' coat pocket as he took that weapon. The woman told him to hurry again, saying that people were coming down the road, drawn by the gunshots.

"We're going to have to run, Edna," Raley said hoarsely, backing out. "Stay in this room or—" he warned Dickens and Bucko Whickers. They vanished down the hall.

Bucko beat Dickens out the door as they heard the fugitives around the corner, the kid bent over with the pain of his hurt arm. After him in great hopping swings on his crutch, Dickens was hard on his heels when Bucko reached the head of the stairs. The latter flung himself flat as Raley's automatic spat. Dickens leaped over his prone figure, leaned over the bannister and flung his crutch twistingly.

The heavy implement nailed Raley across the back of the knees and sent him tripping and then into a head-first dive to the bottom of the stairs. The guns were jarred from his hands and went bouncing off into the shadows. Scrambling up at the woman's command, Raley ran on after her into the pantry without wasting time searching for them.

DICKENS got to the foot of the stairs before Bucko. Using the bannister as a slide, he chuted to the bottom, thumped off onto his good leg and scooped up his crutch. "Why in blazes didn't you say the dame was in on it?" he threw at Bucko over his shoulder.

"Didn't know it. . . . She must have been hidden in the back of the sedan all the—"

Dickens failed to hear the rest as the swing door of the pantry swung after him. The fleeing pair had hauled it shut to slow up pursuit. Racing at unbelievable speed on his lethal crutch, Dickens yanked open the door at the end of the back hallway and lunged out. The waxing dawn was a gray feathery wall. Out of it reeled Watsicki drunkenly, cap gone and mop of black hair over his eyes.

"Hey, boss, what gives?"

"Holy hell, are you handing out passes at the back door, dope?" snorted Dickens as he went rushing by. He crashed through the weeds to the driveway and wheeled toward the back end of the property. The growl of a car's engine came to him.

Raley's sedan, driven in from the rear of the drive, came shooting around the corner of the stable and straight along the drive at Nick Dickens. Dickens' crutch swung up from the ground, held parallel like a

javelin. Then he launched it an instant before he dived sideward into the grass. The missile struck squarely in the center of the windshield, shattering it as the woman's scream tore the dawn. The accelerating car twisted sharply, rocked as it left the drive, tore into the high grass. A moment later, with a sickening thud, it brought up against one of the huge old trees of the place.

Raley lifted his head from the wheel and started to struggle out the door. But Bucko Whickers' orange head came leaping out of the haze. Bucko dropped him with a blow as the woman flopped from the other side and sat down heavily, sobbing.

Rising from the other side of the drive, Dickens bawled for the Baron to help him walk without his crutch. He pointed at the wrecked car. "See, Baron, what comes of trying to mix murder with alcohol?"

WITH the bright morning sunlight glistening in from the street on the freshly scrubbed floor of the Orinocco Bar, Nickleby Dickens sighed as he finished ordering a breakfast of scrambled eggs on toast well buttered with imported caviar. He turned a sour eye on Baron Watsicki on his right.

"Give him a double Scotch," he ordered the barman.

Watsicki cocked a suspicious eye-



Tortilla Joe and Buck McKee
Ride Together Again

In

MILK RIVER RANGE

By Lee Floren

The day of the range hog was nearly over in Milk River valley, but gunsmoke and hangrope trouble still brewed as Len Cavanaugh desperately tried to hold back progress!

See the October

REAL WESTERN

brow. "You ain't feeling so good or ya wouldn't uh done that, Dickens."

For once Dickens agreed, nodding. "I almost miscalculated on that little job, Baron. . . .Raley kept us waiting just long enough before he took Bucko to the place so that Marko had time to get there sooner than I figured." He sighed again and took a gulp of his Fernet Branca. He had just returned from the offices of Captain Elgin of the Homicide Bureau. The case was closed, the dead Marko charged with the slaying of Uncle Stuckney and Raley himself in jail for kidnapping. Miss Morley was held as an accomplice.

"Yes, I understood the whole setup. . . .Of course, I was slightly surprised down at Police Headquarters when the Morley woman admitted she had been jilted by Marko out on the Coast a couple of years ago. . . .She engineered the Raley side of the thing, of course."

Watsicki pulled his nose out of the Scotch. "Why did Raley want to hold Fancy Pants," he jerked his chin upward to indicate Bucko Whickers who had retired to his room above to meditate over the ruins of his film career, "Uncle Stuckney for?"

"Bait, Baron, bait. Raley and the woman grabbed Stuckney to draw Bucko. Then they were going to hold him for ransom."

"Fancy Pants ain't got no fancy dough."

"Remember, Marko had insured the film production heavily. The insurance company would have had to put up to protect their investment. That was the way Raley and the woman had it figured out anyway. And then Marko entered the picture."

"He must uh been cracked, wanting to kill his star."

FAR FROM it. Marko was a shrewd operator, Baron, as I found out when I visited Denison Young's office on the way here. A lot of the stockholders were up there and they'd just gotten wise. Marko had sold a hundred and twenty per cent interests in the production. More than a hundred per cent of the take, you see. It would have ruined

him to go through with it, if he ever intended to. . . .But if Bucko got dead, again the insurance company would have had to pay off. Marko could have paid back the stockholders and been ahead." Dickens lifted the Fernet Branca again.

"It was he, Marko, who followed Bucko as he shadowed me and took the shot at him outside the mansion. . . .Raley was inside with food for his prisoner then, of course. . . . Say, how did you happen to turn up then?"

Watsicki stuck out a lower lip. "Cop stopped me after you left the car on the way up, boss. . . .So I didn't get no chance to take that cab on a goose chase. Then I went to the address and cruised 'round and saw ya hoofing it about up in that residential district. So I followed you."

Dickens' eyes bulged. "You let me drag my carcass all around up there? Well, when I phoned Marko last night and let him think Bucko might be arrested, I had my hunch. When I went up to his room, certain of his reactions confirmed it. When he found the Raley angle was, apparently, nothing serious against Bucko, he lost interest. Then he wanted me out of the case so I wouldn't be snooping around when he tried for Bucko the next time."

He paused as his food came. "After that, it was simple. I used Bucko as bait to make them show their hands. . . .By the way, Baron, how did Marko get by you and into the place?"

The Baron shrugged. "I don't know—he didn't. He must uh been on the grounds before we got there. . . .I waited, then went in. And that dame slugged me when I stepped 'round to the back."

Dickens' lip curled. "Baron, you certainly weren't much of a help. Barman, don't put that drink," he thumbed toward Watsicki's double Scotch, "on my—"

"Not much help, huh?" Watsicki sniffed. "Who the hell do ya think slipped the gun ya forgot to ask for into your coat pocket?"

(THE END)



JOHNNY ON THE SPOT

By Talmage Powell

(Author of "To Fit The Crime," "Early To Bed, Never To Rise," etc.)

A man who has only a month to live, isn't going to worry about a murder rap — or is he?

DOCTOR THERON WHITFIELD'S small surgery was cool, glistening white, smelling of brisk antiseptics. The steam table where hypodermic needles were sterilized, the glass cabinet

containing the gleaming tools of the medical profession; all these things made the surgery suggestive of man's conquest of death, pain and disease. But the suggestion fell flat, lost on Johnny Bayliss. He stood in the middle of the floor of whit linoleum and slipped his arms into the sleeves of his shirt. As he buttoned the shirt across his chest, his fingers were trembling.

A gentle, late afternoon breeze swept through the venetian blinds, easing the door to Doctor Whitfield's office open. From the office, the doctor's voice came softly: "Oh, bother! Of course I'll have the money! I'll take care of the check. No. . . Don't do that! Just keep it until tomorrow. I'll have the money then—I promise you! Now good day, I have a patient." The phone cradle clicked softly.

"He has a patient," Johnny thought. "That's me. Here in a saw-bones' office—wondering if I'm going to live or die. . . ." He stalled with the last shirt button, reluctant to face the doctor. In the back of his mind, Johnny Bayliss had already guessed what Doctor Theron Whitfield would tell him. Johnny'd watched the doctor's face during the examination, finished only moments ago.

He was tucking in the tail of his shirt when Doctor Whitfield cleared his throat. The doctor came forward from the doorway. He was a trim man, nearing middle age, an air of elegance about him. He wore a gardenia in his lapel, affected a small, waxed mustache, and tiny lines of dissipation had frustrated the full effect of his facial masages. He rubbed his palms and said, "Sit down Mr. Bayliss."

Johnny eased down on a metal stool enameled in white, his eyes following Whitfield as the doctor paced back and forth.

Doctor Theron Whitfield faced Johnny. "Bayliss, I've never been a doctor who'd fool his patients." He laid his hand on Johnny's shoulder, gripped tightly. "I believe in giving my patients the full truth, Bayliss. It helps them fight, strengthens

their will, removes dangerous walls of false security."

Johnny's voice shook. "What are you trying to tell me, Doctor?"

Whitfield's eyes dropped. He hesitated. "You've never had any indication of a heart condition before last night?"

Johnny shook his head, thinking of last night, thinking of Martha, his wife, and the cozy little party in their apartment. "We were having a swell time, doc. Not doing much of anything, really, but still having fun. The sort of little gathering, warm and informal, that I used to think about during those long nights in the mud of France. Steve Neilson, my cousin, and Loretta Dane came to our apartment for dinner. We were going to eat spaghetti, drink beer, and gab and play cards until it was time for Loretta to leave for the Gilded Peacock. She sings there, you know.

"Steve, in his jovial way, brought flowers to Martha, my wife. He pitched in, made drinks, and Loretta and Martha fixed dinner, while Steve and I had a couple of his crazy highballs that he called Dodo Birds. We had dinner, and played a couple rubbers of bridge—and I busted the evening up at that point, I'm afraid."

HE LOOKED up at the doctor. "I began to have to gasp for breath. I asked for water. I felt them getting scared, just looking at my face. It was as if tight bands were squeezing my heart. Then the room began to spin and I couldn't stand it any longer. I stood up, choking, knocking the card table over. I heard Martha scream, and the sound was very far away. Everything was turning gray, and I felt myself falling. I heard Steve yell, 'I'll get a doctor!' He was bending over me, pulling me up on the couch. In the distance somewhere was a crazy clicking sound, gray shapes winging across my mind. Then I don't remember anything more until I came to in my own bed with you working over me, Doctor."

Whitfield said, "I had to use adrenaline. It was a serious attack, Bay-

liss. A lesser physical specimen than you might have died."

Johnny wiped his clammy forehead. "But I can't understand. . ."

The doctor shrugged, resumed his pacing. "The heart, Bayliss, is a very tricky machine. Often it doesn't give warning—until a person has a serious attack. This condition might have lain dormant, defying detection since your birth. It's often that way."

"All right, Doctor. Tell me!"

Doctor Whitfield looked through the window, far away. "Last night I suspected—but couldn't be sure. That's why I was so insistent on giving you a thorough examination today. Now that I've completed the examination, I. . . I'd suggest you settle your affairs."

Johnny's face was numb. "It's that bad."

"I won't fool you, Bayliss," Doctor Theron Whitfield said heavily. "I. . . You're a very lucky man if you're alive thirty days from now. . . ."

Darkness had come, a shroud clutching the earth. But Johnny Bayliss hadn't turned on any lights in his apartment. He was slouched in a square, over-stuffed chair, wondering what he was going to say to her. Should he tell Martha: "Listen, wife, I knew you a month before I shipped overseas. I carried your memory through the mud of France—maybe that's what put the strain on my heart that brought the disease to light: the mud of France. I've been back with you now, Martha, for two months. I've learned to know you—and I've always loved you. We've been happy here, with Steve and Loretta dropping in, since you introduced them to each other. But it's all going to end in thirty more days and nights, maybe less. . . ."

His laugh echoed harshly in the apartment. He'd got out of bed early this morning despite Doctor Whitfield's suggestion when Johnny'd had the attack last night that Johnny take it easy as possible. He'd wanted to hide it from her. But now that he had been to Whitfield's this afternoon, Johnny knew he couldn't hide it from Martha long. Thirty days at the most. . . .

The telephone shrilled. He rose, picked up the phone. The voice that came to Johnny was low, hurt. "Johnny? This is Walter Gerard. I. . . ."

The voice died, and Johnny asked, "What is it, Uncle Walt?"

"This is hard to say to you, Johnny. You've always been my favorite nephew, you and Steve. You and he are the only relatives I've got left and I wouldn't want to hurt either of you. But I. . . . Your wife, Johnny, Martha. Has she seemed upset, asked you for money lately?"

The open line crackled. A barb of strange, new fear lanced into Johnny's mind. His thoughts flashed back, covering the two months he'd been home. Three weeks ago she'd insisted that she needed two hundred dollars. A week later, he'd found a paw ticket in her purse for a bracelet. And there'd been moments when he'd looked at her unawares, caught the fleeting, drawn expression of worry on her soft face.

He faltered, "Yes, Uncle Walt. She. . . ."

"Then you'd better come over here right away," Walter Gerard said heavily. "We've got to get her straightened out, help her. I. . . I'm afraid that your wife Martha is in trouble, Johnny. Very serious trouble. . . ."

* * *

THE house in which Johnny's Uncle Walter Gerard lived was an age-mellowed structure of wood, set in a wide, flowing lawn of green that was dotted with shrubbery. Not a pretentious place; for despite his sizable fortune Walter Gerard was not a pretentious man.

It had always been a cheerful place before but as Johnny approached, the house loomed chillingly, somehow, in the darkness. He hurried up the walk.

The front of the house was dark, but a light burned on the south side downstairs, casting a hazy murkiness over the side of the lawn.

Johnny pounded on the door. There was no answer. Walter Gerard lived alone except for a gaunt house-

keeper who came in by the day, and Johnny decided after a long moment that his uncle was in his study, engrossed. And yet, the old man had known Johnny was coming, should have listened for the door.

Johnny turned the old-fashioned brass knob, stepped in the high hallway. "Uncle Walt?"

His words were swallowed by the depths of the house and no sound answered him. He started toward the study where the light was burning.

He opened the study door. His Uncle Walter Gerard was sitting behind his oak desk, looking at Johnny—but not seeing him; Walter Gerard was dead.

The silence in the house beat at Johnny's eardrums. He moved forward like a stiff robot; but his mind was seethingly alive. With memories. Of the years he had known his uncle, the pleasant hours they'd spent together.

He was standing beside the desk. He looked at Walter Gerard's puzzled blue eyes, the quirk of pain about the small, chubby man's mouth. The black hole just over the left pocket of Walter Gerard's white shirt. The bullet had stopped the old man's heart too quickly for him to have bled much.

Then into Johnny's swirling vision came other things. In the yawning mouth of the ashtray were two cigarette stubs. His trembling fingers reached for them. They were *Martha's* brand, stained at the tips by her shade of lipstick. He turned his head stiffly. He saw the handkerchief, lying at the end of the desk, almost hidden. He bent, reaching again unwillingly.

Her perfume was unmistakable. Her initials were there in the corner of the handkerchief. He turned the bit of silk slowly in his hand. It was stained, torn, and he could picture her at the end of the desk, her slim body straining forward, her deep brown eyes shot through with fear, her hands twisting, pulling, tugging the handkerchief. Worrying it. Until the moment she'd reached for the gun . . .

He moved in a black, yet very vivid dream. He saw the gun, and the

dread thing that had been growing in his mind burst now in awful certainty. For it was his gun, a twenty-five automatic.

He stood there with his hands full of her things, and his mind told him: "It's mad, fantastic!" But her things in his hand, the body of his uncle, reminded him that it was real. Mad and fantastic, yes, but nevertheless real.

But why? Why should Martha do such a thing? Slowly, he moved around the desk, began opening drawers. In the second drawer he found the deadly black notebook, and he knew why. There were no names in the book, only initials and amounts of money entered, like an expense account. Or the record of a blackmailer! Her initials were there and under them were two figures, two hundred dollars, a hundred fifty dollars. The two hundred he'd given her, the hundred fifty she'd pawned the bracelet for. . . .

His stomach was sucked in with coldness. He looked at his uncle and said, "She wasn't a very clever murderess, was she? The shock of it drove her a little crazy for a moment, and she ran from the room blindly, the shot echoing in her ears, forgetting the cigarette stubs, the handkerchief, the gun. The black notebook. She knew only the wild urge to run, get away from your eyes, the sight of your blood, Uncle Walt. . . ." His throat, hot and tight, strangled the words.

HE STOOD there with his uncle, and it took him a long time to decide what to do. He tried to be logical, but he didn't succeed very well. He knew only that he owed her a lot; the thought of her had carried him through the black hours in France, the agony in a hospital in England. He had never really lived until he'd met her, and his mind told him that the two months he'd had with her since he'd come back were worth more than a whole lifetime of emptiness without her. Or maybe his mind wasn't actually speaking at all, just his heart. He faced himself and knew that no matter what she had done he loved her enough to want to

protect her. It was as heartbreaking-ly simple as that—and he was a man who would walk with doom only thirty more short days anyway. . . .

He walked to the window, opened it. He held the gun in his hand, fired at the lawn. Now a nitrate test would show he had fired a gun, and his fingerprints were on the weapon. He turned, leaving the window open, knowing the police would assume that the extra shot from the gun had missed Walter Gerard, spending itself through the open window. The second shot, the police would think, had found its mark in Gerard's chest.

He laid the gun back on the carpet near the desk, where it had been. He pulled his own handkerchief from his pocket, crumpled it in his hands, tossed the handkerchief just under the edge of the desk, where it would seem as if he had overlooked it.

He took one last look about the study and left it, putting Martha's handkerchief, the cigarette stubs, and the black notebook in his pocket. His laugh echoed harshly in the hallway. Johnny Bayliss had wondered, in an idle moment, a time or two in his life what he would do if he should find he had only a limited time to live. Now the question had actually faced him, magnified by murder, and Johnny had answered. With Martha's safety in the balance he'd just framed himself for the murder of his uncle. And, he thought, the job was just about perfect. . . .

* * *

His apartment was still dark, silent as a tomb, when he returned. He turned on the living room lights, went back to the kitchen. How long? When would the police discover the murder of Walter Gerard and come for him? Johnny wiped clammy perspiration from his forehead.

He dropped the cigarette stubs and Martha's handkerchief in the garbage receptacle on the small screened-in back porch. He held the black notebook in his hand, deliberating, replaced it slowly in his pocket.

He re-entered the kitchen. There

was a sound in the front of the apartment. He stiffened. Footsteps came toward the kitchen; then Martha was standing in the doorway slim and tall, her chestnut hair tumbling about her shoulders, her brown eyes frowning as she looked at him.

"Hello, Johnny," her eyes were worried, and he knew she was thinking of the attack he'd had last night. "Are you feeling all right?"

He forced the thought from his mind that he was touching a murderess as he put his hands on her shoulders and kissed her lightly. "Okay," he said. He looked at her, trying to read her secret in her eyes. But they hadn't changed. He could read nothing except concern for him.

"Martha, I. . . ." He licked his lips. "I want to talk to you."

"All right, Johnny. I'll start dinner. I'm sorry I'm late. You can talk while I work."

He held her shoulders, looked into her face. "No. It will only take a moment. Just tell me about the. . . the blackmail."

Her eyes changed then. "How did you find out?"

He shrugged, didn't speak.

She walked away, turned again to face him. "It isn't what you're evidently thinking, Johnny. You must believe that."

"Will you tell me?"

She shook her head, her eyes troubled. "I wish you wouldn't ask me, Johnny. Just trust. . . ."

JOHNNY BAYLISS felt a hard pang. She wished he wouldn't ask her—when a man had been murdered! He turned her with his hands on her shoulders. "I've got to ask you, Martha. I. . . ."

The front door buzzed, and Johnny let his arms fall slowly as Martha said, "I'll answer it, Johnny. We can talk later."

He followed Martha into the living room, watched with the blood pounding in his temples as she opened the door. But it wasn't the police; it was Johnny's cousin, Steve Neilson, and Loretta Dane.

Steve was trim and muscular with a ruggedly handsome face and waving, crinkly red hair. Loretta was ev-

everything a blonde vocalist in a club like Sime Karkins' Gilded Peacock should be, and Luretta had a few points all her own.

"We just dropped by," Steve said. "Luretta's due at the club in a little while." He lighted a cigarette, sat down beside Luretta's blonde perfection. "How're you feeling, Johnny?"

Johnny shrugged.

"Did you," Steve asked. "see Doctor Whitfield today?"

Johnny waited, and felt all their eyes upon him. He watched the color leave Martha's face. Her hand gripped his arm. "Johnny, it isn't. . ."

"It's okay," he said. The smile felt ghastly on his face, but the room relaxed.

"You gave us a turn last night," Luretta said.

"Yeah," Steve echoed. "We've been wondering all day how serious it was."

"I guess any sort of heart attack will make you look like a ghost," Johnny said. One part of him was smiling, talking, another dying by degrees, listening for the police.

Martha said, "I'll rustle some sandwiches. I'm afraid I've been starving my husband, not getting in earlier, but losing the blood hit me worse than any of us—the nurses and myself that is—thought."

"Losing the blood!" Luretta gasped.

"It was nothing," Martha smiled, as Johnny turned to her. "But they wouldn't let me leave the hospital until a few minutes ago. I caught a taxi and came straight here. . . ."

She winced under the sudden pressure of Johnny's fingers on her arms. "Say that again! You've been in the hospital? Since what time?"

She looked at him strangely. "All afternoon. I made a blood donation, and it left me shaky. I didn't want to tell you I was going and worry you after that. . . that attack last night."

Johnny's voice was ragged. "You can prove that? You can prove that you were at the hospital all afternoon and came straight here?"

Rising alarm was in her eyes, and Johnny was aware that Steve and

Luretta had risen uneasily, feeling that something was wrong.

"What is it?" Steve began, but Johnny cut him off with a gesture.

"Yes," Martha answered Johnny's question slowly. "Of course I can prove it. By several nurses, a doctor or two, and the cab driver who picked me up at the hospital and brought me here. In fact, one of the nurses helped me from the hospital steps to the cab. She. . . ."

Johnny wanted to tell her. He wanted to shout, "Then you couldn't have killed Walter Gerard!" But he said hoarsely, "I've got to go out." He turned, rushed from the room. Steve followed him into the corridor. "Johnny. . . ."

"Sorry to be abrupt, Steve, but I'll see you later." It was the most important appointment in Johnny's life. He had to get to his uncle's, destroy that damning evidence he'd played against himself before the police got there and found it. He vanished down the stair well with Martha and Luretta calling something to him, and Steve standing in the corridor. Maybe, Johnny thought, they think I've gone nuts. . .

Johnny alighted from the taxi half a block from the house Walter Gerard had lived in. Coat collar turned up. Johnny walked down the sidewalk past the house. The front of the place was still dark, the lone light spilling on the side lawn from the study window. Just as Johnny had left the place from his earlier visit. There was no evidence of activity by the police, no indication that Walter Gerard's body had been discovered. He'd arrived in time.

Johnny breathed, "Thank the Lord!" He wiped sweat from his drawn face, started up the walk.

HIS hand was on the knob when a rustle of movement whispered in the darkness. A footfall on the porch at his left, a sharply drawn breath. Johnny whirled, dropped in a crouch.

But the bulky shadow was too close; an arm rose and fell, bringing a gun barrel across the side of Johnny's head. He staggered back, trying

to come out. The man moved forward, stalking him swiftly, and in the wan light from the street lamp Johnny glimpsed the flat, heavy face. Sime Karkins. The man who owned the Gilded Peacock where Loretta Dane sang.

Off-balanced, Johnny brought an arm up to shield his head, the other hand clenching in a fist. Seconds were long eternities, giving Johnny the feeling that he was suspended in a slow motion picture of a nightmare.

With a grunt, Karkins moved in, rolled with Johnny's blow. Johnny knew in that flashing moment that Karkins had heard him coming up the walk and had flattened himself against the wall, near the door, until Johnny had been in the position, unaware, hand on the doorknob, that Karkins had wanted. . . .

Sime Karkins slammed him again with the gun and liquid fire poured over Johnny's brain. He felt the porch railing behind his knees. Blindly, he struck at Karkins again, contacted thin air. His senses kept shooting off in black space. He felt himself reeling over the railing, falling, crashing into the shrub at the end of the porch. The earth was cool and moist on his face, but not enough to revive him. The pain in his head was swallowed by ungodly blackness.

* * *

When he opened his eyes, Johnny was seeing stars again. But these were real, diamondine glitters in a blue-black sky. He realized over the pain in his head that he was lying on his back. The knowledge stiffened him. He was still lying at the base of the shrub in the thick darkness at the end of the porch. But he remembered that he had fallen on his face. His hands patted his pockets slowly. The black notebook was gone. Sime Karkins had turned Johnny over, he knew, searched him, taken the notebook.

Johnny started to sit up, but a voice above him, on the porch, froze him. ". . . And sure if he didn't do a good job of killing the old boy!"

Police. They'd arrived, in force.

Johnny could hear a babble of voices on the porch, in the house. Several pairs of parking lights on official cars glowed at the curb.

Cautiously, he moved, knowing the slightest sound would bring them down upon him. In the darkness beneath the shrub, he'd been overlooked so far. But a cracking twig, or a sharply drawn breath to ease the pain in his head would be as eloquent as shouting his whereabouts.

He eased away from the shrub, wriggling across the lawn. He reached a spot that brought the interior of the study into his vision. A blue-coated cop passed over the face of the study window. Then a big man with a cigar in his mouth, a plainclothes dick.

A VOICE rolled out the window, across the lawn to Johnny: "I just phoned headquarters like you asked, chief," the voice said. "The gun with that serial number is registered in the name of John H. Bayliss."

"And those are the initials on this handkerchief under the edge of the desk," another voice said.

A third added grimly: "We've got him dead to rights. Walter Gerard's will states that his money goes in a lump sum down the line of his heirs. Only two of Gerard's relatives living, this Bayliss and a fellow named Steve Neilson. Bayliss was next in line for the money. He'd have inherited it all, under the terms of the will. Since old man Gerard was worth plenty, that's motive enough, I guess, for Bayliss to have killed the old guy." The speaker, whom Johnny couldn't see, cleared his throat. "Quaine, call headquarters. Get a call out for John H. Bayliss. You said you'd known old man Gerard and had seen Bayliss a couple of times. Give headquarters the best description of Bayliss that you can. We'll cover this town like a wet blanket. Anybody want to bet we haven't picked up Bayliss by morning and that we don't skid him to the chair?"

No voices followed that one over the lawn. There were no takers to the bet.

Johnny faded back in the darkness. Thirty days of life left, the last thirty days he'd ever have with Martha. And he'd be lucky to stay out of jail until tomorrow's dawn. . . . Not to mention a black notebook with Martha's initials in it. . . .

* * *

The rear of the Gilded Peacock was far less inviting than its blue crystal front. Johnny skirted an odorous garbage can in the alley, fumbled in the darkness and eased up three wooden steps to a small platform. His hand touched the rear door of the club. He'd never gone in this way before, but he'd come out through the rear a couple of times when he and Martha and Steve had come down to the club to hear Luretta sing and they'd left by the rear door with Luretta to keep masculine admirers out front from stopping Luretta and hindering them. Now such things were only memories. He and Steve and Martha dropping by the club to pick up Luretta. Drinks in Johnny's apartment. A midnight snack once in a while. Memories twisted with the new, sudden fears that had grown and filled Johnny's mind in the last hours.

He went down the dimly lighted corridor. From out front drifted the muted tones of the orchestra, Luretta's voice, as golden as her hair. She would come back this way in a few moments, to her dressing room. Johnny stopped at the dressing room door, turned the knob.

The door swung back. He chilled in his tracks. Martha was sitting at the dressing table, stiffening at sight of him.

"I didn't expect to find you here," he said, closing the door behind him.

She rose slowly, her eyes on his face. "What's happened, Johnny? Tell me! The things you said in the kitchen tonight, before Steve and Luretta came, the way you left the apartment. . . ."

"All right," he said. "But first you've got to tell me the whole story. Sime Karkins has been blackmailing you, hasn't he?"

SHE sat down. "No, Johnny, not that. I knew you were thinking that when you first mentioned blackmail in our apartment tonight. That's why I came here—to see Luretta. You see, I've known Luretta for a long time. She's had a lot of rotten breaks in her life, Johnny. She left the small town where we grew up together with a black cloud of trouble hanging over her—she'd witnessed a murder and the police wanted her, but she'd received anonymous, threatening letters. So she ran away, came here. . . ."

His breath was choking, his voice trembling. "Then it was not you! Luretta! Sime Karkins has more sources of revenue than this club—blackmail, for example. Luretta came to work for him, and he found out her past."

"That's right, Johnny." Tears were beginning to well in Martha's eyes. "Have I been a dope? I gave her money, tried to help her. . . ."

He slipped his arm about her. "You've been a real friend to her, Martha, but what about the initials? I found a black notebook tonight with the initials. . . ."

"Luretta's," Martha said. "Sime Karkins discovered her real name the same way he finds out everything about people. Her real name is Marge Blakely. But the notebook, Johnny? Where did you find. . . ."

"In Walter Gerard's desk," Johnny said bitterly. "He's dead, Martha."

"Dead. . . .?" Her lips formed the word without saying it. Johnny steadied her with his arm, watched her fight for control. "I. . . I'm all right, Johnny. Tell me how it happened."

"Later," he said gently. "We've got to move fast right now. First, I want you to go back to the apartment. Get rid of the police when they come. Tell them anything—that I've gone crazy, threatened you, left you. But get rid of them!"

"Police, Johnny? Coming to our apartment?"

"For me," he said as gently as he could. "They think I killed Walter Gerard."

She clutched his arms, her eyes

searching his face, her mouth tight with shock and pain.

"Easy, soldier," he said. She relaxed slowly. "All right, Johnny. I'll get rid of them. What then?"

"I'll get Loretta to contact Steve. We've got to have his help to get out of town. The police will be watching every terminal. We'll go away. I . . ."

"No, Johnny," she pleaded. "Even if Steve got us out of town in his car all right, the police would catch us."

He forced a grin to his stiff lips. "Trust me, Martha. I promise you they won't catch me for . . . for a lifetime. And I'll spend the rest of that lifetime making this up to you." A lifetime of thirty days. But it was the most he could give her.

After a long moment she rose. "I'll be waiting at the apartment for you, Johnny."

He didn't trust himself to say anything more. He opened the door for her, watched her go down the corridor toward the front of the club.

He hadn't paced the floor of the dressing room longer than five minutes when Loretta entered. "Hello, Johnny."

He smashed out his cigarette, said without preliminary: "Will you do me a favor?"

"Sure, Johnny," she laughed. "As long as Martha doesn't mind."

"I'm not joking," his voice brought a quick look from her. "I want you to get Steve, bring him to my apartment and wait there for me. You're not to say anything to anyone. You're through here for the night, aren't you?"

"Yes, I've done my last number for the night. But, Johnny. . . ."

"I'll explain later. Will you do it?"

She sat down at her dressing table, began removing make-up. She shrugged and said, "It's as good as done."

"Thanks," he said. Then he slipped quietly into the corridor.

THE sidewalk was almost deserted. Johnny's footsteps echoed hollowly. The street light on the corner ahead of him was wrapped in a halo of yellow mist that had come with early morning. It had been two

hours since he'd left Loretta's dressing room. He felt sure the police had had time to have come to and gone from his apartment.

He turned the corner. His apartment house was half a block ahead. Then he saw the reeling dark figure ahead of him on the sidewalk. The man lurched, fell, tried to rise, sank to the chill concrete. Johnny ran forward, knelt over the man. He turned the man and the street light fell on the pain-twisted features of Doctor Theron Whitfield!

The doctor's coat was open and Johnny saw the man had been shot in the stomach. Whitfield's breath came heavily. With a choking sound he summoned strength to clasp Johnny's wrist, hold Johnny down to him.

"Too late to help me," Whitfield breathed. ". . . Was coming to your place. I" He smiled, and in the yellow glow of the street lamp it was like a skull grinning. "Thought I was . . . dead. Left . . . me for . . . dead. Being a doctor. . . . I played possum pretty good. . . ."

"Who shot you, doctor?" Johnny begged hoarsely.

". . . Coming to tell you. . . what . . . I've done." Whitfield's eyes were glazing. "Sorry I . . . did it to you, Bayliss. Always liked . . . elegant life. . . money. Was even begging time on . . . bad check over . . . phone while you were in my office today. Wanted. . . too much money . . . demanded too much. . . and it got me a couple bullets. . . in the stomach. Had to have . . . money. . . money. . . so I agreed to do it to you. . . ."

"Do what to me?" Johnny almost shouted.

"F of you. Lie. . . to you. Your heart. . . sound as a dollar. . . You'll live to see your. . . great-grandchildren if. . . you keep yourself. . . out of trouble. . . ." Johnny's mind turned to lead in his throbbing skull. Live to see his grandchildren—and he'd framed himself for murder so tightly no power on earth could tear it!

Doctor Theron Whitfield opened his wracked lips to say something more, but the words never came out.

Doctor Whitfield died under Johnny's hands.

Johnny Bayliss opened his apartment door and stood a moment, looking at them. Martha, Loretta, and Steve. They whirled as he came in, Martha pausing in her floor-pacing.

"W 've been waiting," Martha said, coming to Johnny quickly.

"We're all set," Steve added. "Martha has told us."

He started to rise from his chair and Johnny pushed him back. "Yes, Steve, I think we are all set. Let's say, for the perverted fun of it, that Walter Gerard's money is motive for murder."

The room was hushed. "I don't get this," Steve said slowly. "You inherit Uncle Walter's money."

"I'll get around to explaining that," Johnny said. "First, let's go back to last night. Let's say that you know a not-too-ethical doctor—Theron Whitfield—who can be bought. You buy him as an accomplice. You come here, see that I get drugged last night—not much, just enough to bring on a heart attack. There are hundreds of drugs that would do it, up as, digitalis. I have a very real heart attack and Doctor Theron Whitfield is called. He scares us all half crazy, saying that I almost croaked from the attack. Today in his office he carried through the rest of his part—he examined me, told me I had thirty more days. Why should I doubt him? Any normal person would have been deadly sure that his days were numbered after being told that by a doctor, just as I felt.

"Then, at gun point, you force Walter Gerard to call me, to get me to hurry to his house. Then you shoot him. You've been here sometime during the day today. You've stolen the gun, the evidence you need to plant the murder frame on Martha. I arrive, and I react exactly as you hoped I would. As, knowing how much I thought of Martha, you knew I'd react! With only thirty days to live, how could I lose? So I switch the frame to point to me!"

"No," Steve gasped. "You can't think. . . ."

"Let me finish. Now take a look at

the set-up. Walter is dead. I burn for it. And little Steve gets the money. And because I have burned the case is closed, never to cause you possible danger again. You were nice'y killing two birds with one stone.

"You didn't want to frame me outright; it might have gone wrong. I would have fought back. You chose this more subtle, more sure way. All you had to do was jockey me in a position where I'd take the rap without fighting back. Even if I hadn't reacted as you expected, the odds of my doing so would have been great enough for you to gamble on your scheme.

"But Doctor Whitfield got greedy, got shot, fooled you into thinking he was dead, and dying, came to tell me the truth. Sometime in the last two hours he was shot. You could have done it, Steve."

"Yes," Loretta said heavily. "He could have. I had a hard time getting hold of him."

Johnny turned to her. "I'm glad you rose to the bait, Loretta."

HE whitened, stepped back, tried to laugh. "Are you making a joke. . . ."

"It isn't a joking matter. You've also had two hours in which to kill Doctor Whitfield. I've been talking, Loretta, to build you up. Playing on your nerves, I guess. You've been standing there with your slimy conscience hearing the crimes rehashed exactly as they happened—except for one tiny detail. It's a very important detail—you did the killing, Loretta.

"You've fooled Martha into thinking you're sweetness and light, a girl who got bad breaks, but this whole scheme shows you're rotten clear through. You're deep enough in crime to be paying heavy blackmail. You needed money, had to have it. You stalled Sime Karkins on the promise that you would marry a fortune. You planned to get me and Walter Gerard out of the way, which would give Steve the Gerard fortune."

Steve was standing, haggard. "She married me a week ago," he said

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Abner Scrum was
as dead as he'd
ever be!



THE STRANGLE HOLD

By Rex Whitechurch

Blackmail and murder are something any shamus can spot right away, but sometimes a hot tip will go right over a dick's head!

THE dumb little shamus didn't seem to know any more than the law allowed, but he had a valuable tip for me and I paid him ten bills on the nose for the information. Porgy Hammer managed to get around town and he'd sell out to his worst enemy if the price were right. I didn't stop to question Porgy's sincerity, knew he would put out no bun, steer to an established private dick who stood in good with the police. I heard him say tersely: "Remember he's playing vacuum sweeper salesman, Tom."

"There's a gentleman on the third floor at the back of the hall," the stout housekeeper said. She was sweeping snow from the stoop. It fogged around her in a cloud of ermine. "He came two days ago, late evening, the night of the blackout. I couldn't see him very well."

"Why didn't you say so in the first place?" I complained. "The man is Abner Scrum."

She went on brushing snow. It was a narrow little street. I saw some doves circling a thin church steeple in the iridescent flakes. A deep hush

lay over the neighborhood. "Like reading a good mystery story," she said. "A murder mystery."

She had her head down. "He didn't say his name was Abner Scrum," she continued. "Signed my register Gerald Smith. He had a vacuum sweeper with him and promised to talk to me about it later. He paid in advance. I haven't seen him since. I didn't see him well. I'd guess from his voice he's about fifty years old. He wore a gray plaid overcoat."

"That's Abner Scrum," I said. "I'll go up and see."

I fairly jumped past her. I was taking no chances now. I thought she was going to trip me with the broom. She was big and gray and solid as a rock. "Wait a minute," she objected. "I didn't say you could go up there. He told me he wasn't home to nobody. I—"

I was in the hall now, the door shut. I skipped up the stairs. A dim bulb burned in the ceiling. I hit the landing, paused a moment to get my bearing. I listened. The old lady was still sweeping the front steps. I moved slowly along the hall. It was hard to see the numbers on the doors, but I came to the last room on the right. The last room on the left was directly across from this, but it was dark. I took the one on the right because the transom was suffused with yellow light. I rapped hard, twice. I stalled, rapped again. My knuckles drummed out an insistent tattoo, but I didn't hear anything beyond the door.

I tried the knob. It turned. It stuck to my fingers. I gave the door a gentle push and it opened. Momentarily baffled, I paused. It was warm in the room, too warm. The windows were down. A musty smell seeped out of the emptiness before me. I moved forward on an old rose rug. A bureau stood against the wall on my right, a bathroom door was open on my left. A big four poster loomed straight ahead. Two deep chairs and a table occupied the center of the interior.

Clothes were scattered about everywhere, on the chairs, on the floor. Things like ties and shirts and hose-riery stuck out of the bureau drawers.

A few letters ornamented the rug, blue and white. And on the bed was a man. He was lying there, motionless, on his back, staring up at the ceiling. He had no cover over him. He was clad in a brown suit, and he had his shoes on.

From where I stood I could see the man's nose, and it was very long and very bright red. Abner Scrum.

So I'd trapped the old fox, just like this. I flicked my gun out of my shoulder holster, cleared my throat. He was due for a surprise; I was the last man in the world he wanted to see.

"Come on, Abner," I said grimly. "Snap out of it. Get up. Move carefully. I've got you covered. It's taken days to corner you and I'm not risking all I've gambled by having you take a pot shot at me. You old—"

WHAT was it running across his chin, or that had already run across it and stopped, to coagulate and glisten in the lamps? It wasn't a nice color. Scarlet's never a nice color to me, and when I see scarlet I usually think of blood. And blood it was; Abner Scrum had been shot through the head. A blue bullet hole was clean, ugly, decisive. The wound had been inflicted hours ago.

I dropped into a chair and wiped cold sweat. My heart was hammering like a chugging locomotive. Abner Scrum had been liquidated. Ostensibly Tony Garlock had beaten me to him. When I thought of Tony I got mad. I scrambled to my feet, padded around the room. I went into the bath, inspected it closely, back out in the living-room I scanned the floor, the walls, searched the clothes closet. There was no luggage. All I saw was that damned impudent vacuum sweeper—

Stalling! He'd been playing sweeper salesman to throw me off his track, maybe to mislead Tony Garlock. Slowly I turned to the bureau. I put on my gloves. I didn't want to leave any finger-prints. The cops would be coming any moment—as soon as the old lady found out. I would have to hurry.

There was nothing in the bureau. I crept back to the cold corpse. My

exploratory fingers went through the pockets of the brown suit. There wasn't a damned thing in them, not even a coin. Those pockets were used to being searched.

A pool of scarlet lay on the sheet under the gray head. The wound had bled profusely, but from the other side of his noggin. The slug had gone through, and must be somewhere around, probably in the wall. I tried to find it—finally picked it off the sheet where it lay, misshapen, grooved and scratched. Enough to tell ballistics a helluva lot, if the gun was found.

But the murder weapon wasn't in the room. That's what I wanted. Something definite to link Tony Garlock with this killing. It would be like Tony, after killing Scrum he'd hide the gun in the room for fear of being caught with it upon leaving. And a gunshot in this room would sound like a cannon.

I went to the window, raised it and peered down in the white bluster. The snow vortexed around me. It was three stories to the alley pavement. I didn't see a fire escape, no way to get down unless you walked out the front door and halfway around the block. The alley cut straight through. Moreover, it was hard to distinguish anything in the snow flurries.

Tony hadn't tossed the gun out of the window. He wouldn't take a long chance like that. I put the window down and again scurried to the bathroom. There was no weapon in there. The little metal pellet rolled around on my sweaty palm. A .38. Well—I had something. I didn't mean to give it to the cops either.

* * *

I sat in the red parlor which belonged to the gaslight era, stared at the old lady and said, "You wait ten minutes before you call the cops. The man's been dead for hours. They'll want to know everything. You'll have to be truthful. Abner Scrum was an absconding bank cashier. I don't think he had any money. My name's Tom Tooker. I'm a shamus. a private detective, but I don't

want to be here when the dicks come. Nor do I want them to know I've been here. They won't ask you. You just keep buttoned up and here's fifty bucks for your trouble."

She gazed at me with calm gray eyes. She was wise; she'd do anything within reason for money. I knew it; she knew I knew it. So we made the deal. But she bemoaned the fact that the killing had happened in her respectable house. Nothing of the kind had ever taken place there before.

I tore off across the snowy walk to my sedan, jumped on the gas and tooled the little machine around the corner. I came back through the alley, again looked for the gun. Not finding it I got back in my car and spurred away.

Hopefield Vanburen poured two glasses of Scotch, flicked on a drum lamp and lowered himself into a jade green chair. The ornate hotel suite the banker occupied in the city's leading hotel was in keeping with his wealth. A man of his rank wouldn't be satisfied with anything but the best. Besides, he had a swell brownstone out in the west part of town. Because of his ability to get stinking drunk too often to take chances he maintained this suite as a sort of hideout.

HE WAS short, heavily built. He had a bullet-shaped head without a hair on it. He had a thick neck, a low forehead and a square, hard chin. His eyes were gray in the lamplight and gradually changing to a sullen blue because he was mad as hell.

"I hoped to keep the police from finding out about him," the bank president said. "It shows me up as a fool. I trusted him, went in over my head to get him a job, to hide his prison record. I thought he was straight. Then he beat it with ten thousand dollars. You know why I protected him. I—"

Now *she* came into the room, tall, willowy, a metallic blonde. Her eyes were capable of melting a man's firmest resolutions. I guess it was the violet eyes, elongated and clear and lovely, that first drew my atten-

tion. She had a tall glass in her shapely hand with ice clinking in it. She was clad in a gold and black Chinese robe, one of those imported things that cost a mint. She wore red mules.

"There isn't a chance now of hiding what happened." Vanburen rubbed his face vigorously, took the glass out of the blonde's hand, drained it at a gulp.

"What is it?" Theodora Scrum whispered. "What's the trouble? Who's dead? Anyone I know?"

The banker nodded his bald head. "Only too well, I'm afraid," he muttered. He lifted his eyebrows, stared at the girl. "Your father—something has happened to your father. It's awful—"

She didn't blink those lovely eyes, was cold, imperious and impervious to hurt, I figured. She'd lived too long for the finer things of life to feel deeply. Too much fur, champagne and diamonds. She knew how to get these, too. She knew how to make Vanburen crawl at her feet. The daughter of a convict—Well, that alone didn't spell anything. Many good men have been convicts, but Vanburen's wife was heartless.

"What's the matter with Abner?" she asked listlessly. "Did he get drunk again, Hoppy?"

"No," Vanburen said, "he's dead. Tony Garlock killed him. Mr. Tooker here has just come from the body. I—" He mopped perspiration from his brow with a silk handkerchief.

The eyes of the girl didn't even blink now. They remained cold, obdurate. Not a hint of grief or a tear. That fur and champagne and those diamonds were too precious. It had cost too much to make up her face. "Too bad," she said. "I need another drink, Hoppy. Of course we'll give him a decent burial."

She glided from the room. I sat there watching the door through which she'd vanished, listened. I hear something like a pitiful little whine, but a moment later a white dog came sneaking out through the same door.

VANBUREN paced the floor. He was baffled, worried. "It's going to come out now. Garlock knew it; he served a sentence in the same jug with Abner Scrum. He's the only man in town who knew Abner. I was a damned fool for importing Scrum, to let him ruin me. What are my stockholders going to say when they learn I faked Scrum's references and lied about getting him from another bank on the west coast?"

"Looks pretty dark," I admitted. "But back to Garlock. He wanted the money."

"Sure, he was blackmailing Abner." Vanburen again mopped sweat. He crumpled the handkerchief into a ball, stomped the Persian. He stood now with his back to the fireplace, his hands in the pockets of his blue lounging robe. "I'm glad Theodora didn't break down. She's a wonderful girl. Of course I did it for her. I—after all, she's my wife."

"Sure," I conceded. "I understand. I think your stockholders will see it, Vanburen. Garlock put the heat on Abner. He loved Theodora and hoped to keep disgrace from her. He paid off to Tony Garlock. Then he must've had a fight with Garlock, maybe refused to be victimized again. He dared Garlock to reveal his prison record. And maybe he said he was going to the police—"

"I can make nothing else out of it," Vanburen said. "Garlock liquidated him to keep from being arrested on a blackmailing charge." He got very blue in the face. "You find out what you can. I'm going to try to cover up, even now. If Garlock dares to squawk—"

"You mean you're going to let the murder ride, not do anything to Garlock?"

He wagged his hairless head. "Sure. It's the best. Then Garlock won't disclose Abner's past and I'll be spared that humiliation. Don't you see? I may succeed in covering up for Abner. You see Garlock and put the deal before him. You give him to understand he must remain silent or we'll put the murder on him sure as hell."

IT WAS cold now, the snow flakes thin and dancing on my windshield like little silver spinwheels. The deep rumble of traffic in the canyons was monotonous. I dodged the clapping horse that pulled a beer wagon, slapped the brakes on and curbed my old sedan in front of Tony Garlock's Red Lantern.

The juke box was playing down stairs and Garlock was walking back and forth across his sumptuous office, a cigar half buried in his throat. A giant, in garish plaids, a ruby red tie and two-tone shoes he looked his part—a big time gambler who loved to match wits with old lady luck and the bangtails. I sat there watching him, saw his rage slowly simmer down to a purring threat. Saw his huge hairy hands clench and open and close again. His crisp black hair glistened in the violet light which seeped in from the big cocktail lounge below.

"I didn't kill him, shamus," he muttered thickly. "Hell, why'd I commit a crime that would send me to the chair if I slipped up in any of the details? And do you think a murder was ever pulled where there wasn't a slipup? Furthermore, I never got a dime from Abner Scrum in blackmail. I helped him. I liked him. I told him I'd keep mum; he wasn't worried about me. Somebody's trying to put the frame around me. It makes me sore as hell."

I liked the way he talked. His brown eyes were sincere, but they were at the same time capable of trickery. You couldn't tell where a guy like Garlock stood. Yet it had to be the way I'd figured it.

"Then," I said smoothly, "let's tack! it from this angle. You sat in with Abner to blackmail his daughter. You didn't want the girl to know her old man was messed up in it. You fall out with Abner when he kicks up a fuss and doesn't want to do it any more. Finally you turn on him and demand ten grand. He steals it from the bank, brings it to you. You get to planning his demise so he won't ever lose his head and squawk."

He came slowly to me, clenched his big fist and stuck it under my

nose. "Shamus, I respect the fact that you've got to make a living—the way you're doing it now. But if you say I killed him one more time I'll cave in your face."

I gulped, taking him at his word; he was big enough to do it. "Listen, Tony," I rapped, "I'm not trying to get you in a jam. I'm hoping to keep you out of facing a murder rap. The only thing—my client doesn't want you to talk about where you knew Abner. You get it?"

"Trying to bluff me, huh," he sneered. He skewed round, picked a decanter off the glass-topped desk and poured two drinks. He handed me one and I took it right quick. Facing me with his glass hoisted the gambler said, "I told you I liked Abner. It stopped there. I didn't say anything about liking Vanburen or that lousy rag of a wife of his either. What's she ever done for her old man? Nothing. She wouldn't even recognize him as her father."

I shrugged, put down my glass to watch the thin snow flakes make little white patterns on the window.

"Vanburen went to the west coast and married a swell blonde, one in pictures. She was a dancer, I understand. He went for her; he'd been married three times before. But his previous wives were women who were clean and above board. They didn't have skeletons in their closets. He settled money on them. Then this blonde turns out to have a father who's a con. Vanburen's shocked. He gets afraid and schemes a way to get his father-in-law a job in his bank where he can keep a close watch on him, keep him satisfied so he won't talk. Nice set up, but it didn't last. Somebody found out about it and put the bee on Abner who paid off once, then wouldn't pay off no more and got shot for his trouble."

"You've a nice way of talking," I admitted. "Can you tell me the black-mailer's name?"

"Forget it and beat it," he snapped. "If Vanburen brings my name into this mess I'll tell all I know on Abner. I think I'll do it anyhow. In fact I think I'm going to pay Vanburen a little visit."

"You can't get away with another

liquidation, Tony," I warned, rising. "I stated our proposition. You can take it or leave it." I got up and went to the door. I knew he was watching me closely. Tony Garlock was nobody's dummy.

"I list the same," he said, "I'm calling on Vanburen."

I clumped down the carpeted staircase, through the violet haze of the cocktail lounge.

* * *

VANBUREN was scared, he was scared stiff. He said he'd beat it out to his brownstone in the west part of town. The cops had been to see him; they'd asked questions about Abner. He'd told them nothing. They'd gone away satisfied, but he couldn't handle Tony Garlock.

"He'll kill me," the banker moaned. "Oh, what a mess I've got myself into now. They'll find out; my reputation will be ruined, absolutely ruined."

I let him sweat. There wasn't anything else I could do. I'd tried, failed. Maybe though there was a chance. I'd guard him, not let Tony Garlock bump him. But he'd have to promise to stay in this hotel and not leave his suite.

He glowered at me. "Why," he complained, "this is a veritable trap. He wouldn't dare to come out there, but he can slip in here and—"

I insisted and had my way.

Suddenly I thought of something. That dumb shamus who'd tipped me off to the whereabouts of Abner Scrum—how had he found out? I knew Porgy Hammer too well not to suspect him of knowing more than he'd told me. He was a down-at-heel private dick who went in for scurrilous undertakings, working for clients who stood outside the pale of the law. The moment the idea came to me it clicked, locked itself up in my mind. I decided to see Porgy at once.

I drove quickly over to his apartment. He lived in a second-class house. He was little, ratlike, blackish and looked like a miniature undertaker. Everything about him was black, even to his necktie. The white

shirt open at the collar was the only break in the diminutive one's somber apparel.

He had a pool table in his living room. He played pool when he wasn't working a case. He lived only to play pool, to eat and to drink. He had a mop of gray hair that needed combing. I'd made up my mind I was going to comb it for him if he didn't talk.

"I gave ten bucks for the information," I snapped. "But you held out on me. You knew he was dead."

He paused, let his cue idle on the green baize. "That's a damned lie. If I'd known he was dead I would've called the cops."

"Stalling won't help," I insisted. "You come clean now. Where did you get acquainted with Abner Scrum? You sent me to the correct address. Of all the guys in the town in our business you happened to be the only one who knew where Abner was holed up. How long did you know Scrum, Porgy?"

He shot the eight ball in a corner pocket, dropped the butt of the cue on the rug. I stared round at his clean well-furnished apartment. He had an income, but it wasn't from the cases he handled. He couldn't do so well on clients' fees.

"I've told you," he said, sullen. "Tony Garlock told me. I'm closing shop now. Beat it."

Before he could move I shoved my service revolver into his flat stomach. "This is a big mystery," I grunted. "You're going with me. I got a client who wants to see you. If you don't talk I'm going to try hard as hell to pin the murder on you. Where's your gun?"

HE TURNED white, his thin lips quivered. "I hate to donate my recreation period to a hum like you," he sneered. "What's my gun got to do with it?"

"I'm wondering," I said. "Shuck it."

He tossed a .38 on the pool table which he pulled out of a shoulder holster. I took the revolver in my handkerchief covered hand. "Abner Scrum was shot with a gun of this

caliber," I said. "Now get your overcoat on and let's go."

He was silent as we headed for the hotel where Vanburen lived like a king. He still was silent when I shoved him up the service steps ahead of me. Only when we got to the door and I'd pressed the buzzer did he speak.

"Listen, Tom Tooker," he mumbled, "I'm not messed up in this thing. I know a lot, but I've never breathed a word. Abner Scrum was one of my clients. I went up there, found him dead. Knowing you were on the case I tipped you off. I—"

There was no answer to my ring, and the little shamus beside me was staring with wide, fright-filled eyes. "They won't answer," he said, "but there's somebody in there."

I tried the knob and twisted it. The door opened. We emerged into the vestibule. I heard a window being raised slowly and raced into the bathroom. Tony Garlock stepped down onto the edge of the lavender bathtub. He was pale, and globules of sweat had formed on his brow.

Just then I heard Porgy Hammer's yell. "Hey, Tom, he's in here—"

"Step down, Tony," I said, entering the room. "It was polite of you thinking to go out the window when the lady had callers. I guess I've got you with your earflaps down."

He stood there on the edge of the tub, his eyes glinting. They were very deep and very solemn brown eyes. They had little flecks of crimson in them. "Button up, shamus," he demonstrated. "You don't think—"

"I said step down, funny boy!" I jiggled my gun at him. He turned very white. Those red flecks grew brighter in his eyes. He slid one leg down. The light struck his ox blood shoes and gave them a gloss. "You've escaped breaking your neck by jumping out the window," I concluded. "It's two floors down."

"I don't know anything, see." He lowered his other leg. The foot scuffed the linoleum. He kept his hands out where I could see them.

Then Porgy called out. "Come in here! Come—"

I made Garlock walk ahead to the bedroom where little Porgy stood

pointing a skinny finger at the bed. A man lay there, in a pool of blood. Beside him, evidently pickled, was his blonde wife.

Vanburen was plenty dead; the blonde was plenty drunk. I raced to the phone, careless. When I turned my back to Garlock, he followed and jumped me. I held onto my gun, but he had his arms around my throat. I skewed, he slapped me across the face hard with his bare hand, tried for the strangle hold again. I forced my gun up, triggered. He got the slug in the belly.

He stiffened, ran back on his heels and cascaded along the wall, coming at me again. But he couldn't help himself. He held both hands to the hole in his stomach. He pitched down, lay there thrashing around in pain.

Porgy was at the phone. The black clad shamus said, "Make it snappy," he blurted. "There's so much gore in this apartment it resembles a slaughter house."

I SCURRIED into the bedroom, jerked Theodora Vanburen to her feet. Porgy was standing in the door. The girl was sure tight.

"Don't touch me," she cried. "You crazy fool—you leave go of me. I'll tell—"

Porgy pounded on the bed. He reached far over the banker's inert body and came up with a small automatic. He held it aloft.

"There's something screwy in this set up, Tom," he wailed. "If Tony had done it—"

"He would've kept the gun," I said, nodding. "Sure. Then she killed her husband. Say, what is this, anyhow?"

Porgy grinned at me. "About the worst mess you ever saw," he expostulated. "Think hard, shamus. It's going to pay you to think hard. What was it you missed back there in Abner Scrum's apartment that might shed light on this enigma?"

"Why I—I didn't miss anything."

"Nope, you must've." Porgy scratched his thick mop of uncombed wool. "Didn't I tell you he was posing as a vacuum sweeper salesman?"

"What about the vacuum sweep-

er?" I asked, cold inside. Something was pounding in the back of my skull, trying to make me remember things I'd passed over. The sweeper in the clothes closet—

"Well," Porgy said sheepishly, "I put one over on you. When I found Abner Scrum dead I started a systematic search for clues. I found plenty stuff to prove who bumped him. I gathered these up and stuffed them in the bag of the vacuum cleaner, told you he was posing as a vacuum sweeper salesman because I figured you'd grab that cleaner. And you muffed it. . . ."

I saw it all now. Porgy, true to his type, had tried to conceal the killer's identity because—and he'd told me, or had tried to tell me, where I'd find the evidence to protect my client.

Crooked little shamus that he was he had left the stuff there for me, rather than to bust into my case by turning it over to the cops. It's a funny thing that men like Porgy Hammer could see only the wrong way out.

"Yea," I said, "I get it. You thought I was working for Vanburen. You threw me a way to make some big dough quick. I could surrender the proof of Vanburen's guilt to him and he'd pay me a handsome price. Well, it was all right—your heart was in the right place, Porgy. Only it was the wrong way—"

He grinned mischievously, asaundered back into the living room. "Get a move on you, Tom," he called out. "Tony's still kicking and he wants to talk—"

I STEERED the helpless blonde into the living room, shoved her into a chair and listened to the dying Garlock's hoarse statements. But he merely was saying what I already knew. He'd come in to see Vanburen, heard a gun explode and had dashed in to find the inebriated blonde with the smoking gun in her hand. She'd liquidated Vanburen because she'd discovered that he'd killed her father. Why? Because Vanburen had been sold on the idea that Abner

Scrum was blackmailing him single-handed, but the truth was, Abner had merely been a tool in Tony Garlock's hands.

Vanburen had been foolish enough to think he could save himself from being exposed to his stockholders for panning off the ex-con as a bank clerk he'd imported from another bank on the west coast.

"Vanburen wasn't taking chances," Tony continued. "He figured Abner Scrum was going to take him to a cleaning. He let Abner get away with stealing the ten thousand from the bank, didn't know I was behind it. He hired you because he didn't want the cops brought into it. That was because of his reputation, his desire to go on living a double life and not be found out. He maintained this suite—because he's a bigamist. That blonde's no more his wife than I am. But he married her; his indivorced wife doesn't know."

"You were behind Abner's theft of the dough?" I stabbed at him.

"Sure. I made Abner think I would split with him. I told him how matters stood with Vanburen. He was convinced he could take the money and Vanburen wouldn't open his head. When he hid out so long Vanburen hired you to find him. There's nothing more to it."

I let the dead man slide from my arms and spurted from the room. I didn't even stop to look at the blonde who had begun to weave around on her feet. I wanted to get back there as soon as possible. Porgy kept lookout while I was away.

Back in the room in which Abner Scrum was murdered by Vanburen I found the vacuum sweeper. In the black bag was a revolver and a ring on a metal tag. The number of Vanburen's suite and his bloody fingerprints and the gun from which the murder slug had been fired, had all been concealed hours ago by Porgy. Poor little rat. It made me wince to think how he'd overestimated my mental capacity.

(THE END)

"Here it is," said Beattie triumphantly.



DEATH OFF THE RECORD

By Marcus Lyons

Death was the melody, but what hidden motive was the counterpoint in that heap of broken Nazi records on the music-shop floor?

BICARBONATE Johnny regarded the pulpy dead face with more than his usual depression. By rights he should have felt pretty good about it; he had a clear case, out of what had looked at first like a flat bust. But he was still unhappy, for no definable reason.

He put his hat on top of a stack of record albums and scowled at the occupants of the locked music shop. "I don't like it," he said. "This racket

hurts my ulcers worse than the old rewrite desk."

"What's wrong with it?" the sergeant wanted to know. "It's written all over *his* face." He stabbed a knobby finger at the corner into which Kellogg was trying to shrink. "Everyone in town knows about *him*: he even tried to have Fatty here run out of business."

"And out of town," Kellogg said haorsely. "With damn good reason,

too, the lousy Nazi. Him and his brother both. But I didn't club him; somebody beat me to it."

"Yeah," the sergeant agreed. "Mr. Peattie, I suppose."

Peattie took off his pince-nez and started to speak, then changed his mind.

"Well, why not?" Bicarbonate snapped. "You found the body, didn't you, Peattie?"

The little man nodded vigorously, like a Hollywood Arab. "Just as I told you. I was coming here late to pick up the new Saint-Saens concert album, that he was holding for me; I run a record column for *Renaissance*—one of the Little Magazines, you know—"

"Yeah. First time I ever heard of one of those sheets having a deadline, but we've checked that. You didn't touch anything?"

"I'll vouch for that," the corpse's brother put in. "Nothing in the place has been touched, except for that stack of German discs, and your own men moved those." He turned his back on the detective and went on talking in low tones to Robert Clyde. Johnny's face began to turn red.

"Outa that!" he roared. "This is no damn business conference. Clyde, how do you get into this, anyhow?"

The tall gray man shrugged. "Accident—I'm an old friend of the brothers, as I've told you fifty times already, and Hans let me in when the police first got here. You needn't shout, Johnny; if you have any new question to ask—"

"All right, all right," Johnny said disconsolately. There was little sense in pumping Clyde any farther; he was without information, without motive, had a good standing in the community, and generally Johnny wished he'd get the hell out. Detectives, however, do not order city selectmen about. There was as little to be said for the brother—he'd bought into the record business, once the murdered man's exclusive property, during the hard times of the twenties, it was pretty well known that Helmuth Ehret had wasted no love on him for that, but again, no evidence.

"What's this about the German discs?" Peattie asked.

"Not much," Johnny admitted. "Someone came into the store last night, apparently just after you left; someone the old man knew, because there was no fight. Then the killer made a clumsy pass at the safe—what's the matter?"

THE little man had begun to hop from one foot to the other. "Surely that's plain enough, then. Everybody here knows there's nothing in that safe but a copy of V-10005.

"Of what?"

"It's an old Caruso-Hempel recording of a duet from Verdi's *Masked Ball*. Very valuable, of course, but too well-known to be re-salable without inquiries; and no one here but myself would want the thing for himself."

The detective regarded him suspiciously. Was the mousy musician as transparent as all that, or had he just heard a confession? He shook his head. "That doesn't change things any. Whoever did the job didn't bring any equipment capable of opening even a Wells-Fargo safe. He just made marks on it with a hammer and chisel, so it'd look like that was what he was after; probably the same hammer he used on the old man, though we haven't been able to find it.

"The clue is in the pile of broken records on the floor. The whole idea was to make it look like they'd been swept off accidentally while working on the safe; but the shelf they were on, according to Ehret here, was above eye level—too high for a casual elbow. So—"

"I see," Peattie said. "If the safe-cracking was a blind, then the records themselves were the object."

Kellogg made a choking noise. "We've been all through this before. Everybody knows I tried to have those discs destroyed. They were all Nazi records, every damn one of them—songs of the SS and the SA of the work gangs and the Party. Even the *Horst Wessel Lied*. These two were selling them in a decent American town, and probably doing

some sort of spying on the side, to boot."

"You lousy fanatic," said Hans Ehret in a dangerous voice. "I'm a better American than you'll ever be. You know damn well we sold those things just for historical purposes, to an occasional curious customer."

"You lie in your teeth." Kellogg's voice began to crack again. "Don't you think I know a Nazi when I see one? Didn't I get beaten steady for three years by Nazi prison guards in Spain? It's a crime whoever did this didn't get the both of you—" He swung on Johnny. "There's some evidence for you! You can be damn sure that it *would* have been both of them if I'd done it!"

Johnny winced. The man's hatred was fantastic in its intensity. He hated the turn the case had taken:—to send a man to the chair almost directly from a concentration camp—Johnny could appreciate the feeling, for he had been overseas himself. But if the camp had unhinged Kellogg this far, then—

"Excuse me," said Peattie. "Where are these broken records?"

"The boys picked 'em up with gloves and packed 'em all down to the lab in a wastebasket," the sergeant returned. "Why?"

Peattie shook his head. "That's too

bad." He wandered toward the back of the store. Clyde, who had been lounging silently against the counter during the altercation, straightened and peered after him.

"Wait a minute," Johnny growled. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Why, back to the stock room, where the safe is," Peattie explained mildly. "You know, records stacked flat make a pretty heavy load on a shelf. It's a chance that the bottom disc got stuck in the paint, and if the shelf was above eye level, then the killer probably missed it when he knocked the pile off."

Everyone was looking at Peattie now, in a kind of silent chorus of dropped jaws. "I don't know why everybody's so interested in this all of a sudden," Johnny bit off, "but we'll find out. Peattie, this bird left no fingerprints, and anyhow you wouldn't find any on a record he hadn't touched."

"I'm not looking for fingerprints. I wouldn't know how to." He walked doggedly back.

"The rest of you stay planted," said Johnny. "Keep your eye on 'em, Sarge."

"AS I thought," Peattie said when he returned a single record. "Mr.—uh—Bicarbonate, be-



THE SILVER KID RIDES

IN

'The Gallows Brand'

By T. W. FORD

Don't Miss This Thrilling Book-length

Novel — Complete In the November

DOUBLE • ACTION

WESTERN

fore I touch this disc, I want you to make me a promise."

"Well?"

"Don't let anyone come near me while I have it in my hands. I think it's important that this one doesn't get broken."

"I think you're off your chump, but—well, all right."

Peattie nodded in his self-satisfied, Arab-like way, as he studied the record. It had a blue Telefunken label on it, which read *Arbeit ist Gluck*. "Song of the Work-Service," Peattie explained briefly. "Part Two on the other side. Supposedly."

"What do you mean, supposedly?"

Instead of answering Peattie held the record up to the light and examined it nearsightedly; then he tilted it and looked along the label. "Remember the promise," he said.

"All of you keep clear," the detective said. "Something's breaking here. I'm damned if I know what it is, but—well, go ahead, Peattie." Ehret and Clyde leaned forward nervously; Kellogg remained huddled in his corner, eyeing the procedure with fearful eyes.

"Now what I propose to do," Peattie said academically, "is to take this record into the booth there, and play it over to see what the killer missed."

"Code?" said Johnny. "I'm no more equipped for that than you are for fingerprints."

"You don't understand. I want to play the record *with the door open*, so we can all hear it. Does anyone—Detective!"

The personnel of the stuffy shop did a fast three-way shift. Johnny had spotted Clyde's lunge almost before it had begun. As Peattie scuttled aside, holding the precious record high, Johnny blocked the way with his own heavy body; the next second the cop had the selectman's arms pinioned behind him.

"What the hell, Clyde," Johnny growled.

The tall gray man gasped angrily. "Blackmail. For Lord's sake, don't play it. Break it. If you'll break it now, I'll plead guilty; I'll sign a confession. I'll do anything, only *don't play that record!*" He clenched his fists spasmodically.

"Hans never knew about it, but his brother had a disk like that for half the customers of the shop. How he got them, I don't know—he must have had dictaphones scattered all over town; it was a regular syndicate. I didn't care about the others, but I had to break my own and kill the fat slob, who knew what was on it. I'd have killed Hans, too, if he'd known."

"That's enough," said Johnny grimly. "Sean, cuff him and haul him off."

As the door closed behind them, the detective swung on Peattie. "Out with it," he ordered. "Was it just clever guessing, or what?"

"Nothing of the sort," Peattie said in an injured tone. "I could see right away that the Telefunken label was counterfeit. The real Telefunken Blue has a little gold flecking in it, that you'd be likely to miss if you weren't looking closely for it. This was just a flat hue. And when I looked inside the hole in the middle, I could see that the disc had a glass base, with just a thin coating of acetate on top—in other words, a home recording, with a fake label. If your policemen had known anything about records, they could have seen that from the broken fragments—but of course that wouldn't have done any good, because it was what was *on* the discs that was important."

"But how did you know it was Clyde's disc on the bottom?"

Peattie looked more like an injured mouse than ever. "How could I possibly have known that?" he complained. "As a matter of fact, it probably *isn't* Clyde's record at all. I took a chance on the murderer being in this group, because I knew *he* wouldn't dare take a chance on its *not* being his record—didn't dare let it be played."

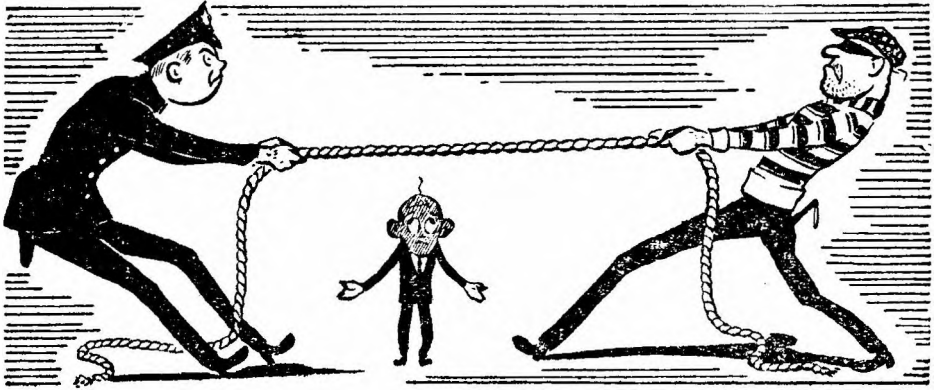
Peattie shook his head disconsolately. "It's very upsetting."

"I don't know why you should be upset. You did a nice job."

"Yes, yes—but where am I going to find another record stock this size in this town?"

(THE END)

Law and Disorder



FACTS AND FUN

By Wilcey Earle

He Had a Right to Know

A drunk staggered up to a cop in New York City and blabbered—"Where am I?"

The gendarme replied—"Broadway and 42d Street."

"Wise guy, eh?"—snapped the stew—"cut out the details—what city?"

It Certainly Was

The screwball stopped a stranger in the street and said—"My uncle is a great builder. He built a house that had 10,000 people living in it."

"Is that so?" replied the stranger, realizing it would be safer to soothe the wacky guy than run away—"I guess it must have been hard labor."

"Yeah," replied the nut—"it certainly was. When my uncle started—that's what the judge said!"

It Isn't Unusual

Didja hear about the movie actor who was arrested for stealing scenes?

He Was Labor-Minded

Then there was the robber who would only steal quarters. When he was asked why he stole such small

coins, he replied—"I believe in the Little Steal Formula."

Punishment Indeed

Henry Youngman, the comedian, practices on his violin an hour every day. He calls this session—"The Hour Of Torture."

His services are much in demand by the police because of this. Off-hand, you are probably wondering where the connection between Youngman's violin playing and the police is. Well, set your minds at ease. The following story is self-explanatory.

Henry was in the midst of one of those weird violin concertos when there came a sudden knock at his door. He opened it only to be roughly brushed aside by four cops lugging a man into the room, who looked like a desperado.

"Keep playing," barked one of the cops. Henry resumed his playing, which closely resembled a dozen screech owls having an argument.

The prisoner listened for five minutes, clapped his hands over his ears, rolled his eyes and pleaded with the gendarmes—"Take me away, take me away, I'll talk!"

Crimepourri

Quick quizzes—"Can you arrest a cross-eyed man—for looking crooked?" . . . At last reports, Tom Heenev, the New Zealand Rock From Down Under, who was kayoed by Gene Tunney in a sensational bid for the heavyweight tiara, was a cop in Miami Beach, Fla. . . . At the start of 1945, Joseph Francel, the executioner at Sing Sing faced a bleak financial year. There were only three people in the Death House. Lewis E. Lawes, former Warden of Sing Sing Prison, is such a firm opponent of capital punishment that during the executions in the Death House, when his presence was required, he would turn his back on the electric chair as a form of silent protest. . . . The late Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis, Baseball Czar, who passed on at the age of 81, was a grand character. When he sat on the bench, many a malefactor who was a victim of circumstances, received leniency, while the real, hard-beaten crooks received stiff terms behind the bars. . . . An Army pal of ours, home on furlough, excused his delay in keeping an appointment thusly—"I'm sorry I am late, but I was delayed by one of those civilian booby traps—a slot machine". . . . Thumbnailed Description of a Crook: He found things—before they were lost. He was also born in a fog. Everything he touched—was mist.

Larceny, Inc.

Two gentlemen who were sent away to prison because of their penchant for being found in warehouses with which they had no connections at all, late at night, were discussing their future, in a cell.

"What are you going to do when you get out?" asked the first convict.

"I'm going to be a bartender," was the reply. "This time, however, I'll stay on the right side of the law. I'm going to serve hooch, but it won't be the best—I'm telling you right now. In fact, it will be cut so much—it will be bleeding in the bottle. What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to stay on the right side of the law too," replied the second jail-bird, with a bit of a twinkle in his eye—"I'm going legitimate. As soon as I get out, I'm thinking of opening up a jewelry store—some night."

He Was Very Modern

The man was awakened in the middle of the night by a steady pounding on his door. He put on the electric light, donned his bathrobe and went to the door. There he saw an old friend who was highly agitated.

The friend said: "I'm in trouble. I need you." The man who had just been awakened said: "Is that so?"

"Yes," the friend replied: "Do you remember when you were indicted on a dope-smuggling charge, I got you off?"

"Yes," was the reply.

"And do you remember when you were tried on a murder rap? I fixed that up for you."

"Yes," was the rejoinder.

"And do you remember when you robbed the orphans and children and they wanted to lynch you, I saved you?"

"Sure I remember it," replied the man who had been awakened—"but what have you done for me lately?"

A Natural Reaction

Once a ball player, always a ball player.

A retired baseball player recently found employment in a cleaning and pressing establishment. The other day, his fellow workers decided to go out on strike and suddenly howled at him: "STRIKE."

The baseballer immediately whirled and thundered: "ROBBER!"

And What Was Wrong With His Answer

The prosecutor fired questions at the witness from all sides. But every time he asked a question, he was answered with a question. Finally, he stabbed an accusing finger at the man on the stand and roared: "Don't answer my questions with a question."

(Continued On Page 93)

THE CORPSE WANTS COMPANY



By Emil
Petaja

Mike Monkis goes on a grim journey with the man he has just rubbed out!

CRASHING chords filled the big Wilshire apartment with sound, as John Forrest's flaccid fingers struck the keyboard of his baby grand.

Forrest weighed upwards of two-hundred and fifty pounds, so his broad back in its rich silk dressing gown made a big target for Mike's gun.

Mike crept nearer, cat-like. His lean face was prison-pale, his bullet-grey eyes glittered with menace. Forrest's Beethoven Sonata was an incoherent blur to Mike's trick ears. Something had happened to them that time he got conked during a jail break.

"Reach, Harp!" he gritted.

The fat man winced, startled. Then he turned, slowly. His flabby jowls quivered when he saw the ugly-nosed rod and the one who held it.

"Hello, Morkis," he rattled, pushing up a scared smile. His white fingers kept on chording.

Mike gloated. Rubbing out John Forrest was a pleasure he had promised himself a million times those stinking years up at Sing Sing.

"Can the noise!" he growled. "And stand up, so's I can watch you fall, you dirty—"

"You can't get away with it, Morkis," Forrest said hoarsely. "Crime doesn't pay."

Mike laughed.

"It's paid you plenty good, Harp! Like when you planned the Louis job eight years ago. I did the dirty work—and got a ten-year stretch in Quentin for my pains! You wouldn't know who ratted, would you, Harp? Or what happened to the thirty grand?"

Suave, oily John Forrest, alias The Harp, began to get hold of himself. He'd been in tighter spots than this and got out of them. Mike was a chump, always would be.

"Then there's Alice—" Mike grated. "I understand you two got married. That makes one of the prize triple-cross deals of all time. You get all the dough, and my girl—after framing me where I can't do nothing about it! And now you blab that crime don't pay! Well, now comes the real pay-off!"

"**WAIT!**" whimpered the fat man in terror. He oozed off the piano stool and held out his hands.

"Stay where you are!" snarled Mike, his middle finger whitening over the gun trigger. Mike had lost the first digit of his trigger-finger in a fight years ago. That was how the cops nailed him.

Forrest shrugged.

"I was just going to play my Capehart. A new Beethoven sonata. Like Beethoven, Mike?"

Mike glanced at the big mahogany phonograph, then back.

"Can the baloney. Okay. Turn the juke box on. A little noise right now is okay. . ."

He watched the fat man pile eight sides of a piano sonata on the changer mechanism. Forrest plunked at that piano by the hour. Anybody hearing it would think he was still playing. It would give Mike time to make a clean getaway, cinch his alibi.

"Just curious, Mike—but why are you killing me? Revenge? Money?"

"Both, stupid!"

Forrest chuckled.

"Sorry to disappoint you, Mike. I never keep money in my apartment; just chicken feed. I do all my business by check. Just here in L. A.

temporarily. You know Alice and I live in New York. You won't find any money or valuables here; only a few dollars. It isn't worth it, Mike."

"You're lying!" That smooth gab of Harp's, trying to talk him out of it.

The fat man's eyes met his.

"No, Mike."

Mike wavered.

"You need money more than you do revenge, Mike," Forrest said, daubing his beaded forehead with a silk handkerchief. "Suppose I make it worth your while—"

The phonograph thundered loudly. For a few seconds Mike scowled at it, considering the offer. He did need money—bad.

In those seconds Forrest saw his indecision, and made a wild dash behind a heavy velvet drapery.

Snarling, Mike let him have it.

The music welled up and covered the noise beautifully. Things were working Mike's way for a change. That bloody gurgle the fat man made was his swan song.

MIKE chain-smoked and paced his crumby flop-house room. He cussed steadily under his breath.

Forrest had told the truth. A quick, practiced casing of his swanky joint had netted him less than ten dollars.

He sat down on his creaky bed and picked up last night's *Record*. After three days on the Forrest case the cops had practically admitted defeat.

That phonograph alibi was the nuts. It had taken Mike less than five minutes to strike out for an Alvarado Street pool room, and slip in the back way, where he had slipped out twenty minutes before. Nobody had missed him. And that fancy machine would shut itself off after finishing the music, so they'd never know exactly when Forrest had died.

Mike spent a few minutes preening, then started cursing again. That ten-spot was gone with the vind, and he had to get back to New York. He wanted to see Alice. Besides, they might nab him for jumping parole.

His trick ears buzzed. It was as if a voice was mocking him, inside his

head, "You need money more than you need revenge, Mike!"

And Alice had it. She was a widow, now—and she always had been soft on Mike. The only thing about John Forrest that she really cared about was his money. Alice was smart. Money ran love a close second with her. But with Mike she was a push-over. . . .

"I gotta get to New York!" he gritted.

He crushed out his last fag, pulled on his black topcoat, and checked out. Mike travelled light.

MIKE stroked his bruised knuckles as he stepped through the mob at Union Depot. He had the money for a ticket in his pocket. It wasn't so hard. The guy didn't like giving up his wallet, so Mike had had to put on a little pressure in that dark alleyway just off Los Angeles street. But he got it.

"Gimme a ticket to New York," he told the girl, after waiting in line twenty minutes. "When does the next train leave?"

The gum-chewing blonde looked.

"Let's see—at midnight, exactly."

Mike pushed over the dough. The blonde giggled.

"Are you kidding, mister? All reservations East must be purchased two weeks in advance!"

"Listen, sister—I gotta get to New York!"

"Sorry. Unless you happen to be Mr Kaiser!"

Mike swore under his breath, and went out to the big patio for a cigarette. He *had* to be on that midnight train!

Near him two men were talking. One was chubby and excitable; the other tall and sad-looking.

"You understand, Mr Logan, that this is merely a formality?" the tall one asked.

"Sure, sure!" the chubby one tittered. "I don't much like the idea, but I've got to get a seat on that midnight train. My wife—"

The tall guy was bored.

"I understand. Well, here's the ticket."

"It's registered under my name?" Logan asked as he pocketed it.

"That wasn't necessary," the tall one said impatiently. "Don't worry. All you have to do is board that midnight train."

Mike's eyes gloated over the large envelope.

"I certainly will. Oh-oh!" The chubby guy glanced at the clock in alarm. It was 11.35. "I've got to hurry down to First and Main, and not a cab in sight. I'll have to walk!"

Mike followed close behind. Then, at a gloomy alley mouth, he snatched the chubby guy into the darkness. A length of pipe in his handkerchief did the dirty work. The chubby guy crumpled. He was dead.

Mike's hand groped, found the long envelope, tore it open and reassured himself that it did have a railroad ticket in it. He tossed the envelope aside carelessly and slipped the ticket in his pocket.

He reached the Union Depot with minutes to spare.

THE MIDNIGHT CHIEF hurried past orange groves, vineyards, Joshua trees on the desert—then out of California.

Mike stretched out luxuriously in his chair-car seat. Not a bad night's work, he congratulated himself. He now had over a hundred bucks, besides the train ticket. Enough to put up a front with Alice.

"Ticket?" the conductor asked.

Mike pulled it out of his pocket. Something fluttered to the floor. The conductor tore a piece off his ticket, then picked the card up.

"You dropped this," he said, grinning oddly.

Mike frowned at it.

"Keiwin and March. *Funeral Directors*. 'The Service Supreme,'" he read.

He shrugged and flicked it on the floor again. As he did so he noticed that the woman across from him was watching him closely. She wore a mannish grey suit, had straight iron-grey hair, and biting eagle-eyes.

Her hard look annoyed him. He gave her back a slitted stare which he hoped would make her blush. It didn't phase her.

The conductor came back, still wearing that silly grin.

"Say," he said. "I think you forgot to give me the ticket."

"I just gave it to you!" Mike snapped.

The conductor grinned slyly.

"Sure, but—" he got confidential, "I mean *his!*" He winked.

"His?"

"Yeah. You know!"

MIKE thought fast. So there were two of them on this job, whatever it was. Maybe the tall sad-eyed guy forgot to give the other joe his ticket. But there had been only one ticket in that envelope. Well, he'd better be plenty careful what he said. . . .

"I thought they took care of it in L. A.," he said gruffly. "Hasn't he got his own ticket?"

The conductor laughed outright.

"That's a hot one! Well, I'll go ask about it. I'm new on things like this."

He moved down the aisle, waddling like a grotesque duck. Mike watched, scowling uneasily; he didn't like this.

After a while he dozed off.

His trick eardrums heard blurred voices that seemed to be half-dream and half-real.

"—the cops okayed it in L. A.," one voice said.

"John Forrest, eh?"

The voices were right over his head now.

"Is this him?"

"Yeah."

A woman's whisper intruded.

"*Shh.* He's asleep. The ticket's all taken care of. I can't understand why they did it this way, but I'm just following up."

"Sure. We understand."

"Better not talk about it any more."

"Okay, lady. No use rubbing it in, eh?"

"Right. They'll pick him up in New York. . . ."

The voices melted away. . . .

MIKE'S brain churned feverishly. What the hell did all this mean, anyway?

The cops okayed it. Okayed what? Okayed Mike's leaving the city, of course!

John Forrest. I'm following up. Pick him up in New York. . . .

That added up to only one thing. They were on to him! They had found out some way that he had rubbed out John Forrest and they were playing some kind of a game to make him give himself away. Then they would nab him in New York!

His hand shook as he mopped his forehead with a handkerchief. Funny. Mike had nerves like steel. That was because he had no conscience, they used to say.

His eardrums created a terrible roaring inside his head, like Niagara. It made it hard to think straight. But he *had* to think! He had to figure this out—find out just how much they knew, and whether he ought to stick to the train all the way to New York, or take it on the lam at the next stop.

How did they trace him? Fingerprints? But he didn't touch anything that would take prints, except—

He sweated, remembering.

There was one thing. Just as he was crawling out that back window onto the fire-escape, the phonograph started acting up. It had caught in one groove, and played one note over and over, like a police siren.

Forrest had nicked it while he was fussing with the machine, to trap him. But luckily, it reached that part before he left, and he ran back and fixed it.

And he must have left fingerprints on the phonograph! That missing index finger again! That one chunk of evidence could send him to the chair—

Mike licked his dry lips.

That hawk-eyed dame. She was watching him again. It was her voice! Those icy eyes seemed to stare right into his mind. She looked like a lady copper.

Of course! That was it! She was a lady copper. They had women coppers these days. She was detailed to watch him, and that big black bag she held on her lap probably had a rod in it.

AT THE next stop, he decided to take it on the lam. He sauntered casually out onto the depot platform. Then he bumped into the conductor. "Better take your seat," he ad-

vised. "They're apt to think you left and sell it again. Lots of people wanting to travel these days, that can't."

He nodded at somebody behind Mike. It looked significant. The two conductors watched him climb back aboard, exchanging knowing smiles.

He tried again at the next station.

This time old eagle-eyes stopped him. He was slinking toward the depot when he felt her tap his shoulder.

"Pardon me," she coughed. "I'd like to ask you something."

Mike sucked in his breath. That tap on the shoulder. It was a copper's trade mark.

"What dya wanna know?" he asked hoarsely.

"Did you know John Forrest well?"

Mike's trick cardrums started acting up. He stared at her, gulping.

"No! Never met the guy!"

She nodded.

"I understand. It was just another job for you." Her firm lips cracked in a wintry smile. "Too bad. He was a fine man. Loved music. Had a wonderful record collection. He played the piano, you know."

Mike's seething mind conjured up the vision of those flabby fingers moving up and down the keyboard.

"Yeah, I know," he said huskily. Then, to cover up, "Guess everybody knew that. He was pretty good."

She nodded, her eyes watching him curiously.

Just another job. . .

He couldn't stand much more of this baiting. His nerves were tangled up into knots. His ears roared.

Why didn't she get it over with? Why didn't she call those two cops over, who were lounging warily against a baggage truck, watching the crowd idly?

"Why are ya asking all these questions?" he hissed.

"Just curious," she said softly. "I'm Laura Tilson. I was John Forrest's secretary before—before I took my present job. He hardly made a move

without me. Understand now?"

Mike did. His face twisted into a grimace of defeat as she took his arm, when the conductor yelled, "All aboard!"

THE wheels of the train spun on.

Now they were nearly at their destination.

Mike's eyes had black circles around them from no sleep. His fingers and toes felt all numb. His mind kept roaring on in a monotonous pattern. . .

Laura Tilson, eh? She used to be John Forrest's secretary—before she took her present job. Yeah. Her present job as a slimy copper!

Naturally she was curious about Forrest's killer. She probably suspected that her boss was connected with unsavory activities, being his secretary. And maybe she liked the guy. He had probably paid her plenty. So now she was doubly glad to pin the rap on his killer!

But *why* were they letting him go all the way to New York? There was one possible answer. *Somebody* in New York was going to identify him—somebody who knew that Mike hated Forrest's guts, and that he had recently been paroled from Sing Sing.

Who? There was only one answer to that, too.

Alice. . .

When she found out her husband was murdered, she told the cops who to trail. And when he arrived there she would be waiting with them—waiting to send him to the hot seat.

Alice had betrayed him. She who had once promised to stick by him forever. . .

Somebody woke him from his harassing nightmare by shaking his arm. He blinked up at a spindly guy with glasses and grinning teeth.

"Sorry to bother you, old man—but I'm on the *Bugle*. I heard about you, and I'd like to get your angle on this Forrest deal. Inhuman interest stuff, eh?" He poked Mike's ribs playfully.

WATCH FOR "Red Letter Night" by Emil Fetsja

COMING SOON!

Mike shot to his feet.

"Get the hell away from me!" he snarled. His mind was a thundering maelstrom of confusion.

"Okay, okay. Sorry." The toothy reporter backed away hastily.

So Mike didn't get any sleep. He watched the telephone poles blur by, and the metropolis sprout. Mingled with the waterfall noise his eardrums made, ghost-voices tortured him:—

The cops okayed it in L. A. This is the fellow. No use rubbing it in. Pick him up in New York. He played the piano, you know. Just another job. Inhuman interest stuff. John Forrest.. Forrest. . .

And a sinister whisper that brought out cold sweat on Mike's forehead:—

"You can't get away with it. . . Crime doesn't pay. . ."

THE tunnel reached its terminus, and the train drew in line with all the others at Grand Central Station. There was a confused bustle, as everybody started crowding the aisle.

Laura Tilson yawned, her hawk-eyes meeting Mike's.

"You might as well come along with me, young man," she said matter-of-factly. "I'll make the final arrangements." She added something about ". . . if they had known. . . All this unnecessary. . ."

Mike's thundering eardrums missed most of it. .

He thought wildly of making a run for it. But her sharp eyes were on him. The aisle was crowded. And she had that ominously big black bag handy. . .

He moved ahead mechanically, his muscles strained and weak. She grabbed his arm. She had a domineering way about her. She would. A lady copper would.

They threaded through the crowd, and she led him to a small baggage room. There were four people standing in it, around an oblong box. It looked like a boxed coffin!

The three men were coppers. The woman was dressed in black. She wore a black veil, too.

Mike's trapped eyes stared across the room at the woman in black.

Then he recognized her.

"Mike," she whispered huskily. Her face, under the black veil, was like chiselled marble.

"Alice!" he cried hoarsely.

This was it!

The roaring inside his head reached a fiendish pitch. Then something in him, pent up those days on the train, snapped.

"You told them!" he screamed. "You helped them set this trap for me! The fingerprints on the machine weren't enough, but what you knew convinced them that I killed him!"

HE DREW back, his hand reaching for the rod hidden under his coat. His brain was a tormented chaos. All he could see was Alice's white face, her staring eyes.

"No, Mike! No!" she cried.

Snarling, he covered her with his gun. His finger loosed hot death.

But one of the cops shot first.

Mike's bullet hit the ceiling as he sagged to his knees. Sharp pain racked his chest. Coughing, he half-rose, took two wild steps toward Alice, then fell face down over the coffin. . .

Alice sobbed into a black-lace handkerchief.

"I loved him. . ." she babbled.

Cop Clancey tipped back his cap, and rubbed his lean jaw briskly. "I don't get this at all," he said. "The guy apparently killed Forrest, all right. But the L. A. cops had nothing at all on him. Neither did we. I'm just here to check about the delivery of John Forrest's body to his widow!"

Laura Tilson watched them carry the dead killer out, grim-lipped.

"He didn't know," she said stonily. "He thought we were all baiting him. . ."

"What'd you mean by that?" Clancey frowned.

"Just this—he must have found or stolen that train ticket somewhere. And he obviously didn't know that Kelwin and March Funeral Directors had given it to the man who was to accompany the body of John Forrest to New York!"

(THE END)

THE PHEASANT DIED TWICE

By Cliff
Campbell



Nothing made sense in this case, except the ceaseless rain of bullets aimed at Pat Donnegan and this AWOL soldier who came to him with a fantastic story!

like I said, Mr. Donnegan, everything was all right until the guy socked the pheasant in—”

“In the caboose,” Donnegan nodded his heavy head of red hair. Then abruptly and harshly, “And why should any-

one take a sock at a pheasant? Let’s make sense.”

The soldier drew a long breath. “I told you, Mr. Donnegan, that if I hadn’t seen this man take a sock at the pheasant I wouldn’t have been shot at and chased all the way over here.”

“You were chased to this office?”

“Yes sir!” the soldier said vehemently. “And right into this building, too, sir.”

“EVERYTHING was all right until the guy socked the pheasant in the caboose,” the soldier said. “And then the shooting started.”

“Now take it easy,” Pat Donnegan broke in, “and let’s start all over again just for the hell of it—like making sense.”

The soldier twisted his cap in his hands and drew a hurried sleeve across his perspiring brow. “It’s just

"Dammit! Stop saying 'sir' to me. Let's see your pass papers from camp."

The soldier shuffled his feet uncomfortably. "I—I haven't any, sir—er—Mr. Donnegan."

Donnegan's blue eyes blazed and his heavy shoulders came upright from the back of the chair. "You're AWOL—and you come to me?"

"Yes sir, but—"

"Forget the 'sir' and the 'Mr. Donnegan'. Why did you come to me? I'm only a private dick. I work for peanuts."

"I can't even pay you that, si—Mike. I just know that you're a vet from the last war and have helped a lotta guys outta jams in this one. You're rated an okay guy."

"Fine—fine. I'm a sap for a G. I. in trouble. But not for you kid. You made your own trouble—being absent without official leave, and then coming to me with a tall tale of shooting. I'm a good guy, but I'm not a chump for—"

IT WAS then that the glass in the outer office door shattered and a heavy object thumped against the floor. Donnegan was out of his chair and in two leaps had opened the private office door. Amid the glass fragments was a revolver with a small piece of paper tied tightly about it.

Donnegan disregarded it, opened the door and went plunging down the hallway like a fullback bent on making the final five yards to goal. One elevator just had closed its door and red "Down" light blinked out.

Donnegan started running down the winding stairs. There might be a chance of meeting the outgoing passengers in the lobby. It simply depended on how many stops the elevator made on the way down. . .

He was out of breath, panting like a spent horse, when he reached the ornate lobby. The revolving doors were spinning and released elevator passengers streaming into the street.

Trotting, Donnegan followed them. There were many, and no passenger looked too suspicious at first glance.

Then Donnegan saw him—Donald

Toole, the Brooklyn hood—start cutting across the street. He was walking fast, his head bent against the wind, pulling his topcoat close across his chest and over his ears.

A black sedan swung out from the curb, and Donnegan started running. It was a pick-up car. Of that Donnegan was sure, especially when it cut directly in front of him and started to swerve across the street to reach Toole.

It did not reach Toole in the manner that Donnegan had expected. It hit him directly amidships; the left rear wheel crossed over his body, the car gathered speed—and turned with the light, vanished around the corner of the building.

Donnegan had a brief glance at the occupants, and his acute mind automatically registered the license plate of the sedan.

Pedestrians were screaming and others, more bold, were approaching the inert form of Toole.

Donnegan went forward on reluctant feet. Toole's fedora hat had rolled from his head and lay near his right shoulder. It was an ordinary hat in many respects, save that the interior and the hairs on Toole's head were covered with feathers—a grayish-black type—like a pheasant's.

DONNEGAN took a deep breath, and retraced his path directly into the building, his brow furrowed in concentration.

He entered the door with the shattered pane, picked up the revolver from the floor and, holding it in his hand, went through to his private office.

The soldier was still there, his back turned, looking out of the window and down at the street.

There was a rubber band holding the torn piece of newspaper to the revolver.

Donnegan snapped the band, unwound the paper, and found nothing upon it. It was just the top half of the front page of *The World-Herald*.

The revolver was empty, but the smell of cordite indicated that it had been fired recently.

Still carrying the gun flat in the

palm of his hand, Donnegan crossed silently to the soldier's side and looked down at the crowd ringing about the prostrate Toole. The wail of a siren sounded in the distance, coming fast.

The soldier had stopped perspiring and was deathly pale. When Donnegan spoke, he started and whirled about, his eyes wary.

"Know him?" Donnegan nodded, inclining his head at the street scene below.

"Yes—I know him." The soldier's voice was an expressionless monotone.

"Who?"

"He was the guy that socked the pheasant and shot at me when he saw me watching from a window across the courtyard in the Brooklyn apartment. But why—why did an auto run him down? I was up here, watching. I saw it all. That auto was waiting for him to come out of your building. Do you think the men in it thought he was a pal of mine?"

Donnegan shook his head. "Son, I don't know what to think. This don't make sense."

"That's what I was thinking myself, sir—er—Mike."

Donnegan had been studying the torn half of the newspaper, trying to concentrate. Abruptly he straightened. Letters were circled in various headlines—a round circle with a numeral in the upper right-hand corner of the circle.

The numbers ran from 1 to 35—a simple code.

Donnegan seated himself at his desk and his pencil traced the numerals by successive numbers. The thirty-five letters, made on a scratchpad, read: *Donnegan lay off or die turn gertomps.*

THE SOLDIER moved in close and peered over Donnegan's shoulder. "For a guy in the cryptograph section of the Air Corps that's simple," he said.

"I'm not in cryptograph or the Air Corps," Donnegan snapped. "But I've got it, too, and it's not simple. It reads 'Donnegan lay off or die turn

G I over to M P's.' Why did he want you turned over to the M. P's?"

"I don't know. I never saw him before. And I didn't think anyone but you knew that I was AWOL."

"Still," Donnegan mused. "He smashed my door glass to give me this warning—and then got run down by a car—maybe just because he delivered it. Just how hot are you, kid?"

The soldier looked startled. "I'm not—er—hot. I never committed a crime in my life. I was just looking for Frannie when I happened to glance from her apartment to across the apartment courtyard—and here was this guy taking a sock at—

"The pheasant," Donnegan added. Then abruptly. "Who was Frannie?"

"My girl before I went into the Army," the soldier said simply. "Only I found out in her apartment that she had moved."

"What!" Donnegan howled. "You broke into a strange apartment looking for a missing girl, and while in there you saw a man across the courtyard sock a pheasant and shoot at you?"

"Yes si—er—Mike. That's it. That's all of it. All in a nutshell. Only did I mention that the pheasant was stuffed?"

"You didn't have to," Donnegan barked. "What would a live pheasant be doing in a Brooklyn apartment?"

"I dunno; but for that matter why should a stuffed one be there? You don't kill pheasants in Brooklyn and then have them stuffed as trophies."

Donnegan banged his big fist against the desktop. "I was just thinking about that myself. Let us go take a look at the pheasant that the guy banged on the caboose. Guys don't go around banging them and then shooting at strangers if they haven't some reason."

"Let us!" the soldier said, sobbing. "I don't want no more of that place. I just want to find Frannie."

"Listen, finding Frannie is not important."

"The hell it isn't, that is all important."

"The only important thing now, kid, is to get you out of this jam."

"I'm in no jam."

"Not much. You're just AWOL, and broke into and entered an apartment and got involved in a shooting."

"Well, that isn't so serious."

DONNEGAN PUT his feet on the desk. "Kid, take a look out of the window. I'll bet you that a morgue wagon and not an ambulance is taking that guy away."

The soldier went unsteadily across the office and looked out of the window.

He returned, pale-faced, to the desk. "Mike, you're right. The mugs in that car killed the man. It's the morgue, all right."

Donnegan got up, his face grim. He released the safety on the automatic under his armpit, shoved five cartridges into the orphan revolver, and started to hand it to the soldier. At the last moment, as the soldier's hand was reaching for it, Donnegan thought again and dropped it into the pocket of his topcoat.

"Can you shoot?" said Donnegan. "Certainly."

"Well be ready for a quick catch." "Why?"

"This pheasant thing adds up to something—but I'm not trusting myself with an AWOL and a funny story with a gun to prove it. I'm a soft-hearted guy for a G. I., but I'm not a damned fool. I'll carry the guns, and you just string along."

The soldier looked downcast. "Hellamighty, Mike, I don't want to go back there again without a gun."

Donnegan's eyes were slits. "You know I said that at times I worked for peanuts—and this time was once when you didn't even have the peanuts. Well, you had better prove this phony tale—and come out with all the truth—or I won't be playing for peanuts."

"Whadda mean, Mike?"

"Just that a G. I.'s hide at this time is worth more than peanuts."

The soldier braced himself. "Even after all this, you don't believe me? Is that it?"

"That's it," Donnegan said. "We're grabbing a taxi for Brooklyn."

ENROUTE THE soldier said: "Mike, what do you make of this? Is it two gangs fighting? And what over? And what has the pheasant to do with it? And why did the man who was killed try to kill me?"

Donnegan looked moodily out of the window and said: "I can't answer any of those questions, kid. You just look out for the M. P.'s. You're hot—both here—and militarily."

The soldier ducked low in the cab seat. "You're a good guy, Mike."

"I'm a softy for a soldier in trouble."

"You're not so soft."

"Well, I hope not," Donnegan said grimly, "but you'd better be right about this, kid!"

The soldier hesitated, then said: "Mike, I don't care about all this. All I wanted to do was find Frannie."

"That's what we are looking for, kid," Donnegan mumbled. "I have a hunch that when we find out about the pheasant we'll find out about Frannie."

"Aw, she wouldn't have anything to do with a gang who killed a man. She's a nice girl, a very nice girl."

"Nice girls knock off people at times," said Donnegan, "and just for the hell of it."

"No. She wouldn't be in a thing like this. She's nice, Mike—very, very nice."

"So was Eve. Only she ate apples. Adam didn't like apples. The whole human race hasn't liked apples since."

"No, Mike, no. She's nice. You don't know Frannie."

Donnegan looked at the kid. He had belief and sincerity and trustfulness in his eyes—the crazy kid. And there was guts there and loyalty and faith—like a kid in love.

"Okay, just okay, kid," Donnegan said hoarsely, "we'll find Frannie."

"Jeest, Mike," the kid said thankfully, "that's swell!"

Donnegan looked again at the kid, then out of the window. "Sure it's swell, kid, sure. Swell—just swell—I hope."

IT LOOKED like a soft touch when they arrived in Brooklyn. The soldier pointed out the apart-

ment house, and they entered through the rear entrance.

The soldier led the way to the third floor, then pointed to a broken window across the courtyard.

"I was standing there," he said, "when the shots came from this apartment." He gestured with his thumb to A-3.

Donnegan cautiously tried the knob and pushed gently against the door. It swung open like the Angel Gabriel had blown his horn.

The finger of trepidation raced up and down Donnegan's spine like a forewarning of impending doom. This was too easy. Shots had been fired from this apartment, presumably across the courtyard, but no tenant had seen fit to report the shooting. There were no police, no spectators, and the broken window across the way obviously had been broken by slugs. That bore out the soldier's story, to a certain extent, but the whole set-up was wrong.

It narrowed down to the fact—simply and concisely—that everything was too easy.

Gun in hand, Donnegan moved into the hallway and then into the living room.

Upon the mantelpiece above the fireplace a bird stood on two pigeon-toed legs. It was a pheasant—an ugly sort of gray-black, with only flamboyant colors showing on the tips of its tail feathers—and, under those feathers was a ripped hole at least twelve inches in diameter.

The apartment was deserted. Donnegan shoulder-holstered his gun and reached for the pheasant. He drew it down from its inanimate perch and plunged his hand under the tail feathers. There were narrow bones, held together by harder glue, a stomach and breast cavity—but nothing else.

Donnegan pushed the pheasant above his head, feeling with searching fingers of his right hand. He was helpless, a man who had to make a right-handed draw from a left-shouldered holster.

As he thought of it later, he must have looked ridiculous. There he was, holding a stuffed bird aloft and mak-

ing it revolve with every movement of his hands. The soldier stood near the aperture of the living room and hallway, watching with nervous interest.

"Just drop it, pal," the soft voice said from the door leading to the bedroom. "Whatever it is you're looking for, it isn't there."

DONNEGAN turned slowly. The swarthy man, hatless and coatless, was grinning toothily at him. The gun in his hand was not. It was like a black and round eye, ominous and threatening, and too steady. It was dead-center and staying on target, which was right on Donnegan's heart.

Donnegan estimated distances. The soldier still in the hallway, was not in line of fire. It was odds-on that the swarthy man did not know of his presence. But still he was not of any help in this predicament. . . .

"Put it down on the floor and pass the bird to me," the swarthy man said. "Just kick it across the floor. Then get your right hand high again. Never lower the left."

Donnegan bent forward with slow caution. This was a tough spot, with a left hand high in the air and a slowly-descending right hand rendered totally inadequate by an overstuffed bird—it made a quick draw as entirely impossible as though his hand had been covered by a half-dozen boxing gloves. Donnegan placed the bird on its spindly-legged pedestal on the floor and said: "If what I'm looking for isn't there, why do you want it?"

The toothy grin became broader: "Just because it's a pheasant, pal. It's valuable. Just kick it across the floor—and we'll be pals while I vamoose and you just keep them up high."

Donnegan's toe moved out and propelled the broken specimen across the room. He was cursing himself for a fool, being caught in such a ludicrous and futile position when it happened.

"Duck!" the soldier yelled.

Donnegan fell flat on his face.

The machine gun across the courtyard cut across the walls, chopping

them and making splinters fly, until it moved to the bedroom doorway and shot the pheasant to bits and ate itself across the swarthy smile of the man in the doorway.

In the silence that followed there was the stifling smell of plaster dust and the wet odor of a riddled body.

"Toss the gun," the soldier said from behind his protection of the wall. "Toss it! I told you this place was a shooting gallery."

"To hell with you—you AWOL," Donnegan said hoarsely. "I'm not giving you a gun. You seem to know too much about this."

He started to squirm his way across the floor.

"Roll to the wall quick!" the soldier said.

Donnegan rolled, the gun in his pocket and the shoulder holster making thumping sounds.

THE MACHINE gun cut loose again, first high across the room, and then making wooden chips fly from the window sill near the wall under which Donnegan crouched as the gunner fought the up-pull and tugged it firmly down. The carpet jolted, its ridges making holes as it rolled—and slugs again knocked the pheasant from its prone to an upright position.

It stood there tottering, wide-eyed and innocent, rocking on its narrow in-turned legs.

It seemed to say: *What the hell, I've been killed once. A few more blasts can't harm me.*

Donnegan, from his prone position, looked at the pheasant. How could an inanimate thing cause such a holocaust? There was nothing in it. His searching fingers had told him that. Still it was the cause of machine gun fire and a second death.

About one hundred and ten rounds went out—and then the tommy gun stilled.

Donnegan went rapidly across the floor, hugging close to the wall, until he made the turn into the hallway. There he stood upright to face the soldier. The soldier seemed calmer now, some of his paleness gone.

"I understand this kind of busi-

ness," he said. "This is my kind of business—guns and bullets. I want to take a hand. Give me that revolver."

Donnegan said: "How much guts, kid?"

"Enough?" the soldier said from deep in his chest. "You remember all I was doing when this thing started was looking for Frannie."

"Enough guts to go into that apartment where the tommy went off?" Donnegan asked.

"Sure. Why not?"

Donnegan, stony-faced, passed over the revolver. "Trigger twice, kid," he said. "She's only holding five. The hammer's first drop is strictly one for Sweeney."

"The second drop," the soldier said, "is strictly for sure."

Donnegan stared at the soldier. "We used to have an expression after a buddy was killed and we had a Heinie in our sights that 'This is for sure.' Is that what you mean?"

The soldier's face hardened. "I came to you today for help. You did okay in the last war. Do you guys think you got a patent on 'This is for Sure,' or do you think we're fooling in this one? I've said that a lot of times in this one—and I meant it every time. We going into that apartment?"

DONNEGAN drew a long breath. This was something entirely different than the soldier he had first seen in his office. The kid seemed keen-eyed, on-his-toes, and dangerous. And he knew how to handle a gun. He had triggered once, muzzle down, against the floor. Now there was a cartridge under the hammer.

They went out the door and into the hallway. It was strangely deserted. There were no curious heads poking from partly-opened doorways, no frightened faces—nothing to denote that a machine gun had emptied a drum twice—sufficient racket in itself to raise the dead.

The heel of Donnegan's boot kicked open two apartment doors. Both apartments were deserted.

They went down under the area-way, crossing under the corridor, and into the adjoining apartments.

Guns in hand they cautiously approached the third floor.

Donnegan was in the lead. He felt the pain in his shoulder just before hearing the sharp bark of the automatic. It was triggered three times as he threw himself backwards around the bend.

The soldier put a nonchalant hand through a hole in the sleeve of his coat.

"Nice shooting, considering it came from an angle," he said almost conversationally. "How about you, Mike?"

Donnegan drew his right hand away from his shoulder, and it came away crimson-stained.

"Hurt much?" the kid asked.

"You know damn well it doesn't yet," Donnegan growled. "The nerves are still shocked. But it's going to—and soon."

The soldier considered that, and said: "I was sorta figuring on that. We got to move in fast and get these mugs—but I don't know why we're shooting at them or they're shooting at us. But they're also saying: 'And this is for sure.' Anybody can see that whoever they are they ain't just shooting for peanuts."

"I'll go in low," Donnegan said, "and you cover that door with fire until I reach it."

The soldier shook his head. "I know this apartment house. Frannie used to live in the apartment that

the men are in now. A flanking attack seems to be in order, through connecting rooms. I know how to get to them. If you hear shooting come in low and quick—straight for the door."

He backed to a door to the right, twisted the knob and the door swung open.

"Listen, kid," Donnegan said. "I'm boss here and you'll do as I say and—"

The door slammed shut—loudly—and Donnegan cursed himself again. These apartments, too—save for the one that had become a shooting gallery—were unoccupied. For possibly an entire double wing of an apartment house to be vacant save for two apartments that fronted upon each other suggested only six things.

And that was: First, an immense sum of money being involved; secondly, one party wanted the privacy and the opportunity to watch all actions of the second; thirdly, only a realtor could achieve such a situation; fourth, the realtor was aligned with killers, and, fifth, the soldier, simply looking for his girl, had set off the fireworks.

The sixth contingency was far more ominous: The girl, Frannie, was involved.

Pain through Donnegan's shoulder rocked him with sudden intensity.

But only one thought was uppermost in his mind:

If a G. I. thought enough of a girl

Mustang Marshall encounters a hidden opponent, whose craft is more deadly than bullets!

RAINBOW TRAIL

By **Cliff Campbell**

IS IN THE SUMMER

COMPLETE COWBOY



to go AWOL just to see her, he shouldn't ever discover that she was hooked up in anything as dirty as this seemed to be. The kid had enough troubles and eventually would have many more. There was no sense in piling more of them on at this time.

He abruptly wheeled and entered through the door through which the kid had disappeared.

There were three doors all open and connecting and all engulfed in an atmosphere of silence.

Rocking with pain, Donnegan went forward, slowly, like a wary man on point in the infantry. The blast might come from any direction. . .

It was in the fourth room that he found the kid's overseas cap, the revolver and the blood.

The apartment was furnished and looked comfortable enough save for the bullet-shattered window.

A trail of smeared blood drops led directly across the carpet, as if a bleeding body had been pulled over it, and through the far door leading to a bedroom.

DONNEGAN went far to the left of the door and approached it from the protection of the inner wall. When he touched the knob and turned it the slug smashed through the door where his chest should have been had he been standing directly before it.

Again it was the sharp bark of an automatic, possibly a .45.

Donnegan calculated rapidly. Obviously there was no ammunition for the machine gun. The assassin had fired two drums, meaning that he had had to carry one extra. It was doubtful, for a man relying on a machine gun, to carry extra rounds of ordinary cartridges. The usual .45 carried only six rounds, and four had been fired. Two were left. . . two on which to gamble a kid's life . . . two on which to make a dead pheasant talk. . .

The pheasant. . . the pheasant. . . the words started to chant like a dirge through Donnegan's brain. The answer to the problem wasn't here

but lay somewhere with that shot-to-hell stuffed pheasant. . .

He fired at the lock on the door and drew back along the wall before the high return shot sounded. Then, taking a chance on the kid's life, he fired twice in rapid succession at the lock. The door gave and swung back on its hinges.

The shot came whistling on a low angle where a man's body diving at the door ordinarily would be. Donnegan stepped brazenly from behind the protection of the wall and kicked the door open.

The kid was in the middle of the floor. Blood oozed from his head from a scalp cut. Possibly there was a concussion, but that was immaterial now. He hadn't been shot but struck down by a blow on the head.

What was important was the closing door leading to the hallway.

Donnegan reversed his route until he was directly in the hallway whence he had come. Below him on the stairway leading to the adjoining apartment the swift beating of frantic feet sounded.

Grinning wryly, Donnegan trotted on tiptoe in pursuit. He could hear the feet beating faster and faster in absolute flight.

They died out at the apartment of the pheasant. Donnegan's did not die out. Pain racking his shoulder with each jouncing step he drove his legs forward and threw his firm shoulder against the door.

It shattered, fell from its upper hinge, and Donnegan tumbled through the narrow opening.

The belated shots at the door were surprising. He would have vowed—from the frantic movements of the man alone—that he was unarmed.

He kept rolling as he struck the floor and instinctively and automatically fired twice in the direction from which the shots had come.

There was a gurgling cry, quickly throttled off, and the loud thump of an inert body falling.

Donnegan rose warily but quickly. One man was frantically digging at the riddled pheasant. A nattily dressed man, who had fallen for-

ward, lay with a hat over his face flat against the rug. A wisp of smoke still curled from the small revolver that was inches from his outflung right hand.

"Let's stop it," Donnegan rasped at the coatless man tugging at the bedraggled pheasant. "Do you want to be shot too?"

The man turned, his heavy shoulders seeming to swing under the lash of a whip. His jowls were wobbling and his eyes set in a desperate stare.

"Don't shoot!" he whimpered. "Don't shoot! I haven't any gun. I haven't hurt anybody. I never hurt anybody. You—you see, I haven't any gun. You can have the Plebe. It's—it's worth a million bucks cold cash even cut up. Can't we make a deal? You—you see I haven't any gun. I—I'm a right guy."

Donnegan looked at him with contempt. He knew the gibbering coward—Rocco, a tough guy, a bad guy, when he had a gun in his hand.

"You punks are all the same," Donnegan rasped. "Catch you in a tight spot and you beg for mercy. Why didn't you count my shots, Rocco? There's been five—there's only one left."

"Awh!" the growl that came from Rocco was the inaudible throating of an animal that had had a last-minute reprieve. One shot—only one—

why almost anyone could gamble on that. . .

"But it's going to be for sure," Donnegan said.

"Sure—sure," Rocco said, almost calmly. His eyes had grown crafty.

"Start talking." Donnegan thought that he knew the answers, but verification solved many loose ends.

"Well, it was this way," Rocco said from the side of his mouth. He jerked a thumb at the corpse on the floor. "That's Jim Arnold you plugged. He was strictly legit. Owned a lot of property and night-clubs. Only he got in some trouble someway about taxes. He was caught with the shorts."

"He owned this building?"

ROCOCCO was sidling forward. "Sure. He got everybody right out of here just so Toole and me and Toothy could watch this apartment. We been watching it for three days now. We knew somebody would have to come for the Plebe diamond. And we was sure that it was here."

"Why?"

Rocco's big shoulders were starting to sway and Donnegan noticed the tenseness of his legs, like a tiger ready to spring.

"Well, there was a dame—Fannie something or other—that was running around with a slick diamond heister named Gilbert who lived here.

TEN COMPLETE WESTERN STORIES

"The Great Marpane"

By T. W. FORD

"Funeral O'Neill's Trigger Trap"

By LEE FLOREN

In the Fall Issue of

FAMOUS WESTERN

She was in love with some mug who's been overseas about three years. She wanted to have a little stake when he came back. She and this Gilbert were strictly business partners. But they were partners in the society heist racket."

"Were—did you say 'were'?" Donnegan said ominously.

"Sure, pal, sure. That's why Toole got hit by a auto today. He made her talk. He was just coming for it when he turns around and sees this lug of a soldier standing at the window of her old apartment. The damn fool started shooting."

"I heard that."

"Well, Toothy had told the boss and me about Toole knowing something and figgering on a solo. When we heard the shots from out in the street, we were tailing Toole while he tailed the soldier to your office. We were ready to put him on the spot with slugs. But he made it easier. He came like a jaywalker right across the street. Our car sorta bumped into him."

Donnegan was thinking rapidly. The Plebe diamond—almost as famous and large as the Hope diamond—had been missing almost two weeks. It had been in necklace form and removed from its owner's neck at a society function. The necklace had been discarded in the street—the huge diamond missing.

It wouldn't do for the soldier to know that his Frannie was involved in anything as sordid as this. After all, the dame had gone overboard for him in her own queer sort of way. She had been a decent sort, of sorts...

"What happened to Frannie?" Donnegan rasped.

Rocco shuffled a few more steps forward. "No kidding, boss, we were waiting to put the screws on Gilbert and make him talk. You know—legitimate highjacking in our trade—when he falls dead for no reason at all in a theater lobby. Heart, the coroner said. So the boss had Toole and Toothy and me grab the girl."

"What happened to her?"

"Boss, no kidding," Rocco said, his voice bold and his little eyes riveted

on Donnegan's wounded shoulder, "she jumped outta our car and off the Queensboro bridge. It's a long ways down."

Donnegan's lips curled. He was watching Rocco's feet, deliberately leaving him come forward. With Rocco removed there could be no witness against Frannie. With Arnold dead and Gilbert dead, the key-men; and Toole, Toothy and Rocco, the violent toys of idiots, also dead, the recovery of the diamond could be laid to the gang strife. There might even be a reward for the soldier for stumbling upon the case. Frannie's death eventually would come out and be laid to an accident.

"Toothy was waiting for me here," Donnegan reminded.

Rocco grinned. "He heard the news broadcast about Toole dying in the street. Maybe the guy did figure he was going to take a bump, maybe he did want to leave a clue to the Plebe. Why else the feathers in his hat?"

DONNEGAN deliberately moved out and around Rocco and reached for the pheasant with his stiffening left arm. He pulled at the head and his thumb and forefinger snapped loose the glued bills.

It was there, gleaming blue and enticing in the afternoon sunlight—the Plebe.

Donnegan heard Rocco's indrawn breath, heavy with avarice.

The timing was perfect. Donnegan turned, gun low and pointed upward, just as Rocco leaped.

The shot seemed to stop him in midair, and then he fell almost straight downward.

Donnegan blew upon his smoking empty gun, pulled the diamond from the pheasant's mouth, and opined to himself that it was time to help the injured soldier.

"And that's for sure," he said aloud, "in this war or any other war." The staring eyes and open mouth of Rocco seemed to silently re-echo the vengeance creed of military men:

"And that's for sure."

THE END

The Kid and Marjorie

By
GRANT LANE



Danny Garrett had known this girl Marjorie well enough to be sure she hadn't committed suicide. But that only seemed to be putting a rope around the neck of the man he knew could never have killed her!

DANNY GARRETT had never known the girl well. But he knew her name, and she had spoken to him once or twice, and really—he had never told anyone this—he knew more about her than anyone would have ever dreamed. That is, even though he did not know her well personally, he could have told you a great deal about her from things she had written.

Because she was a girl writer, and she did stories for the fiction magazines you saw everywhere on the newsstands. Her name was Marjorie Ann Bennett, and he remembered how often he'd seen titles with her name beneath them. Just this past week, for instance.

It had been a magazine called *Sweetheart Sagas*, and printed on the cover had been her name beneath a title: "*Don't Say Goodbye.*" He remembered another one, a magazine called *Heart-throbs*. Her name had appeared on that cover, too. "A complete short novel by Marjorie Ann Bennett . . . *Army Girl.*"

Danny thought he would have never admitted the fact, to anyone, had read some of her stuff. He had read it in the beginning because he had been proud to know a real girl writer; and then, later, he had continued picking up magazines with her name on the cover because she was good. There was a nostalgic sweetness to her writing that caught the kid's favor. Danny himself was an emotional kid, though his two detective friends—Mike Ryan and Slug O'Donnell—never would have suspected it. He saw glamour and romance in everyday things. He got a kick out of just walking down the street on a sunny day and hearing a bird chirp merrily somewhere on a window ledge.

But mainly it had been swell knowing Marjorie Ann Bennett, having her say hallo to him as she passed his house once in awhile on a warm summer's evening. Sometimes she would be with a tall, blond-haired fellow who was almost as striking as those guys you saw in the Arrow collar ads. They were both quite young, and Marjorie would wave to Danny as they passed his porch.

And then, later that summer, they went past one evening and the blond young man was in uniform. So he was in the army now. Danny thought Marjorie seemed very proud as she clung to the young man's arm.

The next morning Danny happened to bump into her at the corner newsstand. Marjorie had three or four new magazines under her arm. She was dark-

eyed, and her hair was brown, and she had a sweet, bright face. It struck Danny that she was every bit as pretty as the girls on the covers of the magazines that carried her stories.

SHE told Danny about the uniform. She was a little breathless and excited. "His name is Bill Anderson. He's going away tonight. I won't see him for a whole year, perhaps."

"Is he a writer, too?" Danny asked. Marjorie shook her head. "No, Bill's a reader in a publishing house downtown. That's how I happened to meet him. Of course, now, he has to give up his job. . . ."

Danny indicated one of the magazines the girl was carrying. "I read that one last night," he told her. "*I'll Never Go Away.*" He smiled. "That was a swell story. It really was."

The girl's bright face studied his seriously. "You really think so, Dan-



Danny

ny? I mean, don't say it was if you didn't like it. . . ."

"It was!" he said.

And she said warmly, "Thanks. That helps a lot." And as she left the store he saw the light that was in her eyes. She was very happy because he had paid her that compliment.

could understand. Often, he had seen a light turned on in her third-floor room late at night. And with the windows open he had often heard the *clack-clack* of her typewriter. He guessed a person must get pretty lonesome, sitting there all alone into the wee small hours, writing.

And so to tell her he had liked one of her stories must have pleased her greatly.

The next night it was raining. Little traffic moved, and there was a slight chill along with the downpour and no one was on the streets. It was utterly dismal having weather like this in the midst of summer. Danny went to a movie, and he was returning home near eleven o'clock when he just happened to see Marjorie's soldier boy-friend hurrying down the street. He wore a slicker coat, the collar turned up against the blowing rain. But it was him, all right. . . the same blond hair, the clean-cut features. Danny saw him catch a bus at the corner.

Danny thought, "I guess he didn't have to leave for camp until to-night."

It was going to be pretty lonesome for Marjorie, with her boy-friend gone for a whole year. Danny figured maybe he could talk to her once in a while, sort of cheer her up.

But the next morning he knew that no one was going to talk to Marjorie again, ever.

She was dead.

* * *

IT WAS eight o'clock, and a crowd had gathered around the steps of the house only a few doors away from Danny's own. The rain had stopped sometime during the night, but the sky was gray and overcast. It was still chilly.

Danny Garrett gave a start when he came down the steps and he saw two police cars drawn up to the curb at Marjorie's house. He hurried that way. He pushed through the crowd and climbed the brown-stone steps.

A heavy-set officer blocked his way. Danny had never seen the cop before, and thus he wasn't recognized.

"What happened?" Danny asked.

"Scram, kid. . ." the cop started to say.

"Wait a minute," Danny raced on. "I'm Danny Garrett. Maybe I know some of the men who are here. . ."

The officer's entire manner changed. He said quickly, "Danny Garrett! Sure, kid you can go up. Mike Ryan and some guys from headquarters are here."

Danny stared.

If Mike Ryan was here, then it meant a homicide. . .

He asked tensely, "Did somebody get shot or something?"

The officer nodded. "I guess so! A dame pulled the Dutch."

"Who?"

"Some writer dame, kid. I guess maybe them magazines wouldn't buy her stuff, an' she got discouraged."

Danny felt ill as he went into the house.

* * *

HE CLIMBED the carpeted stairs, and there was an emptiness now in the pit of his stomach. His ordinarily bright blue eyes were dull. His red hair was bared as, reaching the third-floor landing, he stood with his cap in his hand and looked in the doorway of *her* room.

Mike Ryan was there, all right; Mike and Slug both.

Ryan was a big, hard lieutenant of detectives who looked so much like a typical flatfoot that no one ever took him for one. There was always a derby perched half back on his big head, and the stub of a cigar jammed into his mouth.

Mike Ryan was talking to a thin beanpole of a man and a couple of other detectives. The thin one was Slug O'Donnell. Danny Garrett, the

top-flight kid detective well-known in New York City, had known his two detective friends for several years now. It had all started when Danny was a shoe-shine kid down near Center Street headquarters.

One day, because the kid had a quick eye and a sharp, alert brain, he had helped Mike Ryan and O'Donnell bag a killer. And that had been the start of an association that had benefitted both Danny Garrett and his two friends. For the kid had an uncanny ability for spotting crime clues. He was somewhat of a phenomenon, considering that he was not quite fourteen years of age. His name had been in the papers; he wore an honorary police shield beneath his light jacket.

And, ordinarily, he would have been anxious to push into this room of death and investigate. But now, seeing what was there near the front window, he held back, stunned.

There was a desk near the front window. And there was a portable typewriter and books and scattered manuscript paper. And there was Marjorie Ann Bennett, with her head resting on her left arm, like . . . like a little girl asleep, Danny thought. Her right arm dangled downward beside the chair.

Danny saw the dark-stained mark on the right temple, and he shuddered. There were powder burns around the gun wound. He did not see any gun nearby, though.

And then he saw that Slug O'Donnell was holding a weapon in his hand, a gun partially covered by a clean handkerchief. At the same time, the two detectives saw Danny Carrott standing in the doorway.

Mike Ryan said, "About time you showed up, kid. Here you have a suicide right next door to you, and you're still in bed!"

DANNY'S easy kidding had no effect today; Danny moved slowly into the room and he was twisting his cap in his hands.

"Suicide?" he said quietly. His gaze kept going to that still, slim figure slumped over the writing desk.

"Yeah," Mike Ryan said matter-of-

factly. Then his eyes suddenly narrowed on Danny. "Don't tell us you're walking right in here cold and saying it's anything else but!"

"No," Danny said slowly, "I'm not trying to tell you anything."

"You know her?" Slug asked.

Danny nodded. "A little; she was a nice girl." He almost added that she was a fine writer, too, but he caught himself. Guys like Ryan and Slug wouldn't understand about him reading love stories; they might think he was a sissy. That wasn't why he had liked Marjorie's stories. It was just that the writing itself expressed the girl's own character. It had been fine and delicate, and yet with a deep, warm feeling. . . .

He nodded to the gun in O'Donnell's palm. "Is that the weapon. . . ."

Slug jerked his head. "Yep. One shot fired. We picked it up off the floor, just below her hand." He indicated the girl's lifeless, dangling arm.

"How can you be sure it's suicide?" Danny demanded.

He asked these questions mechanically. He was really not thinking about the gun or the other men in the room or anything like that. His mind burned with a single thing: *she* was dead. She had been a fine girl, and she had talked to him once in awhile, and she had been pleased when he complimented her on her stories.

Ryan was saying something. "We've talked to the landlady," he explained. "Marjorie Bennett was home all evening, working, the landlady says. Mrs. Murphy says she heard her typing when she came in from the movies, about midnight."

"Mrs. Murphy is the landlady?"

Ryan nodded. "Yeah, and she says she went right to bed. Never heard the shot or anything. But Marjorie had told her at supper last night to be sure and call her early this morning. That's when Mrs. Murphy discovered she had done the Dutch. She came in here and found her. . . like this."

Danny asked again, "You're certain, then, that it's suicide?"

"Come here," said Ryan, and he

led the way to the desk near the window.

There was a sheet of 8 x 11 typewriter paper in the machine, and on this typewritten words stood out starkly. "Read it," prompted Mike Ryan. He took the stub of cigar out of his mouth, put it back again. His jaw was grim.

Danny read the words typed on the sheet of paper that was still in the machine:—

"Bill, darling:

After what you said tonight, I'm afraid I can't go on. I had planned on so much. . . our wedding, that little place up in Connecticut, *everything*. You say you will only be away a year. Bill, it might be that you will be gone. . . fore r! I had hoped for so much. We were to be married next Thursday, remember?

I can't go on. Perhaps I was built up to a terrific letdown. I can't take it. Please forgive me, darling. This is good-by. . ."

Danny read the words, and somehow his vision blurred a little as he saw something. Marjorie's head, cradled on her left arm, so near that same typewriter. Her curly dark hair, with a bit of her smooth white neck visible beneath. He turned away. . . .

"We've been talking to that landlady and her sister who lives with her." Ryan went on. "Marjorie Bennett lived here alone. She's got a brother somewhere in California, and we're trying to locate him. We've learned that Marjorie had a boy-friend named Bill Anderson. I guess the two of them were going to get married. But this Bill Anderson was drafted recently, and last night he was called away to camp for training." He nodded to the note in the typewriter. "So I guess the girl got discouraged. Women are funny that way; you never can tell what they might do."

They were interrupted by the arrival of the medical examiner. Mike Ryan told him, "Just a routine examination, doc. We've checked the place carefully. There's no evidence that it's anything but suicide."

Danny went out to the hallway. He sat down on the steps and waited, his chin cupped in his hands. He was thinking. He heard Mike Ryan and Slug go down the hall. They were talking to a woman at the back of the hall. The landlady. Danny heard her saying, "No, she was alone all evening. There was no one here to see her at all. That young man who always called on her went away the night before. He went away to camp. . . ."

Danny jumped to his feet. He remembered last night. The rain beating down, a man going down the street with his slicker collar drawn up about his chin. A young man with sandy blond hair. . . .

HE HURRIED back along the hall and paused before the room door. He saw the landlady inside, a short, thin woman with wide, excited eyes. He called, "Mike?"

Ryan, at the tone of Danny's voice, left the room. The kid drew him to one side. He said, "Mike, that fellow Bill Anderson—Marjorie's friend—was here last night!"

Ryan frowned, staring at Danny. "You're sure?"

"I saw him just leaving this house and heading for a bus at the corner."

Mike Ryan went quickly down the hall to the room where the medical examiner had been making his examination. The doctor was just coming out, looking for Ryan himself.

Mike Ryan said, "Well, what did you find out?"

The medical examiner shrugged. "Nothing unusual. The revolver you found there in the room was obviously the weapon used. We can check on the slug as soon as we get her down to the morgue. It was held close to her head. I figure she shot herself sometime last night. . . say about eight or ten hours ago."

Danny gave a start. He saw Mike Ryan looking at him. "What is it, kid?" his friend asked.

But Danny was looking at the doctor. "That would make the time of her death between ten last night and midnight?" he asked quietly.

The medical examiner nodded.

"Approximately. Of course you can't pin a thing like that down to the exact hour. But I would say she died before midnight."

Danny met Ryan's intent gaze. The detective was nodding, as though he read the thought that flashed through the kid's mind.

"The landlady says she heard her *typing* at midnight!" the big detective exclaimed.

"Yes," Danny agreed.

"As I said," the medical examiner pointed out, "stating the exact time of death is a hard thing to do. But I feel almost positive that the girl must have been dead before midnight."

Slug O'Donnell had come out of the room and was listening. "Let's talk to that landlady again," he suggested.

First, they had to wait while attendants from the morgue removed the girl's body. They drew Danny aside, seeing the white tenseness of his face, the way he looked at the girl as she was carried past him. Then the room was suddenly deserted, and Ryan and Slug were down the hall. Danny stepped slowly across the threshold. There was a delicate fragrance to the room, of which he was conscious. He remembered it was a type of perfume that Marjorie used; he recalled the haunting scent from the various times he had talked to her.

He moved quietly about the room, and finally he paused before the desk where she had always worked. He noted the pile of manuscript copy near the typewriter.

He picked up a few top pages. Each white sheet was accompanied by a yellow carbon copy. He read some of it. It was her copy, all right. He recalled the way she phrased words in some of the published stories he had read. The style was the same.

He reached for another sheet. He had to thumb through a number of pages before he found the one that followed the sheet he'd been reading. He frowned. All the numbered pages were in disorder. He started swiftly searching through the pile.

And down at the bottom he found a complete manuscript clipped together. He started reading this one, too. A puzzled expression came to the kid's lean, slightly freckled features. The writing didn't sound anything like Marjorie's stuff at all. It set him to wondering.

He looked around the room. And he discovered other little things that made him frown. There were some artificial flowers jammed in disorder in a vase atop the davenport table. And on the same long table were a number of magazines heaped in disorder. The rug, where it ended beneath the davenport, was wrinkled and out of line.

There were other little details. Certain things in the room were in immaculate order; others were not. And he remembered how Marjorie herself had been as dainty as a new doll's dress.

Mike Ryan came back down the hall and into the room.

"What did the landlady have to say?" Danny queried.

"She sticks to her story," Ryan said. "Says she came in about midnight and heard the girl at her typewriter. She went to bed and heard nothing further."

"And her sister. . . the landlady's sister?"

"She's deaf," announced Mike Ryan.

The detective's manner said there was something else of more importance at the moment. He added hastily. "We found out something about that boy-friend of her's. We've found out what division he was inducted into. That outfit's already left for camp in Virginia, but we'll have him brought back."

"Then you think," Danny said, "it might *not* be suicide?"

"We could have been mistaken," Ryan said.

And that was the thing Danny Garrett had been thinking right along.

* * *

SLUG O'DONNELL was waiting for Ryan at the head of the steps, and when they asked the kid
(Continued On Page 78)

COMING NEXT ISSUE

It was a quarter after eight when I came out of the kitchen. Moon was still in his favorite state of being — suspended animation in a soft chair.

"Well, have you solved my problem?" I asked nastily. "What kind of screwball tries to poison you in a room crammed with people and then leaves a note to meet him somewhere so he can kill you?"

Adam Moon opened one blue eye. "There was too much prussic acid in your highball."

"Any amount would have been too much for my taste."

"And," he went on, "it would be far simpler to walk up to you in the street at night and pump you full of lead. It's not very complicated to murder somebody."

I was about to tell him to suggest that to the nut who was after my life, when the phone rang. I answered it.

"Waldo Haggerty?"

The voice that asked the question was hardly human. It had no tone or character, and it seemed to be drifting over the wire from a vast distance.

My fingers tightened on the handset. "Speaking," I said.

"Coward!"

There was a click and the line was dead.

Here Is a Thrilling New Mystery Novel

TWO MICE FOR A CAT

By Bruno Fischer

You'll find it complete in the
January, 1946 issue of

**CRACK
DETECTIVE STORIES**

(Continued From Page 76)

if he was going with them, he said he thought maybe he'd hang around awhile. He watched them go down the stairs.

Then he turned back to the girl's room. He again picked up that one manuscript he had found at the bottom of the pile of loose pages on the table. He was reading it again.

And he thought, "This writing stinks!" He was puzzled, because everything he had ever read of Marjorie's had been done with feeling and beauty. He started poking around the room.

And in an open book rack in one corner, he found another pile of stories — or rather, copies of stories that the girl must have already sold to publishers. He glanced at a few pages. *This* was her writing, all right.

He picked up some others from another stack. And then he noticed something. There were two carbon copies clipped together in each story. He read a title: "*Broadway Serenade*." It was Marjorie's writing again; he could recognize the style in a moment. But beneath this was clipped another story. The same title. He started reading. It was awful.

He pulled the two carbons apart and he saw a name in the upper left-hand corner of the first page. "By Stewart James." There was something very queer . . .

Suddenly, as Danny stood there near the window looking at this second manuscript under the name of "Stewart James," he had the instinctive feeling that someone had been watching him.

He turned around.

But there was no one in the doorway. However, he thought he heard a whisper of swift movement. Danny stepped quickly across the room, looked out into the hall.

It was deserted.

Somewhere, though — whether on this floor or the one below, he could not be certain — a door had closed quietly. He had caught the faint snap of a latch.

The manuscript still in his hand, he moved quietly along the hallway and

peered over the stair well. He saw no one.

As Danny turned back, his eyes suddenly narrowed on a doorway behind him, in line with the stairs. He hurried back along the hall, opened the door, saw a steep, narrow flight of stairs that apparently led to the roof. Even as he swung the door open, he had the impression that the one at the top of the flight had just closed.

He went up the steps, located a doorknob in the darkness at the top of the stairs, pushed the door open — and found himself on the roof of the building.

Someone came out from behind the roof entranceway and crashed into Danny Garrett. He was sent sprawling to the rough, tarred gravel of the roof. Instantly the person flung himself at Danny again.

* * *

THE KID had a quick impression of a tall, very pale-looking young man with watery, weak eyes and almost pink complexion. Pretty would have best described him, but he wasn't pretty now.

His features were contorted in rage, and a funny cry came from his lips as he tore into Danny Garrett. Some insane frenzy must have given the fellow unusual strength, because hands ripped at the kid's throat like talons of steel.

Danny rolled, tried to get a foot planted in the other's stomach. His leg was knocked aside. His assailant's knee came down into the kid's stomach and drove the breath out of him.

Danny twisted partially on his side, and got one fist twisted in the wild-looking man's shirt front. He hung on, twisting the shirt, trying to fling the man from him.

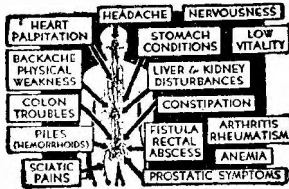
Snarling, panting like an animal that has suddenly gone mad with the summer's heat, his attacker sank his hands into the kid's throat. Thumbs dug close to his jugular. The kid gasped, trying frantically to get free of the choking hold.

Danny was tough. He had earned

(Continued On Page 80)

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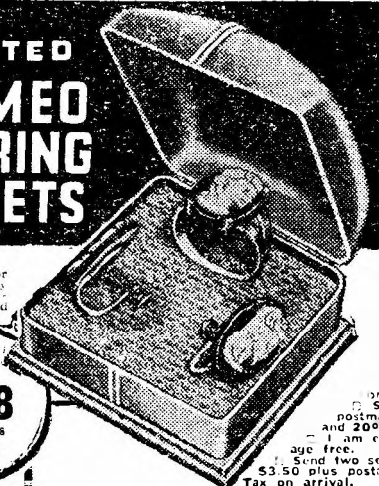
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Crack Detective Stories

(Continued From Page 78)

a living on the sidewalks of New York, shining shoes. But this thin, tall person he was struggling with now had the strength created by mad fear.

The rolling, furious fight continued across the roof. For a moment Danny had the upper hand. He got above his opponent. And then, with a wild lunge, the fellow was above him again, those long, strong fingers closing around Danny's throat.

Danny jerked his arm up between the man's arms. The heel of his hand caught the fellow beneath the chin. His head snapped back with a jerk. He gave a gasp of pain. His fingers slipped from Danny's throat.

Instantly the kid whipped his wiry body sideways, threw the man clear and came to his feet. Dizziness swirled through his brain. It felt like all his breath had been cut off and he couldn't breathe.

Danny sent a foot smashing at his assailant's face. The man was still on his knees, starting to jerk to his feet. He managed to duck the blow. He threw himself forward and wrapped his arms around Danny's legs.

In attempting to keep his feet, the kid staggered backwards, his heels digging into the gravel of the roof. A small puddle of water left by the rain the night before was beneath his rubber heels. One foot slipped. He flung out his arms to maintain his balance.

And quickly the tackle hold on his legs was released. Before Danny could catch himself, he understood.

Directly behind him was the low wall of the roof edge. It struck him just below the hips. Making use of that low wall as a fulcrum, Danny's attacker whipped down and yanked at the kid's legs. Pulled them up. And Danny's own backward motion was carrying him in a flying arc over that wall.

And he was falling, falling backward into space. All he could think of was the pair of wild, terrible eyes that were leering down at him from above. Eyes that held madness . . .

(Continued On Page 82)

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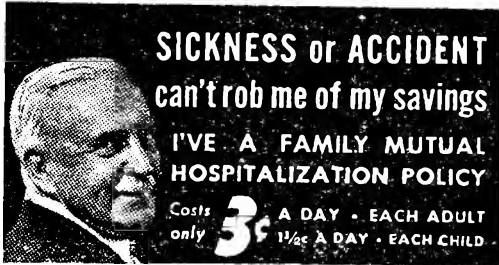
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Crack Detective Stories

(Continued From Page 80)

Then he struck. Everything was suddenly dark and full of pain and . . .

HOW LONG Danny Garrett had lain there on his back he did not know. But when he opened his eyes he felt the hot sun beating down upon his face. Clouds had broken in the sky above.

He moved his head sideways. He was almost afraid to try working his arms and legs. Surely, they were smashed — but they responded to the grim determination to try.

Pain, aching stiff pain was in his back and shoulders and legs, and yet he could move. He turned slowly — and saw that he was atop a second-story roof that protruded at the rear of the house. Luckily, he had fallen a single story. Otherwise . . .

He shuddered as he cast the thought aside. He rolled over onto his stomach and came slowly to his hands and knees. His brain pounded. His whole body ached. He hung there a moment before he dared try to stand up.

But he finally made it; he stood swaying on the flat roof. He walked uncertainly toward a single window that faced him. He rapped on the glass. There was no response.

He tried the window, found it unlatched, and a moment later was swinging over the sill. He found himself in a deserted storeroom at the rear of the second floor. He crossed the room and tried the hall door. It was locked.

He started pounding on the panel. Within moments someone was coming along the hallway outside the room. The door was unlocked. The landlady, thin Mrs. Murphy, was there, wide-eyed with amazement.

"Landsakes alive!" she gasped. "You're the young man who was with those detectives! How in the world—"

Danny did not want to take time explaining. So he said swiftly, "Look, do you know if Marjorie Bennett ever knew anyone by the name of Stewart James?"

"Of course!" the woman said. "He's

The Kid and Marjorie

the young man lives next door. Why, he was just over here less than an hour ago, telling me how badly he felt about that poor sweet girl . . ."

Danny was gripping the woman's arm. "He was over *here*."

She nodded. "Certainly. He used to come back and forth all the time when she was . . . was . . ." She stopped, gave a shudder, then added, "He said he had left some papers in her room. He wanted to get them."

Danny was suddenly pushing past the woman. He asked tensely, "Which house did he live in?"

"No. 392. Like I said . . ."

He had started down the hall, but now he stopped, looked back. "You say he was here less than an hour ago. What *time* is it?"

The woman frowned. "Young man, what in the world's wrong with you. It's noon time. The whistles were just blowing a little while ago . . ."

But Danny had started for the stairs. On a sudden impulse he swung toward the flight leading up to the girl's room. The landlady had said Stewart James had come back here . . .

An instant later he was staring at the desk, at the book rack on the side of the room. *All* the manuscripts were gone!

DANNY raced down the stairs again. The landlady stared at him in amazement as he continued down to the first floor. He reached the sidewalk, swung left, hurried up the steps of No. 392.

A stout woman with bare, fat arms was sweeping the vestibule.

"Which room is Stewart James', lady?" he asked.

The woman leaned on her broom and frowned. "*That* fellow!" she said sharply. "Leaves without giving me one minute's notice. Packs his things and goes almost without paying his rent! If I hadn't been down here cleaning—"

"Then he checked out?"

She nodded, sucking in her fat lips. "Fifteen minutes ago. And only this morning I had a chance to rent a room—"

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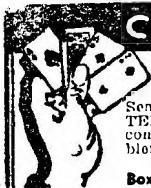


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Crack Detective Stories

"Did he give you any forwarding address?"

"Nothing at all!" the stout woman snapped. "Why, he almost ran out of the place. Never saw the likes of it—"

"He took a cab?" Danny prodded.

The woman shook her head. "He didn't take anything. He walked. And with two heavy bags that he could hardly manage, that cheap-skate!"

Danny thanked her and went slowly down the steps. He hurried down the street toward his own rooming house, and he was wondering how he could ever trail Stewart James.

For a few moments he had forgotten the stiffness and pain that was in his bruised body. He climbed the stairs to his own room and located a bottle of liniment. He rubbed the stuff into his sore muscles.

A name on a magazine held his gaze. It was one of the love story magazines he had bought at the corner newsstand . . . *Marjorie Ann Bennett*.

Suddenly, Danny had an idea. This Stewart James apparently had been writing stories, too. Perhaps he had taken some of his stuff to the same publishers that featured Marjorie's stories. Perhaps . . .

Danny slipped back into his shirt and clothes. He knew that he smelled like the rub-down room in a gymnasium, but he couldn't worry about that now. He got a pencil and paper and looked up publishing house addresses inside the magazines that were on the table. Every magazine was one containing some of the girl's stories. He knew there were more on the newsstands.

He hurried out.

At the corner shop he stopped, asked the proprietor if it was all right to look over some of the books, and got more addresses. He saw that she had written for half a dozen publishing houses.

Then he hopped a bus downtown.

In each of the editorial offices he visited, he found it impossible to get by the receptionist. But he asked about Stewart James. Did they publish his stories here?

At the first place — a modern of-

The Kid and Marjorie

fice whose walls were decorated with large, original art paintings of magazine covers, they had never heard of Stewart James.

At the second, the girl called an editor on the phone. She listened a moment, then turned to Danny Garrett and said, "The editor says he wouldn't take Stewart James' stuff as a gift. He says if you have any of his stories with you, not to leave them—"

Danny said, "I'm not trying to peddle his stuff!" and went out.

IN THE street again, it occurred to him to call his two detective friends. He stepped into a cigar store booth and phoned headquarters. And learned that Ryan had been trying to reach him.

Mike Ryan was on the phone in a moment, saying proudly. "Well, we got that fellow Bill Anderson, kid. He was taken off a train just leaving for camp this morning. He was brought here to headquarters. We're holding him for the murder of that girl."

"But look—" Danny started worriedly.

"Imagine what he tried to tell us," continued Ryan. "Says he and the girl were going to be married next week. She was going to come down to Virginia and live right near the camp where he was to be stationed. He admits he was up to her room last night. Naturally he claims he loved her, and all that stuff, but we're going to work on him and I'll bet we'll get a confession . . ."

"Wait!" Danny interrupted. "He was in love with her. You've got the wrong man!"

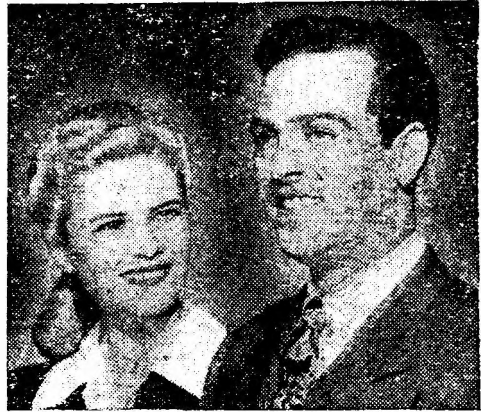
"Now look here, kid . . ." Mike Ryan started.

But Danny raced on, "Those two were in love. I used to see them walking down the street nights, and you could tell."

"Sure." Mike Ryan said. "And so the dame committed suicide. Like blazes! I thought of that after I left there this morning. The girl never wrote that suicide note. It was planted by Bill Anderson himself. It

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Crack Detective Stories

was Anderson who the landlady heard typing when she came in last night . . ."

"No!" Danny got in. "I saw Anderson leave her house at eleven o'clock. And the landlady didn't come home until midnight. And yet she heard the typewriter. Don't you see? It was *someone else* . . ."

Ryan started to laugh. "Sure . . . a ghost," he snapped. "Maybe a . . ."

"Look," the kid went on hurriedly, "Marjorie herself was the ghost. That was the killer's motive behind this whole thing. You see . . ."

"What in hell are you talking about?" Ryan snorted.

Quickly, Danny told him something about Stewart James, and the search he was making right now of the publishing houses. Mike Ryan's tone changed. He listened. He asked for the addresses that Danny had. And he said, "Now look, kid, you wait until we meet you . . ."

But Danny hung up. It was getting late, and there were other publishing houses he had not yet visited . . .

A little after five that afternoon he got out of the elevator on the twelfth floor of a building on 42nd Street. There was a double doorway directly across from the elevators, and on the frosted glass were printed the words: "Century Publishers." Beneath this was a long list of the titles of magazines. Danny stared. Among them were several of the ones which he himself had bought. He went inside.

There was a big office, and deep leather chairs, and magazines on tables. The place was deserted. There was no girl at the switchboard behind the closed glass panel in a wall on one side of the room. It was very quiet.

But Danny became aware of the faint clacking of a typewriter somewhere beyond a closed door on the other side of the room. He opened the door and found himself in a long hallway lined by open office doorways. Light shone from one of the doorways.

He went down the hall.

(Continued On Page 88)

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Crack Detective Stories

(Continued From Page 86)

A MAN looked up from a typewriter. He was a well-dressed man with pleasant, middle-aged features. Manuscripts were piled on the big desk. A dozen brightly painted art covers were stacked against the wall.

Danny said, "I'm looking for someone. Perhaps you can help me?" He stood with his cap in his hands.

The man leaned back in his chair and smiled. "You're kind of late," he said. "Who was it you wanted to see?"

"Well, first," Danny said, "do you know Marjorie Bennett?"

"Know her!" the man exclaimed, "she's one of our best writers." He motioned to the typewriter. "I was just writing her a letter, telling her we were using another of her novellettes in *Real Romance*—"

Danny nodded. "It's really about another person I wanted to find out. I think Marjorie was rewriting some of his stories. What is it you call that?"

"Ghostwriting," the editor said.

"That's it. Well, I want to locate him. I imagine he submits those stories to editors like yourself. I've tried several places . . ."

"What's his name?"

"Stewart James," said Danny.

The man's chair came down and hit the floor with a thump. "I'll be damned!" he exploded.

"What's wrong?" Danny Garrett asked, puzzled.

(Continued On Page 90)

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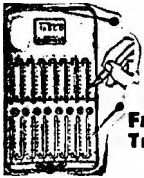
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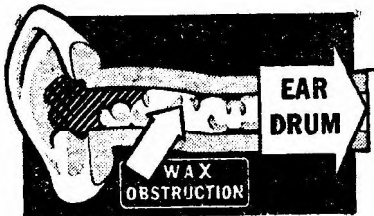


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Crack Detective Stories

(Continued From Page 88)

"That guy works here in our art department. He's submitted some of his stories to me, and I've been buying them." He jerked to his feet, fumbled through some of the manuscripts on his desk, snapped up a story. "Here's one he gave me when he came in late today. Imagine! *Margorie* doing this story for him—"

Behind Danny Garrett, someone moved in the doorway. He spun. He saw wild, pinkish eyes; he saw the gun.

Stewart James!

The man leaped toward Danny Garrett, muttering, "You snooping little punk!"

Danny flung himself sideways. The gun roared in the small office. Glass shattered in the windows behind Danny Garrett. The editor, with a wild cry, leaped out from behind the desk.

The gun was again leveling on the kid. He dived at the man's gun arm. There was a shot; Danny was falling. And then there were other shots, wild exclamations, and noise.

Tall, wild-eyed Stewart James was swaying, blood oozing on his shoulder. Big Mike Ryan was coming into the room, Slug O'Donnell behind him. They seized the killer. Stewart James still held the gun. He tried to raise it. Ryan fired again.

(Continued On Page 92)

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Novelette

In Our January

Issue

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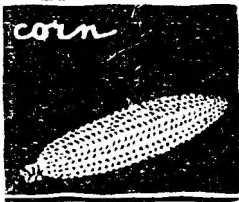
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Crack Detective Stories

(Continued From Page 90)

DANNY turned away, his stomach trembling as he watched the pink-eyed man, dying, fall to the floor. And the room was suddenly very quiet, and he heard the broken, half sobbed words . . .

"Yes . . . she was rewriting my stories. I had never . . . been able to sell anything . . . but now I was getting checks. She told me she . . . was going away. She was . . . going to get married. She wouldn't be able to do my stories anymore. I . . . guess I was desperate. We had an argument . . . I struck her. . . She said she was going to tell the truth to the editors. . . I didn't mean to kill her, honest . . ."

There was a gurgling cough. Danny turned away. The man was dead.

Later, he said to Mike Ryan. "Stewart James wrote that suicide note himself. He left it in the girl's typewriter. This morning, after you left, he stole *all* her stories and took them with him. He probably planned to submit them under his own name. He was desperate to have his name in print . . ."

Mike Ryan looked at the kid. He said, "He'll have his name in print now, all right. In headlines!" And then, quietly, "Kid, you've got an instinct. I guess maybe us cops get dumb after awhile. We miss the little things."

Behind them, the editor said quietly, "We'll miss . . . Marjorie." There was a catch in his voice.

There was a new magazine on his desk, one that had not yet gone on sale. Danny saw her name on the cover, and a title. "*Paradise Island.*" He looked at the man who bought her stories.

The editor nodded.

Danny put the magazine under his arm and went out. His cap was still in his hand. His eyes were misted. . . .

The End

Law and Disorder

(Continued From Page 51)

The witness sent the court into stitches when he replied: "Why not?"

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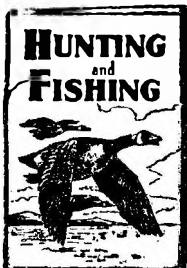
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Johnny On the Spot

(Continued From Page 40)

brokenly. "I can see now why she wanted to keep it secret for awhile. . . ."

Johnny looked back into Luretta's blazing eyes. "You searched as much as you could in Sime's club, Luretta, wanting the evidence he was holding over your head. You didn't find it, but you found the black notebook. That fitted right into your plan, for it would point a motive, in my mind, to Martha when I arrived at Uncle Walter's house to find him dead. Then tonight when you and Steve came by here you heard Martha tell me she'd been in the hospital. When I rushed out you knew I'd tumbled to the fact that she couldn't have murdered Walter Gerard. You knew, too, that I was heading back for Gerard's house to take the frame off myself. So you phoned Sime Karkins, disguising your voice, and tipped him that he'd find his black notebook on my person and that I'd arrive at Gerard's house shortly. You had to keep me from taking away the evidence that I'd planted against myself. You knew Sime would stop me, leave me unconscious or take me for a ride in the process of getting his notebook.

"Everything pointed to you, Luretta. Steve mixed drinks last night, but he was where I watched him. It was you who went in the kitchen and helped Martha with dinner and slipped drugs in my food. Steve intended to call a doctor, but it was you who was dialing the phone while Steve was helping me to the couch, calling the doctor of your choice, your accomplice Whitfield.

"It was smooth, but like all murder, a little rough in spots. The rough spots trip you, Luretta. Whitfield is lying dead on the sidewalk outside at this moment. He'll be found any moment. And that one wasn't a clean kill, Luretta. They'll break you down, look over Whitfield's records, Sime Karkins' black-mail mess, which will be blasted wide open after tonight. You. . . ."

(Continued On Page 96)

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Johnny On the Spot

(Continued From Page 94)

Luretta screamed, sprang backward, her hands tearing at the jeweled purse she'd laid on the table. Johnny ducked as she pulled a small revolver from the purse; but Steve didn't. He lunged toward her, face gray, mouth twisted.

She fired at him and a hole jumped in the plaster. Steve seized her wrists. Screaming, she struggled. Then the gun exploded again and the room froze. Luretta looked up at Steve, her eyes bubbling with fear, and sank slowly to the floor. A small splash of crimson, growing, added its own bright spot of color to the jeweled, clinging gown she was wearing. A thin wreath of smoke curled lazily from the revolver as it fell from her hand.

Steve eased her down gently. Johnny felt a quiet movement near him and slipped his arm about Martha.

"Well," Johnny said softly, "Johnny's off the spot."

"Yeah," Steve said, looking at Luretta's prone form. "And I guess I'll get over it in time, eh, Johnny?"

"Sure," Johnny said, and his own voice quivered, for he found it hard to listen to a grown man sob.

(THE END)

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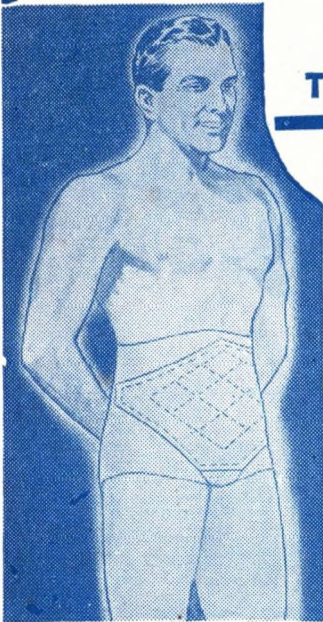
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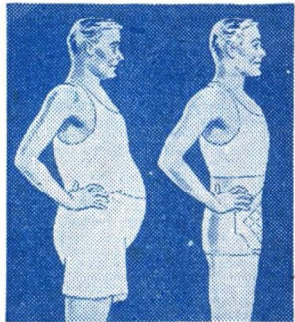
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