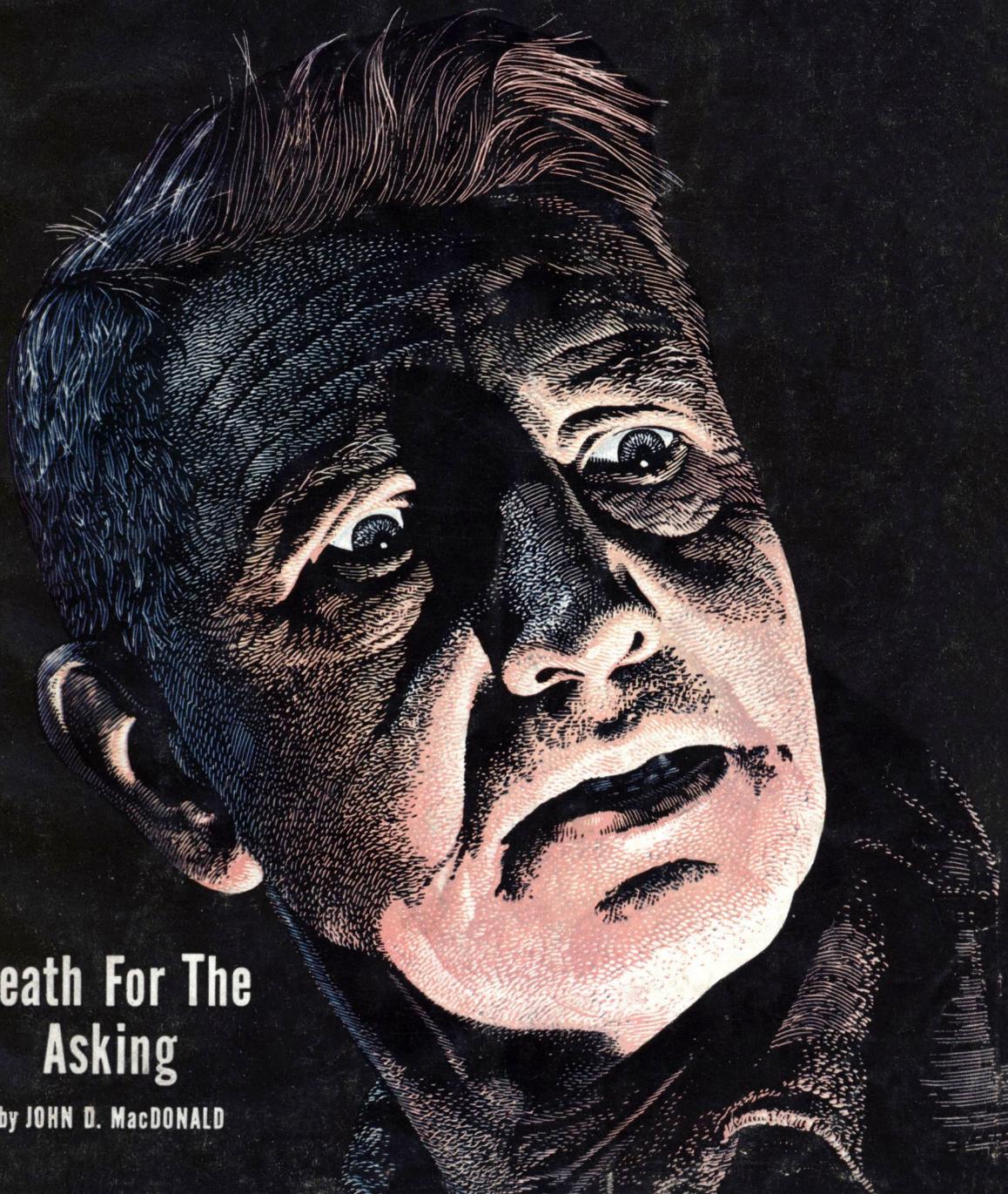


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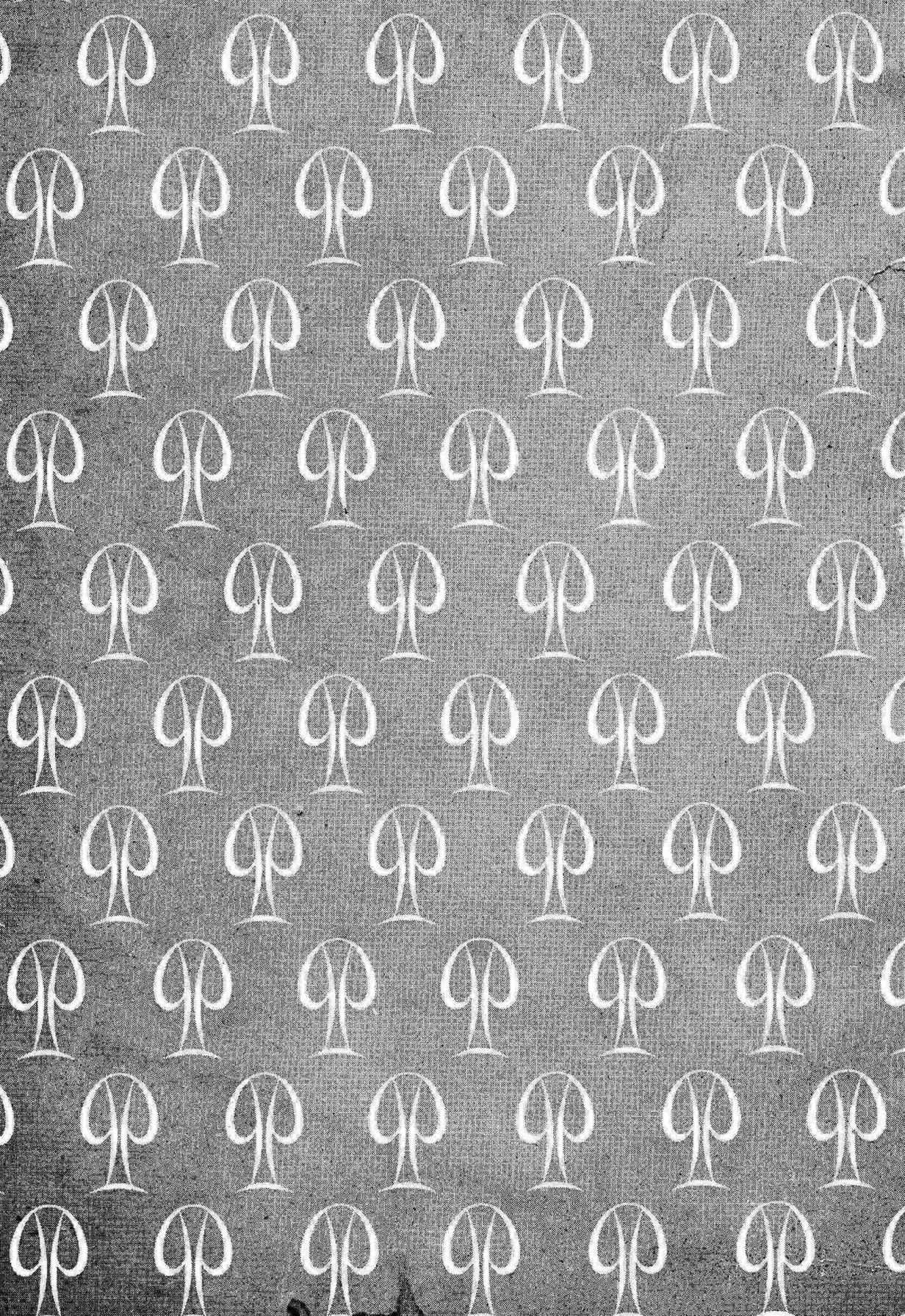
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Death For The Asking

by JOHN D. MacDONALD



Detective

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If we were asked to name a born writer, the obvious answer would be John D. MacDonald. Since he gave up a successful career as an industrial engineer a few years ago, hundreds of his fine stories have appeared in Argosy and other leading magazines, winning him an enviable reputation in such diverse fields as detective, fantasy and sports fiction. His mastery of all three is self-evident in the following story, which relates the fantastic adventures of an athletic young Irishman whose personal demon involves him in the deadly game of international intrigue.

DEATH FOR THE ASKING

by JOHN D. MacDONALD

TERENCE DELANEY MAHANE was becoming convinced that his personal demon was on vacation too. It was such a startling thought that he found it necessary to impart it to the joyous creature who was sharing the roof of the cabin cruiser with him.

Untold amounts of Irish whisky had suffused him in a warm and mellow glow. He rolled up onto one elbow and regarded the lass fondly. The colors pleased him. A nut-brown lass in a two piece suit of gold on a navy blanket. Delightful! The bow of the cruiser smashed through the swells, arcing spray that held a permanent rainbow in the Florida sunlight.

"'Tis barely believable," he said, tracing with his eye the subtle blending of the convex and the concave. She rolled onto her side and regarded

him warmly. "What's your name, lass?"

She pouted. "Jackie. And what can't you believe?"

"I'm a peaceable man. But I've got a demon. He goes about with me and gets me into trouble. I end up with my knuckles swollen and my clothes torn and iron bars encasing my proud spirit. Now I'm here in Florida for three days of my vacation and not a fight yet."

The blonde called Jackie swept an approving eye across the wide sloping shoulders, deep chest, flat belly and arch of the thigh muscles. "Lucky for the other guys, isn't it?"

"'Tis said that Terence Mahane acquits himself in a reasonable fashion," he said with dignity. He sat up and looked ahead of the cruiser at the

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tiny island on the horizon. "Where are we going?"

She ran her fingertips along his arm. "You haven't kissed me in ever so long."

"Lass, I hardly know you. Besides that, I'm a furtive type that prefers kisses at dusk and dawn. Where's the bottle?"

"You finished it, darling, and threw it over the side."

"Did I, now!"

Jackie sat up and looked down at the group in the big cockpit of the cruiser. "Joe! Got any more Irish?"

Joe was a puffy man with a wide smile and a head blistered by sunburn where the hair had receded. "Is that last one gone too?" he asked incredulously. He disappeared into the cabin and came back with another bottle, which he handed up.

"Never," said Terence Mahane, taking the bottle and attacking the seal, "have I fallen in with such an agreeable group of people. I am forever making close friends and alienating them the next moment." He found his glass. "A drop for you, lass?"

"Gee, I couldn't!"

"There I was," he said, "a stranger in a strange city. A poor lorn man by himself. Was that only yesterday?"

"Only yesterday, darling."

He frowned at her. "Weren't you a redhead yesterday?"

"Oh, that was Alice. She's down there with Joe and Tommy and the rest. You told her she had no poetry in her soul."

He tipped up his glass, emptied it,

sighed. The island was nearer. The mainland was a misty line on the horizon. "Where are we going?"

"To Mr. Saddock's island for a house party. Gee, you knew that!"

"Did I, now? Seems like a splendid idea now that you remind me."

He stood up easily and balanced on the balls of his feet on the cruiser roof. He frowned. "An old failing of mine, lass. I seem to be drinking myself sober."

He turned and looked down into the cockpit. There were four men and three girls down here. He turned quickly enough to catch them all in the act of staring at him. He had the vague feeling that their stare wasn't exactly warm and friendly. There seemed to be a certain cool curiosity in it, as though he were an odd new fish brought in on the end of a line and they were trying to decide whether or not he was edible.

Their smiles appeared immediately. He noted that these people seemed disturbingly sober. They did not look like the gay companions of the previous evening. He dredged deep into his mind for the right names.

Joe was the pasty fat one with the sunburned head and the painted smile. Saddock would be the small, thin, dry-looking man. The one who looked like a wheel-horse in the heavyweight division was Tommy. And Lanfer was the erect military-looking one with the accent.

One thing you had to give them, they had nicely stocked the girl department. Alice was the redhead, Jackie the blonde on the roof. **And**

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there were two more, equally well equipped. Maria was the dark one with the crackling eyes and the nose that wrinkled when she laughed. Alicc, Jackie and Maria seemed to be there in the status of communal dates. The languid one called Kit, the lean silver-blonde one with the cheekbones, seemed to be exclusive with Saddock. Her eyes were chilly as she looked up at Terence.

He wondered who was handling the boat, and then he remembered the sun-darkened boy with the colorless eyes and bitter mouth. Harch was his name. Bud Harch. Terence beamed at this remarkable display of memory.

AS HE glanced again at Kit, his personal demon tapped him on the shoulder. It wasn't off duty. He looked directly at her. "Come on up here out of the crowd, darlin'."

Her eyes flared. Tommy flexed his big broken hands and stared up at Terence, his smile gone. "Lay off," he said.

"Shut up," Saddock said to Tommy in a voice like the rustle of dead leaves. He made a little gesture at Kit.

"Now look," she said angrily, "there's a few things I won't . . ."

Saddock's dry palm cracked off her mouth. She got up dutifully, walked to the edge of the roof and held her hands up with a shy smile. "Then help me up, Irish."

Terence could visualize the look of disgust on the face of his demon. He lifted her up with one easy swing and

set her beside him. With his arm around her he stared in a puzzled way down at Saddock. "Not even an argument?"

"Have a drink, Mahane," Saddock said. "We want you to have a good time."

Again Terence felt the watchfulness. The engine noise changed tempo and the bow dropped a bit. He turned and looked ahead. They were in the lee of the island, swinging in a big curve toward a protected bay and a jetty. From the jetty concrete steps led up to a big house of heavy cypress timbers. The house had a faint look of darkness and of brooding. He could see outbuildings beyond it. Because of the trees fringing the property, it would be difficult to see the house except from the sheltered bay.

"Nice homey little place," Terence said dryly.

No one laughed. Two men came down the steps and out onto the jetty. They wore white coats. The cruiser was tied fast and Saddock said, "Don't bother with the suitcases; the boys will bring them along."

Up in the high-ceilinged hallway, Saddock rubbed his hands together and said, "Let's get organized. Mr. Mahane, you take the room at the end of the hall to the left up the stairs. You can change there, as I guess we won't have time for any more swimming today. Jackie, you take the next one this way from Mr. Mahane. Joe, you take the one across the hall from Jackie. The rest of you take your usual rooms. Get dressed and we'll have cocktails."

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Terence's bag was in the room Saddock had indicated. It was a pleasant room with small steel-casement windows, a small modern bath. He took off his swimming trunks, showered at length, toweled himself dry and then unpacked. He put the two bottles of Irish atop the bureau, shook the wrinkles out of the Shetland jacket, the faun-colored slacks. He dressed carefully in a creamy linen shirt, maroon tie, cordovan moccasins.

He looked at himself carefully in the mirror as he brushed his hair. It was the standard test. If the face in the mirror were the face of a total stranger, then consumption had been a shade too high. But the face was his. Black, black brows and deep-set dark eyes, and the big nose with the scar on the bridge, and the jutting, black-Irish jaw, blue-shaded by the beard under the fair skin.

When he was ready to go down again, he inspected his hands. The dark grime of his trade was almost gone. A few more days of vacation and it would be. His fingers were long, spatulate at the tip, sensitive looking.

There was a tap at the door. Jackie stood there. She wore a Mexican blouse of lace that revealed her brown shoulders, her midriff bare for four inches above the hand-painted aqua skirt.

"Like it here?" she asked.

"Better than I did a bare ten seconds ago, lass."

"Let's go down and dazzle the people, then."

The others were all gathered. Again

Terence had the impression of watchfulness, quickly concealed. A white-coated man stood behind the portable bar.

"Order what you'd like," Saddock said with a knife-edge smile.

After Jackie took her Martini, Terence ordered a Mahane.

"Sir?" the man said.

"It's made in an old-fashioned glass. Two cubes of ice. Fill with Irish whisky. One tiny twist of lemon peel."

He stood drinking with Jackie. Shaddock came over and Jackie, in response to some signal, drifted away. Shaddock edged Terence over into a corner of the terrace.

"I understand, Mahane, that you are a competent machinist."

TERENCE SAID, "Ah, Joe has been talking to you. He questioned me last night, if I remember correctly. But he disappoints me. He has passed on very little of what I told him. Competent, indeed! I, sir, am the best tool maker, die maker, machinist and specialist in metal-working in the entire United States. Understand, I am not bragging. You wish facts, sir. You have them. For a mere thousandth of an inch, fingers and eyes are good enough. Only for ten thousandths do I need my gauges."

"I don't want to doubt you, Mahane. Why, if that is true, aren't you employed?"

"There is always work for Mahane. I'm on vacation now. I have a great restlessness. 'Tis a curse, sir. When I tire of a place, I move on. I'll never

lack for work. There are thirty great companies whose doors are always open to Mahane."

"It must be nice to be able to set off with your friends on a vacation every time you feel like it."

"Not with friends. Alone. Frankly, I have a bit of trouble keeping friends. I can't stay out of trouble. It is a curse. There's a demon on me. At heart I am a simple, peaceable man. The O'Rourke of Limerick put the demon on my great grandfather. It's been with us ever since."

"Where do you plan to go when your . . . vacation is over?"

"There is a place in Birmingham I thought I might try."

"You've written them, of course."

"Indeed not! When I appear, they will put me on the payroll at no less than four dollars an hour."

"I have a little machine shop here, Mahane. You know, to keep all the pumps and such in repair. My men seem to be stuck on a part that's broken. They can't make a proper replacement."

"Why don't you buy one then?"

"The . . . part we want is no longer manufactured. When Joe mentioned your work, I thought you might be willing to make a stab at it. I'll pay you, of course."

"Nonsense, sir. Your hospitality is pay enough."

"Then would you like to see the problem right now?"

"I would. But I cannot work at it now, you understand. A drunken man must stay away from metal-working."

"You're not drunk."

"I'm not sober."

"Well, come along and take a look."

He walked out beside the small dry figure of Saddock. Joe and Tommy followed them. They walked around the house and across an open space to a good-sized cinderblock building. Saddock unlocked the door and turned on the lights.

Terence stopped six feet inside the door and took a long look around. He whistled softly. "Must be bloody big pumps that need fixing," he said. There were two excellent turret lathes, a milling machine, a planer, a shaper, another lathe, a cutter-grinding attachment for the plain lathe, a big drill press, a small stamping machine, big stock bins full of bar stock, rough castings, forgings, even a set of gauge blocks in a case with automatic temperature control. All of the equipment was sleek and modern, and bolted to concrete. Terence was puzzled. The building and equipment represented, he knew, a minimum investment of half a million dollars. He decided Saddock must be some sort of a crank.

"Where's the part?" he asked.

Saddock went over to a bench and picked it up and handed it to him. It looked like an oversized piston arm. It was beautifully made, and quite obviously a machined forging. One end was cracked.

"What does it go on?" Terence asked.

"I don't think that concerns you, Mahane."

"Don't be a fool, Saddock. If I know the function, I know where I've

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got to keep the tolerances exact. And this thing has been in use. I want to know how long. It may be badly worn and the replacement part may have to be thicker here and here than this is. Obviously, it's a piston arm. A big one. Probably from a diesel."

Joe said, "It is off a diesel. That all you have to know?"

"How long was it in use?"

Joe shrugged. "Ten thousand hours, for a guess."

Terence fingered the crack in the metal. "There was a flaw in the original forging. It cracked along the strain line here. If you want a duplicate, I've got to start from a forged piece. And you haven't got that kind of equipment, even though you've got everything else, almost."

Joe went over to the bins and came back with a forging. It was obviously identical to the original from which the arm had been made. Terence took the two over to a bench. He turned on a small grinding wheel and held the broken arm against it, studied the spark pattern. Then he did the same with the forging.

"Need a lab to make sure," he said, "but I think it's close enough. I don't suppose you've got any heat-treating equipment around. It'll have to be heat treated after it's machined."

"We've got heat-treating equipment," Joe said.

"How long will it take you?" Saddock said impatiently.

Terence shrugged. "The actual machining, only four or five hours. But I've got to make the setups on the equipment. This is hard stuff.

Special stuff. Maybe I'll break a few cutters. Two days ought to do it. And then it may be no good. I can't make a good estimate of the wear on it. Now, if you had the prints . . ."

"We haven't," Saddock said quickly.

"And if I had my own gauges, I could work faster."

"They're here," Joe said. He pointed.

Terence looked over and saw his familiar tool box under the next bench. He went to it, lifted the lid and looked in at the neat alignment of his own tools and gauges. They gleamed with oil.

He straightened up. "Isn't that a little unusual?"

Saddock gave Joe a hard glance and said, "Sorry, Mahane. We took the liberty of assuming you'd be glad to help us. So we checked you out of your room. Your other suitcase is in the house."

CHAPTER 2

Slave Labor

TERENCE WAS silent a moment, eyeing the three of them. "How green do I look?" he asked softly. "And I don't mean Irish green. What kind of a dirty underhand business is this with a half million and more of tools and equipment on your island, Mr. Saddock? When you met me yesterday, why didn't you ask me to come out and bring my tools? No, you had to do it in this sneaky way, tossing Irish whisky and leggy women at my

head. Let's drop the guard, boys. What's this piston arm for?"

"You'll make the part and make it right, Mahane, and you won't ask any more questions," Saddock said.

"And that shows you how wrong a man can be. Saddock. Mahane is leaving."

Saddock stepped aside. "Take him, Tommy."

The wild glee of battle flared up in Terence Mahane's brain. It mattered nothing to him that Tommy shuffled forward with the easy, relaxed competence of an old pug. Mahane had learned two trades. The first was learned in shops all over the country. The second had been learned in the bars usually found across the streets from said shops.

As Tommy measured him with a long, tapping, exploratory left hand, the right fist cocked, Terence stuck both arms straight up in the air. As he had expected, this made Tommy pause to think. As Tommy's glance shifted up to the empty hands, suspecting the presence of a weapon, Terence kicked Tommy in the pit of the stomach with enormous gusto.

Tommy, with a great grunt, doubled over. Terence locked his fists together and brought them smartly down on the exposed nape of Tommy's neck. Tommy's face hit the floor with a sound like a dropped bag of fresh eggs. Terence felt a sharp disappointment. He shrugged it off and spun, reaching for Joe. But Joe had something in his hand. It was pointed at Terence's belt buckle. It gleamed.

Terence stood with arms out-

stretched, as in a game of charades.

"You have the advantage of me," he said.

"Back up to the bench," Joe said. "Move!"

"Delighted," said Terence. He backed until the bench hit the small of his back. Tommy groaned and lifted his bruised face off the concrete. Saddock, showing little pointed teeth, stepped mincingly around in front of Tommy and kicked him full in the mouth.

"Thomas is having a difficult day," Terence said softly.

Saddock spoke to Joe in a language that was unfamiliar to Terence. Joe replied. Saddock walked out. Joe stood covering Terence.

"Now I'm not a child, lad," Terence said, "even though you're treating me like one. What have we here? The Atlantic Ocean. A vast place. A deep place. We have an island in it. An establishment on the island. And what is the establishment? A base, I should say. A small, well-equipped base. For what, the man says. Why for something that uses a big diesel of foreign design. Is it a bird? No. It's a fish. A big tin fish."

Joe had lost his painted smile. He looked very competent. "It would have been smarter to keep your mouth shut, Mahane. It would have been smarter to act so dumb that Saddock might have risked letting you go. Our machinist had an accident. We've spent ten days on the mainland looking for somebody with machinist's grease on his hands and a competent look. We found you. Now

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you're such a splendid guesser that you're going to get a submarine ride. A long ride. And at the end of the ride you're going to be put in a factory and all that skill of yours will be very useful."

"Slave labor, eh?" Terence said. "They never tried to make a slave out of a Mahane, 'tis easy to see."

"You'll be amazed at how easy you'll break, Mahane."

"Will I, now?" Terence said softly, swinging one leg out and up with all his strength.

The toe of his moccasin chunked nicely against Joe's gun wrist. The gun spun ceilingward. A fraction of a second before it hit the concrete floor, Terence's fist, whipping through a three-foot arc, made of Joe's nose a pretty problem for a plastic surgeon. But Joe, hurtling backward, hit his head against the tool jig on the big turret lathe. It made a sodden sound. He dropped and rolled onto his face. Terence took a look at the back of Joe's head and swallowed hard. A plastic surgeon had just lost a promising customer.

Terence was hunting for the gun when they came through the door. A pack of them. Hard-eyed men in a tantalizingly familiar uniform. One he'd seen in news pictures somewhere.

With a thick-throated yell of combat, Mahane went to work. He dropped the first man on Joe's body, paralyzed the second one with a blow under the heart, and spun over to the bench, grabbing a short length of bar stock. He rang the bar stock off two skulls before one got him around the

middle and another one around the ankles.

As he kicked the lower one loose and jabbed the higher one in the face with the sawed end of the bar, the world went black and a shower of red sparks fled through the blackness. As he mentally decided that a low-carbon steel would make that particular spark pattern, a black submarine took him six miles down and stuffed him head-first into a black mud bank. . . .

MAHANE CAME to. Without opening his eyes he cautiously fingered the lump above and behind his left ear. It had a pulsing throb to it like an unbalanced turbine. With each throb it gave off a shower of hot needles that pieced his eyes from behind.

He felt for his wallet. Still there. His watch was still there. At least he hadn't been rolled this time. And no itching. Must be a nice clean cell. The bunk felt soft. He tentatively opened his eyes. He shut them hard. No jail this time. His room in Mr. Saddock's house.

He sat up, holding his head. He examined his knuckles. His right hand was stiff and so swollen that the individual knuckles were buried. He worked at it and couldn't feel any loose bone chips.

It was night. The bed lamp was on. On the bureau glittered the two bottles of Irish, their dark gleam like a promise of salvation. He was halfway to the bureau when he remembered the look of the back of Joe's head.

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"And such a nice fellow too," he said. "Like a pet tarantula."

He looked into the mirror and found a purple bruise on his cheek. It was painful to the touch. Possibly some more of Saddock's handiwork. He stared ruefully at his favorite jacket. Grease on the shoulder and a tear in the sleeve.

He listened. There was no sound in the house. His wristwatch had stopped at eleven. The windows, as he had suspected, were of the institutional type. Not as flamboyant as bars, but just as effective. The door was heavy and locked on the outside.

He balanced on the balls of his feet and flexed his sore hands. "Slave labor, eh? We shall see, lads and lassies."

He felt alert and rested, in spite of the throbbing lump behind his ear. He uncorked a bottle of Irish, went into the bathroom and, with misty eye, poured seven eights of it down the sink. The remainder he poured on the front of his jacket. It gave off a tantalizing reek. The empty bottle he put on the bed. He loosened his tie and mussed his shirt.

Next he lighted the overhead light and unplugged the bed lamp. Midway along the bed-lamp cord he peeled off the insulation, exposing two bare wires. He placed them between the pillows with great care, in such a way that by pushing either pillow toward the center of the bed, the exposed wires would make contact.

When the stage was set and the bed lamp plugged in again, Mahane be-

gan to sing. A ballad. It was on key. Yet his singing voice had been the focal point of many scenes of violence in the past. It was loud. Very loud. And it had the nerve-shattering quality of a circular saw hitting an unexpected nail in a plank.

His voice drowned the sound of the lock. Saddock, his thin face puffed with sleep, looked angrily in over the shoulder of one of the uniformed men. The man held a big automatic pointed at Terence. He moved into the room and kept a cautious distance from the bed.

"Drunk," Saddock said with disgust. A maroon robe was belted around his spare waist. "Stop singing!" he yelled.

Terence stopped. He kept his face loose and vacuous. "Doan like it, huh? Maybe like this one." He faked a convincing hiccup and broke into *Danny Deever*.

Kit appeared in the doorway. Her hair was tousled. "Can't you make him stop?" she screamed. The man with the gun and Saddock stood helplessly. Kit strode to the bed and hit Terence with a full arm slap. He caught her hand, kissed the palm, beamed up at her and hit the next note with all stops out. He glanced at the location of the bottle and shut his eyes tightly as he sang. Night vision would be a help.

With his elbow he pushed one pillow toward the center. There was a spitting sound and he opened his eyes as the overhead light went out. Grinning, he pounced on the bottle in the dark. He caught it by the

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neck, hurled it at the gunman. It hit with a satisfying chunk. In the same motion he rolled off the bed, returning Kit's slap with an appreciable amount of increment. She screamed as she fell back into Saddock. Terence went out the door, stiff-arming Saddock. A gun boomed behind him in the room.

The hall lights at the bottom of the stairs were still on. As Terence started down he saw Tommy, thickly and whitely bandaged, start up. Terence launched himself feet-first down the stairs. The feet hit Tommy squarely in the chest. He and Tommy landed in a tangled mass in the lower hallway. Tommy lay limply across Terence's thighs. Terence was scrambling up when . . .

Terence came to in his bed. He fingered his head cautiously. There was a second lump an inch from the first one. This second one had broken the skin. His hair was matted with dried blood. Dawn was gray outside.

He stood up, cursing blackly. Locked in again.

The house had settled down. He grinned. "Time for them to be up," he said.

He went into the small bathroom, put his back to the sink, got his hands under the edge and pulled hard. After a few minutes of straining effort, the sink tore free from the wall. Water spouted from the ripped pipes. He picked the sink up in his arms and staggered into the bedroom with it. He got over near the door, faced the windows and started to run in heavy-footed fashion. Water was hissing and

steaming in the bathroom. By the time the sink hit the window it had gotten up a nice momentum. The glass smashed and the steel strips bent outward, one of them breaking. The next run would do it.

He searched his pockets. They'd emptied them. A fire would be nice. He took the paper lining out of the bureau drawers, crumpled it, ruined another lamp cord. The short hissed and sputtered and the paper caught. When it was going nicely, he fed it a pillow case. As soon as that was burning, he draped a sheet over it. The smoke was heavy. On the next plunge the sink went through the window. He heard it thud onto the yard below.

The smoke made him cough. People were running up and down the corridor, yelling excitedly. He crawled cautiously through the shattered window and dropped to the ground. He raced for the steps leading down to the jetty. The cruiser was at the jetty. He cast off the bow line and was fumbling with the stern line when a floodlight snapped on, blinding him.

A voice called out in a foreign language. Then Saddock called from the shadows, "Drop that rope and put your hands up, Mahane. I've got a rifleman here. If I have to order him to kill you, I will."

TERENCE SIGHED heavily. He could still hear excited shouts from within the house. A red glow came from the west windows, pinking the trees. The floodlight had turned the pallid dawn back to night.

They came down cautiously and

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bound his wrists behind him. Terence sighed again and kicked the nearest one off the jetty into the water. Two of them held him and a stocky one went to work on his middle with fists like boulders. Terence writhed and the world blackened and finally the blows seemed to come from a great distance, the pain muffled, like far-off cries in the night.

They took him to the shop and the middle of him was one vast growing pain. Each breath hurt. They tied his ankles and rolled him under a bench.

"Can you hear me?" Saddock called from a million miles away.

"Yes, I'm sorry to say," Terence grunted weakly.

"That was a sample, Mahane. You'll do the work you were brought here for. Every time you act up you'll get another dose."

He heard their heels on the concrete as they walked out. He tried to wiggle into an easier position. He found that they'd taken the end of the line that was around his wrists and fastened it to one of the bench supports, an iron pipe.

At ten o'clock, moving like an old man, his shoulders hunched against the dull ache of his battered stomach, Terence Delaney Mahane began the first cut on the rough forging. The metal peeled back from the cutting edge, wet with the flow of coolant he focused on the cutting point.

When Saddock came in to inspect progress, Terence sniffled and pleaded, "Look, don't let them hit me any more. I'll do just as you say, sir."

Saddock smiled thinly. "Your type breaks the quickest, Mahane."

"Yes sir," Terence said. "I've got an awful misery in my middle. Hands like stones he had."

"How is it going?"

"You can see for yourself, sir."

"I want it exactly right, Mahane. I've gotten the drawings. They're over on the bench."

"Thank you, sir," Terence said. He shuffled over to the bench. The drawings were on the metric scale. The foreign designations were undecipherable. But an engineering blueprint is an international language in itself. There were four prints of the part and one showing it in assembly.

Saddock asked, "Does that help you?"

"A great deal. It will go faster."

Jackie came in. She wore slacks and a sweater. She wavered as she walked.

"Get out of here!" Saddock snapped.

"Oh, don't be like that," she said, loose-lipped. "I wanted another look at the wise guy."

"Take a good look, lass," Terence said. He sighed. "And he's not as wise as he was, and that's the truth."

"Go back to the house," Saddock said.

She wavered closer, stumbled and fell against the bench. She clawed at Terence for support. Saddock pulled her away. Terence palmed the tiny wad of paper she had thrust into his hand. Saddock pushed Jackie roughly, and she snarled at him and walked out with enormous and precarious dignity.

"I've got to study the prints, sir," Terence said. He hunched over the bench. Saddock watched him for a long time and then walked out. Terence took the wad of paper and spread it out.

Work slowly. Don't make any more trouble. Spoil one if you think you can get away with it. I'm a plant. If you give me away, we're both through. Swallow this.

He slipped the paper into his mouth and swallowed it. He glanced at the two armed guards. They were relaxed, but they never took their eyes from him.

He worked steadily for the rest of the day. Two meals were brought to the shop. The guards were changed. Slowly the piston arm took shape. Saddock made frequent inspection trips, and he seemed pleased with the progress, and amused at the humility of Mahane.

At ten at night he said that he was too sleepy to continue. A cot was placed in a corner of the shop. A light hung over the cot. A new guard took his position in a chair ten feet away, a gun in his lap. Terence tried to speak to him. The guard spoke no English. Terence looked moodily at the square peasant's face, turned over and went to sleep.

By noon of the next day the part was ready for heat-treating. They took Terence to a small building nearby. The equipment was good, the oil bath electrically heated, the thermostat controls delicate and automatic.

He put the shining new part on the rack, and waited for the oil to reach the proper temperature. When it had, he lowered the part into the oil. At the end of the proper period he lifted it out on the rack, swung it into the mouth of the small electric furnace and heated it to the proper temperature. Then he swung it back into the oil. There was a certain pride in being able to meet the exact specifications of the drawings.

Saddock said, "Ah, so it's done!"

"Not yet. According to the prints I've got a few more operations. Not more than two hours work, sir."

He took it back to the shop, used clamps to devise the jig he wanted and took it over to the big drill press.

CHAPTER 3

Ten to One

AT THREE in the afternoon the brass arrived, resplendent in uniforms and medals. Terence stood respectfully to one side while the one he imagined was the engineering officer inspected the part. The man checked the drawings, used Terence's gauges to check the replacement part. They talked to each other and to Saddock in the language Terence couldn't understand.

The officer nodded at last and threw one of Terence's gauges carelessly in the direction of the bench. It fell to the concrete floor. Terence stifled his cry of rage and contented himself with placing a Mahane curse on the man that would follow his great-grand-

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children's children to their graves.

Saddock smiled at Terence. "A good thing, Mahane, that you didn't attempt any sabotage. You wouldn't have been given a second chance."

"I do as I'm told," Terence said humbly, his eyes on the floor.

Saddock spoke to the officers in their own language. Terence saw their look of sudden alarm, saw it gradually fade. He wondered what was up. Saddock went to the shop door and called. Two of the uniformed sailors came in, each one holding one of Jackie's wrists. Her face was pale, her chin high. They marched her up to the group.

One of the officers looked her over as though he were buying cattle. She neither shrank away nor changed expression. The officer dug one of his companions with his elbow and they all laughed at what he said.

Saddock smiled at the girl. "You've been very brave, very clever and very foolish, my dear. My friends are going to take you on their voyage. For your information, they're leaving within the next fifteen minutes. And they have aboard all the information you people are trying the hardest to keep them from obtaining."

The girl looked at the new part Terence had made. She glanced over at him. "You made it for them, did you?"

"As best I knew how," Terence said.

Her mouth twisted. "I should have known you were all brag on the surface and nothing underneath. You've done as much damage as three of their divisions could do, Mr. Mahane."

"They had me," he said. "What could I do?"

She looked away from him, as though he were an object too contemptible for further inspection. The engineering officer left with the heavy part.

"Am I going too, sir?" Terence asked Saddock humbly.

"Yes. I told you before, Mahane. They need trained technicians like you. You'll be well fed and you'll have a warm place to sleep. But don't expect any luxury."

"Yes, sir," Terence said.

THEY WERE taken outside, the two of them; left with a close guard. From the brow of the hill they could see the bay. The breath caught in Terence's throat as he saw the massive gray conning tower, the schnorkel tube, the heavy gun on the bow. Sailors were on the weather deck, tiny figures in the afternoon sunlight. The dread gray beast rose and fell gently in the swells, like some obscene animal of the deeps that had risen into the daylight for the first time. There was no ship on the horizon.

The cabin cruiser went alongside and tiny figures climbed aboard.

"Installation of the part will take only fifteen minutes or so," Terence said.

The girl gave him a frosty look. One of the guards said, "Shut mouth!"

The cruiser turned and sped back. Another contingent of sailors was waiting on the jetty. They climbed aboard and were sped out to the waiting submarine.

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Saddock came out, rubbing his hands, looking around him, like a householder ready to leave on vacation. He came up the slope toward them.

"They'll take you out on the next trip, the last trip. Bon voyage."

"Thank you, sir," Terence said in his new meek voice.

"You won't get away with it," Jackie said bluntly. "They know about the island. They should be here by now."

"Didn't you know, my dear? My work here is done. I'm going along too. So is Lanfer. Joe is dead. We're leaving Tommy, Harch and the girls to face the music. And I'm sure there will be music to face. They should have thought about that music when they let me buy their loyalties so cheaply. Come on, now. The cruiser is headed back. We'll meet it at the jetty. The others think I'm merely seeing you off. Lanfer is down there already."

Terence managed to get his lips close to Jackie's ear. "Faint when I cough," he whispered.

"What did you say to her?" Saddock demanded.

"I didn't hear whatever he said," Jackie said, "and I have no interest in it, whatever it might be."

"Don't condemn the boy," Saddock said. "There was nothing he could do but cooperate. You made your mistake, Miss Holton, when you tried to use my sending set."

"I used it," she said.

"But you don't know if anyone heard you, and if they did, we'll be

gone before they arrive. Please walk a little faster."

Terence wondered if she had heard him. It might make a great deal of difference.

After a night's sleep he felt as though he had the strength of ten. One thing was very certain. He had no intention of boarding anybody's submarine. The three guards wore holstered automatics. Two of them carried carbines of foreign make. All three of them, despite underwater pallor, looked as hard as weathered wood.

Jackie went ahead. Saddock was a step behind her. One guard was almost beside Saddock. Next came Terence, with the last two guards a full two paces behind him.

Midway down the concrete steps he caughed. He watched the tall blonde girl narrowly. She stopped and weaved. Saddock made an exclamation and reached for her. She fell away from him, over onto the bank beside the steps. Terence stopped. One of the rear guards brushed by him, leaving only one behind him.

As the three men bent over the girl, Terence spun like a black cat. He slapped his left hand down on the barrel of the guard's carbine and yanked. The startled guard tried to cling to the gun. That was a mistake, and one that Terence had hoped he would make. The yank pulled him forward, off balance. Terence, in deference to his sore knuckles, sank his right fist up to the wrist in the guard's middle as the man fell forward. Terence moved to the side, yanking the

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carbine free from the hands that had gone suddenly slack, letting the man have room to skid down the concrete on the bridge of his nose.

There was no time to reverse the carbine. He leaped down toward the other three, swinging it in a whistling circle around his head, yelling, "Up, Mahane!"

THE NEAREST guard turned in time to catch it across the eyes, a sickening blow that belted him off the steps and into a death that came before he ceased rolling. The other guard's reflexes were better. He scrambled beyond the girl, yanking his automatic from the holster.

Terence kept coming, his insides crawling in anticipation of the lead slug. Jackie kicked the man's arm as he leveled the automatic, and Terence gave him no chance to bring it back down into a reasonable line of fire. He struck like a man killing snakes and, whirling to see where Saddock had gotten to, noted with approval that Jackie was scrambling toward the dropped automatic.

Saddock, screaming thinly, was running down the steps toward the waiting military figure of the one called Lanfer. The cabin cruiser was swinging in toward the jetty, engine in reverse, water bubbling wildly astern.

Terence saw the sailor in the cockpit, saw his startled, vacant expression, saw the automatic weapon he was unslinging from his shoulder. He reversed the carbine, set his cheek against the splintered stock and put

three shots into the round face. The sailor plunged forward and hung over the rail like a wet rag, the weapon sinking immediately, blood falling in thick drops to the churning water.

The explosion at his elbow made Terence jump. He looked down and saw Jackie holding the automatic in both hands, her eyes squeezed shut, the barrel pointing in the general direction of Lanfer. A slug whined in ricochet off the concrete steps from Lanfer's gun. Saddock wavered and turned, and as Terence aimed at Lanfer, he saw the back of Saddock's head disintegrate from the impact of the slug from Jackie's unaimed weapon.

"Up, Mahane!" he roared again. He shot at Lanfer's belt buckle and as the man bowed with a certain amount of stiff military dignity, he put the second slug in the top of his head. Jackie's weapon clicked dryly. Harch ran through the cockpit and dived off the far side, making swimming motions before he hit the water.

As Terence was waiting for Harch to reappear beyond the boat, several hot busy items chuffed by through the air and hit the bank with a sound like a post-hole digger. On the heels of the noise came the hard rattle of an automatic weapon far out in the bay.

He grabbed Jackie by the wrist and, ignoring the steps, plunged up the bank. She fell at the crest. He dragged her for three more steps, then dived, pulling her along with him, holding her flat to the ground. Beyond them a great iron fist struck

the house and splinters whined through the air.

Jackie lay gasping, fighting for breath. There was a large smudge of dirt on her cheek.

"Stay down and keep your eyes shut, lass. That's a nice weapon they have out there. They probably watched us through glasses and saw the slaughter."

Glass exploded out of the house and, stretched out on his back, Terence saw the whip-flash of tracers streaming by. They ceased and he heard a distant siren. Cautiously he raised his head so that he could look over the crest of the bank. Uniformed men were popping into the conning tower. Water was cresting white at the bows of the sub. She was turning away from the island, out toward the open sea.

As he watched he saw her nose down. The last of the men disappeared. The narrow deck was awash and the base of the conning tower made its own wake. Then that went quickly down out of sight. The last thing visible was the schnorkel tube and then that too was gone.

Jackie sat up. "It's gone!"

"That I should call a true statement, darlin'. They left in a helluva hurry, as though something had alarmed the little lads."

He helped her to her feet. She looked at him and snatched her hand away. "They're gone, thanks to you, Mahane."

"Not aboard, are you?"

"I almost wish I were."

Tommy came out of the house. Kit

was with him. They walked on their toes, their knees bent. They shook visibly. Maria and Alice and three servants in white coats stumbled out after them. Kit looked over the bank and promptly dissolved into hysterics. Terence handed the carbine to Jackie, thumped his right fist into his left palm twice, and started toward Tommy.

Tommy stood his ground for only two seconds. Then he turned and started to run.

"Stop that nonsense," Jackie commanded. "All of you. Line up there against the side of the house. You too, Mahane!"

Mahane did as he was bid. He held his hands over his head and winked broadly at Jackie Holton.

"Wipe off that smirk, Mahane," she said.

Kit stood beside Mahane. She wept, making little animal sounds in her throat. Tommy stood beyond Kit and beside the three servants. Alice and Maria stood at the ends of the line, their faces sullen.

"A nice little group," Jackie Holton said with deep contempt. "A Federal court will take care of you."

Terence squinted at the horizon. "Don't look now, darlin'," he said, "but there's a destroyer steaming up behind you."

Jackie gasped and spun around to stare at the ship growing visibly at its forty-knot speed. As she stood there, her back to the lineup, Kit darted for her. Terence took one quick step and swung his foot in an arc close to the ground. It clipped

Kit's feet out from under her and she fell with an audible thud.

CHAPTER 4

Luck of the Irish

AFTER THE launch came smartly up to the jetty, the entire affair was taken over by a group of sleek young men in civilian clothes and a group of sleeker young men in uniform. They all had the solemn and defeated look of duck hunters who discovered at daylight that they've built the blind in the wrong place.

To his relief Mahane was able to lower his weary arms. He was even able to bum a cigarette from one of the civilians, in spite of the man's cold-eyed look of contempt.

When at last they permitted him to enter the study that had been set aside as a place of investigation, he found three of the civilians, one be-braided officer and Miss Holton staring at him coldly.

"This one," she said, "was not part of the ring. His name is Terence Mahane. He's an itinerant mechanic, possibly a good one. They picked him up on the mainland, got him drunk and brought him out here to make the part they needed."

"Sit down, Mahane," the eldest civilian said.

Terence sighed. "Thank you, sir. I'm a bit weary." He sat down.

Miss Holton said, "Mahane put up a certain amount of resistance. Also, he rescued me when they were going to take us aboard. But that's of little

importance compared with the way he helped them by making the part they wanted. I'd like to see him punished some way for knuckling under to them."

The civilian's eyes widened. "The fighting was only this man against all of them? We've counted ten bodies in all!"

"Let me see now," Terence said, counting on his fingers and looking at the ceiling. "I got Joe and one other in the squabble in the machine ship."

"Joe and two others," Jackie said. "The second man didn't die until today. And you killed another one in the bedroom with the bottle."

"Ah, did I now! And that makes the total. Four, plus the six we got an hour or so ago, darlin'."

"We got?" she said.

"Tut, no false modesty, lass. Didn't I see you blow off the back of poor little Mr. Saddock's skull?" He smiled pleasantly at her as she turned green around the mouth.

"Quite a remarkable showing, Mr. Mahane," the civilian said.

Terence looked at his fingernails. "They shouldn't have annoyed Mahane."

"Oh, you talk big now," Jackie said hotly. "You had another tune a while ago."

"You made them a part that was according to specifications?" the officer asked, his voice harsh.

"Well, I'd say the outside specifications matched up nicely. I thought they'd measure the finished product, so I couldn't do anything crude."

"What are you trying to say?"

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"I'll say nothing if you use the edge of your tongue on me, man. I'm not in your bloody little tin-can navy."

The civilian gave the officer a warning look. "Please, Mr. Mahane. Will the part you made work properly?"

"It will, for a time."

"Then what will happen?"

"After I heat-treated it for hardness, I used the biggest drill I could find and I put a big hole up through it, but not big enough to make it too light. Then I filled the hole with about two pounds of chips, shavings and steel bits. I sealed the hole with a soft plug that should melt after a while at operating temperature. A sad thing to do to a fine engine. Metal has no politics, you know. Once the plug melts and all that hardware starts churning through the engine, they'll need more than a new piston arm, believe me."

The officer jumped up. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"What makes you so excitable, man? Nobody asked me."

"How long would the engine run after it was started?"

Terence frowned. "A hard question to answer. Not less than twenty minutes, I'd say but probably not more than forty."

The officer turned to the civilians. "I'm going back aboard. That'll leave them somewhere along the channel. The drawings indicate it was their big compressor that gave out. None of the hydraulic gear will work. They can either surface or sit on the bottom for a few days to be safe."

"What are your orders?" the civilian asked.

The officer smiled. "I can't tell you that. All I know is that the Bureau issued us some new sound equipment to test, and some new depth charges that they want reports on. We just have to find a nice quiet hunk of ocean and let 'em go."

"Damn bad luck if anybody should happen, by accident, to be sitting on the bottom right there, eh?"

The officer tugged at his cap, settling it firmly. "It certainly would be tough," he said, heading for the door. "And we wouldn't know a thing about it until the oil started coming up, would we?"

He slammed the door on the way out.

"Terence," Jackie said softly, "I'm very, very sorry."

The civilian coughed loudly. "You must understand, Mr. Mahane, that for the record, your stay here on the island has been nothing but what you thought it would be in the beginning. A house party. In spite of the nation's great debt to you in this matter, the whole thing is so delicate that we couldn't possibly let a word of it leak out. I feel that . . . Say, aren't *either* of you listening?"

THEY SAT at a table for two in the bar lounge of the hotel. Candlelight was soft on her face. "This is the last night of my leave, Terry," she said.

"Lass, I detest any shortening of my name. Call me Terence."

"All right, Irish. Terence it is.

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Terence Delaney Mahane. I don't want to leave you. I'm afraid that after I've been given a new assignment, I'll begin to think you're a mythical creature. A legend."

"Lass, haven't you had enough proof of my reality?"

"Almost enough," she said. "What are you going to do, Terence?"

"Take the rest of my vacation. I promised myself a full month."

"Won't you miss me?"

"Of course, lass. Of course."

She glanced in her mirror. "Goodness! I need a new face. Back in a minute, Terence."

He watched her walk away from the table. A lovely lilting walk on the lass. He finished his drink and poured another. He looked over at the bar. A dark-haired girl with nice shoulders was staring up into the face of a florid, white-haired man.

"Sure now," Terence said softly, "An old goat taking up the time of that entrancing bit." He walked a careful straight line to the bar, ending up between them.

"Miss," he said, ignoring the heated look of the companion, "we've a convertible in now in that color you said you liked."

The girl frowned prettily. Terence winked at her. The florid man said, "Karen! You haven't been looking at cars."

"If you're staying here, I could bring it around at two tomorrow afternoon," Terence said quickly.

"See here," the florid man said. "Sell your damn automobiles during business hours, young man."

"Don't be a bear, Harold," Karen said. "He's just trying to make a living. Yes, I'd like to see a convertible in that color, Mr.—"

"Mahane. Terence Delaney Mahane."

"Give me a ring on the house phone. Room Ten-twelve. Miss Willoughby."

The florid man made the mistake of putting his hand on Terence's shoulder and yanking hard. Terence went wildly off balance as he spun around. He raised his hand to save himself and it spat off the florid man's nose. As he staggered to catch his balance, he trod heavily on the big man's polished instep and inadvertently tilted the man's drink down the front of him. Terence, with profuse apologies, brushed the man off with more gusto than necessary.

"At two tomorrow, Miss Willoughby," Terence said with a bow.

Jackie came back soon. She sat down. "You'll see me off on the plane tomorrow?"

"Of course, darlin'."

She patted his hand. He smiled at her. He was full of a warm dreamy glow. She had convexities and concavities, arranged with precision, abundance and neatness. He decided he was very fond of her. So fond, in fact, that he was going to try to remember her name all by himself instead of asking her. He seemed to remember meeting her on a blue navy blanket on somebody's boat.

Ah, well, he thought, 'tis a blessing that you can call them all lass if you don't know them, and darlin' if you do. ♠ ♠ ♠

Detective literature abounds with amateur sleuths who turned pro because of their success at solving crimes, but to our knowledge Mr. Jake Worley, whom you'll meet below, is the only one who became a private eye because of a lack of success in the plumbing business. Guns were more in his line than pipes, he felt, even before he discovered that a neat little murder frame was making him his own best client. We predict that you will agree Jake's change of professions was a happy one when you read E. O. Umstead's thoroughly delightful and zany tale.

THE QUICK AND THE DEADLY

by E. O. UMSTEAD

WHEN A doctor bursts his appendix, he calls in another doctor to operate. When a lawyer stands charged with murdering his mother-in-law, say, he entrusts his case to a fellow lawyer. But Jake Worley did not hire another detective when he got into trouble.

There wasn't another in Spring Center, for one thing, and anyway Jake could not have raised the fee for it to save his neck. His hide rather, Jake thought to himself, for that state favored the electric chair.

Fact was, things didn't look so black for Jake at first. Just puzzling. And Jake Worley liked a puzzle no end. That was why he had quit being

a plumber and turned private dick. People were more puzzling than pipes any day.

Jake's office was in the swanky Professional Arts Building. You had to make a show to get business, didn't you? He had one room on the second floor and an arrangement with Dr. Lowe, the dentist across the hall, to pay Lowe's phone bill in exchange for the services of Lowe's office girl. This girl—Margie Kern her name was—would call Jake to the phone and if he was out somewhere she took the message for him.

The entire setup was very satisfactory, Jake often congratulated himself, except that it cost rather

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more than he could afford, which was really what got him into this trouble.

Lawyer Henry Clay McEwen's suite was next to Dr. Lowe's dental office. McEwen owned an interest in the building and handled all the rents. He was the town's biggest lawyer and incidentally a first-class collector. He always tried to collect with a joke if he could, because lawyers don't like to make enemies and he was good-natured besides. He didn't know, of course, how Jake Worley was about jokes.

Jake was twenty-seven. Big, stringy, freckled, sandy-haired. A hitch in the Navy had left him pin-neat by habit and a pipe-fitter by trade. Spring Center was being piped for gas at the time his enlistment ended, so he'd come here a stranger and opened a plumbing shop.

As the gas-fitting business slacked off, Jake's old interest in crime detection revived. In the Navy he had not seen as much of the world as you might expect, if you've never been in, but he'd read lots of detective stories.

So now he took to hanging around the sheriff's office, seeing crime movies, and finally he changed jobs. Understand, it wasn't a silly move; he'd already handled a few cases his friend the sheriff had thrown his way, and he was certainly going broke where he was.

JAKE HAD six dollars left this day McEwen dunned him, and he told the lawyer so. McEwen made his joke then.

"Our big fine detective, all full of bravery," he said. "Or is it perhaps full of movies?"

Jake did not laugh. His wide, homely mouth didn't even crinkle, but likely it wouldn't have even if the joke had been quite funny. This failing was not Jake's fault. Things that set others roaring with merriment rarely tickled him at all. He couldn't see them. Of course he could tell when he was supposed to laugh: usually the guy telling the joke laughs, as McEwen had done this time; but Jake preferred to laugh when he saw something funny—which only happened about once a year.

Now the biggest lawyer in a town of eleven thousand does not want his jokes ignored. McEwen figured Jake was being nasty. One word brought on another, and finally Jake lifted McEwen and dropped him into the hall. Not roughly but definitely. He was sorry for it when he cooled off; McEwen was all of fifty and not half bad, to boot. Sorry even before what happened that night.

Jake went up to his office about eight p.m. He had no set hours. It was the last of the month, November, and lots of the offices flanking the hall showed lights. Jake wished he had statements to mail, too. He was unlocking his door when Margie Kern stuck her blonde head into the hall and called him about a phone message.

Jake entered the dentist's reception room warily. Maybe this was another of Margie's ruses. A nice kid Margie

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was, with big blue eyes, a trim figure and a throaty voice that made him nervous. Jake knew she could have her pick of guys in town. So why was she always pestering him to take her places? Jake Worley was leery of girls.

But it turned out Margie did have a message. Jake called the number back, and some irate housewife wanted him to investigate a case of chicken-stealing. Sheriff Bascom had recommended Jake, the woman said. The work did not sound promising, but Jake said he'd come right out there.

"What are you doing afterwards?" Margie asked when he hung up the receiver. "I'll finish these statements around nine-fifteen and there's a film at the Roxy about a boy and a girl . . ."

She kept on talking. She edged between Jake and the hall door. After several minutes of this steady stream of gab, Dr. Lowe came in. Tall, maybe thirty, handsomely dressed, he removed some dental plates from a cabinet, laid them on a briefcase he carried and turned into his laboratory. "Wish she'd fall for me like that," he cracked good-humoredly, which rattled Margie so her face got red, and gave Jake his chance to escape. . . .

Jake returned about an hour later. He was wondering at all the strange people in the hall when Sheriff Bascom called him into the dental office and shut everyone else out. Around forty-five, Bascom was a beefy, shaggy-browed officer who'd

been sheriff for years. Jake Worley knew that if he made a success as a private dick, he'd owe much to tips and advice he constantly received from this fatherly, sincere cop.

"I need your help," Bascom said. "No money in it, Jake, but you'll be interested."

"A case, huh, Sheriff?"

"Murder. Somebody's knifed Lawyer McEwen in his office. I'll give you the setup."

Dr. Lowe and Miss Margie Kern had worked tonight; maybe Jake knew. Dr. Lowe heard a crash. He was in his laboratory, next to McEwen's suite, and knowing about the lawyer's chronic dizzy spells he'd gone next door to investigate.

McEwen lay on the floor. He'd been stabbed in the chest and was all bloody. He'd knocked some books off a table as he fell; they'd made the noise. He was still conscious, working his mouth, trying to talk apparently.

"Dr. Lowe tried to give him some water," the sheriff said. "McEwen couldn't drink. He mumbled a few words, then slumped down. Lowe pounded the partition for Miss Kern, who ran over there. They phoned me."

"Hmm," said Jake. "You suspect Dr. Lowe?"

"No, the knife's gone. Lowe was just in there a few seconds. He didn't have time, even if he'd had a motive."

"Yeah," Jake said. "Yeah, motive." A delicious tingle passed up his spine. His first murder case. Sheriff Bascom, an old head, was consulting him, Jake

Worley. He'd have to come through. "Have we got a suspect with a motive?"

"Cullen Green." Sheriff Bascom hesitated. "You know Green, I guess. When he's not fishing, he's trying to make folks think he's a big shot. That's his one ambition. Last week McEwen joked him about it in public. They say Cullen Green got so mad he threatened to kill McEwen."

"Good. Anyone else?"

"Yep, Maurice De Salle. Leastways, that's what he calls himself. The stranger who's in town planning to sell carburetor gadgets. To squeeze seventy miles out a gallon of gasoline. McEwen swore out a warrant for him this morning for swindling. De Salle's been missing ever since."

Jake nodded. "Okay, two suspects to work on."

"No, three." Sheriff Bascom scratched his tufted ear. "Didn't you have trouble with McEwen yourself today, Jake?"

The plumber-detective blinked. "Why, that was over my office rent. Even with him dead I'd still owe it, wouldn't I? The argument was motive for the scuffle we had but, gosh, not murder."

Sheriff Bascom's eyes were troubled. "I'd agree if it wasn't for this other. What McEwen said, just as he died. He said: 'Worley's funny knife.'"

Jake Worley's hands began to sweat. He passed his tongue over his wide lips.

"Understand," Bascom went on, "McEwen didn't say you did it. Got

any idea what he meant—your funny knife?"

Jake said: "I don't own any knife."

Sheriff Bascom sighed. "I reckon you couldn't make much of a bond. Some folks are wanting you arrested, but you couldn't help yourself much in jail. So I'm leaving you free, Jake. Unless we can find a killer you're in kind of a jam."

IT WAS a worried Jake who went into McEwen's office alone then. Nothing had been touched, the sheriff said, except that the body was gone. There was a blood spot on the rug, with three fallen lawbooks beside it, one asplit. A half glass of water stood on a table close by.

Jake looked around the big room. Shiny desk, thick costly furniture, filing cabinets, shelves of books ceiling high. A thumb bolt was visible on the door to the rest of the suite; apparently there had been occasions when McEwen wished to insure privacy from his own office force. The bolt was shot now.

Jake examined the single window, over the lighted street. A score of curious people gazed up at him. The window was latched. He did not doubt that the killer had departed through the hall door; he was thinking of the knife. And of Dr. Lowe; he wanted to rule the dentist out of the case.

The knife was gone. The sheriff had examined this room, and the whole suite, book for book, article by article, high and low, and it wasn't here. If the killer was someone be-

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sides Lowe, of course he'd carried the knife away with him. But Lowe couldn't have done so because he hadn't had time. If he had tossed the knife out of the window, some of those people below would have found it before now. And Lowe didn't have it on him; he'd insisted the sheriff search him. And it wasn't in the long hall outside. So Lowe was out.

Jake sighed. It was one thing to say who had not committed murder. It was another to say who had. Some people said Jake Worley had.

Margie Kern came in, shut the hall door quickly. "Oh, Jake, we've got to do something." She perched on the desk, spread a stenographer's notebook. "Look, you examine the room and dictate what you find to me, and I'll write it in shorthand—like the movies."

Jake stared around. "I don't see anything to dictate." His glance stopped on the half-filled glass. "This the water Lowe tried to make him drink?"

She nodded rapidly. "I'm so worried about you—about us, Jakie."

Jake winced. One thing about Margie, she was neat. Nails, hands, face, clothes, all shipshape. Pretty, too, but so darn persistent. Jake wondered what she saw in an ugly mutt like him, for evidently she did see something. Maybe it was just because he didn't give her any encouragement. Well, the fact was he was kinda scared of her.

Dr. Lowe came in. He had nice teeth to advertise his business but he did not show much of them now.

Sober-faced. "Sorry, Jake. What else could I do but tell what McEwen said? But the words don't make sense; he was probably delirious."

"It was all you could do, doc."

Jake liked Lowe. There was a guy starting in his profession the right way. A swell office-reception room, chair room and laboratory—first-class equipment, clothes like a millionaire. People liked to trade with a prosperous fellow like Lowe, even though he hadn't made his dough in his profession. He would. Patients were already flocking in, and Lowe hadn't been in town six months.

Jake didn't envy Lowe. He just wished he too could start business with money and clothes and stuff that way. It would save you years in working up a clientele.

"How long after I left your office," Jake asked him, "did you hear the racket and come in here?"

"How long, Marge? Five minutes?"

"Hmm," Jake said uncomfortably. "Just time for me to kill him and beat it."

Shortly after noon next day Jake entered the local hotel. He eased into a certain lobby chair and, noticing that dust had collected on his right shoe's instep, he rubbed it against his left trouser-leg till the leather bore its neat, wonted shine. Then he unobtrusively spread a newspaper before his face.

Pretty soon, over the paper top, he saw the dining room door open and Cullen Green came in picking his teeth. Fiftyish, red-faced, Green had his coat open and you saw how his

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straining belt supported a paunch that must have sent his weight over two hundred. With stately tread he made a ceremony of crossing the lobby. He sank into the easy chair Jake knew was his favorite and eyed a little man in the next chair.

"Don't believe I've seen you around," Cullen Green offered.

"Salesman. Peddle farm machinery. I'm new. Nice day."

Green removed a pearl-gray hat, slightly worn at the creases, and leaned his large head back against his chair. "I'm a farmer myself. Folks call me a gentleman farmer," he added with an indulgent chuckle. "Got me a little two-section cotton patch."

Jake peeped around his paper. So Green was a big planter now. Last time Jake witnessed this act, Green was a wealthy dry-goods merchant. Only that time Green's listener had been a straw hat salesman.

The little salesman sat up. "Two sections? That's some cotton patch. Say, maybe we could get together, sir. Plows, harrows, drills, that's my line."

Green waved expansively. "You can't tell. Like I said to my brother—he's a bank president in Memphis (that's a lie, too, Jake thought)—I said: "Maybe I'll start buying more of my equipment through traveling men instead of direct from company heads. These drummers have to live."

The drummer gave him a cigar, lit it for him. Asked the name, Green gave his but was vague about the address. He talked about this and

that, the drummer hanging on each word, the point of it all being what a big shot Cullen Green was.

"Porter!" he bawled suddenly. A uniformed boy shuffled up. "Boy, who drinks more liquor'n anybody in this man's town?"

"Mistuh Cullen Green, suh."

"Good liquor? Best there is?"

"Yessuh, yessuh." The porter sidled away. He worked there and Green ate one meal a day there, but he was anxious to go.

"Yes, what?"

"Yes suh." The porter escaped.

The drummer grinned. Cullen Green smirked, raised a brow with studied negligence. "I slip him a pint every day or so to keep him happy. Bonded stuff." He slid a hand inside his coat. "In my other coat, by grabs. You got your bottle?"

Jake got up and stood before them. "Don't let this stumblebum cadge you for drinks," he warned the salesman. "He's got no farm. He gets a pension of fifty a month and lives over a butcher shop. Besides bumming drinks and fishing, he just has one ambition. He'll go any length to make you think he's important. He lives for that. He won't pick local folks; they're hep to him. Just strangers."

Cullen Green was up, dancing with rage. He swung at Jake and missed. "Nobody can insult me and live!" he shouted.

"That's what you told McEwen."

The desk clerk ran over. Lobby sitters perked up. Cullen Green swallowed, turned pale and marched for the street. At the door he turned.

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"That'll cost you plenty, Worley."

AS JAKE walked back to his office a car passed him, stopped, and Sheriff Bascom and his pudgy deputy got out and waited. "We found the knife this morning," Bascom said when Jake caught up. "In the alley. At the other end of the block from the Professional Arts Building."

Jake shook the officer's hand. Now they were getting somewhere. "You're sure it's the one?"

Bascom motioned him over to his sedan, unfolded a towel on the seat and disclosed the knife.

It wasn't a real knife. A narrow rat-tail file with the handle-end stuck into a corncob. A piece of black metal was clamped around the corncob to form a handle. Blood caked the file ridges. It wasn't a knife, but it made a wicked weapon.

Jake whistled softly. "But can we be sure that's McEwen's blood?" He reached out.

Bascom laid a hand on his arm. "Careful, there's fingerprints on that handle. The state trooper checked them for us while ago. Compared several folks' prints we collected. That handle's got your prints on it, Jake. Just yours."

Jake gulped. His throat felt raw. He looked around giddily and was surprised that the people on the street paid him not the slightest attention. Their eyes ought to be popping. The lake at the street's dead end looked as usual, too—a chop out of the long blue lake reflecting dense, orange-colored woods beyond. Phew, his

prints. That sure looked bad for him.

"Reckon I'll have to take you in," Bascom said.

Jake nodded. "Of course I can't help myself much from a jail."

"Reckon there ain't much you could do. Sorry, Jake; I always liked you."

Jake nodded again, soberly, and then began to trot. The sheriff called out and gave chase, his deputy at his heels, and Jake ran faster. Pretty soon they were all three running as hard as they could go.

Jake was young and stringy and fit. His pursuers were flabby and broken-winded, so that when Jake reached the lake, a quarter-mile away, he was well over a hundred yards in the lead.

The lake was three miles long and only two hundred yards wide; he could swim it, and escape through the woods before the officers could circle around the end.

Jake went off a fish dock. The water was cold and had that sulphur taste of all the water around Spring Center. He struck out for the far bank.

They'd taught Jake speed swimming in the Navy, but no swimmer can beat a man on foot. He heard a yell, looked back. The sheriff crouched on the dock about forty yards off. "I'll shoot," he called.

Jake kept splashing. Next thing he heard was a pistol crack. He glanced back just in time to see another blast, and water skipped in a line a foot from his ear. The slug made those skips. Too close for mere warning. Bascom meant to hit him.

Jake dived.

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Of course, Bascom would. A dead earnest man, he'd feel it his duty to stop a fugitive. Jake suddenly remembered something he'd seen in Bascom's office: a silver loving cup won at the last Peace Officers' convention. Bascom was the best police shot in the state. And Jake, winded to start with, needed air badly.

He stuck his head up, saw the gun buck, and dived again with half enough breath. Water with it. He swam froglike, strangling. His clothes bound him, the gun and handcuffs in his pockets dragged.

He wasn't out of range. He needed one good breath first. Jake clawed his pocket, jerked out a handkerchief and kicked to the surface holding the handkerchief above him.

"White flag," he gasped. "I surrender."

He took three wonderful breaths and dived again. It was a dirty trick on Bascom, but he couldn't go to jail. Somebody was out to frame him, send him to the chair. Jake dived quite a way and when he rose he knew he was beyond range.

He hit out for the wooded bank. Unbelieving, he heard a new familiar sound and looked backward. It shot across the lake with its nose up. It slid alongside, a cheap flimsy motorboat. Bascom had his short-barreled gun aimed at Jake's head.

"Don't try to dive," he snapped.

As they hauled him in, Jake looked in the stern. Cullen Green lolled at the tiller, his fishing pole beside him. "Luckily I was handy," he grinned. "You murderer."

WHAT WITH questions and one thing and another, it was after night when they locked Jake in the ancient jail back of the dark courthouse. He had the whole upstairs room, with its dull yellow bulb and barred windows, shadows and—he glanced sideways at a noise—and rats?

He saw he was not alone. A man stepped from a corner.

Small and wiry, sharp-faced, dark, the man looked Jake over at length. "So the sheriff gets the reward." The voice had an accent. "Boy, could I do with that money!"

Jake asked what reward.

The middle-aged stranger laid a finger along a crooked nose. "For catching you, mugg. McEwen's son offered a thousand fish for his old man's murderer. That's you."

"And who the deuce are you?"

"Maurice De Salle. Perhaps you have heard of me?"

Jake had. This bird had been in town a week now. He claimed to have the state franchise for "Gas Giant," a car attachment that would get you seventy miles from one gallon of gasoline. Jake had not seen it work. Not even seen it. Nobody in town had.

De Salle claimed he could not show the gadget till next month, the release date. He'd arrived to train his sales force. He was persuasive. Out-of-work men by the score were plank-ing down the ten-dollar registration and training fee, and De Salle was filling his sock.

He hailed from Louisiana, so he

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said. A French Creole of noble descent. He'd rented a house in Spring Center, shipped in one load of dubious-looking furniture already, was bringing his family next week. He was strictly a family man and also a church man. Last Sunday, Jake knew, he'd made a lay speech from a pulpit and volunteered to take a class in the Sunday school. But now he was in jail.

"So they'll collect a reward on me," Jake said. "And what are you here for—playing marbles?"

"Pah! That McEwen's son. He owns a garage. His customers swarmed him, begged to buy Gas Giants or something similar. So he went to his father, said the Giant's a fake. His father claimed I'm swindling my sales force. He got a warrant out. Fool!"

Jake sat down on a cot. He shifted his handcuffs to a side pocket—Bascom had lifted his gun—so he could sit easier, and said: "You've really got this Gas Giant, huh? Look, I'm a mechanic. Things like that get next to me. Between the two of us, how does your gadget work?"

De Salle's eyes slitted. He flicked a glance through a barred window. "I know about you, copper. Okay, there is no Gas Giant. I've got four hundred in fee-money stashed, and I've been doing some mechanical work myself."

His hand darted and a gun glinted in it. He backed to the wall.

"I am no fool. I heard last night they meant to get after me. I inquired, learned the jail was empty

and isolated. I climbed the porch roof just under this window and left a package in easy reach of the sill but out of sight—just in case. It contained this revolver and certain digging tools.

"I'm going down the porch post," DeSalle said. "In a minute you can follow if you want; I don't mind. But one peep of alarm and I will let you have this."

Jake licked his lips. "Freeing me, too. Maybe it would bother your conscience if I stayed and burned for your kill."

De Salle only growled and stuck a leg through the opening. Jake knew that every crook has plenty in his past he hopes is a secret, and constantly wonders how much of it is known. "Guess where old McEwen got his dope on you, fella," he ventured. "It wasn't just from those gas customers."

De Salle froze. "What are you getting at?"

"Somebody in this town knows plenty about you. You're kind of a hobby with him. You know Cullen Green?"

"That drunk at the hotel? That fat windbag that picked me up my first day here? You mean that rat went to McEwen and—?"

A snarl guttered in his throat and he was gone.

Jake Worley studied the black hole in the wall. A criminal was on the loose. Jake pondered. Should he follow? It wouldn't exactly be jail-breaking; he hadn't dug the hole. And did he need to be free!

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Jake Worley swallowed and crawled inside.

Somewhat later that night Jake unlocked his house door. He listened, locked the door, drew the shades and lit the kitchen light. He choose the kitchen instead of the other room, his bedroom, because it had good, heavy windowshades.

Jake was home for several reasons. He was cold. Also he figured that the cops, if they'd discovered his escape, would not suspect he had the nerve to come home.

But the main reason was that the lake swim had shrunk his cheap suit till he was conspicuous as a scarecrow. He had sleuthing to do tomorrow—on the quiet, of course, and among people who wouldn't know him—and this suit would be a giveaway. Besides, since Navy days he'd never felt quite right unless he was neat. A guy wanted to keep shipshape.

AS HE changed clothes, he thought about the case. Dead McEwen, a killer and Jake Worley; what was the tieup? The killer had purposely thrown blame on him, somehow got his prints and transferred them to the knife. Why? Did the killer want to hurt him personally? Or just needed a scapegoat? Or both?

Jake eyed dishes in the sink. Dirty plate, saucer, cup, glass, knife and fork. He'd never let his dishes stand before. In the hurry to catch Green at the hotel he'd let the noon dishes stand, unwashed and untidy. And what happened? He'd got in jail. Jake guessed there was no connection,

yet he picked up the dish cloth.

Who'd killed McEwen? And why? Of course Dr. Lowe was in the law office alone with him for a moment, but when Margie arrived the knife was gone. A block away. And the dentist had no motive against McEwen or himself, unless—

Jake paused thoughtfully. Unless Lowe could be jealous of the way Margie Kern hung after him.

Hmm. Still, Margie would have mentioned it if Lowe ever made any play for her. Didn't she talk his arm off about everything that happened? No, nothing interested Lowe but his success as a dentist. Besides, you didn't murder an innocent man just to throw blame on another. Maybe in the movies you did, but not in real life.

Jake touched the plate with his finger. Still slick. Cold water didn't cut the grease. He set some water on the gas to boil. Maybe he was crazy to be washing dishes at a time like this, but it gave him something habitual to do with his hands, helped him think.

What about De Salle? McEwen had already sworn out his warrant; De Salle was a fugitive; how could murder help him that late? Revenge?

Hardly, Jake thought. There was no money in revenge. Maybe De Salle figured McEwen was holding back some evidence, though. Something from his past to spring at his trial. After all, lawyers have ways of digging up dirt. Maybe murder was the only way De Salle could spike McEwen's evidence of some bigger

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and deadlier crime than swindling.

Jake dried the cup, picked up the saucer. He was still following this routine habit of his, almost without thinking.

And Green. A guy who lived to impress people because it made him feel big. When strangers took him for a big shot, he actually felt like a big shot instead of just a bum. A guy like that must live in what the papers called a dream world. He'd fight to keep somebody from puncturing it. Kill, maybe.

Jake set the glass down. He poured more hot water over it and dried it a second time. He held it up to the light a bit absently, blinked at it. All at once he dropped it with a crash and fumbled behind the stove. He found a flashlight, switched off the room light and left the house in a hurry.

A few minutes later Jake Worley let himself into an office, swiveled his light beam, began opening and shutting drawers. He found one locked, forced it and directed his beam inside.

He was about to grasp a piece of electric cord in the drawer when he saw the letter-file there. He spread this on a filing cabinet, glanced through several of its letters and said: "Umm." He reached back into the drawer, tugged at the object toward the drawer front. Then the room lights blazed overhead and someone behind him said:

"Turn around slowly."

Jake did, and Dr. Lowe stood across the little laboratory with a gun in his

fist. The dentist shut the door, the room's only opening. "I saw your flashlight through the frosted reception-room hall door, so I just eased inside and watched you a moment. You're supposed to carry one of my keys to get at my phone, Worley; not at me." He snickered. "That's a joke, but you never see a point. Too bad: a sense of humor might help you through this next minute."

Jake's palms sweated. He eyed the big automatic. "If you shoot me here somebody will hear you."

"Correct. And when they come up I'll say I shot you in self-defense. You're in my office, a jail-breaking killer. I'll even get the reward for catching you."

He smiled, then his smile died. Jake Worley was grinning.

Lowe lowered the gun a trifle. "You're a queer one. What I'm going to do to you is the only thing I've ever seen amuse you."

"No," said Jake. "It's what I'm going to do to you."

He jerked his hand forward. It held a wire. The attached heavy object jumped from the drawer, past him and into Lowe's stomach. Lowe's gun exploded.

Jake grabbed the gun wrist, felt it kick twice more. He sidestepped, parried Lowe's left. Then Jake launched a swing of his own. All the brawn from years of holystoning Navy decks was behind it. It caught the dentist between the eyes. He crashed against a shelf, dropped, and an upset carton showered dozens of spare teeth on his unconscious form.

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THIS IS the telephone I jerked into his stomach," Jake said later, around midnight. Jake was in the dental laboratory with Margie and Sheriff Bascom. The deputy had taken Lowe away and gone on another errand.

Jake held up the telephone with its loose cord. An upright desk set, but it wasn't all there. The metal was missing from around the central post which you grip with the right hand.

"I've checked with Central," Jake said. "Lowe must have cut this phone from a country store near here; there's one missing. He connected that in place of his regular set before he called me to the phone one night last week. I remember there was no one on the line. After I left he switched phones again, stripped the outside metal off this one, with my prints, and fitted it around his dagger."

"But how," Bascom asked, "could he take the knife way down the alley after he murdered McEwen? Miss Margie followed him so soon."

"He'd planned this kill for several days. With a crime like that practically under my nose, he knew I'd work on McEwen's case whether I was hired to or not, and might be troublesome. He needed a goat anyway, so he picked on me. He's been toting that marked knife around and watching his chances.

"Last night he spotted McEwen alone in his office. From the hall he overheard me tell Margie I was leaving on a chicken-stealing case. He

knew she'd have to gab awhile first so he went back, stabbed McEwen, put the dagger in his briefcase along with this letter-file, then came in here and hid them in the drawer with the damaged phone. A few minutes after I left, he went back into the law office, arranged the books beside the body, poured water into the glass and called Margie."

"And planted that knife in the alley later?"

"Hours later."

"Then all Lowe's talk about McEwen's dying words was a lie." The sheriff flapped open the letter-file. "McEwen's correspondence?"

Jake nodded. "Lowe was poor. Sure, he had fine equipment, dressed himself like a million. That was all front; the stuff wasn't paid for. That's why he killed McEwen."

"You mean he stole that stuff?"

"Something like that. He went to dental school in the East. He knew a good front would bring him patients, save him years of waiting. It's hard to get cash money that way, but if you work it right you can get lots of goods on credit. Lowe used to work for an automobile credit company and knew how to fool credit men by mail. During his last months in school he got about three thousand dollars' worth of clothes and dental equipment, then skipped out here, leaving no trace. He got his license to practice in this state merely by showing his diploma."

The sheriff nodded slowly. "So McEwen knew he was a credit crook. But how?"

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"These various creditors got together, got wise they'd been swindled. They lumped their claims, turned them over to an Eastern law firm with instructions to collect or prosecute criminally. This firm sent tracer letters to prominent law firms all over the country, one to the town. McEwen got the one here."

"And wrote them Lowe was here?"

"No, he saw Lowe. Wanted to give him a chance. He told Lowe he'd kept it confidential. Lowe promised to pay up, he tells me. He was starting to make money here but nothing like three thousand. Jail stared him in the face. His career would be wrecked. So he killed McEwen, stole the correspondence and meant to write these Eastern lawyers, signing McEwen's name on a McEwen letterhead, saying that he was not in town."

The hall door opened. The pudgy deputy herded two men inside—Green and De Salle.

Cullen Green wore a mouse under each eye. "Arrest Jake Worley," he wailed. "He sent this foreigner to my place with some story that I'd squealed on him. Then Worley showed up, took De Salle's gun and handcuffed us to the water pipe."

The deputy tossed Jake his handcuffs. "The dough was where you left it, Jake. Sheriff, this De Salle was skipping out of town with that Gas Giant training-fee dough. He just stopped by to beat Green a little."

"Lemme go," De Salle growled. "You got the money."

"Maybe you think you can beat the swindle rap," Bascom said, "but you

also broke jail. Take him away."

After Cullen Green followed them out, mumbling, the sheriff asked: "How'd you get suspicious of Lowe, Jake, and come search?"

"Well, I was being shipshape."

"You what?"

"I dried a drinking glass at home. It had little specks inside, hard to rub off. It's that rotten-egg water around here—all the water in Spring Center. When it dries by itself on a glass it leaves specks of sediment."

"But how did that figure?"

"I didn't remember any such specks on McEwen's glass. The one Lowe said he'd held to the dying man's lips. When you tilt a glass to drink, water runs up one side, huh? This glass was half full, yet no specks showed above the water line. That meant Lowe hadn't tried to give McEwen a drink. He'd lied. I came back here trying to find why."

Margie grabbed his arm. Her eyes were starry. "Oh, Jake," she sighed.

Jake looked at Margie, and blinked. She was not bad, as girls went. In fact. . . . His wide mouth got wider. He reached out speculatively and touched her hand. Then he laughed out loud.

"Say, how'd you like to work for me now? Your boss is through and I gotta have someone to answer my phone, haven't I? And say, how'd you like to see the movie tomorrow night at the Roxy?"

"Oh, Jake! A love film?"

"Gosh, no; detective. But I reckon it'll have some of that mushy stuff mixed in." ♠ ♠ ♠

One of the most inspiring chapters in the history of the courts is the true story of a district attorney who risked his whole political future to prove the innocence of a man he believed to be unjustly accused. That D.A., whom you saw portrayed on the screen in "Boomerang," later became Attorney General of the United States. In "Zero Hour," Edward S. Williams reveals with consummate skill the dilemma of another prosecuting attorney, who must decide whether to risk not only his ambitions but his life itself in order to save a girl from the chair.

ZERO HOUR

by EDWARD S. WILLIAMS

SCOOP WYATT drifted through the door of the district attorney's office. Drifted is the word. Scoop Wyatt never went anywhere. He wandered here and there, much as his fancy seemed to lead him, but always, it transpired, where things were to be found out. Obscure things. Scoop Wyatt, it appeared, had an uncanny nose for news that was *about* to happen. And when a story broke, nine times out of ten Wyatt was the only reporter on the ground.

He wandered across a vast anteroom crowded with desks at which sat clerks and assistant clerks, typists, stenographers. He came to a railed enclosure behind which were a row of doors leading to private offices, and guarded by a gum-chewing girl at

a switchboard. There was a gate marked *Private—Keep Out*, but Scoop Wyatt lounged through it with a casual nod for the girl.

"Hiya, Kitty," he said. "Is the First Assistant Parasite in?"

She grinned. "Sure, Mr. Murnane's back. He's got a poisonous grouch, though."

"Grouch? What about?"

"Dunno. Just feeling savage, I guess."

"Hell of a way to feel, just back from a month's vacation, huh?"

"Ain't it?" She shrugged. "Oh, well, men're like that."

Wyatt agreed gravely, then slouched toward the door labeled *Scott Murnane—Special Assistant—Private*. Again he ignored the ad-

monition. He turned the knob and went in. The man behind the desk, with his feet on it, glanced up from the sheaf of papers he was studying.

Scott Murnane was the direct antithesis of Scoop Wyatt. He was tall and spare, where Scoop was short and chunky. There was a controlled vigor in the man, a pantherish grace of movement that you sensed even in so small a gesture as raising his head. A dark, double-breasted suit and the mirror polish of the cordovan shoes on the desk contrasted sharply with Wyatt's comfortable sloppiness. Even in their eyes, the difference was pronounced. The reporter's were blue and whimsical. Murnane's eyes were gray-green, with a frosty, direct, level stare that missed being deadly only by the thin margin of a certain faint humor that lurked in their depths. The humor gleamed now as his mouth curved in a one-sided smile. He dropped the papers on the desk, folded long arms across his chest.

"Hello, Vulture," he said.

"Hi, Leech," Wyatt answered. He ambled to the chair beside the desk and dropped into it.

Murnane said, "Come in. Have a seat."

"Thanks." Wyatt grinned amiably. He lit a cigarette and tossed the match in the general direction of the waste basket. His eyes cut across the desk to the papers Murnane had been reading. He saw the title, *Transcription, the People Vs. Claire Hayes*, and his glance narrowed.

"Bet you're pretty proud of that," he remarked.

"So that's it," Murnane said. "I wondered what you'd come in for. Going to push your nose into the business of the D. A.'s office again, eh? All right. What about it?"

Wyatt's grin was mirthlessly sardonic. "Nothing," he mused, "that would interest District Attorney William Gledhill. He's got another conviction. He's put a girl in the death-house and tomorrow—before midnight—they're going to kill her, and the case of the People vs. Claire Hayes is going to be closed. I'm just wondering how interested *you're* going to be in the fact that Claire Hayes is innocent."

"Can you prove that?" Murnane asked it evenly, his voice uninflected.

"Hell, no." Wyatt choked. "If I could, why would I divvy the credit with you? No, I'd prove it—if I could—and write it, and scoop the world, you included. But listen, Scott. That girl *didn't* kill Hallam."

Scott Murnane laughed softly. The humor was missing completely from his eyes now. They were merely gray-green and inscrutable. Scoop Wyatt oozed smoke from his nostrils as he shot words across the desk.

"You're not kidding me, Scott. I've known you too long for that. Even if you have been on a vacation in Canada, you've read the papers, you've followed this case. You could smell it all the way to Montreal. It stinks and you know it!"

"Do I?" Again he laughed. "Let's suppose, Scoop, that I haven't read a paper since I've been gone. Suppose I haven't followed this case, or any

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other. I've known you just as long as you've known me, and you're a sucker for a pretty face, a nice pair of legs. Beside that, what makes you think the Hayes girl didn't kill Stuart Hallam?"

"Nuts!" Wyatt snapped. "If you haven't followed the case, how do you know she's pretty?"

Murnane didn't answer. His mouth curved again at the corner in that faint smile.

WYATT JERKED a hand toward the papers on Murnane's desk. "Finished that transcription of the evidence?" he asked.

"No."

"Don't then." He swept the bound pages off the desk. "Because the important part of this case didn't even get into court. You won't find it in the evidence. That's why I know Claire Hayes isn't guilty. Listen to me, wise guy . . ."

Scott Murnane listened.

"You knew Stuart Hallam, Scott. He was square. He had all the dough he'd ever need, all the influence and social position. That Civic Betterment League of his was on the level, even if he did make it hot as hell now and then for politicians like you and Bill Gledhill and Blaggett. You've got to admit that."

"No," Murnane shook his head, "I don't have to admit anything."

Wyatt swore, softly, intensely. Then, "Okay. Listen some more. This Claire Hayes was Hallam's secretary. Hallam must have liked her, trusted her, because she handled all his pri-

vate correspondence. For weeks before the killing, Hallam and Claire Hayes had been working off and on after hours in his office. And Hallam's married. There's the set-up, and what do four people out of five think about it?"

"You tell me," Murnane suggested.

"Hell, I don't have to! If you believe the girl's guilty, you think what the four-fifths do. But let it go. It's all in the transcript. It was all brought out—and emphasized—by our very upright and moral D.A., Bill Gledhill.

"Just lend me your ears some more. It's the night of the killing. Hallam's wife is out. Her personal maid's out. The cook's out. Everybody's out except Hallam and his butler. Hallam himself comes in late. According to the butler he seems preoccupied: worried and excited, maybe, a sort of suppressed excitement. He goes into his study and makes a phone call. The butler hears him dial, but doesn't recognize to whom he's talking. Then Hallam comes out and tells him he can have the rest of the night off. The butler leaves. It's ten o'clock.

"Then there's a skip of a half hour or so. At about ten-thirty Mrs. Hallam comes home—unexpectedly, according to her. The house sets back from the street, all by itself in the middle of those big grounds, but as Mrs. Hallam's car approaches the drive she sees Claire Hayes come out on the street. She says the girl's swaying, seems unsteady on her feet as she hurries away. Our Mrs. Hallam's suspicions are aroused. She goes on to the house, and very thoughtfully

she takes her chauffeur in with her. She goes straight to Hallam's study and finds him dead, with a slug through his heart. Then, well—Claire Hayes is picked up inside another half hour, and she admits she's been to Hallam's house. He phoned her, she says, asked her to come over and help him with a report that has to be written at once. She doesn't know what kind of report. She says she found him dead and was so shocked that she hardly remembers what she did then, or where she went. And while she's telling the coppers all about it, they find the murder gun—a little .32 automatic—stuffed into a slit in the mattress of Claire Hayes' bed. Nice, huh?"

When Murnane didn't answer, Wyatt went on:

"Motive? Easy! The widowed Mrs. Hallam really goes to town under the expert guidance of our D. A. She tells about those many, many hours of overtime that Hallam and the girl put in. It's not what she says; it's the way she says it that hurts. Not a word of blame for Hallam. It's all for the designing female who tried to steal her Stuart from her, and killed him when he tried to break away. Killed him with malice aforethought—or else why did she bring a gun with her?"

"There's your transcript, Scott, along with some very fine and impassioned oratory from our Mr. Gledhill. And some very clever technical dodging on the part of counsel for the defense, Gregory Novas, Esquire. I've saved you a headache reading it.

Now I'll give you one that's *not* in the transcript."

Abruptly he stopped. Scoop Wyatt smiled, but his lips were tight, his eyes narrow. There was still no change in Murnane's level gaze. Wyatt breathed, "Why, my friend, is Greg Novas, counsel for the defense, scheduled for an early berth on the Parole Board at ten grand a year? And why, with all his clever tricks, with his rep as a lawyer who always gets his man off, did Greg Novas pass up the best bet in his whole bag: Mrs. Stuart Hallam?"

A GAIN THERE was silence. Scott Murnane's feet slid off the desk. He rose and you saw more of that smooth, effortless strength. At his full height he seemed taller than his actual five-eleven. It was his innate grace of posture, perhaps; the perfect control of every muscle. He crossed to the window behind his desk and stood staring out at nothing.

Scoop Wyatt watched him narrowly, watched for little things: the bulging and relaxing of the jaw muscles below his ears, the tense grip of hand on wrist behind his back. Wyatt smiled as Murnane turned.

"All right, Scoop," Murnane said somberly. "I have followed the case and maybe there's something wrong somewhere. Hallam's Civic Betterment League would have hooted at anyone except Judge Simms for that Parole Board vacancy. You think Novas killed Hallam and used the Hallam woman's testimony to convict Claire Hayes and cover himself?"

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"Why not?" Wyatt breathed. "Or why not Mrs. Hallam herself in the place of honor? Do you know her at all, Scott?"

"No."

"A lot of people don't. Evidently that jury didn't. She's a gin-guzzling party hound. She's a first nighter, a prizefight fan, a horse-and-dog-race follower. She knows every bartender in town by his first name. She's the kind of woman who'd drive any man into the arms of the first receptive secretary he met. She and Hallam haven't been seen together in six months, and Nova let her twist that around into evidence against the other girl. That's the woman who testified Claire Hayes right into the chair—and Novas didn't even ask her where she'd been on the night of the murder! I tell you, Scott, between us we can get at the truth of this. You'll be D. A. and I'll have the story of the year. And—"

Scott Murnane's mouth curved again in his bleak smile. "I'll be D. A., will I?" he said. "That isn't smart of you, Scoop. What am I now?"

"You're—hell, man, you're what makes the D. A. tick! Crack this thing and you're the heir apparent."

Murnane laughed. "Yeah. The air would be very apparent. I'd get it—lots of it! Listen, Scoop, I'm a politician. I want to be D. A. I want to be governor and maybe senator, and—" he frowned—"the way to get there is not to go busting cases Gledhill's got on ice. Gledhill's a big-shot right now. Maybe, just maybe, Bill Gledhill will be our next governor. But he did his

job, didn't he? He got a conviction. Is it his fault if Novas took a dive?"

Wyatt didn't move for ten full seconds. His eyes questioning, he stared into Murnane's cold face. Then his jaws clicked together on two words. "You rat!"

"Am I?" Murnane asked softly.

"No." Wyatt shook his head. "I take it back, Scott. 'I'm sorry I said it . . . There for a minute I saw something that wasn't you. You're hard, Murnane, and maybe you think you're harder than you really are. Maybe you think you'd enjoy riding into prominence on the coat-tails of a man, or a machine, that'd let this thing go through. But you wouldn't—and we both know it."

"Look, Scott, I don't know who killed Stuart Hallam. Maybe Novas. Maybe the Hallam woman. Hell, maybe Gledhill or the mayor for all I can prove! But I do know there's a girl going to die for a crime she didn't commit. . . . Oh, damn it! You care and you know it. You're going to help me. It's a midnight deadline, tomorrow. Go see that girl, Scott. Talk to her. Maybe you can get something out of her that I couldn't. I'll see you later."

Scott Murnane faced the window again after Wyatt had gone. He stood looking out of it and his eyes were unreadable.

The thought in his mind was bitter. Scoop Wyatt hadn't made it any more so. He'd been thinking that way before Wyatt came. The girl outside had called it a grouch. . . . D. A., he thought, governor, senator.

Senator Murnane. . . . And then he laughed softly, without warmth. He got his hat from the closet across the room. He went out and closed his office door.

He spoke to the girl at the switchboard: "If Gledhill wants me, tell him —" Murnane paused and his lips curved faintly—"tell him my vacation sunburn's got me."

CHAPTER 2

Anagram for Murder

THE SUN hurled oblique shafts against the western wall of the Women's Prison when Murnane got there. It was a three-hour drive from the city. He rode up to tall gates and identified himself. The guard let him in immediately, and his respectful manner brought back Murnane's faint smile again. Wait until tomorrow, he thought, or the next day. . . .

The warden said, "Of course, Mr. Murnane, you can see her. Does this visit mean that there's a chance for her?"

"Why?" Murnane hadn't intended it to sound as sharp as it did.

The warden shrugged and looked down at his desk. He said, "Frankly, I hoped it did. She—this woman is different, somehow."

"How?"

"I don't know." He looked up, smiled, and spread his hands in a gesture of uncertainty. "Maybe I'm being sentimental."

"Maybe," Murnane said.

"Well—here's the matron. She'll

take you to the cell. And, Matron—"

"Yes, Warden?"

"You can give Mr. Murnane all the time he needs."

"Yes, sir. This way, if you please."

Murnane followed her.

There was a curious silence in the corridors that the matron's rubber soles didn't disturb. Murnane found himself trying to lessen the impact of his own hard heels. Then they were in a cell-block and there were eyes watching him. Hot eyes, dull ones; eyes that smouldered deep down beneath the surface; averted eyes. And silence.

He followed the woman into a smaller corridor with only six cells, three to a side. Four of them were empty. A woman in one lay in her cot and stared up at the low ceiling. Just stared. Motionless. There was no deviation in her wide-open, dead gaze even when Murnane passed. She seemed already dead. He looked away quickly and saw Claire Hayes in the cell on the other side.

"A gentleman to see you," the matron said. She unlocked the cell door. Her voice was kind; it seemed to re-ignite some flame of hope in the girl's face. Claire Hayes was very pale, but now a sudden, feverish color burned in her cheeks.

"You can go in," the matron said. "I'll have to lock you in. Call me when you're ready."

"Thanks," Murnane said. He stepped through the door.

Neither of them spoke while the woman closed and locked it. The soft pad of her shoes as she walked away

was the only sound. Scott Murnane saw a small, oval face that might have been more than merely beautiful. It was that now; even pale and haggard with the constant promise of death, there remained the soft curve of cheek and lips, the clear depths of eyes that were like his own, gray and level. Her hair was soft brown, still lustrous and cared for.

He said, "My name's Murnane."

"Yes . . ." She spoke breathlessly. He saw that her hands were clenched at her sides, her arms stiff.

"I'm from the district attorney's office," he went on and she slumped suddenly, as though hope had run out of her, like water from an inverted glass.

She said, "Oh," and sank down to her cot.

Scott Murnane was conscious of dull anger: at himself, at this girl, at the thing, whatever it was, that had goaded him into coming here. It showed in his face, his low, even voice. It made what he said almost brutal.

"Miss Hayes, you're going to die tomorrow. You know that."

Her breath caught, but she nodded.

"Will you answer a question? Truthfully?"

"Yes."

"Did you kill Stuart Hallam?"

His cold eyes stabbed into hers. He saw them change and darken, like gray-green winter sea under the whip of wind. He saw fire tinge their dark depths, saw her lips tremble on the verge of words that came in a sudden torrent.

"Dear Heaven! Did you come here

to ask me that! Did you come all the way from—" As suddenly as it had come, the gust ended. "The District Attorney's office," she whispered, "wants to know if I killed Stuart Hallam! Do you know, that—that's almost funny!"

But she didn't laugh. Neither did Scott Murnane. He said:

"You don't understand, Miss Hayes. My office didn't send me. I came because I wanted to know. Or maybe you can't understand that either. Maybe I don't myself. I used to think I knew most of the important things, but now I'm not so sure. Just answer my question. Did you?"

"No!" As though she sensed the conflict behind the thin, cold mask of his face, she leaned toward him. "No, I didn't kill Stuart Hallam."

"I believe that," Scott Murnane said somberly. "Do you know who did?"

"No."

"Aren't you protecting someone?"

"Oh, no."

"Was it Mrs. Hallam?"

"I tell you, I don't know."

He rested one hard shoulder against the hard wall. His hands were in his coat pockets. He stared at her. "Miss Hayes," he said, "you were pretty much in Hallam's confidence, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"Do you know anything about his money? How much he was worth? Who inherited it?"

"Money," she said. Her eyes grew vague in thought. She whispered, "Millions. More than two millions.

He made a will. I witnessed it. It was three months ago—in April.”

Murnane rapped, “Yes? Go on. Who benefited by it? His wife?”

She shook her head slowly.

“No. He—he didn’t like his wife. He left most of it to charity.”

“Umm. You mean he cut his wife off entirely?”

Again the husky negative. She said, “He set up a trust fund. Mrs. Hallam was to get three hundred dollars a month, for life.”

Murnane asked, “Did you benefit?” and then answered his own question irritably, “Of course not. You couldn’t have witnessed it if you had.” He caught his under lip between his teeth. Then, suddenly, he asked, “How did you come to hire Novas as your attorney, Miss Hayes?”

She looked at him blankly for a moment. “He came to me. He offered to defend me. I thought it was because the case was so much in the papers. I thought he just wanted publicity, but he has a reputation for winning. I let him.”

“For how much?” Murnane asked.

“You mean, did I pay him? Nothing. He said the case interested him. He said money didn’t matter.”

“Did you know, Miss Hayes,” Murnane breathed, “that Gregory Novas may get an appointment to the Parole Board?”

Claire Hayes’ eyes burned again. Anger, hope, despair melted in a flux in her eyes. Her lips parted as though she were panting for breath and yet she seemed not to breathe. She said: “Mr. Hallam would never have al-

lowed that! I’ve heard him talk about it. I’ve written letters from his dictation. . . . Did Gregory Novas—? Is that it?”

“Tell me,” Murnane said softly, “exactly what happened on the night Stuart Hallam was killed.”

THE MOON hung, a thin crescent in a black sky, directly over the tall tower of the hotel when Scott Murnane got back. He felt stiff and weary, as exhausted in mind as in body.

There was no sense to it, no loophole in it. Claire Hayes’ story of her movements on the night of Hallam’s death was the same story Scoop Wyatt had outlined. She added nothing to it, detracted from it by exactly nothing. She denied ever having seen the gun with which Hallam was killed. And there was that in Claire Hayes which proclaimed her innocence. Wyatt had felt it—Scoop Wyatt, an experienced reporter. The warden of the Women’s Prison had felt it, too. Both of them were hard-headed men. Scott Murnane felt it, and he cursed again as he crossed the lobby of the hotel, stepped into a waiting lift.

“Evening, Mr. Murnane,” the operator greeted him.

“Hi, Sam.”

“Goin’ up to the D.A.’s shindig?” He started the car without waiting to hear where Murnane wanted to go.

“Shindig?”

“Sure,” the man grinned. “All the big shots are there. Blaggett, Crocker, all of ’em. I thought you’d be

coming along soon to join the party."

"Yeah," Murnane said.

He frowned. He'd wanted to talk to Gledhill alone. He didn't know what he'd say, but maybe that wasn't important. It was what Gledhill might say, about Claire Hayes, about Novas, that mattered. But maybe—his mind paused a moment. Blaggett, Crocker. Political powers in city affairs. The men who made district attorneys and governors and senators. Murnane smiled faintly. He stepped out onto soft, thick carpet and crossed to a door opposite. He rang.

"Hello, Scotty." Gledhill himself opened the door. Bill Gledhill wasn't more than five years older than Murnane, which made him about thirty-seven. He looked fit physically. He was big and handsome, with gray hair at his temples. He drew Murnane in with the cordial power of his handshake. "What's this about your sunburn?"

"Just a gag," Murnane said. "Doesn't do, does it, for the employees to know it every time we take an afternoon off?"

District Attorney Gledhill laughed. Murnane followed him into a spacious living room, beautifully furnished. The others were there, and there was a lot of liquor and loud music on the radio. Blaggett and Crocker and many of the lesser lights clustered about and greeted him. There was something in the air; an indefinable aura of satisfaction and celebration. Gledhill raised his voice above the radio.

"Gentlemen," he said, "our return-

ing vacationist. And, gentlemen—" he paused impressively—"our next district attorney!"

It broke then. Murnane understood what it was. Like the movement of men on a chess board, one thing pointed to another. Politics was just another form of chess. You made certain moves, certain sacrifices in pawns that didn't matter, to attain ends that did. You even sacrificed more valuable pieces when the end seemed to justify the means. Stuart Hallam, for instance, and his powerful, non-partisan Civic Betterment League. . . . But Murnane smiled as much as he ever did. He accepted congratulations, and finally, when he got Gledhill off to one side, while Gledhill was mixing him a drink, he asked:

"Governor?"

Gledhill winked. "If the people," he pronounced in his solemn, sincere baritone, "choose to honor me with that high office, they shall not find me wanting." He laughed.

"All settled, eh?"

Gledhill nodded. "Barring the unpredictable, you and I, Scott—you frozen-faced sphinx—are respectively the next D. A. and governor. How do you like it?"

Scott Murnane didn't answer. He sipped from the glass in his hand and when he spoke again his voice was quiet.

"I was reading the transcript of the Hayes case this morning, Bill. Novas bungled it."

"What?"

Murnane's lips curved. "Bungled

—or just plain threw it. Which?"

Gledhill smiled narrowly. "Well, those things happen now and then. We got another conviction—a conviction that we needed like the very devil—and somebody else got a boot in the pants. It's what we've always said, Scott. Play ball with the organization, and the breaks'll come. You and I are on our way up. Come on, let's celebrate it!"

Gledhill turned away and Scott Murnane drank. He choked on it. He set down the glass and no one observed his quiet exit. He seemed to forget that his car was parked nearby when he left the hotel, walking.

MIDNIGHT DEADLINE. He looked at his watch. It was midnight now, and before another midnight a woman was destined to die. Inexorably the small cogs and springs and wheels measured off minutes and hours. Time. That was the only thing of which he was sure, now. You wound a watch—you, yourself, kept the wheels turning—and with each revolution you measured a portion of life into oblivion. You treasured the thing that sign-posted every minute of life, toward death. Hurry, hurry, it said. Nothing matters but time and the end. District attorney, governor, senator. . . .

Scott Murnane smashed a thin, platinum time-piece on the sidewalk. He went on without looking back. There was a light in the window ahead, high up in the façade of a brownstone house. Scoop Wyatt's window.

Murnane took the steps leading to the lighted, first-floor vestibule. He didn't ring. The young fellow who lived in the second floor back room was coming out as Murnane came up. A friend of Scoop's. Murnane knew him slightly. They nodded as they passed and Murnane climbed the worn stairs to the top floor. He turned toward the door at the end of the hall way and knocked.

Funny, he thought when no one answered. The light was on. Scoop must be home, although it wouldn't be surprising for Scoop Wyatt to go out and leave his light burning. Or to go to bed with it on. Murnane turned the knob and went in.

At first he didn't see him. He saw the bed, still made up, a necktie-draped bureau, a pair of shoes beside the bed with socks lying over them. There was the battered small desk and a battered typewriter at which Scoop worked when he felt like it. And suddenly Murnane saw another pair of shoes. They were on Wyatt's feet, and he was lying sprawled on the floor behind the desk.

He saw everything at once, then, in a confused jumble like a composite picture of many things. Scoop had three eyes, all of them open, but the third was a red hole over his left eyebrow. He was dead, and he must have been writing when death entered his room. The desk chair was overturned, the typewriter knocked askew on the desk. A lot of typewriter keys were pressed down and held there by the raised typebars, jammed together in the small opening where the ribbon

made contact with a sheet of paper.

Scoop must have been writing, and with the realization of death his hands had convulsed on the keyboard, jamming down those keys. Murnane read them mechanically: *eroasgvn*.

He stared at them and something kept coming between his mind and the typewriter. He caught it suddenly, a wadded dark object on the floor, beyond the desk, but directly in his line of vision. He bent over and picked it up. It was a blue silk glove: a woman's glove with a short gauntlet trimmed in white. Suddenly Murnane tautened again over the typewriter.

eroasgvn.

He re-arranged the letter: *novasgre*.

There was only one "g" on a typewriter, but another wasn't needed. Greg Novas, Wyatt had spelled unmistakably. Scott Murnane whirled toward the door.

CHAPTER 3

The Very Peculiar Will

THE DOOR marked *Scott Murnane—Special Assistant—Private* swung back. He entered his own office silently, a lean shadow in the dark. He made no light; it wasn't needed. Murnane crossed to a small steel locker in the corner behind his desk. He opened it and slid a gun into his coat pocket. He tested a tiny flash; a thin beam of light stabbed the darkness, winked on and off twice. Satisfied,

Murnane slipped it into his vest. He took a ring of master keys and closed the locker. Again the office door opened and shut behind him with a faint click. He went out and strode into the waiting night elevator.

"Workin' late, Mr. Murnane?" the operator asked sleepily.

"Yeah," Scott Murnane said. "Working late."

He left the lobby and got into his car again. He drove with a controlled recklessness, a savagery that seemed to transmit itself to his car; the motor purred with a soft snarling note. The low round hood with its bronze ornament seemed to thrust ahead with animate, vindictive eagerness. Tires screamed on curves. Then brakes were like a curb bit to a rushing stallion. The car stood and panted at the entrance to an apartment building that made one expect a doorman. But there was none; it was too late.

Murnane cut the motor and got out. He entered a chaste and elegant lobby and crossed to the man at the desk.

"D. A.'s office." He spoke without opening his teeth much. He showed a card and a silver police shield. He added, "I'm going up to one of your apartments. I don't want to be bothered. Understand?"

The man's surprise churned into dull resentment. "Wait a minute," he said. "What is this, anyway? What right have you to—"

"Lodge a complaint," Murnane said, "if you want to. This is a special investigation that concerns the district attorney and doesn't concern

you. Tell that man to turn his elevator over to me."

He waited, cold, his eyes green-flecked, until the desk-clerk called grudgingly to the staring lift operator, "This man wants to go up alone, Tony. It's okay." Then he clipped, "But I'll complain, all right. Count on it, brother!"

"Good." Murnane's mouth curved frigidly. "Get yours in early. There may be a long list," and he turned and walked to the elevator.

It was an automatic elevator, no trick to run. Murnane knew that. He knew that Gregory Novas lived in Suite 732. Novas liked to entertain. Twice Murnane had been a guest at the attorney's lavish, expensive parties. But that fact didn't alter the purpose in his mind. Scoop Wyatt had been a guest of Novas, too, on one of those occasions. And Scoop Wyatt was lying dead in his room, with Greg Novas spelled in anagram on his typewriter.

Murnane pressed the starting button and the doors closed smoothly. He pushed the seventh floor stop.

Murnane didn't ring. He didn't care much whether Novas was in or out. Probably he'd be home, in bed. It was late enough. But that didn't matter. The right key from his bulky ring of them let him in silently. Then the keys went back into his pocket and the gun took their place in his hand.

It preceded him in his slow, methodical search of seven rooms. Gregory Novas was out. That simplified things, for the moment. Whatever

there was to be found here could probable be found easier without the necessity of holding Novas at gun's point while he searched.

Murnane turned on lights. There was a small room, off the big living room, which served as an office. Murnane entered it. He went behind the beautiful walnut desk and sat down. He laid his gun on the blotter in front of him.

Scott Murnane didn't know what he was looking for. He only knew that Scoop Wyatt was dead, and that Gregory Novas had killed him. The pressed-down keys of a typewriter had convicted a man of murder in Murnane's mind. They could mean nothing else to him, even though they could mean nothing at all in a court of law.

They were not evidence. Evidence was motive and proof and patient explanation—but Gregory Novas was destined for an appointment to the Parole Board. Gregory Novas had twisted evidence and law and justice to cover the murder of Stuart Hallam so that he could have his appointment to the Parole Board. And—Scott Murnane's mind twisted in another bitter thought—maybe so that Bill Gledhill could be governor, and so that Scott Murnane could be district attorney!

But that was all over.

HE LOST awareness of the passage of time. He lost self and individuality in a fierce intensity of searching, a grim determination to find something that would prove

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what he knew. And in the last desk drawer he opened he found Stuart Hallam's will. The will that Claire Hayes had witnessed, that left two million dollars to charity and to his wife a trust fund of three hundred dollars a month.

It was brief. He read it word by word. Then he turned over the bound pages and read the back of it:

Last Will and Testament
of
Stuart Arthur Hallam
Dated: April 3, 1950
Harlow, Beauchamp & Flynt

Harlow, Beauchamp & Flynt. The best, the oldest and most reputable law firm in the city. And the signed and witnessed copy of Stuart Hallam's will was in the possession of Gregory Novas!

Murnane cursed, and sat erect in Gregory Novas' chair. A newspaper lay on the desk, tonight's late edition. A headline caught his eye with a sudden, blinding impact.

HALLAM WILL FILED FOR
PROBATE

Widow Receives Bulk of
\$2,000,000 Estate

Widow receives bulk . . .

Scott Murnane jerked to his feet. He was blind and deaf with thinking. He stared, unseeing, into the gun-muzzle—into the sardonic face of Gregory Novas. Instinct kept him motionless until senses returned. It was Novas. The man stood in the doorway and the gun in his hand was real. None of it was hallucination.

Scott Murnane's eyes dropped in a reflex, unwitting glance to his own gun, not a foot from his hand, lying ready, the safety off. Novas smiled narrowly.

"Fancy," he drawled, "meeting you here," and he seemed to wait, in his eyes a merging of surprise and anger and suspicion. He seemed to want Murnane to give him an opening, to explain. Scott Murnane stared at him, coldly silent.

Novas flared, "Well, what is it, a double-cross?"

Murnane smiled then. He looked at the gun in Novas' hand and bit back the accusations that boiled behind his eyes, behind his locked teeth. He beat down the boiling urge to hurl himself across the desk and to kill bare-handed the man who faced him. Instead he asked softly;

"Double-cross? Now, why, Novas, should you think that? You earned your appointment, didn't you? You went into the tank on the Hayes defense. But some of us are wondering, maybe, if you didn't hold out a little. We're wondering about that Hallam will, about that two million. We're even wondering about this."

He dropped it onto the desk between them, the other will, and pointed to it. His voice coldly mocking, entirely cynical, he said:

"What about this one, Novas? It's dated not three months ago. It's signed. It's witnessed, by Claire Hayes, among others. Fun's fun, Novas, and anything goes, Novas, as long as you can get away with it. But if we rub it in too thick, some-

body's going to get nosy. And, Novas, we don't want too much nosing into this business, do we? Into the murder of Stuart Hallam—or into your appointment to the Parole Board?"

Again he paused and Gregory Novas gazed silently at him, his long heavy-lidded eyes glittering. The man's nostrils flared with his quick, shallow breathing; his mouth was a liplless line across his face. And Scott Murnane knew he'd lost. Novas wasn't going to break.

Novas took two rapid strides into the room. He snatched the will of Stuart Hallam off the desk, and Murnane's gun. He thrust both into a pocket. Without turning his eyes, he spoke over his shoulder, "Come on in, Crossman."

Murnane's glance flicked to the door. Bat Crossman—"fixer," runner of shady errands, and general handy man about Novas' law office—l lounged into the room. He was a thick, squat man with colorless hair and pale, lifeless eyes. He had one cauliflower ear and his lips were splayed and shapeless. He stretched them in a grin.

"Murnane," Novas said, "you're lying. You know damned well how much I care who noses into what. But you and Blaggett and Gledhill and the rest of 'em care! If you're trying to frame me—trying to welch on that appointment—I'll . . . Who sent you, Murnane? Gledhill?"

Scott Murnane didn't answer.

"Sit down!" Novas came around beside him. He jabbed the gun into Murnane's ribs, and Murnane sank

into the chair. Novas smiled tightly.

"Crossman," Novas ordered, "there's a tackle-box in that closet over there. You'll find a spool of heavy line—tarpon line. Get it.

"You're going to talk, Murnane," he said. "You're going to tell me what the hell this is all about, or maybe I'll do some talking in the right places!

"Okay, tie him up," he finished as Crossman emerged from the closet.

MURNANE FELT the strong, thin fishing line bite into his wrists. He sat motionless, tense, as yards of it were drawn taut about wrists and ankles and knees. He was helpless and he knew it. Even without the cord there was nothing he could do.

To fight meant death. He knew Novas would kill him, and maybe, he thought, that would be the easy way out. But his death would only add to the total of death that was already piling up: Hallam, Scoop Wyatt, himself, and then Claire Hayes. He had to live, somehow, until that girl was out of the shadow of death.

"All right, Murnane," Novas said.

There was silence. Bat Crossman's pale eyes were fixed on him; he licked thick lips. Novas bent over him, the gun leveled, poised six inches above Murnane's eyes.

"Talk!" he snapped. "Who sent you? Why?"

Murnane smiled, and suddenly the gun was a lashing bludgeon, a swift glinting arc of motion, half seen, that ended in an explosion of pain across his cheek bone. His breath caught in

a gasping tremor. His hands closed in a convulsive grip of pain. The cords bit into flesh that hardened spasmodically against the hammering, greater pain, and somehow that constant bite was the reminder of all that he had thought and seen and experienced in a few swift hours.

It kept on long after individual hurts had merged into one screaming agony of tortured bone and muscle. . . . Talk! Talk! Talk! . . . He was blind with pain, and deaf with it, insensible to everything but pain. He ceased to hear that snarling accompaniment to blow on blow. He heard only the crushing, dull impact of the gun-barrel as it rose and fell, and finally even that ceased to be distinguishable and he didn't know when they had stopped. Maybe he had lost consciousness. He didn't know that either. The knowledge that they had stopped came slowly with the realization that there was no new pain. With the sound, as from a great distance, of someone talking:

"Get him out of here. I don't care where. Just get him out."

And after that there was a hazy, sightless remembrance of movement, of the sensation of rolling, lurching, falling. And then oblivion. . . .

FOR A LONG while he lay looking at it. It was queer, incomprehensible. A white, flat surface, like a two-foot slab of marble half an inch thick, was suspended just below the level of his eyes. It dipped and swayed dizzily, and yet the few indistinct objects on it remained upright, didn't

fall off. He couldn't understand it, or the soft aura of white in which he was submerged, covered, surrounded. He was alone in a floating cloud of white, with a white slab that floated before his eyes. . . .

He gave it up. Perhaps it didn't matter. Nothing seemed to matter except a growing disinclination to move, or even to keep his eyes open. Then something else, also white, came into his field of vision. It took its place beside the white slab and a new sensation intruded upon him. A weight on his head—sound—words.

"Feeling better, Mr. Murnane?"

Everything danced and whirled crazily. Pain returned, though only in the background of his mind, dull and gnawing. Realization came. This was a hospital room. The white was the white of sheets, of walls. The slab was the top of the bed-side table and the voice was a nurse, standing beside him with her hand moving over his forehead.

He had moved. He had jerked himself up on one elbow, and collapsed. A pounding, ringing, clashing in his head almost destroyed consciousness. A stabbing agony in his side and back robbed him of strength. But the renewed assault of pain served also to bring him to full remembrance.

He heard his own voice, thick and unfamiliar, before he could see clearly again. "What time—what day is it?"

He tried desperately to focus his eyes on the blurred face of the nurse. Her cool impersonal voice helped. "Don't worry. You're going to be

all right. Just a few cuts and bruises, but you must rest."

"What day!" he exploded.

"Today's Wednesday," she said. "It's about seven o'clock. You were brought in last night and you've been sleeping all day. Here, can you drink this?"

He opened his lips to talk and she slipped a glass tube into his mouth. "Drink," she ordered softly, and he was glad that she had stopped him. He had been on the point of demanding his clothes, and he knew it wouldn't do any good.

Seven o'clock, Wednesday, and the dusk outside his window told him it was evening. Today—at midnight—a woman was going to the chair. He had five hours to prevent it.

The liquid that flowed into his mouth was cool, vaguely bitter. The nurse spoke again.

"A friend of yours has been here to see you, a Mr. Gledhill. He'll be back later. And a Mr. Blaggett phoned . . . There. Like that?"

"Yes," Murnane said. He smiled faintly. "Sleepy, though. I think I'll go back to sleep."

"Good," she said. She patted his pillow, pulled the sheets straight. She went out softly.

He knew that they wouldn't let him leave. If he had flung out his demand, the nurse would have denied it. They would have kept him there. But he thought he'd removed the danger of being watched by his compliance.

He'd been doped, of course, not sleeping. They'd filled him full of

some sedative, which accounted for that floating sensation of unreality. But it was passing rapidly now. His mind was clearing. The liquid he had drunk couldn't be more dope, for he felt strength returning. He sat up, slowly this time.

He found that he could stand. He stood at the foot of his bed and gripped the foot rail until the room stopped its dizzy gyrations. He found his clothes in a wardrobe beside the bed. He got into them, scowling when he discovered that money, gun, keys, were missing. In the hospital safe, no doubt. He'd have to get another gun somewhere.

He found the reason for the dull ache in back and sides when he tried to put on his shoes. Ribs were broken. His whole torso was taped tightly. It hurt to bend over, or breathe deeply, but he got his shoes on by lying on the floor. He went toward the open window and as he passed a bureau he saw his face in the mirror, and stopped. His head was bandaged-swathed. One cheek was taped over. His nose must be broken, for both eyes had the tell-tale blue patches under them. The point of his jaw was a livid bruise. But he went on.

What of it? He had five hours to win a desperate game with time, with death. A bandage more or less wouldn't matter. They could locate him easily enough, for he was going to locate them, carry the fight to them. He looked out the window. He was on the first floor: it was a bare five feet from sill to ground. Painfully Murnane went through the window.

He lurched as he crossed a shadowy grass-plot to a gravel walk.

CHAPTER 4

Midnight Deadline

HARRIET HALLAM lurched slightly as she rose from an Empire divan and took two steps to the coffee table and the cocktail shaker. Her hand was only slightly unsteady as she filled her glass and waved the shaker vaguely in the direction of her companion.

"Have another," she said. "Stay for dinner, Greg. What's more important than me?"

Harriet Hallam carried her liquor well. Beyond the unsteadiness, a certain precise care in her speech, she didn't show it. She was a synthetic blonde, but well executed. It was a surprise when you realized that she was a fake blonde. Her hair was soft, metallically lustrous. Her eyes were deceptively direct, and light blue. Gregory Novas looked at her in an appreciation of the beauty which did not take into consideration its sources and methods. He placed his own glass on the table and rose.

"No," he said, "thanks. Nothing, my dear, is more important than you. Some things, though, are more demanding. Business, you know."

She smiled carefully. "That was nice," she said. "Why won't you marry me now, Greg? Then business could wait. Two million should be enough even for—"

"Harriet!" His voice was sharp.

"Your husband's death occurred hardly six weeks ago. And we—you aren't out of the woods yet so far as the two million's concerned. You know that I'm doing all I can for you, but don't be foolish. And don't drink so much. Some day you're going to say something wrong."

"Oh, stop it, Greg!" she flared. "Don't drink so much, don't do this, don't do that! You sound just like Stuart."

"Do I?" He faced her, smiling suavely. "But you know why, Harriet. You know that we must be careful until . . ."

"Oh, I suppose so." For an instant something furtive and unpleasant crossed her face—a furtive rabbit-thought, pursued by the inexorable hounds of knowledge. Novas stepped closer to her; they kissed.

"See you later," he said, and he went out.

He left her staring after him, but she didn't, perhaps couldn't, see the sardonic glint in his long eyes. She rang for the butler. A new man answered: not the one who had heard Stuart Hallam phone someone on the night of his death. Mrs. Hallam said:

"Make more cocktails, Dawson."

* * *

Dawson opened the front door for him. "Mr. Scott Murnane," he announced.

Murnane saw her for the first time much as Novas had seen her last. A little more uncertain in her movements, a bit more precise in her speech. Her eyes widened as she looked at him; then closed, opened,

and she looked again, smiling brightly.

"Come in," she invited, "Mr. Mur—Mur—"

"Murnane," he said.

"Mur-nane."

His eyes narrowed as he watched her set down the stemmed crystal glass. He knew, then, that she was drunk, and he knew how he would handle her. He hadn't had the faintest idea before. He crossed to the chair Novas had sat in.

"Do I know you?" Harriet Hallam asked.

"No."

"I didn't think so. I remember men. Good-looking men. You'd be good looking without the bandages. Who are you?"

"I'm a lawyer, Mrs. Hallam."

"Lawyer? I know some lawyers. I'm going to marry a—" She stopped, wide-eyed, her mouth still open. Then she closed it and smiled vaguely.

Murnane smiled. "Oh, yes," he said casually. "I've heard about that. Gregory Novas."

She was silent, vacant. Then, "You're a friend of Greg's? He told you? That's funny. He said I mustn't mention it. He said . . ."

SCOTT MURNANE rose. Even the bandages no longer masked the anger in his eyes. Even the fog of alcohol in Harriet Hallam's mind no longer obscured it from her. Before he spoke, she saw it, and gasped:

"What—who are you?"

He stood over her. His voice was quiet, frozen. "Why," he asked, "did

you kill your husband, Mrs. Hallam?"

All color left her. Even the bright rouge tint seemed to blanch and faded out. Into her eyes there came a creeping terror that couldn't meet his accusing gaze and yet couldn't look away.

"Shall I tell you, Mrs. Hallam?" he went on in that deadly, even monotone. "It was because he made another will. Because you'd destroyed all the affection he once had for you. And when you saw his secretary coming here that night you murdered him in a drunken, desperate, greedy rage. Then you and Novas framed Claire Hayes. Is that it, Mrs. Hallam?"

"No!" Her lips formed the word that wasn't audible. They twisted over it, fought to say it without breath. Then her whole body stiffened; she gasped air into empty lungs. Her voice was a harsh, grating scream.

"No! You're lying! They're trying to frame me! I didn't kill him, I tell you. Get out of here—get out—get out!"

Scott Murnane smiled. "They don't have to frame you, Mrs. Hallam," he said. "They only have to tell the truth about you. They've done that!"

She darted frantic eyes about her as though "they" were present, accusing, blocking every avenue of escape. She panted, sobbed rackingly. And suddenly she broke.

"I'll tell! They can't treat me like they did that girl! I don't know who killed Stuart. They told me she did, and she was here, but so was—"

The hammering crash of a gun

filled the room. It drowned Harriet Hallam's scream, drowned the choking oath in Murnane's throat.

He whirled. Flame slashed from the window across the room. The gun that leapt into Murnane's hand added staccato answer. He walked toward the window, shooting. He saw the man outside as dim vague bulk, unrecognizable. A silhouette target, nothing more. And as suddenly as it had begun, it ended. The silhouette wavered backward, melted, disappeared. Hit? Murnane lunged forward, and stopped.

"Drop it, Murnane. Get your hands up—high!"

The gun lowered slowly. He released it, heard it thud on the carpet. Slowly he turned.

It was Novas again. He stood inside the closed door. The Hallam woman swayed, dazed, apparently unhurt, where he had left her. Her mouth was a lax, gaping hole in her face. Her lips were a startling red smear. Silence was appalling after that storm of sound.

Murnane stood frozen.

His mind was a furor of contradictions. It wasn't Novas who had shot at him. Or had he been shot at? Wasn't the target Mrs. Hallam? And the gunman had seen Novas enter the room. . . .

"Harriet," Novas clipped. "Go pack your things. Just what you'll need tonight. You're sailing tonight on the Atlantic Empress. You're going to Europe."

Murnane hardly heard what was being said. He stared with the in-

voluntary fixedness of hypnotism. Not at Novas, or at Harriet Hallam, but at a glove. One glove. A blue glove with a short gauntlet trimmed in white, lying on a table beside him.

Was it the mate to the glove he had found on the floor of Scoop Wyatt's room?

THE FACE of the clock was subtle torture. He could not escape from it. He could turn his head away, he could close his eyes and shut out its luminous, distant face, but always his gaze returned to it. He could no more ignore the implacable onward-creep of time than he could loosen the cords that bound him again, or the gag that stifled him.

He lay on an unmade bed in a musty room: a fourth-floor room in a vacant, dilapidated house somewhere in the city. There was no one to hear his thrashing about on the bed. The room was dark, but the two windows, uncurtained, glared blindly out over the street. Through one of them he saw the clock, a huge clock high in the tower of a tall, distant building. A clock with a lighted face. It was ten minutes after ten.

Murnane lay in the grip of exhaustion, cursing himself for having bungled. The time for fighting had been on the way here, when he had been alone with Novas in the cab. Novas had had the gun in his ribs all the time, but what of it? He should have risked that, risked a sudden attack. Maybe he'd have died then, instead of waiting like a trapped animal for death at his captor's leisure.

But he should have acted then, before Novas had added Bat Crossman to the odds against him.

Novas had gone again somewhere. Crossman was still in the house, waiting for Novas to return. And after that—death, of course. They wouldn't—couldn't—let him live now. They'd remove the danger that would be constant as long as he lived. Claire Hayes would die too. Novas would get his appointment. He'd bring Harriet Hallam back from Europe and marry her, and her two million.

He saw the clock again. Another five minutes had gone. Scott Murnane's muscles swelled as he strained, twisted. The cords at his wrists cut like heated wire. He turned, threw himself from side to side. The length of rope that kept him flattened on the bed was looser. He could turn on his side. If he could win release from the bed he might get to the window, watch until someone was underneath, on the sidewalk, and break the glass. It might work.

He lunged against the rope, threshed, sweated, hurt. The bed rocked and creaked. It filled the room with sound. He heard nothing else, saw nothing but the face of the clock that seemed to mock his struggle with a human, taunting glee. You could smash me, it seemed to say, as you smashed your watch, and still time would go on. Still you and all the others would be caught in the wheels and cogs and springs of Time. You can't stop it, or even slow it.

Then, suddenly, light flooded him. He lay motionless, and his eyes

fought the blinding beam of light from the doorway. Novas was back. He knew that before he heard Novas' low clipped voice, and Crossman's harsh reply.

"Get him up from there," Novas said. "Untie his feet."

"Aw, hell," Crossman rumbled, "why take him out? Why not let 'im have it and let 'im lay, like that smart reporter?"

"Do as you're told, Bat."

Crossman muttered. He came and bent over Murnane. "Relax, guy. Loosen up them ropes." He swore unintelligibly as he fumbled with knots pulled to the last fraction of tautness by Murnane's fighting. Crossman's hand sought his pocket. He brought out a knife with a three-inch blade.

In Scott Murnane's mind a single thought repeated itself with the monotonous insistence of dull hammer strokes: "Like that smart reporter." Novas had killed Scoop Wyatt. Novas had killed Stuart Hallam. Novas would kill Scott Murnane, and perhaps Harriet Hallam, once her two million was under his control. Novas was a madman—murder-mad, power-mad. He would kill, and kill again.

The light beat down on Murnane like a physical weight. The flash was in Novas' hand. Murnane saw him dimly, standing behind Crossman as Bat slashed at the rope that bound him to the bed. He knew that Novas would have a gun in his other hand, but that didn't matter now. His eyes and mind were intent upon Crossman, upon the loosened rope. It was off

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at last. He could have lunged upward then in his final, desperate play. But he waited until Crossman attacked the cords at his ankles. He heard the keen slashing of the blade, felt sudden release as the cords parted. And with all the strength in him he swung a foot at Crossman's jaw.

He felt the jarring impact all the way to his thigh. He heard Bat Crossman's muffled yell and then a choked, gurgling gasp. He saw Crossman hurled back, his arms upflung. He expected death then, but it didn't come.

The light went out. Crossman had reeled back into Novas. In the confused moment of his flailing fall, Murnane rolled himself off the bed. He hit the floor and kept on rolling, expecting the shot that didn't come. And then he could roll no farther. He hit a wall.

HE LAY there, his muscles taut. What to do next he didn't know. His kick had been instinctive, the last blow of an indomitable spirit that would go out fighting to the last. But it was still dark, and no shot came. And there was a fluttering convulsion on the floor, a spasmodic, liquid rattle.

Crossman? Had he kicked him in the throat? A man hit hard enough in the throat can die horribly, gasping for air through a crushed and swelling larynx. Was it Crossman? Was Novas waiting, his flash broken, perhaps, for Murnane to betray his whereabouts by a sound, a movement?

His hands were still bound. What could he . . .

His hands! They were free! The sudden lunge of his kick, his fall from the bed, must have snapped a cord already weakened by his constant fight against them. His hands were numb. There was not feeling enough in them for him to have known exactly when the cord gave way. Now he felt the hot-cold hurt of returning circulation. He raised his arms slowly. He got his almost useless hands on the floor and pushed upward. And he could see dimly.

Novas was down, too. They lay, the two of them, in a huddled heap. He saw the glint of metal almost within reach of his hand. The gun? Or the flash?

Without breathing, Murnane inched toward it. All sound had ceased now. His slow movements seemed to shake the house. He touched the faintly shining object with one wooden hand. It was the flash; it didn't seem broken. He pressed the button under his thumb.

He swayed over them, the dizzy nausea of a battered body made almost uncontrollable by the bloody death at his feet. Gregory Novas lay on his back, his eyes set in a blank, unwinking stare. His collar and the whole front of him were drenched with blood. His own blood. It still oozed sluggishly from the gaping wound in his throat, where, jammed to the handle beneath his ear, was Bat Crossman's knife. The knife that had been in Bat's hand when he had hurtled back under the impact of

Murnane's foot. His arms had flung wide in a sweeping arc, and he . . .

Scott Murnane tore his eyes away with a grating oath. Novas was the key-stone in the whole thing, and Novas was dead. But there was Harriet Hallam, if he could reach her in time. There was Crossman.

He swung the beam of the flash to the other of those prone figures. Crossman stirred and moaned. Blood trickled from the corner of his wrecked mouth. His eyes opened slowly, squinted against the beam. He sat up.

"Crossman!" Murnane's voice was like a whip. "Do you see that?"

The light swept back to Novas' body. For a long moment there was no sound. Then Bat Crossman gasped.

"You killed him, Crossman! It's your knife! It has your prints on it. Do you understand? You murdered Gregory Novas!"

He still stared, making thick sounds with his mouth. Sweat broke out on his face. His eyes strained.

"You'll burn for it, Crossman. So help me, I'll let you burn! Unless you talk."

The man whimpered. Then, hoarsely, in a liquid guttural, "You win, Murnane. I'll—talk."

CHAPTER 5

The Price of Success

THE LIGHT poured down in pitiless, searing flood. The man in the chair writhed. He sagged, swayed.

His slow gasping for air was an agonized struggle, as though his throat were almost being torn out with each breath.

"Talk, Crossman! Who killed him. Who killed Stuart Hallam? Who?"

"I dunno—" the words came again. He ran them together, jerked them out with a tearing effort. "I dunno, I tell ya! Novas killed the reporter. I seen him. But I dunno about Hallam."

The man who crouched over him gripped his pale hair in one fist. He forced Crossman's head back until the tendons and pulsing veins in his neck stood out like ropes. His other hand rose and slapped him.

"Who? Who killed him? It was Novas. Novas killed Hallam and you know it! Novas wanted a job on the Parole Board, didn't he, Crossman? Novas was after Hallam's wife and Hallam's money, wasn't he, Crossman? Wasn't he? Wasn't he?"

"No!" The man in the chair hid his face in his hands, sobbing. "No," he moaned. "No!"

District Attorney William Gledhill slowly straightened up, shaking his head.

They looked at each other with bleak eyes: the commissioner of police; the politician, Blaggett; an elderly lawyer, Stephen Harlow, of the highly respectable firm of Harlow, Beauchamp & Flynt. There were others who didn't matter much: police officials, uniformed men and detectives. And there was Scott Murnane.

He watched Gledhill as the D. A.

turned away from the man on the chair. Gledhill had conducted the third degree, and he looked like a man who has just completed a revolting duty. It was a terrible thing, the third degree. But it was terrible, too, that a girl should die for a crime about the guilt for which there was the slightest doubt. They were all thinking that, perhaps, when Gledhill turned back to them and shrugged.

He spoke in a flat, metallic voice, "Well, gentlemen, that's that. I'm convinced that Novas had nothing to do with Hallam's murder. I think he merely saw a chance to make his fortune by marrying Hallam's wife. Somehow Wyatt must have got wind of it. He knew he could defeat Novas' political ambitions, and score a beat for his paper, by exposing Novas' intentions. But I'm convinced that we have the murderer of Stuart Hallam where she belongs!"

His eyes swept the circle. No one spoke. Gledhill shrugged again and turned to put on his discarded coat and vest. His left arm seemed stiff, and there was a smear of blood on the white shirt sleeve.

Scott Murnane said softly, "No, Bill, you're wrong. Claire Hayes didn't kill Hallam."

They tensed again. Silence crept down like a tangible, cloying fog over the room. Murnane didn't seem to be looking at any one, but he saw Blaggett's eyes narrow, he saw Gledhill turn slowly to face him. The district attorney's voice was hoarse.

"In heaven's name, Scott! I can understand your feeling. Wyatt was a

friend of yours and Novas killed him. But Novas is dead, too. What earthly good can it do to keep trying to pin everything on him?"

Murnane got up from the chair in which he slouched. He said, "It can save an innocent woman's life, perhaps."

With a stiff movement of his arm, Gledhill bared a wrist-watch. "It's half-past eleven, Murnane," he snapped. "The wire to the governor is still open."

"And," Murnane's voice was a dead level of monotony, "the Atlantic Express must be somewhere off Sandy Hook by now, eh, Blaggett?"

"What d'you mean by that, Murnane!"

"Let it go," he said. "I've told you all how Novas caught me in his apartment. You know what he and Crossman did to me. But you don't know what I found there. Mr. Harlow, read Stuart Hallam's will, please."

The lawyer read the brief document without comment. Murnane stood motionless, watching with restless eyes, until Stephen Harlow finished. The silence was palpable. Murnane broke it with his icy drawl,

"So, you see, we have two wills, and Hallam must have neglected to destroy his old one when he drew this. But you can forget that. Discount it, because maybe the district attorney is right. Maybe Novas was acting merely to better his own fortune. He was hiding the later will in order to benefit under the old one, and maybe Scoop Wyatt knew that. Maybe that's why Novas killed him. But it proves

one thing: That Gregory Novas, counsel for the defense of Claire Hayes, and Harriet Hallam, the prosecution's star witness, were in collusion."

He paused, and Gledhill breathed, "You're intimating that Mrs. Hallam killed her husband, framed the Hayes girl, and that she and Novas disposed of the later will?"

"That," Murnane smiled, "would be an easy answer, wouldn't it, Bill?"

"It'd be crazy!" Gledhill rasped. "Why would Novas have kept the will in his possession?"

"Because Harlow, Beauchamp & Flynt drew it. Because Novas couldn't be sure whether Stephen Harlow knew it had been properly signed and witnessed. As a matter of fact, Mr. Harlow didn't know that Hallam had executed the will. That's why he couldn't step in, with the unsigned copy he's just read to you, and investigate."

He stopped and he was still smiling. He spoke again, to the commissioner of police this time.

"Kurtz, I'd appreciate it if you'd bring in Mrs. Hallam."

"Kurtz!" It was Blaggett, his voice a hoarse explosion of sound. "This is damned nonsense!"

"All right, Murnane." The commissioner was a grizzled, square-jawed man, obstinate under threats. He said grimly, "We'll play it out. Johnson, bring in Mrs. Hallam."

SHE SAT under the light. She was alone in an island of light, with no relief from it anywhere. Mur-

nane stood beside her, outside that cone of light. He let her wait a full minute, two, three. . . .

"What is it?" she flamed. "What do you want of me?"

His voice came from above her, disembodied, frigid. "Mrs. Hallam, you killed your husband."

"No! No!"

"But you killed Scoop Wyatt! I found this in Wyatt's room."

His hand thrust beneath the light with one object, a blue silk glove.

"No, I didn't! I went there but he was dead already. I swear it. He—he told me to come. He said he knew about me and Greg, but I—"

"You went," Murnane's voice droned on inexorably, "and you say you found him dead? That's funny, Mrs. Hallam. That's what Claire Hayes said. She said she found your husband dead. And she did. And you know she did! Why do you keep on hiding it? Who else was there when you came so quietly into your husband's study? Is he in this room? Is that it?"

There was the silence of death. Even the woman's harsh breathing stopped. Then suddenly:

"Oh, I'll tell. I'll tell! It was—"

The two shots came so close together that there was but one report. It roared out in that crowded room and brought bedlam. And when other lights flared on, men stood with drawn guns everywhere, and Blaggett cringed against the wall.

But no one had time for him then. Smoke dribbled in small gray wisps from the muzzle of Scott Murnane's

gun. Smoke oozed too, from Gledhill's gun. But the district attorney was on the floor and there was a round blue hole in his forehead.

"It was Gledhill?" Scott Murnane asked softly.

"It was that man," she whispered. She pointed to the floor. "He was kneeling at the fire-place burning up papers. I was—was—"

"Drunk."

She nodded, and her head stayed down. Again she faltered, "He told me it was that girl. He said they might suspect me. He said he'd fix it so they wouldn't if I . . ."

"That's all, Mrs. Hallam."

Murnane looked at Blaggett. "So you made a deal, did you, Blaggett? Gledhill was to be governor and I was to be D. A. But Hallam didn't like that any better than he liked Novas for the Parole Board. Hallam found out about your deal, didn't he, Blaggett? He got affidavits and statements from some of the political hyenas who sold out to you. And that would have killed us all, politically. So Gledhill shot Hallam and burned the papers. And you knew it, didn't you, Blaggett? Answer me!"

Blaggett nodded.

Slowly the gun lowered in Murnane's hand. He said, "Look at Gledhill's left arm, Kurtz. You'll find he's been shot. I shot him after he'd shot at me in the Hallam house—when I almost got the truth from Mrs. Hallam. I saw the blood seep through on his shirt sleeve while he was manhandling Crossman. I knew then. And that's all. That's . . ."

Slowly Murnane swayed from side to side. He took one step toward the nearest chair, and collapsed. The commissioner of police swept a phone to his ear.

"Operator . . . Operator! Get me through to the governor!"

It was a quarter to twelve o'clock....

"Hello," she smiled. She stood in the door of his room, hesitantly.

"Hello, Miss Hayes," Murnane said. "Come on in."

She came to the bed. She said simply, "I wanted to come sooner but they wouldn't let me. I'm sorry you were hurt so badly on my account."

Murnane looked out of the window. His lips curved faintly. "It's nice of you," he said, "to come at all. You see, I didn't get hurt entirely on your account."

"Oh, but you did! You sacrificed so much to help me."

"Did I?" He looked up at her. He punched the pillow a little to lift his head up higher. Then he said, "I don't know. I thought I got something back. Something I must have mislaid a long time ago. I think they call it honor." He laughed. "Or maybe I'm just being sentimental."

"No, Mr. Murnane. I don't think you are. Good-by—and thank you."

"Good-by?" he grunted, tried to sit up. "Hey! Where're you going?"

"This nurse," she smiled, "says I have to go."

"But you'll be back?"

"As often as they'll let me."

Scott Murnane relaxed on the pillow, and smiled. ♠ ♠ ♠

The new DETECTIVE FICTION could hardly be considered complete without an offering from a worthy new writer—a category which Rufus Bakalor fills with highest honors. Your editor's life would indeed be rewarding if we could always be sure a pile of incoming manuscripts contained a talent as fresh and witty as he evidences in "Good Night, Sweet Alibi." We are proud to place his story among those of our other writers, and hope you get as many chuckles out of the Ringading Kid's adventures as we did.

GOOD NIGHT

SWEET ALIBI

by RUFUS BAKALOR

GILBERT PITCOTT, who was known to the grift and law-enforcement professions as "The Ringading Kid," had no business being a con man. He had the appearance of one, which is to say that he looked like a handsome, progressive young businessman. And he was materially successful in the swindle, as witness the fact that he and Diehard Dyson had just roped a visiting Brazilian and fleeced him for the not inconsiderable sum of \$300,000. Before taxes, of course.

But Mr. Pitcott, hereinafter referred to as Ringading, was seriously lacking in those strong moral fibers which go into every grifter's makeup. A true blue grifter, all wool and a

yard wide, abides by certain professional ethics. Among these are injunctions against the use of violence—except perhaps with a difficult victim—and against the commission of common, thuggish thievery, particularly of a fellow grifter.

As he lay on the bed in his hotel room, smoking a soiled cigarette, Ringading contemplated the violation of both these injunctions. On the deal they had just pulled, he had cleared \$120,000. He figured that Diehard Dyson, after cutting in the mob, still had ninety, maybe a hundred, thousand left.

It was Diehard's part of the touch that Ringading wanted, and he wanted it badly. He figured that,

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with Diehard's money plus his, he could quit the racket for good and maybe open up a nice, respectable nightclub or a nice, legitimate bookie joint. Anyway, he'd find a way to invest the money.

So Diehard had, say, ninety grand, thinking conservatively; and he knew for sure where Diehard had it: with him up at Shay Lake in that little log, porcupine-eaten shack where Diehard always went for fishing, rest and money-counting after a big take.

Ringading worked it all out and decided that it was a sure thing. Ringading was very, very clever. . . .

He checked an address in his memo book and drove to the Runcorne Arms apartment house on Michigan Boulevard. He pressed the buzzer under a card that read *Glorya Easterly* and announced to the throaty contralto inquiry that it was the Ringading Kid on urgent business.

Then he went up.

Glorya Easterly was a sometime showgirl who was gorgeous but greedy. She was very fond of currency and/or possessions readily convertible into same: pearls, the pelts of small fur-bearing animals, precious stones and metals, and the like. She had plenty of them and she wanted more. A lot more. Whether or not she was an elegant fluff is a proposition that has no bearing on this tale.

When Ringading recovered from momentary drowsiness induced by the fumes of *Or et Noir*, he took a chair that Glorya indicated with a jewel-festooned hand.

Glorya fixed him a drink and asked,

"Well, Ringading, what's the nature of your urgent business?"

Ringading came right to the point. "How'd you like to make a very soft grand?"

"Love it," said Glorya, leaning forward and breathing a little heavier. "What's the pitch?"

"Just for doing two simple things."

"The simple things are always the best things."

Ringading was silent for a moment and then went on, "I've got to go away on a little trip tomorrow night. But I want it established that I was here, with you, in this apartment, say from eight o'clock until two in the morning."

"A grand for being your alibi?"

"That's it. Only it's got to be an air-tight alibi, air-tight enough to hold water. I'll stage it right. All you got to worry about is following the stage directions."

"Uh-huh," said Glorya. "And where will you be from eight to two?"

"That's the second simple thing in your contract: not to ask any questions."

"Reasonable enough. How do you pay off?"

"Two-fifty to seal it now, and after the job's done, this." He showed her a thousand-dollar savings bond made out to Gilbert Pitcott or Glorya Easterly. "I'll deliver possession of this to you the day after tomorrow. Then you can do what you want with it."

"Sounds all right, but a wee bit cagey. Don't you trust me, Ringading?"

"Sure, I do, up to a point. But Ringading never takes unnecessary chances."

"I just love to do business with you, Ringading."

"And I love to do business with you, Glorya."

"Well, I'm an old, established firm."

Ringading smiled tightly, like an infant with gas on its tummy, counted out two hundred and fifty dollars into Glorya's eager little hand, and said, "I'll see you tomorrow night at eight."

"It's a date."

"By the way," said Ringading, "bruit it about a bit that you'll be entertaining the Ringading Kid here tomorrow night. You know, call up a girl friend and let it drop. That's all you've got to do until we set things up. Say anything you can to plant me here."

"Whatever you say, Ringading. Won't the girls envy me?"

"The thousand is for an alibi," said Ringading. "If I want wisecracks, I'll catch the comic at the Chez Patee."

THE NEXT evening, polished and shiny, Ringading wore a brown derby hat, a red cravat, and a Tattersall vest, among other less conspicuous apparel, of course, so that he might be readily identified later.

He walked to the desk in the hotel lobby and told the room clerk, "A rather important call from Detroit may come through for me later. For all others, tell 'em I've checked out. But if the Detroit call comes through, I'll be spending the evening at the

Runcorne Arms, apartment one hundred-twelve, care of Miss Glorya Easterly."

He winked elaborately, placed a folded twenty-dollar bill on the desk, and said, "Got that? Runcorne Arms. Miss Glorya Easterly. Better make a note of it so you won't forget."

"I sure won't forget, Mr. Pitcott," said the room clerk. "I wish I had a vest like that."

Then Ringading stopped at the hotel flower shop, and bought seven dozen long-stemmed American beauty roses. "I'll take them with me," he told the befuddled florist. "You write out a card for me. Put: 'To Glorya with love.' Sign it: 'Ringading.'"

Struggling with the roses, Ringading engaged a cab to take him to the Runcorne Arms. When the cab drew up in front of its destination, Ringading handed the cabbie a fifty-dollar bill, and told him to keep the change. "Courtesy of the Ringading Kid," he said, clearly and distinctly.

Sure, it had cost him some money, but the hotel clerk, the florist, and the cabbie would be sure to remember him and surmise his mission. Charge it off to sewing up the alibi with a nice, tight lock-stitch.

When he entered Glorya's apartment, she gasped at the roses that obscured Ringading and cooed, "Oh, Ringading, for me?"

"Yeah."

"Darling! You shouldn't a done it. Just hold on while I run some water in the bathtub."

"Cut the antics and let's get to

work. I've got a million things to do tonight."

Ringading had brought with him a small box containing a day's collection of cigarette stubs of his favorite brand. He distributed them liberally in the ash trays in all the rooms of the apartment. He had Glorya mix up a drink and then he planted his fingerprints on the glass. Then he put his fingerprints on various other objects, animate and inanimate. He dropped one of his gloves behind an easy chair, and he left his monogrammed comb in the bathroom.

He stepped to the center of the room, and surveyed, with pardonable pride, what he had wrought.

"Ringading was here!" shouted Glorya.

"That's the general idea," said Ringading. "Now remember, just take it easy until I get in touch with you. All you got to do is pretend I'm here. Get that into your head and don't let anyone ever tell you otherwise."

"Good night, sweet prince," called Glorya as Ringading crawled out the window on to the fire stairs.

"Good night, sweet alibi," rejoined Ringading. . . .

Ringading went down the fire escape stairway and walked four blocks to the place where he had parked his car. He took off his tie, hat and vest and threw them in the back seat. Then he got behind the wheel and started off in a northerly direction, toward Shay Lake and Diehard Dyson's ninety grand, one hundred and ten miles away.

He reached there at a quarter to

eleven. By ten to, he had aroused Diehard from his sleep.

When Diehard saw that it was Ringading, he welcomed him heartily. Diehard, as befits a good inside man on the grift, looked like a Wisconsin banker's conception of a Wall Street broker.

"Well, Ringading, what brings you into the wilderness?"

"Got fed up in the city and thought I'd run up here for a change, just for a couple hours. How's the fishing?"

"I wouldn't know," said Diehard. "What're you drinking?"

"Nothing tonight. My stomach . . ." Ringading thought to himself: *Don't touch anything in this place, that's my motto.*

They sat and talked for a while, mostly about the visiting Brazilian and how they had cooled him out.

At last Diehard said, "I don't believe you drove all the way up here just to punch the guff. You're a little too fidgety, even for you. What's up?"

"You're right, Diehard. I've got a lead on an apple that looks good for a hundred G's, maybe more."

"Go on."

"I didn't like to ask you, but I need a bankroll to operate on. I'm cleaned."

"So soon? What's happened to the enterprising Brazilian's investment?"

"You know, Diehard: the ponies, the women, the dice."

"Yes, yes, and yes. It could happen. Ringading, why don't you settle down like me and enjoy the more economical pleasures of life?"

GOOD NIGHT, SWEET ALIBI

"Maybe I will when I'm an inside man."

Diehard sighed like an indulgent parent and said, "How much do you need?"

"Five thousand should do it."

Diehard rose and walked to the cupboard. "Rope me another sucker like the Brazilian and it's worth it. I'll be back in town Tuesday, same place. So contact me then."

When he reached for a box of corn flakes, Ringading went into action quickly with a blackjack. Diehard never knew what hit him, never knew what hit him again and again and again.

After Diehard stopped jerking, Ringading bent over him and assured himself that Diehard was good and dead. Then he went for the box of corn flakes. And there was the cache, all in five-hundred-dollar bills, as crisp and delectable as the breakfast cereal it was cushioned in.

Ringading stuffed the money in his pockets, took a last look around to see if he had left any tell-tale souvenirs, except for Diehard, and went outside. No one and nothing was stirring outside the cabin, unless you count a highly amateurish choir of crickets. He washed the blackjack clean of fingerprints in the water and then flung it as far as he could into Shay Lake.

There was no reason for him to hide the bills, so he put them in the glove compartment and locked it.

IT WAS NOW eleven thirty-five and Ringading began the less tense drive back to Chicago. He wondered

how much richer he was on the return trip.

He hit the suburbs of the city at ten to two and decided that he'd better go directly to Glorya's place and check in and out. He had told her two o'clock, and with a crazy dame like Glorya, you couldn't always tell what to expect.

He stopped the car, put on his derby, vest and necktie again, and then continued on at a breakneck clip.

Everyone knows what happens when you exceed the speed limit in Chicago: a squad car nails you. They are very strict about the traffic regulations in Chicago.

So a squad car nailed Ringading. And, what is more, Ringading was prepared to take his ticket like a good citizen and not give the copper any argument.

The policeman peered in the window and exclaimed, "Well, well, well. If this here ain't a pleasant surprise! The Ringading Kid!" He called to his companion at the wheel of the prowler car, "Guess who the cannonball is. The Ringading Kid."

"Maybe I was going a little fast," Ringading put in.

"And that ain't all, Ringading. There's a general call out to pick you up."

"Pick me up? Why?"

"I wouldn't be knowing. But a certain Detective Lieutenant Martin J. Foy is anxious to have a chat with you. And Detective Lieutenant Martin J. Foy is assigned to Homicide, if you take my meaning."

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"I don't get it, not at all. My nose is clean."

The policeman stuck his hand in the window, removed Ringading's ignition key, and said, "We'll leave your car just where it is and you come along with us, Clean Nose."

At the precinct station, waiting for Lieutenant Foy, Ringading couldn't dope it out. Something had curdled. But he was sure that he'd left no evidence back at Shay Lake. And just let them try to break down his alibi.

At last, Lieutenant Foy came in and took him to his office. He ushered him to a chair, and offered him a cigarette. "Just a few routine questions, Ringading, if you'll bear with me."

"Sure, sure, Lieutenant. I've got nothing to hide."

"Where were you between, say, ten-fifteen and midnight tonight?"

"If it's O.K. with you, I'd rather not say."

"Why not?"

"Well, to be perfectly frank, Lieu-

tenant, I was with a certain young lady in her apartment during that time." He turned and winked at the several policemen posted about the room. "A fellow's got to have a little fun once in a while."

"I'll give it to you straight, Ringading: there's been a murder and it looks like you're into it up to your neck."

"Hold on, Lieutenant! You can't pin a thing on me and you know it. I had nothing to do with that murder and, what's more, I can prove where I was at the time it was committed. I got witnesses."

The detective smiled like a man having a Swedish rubdown. "So can we, Ringading, and with enough witnesses to do you up nice and brown. I'm warning you now that anything you say can be used against you. Because I'm booking you for the murder of Glorya Easterly. Between ten and midnight tonight, she was killed and robbed in her apartment." ♠ ♠ ♠

COLOR GUARD

by Joseph C. Stacey

One of the clerks employed by a large New York City grocery emerged from the store's washroom and found himself under arrest for stealing money from the cash register.

"There must be some mistake," protested the clerk. "I never took a penny—today or any other day."

The detective led the clerk to the register, opened it, and nodded to the cash box, which appeared spotlessly clean. "After the owner complained that various amounts of cash was disappearing from the register daily," the detective said, "we sprinkled the cash box with metholene blue, an invisible powder. It turns the human skin blue upon contact."

The clerk didn't say a word, but looked down at his shaking hands, which were guiltily splotched with blue.

It takes a real old salt to tell a mystery of the sea, but no tale of a schooner riding the waves with all sails set and not a living soul aboard could be more dramatic than the situation in which Gard Craddock finds himself in "Murder Off Shore," when he answers a small boat's SOS and finds only a dead man and a beautiful girl on board. The fact that the lady is as dazzlingly tough as a typical Dashiell Hammett heroine should give you fair warning that you won't be able to put down B. B. Fowler's novelette until that quietly masterful writer sets you free with his final sentence.

MURDER OFF SHORE

by B. B. FOWLER

WHEN GARD CRADDOCK first saw the boat he dismissed it briefly as belonging to a hand trawler lying-to after setting his trawls. He had seen them lying thus along the coast of Maine in the early morning. He turned the wheel a trifle and brought the nose of the *Betsy* in line with the black welter of rocks that marked Gull Point.

His thoughts traveled ahead to the little wharf that waded out from the tiny cove and, just beyond, the comfortable sprawl of the lodge that, for a brief period every fall and spring, became his home. As he thought of it his eyes took on a warmer shade.

Always, when he came home to this, he left behind another of the seasons that made up his life, left behind the

boom of white surf on coral beaches; or the croon of trade winds in swaying palms; the grinding roar of the bitter Atlantic on jag-toothed rocks; the breath of the Arctic that came to him from south-drifting bergs. Behind him this morning lay a summer that still gripped his heart with its strong and potent magic.

All these things were in the cool level gaze of his gray eyes; in the easy swing of his big shoulders; in the fluent ripple of muscles along his arms; in the impassive bronze mask of his face that was quietly and strongly sure for a man who was only twenty-four.

He glanced at the boat again and his eyes narrowed and little puckers of wrinkles sprang up at the corners

of his eyes. The boat lifted with the slow heave of a roller, stood poised for a second against the sky, then slid sideways soggily out of his sight. A hand trawler, lying-to at the end of his set, would have an anchor out. The boat was rolling in the trough of the waves.

His eyes widened as the boat swung up on the next roller. A figure in oilskins was standing up, one hand clutching the side of the boat, the other waving what looked like a bur-lap sack.

As he brought the *Betsy* around on her new course and headed for the other craft, he noticed strange things about the boat. It was, he saw now, no fisherman's motorboat. It's lines were clean and slender, telling of speed and grace. The figure that waved didn't go with the oilskins. There was something odd about it.

He was close to the drifting boat when he saw the face of the one who waved, a pale oval of white. A woman was wearing the oilskins. She sat down and waited, her eyes on Gard as he pulled the *Betsy* alongside and caught the gunwhale of the drifter with a boat hook.

He studied the woman for a second without speaking. She was very lovely. Under the man's hat she wore, her hair gleamed red gold. Makeup on the pale cheeks was streaky and mixed with dirt, but it could not hide her loveliness. But it was her eyes that interested him most, eyes of a tawny, almost indefinable color. Flecks of deeper color moved on their surface as she stared at him unsmilingly.

The woman had waved to attract his attention, but now she showed no warmth of relief or gratitude. She watched him with cold caution and narrow appraisal in her eyes. Something in her manner touched Gard with a finger of warning. Then he saw the other occupant of the boat and his stomach muscles crawled. He looked at the woman again with no change of expression on his face.

The man in the bottom of the boat lay on his face. Blood from the crushed back of his head had run down into the slop of dirty water in the well beside the motor, turning it red.

The woman was waiting for Gard to speak. Gard knew that. But he spoke only when it suited his purpose. The training of a lifetime had taught him when to let the other fellow do the talking. Just now, he figured, it was up to the woman.

Something deep in the tawny eyes glowed for a second, then was gone. Her lips parted slowly as though she were reluctant to speak first. When she did speak her voice was throaty, cold.

"Well, that's how it is. I killed him." She said it without any trace of emotion.

She took her hand off the gunwhale of the boat, pulled the other from the oilskin coat pocket and pushed them both forward before Gard's gaze. Both wrists were raw and bloody. She looked from Gard's eyes to her wrists and then stared briefly at the man on the bottom of the boat, and her lips twisted in a sneer that wiped out

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all her beauty for an instant. "He brought me out here with my wrists and ankles tied and an anchor fast to my feet." She jerked her head toward the old flywheel of a motor with a length of rope still tied to it.

She put her hands back in her pockets and talked to Gard while she kept her eyes on the dead man. "Never mind asking me why. Say I knew too much. Say anything. I was turned over to him to drop over the side. He brought me out here last night. But on the way I worked my wrists loose and got hold of one of those wooden things you call a marlin-spike. When he leaned over to pick me up he laughed and said, 'In you go, baby.' Then I hit him."

GARD LOOKED the dead body over slowly. The fellow seemed incongruous out here in the bay, rolling with the motion of the boat. He had shoulders like a lumberjack, but he was dressed in a too-light tan suit. His feet were encased in narrow pointed shoes, with purple socks.

"I hit him," the girl repeated and laughed shortly. "He was a dirty, yellow, boot-licking rat. He deserved what he got."

"Undoubtedly," Gard said drily. "But suppose we tow him in and let someone else decide that. You'd better jump in with me. I'll make a line fast to your boat."

Again Gard saw that strange expression stir deep in the tawny eyes. "I was wondering," she said quietly, "when you'd get around to saying something." Her eyes narrowed a

little as she added, "You're a very cool egg, aren't you?"

Gard figured that the remark didn't call for a reply. He shrugged. "Jump in and we'll get started. I'll take you into Spaniard's Cove."

She raised her eyes and shot a long stare past Gard into Spaniard's Cove; a long, searching, calculating stare in which Gard saw shrewdness, hate and stark fear. Then she shrugged and stood up, put one foot on the gun-whale of the boat and leaped into the *Betsy*.

As she came over the side Gard saw that under the oilskins she was wearing a long, flimsy evening gown of gold bronze. Her feet were shod in gold-bronze satin slippers. Her ankles had been tied. Gard could see where the cords had torn the silk stockings to rags and worn raw rings about her slim ankles.

Gard was making the line fast to the derelict when her voice behind him said coldly, "No, big boy, you won't do that. You'll drop the line and get back to the wheel and go where I tell you."

Gard turned slowly and faced the round, black muzzle of a big automatic. The slim hand that gripped it was very steady, her wrist resting on one knee. Behind the gun her tawny eyes were as hard as steel. Gard gave the dead man another glance and cursed himself silently. He saw now what he should have seen before, the empty holster under one upflung arm. The cold poise of the woman should have warned him she would try something like this. He could have caught

her and taken the gun from her as she came aboard.

He mentally shrugged away the thought of what he might have done as he turned back to the wheel. The woman was eight feet away. He measured the distance with his eye and met a hard twist of her lips.

"Try it," she said softly. "Just try. If you do you get a slug where it will do the most damage. I killed a man last night. I'd kill another just as willingly today to save my scalp. He," she jerked her head toward the boat that slid away from them, "was only a strong-arm punk. He was acting under orders. The orders are still out. But I'm going to beat the slimy devil who is behind this. I'll show him he can't pull that stuff on me."

Her voice took on a sharper, commanding note. "Swing your boat south. We're making for Port Easton. I can get a car there. Spaniard's Cove can wait."

Gard sat sideways at the wheel, his big shoulders braced negligently against the gunwale, watching the woman with his cool, level gaze. He hoped she would relax and knew she wouldn't. He wondered briefly about the mystery that must lie in Spaniard's Cove. His own cottage was there in a pocket of the inlet. When he got back he would make it his business to find out what it was all about.

He tried to surprise her out of her icy calm. "If he leaned over you to pick you up, you must have hit him on the forehead. How did the back of his head get battered?"

"I did that," she said calmly. "I made sure of my job after he fell." Her mouth twisted in snarling hatred, making her look wolfish. "That's where I made my mistake. I should have held a gun on him and let him live long enough to land me somewhere."

Gard's eyes told her nothing of the feelings that seethed behind the mask of his face. His voice was even, almost casual. "Why didn't you run the boat in yourself?"

"You think of everything, don't you?" the woman remarked thinly. "When he got ready to heave me over the side he shut the motor off. I couldn't start it again. Don't know anything about those things. Now will you shut up and wheel this tub into Port Easton?"

WITH THE *Betsy* headed for Port Easton, Gard let his thoughts dwell briefly on the woman. She was incongruously out of place here on the coast. Her beauty, her poised, icy calm belonged to a harder world than Maine fishermen ever know. She was a woman who could look on death unmoved; who could strike in stark ferocity. The battered head of the dead man told volumes of the nature behind the flecked brown eyes. He knew it wouldn't do to start anything.

If the dead man had been, as the woman remarked, a strong-arm punk sent by someone to throw her over the side into sixty fathoms of Atlantic, it made a mystery as deep and stark as the woman's nature gave every evidence of being.

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She watched him with feline alertness. But when she spoke again there was a new note in her voice. "You're the oddest kind of a chap I've ever seen." She stared at him with narrow calculation in her eyes. Finally she added, "I'd rather have you playing for me than against me any time. I wouldn't feel half so comfortable now if, for instance, you had given the orders for my death."

She shivered slightly. But the glow of the brown eyes washed away the emotion that had made her shiver. "I wish," she said slowly, "that I had someone like you on my side for awhile. I'm going to need some help."

She held Gard's eyes for a long time. His remained level and cool. His unsmiling mouth refused to answer. She shook her head and something shadowed her tawny eyes for a second.

"You don't talk a hell of a lot, do you?"

"Only when I have a reason," he said. "I've seen a lot of men dig graves with their tongues."

She put her head on one side and studied him through lowered lids. "Yes," she said slowly, "I believe you have. You wouldn't want to be telling me anything about yourself? Your name? What your racket is? Just where you fit into this picture?" She took in the sweep of shore and sea with a gesture of her slim hand.

Gard shrugged. "Does it make any difference?"

She twisted one shoulder in time to the jerk of her lips. "I suppose, the way things are, it doesn't. But

I certainly can't spill anything if you won't trade."

After a little silence, she said, "I think you're making a mistake, friend. I'm up against something pretty big. I can see how you'd fit in. But if you can't see your way clear it's just too bad."

A ghost of a smile drifted across Gard's bronzed face. "I don't suppose on the other hand, that you'd care to tell me *your* name?"

She shook her head. Then she seemed to reconsider. Gard could see what she was thinking. She was sizing him up, wondering if some information from her might not loosen him up. There was something in her eyes, at the same time, that baffled him. It was almost as if she were contemplating something with regret. He looked at the gun in her hand and a trickle of ice ran along his spine.

Her full lips curved in a slight smile. "If you see me again, call me Julia. But—" she hesitated a second—"I don't think you'll see me again."

That might mean something or nothing. Gard mulled it over in his mind as he turned his attention to the rocks ahead. He knew the channel. It was a tricky, snaky path for a boat through the jagged teeth of the rocks.

He was almost through when he was seized with an almost uncontrollable impulse. It was as if a voice inside him suddenly called out clearly and sharply: *Run the boat on the rocks and dive for it.*

The impulse was strong enough to make him measure the distance

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between the boat and the strip of beach at the entrance of the harbor. He could make it easily. He could even take the woman in if it were necessary. Though something told him she could always take care of herself, whatever the situation.

He thrust the impulse from him. He'd been through too much in the old *Betsy* to ram her into the graveyard of the rocks for a mere whim. Not even the threat of the gun in the woman's hand could make him do that.

As he cleared the channel he turned and met her gaze. There was an enigmatic something in her eyes that puzzled him. At the same time he felt some of the cold dread lift. It was as if she had made a decision while his back was turned toward her. He knew then that it was the cold threat of the woman that had given rise to the impulse.

Her lips twisted in her tight smile again as she said, "I could have plugged you in the back that time. I could have gone over the side and made the shore easily. Did you think of that?"

Gard nodded. "Yes, I thought of that."

She considered him gravely. "I thought you did. You're even odder than I imagined. I take back what I said a while ago. I think you and I are due for another meeting."

Gard shrugged and turned his attention back to the boat. He was winding his way among anchored dories toward the gray wharf. Just beyond, he knew, was the road and

the few stores and scattered houses that made up Port Easton.

He didn't hear the woman when she crept up behind him. Afterward he was to consider the catlike stealth of her movements. The boat was bumping against the wharf when he heard her speak.

She said, "I hate to do this, friend."

He started to whirl around but something crashed down on his head and darkness swallowed him.

CHAPTER 2

Spaniard's Cove

HE ROCKED back and forth in whirling darkness, shaken by hammer blows that banged the world about him. After awhile he became dimly conscious that it was the boat rocking in the swell that rolled in from the bay. The knocking was the side of the *Betsy* against the wharf.

He sat up and held his aching head in his hands. Gradually it all came back to him. Lifting his head, he stared in the direction of the road. He saw nothing but buildings that whirled dizzily in a red mist and he felt brief rage stir him. If he hurried he might catch up to her.

He pushed the thought away from him. "What would I do," he asked himself, "if I did catch up with her?"

He stood up slowly, swaying on his feet. He kept his eyes tightly closed while he looped a line about a pile. In a little while he would pull

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the *Betsy* around where she wouldn't hammer. Just now he couldn't do it. The light hurt his eyes. His head ached agonizingly.

Even the effort of making the *Betsy* fast almost put him under again. He staggered to the side of the boat, leaned over and was deathly sick. After that he felt better. Memories began to form into echoes of sound in his head. He heard her voice again saying, "I hate to do this, friend."

He smiled wryly as he stripped down to a pair of swimming trunks. He dove over the side deep into the crystal-green depths.

He climbed out shivering from the icy bite of the water, but his head was clearer. The ache was less intolerable than it had been. He could open his eyes and look about him now.

He rubbed himself briskly with a coarse towel and got into trousers and a clean shirt from the locker in the tiny cabin. After that he broke out a bottle of Demarara rum. He drank in little sips, letting the liquor trickle slowly down his throat and warm him inside. It settled his stomach and relieved still more the ache in his head that had now become dull and heavy.

When he came out of the cabin again, an old man was walking toward him along the wharf. He came to a halt and stared down into the boat with bright, birdlike eyes in a weather-seamed face. The toothless mouth was puckered by hundreds of tiny wrinkles radiating from it.

His voice was sharp and bright as his eyes. "Mornin', mister!"

Gard said, "Morning," and stared up at him. He could see the keen appetite for information in the bright eyes.

"That was a dang smart-lookin' woman came in with you."

"Um," Gard grunted. His lips twitched again. She was smarter than the old fellow would ever guess.

"Kind of funny rig-out for sailin' in a boat like this," the old fellow chirped.

Gard merely nodded. For a second he felt an impulse to laugh aloud. The old fellow's face had the naive disappointment of a child who has been refused candy.

The old fellow shrugged slowly. It was in his eyes that he accepted defeat. "She hired Luke Sewell to run her into Portland in his Ford."

Gard said, "Yes," as he climbed up to the dock. He tried to soften the old fellow's disappointment with a smile, and, "Thanks for the information." Then he went swinging up the wharf in long, lithe strides.

From the general store he called the Coast Guard at Portland, and reported the boat with the dead man. He answered questions, then hung up and called New York City.

He thought of his cousin, Ralph Craddock, as he waited for the connection to be put through. He smiled thinly as he pictured him, tall, lean, with his cold eyes and the hard Craddock mouth. He never could like Ralph. They lived in different worlds. With both their fathers dead, Uncle

George had looked after them from boyhood. Gard had chosen to spend his comfortable income traveling as he wished. Ralph had gone into the business with Uncle George to be nearer the profits and margins and dividends that he loved.

Ralph's voice over the wire had an odd quavering note in it as he said, "You, Gard? We weren't expecting you for a while yet."

"Dirty weather settled in early this year," Gard answered. "So I came down a little ahead of schedule."

"You're not at—" Ralph started to say. His tone changed; there was something more in it now. "Where are you?"

"Port Easton." It was like him not to make explanations. It never occurred to him to tell Ralph of the boat and the dead man. That was part of a story that, something told him, was just begun. He countered with a question of his own. "I'd like to talk to Uncle George. Is he at the office?"

There was a long pause at the other end of the wire. Then Ralph said, "He's been cruising along the Maine coast in the *Polar Star*." A longer pause, then Ralph's voice again. This time it was positively jittery. "Haven't you heard? But then, you wouldn't. We're worried about Uncle George. We haven't had any word from him for several days."

COLD PREMONITION touched Gard briefly. He stood staring into the mouthpiece of the telephone, seeing a woman with cool brown eyes staring into Spaniard's Cove. There was a

boat rolling in the trough of the swell with a dead man in it; a man who had brought a woman out to dump over the side because she knew too much.

Finally he said, "Hasn't he been near his place at Bar Harbor?"

"Naturally we called there first," Ralph said with a touch of impatience in his voice. "The servants haven't seen him, though they had word to expect him there three days ago. I'm worried, Gard. I'm worried sick. There are important details coming up in the business that Uncle George should handle."

Yes, Gard decided, Ralph was worried. But there was something else coming to him over the wire, something that touched him coldly.

"Where are you going now?" Ralph asked.

Gard hesitated again, then said shortly, "I'll just cruise around. I'll get in touch with the Coast Guard up here and see if I can help."

"It would be fine if you could," Ralph said. Gard could feel the relief flowing back into the voice. "You know about these things. You know your Maine coast."

"Yes," Gard said to himself as he hung up, "I know my Maine coast."

He walked back to the *Betsy*, after making arrangements with the storekeeper to moor the boat offshore where she wouldn't rub against the wharf. He started to pack a suitcase from the locker, then decided against it. Instead he dressed in a loose coat. He took a long-barreled revolver from the bottom of the locker, cleaned it carefully, loaded it and juggled it in

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his hand before sliding it down inside his belt where it pressed against the hard flat muscles with a comforting coolness.

He buttoned the coat so the gun wouldn't show and strode back up the dock. He swung through Port Easton and struck out along the road to Spaniard's Cove. He took the road because of a woman who held a steady gun on him to stop him from putting into Spaniard's Cove. Someone had sentenced her to death in Spaniard's Cove. That someone would still be there. To sail in would be to ask for trouble. Gard Craddock believed in giving the other fellow credit for intelligence until his actions disproved it.

He was thinking of his Uncle George; seeing again, as he walked along the road, the old man with the hard gray eyes and the white moustache that failed to soften the hard mouth. He was the hard-driving type, harshly impatient at what he considered Gard's irresponsibility. In spite of that Gard liked the old man, and knew that he was liked grudgingly in return.

The sight of the roadside restaurant made him conscious of the gnawing emptiness of his stomach. He had last eaten an hour before dawn when he had left his anchorage and started for Spaniard's Cove.

A shirt-sleeved man came along the counter to take Gard's order for ham and eggs. He made rambling attempts at conversation as Gard ate, without getting any reply. He was still trying when the sedan pulled up

outside and two men came into the restaurant. As they came Gard noticed that a third man stayed at the wheel and kept the motor running.

One of the men was gray. The skin stretched over the protruding cheekbones was almost as gray as the hair. He turned a nose like a prow in Gard's direction and stared at him with gray eyes that were as lusterless as moss. Again the finger of promonition touched Gard. He felt a cold threat walk into the restaurant with the two men.

The second of the pair was lean and dark and alert. He had nervous hands. The right kept plucking at a button on his coat, just below the bulge under his armpit. Past him Gard could see the man in the car, a red moon face turned half-expectantly toward the restaurant.

THE TWO ordered coffee and sat down at the counter next to Gard. After awhile the gray man said, "Hiking it, kid?"

Gard nodded.

The dark one said, "Give you a lift if you're going our way."

Gard stared out the door at the sedan. "If you're going the way you're headed it won't help me any." He added slowly, "I'm making for Portland. Unless," he said, "I find a job on the way."

The dark one seemed to relax a little. He dropped his right hand from the coat button and picked up the cup of coffee.

The gray man considered Gard for a long time. Then he said, "We drove

your way awhile back. Didn't notice you along the road."

Gard shrugged, "Got a lift with a farmer early this morning. He dropped me a little way off the road when he left the main pike." He felt the muscles across his belly relax a little. "I sure am sorry you're not going my way. I could use another lift. I'd like to get to Portland today."

The gray man stood up. "Too bad, kid, but we're heading the other way."

The two of them walked out into the autumn sunshine. They stood, the gray man with his hand on the door of the sedan for a moment, irresolutely. He said something in a low tone to the dark one, then shrugged and got into the sedan.

As the sedan pulled away Gard began to breathe normally again. He knew that in that moment the sable wings of death had brushed him. He had felt the stir of those wings touch him and slow his heart.

The lunch-counter man stared at the door, then at Gard. "I'd swear I saw you comin' from Portland way."

"You'd be wrong," Gard said harshly. "I'm traveling west."

He paid for the ham and eggs and went slowly out into the yard. He saw, without turning his head to look, the sedan parked a little way down the road. He knew that he had saved his life again by turning west as he left the door. They were waiting to see if he turned west naturally.

He walked up the road with long strides, never turning his head. But his chest felt tight and drawn until he heard the throb of the motor as the

sedan started east. He kept on walking another half mile, then left the road.

He sat for awhile behind a fringe of bushes at the roadside, trying to figure it out. The woman was at the heart of this mystery. Perhaps she had sent word to someone. But, he told himself, that wasn't logical. She was getting away from whatever it was.

It followed, then, that he had been spotted at Port Easton. Someone at the store; someone like the garrulous old native had tipped the men in the sedan. There was another possibility that made his face a granite mask as he thought of it.

He shrugged it off and started across the fields in the direction of Spaniard's Cove. It was longer that way. But the road wasn't safe for him now. And he had plenty of time. He didn't want to get to Spaniard's Cove before dark.

In the late afternoon he lay down in a clump of small pines at the crest of the hill overlooking the pocket of the inlet where his lodge nestled against a background of pines. A boat rode at anchor just off the rocks in front of the lodge. A boat was pulled up on the beach. A pulse in his throat throbbed. Someone was using his lodge. While he watched, the big sedan he had seen at the roadside lunch backed out of the garage and headed for the main road.

Gard's gray eyes were expressionless as he stared down the slope. Then he shrugged again and lay down. He had that ability that comes to sailors:

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that ability to catch a few hours sleep at any time. Something told him there would be little rest for him when night came. That is, there would be little rest if he hoped to find the mystery behind the dead man in the boat, the woman, and the men who had taken over his lodge.

CHAPTER 3

The Lady Returns

IT WAS growing dark when he awakened, shivering slightly. The bite of early fall was in the air. And he was hungry. He tightened his belt another notch and pushed the thought of hunger from him.

It was dark when he crept down the hill, his soft-soled deck shoes making no sound. Beyond the lodge the sea was luminous, the line of the surf ghost white, hissing over the jagged rocks. He could see the white blotch of the boat riding at anchor. Nearer the lodge he could see the thread of light that seeped past one drawn shade, and his pulses beat a little faster.

Skirting a clump of dwarf spruce, he circled the garage and came close to the lodge on the side. He squatted on his heels like an Indian and waited for five minutes. At the end of that time a man stirred somewhere at the back of the house. He heard the scratch of a match as the fellow lighted a cigarette. But the man was shielding it well so that no gleam should give away his position.

The fragrance of tobacco drifted to

Gard. He got up, crossed like a shadow to the side of the house and stood close against the screened porch for a second, then inched his way along, the cigarette smoke growing stronger.

He could see the man now, a vague dark bulk in the gloom, his back to the lodge. The cigarette cupped in his hand lighted his face briefly as he drew on it. It was the beefy man he had seen at the wheel of the sedan.

Gard came away from the house in a swift, tigerish leap, his gun grasped by the long barrel. The man whirled, his exclamation of surprise a loud gasp. Gard could see one arm go to his armpit. The butt of the heavy gun crunched on his forehead and the man dropped like a pole-axed steer.

Gard stood for a moment, listening. Down on one knee, he caught the beefy man's wrist in one hand and slipped the other under a leg. With a heave of muscles he got the fellow on his shoulders and carried him beyond the clump of dwarf spruce. There he gagged him with his own dirty handkerchief, tied him up with the piece of light line that, sailor fashion, he always kept in his pocket. He took the automatic out of the holster and slipped it into his hip pocket. All this done he stood up, slipped off his coat, slid the revolver back under his belt.

The pillars that supported the roof of the sleeping porch were of rough stone. Gard went up them like a monkey, or a sailor, and swung over the edge of the roof. The third window he tried was unlocked. He slid

it upward, grateful as he had never been before for his own care in keeping the lodge shipshape.

The air in the room was stale and warm. He opened the door noiselessly and slid along the hallway. He could hear the murmur of voices from the big living room below. In the dark Gard smiled thinly. He was in his own house. He knew things about it that these men did not.

The tiny door that rose but three feet from the floor level opened as noiselessly as had the window. Gard went in slowly, inch by inch, squirming through the trunks and boxes piled there. When the door was closed he turned on the dusty bulb that brushed his cheek.

He was in the storage room that took up the waste space at the end of the lodge. Gard knew that no one would have guessed by glancing in that a trap door farther back led down into the entrance of another storage room. He snapped the bulb off again and slid across to the trap door. Lifting it, he let himself down till he hung by his fingers and dropped the last few feet. The soft thump he made sounded loud in his own ears. He stood for a second, frozen into immobility, listening.

A voice the other side of the pine paneling came to him muffled, but still distinguishable. "This dump gets on my nerves. Did you hear that noise just now?"

The answering voice was sharper, harsher. "Squirrels. The damned place is full of them. Hang onto yourself, Dave."

Dave's answer was an indistinguishable murmur.

Gard started to move, then froze again. The sedan was coming back from the road. He could hear the throb of the motor. The men beyond the paneling heard it too. The sharp voice said, "There's Gino and Trigg now."

Dave's heavy voice said, "I hope to blazes they've got something."

The motor died in the yard at the back. Feet climbed the steps to the back porch. There were three of them. Two men and a woman. One of the men must have pushed the woman because she exclaimed sharply and banged against the door as though off balance.

The door opened, the feet went past Gard's hiding place into the room. The sharp voice inside had a ring of savage pleasure. "Well, if it isn't Julia. Hello, you hellcat, Maybe you'll tell us now what happened last night."

THE HARD voice of the gray man Gard had seen in the restaurant come to him. "I thought Stevey was supposed to stick at the back door to watch for anyone coming."

The voice that had spoken to the woman snapped, "He is. Why, isn't he there?"

"Not a sign of him."

Two of the men went out. Gard could hear one of them calling softly, "Stevy! Hey, Stevey!"

They came back into the room. The sharp voice was a little worried. "He isn't there. Now what the hell do you suppose happened to him?"

The gray man said, "I think the rat took a runout powder. He said today in the sedan that everything was going haywire. He was getting the jitters."

The voice of the man who seemed to be the authority said, "Maybe he did, at that. But things are not as haywire as some of you guys seem to think. We can still pull out. Tonight we do the job that was bungled last night. This hellcat and the old man go over the side. And this time there'll be no slip."

Julia's voice was edged with cold hatred. "You couldn't do anything right, you bungling fool. I got away last night, didn't I? Well, I'll do it again." The woman was against the paneled wall beside Gard.

Gard could hear the man walk across the room. His voice was almost a purr. "There's never a second time, Julia darling." Then questioningly, "Where did you boys find her?"

The gray man's voice said, "In Portland. She wasn't hard to find. She was trying to get through to New York. But she hadn't got her party yet."

The man who had moved close to the paneling laughed. "Did you make the call I told you?"

The gray man said, "Yes, but he wasn't home. His wife said he'd left early in the afternoon."

"If he's wise he'll be heading for here."

The woman laughed again. "Getting jittery, eh, Price? Well, you'd better. You didn't get the guy who picked me up out of that boat. I'd

worry lots about him if I were you."

"That sap," Prince snarled. "We'll get him. He's just a dumb sap."

"I know men," Julia said. "I'm not scared of you, Prince. Neither you nor your punks can frighten me. But that guy could scare me. He's too quiet. I know enough to be scared of fellows like that."

"You and the old guy will both be blame quiet in a few hours. And you'll stay that way forever. Better start practicing holding that tongue of yours now." The slap with which he punctuated his threat was loud and sharp.

Prince's voice barked, "Tie that hellcat up. Put her arms around that chair and tie them. And leave her where I can see her."

His ear against the crack of the tiny door that opened into the room, Gard could hear the woman's sharp exclamation of pain as someone slammed her rudely into the chair. Her breath made a long hiss as though she were suppressing a scream.

He could hear the man fumbling with something beyond the paneling. Then they moved away and Prince said with a dry chuckle, "That should hold you, my darling. Think that over for awhile."

Another car driving through the pines brought a sudden hush to the room. Prince snapped, "You, Gino, get out to your place at the door. It's probably the dope. But we don't want anyone else nosing in now."

Gino went out through the back entry as the car stopped. Gard could hear his voice, "Oh, it's you, is it? It's

about time. The boss was beginning to think about putting the finger on you."

The man, whoever he was, did not answer. He walked heavily up the steps and into the room. Inside the living room he spoke, "I don't see why I had to come here. We made our bargain. You knew what to do."

Gard's breath caught in his throat at the sound of the voice. Now things were getting a little clearer.

Julia's voice was a snarl as the newcomer gasped. "Yes, I'm here, you slimy rat. And I'm still alive. That surprises you, doesn't it?"

The newcomer stammered, "Why, Julia, I sent you away so you'd be safe. What are you doing tied up?"

Prince's voice snapped, "Cut out the baloney. You sent her here for me to bump off because she knew too much. You needn't try to cover up. I'll go through with it. But I want you here when we do it. You're in this deeper than we are."

GARD COULD hear better now. He had the door to this storage space open a crack. The voices covered the tiny click made by the latch when he opened it. He pulled the door wider. Julia was tied in a chair, her arms twisted around the back. She, and the angle of the fireplace, hid the door.

He could see Prince now, tall, wide-shouldered, darkly handsome. Black hair swept back from his forehead in waves that looked as if they had been marcelled there. His mouth was twisted in an ugly smile.

"Before you go, dear Julia," he said, "you're going to tell us about this guy you're raving about. Where is he now? You know who he is. Where did you leave him?"

The voice of the man Gard could not see had a quaver of fear in it. "That was Gard. Didn't you get him? I sent you word as soon as he called me."

"No, we didn't get him," Prince rasped. "So what?"

"So that fellow will be taking you, Prince. I'd start shaking now if I knew that guy was on my trail. And he is, Prince, make no mistake about that."

Prince came across the room in long strides and struck Julia full-handed across the face. His own was contorted with fury. "I warned you, you hellcat. Now, if you know so much, you'll talk. Dave, stick a poker in the fireplace. We'll see how long she can keep her yap shut."

Gard saw Dave cross to the fireplace. He was a burly thug with scrambled features and a cauliflower ear.

Then Gard saw his cousin, Ralph, as he took a step forward. His eyes were wide with terror, his face chalk white. He looked what he was, an errant coward whose greed had gotten him into something that now panicked him.

His voice quavered. "You can't do that, Prince. You can't torture her."

"Oh, I can't," Prince purred. "Listen, puttyface, and get this straight. I'll do just what I like. All you've got to do is pay me the two hundred

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grand when the job is finished. You hired me. And I'm going through. I want you here so that you'll be in as deep as I am if there's any slip. You let Julia get wise to you. So she has to die. The old guy has got to die now that we've persuaded him to sign the papers you needed. The end is fixed. You've got the papers and the old guy's business is yours. Now he dies and everything is nice.

"But," he went on, "there's another guy can spill the beans. I think Julia knows where he is. I'm going to see if she won't tell. If you don't like it go and hide your fat head in a corner."

The door was all the way open now. Gard slid through far enough so that he could reach Julia's hand. He touched her fingers warningly and felt her stiffen. He slid the knife out of his pocket and cut the cords at her wrist. He smiled thinly as he slipped the automatic out of his pocket and pushed the butt into her right hand. He watched the fingers curl around the pistol spasmodically. He slid the big revolver out of his belt and drew his knees up under him. He waited taut and alert, till he heard Dave's voice say thickly, "It's nice and red now, boss."

Dave came around with the poker, its end glowing. Prince came across the room to stand before Julia. He took it from Dave and stood with it in his hand. Something in the eyes of the woman brought a puzzled frown to his face.

Then the smile came back. He leaned forward and said, "This across

your pretty face, my dear, and I think you'll talk."

He leaped back, his mouth sagging as Julia jerked the automatic from behind her and jabbed it toward his stomach. She pulled the trigger just as Gard stood up.

At the click Gard smiled, "I took the cartridges out of it before I gave it to you. I thought you'd try to kill him. I don't want that—yet."

The big gun in Gard's hand was steady. He waved it in a small arc covering the four men. Ralph Craddock was like a statue of frozen despair. Prince brought his hands up slowly, his dark face tightening. The gray man, Trigg, held his own shoulder high. Dave's face looked as though the big bruiser had just been kicked in the stomach.

"Now, my dear cousin," Gard said softly, "suppose you tell me what this is all about."

Julia spoke first. She said in a tight voice, "That was a dirty trick, friend. It would have been better for all of us if Dave and Prince had some slugs in their chests right now."

She laughed, a brittle, hard laugh and said to Prince, "I told you this guy was dynamite. I told you he'd catch up to you."

Gard walked around the chair to where the poker lay, sending up a tiny plume of smoke as it burned into the floor. He kicked the poker and it rattled across the floor into the fireplace. Where it had lain the hard pine floor glowed redly and the smoke continued to spiral up.

Behind him Julia said, "No one

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wants to talk. So I will. Your precious cousin had this bright idea. He was making a play for me. He was quite a playboy. So much so that he blew all his own money and was being pushed for debts. He was in business with his uncle, as you know. So he had the old guy snatched.

"Prince tortured the old fellow into signing papers giving Ralph control of the business. The stuff was dated back a couple of months to make it look right. After that the old fellow was to be killed. That would leave Ralph sitting pretty."

Her laugh was not nice. "One night when he was tight he boasted he'd soon have millions to spend on me. When he sobered up he got jittery. The old guy was due to get bumped. So he had me brought out here to Prince and his gang to keep your uncle company.

"Your uncle wasn't due to go yet. I guess Ralph had some details to clear up. But they didn't have to hold up my funeral. So last night they sent one of their gorillas out with me. You know the rest."

Gard let his cold eyes travel over the group and come to rest on Prince. "So you tortured my uncle, did you?" he said softly. "Where do you have him now?"

"Where you're going in a minute, big boy," a voice at the door said harshly.

The little dark man who had been in the restaurant with Trigg was standing in the doorway, a sub-machine gun cuddled in one arm.

"All right, big boy," he said, grin-

ning tightly. "You've had your fun. Now drop that gun."

CHAPTER 4

Family Reunion

THE THUMP of Gard's gun sounded loud in the sudden silence. "Good work, Gino," Prince snapped as he crossed the room. "How did you get wise?"

Gino said, "Stevey. I heard something crashing around in the bush and took a look. It was Stevey. This punk," he jerked his head at Gard, "smacked him down and tied him up."

Stevey pushed into the room. His face was caked with dried blood.

Prince said, "Tie up the smart guy, Stevey. You, Dave, tie that dame up again."

He turned to Ralph and said, "You see. You can't act soft with these babies. The hellcat is bad. But everything is nice now. We've got the guy who had us worried. He can keep Julia and the old man company on the bottom of the ocean. How'll you like that, sailor?"

Gard didn't answer. His face gave no sign of the sick turmoil that went on inside him. He had had the game in his hand and had slipped. He looked down at the floor and saw the red glow of the smouldering floor board. He took another step so that his legs hid the curling plume of smoke from the others.

Stevey came forward, caught Gard's wrists and jerked them behind

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him. He tied them, tightening the cords till they bit into the flesh. When the tying was finished he clubbed Gard on the jaw with a fist that felt as hard and heavy as a cocoanut. Gard went down with a sharp pain shooting from his jaw to explode into fire before his eyes.

Gard tried to roll with the slamming toes of Stevey's shoes. He felt as though the heavy boot was loosening him inside. His ribs felt as if they were caved in.

Prince's voice snapped, "Business before pleasure, Stevey. You get outside with Gino and see that everything is clear. You, Trigg, bring the old man down. We're ready to go now. Dave, go down and bring the boat into the dock. Then we'll all go for a boat ride. This time I do the job myself."

Ralph's voice was not scared now. It was thick and heavy with gloating triumph. He came around to stand over Gard and look down at him with his thin lips twisted in savage pleasure. "You snob, you'll never sneer at me again. Remember the time you blacked my eye when we were kids?"

He kicked Gard in the aching ribs. "That's your pay for that. You were Uncle George's pet. He left you a big slice in his will. I'll spend that." He kicked Gard again.

Every time Ralph kicked him Gard jerked back, trying to avoid the full force of the blows. But as he jerked backward he stared up at Ralph. His gray eyes were expressionless. He fought down the pain and put a thin smile on his face as he said, "You al-

ways were a rat, Ralph. This doesn't surprise me."

Ralph kicked him again. Then Prince's voice snapped, "Forget this pleasant family reunion for a minute. We've got things to do."

As Ralph backed away, Gard heard Julia say, "You are a sickening rat, Ralph. I wonder how I stomached you as long as I did."

Ralph slapped her full in the face and moved away across the room. Looking up Gard caught her eyes on him. Her face was red and swollen where Prince and Ralph had smashed her. But her brown eyes were as cold as when he had first seen them on the boat. She smiled, and her eyes warmed a little as she said, "I told you that you'd made a mistake, friend. You should have let me kill him. But I'm for you just the same. You've got what it takes."

Gard flinched involuntarily as his hip pressed down on the spot where the poker had burned into the floor. He could smell his clothes scorching.

He rolled over to face Prince and felt the spot with his fingers. It was still a live coal. He got his tied wrists on it and pressed down hard. Liquid fire rippled along his nerves from his tortured wrists. He bit the inside of his lip to hold his face in a blank mask, and the pain settled in his stomach and threatened to make him sick.

When he could stand it no longer he began to put pressure on the cords that tied him. Across the room Prince suddenly sniffed. His hard eyes became alert and watchful. He jerked the gun to a level with his hip and

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started forward. "What the hell is coming off here?" he asked harshly.

He was standing almost over Gard when the bonds gave way. Gard brought one foot up in a driving kick. Prince doubled over in sudden agony as Gard came to his feet. He caught the automatic with one hand and slammed the other to Prince's jaw with a smack that could be heard all over the room.

He jerked the automatic free and whirled to face Ralph. His cousin's face was once more terrified as he jerked the gun from his pocket. It was lining on Gard's middle when Gard snapped a shot that struck Ralph in the shoulder and whirled him around. He tried to bring the gun up once more and Gard shot again. With the second shot Ralph stumbled forward, writhing.

Julia's voice snapped him around. She screamed, "The door! The door! Gino's coming!"

Gino leaped into the room, the submachine gun stuttering, hailing lead. He swung the gun muzzle round to get Gard in the line of fire and folded over with a slug from Gard's gun in his chest.

Behind Gino Gard saw the shadowy bulk of Stevey and snapped a shot at him. Stevey yelped and spun. His feet pounded across the back porch. He was yelling as he went, "Beat it, Dave, that damn punk got Prince and Gino. Beat it!"

WITH HIS eye on the door through which Trigg should come, Gard cut the woman loose. She stood up,

saying with hard humor, "That's the second time, friend. Now I know you're hot stuff."

She walked over and picked up the gun Prince had dropped. Half erect, she flung herself back against the wall, the gun in her hand echoing the blasting shot from the far doorway. She triggered the gun in her hand three times.

Trigg came stumbling into the room, both hands gripping his stomach. He took three shambling steps and collapsed. His legs jerked once and he sobbed deep down in his chest; then he was still.

Julia crossed the room to the fireplace where she could see all the doors. "You'd better go and find your uncle," she said huskily.

Outside, the sedan motor roared and its tires screamed as gears clashed. "Stevey, the yellow rat," she said. "He's making a getaway."

Gard said, "Maybe Dave'll come back, after getting the motorboat ready."

Julia smiled thinly. "I hope he does. But I don't think he will. I'll bet the rat got away with the motorboat."

"The Coast Guard will pick him up," Gard snapped. "He can't get far. They should be around if they've found that dead man in the boat."

"They didn't," Julia said. "I got the word. Prince sent a boat out and found it first. It's at the bottom of the bay now. Go on, get your uncle."

As he went up the stairs Gard heard the muted thunder of the motorboat in the cove. He paused for an instant. It was heading out to sea.

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He found his uncle in a small bedroom at the back. He was lashed down to the bed. His hands were torn and bloody. But his hard old eyes were bright.

"Well, Gard," he said without emotion, "you did come along in time. I never thought I would see you again, boy."

As he untied his uncle, Gard started to tell him about the plot. The old man shrugged. "I've been hearing all about it for the last three days." He flinched with pain as Gard caught his arm.

The knuckles of Gard's fists went white. "We evened things up a bit for you," he said grimly.

The old man smiled. He was a game one. Gard felt his own lips quiver. "Let's go," the old man said.

As Gard helped him into the living room, Julia got up from the telephone. Prince was lying trussed on the floor.

"Lucky you didn't have that phone taken out," Julia said. "Prince and the boys didn't dare use it, but they left the line intact in case of emergency. I phoned the State Police. Some of them are on their way here. They're flashing a warning to pick up Stevey in the sedan. He won't get very far."

"Dave got away in the motorboat," Gard said. "Better call the Coast Guard."

He helped his uncle into an easy chair and started to strip away the shirt from his chest as Julia telephoned the Coast Guard. He went to a medicine chest and came back with

bandages and ointment. Julia took them from him. She smiled and her brown eyes warmed. "Sure, I'm a hell-cat," she said softly. "But I know other things. I'm pretty good at first aid."

George Craddock's hard old face softened as he watched the deft fingers.

"Just who are you, my girl?" he asked finally.

Gard couldn't see Julia's face. He could only hear her voice. "That precious nephew of yours thought I was a golddigger. I'm not. I'm just a girl trying to get along. And Broadway's a tough place to make the grade."

George Craddock said, "Between you, you saved my life. Also you saved a few million dollars from going into the hands of a crook. Perhaps there'll be something I can do."

Julia said, "I like the sound of that." She walked across the room, picked up a bottle and held it to the light. "Half full," she said, "and I know Prince only uses good scotch. How about it?"

George Craddock proposed the toast. "To a woman with nerve."

Julia said, "That calls for another. To the admiral who steamed out of the sea to make a killing."

When the state police came, they were drinking the third toast, with Gard's gray eyes on Julia. He had never seen a woman like her before. He wasn't quite sure whether he ought to like her or not. At the same time he was darned sure he did like her—a lot.



If you have ever felt annoyed at the stupid sort of murderer who leaves his calling card in the form of fingerprints, initialed handkerchief or otherwise, you'll be pleasantly surprised by the homicidal gentleman in "Class Reunion." The only clue that Russell Montgomery allows him to leave behind is one that actually isn't there at all: an unknown picture stolen from the wall. Incidentally, the name Russell Montgomery is a pseudonym, which may be one reason he is so clever at masking the identity of the killer we vote most likely to succeed in baffling you.

CLASS REUNION

by RUSSELL MONTGOMERY

I STARTED HANGING around with Fred Murray from the moment he got his job on the *Argus*. He was a tall, rawboned, awkward-looking guy, with a long, sad pan and a pair of haunted-looking eyes. He seemed to like to talk to me, so I let him ride along.

Joe Davenport was on vacation when Fred got the job. Joe was a fotog on the *Argus*, in fact the star fotog. So, with me covering the Headquarters beat and Joe taking pics, we got a lot of assignments together.

Joe was everything that Fred Murray was not. Joe was a big guy, as big and blond as I am. But he was a lot better looking than I ever will be. He had a smile that worked overtime,

a smile that made him friends everywhere he went; and a wisecrack for every occasion and never a beef about anything. I missed the guy while he was on vacation, even if he did steal every gal I ever tried to look at.

I guess I'm a guy who likes to have a pal. That's why I liked the job of breaking in Fred Murray.

The boss wanted Fred to cover Police Headquarters. I had been working on features lately, and the boss had an idea that I should do feature spreads regularly. Fred was to have my job. So I batted around with him, showing him the ropes and having an odd beer with him in between jobs.

On top of that he was an easy guy to work with. He'd seen a lot of service on various sheets across the coun-

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try. He had a record like a journalistic tramp. But he wasn't the type. He was too serious; too quiet and mild to be classed as a happy-go-lucky bumming reporter.

I noticed one thing odd about him. It was the way he looked at everyone he met. He stared at people passing him on the street. In bars he'd look at every face along the mahogany before he'd settle down to have a drink. That side of Fred intrigued me. But I didn't say anything to him about it. After all, a guy's habits are his own business.

On the Monday morning Joe Davenport got back, I came into the office with the idea of introducing him to Fred Murray the first thing. I figured the two of them would get along well.

Fred Murray was at his desk. I inquired around for Joe. He had been in. Several of the boys had seen him. I went down to his little cubbyhole of an office, but he wasn't there and his camera was gone. I figured the boss had sent him out on an assignment and went back, picked up Fred and we went down to Police Headquarters.

We got in on a dirty piece of business right away. The cops had found a stiff up an alley with his head caved in. We had a look at him in the morgue. There didn't seem to be any sense in such a guy being killed this way. He was a little chap, dressed in a suit that verged on being shabby. He had a round little face with mild eyes and a weak chin. He looked like a clerk out of some office. If a heist

guy had slugged him, he couldn't have gotten more than a few bucks off him.

This job was one of those that leave a bad taste in your mouth. When the cops told us where they had picked him up, Fred said, "Why, that's just around the corner from where I live."

Hal Spence of the Homicide Squad gave Fred a crooked grin. "You want to look out, then. We figure this guy was bumped off by a thrill killer. There's no other reason we can figure. We've got his record. His name was Ambrose Crane. He worked for an insurance company. No enemies and few friends. He never drank nor stepped out with the dames. He never carried more than a buck or two with him. His one habit was that of prowling around town of an evening. His landlady told us Ambrose liked to walk around and see the odd corners and odd people in the city. He was that kind of an inoffensive little guy."

I'm telling you all of this because of the way it influenced our thinking later. Ambrose was about the fifth guy who had been killed the same way. There didn't seem to be any reason for any of the killings. So the cops were working in the dark, looking for the toughest kind of a criminal to find, a thrill murderer, who has no motive and generally leaves no clues behind.

Fred and I batted around a lot that day. Fred wasn't feeling so good. The sight of the little guy seemed to bother him. Fred was odd in many ways. I wondered why he wanted to get nauseated by the sights we had to

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sée. I remember once when we had to go down to the morgue to look at a girl who had been fished out of the river, he nearly passed out on me. But when I questioned him he just told me to forget it, that this beat was the one he liked best of all.

We wound up having spareribs and cabbage with a few beers at the Dutchman's after the home edition had gone to bed. Then Fred left me, said he was going home.

I dropped into a movie for awhile. I saw one good feature but, as usual, the second one was rotten and I walked out on it.

I hadn't seen Joe all day so I decided to take a walk back to the *Argus* office. I knew Joe had a habit of working awhile in the evening when he had some pics to work up for next day's sheet. I wanted to see the guy and shake his hand.

He was there, working in the dark room. When I banged on the door he came out, wiping his hands on a towel. His smile stretched from ear to ear and his blue eyes looked pleased as punch as he pumped my hand and said, "I was sorry to miss you, Dane. But the boss sent me out to take some pictures at a women's club convention. They're giving the old gals a big spread in tomorrow's sheet for the convention circulation, so I had to get on the job early. I came back during the day but I guess you were out on the beat."

WE SAT down and Joe told me about his vacation. He had gone up to Maine and put in a lot of

time lazing around the beaches. He'd met some nice gals and had him some fun. Joe would do that. There was always a girl somewhere around Joe. He was the kind of a guy that girls and men both liked.

We were there chewing the rag when the phone rang. I answered and at first I couldn't grasp what the guy on the other end of the line was saying. Then the words began to hit me like blows, and made me feel sick and empty inside.

I didn't know my own voice as I said, "Say that over again slowly."

The guy on the other end was Hal Spence. He said very patiently, "I'm up at the house where Fred Murray has a room. Fred has been killed. It looks like the thrill murderer caught up to him. His head is bashed in."

I managed to croak, "I'll be right up there."

I hung up and swung on Joe Davenport, who was looking at me with a frown. I said thickly, "It's Fred Murray. He's the guy who came on the sheet while you were away. He's just been killed. Grab your camera and come on."

"This thrill killer," Joe said soberly, "must be nuttier than they usually come, picking newspaper reporters to bump off."

We grabbed a cab and made the hackie burn rubber getting to Fred's place. There was a uniformed cop on the door. He let us in when I showed him my press card. Inside we found Hal Spence and a couple of the Homicide crew.

Joe got a couple of shots of Fred.

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He was lying across his bed, with blood from the back of him staining the bed clothes. His lips were twisted in a grin that looked like rage. His face didn't look at all like Fred Murray's. There was something there I had never seen before, something that made me shiver a little. Fred, as I told you, was always such a quiet, good-humored guy.

The whole thing got under my skin and, looking at Fred, I felt that though I'd never be able to look at stiffs again without feeling shaky. I realized then that I had liked the guy a lot more than I had realized.

The Homicide boys had given the place a going over without finding anything that looked like a lead. And the boys were thorough about it. This killing had all the earmarks of the other jobs that had Headquarters crazy.

Then Hal Spence spotted the thing that was to drive us almost nuts during the next few weeks. I could tell by the tone of his voice when he said, "Hey, look here a minute!" that he had found something.

He was standing in front of a chest of drawers, staring at an oblong on the wall; an oblong marked by six tiny holes. It took a very observant guy to notice them. He pointed to the oblong and said, "There was a picture here and now it's gone."

One of the Homicide dicks growled, "It might have been up there a year ago when someone else had the room."

Hal Spence said, "Well, look there." He was pointing to the top of the chest of drawers. There were six

thumb-tacks lying on the linen cover of the chest.

He took a handkerchief and carefully picked up the thumbtacks. "The same guy that did the other kills might have bumped off Fred Murray. But this makes it look different. Somebody took a picture off this wall. Fred might have done it himself. Or the killer might have taken it down. If he did, that gives the case another slant."

After that the Homicide dicks made another prowling of the room while the official photographer took shots of the wall where the picture had been. Joe made a couple himself. We were getting unusual breaks on this case. The cops were generous with us because of the fact that it was an *Argus* man who had been bumped.

We stayed till the ambulance boys brought in the long basket and carried Fred's body out. In the meantime we had the landlady in. She had never been in the room since Fred rented it. There was a woman, she said, who did the cleaning.

Finally we got the cleaning woman in. She was a mess; a bleary-eyed old soak who said she never remembered seeing any picture. You could believe that as you looked at her. She was the type who would slop in, drag a mop around, make the bed and slop out again without seeing anything unless it happened to be a bottle with a few drinks left in it.

We rode down to Headquarters in a squad car with Spence, and waited there while he had the thumbtacks examined for prints. There were

none. Whoever took them out of the wall had been very careful. He had been almost careful enough. If he had remembered to carry them away with him, the oblong on the wall might have been forgotten as soon as it was found.

Joe and I talked it over back at the *Argus* office before we started home. Joe agreed with Hal Spence that the thumbtacks must mean something, but neither of us could figure just what.

Joe's smile was not working for once. The thing had sobered him, although of course it didn't hit him below the belt the way it did me. After all, he hadn't palled around with Fred Murray for a week. But it got him just the same.

He stared at me soberly and said, "You know, Dane, this hits close to home. One of our own guys has gotten bumped. I guess that makes it up to us to take the job over. We might crack this case ourselves."

"If we don't," I said grimly, "it won't be for the want of trying."

I DID A lot of running in circles the next day. I talked to everyone on the staff who had known Fred, and got no more than we knew already. No one had ever been in Fred's room. He had been a friendly enough guy on the job but he was always aloof. No one could ever remember seeing him step out with anyone. No one knew what he did with his time off.

I saw Hal Spence several times and he looked the way I felt. There was plenty of pressure being put on Homi-

cide to stop the thrill killings. All the sheets were playing up the fact that Fred Murray was a victim of the same guy.

Spence didn't believe it. He shook his head and said to me one day, "There's a picture somewhere that will crack that case. Someone took that picture down off the wall. Why? When we find that out we'll have our killer."

We dug up what we could of Fred's background. He had worked on a lot of sheets, as I said before. All of them knew him as we did—as a guy who was easy to get along with, smart, but aloof and distant. I guess I was about the only guy he ever got really pally with.

The rest of the stuff about him was merely routine. He had graduated from Sheridan College in the class of 1934. His application blank gave us that information. The *Argus* got in touch with a sister in Denver and had the body shipped to her.

That was the second day after the murder. After the home edition had gone to bed, I sat at my desk, holding my head in my hands. I felt as though there were a thousand wheels in my head, and all of them spinning in different directions. I had been working like a dog, trying to dig up a lead, and all I'd got was a headache.

The rest of the staff were drifting out. Joe Davenport came out of his office and sat on the edge of my desk. He said, "Don't let it get you down, Dane. Stop working yourself into a lather. Let's just plug along slowly until something breaks. It will, boy.

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I have a feeling that we're going to crack this yet. Some day we'll get a lead that will tell us what that picture was."

Just then Sam Hoff, the city editor, answered the phone. He listened a minute, then yelled, "Hey, Dane, come over here. You too, Joe."

He talked into the phone a few minutes, then banged it down on the desk and stared at us with eyes that were harder than they usually were, which was hard enough. He ran lean fingers over his stubbled chin and said, "The Homicide boys are back at that rooming house. They want you and Joe to have a look at what they've found."

I said, "Huh? What have they found?"

"Not what you think," Sam snapped. "There's no new lead. Just some more grief. Another guy has been bumped off down there. The guy who had the room next to Fred Murray."

I grabbed Joe's arm, "Come on, kid, let's get going. The cops may have found something."

But there was nothing there; just a ratty little guy lying on the floor with his head busted in. He was dressed in a loud patterned suit that was very shabby. He had a tight, dark face and little black eyes that stared up at the ceiling slightlessly.

Hal Spence was there. His voice sounded hoarse and weary as he said, "This is what's left of Bib Ecknor. He was a little crook who had been up a few times for petty larceny raps. He was a dirty little chiseler. We

should have taken that into account when we talked to him before. Sure, we talked to him. He claimed he was out the night Fred Murray was killed."

Hal made a grimace of distaste. "We should have been tougher with him. We should have realized he wouldn't get himself involved in any case, even as a witness."

He stared at me and said, "My bet is the little rat saw who killed Murray and put the bite on the guy. Ecknor was broke and must have been desperate to get his hands on some cash. He would have held the guy for whatever he could squeeze, even if it were only nickels. Evidently the guy paid him what he could, or stalled him, then came around tonight and put the slug on Ecknor. Which leaves us right where we were before."

There was nothing in Ecknor's room to give them a lead. But they didn't expect to find anything. Anything Ecknor had he could keep under his hat.

As we were leaving Spence said bitterly, "That picture's the only lead. And it might be any picture in the world."

The same idea haunted me for weeks afterward. I was slowly going nuts on the subject. I couldn't pass a window with pictures in it without feeling sick.

I was back on the police beat. The boss still had the idea that I should do features all the time but I got him to let me stay on the police beat for awhile, just to see if I couldn't dig up a lead.

AS THE weeks passed, the whole business seemed to get colder and more hopeless. Joe and I admitted to each other we were stuck. Joe's idea was to go along and hope the old break might come our way and crack the case open.

In the meantime, Spence wrote a long letter to the dean of men at Sheridan, asking if he knew of anything in Fred Murray's life that might throw light on the case. He wasn't leaving any stone unturned that might give us something.

The dean of men had nothing. According to his letter, Fred was a bright student, steady and dependable, and had never gotten mixed up in any fool scrapes at college. We were not disappointed in the lack of a clue, since we hadn't banked much on the possibility.

One bit of relief did come into our lives. It came in the shape of a tall, taffy-haired girl in the advertising department. She was something to stir a man's pulses. I fell for her the first time I met her with Joe Davenport.

Sure, as usual, Joe had beaten me to the gun. He had discovered her working down in advertising. It surprised me that she had worked there for two weeks without Joe spotting her. They seldom escape him that long.

But when I saw her I barged in. Joe would have done that if I had been with the girl when he saw me. And Joe took it with his usual grin and introduced us. Her name was Marion Black. She hailed from Omaha. And she was very swell. I liked her grave,

deep eyes and her slow, lovely smile. She had a habit of listening to you talk as though everything you said was really interesting.

If I were to write a book on how to captivate men, I'd put in a chapter on how to listen to a guy talk. Marion made you feel so important, and at the same time she sure let you talk plenty. By the time I'd known her a few hours I was telling almost all I knew.

A couple of days after that I decided to make a play for a date. I'd gone overboard for her, and admitted it to myself. This time I intended to give Joe Davenport a run for his money. To my surprise she gave me the date, and I took her out to a show and supper afterwards. In the course of the evening I realized that this time I was sunk.

Marion puzzled me. She was warm and friendly, but she never let down any bars. She made me feel I was a pal but that was as far as I could get. She went out with Joe several times. And several more times the three of us went out together. Even that was swell. The three of us could make an evening of it without getting on each other's nerves.

It was right after that night that the picture came back into our lives with a bang. It was funny, because I had quit looking at pictures everywhere I went, and the case of Fred Murray was growing cold.

This night Joe and I went home with Nick Anderson, the dramatic critic. We ran into him after a show and Nick invited us over.

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The walls of Nick's place were decorated with pictures. There were hundreds of autographed pictures of theatrical stars that Nick had picked up during his years as critic. But there was one that jolted me.

This photograph was tacked up over the the telephone table. It was a picture of whole gang of guys in caps and gowns. Down in the corner it was lettered in white: Haviland, Class of '32.

I saw Joe staring at it and asked, "You look as if you had seen a ghost, kid. What's eating you?"

Joe blurted, "I did, at least a kind of a ghost." He grabbed for his hat. "Sorry to bolt on you like this, Nick. Thanks for the drink. But Dane and I have got to see a man about something. Come on, Dane."

Nick yelled after us, "But you haven't even touched the drinks. Come back here, you fools, and tell me what hit you."

We didn't go back. We kept on the run until we hit the street. When we got that far, Joe stopped and said harshly, "We are a pair of fools. That picture on Fred's wall was a class picture. I should have known that by the size of the oblong. Fred was looking for somebody; probably the guy was somebody in his class at college. Therefore his mug is in that missing picture."

I said excitedly, "I think you've got something there. It could be that."

We went straight to Headquarters, where we caught Spence and told him the idea. Joe could hardly get the words out fast enough.

"Don't you see? Murray was looking for some guy. Well, the chances are it was some guy who graduated from Sheridan with him. He probably looked for him all the way across the continent. That accounts for all the sheets he worked for. When he located here he stuck the picture of his graduating class on the wall. Every guy that graduates does that. Somewhere in the picture was the face of the man he was looking for. The guy caught up to Fred first and killed him. Then he took the picture down off the wall because his mug was in it."

Spence said, "It could be that, kid." He raised his voice. "Hey, Clancy, come in here and take down a telegram and get it on the wire. It's to go to Sheridan College." He turned to me. "What year was it Murray graduated?"

I told him and he had Clancy write a telegram asking for the picture of that class sent by airmail.

When the telegram was on the wire, I wiped my face with the back of my hand and said, "Whew, am I glad that my two years of college was spent in dear old Bolton University."

Joe grinned. "Me too. I'm going to say a prayer tonight to my alma mater, sweet old Alverford."

There wasn't much sleep for me that night. I was so excited over the first break that had come in the case that I tossed till almost dawn.

I WENT TO the office in the morning and looked for Joe. He was as excited as I was. I called Hal Spence,

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who told me to keep my lip buttoned while we waited. He didn't want anyone to know what we were expecting in the mail.

So Joe and I calmed down and went about our business.

The day was a year long and I went through it in sort of a mental haze. I nearly drove Spence nuts the latter part of the afternoon calling him to see if there was any picture yet. He told me to lay off, that after all a plane had to fly half way across the continent. And there was no telling what connections the college had made.

It was the next morning before I got my call. I came out of my bed in a dive with the first ring of the phone. It was Spence.

He had the picture and he wanted me down at Headquarters right away.

Joe Davenport was with him when I got there. The two of them were bent over the picture, studying it.

Spence growled, "This is nuts. All we've located is Fred Murray. His face is there as big as life. But there's no one else that either Joe or I recognize. You take a look at this and see if you know anybody. There are over a hundred guys in the picture. We can't start looking for someone who may be any of these."

I felt much as Spence sounded by time I'd studied the picture awhile. I couldn't see anyone I ever remembered seeing before.

Joe had a suggestion. "We could take this and blow it up," he said. "That would bring out more detail. The faces would be a lot clearer then,

and we might have more to work on."

They did the enlargement at Headquarters while we waited. And even that didn't help us any. The faces were larger and clearer, but they were still just faces, without meaning for any of us.

I went through that day sicker than I had been the day before. The evening was a little better. I had a date with Marion Black. I had to talk to someone. So I told her about Joe's idea and how it had fizzled out.

She stared at me with an odd look on her face as she listened. When I had told her the whole story she leaned across the table and said, "You really do want to find out who killed Fred Murray, don't you?"

That made me a little sore. I said, "Why do you think I've been working on this for weeks? Fred Murray was my friend. I didn't know him very long, but I liked him. I may not find out who killed him but by all that's holy, I'm going to stick with this thing for years if necessary. Although right now it looks as though it has us licked."

Marion put her hand out and gripped mine. Her fingers were shaking. It gave me a jolt. I didn't have any idea she felt this way. She was always so cool and poised.

Her voice shook as she said, "I've been lying to everyone. My name is not Marion Black. It's Marion Murray."

There wasn't anything to say to that. I just gripped her hand and let her go on.

"I was Fred's kid sister. When he

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graduated and got a job on a paper. I was in my awkward teens. He wanted to stay near the college. You see, Fred was very much in love with a girl there. But there was another man. He stole Fred's girl.

"The next thing Fred knew this fellow, Peter Armstrong, had run away with the girl. We didn't hear anything for a long time. Then—"

She bit her lips and her eyes filled up with tears. It took her a minute or two to get a grip on herself. When she did her voice got thinner and harder. "Then he got word from Kansas City that the girl was dead. Fred went there and identified her body. Peter Armstrong had never married her. When he found out there was a baby coming he deserted her. She drowned herself in the river."

My own voice was thick and shaky as I said, "The louse. The dirty low louse."

Marion agreed. "Yes. Of course it changed Fred completely. He left the paper and started East. He had just one idea—to keep going until he found Peter Armstrong.

"There was no trail to follow. Peter had dropped out of sight. But it had become an obsession with Fred. He had a fixed idea that some day he would find Peter Armstrong."

I knew then what it was that I had seen in Fred's face. That was why he had stared at every passing stranger. He was always looking for Peter Armstrong. And he had finally caught up to him. But Peter Armstrong had seen him first and Fred had died. Ratty little Eckner had seen him and

tried petty blackmail, so he had killed Eckner.

I asked Marion.

"And you never saw this Peter Armstrong?"

She shook her head. "I told you I was just a kid at the time it happened. But I do know one thing: Peter Armstrong was not in Fred's graduating class. I told you that Fred stayed on for a year because he was still in love with the girl. The fellow who won her over was still in college. He graduated in 1935. That's why you didn't find the face you wanted in the photograph you sent for."

I jumped up from the table. "What are we waiting for? Why don't we get that wire away?"

On the way out Marion said, "I was awfully dumb. I came here to find out who had killed Fred. I knew all the time that Peter Armstrong had graduated in 1935. I wrote to Denver to see if anyone had a picture of him. But no one had. I never even thought of the class picture."

WE SENT the wire, then I took Marion home. I drifted into the Dutchman's for a nightcap and ran into Joe Davenport at the bar. When I told him about Marion and the class picture, he was as excited as I was.

After that I went straight home. I was throwing some stuff into a bag when someone knocked at the door. I opened it and there was Joe Davenport staring at me. He looked past me into the room and said, "Packing up to go somewhere, Dane?"

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I went for the gun in my pocket but something that felt like a mule's hoof slammed me on the point of the jaw and the room dissolved into whirling fireworks.

When I got to my feet Joe had the gun in his hand and Marion Murray was coming in the room behind him. She said, "He had me completely fooled, Joe. It wasn't till I saw him write the second telegram and send it instead of the one I watched him write, that I realized.

"After he left I went back to the telegraph office and asked the girl for a copy of the telegram we had just sent. He had asked the college for a picture of the class of 1933."

Joe shook his head. He wasn't smiling now. I didn't recognize his voice as he said to Marion, "Use that phone and call Spence at Headquarters. Tell him to come up here and get his murderer. . . ."

They tell me that I may get off with life. I don't care much.

You see, Fred Murray didn't know me. He had never seen me at college. I didn't travel with his gang. And, up till the time I ran away with the doll he was nuts about, I was able to keep my romance with her quiet.

I think he was suspicious of me from the start. Of course he had only that picture in the class group to go by and a guy changes a lot in four years, especially when he grows a mustache and changes the cut of his hair and a few things like that. But Fred was suspicious and stuck close to me. Then, on that last night, I made some kind of a slip and Fred

knew. He didn't say anything but I saw it in his eyes.

I didn't know what he might be planning on doing. I figured he intended to kill me when he got the right break. So I beat him to it. I went around to his room and socked him with a piece of pipe. I tried to make it look like the work of the thrill murderer.

The picture was the only link to me. So I took it down and destroyed it.

The next day Ecknow came after me. He'd seen me go into Fred's room. I paid him a hundred bucks and promised to dig up more. But I knew then that I'd never get rid of him.

So I went around and handed him the same dose.

I still think it was smart of me to work as hard as I did on the case. It kept anyone from suspecting me. But I guess I overdid it. Telling Marion about the class picture started her thinking.

The psychiatrists who have talked to me say that I've got a blind spot; that I have no sense of moral values. That's a lot of baloney. I didn't want to kill Fred. I liked the guy.

But he was going to make trouble for me so he had to go.

It was the same with the doll. I left because she was always whining about getting married.

Joe Davenport has not been around to see me. He was pretty bitter that night when he turned me in. It's kind of funny. After all it was no skin off his nose. And I liked Joe. I really liked the guy. ♠ ♠ ♠

The highlands of Scotland may seem far removed from the barracks of an American state trooper, but neither are out of bounds for Donald Barr Chidsey's seven-league pen. An inveterate traveler of the world's byways, both past and present, he is perhaps best known for his novels of Scottish and medieval history. Even if these books had never been written, however, his reputation as a writer would still be secure, based solely on the pleasure he has given thousands of detective readers through the years. Here he is with one of his excitingly real police yarns, done with that inimitable Chidsey touch.

PLENTY TOUGH

by DONALD BARR CHIDSEY

STATE TROOPER Kinlay had been just about to leave Headquarters station when the call came in. Something about the way the desk man grunted at the first words of the message caused Captain Kinlay to grab an instrument. The desk man, nodding, with big eyes, plugged him in. The voice over the wire was excited.

"... Matts speaking, sarge, at *The Pines*. Conroy's old place, you know. ... Why, only this minute practically. I called you right way. Say, if Kinlay's—"

"Frank Tugwell, you said it was?" the desk man cut in for Kinlay's benefit. "Is he dead?"

"He's bleeding like a pig. Dunno whether he's dead or not. Some of the boys are trying to stop all the blood, but it looks pretty bad."

Kinlay hung up, whispered to the desk man: "Stall him as long as you can."

He opened the door of his office and called to a trooper there: "Get Doc Weston. On the private wire, not through the switchboard. Tell him we'll pick him up inside of five minutes, and for him to be ready!"

Then he flung open the door of the recreation room. There was one kibitzer at the card game. "All you guys! Make it fast!"

On the way to the front door he

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stopped to whisper again to the man at the switchboard. "Dolan ought to be back any minute. Send him along."

The desk man nodded, and growled into the mouthpiece another protest that he couldn't hear what was being said.

There was very little traffic on the highway, and Kinlay, who had taken the wheel, drove at a terrific pace. The big car swayed back and forth as it roared through the darkness. From time to time Mike Walsh, the fingerprint and ballistics man, who sat next to Kinlay, sounded the siren.

"What the hell did you have to throw your hand in for?" a trooper in the back seat complained. "We might've got a chance to play it out afterwards. I was holdin'—"

"Aw, I had a bust."

"I know, but I was holdin'—"

They shrieked to a half-stop in front of a trim white bungalow, and Dr. Weston scrambled into the back seat. He toppled against a wall of knees as Kinlay snapped the car back into high speed. He sat in somebody's lap and leaned forward, shouting against the side of Kinlay's head.

"What's the big rush, Captain? Murder?"

Kinlay shrugged.

"Whereabouts?"

Kinlay yelled out of the right corner of his mouth: "Conroy's dump."

"Where?"

"*The Pines*. Conroy's place out here."

"What was that?"

"Let it go," yelled Kinlay, and thereafter gave all of his attention to

the road, which was curving sharply.

There actually was a small clump of pine trees in front of the roadhouse, in the center of a circle formed by the driveway. They were not very healthy-looking pines, and leaned away from one another in a discouraged manner, as though ashamed of being seen in such a place.

Kinlay's car stopped with a rattle of gravel and a dry screech, and Kinlay sprang out, snapped: "One of you guys cover the back door. Nobody goes in or out, see?" He ran up the five wooden steps and crossed the rickety, old-fashioned porch.

Sam Matts opened the door before Kinlay reached it. Matts was the manager. He wore soiled, rather shabby dinner clothes, with a soft pleated shirt; and he looked scared. His right name wasn't Matts, but something much longer and much more difficult to pronounce.

"You got here fast," he said. "I only hung up this minute."

"Where's Conroy?"

"He's in the city. Had a date with a jane."

On the right of the entrance hall was a barroom and a tiny dance-floor. There was no orchestra, only a radio and a monstrous, complicated nickel-in-the-slot machine for playing records. On the left was what had once been the dining room. On the large table covered with green oilcloth were poker chips, cards, ashtrays, glasses empty but wet. Six men stood around the table. They were silent and seemed stunned.

Kinlay snapped: "Whereabouts?"

The six pair of eyes turned towards the kitchen which opened off the dining room directly in back. There was a door between the two rooms, but the doorway was narrow. The kitchen had a stone floor, and two stone steps led down into it from the dining room. This was a very old house.

Kinlay went down into the kitchen. With the dining room it comprised a one-story wing of the house, and the roof was low and sharply slanting. The walls were whitewashed stone, perfectly bare. Directly in front of Kinlay as he entered was the back door. On the right was a large, old-fashioned fireplace, bare and dismal, which extended a good three feet from the rest of the wall. On the left was a pay telephone, unboothed; and directly below this lay Frank Tugwell, ex-state trooper. He lay on his left side, with bent knees. His eyes were closed, and his mouth was open. On the floor beside him were three handkerchiefs soaked with blood.

Kinlay stood on the second step, quietly surveying this. Dr. Weston pushed past him and knelt beside Tugwell; he felt the heart and pulse, and then pulled up the coat and began to tear the shirt.

"Help you, Doc?"

"No, thanks."

Sam Matts had come up behind Kinlay, and stood in the doorway. The others were loosely grouped behind him; everybody silent, everybody careful not to touch things.

"Who shot him?" Kinlay asked, without turning his head.

"We don't know," quavered Matt.

"Nobody knows. All we know is, we were sitting here playing, and the phone rang and I came in and answered it and it was somebody for Frank. So I called Frank, and he came in, and I went back to the game. A second later we heard a shot. We couldn't see him from the table and we all rushed in here, and here he was lying on the floor. I know it probably sounds fishy."

"It does," said Kinlay. "Is he dead, Doc?"

"No."

"Going to die?"

"Most likely. Hard to be sure, right now."

KINLAY TURNED his head slightly, speaking over his shoulder. "Fisher, you got your little pad and pencil? Good. Plant yourself next to Tugwell and don't you stir till you're relieved—or until he passes out of the picture. Can we move him, Doc?"

"I'll tell you that in a little while. Looks pretty bad."

Kinlay sighed. He walked slowly around the dim kitchen, peering at things. There was a table in the middle, and two straight-backed chairs. The fireplace was empty. The stove and sink were greasy, empty. They looked as though they had not been used for some time.

"We practically never come in here any more, except to use the phone," Matts explained. "What cooking we got to do, we do on an electric stove in that little room behind the bar."

Kinlay nodded absently, and continued his stroll. The back door was

locked and the key was in the lock. There were three windows, all locked. Kinlay examined them without touching them.

Mike Walsh came into the room with his little bag. "Want me to powder 'em for prints?"

Kinlay shook his head. "Anybody can tell they haven't been opened for weeks."

Dr. Weston said: "How about some light?"

"That bulb in there's dead," said Matts. "I'll get you one." Presently he returned, screwed a new bulb into place. "It's the craziest thing I ever knew! The only way I can figure is that Frank must have shot himself. Nobody else could have got in or out of this room without us seeing them."

"A man can't shoot himself in the back between the shoulder blades," Dr. Weston said from the floor. "Besides, he doesn't seem to have any pistol here. And there are no powder marks."

Kinlay looked very tired, perhaps a trifle bored. The wound, front and back, now was visible on the bared torso of Frank Tugwell, and Kinlay peered at it from a distance.

"Then I just can't figure out how it could have happened," Matts wailed. "All of us are absolutely certain nobody went in or out of this room while Frank was here. And we didn't hear a thing except just the one shot. And if he—"

"Save it," said Kinlay, who was strolling around the kitchen still peering at things. "Who was it called Frank on the phone?"

"I dunno. It was a woman's voice, and she didn't say who it was. Just said tell Frank a red-hot mama wanted to talk to him."

"A red-hot mama, huh?"

"She sounded as if she might be tight," Matts added.

"What time was this?"

"Just about twenty minutes ago. Maybe twenty-five."

"In other words, just about midnight?"

"Just about, yeah."

Kinlay went to the phone and asked for the chief operator. He told her who he was, where she could check this information, and what he wished to learn. While he held the receiver, waiting for her report, he pointed listlessly to a splintered hole in the wood upon which the telephone was fixed.

"There's the slug, in there. You might work it out, Mike, and see what you can make of it."

The chief operator spoke briefly, and Kinlay grunted and hung up.

"All right. All inside now, and let's see if we can find out what this's all about."

He herded them into the dining room, Sam and his five customers and his bartender. Troopers watched from the hallway.

"First of all, how many of you boys are ironed up?"

There was an embarrassed pause. Then a short, smooth fellow drew a large automatic and laid it on the table.

"But you can see for yourself it ain't been fired. I got a permit for it, too, and if you—"

PLENTY TOUGH

"Okay, Joe. I know you got a permit. How about you, Sam?"

Matts, without a word, put a small blue automatic on the table.

"Any more? Don't all speak at once." Nobody moved; and Kinlay nodded to the troopers. "All right. Search 'em."

There were no more guns.

"Now," said Kinlay, "just who was here when this happened?"

"Only who you see," Matts said hastily. "There wasn't another soul came in or left the place since it happened."

"Uh-huh."

"It was just like I told you. We was all sitting here playing—"

"All of you?"

"Yeah. Well, as least, all but Nuts here."

KINLAY LOOKED at Nuts McGrath. The bartender-bouncer was a short man, but powerful; a missing-link type. His face was moon-like, impassive, and his watery blue eyes were blank. He'd been a chopping block for some of the best middleweights of his day; it was said of him that he could take anything and still stand on his feet. Both his ears were more or less cauliflower, and his cheeks were permanently puffed, making his eyes seem smaller than they were. His nose had been broken years ago, again and again. A hundred thousand punches had long since battered out of him whatever intelligence he might once have possessed, and he was commonly considered a half-wit, though some called this flattery.

"Where were you, Nuts?"

The bartender jerked his head back. "Getting drinks. I was just about to pick 'em up from the end of the bar there. They're there yet."

One of the poker players said: "That's right. I remember I'd ordered a round only a few minutes before. I'd just won a big pot."

"How were you sitting? Show me."

They took their places without hesitation, leaving one place significantly vacant.

Matts explained: "I sat here because it's handy to the door and the telephone booth."

"You were playing too?"

"Yeah, but I wasn't banking the game. Harry Felter was doing that. I just cut a pot now and then, for the house."

"I see," said Kinlay. "That's very interesting. Now, who was the last in that kitchen before the call for Tugwell came?"

"I was, myself," Matts said. "I went in about ten minutes before because I thought I felt a draft, and some of the boys said the same thing. I went in to take a look at that fireplace. A couple of months ago, when it began to get cold, we had that screened up inside there and a big thick piece of pasteboard put in, to keep the cold air from coming down the chimney. I thought that might have got loose."

"And had it?"

"No, it was okey. So I came back to the game, thinking maybe it was my imagination or something. So we played along a little while longer. No-

body was either winning much or getting very hurt, and nobody was sore or anything. Frank himself was a little ahead of the game, I think. There's his chips over there, and he bought three hundred to go in, so you can figure it out for yourself. And then came this phone call, and I answered it and this dame's voice asked for Frank, and when I asked who's calling she said never mind, only just tell Frank it was a red-hot mama who wanted to speak to him."

"And of course he went for that, right off?"

"Sure. You know the way he is! Me, I came back in here and sat down again, and I heard Frank say 'Hello' and then 'Hello, hello, hello,' about six or seven times. And then all of a sudden came this shot—and we all rushed in there to find him on the floor."

"Receiver off the hook?"

"Yeah. I picked it up and said hello, but the line was dead. Then right after that I called up you guys."

To have asked who had anything against Frank Tugwell would be to invite the retort: "Who didn't?" Tugwell had been a state trooper for just one year, and had resigned barely in time to prevent his superiors from bringing charges against him. He'd been crooked, a shakedown of roadhouses like this, an inveterate and consistently lucky gambler, a heavy drinker, and determinedly a Lothario. But he'd made money; and since his resignation he had been making more money, at craps and poker.

Kinlay wasted no time in questions

or a search for minor inconsequences. He merely nodded, and wandered back into the kitchen.

"Think it's safe to move him yet, Doc?"

"Move him all you want." Dr. Weston rose from his knees. "The morgue would be the best place."

"So that's the way it is, huh? Can you fix it for an autopsy tomorrow morning?"

The physician nodded. Kinlay turned to Mike Walsh, who was busy with a tiny set of scales, a magnifying glass and some brass gauges.

"How about it?"

Walsh wrapped the slug in cotton and put it into a shirt pocket.

"From a .38. Can't tell what kind till I see it under the microscope, but I think it was a revolver."

Kinlay nodded. The pistols on the dining-room table were both automatics, one a .22, the other a .45.

He examined the screen and pasteboard fastened into the lower part of the chimney; they were firmly in place. He sauntered around the room, examining again everything quickly, quietly. Then he went through the dining room into the hall.

Lieutenant Dolan tramped in, grinning. "Little excitement, huh? I came in the sidecar, with Anderson holding the handles."

"You were just born reckless," Kinlay muttered. He waved towards the dining room. "Somebody gave Frank Tugwell what was coming to him at last, but nobody seems anxious to claim the credit. They all tell the same story. See what you think."

While Dolan barked questions in the dining room, Kinlay searched the barroom and the room behind it. Then he went upstairs. He was up there for about ten minutes; and when he returned, Dolan was emerging, happily asweat, from the dining room.

"Baloney, of course," Dolan announced. "Not even very good baloney, either. Sounds as if they didn't have much time to rehearse it. What I think, I think we ought to start on Harry Felter in there. He's got the least drag, in case of a back-fire later, and besides he's the most likely one to fall apart if we push him around."

Kinlay shook his head sadly. "I never use rough stuff, Danny, unless I have to. Listen, I'm borrowing Anderson. See that my crate gets back to the station, will you?"

"Where're you going?"

"What I want you to do in the meanwhile," Kinlay pursued, "is to find the gun first, and then take these punks to the station and get formal statements from them all. And be sure that kid puts in two pieces of carbon paper for each one, too! Then hold 'em on anything you want. Don't book 'em at all would be best. Let 'em think they're being held as material witnesses, but don't tell 'em that in so many words." He moved towards the door. "I'll be giving you a ring."

"No roughhouse at all. Just get the gun and then take 'em to the station and get the statements."

"Okey, genius. Only maybe you

better tell me first where to find the gun?"

"Sure." Kinlay made a vague gesture. "It might be on the ground somewhere within a hundred feet or so of this side of the house. But you'd probably save time by taking down that screen they got fastened inside the fireplace in the kitchen. It ought to be there."

Anderson grinned; and when Kinlay climbed into the sidecar and said, "The city," Anderson asked eagerly: "Do I go fast, Captain?"

"No. You go faster than that."

CHAPTER 2

Murder by Remote Control

ACTING CAPTAIN Mitchell, in charge of the detective bureau, told Kinlay over the telephone: "Andy George is the dick you want. He's working now, somewhere. I ought to be able to get in touch with him in ten minutes or so."

"Thanks. Ask him to meet me at the *Western World*, huh?"

"He might be there now, for all I know. He hangs out there a lot. So somebody gave it to Frank Tugwell, huh? Ain't that just dandy?"

"Ain't it, though? Well, much obliged, Mitch."

It was about one-thirty when Kinlay reached the *Western World*. He left Anderson outside.

Andy George, long and lugubrious, was at the bar staring at a straight ginger ale as though it had just betrayed a trust.

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"Yeah, Conroy's been here since about ten-thirty," he said in answer to Kinlay's question. "Party of four." He nodded towards one of the ring-side tables, in a far corner. "Bubble water, too. That's practically Diamond Jim Brady stuff, for that guy."

"Who's that other girl with him? Stella McGrath I know. She's a sister of Nuts McGrath, that punchy bartender out at Conroy's place."

"Yeah, she's been playing beanbags with Slats Conroy for some time now. The blonde's new. Just one of the hostesses that the house throws in for atmosphere."

"Would Sam Matts be likely to know that blonde?"

"I don't know. She just came to town this afternoon."

"Suppose I could speak to her? In the manager's office, maybe? Not calling her away from her charming and distinguished company, but just catching her some time she heads for the nose-powdering retreat, huh?"

"Sure." Andy George whispered briefly to a waiter, who nodded. The waiter seemed unhappy; he gazed with doleful eyes at Kinlay, who leaned both elbows on the bar and stared across the dance-floor.

"And who's the little guy?" asked Kinlay, when the waiter had gone. "Looks like a bodyguard or something."

"Understand that's what he is. Comes from Philly, and they say he's very, very tough indeed. A very tough mugg."

"But why should Conroy need a bodyguard? He's supposed to be

broke. In fact, he's supposed to be pretty deep in the soup to several guys. And bodyguards are expensive."

Andy George nodded gloomily. "Yeah. So's bubble water."

"I'd like to know more about this mugg from Philly."

"So would I," said Andy George. "In fact, that's what I'm hanging around this dump for tonight." He shook his head. "There's another thing. Slats Conroy's going to get himself in trouble some one of these days, tossing quoits with that McGrath dame."

"Brother Nuts doesn't know yet, then?"

"Nobody dares tell him. But he knows she's making mudpies with somebody, and when he finds out who it is he's going to be very disagreeable, Captain."

"So I hear tell."

"In fact, I shudder to think of it."

"Yes, I guess it would be pretty unfortunate."

"Stella's been scared of her brother ever since she was a kid, but at the same time she's been just dying to have a regular boy friend for herself and find out what life's all about. She certainly picked a honey when she picked on Slats Conroy! But you got to hand it to him, at that. Lots of the other boys wanted to make a pass at her, but they didn't have the guts to do it. They all remembered that pan on her brother."

"Let's go into the manager's office," Kinlay suggested. "I don't like it out here."

PLENTY TOUGH

The manager had a question of his own to ask.

"Say, what's all this about Tugwell getting the works?"

"Oh, you heard about that, huh?"

"A waiter just told me. I suppose you're tickled to death?"

"Maybe." Kinlay shrugged. He was delighted to learn that the story was out. Good old Anderson! He, undoubtedly, had told the doorman, the taxi drivers outside, everybody else who would listen. And stories like that travel fast. "Of course, I always thought Conroy had been there too long," he admitted.

"But you're too—" The manager stopped suddenly.

Kinlay leaned forward. "You were about to say?"

"Well, if you don't know it, maybe I oughtn't to tell you."

"Maybe you ought, though."

"Yeah," said Andy George. "Maybe you ought, Ed."

The manager shrugged. "You'd find out pretty soon anyway. I was just going to say that you're too late for Conroy. He sold *The Pines* the other day. To Sam Matts. Cash money."

"Oh," said Kinlay, and looked at the floor.

AFTER A time he reached for a telephone. He called Headquarters, and got Dolan.

"Just blew in," Dolan panted. "Say, the gun was where you said, in the chimney. How'd it ever get in a place like that?"

"Did Mike test it?"

"Yeah. Oh, it's the gun Frank was

killed with, all right. A .38 revolver. An S. and W. But what I can't figure is, how they ever got it up there after the shot. Why, it took us a good ten minutes to tear that screen down, it was so solid."

"Did the gun have to be put in from underneath?"

"But you couldn't stand on that roof, Cap! It's too slanty!"

"The chimney comes up right next to the second story windows on that side, doesn't it? It comes out of the roof of the wing and close up alongside the house till it sticks up above the roof of the main part of the house. Well, there's two windows face out over the roof of the wing, aren't there? You try one of them, next time you're there, and you'll find it works easy, doesn't make a sound. It's the back one, that looks out over the roof above the kitchen part of the wing. Catching on, Irishman?"

"Oh. You mean a guy could—"

"And there's a loose brick in the chimney, right on the corner, that can be taken out and put back easy. You wouldn't even have to step out on to the little roof. All you'd have to do is just lean out that window. And not only that but there's two shingles loose in the roof there, also within easy reach, that can be slid back and forth. Now are you getting it?"

"But Frank was shot from behind, not from above!"

"He was shot from behind and above both. I suppose now you're going to tell me the bullet went horizontal through his body? Well, just remember that he was talking

into the telephone at the time, and that telephone was put there with the idea of having a chair in front of it. Even I had to lean away over to talk into it, and Frank was a good five inches taller than me. Or if you still want proof, just measure the height of the place where that slug was stuck in the wood. I don't think even you could miss that one. Or maybe I ought to draw you a set of blueprints or something?"

"Oh," said Dolan.

"Now," said Kinlay, "what I want to do is get those statements as fast as you can, and then tell all the tin-horns they'll have to find some other place to sleep tonight."

"What!"

"Uh-huh. Tell 'em we can't get a thing on 'em, and so we don't want 'em cluttering up Headquarters."

"But the guy that killed Frank must be one—"

"Catch up to me, Irishman! I'm not after the guy who shot Frank any more. I'm an accessory before the fact."

Kinlay hung up, and gazed with a frown at the manager.

"You didn't hear that."

"Sure," said the manager.

"And be damn sure it is sure," said Kinlay.

The door opened after a pair of knocks, and a tall blonde came slowly into the office. She looked with hard suspicion at Kinlay and Andy George, then at the manager.

"You send for me?"

"No, I didn't send for you, Helen."

"I did," said Kinlay. He looked at

the manager. "Blow, friend, and leave us alone with our thoughts. And incidentally, don't forget what I told you about keeping your trap shut!"

The city detective was slumped deep in a chair, still holding his glass of straight ginger ale; the ice in it had melted, and it looked as weary, as discouraged as the man who occasionally sipped it. The girl Helen stared at Captain Kinlay, and Kinlay stared at her. She was a pretty thing, though altogether too emphatically blonde. She was young, tall, self-consciously hardboiled.

"Well, so what?" she said at last.

"Helen, you made a phone call at about twelve o'clock."

Kinlay uttered a statement, not a question. He was bluffing, but to his amazement, the girl seemed relieved.

"Somebody kick, did they? Well, how could I help it? The guy was tight as a tick, and he insisted on me calling those numbers."

"Which guy was this?"

"The guy that's giving the party where I am over there in the corner. Hell, he's buying champagne, and what's a girl going to do when you work here and he wants to play jokes on some of his friends?"

"How many numbers did you call, Helen?"

"Three. He stood there with me all the time. Got a big kick outta me telling these guys this was a red-hot mama calling them and that I bet they couldn't guess who it was. That was his idea of a joke."

"Did you talk to all three of these guys that way?"

"Two of 'em. The other one Conroy said let it go before the guy came to the phone, and he hung up."

"Do you remember what the number of that one was?"

The girl shook her head, disgusted. Obviously she supposed that all this was the result of no more than a petty complaint to the management by a crank.

"I didn't know what any of the numbers was. As a matter of fact, I didn't even dial them myself. He did that."

"What did he say to let the third one go, before he came on?"

"How should I know? He just seemed all of a sudden to think it wasn't so funny any more, so he put down the receiver hook and said: 'The hell with this. Let's get back to the table.' So I went back with him. What the hell, he was buying champagne, wasn't he?"

"I guess he was, from what you say. Do you remember what the name of this third man was, the last one, the one you didn't get?"

The girl shook her head.

"Was it Frank, maybe?"

"Might have been. One of 'em was named Frank, I remember."

Kinlay rose. "Okay, Helen. You better hang around in the office here for a while."

"Say, wait a minute! I gotta get back to that party. What the hell, that guy's buying champagne."

"You told us that about six times already."

"Listen, I been sitting there laughing at his jokes for three hours. I got

a nice sweet tip coming to me, and now you gotta nerve to tell me to shake him and stick around here! Say, if you think . . ."

"Listen, Helen," Kinlay said softly, "I'm going to give you the nicest, sweetest tip you could get anywhere, and that is: stay away from those two bimbos, if you know what's good for you!"

THEY WALKED back to the bar, and Kinlay said: "Smart, isn't he? Look at him. He's no more drunk than I am. But he knows this kid Helen isn't long enough in the game to know the difference, and yet that she's trying to show everybody how hard she is that she'd never admit she didn't know real drunkenness from fake. What I can't figure out is why Slat's hanging around now. Unless maybe the news about Frank hasn't reached his table yet."

"You think he'll blow right away when it does?"

"Sure. His alibi's established then and he doesn't have to make a big show so's everybody'll remember he was here."

Andy George asked the bartender to put a piece of ice into his ginger ale. He said: "I might have known there was something funny going on when Slate Conroy started ordering bubble water. How'd you happen to figure it was him, anyway?"

Kinlay shrugged. "It was a cinch Nuts McGrath did it. Figure it out. If it was one of the players, we'd have seen signs of a squeal; if an outsider, they'd have hollered. They all

had the same story without time to rehearse it. Besides, the layout upstairs and where the gun was ditched prove it was an inside job, with McGrath the only candidate with a grudge against Tugwell.

"But Nuts didn't have brains enough to figure out how to do it without being seen. Anyway, he wouldn't shoot a guy, ordinarily, even if he thought the guy had been fooling around with his sister. What he'd do would be to smack the life out of the guy with his mitts. That's the way he is. He thinks with his mitts, if he thinks at all.

"Somebody must have planned the thing for him, and it must have been somebody who knew the upstairs of that house pretty well. Which means either Conroy or Sam Matts—because that's where they got the liquor stored. I couldn't see Sam Matts doing a thing like that, but it was just exactly the kind of thing Conroy would think of.

"It wasn't such a bright scheme, after all, but it seemed so to Nuts McGrath. All he had to do was slip up there about half an hour before and slide back those shingles—that accounts for the draft that Matts and the others felt—and take that brick out of the chimney. Then when the phone rang at twelve o'clock sharp, he knew it was going to be for Frank, so he simply slips upstairs again, reaches through the window, sticks the barrel of the gun through the hole in the roof, and lets Frank have it.

"Then he drops the gun down the

chimney, puts the brick back, slides the shingles back, and gets downstairs again—gets into that kitchen so fast behind the others that not a one of them suspects he'd ever been out of the barroom or the entrance hall. Yeah, it must have seemed like the perfect crime, to him.

"But the one I wanted was the rat who showed Nuts how to do it and who fixed up that phone call. Conroy knew Sam would answer the phone, and he knew Sam would know the voice of any of the regular janes in the business around here, so he springs a newcomer. You notice he never spoke over the phone, himself? He never even gave the girl a number she might remember. He dialed 'em. Sure. He was drunk, and just trying to be funny. But he wasn't so drunk he didn't know enough to hang up before the shooting started, so's the jane wouldn't hear."

They were standing near the end of the bar, and Kinlay was watching the party in the corner.

Slats Conroy was making a lot of noise, as usual; he was thumping the table, bellowing with laughter, spilling drinks. He had very long legs, but a thick, heavy body; and he had a red face, huge red hands, and a manner naturally boisterous. As a gambler he wasn't in the really big money, but he tried to pretend that he was. He slapped the back or shook the hand of everybody willing to tolerate his touch. He was talking continuously — booming rather — and spreading his forearms all over the table.

"I wonder if he's getting worried about that blonde not coming back," Kinlay murmured.

The mugg from Philly was a much smaller man, much younger too, and quieter. He had a thin, mean face, the chest of a consumptive, a twisted smile. His eyes, dark and very small, were nervous; and his manner too was nervous. Possibly a dope addict. He drank very little.

"No, he ain't dumb," Andy George said, meaning Conroy. "From all I hear, Frank Tugwell was one of the boys he owed a flock of jack—and Frank had a nasty way of getting what was coming to him. Probably had something real on Conroy and was ready to spill it."

"It all works out," Kinlay said. "Conroy figured that Nuts was shooting himself right into a bughouse, or maybe even into the hot squat itself. Whatever it was, it would put him away before he could find out about Conroy playing around with his sister. I suppose Conroy told the poor slob it was Frank who was the sister's heart trouble. He's a great one for working things against things."

Andy George was swishing the ice around in his glass, as though he hoped that the motion might somehow improve the taste of the ginger ale. He said: "And of course there's no sense going to work on Nuts. I can see that. A rubber hose wouldn't mean a thing to that guy. I don't suppose he'd even pay much attention to a crowbar, a guy like that."

"Look," said Kinlay suddenly,

"they're getting up! I guess they must have just heard about Frank."

"Do we follow 'em?"

"Yeah. You in a cab, and I'll trail you in the sidecar."

Andy George finished his ginger ale, and made a face. He hung back. "If there's going to be a pinch," he said, "I think there ought to be two city cops in on it, if there's going to be two state troopers."

"Sure," said Kinlay. "After all, it's really your district."

"Is there going to be a pinch?"

"I don't know. I'd like to pick him up, but I haven't got enough on him. I'm hanging around hoping for something to break. That's one reason why I had Dolan release Nuts McGrath with the rest of 'em. It's perfectly safe, because you could pick up a guy like that anywhere even if he had sense enough to lam, which he hasn't. And I'm curious to see where he goes. If he goes to Conroy's apartment right away, as I think he might—well, that'd be a little evidence."

"What if Conroy takes the jane there, and Nuts finds them?"

"Conroy wouldn't do that. He'd have better sense than to take her to his apartment. He'd have some hide-away Nuts wouldn't know about."

CHAPTER 3

The Age of Chivalry

THE PURSUIT led to a section of the city consisting of warehouses, small factories, shabby shops, and

buildings which were called apartment houses by some, by others tenements.

Anderson, at Kinlay's curt command, drove a mere forty-five miles an hour; for Kinlay only tried to keep Andy George's taxicab in sight, not wishing Conroy to take alarm at the official motorcycle.

In the middle of a block, in front of one of the apartment houses, the Conroy taxi came to a stop. Kinlay saw it in time to order Anderson to drive around the block so as to avoid passing the building. The taxi had started away by the time they had encircled the block, but Andy George had stopped it around the corner and was questioning the driver. Andy George looked annoyed when he came back to Kinlay.

"It's just what I was afraid of. You remember when we turned from Hausman into North Avenue there? Well, I'd been staying fairly well behind Conroy's cab, but when we made that turn we almost smacked it in the rear. I could tell it'd stopped there for half a minute, and I was wondering whether anybody'd got out. I could see at least two people through the back window. Now this driver tells me he stopped there long enough to drop Conroy's boy friend from Philly."

"Hausman Street and North Avenue. What's there?" Kinlay wanted to know.

"An all-night garage that's a drive-it-yourself agency too."

"Looks like the mugg from Philly's taken a powder then, huh?"

"Looks like it." Andy George made a shooing motion with his hands to one of the drivers. "Run along, beautiful." To the other he said: "You stick around. And keep your engine running and your door open. We may be in a hurry."

Anderson, who was in uniform, they left behind. They walked to the building in the middle of the block, a seven-story affair with a tawdry Italian Renaissance entrance, the front a mass of old-fashioned fire-escapes. A vacancy sign hung in the entrance.

"This certainly isn't where Slats lives?"

"No," said Andy George, "he's got a swell dump up at the Tuscany Apartments. This must be the hide-away, or else McGrath's place."

Over one of the buttons the card read: *H. McGrath. S. McGrath. 7 Fl. Front.* They went across the street. There was a light in the seventh floor front apartment—the only light showing—and somebody there was pulling down the shades.

Andy George strolled around the corner to an all-night luncheon and telephoned to his sidekick. Then he strolled back to join Kinlay.

"I sent Cassidy over to the Tuscany Apartments. Told him to watch for Nuts McGrath particularly. Not to pick him up, if he appears, but to let us know here. He can call back at the lunchroom. The guy there said he'll run around and tell us if there's a call. I gave him your name too, Kinley."

"Fine."

"Cassidy gets credit, of course, if

there's a pinch here? Do you agree?"

"Sure," said Kinlay. "That's understood."

They waited almost an hour. Andy George smoked cigarettes and looked bored. Kinlay stood in a doorway and stared at the lighted windows, sometimes shaking his head in a puzzled manner.

"I don't altogether like this business of the Philly boy slipping away," he admitted once.

Andy George shrugged. "I suppose what happened is that Slats just wanted to be alone with the dame."

"Another thing I can't understand is, why are they hanging around this apartment instead of his?"

"They figure it'd be safe enough. Nobody in the world'd think a captain of state police would fail to keep Nuts McGrath in the cooler overnight, after what happened." Andy George chuckled. "Be funny, at that, if Nuts was to come back and find those two duckie-birds up there, wouldn't it?"

"You got a great sense of humor," Kinlay growled. "Of course, if he should come, we got to stop him from going up."

"Oh, sure!"

"I suppose it'll end with us hanging around here all night and eventually arresting Nuts on a murder charge and letting that louse up there get away with it." Kinlay's voice was bitter. "I hate that guy Conroy. For more'n a year I've been waiting for a chance to close his place up on him and make the country air a little cleaner out there. And now along

comes a nice, convenient scandal—and Conroy's sold out and taken his dough."

"You can be damn' sure he wouldn't have had anybody erased in The Pines if there was any chance of him losing money by it!"

"Yeah. That was the one thing made me think my hunch might be wrong, at first, until I heard about the sale."

THEY WAITED a little longer. It was chilly. Andy George leaned against a store front and half slept, but Kinlay lighted a cigar, all the time frowning at the seventh story windows.

"I'm still trying to figure out why that mugg from Philly did a fade-out. I can't help wondering whether it had anything to do with the fact that Helen was in the manager's office for a while and then didn't rejoin her party. We should have taken an affidavit from her on those phone calls."

"If you feel that way about it, why don't you send that motorcycle cop back to the *Western World* to ask a few questions? It's only half past two. They'd still be open."

"I think I'll do that," said Kinlay, and moved off.

A few minutes later he returned from the other end of the block. "I told him to call us at the lunchroom here if there was anything wrong."

"Uh-huh," murmured Andy George, and resumed his snoozing.

It wasn't long after that the lunchroom man scurried to the corner, squinting. "Which one of you guys

is Kinlay? There's a call for him."

Kinlay looked grave when he came back. Andy George looked grave, too. Andy George was staring after a coupe with a *P.D.* on the panel.

"Sure, I know what it was," Andy George said promptly. "They told the cop that Blondie's been missing for three-quarters of an hour. Slipped away."

"That's a right guess."

"Wasn't hard. The prowling boys—" he nodded in the direction the car had taken—"just gave me a suspicion stop, and when I showed 'em who I was they explained they'd just had a murder report on their radio set and were questioning all dangerous-looking loafers—like me."

"Umph," said Kinlay. "But it wasn't around here?"

"Of course not. 'Way up in the West Park section. Thrown out of a car. A tall blonde in a blue and silver evening gown. Not identified yet. Abrasions of the throat and the skull pushed in by a blunt instrument. Our friend from Philadelphia's versatile, ain't he?"

"Umph," Kinlay said again. "I guess maybe we'd better pick up Slats after all."

"I guess maybe we'd better," said Andy George. "I told the boys to put in a call at the nearest box, which is faster'n us calling from here, and to get somebody from the *Western World* to view the remains. I also told 'em to send reserves over here, so's we can—"

"Judas Priest!"

Andy George wheeled, gaping. And

he saw what Kinlay saw at once.

A short man with enormous shoulders had come up the block, on the other side of the street, and had turned into the apartment house. He walked soundlessly, with a peculiar rolling gait, ape-like, awkward, but very fast. They caught a glimpse of his face at the entrance.

Kinlay started first, but Andy George was lighter and had longer legs; he was banging the inside door with his shoulder when Kinlay entered the hallway.

"Hurry, man! He worships that girl!"

Kinlay threw himself against the door. It was unexpectedly solid. Again and again he threw himself against it. Andy George sprang to the index panel and pushed every button except that for the McGrath apartment. A moment later he was next to Kinlay again, lending his shoulder.

There were some blurred, hollow "who-is-it" noises from the speaking tubes. Then the lock rattled and the door swung open.

This time Kinlay was first. He had his pistol out before he reached the second floor. There was no elevator.

On the fourth floor Andy George passed him, only to collide with a woman on the fifth floor and lose his lead. The woman, in a greasy kimono, had stepped out into the hallway to learn the cause of all the bell-ringing. At sight of the two wild-eyed men and the two guns, she screamed, and screaming, she promptly slipped into a faint.

There were more screams before Kinlay reached the door of the McGrath apartment and smashed in a panel. They came from Slats Conroy.

Conroy and the McGrath girl, standing bolt upright in an inner doorway, were stiff with terror. Conroy held an automatic. But Nuts McGrath was a madman.

Nuts McGrath had followed his instinct. He was using his fists. He didn't seem to be aware of anything at all except Conroy's face. He didn't even seem to be aware of the fact that Conroy was slashing at him with the pistol barrel, hitting him again and again on the forehead, as Conroy backed away screaming.

"You're crazy, man! Wait a minute! Let me tell you!"

Then the girl, too, screamed.

"He'll shoot you, Harold! Harold, wait!"

So Nuts' right name was Harold? Kinlay, pistol raised, roared a command. But nobody paid him the slightest attention.

"Keep away from me! I'll give it to you! I mean it, Nuts!"

Only McGrath was silent. Cat-like, his head low, his shoulders hunched high, he slid forward. Conroy sprang back, banged against a wall. He held the automatic straight in front of him.

"I'll give it to you. I mean it!"

But Nuts McGrath was on a single track.

He moved forward.

The girl stopped screaming and ran in front of her brother, probably

in an effort to quiet him. And at that instant Slats Conroy lost his head and fired. He fired seven shots, all the gun held. Seven shots at Stella McGrath's spine. Three of them ripped through her body and sank into that of her brother, where Conroy had intended them to go; but they didn't mean any more to the madman than three house flies.

The girl was thrown against Nuts as though she'd been kicked in the small of the back. She didn't topple Nuts, but she stopped him for a moment. He made an impatient gesture, like a man who brushes aside a cobweb he has walked into; and he stepped past her, probably without even being aware of her existence.

By that time Conroy was out on the fire-escape. Conroy had dropped his empty gun, had smashed the window with a chair, and had sprung through that window headfirst, jagged glass and all.

Kinlay and Andy George finally got all the way through the door, and grabbed McGrath from behind. He swung completely around, stepping backwards. He was a heavy man, incalculably strong. They lost their grips and staggered away. Before they could reach Nuts again, he had jumped through the shattered window after Conroy—jumped through it like a circus rider diving through a paper-covered hoop.

ANDY GEORGE tried to raise the window, but it was stuck, Kinlay yanked two of the larger pieces of glass from the frame and stepped

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through to the fire-escape hurriedly.

The whole fire-escape was shivering and shaking. He looked up. On the platform above the top one, Nuts McGrath had caught up with his late sister's boy friend. There was no room for blows. McGrath was using a simpler, more primitive method of attack; he was choking Conroy to death in his enormous hands.

Then the apartment behind Kinlay seemed to explode. He whirled around, squatted.

In the hall doorway stood the mugg from Philly, panting, a gun in each hand. He was firing from the hips, wildly, both guns at once. Andy George was on his knees, trying to lift his own gun.

Kinlay fired twice through the broken window, and the mugg from Philly collapsed swiftly, jerkily. Kinlay fired twice more into the body.

Then he started up the fire-escape.

But he was too late. The platform railing on the eighth floor, rotten with dust, crumbled like wet cardboard.

Slats Conroy shrieked once, briefly. McGrath didn't make a sound. Kinlay looked at the sky for a second and wished he had a drink—either a drink or else the time and opportunity to go ahead and be sick.

He kept as far as possible from the rotten railings on the way down. People were appearing at windows, yelling, swearing. He dropped the last ten feet. What was left of Conroy took up a lot of pavement, and it wasn't pretty. But Nuts McGrath's eyes were wide open, and his lips were moving.

"My Lord, what a tough baby you are!" Kinlay grunted.

"Nuts, don't you know me?"

The eyes returned from somewhere, straightened, focused. McGrath's fury was gone now. He looked almost sane.

"You—pinching me—Captain?" He ran his tongue over his lips. "Nobody to take care—Stella—if I go—jail."

The man was dying and he didn't know it, or couldn't believe it.

"Captain, you—you watch her, huh? Watch Stella for me, huh?" He didn't seem to remember anything that had happened. The whites of his eyes were trembling; but there was some expression there now; the eyes were pleading. "She—she's good girl, Captain, but — somebody needs — watch her."

"Take it easy, Nuts. You're all right. Just take it easy."

Cops were coming now, droves of them, tumbling out of automobiles. An ambulance clashed and clanged around the corner.

"But you—keep your eye on her—Captain."

Then he died.

Kinlay grunted, wiped his face, lighted a cigar, re-entered the building and climbed wearily to the seventh floor front, where he found them lifting Andy George onto a stretcher. The detective was pale and weak, but very much alive.

"Well, you wanted something to break, Trooper, and it did."

"Yeah," said Kinlay. "Yeah, it certainly broke, all right." ♠ ♠ ♠

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